

# UNHOLY TERRORS

SCARLET FORCE BOOK TWO

C.M. STUNICH

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

## Table of Contents

[Table of Contents](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Join My Group](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Vile Bastards Cover](#)

[Throwaway Prince Cover](#)

[Havoc at Prescott High Cover](#)

[I Was Born Ruined Cover](#)

[Keep Up With The Fun](#)

[More Books By C.M. Stunich](#)

[About the Author](#)

SCARLETT <sup>2</sup> FORCE

UNHOLY  
TERRORS

C.M. STUNICH

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## **Unholy Terrors**

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For information address Sarian Royal Indie Publishing, 89365  
Old Mohawk Rd, Springfield, OR 97478.

**[www.cmstunich.com](http://www.cmstunich.com)**

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Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, businesses, or  
locales is coincidental and is not intended by the author.

*this book is dedicated to  
my inner artist child.  
you show up, even when it feels fucking impossible.*

~

*thank you, Julia Cameron—you're awesome.  
P.S. y'all should read 'The Artist's Way'*





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**Seriously? You're back again? It's clear you don't value your own life.**

Look, last time, I threatened to kill you. That was rude; I'll admit it. But you read through my story anyway, so you must be *dying* of curiosity.

Or maybe you're like me, and it's the adrenaline that gets you, the thrill. You want your foot on the throttle, the wind in your hair, and a sturdy fuckboy ... or two or three.

But what if there are four? Four unholy terrors. Four men to warm your bed ... or wait beneath it, watching from the shadows. And what if you had to pick one to die?

**Ash Kelly.** Who knew I'd be dating a dead boy? He might be wearing someone else's skin, but it'll always be Ash for me. Ash, the obsessive one, the one with the most to lose, the one I can't trust. My biggest secret.

**Kellin Bohnes** is always there for me, but he keeps a bulldozer-turned-tank in his warehouse. He has eyes everywhere, but mostly he has eyes for me. Also, he brought me a severed head as a present. His love for me is escalating.

There's always **Adrian Lawless** aka Widow to fall back on. He reads romance and strums a guitar, but he isn't the type to



give up on a woman. Not when he's already claimed her. Not even when he has to help bury the evidence.

Did I mention my cold prince, **Alexei Grove**? With his father gone, he has nothing left to lose. Piece by piece, his sanity falls apart in my hands, and I love every minute of it. Touch me with your black-gloved hands, sir ... *Don't stop.*

And of course, you know me—Scarlett Motherfucking Force.

I'm your only friend: remember that.

Let me warn you one last time; I really don't want to write your epitaph.

So hit the gas and get the hell out of here.

Just ... remember to check the back seat first.

Someone might be waiting for you there.

**Love, Me**



# PROLOGUE

## *Scarlett*

Fucked by a fuckboy at the old racetrack. Nothing unusual about that unless you consider that said fuckboy is a germaphobe virgin with mob connections and a bad temper.

If I were anybody else, I might say I was in love. But hell, I'm Scarlett Force. I consider myself to be in love with a lot of boys. Four, to be exact. Four of them, even if I can't keep them all. Even if they might kill one another to keep me to themselves.

I'm standing calf-deep in the mud, my bright red wedges soaked through, my panties torn and dangling. Widow stands nearby, wiping cum from his fingertips with a handkerchief.

"I can't believe you just talked me into watching that," he growls out as the sacrilegious murmurs of the Prescott High congregation drift down to us. Did anybody see what we just did? Do they know? Do any of them have a clue why Alexei Grove is rocketing out of here in his orange Lamborghini.

"How much royal ass do rich boys suck?" I whisper, yanking the torn panties from my leg, and ignoring the mess between my thighs. "Follow me. I don't know what it is, but that Russian pissant is up to something."

Widow groans, almost screams really, in frustration, but he tucks his dick away and slogs through the mud in his boots, yanking open the door to that pretty purple Corvette of his. Nothing like a '69, is there?

Bohnes' Chevy Chevelle SS. Widow's Corvette Stingray. Alexei's Lamborghini Miura. All from 1969.

The only person who doesn't match the formula is our dear old friend, Ash Kelly. Oops. Aspen Kelly? Well, whatever you want to call him. *He* drove the '68 Mustang Fastback which is close ... but it's also off. By a whole year. I *really* like the number sixty-nine, if you catch my drift. It's lucky.

Ash isn't exactly what I would call *lucky*.

What am I supposed to make of that? Is it a sign? Are we not meant to be?

Of course we're not.

That's what makes it fun.

I slide into the driver's seat of my 1972 de Tomaso Pantera. Code name: the Devil. Also, who gives a shit about code names? I have a fuckboy to tail.

As soon as Widow moves his car out of my way, I jet, wheels spinning in the slick, icy mud. People scatter as I blast through the parking lot and into Springfield city proper. If I were anyone else, Alexei might be able to escape my tail.

If *Widow* were anyone else, I might be able to escape *him*.

Instead, he hugs my ass—shocker, right?—as I follow the distant glow of Alexei's brake lights around one corner, then the next. He seems to realize that I'm following him then, and he hits the throttle. But come on, screw this guy. Who does he think he is?

Nothing but a rich boy psycho, that's what.

I make a sudden and horrifically sharp right that causes the 'Vette to screech and waffle behind me. Lucky for that pretty purple baby, Widow's able to get it under control, chasing me down side streets and rocketing past trash cans so quickly that they blow over and scatter.

Hey, I'm not usually about littering, but tough times and all that.

Alexei's good. I mean, he's *good*. But he isn't from Prescott. He doesn't know which alleys are too narrow to pass through and which ones you can squeeze into, like a fat cock in a tight pussy, inches to spare on either side mirror.

He doesn't know how to loop around and find someone redlining down Coburg Road toward the McKenzie View exit. He turns at the last second, sending the ass-end of that orange Lambo skidding and screaming across the road, scarring the pavement with black rubber marks that burn and reek.

But as he turns onto that winding country road, he also doesn't know that I've taken a small shortcut through the nearby quarry, up the bridge, and over it. Off of it.

My car hits the ground just far enough in front of his that he's able to slam on the brakes, spinning and careening to a violent stop in the gravel pullover. Catching air is a blessing; it's like living for the very first time, every time. The rush of the wind, the blur of the scenery, that sick, empty, weightless feeling in your belly.

Once I skid to a stop, and Widow pulls up behind Alexei, it's game over.

He can either hit us and knock us out of the way or get out and deal.

Trapped on this same, sad road the way he was when my crew and I robbed his OCD ass. He's in much bigger trouble this time though since he, you know, fucked me for the first time and then bailed.

Actually ... with a curse, I roll down my window and look out to see that I'm losing air in my left front tire—and fast. I slowly scoot the Pantera over to park beside the Lambo and climb out.

He's waiting for me.

“Are you insane?!” Alexei shouts, moving close, his gloved hands squeezing into fists. He has gritted teeth, and a red face, and I can't decide if he's euphoric or destitute. “You could've gotten yourself killed!”

“What does that matter to you?” I snap back, and then he's yanking me against him and staring at my lips like they're pure and pretty poison. But even though he just had his cherry popped and gave up a little part of himself for me to keep, he won't do it. He won't close the distance. He *still* won't kiss me.

“I'm putting my life on the line for you, Scarlett Force,” he murmurs, and then he sags back, almost as if he's defeated. “Please move out of the way and let me get on with my business.”

“Where you’re going, driving over a hundred miles an hour down a city street, it’s not somewhere that I want you to go. It sure as shit isn’t somewhere you’re going without telling me.” I cross my arms obstinately, frustrated by the slick wetness between my legs, dutifully ignoring the raging storm cloud that is Adrian Arden Lawless as he draws up alongside us.

He’s a comforting presence, like a true king to my queen.

He could be anyway, once he gets his shit together.

For now, we’re still just a girl and her fuckboy.

“Tell her where you’re off to, rich kid,” Widow snarls, when he knows damn well he should stay quiet.

“Where I’m going ...” Alexei tells me with a harsh laugh, releasing me and raking his gloved fingers through his blond hair. He looks up, his eyes the color of an old liquor bottle, washed ashore, broken to pieces and polished by an angry, churning sea. “It isn’t somewhere that I’ll be coming back from.”

I pause. Stone-still. Putting pieces together.

That’s when it clicks.

*They’re here.*

*They found him; they found us.*



The image features the text "CHAPTER ONE" in a white, serif font. The text is centered and overlaid on a dark, gradient background that transitions from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. The text is heavily splattered with bright red, blood-like stains, which are most prominent around the letters and drip down from the top. The overall aesthetic is dark and ominous.

CHAPTER  
ONE

## *Scarlett*

**Boyfriend** - *noun* - some dude who's managed to convince his girl he's worth more than just his dick

*Chiefly 'Prescott High' slang:* a possessive term that denotes that said boy belongs to a girl with his whole body, heart, and soul; a clear and daring upgrade from *fuckboy*; used sparingly, if at all

Sigh.

It's you again, isn't it? The curious one, the foolhardy reader with a thirst for dark and twisted things.

Welcome back to Prescott, you brave, stupid motherfucker.

Last time we saw each other, I had a dead rich boy in my fuckboy's trunk. The situation hasn't changed—for me anyway. It's going to get much worse for you. See, that's the thing with the darkness: the deeper you go, the harder and faster you fall.

Before you read any further, I need you to promise that you'll take these secrets to your grave. I know it sounds dramatic, but I have a good thing going for me, and I can't lose it; I want my name in lights. I *deserve* my name in lights.

I also deserve my fuckboys turned boyfriends turned ... well, whatever. What's the opposite of Prince Charming? Oh, that's right: psycho. Yep, that's the word I'm looking for. *They are all fucking psychos.*

Ahem.

Now, here's the clincher: by the end of this book, one of us five will be dead. The person won't deserve it this time, but they'll flatline. Death is a static state, but sometimes, murder moves.

Time of death: three a.m. The witching hour. An hour when all things are possible.

---

*Two weeks before Alexei dropped a late-night bomb in my lap ...*

Some asshole stole my heart.

More than one asshole actually. But the current asshole in question—Ash Kelly—is holding my focus. He’s lifted me up to sit on the edge of the old picnic table, his warm, hard body between my thighs, while my hands—and my ruined manicure—rest on his firm shoulders.

His mouth is slanted across mine, hot and dirty and wrong. This is *so* fucking wrong. I’m covered in his twin’s blood; he lied to me; I killed the mayor’s son.

“A—” I stop myself because I *want* to say Ash, but I have to say Aspen. I have to, because my life depends on it. His life depends on it. “Aspen,” I murmur, our mouths still pressed close, his erection pressing against my needy cunt. I want to fuck him so bad right now. My need is this strange mix of relief, fear, and adrenaline; I know I’d come so damn hard if this Kelly brother were to screw me against the picnic table.

But I also know that we don’t have the time or the leisure for that.

“Scarlett,” he says, that hint of a British accent in the sweet and spicy sound of my name. The way it comes out of that plump mouth of his, like both a promise and a curse, heats me up even more. “Don’t worry; I know exactly how to handle this.”

“And how is that?” I inquire, cocking a brow and running my hands down Ash’s chest. I let my right palm rest over his beating heart. If I’m honest with myself—which I usually am, much as the truth sucks sometimes—I was upset when I thought he was dead. I mean, considering Aspen—the real Aspen—was a rapist in the end there, I wasn’t mourning much, but ... those wild eyes, that obsession ... I would’ve missed that. “Explain it to me.”

The way he smiles at me makes me wary in so many ways. First off, I like it. I like it a lot. I like his face, and the shape of his mouth, and the way his heart is beating steadily under my hand. That freaks me out a little. Especially since he lied to me. Because he did, right? With both words and omission.

*Maybe I shouldn’t have texted Nisha to tell her I was heading home?* Could her acerbic stare cut through my own obsessive tendencies toward this idiot fuckboy? Mm. Probably not.

“While you’re at it, you might also want to explain why you didn’t tell me you had an identical twin. What was I supposed to do?”

Sleuth that shit out?” Ash interrupts my tirade by cupping his hand over mine. My response? I yank it back and slam it into his shoulder hard enough to make him grunt. “Don’t get cute with me. Think about it: why would I *ever* guess you were a twin? A logical, rational person doesn’t assume that somebody they’ve just met is hiding their identity behind their brother’s. A logical, rational person would *tell* the person they like that they have an identical twin.”

Ash’s face shuts down and his dark eyes flick to one side before he draws them back to me with seemingly great effort. I’ll call him Aspen out loud, but it feels better to call him Ash inside my head. It feels right.

“If I’d told you who I really was and Aspen got word of it, he’d rape you and then kill you. He’s done worse things.” Ash sighs and reaches up a hand to play with his feathered hair. “He’s done it before, Scarlett.” I raise a brow at that, shivering as Ash puts his hands on my hips and yanks me even harder against him. “As it is, we still need to be careful. Nobody can know how I feel about you.”

He leans down and puts his forehead against mine, making me shiver. Truthfully, do I know this guy? Nah, I don’t. I don’t know him for shit. We’ve spent, what, a collective two hours together in total? Had a quickie in the rain? Those things ... do not constitute a relationship.

So even though I have to trust Ash to help me with his brother’s murder, I don’t have to trust him with anything else. Bohnes, on the other hand, I might have to start trusting *more*.

“And how is it that you feel about me, Mr. Kelly?” I whisper, wishing I didn’t care. Knowing that I do. He pulls back slightly, just enough to look into my eyes. His lips—those lavish, libertine lips—part. Close. Part.

He licks them.

“I know it seems absurd, Scarlett, but I’m in—”

“I knew it,” a voice hisses from the shadows, and my blood goes cold. My gaze jerks over to the tree line as Widow steps out with a baseball bat in hand. It’s dark out, so I’m not entirely certain, but are those bloodstains on the wood?! He taps the end of the bat against his left palm, gripping the base of it with his right. “The rules of the track are sacred, my ass. You were too afraid to fuck me because of my deal with Bohnes, but this rich piece of shit gets a free pass to bend the rules?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I start, pushing at Ash and finding myself supremely annoyed when the idiot doesn’t move away from me. He’s watching Widow with open curiosity and undisguised hostility. I see it then so damn clearly, like the truth is limned in white light: if Ash needs to kill Widow to keep our secret, he’ll do it.

And he won’t lose a wink of sleep over it.

I shove at him again, finding my feet and holding two hands up, palms out in a placating gesture.

“Just, hold up, Adrian,” I start, hoping my use of his real name will stop him from doing what it looks like he might just do anyway. That is, he’s looking at Ash like he might kill him with the wooden bat in his hands.

Widow’s amber eyes slide over to mine before dropping to the ground. He frowns prettily and steps forward, sliding the toe of his boot into a puddle of blood. Again, the only lights we’ve got are the red taillights of Bohnes’ idling Chevy Chevelle.

But it isn’t hard to tell what the viscous substance on the ground is.

Or how much of it there really is.

Loads. Loads and loads and loads. Nobody could survive the loss of so much blood.

Widow lifts his attention up to Ash who’s snuck his hand inside his suit jacket. I snatch his wrist. Does the idiot have a gun in there, too? The hell is wrong with these damn Kelly brothers?

“Who died here?” Widow asks, still tapping the bat against his palm. His voice is almost, dare I say, conversational? He looks up at Ash again and something registers in his expression. I’m not sure if it’s the lack of a torn suit jacket, the missing black eye, the missing split lip ... but his gaze widens before sliding back to me again.

Shit.

Shit, shit, bitch, ass, fuck, dildo, cock, motherfucker, crap.

I’m in big trouble here. Arguably, this is the worst trouble I’ve ever been in. Granted, murdering the drunk rich boy and his insufferable parents after the car accident was pretty bad, too.

This is worse, I think. There are more players here than there were last time. Last time, it was just me. And Bohnes. Kellin Bohnes.

*Fuuuuuuuck.* I should just call him up right now and beg to be his wife. I'll marry the bastard if he can get me out of this mess.

"Let me handle this," I hiss to Ash, glancing over at Widow and weighing my options.

There aren't many.

Kill him, which I'm sure is the option that Ash is favoring.

Offer him money to stay quiet. Offer him sex.

Offer him ... something else.

"We're not breaking track rules, Widow," I say, moving in a wide arc around him to the trunk of the Chevelle.

"Scarlett," Ash growls out, pausing when Widow lifts up the corner of his lip in the man's direction. I open the trunk anyway and gesture at the body inside. It twitches, making me jump, my heart thundering like crazy before I remember that corpses move. A lot. Like, it's disturbing as hell. Pray you never have to experience it firsthand.

"Because that isn't Aspen." I wait beside the trunk as Widow edges his way over, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. He probably thinks we're going to shoot him and shove him inside. Not an invalid concern. He peers into the trunk with those pretty gold eyes of his and then pauses, a frown pulling down his lips. His expression switches to one of reluctant surprise as he looks up at Ash, back to the corpse, Ash again. "This is Aspen Kelly; I killed him on accident after he tried to rape me."

An allover shudder travels through Widow, and he clutches the end of the bat with his left hand, squeezing so hard that his knuckle bones look like they might just pop right out of his skin. He lifts his gaze back to mine and then shifts it to Ash again.

"Your twin is lying here dead, and you don't seem so shook up over it." Widow rests the end of the bat against his right shoulder, his tattooed right hand holding the base of it in a nice, tight five-fingered grip. He looks casual; he's anything but. He's just as likely to kill Ash with it as he was five minutes ago.

"My brother was a monster; you met him," Ash explains, looking at me in such a way that says he isn't happy with my decision. He does, however, drop his hand away from his suit jacket and the gun that's presumably resting inside of it. "My question to you is: what are you planning on doing with this information?"



Widow looks from Ash to me again, his gaze softening just slightly.

*“I’ll be your man. Not your fuckboy. Oh no. One day, I’ll be your husband.”*

He’s the one that said that, who declared it to me like some sort of unbreakable promise. Here’s where I find out how dedicated Adrian Arden Lawless is, how much he likes me. He taps the bat against his shoulder a few times. Obviously, if he’s going to screw us, he won’t say as much right now, not when Ash and I could kill him and dump his body alongside Aspen’s.

But, growing up in South Prescott, I’m damn good at reading people.

Whatever he says, I’ll read between the lines.

“Hm.” Widow looks down at the body again. “Your father is the mayor. This could be bad for Scarlett.” He turns back to Ash. “How are you going to keep her safe, rich boy?”

Ash smirks at that and perches elegantly on the edge of the picnic table. The more I look at him, the more disturbing he becomes. He’s as unhinged as his crazy twin, no doubt about that. He’s just marginally more likable.

Okay, fine, a lot more likable.

“My father has only ever cared about one of his sons.” Ash toys with the diamond cufflinks at the ends of his sleeves. “And yet, he’s never been able to tell us apart.” There’s that creepy smile again, the one that makes my heart thump even though I should know better.

Fuck, Nisha is right: I’m as bad as Lemon.

Maybe worse.

I’m crushing on how many guys right now? Four, if you include the sweet, sad kitten with his poisoned needles and his gloves. Lemon usually doesn’t go for more than two or three men at any given time.

“So, we’ll dispose of Ash, and I will remain Aspen, and my father will care so little about it that you’d be surprised.” Ash takes a step forward and Widow tenses, dropping the end of the bat down to the ground. He puts it in the bloody dirt and rests both hands on the knob, like a knight with his sword. “Don’t make me ask again: what are you going to do with this information? What do you want? Money? I have plenty of it.”

Widow scowls so viciously that I get the chills.

“He doesn’t want money,” I say for him, because I already know what he’s going to ask for. The edge of Widow’s pretty mouth curves up in a shark smile. He’s terrifying and beautiful in equal measures.

His attention swings back to me.

“You could have your fuckboy shoot me right now,” he says, gesturing with his right hand in Ash’s direction. “But you don’t want to do that, now do you, Scarlett Force?”

I smile right back at him, and then the night darkens even further because there are three psychos standing around and grinning maniacally at each other while a corpse in a fancy suit twitches in the trunk of yet *another* fuckboy psycho’s car.

Eek, Scarlett. Eek, eek, eek.

So spooky. Good thing Halloween is on Friday, eh? The spirit realm is thinned; ghosts walk among us. I bet if Aspen even had a soul at all, it’d be here with us, watching the entire thing unfold. Oh, he’d be irate, wouldn’t he, seeing our perverse glee in spite of—or maybe because of—his timely demise?

“If I wanted you dead, Widow,” I explain, crossing my arms under my breasts. “You’d already be dead and stuffed inside that trunk with Aspen Kelly. Just say it. What do you want?”

“What do I want?” he asks, cocking his head at me like a dog. I don’t mean that in a bad way. You know how even the most intimidating German shepherd or mastiff or Doberman can cock its head to one side and it’s cute as shit? That’s Widow. He’s adorably broken, and I want to lick his face. “Was I unclear before? Should I say it again?”

I just stare at him, and he moves over to stand in front of me. He reaches up with his left hand, drawing his knuckles down the side of my face. The touch is electric; need arcs through me; my skin scintillates and sparkles.

*Hot damn.*

Murder goes surprisingly well with sex, doesn’t it?

Or maybe I just think that because I’m crazy? Either way, I’m not the only one in the mood despite the puddles of blood at our feet or the corpse in the trunk.

“You’re my woman, Scarlett,” he says, as if that’s simple, that easy. It’s just a fact. His eyes shimmer like distant stars and a telling smile spreads across his deviant little mouth. He leans in and reaches out, pulling my braid over my shoulder and then, as I swallow hard against a rush of fresh ardor, around my *neck*. Widow gives it a little tug, and I take a step toward him—but only because I want to.

“Make me your fuckboy,” he says, leaning in even closer and letting his minty breath fan across my lips. “But not because I need anything from you, just as a favor.”

I exhale sharply, my pulse thundering against the silken leash of my own raven-colored hair, pressing tight—but just tight enough—around my tender throat. Widow has me in his hands right now, quite literally.

“You said you didn’t want to be my fuckboy,” I start, and he flicks his tongue across my lower lip, making me shiver.

“You wanted me as one though, didn’t you?” He sucks my lower lip into his mouth and bites gently with his teeth before releasing me. “We practically fucked in the library the other day.”

“Practically.” I narrow my eyes. “But fuckboy? That’s it?” I ask, quirking a brow at him. As I said, nothing in Prescott is free. Nothing. “You don’t want to demand to be my steady beau?” I cock a hip out and cross one arm over my middle, resting the elbow of my other arm in my palm and gesturing loosely with my hand. All that posturing, as if my hair isn’t literally wrapped around my neck. “Or maybe my fiancé?”

Ash shifts behind me, but I ignore him.

If I give any one of these boys too much power, it’ll be *me* who suffers the consequences.

Fuckboy psychos must be given short leashes, preferably made of chain or leather. Because they will chew and twist and squirm; they will go feral, if allowed even one extra inch of leeway.

“Tempting. But no. I won’t get anything out of forcing your hand, Scarlett. I might not have known you very long, but you and me, we’re the same. We don’t like to be told what to do, and you’ll never love me the way I want you to love me if I make you.” He releases my braid and it slithers back over my shoulder, uncoiling from around my throat of its own accord.

I can *feel* Ash behind me; he’s standing up now, glowering, his gaze boring into my neck. Spiders of unease crawl down my spine,

warning me. *He's no different than Aspen. He likes you, but he's no different. Watch your back, Scarlett.*

Wetting my lower lip and flicking my tongue against the corner of my mouth, I shake out my hands.

“You’re going to keep your mouth shut about this in exchange for being my fuckboy?” I laugh at that; I can’t help it. It’s too easy, and nothing about Adrian Arden Lawless is easy. “You know that doesn’t change anything. I *still* can’t have sex with you.”

“Unless you race Bohnes for me,” he offers up simply, adding a smirk onto the end of his words. It’s cocksure and dirty, but this trick of his, it’s street-smart. He doesn’t know if he can beat Bohnes—but he knows that I can.

At least ... I think I can.

Nah, nah, I totally can. That is, if he’ll agree to race me; he could say no. It’d be his right to decline the invitation.

“Regardless, one day you’ll let me fuck you the way I want to fuck you,” Widow continues, drawing his hand back and then using his thumb to tease my sensitive lips. “Let me date you the way I want to date you.” Another pause, and he leans in, putting his mouth near my ear. I know without knowing that he’s smirking at Ash over my shoulder. “Marry you the way I want to marry you. I’m a patient man, Scarlett. You rile me up, so maybe you don’t believe it, but it’s true. I waited behind bars for five years.”

Widow draws back and frowns prettily, looking down at me with an extremely serious expression on his face. Well, shit. At this point, polyandry is clearly in my future.

I step back and glance over at Ash who’s scowling viciously at the pair of us, jealousy glittering in those black pits he calls eyes. There’s hellfire there, cold on the outside but scalding hot in the center, the worst of both worlds.

The obsessive glint in his gaze becomes a knife that slices straight through my heart.

Uh-oh. Balancing fuckboy psychos is like balancing weights on a scale. If I’m not careful, if I let it tip too much to one side ... bloodshed. Someone will die. Not me, but one boy will kill another, and then what happens?

“Isn’t this sweet?” Ash purrs, toying with the edge of his jacket. He must have a gun in there, a knife at the very least. He moves

away from the picnic table to stand on my left side. “But, as endearing and romantic as I find all of this, we have more pressing matters.”

Ash stares Widow down in challenge, black eyes clashing with gold. Rich boy versus poor boy.

“I’ll do anything for Scarlett,” Widow says, playing with his baseball bat. He turns the end of it in the mud with a single hand. “Die for her ...” He looks up. “Kill for her. I will bleed, bury, dig, scrape, drive, and suffer even *your* presence.”

My gaze drifts to Ash, and I see that he’s breathing hard, much harder even than he was when he discovered his brother’s body. He’s mad. Oh, he’s beyond mad—furious, might be a better word. And then he laughs. The sound is polished and genteel but also unhinged. He reaches up and grabs a hank of his blue-black hair, giving it a sharp tug.

“That’s okay,” Ash says, more to himself really, than to Widow. “Be her fuckboy in name only.” His strange laughter dies off, and he offers this hideous smile up to Widow. “I’ll remember the sweet but violent contractions of her cunt while you fantasize—”

“Enough.” I don’t have to yell; that single word is more than sufficient to get them both to be quiet and look at me. *Why do I have to be attracted to guys? And not just guys, but crazy ones? They’re both certifiably insane.* I turn to Widow first. “Fine. I’ll race Bohnes for you—as a favor, not a promise. Whether I fuck you or not, well ...” I shrug one shoulder and Widow smiles at me again. At least, that lush, angry mouth of his makes the shape of a smile. I’m not sure there’s any mirth or joy present in that expression, just grim appreciation of a glimmer in the darkness.

“Give me your hand,” Widow says, keeping hold of his bat in one hand and taking out a handkerchief with the other; it looks similar to the one he cleaned his cum off with the day I caught him masturbating to me and Bohnes. I’m just assuming it’s been washed. “You cut yourself.”

He nods at my hand, and I look down, noticing for the first time that I have a large gash on my right palm. Oddly enough, it matches the one that Ash has on his. I must’ve gotten it during the fight with Aspen.

Without hesitation, my eyes locked with Widow’s, I offer out my hand.

He finally tosses the bat to the ground and takes my hand in surprisingly gentle fingers, wrapping the wound with the handkerchief and tying it off neatly. The pressure of him yanking on the knot is both painful and reassuring, all at once. *Oh yeah, he's gonna be a rough one in the bedroom, isn't he?*

Because, despite my bravado, we all know I'm going to sleep with this alpha dickhead eventually.

"Thanks." The word is a barely-there mumble, but I have to say it. Because I'm not just thanking him for this; I'm thanking him for everything else. For being on my side, most of all.

Widow smooths a thumb over my pulse point and then, reluctantly, releases my hand. Ash makes another sound, somewhere between a scoff and a hiss.

"*Uzai*," he mutters, dragging out the end of the word like a long *e*. We both look back at him, and he smiles. "It means *we should probably get going*."

Obviously, that's a lie, but I don't care. Let him curse under his breath in Japanese all he wants; it's undeniably sexy.

Widow lifts his attention back to mine, amber eyes shadowed in the strange light from the Chevelle's taillights. "First off, if we want to make this believable, I'll need to beat the shit out of the new Aspen Kelly over here."

Ah.

Right.

Because Widow fucked Aspen up in front of half the damn school down at the track.

"Somebody needs to fuck me up, but it isn't going to be you," Ash says in that delightfully posh accent of his. "Scarlett will do it." He glances over at me as I lick my lower lip. It's swollen. From kissing Ash Kelly? From fighting—and accidentally murdering—Aspen Kelly? Who knows? "Won't you, Scarlett?"

"Sure thing, *Aspen*," I say, and then I turn and clock him so hard in the mouth that he actually stumbles back and then falls to his ass in a puddle of his twin's blood. For a minute there, his eyes go wide, and he blinks through the pain. Either physical pain or emotional, I'm not sure. He's acting as if he doesn't care that Aspen is dead, but is that truly possible? Is he truly that monstrous?



Widow extends a hand that Ash stares at for an inordinate amount of time before reaching out to take it. The former pulls the latter to his feet.

“Split lip, black eye ...” Widow pauses, reaching out and grabbing onto the front of Ash’s suit.

There’s a strong and immediate reaction from Ash. His hands clamp down on Widow’s, and the two men go tense, meeting one another’s eyes. They’re very nearly the same height, staring at each other like they might just go to the mattresses with this.

Heh. *Godfather* reference, you’re welcome.

“Boys,” I warn, moving up to push them apart. It doesn’t take much, just a palm on either of their chests. “Cool that poisonous testosterone for a minute.” Since I don’t want Ash to anticipate the agony, I spin and swing a hard punch into his right eye. It’s, like, an art form to be able to punch someone in the eye, black it out, and not cause an orbital fracture.

Fortunately, I’m a woman. I run the girls of Prescott High. Being able to punch another girl without breaking her face is a skill I’ve honed to a fine blade over the years. Women have smaller skulls than men, but actually, on average, thicker ones.

So I use the same force I’d use if I were disciplining some unruly Prescott bitch.

To his credit, Ash stumbles back again but manages to keep his feet, hissing in pain, his slacks wet with blood. I can only imagine what he’s feeling, but we can’t indulge our emotions right now.

First, we need to clean this mess up.

Then, if he wants, even against my better judgment, I’ll lick his wounds ...

*You’re a lunatic*, I tell myself, cracking my knuckles and trying not to imagine what my besties, Nisha and Bastian, might have to say about this matter. Nothing good, certainly. I don’t consider what Lemon might think about all of this.

I just killed my best friend’s fiancé.

Fuck my life.

“Anything else?” I ask as Widow looks Ash over, studying him to ensure he looks as messed up as his twin did after the fight. There’s

a good chance someone at Prescott filmed the whole thing, so we've got to be damn careful with this.

"Let's see how he swells up." Widow turns and moves back over to the trunk, staring down at Aspen's body and then reaching out to turn the corpse's head toward him. "Good enough for now."

The sound of a phone ringing gives us all pause.

It's Aspen's phone, buzzing from inside his suit jacket.

"Shit," Ash growls, swiping blood from his lips as he moves over to the trunk and rummages around inside his dead twin's jacket, withdrawing his brother's cell and a set of keys in the process. He purses his lips into a thin line before answering the call. "Baby girl," he greets, cleansing his voice entirely of his accent.

There's a strange pause there where Ash's brows draw in, and his mouth turns down in an even sharper frown.

"Get in your car and leave," he commands imperiously, his entire body stiffening up, every muscle taut and ready for action as he listens to whatever Lemon has to say on the other end of the line. This is going to be weird as hell, isn't it? Ash dating Lemon—for real this time. I don't like the idea of it.

I cross my fingers together behind my head, watching him carefully, waiting. My eyes slide over to Widow, but he's content to wait, picking up his baseball bat again and resting it on his shoulder as he stares back at me. In the moonlight, his jewel-toned hair shines in various shades of silver.

"No." Ash's voice snaps out like a whip. "Do not call the police."

Chills skitter across my skin, more of those dark and ominous spider legs crawling over every inch of me. If Lem wants to call the cops—whom she hates with a passion—something must be really wrong.

But after talking to Emma Jean and Alexei, I know that's a terrible idea. The Springfield police are very firmly tucked into Mayor Kelly's pocket.

"Stay where you are; we'll be right there." Ash hands me the phone, and I lift it to my ear just in time to hear Lem give a shaky exhale. Things must be really bad for him to give up our cover like this.

"Hurry, Aspen. I'm really freaked out right now." The way her voice warbles like that, thick with tears, even thicker with fear. Too

scared to properly cry. Man, that kills me. As angry as I am at her, I've always got her back. I keep telling myself that she's toxic, that I can't save her from her own terrible choices, but somehow, I can't seem to help myself either.

"Where are you?" I ask, not caring that she's going to have questions about why I'm with her fiancé. Why he'd hand me his phone. Why I'd come with him to save her ass.

"Scarlett?" There are a million questions hiding in the sound of my name. I can sense Lemon's hesitation (and annoyance) in my old leg injury, an ache in my bones that signals an incoming storm. *Ah, shit.* Right on top of the Aspen thing, on top of the hired gun thing.

When it rains, baby, it motherfuckin' *pours*.

"Where are you?" I ask, already heading for the driver's seat of the Chevelle and silently apologizing to Bohnes for adding yet another line item to his already very long list of *Cleaning Up Scarlett Force's Messes*.

He gave me his car which is, I mean, it's romantic as all get-out, and I bloodied it up with the corpse of the mayor's favorite son. It occurs to me then as I reach for the door handle that I would be well and truly fucked without him. What's the Crimson Crew without Kellin Bohnes? Who am I without Kellin Bohnes?

Maybe it isn't because of Bohnes that we can't have a real relationship. Maybe, just maybe, *I* am the problem.

I owe that man an apology; a blow job wouldn't hurt either.

"Aspen knows." That's what she says to me, even as I'm worried about her and sweating bullets, ready to take a corpse to wherever she is and risk my future freedom and career, my whole life. "What are you doing with him, Scarlett?"

This last part she snaps out at me like a curse, jealousy coloring her voice an envious shade of jade.

"*Where.*" I repeat the question as a statement. I'm not playing around here. I want answers *now*.

"Address is in the text Aspen sent me," she capitulates sourly, and I can just see the pouty shape her mouth must be making. That calms me a little. She can't be in *that* much trouble if she's mad at me, no can she? There's a blip of hesitation there that makes me second-guess that idea. "Just ... hurry up, please. Something is really wrong here."

“We’ll be right there. Stay on the line with me, Lem.”

“Let me drive,” Ash says, grabbing my wrist before I can open the door. I let my gaze slide over to his, cold as ice.

“Nobody drives my fuckboy’s car but me.” The words come out in a growl, but then I hear Lemon suck in a sharp breath on the other end of the line, and I know we’ve got to haul ass. I yank the door open and slide in, taking comfort in Bohnes’ scent as it surrounds me.

Ash hops the hood—to show off, I guess—and then climbs into the passenger seat. Before I even really register what’s happening, Widow and his baseball bat are in the back seat.

Right.

Southside Avengers assemble, I guess.

Without a word, I hand the phone back to Ash and hit the throttle.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER TWO' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily splattered with bright red, blood-like stains that drip down the page, creating a macabre and violent atmosphere.

CHAPTER  
TWO

## *Scarlett*

The distance from the track to the edge of the city where this mysterious address is would take the average driver about a half an hour. But for my bad self, driving that sexy-ass Chevy Chevelle? May as well be next-door. It takes me all of ten motherfucking minutes.

As we drive, Ash turns the speaker on so that I can hear her breathing, the sound of her soft footsteps as she paces nervously.

“Maybe I’m just going crazy?” she murmurs quietly, and the pacing stops. “But I swear, I heard my car door open and shut when I was on the back porch.” She exhales again as I tighten my hands on the wheel, making a right turn and heading down a long stretch of road with woods on either side.

There are houses here, but each lot is zoned for a minimum two acres. Most are still much larger and owned by one of three local logging companies.

“Just stay calm and stay inside; we’re almost there.” Ash stares out the windshield, the fingers of his left hand playing across the swollen and bloodied seam of his pretty mouth. Widow remains silent in the back seat, just in case. A trump card. Nobody has to know he’s with us.

“You were at the track?” she asks eventually, and I swear, I can feel the tension radiating off of Ash’s still and silent form.

“Just killing time while I waited for you,” he replies easily, and his words are so convincing that *I* almost believe them. Damn, he’s good. So good that it’s scary, actually.

“Killing time with Scarlett?” she asks, and I give a derisive snort in response. Even as I’m worried about her, I’m annoyed with her, too. This better not be like that one time she swore up and down that there was a shadow man living in her closet; she made me sleep over for a week until I proved her wrong.

“I don’t want your sleazy, pervert of a fiancé, Lem,” I snap back as the GPS on Aspen’s phone alerts us that our

destination is coming up on the right. What the hell is this place anyway?

“Really? Because that’s not what I’ve heard.” Her voice is low, but that green envy is now limned with cherry-red rage. “Tuesday said she saw you two making out at Bohnes’ party—right after you pushed me into the mud and left me to walk miles down the road by myself. Want to explain that, huh?”

Ash glances my way, and I meet his eyes briefly, noting the spark of fear in them before he blinks it away. He continues to trace his bloody mouth with a single finger, staring at the dash in thought.

“You know about that and still, you want to marry the guy?” I snap back at her, and she just gives a soft, haughty laugh in response.

“Aspen, do you love me, baby?” she asks, rather than responding to my question.

“Of course, sweetheart,” he purrs, biting onto his thumbnail and gritting his teeth. “You know what I promised you: after we’re married, no more fooling around.”

Widow lets out a small sound from the back seat, one that clearly says he isn’t impressed by any of this. All the while, Aspen lies dead and bloody in the trunk. Such is a typical Saturday night in South Prescott.

“Just hurry up, baby.” Lemon’s voice softens slightly. “We can talk about this all later. Trust me, I know better than anyone how Scarlett can be.”

I just can’t help myself; I throw another insult back at her.

If only I hadn’t done that.

Life is full of shit like that, you know?

What if I hadn’t clapped back for once in my life? What if I’d tried to be nicer, more understanding? What if I’d let my pride and hurt feelings go just this one time?

What-ifs are one of the most deadly and morose loops a person can travel. They never end; there is no finish line, no

checkered flag to wave. It's a race full of losers that I refuse to participate in.

At least, I always thought I was strong enough to resist such a pull.

"How *I* can be? Maybe if you weren't so goddamn sad and desperate, your man wouldn't have come to the track tonight looking for me?" *Looking to shoot me and then rape my bleeding body, to be exact.* None of which is her fault, I know that. But here she is on the phone defending Aspen Kelly—the real Aspen Kelly, not the shiny new one sitting in the passenger seat—when the guy came at me intending to ruin or even take my life.

"You can't control me anymore, Scarlett. I know that's hard for you to accept. *Get over it.*"

Lemon hangs up the phone as I make the right turn onto the curving dirt driveway that winds through the woods and up to a large house with a wraparound porch.

"Shouldn't you be jumping in more?" I ask, and Ash just sighs, tossing the phone into one of the Chevelle's cupholders.

"If Aspen were here, in this same situation, he'd find it amusing. He'd encourage the two of you to bicker and fight over him and then he'd go home and masturbate to thoughts of it." Ash looks down at the disheveled state of his suit and sighs heavily. "Trust me: if I know how to do anything well in this life, it's how to play my brother."

He opens the door before I even come to a complete stop and hops out.

"Whoa, who owns the Ferrari?" Widow asks as I turn off the Chevelle's engine and we get out together. I scan the woods first before I return my attention to the vintage yellow beauty parked beside us.

Aspen pauses halfway up the porch steps and glances back, face schooled into careful disdain.

"I bought it as a gift—for my *fiancée*." He emphasizes this last part, removing the keys he took from Aspen's jacket



pocket so that he can unlock the house's front door. "Just like I bought this house," he adds, and then he's heading inside.

Jesus.

The real Aspen bought Lemon a yellow '76 Ferrari 308 GTB, a two-hundred thou gift, easy.

I wet my lips with my tongue.

"Let's go." I turn away and head up the steps with Widow hot on my heels, but not before turning and looking out at the woods again. Just as I felt that strange sense of *other* when I approached the side door at my house earlier, I feel it here.

Lem's right: someone is watching us from the woods.

We find Ash and Lemon upstairs in one of the house's empty bedrooms. His arms are around her and he's stroking her hair back, murmuring soft words under his breath. His eyes meet mine above her head, and a hot flash of annoyance takes over me.

*He's mine, goddamn it.*

The thought hits me like a gut punch, and I'm immediately annoyed with myself. *Will he have to fuck her? Would he, even if he should in order to keep up appearances?* I have no idea.

Lemon pulls away from Ash, gazing up at him with undying devotion. With a sigh, I cross my arms over my chest. I've seen this look before, many times. Besides that, does she not realize there's something off about Ash the way I did when I was around Aspen?

Leave it to us to each pick one guy in a set of twins. To my credit, I picked the better of the two. Not sure either is (or was, I guess) a smart choice whatsoever.

"Scarlett." She clings to Ash's arm, dressed and styled differently than I'm used to. Her short, blond hair is in this slick wave, like some 1920s movie star while her dress is short and tight, shiny and silver and flattering. *Expensive*. "And ... Widow?" she asks, looking back up at Ash in question.

He doesn't bother to respond to her. Instead, he moves away from her and over to one of the windows.

“What is he doing here?” Lemon asks, getting defensive as she studies the three of us with a questioning look on her face.

We’re in a rough state, to be sure. Widow is fucked-up and carrying a bloody baseball bat. I’m sure I’ve got blood speckles here and there, a knife clutched in one hand. Aspen’s pants are wet with blood—though it’s hard to tell since they’re black—and his right eye is beginning to swell shut.

Surely, she’s wondering what happened between us before we jetted over here to rescue her ass. With a roll of her eyes, she moves back over to stand beside Ash, frowning as she notices the Chevelle parked beside her sexy new Ferrari.

“Bohnes’ car, really?” She turns to look at me, her eyes dark with unspoken accusations.

“We rushed over here together to save you,” I breathe, moving further into the room to stand beside Ash. He’s just staring out the window, like he can sense the same thing that both Lemon and I did.

Someone is out there, creeping around in the woods.

Moonlight drips through the canopy here and there, dotting the darkness with silver, and a heavy fog has settled over the landscape, obscuring the repeating lines of tree trunks and the bushy thickets of blackberries.

“Why don’t we just get the fuck out of here?” Widow asks, moving up to peer out the window, too. “*Before* we get into trouble.”

“There are at least a half-dozen men out there,” Ash murmurs, and then he’s biting his thumbnail again which is sort of cute since I have the same habit. His eyes flick my way, and I raise my brows. How could he possibly know that?

But then I see them, moving toward the house from various directions.

Why didn’t they come for us when we were outside? They could’ve put rounds through each of our skulls before we were even fully aware of the danger present. And why leave Lemon in the house alone all this time?

*Because they were waiting for someone.*

More than likely, they were waiting for Aspen Kelly.

“Wait here.” Ash pulls away from Lemon, and she makes a small sound of protest. The look he throws back at her is dripping with dominion and sovereignty, like he’s a prince or something. “*Wait.*” He grinds his teeth together and then takes off down the stairs by himself.

Pretty sure he just came to the same conclusion that I did.

I smell a plot.

“Let’s go,” I command, making a split-second decision. I move over to the window and push it up, gesturing out at the roof. “We can use the porch railing to climb down.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Lem declares obstinately, crossing her arms over her small breasts and looking at me like I’m the enemy instead of her best friend of thirteen years. “Aspen will handle this.” She smirks at me. “Do you know what this place is, Scar? It’s my future home.”

I resist the urge to cunt punch her, toss her over my shoulder, and carry her out of here. I have a really bad feeling about this.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, darling, but I don’t give two fucks. *Let’s go.*” When I move forward to grab her arm, she jerks away from me, eyes flashing with hurt.

“Aspen is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Why can’t you just be happy for me and support me?” I take another step forward and she moves back again. “Instead, you humiliate me in front of the whole school, crash my engagement party, and try to steal my man when you’ve *clearly* got a whole collection of dick going on.”

She gestures loosely in Widow’s direction, but he isn’t paying any attention to her. Instead, he’s positioned near the bedroom door, back to the wall, head turned to one side as he listens for any activity from downstairs.

The fact that we haven’t heard anything yet must mean that I was right: those men, whoever they are, were waiting for

Aspen.

Aspen, who's dead in Bohnes' trunk.

What a mess.

"Listen to me, Lem," I begin, getting my Queen of the Crimson Crew voice on. "If you just climb out onto the roof and get into the car, I'll let you insult me as much as you want. I'll even apologize for kissing Aspen. How does that sound?"

She looks askance at me, all glamoured up and looking like a different person altogether. In my heart, I wish that Aspen had loved Lemon the way he'd proclaimed. Truly, all I've ever wanted was for her to be happy.

She opens her mouth to respond and then pauses as we hear the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

"It's Aspen," Widow breathes, and we all go still, waiting, watching.

He appears in the doorway, dark eyes wide, breathing heavy.

Our gazes meet, and then there's another set of footsteps on the stairs followed by two more.

Ash moves into the room, reaching into his suit jacket and removing a Ruger. Whether it's the same gun he pointed at Widow on the track that day or his dead brother's, I'm not sure. He holds it down by his side, glancing over his shoulder as a man appears in the doorway.

"Baby, what's—" Lemon starts, but then Ash is turning and lifting the weapon up with two steady hands. He shoots the guy—whoever he is—right between the eyes, dropping him to the beautiful hardwood floors beneath our feet.

When the second guy moves into the doorway, Widow whips around and swings his baseball bat into the side of the guy's head with the sound of shattering bone.

"Out the window," Ash commands, turning to me as Widow slams the bedroom door closed and locks it. "We need to go *now*." He tucks the gun back inside his suit jacket, and I wonder if he isn't out of rounds. Aspen wasted quite a few shots as we struggled for control in the mud.

As I'm turning back to Lem, Ash grabs my arm and drags me forward, shoving me toward the window first.

"Go," he growls out, and then I'm standing barefoot on the roof while Lemon crawls out behind me. She's breathing heavily, but she isn't panicking. Annoying as she might be at times, she's still a Prescott bitch first and foremost.

Her eyes meet mine briefly, and I can see that she took note of Ash's concern for me; he pushed me out the window first for a reason.

I don't waste any more time worrying about fuckboys, climbing down from the roof and using the railing as I suggested as a foothold. Hopping into the dirt, I turn to offer Lem my hand, but she ignores it, kicking off her heels and getting down without any help from me.

My hand sneaks into the back pocket of my jeans, sliding my knife out as I watch the front door.

Something occurs to me then: *Lemon said she thought she heard someone open her car door.*

My eyes flick that way just in time to see a man climbing out of the Ferrari and lifting a gun in our direction.

"Lucy, down!" I scream, shoving her hard enough that she falls to her side in the dirt. The man's shot flies clear over her head, burying itself into the wall of the house. He moves around the front of the car like he's in no hurry.

No hurry and no threat.

He doesn't see us as dangerous whatsoever.

Widow leaps down from the roof, crashing into the man and knocking him into the side of the Ferrari a split-second before Ash lands beside us. He hauls Lemon to her feet as Widow extricates himself from the man, pushing away from him and swinging his baseball bat into the guy's stomach.

He looks around for the gun, but there's no time to look for it. Two other men are emerging from the front door, both of them holding firearms of their own.

“*Run.*” Ash whispers the word out with the slightest kiss of his posh accent, and then we’re all sprinting into the trees together. There’s no way to get to the Chevelle without putting ourselves directly in the line of fire, so we skip it altogether.

Instead, we head into the darkness, skirting trees and hopping lush clusters of ferns, dripping with dew in the moonlight. Rather than make it easier to see, the light is broken into pieces by the fog, leaving us with this wet, silver sheen that obscures the world and makes it hazy around the edges.

Ash leads the way though I’m not entirely certain he knows where he’s going either.

Not that it matters: we’re all lost here tonight.

When he skids to a stop and puts a finger to his lips, we all struggle to control our breathing.

The woods are silent but for the distant call of an owl.

“Are we safe?” Lem pants, scooting closer to Ash and grabbing onto his arm. He ignores her, dark eyes peering into the fog.

“We need to get back to the Chevelle,” I murmur, rubbing a hand down my face. We just left it there with Aspen’s body in the trunk. If one of those goons were to open it, our entire plan could go down in flames.

Ash might not be able to step into Aspen’s role.

Hell, for all I know, he’s destroyed any chance of that with his actions tonight.

“Let’s just abandon the cars and head for the road,” Lemon whispers, glancing over at me and Widow. “Do either of you have your phones? We could call our crew and get a ride out of here, at the very least. Backup, too, if we need it.”

I move to slide my phone from my back pocket when Widow reaches out and grabs my wrist.

There’s a rustling sound coming from ... somewhere.

A man appears in the fog, just a single dark silhouette calmly moving in our direction.

“Take Lemon and go,” Ash tells me, his dark eyes shadowed and impossible to read. He shoves her toward me, and I reach down, wrapping my fingers around her wrist. But when I try to pull her along with me, she yanks back at the last minute and throws herself at him.

“I’m not leaving you,” she declares, and then Widow is snatching my arm and yanking me away from my best friend. In retrospect, I’m damn sure he saved my life. In the moment, all I felt was pure tragedy.

Lemon.

Lucy Bree Hall.

The girl I’ve known since preschool.

As Widow drags me away from Ash and Lem, I see him step in front of her.

“Wait—” he starts, but that’s as far as he gets. Another man moves out of the woods from behind, and grabs Lemon by her hair. She’s dragged backward with a scream, and then a blade flashes silver in the moonlight.

“Lucy!” My voice is a ragged, broken thing, tearing from my throat like the scream of a wounded animal. It’s crazed and primal and entirely useless. The knife slides into her chest even as Ash is turning and slipping a knife of his own from inside his jacket. He attacks the man as Lem stumbles, her blood a brilliant ruby red in a stray shaft of light as it stains her silver dress.

That’s my destiny, I suppose, as the leader of the Crimson Crew.

Living, dressed in, breathing blood.

The first man that we spotted has a gun in his hand, but when Ash redirects his attention from the thug that stabbed Lemon and over to him, he drops it by his side, turns, and then takes off into the woods.

As Ash chases after him, I tear my own hand from Widow's strong grip and sprint back over to Lemon.

No.

No.

*NO!*

I'm there to catch her when she falls, like always.

Lemon's gurgling and choking, little air bubbles popping in the red that surrounds her mouth.

"Scar ..." she chokes out as my knife clatters on the forest floor, and I drag her against me, sinking to my knees with my friend's body in my arms. "It ... it hurts."

"You'll be fine; you'll be alright. It's okay, Lem. I'm here. I'm here. I got you." But it's all lies. I have the tongue of a snake. Satan would be proud to hear such sibilant shit slither past my naked lips. But lies can be prettier than truths sometimes, can't they? And there's no need to tell a dying person that they're ... that ...

"Scarlett!" a voice calls out, and I instinctively duck, curling my body over Lemon's as another gunshot goes off. A man's body stumbles and knocks into me before he goes down hard, careening over my back and crashing into the trunk of a nearby tree.

Widow moves up behind him, lifting his bat and bringing it down on the guy over and over again. Too many times to count. Only when the man goes still does he stop and turn back to look at me, panting hard, his eyes a brilliant, impossible gold when the moon kisses them with light.

"Hospital," I'm saying suddenly, lifting my head up and turning to see Ash sprinting toward me. He sets his own knife beside him as he goes down to one knee.

Our eyes meet over Lemon's body, and I know we're both aware that she's dying.

She's dying.



“Hospital,” I repeat, and I’m sure I look and sound like a wild woman.

“I couldn’t catch—” Ash starts, but he cuts off his sentence and lets the rest of his unsaid words hang in the air like smoke.

Without my even having to tell him, Widow bends down and collects both my knife and Aspen’s, tucking them into his pockets.

“Help me lift her.” It’s a command, the voice of a general on the battlefield. *Don’t look at the blood. Don’t look at the wound.* The color of Lemon’s blood is what concerns me. It’s so dark. Why is it so dark? And those bubbles around her lips ... *Don’t think, Scar. Act. Move.* I stand up, and both boys help me lift her.

To be fair, she weighs so little, any one of us could carry her by ourselves. But I don’t want to hurt her. I don’t want to hurt her any more than she’s already hurt.

“This way,” Ash pants, and we move as quickly as we can through the trees and the fog. It’s so damn cold and wet and dark that it seems like we’ll never make it back to the Chevelle, like maybe we’ll get lost in these woods and Lemon will die bathed in moonlight and fog.

Eventually, the porch light appears in the darkness like a beacon and there’s the Chevelle, materializing from the gloom like a hearse.

I climb into the back seat and the boys get Lem settled on my lap.

Even though I nearly took Ash’s head off for suggesting this earlier, I let him take the keys to Bohnes’ car.

“Drive fast,” I breathe out, and he nods, mouth pressed into a grim line.

Taking a corpse to the hospital maybe isn’t the smartest move in the career book of the modern-day criminal, but I’d rather go to jail than lose Lemon.

“Hey,” I whisper, stroking blond hair back from her forehead. Widow watches from the passenger seat while Ash

shows off his driving skills, whipping us around corners as fast as physically possible without throwing Lemon and me around in the back seat. “Hey, girl.”

“Scar ...” she whispers as hot tears roll down my face. There’s no part of my pessimistic little heart that believes my childhood friend is going to survive this. No part. But sometimes, even when we know the end result is futile, we fight. That’s what makes us human; that’s what tells us we’re still alive.

The moment we stop fighting, that’s when we die. Even if our hearts are still beating, death can come on swift wings, swoop in, and devour us whole.

“Just relax, sweet girl.” I lean down and kiss her forehead, my entire body quivering with adrenaline and fear as I keep her close, hold her to me, cuddle her for what is most certainly the final time.

“I need ...” she starts, choking and sputtering, blood spattering my face. *Fuck*. Fuck, fuck, fuck. “I want Aspen.” Lem lets out this horrible, little cry, and I just know we’re running out of time.

We’re not going to make it to the hospital.

Not even close.

Ash jerks the wheel to the left, sending the car careening into the grass beside the dark specter of the woods. He puts the Chevelle in park and takes off his seat belt, turning and leaning his body over the back of the front bench seat.

“I’m right here, baby,” he murmurs, reaching out and taking Lemon’s hand in his.

Even amongst all of this, she’s calling for him, reaching for him.

Not for me.

For a man who didn’t care if she lived or died.

A dead man.

My throat tightens up, but this isn't a moment for me to be selfish or even rational.

"Asp—" She can't quite finish his name, but she clings to his hand, her eyes on him and not on me. I tell myself it doesn't matter. It does. It's going to royally screw me later, isn't it? Her last moment and she doesn't want me, no matter how hard I fought for her, how much I loved her, how desperately I tried to save her from this fate.

*"Aspen is a snake, and if you don't extricate yourself from his coils now, you're going to find yourself suffocated and bleeding from the eyes."*

Well, maybe not the eyes, but the chest, the mouth ... Do people realize that being right all the time sucks? It's not fun. I don't open my mouth just to hear myself talk. I warned Lemon for a reason.

So, yeah, I was right.

Yay for me.

Aspen was—thankfully past tense—a goddamn snake.

None of that matters.

When the heart wants something, it'll turn shadows into sunlight.

"I ... love ... you so much," she chokes out, coughing and spasming as Ash pulls her hand to his face, staring down at her so earnestly that for a minute there, my head spins with possibilities. Does he actually care about Lemon? Shit, does he love her? He *looks* like he loves her.

*Consummate liar. Skilled liar. Beautiful liar.*

Talented thespian.

I need to be careful with this Ash Kelly.

"I love you, too, Lemon. I'll be right behind you. You don't have to face the unknown by yourself. That much I can promise you. Aspen Kelly will be there." Ash leans even farther over the seat, releasing Lemon's hand and cupping the side of her face with his elegant fingers. He closes the distance

between their mouths and then, as I sit there with my dying best friend on my lap, he kisses her bloodied lips.

She lets out a sigh followed shortly by a shudder and then ... that's it.

It's over.

Lem makes another horrible sound, and then it's as if she's in the grip of a seizure.

Ash draws back, watching the entire thing unfold with an unreadable expression on his face. His beautiful, bow-tie mouth is bloodied and neutral. Widow's amber eyes are narrowed, but he's trembling, as if this is as hard for him to watch as it is for me.

There's a minute or so there at the end where the invisible lines between life and death are blurred. Is the person you love so much still alive? Are they gone? Maybe it's not too late? What if I'd held tighter to her hand? What if Ash had driven just a little faster? What if I'd come down harder on Lemon, forbidden her from dating Aspen?

What if? What if? What if?

I suddenly find myself on that closed track, and grief bubbles up inside of me.

"Lem ..." The word falls from my mouth and then I'm sobbing. I'm hyperventilating and pulling her more tightly against me. *Even in her last, she called for him. Not for me. For him.* "Lemon!"

The scream rips out of me as I hug her close, rocking back and forth and sobbing dramatically. I mean, I can't even breathe. There are tears and snot, hiccups and choking, screaming. So much screaming.

I'm mumbling things, but I have no idea what words are coming out of my mouth.

I'm crying so hard that I can't breathe. Not that it matters. Do I need to breathe? Is air important right now?

"Scarlett ..." It's Widow. His voice is soft and gentle, enough so that it actually breaks me out of my hysterics for the

briefest instant. I look up and meet his amber eyes, my gaze sliding over to Ash.

He won't look at me. His head is turned to the side and his dark eyes are pinched shut.

Right.

We now have *two* bodies to worry about, and the night isn't getting any younger.

Sniffing and shaking, I somehow manage to pull my phone from my pocket.

"You can grieve all you want," Widow says, on his knees in the front seat, watching me with what I think is sympathy. Could be pity. There is a distinct difference between the two, in my opinion. "You don't have to do that just now. I wasn't calling your name to stop you. I just want you to know: I'm here if you need me."

I just stare at him.

I don't have the emotional energy to process anything that he's just said.

Instead, I pull up a name on my contacts list.

*My Dark Love Bohnes.*

He answers on the first ring.

"Yes, my sweet little ruckus?"

I don't even care that he's somehow blessed me with a horrible new nickname. The sound of his liquid shadow voice sweeps over me, pushing back the crest of my melancholic wave just enough so that I can keep my head above water. Sure, the foamy sea is still crashing around me, burning my nostrils and throat with salt water. Sure, I'm still breathing in too much liquid, still drowning, but his voice is a life raft, buying me precious time.

"Bohnes, I need you," I say, and there's no room for shame or pride to interfere this time.

It's just a simple fact.

As soon as he hears my voice, his hardens to steel.

“Where are you.” Not even a question. A demand. He’s coming for me.

“We’ll meet you outside of the old elementary school. What I have to say can’t be said over the phone.”

“Are you okay?” he asks me, his voice edged with suspicion and worry. There’s a kiss of frenetic energy there, too, like he’d tear the world in half to get to me. I really do owe him more credit than I give him.

“I’m ... alive.” That’s the only response I can think to give that doesn’t sound like a total bullshit lie. Lemon’s dead body is quite literally lying in my lap. Am I okay? Fuck no. I want to die. Never in my life have I wanted to just end things the way I do in that moment. “We’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

I hang up the phone and set it aside, staring down at my friend’s still face. Her eyes are partially open. I don’t like that. I reach out with two fingers and drag them closed.

“Drive, Ash.” My voice is hard, rough, like broken glass and gravel in a garbage disposal. I sound dreadful, and I don’t even care that I accidentally called him Ash out loud. “Now.”

He sits back down in the driver’s seat and starts the Chevelle. Prescott culture demands that I drive the car. How could I possibly let Bohnes see another man in his car? Another fuckboy? I can’t do that to him.

Yet, I can’t move either.

I sit there as he pulls off of the grassy strip and into the street, staring down at Lucy Bree Hall. My friend of thirteen (nearly fourteen) years, dead and gone. Over what?

One thing is clear: those men did not expect Ash to be here.

Oh no, they were waiting for *Aspen*.

Rage boils up inside of me, stabbing through my bubble of grief. I shed more blood, but it’s all on the inside, drenching and coloring my very soul.

*Aspen Kelly, if you weren't already dead, I would gut you like a fucking fish.*

I close my eyes and let the sobs begin again, allowing myself to get hysterical for one of the first times in my entire life.

Scarlett Force, completely and utterly undone.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a light grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER THREE' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by numerous red splatters and streaks, resembling blood, which are scattered across the letters and the surrounding area. The splatters are most prominent around the word 'CHAPTER' and extend downwards, creating a sense of violence or horror.

CHAPTER  
THREE



## *Scarlett*

We arrive at the old elementary school at the same moment Bohnes pulls up, driving my red and black '72 De Tomaso Pantera. I don't expect him to have a passenger. I really don't expect that passenger to be ...

"Alexei," I breathe, standing on the sidewalk, wet with Lemon's blood. The reason I chose this spot is because there aren't cameras. Not on any nearby buildings, not on the old school. There are no neighbors, just a junkyard of derelict school buses across the street and an abandoned building filled with meth and heroin addicts behind us, none of whom would ever make a credible witness.

The cops rarely came this way in the past. Now, with the mayor's careful withdrawal of police from the Prescott neighborhood, we're unlikely to see a single officer in any part of the southside let alone this one.

Quiet, dead, populated with zombies too strung out to remember they're supposed to be human.

"Miss Force." Alexei swallows hard, grabbing at the white glove on his right hand with his gloved left. He looks me up and down, pausing with his gaze on my face. It's hard for me to say what he's thinking or feeling right now but seeing as he offered up a chunk of his inheritance for my help in hunting down his father's killers, I don't think he's a threat.

Then again, I *am* a sucker for a fuckboy psycho.

Just like Lemon.

And that obsession of hers, it's ultimately what got her killed.

I won't allow myself to end up in the same situation.

Alexei's gaze drifts past me to Ash, and he blinks in surprise.

"Aspen?" he chokes out, and it occurs to me that he doesn't know about the twin thing. Nobody did. Not me. Not Lemon.

*Lemon.* “What on earth are you doing here?”

“Long story,” I whisper as Alexei’s gaze shifts to Widow. Ash seems just as surprised to see Alexei there. Same for me, if I’m being honest. Bohnes glares daggers at both Widow *and* Ash as he strides toward me.

It’s definitely a surreal moment, seeing these four boys together for the first time.

Each one of them seems surprised and confused by one or more of the others.

“What the hell happened?” Bohnes growls out, grabbing me and pulling me into his arms. He doesn’t hesitate. He doesn’t seem to notice the blood covering me. Instead, he drags me close and cages me against his black, skeleton-patterned hoodie. His breath is warm and comforting against my hair.

My intention is to pull away from him.

Only, once he’s got me in his arms, I can’t seem to find it in myself to move. Instead, my fingers curl in the fabric of his hoodie, and it’s like I’m clinging for dear life.

To Kellin Bohnes, of all people.

“Lemon’s dead,” I breathe, the words stirring up my feelings all over again. Her body, when I pushed it off of me to get out of the car, was still warm, still pliable, still human. I know the process of rigor is quick—two or three hours, I believe—and that ... decomposition isn’t far behind.

Bohnes’ grip on me tightens, and I can sense that he’s looking at Ash and Widow behind me. Likely, he’s wondering how the fuck we all ended up together in his car. Most especially, maybe, why the mayor’s son of all people is driving his Chevelle.

I push away from him, and, after a moment of resistance, he lets me go. But not far. Bohnes grabs onto my hand and uses the fingers of his other hand to tilt my face up so he can look at me.

He is undeniably pretty, with his shock-white hair and ice-blue eyes, skin like white jade, flawless and blemish free.

What little of it I can see anyway. Just his face mostly. His skeleton tattoos are mostly hidden, but for the ones on his hands.

“What happened, Scarlett?”

I glance back at the Chevelle. Pretty sure his intention in taking the Pantera and giving me his car was that mine was already wet with blood whereas his was clean. Not so anymore. The back seat and the trunk both are a mess.

Before I get a chance to answer, Bohnes releases me and takes a step past me, effectively putting himself between me and Ash, me and Widow.

I turn around in time to see Widow grit his teeth, but Ash, mouth still bloodied from Lemon’s last kiss, is just standing there, frowning prettily, dark eyes sparkling with myriad emotions.

“I assume you’re the good twin then?” Bohnes asks casually, and my eyes widen.

He knew?! He fucking knew?! How? And is it just because he’s that good? Because I’m that dense? Something else?

“Good?” Ash queries, licking his lip and then shuddering in revulsion. He stumbles over to the bushes and, as we all stand there in total silence, retches into them. He doesn’t seem to have anything in his stomach, just spit and bile and the blood from his lips apparently. He stands up and swipes the sleeve of his suit jacket across his mouth; the diamond cufflinks look obscene in the moonlight, speckled with blood as they are. He turns back to us and finishes his thought, as if he didn’t just vomit on the edge of the sidewalk. “Better. But not good.”

Bohnes turns his head to look at Widow, his movements slow and controlled, but brimming with unused energy. He squeezes his hands into fists on either side of him, releases them, cracks his knuckles.

“I can take a guess as to how one of the Kelly boys ended up entangled with the death of Lucy Hall. But you?” Bohnes laughs, the sound as dry as old, well, bones rattling. He points a bloodied, inked finger at Widow. “What part do you play in

all of this? Last I heard, you two—or one of the Kellys anyway—were fighting down at the track.”

Widow stares Bohnes down unflinchingly, a feat which must be appreciated and acknowledged. Not many people are capable of such a monumental task.

“Scarlett is my woman,” he explains, and Bohnes shudders and spits on the sidewalk. “I’m here because of her. For her. That’s it. Nothing else.”

“Before we get into all that ...” I interrupt, glancing back at Alexei. He still has that stricken, forlorn look about him. I think about how upset he was earlier, when I let him off on Main Street and watched him walk away. I meant to call out to him, but then I got the call about Aspen and Widow.

“The good ... twin?” Alexei murmurs under his breath, his pale green eyes widening slightly. He adjusts himself slightly, angling away from Ash and staring down at the sidewalk as he rubs at his chin with a gloved hand. “*Twins.*” His eyes meet mine, and I realize that I better start talking—and quick.

Any one of these guys could—and would—kill any one of the others.

Alexei knows the police chief killed his father; the mayor and the police chief are buddies.

Standing here, in the desolate dark, is the mayor’s son.

“Don’t hurt him, please,” I manage to choke out, and all four boys turn to look at me. The pressure of their combined gazes is staggering. What was it that I said? That I could handle men like this?

Sure. But four of them? At the same time?

“Just ... give me the chance to explain.” My mind whirls as I consider the implications of this moment. It’s a game-changer. From this point forward, nothing will ever be the same again.

*Lemon.*

I should’ve grabbed her by the hair and thrown her out the damn window. If I had, could I have gotten her into the

Chevelle and rocketed out of there before it was too late? What if I'd been nicer to her—on the phone and in person? If so, would she have been more willing to listen to me? If I'd reached out earlier in the week and apologized for coming to her engagement party uninvited, would that have altered her fate?

I reach up with both hands and hit myself in either side of the head with both fists.

“No what-ifs, Scarlett. No what-ifs. It's a closed track.”

The boys continue to stare at me, all four of them, four possible fuckboys gathered in one place. It's the first time I've ever seen them together like this, actually. It's a bit disconcerting. Not a one of them is related to, friends with, or connected to any other.

Surprisingly enough, it's Alexei who reaches out and grabs my wrist, drawing my fist away from my head. He bloodies his glove a little, shuddering and swallowing in revulsion, but he doesn't release my wrist. He holds it still, as if he's worried that I might hit myself again.

“What the fuck are you doing with Alexei Grove?” I say to Bohnes instead. I need to understand this. I need to understand something. Anything.

*Lemon is dead. She's fucking dead. Your best friend is dead. You'll have to tell Nisha and Basti. There's no nice way to avoid this. They have a right to know, don't they?*

I crush those thoughts under the high heel of immediacy.

I have things to do.

Namely, I have to get rid of not one, but two bodies.

Which, you know, is why I called Bohnes. Has nothing to do with my feelings, and the fact that when I said, *I need you* to him over the phone, I didn't just mean for work-related reasons.

“He seemed to find himself alone and stranded on Main Street; we have an agreement.” Bohnes shrugs, as if that's explanation enough. Right. Because Alexei went to Bohnes in

order to find a place to stay. And not because of me, just because Bohnes' reputation precedes him in any and all circles.

And yet ... I feel like Bohnes isn't telling the whole truth. He seems almost frantic, like maybe he was so concerned about getting to me that he didn't consider Alexei in his haste.

It'd be a rare mistake for Bohnes to make, certainly. Does he like me that much?

"I almost called out to you," I say, glancing over at Alexei, wondering why I'm even bringing this up when we have two bodies to deal with, one of which is my best friend. But it's so much easier to focus on something else, on an event that happened mere hours ago but feels like years.

Was it really earlier this evening that I ordered a steak and scallops at the country club with Alexei? That I drove to a cemetery to bury the body of the mayor's hired gun and ended up surrendering that task to Bohnes instead?

Man, my body count is getting ridiculous.

"Don't worry about me, Miss Force." Alexei releases my wrist and then, with yet another convulsive shudder of repulsion, he removes his bloodied glove and turns it inside out. He very carefully uses the wadded-up material of it to pull off the other glove. They both go back in my Pantera, and he reemerges with black latex gloves on instead. "Now, what's the problem at hand?"

*God, he's weird as fuck. I like him. A lot.*

I turn back to Bohnes. He twists his big body around to examine me, his jaw clenched, his pale eyes dark with enough emotion to choke a horse.

I ignore all of that.

Practicality. Reality. Immediacy.

Without a word, I move over to the trunk of the Chevelle and open it, standing back so that Bohnes can see the other wonderful surprise I've dragged along with me. Waiting there

for him to see and fully grasp the extent of what I'm asking, I actually wonder if *I* shouldn't be his fuckgirl instead.

Like, who really has the power here?

I'm the one bringing all the baggage.

First, the drunk driver brat and his parents. Then, the mayor's hired gun. Now, my best friend and fiancée of the *mayor's fucking son* who also just so happens to be dead.

It doesn't take Bohnes more than a few seconds to start putting pieces of the puzzle together. It's why he's the fixer for Prescott High, the cleaner, the go-to man for every dark and dirty deed.

His level of intelligence is frightening sometimes.

"This is Aspen Kelly?" he queries mildly, as if he were looking into a trunk full of stolen, rusted auto parts (a common scene around Prescott High) instead of at the mayor's dead kid.

"No," Ash breathes, gritting his teeth as Bohnes swings his gaze in his direction. Widow tenses up, but doesn't move, says nothing. He's clearly uncomfortable around so many other monsters.

Oddly enough, I'm not.

Cute young girl, four big dudes with weapons? I should be pissing myself. Instead, I feel strangely at peace. Shock has set in, and I feel almost Zen-like, as if I could allow my consciousness to melt into the vast energy of the universe, lose my ego, and not care if I never had another thought ever again.

Of course, that's just the grief talking. Scarlett Force has an ego bigger than the landmass of Pangaea.

"No?" Bohnes repeats, this time turning his terrifyingly dark gaze back to me. And by dark, I mean in intent and content. His eyes are as pale as the melting arctic.

"For all intents and purposes, this is now Aspen Kelly," I explained, gesturing randomly at the boy in question. Ash. The one I fucked. The only one I liked. Some deep instinct in me

knew exactly when Ash was Aspen and Aspen was Aspen, and holy shit, my head is killing me.

“My father does not care whether Ash lives or dies; he has worked tirelessly to mold Aspen’s cruelty into his own image. Does that make sense?” Ash crosses his arms over his chest. His right eye is absurdly swollen and purple now. That gorgeous mouth of his is not only stained with drying blood, but also puffy. I hit him with just the right amount of force.

“I see.” Bohnes looks back down at the body in the trunk. “How did this all happen?”

Alexei moves over to stand beside him, swallowing hard and then reaching down with his gloved hand to turn the corpse’s face toward him. His perfect, princely mouth parts in surprise, and then a sharp, cruel satisfaction flashes across his handsome features.

He sneers, and then, as if he just can’t help himself, he smiles.

Alexei blinks a few times and then stumbles back, as if he’s just realized what he’s done, tearing yet another pair of gloves off and replacing them as the rest of us look on.

I turn back to Bohnes, gathering up the courage to speak. When Widow moves toward me, as if he might reach out and comfort me, Bohnes flashes him a warning look and the two of them freeze in opposition to one another.

Fuck. I better start talking *quick*.

“He tried to rape me; I killed him. That’s the condensed version of the story.” I almost take a step back when Bohnes’ gaze snaps up to mine; his rage is palpable. “Ash—pen.” Whoops. “He showed up just after I loaded the body in the trunk; Widow came on us and thought I was betraying the rules of the track. I had to tell him.” I don’t have to explain that Widow beat Aspen and therefore banned him from sleeping with me; Bohnes knows. “Lemon ...” I choke on the words and try to swallow past them.

They’re gagging me.

The pain is suffocating me.



I can't breathe.

I lean heavily against the shiny black surface of the Chevelle, resting my cheek against the cool metal. Cars are so simple, aren't they? They don't manipulate people; they don't make people fall in love and then betray them.

"Lemon called Aspen's phone to ask for help." I swallow again as Bohnes slams the trunk closed. "We went to her, but ... we couldn't save her."

"You want me to take care of the bodies?" Bohnes asks, his voice that of a specter, a ghost, some spirit in desperate need of an exorcism. There's something more to it, something that I can't quite put my finger on.

I look up at him, exhausted beyond belief, desperately sad.

How can I go on without Lemon? She's been a constant in my life for as long as I've been a fully conscious being. What do I do without her? What do I tell her aunt? I can't tell her aunt, can I?

"That's not all; I just wanted to see you." There it is, an admission of vulnerability. It exhausts me even further, to the point that I wonder how I'm even still standing. Slowly, my body sags down until Bohnes catches me with an arm around the waist.

He hoists me to my feet and keeps me there, pressed up against him.

"However you generally deal with this sort of thing," Ash begins, his gaze straying to the trunk again. *I knew it*. He may truly be glad that his brother is dead, but he's also grieving. Now, I'm not a twin myself, so I can't speak on whether or not twins have some special connection that goes above and beyond that of other siblings, but I know what it's like to lose a brother.

I lost one once, in a car accident that didn't need to happen. Because some idiot drove drunk and then used daddy's money to weasel out of serving any time for his crimes. Same said weasel came to my house and taunted me, taunted my mother, my aunt, my grandmother.

So I fucked him up.

Ash ... doesn't look like he wants to fuck me up. I don't even know what to do to make him feel better right now. Kiss him again? Fuck him? I'm not sure I have the gusto or the energy for either of those things now. At this exact second, I might swear that I'll never have the energy or gusto for those things ever again.

It's a lie, of course.

I'm Scarlett Motherfucking Force, obviously.

Endless. Infamous. Legendary.

"You won't be able to dump this body quite the same way," Ash finally finishes, and I realize that I'm starting to get too tangled up in thoughts and philosophy. No. No, I don't have time for that shit. "My father may not love Ash or really care if he's gone, but he'll still hunt him to the edges of the earth. We need to make this look like an accident."

"Or a suicide," I suggest, glancing over at Widow. Is he regretting getting involved in this now? Doesn't look like it. He seems more annoyed than anything else, like this is a dance between Bohnes and Ash, and he wants a part to play.

Alexei ... he's harder to read. He can't seem to stop looking at the blood that's all over me, sticky and gross and smelling like old pennies. Until I shower and change, I can't escape the horror of it. It's painted across my skin, a sadistic replay of *Carrie* in real time. Only, it's not pig's blood this time: it's best friend blood.

Best friend blood drying between my breasts.

Best friend blood sticking my shirt to my stomach.

Best friend blood soaking my crotch.

"Put him in that pretty car of yours," Alexei begins, stepping forward, his blond hair miraculous under the silver moonlight, almost metallic. "Jack the rear wheels up, shove his foot down on the gas, hands on the wheel. Kick the jack out and send him off a cliff. When the car crashes, it'll catch

fire and hopefully hide the evidence of his true cause of death.”

The rest of us turn to look at Alexei, blinking through shock. At least, in my case that’s what’s happening.

“I’d heard the Borisov family had connections to the mob. Thanks for confirming that for me.” Bohnes looks over at Ash. “Have you or your brother ever been fingerprinted?”

“Not to my knowledge.” Ash looks down at his hands, both of which are marred with Lemon’s blood. He lifts his gaze back up and drops his arms to his sides, releasing a very tired sounding sigh. “Who knows what my brother got up to in his own time, but I imagine that—with his particular proclivities—that he would avoid being fingerprinted at all costs.”

“The DNA test should check out—unless you’ve had a sample taken in the past. Identical twins don’t necessarily have the same DNA profile. In very rare cases, genetic mutations can occur in the womb. That’s relatively new information, so maybe it won’t matter?” I pull away from Bohnes, just enough so that he drops his arm.

I need space from him to think properly.

“Again, not to my knowledge.” Ash looks back at the Chevelle. “This should work, provided there’s no bullet lodged in his arm. I didn’t think to check.”

“I’ll do it.” Bohnes shoves the trunk open before looking over at me. “Where did you shoot him?”

“Upper right arm.”

We all stand there in silence as Bohnes goes about moving the corpse around. He examines Aspen’s arm, looking for any remaining evidence.

“I don’t see anything. Where did this happen? Is there blood left over at the scene?”

I nod, the weight of my mistake pushing down on me so heavily that my knees buckle again, and I catch myself on the trunk of the car. If I hadn’t taken Aspen out there to talk, I

wouldn't be in this situation. I should've known better. I usually *do* know better.

Ash bamboozled me.

I've been tricked by a mere fuckboy. Me, Scarlett Motherfucking Force.

"Get in the car, Scarlett." Bohnes nods with his chin in the direction of the Pantera and then closes the Chevelle's trunk. "Take me there." He moves over to the driver's side and pauses at the back door, opening it to look in at Lemon.

I can't bear to see her like that, so I head for the driver's door of my own car, climbing in and finding Alexei doing the same on the passenger side. Which means ... I look up to see Widow getting in the front seat of the Chevelle while Ash ... sits in the back.

With a corpse.

The fiancée of his dead twin brother.

He kissed her last, dying breath out of her; it's an image I'll never be able to forget for as long as I live.

With a shudder, I start the Pantera, my nostrils flaring at the faint scent of chemical cleaner from the direction of the trunk.

Because I can't bear the weight of my own thoughts, I switch on KMZI 66.6.

*Lucid Dreams* is playing, but not the original version by Juice WRLD, a cover by Fame on Fire. I'm aware that it's a break-up song, but as soon as I hear the lyrics *I should've listened to my friends*, I reach out and slam my palm into the radio, shutting it off.

Lemon should've listened to me, goddamn it.

I punch the steering wheel with a wild growl, sending us careening back and forth briefly as Alexei sits quiet and still in the passenger seat. Why can't I rewind time just a few hours? I could've prevented all of this.

*I could have ...* It's the same damn thing as *what if*.

“My father was shot through the head by the chief of police,” Alexei says softly, even though I already know that. “Just last night. Him being alive and healthy, and his being dead, a mere fraction of a second apart. I keep asking myself all of these impossible questions.” He spreads his gloved hands, fingers wide, and stares down at slick, latex-wrapped palms. “What if I’d made some sort of noise? What if I’d thought to grab a gun and take it with me when I climbed out onto the roof? Could I have saved him?”

Tears well up in my eyes, but I don’t look at Alexei. Just the road. Only the road.

“What-ifs and could haves are a closed track,” I whisper. “A road that leads to nowhere. Abso-fucking-lutely nowhere. Life is supposed to be, well, not to sound cliché or anything, but an open highway. Open road. Endless ribbons of possibility. A road trip.”

“If there’s something to learn from the situation, absorb it. Otherwise, grieve but don’t question yourself.” Alexei drops his hands to his lap and leans back against the seat, closing his sea glass colored eyes. Like two pebbles I could theoretically stumble across on a deserted beach.

“Good advice,” I admit, reaching up to swipe an arm across my face. “You following it?”

Alexei hesitates a moment, but then he opens his eyes and, grudgingly, shakes his head.

“I really was going to call you back,” I say, trying to think about anything other than my dead friend. *Oh Lucy Hall, you idiot. You boy-crazy moron.* I wonder briefly if I’m not the worst hypocrite ever born. I’m chastising Lemon for following her man into an early grave because—quite clearly—that was some sort of planned hit that Aspen was meant to be involved in.

At the same time, here I am, with four very dangerous boys in my orbit.

What happens if they collide with one another? What happens if there’s conflict amongst them? How can I solve it?

Would I even be *able* to solve it?

“As in, I rolled down my window and ... I got an urgent text message.” One that I should’ve ignored. I should’ve let it pass me by, yelled for Alexei to get back in the car, and talked things over with him. If I had, maybe I could’ve—

Crap.

I’m doing it again.

“You’re under no obligation to assist me,” Alexei Grove says in that snooty, Russian-y way of his. “But if you’d like to, perhaps we could help each other?”

“You’re not gonna rat-fuck me over this, are you?” I ask, even though I can read people pretty damn well and I know for a fact that Alexei is not the type to go snitching. Nah. As soon as he grabbed Aspen’s arm to keep him from striking me, I knew. When he told me wouldn’t dare leave me at the gallery because I was his date, all chivalrous and shit.

“Rat-fuck?” he asks, as if he’s never heard the term before.

“American slang for dirty political bullshit. Pretty sure it was coined in the seventies or something in regard to Watergate.” I shrug my shoulders. “Around here, it just means ... snitching, basically. Like, what’s to stop you from turning me in for killing—” I almost say Aspen again. Oops. I need one of those electric shock dog collars or something. Ash, buzz. Aspen, buzz. “Killing Ash.”

Alexei considers that for a moment.

“Integrity?” he suggests, which makes me laugh. It’s not a very friendly laugh. It sounds like a rockslide made up of bones and black-market organs, a little dry, a little squishy since I’m still so snotty. “Gratefulness? The mayor’s son is dead; I’m ecstatic.” He adds a little exclamation on the end of that, something that sounds like *kruto* which I’m just assuming is Russian.

“Not because I might kill ya?” I query, appreciating the distraction from my thoughts.

“Miss Force,” Alexei begins, still oh so conversational. “I imagine a deadly conflict between the two of us would end with one or the other hospitalized.”

Under normal circumstances, a comment like that might make me blush.

Not today.

The best I can hope for is numb and empty.

We pull into the campground spot with the Chevelle hot on my ass. I open the door and climb out, leaving my headlights to shine across the churned mud and blood mixture near the picnic table. It’s been raining on and off since we left, so it’s more diluted now, but still conspicuous as fuck.

“First, we need to find the bullet.” Bohnes takes off and I follow after, Ash and Widow close on our heels. Unsurprisingly, while Alexei does manage to get out of the car, he does not join us in parsing through the bloody mud to search for it.

“Here it is,” Widow says, hand dripping brown and red as he lifts up a bullet made shiny from the rain. I hold out my hand, and he drops it into my palm.

“Thank you, Adrian.”

He stands up and rakes his fingers through his wet hair as I tuck the bullet into my pocket and step back so that Bohnes can do his thing. Ash says nothing, but there’s an almost fanatical glimmer in his gaze as he picks at the diamond cufflinks he stole from his brother’s body.

Bohnes moves over to the trunk of the Pantera, opens it, and removes a large plastic container, the same one he used on Evelyn’s bloodstain. He pours a generous amount of it over the blood, making it bubble and froth in a disturbing, alchemical sort of way.

“This place is fairly deserted, and with the rain, this should be enough,” Bohnes remarks acerbically. He flicks his tongue over his lip as he turns to me. “Lemon first then?”

My heart seizes, and I resist the urge to start screaming. Once I do, I won't stop.

Looking down at my ruined shirt, it's impossible to forget that my name is Scarlett, my crew is Crimson, and that I hate the color red. Hate it, hate it, *loathe it*.

"Lemon first," I agree, glancing over at Ash. "What car did you drive here?" I ask him, and he offers me up a tight, humorless smile.

"When I saw that the Fastback was missing, I knew right away that Aspen was coming here. He only ever takes ... *took* ..." Ash trails off for a second and then shakes his head. "He only ever took my car when he was pretending to be me. I drove the ... Cobra."

Right.

The car that Aspen was driving when he shot Evelyn in the face. Fantastic.

"I'll take the Fastback now and we can use it to dump him."

I nod and turn back to Bohnes.

"Can you give Widow and ... *Aspen* a ride back to the track to get their cars? I'll keep Alexei."

"Of course, provided everyone ditches their phones here; we'll come back for them later," he adds, hesitating as the other boys move to climb into the Chevelle and the Pantera.

Bohnes, though, Bohnes stays.

"Spend the night with me," he murmurs, looking out at me from inside the shadows of his hood. It's black, with a white skeleton pattern, the perfect complement to his shock-white hair and tattoos. "Doesn't matter where. A nice hotel. Your bedroom. My place. The woods."

I think on that for a moment.

"I'm not in the mood for sex, Bohnes. Especially not the sort of sex we have."

He snorts at me and shakes his head.



“Did I say it was for sex?” he queries, and then he, too, turns and heads back to his car.

As soon as I slide my butt onto the supple leather of the Devil, I see the time on the radio. It’s almost midnight now. We have two bodies to deal with plus clean-up.

The night stretches out, this endless, ugly, hulking thing.

Alexei seems to realize that I’m struggling. He turns the radio back on; it’s *Kill the Noise* by Papa Roach.

Mm. No offense to Papa Roach, but I need to bring the noise, not kill it.

In the end, it’ll be the silence that really gets me, digs its claws right into my soul.

Guess I will let Bohnes stay with me tonight after all.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. Overlaid on this background are several vertical and horizontal streaks and splatters of bright red, resembling blood. The text 'CHAPTER' is written in a large, white, serif font across the top, and 'FOUR' is written in a smaller, white, serif font directly below it. The red splatters are most prominent around the text, with some streaks extending downwards from the bottom of the letters.

CHAPTER  
FOUR

## *Bohnes*

Ah, my sweet Scarlett.

She attracts trouble the way she attracts followers, boys, and wins on the track. It frightens me to consider the holes she'd dig for herself if I weren't around. Tonight's issues are not easy ones to sort out.

Disposing of the first body was simple enough. Cleaning her car was a pain. In order to clean my Chevelle ...

I sigh heavily, glancing over at the man in my front seat.

Adrian Arden Lawless.

Murdered his shit-stain, pedophiliac uncle with drain cleaner. Went to juvie for five years. Newly released. Impossible to impress. Difficult to kill.

I chew on my lower lip for a moment in thought.

"You were stalking Scarlett, were you?" I query, and he glances my way, his eyes like gold coins as they reflect the glow from the stereo. Before Scarlett got too attached, I should've killed him myself. I'm worried that it's too late now.

She'd be very angry with me if I did it now, wouldn't she?

*"That's not all; I just wanted to see you."* Scarlett said that to me, didn't she? I didn't imagine it? I grin and then chuckle to myself, even if it makes me appear to be insane. Doesn't matter. I don't just look that way; I *am* insane.

"She refused to fuck me because of her loyalty to you." Widow pauses here, and scowls at me. The boy has trouble controlling his emotions. His obsession with my woman is so obvious as to be grotesque. Of course, every boy in Prescott (except for Bastian) wants Scarlett, many of the girls, too.

But nobody has ever panted after or chased her quite like this.

I'm not sure how to handle it.

*You could still kill him, Bohnes. Nobody would care. He has no friends, no intimate relationships, and his only family is the aunt whose husband he killed.*

Thus, the name Widow. Widow-maker, more like.

Nobody would care if he disappeared. Just another Prescott runaway. It wouldn't even make the news. They'd write him off the way they always do, a kid who's just a drain on society.

Only ... Scarlett would care.

"Scratch that—her loyalty to the track," Widow corrects with the sole purpose of annoying me. Too bad for him that I have a long fuse. Once it burns out, well, I'm not saying I don't have anger issues, but I'm too used to Prescott High and its bullshit. Kids talk crap all the time, but follow-through? Nah. Not a one of them possesses it the way Scarlett or I do. "I wanted to see if she would respect my win against Aspen."

Widow casts a look over his shoulder but turns away quickly. Can't blame him. The sight of a dead girl dressed in her own blood is never a pleasant sight. I'm used to burying men who deserve it. But, as stupid as Lucy Bree Hall was, she was a damaged, broken little girl with no support system. I get no pleasure out of seeing her dead.

I won't mourn her either, but this is definitely a different flavor than my usual cases.

"I see."

The conversation ends there. It's too morose for the three of us to shoot the shit with two bodies in the car. Ash, in particular, looks as if he's on the edge of hysteria. Even I'm not heartless enough to force conversation into this cold space.

It does bother me, however, that my girl showed up with two men who aren't me.

I can't shake that.

Widow is a problem; Ash is a bigger problem.

*A problem for another day, Bohnes.*

The track is still lively for a Saturday night, but nobody pays us much attention when I pause at the entrance to the parking lot to let Ash and Widow out. If anyone here does notice anything amiss, well, they know the drill.

Snitches get stitches in Prescott—literally, oftentimes.

I rest my chin on the steering wheel, watching as the two of them disperse to their respective vehicles. Knowing that they—and not me

—were with Scarlett tonight when she needed backup is absolutely gruesome.

“Why won’t you put a leash on me, Miss Force?” I murmur, sighing and sitting up.

With Kelly and Adrian behind me, I head back down the road, collecting Scarlett’s Pantera as I go.

I drive us to a small pond on a large piece of logging property out near the Mohawk Valley. Nobody comes here. It’s private property, and it’s been logged recently. There are no trees, just stumps. Not only would a swim here constitute trespassing which many people aren’t keen to take on, but it’s a fairly unpleasant spot.

The pond, however, is deep. Twenty feet or so. I know because I’ve dived down to look. I’ve kept this place as a backup plan, just for an occasion such as this. There’s not room for multiple bodies here, just one. None of these boys can come back and use this against me without also implicating themselves.

First rule of burying bodies: tell no one where your secret spots are.

We park the cars and I climb out, ignoring the other men as if they don’t exist. Alexei Grove, well, he just happened to be with me when my woman called. I almost kicked him out onto the sidewalk, but he’s a potential multi-million-dollar deal in the making. I can’t treat my biggest client like that, now could I?

*You’re such a liar, aren’t you Bohnes?* I think to myself, roiling on the inside, angry and frustrated at my inability to think clearly earlier. When Scarlett called me, I panicked; I don’t often panic.

I take the fresh tarp from Scarlett’s trunk, the one I purchased after I finished up with whoever it was that she had me bury earlier. I still don’t know who that is, but I have my guesses.

Second rule of burying bodies: always keep supplies on hand. It’s far less suspicious to have the supplies *beforehand* than to stop by Walmart for bleach, a tarp, and duct tape in the middle of the night.

I lay the tarp out on the grass and then nod at Widow.

“Help me get the body out of the car.”

Scarlett watches impassively from the sidelines. I won’t ask her to help with this. That’d be far too cruel.

“Wait,” she says, choking on the word. She makes her way carefully over to Lemon’s body and sits down beside it. After a moment, she reaches out and takes the bracelet from the girl’s wrist. “You’ll be okay, Lem. In the next life, you’ll be a pop star.” Scarlett leans over and kisses the dead girl on the forehead, tears streaming freely down her face.

*Oh, how I love this woman,* I think, wetting my lips and swallowing past my grief. Not for Lemon. As I said, I won’t miss her even if I do pity her. But Scarlett? I can barely stand to see my woman cry; it kills me.

After a few moments of silver moonlight and distant animal sounds, Scarlett stands up and begins to strip herself down.

Alexei Grove, strange creature that he is, turns away with a small cough.

Widow watches Scarlett with undisguised but tamped down interest while Ash stares so blankly that I wonder where his mind actually is. Certainly, it isn’t here. Me? I appreciate my girl’s form, but I can’t take it any further than that.

There are too many things that need doing.

“Don’t leave your clothes here,” I warn, but Scarlett just shakes her head. She’s too smart for that. In her bra, panties, and sneakers, she turns away from me.

“No. I’d just rather wear Aspen’s blood than ...” She trails off, curses, and then corrects herself. “Ash’s blood. I’d rather wear Ash’s blood.” She sweeps past me to the Chevelle, switching her clothes out for a bloodied skirt and blouse, likely the outfit she wore to dinner with Alexei.

Hmm.

I slip out a knife from my boot and offer Scarlett a sympathetic look.

“I need to ... well, you might want to look away.”

She doesn’t take me up on the offer, so I do what I need to do. Bodies fill with gas; they’ll float after a while. Unless ... well, a plastic ball will float unless it has holes in it. Anyway, I take care of the problem and then, with Widow’s help, we wrap the body up, tape it, and then add a few holes to the tarp.

There’s a cinderblock out here, one that I dropped off long ago. This is attached to the tarp after carefully wrapping and knotting it

with heavy rope.

Once again, Widow and I heft the body up and then toss it as far as we can into the center of the pond.

“What about the other bodies?” Widow begins, glancing over at Scarlett. It kills me that I don’t know what they’re talking about.

“Someone else’s problem,” she responds, her gaze shifting to Ash Kelly. Excuse me, the new and improved *Aspen Kelly*. Does this twin also have antisocial personality disorder with narcissistic tendencies and a kiss of psychopathy? Wouldn’t surprise me if he did. “Now what?”

“We can clean up all at once; let’s deal with Mr. Kelly next.” I look over at his twin, his eyes now on the pond and the strange bubbles coming up as the body continues to take on water and sinks to the bottom.

“Any ideas on where we can do this?” Scarlett asks, rubbing at her face with both hands. She needs a shower, some hot food, and a back rub. I’m more than happy to provide that last one. I can be sweet; I can be tender. For the right person, obviously. Scarlett *is* my person. The only possible person for me. The only option.

She need but ask, and I’ll tame for her.

Well, sort of.

“I know a place, but it’ll be a bit of a drive,” Ash offers up, frowning heavily. “I’ll need a ride back to grab the Cobra afterward.”

“Lead the way,” I say, gesturing at his ‘68 Ford Mustang Fastback. Too bad the car has to bite the dust along with the rapist. Clearly, the car is far more valuable, but sometimes, sacrifices must be made. “Let Alexei drive your car, Force. Ride with me instead.”

She looks up at me like I’m nuts.

Clearly, I must be, suggesting she allow another man to drive her car. The thought makes me edgy, but I’d rather have her with me than follow the usual Prescott rules. After all, tonight is clearly an emergency exception. I’ll forever be stuck with the image of Ash Kelly in the driver’s seat of my Chevelle.

Bile rises in my throat, but I swallow it back.

“Okay,” she says finally, sagging slightly, too tired to fight the suggestion. She tosses her keys to him and then gives him a look. “If

you want to go back to ... well, wherever it is you're staying, you can pick me up in the morning. We need to talk anyway."

"I'll come," Alexei offers, surprising me. But then his eyes sweep my woman, and I see that he, too, is a problem.

Of course he is.

Because Scarlett Force, well, she's honey and these boys ... they're *flies*.

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As soon as Scarlett is seated in the front seat, she turns on KMZI 66.6, ignoring the mellow tones of Milicent Patrick, the host for tonight. She's lamenting the current state of the neighborhood, a common theme as of late, but I know it's more for the noise than the content that Scarlett tuned in for.

To my great surprise and immense pleasure, Scarlett stretches out on the bench seat and puts her head in my lap. *What does this mean?* I wonder as my hand hovers, and I finally give in, sweeping hair back from her forehead. I adjust the steering wheel to give her as much room as possible and start the car.

"I thought I'd lived my worst day," she murmurs after a couple of minutes. It looks as if Ash is taking us down the 126 toward Florence. Ah, the coast. That's a good idea. Dump the car off the cliff into some rocks, and then let it get swept up by the sea. I like that. Very much so. "But today managed to top even that."

I stay silent, wondering how to process this, how to respond.

*I've been waiting for a moment like this.*

I've wanted for so long to see Scarlett Force relax around me, to give me some trust, and here's proof of that. I doubt that she's ever laid her head on another man's lap. I greedily grasp yet another first of hers, pocketing the memory to keep for myself.

"You need me tonight, just admit it." My voice is low, almost a purr. A true match for Milicent's sultry tones as she introduces the next song, and I reach out to turn down the radio. "I'll curl up around you in bed and keep you safe."

There's a long pause there where Scarlett thinks, and I hold my breath.



“My grandmother’s going to be upset if I don’t come home,” she begins, exhaling and sitting up. I lament the loss of her head in my lap, but at least I can look over and see the elegant outline of her face, limned by passing headlights as we make our way to the coast. Usually this drive takes about an hour and twenty. With me at the wheel? Much less than that. I have a police scanner and a radar on hand, just in case. “But fuck it. At best, we’ll be crawling back around, what, four? Five? I’ll text her and tell her I’m staying with Nisha. What’s one more lie?”

With a scoff, Scarlett sweeps her palm over her mussed hair. This moment should be tense and fraught with worry, but I’m so pleased to have her perfect thigh just an inch or so away from mine that I’m in a damn good mood considering.

“When I was neck-deep in this shit, when Lemon was breathing her last breath on my lap ...” And here Scarlett trails off, as if she can’t bear to get the words out. I hate myself for not being there. With Lemon. Especially the part with Aspen Kelly. I need to know every detail about that.

*You failed to protect her, Bohnes.*

I’ll self-flagellate later; I deserve that and more.

She swallows hard and then clears her throat.

“When I was in it, Bohnes, all I could think about was ... how much easier it would be if you were there.”

“Is this an admission of some sort?” I query back at her, trying and failing to hide the rampant excitement in my voice. “Because, Scarlett, if you’re interested, I want to show you how a relationship with us would work. It’s all of this and more; I’ll do anything for you.”

“That’s what scares me, Bohnes,” she says, sounding tired. Not physically. Well, perhaps. But more so, she sounds tired in her heart and soul. “What *won’t* you do?”

I muse on that. I can’t decide if she wants to hear the full truth. That is, that I would quite literally do anything for her. Is that what she’s waiting for? Or will that send her running in the opposite direction?

“God, fuck, I can’t take the smell of blood.” Scarlett grits her teeth and then rolls down her window, sliding across the seat so that she can stick her head out into the wind, her long dark hair fluttering like a flag.

My chest constricts and, even with the scent of blood, I can't stop other things from constricting. Namely, the blood vessels in my cock. What can I say? I'm a monster. Born, raised, crafted. At this point in my life, I relish and enjoy my monstrosity.

The world is a dark, broken, fucked-up place, and let's be honest: nobody ever got ahead by being *nice*.

Scarlett lets out a scream of frustration that gets caught by the wind and dragged away, an endless sound of pain that tears into the night and shatters it in half.

It kills me that there's nothing more I can do for her.

Eventually, she slumps back into the seat and closes the window.

"Are you, like, in love with me or something?" is what she asks instead, surprising me. Generally, when it comes to Scarlett Force, avoidance is her primary coping technique. I glance sidelong at her and offer up a smile, pushing my hood back so that she can see my face just a bit better.

"Are you in love with me?" I retort, and she stares at me like I've lost my goddamn mind. "What made you decide to fuck me in the woods that day?"

"What made *you* decide to fuck *me*?" is what she comes back with, like we're both five years old. "Am I the only girl that isn't afraid of you at Prescott?"

"Afraid of me? What does that have to do with anything? Women offer sex as payment to me for services rendered all the time. I could have most any girl at that school that I want, just as you could have any guy."

Scarlett scoffs at me in disgust.

"God, you're so fucking shameless. How many girls have you slept with?" Her voice cracks slightly, just the barest little chip in her windshield, the only indication that she's struggling with her emotions. I'm not entirely certain she cares how many girls I've slept with; it's a distraction technique.

I'm more than willing to comply.

"One." I follow Ash Kelly as he slows and then makes a right turn, up a private road. Interesting. Beach house? Don't rich assholes always have beach houses? As if they're the only ones with the right to the earth's natural joys.

I wet my lips in annoyance.

“One?” Scarlett repeats, turning to stare at me. “What do you mean *one*? You’re a *virgin*?!?”

“Virgin? Scarlett Force, you were *there*.”

She slaps me in the arm which I like. She’s being playful. Yes, her face is tear-streaked and she’ll probably end up with lifelong nightmares after tonight, but at least I’ve successfully distracted her. Dating me would be like dating a nightmare anyway; it would help push the others away.

“I don’t believe you.” She turns away and stares out the window, into the darkness of the woods as we find ourselves swept up in total blackness. Up we go, along a narrow gravel road that makes me a bit nervous.

What if Ash Kelly is plotting?

I mean, he *is* plotting, but it better not involve Scarlett, myself, or Alexei Grove. That last one is our ticket out of Prescott and poverty forever. If he pushed Widow off a cliff, eh, I could live with that. Maybe Scarlett would cry, but I’d be there to comfort her. Eventually, she’d get over the loss of a possible fuckboy.

“Don’t believe what? That you’re the only girl I’ve ever slept with? Why sound so horrified? Is it attractive for men to fuck a bunch of women they don’t care about? That’s disgusting.” I hiss this last part out as she blinks at me like I’m crazy. Pretty sure that I am, but what does that have to do with anything? It’s morally irrelevant. “Aren’t you happy about this?”

“I slept with Ash.” That’s what she throws at me. *She’s deflecting, Bohnes*. Still, the reminder infuriates me like nothing else. I slam on my brakes, and Alexei nearly runs into the back of my car.

I come to a full stop and then turn to look at Scarlett who’s returning my stare with a defiant one of her own. It’s impossible for me to miss the puffy redness around her eyes, the red veins in the whites of her eyes, the tremble of her hands in her lap.

She truly loved Lucy Hall, didn’t she? She felt responsible for her.

“Yes, you did. And I don’t like it. I don’t like you bending over and flashing your panties at Widow in the library. What does that have to do with anything? Do you *want* me to go out and sleep with another girl? Would that make you feel better?”

Scarlett just stares at me and then turns her face back to the windshield. Ash's silver Mustang is paused just ahead of us, red brake lights casting an ethereal glow in the woods, like blood-soaked moonlight.

"The other day, Widow and I ... I don't know if it was sex. He ground against me in the library and came in his pants." She throws that out there, still staring out the windshield as cold rage fills me, like fog rolling into a cemetery. "Do whatever you want to do to him. Anyway, he's officially my fuckboy, too, I guess." She parks her elbow on the door and puts her chin in her hand, closing her eyes against the pain.

"Fuckboy?" I ask, trying to wrap my head around all of this. You'd think—oh, you'd *think*—I might be more distracted by the corpse of the mayor's favorite son in my trunk. Only, I'm not. I don't care about that. This is all that I really care about. "Scarlett Force, you think I didn't know about that shit in the library? I can't be omnipresent, but I have eyes *everywhere*. I'll punish Widow when I see fit, but how did this fuckboy thing come about? At the very least, make me your boyfriend."

"Bohnes ..." Scarlett releases a soft sounding sigh, turning to look over at me. "You're always there for me." She pauses again, as if she's gearing up to say something big. "Don't be. Stop coming to rescue me. It'll only bring you more trouble."

"I'm in love with you, Scarlett Force." I can't control my breathing. I want to scream, too. Just like she did. Stick my head out the window and yell into the wind. "I know you're afraid of that. I even understand it. Look at what happened to Lemon."

"No ..." She grinds her teeth together and rubs both palms over her face. "Bohnes, just ... stop."

"I understand it, and I'm willing to be patient. Like I said, normal is overrated. Normal is complacency. Let's not be complacent, Scarlett Force. Let's be conscientious, fervent, and *extraordinary*." I reach out and grab her arm, yanking her across the length of the leather bench seat until her thigh and mine are pressed together, and then I take her head in both hands and turn it so that she's facing me. "Let me be your monster."

I lean in and allow myself just the *barest* ghost of a kiss, just enough so that she knows I'm here, that she can taste my sincerity.

A fist appears, banging on my window, as I pull back from Scarlett. Her eyes aren't on that other person though. Instead, they're

on me.

I smile gently at her, rolling the window down before I bother to turn and bare my teeth at whatever male in tonight's murder party is arrogant enough to interrupt me.

"Don't you have a *curfew* or something?" I grind out, finding Widow standing there with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes are on fire, and I decide then and there that he's my biggest problem at the moment. *How easy would it be to drown this boy?*

"I do, actually. I'm going to pay for this. Probably every last cent that I have, just to bribe my parole officer *once*. I don't have time to sit around so you can stick your tongue down the throat of an emotionally damaged woman. Get yourself together, Kellin." Widow lifts the edge of his lip at me, and I squeeze my hand on the edge of my door to keep it from wrapping around his throat.

"Emotionally damaged?" Scarlett echoes, leaning over my lap in such a way that her breasts are in my face, and I let out a sharp hiss of surprise. *Control yourself, Bohnes. Keep it together.* But it's hard, I'll admit. My sweet, dark love has her tits with their pebbled nipples right next to my mouth. "Screw you, Widow. Get back in your car, fuckboy." She leans back in and then rolls the window up herself before settling into her seat.

I may have creamed my pants or else I'm just leaking so much pre-ejac that the inside of my sweats are *wet*.

"How dare he call me Kellin," I murmur as I start the car again and up we go, winding deeper into the woods. "We don't know each other."

"Get to know each other quickly then," Scarlett says, pulling one leg up onto the seat. Her gaze has sharpened, narrowed, focused in on something distant and shining. "Because we're going to be working together. You, me, Widow, Alexei, and Ash. Lemon's death wasn't accidental; it was planned. Aspen was involved which means the mayor was involved." She turns her head to look at me, her face cast in a strange glow from the near-silent stereo. "I almost let them have my neighborhood, but I'll be damned if I let them use Lemon to get it."

She turns away from me again, but I can't disagree with any of that.

The mayor, the police chief, the CEO of Archer Realty.

There's a plot there, one that involved Alexei's father, that involved Lemon.

It makes sense for us to work together on this. All of us except for Widow. He has no part in this unless ... he's here for the same reason that I am.

That he's in love with Scarlett Force.

*Yeah, maybe I will kill him after all.*

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER FIVE' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by numerous red splatters and streaks, resembling blood, which are scattered across the letters and the surrounding area. The splatters are most prominent around the 'C', 'H', 'A', 'P', 'T', 'E', 'R' and 'F', 'I', 'V', 'E' characters, creating a sense of violence or horror.

CHAPTER  
FIVE

## *Scarlett*

*“I’m in love with you, Scarlett Force.”*

How dare Bohnes spring that shit on me tonight of all nights and yet ... it softened some of the jagged edges in my shattered heart. *Lemon*. I can hardly believe that she’s gone. Now that her body’s no longer in the car, it’s easier to pretend that tonight was just a dark and twisted nightmare.

Only this nightmare is my life, and it’s nowhere near over yet.

Rationally, I know I should let sleeping dogs lie. Let the mayor and his posse do whatever they want to this horrible city. I should run. I should leave Prescott and Springfield and Oregon altogether, start a new life somewhere else.

I’m talented; I know how to win races. Shit, that dream of being a stunt driver in Hollywood, that could happen for me. I know how to open doors. I’m driven.

But ... I can’t let this go.

Dark blood bubbling from her lips, the fear in her eyes, that last, awful kiss with Ash.

*Fuck.*

Even in death, Lemon is screwing everything up for me. And yet, this is the last thing I’ll ever be able to do for her, the last time I’ll ever be able to save her from herself and her terrible decisions.

We come to a stop at the crest of a hill. There’s a house in the distance; I can see the peaks of various rooflines from here, but it appears dark. There’s not a single light on, not even a porch light.

I shove my door open to the sound of the sea, this angry murmur of crashing waves that matches the sound of my own rapidly beating heart.



“What is this place?” I ask as Ash climbs out beside me, looking down at me with eyes crafted of shadow and pain. The closer we get to saying goodbye to Aspen’s body, the more his real emotions begin to drift to the surface, like oil on pavement after a hard rain. It’s being drawn out, making everything slick and unsure.

“My father wants to work on developing the coast next; he’s been buying up whatever properties his best buddy Chet Archer recommends.” Ash turns to the right, his feathered black hair caught and tousled by a salty breeze that cuts straight through my dirty blouse and skirt like ice. I shiver and wrap my arms around myself as Ash stares into the darkness. “This is one of them. There shouldn’t be anyone here.” He turns back to me as a hoodie falls over my shoulder.

“Put that on, sweetheart,” Bohnes tells me, moving over to the edge of the cliff and looking down. “No security guards or anything like that?”

“If *Ash* is going to commit suicide, he’s going to do it the way I’d once planned on it.” Ash stops talking, and I can see it in his face that he’s serious. He’s put some real thought into taking his own life. That makes me so unbelievably sad that I can barely stand it. God, this day has just been royally fucked.

First, the hired gun I killed in my grandmother’s living room. Then Aspen Kelly. Then ... then Lemon. Is this even real? I pinch myself so hard that my arm bleeds but, alas, I’m still awake. Reality, the one nightmare you can’t wake up from, am I right?

“There are no security guards,” Ash says finally as Widow leans against the trunk of the Pantera with his arms crossed and Alexei stands quietly off to one side. I feel like a sun with planets in orbit only, instead of planets, they’re like, hot but psychotic dudes. “No cameras. I’ve looked into it.”

“Dark,” Widow drawls, pushing up off the trunk. “Let’s get this done. I need to get back to the halfway house. Every hour I’m late, I pay extra, and I’ll be straight with you: I don’t exactly have the funds to camp out here until sunrise.”

“I’ll give you the money,” Ash offers up easily enough, but the gesture becomes an insult in Widow’s eyes. He narrows them to slits and scowls so heavily that I wonder if he isn’t going to deck the guy. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

Ash removes several items from the Fastback’s trunk, and then chocks the front wheels before jacking up the rear of the car.

“Grab the rope,” he commands me as Alexei remains unmoving near the Pantera. I do as Ash asked, snagging a coil of rope from inside his trunk and giving him a look as I pass it over.

“You keep rope in your trunk? For what purpose?” The look he gives me is a terrifying one. “*If Ash is going to commit suicide, he’s going to do it the way I’d once planned on it.*” That can’t be it, can it?

Ash ties the rope around the jack and then stands up, starting the Mustang and gesturing at Alexei to hold the gas for him so he can climb out. After a brief hesitation, the stuck-up Russian prince actually deigns to help, even as he shudders at the idea of it.

The Mustang is left to hover there with its rear wheels spinning. Thank the dark gods we’ve got just the right make, model, and build of vehicle or we’d be screwed on this plan. The universe must really be looking out for us deviants, am I right?

I mean ... come on, *come on*: Aspen’s death is straight blessed.

Bohnes pops the trunk on the Chevelle, and Widow helps him heft the corpse out. Aspen, err, appears to be in a relatively *unnatural* position. We can owe all our thanks for that to the miracle of rigor, I’m sure.

Fucking gross.

I exhale sharply and then step forward to do my part. I’m the one that killed Aspen, after all. Shouldn’t I be doing most of the work?

I move forward to help, but the boys all look at me like I'm nuts.

"You've been through enough tonight, don't you think?" is what Widow says to me. Widow, who has no horse in this race, who, presumably, is just here for me.

Guess he must *really* like me.

Apparently, my idea of romantic gestures includes severing fingers, burying bodies, and hefting corpses. Definitely better than roses and chocolate. Told ya I was a psycho, too.

Ash waits as Widow and Bohnes—both wearing rubber gloves, thanks to Bohnes' impeccable stash of goods—shove Aspen into the driver's seat.

"Let me touch everything," he commands, and the other boys retreat as soon as Aspen's foot is wedged on the gas. Ash finishes up the details of the arrangement as I watch him, his back tense beneath his torn suit jacket, his shoulders shaking. He pauses briefly and puts a hand to his face.

I can't help myself. I move forward, laying a hand on his shoulder.

He's *crying*. He's fucking crying, and it's ... well, it's not my *fault* per se, but I should've left well enough alone like he'd asked me to. He warned me about Aspen in his own way, and I didn't listen because I liked Ash Kelly too much.

"*Doshite? Doshite yatta nda, Aspen?*" he murmurs in Japanese. I've seen some anime in my time, so I think *doshite* means *why* but other than that, I'm not sure. Ash surprises me by hitting his brother in the chest. "You couldn't leave well enough alone, could you? You couldn't let me have one goddamn bloody thing." His British accent thickens, and then he steps back, his face wet with tears. He's unbelievably handsome like that; I'm almost taken aback by my reaction to him.

Poor, tortured Ash Kelly suffers his brother's final torment, ensuring that Aspen's stiff fingers are on the wheel, and that he's sitting in a relatively upright position. Ash finally steps back, sliding a bloody phone from his pocket. He unlocks it

and taps out a few text messages before slipping it into Aspen's suit jacket.

"*Sayonara, Oniisama.*" Ash grabs onto the rope and then yanks it, knocking the jack loose of the undercarriage. The Mustang's rear wheels hit the dirt and then off it goes, slowly but surely.

I feel bad for Ash, but to be quite frank, I'll be mourning the loss of the Mustang a million times over Aspen Kelly.

There's an odd sort of creaking sound as the car reaches the edge of the cliff, and then it's tilting forward and dropping like a stone. Nobody moves. Instead, we stand there and listen.

There's a horrific crunching sound, metal scraping on rocks, and then a whoosh of heat that sweeps up the side of the cliff like a summer wind.

"Do you want to ... see?" I ask Ash, but his eyes are dead and blank. He shakes his head at me.

"We should get out of here as quickly as possible," he says, turning and storming over to the passenger door of the Pantera. Apparently, he feels more comfortable riding with Alexei over Widow.

That, and he must *know* that riding with me and Bohnes isn't an option; Bohnes would never allow it.

"What a goddamn night," Widow murmurs, looking over at me. I turn to meet his gaze, but I don't know quite what to say. Thank you? Is that so pathetic as to be insulting at this point? "What do you need from me?"

"Nothing," Bohnes answers for me. "I'll take her back to my place for the night and we'll clean the Chevelle there." He turns to Alexei next. "You can go back to the warehouse; I'll drive Scarlett over there tomorrow to collect her car."

"Does that sound acceptable to you, Miss Force?" Alexei queries, looking to me for an answer rather than listening to Bohnes. Good sign ... or bad one? I nod, and he inclines his head. "Get some good sleep, and if you need anything, call me."

He climbs into the Pantera and, even though I'm uncomfortable with the idea of him driving it, he looks good in it. Too good, maybe. *My brain must be fucking fried right now.*

"Bossy, isn't he?" Widow quips, reaching out for my hand. He pulls me closer to him, and I let him.

"Just so you know, I told Bohnes about what happened in the library."

Widow goes completely still, but even the scent of blood and the threat of violence can't shield his black plum and ancient forest smell. It permeates everything, driving a hard wedge between my brain and the trauma from earlier. My body's fully aware that fucking away my feelings is a possibility. If I were in Widow's bed, underneath him, my hands roving the strong muscles in his back, I wouldn't have the capacity to think about ...

Lemon.

"It's in my rights to punish you as I see fit," Bohnes purrs, moving so close to my back that it feels as if I'm seconds away from a fuckboy psycho sandwich. He puts his hands possessively on my hips, and I can see Widow's gaze locking with his over my shoulder. "For now, we'll start with this ..."

Bohnes yanks me back, and I counter by twisting away from him, so that I'm separated from both boys.

"Don't make the mistake of thinking that what happened tonight has changed anything about me," I warn them both, but I'm not in the mood for any more games. I give Widow a tight-lipped look, equal parts sympathetic, thankful, and annoyed. "So far as I'm concerned, you're both fuckboys. Keep that in mind."

I head back to the Chevelle and climb in. I'm not looking forward to scrubbing Lemon's blood out of the upholstery, but such is life. Maybe if I bat my eyelashes, Bohnes will do that part, and I can clean the trunk out instead?

He climbs in as I rest my head against the window, listening to the sound of the Stingray's engine firing up, the Pantera.

I'm asleep before the Chevelle's even put into first gear.



The image features the text "CHAPTER SIX" in a white, serif font. The text is centered and overlaid on a dark, gradient background that transitions from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. The text is heavily splattered with bright red, blood-like stains that drip down the sides and are scattered across the top and middle of the letters. The overall aesthetic is dark and ominous.

CHAPTER  
SIX

## *Scarlett*

When I next open my eyes, I'm in a bed and not in Bohnes' car anymore. I sit up suddenly, shocked to find that I'm wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt instead of the bloody skirt and muddy blouse.

"The fuck?" I murmur, sitting up and rubbing at the side of my head. My hair is sticky with yet more blood, as if the whole world is bathed in it, and I can never escape. Just drowning in crimson heat.

A quick look around reveals a small bedroom with corrugated metal walls and a floor covered in rugs; there don't appear to be any windows. The bed itself is nice, a king whose linens are covered with a flannel sheet. I'm lying on top of all that with another blanket thrown over me.

Likely because whoever put me here didn't want dried, flaking blood in their sheets.

I slide off the end of the bed and open the door, peering out into a large warehouse that's been converted into a fairly comfortable living space. The floors are still dirt, but there's a kitchenette to my right, and I'm pretty sure I saw a bathroom through the cracked door in the bedroom.

There's a couch, some comfy looking chairs, and a coffee table positioned over a rug. A TV adorns the wall across from the couch, giving it the look of a living room. Only ... there's also a bulldozer, a hulking yellow piece of metal that fits easily into the massive space.

It sits quietly on one end, surrounded by worktables covered in tools. On the opposite end of the space, there's the Chevelle and Bohnes, shirtless motherfucking Bohnes. He leans into the back seat with a handheld steam cleaner as I blink the sleep from my eyes.

There are no clocks around, and no windows, so I have no idea what time it is or how long I slept for.



Also, I've never once in my life allowed myself to be so vulnerable as to sleep through someone moving me, changing me, and tucking me in. Never.

I must *really* trust this man.

Mistake? I'm not sure about that part just yet.

I should make him my boyfriend; he's right. Only, it isn't because of him that I refused.

It's because of me.

Trouble with a capital T, that should've been my middle name. You know, instead of *Motherfucking*.

Bohnes stands up straight after a minute, setting the steam cleaner on the roof of the car as he lets out a sigh and rolls his head around on his neck. From here, I've got a glorious view of his body, tall and muscular, a honed blade designed for slinking in shadows, burying bodies, and ending lives.

I've never personally contracted Bohnes as a killer, but I know all the Prescott gossip.

*A virgin undertaker/assassin? And here I thought things couldn't get any weirder.*

"Where are we?" I ask, and to his credit, Bohnes doesn't jump or seem even remotely surprised that I've materialized behind him.

"If I told you that," he says, tossing a saucy look over his shoulder and raising both dark brows. "I'd have to kill you." Bohnes moves to close the back door and then pauses when he sees the look on my face. "Did you want to see?" he asks, almost eagerly.

I move across the hard-packed dirt floor in my bare feet and peer inside.

The leather seats gleam, the floor upholstery is spotless, and there's no sign at all that Lemon breathed her very last breath inside the backseat of the Chevy Chevelle SS.

Bile rises in my throat, and I pull back, moving over to the trunk, very businesslike.

I pop it open and peer into a pristine—and also still damp—space. There’s a faint chemical smell, but it’s like any other when a car goes in for a detail.

“You cleaned all this up by yourself,” I posit, trying and failing not to be impressed by Kellin’s dedication. He moves up behind me, sliding his arms around my waist in a way he’s only done just before sex. Even then, how many times has it been? I’ve stopped counting exactly, but less than a dozen certainly.

I should pull away from him.

There are a million reasons why and none of them have to do with him specifically. First and foremost, there’s the issue of *me*. I draw trouble to me the way Reddit gathers internet trolls. On top of all that, romance *never* works for Prescott kids—girls in particular. I’ve never known a woman in this neighborhood to come out on top by relying on a man.

And yet ...

*You’re as stupid as Lemon*, I think, and then it’s as if I’ve been gut punched. I can’t breathe. I can’t stop seeing her lips, bloodied, pressed to Ash’s. What he did for me, claiming to be Aspen in her last moments, it was an act of pure kindness, but even then, it was edged with irony.

*“You don’t have to face the unknown by yourself. That much I can promise you. Aspen Kelly will be there.”*

“I’ve never understood the phrase *sleep like the dead* until I picked you up and held you in my arms. Why would I wake you for something like this anyway? I was going to make you get in the shower and leave me to it; this is my specialty, not yours.”

I reach down to untangle his fingers from my waist. He resists, but only for a brief moment. Bohnes releases me and steps back. Since I suffer from severe emotional intimacy issues, I decide a change of subject is best.

Don’t think about Lemon; don’t think about Kellin Bohnes taking care of me.

“What’s with the bulldozer?” I ask, turning around to look at him. He lifts his glacial gaze past me and directs it over to the item in question, offering up a darkly smug sort of look in response.

“I’m modifying it,” he explains, shrugging his big shoulders. “Have you ever heard of Marvin Heemeyer?”

“Uh, definitely not.” I move away from him, in the direction of the bulldozer itself and he follows. “Should I?”

“How about the song *Killdozer* by Kim Dracula?” Another shake of my head, and Bohnes sighs, reaching out to ruffle up my hair. He moves ahead of me and pauses next to the bulldozer, looking up at it. It’s maybe two and a half times as tall as he is, fitted with a strange gray shell on the exterior that he must’ve added himself. “Well, in 2004, this guy in Colorado named Marvin Heemeyer took a modified Komatsu D355A bulldozer, turned it into a tank, and blew through his own town. Through a concrete plant, the mayor’s house, a library. Anyway, he did seven mil in damage, and then killed himself.”

“Um,” I begin, clearing my throat and trying not to jump to conclusions. “And this has to do with you modifying a bulldozer, why? Bohnes, I’m not all about cops and clinics and whatnot, but are you sure you don’t need inpatient treatment?”

He laughs at me, this rough, throaty purr sound that shouldn’t make me horny, but yet does anyway. My body doesn’t care that my heart and soul were broken into pieces last night; my brain knows that sex hormones flood the system, that I could ride Bohnes’ pretty alabaster cock into oblivion. Better than alcohol, better than drugs.

“See, despite the fact that Marvin didn’t hurt or kill anyone in the rampage—besides himself—the modified bulldozer became known as *Killdozer*, thus the name of the song.” Bohnes steps up on the wheel track and then turns around, taking a seat on the edge of it. “Anyway, I don’t know all the details, only that the whole thing was over some dispute with the city.” Bohnes looks up at the cab portion of the bulldozer. “What do you think about Mayor Kelly and his plans for

Prescott?” He turns back to me with another smile, a very wicked sort of smile. “I thought, well, if Mr. Heemeyer could make one of these in just a year and a half, why couldn’t I do the same?”

I just stare up at him.

“I ... am learning all sorts of new and strange things about you,” I mutter as he hops down beside me, landing in what I have to admit is a fairly epic crouch. Even more so when he unfolds that big body into a standing position and stares down at me with impossibly alluring eyes. “You’re going to, what, use this tank to blow up condos or ...?”

“Well, I haven’t decided yet. Maybe I’ll never use it? Maybe I’ll never even finish it? But why not?” He reaches out and pats the side of the bulldozer-cum-tank. “It’s always nice to have a backup plan. The world is cruel, Scarlett Force. You know that as well as anyone. This is just an extra layer of protection against the outside.”

Whelp.

I always knew Kellin Bohnes was nuts. This is definitive proof.

Somehow, the idea that he’s turning a bulldozer into an army tank doesn’t make him less attractive, but *more*.

“What time is it?” I ask, because I have no response to his words. The chances of him ever finishing the damn thing are slim to none. Anyway, I’ll look up Marvin What’s-His-Name later for fun. And also to see how much of that story Bohnes just told me is true. It *sounds* like something a deranged thriller author might come up with, but who knows? Reality truly is stranger than fiction.

“About seven,” he says, tucking his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants. These, too, are printed with leg bones. Give the guy some credit; he saw a theme he liked and rolled with it. “Why? I was going to make you breakfast; you can’t leave yet.”

I give him a dark look that clearly says *I can leave whenever the fuck I want*, and he grins at me. It’s the grin of a maniac,

but yet, it's also charming.

*Lemon.*

I shut the thought down as soon as it comes, glancing down and lifting my hands. I turn them over to stare at my nails, disgusted by the rust-red around the edges. It's obvious that Bohnes wiped me down a bit, but just a bit.

I need a shower.

“There's no point in my leaving now. I don't want to wake Alexei up when I grab the Pantera, and I can't go home this early. If my grandma isn't already pissed off, that'll do the trick. She'll know for damn sure that I wasn't at Nisha's.” I lift my gaze up to find Bohnes watching me carefully. This is his sanctuary, his cave, his place of mischief, and he brought me here?

If he's only ever fucked one girl, he's certainly never brought any here. He may have *never* brought anyone here.

“Do you have any family, Bohnes?” I ask, because I think he's still seventeen. At most, he'd be eighteen. Even then, it seems like this place took some work to get it where it is. Did he do all that by himself? Does he rent this? Is he squatting? I have so many questions.

I do not know the man for shit. He says he loves me, but like, does he have a middle name? Does he know *my* middle name?

Eh, on that last one, I'm sure that he does. The guy knows everything.

“None.” Just that. He doesn't elaborate. When people answer a complex question with a simple yes or no, it's usually a polite warning to back off the subject. “Why don't you have a shower and I'll cook?”

“You cook, too?” I ask, and he smiles again. They never last long, his smiles. Usually, they fall right off his face and leave his expression dripping with menace. But at least he tries.

“Who else would cook for me if I didn't do it myself?” he wonders aloud, and then moves over to the bedroom door,

holding it open. “Bathroom’s through here. There are towels in the cabinet.”

“Can I borrow another set of clothes to wear when I get out?” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“No. You have to walk around naked or, at the very least, dripping wet and wrapped in a towel. You owe me, Force.” Bohnes’ careful smile turns into a wide grin, but even though I can see that this is his attempt at humor, he’s right.

“I do.” I exhale and reach up, pushing stray raven-colored strands of hair back from my face. “Actually, I never even asked what the price was going to be for ... well, any of this.” I raise my gaze from his bare feet, tattooed with gray and black bones, up to his face. “What’s it going to be? If it was a date last time, I’m almost—”

Bohnes interrupts me by moving forward, his bare feet whisper-silent on the hard-packed floor, and he takes my face between two big hands, leaning down and slanting his lips over mine.

Heat spirals through me, a firestorm of desire that reminds me why I had sex with him in the first place. That day in the woods, he came to me, and there was something almost magical between us, a spark if you will. Dry tinder and embers. Gasoline and matches. I went up in flames, just as I am now.

My hands come to rest on his midsection, palms flat against his smooth, milk-white skin. He rarely spends time in the daylight without his body swathed head to toe in black. He’s truly corpse-white, like a lost member of the Addams family.

*Bohnes is a gothic fucking truffle with a chocolate-chili center; I want to eat him. If I eat him, I’ll burn, and if I burn, I’m not being snuffed out.*

I pull away from him abruptly, a small gasp slipping past my lips.

“Price, Bohnes. Price.”

“Get in the shower.” It’s a command, which bothers me. Whatever. He sounds annoyed, too. Did I do something to tick

him off? I stare at his back as he moves away, simultaneously admiring his tattoos and wondering if I'm one of those heroines in a book or movie that just doesn't fucking get it.

"Fuck my ass," I growl out as a curse, but Bohnes somehow overhears me anyway, and tosses a smarmy look over his shoulder.

"Maybe later. Go wash that pussy, Force. If you're lucky, maybe I'll join you?"

I lift my lip at him, reminding myself of Widow (that seems to be his preferred facial expression) and then I take off for the bathroom.

It's just through the bedroom door and to the right. There's no ceiling for either room, just eight-foot walls to delineate the spaces. When I look up, I can see the corrugated metal roof of the warehouse, forty feet or so up. The distant tinny ring of rain on the roof is soothing, and the sound of clanking pots and pans from the kitchen adds a homey touch to an otherwise unconventional space.

The towels are easy to find, in a tall cabinet to the left of the door. The shower itself is tucked in the corner with a curved glass door. It's a pretty simple set up, linoleum on the floor, a pedestal sink and toilet opposite the door.

I crank the water up to scalding, hissing as it burns my skin, and then I start to scrub. My hair, my nails, and yeah, my crotch. There was so much blood, it's ... it's everywhere. Lemon died in my lap, so ...

A sob escapes me, and I end up sliding to the floor, sitting with my knees pulled up as water streams around me.

*Oh, Lemon.*

She only ever wanted two things out of life: to escape Prescott and to fall in love. She wanted those things so desperately that they not only became tangled in one another, they also tripped her up. Over and over and over again.

Escaping Prescott takes work (and even then, it isn't always possible). Same deal with romance. But Lemon, she never

wanted to do the work. She wanted to snap her fingers and find an easy fix.

Aspen Kelly must've seemed like a neat solution to all of her myriad problems. Rich, handsome, doting, connected, powerful. Right up to the last, she clung to that dream, reaching out for him and forgetting all about our decade-plus long friendship.

I try not to be hurt over that. She's dead, after all. Dead and gone. And our last few meetings didn't exactly go well. Last night was a disaster. The art gallery was a mess. Just before that, I ground her into the mud with my heel.

I bury my face against my legs and try to breathe through the pain. The last time I felt like this, like parts of my soul were being snipped off to die like a tree's pruned limbs, was when my brother and cousins died in the wreck.

The way I dealt with that pain was by extracting vengeance. Does it heal old wounds? Fuck no, but it covers them up, like foundation over a prominent scar.

I'll do the same now.

Lemon's death was planned.

Why?

Why there, in the house that Aspen supposedly bought for her? What was there to gain by killing her in it?

A rush of cool air sweeps into the shower, and I lift my head to see Bohnes standing there with the door open. He squats down in front of me and then reaches out with pretty fingers to push wet hair back from my face.

"I was going to fuck you in here, but ... maybe not." He frowns heavily and withdraws his hand. "Come eat, Force. I'm no chef, but I can do eggs and bacon, toast and coffee." He stands back up and turns the shower off, holding out a hand to help me to my feet.

I accept it, even as I'm struggling with the shift in the power balance between us.



I feel vulnerable right now which isn't at all something I'm used to feeling.

And Bohnes, of all people, is here to not only see it, but guide me through it?

I take the towel and dry myself off as he watches and then, because he suggested it, I just wrap it around my hair and stand there buck-naked and proud.

"Food," I tell him, and he smirks, reaching up to rub at his chin. He nods in the direction of the bedroom, and I follow him out, back into the warehouse proper and over to a small table with mismatched chairs that I overlooked before.

I sit my naked ass on a wooden chair and pick up the mug of coffee, staring down at the black liquid and trying my hardest not to think of Nisha and how she drinks her coffee. "*Hot, cheap, and sweet—just like Lemon.*" She always says that.

She can't say that anymore.

"I have to tell Nisha and Bastian about Lemon, at the very least." I'm just thinking out loud, but Bohnes acts like I have something interesting to say, parking his elbow on the table and resting his head in his hand. "Fuck, this is rough."

I lift the mug to my lips and, even though the coffee is still too hot, I drink it all down in several big swallows. The burn of it on my tongue, in my throat, it's as welcome as the scalding shower water ... or the touch of Bohnes' hands on my body.

"No charge, Scarlett Force," he says after I set the mug down and yank the plate of food closer to me. The last thing I feel like doing right now is eating, but I'm light-headed, and my stomach is cramping. I've got to eat something, don't I? May as well be a meal cooked by Prescott High's best secret keeper and purveyor of evil deeds.

Who else can lay claim to eating a meal prepared by Kellin Bohnes?

"No charge?" I ask, noticing that his eyes have drifted from my face to the pebbled brown points of my nipples. Right. I let

him look, shoving a piece of bacon into my mouth. “The hell does that mean?”

“It means, *no charge*. I’ll keep the date you owe me, but otherwise, that’s it.” Bohnes reclines back in his chair. His is this big, velvet-covered throne-like thing with intricate, silver arms and legs. It looks like it belongs in a castle, not a warehouse. My chair is a plain, golden oak dining chair that looks like it was the height of big box store fashion in the mid-nineties. “I’ve realized something. Our relationship started out as transactional and has remained so. I take the blame for that. By accepting payment for services rendered, I’ve turned you into a client.” He reaches up and very dramatically sweeps those bone-etched fingers through his white hair.

Oh, what a pretty countenance it is, but misleading, too. He’s pretty-deadly, and that’s the worst sort of thing there is. Misleading, that’s what his visage is. Too handsome to be trouble, but really, it’s always the most beautiful boys that break hearts.

“Maybe that’s why you won’t see me as a boyfriend, why you still keep calling me a fuckboy.” He leans in toward me, and I feel attacked. Like, fucking hell. This boy is relentless. My heart’s heavy shields are down, and I’m cracking on the inside. As expected, Bohnes is wiggling right into those breaks and infecting me. “I’m going to fix that. Call me your boyfriend, Scarlett. I’d ask for more, but I don’t think you’re ready for that.”

“Oh, I’m not ready for that?” I retort dryly, naked and eating diced fruit off my plate now. Cubes of watermelon and cantaloupe that are barely sweet, out of season stuff grown in a greenhouse. Doesn’t matter. I make myself eat all of it. I stare down at the plate, but my mind is still fixed on Kellin.

Fuckboys are, well, fuckboys. Useless. Good for their dicks and not their brains. But Bohnes is useful. He’s a comfortable ally in a hostile world.

I’ve already promised not to lie to myself; I admitted I had a crush on him.

“I have conditions.” That’s what comes out of my mouth. But underneath it all, I know the truth: I’m a hopeless romantic. I have many of the same failings as ... Lemon.

“Of course you do.” Bohnes picks up his own coffee. I wonder about him, about why he’s seventeen and living in a warehouse with a bulldozer-tank and burying dead people for money. Where are his parents? When did he last have someone he could rely on besides ... me? “Name them.”

It strikes me as odd to have this conversation in the nude, but oh well. I take the towel off my dark hair and let it fall in wet waves over my shoulder. Reaching down, I begin to comb through the sections with my fingertips, separating it so I can braid it.

“You have to stop avoiding me at school.” *Shit, why did I say that first?* I’m breaking here; I have to get my shit together. I am Scarlett Force. Scarlett Motherfucking Force. If I can ride it, I can win it. Races, boys, anything.

I’m a modern-day Robin Hood, for fuck’s sake. Well, except for three things. One, I’m hot. Two, I wear stilettos. Three, I keep the money for myself. I *am* the poor, okay?

Certainly I can lay down the law for a fuckboy, even after watching my best friend die in my arms.

“I don’t avoid you; I allow you space.” Bohnes grins sharply at me, setting his coffee mug back on the table. “But if you want me to keep finding you in the bathroom ...”

“Also, I don’t know what the fuck is going on with Ash Kelly.” This time, I make myself look Bohnes in the face. “When I thought I’d killed him, I was upset. When he showed up and I realized the Kelly boys were twins, I was so relieved I thought I might collapse. I’m going to explore that.”

Bohnes frowns at that, but he doesn’t interrupt me.

“And Widow ...” This time, he gives a disgruntled rumble that sounds like a growl. “I really like Widow, Bohnes.”

“I’ll kill him for you.” Bohnes offers this up as easily as another man might offer to take a woman on a dinner cruise. It’s that easy for him. He means it, too. “Nobody would care.”

He's like me. There's nobody in this world that cares whether he lives or dies ... except for maybe *you*."

Yikes. Put like that, I almost feel sorry for both Bohnes and Widow.

But feeling sorry for bad boys is against the unspoken Crimson Crew code of ethics. It's a mistake. If I spend any time with them, fuck them, date them, because I feel sorry for them, I'm going to have my emotional health and labor siphoned out of me like blood taken by a vampire.

I refuse.

So, because I'm a southside girl through and through, I appreciate the offer even if I can't accept it.

A smile tweaks my lips, and I sigh, picking up my fork and cutting into my now cold eggs. I don't even care. Every bite of food tastes like ash anyway. Ash. *Ash*. Aspen.

I shove those thoughts aside.

"Severed fingers, buried bodies, assassination offers. How could I not like you, Kellin Bohnes? You do romance Prescott style, nice and bloody. But I really do like Widow. Anyway, as the queen of Prescott High, I feel like it's not entirely inappropriate for me to have a stable of willing males at my disposal."

"A stable?" Bohnes repeats, cocking his head at me and licking his lips. "I won't agree to that. Widow, you want. Fine—for now. Ash Kelly? That won't last. You can't date him anyway. Now that he's officially Aspen, he'll have parts to play. You can't even be *seen* in public with him; he's no threat." A pause as Bohnes thinks this over. "That's it, isn't it?"

He's fishing for something.

What for, I don't know. There are no more fish to catch. Except ... my mind strays to a brief kiss, just a brush of lips, as innocent as a children's fairy tale.

I know my own heart.

Some avenues may not be traveled but are best left open—just in case.

“Alexei Grove.”

There, I said it. I can’t say why. There’s nothing between us but a single, chaste kiss, a platonic date, and a shared vendetta.

He wants to get revenge on—and discover more about—who killed his father. I’m the same with Lemon. And their deaths are related, make no mistake about that.

“Alexei Grove?” Bohnes sounds supremely annoyed. “Is that what your dinner date was about?”

“He wants my help dealing with his father’s murderers,” I reply with another sigh, sitting back in the chair, far more comfortable with my nudity in Bohnes’ presence than I expected. Maybe it’s because he’s not that sort of predator? He’s the monster that eats other monsters.

Is that the definition of a hero? It might be, if there’s any such thing in this world.

“And you want to date him?”

“I want to live my life without rules,” I respond easily, and that’s the crux of it. I really like Bohnes, but I also can’t be tied down or controlled by anyone else for any reason. It’s why I gave him the title of fuckboy in the first place. “If you don’t agree with that, I understand.”

“Is that what I said?” Bohnes retorts, looking a bit perplexed. He drums his fingers on the table and smiles again. He lifts his gaze from the table back to my face. “Okay, Scarlett Force. I’m upgraded from fuckboy to boyfriend then? I’m aiming for husband, but we’ll take baby steps.”

I snort.

“You and Widow both, my friend. Good luck with that by the way.” I stop then, exhaling sharply. When I do, when the air leaves my lungs, I swear that I can feel the broken pieces of my heart stabbing me from the inside. *Oh, Lem.* “Sure, we’re dating. We’re an item. A discounted, Dollar Store meets Hot Topic meets *American Psycho* item on a very low shelf.”

Bohnes lets out a howl of laughter, throwing his head back like the deranged lunatic he is.

“Come, Scarlett Force. Let me take you to bed.” He stands up and scoops me from the chair before I can think to protest.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I protest, almost breathless. *The fuck is going on? Did Kellin Bohnes literally just sweep me up in his arms like a fairy tale princess or some shit?*

He stares down at me, his gaze impossibly adoring, and I damn near panic.

*He is not allowed to look at me that way.* Bohnes is ... he’s my rough fuck in the woods with the bloodied dick and the scratch marks and ...

“Can we watch a movie or something first? I don’t think I can sleep right now.”

“You want to watch a movie with me?” he asks, seeming as surprised as I am by the suggestion. Watch a movie? Bohnes and I don’t watch movies together. We bury people. We race. We screw. This is, I mean it’s a lot of change all at once. “Well.”

He sets me, naked and damp, on his couch and then proceeds to turn off the lights. When he climbs up beside me and offers the remote, it gets even weirder. I glance over to find him watching me, his face neutral but his lips in a delicate frown.

“I’m big into horror movies,” I explain, imagining that maybe he enjoys much of the same. “Do you want to watch *Creature from the Black Lagoon* or something?”

“I prefer romantic comedies,” he says, completely deadpan. I can’t tell if it’s a joke or not.

“You and Widow both, I’m sure,” I murmur, and that does it. At least he’s scowling again, knees tucked up close, arms wrapped around them. He watches me from the corner of his eye as I start the movie, grabbing a random blanket and covering myself up with it.

For the next forty minutes, I swear to God, he doesn't look at the screen. He just stares at me.

"Are you not going to watch the movie at all?" I ask, pausing it and turning to look at him. Bohnes smiles at me, an expression that's reminiscent of velvet-lined coffins and the smell of fresh lilies in the foyer of a mortuary.

"Why would I watch the movie when I could watch you instead?"

He turns toward me, leaning forward and putting one arm on the back of the couch, the other on the edge of the cushion to my left. His big body hovers over mine, smelling faintly of grave dirt, chemical cleaner, and soap.

Magical.

"First fuck, first boyfriend ..." he trails off and then leans down, running his tongue up the side of my face in that strange, obsessive way of his. *That's much better.* "What other firsts of yours can I have, Scarlett?"

I swallow hard and reach up, putting my hands on either side of his face.

"First time I ever let a man take my car," I admit, and he smiles prettily. Well, like a skeleton, but the macabre is beautiful to me. It's had to be, or else I may never have found a single thing in Prescott that was worthwhile. "We traded cars, Bohnes, and I royally fucked yours up." I scratch at his smooth cheeks with my nails and he shudders in pleasure. "About Ash driving, I know that was wrong."

"Mm, so you'll make it up to me then?" he breathes, and then he bites down hard on the side of my neck, making me gasp. Bohnes sucks at the tender flesh as I feel a heat building between my thighs, a promise of sweet release, an escape from this maelstrom night. "How?"

"Um, a blow job?" I suggest, swallowing hard. "That'd be another first. You can have that, too."

He laughs against the side of my neck, his breath warm, feathering across my skin like steam and making me squirm. Pretty sure he loves that, all the squirming. Bohnes grabs my

face in strong, possessive fingers, holding onto me so tightly that he's probably leaving red crescent marks in my skin.

"Done." He pauses then, his eyes a diluted sapphire, drawing me in and drowning me. "But not tonight."

Bohnes draws back suddenly, and then he scoops me up again.

"I do have legs, Kellin." He ignores me, carrying me into his bedroom and setting me down in the single chair that graces the corner. I wait as he strips off the bloodied blanket and sheet I was using earlier and tosses them aside, turning down the covers and offering out a hand.

"Get in."

I just stare at him, and he stares back at me, two emotionally damaged people drawn together in the darkness.

"I can't believe I'm sleeping in Kellin Bohnes' bed." The words come out as a grumble as I climb in and he moves over to switch the lights off.

As soon as he does that, plunging us into straight-up *pitch*, the mood shifts.

There's some rustling movement in the dark that may or may not be him taking off his clothes. I sit up and unwind the towel from my hair, tossing it aside, and feeling this fluttery sense of panic take over me.

I've never had sex in a bed before.

How messed up is that?

In the woods, in the school bathroom, on the hood of a Mustang ...

But not in a bed.

Bohnes climbs into bed and on top of me, burying his face in the hollow between my neck and shoulder before exhaling sharply and giving me goose bumps.

He doesn't talk, just moves his mouth to mine and kisses me, a volcanic explosion of heat and need, of scalding fingers sliding down my sides like lava. My skin burns with the sultry



brush of his naked body, and he nudges my legs apart to settle between them.

“When we die,” Bohnes whispers against my ear, rubbing his thick, velvety shaft against my slick folds, “let’s be buried in the same grave.”

A rational person would run away from a statement like that; a normal person would find it disturbing.

Instead, it comforts me.

Bohnes continues to rub against me, sliding his right hand up to palm my right breast. He lazily drags his thumb over the pert point of my nipple, drawing a gasp from me like a musician draws notes from his instrument.

“In the same coffin even, pressed up tight together.” He thrusts into me on the end of that statement, filling me up and driving away my demons. At least, for the time being. I’m sure he considers that to be a romantic statement.

As romantic as severed fingers offered up in a bloody palm  
...

*You’re fucked, Scarlett. You are absolutely and completely fucked.*

My arms wrap around Bohnes’ neck as he returns his lips to mine, moving his hips in slow, undulating motions, pushing himself balls-deep and then pulling nearly all the way out before he slams forward again. Our pelvises crash together in a hypnotic dance, mesmerizing me, drawing me in, while he explores my body with questing hands.

In the woods, I’d thought his fingers were cool, almost ghost-like. Not now, not in here.

Each place he touches me is branded, scarred, seared with a memory that I wouldn’t be able to forget if I tried.

It’s a canicular joining, like a sultry summer evening when the heat is moist and oppressive but somehow comforting, a blanket of atmosphere to wrap up in and take comfort from. It’s lackadaisical and languorous, and if it weren’t dark in here,

I don't think I'd even allow myself to fall into the moment the way I do.

"I love you, Scarlett Force," he whispers, his lips hovering so close to mine that I have to both hear and *feel* the words against my lips. "We should fuck until our bodies meld together and become one." He nips at my lower lip, and I groan, wondering what I should say in response to that, if anything.

*I'm so going to regret this in the morning.*

But I don't stop him. I let him ... no, I *encourage* him to keep murmuring these gothic declarations against my lips, into my ear, with his mouth alternately sucking on my tit.

"Let's haunt cemeteries together as spirits," he murmurs, biting down on my nipple and cupping my ass cheek with his right hand and digging his short nails into my skin. "Let's kill the whole world while we live."

And then he starts to fuck me, hard and fast and vicious, slamming his hips into mine and impaling me so deeply with that monster cock of his that I can't breathe, can't speak. All I can do is claw at his back the way he likes, tearing him apart as he begs me for me.

He flips us over abruptly, and I grind my pelvis down into him, shredding his chest, yanking on his hair.

Getting myself into trouble, that's what I'm really doing.

Diggin' a big, ol' deep hole.

Might not fuck up my manicure this time, but a metaphorical hole is much, much harder to climb out of it.

My orgasm starts in small waves, my muscles locking down, my body going stiff. And then Bohnes will stop, wait for it to pass, and encourage me to keep moving. He does that so many times over that I'm sweating and panting, almost crying from the need to come.

His hands finally settle on my hips, and he urges me to move fast, fast, *faster*.

I come, clamping down on him with a scream, one that I don't bother to hide.

I'm certain—knowing Bohnes the way I do—that out here, no one can hear me scream ...

This isn't a story about a heroine and her Prince Charming; it's about a villainess and her villains. It's about the bad guys getting a win against the other bad guys.

Because, like, fuck heroes.

Nobody has time for that shit.

Kellin rolls me over again, grinding his pelvis into me and forcing his huge dick past my pulsing muscles. He comes with a ragged, primal groan, biting my shoulder as he does, filling me up with spurts of hot seed that drip down my ass crack and stain his sheets.

“Don't get up,” he pants, holding me there, licking the side of my throat. “Sleep with it. I want to wake up and see you dozing in a puddle of my cum.”

I'm too tired to argue with him.

Or, I tell myself that. Maybe I just like it?

With a strong arm banded around my waist, I fall asleep tucked up against Bohnes' naked body.

Luckily, I've never much been one for nightmares.

But when I wake up, I'm sure my demons will be waiting, as they always are.

I have to deal with them.

Facing demons is the only way to slaughter them.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from light grey at the top to black at the bottom. Overlaid on this background are several vertical streaks and splatters of bright red, resembling blood. The text 'CHAPTER SEVEN' is centered in a white, serif font. The word 'CHAPTER' is on the top line, and 'SEVEN' is on the bottom line. The red splatters are most prominent behind the letters of 'CHAPTER' and 'SEVEN', creating a dramatic and ominous effect.

CHAPTER  
SEVEN

## ~~Ash~~ Aspen Kelly

“You’re a waste of the air you breathe,” Jonas Kelly hisses, trembling with rage as I stand there with a hand to my cheek, blinking through the vibrant pain in my skull. I’ve barely registered what’s even happening when he strikes me again, backhanding me so hard that I stumble back and hit the wall.

When he moves to hit me a third time, I reach up and snatch his wrist in tight fingers.

*You are not Ash Kelly anymore.*

With that revelation, there comes both a wave of shame and one of euphoria.

If I’m not Ash Kelly anymore, I don’t have to take my father’s abuse. If I’m not Ash Kelly anymore, then who am I? By identifying as Aspen Kelly, am I really gaining power or am I just being swallowed up by him, forever relegated to the shadows?

No, I don’t have to take my father’s blows anymore, but I’ll also never be Ash again.

Because I can call myself Aspen all day long, but the truth is that I am and always will be Ash.

“I’ve just walked in the door and you’re starting on me?” I grind out, careful to keep an American accent. It’s going to take work. I spent too much time in English boarding schools for this transition to be anything but difficult. The Japanese, too, I’ll need to be careful with. Aspen *despised* me for learning our mother’s tongue when he was too concerned with abusing prostitutes and raping the maids.

I miss him even as I rejoice in his death. Watching him go over the cliff in my silver Fastback was sickeningly satisfying. Also, I sat in the Shelby Cobra and sobbed before I bothered driving myself home. I’m experiencing a level of cognitive dissonance that’s dizzying.

My father narrows his eyes at me, and I know that this is a crucial moment.

I either become Aspen or I remain Ash.

“Starting on you?” Jonas seethes, his brown eyes—crinkled at the edges from so much time spent offering delusive smiles—widening slightly. “Boy, you’re lucky I don’t *kill* you.” He yanks his wrist from my fingers and swings the back of his palm into my cheek, blinding me with vibrant agony.

It echoes in my brain like bolts of lightning, reminding me that Scarlett Force certainly knows how to throw a punch. My fingers rub the edge of my jaw, collecting blood as it leaks from the fresh cut on my cheek.

My father—*Mayor Kelly*—shakes out his hand and examines his knuckles, cursing under his breath when he realizes how it might look to his constituents. Me, bruised and bloody. Him, with damaged knuckles. Bad PR.

“What happened tonight, Aspen?”

My eyes flick up, peering at him through long, dark lashes. *Aspen*. He called me Aspen. Good. I rise to my full height and exhale, reaching down to adjust my cufflinks the way my brother used to. These cufflinks once belonged to a man named Larron Van Gordon, my father’s running mate in the last mayoral election.

Aspen took great pride in having taken them off of his corpse.

“I went to the track,” I begin, licking the blood from my lips and doing my best not to think about that last, bloody kiss with Lucy Hall. For as long as I live, that memory will haunt me, will peer out at me from the shadows, will arise in my dreams and taint them the color of nightmares. “Things got out of hand, but I dealt with it as best I could.”

“Care to explain why you killed several of my men?” he asks, pausing to glance over to his right. I follow his gaze to see his favorite goon—a man I know only by his last name, Shipman—waiting in the shadows.

I shrug my shoulders and sigh, put out and irritated by the conversation, as Aspen would have been. In reality, I'm screaming on the inside.

"Lucy called her friends before she called me." *A lie.* "They were headed over to the house; I had to save face. What does it matter now? The girl's dead anyway."

*Fuck. My language wasn't harsh enough. Aspen despised women. He'd have said bitch or whore or slut.* I choke on the thought, but I push past it.

*Oh, Shipman,* I think, my gaze straying over to the man. If only I'd been able to catch and kill him along with the others; I could make up whatever story I wanted.

As it goes, I still don't understand what the plan was tonight. Until I figure it out, I'll have to wing it.

"Where's her body?" Mayor Kelly barks, still gazing at his knuckles, likely to decide if he should start hitting me again or not. If I were Ash, he'd keep beating me. As such, it's bad enough that his perfect poster child has a black eye and a swollen lip plus whatever other bruises and cuts he just laid on me.

It won't look good in the press.

"They buried it." Just that. I rub at the side of my face, praying that I can get through this without getting caught. If I'm caught, I'm dead. My father will kill me himself; I'm certain of it.

"They *buried* it?" he repeats, and then, even though I was fairly certain he was done hitting me, he backhands me again, and I stumble into the wall. "You moron." Jonas spits at my feet as I struggle against the urge to attack him, to wrap my hands around his throat and *squeeze*.

I'd do it, too, if Shipman weren't watching. If I didn't think I'd get pegged for it and sent to prison, separated forever from Scarlett Force.

"Where is she buried?" he continues, but I just shake my head.

“I don’t know.”

My father raises a hand to hit me again as I cradle my cheek, and my palm fills with blood. He lowers it at the last second, releasing a long, slow exhale.

“Where is your brother?”

“If he were dead, I wouldn’t shed a tear.” I use a classic Aspen phrase, one I’ve heard since before I can even remember. The first time I heard him utter this particular sentiment, I was eight and I’d just crawled out of a ravine that he’d pushed me into.

I go to move past my father, ignoring the quivering form of Yua Ito, our head housekeeper and once upon a time nanny/stand-in mother. She hates me now. Whether I’m Ash or Aspen doesn’t change that. Aspen pretended to be me and abused her under my name too many times for the damage to be undone.

Daddy Dearest keeps up with me, following me into the living room where his fish tank remains empty but cleaned out of the fish that Aspen killed.

I turn around and he throws another hit at me, one that I allow to connect. Aspen fought back, but he also knew not to push our father too far. Block too many hits and the abuse amplifies. The inglorious mayor once broke Aspen’s arm by throwing him down the stairs; he was fourteen.

The next time he goes to hit me, I stop him again.

“Why?” He gives a harsh laugh that has me cringing. I need to stop doing that. One of Aspen’s extremely limited positive qualities was that he never flinched. “Why go down to that goddamn track again? It’s nothing but mud and hoodlums.” My father reaches out and cups my face in two hands, almost lovingly, a move he only ever uses on Aspen and not Ash.

“There was a girl I wanted; I had to get her out of my system.”

My father reaches out and snatches a handful of my ruined dress shirt, yanking me toward him. All I want to do right now



is wash my mouth out a hundred times over to scrub the memory of that bloodied kiss from my brain.

But I knew what I was getting into when I came home.

I could only drive in circles around the city for so long before it became inevitable. The sun's already up, and I'm sure I'm late for some function or another. Rather, I'm late for one of Aspen's functions. As Ash, I never really had an itinerary.

"Scarlett Force." That girl's name, falling from my father's lips, it's the single most terrifying thing I've ever heard. To protect her, I have no choice but to take on my brother's mantle. It isn't even a question. This is the way that it has to be.

*One precious thing that's mine, just one. Just one thing for Ash.*

"Who?" The casual, insouciant reply just barely scrapes off my tongue before Jonas is shaking me so hard that my teeth rattle in my skull. I snatch his wrists and shove him back, panting heavily as we stare each other down.

"You and your brother both," he growls out at me, standing up straight and fixing his tie. "I *warned* you about getting involved with low-class trash like that. If you want a whore, buy one. Shit, I'll buy a hundred hookers if you want. But make no mistake, if I catch you at that track again—"

"I'm bored of it already," I say, affecting a bored persona by lounging on the edge of the couch. When the maid walks by—the one I found sucking Aspen's cock that day—I rake my gaze over her and lick my lips.

This is nothing new to me. I've been imitating my brother for years. Only, the thought of never being able to shed his snakeskin leaves me floored.

I know then and there that I have to eliminate any and all threats to both myself and Scarlett Force, or I'll be living in a cage for the rest of my life, a shell of putrid entitlement, buffered with gross indifference, and padded with prurient rage.

“Somehow I don’t believe that. Whatever your brother has, you want.” Jonas pauses there and smooths his hands down the front of his pristine white dress shirt. He smiles. It’s his fake mayoral smile, part of the jovial laughing persona he feeds the media, shoves down the throats of his ignorant constituents. “If I bring you her body, will that be enough?” He reaches out to cup the side of my face again, carefully stroking a thumb down my cheek.

I used to find myself filled with righteous indignation at the sight of it, watching Jonas show what little affection he allowed himself to my brother. As I grew older, I saw it for what it was: performance art. It’s a show, a grand play, a televised special on a wholesome family channel.

He didn’t mean it. Not then, not now. But as spoiled as Aspen was, Jonas had to appease him or his violent temper tantrums would escalate to dangerous levels.

“Don’t bother. She isn’t worth the effort.” *Another lie.* It scrapes and scalds as it claws its way out of my sinful mouth. I’ve never cared about lying before. After all, does a sinner deserve any form of the truth? But I can’t let harm come to Scarlett because of me, because she made the mistake of falling for me, because I allowed myself for the briefest of moments to pretend like I could have her.

I can never have her.

I can never fucking be seen with her again.

As off-limits as she was when I was Ash, she’s even more so now.

*Forbidden.*

“Somehow, I don’t believe that,” Jonas remarks, just before a knock sounds on the front door and Yua rushes over to open it. I’m desperate to lunge at him, snatch his lapels, shake him until his fucking head falls off and he forgets all about Scarlett Force.

But that’ll only make things worse.

Instead, I bite my tongue hard enough to bleed.

“Ah, Denis,” my father calls out, laughing before he’s even out the door. “I was just talking to Aspen about—”

I have no idea what he says after that. Yua closes the front door, and I’m left panting in a torn suit with a bleeding face, a devastated heart, and a fearful glimpse of what my future looks like.

*How long will it take before news of my brother’s death reaches my father? The media?*

It doesn’t matter. It changes nothing.

I swallow hard and stand up, exhaling carefully and closing my eyes.

I’m good at imitating Aspen, but really, I don’t know much about what goes on behind closed doors. It’s sheer luck that I’ve never been caught, but with each moment that I live as him, I’m one step closer to the fucking grave.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER EIGHT' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily splattered with bright red, blood-like stains that drip down from the letters, creating a macabre and violent aesthetic.

CHAPTER  
EIGHT

## *Scarlett*

When I open my eyes, it's still pitch-black in the room, and I have a small moment of panic before I remember that the warehouse has no windows. *This place would be boss during a zombie apocalypse*, I think, yawning and stretching my arms above my head. *We could use Bohnes' tank to steamroller right over some undead motherfuckers.*

I almost chuckle at the thought, but then, as my brain comes fully awake, I remember that Lemon is not only dead but that she died on my lap. I remember that I killed Aspen Kelly and that Ash is now pretending to *be* Aspen Kelly.

I sit up suddenly, scrubbing at my face with both hands. I'm still naked, still in Bohnes' bed, still too chicken shit to turn my fucking phone on. *Still covered in his cum from last night.*

With several newly discovered curses—*fuck this scrote sack shit cuckolding bullshit I've gotten myself into*—I stand up and fumble around for a lamp or a light switch. I find one on the bedside table, yanking the chain and flooding the room with golden light.

My eyes are sore and dry, my lips are cracked, and I'm bruised from one or both of the fights I got in yesterday. Yesterday. Like, Jesus fucking Christ. From Emma Jean Thompson to the mayor's contract killer to Aspen's death to Lemon's murder, it all happened on a Saturday.

All. On. A. Saturday.

"Can't wait to see how this shitstorm Sunday will turn out." I rifle through some of Bohnes' dresser drawers, unashamedly snooping, searching for any hint of a disturbing paraphilia.

All I find are sweatpants and tees, most of them printed with bone or skeleton patterns of some sort. I select a loose white tank with a black rib cage pattern and black joggers that say *Fuck Your Opinion*, spelled out in, well, bones. Duh.

After a quick shower—and a thorough examination of all the bites and claw marks Bohnes left on my body—I get

dressed and open the bedroom door to find the warehouse empty. Both of Bohnes and the Chevelle. On the table, there's a box of cereal, some milk, my phone, and a note that reads *My only lament this morning is that I can't cook for you. Call me and I'll come. Anytime, anywhere. Stay as long as you want.*

He's signed it with a drawing of a little skull.

It's almost cute, if I believed in such things as cute.

I pick my phone up and turn it on, surprised to find that Bohnes even charged it for me. Well, shit. Guess I shouldn't be surprised though; he's the king of details and small things.

Messages come flooding in along with a wave of guilt. I've been avoiding my phone this whole time because if I'm honest with myself, I'm afraid of seeing or talking to Nisha and Bastian. I'm terrified of my own crew.

After all, this isn't the first time I've let them down this year. School's been in session for all of two months, and I've managed to lose two of my girls.

Two.

One was too many.

My hand shakes as I parse through the myriad messages that come with running your own crew, and that feeling of guilt amplifies. Turning my phone off was for my comfort and mine alone. I have responsibilities; I don't just get to switch them off when I'm having a hard time. Not even if I'm having the *worst* time.

Fortunately for me, nothing *else* has gone amiss. I suppose the universe thought the life that is my toilet bowl was already too full of crap to flush? Nah. Just pure luck.

*Girl, I'm going to fucking kill you. Your grandma is furious —AT ME. Call me or die.*

Oh, Nisha.

I tap the phone against my lips and then take a seat in Bohnes' throne chair. It's absurd, just like he is. I pull the cereal bowl close, dump what appears to be generic Fruity

Pebbles inside, and then add the milk. Nothing like an overdose of sugar for breakfast.

Then I hit call on Nisha's number and switch to speakerphone, leaving my cell on the table beside my bowl.

"Where the *fuck* are you?"

"Good morning to you, too, sweetie," I reply blithely, acting as if I can't still feel Lemon's seizing body against my thighs.

Compartmentalize, wrap that grief in a box and bow, shove it down.

"I'm not playin' around here, Scar. You tell me where you are right the hell now, so I can come over there and beat your ass." Nisha's breathing so hard she sounds like a bull who's in the ring and ready to gore.

"If I knew that, I'd tell you. To be frank, I don't even know what time it is." I check the phone and sigh. "Four o'clock, it seems."

"If you *knew*? You took off with Aspen Kelly last night, and nobody's seen or heard from you since."

"Not true—I texted to let you know that I needed you to cover for me." I take a bite of cereal, and Nisha lets out this little scream of frustration, obviously only after having moved her phone away from her ear or else my own eardrums would be bleeding.

"Sure. After you messaged me last night to say you were headed home. Clearly, ya weren't. *Where are you, Queen?*"

"Well, I know where I'm at in the theoretical sense. It's the geography of it that scares me. Hold on." I stand up and leave the phone where it is, even as Nisha is yelling at me. The huge warehouse doors are on rollers and easy to slide open. I undo the various locks that Bohnes has in place, and then I open them.

There's a forest outside.

Like, literal trees and shit.

“Uh.” I step outside and listen carefully. If I don’t move or breathe too loudly, I can hear cars in the distance. But like, just barely. “Where the fuck?”

*Oh yeah, Toto, we ain’t in South Prescott anymore ...*

I’m guessing Bohnes wouldn’t set up shop too far from the city, but it’s pretty damn peaceful out here, and I don’t see any houses around, just trees.

We could be on the edge of Springfield, in an area known as the Mohawk Valley. Or maybe a bit further than that, in Marcola, this small town that’s holding strong against the new development plans. It won’t last long. Already, the woods are being carved away for little box-like houses made of ticky-tacky.

I bet that’s where we are, somewhere between the Valley and Marcola.

I move back inside, flopping down at the table as I listen to Nisha cursing through the speaker. I pull up a map online so I can see where exactly this place is.

Yep, down Hill Road on a large plot buried in the woods.

“Whatever. Doesn’t matter. You can explain later. I’m on my way; just stay put.” I can hear a car door slam on the other end of the line. She must be getting in her Lotus.

“I’ll be here.” I hang up, not bothering to give her directions. Bastian, Nisha, and I all have each other’s phones set up to track. We used to ... Lemon used to be ...

Speaking of phones, I imagine hers is still in the Ferrari ...

I slam my arm into the cereal bowl and send it flying. The white porcelain shatters on the floor, splattering milk and brightly colored cereal everywhere. The fingers of my right hand rub my temples in little circles as I try to get myself together.

Nisha will know immediately if I show a single card. Yeah, I’ve gotta tell her and Basti. But not right now. I need some time to process all of this.



Since Bohnes has been, weirdly enough, nothing but nice, I can't leave his place a mess. I scavenge some paper towels from the kitchen counter and do my best to clean it up. With the dirt floors, I sort of just have to leave the milk spots to dry, but I pour water over it just in case.

With the glass bits and cereal cleaned up, I put the milk away, wash the spoon I used and then grab my shoes. Two polished red Louboutins sitting prettily on the coffee table.

Another quick glance in the bathroom mirror shows how jacked-up I really am. There are big purple bags under my eyes, various cuts and scrapes and bruises. But luckily, no blood. No more blood.

I had a hard enough time with it before, but now?

*Fuck, I hate the color red. I fucking hate it.*

Memories assault me, ones that I haven't paid much attention to in years. Memories of sitting in my aunt's minivan, memories of glancing into the back seat to smile at my brother, Mikey.

Between one instant and the next, I was looking at him smiling back at me, and then he was covered in blood and the whole world was moving, shifting, grinding metal, shattering glass, screams, the rush of traffic.

I shove away from the sink and stumble as my right leg throbs, that phantom pain from my throbbing tibia. *Another storm warning.*

Because of course.

Because I can't kill one man, one rapist, and lose one best friend on a weekend where the sun is shining.

I head for the front doors of the warehouse with my phone, locking them behind me and then leaning against them as I wait for Nisha.

She shows up about fifteen minutes later.

"Holy fuck," she says, stepping out of the car and shoving her shades up her face. Even with the incoming storm, the gray glare overhead is migraine-inducing, as if the sun is bouncing

its harsh light off the clouds and aiming it down at us like a laser beam. Ants under a magnifying glass. A punishment from the heavens for daring to have a storm. “What is this place? Thought I was gonna get shot driving up the driveway, I won’t lie. You know how these country kooks are.”

She runs her hand over her mostly shaved head. There’s a new design in it today, a kaleidoscope of stars in different sizes and shapes, some buzzed down to her skull, others left with varying lengths of hair so that each one appears to be a different shade of brown.

“Hair looks good,” I say, pushing up off the metal doors. I’m cosplaying right now. Cosplaying as a girl who just had an amazing night with her boyfriend. *Eww, boyfriend.* Roleplaying as the badass leader of a kick-ass crew who isn’t afraid of anything.

Only, that’s a lie.

I’m terrified that Nisha will take one look at me and see it.

Her dark brown eyes sweep the warehouse before dropping down to my face.

“What is this place? Is this our new hideout?”

I wet my lips and glance back at the building. The metal is a tan color on the outside, white on the inside. From here, it doesn’t look like anything but a gently used outbuilding, a few rust spots here and there.

I can see why Nisha thinks that, that I might’ve moved our hideout from the warehouse in the lumberyard. After Jennifer led Widow there, it’s only logical.

Except ... I can keep Widow on a leash now. He wants to be my fuckboy? I’ll treat him like one then. If I say come, he better heel.

“Let’s go, and I’ll tell ya on the way.” I climb into Nisha’s white ‘64 Lotus Elan, the one she fixed up with her now-deceased father. She spends another minute or so observing the building, the woods, memorizing details to ask me about later, I’m sure. This is her version of rebellion against me.

She swaggers her way over to the car, nice and slow, leisurely, and then climbs half in, leaving one heeled foot on the gravel outside.

“I’m not going anywhere until you give me a single sentence explanation. Queen, I respect you. I’d follow you to the grave. But you know all that. Now, give me an iota of respect and pretend like you don’t have to shoulder the burden of the world by yourself.”

I exhale sharply and lean my head back against the seat, closing my eyes.

“This is Bohnes’ place.” That’s a full sentence, right? I’m no writer, but there’s a subject and a verb and a coherent thought so ... bam. Mission complete.

The admission does what I assumed it would, causing Nisha to sigh dramatically as she slides into the car, slams the door, and starts the engine.

“Queen, you damn near as bad as Lemon,” she mutters which, under normal circumstances, would either annoy me or make me laugh. At this point, it’s just torture. Bamboo shoots under my nails. “What happened last night? I’ll take a play by play, thank you very much.”

“I, too, would like to know what the fuck is going on,” a voice says by my ear, and I shoot up with a bit-off scream, spinning and angling my knife against Bastian’s throat. “Christ, Scarlett!” he shouts, eyes wide.

“What the hell, man?!” I shout back, pulling the knife away, pleased at myself for only having nicked him enough to draw a single drop of ruby red. I’m that good, right? I can react without overreacting. That helps a little, soothes some of this helpless feeling I’m nursing and despise like no other. “You popped out of the back seat like some sort of crazed killer in an urban legend.”

“I just wanted to see if I could,” he adds with a small moue, rubbing at the side of his neck and looking at me like I’ve just kicked a puppy. How will he look at me after he knows about Lemon? *Shove that pain in a box, Scar. Push it away. Crush it.*

“Well, you caught me on an off day. Good for you.” I slip the knife back into my pocket and sigh, settling back into the seat. I realize I just slept for eight hours, but that’s just a normal night’s rest. I went through hell and back; I’m ready for a nap.

“So, this is where crazy, kooky Bohnes lives, huh? Is this where you disappeared to last night?” Bastian leans between the seats again, probably just to get on my nerves. “*Qué te pasa?*” He needles, slapping at my arm.

“I don’t even know where to *begin* with what happened to me yesterday. Can you give me some time to work it out?” I know I’m being snippy when neither of my friends deserves it, but my usual reserve of strength and patience has been carved up and farmed out. I’m dead on my feet.

Nisha slams on the brakes so hard that I find myself thrown forward. My hands come up automatically, my palms slamming against the dash to stop the sudden lurching motion. *Serves me right for not wearing a seat belt, I guess.*

For a second there, I think she’s just being dramatic, but then I notice the sleek, shiny body of Bohnes’ Chevelle stretched perpendicularly across the road in front of us, cutting us off.

He climbs out of the car, dressed almost entirely in white today—white hoodie, white joggers, black boots with white laces. There’s a huge red skull on the front of the hoodie, but that’s the only part of him that has any color. *Of course the skull is red, bloodred, the color of pain and loss.*

“What the actual *fuck?*” Nisha grinds out as Bohnes comes over to the passenger side window, and I roll it down.

Without a word, he reaches in and captures my face between his big hands, leaning into the car and pressing his hot and vibrant mouth against mine. It wakes me up out of my stupor, drawing fire into my veins, making me ache and itch. Our tongues are wild and hard against one another, delving deep, tasting, memorizing, absorbing.

*I could eat this man alive.*

I'm gasping as he pulls back, my eyes mesmerized by the shine on his full, pink lips.

"Scarlett ..." Nisha breathes from behind me, shocked into a rare and likely unending silence.

"Oh, shit ..." Basti chokes as Bohnes smirks, his hood up over his white hair. It looks fresh, like maybe that's the business he had to take care of this morning? Getting his hair bleached anew. If so, he deserves the break. More likely, he bleached it himself in his kitchen sink and then went and took care of other peoples' dirty deeds for cold, hard cash.

"I wanted a chance to kiss you goodbye, but I didn't want to wake you this morning." He stands up straight as my heart thrums and purrs in my chest. *Ah, shit. Bohnes, you unholy terror.*

"Sacriligious. What if we'd crashed into you, Bohnes? Huh? Two fucked-up cars?" I pretend to be annoyed, but I'm not. Is that a problem?

He takes a step back and then gives this fucked-up, disturbing little wave.

"Nisha, Bastian." Without bothering to respond to my question, he turns and takes off for the Chevelle. He doesn't head back to the warehouse, however. Instead, he reverses into the grass a bit and angles himself toward the road, taking off in a spray of gravel.

"Girl." Bastian puts his hand on my shoulder and gives it a little pat and a squeeze. "What is going on here? I thought you wanted to be with Widow."

"I never said that." I sort of did. But really, what I said was that I wanted them both as fuckboys. Somehow, Bohnes managed to weasel into being a boyfriend? What even is a boyfriend? In Prescott terms, it's like, practically marriage. It's almost a blood in, blood out thing. "We're dating now. I upgraded him from his fuckboy status."

"This is the stupidest thing you've ever done, hands down." Nisha's painted purple lips morph into a flatline of pure annoyance.

“If you knew the things he’d done for me, you wouldn’t be saying that.”

“So you’re dating him to, like, return a favor? Pussy in exchange for services?”

I turn a hot glare on her, rage boiling up inside of me much faster than it should. My anger isn’t for Nisha; it’s for myself, for failing to protect Lemon. For killing Aspen and leaving Ash to deal with the mess. For using Bohnes, for dragging Widow into this.

“I would never. I’m not a whore, Nisha.”

Her face softens slightly as she glances over at me, coming to a stop behind the red taillights of Bohnes’ car. He makes a right turn; we make a left.

“I know that, honey. I didn’t mean that. I guess I just don’t understand what’s going on. I can’t, you know, if you don’t tell me.” She falls silent, and I sigh, reaching out to turn on the radio.

The host for KMZI 66.6 today is named Nessie (after the Loch Ness monster, of course). She’s not on nearly as much as either Wolfman or Milicent, but she’s new and still trying to prove herself. Somehow, her voice reminds of a senior girl who attended Prescott around the time that I was a freshman.

*Did I beat her up once?* I may have.

She’s currently on a rant about—what else—the state of Prescott and the city of Springfield as a whole.

*“Do you know what an urban growth boundary is?”* she asks, her voice this soft, almost delicate whisper. Strong, too, though, like the filaments of a spider web. I can just imagine her, shiny and venomous and eight-legged ... *“It’s an imaginary line drawn around a city that’s meant to stop urban sprawl. That is, anything outside the UGB is meant to be preserved in its natural state or used for agriculture. Mayor Kelly—”*

I slam my palm into the radio to turn it off; I cannot deal with yet another rant of this nature, not today.

Nisha and Bastian both look at me like I've lost my ever-loving mind.

"Can we just go party tonight, please?"

Nisha's brows go up. I don't ask what we're going to do unless I'm blithely curious and don't care. Usually, I simply *tell* my friends and my crew what we're doing. After all, I'm the boss.

It might be Sunday, but there's always a party going on somewhere; this *is* Prescott, after all.

"Fine. We can party, but first, you tell me where your fucking car is and how you lost it in the first place."

"I didn't lose it; I let a friend borrow it." Namely, I let Alexei Grove borrow it. A man that I barely know, a virtual stranger. The thought of it now is disturbing, but last night, I didn't give two flying shits if he took off in the Pantera or wrapped it around a tree. Today, it feels ... wrong. Unholy. Sinful. Speaking of, where *is* my car?

I whip my phone out with the intention of texting Bohnes and find a message from Alexei instead.

*Your car is parked safely in your driveway. Your grandmother seems lovely, but please extend my further apologies to her. I simply could not go in for coffee due to my unusual proclivities. Let me know when it might be a good time to talk; we can arrange a meeting in a neutral place. Sincerely, Alexei Grove*

He ... signs his text messages like they're letters.

It's a strangely attractive quality somehow. I don't bother to analyze why I think that.

After all, Bohnes telling me he wanted to be buried in the same coffin as me got me all hot and bothered last night. It's becoming quite clear that I've got issues.

"A friend? Bitch, please. I know *all* of your friends, and you don't let anybody drive your car except us. Rightfully so. I mean, look how badly Jennifer screwed it up the last time." Bastian leans even further between the two seats, his dark hair

tousled and slightly curly, his smile mischievous. Losing Lemon is going to destroy what's left of his little black heart. "What you meant to say was: I let a fuckboy borrow it." He pauses and frowns. "Or gross, a boyfriend? Eww, Scar. Just eww."

"Alexei Grove," I explain succinctly. Yet another line item I need to explain to my friends. I don't have the energy right now. I want to go out and drink myself into a coma. That's my goal today. Party, drink, pass out. Then I'll work out when and how to break the news to Nisha and Bastian.

Also, *how much* of it I want to break to them.

"Alexei Grove?" Nisha asks, and then she just shakes her head. "What the fuck did you do last night?"

"You know how in the movie, *The Hangover*, they wake up the next day with a tiger in the bathroom, a baby in the coat closet, and a missing friend? That's sort of the night I had only I remember every last, miserable second of mine. It's a lot to unpack." I nod with my chin toward the windshield, kicking my heels off, and then propping a foot on the seat so I can wrap my arms around my knee. "Take me home. I'll deal with Patricia, get dressed, and we can scout out something good."



The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. The text 'CHAPTER NINE' is centered in a white, serif font. The word 'CHAPTER' is on the top line, and 'NINE' is on the bottom line. The text is heavily obscured by numerous red, blood-like splatters and streaks that appear to be dripping down the page. The splatters are most concentrated around the letters, creating a graphic and somewhat disturbing effect.

CHAPTER  
NINE

## *Scarlett*

Something good turns out to be a pre-Halloween rager populated by students from all three local high schools: Prescott (future career criminals, like drug dealers), Fuller (disturbingly average teens), and Oak Valley (also future career criminals, like politicians).

My whole squad is here, every drip and drop of the Crimson Crew.

*Except for Lemon. Oh, fuck, Lemon ...*

“Girl, where did you go last night?! That thing between Widow and Aspen, gold.” Jennifer Atwell slaps me on the back, and I grit my teeth. I turn a look on her and she carefully withdraws her hand, her cheeks red with drink. Likely, this is a move to prevent me from relegating her to designated driver again tonight. “There’s talk that Widow followed y’all and caught you and Aspen breaking track rules. Is that true?”

“What a load of shit,” I snap at her, more aggressively than I intend to. Really, my head is spinning from the raging pound of the music; the bass is literally eating my bones from the inside out. “Spread this around: if I hear anyone talking shit like that, I’ll curb stomp them outside the school on Monday. You hear me?”

Jennifer swallows hard, her blue eyes wide, and then she takes off, weaving through the crowd and cupping her hand around another girl’s ear. My words will spread like fire through a drought-fucked forest.

“Get me something to drink,” I murmur, and another of my girls—Juana, this time—takes off to obey the command. Most of the girls stay with me, even as we dig deeper into the crowd, working our way from the front door and down a crowded hallway that used to serve as the foyer for this particular theater.

This place is an old 1920s era silent-film theater, long abandoned and a former home to strung-out losers, hookers,

and the filthy Johns who used to come for ten-dollar hand jobs.

Prescott kids were the ones to kick them out; I can't claim any credit for that. It was before my time anyway, but the story goes that a good half or more of the student body gathered outside with bricks and chains and baseball bats and cleared the place in a half hour or less. They cleaned up the needles and the old mattresses, and it's been a party place ever since.

This building is known locally as the *Flesh and the Devil Music Hall*, a name stolen from a craptastic 1927 film about two idiot friends who fall for the same girl, allow her to die a tragic death, and then go *eh, bros over hos, my friend*. But whatever. Shit film, cool name, and yet another historic building slated for demolition.

All around me, I catch snatches of drunken conversation.

*"Like, you can't erase history, you know? Like, it's there. Like, it happened. I'm going to miss this place."* Hiccup.

I ignore it all, moving into the theater proper. About half of the seats are still left and a dance floor has formed on the old stage. There are burgundy curtains hanging on either side, rotting and decaying off the metal poles they were attached to. Lord only knows how old those things are.

Widow is waiting for me, reclined in one of the less decayed seats, his arms crossed behind his head, eyes closed. He's sitting with his feet up on the chair in front of him, a small but very telling bubble of personal space around him.

As the crowd clears when I walk down the halls, people are learning to avoid Widow, too. That fight at the track probably helped with that a little.

We didn't exactly have plans to meet up or anything, but I just somehow knew that he'd be here. Bohnes should be, too. He never misses a party. It's the perfect breeding ground for gossip and blackmail. The right picture, the right video, well, it can be used in exchange for favors.

I move up to Widow and reach around him, covering his eyes with my hands.

“Guess who?” I whisper near his ear, and his entire body goes stiff. Every muscle locks up, and my instincts flare, a siren blaring *danger, danger, danger* as I release him suddenly and take a step back.

He doesn't move, but he does turn his head to the side as I step up beside him.

“You don't want me to touch you?” I query as my girls scatter around the room, careful to keep me in sight. They're being extra clingy today, as if they can sense the mood I'm in. They'll do that sometimes, tiptoe around me like that.

“Christ.” That's all Nisha says, and then she, too, moves away with Bastian at her heels. He lingers just a bit, giving me this horrible, over-the-top wink that has me rolling my eyes. When he makes a circle with his left hand, and then fucks the hole with the pointer finger on his right—that's like, cheap Prescott sign language for sex—I flip him off with the inked cross on my middle finger.

“Did I say that?” Widow snaps back, dropping his feet to the floor and his hands to his lap. God, everything he says is just *annoying*, snappy and rude and bitten off the end of his tongue like he's about to declare a duel.

He turns those gorgeous amber eyes over to me, narrowed and sullen. He's annoyed. Isn't he always annoyed?

“You went as stiff as a corpse as soon as I touched you,” I say, and then immediately regret it. My stomach churns, and the room spins, but I stand there in high-high heels and a slinky green dress—the very color of envy—and I pretend like I'm entirely unaffected by the comment.

“Sit down,” he tells me, as if he thinks I'll just obey his every word.

“Ask Bohnes if burying a body for me gives you total control over my ass. Go on. Ask him. I'll wait.” I cross my arms under my breasts, propping them up enough that they draw Widow's attention. Actually, pretty sure they already had Widow's attention. No, no, they *definitely* did.

“Why don’t you ask that a little louder?” he growls, standing up suddenly so that he’s towering over me. Does he know that I only like guys taller than me anyway? What’s his point? I could still stab him before he could get the jump on me.

I cup my hands around my mouth, as if I’m about to yell—I am—and he reaches out, snatching one of my wrists and dragging my hand down. His fingertips burn my skin, branding me with shameful attraction.

Lemon is dead. What right do I have to get turned on? But that’s exactly why I came here tonight. Because sitting at home with my angry grandmother, pissed-off mom, weepy aunt, and crazy sister wasn’t high on my list of priorities.

To be clear, I only listen to my grandmother because I respect her, because I care what she thinks. Nobody controls me. Nobody tells me what to do.

Especially not Widow.

“I bury bodies!” I scream, as loudly as I can, and his gold eyes go wide. Nobody cares. Nobody even glances our way. Can they hear me? If they can, do they believe me? Maybe. But everyone here is drunk or high or having sex on rotten theater chairs that are over a hundred years old. Nobody got time for my shit, least of all me.

I drop my right hand down, but leave my left wrist clasped in Widow’s fingers.

His purple, turquoise, and black hair is tousled and messy today, his expression pensive and somehow also simultaneously irritated.

“There are limits to what I can handle,” he tells me, his voice all shadows and cobwebs and hard liquor. Its deep timbre shoves the thrum of the bass aside, making room to take over my bones, to crawl into my veins. “Don’t sneak up on me. Don’t touch me from behind. Don’t touch my things.”

“Excuse me, *sir*,” I begin, pausing to collect a nearly full bottle of Grey Goose vodka from Juana. Mm. Guess the Oak Valley brats can stay tonight. If I can escape the night without

a single can of White Claw or a bottle of Everclear to drink, I'm happy. I shoo Juana away and chug several mouthfuls before offering the bottle up to Widow. He hesitates, but only for a second. Eventually, he takes the bottle from me and drinks a fair amount. "I thought you were my new fuckboy? Your idea, by the way."

He pauses with the bottle near his pouty lips, full and ripe and desperate for my cunt to be grinding all over them ... Or at least, one of us is desperate for that. I'd sit on this bitch's face and ride him until he had tears in his eyes, digging his fingers into my hips, begging me to stop and asking for more all at the same time ...

Ouch. I'm in a mood tonight.

"*I ... love ... you so much.*" Lemon's warbling voice fills my head and I reach out, snatching the bottle back.

Widow releases it easily enough, studying me with an absurdly intense expression. Everything about the man is intense, riling, and enraging. He pisses me off and turns me on in violent and equal measures.

I take another drink, trying to scrub the nightmares from my brain.

"Do you even know how to date?" he inquires, very haughtily I might add. "Is that something in your wheelhouse, Scarlett?"

"I don't need to know how to date. You are a fuckboy, *Adrian*. Convince me to fall in love with you." I'm being a snarky bitch right now, but it doesn't seem to bother him. I mean, he grits his teeth and clenches his fists, but his eyes shine with challenge.

"Oh, trust me. That won't be a problem." He starts to walk around me, and I turn in time with him, following his movements as he circles me. And then we're circling each other, like two wild dogs in the savannah. "By the time I'm done with you, you'll be wearing a big-ass rock on your finger and hiking up your wedding dress, begging me to consummate our marriage."

Laughter escapes me, and I take another sip of the vodka.

In her last, Lemon believed she was in love. She reached for her man, not her friends. That was her mistake. While Aspen clearly knew his fiancée was intended to die that night—and obviously, since he tried to rape me just an hour prior, didn't care—I'll fight for my friend's justice until the very last breath and the very last drop of blood are siphoned out of me.

“Please. Like I said, those romance novels are poisoning your brain. You think love is pretty in real life? It's fucking disgusting. It's hideous.” I'm shaking again, my hand clenching tight around the neck of the vodka bottle. “Did you see Lemon, Widow? Did you see her last, dying breaths? *That* is what love looks like.”

He reaches out and grabs onto my shoulders, touching me even after telling me not to touch him. Hypocrite.

“That wasn't love. That was ...” He looks away and exhales heavily. “That was something else entirely. Is rape, sex? No, it's not. Whatever Lemon thought she had with Aspen, it wasn't love. Clearly, you don't know what love looks like either. I'm going to show you.”

I just stare at him, blinking heavy, sassy lids, my lash extensions fresh, my skin clean but for a kiss of blush on either cheek (okay, fine, and a *teensy* bit of concealer for my bruises).

“Right. I don't know what love is, but you do? Because you read a lot? They're just words, Widow. Just stories.” He drags me close to him, his moonlight orchard scent a soothing balm that makes me a little unsteady on my feet. Or else ... that's the vodka. Whatever.

“Stories written by a person. Ideas that came from a person. Desires dreamed up and consumed by millions of other people. If it's possible for a person to dream of a love as powerful as one found in a novel, then isn't it safe to assume that maybe, every once in a while, it could happen in reality?”

“You're insane.” I move to take another sip of my drink, but Widow cuts me off by grabbing me by the back of the neck

and pulling me even closer. He closes his mouth over mine, tasting faintly of vodka and mint, and then he kisses me so deeply and thoroughly that I have to tilt my head back to give him more room.

He eats me up, Widow does. I drop the vodka bottle, spilling alcohol everywhere. It rolls down the gently sloped aisle toward the stage, but I ignore it. I've had enough for now. My eyes drift closed, and I lift my arms up, twining them around his strong neck, kissing him like I care.

“Let me pop your cherry tonight,” I murmur, pulling my lips away from his and putting them against his left ear. He shudders a little, tenses up a bit, but he doesn't pull away. I push even harder into him, my breasts rubbing up against his chest, my dress riding up my thighs.

Although ... it's not fair for me to ask that, is it? Because Bohnes and Widow raced, and Widow lost.

Right. I'm supposed to challenge Bohnes to a race, aren't I? Or, at the very least, beg for his permission.

Christ on a cracker.

I draw back slightly, finding Widow's face shadowed, his eyes closed, his breathing heavy. And then I see something that hits me like cold water to the face.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?” I grind out, pulling away from Widow and turning to face the blond haired, denim-jacket wearing busybody to my right.

Miss Emma Jean Thompson.

She carefully skirts a pair of guys wrestling drunkenly and makes her way over to me. Her eyes flick to Widow, and her cheeks heat slightly, before she redirects that honey-brown gaze of hers back to me.

“I needed to talk to you, and I thought I might find you here. Why are you ignoring my calls and texts?”

I did. I am. I don't want to talk to Emma Jean Thompson, reporter and journalist extraordinaire who failed to tell me she was being tailed by one of the mayor's henchmen.



“You unnecessarily complicated my day yesterday,” I snap at her, giving Widow a look out of the corner of my eye. He’s staring at the newcomer like he’s committing her face to memory. Now, also very unnecessarily, she’s shown herself to Widow, and he knows nothing about the mayor’s hitman. What am I supposed to do here?

“You can’t ignore my calls and texts,” she says, beads of sweat on her forehead. She appears nervous. Good. She should be. Girls like her get eaten for breakfast by Prescott students. I’ve seen Fuller and Oak Valley freshmen less fidgety than this woman. She leans in toward me, and I allow it, putting a hand on her shoulder as she puts her mouth near my ear. “I’m being tailed again.”

I look up, eyes scanning the crowd. A goon like the one who attacked us at my house will stand out like a sore thumb amongst this group. Only, I don’t see anyone out of the ordinary except for ...

Oh, shit.

It’s Ash.

I mean ... Aspen.

He’s coming down the aisle, dressed in a hoodie and jeans which is weird. I’ve only ever seen him in two states: his Ash form, which generally constitutes cashmere sweaters and designer sneakers; and his Aspen form of suits, ties, and loafers.

Emma turns and her eyes widen. She goes to move around me, like she might make a run for it, but I clamp a hand on her arm to keep her still.

Ash looks almost surprised to see me, but he hides it easily enough, his ebon eyes flicking between me and Emma, me and Widow. Back to me. Resting on me. Digging into me like a shovel in graveyard dirt.

“Him,” Emma breathes, and then she turns. It’s the most she can do, with her arm in my grip. She ends up standing shoulder to shoulder with me, and I release her.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as Widow does the same, turning to look Ash over like he’d very much enjoy taking his baseball bat to the Kelly boy’s head. “Why are you chasing a reporter around?”

“You know her?” he asks me, his voice heavily accented, as if he’s been holding it in all day, and it’s just now come rushing out. “How?”

“Doesn’t matter. What do you want with her?” I cross my arms again. So much for my carefree night of partying and emptying my head. I need more alcohol. Did I say I’d had enough? Not even close. “Is there ... There’s not a problem, is there?”

“Not as such,” he replies easily enough. His stare gives me the chills. We *really* need to be careful here. We can’t be seen around one another, not at all. Even a small rumor could cause Godzilla-sized problems. Lemon’s disappearance. His brother’s disappearance. This reporter. The mayor. The police chief. Alexei Grove. It’s a tangled nightmare. “She was hovering around our house, so I followed her. I didn’t expect her to lead me to you.”

Our eyes lock, and a thrill cuts right through me.

If I could bottle up the feelings I had last night, when Ash appeared out of the shadows, and I knew the Kelly brother I liked was alive and the one I hated was dead, I’d make a fortune. Rapturous, rhapsodic ecstasy, a waterfall of relief, a disturbing eagerness.

“You ...” Emma moves to peer inside the shadows of the hoodie and Ash turns away. Maybe she already knows who he is, maybe not? It’s hard to see faces in the smoke-filled umbra of the old theater. Then again, he *did* follow her from the house, and she knows I’m acquainted with Aspen Kelly. “Who is this?” She asks me instead.

“Aspen’s bodyguard,” I reply easily. Maybe she believes me, maybe not. I don’t care. At this point, it’s just damage control.

I turn to Widow.

“Can you watch over Miss Emma Jean for a minute?” He stares back at me like I’ve lost my mind, his jaw clenched, grinding his teeth together. “Neither of these assholes is allowed on the premises, but I have to talk to that one first before I kick *her* out.” I jerk my thumb in Emma’s direction and then move up to Ash, slipping my knife out from beneath my dress. It slides easily out of my thigh holster until the point of it is pressed to his stomach.

He looks right at me, that heavy gaze cloaked by his hoodie, and there’s no fear in it.

Emma makes a small sound, but then, she did see me kill a guy literally yesterday.

“Alright, buddy, let’s go.”

Ash turns easily enough, exiting the theater proper and turning right instead of left in the hall, easing toward a set of ruined stairs instead of the front door. Almost nobody goes up the steps. It just isn’t worth the risk. They’re rotted and sagging, and who knows how much integrity the second floor has left?

But Ash grabs onto the flimsy banister and vaults over the hole in the first few steps, landing easily enough on the third before he continues up.

I pause to put my knife away and take my heels off, following him up and into the projector room that overlooks the theater proper. There’s a single couple up there making out, but it’s comprised of girls from my crew, so I’m not concerned.

“Out.”

They both scramble to hide their bare tits with their shirts, shoving up from the old chaise and disappearing. I glance around the corner to make sure they’ve gone down the stairs, and then I shut the door before turning to Ash.

He pushes his hood back, and my heart throbs painfully.

How fair is this, for me to feel like this around him? Isn’t this what got me into trouble in the first place? At the very least, I can’t blame myself for Lemon’s death. She’d found

Aspen Kelly far before I did; she got herself into that mess. Only ... only, I still blame myself for not being able to get her out of it.

“Who is that?” Ash asks first, his dark hair disheveled from the hood. I’m happy to see that he has bags under his eyes as big as mine. Well, under his left eye anyway. His right one is so swollen from my punch that it looks squinted and misshapen.

Also, he has some distinctly new bruises and cuts that didn’t come from me.

“Who hit you?” I ask, but it’s a dumb question. His father did, obviously. Who else?

“Answer my question first.” He takes a step toward me, just one.

I notice a bright orange extension cord snaking down the center of the room. It looks brand-new, and it’s connected to what appears to be a projector, also new. I move over to it and fiddle around for a second, hitting a button and then blinking in surprise when an old movie begins to play.

Ironically, it’s a Prescott favorite, an ‘educational’ (LOL) film from 1936 titled *Reefer Madness*. We’ve all seen this before in school. Literally.

I move over to the broken glass of the viewing window and look out as the crowd cheers and howls with excitement. There’s nothing better than watching a hysterical, alarmist propoganda film from the thirties while drunk or stoned. Classic.

Whoever set this up also tacked a sheet up front (the real screen disintegrated long ago), so that there’s at least some semblance of a wrinkly, watery picture to view. Mostly, the dialogue is funny.

*“Because it is only through enlightenment that this scourge can be wiped out,”* a man’s voice booms dramatically.

I turn back to Ash.

“That woman down there is Emma Jean Thompson. She showed up one day at my duplex, looking for the owner of the adjoining unit.” Ash moves a bit closer, but not close enough, really. “She’s a reporter. Or a journalist. Is there a difference between the two?”

“Journalists collect information then craft news stories; reporters report those stories to the public. Journalists often work as reporters, but not all reporters are journalists. Does that make sense?”

“You’re a smart one,” I quip, noticing that the girls left a bottle of moonshine up here. There’s no label on it, but it’s clearly new, free of dust, and has pretty lipstick stains on the rim. I pick it up and sniff it, shrug, and then take a drink. *Fuck, that burns.* “Well, thanks for clearing that up. I guess she’s a journalist who also wants to be a reporter, and she’s researching *your* family. Specifically, your father’s involvement with Larron Van Gordon.”

Ash goes still; even his breathing stops for a few seconds there.

“If you hurt her, *Aspen Kelly*,” I start, practicing the use of that name. In my head, I’ll always call him Ash. Out loud, Ash is dead. My fuckboy is dead, and I can’t have this one because it’ll screw us both straight into the ground. “Then I’ll kill you. Leave her alone.”

“I’m not going to hurt her,” he promises, and somehow, I almost believe him. Almost. “But doesn’t this seem absurdly coincidental to you? This reporter—”

“Journalist,” I correct, and he offers up an empty smile in response.

“*Hai hai*,” he says, drawling out the Japanese so prettily that I want to kiss it off of his face. “This *journalist* just showed up at your place, of all the houses in all of Prescott?”

I cross my ankles and lean back, my shiny green dress creeping up my thighs, and I take another swig of the drink. It tastes cheap as hell, but I’m the one who dropped the nice

vodka, so I guess I'll deal. Still better than White Claw or Everclear or freaking Pabst.

“She saw us fucking; she has a video on her phone.”

Ash once again goes still and then curses in Japanese. At least, it sounds like a curse. Who knows what he's saying? I want him to speak Japanese to me while we fuck; I don't want any of it translated either.

“Is she blackmailing you?” I shake my head. “Then is she planning on blackmailing me? My father? My ... brother?” There's a hesitation there, a heavy pause.

“Mm, I think she wants to be a famous journalist. Reporter. Both.” I shrug again, the alcohol swirling through my brain and making me smile when I want to scream. Ash appears contemplative but reserved. He doesn't trust Miss Emma Jean, and neither do I. But I can and will use her. “You know, we never did get to talk properly last night.”

I stand up and move toward him, stumbling a bit. He catches my arm, and I lift my gaze, falling into his pretty black eyes like they're a vortex. His attention falls to my lips.

Ash steadies me, releases me, and then steps back.

“Talk about what, exactly?” he asks, exhaling again. He's agitated now. I've done that, stirred him up like that.

“Your father sent a hitman after Emma yesterday. She just so happened to be at my house when he attacked her, and I killed him.”

Ash just stares at me.

“You're telling me this now?” he asks, and then he's grinding his teeth the way Widow does. Hey, maybe there's just something off about me? If problems and trouble follow you, sometimes you just gotta ask yourself if *you* are the issue. It's not the world, it's fucking *you*, yourself, and you, you, you.

“Oh, I'm sorry. Should I have fit that in between the murder and the mayhem? After you kissed Lemon maybe? Jesus,

Ash.” I rub at my forehead with the heel of my hand. “Don’t worry about the body; it’s been taken care of.”

“Oh, I’m sure it has. Bohnes, right? Do you want to sell your soul to that man?” He sounds pissed off and jealous as fuck. I’m obsessed with it. I want to drink that feeling. I want to inject it into my veins.

If you’re still sitting here and reading this and wondering when or how I become the heroine in my own story, just piss off. I told you not to read this. There are no heroes, only villains. There are no good guys, just fallible humans in shades of gray.

“Maybe I should? Maybe I *will*?” I take another drink of the moonshine and Ash tears the bottle from my fingers. He drinks some, too, and then he throws it, and then we’re kissing.

His hands are all over me, shoving up my dress, clawing at my ass cheeks through my silk panties. His tongue is down my throat, and he tastes even better because I know that I can’t have him, that if it gets out that we’re having secret rendezvous, we’re both going to be in huge trouble.

Lemon is ‘missing’, and she’s Aspen’s fiancée. Ash is supposed to be Aspen. Not only would I lose the respect of my crew—because they’d think I was screwing my girl’s man—but also, I could become a suspect. Ash could become a suspect. If someone were to look too closely at everything that happened last night, they might start to put pieces together. Either or both of us could be fingered in Aspen’s death as well.

*That* is precisely why Ash Kelly tastes so good right now.

He slams my back into the wall as the movie continues to play, the sound coming out of some distant, tinny speakers. Mad props to whoever set this up, by the way.

“*Yes. I remember,*” the movie drones on. “*Just a young boy ... under the influence of drugs ... who killed his entire family with an axe.*”

This is our background music, our mood music if you will, as Ash shoves his jeans down his hips and pushes my panties aside. I almost tell him to stop, but I’m a little drunk now, and

I don't care. I'm on the pill. Lemon is dead. She died for this boy's identical twin, and I'm going to bang him now anyway.

Ash drives into me, deep and hard, letting out this miserable sounding groan near my ear, like this is the very last straw for him and me both. He *seems* okay, but only in the way that I *seem* okay, and yet neither of us is.

"Say my name," he murmurs, just like he did when he fucked me on his car in the pouring rain. "My real name. Just for me."

"Oh, baby, you've got to work for that," I murmur right back, and then he's cupping my ass in a punishing grip, fingers digging into my skin, and he's pushing into me so hard and fast that I forget to be bothered by his black eye or his swollen lip or his myriad bruises.

We're kissing now, too, tongues tangling up together as my hands grab at his shiny, black hair, yanking on it, making him hurt as he pummels into me.

It feels like a goodbye fuck, but those are the best sort, so I don't let myself think too hard about it. It either is or it isn't.

"You can go harder, faster." I lick his ear and then bite it, and it gets him to growl against me, to pump his hips until he bottoms-out, and I can feel him in my fucking stomach. "Oh God, *Ash*." It comes out, just like I asked for, and he makes a pleased but also seemingly distressed sound in response. "Ash, Ash, Ash ... fuck."

He manages to tear one hand away from my ass, keeping me pressed to the wall with his bodyweight, pinning me with his pelvis. He tears my dress down and frees one, full, aching tit. His head descends, even against the pressure of my fingers gripping and yanking his hair, and his fervid mouth covers my nipple.

Ash bites the hardened bud, and pain crashes into me, morphing into pleasure as he softens the bite to a lick. His tongue dances and teases, and then he's kissing his way up to my neck, back to my mouth again. His hand is on my breast now, squeezing and kneading.



He staggers back suddenly, and we fall to the ground, and then he's bracing himself while I hold his face between my hands, kissing him as he rams me against an honestly very precarious looking floor.

We could fall right through it.

That would end things in a spectacular sort of way, don't you think? Death by sex. Death with Ash Kelly who's technically, sort of, almost already dead. Death with *Reefer Madness* playing in the background.

I'm on cloud nine, intoxicated by my nerve-endings firing a million shots of pleasure straight to my brain. My head gets thrown back, and I can see the flickers of gray light from the projector, dust motes floating around like unruly spirits.

"Oh my God, holy shit, Ash." I yank his head down to my breasts and he bites the left one through the silk of my dress, sucking shamelessly, mercilessly on it, and then my eyelids are fluttering, and the orgasm is coming whether I want it to or not.

This only makes Ash fuck harder, pushing through my resistant muscles as they lock down, as they tease him, coerce him, promise him pretty things if he'll just stay for a moment. A long, ragged groan pulls out of me, and every muscle in my body goes taut, stars dancing in my vision.

I'm sagging beneath Ash before he finishes, pumping hot and fierce into me, and coming with a dreamlike murmur of violent-sounding Japanese words that twist and swirl around me while I pant. He comes inside of me, too, shuddering above me and then collapsing.

I let out an *ooph* as his weight hits me, but I don't let him move. I make him stay there by wrapping my arms around him.

"You're clean, right?" I ask belatedly, almost dazedly. "I am."

"I've only had sex once, with one person, before this," he says. "Years ago. We were both virgins." He pushes up, and I

finally release him, letting him move away from me to sit in a huddled position near the chaise.

I push up onto my elbows to see Ash staring at me, almost accusingly.

“What happened to her?” I ask, and he smiles. It’s a sad, ugly smile.

“Aspen.”

I don’t inquire after any more details; I don’t want to know.

I sit up the rest of the way, lamenting the loss of the moonshine. It, too, faced a fate similar to the vodka. I swipe a finger through the spillage and lift it up for perusal; the floor is coated with a heavy layer of dust in places, and it’s now stuck to my skin.

With a frown, I rub my finger against the part of the floor that Ash and I wiped clean with our bodies. Or, more accurately, *my* body for the most part. I hazard a look over my shoulder, but I can’t see much. More than likely my dress is just as dusty as my fingertip.

“How drunk are you?” Ash inquires, his voice edgy and slightly disturbed.

I turn back to him and flash a grin as the old, stern voice of Dr. Carroll wafts up from the shitty speakers.

*“I’m going to ask you a straightforward question: isn’t it true that you have, perhaps unwillingly, acquired a certain habit through association with certain undesirable people?”*

How apropos.

“I’m not drunk, Ash Kelly. Just a little buzzed. I can hold my liquor.”

“We can’t see each other for a while,” he tells me suddenly, blurting it out into the quiet space between our panting breaths and the dialogue of the movie characters. My grin shifts down into a flat, angry line. “My father knows about you. He even knows your name.” Ash swipes his fingers through his dark hair as he watches me with that strange, certain tint of obsession in his gaze.

Coal black eyes, raven-black hair, skin like cream, a thick full mouth. His injuries don't detract from his beauty in the least.

"I'm not afraid of your father," I tell him, fixing my panties and then using the old metal cart with the projector on it to stand up. It slides a little, obscuring the picture, and the audience groans. I shift it back into place, wishing I hadn't left my clutch in the car; there are tampons in it. There's no bathroom here, so I need one to deal with the mess. "In fact, I'm going to kill him."

I turn back around to find that Ash is also rising to his feet, unfolding that long body of his into a sleek, black-clothed silhouette.

"He knows you were there when Lemon was killed; he knows Widow was there although he doesn't know his name or anything else about him. Scarlett, he threatened to have you killed and brought to me in a body bag."

"Go get my clutch," I command, pointing at the stairs. "Prescott rules. Guy comes inside a girl—or another guy—and it's his job to deal with the aftermath. Go."

"Is this a rule you just made up?" he asks, but it's not. While it doesn't have the same overall power as *snitches get stitches*, it's common courtesy.

"Of course it isn't." Blood and chocolate, that's the voice. I turn to see Bohnes slinking into the room in that way of his, like he can move from one shadow to the next without ever touching the light. He hands me my clutch; I don't ask how he came about retrieving it from inside of Nisha's locked car.

"Stalker." Ash says it, not me. But does he really have room to talk? They're all stalkers, IMHO.

"Nice work, showing up exactly where you're not supposed to be," Bohnes purrs, moving up to the projector and adjusting it for a better picture. It sits perfectly on the sheet at the front of the room, and I wonder if he didn't bring it here himself.

He'd do something like that. Shit, if this pre-Halloween gig is this entertaining, how's the *real* Halloween party going to go

next week? Also, it's my eighteenth birthday. Not Halloween, but Devil's Night, the night before. Also known as Mischief Night.

Could I have been born on a better day?

"Why don't you worry about Scarlett instead of me?" Ash snaps back. "My father's afraid of what might happen if she comes forward with a story about Lemon. I'm almost certain he's going to try to kill her." Ash sighs and reaches back for his hood. That's when I know that he's about to leave, and that I'm unlikely to see him again anytime soon.

Bohnes turns around slowly to look at him, and the way Ash tenses, I can tell he's worried that he might be shot or stabbed or strangled, that Bohnes might trail him through the shadows back to his fancy mansion.

Those are valid fears.

Bohnes just saw me have a wild, bareback quickie with Ash; he won't like that at all. But it's also important for me to keep him from claiming too much of me for himself. He's the type of man that a lover gets lost in, drowns in, that they can never crawl out of.

"Ash texted a suicide letter to my phone, but I've been unable to locate it." Ash talks about himself in the third person, as if someone else were listening in. My body still throbs in response to his, impossibly so. Just the movement of his hands on the hood of his sweatshirt make it difficult for me to think straight.

I notice he doesn't pull his gaze from mine either.

Obsession. More than that, pining. *Thirst.*

"It seems to be under the seat in my car, but I'll find it tomorrow. I don't know how long it'll take to find his body after that. Just as a heads-up." He drags his attention from me to Bohnes, quietly stewing beside the projector.

"We've lived in Prescott our whole lives," Bohnes says, but I'm not sure that's entirely true. We started going to school together in seventh grade. Who, where, or what he was before

that time, I don't know. "We don't need a rich boy's warnings."

"You need a rich boy's something," Aspen retorts, his face neutral, but his eyes ... they swing back to me. The craving is still there. Fucking him did nothing to squash it. He wants more. "We won't see each other for a while," he repeats, moving forward. Bohnes tenses up, but I put up a hand, telling him in no uncertain terms to stay put.

He stiffens—I know he doesn't like to be told what to do—but he doesn't move.

Ash comes up to stand just in front of me, and then he hooks one arm around my waist while the fingers of his other hand crawl up and under my dress. He swipes a finger over my aching cunt, sinking one and then two in as we stare at each other and my lips part.

He slides them out almost immediately and then, unashamedly and with a dreadful calm, he puts them into his mouth and sucks them clean. My desire, his desire, all mixed up and resting on his tongue, and then he kisses me.

"We won't see each other, but I'm not going to let you go so easily. Just remember that every second, every moment, everything that I do is for you."

"Get the fuck out of here," Bohnes snipes at him with a scoff of utter fucking disbelief. "You lie as easily as your psychotic brother. What do you want with Scarlett Force?"

Ash's nostrils flare.

"I've rarely allowed myself to want for anything. Every single thing I've desired, from my earliest memories until as recently as yesterday, my brother took, destroyed, or beguiled. From a box of new crayons, broken into pieces and melted to the rug with a lighter to a baby bird I saved from his cruelty to ... you." Ash sweeps his knuckles down the side of my face and ends by running his thumb over my lower lip.

His touch is intoxicating. If I wasn't drunk before, I might be now. I sway a little, and he catches my arm.

Ash lifts his eyes to Bohnes.

“Now that my brother is dead and gone, I can allow myself for the first time to want. I can crave anything. Wearing his skin, I can *have* anything. But, despite all of that, there’s only one thing that I want. Just one precious thing.” He sweeps his thumb over my mouth again, his bruised and battered face lost in the shadows of the hood, and then he turns away to leave, pausing once in front of Bohnes. “I won’t allow anyone to steal that one precious thing from me. Not my brother. Not my father.” He smiles. “And certainly not you.”

Chills run through me, and I consider that initial warning that I gave myself.

Ash or Aspen Kelly—whatever you want to call the man that just walked out of the room—has a problem with obsession. I tasted it on his lips, saw it in his eyes, and I knew what I was getting myself into.

*Psycho.*

He takes off out the door, leaving me alone with Bohnes.

“I don’t trust him,” Bohnes says, turning to me. I’ve got goose bumps all over, and cum running down my leg, and maybe I’m even nursing a small dose of obsession myself, like he infected me with it or something, but it’s easy enough to form my reply and tell the truth, all at the same time.

“I don’t trust him either.” I turn away and find a shadowy spot in the corner to clean up with the wipes from my purse. I hide the dirty panties in my giant-ass clutch, slide on some fresh ones (yeah, it’s a whole quickie cleanup kit in this bitch) but decide to forgo the tampon. Just in case, um, opportunity strikes elsewhere tonight.

When I’m done, we head downstairs together, and I ignore the quiet, simmering rage that Bohnes is carrying with him.

Or, at least, I try to.

I’m far too nosy for that.

“I need more liquor. Also, you’re angry.”

“I’m jealous. It’s a different emotion.” He says that easily enough, swiping a bottle from the hand of an Oak Valley Prep

girl—wearing her school uniform on a weekend, I might add—who gapes at us but at least knows better than to protest or complain.

Bohnes hands the bottle to me.

It's like, some sort of Japanese shit. I recognize the writing even if I can't read it. Sake, I think, which is a really weird thing to bring to a rager but was probably stolen from the cabinet of a wealthy parent.

I swig some and the creamy taste is surprisingly pleasant. Also, it reminds me of Ash, so it tastes even better.

We find Widow and Emma Jean seated in the theater together, watching a fight take place on the stage in front of the makeshift screen. Two girls are going at it, ripping at each other's earrings, snatching clumps of hair, and letting out these guttural screams of rage.

They're both Oak Valley Prep girls so, clearly, not my problem.

I take a seat beside Widow, and he glances over, noticing perhaps the state of my dress or my disheveled braid or shit, maybe he just smells sex on me. His eyes flick to Bohnes in clear annoyance, but I don't much feel like lying right now, even by omission.

I lean in and put my lips near his ear.

"I just fucked Ash Kelly upstairs." I sit back, and Widow's face goes dark with rage. Bohnes said jealousy was different than anger? How so? This looks much the same to me. "Miss Emma Jean, you are one lucky girl."

"Did you kill him?" she breathes from the seat in front of me, turned around so that she can look at me. Bohnes remains standing in the aisle beside me.

"Not this time."

Widow might not know about the hitman—yet, anyway—but he must assume I'm referring to Aspen and offers up a warning look in response.

Throughout all of this, I forgot to think about Lemon which, of course, was what I wanted. But now that I've realized it, a heartrending affectation just tears right through me.

"Fuck, I'm sad." The words just come out and I scrub both hands over my face. "Now, Miss Emma Jean Thompson, what were you doing at the Kelly house? After what you've been through, doesn't that seem kind of, you know, dumb?"

"I've hit a wall, Scarlett Motherfucking Force," she replies, as glibly as someone with a pixie cut, a Prius, and a denim jacket is able to. Her brown Bambi eyes shimmer with purpose, and I wonder if there isn't something more to this than simple journalistic integrity. Revenge, maybe? A horrendous, blood-drenched backstory?

I consider the things she told me ... yesterday. *Goddamn, was that really yesterday?!* And it was. I rode in a car with Emma Jean while she tried not to puke, went back to my house, slayed a goon, tried and failed to bury his body ... All yesterday.

Time has no meaning to me anymore, apparently.

All the weirdness about Ash and Aspen that she talked about makes so much more sense now.

*"This wouldn't be the first violent incident involving Ash Kelly. I managed to track down one of his ex-girlfriends. He got her pregnant and then beat her until she suffered a miscarriage."*

Mm, likely that was Aspen wearing an Ash Kelly skin. These brothers are downright shape changers. Or, *were* as such, in Aspen's case. Then again, how well do I know Ash?

*Yeeaaaaah*, not that well at all really. *I truly am as stupid as ... Lem.*

"No, you haven't," I reply easily enough, thoughts and decisions running through my mind at warp speed. Now that I've committed to this, to getting justice for Lemon, to assisting Alexei with his own revenge, to helping Ash, I'm in it. And when Scarlett Force is in it, it gets *done*. I lean forward, putting my elbows on my knees and grabbing



Emma's round, cherub-like face. "You've got me. I'll help you. You help me. Do you understand?"

She doesn't seem to need to hear that on repeat to get it.

I very subtly lift my right hand, unfurling my fingers and then closing them into a loose fist; it's a signal for one of my crew to come running *now*. Tuesday, our very own in-house amateur arsonist, stops what she's doing and makes her way up the aisle from the direction of the stage.

"I'll text you a time and place to have coffee." Emma stands up to leave just as Tuesday falls into my lap, acting as if she's truly a giggling, drunken mess. She's not; she's sober.

"What is it with middle-class girls and coffee dates? Christ. But whatever." I wave my hand dismissively, wrapping my arms around Tuesday as Bohnes smirks and Widow gapes. The former is used to the unruly, almost flirtatious behavior of my crew; the latter can barely stand to be touched by me. "Can't exactly meet up for a friendly riot, now can we?"

Emma doesn't seem to understand the joke but then, she clearly knows how to make a quip with the whole Scarlet 'Motherfucking' Force thing. She's not as dumb as she looks or acts, that's for damn sure.

The reporter—err, journalist, right?—takes off up the aisle, and Tuesday snaps to, like a sergeant-at-arms.

"Follow her," I command, and she flicks her long, dark hair over one shoulder, giving Widow and then Bohnes both a scathing look.

"Yes, Queen." Tuesday rises to her feet and disappears into the crowd. I don't intend to involve my girls directly in this mess, but they can do fringe work.

"Are you going to explain any of this to me, or am I supposed to figure it out on my own? Because I will, Scarlett. I don't have anything else to do."

I turn my attention over to Widow, but he isn't looking at me. No, he's staring at Bohnes instead. Our thighs are pressed close; the wooden armrests on the vast majority of these seats

were long ago snapped or cut off. It's just my bare leg against Widow's jean-clad thigh.

"You really want to get involved in this shit, huh?" I ask, and he turns those beautiful golden eyes over to mine.

"You're really asking me that? After everything that happened last night?"

I sigh because, as prickly and rude as he is, he has a point.

"You want to know about Emma Jean? Fine. I'll tell you." I turn away from Bohnes and towards Widow, putting my right hand on the back of his seat, just above his left shoulder. Slowly, carefully, as if I were approaching a wild dog, I move to straddle him, settling down on his lap as he lets out a hiss of either pain or pleasure, I'm not sure. "You're so *stiff*, and not just in the right place, all over." I put my hands on his shoulders and give them a squeeze.

He can't help himself. His hands come up and snatch my wrists, pushing them back from his shoulders.

"You are all sorts of messed-up," Bohnes growls out, giving Widow a dark look. There's no empty threat there; it's all very, very real. "You want Scarlett, but you're afraid to have her touch you?"

"My trauma isn't your business." Widow keeps his hands on my wrists, but he doesn't throw me off. He is, however, sweating profusely and hard as a rock beneath me.

"No, but your copulation with Scarlett certainly is." Bohnes allows a rictus smile to spread across his pale face. "In fact, now that I know you've broken track rules not once but *twice*, I have every right to punish you according to Prescott law. Conversely, I could spread the rumor around the school and let the other students extract a pound of flesh."

Widow's shaking now, in rage, I think. His fingers tighten on my wrists until his grip becomes near-painful.

"But I won't do that. I'll keep this pretty, little favor you owe me in my back pocket." Bohnes mimes sliding something into the pocket on his joggers. "If I call you, you'd best come running."

“I see.” Widow snorts and runs his tongue across his lower lip. “You don’t want me to fuck her, but you’ll stand aside and watch her screw the Kelly bastard?” His voice is a grating, angry thing, deep and dark as the ocean with his rage. He has anger problems, no doubt, and he’s unpredictable, a total wild card. “I raced for nothing last night; I fought for nothing. Ash needs to honor my win, considering everything that happened.”

“You mean like you honored mine?” Bohnes retorts, but Widow and I are now having a thing of our own, so he doesn’t respond to that. Then again, maybe he’s ignoring Bohnes on purpose? Smart move or really stupid one? Mm. Jury’s out on that one.

I frown at Widow, yanking my wrists from his grip. He puts his hands on my hips like he intends to eject me from his lap, and I slap him. Straight up. I just crack my palm across his cheek.

“If you push me off like that, I’ll cut your balls off. Sit still and listen for a minute.” I turn my harsh look on Bohnes, too. Because this is about both of them. “You’re both good-looking, no doubt about that. And I ...” The words feel like they’re being strangled out of me, but I push through them. “I ... *apprec...iate* ...”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Bohnes breathes, leaning down and putting his palms on the seat to my left. His face gets right up close and personal with mine, and I’m once again struck by the rampaging desire for a fuckboy sandwich. “Just say it.”

“I *appre...ci...ate* ...” I swallow hard and clear my throat as Bohnes rolls his eyes. “Everything ... ahem ... you both did for me last night. Particularly you.” I keep my gaze on Bohnes for another minute before looking back at Widow. He appears to be in the throes of a fever-induced sweat storm. His shirt is wet, his body shakes, and he looks equal parts desperate and terrified.

Poor thing.

I decide that enough is enough; if this is trauma-related, I can’t push him. I go to move off of his lap and he clamps his

hands down on my hips, holding me still.

“Also, I do ... I ... *enjoy* ...”

“Scarlett.” This time it’s Widow, snapping my name off the end of his tongue like a whip. His right hand lifts up off my hip and makes a peculiar motion, like he’s about to slap my ass. He doesn’t—unfortunately—and lays his hot palm back on my hip.

“I enjoy ... your ... company.” *Sick. This is goddamn sick.* I clear my throat dramatically. “But I’ll tell you one thing: I never asked for boyfriends. I asked for fuckboys. You’re the ones who are demanding some sort of romance in all of this. So, since I didn’t want this, and you both did, here’s the deal: it’s on my terms, not yours. I don’t want to live my life with rules.”

“Yeah? And I’m not about to sit around and watch you fuck every other guy except for me.” Widow leans in and captures my mouth, much to my surprise, kissing me so hard that I forget to breathe, and then biting my lower lip until it bleeds. He pulls back suddenly, and I can see that even though his black eye is a bit less severe than Ash’s (and Aspen’s), he’s definitely got one.

“Not every guy,” I amend, panting hard, tasting copper on my tongue. I lick it away and swallow it quickly before my thoughts descend back into last night’s horrors. “Bohnes, Widow, Ash ... Alexei.”

“Alexei?” Widow asks, but I can’t explain it. He turns a look on Bohnes, one that’s *almost* companionable. “Seriously? That pompous Russian dude from last night? With the gloves? You’re kidding, right? He has *mob* written all over his forehead. Do you want to die, Scarlett Force?”

“He’s offered up a portion of his inheritance if we’ll help solve his father’s murder.” That’s ... a bit of a misnomer. Solve? Nah, Alexei knows who did it. He just needs to know why, figure out if the mob had any hand in it, and clean house. Anyway, that’s just semantics. “You’ll never have to work another day in your life after this.”

“And you believe him?” Widow scoffs, shaking his head. He runs his fingers through his hair as Bohnes puts his foot up on the seat and leans over his knee.

“We don’t believe or trust anyone—even you.” Bohnes smiles. “But I do have his Miura. At the very least, we can net five-hundred K each.”

The last time I saw Alexei’s vintage Lambo, it was parked at the country club, and we were making a run for our lives. How Bohnes managed to retrieve it, I won’t ask. I mean, this is Bohnes we’re talking about. He’s a professional.

“I knew you were banging the Kelly boy, but ... shit, do you have a thing for rich boys, Scarlett?” Widow’s voice holds a certain note of disgust though I can’t blame him. If I found out he had a fetish for rich girls, I’d be squicked. “Doesn’t he have like OCD or something?”

“I’m not fucking him.” Just that. I don’t have to explain myself or my reasoning. There’s not much to it anyway. Alexei is just ... well, he’s a client. “But if I want to, I will.”

“This is bullshit,” Widow murmurs, rubbing at the lower half of his face. But something seems to have occurred to him, and a bit of that anger has softened up. He turns back to me and then reaches up a shaking hand, tucking a strand of black hair behind one of my ears. He struggles with touch; this is a lot for him. “What’s the next step?”

Bohnes stands up and adjusts his hood; he’s been away from business long enough tonight.

“The mayor is gunning for Scarlett; I can’t watch her all the time, and still get shit done. You’ll watch her whenever I can’t.”

“I don’t take orders from you,” Widow snarls right back at him, but Bohnes just laughs, the sound like dry twigs breaking in a dead forest, as if someone is creeping along right behind you ...

“You will, if you ever want to have sex with Scarlett. We both know you can’t beat me on the track.” Bohnes takes off

before Widow can retaliate, and the latter boy's body goes red-hot. I can *feel* the heat radiating off of him.

"You need to learn to stay calm," I warn, and he gives me this sassy-ass look, offering up a cruel smirk in response.

"You mean like you do?" he snipes back, but I'm unfazed. He isn't wrong.

"Right. I have a terrible temper, so I either confront or avoid. There are only two ways to deal with your enemies: kick their asses or pretend they don't exist. Anything else is a mistake."

"So which of those two things are you going to do to me?"

It's a challenge; his eyes burn with an insistent flame. He's mad. He's thinking about Ash Kelly. More specifically, he's thinking about Ash Kelly buried inside of me, fucking me, coming in me.

"You're not an enemy, are you, Widow?" I ask, softening my voice to a purring husk. I notice a beer on the seat beside him and reach out for it, lifting it to my lips and finishing it off. Anything to chase my fading buzz. At least it's some local IPA-handcrafted-organic-hippie-blah-blah-blah beer, and not a White Claw or a Pabst. I've still kept my promise to myself.

"No. I'm your future husband," he says, loud enough that, when Jennifer Atwell stumbles past, she hears it. She goes as still as a deer in the headlights, caught in this strange trap of euphoria and fear. Euphoria because she's stumbled on some prime Prescott goss; fear because she knows that if she spreads it without my permission, I will cut a bitch.

I glance her way and offer up the briefest nod.

"Widow, and Bohnes," I say, making sure she understands. "Fuckboy and boyfriend respectively; make me famous for it."

Jennifer's eyes go wide with unbridled excitement, and she stumbles off to spread the rumor.

Widow puts a single finger on the edge of my jaw and turns me back to look at him.

“Does everything with you have to be a strategic move or a performance?”

“I’m a star, Adrian.” I grind my pelvis on his lap, and his eyes widen, hands clamping down so hard on my hips that I let out a small sound of surprise.

“Why do you keep calling me Adrian? Does it float your boat or something?” he breathes, his voice thick with strain. *I bet I could get him to blow another load in his pants.* The challenge is there. I shift again, and he tightens his hands even further. This time, it’s not a small sound that escapes me but a full gasp.

“Widow, because you made your aunt a widow?” I ask, curious if he gave himself that name or somebody else did. He just stares at me and then tugs me a little closer. I press down on him harder, letting my dress ride up and my warm heat glide over that pretty, little bulge in his pants.

“What are you doing?” he asks me, as if he’s scandalized, as if he has no idea what’s going on. Right. Romance reader extraordinaire, and he has *noooo* idea what I’m doing on his lap.

“This is called a prologue, in literary terms.” I pause for a moment, tentatively raising my hands and then laying them on his shoulders. This time, he doesn’t stop me. “Or foreshadowing.”

We lock eyes and I move again, rubbing, teasing, making my nipples hard and my cunt wet. *Too bad I didn’t utilize that tampon; I’m probably soaking his pants on the outside as well as the in.*

Widow doesn’t relax, not at all. If anything, he gets more tense the faster I move, the harder I press, and then the veins on his neck are standing out and he’s clenching his teeth so hard it wouldn’t surprise me if they cracked.

“Oh, *fuck*,” he groans, and then he’s shuddering all over and squeezing me even harder. I push away from him suddenly, while he’s still in the middle of it, and then I stand there, staring down at him with a wicked smile on my face.

“Get me drunk and then drive me home,” I command, and then I move up the aisle toward the foyer, snatching an abandoned bottle of ... Viking mead? Huh. Who brought that to this party? Anyway, I drink it and make my rounds and Widow—who’s lucky to be wearing black pants tonight—follows me like a shadow.

I don’t expect to have nightmares when I get home that night; I didn’t have any last night. But I wake up in a cold sweat, thinking of Lemon, hearing her voice, watching Ash kiss her bloodied lips over and over and over again.

Either there was something about Bohnes that chased the nightmares away or else the shock is fading, and reality is setting in.

Lemon is dead; I killed Aspen Kelly; the mayor wants my head.

He won’t get it though, because I’m going to take *his* first.



The image features the text 'CHAPTER TEN' in a white, serif font. The text is centered and set against a dark, gradient background that transitions from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. The letters are heavily splattered with bright red paint or blood, with some splatters dripping down the page. The overall aesthetic is dark and ominous.

CHAPTER  
TEN

## *Alexei*

When I agreed to meet Scarlett Force for dinner, I didn't expect that the address she gave me would be a convenience store in the heart of the South Prescott neighborhood. Dangerous as it is, I drove the orange '69 Lamborghini Miura that my father purchased for my sixteenth birthday to get here, parking in an empty space and feeling my throat tense up as I study the filthy sidewalk in front of the store's entrance.

Scarlett is already inside, sitting at a crooked table near the window, elbows parked on the surface of it. Her face is thoughtful, her lips downturned gently at the edges. The same grief that's tearing my heart apart, that made me stupid enough to risk driving such an auspicious vehicle around, is written there in every line of her face. The set of her shoulders. The pace of her breath.

I fold my gloved hands on the top of the steering wheel and rest my chin there briefly.

*Oh, Papa.* With each passing minute, the reality of his death seems to sink a little deeper into me, becomes just that much more real. The shock and the adrenaline of the last few nights was barely enough to carry me to today.

It will carry me no longer.

This morning, I awoke to the distant, incessant tapping of rainwater leaking through the roof of my makeshift home. Really, it's a hovel. Until Sunday night, I hadn't the capability of much rational thought and so, it was only this morning when I sat up and truly looked at the dirt floors, and the rusted metal roof, and the toilet sitting right there in the open that it hit me.

My life is *ruined*. My papa's life is gone. That girl, that little blond-haired pixie-like creature in her silver dress, dead.

And for what?

What is it that Mayor Kelly, Chet Archer, and Chief Bolin want that they don't already have?

Power? They've got it.

Money? The former two are obscenely wealthy while the third suckles on their teats like a piglet at the slaughterhouse.

I find myself grinding my teeth, my fingertips digging into the steering wheel as cold ire sweeps through me, shattering any chance of my behavior remaining appropriate today.

Perhaps the *only* reason that I haven't asked Kellin Bohnes for a gun and simply stalked those three men until they were lying dead is this.

Scarlett Force.

I tap my fingers against the wheel, gaze sliding down to the gum-covered sidewalk. My stomach churns, and I feel sweat beading on my forehead. *Disgusting*. With a sigh, I sit up and pull a handkerchief from my pocket, dabbing at my forehead and then tucking the filthy thing into a plastic sandwich bag to be washed later.

In the past, I would've thrown it away.

But I can't afford endless leather gloves and handkerchiefs anymore, now can I?

Bohnes rudely suggested I use paper towels, but how uncouth would that be? Certainly, I should maintain at least *some* level of standard in my own life.

Before I can question myself any further, I reach out and shove the door open, ignoring the gaping stares of the people in the parking lot as they take in the fine lines of my car. Let them gawk all they want. If Scarlett chose to meet here, it must be for a reason.

I trust these people are either her people or else they respect her enough to keep their mouths shut.

The front door is open when I approach it, a young woman waiting beside the entrance. As soon as I step aside, she closes and locks the door behind her.

Interesting.

“You sure that’s a smart move, driving the Miura over here?” Scarlett doesn’t even turn my way as I slide a rolled-up trash bag from the back pocket of my new jeans, unfolding it and using it to cover the bench seat across from her before I sit down.

She smiles at as I do the same, covering the surface of the table, so that I can rest my gloved hands atop it.

Rather than focus on the window to my left which is etched with hundreds of small graffitied signatures and must be *crawling* with filth, I make myself look at Scarlett. Even in this horrid dump, she manages to maintain this indelible aura of glamour.

“Bohnes provided me with a new license plate,” I explain, even though the excuse is thin. After today, I won’t drive the car again; it’s far too risky. I just needed ... a piece of my old life. A piece of Papa. Anything to escape the nightmare that has become my reality.

Homeless. Broke. Orphaned.

*Alone.*

“Sure.” Scarlett makes a small, snorting sound and sits up straight, her large, brown eyes focused on me in such a way that I feel a disturbing stirring in my slacks. I cross my legs and ignore it. “New threads?” She nods in the direction of my outfit—a pair of designer jeans and a navy Burberry button-down—and raises the sharp, perfect curve of an eyebrow. “Those from Bohnes, too?”

“He stole them from my house,” I explain, which sounds absurd. I’m paying a criminal to rob my house and then pay himself with whatever goods he wants out of it. Clothes, shoes, linens. *As if I’d sleep on polyester.*

“Your house?” Now Scarlett’s intrigued, blinking deliciously long eyelashes at me. “Isn’t that where—”

She doesn’t finish that sentence; she doesn’t have to.

“Two men have been assigned to watch the place and both are derelict in their duties. From what I understand, Bohnes referred to it as a *sweet slice of cake.*” The corner of my lip

twitches as the microwave on the counter beeps and Scar flashes a bright smile.

“Hold up. I bought us lunch.” She stands up and makes her way over to the appliance as I turn and gape, eyes wide as she presses the button on the front and pops the door open. Inside, there are two Styrofoam cups with paper lids.

With a small curse, she grabs them and runs them to the table, dropping them off before taking two silverware sets from a jar on the counter. Those, at least, are wrapped in plastic, but the soup or whatever it is that she’s just put on the table ...

I rear back from it, bile rising in my throat.

“Ramen noodles,” she explains, reaching over and pulling the top off of one. She licks her lower lip and then pauses, snapping her fingers. “Wait. Let’s go all-out.” Scarlett gets up and moves into the shop which, from first appearance, seemed to be a convenience store of some sort. I see now that it’s some kind of Asian market.

When she comes back to the table, she has two plastic cups with her. One appears to be filled with chopped green onions. The other has sliced, boiled eggs.

“Isn’t this place great?” she asks, taking the plastic off of each cup. “They have all sorts of toppings up front. Green onions, boiled egg, BBQ pork, seaweed strips—”

“Did you bring me here as a joke?” I ask, trying not to be physically ill right here at the table. I gesture at the two soups and shake my head. “If I cannot eat at the Oak River Heights Gallery, and I cannot eat at the Oak Park Country Club, what makes you think I’d ever eat food at a place with a *communal* microwave?”

“You know,” Scarlett starts, and then I see that the silverware set is actually a pair of wooden chopsticks. She scoops up some of the noodles and eats them as I shudder and look away. Not because of her. Just ... this *place*. “I do like you, Alexei Grove, but you’re a stuck-up, spoiled dick.”

I glance back to see that she's dumping the rest of the onions and egg into her bowl.

"Why this place when you know damn well that I'm not able to eat in public?"

"Why any place then?" she fires back, taking another bite. At least she doesn't talk with her mouth full of food. I appreciate that. "If you can't eat at the fancy-pants engagement party, and you can't eat at the country club, you can't eat anywhere, can you? So what does it matter if we meet here—a place that *I* like—or we eat at the drive-in or anywhere else?"

She sits back in her seat, and crosses her arms over her chest, staring at me.

The longer she looks at me, and I look back at her, the harder it becomes to ignore that ache in my cock, the horrible, thick feeling of it, pumped with blood and stiff the way it is.

Her hair is in a high, thick ponytail, shiny and dark and pooling over one shoulder like a waterfall of India ink. The top she's wearing is bright red with white hearts all over it; a large bow adorns the neckline, and the sleeves are full and voluminous but tucked in against her slim wrists with four buttons on either side.

With the high-waisted, cinched black slacks and heels she's wearing, she could fit in at any of the rich boarding schools I've ever attended. Whether Scarlett Force is dressed in money or not, she exudes wealth.

She simply has a charismatic presence about her that I can't ignore.

I can't, and it's bothering me immensely.

I almost reach up and touch two fingers to my lips in remembrance of that brief kiss. In the end, I'm so disgusted by the idea of touching my mouth with contaminated gloves that I almost gag.

"It's safe to talk here," Scarlett finally says, when it becomes clear that I have no good answer to her question. "The owner's daughter owes me a favor. Didn't you see the

place is closed? That's why we're here, Alexei, you snobby shithead."

"Snobby shithead?" I repeat, because I can't remember the last time anyone spoke to me in such a way. My anger roils, pushing back some of my melancholy. "I've offered you the world in exchange for very little. In essence, I'm your employer."

"Very little ... meaning getting myself involved in something so dangerous that I could die? Murdering people? Burying bodies?" She returns to eating her noodles, using the chopsticks with relative ease.

"I will admit, I'm impressed that you brought me the Kelly boy's body on night one." A smile tweaks my lips, and I can't help it. The thrill I felt at seeing that boy's corpse stuffed into a trunk was abnormal, certainly. Oh, and the surprise at learning the Kelly boys were twins? That was a fascinating turn of events.

Still ... my mind strays back to Ash—now Aspen—Kelly and the way his dark eyes flicked back to Scarlett every few seconds. I watched them all that night, studying their every move, every nuance in their interactions.

That other boy—*Widow*—he had the same problem.

Bohnes, it seems, really is Scarlett's 'fuckboy' as he mentioned to me that first night.

Despite myself, I'm jealous.

It tears through me all over again, sitting there across from her, and I'm ashamed of myself. I'm even more ashamed of the way my cock presses against the fly of my jeans, threatening to explode all over the inside of my briefs.

I'm repelled by the very idea.

"See? I'm already delivering the goods." Scarlett sits up, crossing her arms over her ample chest. Her gaze shifts to one side, focused on her Pantera out the window but not seeing it. No, her true gaze is somewhere else, far, far away from here. She looks back at me, and I swallow hard against the power in that stare.

*Yes, Alexei, this was the right decision, coming to Scarlett Force. Papa will see justice.*

It's there, plain as day in her big, brown eyes.

She'll settle this. If not for me and the promise of money, then for her friend.

"Restore me to my rightful place at the head of my father's company, help me get my inheritance back. Bring justice to my doorstep. Be my partner in this, Scarlett. I've already come to an agreement with your ... friend, Kellin."

Scarlett chuckles and shakes her head, teasing her naked lower lip with her tongue. She rarely paints her face. Why should she? She's a handsome woman; there's no need to hide those strong features with makeup.

"Kellin ... his last name is Bohnes, like the remains of long-dead things. Why the fuck would we call him Kellin?" She smirks at me. "I'm bringing Widow—that guy you met last night—in as well. But don't worry: his contract is with me, not you. I'll be paying him."

I nod.

"Whoever you trust to bring in is your business." Here I pause, looking out the scratched and dirty window to the street. Leaves swirl around in an October breeze, plastering wet splotches of red and brown and gold to both our cars. As I look, I see girls here and there, smoking or sitting on a bench near the bus stop, carrying on a conversation at the corner.

Scarlett's girls. Her crew.

I turn back to her.

"But?" she asks, anticipating the addendum to my last statement.

"The Kelly boy." Here I lean in, wondering if this isn't a fatal crack in Scarlett's armor. "I don't trust the Kelly boy, but for some reason, I feel that you do."

"No, no," she says, lifting up two hands, palms out. "It's not that I trust him; I like him."



*Like him.* My face scrunches into something quite ugly, and this time, she lifts both brows at me.

“I want to kill him. He’s the mayor’s only surviving son. What a blow that would be.” Then I lean back, crossing my arms again. “Do you really think he’ll just step into Aspen’s roll and not be affected by the rush of power? For someone who’s been hiding in the shadows his whole life, this is his chance to own the world.”

“Whoever I bring in,” she repeats, staring me down. “That’s *my* business. I don’t expect you to invite the guy over for tea, but let me worry about him, okay? If you kill him, I’ll kill you.”

Rage spirals through me, cold and terrifying, a storm of ice. I’ve spent my life having things more or less the way I want them. I’m not used to being told no like this.

“You’re in love with him,” I accuse, and Scarlett laughs at that. The sound is throaty and husky, and it travels straight from my ears down to my rebellious cock. I grit my teeth against the unpleasant sensation as she shakes her head.

“You jealous, Mr. Grove?” she teases, and then she stands up and moves over to my side of the table. Before I can figure out a way to stop her without resorting to my needles, she sits down beside me, so close that I can feel the heat of her body. “What if I want more than just money?” She reaches out as if she’s going to touch me and I pull back, careful to keep from putting my body against the grimy window. She trails her fingers through the air above my arm. “I should ask for your pretty rich boy cherry, too. You’re a beautiful man, Alexei Grove. I’d love to see you unwound and wild, naked and writhing ...”

“You want to fuck me?” I ask, but she’s already said as much. More than once. I’d assumed she was teasing. She doesn’t appear to be teasing me now. A smile takes over my mouth, but it’s an ugly expression. “I don’t think either of us would enjoy that.”

“Says who? You really are a virgin, aren’t you?” she presses, and I let out a small, disbelieving laugh. It’s derisive

in nature, and I can see that it bothers her.

“Go back to your side of the table before I lose my temper, Miss Force.”

“No.”

She scoots closer to me and our legs touch, sending a strange ripple through my body. I almost reach for my needles anyway, but I don't want to hurt her. She's my only chance to make things right. I can't do this alone. I need her help, the help of her ... fuckboy.

“You like me, Alexei. If I got naked and touched all over that pretty body of yours, you'd like that, too.” She moves just a bit closer, searing me with her warmth. My fingers twitch and sweat beads all over my body, sticking my shirt to my skin. Her gaze is impossible to pull away from.

Without realizing what I'm doing, I end up grabbing onto her shoulder with tight fingers, and she lets out a small sound of surprise.

“You want me to sell my body to you in exchange for services rendered?” I repeat, but she's just looking up and into my face with her pretty mouth parted. “Fine. If that's what it takes, I'll do it. A third of my inheritance ... and me. That's how serious I am about this.”

“It's a joke, lighten up, Grove.” She moves to put her hands on my elbows, but I squeeze her even harder with my gloved fingers and then I do something that I've never done in all of my life.

Scarlett is right: I'm a virgin, in every sense of the word.

I lean forward, putting my mouth right up against her smooth cheek.

“If I were you, I wouldn't make jokes like that around me. You might just get what you're asking for.” My lips brush against her skin, and oh God, the taste of it, the taste of *her*. An intoxicating rush fills me, and I draw back suddenly, my entire body quivering with new sensations.

“Did you just ...?” she raises her fingers to her cheek, her skin coloring pink with embarrassment. And then she’s clearing her throat and retreating to the other side of the table like she’s been burned. “Wow. Um. Okay.” Scarlett rubs at her temple for a moment as I sit there, breathing heavily and wondering what it is that I’ve just done.

Willingly touched someone.

Willingly *kissed* someone.

Other than the featherlight kiss she pressed to my lips at the gallery, it’s my first one. The very first I’ve ever initiated.

With a deep, fortifying inhale, I extend my hand out to her. She looks at it for a moment before reaching out and grabbing onto it, her grip firm and strong, sure. Definite.

A smile breaks those perfect lips apart, and I can see just the slightest kiss of dimples on either side of her face. As my Papa would’ve said, *the face of a heartbreaker*.

Oh yes, Scarlett is the very definition.

“It’s a deal, Grove.” She shakes my gloved hand with vigor and then stands up. “My birthday’s on Thursday; Halloween is Friday. I’ve got ... other shit to deal with this week, but I’ll talk to Bohnes, and we’ll figure out our next move.” Her heels are loud on the grimy linoleum floor as she turns away and pushes out the front door with the jingling of a bell.

I stay where I am until she slides into her car and takes off with the roar of an engine.

My lips burn from where they touched her skin, and I swear, I can still taste her on my tongue.

With shaking legs and an impossibly hard dick, I force myself to my feet and take off for the Lambo. On the drive to Bohnes’ warehouse, I push the limits of the car’s capabilities, a hundred and sixty miles an hour that turns the world into an impressionist’s painting outside the windows.

I take up both lanes, whipping around oncoming cars as they come to screeching stops, adrenaline wiping up the strange

dichotomous feelings of disgust and excitement blurring the lines of my neat and careful world.

The life I've lived thus far is over.

Without my consent, I'm being forced to choose something new. To start over. To rethink everything, the same way I did when my mother died. Before that, I had some of the same issues that I had now, but seeing how a healthy human being could be brought to their knees by an invisible and seemingly harmless invader, I knew.

It's not the big things in life you need fear.

It's the microscopic invaders, like an infection that begins with a simple cut and swarms the body with heat and pus.

That's going to be me. Scarlett. Bohnes. Their accomplices and crew.

Like the very germs I fear, I'll infect men who believe they're invincible.

Jonas Kelly, Chet Archer, and Ernest Bolin.

Because I know without a doubt that my father's 'closest friends' are responsible for his death. Chief Bolin, obviously, but he's the toady of the bunch. He's not the mastermind, not at all. If I knew for sure that my father's family *wasn't* involved, I could utilize them and bring vengeance on swift wings.

If they *are* involved, and they find me, I'll wish I'd died as easy a death as my poor papa.

Even the Miura's impeccable engineering and dizzying speeds can't calm me down, not today.

As soon as I unlock the door to the small, filthy hovel that's now my home, I'm stumbling over to the shower and turning it on. But it takes too long for the water to get scalding the way I like it.

I can't wait.

Stripping my gloves off, I unzip my jeans and shove my underwear down. My cock springs free of its own accord, wet

at the tip, glistening. Swallowing hard against the shame, I look up into the distorted mirror on the wall, meeting green eyes that seem darker than usual, more of an emerald than a soft and gentle mint.

My pupils are blown wide, and my mouth ... there's a hunger there that I don't recognize.

In the bag that Bohnes brought me, there's a bottle of lubricant in the side pocket. He didn't pack it; it's just there. I bought it once on a whim, but I've only used it a handful of times.

The urge is so strong, I can't help myself. I reach over and unzip the pocket, withdrawing the bottle and filling my hands with the clear liquid. It smells like cherries, and that's when it hits me.

That's what she smelled and tasted like, that vile Scarlett Force.

My hand grips my dick, and I drop my head so that I don't have to see the strange expression on my face—whatever it means. Even as I'm swallowing past my own disgust, I work myself up with long, slow strokes, gripping hard at the base and sliding my slippery fist to the tip. My eyes close, and I imagine the way Scarlett's body felt under my fingers. Something she said to me at the track drifts into the back of my mind.

*“Listen here, rich boy, if I put this pussy on your face, you wouldn't know what to do with it. You'd probably cream your fancy trousers and then pass out.”*

Pussy.

I want to hear her say it over and over again, preferably while I'm fucking hers.

With a ragged exhale, I pick up the speed of my strokes, fantasizing about her body. She's a work of art, proportional in relation to herself, but exaggerated when paired up against any other woman I've seen. Big, round hips, a tiny waist, full breasts, a face that's handsome but looks so pretty when she bats those long lashes ...

The orgasm tears through me in a painful way, and sounds come from me that I don't like.

They're certainly not decorous or aristocratic in any way, more like the grunts of an animal.

Trembling with need and disgust, I come hard and defile the pedestal sink, white ropes of cum dripping down and taunting me.

*Look at you, falling apart. You're falling apart, Alexei. Your lips are crawling with Scarlett's essence, and you haven't even addressed that. You've left yourself to fester with it.*

I lift my head up to stare at myself again.

Once more, I'm blown away.

I don't recognize the man looking back at me.

With a curse, I strip down and climb into the shower, remaining there until the water turns ice cold, until my gums are bleeding from the harsh brushing I give them, until my body aches with the vigorous scrubbing.

And still.

Five more times that night, I take that lubricant and bring myself to disgust.

Again and again, thinking of Scarlett Force. Dreaming of her.

Knowing all the while that I'm right: she's a heartbreaker.

A filthy, fucking heartbreaker.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER ELEVEN' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by numerous red, blood-like splatters and streaks that drip down from the top of the page, creating a macabre and violent aesthetic.

CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

## *Scarlett*

There are three cars in front of me, but that's intentional.

I take the next turn on the track nice and wide, gliding across the wet leaves and mud like it's ice. Well, technically, much of it is frozen. The ruts and potholes in the track were glazed over with ice when we arrived here after school. As winter sets in—and especially as we get snow—it'll only get more and more difficult to run this track.

I run my tongue over my lower lip, hitting the throttle and blasting down the straight. At the last second, I swing my wheel and let myself skid sideways, until I'm practically perpendicular with one of the cars.

This one's a very pretty '71 Dodge Challenger, driven by some idiot girl from Oak Valley.

She doesn't know much, but she does know that it's Devil's Night or Mischief Night or whatever you want to call it, the night before Halloween.

And it's also this bitch's birthday.

Eighteen years old. The magical birthday. The birthday that signifies freedom for so many Prescott students. The day they turn eighteen, they can skip coming to class and forget all about the overzealous truant officer, make their way in the world on their own terms.

Usually—and I'm not just being dramatic here—it doesn't go well for them after that. High school diplomas might not be worth much, but they're worth more than high school dropouts.

I gun it and nearly sideswipe the Challenger, counting on an Oak Valley girl to be, well, an Oak Valley girl. Rich people love money more than poor people, value it more, too. She won't want to see her car scratched or dented in any way; she'll be afraid of getting hurt.

I'm not afraid of anything.



The girl doesn't call my bluff. Instead, she turns sharply away from me. So sharply—and with such little experience—that she ends up going into a roll. Even with KMZI 66.6 on—and “*So Called Life*” by Three Days Grace playing, oh yes please—I can hear the collective crowd roar.

It's a big one tonight, too. Everyone's here. Because they know that tonight is monumental. It has been for the last three years. Before that even, because why wouldn't Prescott students revel in a night of mischief and debauchery, but especially now because I always go all-out for my birthday.

In the back of my mind, all I'm trying to do here is scour thoughts of Lemon from my brain. Nearly every action I've taken since last weekend has had that same goal, whether I knew it or not.

Screwing Bohnes, screwing Ash, driving too fast to no place at all, running my mouth, beating the shit out of a Fuller girl for clipping one of my girls' bikes with her car.

All of it. Everything.

So now it's Thursday, and here we are, at the track on a day of the week when we usually wouldn't be. That distant, subtle offer I managed to wrangle out of Alexei at the art gallery—that is, a chance to race in Portland—sits heavy in the back of my mind.

Is it selfish of me to do something like that when I should be working on avenging Lem's death? Saving my neighborhood? Freeing Ash? Helping Alexei?

I'm not sure that I care. Part of me is angry at Lemon, because if she'd listened and she'd stayed away from Aspen, she'd still be alive. Then, I could've really convinced myself to let everything else go, focused on my future and my career.

Instead, like a proper Prescott brat, I'm going to dig myself in even further.

The Oak Valley girl's car lands upright, and she blasts off the track, tires spinning uselessly in the mud. Well, at least she's still alive, and she doesn't seem to be hurt. Her car, on the other hand ...

Not my problem.

I fly past her and move onto my next target. This zippy '66 Pontiac GTO that's probably wild to handle on these curves. *Go play on a drag strip, you little bitch*, I think with a roll of my eyes. Only Bohnes could handle something like the Chevelle on such a curvy track without spinning out of control on every turn.

This Oak Valley douche driver seems to be here more for fun or for show than for any true spirit of competition; the driver seems mildly surprised when I appear beside him, pausing just long enough to glance over at me.

Big mistake, especially in Prescott, and the guy ends up overshooting the track and ending up in the winner's circle. He just *barely* manages to skid to a stop before he hits the dirt wall in front of him. Technically, that's a disqualification.

The last car is, oddly enough, a Mustang Fastback—just like Ash's.

*Ash.*

He shouldn't be texting me; it's not good for him or me.

But he is. He did, earlier today. And I responded, even though I shouldn't.

We're going to meet up briefly tonight, just for a few minutes. Just to talk.

Talk. Right.

I clip the Fastback, and send it waffling dangerously through the mud, lapping it before the driver has a chance to regain control.

I finish the race easily ahead of the last remaining car, and that's that.

When I win a relatively easy race, I always make sure to do it with flair, driving up and around the bleachers and over to the opposite side, where that hump is that Widow took off once upon a time, crashing in and fucking up my race against ... was it Ash that time? Yeah, it was Ash.

If he'd won, would he have made good on his threat to fuck me?

Or would he, at the very last second, have thrown the race the way he did the second time?

There's no way to know, and I don't want to ask. I'd rather leave that question a mystery. Instead, I focus on picking up speed and hitting the hump in such a way that I get maximum air.

There's a suspended feeling, like flying. The adrenaline pumps through me as my stomach ends up in my throat, and then I'm crashing down again, hard enough to make my teeth hurt, soft enough that there's no lasting damage to myself or the Pantera.

With a sigh, I rest for a moment with my forehead on the steering wheel, and then up I go, back to the parking lot. As usual, my crew is waiting for me.

"How much did I net?" I ask, sucking on a THC-laden lollipop that Bohnes slipped in my hand at school earlier. He gave it to me along with a cheek kiss. Now that I've given my permission—or, I guess, my demand?—for him to show me more attention at school, he's been eating it up.

"Almost ten thousand bucks in merch," Basti reports, digging through the box of items. The Oak Valley kids always put up clothes, drugs, alcohol, and cash. They never offer favors or sex or well-kept secrets or anything even remotely fun.

"Sweet." I perch on my car, dressed up in a chocolate brown blouse with a very perky and flirty vintage bullet bra underneath. It's paired with a high-waisted pencil skirt that has a built-in corset at the top, and a slit that goes nearly to my ass. If I bend over even a little, panties show.

With a pair of monk-strap heels and a bright-red headband, I almost look cute. Sucking on the lollipop probably doesn't help. Doesn't matter to Oak Valley Prep boys that I'm chugging a forty-ounce wrapped in a brown paper bag and on my way to getting trashed for my birthday.

I mean, because that's what I'm doing, right? Having a good time. I'm not drinking or getting stoned to bury my feelings, right? Not at all. No way. Not Scarlett Force.

"You fucking cheated," the driver of the Fastback says, storming over to me with righteous indignation as they always do.

See, the thing is, with boys like these, I try to tell them to fuck off first. Insults and threats before action. But my best friend is dead, and it's my birthday, and I don't have time for bullshit.

Before he even gets close enough to grab my wrist—which is what they always do—I turn and kick the Oak Valley guy right in the chin, making him stumble back and yowl with pain. Blood drips from his lips as soon as he rights himself, and I imagine that he's just bitten his tongue.

Which, of course, isn't my problem at all.

I turn back to Bastian and the box of hard-won goods, but the guy just doesn't seem to get the picture. Next thing I know, there's a flash and blur, and I glance over to see Widow with his baseball bat on his shoulder, and the boy lying in the mud clutching his stomach.

"Prescott parties, Prescott rules," he says, which is ironic considering he broke track rules twice. He's paying for it now. Bohnes doesn't let a day go by without passing by Widow in the hallway and murmuring dark threats into his ear.

Fucking. Psycho.

"Whatever," the kid sneers as his buddies haul him up to his feet. He spits at the ground near Widow, and my newest fuckboy (in name only, at this point) takes the bat in his hands and slams the end of it against his other palm. It's a threat the boy ignores. "None of you will be here in a year, so what does it matter?"

Eyes and ears turn our way, and I can sense the collective of Prescott High taking a breath and wondering what the hell this boy is going on about.

I know, of course, because of Treasure the manicurist and that pamphlet about the *gentleman's racing club* that's being proposed for this very sport ... but nobody else does.

I'd rather they not hear about it just yet.

"And anyway, that bitch looks diseased; I wouldn't touch her if you paid me."

I swing off the hood of the car, cracking the lollipop between my teeth and snatching Widow's baseball bat out of his hand.

"The fuck did you just say to me, you frat boy bitch?" I swing the baseball bat at his stomach, and his friends beat a hasty retreat. It hits the guy dead on, and he chokes, doubling over. I take the opportunity to hit him in the back with it and then, once he collapses on the ground, I use my heel to turn him over in the mud. "This is my track, and it's my birthday today, you trust-fund suckling little piggy. Go run home to daddy and cry about it." I grind the end of the bat into his nuts as he groans in agony, and then I turn with the intention of handing the bat back to Widow

Our eyes meet, and electricity flickers, shimmers, fries me up on the inside.

I'm aching and quivering all over again, and that's from a *look*. He's spent the last few days decidedly *not* touching me at school. He does what I tell him in the library, but he refuses to flirt or stroke my panties when I bend over.

The tension is too much. Eventually, one of us is going to snap, and we're going to fuck each other whether it's right or wrong. Bohnes doesn't deserve that sort of disrespect.

*Next week, I'll ask Bohnes to race me. Next week.* I didn't have the energy to do it this week.

The rich boy whines and groans behind me, but I ignore him, too locked into Widow to care what else is happening. His eyes are mesmerizing, and I've been jacking off to thoughts of him on and off for weeks.

I want him with an almost desperate fervor, and he seems to both know and relish that fact.

“You.” I reach out and poke his rock-hard bicep, but he doesn’t react, even as I dig my fingernail into his skin. Those amber eyes, though, they can’t lie. The color appears to darken as his pupils dilate. “You’re not mad at me, are you? For being a fuckboy who can’t fuck?”

Eep. My head is already spinning. How many milligrams were in that goddamn lollipop? Mixing it with the alcohol might not have been such a great idea. I’m starting to sound a bit ... intoxicated.

“Let’s be clear,” Widow says, reaching out and grabbing the bat. I’m still holding it in both of my hands, and now that my fingers are clenched around it, he’s able to yank me forward with one hand in the center of the bat. “I’m only a fuckboy *for now*. This is the first step in our whirlwind romance. I can wait.”

*Whirlwind romance.* This guy. Goddamn it.

Why are so many crazy men in love with me? And why do I like it so much?

“Don’t kid yourself, Widow. You’re panting for this pussy.” I release the bat and then reach up to put my arms around his neck. He goes stiff, but he doesn’t stop me, wetting his lips, his gaze sliding to one side as I press my mouth close to his. He lets the bat hang by his right side and then adjusts it so that it’s behind me, pressing against my lower back as he uses it to keep me caged in.

“You just keep touching me until I—” he starts, and then he pauses as a car rolls up beside us, so close that I can feel the heat of it, tiny spatters of mud collecting on the bottom of my skirt.

I glance over to see Bohnes in his Chevelle. He parks with the front of his car absurdly close to the downed rich boy’s head. Yikes. The tire was like, right fuckin’ there.

“Are you crazy?” the rich boy is screaming, clutching his nuts as he stumbles to his feet. But nobody here is listening anymore. Nobody cares.

I'm a little surprised to see Alexei climb out of the car, shivering at the mud as he clutches a small box to his chest. Nisha and Bastian exchange a look before turning skeptical expressions on me. Likely, they're just as surprised—if not more so—to see the guy here again. And getting out of Bohnes' car, no less.

“Miss Force,” he says, his eyes sweeping Widow and our precarious position before moving to my face. “Happy birthday.”

I smile at him, and gently push back against Widow. He doesn't release me for several seconds, annoying me just enough that I'm even more turned-on. Rebellion. Power. Dominance. I find it attractive even as it pisses me off.

“You know, you're the first person besides my grandma who's said that to me today without the word *fucking* between the two words.” I pause in front of Alexei and frown at the velvet box between his hands. “This isn't a present, is it? You can't afford that sort of thing anymore.”

The look he gives me is domineering, to say the least. I get this cold shiver when I think about the way he tried to command me at the art gallery.

*“You would not want to be left alone here with these people, trust me. Don't bring it up again.”*

He said it like he expected me to obey; he's doing the same thing now.

It makes me want to ... touch him. He kissed my cheek the other day, didn't he? He likes me, even if he's too ashamed to admit it.

I reach out for the item, and he withdraws it, preventing me from touching him.

“Don't try me tonight, Miss Force,” he warns, and he extends the box again. “And never look a gift horse in the mouth.”

I take the box from him, opening it as Bohnes slinks up beside me, barely human, more shadow and spirit than anything else.

“Oh, and what is this?” he breathes, jealousy coloring his voice an even darker shade of *black*. “How intriguing.”

There’s a six-digit code written on a piece of paper.

“This opens the gate at the Portland Classic Car Circuit; the buy-in’s already been paid.” Alexei releases the box into my palms as I blink in surprise and lift my gaze back to his. He’s not smiling. Instead, he’s sweating and pulling at the collar of his dress shirt with a gloved finger. He’s having a panic attack over the mud and the crush of dirty teens surrounding him.

But ... he’s still undeniably attractive.

Whoever gave permission for a man to have such a soft, pouty looking mouth? It’s not right. The sight of his green eyes, half-lidded in judgement as he sweeps them over the gathering, turn me on like nothing else. His shoulders are thrown back, his posture straight, his chin lifted in imperious arrogance.

Everything about him screams *autocrat*.

Absolute and complete authority.

*Just not here, buddy. Not in Prescott.*

“Wow.” I shake my head at him. “I ... don’t know what to say.”

“There’ll be more opportunities like this, Scarlett,” he breathes, redirecting his attention from his phobia and back to me. His gaze sweeps my body, but he plays the once-over off as casual nonchalance. “I’ll give you more than you can handle.”

Um. What? Was that blatant innuendo from Alexei Grove?

“Scarlett.” Nisha’s teeth are clenched, and she looks as if she *might* just strangle me, birthday or no. “You went on one date with the guy and he’s here to give you a birthday present?”

“You slept with him, didn’t you?” Basti whispers from my other side, but I wave them both off.



“I did not sleep with him,” I mutter back, fingering the box and trying to feign nonchalance. But lying to my friends? This is so much worse than keeping my secret about Bohnes; this is monumental stuff. I tell myself I’m going to protect them, but I don’t know if that’s the full truth.

Maybe I’m *afraid* to tell them everything?

“Alexei is a client of mine,” Bohnes offers with a sadistic smile.

“I traded him information at the art gallery in exchange for this.” I hold the box up in explanation, but that’s only *partially* true. Alexei told me I could tag along with him to the track to *watch*, not that he’d give me the passcode to the gate and pay the buy-in.

I can only imagine how he got the money. Likely, Bohnes stole more items from his semi-abandoned mansion to pay for this. It truly is a thoughtful gift.

“Huh.” Nisha remains unimpressed.

“Whatever.” Bastian grins. “We’re really going to Portland?!” he asks, hanging over my right shoulder. Both Widow and Bohnes turn these strange looks on him, like the guy isn’t gay and obsessed with dick. I ignore them as I turn to Nisha and Basti, throwing my arms around both of them.

Bastian squeals with me while Nisha levels a suspicious glare over my shoulder; she doesn’t trust any of these boys.

I wish I was smart enough to follow her lead, but Bohnes, at the very least, has earned my tentative trust.

“We’re going to Portland,” I confirm with a grin, waving around the box as my girls cheer in excitement, as invested in my career as I am. One thing I’ll miss when I leave Prescott is having a crew; there’s nothing in the world like it. *What if, maybe, I could pay my girls with the money I get from Alexei?* We could stay together; I could support them. “I’m going to smoke those boys so bad, they won’t know what hit ‘em.”

There’s never been a female racer on the P-Triple-C track. Not once. It’s a rich boy’s paradise, and I’m going to raze that shit to the ground. If I hadn’t sunk my bestie’s body in a dirty

pond on old logging property, I'd be much more enthusiastic about the whole thing.

"Thank you, Alexei," I say, turning back around and moving forward like I might just offer him another kiss on the cheek or something. He very purposefully moves away from me, and I sigh. Right. "Really, thank you."

"You're very welcome, Miss Force," he replies, straightening his tie with latex-gloved hands. He looks quite a bit more menacing like that, with the black latex instead of the brown or navy or white leather gloves. Somehow, it seems to suit him.

"What's next on the agenda?" Bohnes asks, leaning up against my car. He can do that now, since we're dating. In fact, touching my car like that is a sign of respect and consideration between us. As I said before, cars at Prescott High are swapped the way housekeys might be shared between two young adults who are just beginning to get serious.

"Well," I start, snapping the velvet clamshell box closed with a snap. "Not only is it my birthday, but it's also Mischief Night."

"Mischief Night?" Alexei asks with a small frown. I take it he's never heard of it. Doesn't surprise me.

I flash a bright grin at him as Bohnes presses another lolly into my hands. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was trying to loosen me up a bit.

"Mischief Night aka Devil's Night ..." I hand the velvet box over to Bastian and then slip into the Pantera, starting the engine and turning on KMZI 66.6.

"*An Unhealthy Obsession*" by The Blake Robinson Synthetic Orchestra has just started. *Oh shit yeah*. Not only is this song amazing and perfectly suited for tonight, but I also think it should be my and Bohnes' couple song. Like, if we were ever wedded in a dark and delicious ceremony, this would be for our first dance as a married couple.

I climb back out and crawl onto the hood of the Devil, and then the roof. After cupping my hands around my mouth, I call

out, “clear the floor!”

My girls move in quick order, grabbing Fuller kids by the shoulders and shoving Oak Valley brats from behind. They’re rounded up like cattle, forced into their cars, and sent on their way. Anyone who resists gets a baseball bat on their windshield.

My display with the ornery rich boy earlier must’ve cowed the crowd enough that the other kids leave without complaint, leaving a sea of familiar Prescott faces. Much better. I shake my hands out.

“Mischief Night,” I enunciate loudly, swiping my palm through the air for dramatic emphasis. All my girls are watching. Fuck, most of Prescott is watching. It’s not like I got this queen crown by being shy or insecure, by being quiet or safe.

Nah, bitch, the only things that feed my hungry soul are danger, cars, and dick.

“The first known reference to the holiday is from the late seventeenth-hundreds. So the legend goes, a headmaster”—here I pause because, like, these are Prescott kids—“a headmaster is the British version of a principal.” There are some thankful nods in the crowd, and I forge on. “Anyway, the guy put on a school play that ended in Mischief Night, encouraging students to perform harmless tricks and acts of silly vandalism.”

I grin as I squat down, pointing at the crowd with my red heart lollipop. With my other hand, I snatch up my forty-ounce and finish it off, tossing the trash to Basti. I don’t think about Lemon and how she always loved both Mischief Night and Halloween. I don’t think about how she dressed up as Billie Eilish à la the famous Vogue cover last year and went trick-or-treating (I lied: bitch was straight trickin’) with her then-boyfriend.

Ugh.

My grin hardens, cracks a little. I ignore the pain and forge on.

“Unfortunately, nothing stays pure for long ... Late last century, the vandalism began to escalate—especially in inner cities—elevating to violence, destruction of public property, and *arson*.” I flick Tuesday a special look and she shudders all over with pleasure. Heh. My little fire demon. I stand back up and bite down on the lollipop, sucking on the pieces of cherry-flavored candy. “Well, here in Prescott, we do all of those things so very, very well.”

I pause as the song ends and Wolfman gets on with a little chuckle.

*“Hey kids, this is Wolfman, checking in on this auspicious Devil’s Night. Go out and make some mischief, shake the leaves of the institutions that keep us trapped, ruffle some feathers, and make some noise. This is your neighborhood and your life; they caged you here and now they’re trying to kick you out because they want what you’ve got.*

*“Is that how you want to live your life?”*

*“Milicent and I will be out on the town, so say hi if you see us in a dark alley or a fogged-up cemetery.*

*“Next up, this song is ‘Devil’s Night’ by Motionless in White ...”*

The song shifts and the crowd begins to get a bit ... riled up.

“My mother got swindled out of her house on a bad deal from Archer Realty,” one of my girls—a freshman named Tisa Cypress, new to my crew this year—calls out. “They want us to move into their affordable housing project and charge us double for half the space!”

“Let’s burn down the South Prescott Gardens!” someone else screams, and then the idea spreads like, well, *fire*. It’s repeated from one mouth to the next until everyone’s looking at me for confirmation.

*It is my birthday after all.*

It’s an intriguing idea. South Prescott Gardens is the new ‘affordable housing project’ that the mayor’s been crowing excitedly about for months. The building, while finished, is still vacant; none of the proposed residents have moved in just

yet. What might that do to the mayor's plans for the city, and our neighborhood in particular?

The most important question is: will this ultimately hurt or help the residents of the southside?

The answer is immediate: it can only help.

Because an overpriced collection of rat cages that cost twice the average resident's mortgage or rent is not a solution to bulldozing our neighborhoods to the ground.

"Let's burn it down!" I shout, and everyone cheers. "First, let's rob the liquor store with the sex offender owner, and then rendezvous on the empty lot where the laundromat used to be."

People start piling into cars and Bohnes reaches a hand up to help me down from the roof of my car.

"Ride with me, baby doll?" he purrs, and I nod, casting a look over at Widow.

"Take Alexei and follow us," I tell him, ignoring his scowl as I glance over at Nisha and Bastian. "You two ride in Nisha's car."

My friends nod and off they go. If anything, tonight should help us blow off some steam. Anyway, the cars left behind will be safe enough.

The punishment for pissing me off in the days before Devil's Night include car duty wherein several girls stay behind and monitor the leftover vehicles. The less cars we take on this excursion, the better. Less traffic. Every seat in every car should be full.

I hop into the passenger seat of the Chevelle only to find a fresh bottle of whiskey with a ribbon around its neck.

"Aw, is this for me?" I ask as Bohnes slides in, dressed head-to-toe in black as always. His pretty ghost eyes are edged with liner, making him look even more ghastly than usual.

"All for you, my dark love," he breathes, and then he whips us out of the parking lot so fast that my head is spinning.

I roll the window down, tearing off my headband and chucking it into the mud. My dark hair flutters all around my face as I twist the cap off the bottle and Bohnes turns on the radio.

Wolfman's left a nice playlist on in his absence; "*Gasoline*" by I Prevail is blasting now.

How very fitting.

We head over to the liquor store first and climb out. One of my girls passes over the black balaclava that I wear when we rob rich guys in their fancy cars. After what happened to Evelyn, I haven't had the heart to work anymore jobs, but that won't last forever.

What's that saying? Necessity is the mother of grand larceny? Something like that.

Bohnes slips on a skeleton mask—cute—and Widow accepts a ski mask from one of my girls. Alexei is now wearing a KN95 mask, like he's neck-deep in that weird coronavirus shit from way back when.

I ignore him, borrowing an extra baseball bat from Widow's trunk, and into the store we go.

The owner of this particular liquor store raped and killed an eight-year-old girl, but was let out after ten years for good behavior. So, like, Bohnes is right, isn't he? Fuck this society, and fuck the system, and fuck normal. Fuck it all.

*Lemon.*

The first thing I do is sprint inside ahead of the crowd, my two fuckboys ... I mean my *boyfriend* and my fuckboy ... at my heels. Bohnes and Widow both go for the two security guards; I don't waste time on the bulletproof barrier that surrounds the front counter. Instead, I slide around the side of it and then duck under the small gate there, rising to my feet and swinging the baseball bat at the owner's head.

He already has a gun in his hand, but he drops it as soon as the bat makes contact with his skull.

I don't want things getting out of control, so I kick the gun under the counter, making sure the owner is well and truly passed out (but still alive because some people get mad when child rapists die? IDK). When I stand up, I smash the cash register with the metal baseball bat until it opens, and then I shove the cash under the plastic barrier.

Prescott kids snatch up some bills here and there, but nobody takes too much.

They know what the fuck I'll do to them if they do.

It takes a key to get into the cigarette case, and I don't care to look for it. Instead, I slip back out of the small gate and join the others in loading up on liquor.

"The higher the alcohol content, the better it burns!" I shout, snatching up an armful of glass bottles.

For as large as the crowd is, we're in and out within a couple of minutes, sliding back into our cars with enough liquor to choke a herd of elephants.

"What a night," Bohnes whispers, his voice edged with violence. I like him best this way, full Prescott and meeting me right on my level. He lets his blue eyes slide my way, taking in my outfit, my shoes, and even through the mask, he's a stunning male specimen.

Even though it's dangerous as fuck, I get on my knees and lean over, kissing his exposed lips beneath the mask. He swerves a little, but his dark laughter makes the move entirely worth it.

"Are you angry about the Kelly boy?" I ask him, thinking about Ash and our unhinged fuck on Sunday. Bohnes hasn't mentioned it over the last few days, but he also hasn't tried to get me into bed since. And by *into bed*, I mean in the bathroom, in the woods, on the hood of his car, etc.

"Angry?" he asks, and then he shakes his head again. "Jealous. I told you, they're very different emotions."

"Well, they *look* like one emotion," I explain, unscrewing the cap on the whiskey that Bohnes brought for me and taking several, long drinks. "Explain to me how they're different."

“Anger implies an implicit wrongdoing,” he murmurs, driving so fast that I’m plastered to the seat like I’m on a rollercoaster or something. It’s that feeling, the mix of vertigo and speed and danger that really gets me; it’s an addiction. “Jealousy is an acknowledgement that someone else is touching, using, or loving something or someone that you feel should belong to you and only you.”

I think on that for a minute, reaching out to roll my window down again. Wind whips in and stirs my hair as Bohnes runs stop signs, stoplights, swerves around honking pedestrian cars. He’s a good driver, probably the second best in the city.

Behind, you know, me. *Obviously.*

“But that isn’t how you and I work, Scarlett Force,” he concedes after a little while, his voice an overripe strawberry, dripping with bitter dark chocolate. How can he make me want to take a bite out of him with just a few words? “I give you my monster; you feed my monster. That’s what we do.”

“What does your monster feed on?” I ask, genuinely intrigued by his crazy.

“Pussy.” That’s what he says, just like that, and drunken laughter explodes from me.

I’m still laughing as we pull onto the dirt patch that used to house a family-owned laundromat, one of the only truly affordable ones within several miles. It’s gone now, like so many parts of Prescott, but it’s right across the street from South Prescott Gardens, the brand-new building meant to house all the displaced residents from the new developments springing up everywhere.

I stumble out of the car and then climb onto the hood, standing up with a little help from Bohnes. Doing this, *standing* on his car in heels, that’s almost true love or something.

“First rule of arson,” I say, swaying slightly as one of my girl’s brings over a gas can and then fills a metal bucket with the liquid. “Check the building to see who’s inside.”



Tuesday is already on that, heading across the street with a few other members of our crew; we'll wait for her signal.

"Second rule of arson," I continue as Bohnes hands me a vodka bottle and I unscrew the top, swig a little, and then tear a strip of fabric off the bottom of my skirt. I hand it over to one of my girls to dip the end in the gasoline, and then I stuff it into the bottle. "Be careful when you light your cocktails; don't throw them at anyone in our crew."

Tuesday reappears at the front door of the building. She and a few of the other girls are dragging two unconscious men in black, badges embroidered on their arms declaring them as building security.

It's pretty damn funny actually to watch them in heels and heavy makeup, hair done, nails done, dragging two grown-ass men.

Once the men are lying on the dirt beside our cars, hands zip-tied behind their backs, I give a shout and off we go. Some students make the Molotov cocktails while others race across the street and start throwing them.

Small flames lick over the exterior walls as more and more bottles are thrown; glass shimmers on the sidewalk under the full moon and the old, flickering orange street lamps that have yet to be replaced with whatever fancy new ones the city—à la Mayor Jonas Kelly—feels are appropriate.

Widow is throwing cocktails, Bohnes, too.

Alexei stands off to one side in his white mask, green eyes observing the commotion. He has a single cocktail in one hand, a lighter in the other. I ignore him, enjoying the violent melee of the moment, the wild violence, the feeling of being free, of taking some sort of perverse justice.

There's a sign posted just out front of the building, in the small dirt patch that will be used for some mediocre landscaping.

*Under New Management* is what it says and underneath that, there's a logo with a huge *AR* in the center of a circle, a

faint silhouette of skyscrapers behind it, dotted with fluffy clouds.

Archer Realty.

Alexei moves over to the sign—much closer to the building than I'd like with flames springing up here and there—and he grabs onto the edge of it, peeling back the plastered paper until I can see what lies beneath.

*Site Run by the Borisov Group* is written there like a curse.

He moves back, just a bit farther than the bulk of the crowd, and I lose sight of him for a moment.

There's a boy beside me, chucking cocktails along with everyone else, but something about him draws my attention the way moths are drawn to flame. He's wearing a black ski mask, a plain black sweater, and black jeans.

On his feet, there's a pair of white and green sneakers that might be overlooked by someone else, but which I recognize as designer.

I lift my gaze up to the boy's face and find ebon black eyes watching me.

He smiles and, through the mouth hole of the ski mask, I can see the movement of those full, ripe lips.

“Ash-pen?” I correct myself, sounding like the half-drunk, half-stoned deviant that I am.

He puts a single finger to his lips to shush me, winks, and then returns to what he's doing. I join him, taking pre-made Molotovs from my girls.

One bottle soars above the rest, crashing into one of the second-floor windows. Immediately, the flames snatch on the curtains there and start a much larger blaze than we've managed anywhere else.

I glance back to see Alexei cracking his knuckles. He accepts another cocktail and aims it carefully, taking his time before he launches it and breaks yet another window.

The other kids catch on, starting a massive blaze that licks the air with heat and hungry flames. This new building is on the fringes of the neighborhood, stuck at the edge of the city to keep the ‘renters’ from mingling with the fancy new property owners that will be moving into other developments.

There are no trees left around here, just empty lots where things like the laundromat used to stand. It’s the perfect place for a fire; there’s nowhere for it to spread but up, up, up to the fancy penthouse waiting at the top of this building. Not as fancy, of course, as a penthouse in another building, but too nice for any of the low-income folks to occupy.

The first sound of sirens in the distance is our cue to pack up and run.

The boy in the ski mask—Ash Kelly—grabs onto my wrist and yanks me along with him. He guides me over to a blue Pontiac Trans Am, opening the passenger side door and ushering me inside.

After a brief blip of hesitation—we really shouldn’t be seen together—I wave at Bohnes and Widow, offering them a thumbs-up before I slide into the passenger seat, and off we go.

Ash Kelly drives so differently from Bohnes or Widow, Alexei or Nisha or Bastian. You can tell so much about a person by the way they drive. His style is careful, almost calculated, but with rapid bursts of speed that soon put us near the head of the pack, right up alongside Bohnes’ Chevelle and Widow’s ‘Vette.

“What are you doing here?” I ask breathlessly, panting on the adrenaline, my fingers and toes tingling with the violence.

This new (old) car of his is, well, hot as fuck. I rub my ass on the seat and exhale, reaching up to brush through my tangled hair with shaking hands.

Some of the students stop to spray graffiti on shit; some will go to the police station to egg it. Others will head for the fancy mansions in the hills and use the last of the Molotov cocktails

to chuck over the stone, brick, or iron walls that surround the properties.

Personally, my stoner ass is ready to eat.

“Do you know where Wesley’s is?” I ask as Ash pulls the mask over his head and sets it aside. My dreamy, alcohol-laden brain swims at the sight of him, that elegant profile, that raven-colored hair, eyes like coal in a pale face with a plump upper lip.

He’s healed a bit from last weekend, but not much.

“Not particularly.”

I sigh and point at an alleyway just up ahead.

“Make a right here and I’ll guide you.”

Ash does what I say, following my commands and setting us off in the right direction.

A sea of vintage cars follows, like a car show, only made up of hooligans and brats and delinquents instead of old guys with too much money and time on their hands. Every one of these cars—save this one, I’m sure—was built from the ground up with blood, sweat, tears, and stolen parts.

Every one of these cars is a reflection of the deeply embedded dreams and desires of Prescott High.

“It’s your birthday,” Ash says finally, licking his lower lip. He glances over at me, eyes shining. “That’s why I’m here.”

“We were supposed to meet up in secret later,” I protest, but it’s a half-hearted one. How could I be upset at a birthday visit from a fuckboy? Because that’s what he is, right? I mean, good for little else but sex, no promise of romance in the future ...

I bite my lip.

“Nobody recognized me.” He sounds dead confident about that, but like, *I* recognized him, didn’t I?

“You’re risking a lot—for both me and you.” I shake my head and sigh, knowing that I should’ve sent him home and told him to piss off, not climbed in his goddamn car. “Whose vehicle is this anyway?” I run my hand over the white leather

seat, appreciating the car even as I know that it isn't worth nearly as much as the Cobra or the (RIP) Fastback.

The Pontiac has good power and handling, is agile on a windy road, but it definitely doesn't hold up to European cars from the same time period. Thus, my Pantera. She's a beast.

"It belongs to Chet's son, Cody." Ash shrugs, like a vintage muscle car is just a shiny new toy to be played with. "He drove it over to our place earlier, got pissed, and passed the fuck out; he'll never know that I borrowed it."

"And if anyone asks, you'll say he was the one gallivanting around on Devil's Night, eh?" I snort and rub at my face. "Still, this is a bad idea. You know it; I know it."

"See, and here's the problem," Ash remarks, making a left turn when I point it out to him. Soon enough, we're on the dirt road that leads to Wesley's. The drive up, between the restaurant and the nearest city street, has never been paved. Potholes jostle us back and forth, but I'm still riding a sea of adrenaline, and I like it all too much. "I'm finding it hard to care about that."

"Meaning what?" I inquire, looking over at him and wondering what he really thinks of me, after my having killed his twin. There must be some resentment there, right? Only, I don't see anything but the sharp edge of that horrible, gleaming blade, the sword of obsession that he's going to ram straight through my heart.

"Meaning, I will crush any boundary, cross any line, break any rule that keeps me from you, Scarlett." He glides the Pontiac into one of the parking spaces near the front of the building. Since it's Devil's Night, most of the drive-in spots are full. Some of the cars are bouncing in a very telling way, but there's nothing unusual about that.

Wesley's has been a hookup spot since forever ago. Even my mom and aunt banged losers in the backseats of whatever cute cars they had that made up for their distinct lack of personalities.

I climb out of the car and Ash follows—but not before covering his face with a mask similar to the one Alexei was using. It's a white KN95 mask and, while a bit unusual to see around the Prescott neighborhood, it's not so weird that someone might make note of it.

“You've got to be fucking kidding me,” Widow murmurs, waiting beside the front door of the diner with his arms crossed. He eyes Ash like a monster that needs caging, and I step between the two of them before the moment escalates.

“He has a point, *Aspen*,” I clarify as Ash crosses his arms over his chest. “You coming here on my birthday, when you're ...” *Fuck, this hurts.* I exhale and shake my hands out. “Engaged to one of my best friends. How will that look?”

“Nobody has to know who I am,” he declares, as if it's that simple.

“Yeah, maybe not most people. But Nisha and Basti—my ride or die bitches—*they* will notice. You don't exactly have a forgettable face.”

“Let me spell it out for you, rich boy.” Widow cracks his knuckles in such a way that I'm almost squirming. Goddamn, I'm thirsty as hell. And not for, like, water. I mean dick. I'm thirsty for dick. “You're not coming in.”

“Bar my way then and see what happens.” Ash goes to shove past Widow, and the moment escalates so rapidly that for a second there, I'm almost afraid. Not for myself, obviously, but for the two boys. Either one of them could easily—and without much guilt—kill the other. Speaking of ... “I should've mowed you down when you came slinking out of the bushes like a filthy mutt.”

That does it. Widow is up in arms, and I'm putting my palms on the chest of either boy.

“It's *my* birthday. Unruly testosterone will be ejected.” I give Ash a harsh look. When I tell my friends about Lemon, I'll explain the twin thing. But not now. Not tonight. “Look, I appreciate you showing up for my birthday, but you need to leave. Just go, Ash-pen.”

I almost call him by the wrong name again, and his face shifts just enough that I can tell he's likely frowning beneath the mask. At least it all makes sense now, him blowing his load at the sound of the name Ash. Maybe I should've figured it out then because why would he nut over his brother's name? That's weird as hell.

I go to open the door of the restaurant, but Widow beats me to it, holding it wide and then letting it swing shut in Ash's face. "Don't push me, Adrian," I warn him as I make my way over to the large booth in the corner where Bohnes is waiting, arms thrown up along the back of the red pleather cushion with all the taped-up holes.

He has a song playing on the jukebox, some twenties tune that really sets the scene. Sometimes, I like to pretend that I'm a mobster, running a speakeasy and selling bootleg liquor while outrunning the cops for fun.

"What do you kids want?" Sandra, the owner and waitress, asks. More like demands, really. Gripes. Complains. Kvetches. "You can have yours free, Scarlett. Happy birthday. Everyone else pays cash."

"Oh come on, Sandy," Basti whines like he always does. "You know I'm short on money lately."

I'm *this close* to settling in and finding a relaxing moment when Ash appears behind Sandra, as much a ghoul or a specter or some creeping, undead thing as Bohnes. This. Stalker. Bitch.

"It's on me," he declares, opening his wallet and passing over a fat wad of bills that Sandra counts skeptically, giving him an odd sort of look and a *huh*. "All of it."

"Right." Sandra waits while I slide into the booth with Nisha on one side and Basti on the other, completely and utterly pissed off. Bohnes looks annoyed, dropping his arms down from the back of the cushion, and finding himself next to Widow.

A tentative order for food and drink is placed while Ash just fucking *stands* there.

“Um, care to explain why Aspen Kelly is attending your birthday party?” Nisha asks, digging her fingernails into my thigh until it hurts. My gaze is on the moron in question as he takes a seat beside a furious Widow, his ebon gaze resolute.

After a moment, he throws his hood up and slides the mask down his face.

“I’m not Aspen,” he declares softly, just loudly enough for our table to hear and nobody else. “I’m Ash. Aspen is my twin.” And there it is, folks. Just like that. I should be mad, but ... here this guy is, putting his trust in my friends. “But if you ever mention that fact again, we’ll all likely die.”

“*Cómo fue? No te escuché,*” Bastian says, oh so sweetly. Again, with my limited Spanish, I think he very kindly asked *what the fuck did you just say?* or something like that.

“Twins.” Nisha just sits there for a moment, and then she lets her gaze swing slowly over to me. There’s a whole heaping fuckton of judgement in that look. “You expect me to believe there are *two* of these assholes?” She keeps her voice low, but by no means is it soft.

“I just found out on Saturday.” More truths threaten to spill past my alcohol-laden tongue, but I bite them back. “Ash is mine; Aspen ...” *Don’t say was. Use present tense. Keep using present tense, just for now.* “Aspen is Lemon’s. But this is straight-up confidential shit.”

“Y’all knew about this?” Bastian points at Bohnes and Widow. The former just shrugs loosely, and the latter grits his teeth.

“You told him not to come in here and he did it anyway.” Widow ignores Bastian’s question to turn a glare on Ash. The two of them end up staring at each other again, and bringing goose bumps up along my arms. “Are you going to allow that?”

“If I killed a fuckboy every time he failed to obey an order, the three of you would already be dead.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Basti chokes out, and my face blanches. Oops. “This ... he ... oh my God.” He slaps both hands over



his mouth, covering up an explosion of curses in Spanish. Nisha still has her forehead on the table's surface, eyes closed. "You slept with a rich boy?! Gross."

"That's nasty, Scarlett." Nisha sits up and turns a look on me and then on Bohnes. "And you're just letting this happen? No cares in the world, huh?"

Thank God she's under my protection. The way Bohnes returns her accusing stare is downright menacing.

"Have you ever tried telling Scarlett what to do? It's one of the reasons I like her so much." Bohnes pauses as our drink order shows up, and pulls his soda across the table to sit in front of him.

"When did this Kelly boy thing happen?" Nisha asks me, and then both she and Bastian are *staring* at me in such a way that I wish I were anywhere but here. Truly.

"I told you that I'd tell you guys everything; I just need some time." That's all that I can say right now. I take a quick glance around the room, mostly to avoid the looks on my best friends' faces, but I don't see Alexei anywhere. Not that I'm surprised. I can't seem to forget the look on his face when he peeled back the top layer on that sign and saw his father's company's logo there.

It's only been a week since his father was murdered. About the same since Lemon. Since ... Aspen.

Then there's a bout of awkward silence that follows before my girls start appearing, offering up homemade cupcakes, stolen bracelets, a basket of fresh tamales from their *madre*, cards with secrets or favors, repurposed from their own birthdays or snuck out under t-shirts from the local drugstore.

By the time our food comes, I have a pile of gifts that Nisha is carefully recording and stacking neatly on the windowsill beside our table. The way she keeps tossing glares in my direction tells me that I've been granted a reprieve on the basis of my birthday alone.

We're not done with this conversation. *Oh how well I know that ...*

“Does this happen every year?” Widow asks, watching each new approaching girl with undisguised suspicion. He’s so prickly and growly and frowny that some of them put hands on their belts or reach up to touch that secret hiding spot between their breasts, making sure they’ve got weapons on them. Just in case.

“Every birthday since freshman year,” Bastian agrees, and then he goes still, so still that I wonder if he’s even breathing. “If y’all will excuse me for just a minute.” He slides out of the bench seat and takes off for the men’s bathroom.

He doesn’t even know that Lemon is dead, but he does know that she hasn’t responded to any of his texts or calls this week. He knows she isn’t here when she should be, and he’s upset about it.

He’s not the only one.

I clench one hand in my skirt and use the other to yank over the birthday cake shake that I ordered. Sandra slops a whole big-ass slice of confetti cake into the blender with some vanilla ice cream. It’s not something I’d consume on a normal day, but if I die of a sugar rush, what better day than my eighteenth birthday?

Much to my surprise, the next time the doors to the diner open, there’s Alexei Grove, picking at his gloves and sweating profusely.

He makes his way over to us, skirting kids with trays, stumbling back to avoid scurrying waitresses. As we all watch, he pulls a rolled-up plastic garbage bag from his back pocket, lays it out to cover the seat, and then sits down next to me.

He makes certain not to touch me.

“Look at you,” I say, accepting a flask from Bohnes and spiking my cola with whiskey. The birthday cake shake is nice, but it’s more like a dessert than a drink. I sip my soda, infusing my blood with alcohol. “A real Prescott kid now.”

“My seats aren’t that dirty,” Sandra says as she reappears, gesturing with her chin at Alexei. “The hell is wrong with this

kid?” she grumbles, shaking her head. “You know what? I don’t care; I don’t have time to care. What do you want?”

“Nothing for me, please,” Alexei breathes out, still wearing his mask. He looks around the place like it’s a toxic waste dump instead of a diner with the best damn food in town. Same way he looked at the market owned by my girl, Si-Woo, and her mother the other day. To be fair, it’s the same way he looked around the art gallery, too.

“He’s a germaphobe. Just let him be, eh, Sandy? We’re buying a lot, and we won’t be long anyway.” I give her my best puppy dog look and she rolls her eyes.

“Whatever.” Sandra moves over to the next table as I sit there with my head swimming, hyped up on alcohol, weed, and adrenaline.

This morning, I had breakfast with my family; Gram made me pancakes with chocolate chips.

But I couldn’t go home tonight and have dinner with them or take them out to a fancy restaurant. Not without Lemon. Because every birthday I’ve had since preschool has been spent with her by my side. A thirteen-streak tradition broken, shattered, cleaved.

I exhale and Alexei cringes. Bohnes smirks and slips another quarter in the jukebox, selecting another bizarre twenties song. They’re so foreign; it’s hard to believe the music we’re listening to is only a hundred or so years old. It may as well be crafted by aliens.

“Have you been eating?” I ask, peering over at Alexei as his green eyes shift my way. I’m tempted to reach out and slip the mask off his face, but he might stab me with a needle, so I do my best to keep my hands to myself. “You look pale.”

“I’ve been eating,” he replies, his voice stifled and strange behind the mask.

“Plain fruits and vegetables only,” Bohnes amends, since he’s been doing the shopping for Alexei. “And bottled water.”

“Where are you keeping him?” I ask, as if Alexei’s a hamster or something.

“Hold up. *He* is staying with *you*?” Nisha points at Alexei and then Bohnes. “Why?”

“Saturday shit.” It’s a lame explanation, and I can see that Nisha’s patience is wearing extremely thin. But to tell her one thing, I have to tell her everything. I just wanted ... well, I don’t know what I wanted. Maybe I *needed* time to process all of this myself first.

“I have a safe house,” Bohnes replies easily, answering me and ignoring Nisha. He offers up a loose shrug that causes his arm to *almost* touch Widow. Said fuckboy scoots a few more inches away as Nisha rolls her eyes and mumbles something about a dinner full of, well, fuckboys. “It’s best if you don’t know where that is.” His gaze slides over to Ash as the Kelly boy looks down at the greasy burger in the red plastic basket like he’s never seen anything of the sort.

“Rich people don’t eat burgers?” I ask, lifting my chin in his direction.

“Speaking of, why are you *still* here? Are you stupid or something?” Widow growls out, and then both he and Bohnes are looking askance at Ash like they’d enjoy taking turns beating him with baseball bats.

That’s ... likely not a far stretch from the truth. Actually, it could very well *be* the truth.

“I’m here to celebrate Scarlett’s birthday,” Ash says smoothly, exhaling and then reaching down to pick up the burger. He eyes it for a moment and then takes a huge bite, chewing thoughtfully. His dark brows go up under the hood. “*Umai*,” he murmurs, snatching up a fry with his right hand and stuffing it into his mouth.

“What the hell does *ooo-my* mean?” Nisha asks, shaking her head and reaching up to tug at her gold hoop earrings. They used to belong to Lemon; she’s been wearing them since Monday. When I first saw her, I almost chortled one of our favorite slogans—*the bigger the hoops, the bigger the ho*—but that was one of Lem’s catchphrases, and the words died, rotting right on the back of my tongue until I felt sick.

“It means *good*,” Widow explains, which is weird. I just stare at him.

“You speak Japanese, too?” I ask, blinking in surprise, but he curls his lip. Like always.

“Fuck no. I watch a lot of anime.”

“A lot of hentai more like,” is what Ash says in response, and Widow gives a visible shudder.

“So,” Nisha interrupts as Ash glances sidelong at Widow and the two of them stare at each other yet again. There’s a lot of tension there, more than between Widow and Bohnes. She folds her hands on the tabletop as Alexei sits stone-still beside me, looking like he’s about to have a stroke. “The three of you ...” She releases a heavy sigh and looks over at me. I just raise my brows, acting as innocent as possible (which isn’t much at all). “Are you all vying for the Queen’s hand in marriage or something?”

Ash chokes on his burger, Widow nearly knocks over his drink, and Bohnes howls with laughter. Alexei’s gaze shifts over to mine, his green eyes wide. After a moment, he reaches up and yanks the mask down, panting hard. Not sure his reaction has anything to do with me though.

“She was a virgin all of eight weeks ago, so excuse me if this is all a bit much for me to deal with.” I cough as my cherry soda goes down the wrong side and Nisha flicks her fingers like she’s spreading fairy dust or something before sighing and picking up one of her own fries. She raises her brows like *what?* “We’re not used to having men around, you know? It’s hos over bros for us.”

“Bastian’s always appeared male to me,” Bohnes remarks, and Nisha gives him a dark look.

“Don’t be a goddamn asshole. You know what I meant. One gay boy does not equate to all of this nonsense.” She draws an imaginary line from me to Bohnes, Widow, Ash.

Ash is staring at me, shifting his gaze over to the men on his left.

I'm not sure how much he knew about my relationship with either Bohnes or Widow, but thanks Nisha, for layin' it out like that.

"None of you have answered the lady's question," Alexei breathes, still holding his mask away from his mouth. After a moment, he takes it off entirely and sets it in his lap. Even with his back ramrod straight, and his forehead sweaty, he still looks like a prince with that blond hair of his, those emerald eyes like jewels in an aristocratic face. "What are your intentions regarding Scarlett Force?"

"Do we owe you anything at all?" Widow retorts, sitting up straight and double checking to make sure that no part of his body is touching either Bohnes or Ash. "Are you here for Scarlett, too? What other reason could there possibly be? Don't tell me you just hang out with Prescott kids for fun."

"Do I owe *you* anything?" Alexei retorts as Bohnes closes his eyes and rocks his head in time to the bizarre caterwauling of Helen Kane.

"Scarlett," Nisha commands, turning to me. "Deal with this. This is your business, girl. You brought four boys to your birthday party? Honey, you've lost your damn mind."

I look back over at the three sitting opposite me, and I'm not entirely sure what to say.

"I want what I want," I admit, a little drunk, a little high, a little sad. *What would Lem think about this? She'd probably find it funny at first and then she'd get mad at me. She'd call me a hypocrite or something.* She'd also probably try to sleep with at least one of the guys, no doubt about that. She only ever saw worth in her body and her sexual availability to men; that was something I always wanted to cure her of.

Instead, that's what killed her.

"I want what I want, and I don't have to settle," I mumble, sucking up the last of my soda and raising my hand to call Sandra over so that I can have another.

Bastian reappears instead, slamming the coke down on the table and, after noticing how stiff and strange Alexei is,

proceeds to hip bump Ash over on the seat to make room.

Not only does Ash aka Aspen Kelly look just a little bit terrified at having been touched by someone he doesn't know, but the movement also causes his hip to slam into Widow who recoils like he's been slapped. On the other side, he ends up squished against Bohnes who grits his teeth in disgust but otherwise doesn't seem bothered. He scoots just a bit closer to Nisha to make room for Widow, and she glares at him.

"So, what's the tea with these boys, Scar?" Basti whispers, leaning over the table and shifting his brown eyes around the room like he's looking for spies.

"Remind me who are you again?" Ash inquires, looking over at Bastian like he's never seen him before. I'm sure he has, but only, like in passing.

"Sweetie, I'm Scarlett's best friend. Basically, an older brother. You best take care of yourself around me, *Aspen Kelly*." He spits the words out like they're poison. "I'm also *Lemon's* best friend, if you know what I mean. Are you sure he's really a twin?" Basti looks back at me like he isn't willing to believe it. "Have you seen them both together at the same time? This could all be bullshit."

"She's seen us together," Ash replies easily, still picking at his fries, eating them slightly hunched over in such a way that, even without the hoodie, I might not recognize him. The imperious, haughty, overly educated swagger he usually has is well-hidden. "Scarlett's the only person I've ever met intelligent enough to tell us apart."

"Look, Scar," Basti says, leaning toward me conspiratorially as Alexei's fingers twitch on the bench seat and, subconsciously, I reach over to touch the back of his hand. It's gloved, of course, but he reacts like I've just kissed him, turning to look at me with an expression of pure dismay. "Widow and Bohnes, I can get. They're both southside, both trashy, poor as hell, violent, handsome, alpha. But this guy?" He points over at Ash. "Dump this one and cut your losses, Queen. You don't need a rich boy around. Not this one." He

points at Ash again and then redirects his finger to Alexei. “Or that one. Whatever it is you’re doing with him.”

“Alexei is ... well I’m considering a job offer from him,” I explain while also squeezing his hand. I thread my fingers through his, and he exhales strangely, drawing the attention of the entire table. “Again, Saturday stuff. If you’ll just let me relax tonight, I swear I’ll tell you everything soon enough.” I swirl my finger in the air, swoony and drifting as Bohnes reaches in his pocket and offers me yet another weed lollipop.

Nisha sighs dramatically but doesn’t stop me as I unwrap it.

It’s my damn *birthday*.

I suck on the candy, still holding Alexei’s gloved hand as he silently hyperventilates next to me. The real clincher here is: if he wanted to get away from me, he would. He might be panicking, but he’s also consenting. I have no fears of accidentally pushing past his boundaries; he’d never allow me to.

“You sure you don’t want anything, kid?” Sandra asks, reappearing again in that way of hers. Alexei simply shakes his head. Ash surprises me by ordering another burger and a half basket of fries.

I do the same, and Bastian orders the fried fish sandwich cause, like, it’s the most expensive item on the menu and Ash is paying. I bet he doesn’t even eat it. Bastian hates fish with a passion. Heh. Get it?

I probably look like a total and complete crazy person, a bitch who came completely unhinged at the sight of her best friend kissing her man with bloody lips and then dying on her lap. But I haven’t totally lost it.

I’ve got a lot done in the last few days.

This girl saunters over to our table, holding a piece of paper between two of her fingers. She’s probably, what, thirteen or something?

“Hi,” she says, smacking her gum. She has this big head of fluffy blonde hair, all crimped up like it’s 1982 or something. “I’m Shirley’s cousin, Stacey.” She smacks her gum again and



drags her gaze over me. “Wow. You’re next level, bitch. Can I be you when I grow up?”

“Nobody can be: I’m Scarlett Motherfucking Force.” I reach out and snatch the paper from her hands. In the process, I lean right over Alexei’s lap and sort of put my tits right in his face. As I slump back into my seat, I glance over to see him panting heavily, eyes closed, and a very serious bulge in his slacks.

He turns his head over to me slowly, grinding his teeth.

“Six inches, Miss Force. We’ve discussed it.”

“Is that how big your dick is?” the girl, this middle schooler named Stacey Langford, asks. Alexei recoils at the question and snaps the fingers of his latex glove.

“You’re far too young to be inquiring about such things. Go study and be less delinquent,” he commands, and Stacey laughs at him, pointing at him as if he’s a joke.

“You’re funny. This guy’s funny.” She flashes me a grin and a wink before taking off. I’ve already paid her, and I’ll keep paying her handsomely if she keeps bringing me information. If she doesn’t end up in juvie her freshman year, she could take over the girls at Prescott.

I unfold the paper she brought me, reading it over carefully. Then I get out a lighter and set it on fire, letting the burning ashes fall onto an empty plate.

“Dramatic,” Nisha murmurs, but she doesn’t ask what was on the page because she doesn’t want to bring up the subject of that information in front of the boys.

I smile.

It’s okay; they can hear this.

“I hope none of you are busy for Halloween tomorrow,” I offer, looking over at Bohnes. He smirks at me; he’s hosting the party. Just this morning, he told me *where* he was going to be hosting it.

I’m the only person he told which, you know, made my day even crazier than usual. Every single fucking person in

Prescott was pawing all over me, buying me things, offering me sex or drugs or money to know where it's being held.

In turn, they'll all turn around and sell that information to Fuller High and Oak Valley Prep students. See, it's an ecosystem around here. We already had our rich assholes across the bridge in the 'tree' neighborhoods; Prescott was never meant to be a gentrified, bourgeois storm of beige and gray tract houses and condos. No judgment there, just a statement of fact.

"If you don't tell me what that note said ..." Bastian warns, and then he flicks a fry at me. All four boys watch him with near hostile attention.

And damn me, damn me all to hell ... I *like* it.

"Hey Widow," I ask, drumming my fingers on the table and smiling like the high and drunk maudlin fool that I am. "Have you ever read a *reverse harem* romance novel?"

He just stares back at me, and I shake my head.

He'll figure it out.

"It says that a very important person is planning on attending the Prescott High Halloween party tomorrow ..."

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a light grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER TWELVE' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by large, expressive splatters of bright red paint or blood, which appear to be dripping down the page. The splatters are most concentrated around the word 'CHAPTER' and extend downwards, partially covering the word 'TWELVE'.

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

## *Scarlett*

After we're finished eating, we head outside together and lounge on vintage cars while fifties and sixties music blasts from the outdoor speaker. Most of us nurse to-go shakes and cigarettes, passing around my whiskey bottle from hand-to-hand.

Girls keep coming up to me, offering yet more gifts, petting my hair, touching my hand, asking if I want to fuck them.

"Why are you so popular with women?" Ash inquires finally, his patience worn dangerously thin. I can tell he wants to talk to me alone, but ... it's my birthday. I want company and activity, cigarettes and blunts, alcohol and sex. I don't want to think about Lemon for three goddamn seconds. "Do you sleep with them, too?"

I sit up on the hood of the Chevelle and give him my darkest look in response.

He returns it without flinching.

"My girls are used to people only wanting them for sex; they don't need that from me. I'm here to protect them." The words come out fierce and truthful, like they always do, but then ... then I remember that Evelyn and Lemon both are dead.

And that both of them died because of Aspen Kelly, directly and indirectly.

*Whelp, still didn't make it three whole seconds without hopping on the grief train.*

I continue to stare at Ash, wondering how much I hate myself. Widow had a good point: why is he here? We can't date; we can't even let anyone know we're texting or meeting up. That, and he looks exactly like a guy that tried to assault me and killed my girl and my bestie.

He's the mayor's son, and now that Aspen is dead, all of that power is his to have.

I feel irrationally angry all of a sudden; I know it's because I'm crossfading like hell (that is, mixing weed and alcohol), but I can't help myself.

I slide off the hood and storm over to him, snatching his wrist and yanking him away from the group where it seems, at least, that everyone but Alexei is at least somewhat enjoying themselves.

“What's your fucking problem, Kelly boy?” I snap at him, knowing that I'm taking my anger out on him but unable to make myself stop. “Why are you so damn ornery?”

“I just want to know how many other people you're fucking, so that I can be prepared,” he demands, his face red with anger, his hands curled into fists. I've never seen him like this. Really, I haven't seen him like a lot of things because we don't know each other for shit.

“Why?” I quip, lifting up my clove cigarette for another drag. “You jealous?”

Ash reaches out and snatches the cigarette from me, chucking into the grass. He at least has the grace to stomp it out before he's grabbing both of my wrists and slamming them above my head, against the harsh bark of the tree.

“I am jealous,” he says, staring at my mouth and not my eyes. He repeats himself in Japanese—rather, he says *something* in Japanese that I don't understand—and then exhales again, his warm breath fanning across my lips.

“Say something gross in Japanese,” I moan, and he licks up the side of my neck, sucking on my carotid in a totally perverse way. “Please.”

“*Onegai*,” he teases, but I think that just means *please*. “*Nama ga ii*,” he makes this pouty sound when he says it which I'm not at all expecting. The sound of it drives straight to my core and makes me squirm under his grip. “*Gaman dekinai*.” Ash licks and sucks on my neck until I'm a panting mess, and then he draws back with a challenge in his gaze. “But you don't get any of that until you answer my damn question.”

“What was it again?” I repeat, not purposefully trying to be sassy, just drunk as hell.

“How many people are you *screwing*?” he growls this out, and I laugh. I’m sorry; it’s just too funny. I can’t help it. Ash releases me and paces away and back again, his eyes shining with a disturbed craving.

“Um, three?” I question, looking up at the leafy branches above my head. It’s hard to see in the dark, but I know that all the leaves have changed by now, red and gold and orange and brown ... I drop my gaze back to Ash. “Really, it’s only two for now, but I’m working on the Widow thing.”

Ash just stares at me, and I push up off of the tree. We’re eye-to-eye now. Well, he’s a bit taller, but he tilts his head down until our noses are nearly touching.

“You and I never discussed anything except about you running away to Tokyo and never coming back.” That’s not entirely fair of me, but I’m still not over the fact that he lied about having a twin. How much bullshit could I have saved myself if I’d known?

He curses so fiercely in Japanese that I hate myself for not being able to speak the language. That’s what I need in order to reduce my over usage of the word *fuck*, to learn how to say fuck or its equivalent in as many languages as possible. That’s the key!

“I suppose I assumed that you were interested in me after everything that happened; circumstances have changed. I was worried that Aspen might kill you.”

“And you’re not worried your father might do the same?” I retort, but Ash just maintains that stare. “You knew I was sleeping with Bohnes already, right?”

“I assumed that we might have a different sort of relationship after—” he starts, but I just snort. He reaches up to grab my chin, and I slap his hand away.

“You thought I was a virgin or something when we fucked? Come on, Kelly. That’s dumb—even for you.”

“Then I suppose your friend had a valid question. Let me answer it for you.” I push back against Ash, but he wraps his arms around me. He leans down to lick and suck on my ear, making me moan. “I’m going to clean up the mess here, so that I can have you by my side. You’ll never have to work a day in your life, Scarlett Force. My intention *is* to marry you. The real question here is: what are *you* doing?”

*Never have to work a day in your life ...* For some reason, that phrase bothers me. It doesn’t excite me; it freaks me out. No, no, not *for some reason*. I know exactly why it upsets me: it’s that belief that drew Lemon to an early grave.

I untangle myself from Ash Kelly and take a few steps back, just to put some space between us.

“I’m doing whatever I want, Ash-pen.” Oops. Oh well, good enough. “Learning who I am. Making things right. Sleeping with boys I like. I don’t remember signing up to be your trophy wife.”

He flares his nostrils at me, but I’ll give him credit for not storming off.

“So what am I?” he queries, searching his brain for the right term. “Your fuckboy, is that it? That’s who I am to you?” He doesn’t sound so playful anymore, more furious than anything else. He crosses his arms behind his hooded head and then paces back and forth a few more times.

“Bro, you’re nineteen.” I hook a thumb in Widow’s direction. “He’s seventeen. He handled it better than you.”

“Handled *it*? Handled what?” he asks. “*Nanda yo?*”

“Ash...pen, let’s get something clear right here, right now.” I cross my arms under my pointy boobs. The bra looks fly as hell, but it’s also uncomfortable as shit. For special occasions only. “I like you.” I sigh and let my chin drop just a bit. *Fuck, I’m tired*. And this is exactly why I don’t usually mix weed and alcohol. “Not sure why, to be honest. You’re a rich boy, through and through, your family is awful and violent, you’re arrogant as shit, and you’re obviously crazy.”

“I’m the crazy one?” he asks, letting out a harsh laugh as he points to himself. “I’m crazy because I want you to commit to me and only me? Because I want to marry you and make you a rich, powerful woman?”

“And *there* is your mistake,” I say, snapping my fingers in his direction. “I’m *already* a powerful woman; I’m going to prove that to you. Just watch.”

“Stop sleeping with other people,” he snaps at me, shoving his hood back so that he can get in my face. I just return that stare of his.

“No.”

Ash turns and punches a tree so hard that his knuckles come away bloody and flaked with pieces of bark. With a growl, he tears the bandage off his other hand—the one that was covering that deep palm wound that caused me to suspect the twin thing in the first place—and wraps it around his new injury.

“Let me see—” I start, but when I approach, he jerks away from me, like I’ve punched him or something.

“If you don’t stop fucking other people, I’ll kill them.” He’s breathing so heavily, and his cheeks are bright red. He’s ... serious? He is, isn’t he?

I mean, I would be, if I were him. Make no mistake: this offer is not reciprocal. I’m not sharing my men with any other women, regardless of how hypocritical that is. If that’s the case, they can start leaving me one by one until the right one remains.

And anyway, this is just high school stuff, right?

It’s just ... fuckboys desperate to be boyfriends.

I drag both hands down my face.

“Kelly, did you come all the way over here just to ruin my birthday?” I ask, dropping my hands down as I study him, progressively—and against my own will—becoming more and more sober by the second.



“You killed my brother,” he says, panting heavily, and then pacing another quick back and forth as he rakes his fingers through his hair. “You killed him and now I have to *be* him, and I can’t speak in Japanese, and I have to work hard to use American-English, and I can’t like frogs or read books or eat ramen ...”

He’s rambling now; I have no idea what the frog thing is about. Somehow, I get the idea that it has something to do with Aspen and their childhood together. Oh, what a childhood it must’ve been.

“I killed your brother, and I won’t commit to you and just you alone. Is that it?” I ask, not entirely without sympathy. “I understand that, Ash...pen. I do. I understand it, but I can’t make that promise to you. Nor can I promise that I’d marry you—or any of them either—because I’m not going to go the way of the typical Prescott girl.”

Married young. Little kids. Alone. Multiple jobs. Moving back in with the parents.

It’s a theme around here; it happens to everybody.

But not me.

Not even if I really, really like these guys. I do. And not just sexually. Widow, Bohnes, Ash, they all have something inside of them that calls to me. I genuinely enjoy their personalities, proclivities, and psychoses. Truly.

“*Muri*,” he grinds out, pointing between us angrily. “I don’t accept that.”

He starts to take off, and I snag his upper arm. We’re facing opposite directions. I’m looking toward the woods while he stares out across the parking lot.

“Remember what I said at the art gallery that night? When you did your twin magic, and switched places with Aspen?” He stiffens up beside me and then softens, just a little. “Just outside the bathroom, I said to you that we could’ve had something, and that you were ruining it. You’re doing that same thing right now. You were running then; you’re running now.”

He yanks his arm from my grip, and I whirl back around to see him storming away.

“What does this change? As far as us working together?” I ask, and he throws a cruel, cruel look back at me. But in it, in the narrowed slits of his eyes, I see it: that glimmer.

Obsession.

He’ll be back. Probably by tomorrow. Saturday, at the very least.

Ash ignores me, pausing briefly in the parking lot to stare at Bohnes first, Widow next. He even spares a small glance for Alexei, freezes, and then shakes his head like he’s clearing out a strange thought.

As I rejoin the group, he’s climbing in his car and taking off.

Figures.

I make a faux pout.

“Aww, life is so hard for a rich boy.” Bohnes chuckles at my joke, handing over the whiskey bottle and intentionally entangling his fingers with mine. His touch is magical, a dark spell that travels up my limbs and into my heart.

He’s poisoning me with just his touch, that pretty little toxin. Skull and crossbones is right. He was labeled by the universe correctly.

The world swings back into rapid motion as I lift the drink to my lips and perch on the hood of his car. He likes that, watching the way my black skirt rides up my pale thighs. Bet he’s also imagining how that high slit in the back is riding up, putting my silky wet panties on his Chevelle.

“Did you just dump a fuckboy?” Nisha asks, playing with one of her hoop earrings and offering up a rare smile of approval at me. “Because if so, right on.”

“She didn’t dump him,” Bastian infers, sighing and leaning his shoulder up against the window of Nisha’s Lotus. He’s checking guys out, too, but he’s as bad with men as Lemon or me, just a bit more cautious because he knows his weaknesses. “He got jealous and stormed off; he’ll be back.” Bastian looks

me up and down as I cross my legs at the knee and lean back on Bohnes' hood. "Oh yeah, he'll be back for sure."

"And you'd know that how?" Widow gripes, looking particularly uncomfortable in such a large and vibrant scene. I mean, we've kind of got our own space going on over here, but he's a loner, through and through.

"How many damn times do I need to repeat myself: *Bastian is gay*. Gay men only like dick. I do not possess such a thing. Calm your tits, Widow." I snort at him and take another swig of the alcohol before handing it back to Bohnes.

Alexei is as silent as the dead, but at the very least, he hasn't put his mask back on, and he's only changed his gloves three times so far since he arrived at the diner. The safe house he's staying in sounds pretty dismal; I feel so damn bad for the guy.

Plus, if Widow is a loner, Alexei is like ... a hermit or something.

"But if I'd wanted to sleep with her," Bastian begins, and I roll my eyes. Here he goes, starting drama for drama's sake. "I could have. Isn't that right, Scar?"

"That's right, Basti," I agree with a snort, staring down at the label on the whiskey bottle. Widow bristles at my comment, but Bohnes just chuckles.

"Let's get out of here, Scarlett, so I can give you your real birthday present," he purrs this last bit, and then turns a terrifying look on Widow. "You don't mind if I take her, do you, virgin?"

"He might not mind, but I do," Nisha declares, moving over to stand beside me. "Your grandma's on her way home from work. Plus, you're drunk and stoned, and I'm not leaving you here when you're clearly wallowing over God only knows what."

She grabs my hand and pulls me from the hood, hooking her arm around my waist.

Nisha guides me past Alexei who steps aside but very quietly says, "happy birthday, Scarlett Force," making me smile.

“Girl ...” Nisha sighs. “Not him, too? You don’t need any more participants in this cutthroat competition.”

“If I were in the running, there wouldn’t *be* a competition.” I swear to *fuck* I hear Alexei say that, but when I look back, he’s staring up at the stars with this mask of pure pain on his face.

He didn’t just lose his father, he lost his whole life in a single night.

Starting over is never easy, especially in an environment as unforgiving as Prescott.

“In you go,” Nisha says, gently pushing me into the front seat of her Lotus. “We’ll pick your car up in the morning, okay?”

“Works for me.” I lean my head back against the seat and close my eyes as Nisha turns up the radio and we listen to the hardcore line-up of songs on Wolfman’s playlist.

In my mind, I replay the conversation between me and Ash over and over again.

What an asshole.

Whatever. Screw him. He’s a mistake anyway.

I know all that. I know I’m being logical. So why does my chest hurt when I think about him?

Lemon thought Aspen was going to marry her and lift her from a life of poverty and struggle; I can’t let Ash feed me the same lies and bullshit. That’s not why I like him anyway; I like him *in spite* of being the mayor’s son, in spite of having money.

Because money, above all other things, is true poison.

Nisha drives me straight home and drops me off, leaving me just enough time to stumble in the door and remove my heels before my grandmother comes in. She sees me sitting on the couch in front of a boxed cake, a few small presents, and a couple of cards.

“Your aunt went out of her way to get that cake for you,” Patricia says, hanging up her purse and coming around the

sofa to sit beside me. I wonder if she can see how loopy I am right now, if she's ashamed of me.

She has no power over me, but I respect her, and I care what she thinks.

I don't want her to see me half-drunk and half-stoned and thinking about Lemon's death on repeat.

"Nobody was here when I came home from school," I remark, which is only partially true. Alexis was sleeping in her bedroom with the door locked and everybody else was at work. I knew they had to work today; they're always working. Even my seventy-year-old grandmother.

"You don't have to explain yourself, Scarlett. When I turned eighteen, I went out with my friends, too. The important thing is if you had a good time?"

I lay down on the couch and put my head in her lap. She puts a wrinkled, brown hand on my forehead as I close my eyes. Ugh. Between the greasy food, the alcohol, and the pot, I am wrecked.

"It was okay," I respond with a certain level of abject resignation. Burning down the condo was fun. Hanging out at the diner was fun. Being praised and worshipped by my girls is always nice. But ... "Lemon wasn't there. For the first time since preschool, she wasn't a part of my birthday."

My grandmother sighs and pets my hair a bit as I lie there like a teenage girl instead of a fallen queen.

"I was praying that the two of you would make up before tonight; I miss seeing that girl around here. But don't worry, she'll come back eventually. They always do."

I wish.

Instead, it's so much worse than all that: I know *exactly* where she is.

Six feet under.

Deeper, actually.

“You know what happens to Prescott girls who chase rainbows,” I say, and my grandmother sighs. She does; she knows. We all do. “She’ll probably end up dead.”

*Not probably—already is.*

The words seem so final, like a punch to the gut. I berate myself for getting so lost in the grief, but ... it’s only been a week. Not even. It’s Thursday; she died late Saturday night.

I sit up then, shoving the emotions aside, and flipping open the lid on the cake.

It’s a fancy one alright, chocolate from the frosting to the filling to the cake itself. The icing says, *Girl, Congrats on Being Grown*. I smile at that, moving into the kitchen to grab two glasses of milk and two forks.

My grandmother turns on the TV—her favorite news station—and I sit down beside her, offering up the cup and fork.

“Plates would be nice, Scarlett,” she chastises gently, but I just fold down the white cardboard walls of the cake box, and we both dig in. “Oh, wow, look at that.”

I glance up to see footage of South Prescott Gardens, the fifteen-story building lit up with flames from within. As we both watch, a piece of the new sign falls off and crashes to the pavement below.

I hide a smile with a bite of cake.

We sit there together for another hour, eating cake, drinking milk, and watching Mayor Kelly’s pretty housing project *burn*.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from light grey at the top to black at the bottom. Overlaid on this background are several vertical and horizontal streaks and splatters of bright red, resembling blood. The text 'CHAPTER THIRTEEN' is centered in a white, serif font. The word 'CHAPTER' is on the top line, and 'THIRTEEN' is on the bottom line. The red splatters are most prominent behind the letters of 'CHAPTER' and 'THIRTEEN', creating a sense of violence or horror.

CHAPTER  
THIRTEEN

## *Scarlett*

“If you’re not going to therapy, then I am *done* supporting your ass!” My mother is screaming at Alexis, and it’s not even eight in the morning. I am officially *wrecked* today, and the sounds of another argument between my mom and sister is the last thing I need.

I flop down on the couch in a t-shirt and panties. Nobody cares. We’re all female, all related.

“Are you going to school today?” Geneva aka Mom demands to know, standing behind the sofa and barking at me, too, despite my complete lack of involvement in the whole deal.

“Um, yes? Why?” I rub at my face. It’s Halloween, but costumes have long since been banned at Prescott. What a shame. I remember dressing up in elementary school, but by junior high, even that simple pleasure had been stripped from us. Because, weapons. Because, school shooters. Is it any wonder that nearly everyone at Prescott is involved in cars, crime, or suicidal despondency? “What do you want?”

“Can you pick your sister up after school and take her to whatever party you’re going to? I can’t deal with this tonight; I’m working a double.” Geneva heads outside and slams the door behind her, making the pictures on the walls shake.

I just squint at the TV, nursing a migraine.

*“It was around eight-thirty last night when local resident, Karen Greenburg, noticed smoke drifting down the street outside of her apartment building.*

*“I just went running and there it was, the whole \*bleep\* thing was on fire.”*

The camera cuts from the woman’s interview and over to Mayor Kelly, smiling and waving as reporters—journalists?—mill around him, shouting questions. By his side, there’s Ash, all dressed up in Aspen’s finest, frowning and looking every bit the rich politician’s son.



*“Mayor Kelly has declined to offer up a statement, but local housing experts agree: even without the fire at South Prescott Gardens, the city is in the midst of a housing crisis.*

*“Local homeless advocate and the chairwoman of the nonprofit Housing Dignity for Lane County, Valeria Navarro, has a message for Mayor Kelly and his associates.*

*“We have people living, you know, on the streets, out of their cars, and even in hotel rooms. These are—many of them—they’re regular people. We have one client, a nurse, living in her sister’s garage. We have a vet tech staying in a trailer at a campground with no shower.*

*“If the mayor wants to be governor of this state, he needs to sort out Springfield first. South Prescott Gardens wasn’t a solution; it was a cover-up. Rent prices there were already too high for most local residents to afford. We need to start thinking up solutions that benefit regular citizens instead of out-of-state developers with deep pockets.”*

Blergh.

Enough of that. I stand up and head into the kitchen to find Alexis and my aunt, Anita, eating eggs and bacon together.

“Can you, Scar?” Anita asks, looking up at me. “Watch Alexis tonight, I mean? I’ve got a date for the first time since—” She doesn’t have to say, *since my kids were killed by a drunk driver*, but the implication is there.

“I don’t need to be watched,” Alexis snaps at her, pushing her glasses up her nose. “I’m a grown-ass woman; I’m three and a half years older than Scarlett and she does whatever the hell she wants.” She turns her face to glare at me, and I sigh.

“I’m going to kind of a crazy party.” I don’t tell Anita that the party’s being held in some old moonshiner tunnels outside the city. The county is working on building a visitors’ center and offering tours, but for now, it still belongs to us. May as well take advantage of it while we can. “Honestly, it probably would be better for her to stay home. Gram will be back around like nine. She’d only be by herself for a few hours.”

I have plans tonight. Plans that involve Police Chief Bolin's youngest son.

Because, even while I've been struggling with Lemon's passing, I asked my girl Shirley to get in touch with her cousin, Stacey Langford. That's what last night's note was about.

See, Stacey attends the local middle school with a girl who does volunteer work with this chick from Fuller High. And *that* chick is tutoring an Oak Valley Prep student by the name of ... ding, ding, ding—Bryson Bolin.

See, I told Shirley who told Stacey who told her friend who then told *her* Fuller friend who told her moronic rich boy pupil, Bryson, about Bohnes' Halloween party. Because, of course, every person under the age of twenty-one and within fifty miles of Springfield wants to attend it.

Our trap is officially set which is exactly why I can't take Alexis with me.

I can't commit a federal offense (or two) with my sister in tow.

"She cannot stay home alone on Halloween," Grandma Patricia declares, appearing in the doorway and making Alexis sulk. She'll get attitude with my mom, my aunt, even me, but not with our grandmother. And nobody knows better than Patricia how nuts it can get around here on Halloween. "Scarlett, you partied last night. Either take your sister with you or stay home. I'd prefer it if you did anyway. Halloween night in Prescott can be very unforgiving."

*Fuuuuuuuuuck.*

I slap a hand over my face.

"I'll stop by after school and figure it out."

I book it up to my room, shut the door, and then go still.

*There's somebody in here.*

I very carefully open my door, padding quietly down the stairs, and slipping into my grandmother's room. I 'borrow'

her Glock and book it back to my room, locking the door behind me.

Tapping the butt of the gun against my palm, I squat down and peer under the bed to find a monster looking back at me.

“If I were a jumpier person, I might’ve shot you.”

“Boo.” Bohnes smiles at me and slides out from underneath my bed, just a dark specter living in the shadows. “What else was I supposed to do?” he queries, looking around the room like he’s trying to take in all the details. Seeing as he’s never been here before—err, never been here before *to my knowledge*—he’s all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed about it.

“Supposed to do? Knock on the door, for starters.” I stand up when he does, setting the gun aside. I sort of figured it was him. Otherwise, I would’ve handled things differently, but it never hurts to be cautious.

I stand up, and he rises with me, rises over me more like Towers. Menaces. Whatever you want to call it.

I just stare up at him and cock an eyebrow.

“Why are you here?” I wonder aloud, moving past him and over to the radio on my bedside table. I turn it on—you know the station—just for a little added privacy. My grandmother would shit herself if she walked by and heard Bohnes’ voice, like dark chocolate and murder.

“To take you to get your car,” he offers up, as if that’s a totally reasonable excuse for sneaking into my room and hiding under the bed. His eyes drop down to my panties, just a plain pair of white ones that cling to my hips. His gaze gets trapped there for a minute before he drags it back to my face.

“How did you get in here?” I ask, moving over to my window and checking the locks there. I’ve got everything: a metal pole jammed into the track, a chain lock that’s screwed to the wall, and security film over the glass itself.

I turn around to find Bohnes with his hands tucked into the pockets of his long, black coat. He’s wearing a trench today, that and boots with buckles, tight black pants, and a loose tank that says *WEAR BLACK, EAT PIZZA*. The design is that of an

upside-down pentagram with demon eyes in the center; each point of the star is decorated like a slice of pizza.

“Your mother left the front door unlocked,” he says, and I sigh.

I should’ve checked it after she left; she always forgets to lock it.

“You literally just walked into my house and strolled right up the stairs?” I ask, and he shrugs his big shoulders, sitting down on the edge of my bed. It’s surreal as fuck to see Kellin Bohnes in my room. To see any guy in my house whatsoever, really. First dude (except Basti, duh) that’s ever been in my bedroom. “That doesn’t bode well for our security.”

“I’m better than most,” is what he offers up in response, turning to look at me with eyes like chips of ice. There’s a little bit of blue there, but just a kiss of it. *Just a kiss.*

“That Alexei boy is outside,” Bohnes informs me, moving over to my closet and rifling through my things. He just takes over the space with his presence, invades it, dominates it. “He didn’t like the idea of coming in without permission.”

“I said I needed to have a chat with him today, not greet the damn sunrise with the boy. Why did you bring him over here so early?” I snort as Bohnes pulls out a dress, a slinky red one with the tags still on it. More often than not, I keep the clothes I win. I have to put up a good front to maintain control of the school and dressing the part works wonders. Everyone knows I’m poor as hell, just like the rest of ‘em, so it proves two things: one, I’m a good thief; two, I’m a good driver.

“Oh, I like this,” he murmurs, studying the dress and then putting it back. “I assume you’re dressing up tonight?” He continues his search of my closet, and I move up behind him. He doesn’t tense up or seem concerned whatsoever.

I decide to test him by sliding my arms around him from behind, and he shudders, releasing a sigh of pure, perverse pleasure.

“Did you think I was Widow?” he murmurs. “Ash Kelly? Alexei Grove? I *like* to be touched by you, Scarlett Force.”

I've never hugged a guy like this before (Basti doesn't count!). It feels surprisingly good, especially with Bohnes' burnt sugar and juniper scent wafting around me. I rub my cheek against his back, and he leans forward, putting his palms on either side of the open closet to brace himself.

"I feel like you don't get hugged enough—or at all," I murmur, because that can seriously fuck up a person's psyche, right? Like, not getting enough hugs turns people into ... well, it turns them into people like Kellin Bohnes.

"I can't remember the last time anyone hugged me," he admits, putting one hand over my entwined fingers. He presses my palms against him, and I can feel the rapid thump of his heart. He likes this—a lot. "Maybe I was ... around ten or so?"

"Ten?!" I choke out, and I squeeze him just a little bit harder. "How? Why?"

Bohnes carefully untangles my fingers with his cool, calloused ones, turning around so that we're front to front and he's looking down at me with a slightly warmer than usual smile.

I melt a little bit of that ice in him.

That makes me feel guilty as hell. Like, he's so good to me. He really is. But I can't let him consume me—because, make no mistake, he will. He'll eat me alive and put me on a leash; he's just that powerful. I have to make sure it's the other way around.

"My parents let me off on Main Street and drove away," he admits, shrugging his big shoulders. "That's the last time I was hugged, just before that; I think my mom felt guilty about it."

"They ... what?" I query, blinking at him in surprise. "Your parents dumped you on the side of the road?"

He shrugs again.

"Not my real parents anyway. I was adopted when I was three. We were on a road trip, and they got in an argument; I remember them agreeing to a divorce. Then they both looked back at me, and that was it. They said goodbye and dropped me off." His smile hardens over with a fresh sheet of ice, and

he reaches out, ruffling my hair. “Do you feel pity for me, Scarlett Force? Do you want to take care of me now?”

I snort and push away from him.

There are some harsh backstories in Prescott High, I’ll give you that. But this one is particularly cold. Better than some, though. Definitely better than some ...

“Nisha’s taking me to get my car,” I tell him, glancing at the time and cursing. Tardiness is the name of the game today but, hah, I’m eighteen now. Best threat they’ve got is to kick me out of Prescott High which isn’t much of a threat at all, is it? *Screw you, Officer Tidwell.* God, I hate that bitch.

“Check your phone.” That’s it, just that declarative statement from Bohnes.

With a sigh, I do as he asks and see that I missed several texts from Nisha already.

*takin mom 2 an appt, message Basti when ur rdy.*

*and dont lie, you hungover AF and late as shit today.*

Damn, she knows me too well.

I look back up at Bohnes.

“Should I ask how you know about a private text between my phone and Nisha’s?” And here, he just smiles at me, big and wide, but luckily with no teeth. It’s much scarier when he shows his teeth. Sexier, too. “Never mind. I don’t care. I don’t want to know. Give me fifteen minutes.”

Really, it only takes me that long to get ready. I don’t wear makeup except for a dash of blush. I get my brows done, lash extensions every two weeks, and that’s that.

There’s a sound just outside my door, and I lift a single finger to my lips as Bohnes leans in the corner with his hands tucked in his trench coat pockets.

I open it to see Alexis on her knees, trying to pick the lock.

“What do you want?” I ask, and she shoves up to her feet, trying to strongarm me out of the way. I push her back into the

hallway, step out, and close my door behind me. “Alexis, for real?”

“He’s in there, isn’t he? Kellin Bohnes.” She tries to peer around me, as if she can see through the flimsy hollow-core door. I maintain my position, arms crossed, face in a sharp frown.

“So what if he is? What do you care?”

“You said he wasn’t your boyfriend, but he’s here now.” She juts her chin in pure defiance. “You’re either lying to me or you’re up to something. I’m still your big sister, you know.”

I rub at my forehead and let out a long, tired sigh.

Having Alexis around tonight is seriously going to cramp my style—and my kidnapping plot. Did I mention that was my plan for Bryson Bolin? We’ll just ... borrow him for a little while, get some answers, use him as collateral. Whatever need be. I’ll have to get some of my girls to watch my sister and keep her away from the action; they’re going to be pissed about it, too.

“Alexis, go find something to wear tonight; you take forever to get ready.” I turn to leave, and she grabs onto my shoulder, fingers digging hard into my skin, bruising me.

“Grandma and Anita left, and someone’s knocking at the door.”

With a sigh, I push her hand off and open my bedroom door. When Alexis charges it, I let her in. She skids to a stop, staring at Bohnes with wide eyes.

“Oh. He really is here.”

“He’s here,” Bohnes agrees, smiling at her. “Your baby sister’s savior and soulmate.”

“Go fuck yourself,” is my response as I yank on a pair of pants and head down the stairs to the front door. It’s locked now—because my aunt and grandma aren’t near as dumb as my mother.

I check out the peephole to see Alexei standing there, hands folded together behind him.

Not who I expected to see.

I was expecting trouble, to be quite honest. Or ... maybe he is in trouble in disguise, right?

I open the door, and he blinks big, green eyes at me, surveying my bra-less t-shirt that clings to the full mounds of my breasts, my low-slung sweatpants, my disheveled hair. He shakes his head slightly, as if to clear it.

“Good morning, Miss Force,” he says, as if he’s at a job interview or something. I reach out to fix a button that’s about to come undone on the lower half of his shirt, and his gloved hand snaps around my wrist. “Six inches.”

“You and this six-inch thing. Are you absolutely positive that isn’t the length of your dick?”

Alexei’s face takes on an arrogant cast as he withdraws his hand, snaps off his glove, and replaces it with one from his pocket.

“Scarlett, the length of my cock is on a strictly need to know basis.” He raises a haughty brow and presents this cavalier attitude that simultaneously excites and annoys me. Why is it that *asshole* is such an endearing quality? “Apparently, you have quite the collection of men in your life. You certainly don’t need another.”

“Oh, Alexei Grove, you are so damn cute.” I reach out again, intending on pinching his cheek and he snatches my wrist again. This time, he doesn’t let go quite so swiftly, and I reach out with my other hand for that button. “Where on earth did *need* get factored into this equation? It’s all about *want*.” Instead of fixing the button, I pop it open. He watches me, his grip on my left wrist tightening until it’s *just* this side of painful. With our gazes locked, I slide a single finger between the lines of his white dress shirt and stroke it down the valley of his abs.

*Holy shit.*

Heat patters my skin, like droplets from a shower, scalding and comforting all at once.



Alexei releases my wrist and then slaps my other hand away, fixing the button on his shirt without another word. We continue to stare at one another until I hear my neighbors, Tommy Tits and Megan Face, gearing up for a verbal (and likely physical) brawl on their side of the driveway.

“Come on in,” I say, stepping aside and gesturing Alexei into our house. He licks the nervousness from his lips and complies, his eyes landing on the scuffed wood floors, the old sagging couch, but he seems satisfied enough with the level of cleanliness—thanks to my grandmother—to at least come inside. “I didn’t know Bohnes was bringing you over this morning or else I’d have at least gotten dressed.”

“Take your time. It’s not as if I have anywhere else to go.” He sighs heavily and moves into the room, offering up his ‘dirty’ gloves. “Is there a place I can dispose of these?”

I reach out and snap them from his hand, and he shivers slightly.

“I’d offer you coffee or something, but you wouldn’t drink it, now would ya?” He shrugs a single shoulder in response.

“It couldn’t possibly be worse than what Bohnes’ offers me.” Alexei sighs again and rubs at his forehead. “He rarely washes his coffeepot. He just dumps it and rinses it.” Alexei makes a gagging sound and covers his mouth with a gloved hand.

“So ... yes on the coffee?” I offer up. “My grandmother washes the pot every day, I promise.”

Alexei pauses for a brief moment and then nods which, you know, surprises the fuck out of me. Huh. Is this progress? Or is this ...

Alexei’s gaze sweeps over me, pausing on the dark, pointed spots of my nipples through the t-shirt, and then he lifts his eyes to mine. He doesn’t even try to hide the fact that he was checking me out.

*No, this isn’t progress—this is flirtation.*

He’s flirting with me, and it’s all old-school, and half-chivalrous, half-dirty. Slow as a snail, but basically warp speed

to someone like him.

What do I do with this?

I lick my lips, and his eyes follow the movement. What doesn't follow, however, is disgust.

He likes what he sees.

Casually, I stretch my arms above my head, high enough that the too-small t-shirt lifts up and flashes just *this* much under-boob. Alexei turns his head away sharply and closes his eyes. Too much? I decide to retreat on this battlefield for the time being, heading into the kitchen to start a fresh pot of coffee as Bohnes clomps his way down the stairs, his boots overly loud. He swings around the newel post, black trench coat fluttering prettily. He looks like a bat with big, dark wings.

"If you're making coffee, I'll take some, too." He grabs a seat on the sofa as Alexei lays out one of his signature plastic bags and perches on the edge of a chair. Alexis comes down shortly after and sits in my grandma's usual spot, staring at the two boys.

"Hi," she breathes, because she's weird like that.

"Hello," Alexei replies easily enough, looking awkward and weird as shit in my living room. "You must be Alexis, Scarlett's sister."

"We had a brother, too, but he's dead," she offers, and I cringe, rubbing at my forehead.

"Girl, you don't have to tell everybody that, you know?" I remind her, but she ignores me.

"A drunk driver hit our van and killed him. Our cousins, too. And then Scarlett murdered him—" I reach around her and slap a hand over her mouth. Until this very moment, I assumed she wasn't aware of that. Like, how?

"Shut your fucking mouth," I grind out as she smacks at me. She might have her issues, but she's still my sister, and we fight like siblings sometimes. "You do not need to tell everyone you meet every little thing."

“And you need to be less controlling. I’m a grown-ass woman, too.” Alexis adjusts herself in the seat as Bohnes snorts and Alexei maintains an imperious, princely sort of a look.

“I didn’t kill the guy; his family disappeared over the controversy involving the accident,” I explain, even though Bohnes knows more about that than anyone else. Alexei doesn’t need to know.

“That’s a lie,” Alexis says with a shake of her head, and I resist the urge to slap her. This is exactly why bringing her to the party is a mistake; she has a big mouth. She doesn’t even know anything about that incident. She’s just guessing, and she’s this bad. How much worse would it be if she actually knew?

“If someone hurt my family,” Alexei explains easily enough. “I’d also kill them.”

That brightens Alexis up; she sits up straight.

“See? He’s good people,” she tells me, and I sigh.

“Round of coffee for everyone?” I ask, and then I head into the kitchen to pour four mugs. I set it all on my grandma’s wooden tray, cream and sugar, too. I carry the tray into the living room and set it on the coffee table like a proper hostess or something.

Bohnes takes his black and sips it while it’s still scalding. Alexei picks his mug up, too, but the way he’s looking down at it, I doubt he’ll actually drink any.

As I said, this is about flirtation.

He lifts his eyes up to mine before sliding that sage green gaze back to my sister.

“Take your coffee and go upstairs for a minute; I have business to discuss.” She ignores me, her gaze on Alexei. There’s a shimmer there that I well-recognize. I put my hand on the back of the chair and lean down to put my lips near her ear. “He’s mine. Upstairs now or I really will leave you here tonight and you can get into trouble all by yourself.”

“God,” she snaps, shoving up to her feet and sloshing coffee everywhere. “I’m on my period, and I’m in a *bad* mood. Are you on yours, too? Because you’re an even bigger bitch than usual today.”

“*Now.*” The word is an impossible command. If she ignores me this time, we’ll go to blows like we’re kids all over again. “Get out.”

“Alexei and I have basically the same name. Don’t you think there’s something to that?” she throws over her shoulder as she saunters away, pounding up the stairs and spilling yet more coffee on her way.

I pause there, listening until I hear both her door and the distant buzz of the radio.

“Christ.” I take her abandoned seat and pick up my own mug, offering Alexei a semi-apologetic look. “She has a crush on you, I think. Sorry about that.”

He offers up the barest hint of a smile, tapping his gloved fingers on the sides of the mug. If he drinks any of his coffee, I’ll be shocked.

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve ever caught the interest of a woman.” And then, miraculously, with his eyes affixed to mine, Alexei lifts up the mug and takes a sip out of it. Does he shudder in disgust and seem to have trouble swallowing? Sure. But ... but it’s something.

“Aw, don’t you two paint a pretty picture.” Bohnes sounds like he’s about to shoot somebody, so I push the conversation along. The way his pale eyes fixate on Alexei makes me nervous.

Damn these boys to hell and back. Why do they have to keep eyeing one another like they’re plotting murder?

“I’ve got something for you.” I kick my feet up on the coffee table, and Alexei’s eyes drop to my bare toes. This time, it’s not flirtation that passes over his features; it’s pure horror. Oh well. Can’t win ‘em all. Bohnes, on the other hand, studies my toes like he’d enjoy biting them off. “Chief Bolin’s son—Bryson—is coming to the party tonight.”

That does it.

Alexei goes still, coffee still cupped in his gloved hands, and turns his gaze to one side.

“What are you planning on doing with him?” he queries politely, and Bohnes laughs, gnashing his teeth as he leans in close to the Russian mobster prince sitting in my ratchet-ass living room.

“Whatever you want—you’re the client here.” Bohnes sits back and puts his coffee on the side table, crossing his arms over his demon-pizza shirt. “You want to torture and interrogate him? Done. Kill him and bury him? Sure. Ransom him against the chief? Fine with me.”

“I’ll get him wrapped up all pretty for you and stuffed in the trunk,” I offer, taking another sip of my coffee. “After that, it’s your call.”

Alexei looks first at me, and then over at Bohnes.

“Take him to the safe house,” he instructs, and Bohnes shrugs one shoulder in what I assume is agreement. “I’ll decide what to do with him then.”

“Done.” I stare into my mug and wonder if I can’t use the chief’s son against the mayor as well. What information could we get out of this kid, if anything? At the very least, we should be able to use him to trap his father.

One way or another, I’ll figure out why Lemon was slated for execution, what her purpose was in all of this. I’m counting on Ash to help fill in all the blanks. That is, if he can get his man-panties out of a twist and chill out a little.

The conversation pretty much dies there, and I excuse myself upstairs to change.

When I come back down, both boys’ eyes go to me, raking over my black corset top and the high-waisted, black-and-orange cigarette pants that go with it. Each little orange polka dot is actually a skull and crossbones, if you look closely enough.

Paired with orange heels and a jack-o'-lantern necklace, it's Halloween-y enough.

Tonight, I'll wear my costume to the party.

I glance down to see that Alexei's consumed the entirety of his coffee.

"You actually drank that?" I ask, blinking at him in surprise, and he nods. He shivers, too, like he can't quite believe it himself.

"I drank it," he admits, his eyes locked on mine. He taps his gloved fingers against the mug again before setting it back on the wooden tray.

Well, hot damn.

*Flirtation is right. And why is it so hot when nothing's really happening? Like, oh sir, please drink that coffee, drink it real good while I touch myself.* Puh-lease.

"Stay here and don't cause any trouble," I call out when I hear Alexis emerging from her room. She's rarely left alone, and even then, only during the day.

She comes to the top of the stairs just to flip me off, playing with her phone as I leave the house with my fuckboy-cum-boyfriend and my ... employer.

Bohnes opens the passenger door for me, and I slide across the bench seat. Alexei climbs into the back on the driver's side and off we go.

"So, are you two making friends with each other?" I ask, trying to stir up conversation before things get awkward.

"I wouldn't go that far," Alexei offers up. "We don't have much in common."

"No? Violence, cars, and pretty little me aren't enough?" I query. It's sort of a joke but also not. Alexei looks up at the rearview and catches my eyes, studying me carefully before pulling his gaze away.

Bohnes just laughs.

“We get along well enough. He’s certainly a better rich boy than Ash Kelly.”

Mm.

Ash Kelly.

My chest throbs, and I sigh. Did he really ... dump me or whatever you want to call it last night? On my *birthday*? What a scumbag. Good riddance.

Only, I hate lying to myself, so I just admit that I’m upset and push past it.

Bohnes drops me off at my car, and I relieve the last remaining girls from their duty.

“I’m not coming to school today. Go play with Widow in the library.” Bohnes scowls and then winks at me as I put my hand on the roof of the Chevelle and lean in toward him. He captures my mouth before I get a chance to snatch his, shoving his tongue down my throat while my girls titter at the edge of the parking lot, and Alexei makes this appalled choking sound.

As we pull away from one another, there’s this sensation of stretching, of pulling, like maybe I’m more attached to Kellin than I thought I was?

*Sick.*

He takes off, and I climb into the Pantera, pulling up in front of the school at the same moment as Widow. I swear, that little shit-face was going to park in my space. He scoots up a bit as I pull in behind him, kissing his bumper until he finds his proper place.

“You son of a bitch,” I growl when I climb out, but instead of scowling at me, he almost smiles a little.

“I read a reverse harem book last night,” is what he says to me in greeting. “Two of them, actually. Is that what you really think you’re getting out of us?”

“I guess we’ll see,” I offer up, lifting my brows at him and heading up the front steps. Girls swarm over to me as they always do, and I enter the hallway with an entourage. Widow

doesn't let me get far, catching up to me and grabbing my elbow in such a way that several of the girls gasp.

"Quick question," I start, before he gets a chance to say anything else. I go to yank my arm from his grip, but he holds on tight, meeting my gaze with a defiance that cuts straight through me. "Are your balls the color of a summer sky?" I query, and he pauses. "Navy blue? Cerulean? Oh, royal blue? Cornflower?"

"The fuck are you talking about?" he asks, blinking at me. It occurs to him a few seconds later. "Blue balls." He snorts and shakes his head, releasing me and taking a step back. Widow shifts his gaze away, like he isn't sure what to make of all this. "If you're asking if I've been thinking about you, Scarlett Force, the answer is yes."

"What sorts of thoughts?" I inquire as innocently as I can, and he gives me what one might consider to be a warning look.

"Nightmares." Widow turns and stalks off, as he usually does, leaving me panting and leaning my head back against one of the lockers. I close my eyes and breathe through the rush of hormones that single word conjures up.

He stays away from me for the rest of the day, but that's okay. Because we're meeting up at the party tonight. Because we have plans. And I don't just mean kidnapping Bryson Bolin.

That's just a fraction of a sliver of the night.

It *is* Halloween after all, isn't it?



The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from light grey at the top to black at the bottom. Overlaid on this background are several vertical and horizontal streaks and splatters of bright red, resembling blood. The text 'CHAPTER FOURTEEN' is centered in a white, serif font. The word 'CHAPTER' is on the top line, and 'FOURTEEN' is on the bottom line. The red splatters are most prominent behind the letters of 'CHAPTER' and 'FOURTEEN', creating a sense of violence or horror.

CHAPTER  
FOURTEEN

## *~~Ash~~ Aspen Kelly*

In the past, I've taken on Aspen's skin more times than I dare count. Like a selkie, I slipped his flesh over my head and became him, really and truly, for small, short bursts.

Living as him full-time is poisoning me.

I can feel it. Every day hurts a little worse. Every day I grow more wicked.

*“Remember what I said at the art gallery that night? When you did your twin magic, and switched places with Aspen? Just outside the bathroom, I said to you that we could've had something, and that you were ruining it. You're doing that same thing right now. You were running then; you're running now.”*

Scarlett's words play in my head all night and into the next day.

I offered what I thought was the world but, in retrospect, may as well have been a cage.

I'm quite certain that Aspen offered Lemon the very same poison to draw her in.

Look where that led them both—into early graves.

“Did you hear me?” my father asks, rousing me from my introversion. I need to be careful with that. I was always prone to deep thoughts and glazed eyes. Aspen, at best, was bored and apathetic, never deep. I need to remember that.

“I heard you,” I repeat, standing up from my chair across from Chief Bolin. At this point, I've shown ‘Ash's’ suicide note to my father, and he, in turn, has given the case over to his favorite civil servant. Now all we need do is work on our press release. “We need to spin this, so that it comes across as a tragedy for us, instead of a failure.”

I look over at my father's publicist, a woman named Trish Edelman. She's already nodding in response.

“Let’s get Aspen in front of the camera to read a statement; it’ll be more powerful coming from him, especially if we have a photo of Ash beside him. People love identical twins.” She shuffles her papers as I hold back this fresh wave of hot, raw rage. I knew what I’d be seeing when I came up with this plan, the sheer indifference toward my own emotional pain and death.

But it’s harder to handle than I thought.

“Mental health discussions are big right now,” I continue, maintaining a moue of boredom. Who cares if my identical twin might be dead? Who cares where his body is? My only pain should be coming from the fact that I didn’t get to kill him myself. That’s what Aspen would think. I knew him as well as I know myself. “If I focus on that and top off my speech with a donation to some nonprofit, we can have the public feeling sorry for us, rather than blaming us, for Ash’s lunacy.”

I turn and head for the door as my father calls out to me.

“Don’t get yourself into trouble tonight, Aspen. The last thing we need is some stray footage of you beating up another hooker.” I lift up a hand to acknowledge his words and slip out the door of his office into the hall.

For a moment, I just stand there with my back to the door, taking in long, slow breaths.

*“If you don’t stop fucking other people, I’ll kill them.”*

Why did I say that last night? Why did I *mean* it?

I open my eyes again and push off from the door, heading down the small hallway to the larger one that connects the various wings of the house.

I know why I said it: jealousy.

I want to possess Scarlett Force in a way that scares me, a way that proves to me beyond a shadow of a doubt that I’m not as different from my brother as I’d like to pretend.

There in the hallway, I almost make a mistake. I almost head into my room instead of Aspen’s. It’s painful, at times, to be in

his room, surrounded by his smell. He always favored a certain cologne—like black pepper and saffron—while I’ve always liked floral scents myself.

Opening the door to his room is like entering a tomb. It’s cold and dark; there’s a feeling of unease as I stand there and look around. The first night I stayed in here, I was too tired to change the sheets.

They smelled like that girl, Lemon.

That was hard, harder even than smelling my brother. I feel responsible for that girl’s death in more ways than one.

With a sigh, I approach Aspen’s closet, opening it wide and looking for something to wear. It’s Halloween, right? But I’ve been in costume every day this week. Fingering the sleek suit jackets, crisp dress shirts, and various pairs of slacks folded neatly in drawers, I feel lost, like I’m wandering a winding path with no discernible end.

Eventually, I leave his closet and bedroom untouched and, after carefully checking the hallway, I slip into my own room. Would anyone blame me? My twin could be dead; he left a suicide note, after all.

“You moron,” I whisper, lifting up a framed picture of myself and Aspen when we were just ten years old. That was the last year we went to school together, before my father started separating us, sending us to different schools, different *countries*.

Aspen used to mock me for keeping this photo.

*“Look at you, you softhearted maggot. I couldn’t care less whether you live or die, and you worship at the altar of my disdain.”*

I turn and throw the picture as hard as I can, letting it smash against the wall and rain small glass shards onto the floor. Then I rifle through my drawers until I find something to wear. It isn’t exactly a costume, but it may as well be considering.

On my way out of the house, I spot one of my father’s goons selecting a car from the garage. He chooses a plain, black

coupe, something any layperson might drive, and that's when I decide that I'm going to follow him.

Without Chet's Pontiac to borrow, I'm left to pick one of our family's cars.

The missing Fastback brings pangs to my heart, but I shove them aside, selecting a brand-new Lexus instead. It's a nice car, but not so special that it'll draw attention to me.

The goon is easy enough to catch up to, but he won't be easy to tail; he's too smart for that. After a couple of blocks, I let him go, unwilling to get myself into trouble for the sole purpose of seeing what he's up to.

No, it'd be much easier to get him at home, when he's seated at the breakfast table and sipping a cappuccino ...

Instead, I head to Prescott and wait for class to get out.

I don't follow Scarlett or any of her boys and crew. I pick someone at random instead, tailing them back to their house and then, an hour or so later, down the McKenzie Highway into the woods.

As expected, the student leads me to a grassy patch overflowing with cars. Based on the number of classic beauties, I make the educated guess that I've just stumbled into a very Prescott Halloween.

With my hood up, and a black-and-white bandanna as a mask, I slip into the crowd, music blasting wildly from the entrance of what appears to be ... a cave?

Only the finest for Prescott, of course.

I step inside and find myself in a fairly large tunnel, maybe eight by eight. The walls are hard-packed earth with wood beams equidistant down the length of it. It's overflowing with students in costume—Prescott kids, as well as students from the other two schools in town.

I'm checked right there at the door.

"Name and school?" one of the girls asks, peering up at me and then reaching for my mask. I snatch her hand and shove it away, pulling the mask down myself.

“Kelly Kitagawa, Oak Valley Prep.” That’s a bit of a lie. I’m nineteen; I’m too old for high school. But it’s a good enough lie that the girl lets me slide past. I enjoy it, anyway, using my mother’s last name. Eventually, I’d like to legally change my name and shed the Kelly blood forever.

Deeper into the tunnel, there’s drink aplenty, half-naked girls, and boys trying to show off to win their favor. Someone’s strung lights all down the tunnel, offering up light when there wouldn’t normally be any.

I glance up at the ceiling, wondering how safe it is in here, if the whole mountain might not collapse and kill us all.

Oh well.

It’s not worth worrying about; I’m not afraid of death.

I continue on, searching for Scarlett Force. She won’t be hard to find, surrounded as she usually is by an entourage.

The crowd thins a bit as I progress into the tunnel, but it doesn’t disappear; the turnout tonight is impressive.

“Hey,” a voice murmurs from a small side tunnel, drawing my attention over to Widow.

*One of Scarlett’s fuckboys.* I frown deeply, wondering if he recognizes me even with the mask, with my hood up like this.

“What do you want?” I ask, pausing and turning slightly toward him.

“I knew you’d come tonight,” he replies, smiling at me. It’s not a nice smile: it’s a warning. “Couldn’t stay away, could you?” He gestures with his chin down the slightly smaller, slightly darker tunnel to his right. “If you’re looking for Scarlett, Aspen Kelly, then you should come with me.”

He stands up and heads down the tunnel without waiting to see if I’m going to follow him or not. I hesitate briefly, wondering if he’s telling the truth or if he’s luring me out of the way for ... something.

Bright, familiar laughter drifts down the tunnel toward me, and my body responds like it’s been jolted with a car battery.  
*Scarlett.*

I roll my shoulders to loosen some of the tension in my muscles and move after Widow, finding him waiting around a bend, a lone figure in a slightly shadowed alcove. He turns and, without warning, throws a hard punch that catches me right in the face.

My body slams into the dirt wall, rocks and pebbles spilling down around me. I ready myself for a fight, but Widow just shakes out his hand, curling his lip as he looks me up and down. I want to ask how he knew it was me, but I'm already tasting blood; he hit me hard. It's not as if he's after conversation here.

Although I expect him to come after me, he doesn't. Instead, he stands there by a flickering jack-o'-lantern and watches me with slitted gold eyes. Reaching up, I drag my skeleton-maw bandanna down and swipe the blood from my lips.

"I understand her allure," Widow says, dropping his gaze to study his knuckles. He hit me hard enough that he's hurting, too. "Really, I do." He looks at me again and frowns. "But every time you seek her out, you bring trouble with you. Eventually you're going to get Scarlett—and probably yourself—killed." He pauses and makes his way over to me as I coil my muscles and prepare to fight back.

Looking at Widow, I wonder if I could win? He's a little wider than me, a bit more muscular.

Then again, have I ever played fair in my life? Not once. To quest for such highfalutin morals would've had me dead and buried at Aspen's discretion a long, long time ago.

"What if somebody finds out that you're the wrong Kelly boy? What then?"

I lick the blood from my lips, a metallic shimmer on my tongue.

"How did you know it was me?" I ask, and Widow smiles menacingly.

"First off, your clothes are bourgeois as fuck." He pauses and sighs, leaning down and pointing at his eyes with two

fingers. “And your eyes, they’re more like your brother’s than you think.”

He withdraws as I scowl at him, turning away to head down the tunnel before pausing once more to look back at me.

“Breaking up with Scarlett would be a favor to her. If you care about her more than yourself, you’ll leave.” Widow waits for a moment, reaching up to drag a monster mask over his face. I realize then that he’s supposed to be a wolfman or something. He’s shirtless, with torn jeans and gray boots. There’s fur strapped to his arms with leather straps, the cheap man’s version of a werewolf. He has chains around his neck, too, which are clearly *not* from any Halloween store in town. Oh no, those are real. “But let me guess: you’re not going to do that, now are you?”

He lets out a small, condescending laugh.

“I was careful when I came here; I know how to cover my tracks.”

“Sure you do, rich boy. Believe me: if I see you as a threat to Scarlett, I’ll bury you somewhere that even Bohnes can’t find you.” He turns and takes off down the tunnel.

After a moment—against my better judgement—I follow him.

There are yet more pumpkins along the length of the tunnel, all of them carved into grotesque faces. As I pass, I come across students carving more of the disturbing monstrosities and adding them to the display. There are hay bales here and there for people to sit on, tables laden with alcohol.

I hear Scarlett before I see her, singing along to the song that’s echoing from the speakers positioned near the ceiling. The lyrics are ... interesting. Something about fucking a tight pussy like a pumpkin, an orange Lamborghini, and being a ghost in the sheets.

When I come around the corner, I pause, spotting her atop a hay bale with a microphone in her hand. That’s when I realize that she’s doing some sort of karaoke thing.



I lean my shoulder against the wall to watch as she stands there in a pair of pinstriped pants, a white dress shirt, and suspenders. With the gray fedora on her head, a pair of two-tone Oxfords on her feet, and a fake—I think—Tommy gun slung over one arm, she looks like a twenties mobster.

I'm assuming that's the point.

Still, she's the most beautiful mobster I've ever seen, and her voice isn't half-bad.

She finishes the song and throws her arms up in triumph as her girls cheer and jostle around for attention. I truly despise that, the way they throw themselves at her. *And is it all that different from the way you're throwing yourself at her, Ash Kelly?*

*"Well, fellow campers, that was 'Halloweenie II: Pumpkin Spice' from Ashnikko. Up next, we're continuing the trend with 'Halloweenie III: Seven Days'. Enjoy and stay safe, Prescott."*

The next song starts up as Scarlett passes over the mic to one of her girlfriends, accepting her friend's—Bastian, was it?—offer of help to climb down. She spots me right away, like her eyes are magnetically drawn to me.

A frown creases her heavily painted lips, and she makes her way over to stand in front of me.

*"Ohayou, Kelly-kun,"* she sneers, and I smile slightly. Oh, she's been practicing her Japanese for me. Isn't that adorable? It is to me. If she asked me to run away with her right now, snatch a fake passport, and hop continents, I'd do it.

*"Konbanwa,"* I correct. "It's not morning. *Ohayou* is good morning."

"Mm," she muses, reaching up to adjust her hat. "Okay, yeah. How do you say *go fuck yourself, Kelly* in Japanese?"

I don't bother to translate that for her; I have a feeling she'd memorize it and use it against me regularly.

"Nice costume, by the way. What are you supposed to be? An ex-fuckboy?" she tilts her head at me and then reaches out, swiping some of the blood from my lower lip and,

surprisingly, bringing it to her tongue to taste. Her brows go up and she lifts her eyes to mine. “Real blood, Kelly? That’s a lot, even for someone like you.”

I don’t mention that Widow punched me or the things he said; he wasn’t wrong.

No, I hate it, but he’s right. He’s absolutely right and yet, I can’t seem to bring myself to leave. *Just one more night*, I tell myself, but that’s a lie. My heart, my cock, and my soul, we all know it.

“Hopefully not an ex,” I murmur, burying my pride where it belongs, right beneath my ego and my vanity. “I didn’t mean the things I said last night.” A pause. Shit. “Well, I meant them, but I won’t carry through with them; I won’t kill your other fuckboys. Pinky promise.” I lean in toward her, and she doesn’t pull away. She lets me get up close and personal with her pretty face.

After I stumbled on her with Aspen’s body, I’d hoped ... No, I’d actually *believed* that it was the start of something much more permanent than fuckboy this, fuckboy that. I’d taken it as a grand gesture of romance, especially with the way she reacted to my reappearance.

Thus far, Scarlett Force is the only person who was upset by the idea of Ash Kelly’s death.

The only person in the entire world.

Scarlett studies me carefully as her friend, Nisha, walks up to us and pauses by her boss’ side, arms crossed, eyes defiant. She’s painted to look like some sort of snake or something, gold scales, faux fangs in her mouth, a cobra-like hood on her head.

“What does this bitch want now?” she demands, leveling her dark stare on me. “By the way, next time you see your brother and his fiancée, have her call me. I’m worried about her.”

Both Scarlett and I ignore the latter half of Nisha’s commentary. If Scarlett isn’t ready to tell her friends the truth, I’m certainly not going to.

“He’s groveling for forgiveness,” Scarlett says, wetting her lips and then glancing over at the stage. She points at it. “Get up there and perform for me, and I’ll think about it.”

“Perform?” I ask, looking over to see that Kellin Bohnes is watching me. I need to be careful with him. Widow came to me to state his intentions; Bohnes will not. Fuck, I knew he was her lover—that news was all over Prescott—but I didn’t think they had anything serious going on.

I certainly didn’t know she was sleeping with the other guy, Widow. Or ... I shift my gaze over to see Alexei Grove, perched on the edge of a hay bale with a ghostly mask over his own face, a white one that matches his clothes—white suit, shirt, tie, shoes.

Even the germaphobe is all cozied up—metaphorically, not physically—with Scarlett and her Prescott crew. I remember her asking about him that night we kissed outside another one of Bohnes’ infamous parties.

I swipe a hand down my face.

“Well, if I’m not even worth that much ...” she starts, but I reach out to grab her wrist when she goes to walk away from me. Even with her crisp dress shirt between my palm and her skin, the touch burns.

Scarlett stops and looks back at me, breathing heavily.

“Fine, but I need to know the song, don’t I?” I whisper, and she shakes her head.

“Entertain me, Kelly. Loosen up a little.” She tears her arm from my grip and moves over to sit beside Bohnes. Probably on purpose to rile me up. Or so my ego wants to believe.

I move over to stand awkwardly near the edge of the stage as her girl finishes the current song and another one starts up. Scarlett raises a brow, and I sigh, climbing onto the hay bale stage to take the microphone.

It’s connected to its own speaker, set up in this area of the tunnel. The music is clearly coming from a radio station of some sort. I wet my lips, tasting blood, and look around at the small but intimidating crowd.

*What the fuck am I doing?* I wonder as I struggle to catch my breath.

This isn't like me at all. Any of this. I've lived a very careful life, one crafted of shadows, self-doubt, and fear.

My eyes catch Scarlett's, and I see that she doesn't fully believe that I'll actually do this, make a fool out of myself in front of her friends. She must trust them implicitly; any one of them could rat out my presence here tonight and make life for either of us just that much more difficult.

Someone hands me a bottle of alcohol, and I take a swig, passing it back to a girl in a zombie costume, blood and guts hanging from her mangled corset.

The song that comes up is one that I know, thank fuck: *'ZOMBIFIED'* by Falling in Reverse.

Even though I'm sure that I look like a total asshole, when the lead singer starts to croon, so do I. At first, my hand is sweaty around the mic, but then the alcohol kicks in a little and I'm moving across the hay bale like I have something to say.

Mostly, I think, I'm putting on a show for Scarlett Force.

The way her eyes trail me across the hay bale stage, it almost feels like I'm doing a decent job at it, too. But then the lights—and the music—cut out, and it's just my voice, blasting out into a suddenly silent room.

Everyone lets out a collective inhale, and then the lights switch back on, and there's cheerful screaming and squealing that echoes back to me from both ends of the tunnel.

Also, there's laughter.

At my expense, no doubt.

I hand the mic off to the next person in line and the music starts up again, freeing me from my shame and punishment.

"Well, you can't sing for shit, but I respect your audacity." Scarlett lifts one shoulder in a loose shrug as I stare out at her, trapped in the confines of the hoody, blood still staining the lower half of my face.

I want to kiss her so badly in that moment that everything else becomes a distant blur, a buzz, simple background noise.

My hands end up on her upper arms, fingers wrapping her strong biceps.

“Is there a reason the power cut like that?” I hear Widow asking Bohnes. All I can see and hear in that moment is Scarlett, like a mantra in my head, over and over again.

*Scarlett, Scarlett, Scarlett.*

“Could be any number of reasons,” he remarks absently, and then he’s slinking off down the tunnel like a ghost. Scarlett’s eyes flick his way briefly before returning back to me.

“We can’t kiss here,” she whispers, loud enough for me to hear, but quiet enough that I doubt anyone else does. Scarlett untangles herself from me and turns as two of her girls make their way over to us.

“He’s here,” one of them whispers, giggling hysterically. At first, I think she’s drunk, but then I realize that she’s just excited by the prospect of whoever *he* is.

*So long as it isn’t another lover,* I think, my gaze shifting back to Scarlett.

She’s smirking prettily, turning her attention over to me.

“I’m going to prove it to you, remember? That I’m powerful.”

She takes off down the hall, several girls—and that Basti guy—automatically falling into line along with her. Widow tags along and, after a short moment of hesitation, so does Alexei.

I catch up to him, and he glances over at me, that pale face of his ghastly even when he lifts up the mask.

“I’m sorry about your father,” I tell him, because I don’t think I’ve had the chance to say it yet. Alexei just stares at me, probably wondering where I got the information from. “Pavel was a good man; he was different than all the rest of them.”

Alexei's face tightens, and he lifts his chin, as if to disregard my opinion.

"You met him?" he queries, and I nod.

"Couple of times." I don't have to explain that I met Pavel Borisov while playing Aspen. I *am* Aspen now. It's important for me to remember that.

"Do you have any idea why Chief Bolin—and by extension, your father—would want him dead?" Alexei doesn't turn to look at me, the majority of his attention spent ensuring that nobody touches him. Few get even close as Scarlett's crew naturally clears away the crowd.

"That I don't know just yet," I respond with a long sigh. "You and your father haven't been brought up even once. It's not in the news either, I'm sure you've noticed."

Alexei's green eyes slide back over to mine, but then we're coming to a full stop, and one of Scarlett's girls is whispering in her ear again.

She pauses, and I look up, toward a boy dressed in loose denim shorts and a baseball cap. I *think* he's supposed to be in costume as a famous singer of some sort, but I'm not exactly sure.

The guy is drunk off his ass, his arms around two different girls. He doesn't seem to be aware that they're leading him away from the entrance of the tunnels and deeper into the labyrinth.

If nobody gets lost in here tonight, I'll be shocked.

Scarlett follows after him, shedding girls as we go. Even her—what did she call them?—ride or die friends eventually peel away down a separate tunnel. I don't miss the girl—Nisha—glaring at me as she goes.

I'll have to remember not to unduly upset that one.

At the next intersection, Scarlett instructs me and Widow to take the boy, and the last of her crew disappears into the shadows. I have no idea what we're doing here, but I don't care.

I will do *anything* she asks of me.

Anything at all.

I have no morals left, only desires, only a disturbed fanaticism that started the very first day Aspen went to the track, and I watched from the safety of the trees.

A short time later, I smell a wet breeze, and the air is noticeably cooler. Around the corner, we come to a surprise exit. There's a half-finished building in the distance, a bulldozer parked silently beside it. Directly in front of us is a car—a red 1972 de Tomaso Pantera bisected by a black racing stripe and accented with small navy details.

“Whoa, are we outside?” the guy murmurs dazedly, and then Scarlett's popping the trunk and slipping on a pair of gloves. She motions for us to bring the boy a little closer and then digs through his pockets as he blinks stupidly down at her.

“Wow, you bring your ID even to illicit parties like this? What a good boy you are,” she murmurs as she finds his wallet and then digs through it, removing an ID, and then looking up at the boy as if to confirm his identity.

She replaces the card in the wallet, tucks it back in his pocket, and then waits for a few careful seconds.

The boy's eyes slide up into his head and then he passes out, sagging to the ground between me and Widow.

“Tie him up, gag him, and get him loaded,” she commands, removing the necessary items from the back seat of her car. Scarlett slams the door closed and turns back toward me.

I'm surprised, but I hope it doesn't show on my face.

But should I be? This is Scarlett Force we're talking about.

After Widow and I have thoroughly trussed the guy, into the trunk he goes. Scarlett stares down at him for a moment and then closes it before she turns around to smile at me.

That expression, the shape of her lips, the color of her lipstick ... it all devastates me.

I almost fall to my knees right then and there and beg her to take me, to consume me entirely, to draw me into her until there's no line that separates her from me.

I'm sweating profusely now, swallowing through the tightness in my throat and knocking my hood back as I try to rake nervous fingers through my hair. I'm officially losing the last threads of sanity that I was clinging to.

Sanity? What's sanity? Rationality? Logic? It's obliterated by her very presence.

"This is Chief Bolin's son, Bryson," she explains to me as my eyes drift back to her car.

Oh.

*Oooh.*

Interesting.

"How did you get him to pass out?" I ask, although it's no mystery to me that Scarlett is good at what she does. If she weren't, she wouldn't be standing here after murdering my brother.

I should be angry with her, shouldn't I? At least some small part of me? But I can't summon up anything but need and want. Passion. Possession. I want her to be mine so badly that I can taste it. Does she think it's cute that I performed for her like that? Did she find it charming? Doesn't she know that I'll do anything for her if she just asks?

I'd kill; I'd die.

I rub at my face to push back the strange, haunting thoughts. I'm surely crazy, surely.

"Roofies," she explains, smiling even wider. "Here at Prescott, it's boys who need to put their hands over their drinks." She takes off for the tunnel entrance and then pauses at the sound of footsteps in the woods.

I can visibly see chills trace up her spine, but she doesn't move.



Instead, she waits as the crunching footsteps—clearly intended for us to hear them—get closer.

Bohnes appears out of the woods, dressed mostly in black but with a skeleton's face painted over his own, a smile opening both his mouth and the maw of the creature etched into it.

He's holding something by the hair. As I watch, he tosses it at her feet, and it rolls several steps to bump into Scarlett's shoe.

She pauses briefly and bends down, grabbing the hair of what must be a Halloween prop head. It's only as she stands and lifts it up that I see the thick, syrupy droplets oozing from the neck.

As Scarlett holds onto it, the head spins slightly, and I get a look at the face.

It's that goon, the one I followed from my father's house.

"Holy fuck," I murmur, and Bohnes' gaze drifts over to me. He smiles just a little wider and tosses the man's phone and keys over to me; I catch them.

"Surprised, rich boy?" he queries, tilting his head to one side. There is no *maybe* preceding the thought in my head any longer: Kellin Bohnes *will* try to kill me at some point.

That is an indisputable fact.

And still, I don't go anywhere. I don't run from that scene as fast and far as possible; I stay right where I am.

Because I'm sick. Because I know that Aspen wouldn't run away. When I said that Bohnes was of the same caliber monster—although a different breed—I wasn't kidding. In order to survive this, I'll have to step up my game.

I'll have to be crueler, rather than less. Crazier. More violent. More decisive.

Everything.

I will shed both Ash's skin and Aspen's; I will allow myself to be reborn as an unholy terror, a stalking nightmare, a

devious villain. In order to compete with these other fuckboys, I have no choice.

Smart move on Scarlett's part, picking her favorite boys and pitting them against one another.

*This is going to be a bloodbath, certainly.*

Bohnes smiles at me; I smile right back. Widow watches dispassionately while Alexei Grove maintains a careful distance and plucks nervously at the fingers of his gloves.

*Pretty little male monsters, grinning and posturing in the dark.*

"Who is this?" our female monster asks, and I'm grateful, at least, to see that she's a bit blanched at the sight of the head.

"Not sure of his name exactly. All I know is that he's one of my father's men," I state, proud that I'm at least capable of keeping my tone calm, my stare neutral. I *was* going to kill that man when I got the chance; Bohnes took that chance from me.

I'll need to be more ruthless than ever if I want to keep what little piece of Scarlett's heart that I might be holding onto.

"If you'll excuse me," I murmur suddenly, and then I'm taking off into the woods. Cutting through them. I end up running back to the parking area, looking for the Headless Horseman's vehicle. He'll have reported where he was heading (hah, hysterical laughter) for the night.

I need to move his car and his phone away from this spot, away from any evidence implicating Kellin Bohnes and through him, Scarlett Force. There's a wild frenzy in me, this sudden, inexplicable need to prove myself as useful.

*I should've delivered that head; that head was mine to deliver.*

I'm overcompensating because I want to impress Scarlett, a feeling that I'm not sure I've ever had in all my literally short but figuratively long years of life. *Need*. I need her in my arms, in my bed, but mostly ... I need *her* to need *me*.

Alexei appears by my side like the ghost he's dressed up as, spooking me into reaching for my gun before I even start the car's engine. I glance casually over at him, as if I didn't almost just shoot him right in the fucking face.

"I'll drive one of the cars," he offers, holding out a hand for the keys. I look at his latex-covered palm for a moment and then offer up the set for my own car. Normally, I wouldn't allow another man to touch my ride, but ... it's not as if I drove my decimated Mustang over here.

*I should utilize some of Aspen's privilege and demand that daddy dearest buy me a new one.*

I grit my teeth against my annoyance with my dead brother, and the fact that his raping ass cost me my most important earthly possession. Other than Scarlett, obviously.

Alexei helps me move the goon's car back to the house; I'll deal with scrubbing the security footage as soon as I get home.

First, I'll drive him back to the others.

I refuse to let Bohnes beat my crazy. After all, if Aspen's heart has to beat in my chest, I might as well use it.

The image features a dark, gradient background that transitions from black at the bottom to a light grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER FIFTEEN' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by large, splattered, and dripping red marks that resemble blood. The word 'CHAPTER' is on the top line, and 'FIFTEEN' is on the bottom line. The red splatters are most prominent around the letters, with some dripping down the page.

CHAPTER  
FIFTEEN

## *Scarlett*

Typical Halloween night in Prescott. A severed head, a kidnapping, fuckboy drama. I pop my trunk to see the son of the Springfield Chief of Police, curled into a fetal position and groaning. Resting my palms on the edge of the car, I lean in, smiling down at the now wide-eyed boy lying there and staring up at me.

“Well hello there, Mr. Bolin,” I greet with false cheer, Bohnes and Widow positioned on either side of me. Now, I know sure as shit I wouldn’t want to wake up to see the three of us hovering over my comatose form. It can’t be a particularly pleasant sight.

The boys heft the body out of the car while I stand there and check my new manicure. With muscle around to do the heavy lifting, why ruin my nails on yet another sordid task? They’re cute too, bloody red glitter dripping over matte black shadows. I clack my nails together in appreciation of Treasure’s art as our captive drools around his gag, strutting ahead of the boys and into the small safehouse where Alexei’s been living.

It’s ... um, rustic?

It’s a warehouse alright, but it’s not nearly as polished as Bohnes’ place. There’s a wide-open space in the center of the room, a bed tucked in one corner with a single nightstand, and a tiny shower stall plus toilet—none of which is surrounded by a wall of any sort. There’s a couch and a TV, too, with a couple of space heaters lying around, but the metal walls are rusty, and there’s a bit of a draft.

Poor, poor Alexei.

He comes in just as we’re setting up Bryson Bolin in a chair in the center of the room. The guy is still a little bit out of it from the roofies, but now that he’s realized he’s not just sleeping in a small, dark room, well, he’s waking up *fast*.

I turn to look back at Alexei and see Ash striding in behind him, the bottom half of his face still bloodied. How that happened, I’m not sure, but I also see that Widow’s knuckles are bruised.

I switch my attention back to Bryson, reaching down to tug the gag from his mouth. Bohnes has *assured* me that no one will be able to hear him scream ...

Bohnes. Wow. I mean ... My attention slides over to him, his broad back leaned up against one of the metal walls, hands tucked in his pockets. It's as if he didn't, you know, behead some dude in the woods. Now, I know it was all for a good cause, but like, the extra-ness of severing an assassin's head just so he could bring it to me is ... that's psychotic, isn't it? Bohnes is psychotic, not romantic, right? And why the fuck can't I tell the difference?

*He would've had to really saw through muscles and tendons and stuff, huh?*

Bryson chokes a little and licks his dry bottom lip with a fat tongue.

"Where ..." he drawls, blinking stupidly, but he's going to be out of it for quite a while.

Alexei waltzes up beside me, lifts a gun that I wasn't aware that he had, and blows the guy's brains out. Just like that. That quick. Red spatters my face as I blink in surprise, staring down at the body as it slumps over in the seat.

Blood covers him, too, from his blond hair to his powdered, austere face, his white 'ghost' costume. He's panting, too, and as soon as he realizes how many droplets are on him, he grits his teeth and very slowly, very carefully lays the gun on the ground.

"I ..." he starts, and then he's just staring down at his gloved hands and the red droplets that stain the sleeves of his shirt.

I'm ... well, I'm struck completely dumb.

Completely and utterly dumb.

Who ... who are the bad guys here? It takes my brain a second to remember that there's no such thing. No villains. No heroes. Just messy, ugly, disgusting, infallible, incongruous, hypocritical, and violent people. That's it.

"Excuse me," Alexei chokes out, standing up suddenly and stripping his gloves off as he goes. He doesn't seem to care that we're all standing there as he strips down completely naked and climbs into the shower.

He closes the curtain, but ... but that's it.

*Butt* is right. I noticed his perfectly firm ass and gorgeous (if flaccid) cock before he disappeared into the water.

I turn my attention back to the dead guy.

“Um.”

Bohnes sighs heavily, speaking before I get a chance to.

“This job better turn out the way it’s supposed to,” he murmurs, moving over to stand in front of me. “If I’d known he was just going to shoot him, I’d have set this up differently.”

“Well, shit, now what?” I choke out as Widow and Ash join us, staring down at the body in much less shock than you might expect. Mostly, the three men surrounding me appear to be annoyed by the surprise addition of a new task on tonight’s agenda.

“I’ll get the tarp,” Bohnes says with an exasperated sigh, and then he moves away and I’m left standing there beside a dead body.

I didn’t ... uh, I guess I didn’t expect this from Alexei. Not sure why. He just seems so ... nice? I glance over at his silhouette in the shower, just a faint shadow against the opaque white curtain.

“What the actual fuck was that?” Widow demands, looking past me toward the shower. “I thought he wanted information from the guy?”

“I wouldn’t shed any tears if I were you. Bryson anally raped a female student in the girl’s bathroom at Oak Valley Prep. The incident was covered up with copious amounts of cash, but as they say, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” Ash taps a finger on Bryson’s slumped head and raises his impossible ebon eyes back to my face. “Are you sure this is just about revenge? Or are we cleaning up the city?”

I almost smile at that, but then, there’s a corpse to deal with. I *will* smile later though because—and I’m not sure if this is a common idiom or just a Prescott thing—the only good rapist is a dead rapist.

When Bohnes comes back with the tarp, he gives orders, and we follow them (a very rare thing for me). But in this, I must acquiesce, he *is* the consummate expert. I wonder how many people he’s buried at this point?

We load Bryson’s body up in the Chevelle, and Bohnes puts his hands on his hips.

“I’ll have to burn the whole place down later, just to be sure. Blood spray gets everywhere.” He gives me a look. “What about you?”

He nods in my direction, and I glance down to see that I’m just as covered in blood as Alexei.

Right.

After rummaging through one of the duffel bags stacked atop the couch, I find an acceptable change of clothes. With the sink running, I pull an Alexei and strip down right there in front of the three boys, tossing the bloodied clothes onto the ground and then wiping down as best I can with paper towels and soap.

“Alright boys, pack it up,” I hear Bohnes growl and, even though I can feel the heat of their combined stare, I don’t turn around. I stay facing the sink as I dress myself in the oversized t-shirt and black men’s briefs that I found. “We’ll be back in short order, my sweet, dark love.”

Bohnes presses a kiss to my cheek, collects the bloody clothes and paper towels in a plastic bag and off he goes. When I finally turn around, I see both Widow and Ash, training their gazes on me until the very last.

The metal warehouse door closes, leaving me with a very dangerous man taking a very long shower. I turn my attention back to the curtain, picking out the silhouette of Alexei’s strong form shadowed behind it.

*Is he so different from the girl who murdered three people during sophomore year?*

Eh, maybe not.

And I’m not so bad, right?

Maybe don’t answer that one.

---

“Feel better?” I query as Alexei finally climbs out of the shower. It’s been ... I check the time on my phone ... two hours since he first climbed in. Long ago, the shower stopped steaming; I’m sure it’s been ice-cold since.

Still, you wouldn’t know by lookin’ at the guy.

Ice-cold he might be, like marble is cool to the touch, hard and unforgiving, but under an artist’s hands ... And Alexei Grove is nothing if not a piece of art, carved by the hand of some lusty goddess, hellbent on destroying my ovaries or something.

He goes entirely still, as if he’d forgotten where he was or what was going on before he climbed into the shower. A germaphobe the



guy might be, but he's certainly not shy, demure, or modest.

Alexei stands there, completely and utterly nude, his white skin shining under the faint glow from the lamp in the corner. It burnishes his wet shoulders gold, turns his profile into a portrait, emphasizes the haughty tilt to his chin.

"Can I scrub my brain?" he asks, a rhetorical question clearly, but with enough heat that I stand up from where I'm perched, my butt parked on the back of the old sofa. "Can I sanitize my soul? Can I stop seeing my father's brains and blood and bone on the surface of his favorite painting?"

Alexei sighs and swipes both palms down his wet face. His flaxen hair is curled over his forehead and around his ears, inviting touch. I would absolutely love to dig my fingertips in there, see if it's as soft and silky as it looks.

"Do I feel better?" he repeats, dropping his hands at the same moment my eyes drop to his cock. Still flaccid. No surprise, considering he just soaked the damn thing in freezing water for an hour and a half. But ... the size is good. If he's a grower, it might be *really* good.

I look back up to find him frowning at me, snatching a folded towel from a stack on the small sink that's perched beside the shower stall. He wraps it around himself, flicking his sea glass colored eyes up and down my body.

"You have no sense of propriety, do you, Scarlett Force?"

I shrug.

"Propriety? I barely know what it means." I flash a toothy smile and move over to stand a little closer to him. I almost expect him to draw away from me, hide himself in the shower stall or something.

He doesn't.

And even if I can't see his cock anymore, I can still see his perfect chest with his pale pink nipples hardened to sharp points. His abs are criminal, chiseled and fine. Alexei Grove is tall and lean, but strong as hell. I felt it in his grip, more than once.

"What a silly thing to do, pretend that you're stupid when you're anything but." He watches me as I meander over to his bed, teasing my fingertips across the surface of the comforter. It looks relatively new and expensive as fuck.

Bohnes stole that from Alexei's house, too, I'll bet. That's a lot of commitment for a job with no guaranteed outcome. To restore Alexei Grove to his rightful place, we have a mountain of work ahead of us.

Killing Bryson Bolin didn't change that. If anything, Alexei's just made it that much harder.

"Why did you kill that boy?" I ask, and he laughs. The sound of it is lordly and authoritarian, as if he expects the world to bow before him. You wouldn't know it, with his, um, idiosyncrasies and all that, but right now, with that haughty laugh? There's no denying it.

I wonder what he was like before his mother died?

*Probably another horrible, entitled, spoiled rich boy*, I think, my mind straying back to Ash, and the look in his eyes when he saw the severed head of his father's man. It wasn't fear there or disgust or even surprise: it was jealous *rage*.

I shudder and sit down as Alexei hisses at me.

"You're on my bed," he remarks, as if that isn't obvious.

"So? I changed clothes. Thanks a lot, by the way, for spattering mine in the chief of police's youngest son. I'm *sure* that won't come back to haunt us all." I pick at the comforter with my nails as Alexei shoves his feet into white slippers, storming over to me and snatching my wrist.

His hand is as cold as his face when I let my gaze drift up to meet his.

"You changed clothes—into *my* clothes." His eyes drift down to where my bare thighs are pressed against his blanket. Does he realize that he's touching my bare wrist? That his fingers are gripped so tightly around me that I can feel my pulse against his hand? "Into something that doesn't cover your ..." He stops again, just like he did at the art gallery.

I feel my lips twisting into a wry smile.

"Are we going to do this again, Alexei? My ... kitty-cat? My inner goddess? My—"

"Your pussy, Miss Force." He leans down toward me, that full, lush pout of a mouth getting far too close to my own. "I like the word *pussy*. And I don't have a problem with words or anatomy, just ..."

Here he pauses, his attention drifting down to his fingers on my wrist. His eyes widen, but he doesn't release me. Instead, he hesitates there for so long that I actually wonder if he hasn't entered a catatonic state or some shit.

Then I'm being pushed down onto the bed and Alexei is above me, his towel loosening from around his slim hips and then sliding off to the floor. He doesn't touch me, but for his hands on my wrists.

His legs straddle mine, but my thighs are pressed tight together and not touching either of his.

He breathes slow and heavy, a drip of cool water sliding down his aristocratic nose and dripping onto my forehead. I blink as it runs down the side of my face, joined by droplets from his sandy hair.

"Why did I kill him?" he whispers, licking that luxe and fertile mouth of his with a deviant tongue. "Why?" He laughs then and presses more of his weight into his hands, exhaling sharply and shuddering all over.

I'm so mesmerized by the sight and smell and feel of him that I don't move.

He smells like the Ivory soap he just used—a whole bar of it, I'm sure—with a hint of vanilla, a kiss of chlorine from the well water. But underneath all of that? There's something else, a dirty, musky, male scent that signals to all of my lady parts that Alexei Grove is more than mildly interested in me. Sexually speaking, anyway.

And even though the water dripping off of him is cool, his body is warm, radiating heat all down the length of my own. With a slight lift of my head, I gaze down the length of him to his rapidly hardening cock.

Oh.

He's a grower for sure.

I drop my head back into the pillow and look up into his eyes.

"Yes, why." I lay there, struggling to control my own rapid breaths, wondering if he can smell me the way I smell him, wondering if it disgusts him or turns him on or maybe both at the same time. "I thought you wanted to get information out of the guy. Or use him as a hostage or ... something."

Alexei smirks at me, but then closes his eyes suddenly, a ripple tearing through his body as he struggles to swallow past whatever emotion is currently taking over him.

“I killed him because I wanted the Chief to hurt as badly as I do; I killed him because it was the only way to replicate my own pain. That’s why.” Alexei jerks back from me suddenly, shivering all over and shaking his hands out like they’re in pain.

He moves over to the sink, snatching up a bar of soap and scrubbing at his palms as I sit up on my elbows and watch. Mostly, I stare at his ass, those firm, taut cheeks just begging to be slapped. And his back? Strong and smooth, in desperate need of bright-red claw marks from my nails.

I sit up the rest of the way, well-aware that the others will be back soon enough.

For now, it’s just me here. Me and Alexei, sharing a moment on Halloween night, right after a fresh dose of first-degree murder.

He braces his hands on either side of the sink and lets his head hang over it. Still naked, though. Still butt-ass-naked.

“You’re most definitely not a prude, are you?” I swing my feet over the edge of the bed and stand up, the borrowed t-shirt I’m wearing falling to mid-thigh.

Oh, the looks on those boys when I turned around after changing ... I could’ve had Bohnes, Widow, and Ash Kelly on their knees and begging for my cunt in their face if I wanted.

Even if they’re all hyper aggressive toward one another, is it such a bad thing? Acquiring and keeping so many fuckboys around as pets?

“What good would that serve me?” Alexei wonders aloud, grabbing a second towel and drying his hair off first and then his body. He apparently gives zero fucks that I’m watching and enjoying the show. He glances over his shoulder at me, his lips slightly parted in a saintly pout. “Does modesty have anything to do with infection? Contamination? Bacteria? Viruses?”

He turns back around, and I see that his cock is still hard.

He looks down at it and then back up at me.

“Am I supposed to pretend that you’re not a beautiful woman?” he demands, as if that question is supposed to be platonic, as if it should have zero effect on me whatsoever. “Or that I’m not attracted to you?”

“You’re attracted to me?” I repeat, standing up and moving toward him to test our new boundaries. He watches me warily,

pausing in the midst of his towel-drying to go still and predatory, like he might have to fend off an unwanted sexual advance.

I stop where I am, halfway between the bed and the shower.

Our eyes meet.

The sound of several cars pulling up outside cuts through the moment so fully and dramatically that I actually stumble back from him. He yanks on a cream-colored sweater and some linen pants, exhaling in annoyance as he tousles his hair with his long fingers.

Bohnes heaves the heavy warehouse door open and pauses there, limned in light from the headlights of his Chevelle and looking very menacing indeed.

“It’s all taken care of,” he says with a shark’s smile. His teeth are all that I can make out in his shadowy silhouette. “But at least this time, I had ample help.” He gestures with his head in the direction of the cars. “Are you coming?”

I exchange a long, lingering look with Alexei.

“Enjoy the rest of your night, Miss Force,” he murmurs, slipping his feet back into the white slippers and moving over to the small slab of pre-fab kitchen cabinets against one wall. There’s a box of black latex gloves there that he opens fresh, slipping a pair on and then removing a fresh sponge from its wrapper and a bottle of abrasive cleaner that he gets from under the sink.

And that’s it.

The moment is over.

“I’m coming,” I reply, moving over to another pair of slippers and sliding my feet into them.

“Keep it,” he says, and I pause beside Bohnes, his arms stretched out on either side of him, palms pressed into the doorjamb. I glance back to see Alexei looking at me over his shoulder. “The clothing, all of it. I don’t want it back—especially the underwear.” He turns back around and proceeds to start scrubbing the already clean counter.

I purse my lips and turn away, ducking under Bohnes’ arm and heading over to my Pantera. Nobody bled inside the trunk tonight, but I can still smell that harsh chemical cleaner when I slide into the front seat.

“Have I ever mentioned how sexy it is that you’re so skilled at cleaning up a crime scene?” I quip, and Bohnes pauses, putting his hands on the roof of the Pantera and leaning in so close to me that our mouths brush together. “If I didn’t have to pick Alexis up from the party ...”

*Pick her up wearing a men’s shirt and underwear? With no pants?* I’m sure she won’t notice a thing. My gaze swings back over to the warehouse, and I wonder if I can’t sneak in there and borrow some pants.

“Mm, so that’s it, huh? You’re going to make me jerk off to thoughts of you on Halloween night? It’s not too late to send your sister home with your girls and come over to my place.” Bohnes stands up and slaps his palm on the roof. “We never did finish the movie we started last weekend.”

I snort.

“You didn’t watch a single second of it; you were staring at me the whole time.”

“And I’d like to stare at you for the duration,” he concludes, offering up a slow wink before heading over to the Chevelle. He climbs in and starts the engine, not bothering to wait for my answer.

He thinks he knows my answer already. *Arrogant fuck*. Gaining the official title of boyfriend—which is a huge fucking deal at Prescott—has amped up his cocksurenness to new and dizzying heights.

Hmm.

I start the engine and Bohnes leads the way, the glow of red brake lights from Ash’s boring luxury coupe and Widow’s Stingray paving a route through the darkness, just a line of sinuous metal on a quiet country road.

As I drive, I consider Alexei Grove and his answer to my question.

*“Why did I kill him? I killed him because it was the only way to replicate my own pain.”*

When my brother and my cousins died in the accident, I took justice into my own hands when I couldn’t find it elsewhere. Three lives in exchange for three lives. *An eye for an eye*.

I rev the engine and then take off, passing the other three cars and whipping back into my own lane just in time to avoid being hit by an

oncoming car.

Even as the passing vehicle swerves and honks, I'm laughing because it's the thrill for me, the rush of adrenaline, the roar of the engine. That's what makes me feel better, even when nothing else does.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from light grey at the top to black at the bottom. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER SIXTEEN' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by large, expressive splatters and drips of bright red paint or blood, which are most concentrated around the word 'CHAPTER' and bleed down over the word 'SIXTEEN'.

CHAPTER  
SIXTEEN



## *Scarlett*

“Someone spilled vodka on you?” Alexis asks, eyeing me suspiciously as she leans back against the passenger side door of the Pantera. “And you somehow ended up wearing a guy’s clothes? Do they belong to Bohnes?”

“Yeah, they belong to Bohnes,” I lie, wondering why I thought this was a wholesome plan in the first place. With Bohnes as arrogant as he is, I figured I’d pick Alexis up myself—and relieve my poor girls from babysitting duty—and then drop her off at home before heading back out to the warehouse.

He won’t know I’m coming which should be fun. Provided, of course, that he doesn’t kill me when I try to sneak inside. Shit, maybe this isn’t such a good idea after all?

“Those don’t look like Bohnes’ clothes.” She turns back toward the windshield, reaching up to adjust the wig she’s wearing. I think she’s supposed to be a sexy witch or something, but really, she’s just dolled-up like any other Prescott ho with a goth fetish.

I purse my lips, headlights sweeping the garage door as I pull into the driveway and put the Pantera in park. The lights are on, and I can see the flickering of the TV. Geneva should be home by now and if not, then Gram will be any minute.

“I like Alexei,” she tells me, just sitting there in the dark.

I have no idea how to respond to that. I *also* like Alexei. Pretty sure that he likes me, too, based on tonight’s interaction. I don’t know how many other girls he’s straddled in the nude, but I’m guessing the number before tonight was a big, fat zero.

*It better be.*

I’m a jealous bitch, won’t lie.

“I don’t know how to respond to that.” I glance over to see that she’s fiddling with her phone and making zero attempt to get out of the car. My family won’t like that I’ve just dropped

her off and disappeared into the night, but I haven't spent the night at home on Halloween in years. Not since high school, actually. The last three years, I spent with ...

Fuck.

Do I have to say it? You know who I spent the last three years with. Nisha. Bastian. Lemon.

"How about you give something up for me?" Alexis asks, as if I have any control over Alexei Grove whatsoever. Even if he and I weren't working on some sort of thing, I doubt he'd be into my sister either. "You have a boyfriend already, Scarlett."

"Out." I lean my head back against the seat, but Alexis isn't done with me yet. Either she's mad at me because I didn't spend any time with her at the party or else this is just years of resentment building up and oozing out.

"You have everything I ever wanted. The friends, the car, the reputation. All I want now is this."

"He's a human, Alexis, not a toy. I can't give him to you even were I so inclined." I lift my head up and open my eyes to find her glaring at me. I feel bad for her, I do. She moved out of our house very briefly after she graduated, ended up addicted to drugs, and then found herself living with what my girls and I derisively refer to as 'the Prescott dropout super special'. PD-Double-S boys are homeless, druggy losers oftentimes with abusive tendencies.

My sister was curb-stomped by this guy. I mean, he had her open her mouth, bite the curb, and he ... stomped. My mother thinks she has brain damage from that (she was in the hospital for some time), but also that she's got underlying mental health issues. She hears voices, and she disappears for hours in the bathroom, giggling and stomping her feet. I'm not a doctor; I can't diagnosis her.

All I can do is fight for a way out of Prescott.

Guilt sweeps over me as I once again reconsider what I'm doing here. I can't be a stunt driver if I've got a trail of bodies in my wake. I can't race cars on any circuit if I'm behind bars. Yet, I've managed to double my body count in a week's time.

“I’m just protecting you, Alexis,” I add, and she frowns so darkly at me that I’m almost worried.

“Like you protected Lemon?” she snaps, and then she’s opening the door and taking off for the front porch before I can stop her. My breathing is rapid-fire, and I feel cold beads of sweat sliding down my spine.

First, she acted like she knew about drunk driver douche and his family. Now this?

*She’s bullshitting you, Scarlett. She doesn’t know a goddamn thing.*

With a snarl of frustration, I punch the radio on and then peel out of there like I’m on fire.

I don’t stop until I’m on the gravel road leading to Bohnes’ warehouse. Then, because I clearly have a death wish, I slow drastically and turn my headlights off, rolling to a stop beside the large door and then pausing as I see that it’s already open.

“I wanted to surprise you,” I say as I climb out, still wearing Alexei’s slippers, t-shirt, and underwear and nothing else. The night is chilly, a brisk thirty-five degrees and draped in fog. There’s a single jack-o’-lantern with flames dancing in its grinning maw, and the glow of Bohnes’ clove cigarette, but that’s it.

Otherwise, it’s country-dark out here, and country-dark means dark AF.

“I knew you were coming,” he tells me, leaning up against the edge of the doorjamb, the cigarette between his full lips, his milky skin almost pale enough to break through the shadows. He smells like fresh-made caramels mixed with a bit of clove from the cigarette. I take it straight from his full lips and slide it between mine. “But even if I didn’t, you could never sneak up on me.”

“How do you know that?” I ask, all sass and spice. In reality, I’m standing here in the pitch-dark in an undisclosed location with a guy who buries people for a living. A guy who hasn’t been hugged since he was abandoned on the streets at ten years old. Nobody knows I’m here. Not a single damn

soul. “Never mind. Don’t answer it. Your creepy stalker-self is sexier when I don’t know all the disturbing things you do.”

He throws his head back at that, laughter spilling from his throat the way the Milky Way is giving up stars. All I need do is tilt my own head back and then I can see them, spattered across the inky October sky and blotched with clouds.

“My stalker-self, huh?” he returns, dropping his chin back down so that he can look at me. Bohnes lifts his bone-inked fingers to that shock-white hair of his and ruffles it up in a lazy, mussed sort of way. “You must really trust my stalker-self with all the things you do. Please tell me you don’t meet other men *in the night, in the dark* ...”

I take a drag on the cigarette, chuckling on the exhale.

“*There won’t be anyone around if you need help*,” I add with a grin. We’re both quoting the movie, *The Haunting*. “I like the 1963 version better than the ’99 remake.” I take another drag and go to hand the cigarette back. “Just like my cars, apparently.”

“You never answered my question.” Bohnes grabs my wrist and pulls me toward him, until we’re pressed close, front to front. He ignores the proffered cigarette to put his huge hands on my waist instead, engulfing my curves with his cool, calloused fingers. “Is that how you ended up killing Aspen Kelly? Were you alone with him?”

I sigh and turn my head toward the woods, smoking the cigarette and enjoying the burn in my lungs. I don’t often smoke, usually just one or even half of one before a race. But hey, it’s Halloween, and Bohnes and I like the same poison.

“I thought he was ...” I sigh heavily and Bohnes snatches the cigarette from me, sticking it between his gorgeous lips. “You know, I sort of *knew* but I didn’t know. Honestly, there was a better chance of him being all Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde than of him being an identical twin.” I try not to focus too much on the feel of Bohnes’ left hand sliding down to cup my hip. “Ash could’ve told me.”

“Don’t meet other men alone in the dark,” Bohnes reiterates, snorting and flicking the cigarette to the dewy grass. He crushes it with his boot. “Ever. You’re smarter than that.” He releases me suddenly and grabs the metal warehouse door, pushing it open on its track. “Park the Devil in here.”

I do as he asks, my mind swinging back to that fateful moment.

I shouldn’t give Ash a pass for lying, whatever the reason. He damn near got me raped and killed. He damn near got me put in prison for killing said rapist/murderer. If he hadn’t shown up, and I’d gotten caught ... The thought of never living my dream, of never escaping this place, that kills me.

Once the Pantera is neatly parked beside the Chevelle—and oh what a romantic pair they make—I step out and move back over to Bohnes. He’s gazing up at the heather gray clouds above us as they obscure and then reveal the moon, over and over. Dark. Light. Dark.

Silver moonlight streams across my face as I turn to look at my ... boyfriend.

Boyfriend.

Goddess help me.

At other high schools, I don’t know what it means, but it’s not the same at Prescott. There’s a desperate, cloying need entrenched in that word (girlfriend, too) that isn’t present elsewhere. It doesn’t just mean someone you hang with casually, fuck on occasion, there’s a whole cultural phenomenon behind it in the southside. It’s a commitment.

“Oh.” I snap my fingers as Bohnes turns his head oh so slowly to look at me, ice blue eyes catching a hint of the jack-o’-lantern’s flickering candlelight. “I got you something.” I move back over to the Pantera and open the back door, drawing out a small bag with tissue paper peeking out of the top.

When I present it to Bohnes, he hooks a single finger under the twine handles and lifts it up to his face with an austere frown. The skeleton face paint he was wearing earlier is

smudged, but still recognizable. He's so fucking creepy, and I'm living for it.

"This is a present." I shrug and cross my arms, as if this means nothing. In reality, it's a big, fucking deal. "Fuckboys don't get presents; boyfriends do." I nod my chin at him, and he lifts his blue eyes back to my face. "Open it."

Bohnes lowers the bag and then reaches in with his right hand, drawing out a candle in an opaque white glass jar with a cork lid. The label on the front reads *I Love You for Your Personality, but that Dick is a Huge Bonus*.

"Look, I even modified it for you." I move closer to him and point at the black Sharpie marks I've added. I circled the word 'huge' and then drew an arrow to the space between 'that' and 'dick'. "Now it says, *I Love You for Your Personality, but that Huge Dick is a Bonus*. See what I did there?"

He's silent for several seconds, swallowing hard and wetting his lips before responding.

"You bought me a candle?" he asks pensively. "A gift." He drops the bag with the tissue paper on the ground and then turns the candle toward him for a better view.

"It's not much, especially compared to the things you've done for me." I shrug, but Bohnes is already shaking his head and holding the candle against his chest. His eyes, they *burn*.

"It means something to me." He lifts the lid and inhales, closing his eyes as he breathes in the scent. His mouth quirks. "It smells like cherries." He opens his eyes back up to stare at me, and I feel suddenly uncomfortable. Not in a bad way, but in a *this is getting way too close to being a touchy-feeling romance moment and I don't know what to do or how to act* sort of a way.

"You said I smelled like chocolate and cherries, so ..." I gesture at the candle. "Go light it or something."

"I don't want to light it; it'll burn. I want to keep it just like this." He replaces the lid and tucks it against his chest again, and then ... he smiles at me.

Not like he usually does. Not a rictus grin. Not a grimace. Not a gnashing of teeth.

He really and truly smiles, injects joy and pleasure into those lips, and I'm blown away.

I can't breathe; my knees are weak; my heart pounds.

"Holy shit, you're pretty." That's what I manage to choke out, and he goes silent for a minute before laughing. And his laughter? It's always loud and wild, but right now, it's real, too, and there's genuine mirth present in the sound that's not there under normal circumstances.

"Oh, my sweet monstress ..." He trails off and turns away, heading into the warehouse and setting the candle on his coffee table. My view of his strong back, and all of those anatomically correct skeleton tattoos, pure heaven. Or ... hell? Anyway, I don't follow him because, as weird as this sounds, I don't want to go into his bedroom just yet.

I want him to come back to me, to the edge of the woods. To the dirt and the pine needles and the wildness that's managed to cling to the perimeter of our growing city.

"Do you own this land?" I ask as he glides back toward me, snatching a rag from the counter as he goes. He swipes it over the right half of his face, clearing away most of the makeup in a single go-over. When he moves to clean the other side off, I grab his wrist and stop him.

Half human, half monster.

That's Kellin Bohnes right there in a nutshell.

"I do." That's all he says, tossing the rag into a pile near the door. From the looks of the Chevelle, he must've given her another wash while he was waiting for me.

"You're eighteen?" I continue, and he nods.

"October third," he says with a wistful sigh. "It was a Friday night."

"You should've told me," I murmur, but would it have mattered? We were just getting started; I wouldn't have given a shit and he knows it.

“We fucked that night, so what does it matter? I got what I wanted for my birthday anyway.” He goes to grab the door—presumably to close it—and I stop him with a hand on his large bicep, fingers kneading the rock-hard muscle beneath his silken skin. He meets my gaze dead-on and without flinching, just the way I like.

“I’m sorry that I can’t ... that I *won’t* allow myself to just dive into this romance business. You scare me, Bohnes. Not physically speaking; I don’t think you’d ever hurt me. You scare me in other ways. I don’t want to live and thrive in the underground—I want to race.”

He releases the door and stands up straight, leaving me to admire that beautiful face, half-dressed in paint, half pale and soaking up moonlight.

“Alexei Grove is the sort of man who pays his debts. He’s seen me; he’s seen you. If we get this done, we’ll get our money, and you can do whatever the fuck you want.” Bohnes grabs onto my shoulders, pulling me close to him and dropping his lips down to brush against mine. “I’ll follow you wherever you go, Scarlett Force.”

I can’t decide if he’s saying that he’ll happily join me on my future endeavors or ... if he’ll stalk me. Not sure that I care either. I’m not healthy, emotionally or mentally. Neither is he. This isn’t a healthy relationship, and I don’t care.

“Just say those magic words for me again.” He kisses my mouth with the barest of touches, like a brush of damp fog drifting across my skin. “Say them, please.”

“Which ones?” I breathe back at him because I’m starting to lose cognitive function, and I don’t know what he means.

“*Bohnes, I need you.*” He closes his eyes, waiting, anticipating.

I suck my lower lip under my teeth, scraping at it, wetting it. And then I pull away from him, but I don’t let go. My fingers are curled around his wrist and I’m dragging him into the shadows of the trees.



He follows me easily enough, blinking through the darkness as I push my raven-colored plait over one shoulder and suck in a deep breath. *First time for everything, I guess.* This is one particular first that I've been looking forward to for a while, just to see what sorts of faces I might be able to get Kellin to make, the sounds that might come from the strong column of his throat ...

"Bear with me, okay?" I curl my fingers under the waistband of his black joggers, and he hisses out a curse as my skin brushes across his sensitive lower abs. The pants come down and his massive cock hangs heavy and stiff before me. It's inked, too, and oh so wicked-pretty. He's got a black spell circle around the base, the filigreed designs climbing up his shaft like poisoned veins of ivy. *Deliciously dark, Bohnes. Atrocious.*

The first thing I do is wrap my fingers around the base of it, wondering if I'll even be able to fit his goddamn dick in my mouth.

It's that big.

"Are we playing a new game?" The words are breathy, but rife with excitement. His eyes shine as I lower myself to my knees in the dirt, using my hands to play with him. I squeeze and pull and tug, and then I lean forward and flick my tongue over the tip.

There's a violent and immediate reaction in him that excites and encourages me. He leans back against the tree, dropping his fingers to my scalp. He kneads and teases my hair as I cup his balls in my left hand, stroking and playing with the silky skin and the dark hairs there. As I'm doing that, I keep my right hand fisted around the base of him, and then I lower my mouth.

"*Fuck.*" That growl from Bohnes' throat, on Halloween night, under the moon with only a jack-o'-lantern for company, oh it's primal. It's raw. It's unhinged and expectant in a strange and endearing way.

I take him in as deeply as I can, letting the heavy weight of his cock sit on my tongue. There's a perverse sort of slurping

sound as I slide back and pause to take a breath, licking my lips so close to the tip of him that Bohnes groans and thrusts against my mouth.

“Say it,” he murmurs, but he’s barely human, and the words are almost ethereal in the night.

*I’m going to regret this*, I think, but then, he’s letting me mess around with three other guys even though he’s like a black magic sorcerer/necromancer prince that gives me severed fingers and severed heads of people who fucking deserve what’s coming to them. It’s dark justice. It’s violence to deter violence.

While we haven’t exactly addressed what Ash’s father’s goon was doing at a Prescott party, I can make my guesses.

*Come for me, Jonas Kelly, you little bitch. Get past my monsters. Get past me. Stuck-up, silver-tongued, politician bitch.*

I slide my mouth over Bohnes’ cock, sucking so hard that he bucks against me, pressing his fingers into my scalp and writhing with his back to the tree, like a beast scratching a terrible itch. My teeth scrape along the length of him, drawing unholy sounds from him, dark prayers that drift straight up to the moon’s smiling maw.

If there are any spirits here tonight, they gather around us, bolstering me, infusing me.

Bohnes killed an assassin for me tonight and brought me his head. How can I not be excited by that? I draw back and take another breath, a small strand of saliva between my lips and his cock. He tastes a bit salty, the pre-ejac ripe on my tongue as I swallow.

“Bohnes, I need you.” I slide my mouth over him again, bobbing my head as he fists my hair and then, with an unhinged snarl, he comes in my mouth. Hot, salty jets spill into my throat as I pull back, and some of the liquid drips down the sides of my face.

He’s right there in an instant, dropping to his knees in front of me and capturing my face. His wicked tongue flicks out,

cleaning the excess seed from my lips and chin. And then he kisses me, and I can't breathe because all I can taste and feel and see and hear is him.

My arms slide around his neck, and he falls back, rolling us into the dirt as he continues to kiss me. His lips blaze a trail down my throat as his hands shove the oversized t-shirt up and over my breasts, sucking on my aching nipples, laving them with his tongue.

He doesn't stop there either, worshipping me with his mouth until he gets to my borrowed—let's be straight, they were new and in the package—underwear from Alexei. Bohnes tears them down my legs and tosses them aside, putting his hot mouth between my thighs and sucking on my cunt like he's hungry for it.

*Starving for it, more like.*

"Oh, shit, Kellin," I groan, squeezing my thighs against either side of his head as he dives in, his tongue cleaning up the dripping wet heat of my arousal. "Kellin, Kellin, Kellin."

"*Scarlett,*" he breathes out, pausing just long enough to reach up and wrap his strong arms around my thighs. He yanks them apart, staring up the length of my body, my heavy chest with my breasts full and ripe under the moonlight. He snaps his teeth at me, the clack of those pretty ivory squares making me shiver all over. "I only like my name when it passes your sinful lips, my dark and twisted darling."

He returns to his task with vigor, sucking on my clit and making my scream. When I dig my fingertips into his scalp, I'm much less kind than he was, shoving his face against my cunt and raising my hips, grinding into his face.

Three fingers slide into my heat, and I come completely undone, spasming and groaning under his hungry teeth and tongue and lips. My body quivers as I shove his head against me so hard that he can't breathe, jerking away from me so violently that I pull some of his hair out in the process.

Bohnes sits up, gasping and panting, swiping his arm over his wet lips.

“Oh my,” he whispers finally, his pupils blown out and wild looking. “That’s how I want to die: suffocating on your sweet pussy.” He moves back over me, caging me in against the forest floor with his huge, muscular form.

“God, you’re big,” I murmur, reaching up and petting his cheek, getting some of that wetness of my fingers as I stroke his skin. It’s not just him who can’t breathe: I’m struggling, too. I’m struggling with his pretty face, that skeleton makeup smeared obscenely around his mouth. It’s probably all over my inner thighs, too. On my pussy. “Big and muscular and terrifying.”

He smiles at me again, but it’s more like his usual smiles: macabre and carnal in equal measure.

“You like me that much?” he queries, cocking his head to one side. It’s his inquisitive, quizzical nature that I enjoy.

I turn my head to one side, my cheek resting against pine needles and dirt which feels right somehow.

“You make me see how easily someone might be fooled by the idea of romance,” I admit, staring at the dying light of the jack-o’-lantern instead of his face. “If I hadn’t seen so many people worship this exact same feeling and drive themselves into the ground because of it, I ...”

“I’m willing to wait for you to see that I’m different.” Bohnes sits back on his haunches, points at himself then down at me. “*We* are different.” He stands up and this time, he does extend his hand.

I take it, letting him pull me to my feet. My legs are so shaky that I have to lean on his big arm to stay standing upright.

“Give me ...” he starts, looking up at the moon with his paint-smeared face. He looks back down at me and lifts a hand, five fingers out. “Five minutes.” Bohnes takes off toward the warehouse, and I follow him, waiting for him to close the door behind us and lock it before I really get what he meant.

“Five minutes for ...” I start, using my pointer finger and uncurling it until it’s straight and proud. “You mean for this?”

Bohnes flashes teeth at me and shrugs his big shoulders.

“Don’t tell me you’re planning on going home tonight?” He turns away from the door and heads into the kitchen, opening one of the cabinets and revealing a very impressive collection of liquor. “Well, well ...” he murmurs, pointing at each bottle in turn before snatching one up by the neck. He turns back toward me and hefts it up. “I stole this from Pavel Borisov’s mansion. Want some?”

“Cognac?” I ask, and then shrug. “Why the hell not?”

Bohnes sets me down on his sofa with the bottle and an orange bowl full of Halloween candy that he tosses onto the surface of the coffee table. With my knees tucked to my chest, I wrap my arms around them and consider that I’ve just given my first blow job.

“Well, how was it?” I demand, and Bohnes pauses, turning back from the open refrigerator to look at me, that skeleton paint making him look even more disturbed than usual. “The blow job, I mean.”

He grins at me.

“Did I enjoy seeing the infamous Scarlett Force get on her knees to suck my dick? You must be joking.” He grabs a pair of dewy soda cans out of the fridge and then moves over to sit beside me on his sofa, watching as I take a sip of the alcohol and smack my lips.

“Bold and smooth. Hints of blackberry and apricot. Finishes with layers of chocolate and—”

Bohnes goes to snatch the bottle from my hand, but I resist, and he ends up yanking me toward him until I’m sitting in his lap.

“Give me that bottle,” he murmurs, but I won’t let go of it, even as he drags my hand up toward his mouth and forces me to give him a drink. He pushes the bottle away to look at the label and then smirks. “Smart-ass.”

The alcohol—fancy as I’m sure it is—tastes like smooth alcohol. It doesn’t taste like fruit and friggin’ walnuts or whatever else it says on the label.

“You can read, good for you. Many Prescott students can’t.” He snorts, even though that’s sort of true and also kind of sad. “When did you get so snarky, Scarlett Force?”

“I hear tales that I was born this way,” I admit with a small shrug. A frown takes over my lips as I look up at Bohnes’ pretty blue eyes. “This thing with the police chief’s son ... it’s going to come back and kick us right where it hurts, isn’t it?”

“No matter what happens,” he says, gritting his teeth and releasing my wrist. His strong fingers capture my chin and squeeze. “I’ll protect you. None of this will come back on you, I promise that. Even if I die, I’ll rise from the grave to defend you.”

“Don’t say things like that.” I take another drink of the cognac, but then Bohnes is pulling me forward and kissing me. We end up sharing the alcohol between us, tongues dancing a hallowed waltz that draws energy from the strange, eerie creak of the woods outside the warehouse. “Race me tomorrow.”

The words come out in a whisper and Bohnes tenses up slightly.

“Over what?” he inquires, but there’s a certain sense of peril in his voice that gives me pause. “Widow?”

I sit back slightly and take another drink, finding that buzz I chased so hard last night and then lost. *Oh, Lemon.* How long will it take before I stop thinking about her so frequently? Years, I imagine. Years and years. And even then, when I do think about her, it’ll hurt just as much.

“He’s been helpful, you’ve got to admit.” I shrug one shoulder and look away, almost ashamed of myself for wanting another man when Bohnes is, quite arguably, one of the most hauntingly beautiful souls I’ve ever come across.

But I can’t do that to myself.

I can’t fall into that old Prescott trap no matter how much I wish I could.

“Is that the only reason?” Bohnes asks, sighing and leaning back into the pillows. I think about him sitting here alone by himself, in the woods, in this warehouse, and it makes me sad.

I want to save him, protect him, keep him.

And that, that’s the most worrying part of all.

“I like him,” I admit, cringing slightly at the words. I’m sitting on one guy’s lap and talking about another. But like, that’s such a Scarlett Motherfucking Force thing to do. How could I ever be satisfied with one man? My eyes meet Bohnes’ as I lift the bottle to my lips again, and he snatches my wrist so hard that I let out a small sound.

“Bite me,” he says. And I can’t decide if he’s insulting me or asking for a favor. “I want to get your teeth marks inked into my skin.” He smiles, and I lift my brows.

“Seriously?” He releases my wrist and shrugs his massive shoulders, jostling me around on his lap and proving that he did indeed only need five minutes. His cock is rock-solid and warm, trapped between my pelvis and his taut lower belly. Even with his joggers covering it up, the size is impressive. “Okay. Where?”

He smirks at me and leans in, putting the tip of nose up against mine.

“Right next to my cock. Mark me. Brand me. I want to be yours forever.” He leans back from me and crosses his arms behind his head, eyes closed, a strange smile on his face. Yep. He is officially fucking nuts.

I swig more of the cognac, enjoying the swirl of my thoughts, the blurring of my emotions.

“Remember what I said before I raced Widow for the first time?” he murmurs, and I pause.

“When you said he’d never fuck me?”

“When I said you needed my permission.” Bohnes cracks those startlingly blue eyes to stare at me. He’s a legend. I wonder if he knows that? I wonder if he knows that, in the not-so-distant future, five boys will form a gang called Havoc.

That they'll wear painted skeleton faces on Halloween, paying homage to Bohnes without ever mentioning his name.

Because, in Prescott, even years later, people will know who Bohnes is. They'll know Widow. They'll certainly know Ash Kelly and Alexei Grove. But they won't talk about any of it. Never, ever.

"So ask me, Scarlett Force." His smirk turns into a wild grin. "Ask for my permission. Beg."

"You know better than that," I purr, reaching out and pinching one of his pink nipples. He lets out a sharp but excited gasp. "Would you do it anyway, give me your permission like that?"

He laughs at me, uncrossing his arms from behind his head and cradling mine between his large hands.

"Absolutely not. But I will race you for it. I won't hold back either. Are you okay with that?"

I smile right back at him, just as delusional as he is. Just as broken. Because we're from Prescott and only strange weeds grow between the cracks in the dirty cement.

"I'm okay with that." I go to take another drink and Bohnes pushes the bottle away, pulling it from my fingers and setting it aside.

"Come with me." He grabs my hand and pulls me up from the couch, guiding me back outside and around to the rear of the warehouse. Into the trees we go, and then we pause near a small, rocky outcropping. "Watch," he breathes.

We wait there for a while. So long that I actually wonder if he hasn't lost his damn mind. It's cold out, and with November peeking her head above the horizon, it'll only get colder and colder. Soon enough, we might even have snow.

"Look." Bohnes hisses the word out, eyes wild in the moonlight. A cluster of bats explodes from the cave in front of us, swirling up and into the night air, crossing the silver disc of the moon like a living shadow.



And then he picks me up, just hauls me right into his arms and carries me inside.

I sleep in his bed; I make love to him; I bite him right near the base of his cock until he bleeds.

And tomorrow, I'm going to kick his ass on the track.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from light grey at the top to black at the bottom. Overlaid on this background are several vertical and horizontal streaks and splatters of bright red, resembling blood. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a large, white, serif font across the middle. Below it, the word "SEVENTEEN" is written in a smaller, white, serif font. The red splatters are most prominent behind the letters of "CHAPTER" and "SEVENTEEN", creating a dramatic and somewhat macabre effect.

CHAPTER  
SEVENTEEN

## *Widow*

There's a man waiting for me outside the halfway house when I get home, hours after helping Kellin Bohnes and Ash Kelly bury the body of the police chief's son. It wasn't something I wanted to do. Actually, nothing I've seen or participated in since last weekend has been what I wanted.

After spending five years in juvie, the last thing in the world that I want is to end up in prison.

"You're an idiot," I mutter to myself, even as I'm turning the engine off and examining the man who's leaning against the wall near the front steps. He doesn't look anything like the thugs I beat with my baseball bat. No, he's dressed in much nicer clothing, and he's scary as fuck.

Just like some sort of disturbed anti-hero in one of the romance novels I read, I've been sucked in. I'm drowning in my need for Scarlett Force. When I think about her, when I see her, my heart thunders and sings, and my fingers itch with the urge to touch her.

Even after having driven around aimlessly for hours tonight, I can't stop thinking about her. I see now why Bohnes buries bodies for her, and why Ash Kelly keeps finding himself drawn to her against his better judgment.

I wasn't kidding though, when I said that I'd kill him if he didn't leave her alone. I won't allow him to put my woman at risk.

With a tired sigh, I climb out of my purple 'Vette and stand there in my jank-ass wolfman costume, watching the man in black as he lifts his head up to look at me. He's fairly pale, middle-aged, with nondescript brown hair. The perfect thug. Another gift from the mayor? Or ... something else.

"Adrian Arden Lawless," he says, his voice tinted with the slightest brush of an accent. As he pushes up off the wall, I head to my trunk and withdraw the metal baseball bat—just in case.

I rest the end on the ground, folding my hands over the knob as I wait to hear what the man has to say.

He hardly gives the bat a second glance. Likely, he's got a gun on him. But doesn't he know that this bat is all I need?

“What the fuck do you want?” I ask, exhausted and horny and impossibly twisted up on the inside. When I followed Scarlett and found her with the Kelly boy’s tongue down her throat, I should’ve just written her off and walked. Instead, I got myself embroiled in something big.

Here’s the thing though. Living with nothing to lose is sheer misery. Existence feels interminable; death seems inviting. As the days tick by, deviant ideas come to mind, disturbing thoughts, perverse whispers. Suicide looks almost pretty.

Now though, I have something to live for.

Someone, more like.

I have a mission and that is to protect Scarlett Force, to help her avenge her friend, and to help that odd duck Alexei Grove get his life back. With the money that he’s promised Scarlett, we could live an incredible life together. We could have a big wedding. We could buy a house. We could have kids. We could travel.

I want all of that so badly that I salivate when I think about it.

*And what if you have to share that future? What if she’s serious about this ‘reverse harem’ shit?* I’ve been injecting those strange books into my system the way the homeless addicts under the bridge shoot heroin. One girl, many guys. Sometimes three, sometimes more. I read one about a woman who hopped in the back of a rock band’s bus and ended up with five lovers.

Can I do that? Can I handle that? My jealousy surges through me, bright and hot, almost obscuring the sudden knowledge that the accent I’m hearing in the man’s voice is ... Russian.

Ah, *fuck*.

“I’m looking for a boy about your age,” the guy says casually, making his way over to me. The closer he gets, the tighter my muscles and rage coil within me. Scarlett had mentioned that there was a possibility Alexei’s family was connected to the New York City mob.

Nice to know that’s probably true.

Fantastic.

“Okay?” I respond, much more glibly than I probably should. “Get to the point. It’s Halloween, and I have a curfew.” I tap the end of the bat against the ground, waiting for him to get to the punchline. See, if this guy is here, then he already has some reason to believe

that I either know where Alexei is or that I've at least seen him around.

If he knows that, then ... he'll go to Scarlett next, won't he?

It suddenly doesn't seem so unreasonable to share her with Kellin Bohnes. He was right: he can't watch her all the time. Neither can I. We need more than one guy on this.

"His name is Alexei Grove Borisov," the man explains, removing his phone and showing me a picture. Lo and behold, there he is, the arrogant blond weirdo with the gloves. "The family is worried about him. His father, too." The guy swipes over to a photo of a man I've never seen but who bears quite the resemblance to Alexei. "Pavel Borisov. Have you seen him?"

I shake my head easily at that one, and the man nods knowingly. He was already aware that I hadn't seen Pavel. Alexei, on the other hand ...

"What about the boy?" he continues, smiling at me. There's threat apparent in the expression. "Have you seen him around? You couldn't possibly miss him; he has a strong bearing, doesn't he?" There's a brief pause there where the guy's smile fades a bit at the edges, warning me against a lie. "He's been to the old racetrack more than once."

A spark of hope flares in me. Is that how this man found me? Because of my association with the track? In that case, he might be asking dozens of Prescott—and maybe even Fuller and Oak Valley—students about this.

"Yeah, I've seen 'im." I shrug one shoulder. "Drives a Miura." I swipe my hand over my face. "Fuck, that's a nice car." I lick my lips and let my gaze slide to one side. "If you, uh, have the funds, I could probably tell you where to find him." I switch my gaze back to the man's face, and he reaches into his suit jacket. I tense up, and I don't relax, even when he removes his wallet and offers me out several hundred dollars.

I don't want the money. Not at all. Scarlett was right when she told Ash Kelly that I wasn't interested. Of course I hate being poor and scrounging for coins all the damn time, but I have pride, too, and money certainly isn't as important to me as it is to most people.

Can't buy integrity, dignity, and self-respect, now can ya?

I reach out for the cash, and the man draws his hand away.

“Where.” Just that word. Not a question. A command. I bristle, but I answer him because I know that if I don’t, I’ll be making life a hell of a lot harder for both myself and Scarlett.

“He goes to Oak Valley Prep,” I explain, which the guy already knows. I just hope that he doesn’t know that I know that he knows that ... or whatever. The man tenses up, and I know that I’ve got to give him something else or we’re all fucked. *Snitches get stitches* plays in circles in my head—I’ve already toyed with sacred Prescott rules enough to get myself into trouble—but I can’t let this man go to Scarlett instead. “Saw him at the track yesterday, too.” The man relaxes slightly and passes over the cash. I pretend to count it, fake a smile, and look back up at him. “He was trying to get people to race him for money.”

The man’s gaze sharpens, and I know that I’ve got him right where I want him.

“I see. Any takers?” he asks, but I shake my head.

“Nah. He seemed too desperate. Nobody wants to race someone that desperate.” I tuck the cash in my back pocket and swing the baseball bat up to rest on my shoulder. “Anyway, there was a big Halloween party tonight. Saw him there with some Oak Valley kids.” I sigh and run my tongue across my teeth. “If I see him again, can I call you?” I offer up an unhinged laugh and ruffle my hair with my fingers. “I kind of need the cash, you know?”

“If you see him, call me.” The man moves around me and then pauses about five feet to my left, just out of range of the bat. He tosses a card onto the ground near my feet and moves to the edge of the road. I glance back just in time to see a blacked-out Navigator roll up. The man climbs into the back and off he goes.

I wait until the SUV is out of sight before I pick up the card.

There’s not much on it but for a phone number.

“Fucking Christ.” I shove the card into my pocket.

That was close. But it’s not over. Not at all.

Because if the mob is looking for Alexei Grove, they’ll find him.

It’s only a matter of time.

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Saturday night at the track is usually much livelier than this. But I guess everyone is hungover and partied out or something. I'm sitting on the hood of my car, pretending like I don't give a shit that Scarlett's just rolled up in her Pantera with Bohnes' Chevelle kissing her bumper, but I'm strung tight.

I want her so bad.

I want to walk over there and grab her by her hair, yank her mouth to mine, shove my tongue down her throat.

Instead, I smoke a cigarette and wait for her to approach me. Bohnes is right on her heels, and then they're both basically in my face. Scarlett, I want there. Bohnes ... I tell myself I need his help to keep my girl safe. At this point, it appears she needs protection from both the mob *and* the mayor.

"You said you had something to tell me?" she asks, and I nod, pausing as Nisha and Bastian approach, both of them looking putout and pissed off. They know something's going on behind the scenes, something they're not a part of.

"Later," I murmur, taking another drag on my cigarette.

"Girl, you ditched the party way too early last night," Bastian says, and then his gaze slides over to Bohnes' car parked up alongside Scarlett's. "At least now I see where you went."

"There's hardly anyone here tonight. Maybe we should bail and hit Wesley's or something?" Nisha asks with a small sigh, reaching up to rub a hand over her shaved head. Her dark eyes are almost too perceptive. Eventually, she'll figure out that Lemon is missing. It's just a matter of time. "There's no competition, and I'm not in the mood to run races around Fuller brats."

She glances over at the middle-class kids lounging on one of the picnic benches, eyes aglitter at the idea of playing games with Prescott hoodlums.

"Oh, there's some competition tonight," Scarlett says with a strange smile. Her big, brown eyes swing to mine, and I feel my cock stirring to life, aching, throbbing for her. I can barely stand to be around her at school without excusing myself to the bathroom to rub one out. And at the diner that day, when she spent half her damn time fucking *staring* at me, I fucked my fist in a stall and hated myself for days afterward.

"Scarlett and I are racing," Bohnes tells me joyously, tucked inside his hoodie and grinning wildly. "It's a Prescott first." He

looks pointedly at me, and my blood fires up with heat. Not because of him, obviously, but ... *is she racing Bohnes for me? Is this it?*

I can hardly contain myself. My hand shakes as I finish my cigarette off, throwing my boots over the side of my hood and hopping down. I stab the smoke out in the mud and then flick it into the rusted trash can.

“What for?” Nisha asks, her eyes half-lidded with annoyance.

Scarlett’s attention slips back to me, and then she shrugs coyly.

“Who knows? I might want to crown my new fuckboy.” She reaches out and pats my cheek with her hand, moving past me to look for the grand marshal and their infamous clipboard.

Nisha and Bastian follow her, leaving me alone with Bohnes.

Now’s my chance.

I turn to look at his absurdly pale face, but I’m having trouble remembering what it is I’m supposed to be telling him.

*Don’t let sex ruin you, Widow. Focus. Relax.*

I can’t let myself be obliterated by this new and desperate need, by a girl who’s dressed in a black, off-the-shoulder dress that clings to her curves, kisses that sharp indent in her waist, creeps down her strong thighs ... I reach up and rub at my forehead with hard fingers.

“What?” Bohnes asks, almost spitting the word out. He dislikes me as much as I dislike him. We both feel wronged by the other. Like, if one of us wasn’t around, we could have Scarlett all to ourselves. Thing is, I can’t scrub my mind of the way she gazes at Ash Kelly. She likes him far too much for my taste.

“Last night, a man with a Russian accent and pricey threads came to see me.” That’s all I need say, and Bohnes’ face is tightening up. He scowls and turns away, reaching up to rub at his chin with inked fingers. “He wanted to know about Alexei. His dad, too.” Bohnes doesn’t respond, staring at the ground and swiping his thumb over his lower lip. “He knew about me because of the track.” I drop this last bit, just to see if Bohnes doesn’t come to the same conclusion that I did. “Scarlett is okay ... for now.”

“What did you tell him?” he asks, his eyes wide and disturbed as he looks up at me.

“That I’d seen Alexei here, looking for a cash-heavy race to win. I told him that he came to the Halloween party with some Oak Valley



kids. He paid me for the info, and I insinuated I could call him with more.” I slide the card out of my pocket and offer it over to Bohnes.

He’s the undertaker of Prescott, the devil in the details. Much as I wish he’d die in a freak accident or something, I can’t deny that he’s useful now. I feel so damn inadequate, like if I hadn’t gone to juvie, I might’ve been something at Prescott, might’ve held some sway with which to help Scarlett.

She keeps mentioning how the boys need whipping into shape. Bohnes is too busy and doesn’t care, but ... what if I picked up that crown? What if I became the king of Prescott High to match up to her Queen?

Bohnes taps the card against his lips and growls.

“Fuck.” He pauses as Scarlett comes back over to us, the clipboard in her hand. Under the word *Bet*, she’s written *classified information*, just as Bohnes and I did when we raced for her initially. I’m ashamed of myself for having lost that; I’m half-convinced that, with the modifications I’ve made to the Stingray, I could win if I tried again.

But this is better.

She’s racing for me. She wants me. Our eyes meet, and I see her swallow past a sudden tightness in her throat. A smirk spreads over my mouth, despite the possible looming threat of the mob. If needed, I will chuck Alexei Grove into their arms to save Scarlett. No doubt about that. Snitches get stitches, sure, but I’ll do it anyway; I don’t care.

*You’ve become single-minded, Widow*, I warn myself, but I can’t stop. I’m in it now.

“Once this is over and you win,” I start, moving closer to her and hooking an arm around her waist. Bohnes grits his teeth but says nothing. He’s too focused on the mob thing, I think. Whatever. His loss. “Because you *will* win, Scarlett ... Should we find somewhere private to talk?”

She smiles at me, running her palms up my chest and over my shoulders. My nipples pebble, and my cock is so rock-hard that it hurts. I want to shove my hand in my jeans and yank on it to release some of the pressure.

I’d rather save all the pent-up energy in my balls for Scarlett instead.

“Who says this race is over what you think it is?” Bohnes asks finally, pocketing the card. He smiles at me, the grim reaper parading around in the gray daylight of a November afternoon. He looks at home here, with the mud and the chain-link, the sea of vintage cars and the naked limbs of winter-fucked trees. I’m more alive than he’ll ever be. “You still owe me for your indiscretion in the library; I’m racing Scarlett for *her* right to fuck you. It’ll give her permission, but you won’t have it until you repay the favor you owe me.”

I frown at that, rage swarming up like wasps inside of me. I almost snatch my bat and smash it into the back of Bohnes’ head, but that’d upset Scarlett, and I can’t do that to her.

“Rein it in, cowboy,” she whispers, rising up on her toes to press a kiss to the side of my throat. I go tense, and I almost push her away. Not because I truly want to. I want to fuck her more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life, but I’m afraid.

I’m afraid because—even without Bohnes’ permission—I might do it anyway. I might just lift her up onto the hood of my car, shove her panties aside, and take her right here and now in front of everyone. I’m also terrified that I *won’t* be able to do it, that memories of my uncle’s awful hands will obliterate my brain, and I’ll fall into a massive panic attack.

Touch still scares me. Touch still triggers me.

There’s that, and then there’s the other thing, that awful whisper in the back of my mind. What if sex turns me into a monster the way it did that horrible man? I’m already willing to betray the rules of the track. How much further would I take this shit?

*For Scarlett, all the way.*

As I stare into her eyes, I’m not sure I care.

“I need you *now*—that’s not a request,” I growl out, sweeping a hand down the glossy wave of her dark hair. She usually wears it braided, but it’s free right now, flowing down her back and over the plump ripe roundness of her ass. *God, what it’d be like to spread those cheeks, to position myself at the juicy peach of her cunt, to drive in with a violent thrust and see what it really feels like ...*

I exhale suddenly and jerk back. I nearly push her away, but I stop myself at the last second, panting hard as she looks up at me from under a fall of ebony lashes.

“Just relax, Widow. Bohnes knows how to utilize his resources; he’ll call on that favor soon enough.” She pulls away from me, heading for the Pantera and climbing in.

Bastian sidles up to me, dressed in a pale pink t-shirt and jeans with white cowboy boots.

“Just so you know, I voted for the two of you.” He smiles at me.

I turn up the rage, and flash him a sharp, disparaging look of warning. This is the expression I used in juvie when I wanted to be left the hell alone, but it does damn near nothing on Bastian.

Right.

I see now why he’s Scarlett’s best friend. Who else could put up with her stare? She’s as bad as I am.

“Did you think my getting with Scarlett would make me more tolerant toward you? Screw off.” I roll my eyes and move toward the bleachers, but Bastian cups his hands around his mouth and calls out to me anyway.

“Um, yes, actually. We’re a package deal. Get used to it, Mr. Sulky but Well-Muscled.”

Even turning and spitting at his feet does nothing, so I move on. If not, I’m going to strangle the little bastard.

I sit on the second bench from the bottom, resting my feet on the first. Elbows on my knees, hands clasped together.

I’ve never been as nervous as I am in that moment.

*Do I want her to win ... or do I actually want her to lose? What if I’m not ready for sex? What if ...* I shove the thoughts down and watch.

It’s in Scarlett’s hands now.

She lines up the Pantera beside Bohnes’ Chevelle, bright red and black, a very pretty pair. Even their cars look like a couple. That bothers me. The jealousy sits hot and uncomfortable under my skin, but I push it aside.

“This girl ...” Nisha murmurs, and then she’s sitting just a few feet away from me with Bastian at her side. She glances my way, but I pretend not to notice. “Care to explain where you disappeared to last night? You ain’t up in that warehouse having orgies, now are you?”

I give her the barest hint of a scowl and refocus on the race as the starter waves the green flag.

Bohnes starts off the race with a dirty trick, hitting the front end of her car as I raise my brows and sit up straight, mouth open in shock.

“What the fuck is that idiot doing?!” Nisha chokes out as the Chevelle pushes the smaller Pantera to the side. It’s insane that he’d race his girlfriend—fuck that kills me—like that, but I understand. Scarlett doesn’t want to be pandered to; she wants to crush the competition with her own skills.

Ash threw the race that night, I’ll bet. When I thought he was Aspen, I figured there was no way, despite what it looked like. Now that I know the truth, I’m sure of it. *That* is why she was so mad that day.

*I’ll never hold back, Scarlett. I can promise you that. You will always have all of me, and at full force.*

“It’s the only way for him to win,” I say aloud, even though I’m sure that Nisha and Bastian already know that. “The Chevelle is a quarter-mile car at best; controlled drifting is a pipe dream.” I sit back with my palms on the wet metal bench. It’s rusted all over and I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if the bleachers collapsed one day. For now, it works. “Compared to the Pantera? On this track? Good luck.”

But Bohnes isn’t just a good driver: he knows all of Scarlett’s tricks.

He pushes her to the edge of the track and stays on her, pacing her and putting her exactly where he wants her to go. Bastian sucks in a sharp gasp when she slams on the brakes, spraying mud and skidding violently down the straight.

Bohnes overshoots her, slowing down on the curve, but she’s already moving to the inside of the track, picking up speed so that when the turn comes, she’s able to shoot past him. On the next straight, he catches up to her, the black hearse-like car gleaming under the strange autumn light.

I wet my lips, still struggling to decide if I want her to win ... or lose.

Sex or no sex.

I know that I want it, but can I handle it? Can I push past the trauma that’s broken my brain into sharp pieces?

Once again, the cars are lined up, and Bohnes teases her again, pushing the Chevelle into her front right wheel until she's forced to either take the hit or shy away.

Scarlett yanks the wheel, spinning the Pantera around in a wild circle as Bohnes blows past her, and then she slows down, waiting for him to come up on her. She plays chicken with him, putting her car right in his path, testing him.

He could hit her. Fuck, he could *kill* her.

Instead, he slams on his brakes and turns into the drift, careening through the mud as Scarlett takes off on him yet again. But, because the Chevelle can handle the straights like nothing else, he catches up.

On their twentieth lap, they blast past the finish line together, and the checkered flag is waved.

“Who ... who won?” Bastian asks, glancing over at Nisha and then me.

I have no fucking clue, but there's quite a crowd now. Everyone who was here has gathered around, waving their phones, zooming in on the videos.

The Pantera and the Chevelle—both of which are going to need some work on the front ends—pull up and Scarlett stumbles out, that stupid radio station playing some creepy ass song that seems to fit the scene.

*“I'm Nessie, Prescott fans, and that was AViVA with 'Cemetery'. Halloween night was wild, wasn't it? Three more suspected arson cases, a buttload of graffiti, and an article published by an anonymous writer that's sweeping the city. It was up on the Register Guard's website for only five minutes before it was taken down, but screenshots last forever, my friends.*

*“Tune in later for a special reading by Milicent Patrick. Next up: 'STAY' by No Resolve.”*

Scarlett kicks her door shut with her heel, sweating bullets and shaking all over.

“Who won?!” she shrieks, looking around as girls stumble up to her, showing their phones. Nobody approaches Bohnes. Or me either. In fact, we both have nice, healthy space bubbles around us.

He glances over at me, and I look back at him.

“What do you think, *Adrian*?” he teases, but I ignore him, moving up beside Scarlett. Some of her girls offer me annoyed looks, but she’s my goddamn woman, not theirs. I snatch the phone from her hand and zoom in as she looks up at me, pupils wide, electric energy tracing over her skin.

“You won, clearly,” I state after examining the photo. The crowd murmurs agreement, and even Bohnes takes a look and nods, smiling prettily as he tucks his hands into the pockets of his black jeans.

“You won, my sweet, dark love. Congratulations.” His eyes flick back to me, and he winks which just friggin’ *enrages* me. “Just remember: only *she* has my permission, and it takes two to tango, doesn’t it, Widow?”

I toss the phone into the crowd, and one of Scarlett’s girls catches it.

Scarlett herself turns to face me, a slight smile edging her lips, adrenaline causing her hands to shake.

I know then that I have to race her myself, just so I can be the one responsible for hyping her up like that. She takes a step toward me, sliding one warm palm up my midsection as I squeeze my hands into fists, fighting to either take her in my arms or push her away, I’m not entirely certain.

“I’m going to make it so worthwhile,” she whispers, sucking my earlobe into her mouth and cupping one hand over my junk. I don’t mean for anything to happen, standing there in the crowd like that, but my eyes squeeze shut, and I’m trembling all over.

*Oh God, fuck no.*

Right there, at the edge of the track with all those people, I blow my goddamn load in my jeans. My hands come up of their own accord, fingers wrapping Scarlett’s upper arms and squeezing hard. She lets out a small, surprised laugh, rising up on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear again.

“All the dirty, wicked things you do for me ... I’m going to do them all back to you. Watch that cherry, Widow. I’m coming for it.” She waits for me to, uh, finish and calm down a little before she withdraws her hand, lifts it to her filthy mouth, and licks her palm.

My eyes drift in Bohnes’ direction, but he’s not looking at me.

Instead, he's watching the trees, and I can't help but wonder if there's something out there that's caught his attention.

I look back down at Scarlett, reaching up my right hand to cup the side of her face.

“Don't be too excited: I can't promise I won't lose myself in the moment.”

“Oh, Widow, I'm *counting* on it.”

Scarlett draws away from me, hops in her Pantera, and takes off with her friends close behind her.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from light grey at the top to black at the bottom. Overlaid on this background are several vertical and horizontal streaks and splatters of bright red, resembling blood. The text 'CHAPTER EIGHTEEN' is centered in a white, serif font. The word 'CHAPTER' is on the top line, and 'EIGHTEEN' is on the bottom line. The red splatters are most prominent around the letters of 'CHAPTER' and 'EIGHTEEN', with some streaks extending downwards from the bottom of the text.

CHAPTER  
EIGHTEEN



## *Scarlett*

Something unfortunate happens on Sunday morning, the day after my race with Bohnes, the day after Widow ejaculated in his damn pants again.

*Considering the number of times I've gotten him to nut while barely touching him, what if he just slides his dick in me and then comes? I decide that I don't care. I want to pluck the pretty, bright red cherry of his virginity from the tree of life and keep it for myself, a memory forever tucked into a back pocket that I can pull out every now and again and admire.*

*Anyway, if he does come that quick, I'll work him up again. He can orgasm in me until I'm dripping ... That's what I'm thinking when the unfortunate event begins to unfold.*

It's inevitable. It's my responsibility. It's something I intended to do anyway.

But the choice is snatched from me with a single text from Ash.

*It's hitting the news now, the \*orange emoji\* thing.*

I'm not stupid: he means Lemon, he just didn't want to be so literal over text, not even with an emoji. Nothing of true importance should ever be done over text.

I tap my phone against my lips, sprawled on my stomach atop my bed while Bastian hums from his bed on the floor, flipping through a mechanic's magazine on his phone. Nisha is behind me, propped in my pillows and filling out housing applications for her mom.

Did I mention that Archer Realty just got ahold of her family's rental? They have sixty days to move house.

KMZI 66.6 is playing from the speaker on my nightstand, a song called *'The Horror of Our Love'* by Ludo. Reminds me of Bohnes, as fucked up as that is. I casually sit up and reach over her to turn it off.

I'm going to tell my friends; they deserve to know.

I'd like to do it in my own time, thank you very much.

As I'm leaning over Nisha, she glances up and then grabs my arm, fingertips digging into my skin.

“What are you up to?” she asks me, and in her eyes, I see that she knows. Somehow, somehow she knows that something is wrong. Fuck her and her perceptiveness. Makes her a damn good lieutenant, but also, it’s damn near impossible to keep anything from this woman for long.

The song ends, and a male chuckle trickles from the speakers. Wolfman again. If I lunge to turn the station off now, she’ll know that something’s up. Our eyes meet, and I know she can see the fear in my face.

I sit back on my calves, waiting. Knowing. KMZI 66.6 is the gossip machine of the Prescott neighborhood.

*“Heya sports fans, if you missed our special broadcast from yesterday, we read an open letter from an anonymous source, briefly published to the Register Guard’s website and taken down almost as quickly.”*

A soft feminine laugh follows: it’s Milicent Patrick again.

*“Open letter. More like scathing diatribe. It was the, I mean, the most perfect takedown of Mayor Kelly’s plans for the city. No stone was left unturned, no entity spared. This writer, she really tore down everyone: the mayor, the CEO of Archer Realty, and uh, the police. She went after the homeless addicts shitting in buckets outside of tent city. She was—”*

“Ruthless?” Wolfman interjects with a snort. *“Brilliant, hands-down.”*

I listened to the broadcast last night. We all did. It was quite clear to me who penned it: Emma Jean Thompson. There could be nobody else. Nisha frowns and releases my arm finally, but I’m sure this isn’t over yet. They’ll bring up Lemon in short order; I can guarantee it.

*“Her mentions of Larron Van Gordon—Mayor Kelly’s political rival in the last election—were so poignant, Wolfy. She essentially accused the mayor’s son, Aspen Kelly, of murdering the competition. Anonymous has some Bad Bitch Energy going on, that’s for sure.”*

“Definitely,” Wolfman agrees, and I can tell that he’s about to segue into another subject. *“Speaking of Aspen Kelly, let’s talk about his performance on the news this morning. What did you think about that?”*

Nisha gives me a look and Bastian stops browsing his magazine, sitting up and then crawling onto the bed to listen beside me. He’s so

desperate to talk to Lemon that he's been visiting her aunt nearly every day, hoping for news of any sort.

I know what's coming, and I let it happen. Because if the news is out, it's too late. I'm backed into a corner. It doesn't matter if I'm ready emotionally. This is happening.

*“So, if you're just tuning in,” Milicent announces, “we're discussing an interesting turn of events here in South Prescott. Lucy Bree Hall, an eighteen-year-old Prescott native, has been reported missing by the Kelly Family.”*

Nisha curses so dramatically that I can feel her fear and anger in my bones. Bastian gasps, the sound of his hand slapping across his mouth giving me goose bumps. This is not how I wanted them to find out.

*“Mayor Kelly's pleas generally, you know, fall on death ears when it comes to me, but I'm intrigued by this. After all, she's one of our own.”* Wolfman pauses again to let Milicent explain further.

*“Lucy was engaged to be married to Mayor Kelly's oldest son, Aspen Kelly. I've never liked the guy, I'll be honest, but the, uh, the look on his face during the press conference was heartbreaking.”*

*“Oh come on, Mil. You're better than that. He's a consummate actor! He's a, he's—”*

*“You can't fake a look like that, Wolfy. He was, I mean, he was devastated. I'm not saying that you're wrong; I'm not saying the mayor himself didn't have anything to do with Lucy's disappearance, but I really don't think Aspen was involved.”*

I reach out with a shaking hand and finally turn the radio off.

“What the fuck, Scar? Switch it back on!” Bastian lunges for the radio, but I grab his wrist and turn a quiet, empty look on him. I'm going for neutral, but I have no idea how it comes across. Regardless, it's the best I can do right now.

“I know where Lemon is.” It's not a lie, even if I deliver it in a tone that implies that she isn't wrapped in a tarp and stuck at the bottom of a pond. “You don't need to listen to rumors and hearsay from anyone else.”

“When did you last see her?” Bastian demands as Nisha stares at me, that strange knowing look still twinkling in her brown eyes.

“I last saw her ... on Saturday.” I'm shaking all over. I think Nisha notices, but Bastian doesn't. “I'll take you to her, but not

today.” I turn to Nisha.

“Lemon’s safe?” she asks, because she’s just that good.

“I will take you to her; I promise.” I reach up and rub at my face with both hands.

“When?” Basti demands, looking at me as if I’ve betrayed him. Have I? I hope he doesn’t see it that way. It wasn’t because I didn’t trust them that I didn’t tell them right away. I didn’t want to face the truth of it, didn’t want to believe it was real.

I don’t want to say goodbye to Lemon. Somehow, telling my other besties that our fourth is gone ... that makes it real.

“This week, I swear it.” I draw an X shape over my heart as Nisha scowls at me.

“Not only will you do that, but you’re going to tell us what else happened last Saturday.” Nisha throws her legs over the edge of the bed and takes off, leaving me alone with Bastian.

He stares at me with pain apparent in his brown eyes before reaching out to cup the side of my face.

“Whatever’s going on, I’m sure you have your reasons.” He smiles at me, and I feel violently, nauseously ill. He can’t smile at me like that. He can’t trust me the way he does. As a leader, I’ve failed. If I couldn’t keep Evelyn Moreno safe, and I couldn’t keep my best friend from preschool safe then ... what use am I?

Self-pitying thoughts aren’t generally my MO. I shove them aside and force myself to smile back at Basti.

“I do,” I promise him, enjoying the moment while trying not to wonder if he’ll ever be able to smile like this again.

Or if he’ll hate me as much as I hate myself for failing to save our best friend from herself.

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I can’t sit around and wait for Ash or Bohnes to feed me information, for Widow to check out that suss motherfucker that showed up at his halfway house. Alexei is barely mobile at this point, seeing as he’s public enemy number one.

So I do what I thought I’d never do, and I take the initiative, texting lil’ miss Emma Jean and setting up a time to meet this

coming weekend. I have information to feed her and, I'm sure, she has something that I could use, some detail that might tell us why Pavel Borisov was scheduled for execution.

From the outside, it appears he was just one of the guys, another player in this bullshit game. The Borisov Group specializes in reorganizing entire neighborhoods in suburban areas and redeveloping them into tighter, more urban formats. Archer Realty, on the other hand, focuses on luxury builds for businesses, storefronts on the bottom, offices up top, often capped with extravagant penthouses.

So why kill a guy who was on their side, right? There must be something else to it.

By Wednesday, I know I've pushed this out as far as it can go. The whole school is aflutter with gossip about Lemon. By the end of the day on Monday, I was so over the sideways glances and the whispering that I put down an ultimatum: next person to bring it up within earshot of me gets their car dragged to the junkyard and transmogrified into a goddamn Wall-E cube.

Sweat is pouring down the sides of my face as I climb out of the Pantera, having won yet *another* race against my besties.

Nisha and Bastian both look like they want to kill me.

I don't blame them. I led us all to the track and then I engaged them both in several races—one on one, and both at the same time—and I kicked their asses. Over and over again.

"Jesus, Scarlett, we get it! You're better than us." Nisha climbs out of her Lotus and throws a nearly full Gatorade bottle at me.

"Just for the record," Bastian corrects, swiping at some sweat on his own forehead as I stand in two inches of mud and wet leaves in my high heels, panting like a maniac. "I've always known you were better than me. I'm meant to be under the hood, not behind the wheel."

"Why are we here?" Nisha demands, marching over to me and grabbing me by the shoulders. "You've been weird as hell since Sunday. I mean, you're always weird, but like, even for you." She releases me and crosses her arms over her chest. "You promised to take us to see Lemon. Does this all have something to do with Aspen Kelly?"

I almost break right then, staring into my friend's face. I almost admit that Lemon died on my lap, bleeding from a stab wound to the

chest. That I felt the last twitches and spasms of her body, that I watched my fuckboys roll her up in a tarp and submerge her in a remote pond on logging land.

“I ...” I start, but the words won’t come. “I’ll take you to Lem.”

My throat closes up, and I choke on the sentence.

Nisha and Bastian exchange looks, but when I climb into the Pantera, they get in their own cars and they follow me. Yes, Bohnes was driving this route last week. Yeah, I’ve only been here once.

But I will never, ever forget how to get to this spot.

I could stumble around drunk on Jameson, blindfolded, and wearing stilts, and I could still find my way out here.

We stop at a rusted gate, and I hop out, pushing it open to clear the way. It probably isn’t wise to come out here often, but like, I have to at least let Nisha and Bastian say goodbye. We’ve all been together since preschool.

And now we’ll never be together again.

This is it, the very last time.

I’ll never get to free Lemon from Prescott, or eat her really bad chocolate chip cookies, or watch boring black-and-white movies that make her cry and wax poetic about love and romance.

I come to a stop beside the pond and step out. The air is wet and dripping with fog, a prelude to the storm that’s rolling in, the one that might turn into an ice storm and sweep over the city like Jack motherfuckin’ Frost.

“Okay,” I say, turning around as Bastian looks around the place like he’s never been in nature before.

He moves closer to the pond, and then shies away from a blackberry bramble with a small shout.

“Eww. Scar, what the fuck are we doing out here?” he stares at the sea of stumps and not-too-distant woods that circle the clearing. There’s an old *No Swimming* sign beside me which I find to be ironic. “This is like, the middle of nowhere. Is Lem in hiding?” He turns a terrified gaze over to me. “OMG, she’s in trouble with the mayor?” He gasps and puts a hand over his mouth, but I can’t reply.

I’ve gone completely still.

To make matters worse, Nisha’s gaze moves from me to the pond. Back to me. To the pond.

She takes a step back. Another. And then she sits down on the ground.

“Girl,” Bastian breathes, looking down at her. “What are you doing?”

“Where is Lemon, Scarlett?” Nisha asks, looking up at me with a sad sort of acceptance. She knows, doesn’t she? I don’t even have to say a thing. She already knows. More than likely, she’s known since the radio show.

She just didn’t want to believe it.

Neither do I.

Bastian turns back to me. They’re both just *staring* at me now. Waiting.

Poor Basti. He still doesn’t get it. He doesn’t understand. He’s fiddling with his shades and sighing, looking around like he expects Lem to pop out of the bushes at any moment.

“Bastian,” I begin, hating how cowardly I feel right now. This is the most scared I’ve ever been in my entire life. Right now. This exact second. *Be brave. You’re Scarlett Force, after all. The best thing, even over sliced goddamn bread. The best invention, even over the wheel. A name in lights. Be. Brave.* “Lemon is right here.”

“Right where?” he asks, still not getting it.

Nisha bows her head.

“Lemon is in this pond,” I say, breathing hard. I swallow down the guilt. I didn’t kill Lemon. This isn’t my fault. So why the fuck does it feel like it is?

Because I’m the boss. Because everything is always the boss’ fault. It goes straight to the top, right? It’s a spot that I wanted, that I fought for, that my friends backed me up on, that *Lemon* backed me up on.

These last few weeks, she was in prime idiot mode, thinking she was in love, making stupid decisions, but she wasn’t always that way. She was loyal, and fun, and she brightened every room she stepped into.

She was my polar opposite in so many ways, but now that I’m standing here, and the cool November air tastes like grave dirt and lost opportunities, like a life cut short, like moldering leaves and pumpkin patches that I’ll never visit. Now that I’m here, I see that

Lemon and I are exactly the same in one, simple, horrifying way: *we fall hopelessly, devastatingly in love.*

The thing about me? It's not just boys that I fall for. I fall for adrenaline and cars and races and violence and power and the heady dreamlike euphoria of winning. Every. Single. Time.

"Lemon is in the pond?" Bastian asks, sounding bored. But then he stops looking at the trees, and he's staring at me as the color drains from his face. "Lemon ... is in the pond."

"Lemon is dead."

Those three words, they fucking slay me. I put my hand on the *No Swimming* sign and lean against it, breathing hard, trying not to think of those last few moments, failing, drowning in them.

"What do you mean *Lemon is dead*?" Bastian asks, frowning hard as Nisha lets out a single sob, putting both of her hands over her mouth to hold in the sounds. "Lemon isn't dead; you said you saw her last weekend."

I swallow again, my guilt, my pain, my frustration with Basti for just not fucking getting it.

"I did see Lemon last Saturday night: just before she died."

Silence.

More silence.

Basti is still staring, but he's dropped his sunglasses. Might not seem like much, but those are twelve-hundred-dollar Gucci shades that I won on the track against some Oak Valley bro; they were a gift, and he's always treasured them.

"What ... I don't understand." He reaches up and rubs at the side of his head. "She ... why is she in the pond?"

"Bastian, fuck!" I scream at him, getting angry even though I know he doesn't deserve it. I throw a hand out to indicate the murky water. "She's in there because we wrapped her in a tarp, taped her up, and strapped a cinderblock to her."

I don't mention that Bohnes stabbed her body several times to make sure that gases didn't build up ... I almost vomit. I can handle fucked-up shit, but not when someone I love is part of that fucked-up shit.

"We?" he echoes, shaking, his eyes wide. "Who is we? Why did you kill our friend?"



Oh, man, that ruins me. That fucking *ruins* me.

“I didn’t kill her!” I shout back, but the words sound hollow and untrue, even to me. “She called Aspen and—”

“Aspen.” Just that one word. Bastian and Nisha turn to look at each other, and then Bastian’s running at me. He tackles me right into the water. Right into the water where Lemon is buried.

I push him away, and he flounders, swimming down, searching.

But the pond is too deep, and it’s too murky; it’s impossible to see.

I grab onto the side and pull myself out, gasping and choking. Nisha is there, offering me her hand and yanking me out the rest of the way, until I’m lying on my back on the grass.

Bastian surfaces, sucking in a huge breath of air, and then letting out a sob.

“Lucy!” he screams, and then he’s diving again.

I roll onto my side and let him scream, curling up into a ball, wet and cold and ashamed.

“Aspen did this?” Nisha asks, sitting beside me as Bastian frantically dives over and over again, shouting hysterically. It’s a horrible thing to witness. She hesitates.

“No,” I murmur, and then correct myself with a sigh, sitting up suddenly and staring at one of my best friends in all the world fall into wild hysterics. “Not exactly. Aspen is ... I killed him.”

“I told you not to fuck me over for a fuckboy,” Nisha whispers, turning an accusatory glare on me that I fully and completely deserve. “Scarlett, what the fuck have you gotten us into?”

And it’s that simple question—particularly, Nisha’s use of the word *us*—that undoes me. I curl up with my head in her lap and she strokes my hair while I sob. Bastian joins us shortly after, crawling up and collapsing on Nisha’s other side.

“You fucked-up,” he whispers, but I already know that. He sits up, and I know he’s crying, even if his tears are impossible to see, mixed up with pond water and fresh, cool droplets of rain. “You fucked-up, Scarlett. Stop lying to us. I want to know everything. No, no, I have a *right* to know everything.”

When I finally sit up, I feel like a wet kitten, kicked and stomped on.

But kittens grow into cats. Sometimes, they grow into really, really big cats.

And those cats? They have claws and teeth.

*I'll make this right*, I think, staring at the surface of the pond. *The world be damned, Lemon, I'll make this right; I swear it.*

“Come over,” I say with a sigh. “Everybody should be at work; Alexis is at some workshop where they’ll try and fail to convince her to sign up for in-patient therapy.”

I make myself stand up, stumble a bit, sway. Nisha rises, too, and Bastian storms past me, heading for his car with another lingering sob. As soon as he climbs in, he punches the steering wheel over and over and over again.

“He hates me.” I stare at Bastian through the windshield, shivering in the rain as it turns from a gentle sprinkle to a deluge.

“He doesn’t hate you, Scar. He trusted you, and you broke that trust. You’ll have to work on earning it back.” She puts her hand on my shoulder and then lets it fall off, peering into my face. “If you lie to either of us again—even if you think you’re doing us a favor—I’ll steal your car and wreck it. Mark my words.”

She leaves, climbing into her Lotus.

She and Bastian use the empty space around the pond to turn around, taking off down the gravel road and leaving me behind.

For a while, I just stand there, and then I make my way over to the pond again.

I sit down at the edge of it for a while, rain coming down in sheets on my head, rippling the surface of the water.

The sound of a car’s tires don’t disturb me. I’m so good at recognizing the various engines around the school that I know exactly who it is.

Widow moves over to crouch beside me, as if he doesn’t even notice the rain.

“You shouldn’t come here,” he says, but I already know that.

I turn to look at him, and his eyes lift up to meet mine; I think they were fixated on my mouth.

“I don’t need a bodyguard.” I turn back to the pond, and he shakes his head.

“Maybe not, but you’re getting one anyway. Get up.” He stands up and then, when I don’t comply with his annoying order, he bends down and scoops me up like I weigh nothing at all.

I blink at him in surprise as he carries me over my car and deposits me in the front seat. With his hands on the roof, he leans in to peer at me, and I must say, he’s even more attractive with his jewel-toned hair wet and sticking to his face.

“I thought you didn’t like to be touched?” I ask, because a good quip is distracting. Because flirtation is distracting. *Widow* is distracting.

He smirks at me.

“You’re the cure, Scarlett Force. Make no mistake: as soon as I get the chance to fuck you, I’m diving in headfirst.” He taps his hand on the roof and stands up. “I’ll follow you home, but I’m not leaving: I’m going to sit outside.”

“No, you’re not,” I tell him, reaching for the handle of my door. “You’re going to come inside.”

I slam the door before he gets the chance to respond, and then I almost smile.

Almost.

Eventually, that’ll be true in more ways than one.

Just ... not today.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from light grey at the top to black at the bottom. The text 'CHAPTER NINETEEN' is centered in a white, serif font. The word 'CHAPTER' is on the top line, and 'NINETEEN' is on the bottom line. The text is heavily splattered with bright red, blood-like stains that drip down the page, creating a macabre and violent atmosphere.

CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

## *Scarlett*

Bastian and Nisha have both rinsed in the shower and stolen some of my clothes to wear while waiting for me.

Basti snuffles, a mug of what I think is tea held in his hands. Nisha is nursing coffee, and they're both dead-eyed and silent when I step in the front door with Widow at my heels.

He looks unreal inside the tiny duplex with its meager furnishings. It's like, he's not even a person, just some sort of wet dream that my cunt came up with to fuck with my head.

"What is he doing here?" Bastian asks, his voice getting this strained, angry quality to it that I've only heard a scant handful of times. Once, the owner of the club he used to dance for refused to pay him over some small slight or another. Bastian took this exact tone with him before he smashed a metal chair over the guy's head.

Shit.

"He's a good guy in all of this," I explain quickly, glancing over at Widow and wondering if anyone in any world or any future incarnation would ever describe Adrian Arden Lawless as a good guy. The man himself seems perplexed and also weirdly nervous. He looks around the boring living room with its old lady furnishings—I got a slap on the wrists with a ruler (literally) for the sin of breaking Gram's favorite lamp—and then returns his attention to me. "Let me change and I'll be right down."

Widow continues to follow me, right up the stairs and into my room. He pauses in the doorway, his eyes on the bed before they move to the open doors of the closet and the impressive collection of stolen and hard-won merchandise.

"Jesus. I thought you were poor," he says. It's not an insult or anything. We're both from Prescott; everyone is poor.

"Oh, that?" I move to the closet and finger the sleeve of the gold dress that Alexei sent me. Now that he's basically homeless and on the lam, I should give it back to him. He can

pawn it for extra cash. “Most of this I got from the track. Some of it from Oak Valley brats, some from Fuller kids. Usually, I race other Prescott students and win the stuff they steal.”

I release the sleeve. I don’t feel like explaining that specific dress to Widow. Instead, I reach up and hook a thumb under one of my suspender straps.

He licks his lips and steps into the room, closing the door behind him and putting his back up against it.

There’s something oddly intimate about him being in here, despite the fact that we’re not doing anything except looking at one another.

I slip the suspender strap over my shoulder.

We can’t dally in here; I can’t let sex distract me from reality. That is, the horrible nightmare of sitting there with Bastian and Nisha and telling them how Lemon died. Tragically. Violently. Pointlessly.

The other strap comes off and then I bend down to slip off my heels.

“No bra, huh?” Widow asks, his voice husky and strange. He sounds like he’s in pain.

“What are you, the bra police?” I retort, looking down at the brown spots of my nipples, rock-hard and glaringly obvious through the thin, wet, white fabric. “There’s no law that says I have to wear a bra.” I snort. “Not that I’d ever obey such draconian fuckery.”

“I’d rather you never wore a bra,” he retorts, holding his position against the door with admirable effort. “Or maybe you should always wear a bra? I don’t want other guys looking at what’s mine.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” I groan with a roll of my eyes. I shove the pants down my hips, revealing the pretty thong I wore underneath it. It was intended for Widow anyway, in case I bent over in the library and he wanted to cup the smooth perfection of my ass through the stretchy fabric of my plaid pants. “You’re annoyingly alpha for a virgin, you know that?”

Widow crosses his arms, that fresh ink on his bicep rippling with the movement. I've never paid it much attention, but I'd like to study it and lick it and bite it, just to see if my teeth marks might show through the ink.

"You told your friends?" he asks, ignoring my comment about him being a virgin. But he's not asking about his sexual status: he means Lemon.

"I told them." I take my shirt off and Widow lets out this sharp hiss, turning his head away violently and squeezing his eyes shut. I'd enjoy his reaction a whole lot more if my friend wasn't dead and tied to a cinderblock at the bottom of a pond. "That she's dead anyway. The rest of it ..." I turn away from him and then bend over dramatically, slipping my panties off, and then doing a bit of a stripper roll as I stand straight again. I throw a look over my shoulder, pulling out my hairband and ruffling up my wet and mussed hair. "The rest of it we're going to tell them now."

Widow says nothing.

He looks like he's been hypnotized by the ripe, full shape of my pussy. His cock is tenting his pants and sweat beads profusely on his temples. *Oh, he wants me. Fuckin' bad.* The truth is: I want him, too.

I've wanted him since the first moment that I saw him in the hall, when he had the balls to reject me. I want him when he snarls at me, when he barks orders, when he acts like an alpha-hole; I want him even more when he's spewing lines about romance and shit.

"What? My pussy so pretty that you're speechless?" I grin at him, but he looks straight at me, and I can see that his gaze is burrowing down into the nitty-gritty of my heart and soul.

"Scarlett," he says, and his voice is a dark dream, some distant, hazy thing that, when morning comes, you just barely remember it. But you mourn it. And you think about it. And you want it and miss it so badly that it *burns*. "Put some clothes on."

He turns and opens the door to my bedroom, disappearing out of it and slamming it shut behind him. I just gape after him and, after quickly yanking on a loose t-shirt from the local weed dispensary and a pair of leggings, I follow after.

He's downstairs already when I step out of my room, sitting quietly in a chair in the living room, silent and brooding.

*What a weirdo. Why do I always like the weirdos so much?*

Something that Bohnes said to me whispers in the back of my mind, and I shiver as his—surprisingly—wise words wash over me.

*“Normal is filth. Normal is complacency. Normal is accepting that this hideous world is right, and you are wrong. I don't accept that. Not at all.”*

He's right; he is. And *that* is precisely why I like the weirdos.

I come down the stairs and then just stand there for a minute, trying to decide where to sit. Next to Bastian, who just so happens to be taking up the entire couch and glaring at me like he wants to kill me.

Nisha, in that tiny ass chair that my grandma likes so much?

No.

I turn and then sit down on Widow's lap. He recoils slightly, but then, as if he's just realized the type of reaction he's having and wants to silence it, he curls his arms around my waist.

It's surprisingly comfortable, sitting there in his lap like that. Also, as he leans in close, I have to wonder ... is he *smelling* me? I think he is.

“Fuck.” I can barely hear the word slip past his lips, so I just assume that neither Nisha nor Basti can hear it either.

Big mistake.

“Wow, you two are at this level already? Cuddling all nice and pretty together?” Bastian is *furious*, but how can I blame him? He's staring with wide, empty eyes at the surface of the coffee table. “Lemon is dead and you're prancing around with



fuckboys galore, having a grand old time.” He lifts an enraged gaze to my face. “Fuck you, Scarlett.”

“Don’t talk to my girl like that,” Widow snarls out, the words sharp and fast and scary as fuck. I mean, scary to most people; not me, I love them. But, like, holy shit.

“Your girl?” Bastian argues, shoving up from the sofa and sloshing tea everywhere. “Since when? Let me just ask this: did you two hook up before, during, or after Lemon’s death?”

“That’s enough.” The words are from me this time. They aren’t snappy, and they aren’t mean, they read as what they are: an order. A royal command. This is Bastian’s opportunity to challenge me, to leave, or to fall in line.

He hesitates, I’ll give him that. He has the balls to stand there and fume for an entire *minute* before he finally, blessedly sits down.

“If you’ll shut your mouth for a minute, I’ll explain everything.”

Much of this information will be new to Widow, too. I focus on the hot, foreign feel of his body underneath and behind me, and then I start to talk.

I don’t stop, not even when Bastian cries or screams, or when he breaks the mug. Not when Nisha gets up and paces outside on the miniscule cement block we call a patio. Not when Widow’s arms tighten, and I feel some weird shift in my chest, similar to what happened when I was staying at Bohnes’ place for the first time.

After I’m finished, I carefully extract myself from Widow’s arms and head into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. It’s just an excuse, really. It ain’t like I’m British or something; I don’t drink fucking tea. Bastian is a poof, so he enjoys a cuppa every now and again.

Widow follows me in there, too.

“Dude, you are a stage-five clinger and stalker extraordinaire.” I find that there’s nothing dismissive or upset in my tone or my chest about either of those things. “Don’t stop, please.”

Widow ruffles up, goose bumps everywhere, fingers raking through his hair.

“You’re really fucking me up, Scarlett Force,” he admits, and then he scowls again, like he’s pissed or something. “I don’t even understand how this happened. You stole my car. You insulted me. You fuck other guys in front of me and demand to have your way in every goddamn thing. You make me bury bodies and kill the mayor’s goons, and then you smile and laugh and flirt and bare your tits and bend over ...”

He trails off. And then he comes for me.

He wraps his hand over my mouth, and then he shoves my leggings down. It happens so quick that I can’t even think to protest. One minute, we’re talking and the next, Widow’s inside of me.

His cock is thick and hot and hard, and it slips in so damn easily, putting him balls-deep against my ass.

“Holy shit,” he grinds out, and then he bites me in the shoulder, and I can’t breathe. I’m so full, and he feels so good, and this is so terribly, terribly wrong. It’s just happening. His first time, and our first time together, but oh. My. Fucking. God.

Oh my God.

“Widow ...” My breath comes out so soft as he moves his hand away from my mouth, and then he’s fucking me against the counter, slamming his hips into me as I splay my fingers wide and struggle to control all the sounds that want to escape me.

Not only are Nisha and Bastian in the living room, but any one of my family members could come home at any time.

Tears sting my eyes as I struggle against the overwhelming heat of him, in me, touching me, pressing into my back. One of his hands slides up and under my shirt, snatching one of my breasts in strong, sure, possessive fingers.

“Oh my God ...” He sounds flabbergasted, torn-up, completely and utterly dumbfounded. “Oh my ... fucking God.” Widow makes this adorably sexy little growl near my

ear, yanking me against him and pressing his hot mouth against the side of my neck. “You’re strangling me, Scarlett. Do it more. Choke the life out of my dick.”

I moan and rise up on my toes, tilting my ass back so he has better access, deeper access. He takes a handful of my long hair and uses it to pull my head back, his right hand clamping tight around my hip.

His movements slow dramatically, and I realize that, as he’s sweating and quivering behind me, he’s trying to keep himself from coming.

“Don’t be a hero,” I murmur, and he yanks me back, so I’m back to front with him again. He bites and licks and kisses me on the neck until I’m squirming.

“Don’t ruin this for me.” He pumps deep and slow, burying himself to the hilt and breathing these frantic, little breaths. Oh, I bet when we’re alone, he’ll be loud. He’ll be a groaner, moaner, maybe a screamer. I’d love that, to hear him scream. “Don’t ruin it; it feels so good.”

“You like getting your cherry popped, don’t you?” I murmur quietly, the sound of the TV coming from the living room offering up a kernel of privacy. “You like that, Widow, being my whore?”

“Mm, I like it,” he breathes, covering my mouth again. I bite his hand, but all that does is make him pump harder, faster. “I like you being my woman. I like knowing that you’re going to marry me and bear my kids and grow old with me.”

I struggle against him, but it’s all for play. When he starts to let his hand up off my mouth, I slap it back into place, holding it there as a scream threatens to tear out of me. *I’m going to come. Fuck, I’m going to come before the virgin dude comes!*

“This is better than I thought, so much better. Why didn’t I do this sooner?” I don’t know who he’s talking to: me, himself, if he even knows that he’s talking at all. His words help me hang on just a bit longer, the orgasm teasing, my cunt contracting over and over against him.

And then there are footsteps. Faster. Closer.

Widow makes a horrible sound, and then pulls out of me, yanking his pants into place as I do the same, and then he turns away. He rests his palms on another counter, head down, his back rising and falling as he struggles to control his breaths.

I shove the tea bag in the cup, fill it with water, and then stick it in the microwave. This is how we make tea in the southside, all classy and shit.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Nisha demands, and I freak for a moment, thinking we’re caught, but then she just storms around me and rips the mug out of the microwave, dumping it into the sink. “Move. I’ll make it.” As Nisha fills the kettle, she glares over her shoulder at me. “You can’t even be bothered to boil water?”

“I’m a good cook,” I retort defensively, a sense of relief sliding over me as Nisha turns away, and I look over at Widow.

Poor guy. That was his first time being inside a woman, and he didn’t even get to finish. Ouch. I wonder if he came in his pants again? *I hope so.*

“Don’t you microwave tea at home, too?” I continue, trying to keep Nisha distracted. I needn’t bother to try so damn hard. She’s distracted enough as it is, and I’ve just let Widow fuck his virginity out of me in my family’s kitchen.

I grit my teeth.

Bohnes is going to slaughter him.

“No, we boil water on the stove like sane people.” Nisha turns the stove on and then spins to face me, her gaze sliding over to Widow. She must assume he’s upset by some portion of the story—maybe the fact that we’re sort of pitting ourselves against the mayor, the police chief, and the CEO of a billion-dollar corporation—and ignores his strange behavior.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?” I query politely, and Widow lifts his head up, very slowly and menacingly turning his face to the right to stare at me.

“Do I need to use the *bathroom*?” he asks, like I’ve just slapped him. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Do you two need a minute to work something out?” Nisha asks, sounding annoyed. She doesn’t actually mean that; she’s being facetious.

But simultaneously, Widow and I answer.

“No.” Me.

“Yes.” Him.

Nisha sighs and throws her hands up.

“I’ll make the tea. Go outside or something.”

Widow reaches back and grabs my hand, yanking me along with him and out the door. He looks around to gauge the relative privacy of the place; there is none really. The duplex on the right can see directly into our yard from their upstairs window.

Also, if Nisha moves the leaves and branches from my grandmother’s houseplants, she could see right out the window, too.

Widow paces frantically, back and forth, back and forth. He spots something in the corner of the yard: the crappy rundown shitbox of a shed. He takes my hand again and pulls me over there, to those very same shadows where Bohnes was creeping the day I found him in my yard.

The thought adds to—rather than diminishes—my excitement. Widow shoves me against the fence, my cheek to the rough wood, my palms flat against it. He yanks my pants down, opens his, and then enters me again.

It’s exquisite torture.

It’s la petite mort in so pure a form, a true and utter slaying. I’m dying, and it’s all Widow’s fault; he’s killing me with heat and friction, with these wild noises that are covered up by the rush of cars on the highway beyond the stone wall to my right.

“Oh fuck, fuck, fuck ...” he moans as I drop a hand down and rub my clit. It’s like lighting a damn sparkler or something. My nerve-endings fire, my thighs quiver, and then I’m coming so hard that I can’t keep the moan back.

Widow shoves two fingers in my mouth, and I bite down hard enough to make him bleed, silencing the impending scream that was about to escape my lips. It would've been shrill and wild, a movie star scream, a shriek of the silver screen.

He slams me against the fence so hard, these deep, angry thrusts that drag him over the edge, his cock spilling and twitching and pumping inside of me. He moves inside of me a few, last times and then goes still.

His palms meet the fence on either side of me, right next to mine, his arms and body caging me against it.

“Holy shit.” He’s breathing so hard; I can feel it stirring my hair. “How have I ... how did I ...” He stays where he is for a minute and then pulls away, leaving me to yank my leggings up and turn around. His pupils are blown wide, and he looks wild and beautiful and fierce and angry and *dangerous*. “It’s like nothing else.”

I smile.

“High scores for my pussy, eh?”

“Don’t joke that,” he snarls at me, grabbing me and yanking me into him. “Don’t.”

He kisses me hard and fierce, like *he* thinks he’s in an old movie, tonguing the heroine at the end of the story.

It freaks me out.

I push away from him suddenly, and then, it’s like *he* has just realized what he’s done, and then *he* is the one freaking out.

“Oh God,” he breathes, looking down. “I’m an animal. I’m a fucking animal.”

“We’re all animals,” I start to tease, but then I see that he’s about to devolve into a full-blown panic attack.

“I’m a monster. Sex is turning me into a monster, just like everyone else.”

“That’s not true,” I interrupt, supremely annoyed at having my afterglow shattered like this. Reality hurts. Ecstasy is a safe blanket with which to cover it all up. “How are you a monster?”

“Scarlett,” he says, lifting his head up to look at me. “If you knew the sorts of thoughts that I was having about you, you *would* think of me as a monster.”

My heart thumps wildly, and I place my palm flat on my chest, right over the giant marijuana leaf printed on the fabric. Widow watches the movement like a predator studying prey, eyes wide, his own breathing tight and controlled, strained.

Thing is, I’m not prey. If he’s a predator, so am I; if he’s a monster so am I.

If he’s a psycho, well, you get my point.

“What sort of thoughts are you having?” I ask, pitching my voice low and keeping my gaze trained on his. “You lost your virginity all of ten seconds ago, and you’ve got *ideas*?”

I’m so tempted to grab his hand and drag him upstairs, ride him into my mattress with my hands pressed tight over his mouth to keep back his screams.

“I want to taste your pussy,” he admits, voice low and velvety, the lining of a very expensive coffin, meant to draw me in and trap me. “I want to hold your head while you suck my cock.” I start to move toward the back door and his left arm flies out, hand smashing into the wall and blocking me from my path.

*Oh God, yes.*

I wet my lips, so he can tell how much I like this. I imagine consent is a very, very important thing to Widow. I mean, it should be important to everybody, but I like to make sure my monsters aren’t of the variety who get off on their lover’s pain and suffering. Do I like my guys to be violent to others? Sure. Towards me? No way. That’s all sorts of fucked-up and sad.

“What else?” I whisper, not trusting myself to speak any louder.

“More than anything, I just want to be inside of you,” he chokes out, and then he runs a hand down his face. He’s not telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Before I can call him out on it, he corrects himself. “I want to hold you down on a mattress and rut into you until you scream, over and over again. I want you to come so many times that you’re falling apart, that you can’t think about anyone else but me. I want to find you in the middle of the school day, yank you into an empty classroom and screw you over a desk. I want—”

Nisha’s head pops out the back door, a mask of sheer annoyance on her face. It doesn’t fit too well, that mask. I can see her grief, plain as day, right there in the shiny, slightly reddened orbs of her eyes.

“Your grandmother is here,” she says, and Widow’s skin ripples with goose bumps.

“You want to run?” I ask him, pointing at the gate. “You can, if you want. Just make sure to call Bohnes. Pretty sure you owe him something in exchange for this.”

Widow’s face crinkles up into an odd mix of affection and rage; he’s a strange one, this guy.

“I’ll call him, but I’m not running. I should introduce myself to your grandmother.”

“Excuse me, what?” I ask, but he’s already turning around and heading for the back door.

“Shit, bitch, fuck,” I grind out, jogging after him and feeling the uncomfortable wetness of Widow’s cum between my thighs. I make sure the long t-shirt isn’t tucked in anywhere, that it’s hanging and covering up as much of my ass and crotch as possible.

Grandma Patricia is already in the kitchen, smiling at Nisha as my friend goes about making her a cup of tea. My grandmother always liked my friends, including Lemon. She thinks of them like surrogate grandchildren. Bastian’s grandma, too. She used to call Lemon by the Spanish version of her nickname: *Limónita*. Little Lemon.



Pain lashes my heart like a hard rainstorm, harsh, cold winds pushing the driving droplets into my soul. But I can't tell my grandma about Lemon. I can't tell anyone but the people that already know.

Plus, Widow is standing in the doorway and my grandmother's just turned to look at me, her eyes widening slightly, her mouth opening and then closing, opening again.

"Ms. Force," Widow begins, making an interesting choice right off the bat. So, my grandmother's maiden name is Hunsucker, but in the time period she grew up in, women often took the last names of their husbands (bizarre, right?), and so she legally changed her last name to Force. After he died, she kept the name and, since she clearly has no intention of meeting or marrying another man, she still goes by Patricia Force. "I'm Adrian Lawless, your granddaughter's boyfriend."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

This boy ...

I shove past him as he extends his hand, and my grandmother gives me a sharp look. One, because she's still furious about the broken lamp, her most favorite one. Like, could I tell her that the mayor hired an assassin and that I chucked it at him to buy myself time to get the upper hand? Obviously not.

More than likely, she's still mad that I keep staying out all night.

Now, here I am, in my pajamas, no bra, a gigantic, muscular, tattooed looking monster hulking in her doorway and declaring himself to be my boyfriend.

See, this is why I only wanted fuckboys. This is why I didn't want to date.

But can I really correct Widow in front of sweet ol' Gram? *No, grandma, he's not actually my boyfriend, just my fuckboy. Did they have those when you attended Prescott High? No? Just me?*

"Don't shove the young man out of the way," Patricia chides me, reaching out a hand to shake Widow's. She smiles at him,

even as she's wary of him. She should be, considering what he just did to me and all the things he said and, most importantly, the things he was thinking and didn't yet get a chance to say.

What dark thoughts are hiding in that pretty head of his?

"It's nice to meet you," he greets, his shadowy voice brightened just enough that he sounds human. He shakes her hand and then drops his arms by his sides trying, I think, to look just a little bit less scary than he is.

"Is this the boy you went on that fancy date with?" Grandma asks, and I sigh, sitting down at the table and wishing that Lemon weren't dead so that I could find this moment funny instead of tragic.

*I just popped Widow's fuckin' cherry.*

Also, according to Bohnes, I popped his cherry, too. I wish I'd known that at the time, so that I could've enjoyed it more.

I imagine that Alexei still has his cherry, too. Could I pluck that juicy fruit and keep it for myself?

Of the three guys that I've now fucked, only Ash has copped to having sex with anyone besides me. *Does this make me a cherry hound or something?*

"No, actually that was someone else." I pull my now lukewarm tea over and drink it. My grandmother sits across from me as Widow moves to perch awkwardly in the corner of the kitchen, arms now crossed over his chest.

"When did the two of you start going steady?" Grandma asks, thanking Nisha for the tea. My bestie sits beside me as Bastian ambles into the kitchen, eyes red and puffy, nose flaky from wiping it so much. He gets overly vigorous with the Kleenex.

"Um, since the Saturday before last?" It's almost a question. I try not to think too hard about that night. But fuck. *Why didn't you listen, Lem? Aspen Kelly wasn't a ticket out; he was a ticket to a watery grave.* Now, she's trapped in Prescott forever.

“Mm.” My grandmother sips her drink as I sit there with a naughty secret between my thighs, my mind straying to Widow over and over again. My eyes shift to his to find that he’s still watching me.

I ... did not expect that. He surprised me, and I’m not often surprised.

“I’m just stopping in for tea; I have to take Oli to look at an apartment.” My grandmother sighs heavily, and I cock a brow.

Oli is our elderly neighbor from across the street, the one who’s lived in Prescott her whole life. She’s like in her nineties or something, but she still swims laps at the fitness center every other morning.

“An apartment?” I query, blinking in surprise. “Why would she need an apartment? She owns both sides of that duplex.”

“She just sold it,” my grandmother says, mouth pinched as she stares down at the table. “Her and everyone else on this block.” She finishes her tea and stands up, this tiny five-foot-two Yurok woman from the village of Weitchpec, and she looks up, up, up at Widow’s huge, hulking form. “You take care of my granddaughter,” she reprimands, whapping him in one of his massive biceps with her teaspoon. “And no funny business, young man. I’ll be watching you.”

“I’ll be watching him, too, Grandma,” Nisha says, turning a harsh glare on Widow.

“Yes, ma’am.” He sounds like a picture-perfect angel with his smooth words, but when his eyes shift past her to me, there’s a darkness there that I want to coil around myself, drape over my shoulders, sink into.

My grandma takes off, and I frown.

Oli sold her duplex? Why? She’s one of those crazy people that loves the southside. She says it’s the last true free place on earth. I just can’t imagine her selling off her house. She has a much bigger yard than us and, through hard work, sweat, and blood, she’s turned it into a paradise of mature plants, a fountain she assembled from scratch, and a brick patio.

I smell a plot.

“Oli selling her duplex is bad news; I bet Archer Realty is behind that. It’s a coup; they’re taking over the whole block.” I sip my tea, tapping my fingers on the surface of the tabletop for a moment.

But nobody’s listening to me. Nisha is still staring at Widow.

“And you bet your little fuckboy ass that I’m gonna be watching you. Bastian might be soft toward you, but I dislike you as much as Bohnes and only slightly less than I dislike Ash Kelly.”

“Go for it.” Widow challenges her with a hard slash of syllables, and then turns to look down at her—literally, not metaphorically I don’t think. “We’re written in the stars, but she won’t see it. I’ll make her see it.”

“Stupid little fuckboy, machismo, walk-around-with-my-swinging-dick-and-think-I-own-the-world bitch.” She spits at him, but he just curls his lip at her, a remarkable form of self-restraint on his end. “Make no mistake: I’ve cut a man’s balls off for less.”

She turns back to me as Basti stands sullen and silent with his butt parked up against the kitchen counter.

“So now what? How do we go about this thing? Because I’m not letting my girl die like that, buried and forgotten in some scummy ass pond,” Nisha declares, crossing her arms, just like Widow. “And that Aspen motherfucker is damn lucky he’s dead and gone or he’d wish for an end as easy as that.” She sighs and rubs at her face, exhaustion and grief weighing her shoulders down.

“I’ll start by hitting up the club; they’ve been asking me to take more shifts on.” Bastian speaks up, his voice hardening with every word. “All those rich men come to the club looking for fuckboys.”

“Don’t start whoring yourself out,” I warn him. “You know as well as anyone else here that it’s a one-way ticket to trauma, pain, and an early death. Not even for information on Lemon, I mean it, Basti.”

He looks away sharply, and I know that I caught him in the midst of some stupid-ass, self-destructive scheme.

“Lemon’s death was a planned hit.” I finish my tea and stand up. “One of the men responsible escaped. First, we find him. Then, we follow the trail from his collar, up his leash, to his master. That’s how we start.”

“And we do that, how?” Nisha queries, and I can see that my initial response—my gut response—to banish Bastian and Nisha from this mess before it gets too dirty or too dangerous, is pointless. They’re going to dive into this whether I like it or not; I should’ve just put my trust in them from the very beginning.

“I’m going to meet with that Emma Jean chick on Sunday; she knows more than she lets on. That, and I’m going to set up another meeting with Ash.” I take my dish over to the sink and wash it as I feel three sets of eyes boring into my back.

“Ash Kelly is dead,” Widow states flatly, but there’s just a hint of a growl beneath his words. I turn around to meet his stare and find jealousy boiling underneath his gaze. “Ash Kelly is dead, and Aspen Kelly ...” He moves just a little closer to me, leaning down to purr this next sentence against my ear. “Lost a race to me. He can’t fuck you anymore. I let it go at the theater because I hadn’t yet made the connection, but don’t you think that sounds fair? If he’s going to take over his brother’s life, so be it.”

I shove Widow away from me. Rather, I shove against Widow, but end up taking a step back to put space between us because he’s a brick wall.

“We need to call Bohnes,” I tell my friends, but if I thought they might leave because of that, it does the exact opposite.

Widow clenches his teeth, a vein in his neck popping out in his anger, but he knows I’m right.

“And we’re staying the night. Do what you need to do.” Nisha moves past me and returns to the living room. I follow her in; I have no idea what I was going to say, but whatever it was, I lose it the moment I see that local Eugene news channel

that my grandmother likes. Basti or Nisha must be streaming it from their phones.

*“Startling news from the coast guard this afternoon: a local fisherman stumbled upon what appeared to be a piece of scrap metal in his crab nets. But, after moving his boat just a bit closer to the shore, he found a shoe and, inside of that—a human foot.*

*“While the results of a DNA test are pending, families of missing persons in the area have gathered—”*

I grab the remote from the side table and shut the TV off.

“Call Bohnes.” That’s all I can think to get out as Bastian starts to sob again and Nisha sits down heavily in my grandmother’s chair.

What else is there that I can possibly say to make things better?

Fuckin’ nothing.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. The text 'CHAPTER TWENTY' is centered in a white, serif font. The word 'CHAPTER' is on the top line, and 'TWENTY' is on the bottom line. The text is heavily splattered with bright red, blood-like stains that drip down the page, creating a macabre and violent atmosphere.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

## *~~Ash~~ Aspen Kelly*

For me, dreams are always nightmares. At this point, I don't even bother to distinguish between the two. My heart rate picks up, my skin beading with sweat that soaks my sheets.

*"My name is Ash Kelly, and my favorite animals are frogs."* Aspen's mocking voice, just as sinister at age ten as it was at nineteen, squirms into my brain, drawing up old memories that I'd rather leave buried deep. *"Wake up, Ash. Look what I've done for you."*

Done to me, more like.

I come to with a start, staring up at the mirror on Aspen's ceiling. I'm not being facetious; he truly has a mirror positioned on his ceiling so he can watch all the girls he rapes and abuses and fucks in his bed.

Something slimy and cool brushes up against my arm, and I shudder, trying to distance myself from that particular nightmare, the one where Aspen filled my bed with dozens of dead frogs. That was my mistake, sharing something so personal in front of him.

I adjust myself, but rather than washing away that horrid memory, it only drags it to the forefront of my mind. The slick strangeness of amphibian skin ... it's everywhere.

Now I'm panicking.

I'm truly and utterly panicking.

I slowly and carefully push the blankets back. It may be dark in here, but I didn't bother to close the blinds or the curtains, allowing what little moonlight is breaking through the clouds to warm the room with silver light.

It's enough to see that I'm still dreaming, that my bed—Aspen's bed—is filled with dead frogs.

Bile rises up in my throat as I scramble out of the bed, falling to my knees and scrambling across the floor. I put my



back up against a dresser, panting and sweating, staring down at the dirt and grime on my legs and arms.

I reach up with two hands and grab at my hair, yanking on it and trying to knock the crazy out of my brain. *It's all a dream; I'll wake up; it's just a dream.*

*He's dead. He's dead. He's dead.*

And yet ...

"Hello Ash," a voice says, and my blood goes cold. Ash? Did I just hear the name Ash?

I turn my head to the left, spotting my father's hired gun, Shipman, sitting in the chair near my bedroom door. He has a knife in his right hand. The tip of the knife digs into the wood of the chair as he plays with the handle, spinning it around absently, a mere fidget.

"Ash?" I ask, but my voice is watery and broken, and I can't keep my gaze from flicking back to the bed and the ... the frogs. So many frogs. So many dead frogs. Are they real? Am I hallucinating? I used to take Risperdal for that very thing, but not anymore. Not for a while.

I force myself to my feet, stumbling over to the bed to check for myself. My shaking fingers reach out and ... and ... I touch the frog's still body and it's as solid as anything else. There are so many of them, even more than there were when Aspen ... Aspen ... Aspen ...

I turn and vomit right on the floor; I can't help myself, can't control it.

My legs are shaky as I stumble back again, sliding to my knees on the floor.

"Get out of my room," I hiss, my voice a shard of ice. But I can't hide the trembling, the sweating, the mess I just made. "How dare you?" I turn a violent stare on Shipman, but he just smiles, nothing more than teeth in the dark. All I can see is his shadow. "Your impertinence—"

"Don't bother, Ash. I know it's you. I've known since the woods. But then, how could you expect anything else?"

Shipman lifts a jar up from the floor near his boots and unscrews the top. Out of it, he withdraws a live frog. Even though I can't see much, I can see the creature's vocal sack swell under its chin as it breathes.

*"Look at this,"* Aspen teased, holding up the only living frog in the room. He put a needle up to its eye as I sat there, surrounded by bodies, tears streaming down my face. Because he was my twin, because I loved him despite myself, I could feel his rage toward me through some unspoken connection between us. My soul connected to someone who had none, my face as a monster's face. *"If you apologize for embarrassing me during show-and-tell, I won't kill this one."* He laughed then, wicked and violent and broken from birth. *"Say it, Ash. Say that you're sorry."*

"I'm sorry." I think I'm saying it aloud, in the here and now, but that's what I said in the memory. Actually, back then, I made a colossal error. I didn't say that I was sorry in English—I accidentally said it in Japanese. That was a huge trigger for Aspen. He hated me for speaking other languages when he could only speak one. *"Gomennasai."*

It comes out both in the dream and in real time. Shipman just sits there, allowing me a full mental break in his presence. It was what he came here for, after all.

*"Gomennasai,"* I said it again, snot running down my face. Aspen's face hardened, his eyes widening with rage. And then the needle, he ... All I could do was sit there with my hands pressed over my ears. *"Gomennasai, gomennasai, gomennasai, gomennasai, gomennasai."*

*"Shut up!"* Aspen had screamed, throwing the dead frog at me. Then he'd climbed on the bed amongst all their bodies and snatched my shoulders, shaking me. *"Stop talking like that! Stop it, Ash, stop it!"*

But his rage only made it worse, only made me stutter and repeat myself until I was screaming it.

Just like I'm doing now.

“*Gomennasai*,” I repeat, shaking, tugging at my hair with both hands. “*Gomennasai, gomennasai, gomennasai, GOMEN ... NASAI!*” I shove up to my feet, snatching the gun from the top drawer of the dresser.

With my teeth gritted, I swing it over to Shipman, but he’s squeezing the frog in his fist.

“Put the gun down, Ash. You can shoot me, but this animal will still die.” He smiles again, rising to his feet and moving over to me as my hand shakes around the gun. “You care about something this small and stupid, don’t you?” He laughs as he pauses in front of me, a generic, forgettable man with a horrible burn scar down one side of his face.

That was Aspen, by the way. Aspen made that scar.

“I’ll shoot you.” My voice is ice-cold. “And I won’t lose a wink of sleep over it.”

“No, but you’ll remember this frog, won’t you?” He squeezes it a little tighter, and I flex my finger against the trigger. “You’ve always been a strange boy, Ash.” He hands the frog over to me and, even though I know I shouldn’t, I take it and hold it against my chest. The gun falls by my side, still clutched in my left hand.

The frog’s vocal sack expands, contracts, expands. I look up as Shipman moves away from me, toward the window.

“Did you think I’d come here without a backup plan? You might not be your brother, but I have no doubt that you’d blow my brains out anyway.” He glances back at me. “I’ve scheduled a text to go to your father in an hour. Think you could find my phone before it got sent out? Or maybe you think you could convince Jonas that you really are Aspen, that you killed me for no reason, that my last dying act was pure bullshit.”

“What do you want?” I grind out, hating myself, hating my entire life and everyone in it.

But for Scarlett. Only Scarlett. I hold her in my mind as I cradle the frog against my bare chest. I don’t look at the dead ones in my bed. I can’t bear it.

“I’m a simple man, Ash. I’m motivated by one thing and that’s money.” He turns back around and sighs heavily. “In order for me to get paid, I have to do my job. You made that very, very difficult for me the other night.”

I breathe heavily, trying to swallow past that old memory and the way Aspen hugged me after he was done shouting at me, hugged me and told me that only I would ever love him.

He was undeniably right about that.

“Get to the point,” I hiss, my temper and my sanity rapidly dwindling down to nothing. There are dead frogs in my bed. Aspen’s foot was found floating in the ocean, and it’s only a matter of time before the whole world is looking at me with sympathy. My identical twin is dead, how sad. So sad. So goddamn sad.

Ash was so upset; he had planned his own suicide; he was ready to jump.

But then he saw her, that girl, the one with ass-length raven hair and a gleam in her brown eyes. The only one who could see Ash even when he was wearing Aspen’s skin. Scarlett Force.

My one, precious thing.

I stare down at the frog, but it seems oblivious to its brush with death.

“Alexei Grove,” Shipman says with another sigh, moving back over to stand beside me. He smells like dirt, like he’s been digging somewhere he shouldn’t be, burying someone who shouldn’t have rightfully died tonight. “We need him.”

“Why the fuck would you—” I start, but then Shipman is coming at me. He knocks the gun from my grip and wraps his fingers around my throat, slamming me into the wall beside the dresser. I drop the frog to the floor in our fight, and it hops away as my father’s hitman grips my throat with two strong hands.

“Do not lie to me, Ash. Before you—or whoever else—killed my man at the Halloween party, he called and told me

that he'd seen him. By the time I got there, you were gone. Tell me where Alexei Grove is."

I can't breathe. I'm thinking of Aspen again, of all the times that he choked me until I passed out.

My right hand slips into the pocket of my sweatpants, and out comes a small folding knife.

Shipman anticipates it, grabbing my wrist as I swing at him, but at least he lets go of my throat. We end up facing one another, three feet apart, the knife held out in front of me. I'm shirtless and barefoot, and he's standing there with two guns in holsters on his body, combat boots, and a bullshit smile.

"I saw him at the Halloween party, so what? I don't keep tabs on the Borisov brat."

"Maybe you don't know where he is just now, not exactly. But you can find out." Shipman rests a hand on his weapon, an obvious threat. His eyes—I think they're brown—appear as black as my own in the darkness. "I'll give you three days to either bring him to me or tell me where he is."

"Or?" I query back, so frustrated that I could scream.

*Widow was right. I should never have gone to that party. I'm a fool.*

"Or ... I'll tell your father that you are Ash, that you purposely tried to sabotage our plans with Lucy Hall, that you undoubtedly know where your brother is." Shipman shrugs. "And because I don't believe that's enough motivation for you, here's some more: I will kill that whore you like so much. What's her name? Scarlett? Yes, I think I'll kill Scarlett, but not before I fuck her first. How does that sound, Ash?"

"Why on earth would you care about Alexei Grove?" I scoff and look away, standing up straight and folding the knife away, as if I don't care. In reality, I'm screaming on the inside, just like I did that night. *Gomennasai, gomennasai, gomennasai.*

Oh, Scarlett.

I should've left her well enough alone.

This is all my fault.

It's all my goddamn fault, and I'll die before I let anything happen to her.

“And thank you for confirming that you are, in fact, Ash Kelly. You don't need to know why I want Alexei Grove, only that I do. Find him for me. I'll be waiting.” Shipman turns to leave, but even though my fingers itch to unfold my knife and stab it into the back of his neck, I can't risk it.

If he really does have a text waiting to go out—which I'm sure he does—and my father reads it, I'm ruined. I won't be able to protect Scarlett. My father will kill me. That, or he'll chain me up and make me wish I were dead.

I look down at the frog hopping across the floor.

I suddenly can't breathe again. It's as if I'm still being strangled, as if Aspen's ghost is standing there with ghoulish hands wrapped around my neck.

What the fuck do I do now?

I squat down and scoop the frog up, staring into its strange, dark eyes, and I think about all my available options. I can't go anywhere right now. Whoever I go to would be in immediate danger. Should I wait around and try to kill Shipman later? What if he sets up recurring text messages for my father?

I could, in theory, just give up Alexei Grove. Who cares about him anyway? If I have to, in order to save Scarlett, I will. But I also know that if I do that without telling her, *she* will never forgive me. She allowed me to see where Alexei's safehouse was because she trusted me.

As things stand, I already have enough trust issues to work out with her.

Worst-case scenario, I could walk right up to my father and execute him in cold-blood. Sure, I'd likely end up in prison for life, but if that's what's necessary to make certain Scarlett survives this mess, then I'll do it.

But if I have three days, then I have three days. I'm going to use them.

I stand up, taking the frog with me, and head outside. It's pouring rain. Actually, it's hailing now, little balls of ice pattering against the stone walkway. It's hard for me to imagine that this frog could actually survive out there. Who knows where it came from, probably a pet store or something ...

In the end, I take it back inside and set it up in the bathtub with a small amount of water. I'll figure out what to do with it later.

For now, I need to find a gameplan that keeps Scarlett safe.

Otherwise, it'll be *Scarlett* that becomes the frog.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a light grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by large, expressive splatters of bright red paint or blood, which drip down the page. The splatters are most concentrated around the word 'CHAPTER' and the hyphenated 'ONE' in 'TWENTY-ONE'.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-ONE



## *Widow*

The slick, snug tunnel of Scarlett's pussy is obliterating my brain. I can't think about anything else. I spend the majority of that night watching the video of her masturbating in my car, and I work myself to orgasm with my fist more times than I care to count.

I'm not surprised when she doesn't show up to school the next day. Her friends don't either. I imagine they're all still trying to wrap their heads around Lemon's pointless death.

Even though I know I probably shouldn't, I park right there in front of the school, right in Scarlett's space, and it feels so good that I get hard all over again. With a curse and a throbbing erection, I climb out and immediately feel the cool stare of Kellin Bohnes on my back.

I turn around to see him waiting across the street, leaned up against the Chevelle which I swear wasn't there ten fucking seconds ago. I can't avoid the guy forever, so I turn and head across the street to stand before him.

Clearly, he was waiting for me.

Yesterday, when Scarlett called him and told him what happened between us—among other things—he was in the middle of a job and couldn't come. I ended up getting a smack on the ass from Scarlett and a banishment from the house, like a bad dog.

“My urge right now is to take you to my favorite mortuary, find you a pretty coffin, and bury you alive.” Bohnes smiles at me, dressed in a loose white tank, a black trench coat, and jeans. He looks like a school shooter, to be honest.

“Seeing as you haven't done that yet, I imagine you're not going to?”

He shrugs one shoulder, offering me up a cigarette which I accept.

“By the grace of Scarlett,” he admits, studying me with his head tilted to one side. He takes a drag on his smoke, perfuming the air with cloves. I stare down at the black cigarette in my hand, and then accept the lighter that he slides from his pocket. “See, she's a bit narrow-minded. She doesn't really consider what you did in the library as having sex. But I do. You broke track rules *twice* and you *will* pay for what you did.”

He sighs and continues to smoke, glancing to his left, like he sees something that I don't.

"But?" I ask, because if he isn't trying to fuck me up, he must need something from me.

"But, we're in the middle of something right now, aren't we?" Bohnes turns back to me with a deep frown etching his lips, and then takes another drag of his cigarette. "Not only is the mob in town, but I got a message from our friend, Kelly, last night."

He slides his phone from his pocket as my hormones surge, and I struggle to push down the awful feelings that Ash Kelly inspires in me. This is, arguably, all his fault. His brother and Scarlett's involvement in his death. The hired gun sent by the mayor. Lemon's death. I mean, maybe he isn't personally responsible for all of those things, but it's his fucked-up family that's tearing apart the Prescott neighborhood.

I take the phone as I smoke the cigarette, staring at the message sent late last night.

*We have a problem. Call me.*

"What happened?" I glance up to see Bohnes staring at the clouds like he's looking for shapes in them.

"One of his father's men knows who he is." My blood turns to ice at that statement, and all the horrid implications it has for Scarlett. "He wants the Grove boy in exchange for his silence."

I snort and run a hand over my face.

"What a crock. As if he'll ask for one favor and forever keep his lips sealed. There's no way out of a mess like this without somebody dying." I draw the cigarette away from my lips, exhaling smoke that doesn't look much different than my breath.

It's that cold out.

"Precisely." Bohnes exhales again, dropping the butt of his smoke to the ground and stepping on it. He looks up at me, his trench coat billowing around him. For the briefest of seconds there, he doesn't look like the undertaker of Prescott High; he looks like an eighteen-year-old dude. Then I remember that he chopped a man's head off last weekend. Hardcore.

I almost smile.

“We might’ve actually liked each other given different circumstances,” I offer up, and that seems to surprise him. He cocks his head again, like he doesn’t even remotely understand why I’m here or what I want out of this.

“Why? Because we’re both Prescott boys, through and through? Or because we’re both in love with Scarlett Force?” He pauses there, sighing and tucking his bone-inked hands into his pockets. “Did you think you could woo me with a kind thought, and I’d forget how you betrayed me?”

The violence edging his voice puts *me* on edge.

I wet my lips.

“See,” I start, taking another drag on the cigarette. The smoke on these clove cigs is so harsh that it burns my throat, but when I lick my lips, all I taste is sweetness and nicotine. I can see why Scarlett smokes these. Simultaneously, I’m excited to kiss this taste off her full mouth. *I lost my virginity yesterday*. The thought is such a strange one, I can barely entertain it. “I didn’t go over there with the intention of fucking her yesterday.”

“And that should appease me ... why?” Bohnes tilts his head back and forth a few times. Yep, like a school shooter. He’s nuts. He sighs and shakes his head, brushing his fingers through his hair. “Do you think I care? I tolerate you, at best.”

“She was just standing there in front of me,” I start, knowing that I’m provoking him even though I shouldn’t be. It’s dangerous to my health. Fuck, she was dressed so plainly, so casually that I felt this reach of intimacy between us that should never have been there in the first place. “Making tea, staring into the cup like she could read the leaves ...”

I pause to study Bohnes’ expression, but he’s almost smiling at me.

Can’t decide if he’s more or less likely to kill me.

“I could just imagine a future where I’d come up behind her, wrap her in my arms, kiss her neck, fuck her good and hard.” I pause and rough laughter slips out of me. I’m a different man today than I was yesterday.

A much worse man.

I *knew* what sex was going to do to me; I fucking knew it.

I'm annihilated, eradicated, swept away by the intensity of my sudden need, like I've just freed a caged animal, and I can't think anymore.

"You've already started. Whether you piss me off more or less is irrelevant. You've crushed the threshold of my patience, so keep going. Say it. Get it off your chest while you're still alive." Bohnes gestures at me to continue

"And so I did it," I finish, staring straight at Bohnes. I did it, and I didn't even mean to, and now my brain is this twisted, perverse thing. "If you're going to kill me, well, it was still worth it."

"I knew from the moment I first laid eyes on you that you'd be trouble," he remarks, and then his weak half-smile turns into a full grin. "I'll remember later, when Scarlett breaks up with you, forgets you, but I ..." He taps the side of his head. "I'll remember. And then I'll fucking kill you."

Bohnes exhales, and even though I shouldn't, I do, too. It feels much better between us, like the air is cleared a bit. Anyway, if it's between him and either of those rich boys, I'll fight with Bohnes at my back any day. Pretty sure he feels the same.

"Think we could kill Ash Kelly first?" I ask, and he laughs at me, reaching out to put a hand on my shoulder. I go completely still, the urge to grab him and flip him onto his back on the cement swarming over me. But I fight it back, and his fingers dig just a bit too tight.

His grin switches to a disturbed smirk.

"That I agree with. Just not yet. I'm going to give him a task, and I want to see if he accomplishes it." Bohnes withdraws his hand and scowls. "Anything he does now is better than screwing Scarlett over the hood of his Fastback."

The image hits my brain, and I drop my cigarette, struggling to breathe past it. I rub the butt out with my foot as Bohnes laughs. *This motherfucker is testing my limits.*

Violence surges, hot and desperate and necessary inside of me.

There are only three ways to survive in juvie: fuck, be fucked, or fuck people up. I always chose the latter. But right now? I swallow the anger down, and I *destroy* any lingering images of Scarlett and Ash together. *Ugh.*

"So how do we solve the issue with Alexei then?" I ask finally, wondering what task it is that he might've given Ash. "If we have to

give the guy up so be it, but I'd much rather finish this job and see if he pays us."

"If he doesn't ..." Bohnes begins, and then he just stops talking because we both know what he was going to say. "Ash is going to send the man—his name is Ralph Shipman—somewhere special for me. I'll see if I can't get rid of him then." He glances down the street again, and I follow his gaze.

Still, I don't see anything. Bohnes turns back to me.

"The mayor's goon is one thing, but the mob is ... that's tough." He rubs at his chin and shakes his head. "We need to find out why they're here. That is, are they here to kill Alexei or avenge him?" He pauses again and sighs, staring down at the street before looking back up at me. "I need you to watch Scarlett for me. Mostly, I need you to watch Scarlett in case I die."

I lift my brows at that one.

"It's like that, huh?" I ask, and Bohnes purses his lips, nodding once.

"It's like that." He lets out a harsh laugh and puts his hand over his mouth for a moment. His eyes meet mine as he drops it back by his side. "If I could dump Alexei and everything would be okay, I'd do it, despite how much I want that payoff. But you know how those sorts of people are: the moment I cease to be useful to them, they'll just put a bullet in my brain."

He turns away, reaching for the door handle of the Chevelle.

"Those sorts of people ..." I start, handing him back the lighter. He takes it from me, clutching it tight in his palm. "Meaning the mob?"

"You still don't have my permission to fuck her." That's how he answers me, yanking open the car door. "But I'm going to kill you anyway. Use that pretty cock of yours to keep her distracted." He snorts and pulls on the door, sliding into the Chevelle.

When he takes off, he damn near runs my feet over.

*God-fucking-damn it.*

I'm tempted to skip class altogether, but then I see Officer Tidwell pull up in her cop car with the lights off. She parks right behind the Stingray, her eyes on the Chevelle. Bohnes is eighteen, I think, so she can't nail him to the wall.

Me, on the other hand. With a curl of my upper lip, I turn and take off for the front doors of Prescott High. When I pass by a pair of boys scuffling in the hallway, I grab the aggressor by the back of the hair and slam his face into one of the lockers, drawing blood and silencing every single person lining the walls and watching.

“What’s this about?” I ask, and the boy looks up with red spilling down his nose, dripping off his chin into his palms.

“Why the fuck do you care? Go play your guitar or read one of your mommy porn books, killer.” I kick out, knocking the legs from beneath him. He crashes to the floor and immediately comes for me, but I put a boot on his forehead and push him back. “What is your fucking problem?”

“I’m tired of listening to useless squabbles.” My voice is a weapon, harsh and cutting. I remove my boot from the guy’s face just seconds before the school’s main officer on duty—Scarlett calls him any number of names, like Officer Porn-Addict—emerges from a door marked *Administration*.

He looks at the face of the bloodied kid and then up to me.

“You—” he starts, but then one of Scarlett’s girls scoots up beside him and whispers something that’s too low to hear. Whatever she is, the officer turns and heads outside, ignoring the fight between me and this boy entirely.

I look back, toward the other guy, the one I didn’t hit.

“What’s the fight about?” I inquire, forcing back a smile.

“We’re arguing over whether this idiot should be able to date my sister or not,” the other guy says, looking down at his opponent as the backtalking boy puts a hand against the metal door of a locker and struggles to his feet. “I mean, thanks for the help, but why do you care?”

I smile at that as the first guy finally finds his feet. He’s figured it out; I can see it in his gaze.

“I don’t want to see or listen to this sort of shit when I’m between classes. Find somewhere else to work out your problems.” I move past them and head for my first class of the day. I wonder if they’ll still find it funny to throw paperclips and balls of paper at me?

I’ve ignored it thus far because I didn’t care. Because I get so upset about some things, I have to keep my cool on others or else I’ll explode. Now? Now, I know what I want.

I want Prescott High; I want to be king.

As Scarlett's fuckboy, I start with a distinct advantage on the social ladder.

People move out of my way today.

Good.

Because I've got a hell of a lot of tension riding in me, and I won't be able to do a damn thing about it until after school ...

---

I park the Stingray on the street and shut the engine off. It looks like I've caught Scarlett's friends, Nisha and Bastian, on their way out the door. They notice me right away, pausing near the front stoop to watch me.

"Oh, booty call?" Bastian asks, but there's a distinct lack of feeling in his voice. He's still processing the news about Lemon. I don't even know the guy very well, and I can see that. What happened was fucked, no doubt about that.

I didn't know the girl from Eve, but my heart broke for Scarlett when she wept.

I just stare at the guy, crossing my arms over my chest as Nisha looks me up and down, sighs, and shakes her head.

"News on the gossip circuit says you're in to tame the boys, huh?" She snorts and wags a finger at me. "Good luck with that by the way. They're a rowdy bunch. Whip those penises into shape." She flicks my arm as she walks by, and I scowl at her.

Scarlett is leaning around the doorjamb, draped lazily across it as she watches me approach the front door.

"I'm impressed," she tells me, switching her gaze to her friends as they climb into their cars and take off down the street. Scarlett redirects her attention back to me, as if she's as drawn to me as I am to her. Mesmerized. Hypnotized. "You want to be king of the school, huh?"

"You're the queen; it's my natural place." *Fuck, Widow, what the hell?* I don't even know why I say things like that. It's honestly disturbed. Scarlett and I barely know each other, but I've already decided that I want to spend the rest of my life with her.

Does that make me insane? It does.

Also, I don't care.

She steps back and gestures for me to come in.

I head up the steps and move into the house as she shuts and locks the front door behind me.

As soon as the deadbolt clicks into place, something happens. The atmosphere changes, shifts, morphs from a casual afternoon greeting to something darker, something best left for night but which can't wait.

I can't wait.

I almost came back here last night, climbed the tree to the roof, and knocked on her window until she let me in. *Or broke in and took her anyway.*

"I've been waiting for you," she says, and then I'm turning and sweeping her up into my arms. Our mouths come together with a rush of heat and promise, like the first page of a fairy tale. There's a story here, one that I intend to follow all the way through to the epilogue.

I have to see how it ends.

We kiss violently, slowly, killing each other with each movement of our lips, with the way our hands roam one another's bodies. I've got her all bundled up against me, this brand-new sensation that both triggers my trauma and rewards all the rest of me.

I slam Scarlett's back into the wall near the staircase as she grips my arms with tight fingers, nails digging into my skin. I've got one arm around her waist, the other gripping and kneading the soft flesh of her ass. She's still wearing that t-shirt from yesterday, but an entirely different pair of leggings.

Did I ruin the other pair with my cum? I hope so. I want that. I want her to race with my seed inside of her, dripping out of her, staining her seat.

We part just briefly, both of us sucking in air, panting, shaking.

"Nobody's home right now ..." she starts, and then we're stumbling up the stairs, still kissing, hands all over one another. All sorts of warning bells and alarms go off inside of me, but the force of my frenzy is so overwhelming that I barely notice them.



If the two sides of me are at war, one has tanks and the other is wielding swords. I want Scarlett more than I want to reward my trauma. Her back hits her bedroom door, knocking it open. As we go, I kick it closed and she reaches past me to flick the lock.

We are Prescott in our blood, after all.

We fall to the bed, and I shove her shirt up, baring her breasts. She bites my lip as I go to pull away from her, but I have to see them. I have to look at them. I have to suck on them.

“Oh shit,” she groans as I drop my head, sucking on the hardened peak of her nipple. It’s my first time, too, and I fucking *love* it.

“Does every part of you taste this good?” I murmur, lifting my head up slightly and attacking her mouth. Does she taste the sweetness of the clove cigarette on my lips? Does she like it? I lick her lower lip and sit up, chucking my shirt and nodding at her. “Take it off. I want to eat every inch of you.”

“I’m so glad Bohnes didn’t kill you,” she says with a smile, sitting up and taking her own shirt off. I come back to her, putting my arm underneath her and pressing our fronts together. The feel of her breasts on my chest, it’s the very definition of electricity.

Everything inside of me is wild; every nerve ending is firing.

“He promised to do it later,” I growl out, digging the fingers of my left hand into her hair and giving it a yank. She wraps her arms around my neck, and we end up kissing again, slow and soft which surprises the shit out of me.

All the thoughts I’m having—and there are many—demand that I take her in every possible way. So what is this?

It’s ... I just can’t help myself.

That goddamn radio station is on again, a No Resolve cover of Adele’s “*Set Fire to the Rain*” playing. It suits the mood perfectly, a true moment of synchronicity. We kiss through that and into the next song, her hands smoothing over my back, enjoying my muscles. I’m doing the same to her, taking in her curves, her softness, but also the undeniable strength underneath.

Her grip is powerful when she takes a hank of my hair and pulls on it, forcing our mouths apart. Our eyes meet, and she smirks at me.

“Get naked.”

I don't have to be told twice.

My boots, socks, pants, underwear, all of it ends up on the floor. All she has on are leggings, throwing them aside and then leaning back in her pillows, naked and unashamed. I study her for as long as I can, before the ache in my stomach and my chest and my cock becomes too much to ignore.

I slide my palms up the outsides of her legs, finding her hips and pulling her toward me until her head is nestled in the pillows. My tongue ends up on her nipple again, flicking and teasing, my fingers splaying wide on her belly as I listen to the soft, happy moans from her lips.

I want to fuck her the way Bohnes did, wild and crazy in the woods. But first, I need to do this, show her how I really feel. Sex shouldn't only be about kinks and oddities, it should be about connection and intimacy. There should be laughter; there should be smiles.

Working my way down, I end up at her cunt, and the sweet scent of it nearly knocks me out. I've never been exposed to anything like this, and I wonder if it's just Scarlett or if I'm just male or what, but I want more, more, more.

"Adrian," she whispers as my breath fans across her heat. I push her thighs wide and she complies, opening for me as I bury my face in her, reveling at the taste, devouring her, already dreaming of the next time I'll get to do this. "Did you park in my space today?" she manages to pant out, and I pause, lifting my head slightly to stare up at her.

Has there ever been a woman this perfect? Feisty, spirited, intelligent, brave, superbly arrogant, stunningly beautiful ... delicious. I blink at her and then I curl my lips in a growl.

"Of course I did. I'd do it more if you didn't have your minions show up early to save it. Why the effort, Scarlett Force? Are you worried I might actually present a challenge?"

She laughs at that, but the sound cuts right off when I drop my face back to her sweet pussy, licking the honeyed nectar between her thighs and then adjusting my lips to the swollen, ripe bud of her clit. *Guys have trouble finding this?* I wonder, marveling at such a low level of intelligence. That, or sheer, unadulterated ignorance.

My teeth just barely graze the bud and she gasps, shoving at my head. That both pisses me off and excites me, so I slide a single

finger in, marveling at the strength in her muscles. She's squeezing me so hard that I know I can't wait anymore.

I need this.

I rise up over her, panting and shaking, our eyes meeting as she drags me down for another kiss.

Yesterday, I didn't even think about a condom. It didn't even occur to me.

"Do we need protection?" I mumble, even though the thought of being separated from her slick warmth by anything at all infuriates me. But, as much as I want to go full alpha on her, consent matters. In everything. No matter how small.

I know better than most the pain of ... I blink back the trauma as she shakes her head, sitting up to nip at my lower lip.

"Nope."

Just that.

Scarlett pulls me back to her, wrapping her legs around me as I nestle between her thighs. It was so quick yesterday, and her friends were right fucking there. This is better, exactly what I needed and wanted.

I have to experience all of it, every position, every possible configuration of her body and mine. I want my mouth on all of her, hers on all of me. Everything.

My hand slips between us, and I guide the head of my cock to her heat. *Please don't blow a load too fast*, I pray, but I don't have a lot of control over that, so I thrust forward hard and fast, pushing past those strong, throbbing muscles until I'm seated fully inside of her.

It's sheer bliss.

Sheer fucking bliss.

My forearms are braced on either side of me, propping my body up so that I can look down at her face. Seeing it like this, it's better. I always want to see her like this, breathless, eyes wide, cheeks painted pink, mouth parted.

All for me. Because of me.

"Did you think you'd be here?" I whisper, stroking her hair back, gazing at her. Can she tell how insane I am by the look on my face? She'll never get rid of me now that I've experienced this. "Fucking

the new guy who parked in your spot? The guy whose car you stole? The guy who crashed your race and almost killed us both?"

"Oh, so you admit to that?" Her words are soft, as soft as I've ever heard coming from Scarlett's wicked lips. It's a front, I know that. She could turn on me in an instant, grab a knife from her side table and stab me straight through the heart. "I knew from the very first second I saw you that I'd be able to fuck you."

"Bullshit." I thrust harder, deeper, desperate to get closer to her. My hands find hers, curling our fingers together as I move inside of her. Her snug cunt cups and holds me, massaging the length of my shaft as I pleasure her with my movements. The better I do, the happier she is, the more exquisitely she contracts around me.

"You see?" she murmurs, putting her hands on either side of my face. "You're not a monster, Widow. Not in the ways you're afraid of." Scarlett lifts her head up just enough to put her mouth near my ear. "So if you want to come undone with me, do it. Shed your skin. Let the beast out."

She pushes at my chest, encouraging me to roll over.

I do, pulling her along with me and gripping her hips as she rolls on top of me. Her movements are controlled, confident perfection. Seeing her like that, moving above me, it's almost too much. My balls contract, and a familiar tightness coils in my belly. *I'm going to come, oh God.*

Scarlett digs her hands in her own hair, bunching it up and then letting it loose. Those raven strands slither over her curvy body, brushing against my upper thighs, my lower belly.

It's too much.

Shit, this is only my second time.

My hands tighten on her hips, and I pull her ever tighter against me, coming hard as she laughs. I don't expect her laughter to make her muscles contract even more, to squeeze me like that. I'm shuddering and moaning as she drags her nails down my chest.

Pretty sure I make more noise than I intend to.

"Oh, there it is ..." she murmurs, and then she's rocking wildly against me, working her clit until she comes. The sensation of that is impossible to describe, a horizontal roller coaster that devastates me and milks every last drop of seed from my balls.

Scarlett rolls off of me, into the curve of my arm, and then turns toward me, gaze sparkling.

“I knew you were gonna be a screamer,” she says, panting heavily and reaching out a finger to brush across my nipple. That’s enough to get my cock hard all over again. “Whoa there, tiger. Calm yourself.”

“Absolutely not.” My voice is a rough growl as she scoots closer to me, propping up slightly on her elbow to study my face.

“I’ve never had sex in my own bed before,” she replies, smiling as she traces my lower lip with a soft fingertip. “So ... I popped ya cherry, you popped my bedroom’s cherry. Sounds fair.”

I snort and reach up to swipe some of my hair back, the urge to go again already rising inside of me.

“Want to stay the night?” she queries, and I want to. I want to so goddamn badly, but then I think about my parole officer. He asked for nearly a thousand dollars last time to overlook my broken curfew. I had no choice but to take the money that Ash Kelly offered. I’m proud, but I’m not stupid.

“I wish.” A smile teases my lips as I look over at her, hardly daring to believe that this is even happening. All of that reading, all of those romance novels, they’re really coming in handy. The urge to push Scarlett away, to get some distance, it sweeps over me, but I shove it back, unwilling to lose this moment because of some shitty, horrible thing that happened to me in the past. I won’t let that nightmare win. “But it only takes me three minutes to get home from here, so ... I’ll stay for a while.”

“How long?” she demands, and I roll over to look at the clock again.

“About six hours.” I glance back to see that Scarlett’s pleased with the thought.

“Six hours, huh? Is that it?” She grabs my face and turns it back toward her, kissing me again.

Within minutes, I’m inside of her and we’re fucking all over again. Even when her family comes home and knocks, she calls out to let them know she’s there, and we keep at it, covering each other’s mouths to muffle the sounds.

Hours upon hours of exploration.

When it comes time to leave, she undoes the locks on her window, and out I go, pausing in a crouch on the roof for one, last kiss.

“Get home safe.” She grins at me, slamming the window shut and leaving me to climb down to the fence and then hop into the yard.

I have to go—I have no choice—but I’ll be back.

There’s nothing on earth or in hell below that could keep me away from Scarlett Force.

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from light grey at the top to black at the bottom. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by large, expressive splatters of bright red paint or blood, which drip down the page. The splatters are most concentrated around the word 'CHAPTER' and the hyphenated 'TWENTY-TWO'.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-TWO

## *Bohnes*

“He’s better than you think he is,” Ash Kelly says to me, standing beside my Chevelle with his very expensive hands on the hips of his very expensive trousers. Talking to him is like digging a long and excruciatingly dull needle into the center of my eyeball.

I’d much rather be with my daring love, severing heads or fingers or whatever else she might need from those who dare harm her.

My chin is resting on the steering wheel, and I sigh. Asking Widow to watch over her was torment, certainly. But I can’t go into something like this without a backup plan, now can I?

“Maybe he is. But *better* isn’t all that good, is it? All you need to do is *get him there*.” I’m gritting my teeth as I lift my head up and turn to stare at the pretty black-haired boy to my left. Why Scarlett likes him, I can’t discern, but he’s useful for the time being, so I’ll leave him as he is.

For now.

We’re parked beside one another on a remote stretch of road along the McKenzie Highway. Ash said he lost his tail, but I double-checked before allowing myself to meet up with him like this.

With everything that’s going on, it’s not safe to discuss anything via text or phone calls. Somebody could always be listening. Meeting in person is better. Arranging to meet in person is difficult in and of itself.

This time, I had Ash head to the track first—because who cares if someone knows we’re meeting there—and then set this shindig up. Hopefully, it’s almost over, so I can get away from him. As much as the desire to wrap my hands around Widow’s neck piques me, this is worse.

Ash is my absolute least favorite fuckboy—even counting Alexei Grove who, despite Scarlett’s interest, has yet to give any indication that he reciprocates it. But compared to Ash Kelly, he’s practically a saint.

“Just send Shipman to the Borisov estate.” I lean back in my seat and sigh. “Did they ID the foot yet?” I ask, because I might as well get information from the rich idiot while I’m out here.



“They did. The chief is keeping it hushed for now, but it won’t last.” Ash looks up and into the distance, toward the sunset. It’s a Friday night and I know from my contacts that Scarlett and Widow are already at the track. It’s a good spot for her. There are people everywhere, Prescott people in particular. She has her crew; I have boys who owe me big favors. It’s the safest possible place. “Soon enough, we’ll see the results.”

“Please show me that you can handle at least this one thing,” I tell him, drawing his black eyes down to me. They’re so dark I can’t even see the pupil, the polar opposite of my own. “Seeing as you failed to protect Scarlett from your brother in the first place.”

Ash’s lips thin into a menacing line, and I can see that he’s not at all pleased with my statement.

But also that he can’t refute it.

“The truth hurts, doesn’t it, Kelly?” I prod, wondering how much verbal abuse he might take before he snapped. Mark my words: he *would* snap at some point. I imagine he can take a lot, however, considering what his deranged maniac of a brother must’ve put him through.

“I’ll get it done.” He says it with such lofty authority, such domineering sensibility, that I almost believe him. Does he know he’s just a fail-safe? That I’d never trust such an important task to someone so ... guileful. “I care her for as—”

I lift up a hand, palm facing toward him.

“No, please save yourself the trouble. I’ve already been forced to listen to Widow’s undying spiel of devotion and—much as I despise him—you’re infinitely worse. A Prescott boy’s words will always hold more sway over me than some rich boy with a deranged dead twin and a politically vicious father.”

Ash’s eyes narrow at the insult, but he doesn’t take it any further.

Good for him.

Anything further than this is liable to get him killed. I don’t hold the same moral distaste for slaughtering rich boys as I do poor ones.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” he queries right back at me, and I smile, looking out the windshield and not at him. Because if I look at this slick, rich, globe-trotting fool, I might just snap. “That you were first, but not enough. That would kill me.”

I turn slowly to stare at him, but I’m not smiling anymore.

“Has Scarlett Force ever seen a truly functional relationship?” I wonder aloud. “Have I? Have you? Do men have excellent track records in taking care of their female partners? I don’t blame her. I don’t care if she experiments; in the end, it’ll be her and me anyway.” I reach down to start rolling up my window as Ash remains still, sullen, and silent. “You’re just a detour, Ash Kelly. A pitstop on a much longer journey. Don’t fool yourself.”

I finish rolling it up and, as I reverse out of the space, I pretend to run over Ash’s foot, missing his toes by about a half inch. To his credit, he stays right where he is, watching me as I reverse down the gravel road and into the street before peeling out.

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The Borisov estate—or whatever one might bother to call it—is situated on a ritzy country back road known as McKenzie View. Inflated mini mansions carved out of the woods and overlooking the river. How picturesque. How quant.

I’ve buried many bodies out here.

I park just off the main road and down a small slope, right up against the water’s edge. It’s high this year, threatening to crest the banks, but slow and lazy without the rampant rainfall to encourage it.

After climbing out, I hike up to the road, cross it, and enter the woods. I don’t know whose property this is, and I don’t care, waltzing past *No Trespassing* signs in the dark. Every so often, I pause and listen, just to make certain that I’m not being followed.

I’m not, of course.

This is my specialty. Nobody glides through shadows or swims in darkness the way I do.

*Over here cleaning up rich boy messes*, I think with a scowl, strolling alone and considering how much I enjoy solitude. It’s always done me such favors, given me a break from society and the constant buzz, chatter, and regurgitation of nonsense. Only after fucking Scarlett for the first time did it discomfit me. Only then did I wonder if I wouldn’t be happier in the presence of another person.

Well, not just any person, only her.

She’s my dark galaxy, drawing me in, an infinite and powerful goddess to lay worship to.

I'd enjoy this hike if I wasn't concerned about so many other details. Namely, Scarlett. I'm concerned about Scarlett ...

But nobody else can do this job. It has to be me. No one else is capable.

I pause at the edge of the property, searching out either of the two goons who are on patrol here. There are four of them in total that rotate duties, but none of them are worth the pennies they've been paid to sit around here and wait.

Alexei Grove would have to be an idiot to ever come back here.

But me?

I've been in and out of this house a half-dozen times already, stealing bags worth of shit, and nobody's ever noticed. Tonight's plans are a little different: I'm going to kill the two goons rather than skirt around them.

If Ash does his job and convinces that man, Ralph Shipman, to show up here like I have planned, I'll kill him, too. What's the difference between cutting off a goon's head on Halloween and doing it right now? Just the date.

Squatting down, I rest my palms on the ground, dressed in skeleton-patterned gloves for fun. And then I wait. At some point, one of the two men will head out front to patrol. From where I'm situated, I can see the front door, the circular drive that surrounds a fountain, and the large garage which sits off to the side of the main road.

For the past two weeks, I've seen these moronic lackeys run the same routine, walk the same paths, sit in the same chairs and slurp down stolen bottles of Mr. Borisov's best vintages.

Not tonight.

Something is wrong tonight.

"Well, well, a change in plans?" I whisper, excitement at the hunt turning my cock to stone. In an ideal world, I'd hunt monsters at night and return to my sweet Scarlett come sunrise, curl up beside her in a coffin made for two. Ah, delicious, delectable romance. Eventually, I'd love to bring her on hunts, but not this one.

The mayor and the mob are too much. I can't risk her. But wouldn't it be fun if we looked up a pedophile's address and stalked him just for the hell of it? Hung him up by his toes and slit his throat

...

My thoughts come to a screeching halt when I notice movement in the brush a mere five feet to my left. I go still in that special way of mine. I've been practicing holding my breath for years. I can do two minutes easily, without making a single sound. All those world records for breath holding are mere fits of hyperventilation.

This is real, silent stuff, quiet as the grave.

I may as well be dead.

The man moves toward the driveway, walking along the length of it but remaining hidden in the trees. He doesn't see or hear me, and he moves just quickly enough that when it comes time to take a breath, I'm able to do so.

*These are not the same goons.*

Whoever that was that I just ran into was someone with real training, someone who's more than just a pair of muscled biceps and a trigger finger. Hmm. I stand up, teasing my fingers through a stray shaft of moonlight, as if I could grasp a handful of it and take it with me.

Should I stay or should I go? Even humming that old Clash song doesn't give me much clarity. If I leave now, and Shipman shows up here, we're in for a world of trouble. He'll assume that Ash was double-crossing him, and he'll either out the Kelly brat to his father or go for Scarlett. Either way, it's the same outcome: my darling dame of darkness will be in the mayor's crosshairs.

A growl escapes me, and I crouch down, creeping through the shadows toward the house.

There's a convenient ring of trees around the circular drive that I use to approach the back porch. An easy hop up puts my fingers on the edge of the roof, and I raise my body up as if I'm doing a pullup, sliding belly first onto the shingles.

I take up a crouching position, crawling slowly toward the nearest window.

The house is dark but for the porch light out front, both upstairs and down. Smart move. The last set of goons left lights blazing, making it easier for me to both creep around out here and also spy on them.

I miss those morons already.

First order of business here is to start with the house, clear it out of any guards, and then work my way outwards in a spiral. Check

the guest house. Check the garage. Peruse the woods as I circle the main house.

The first window I come to is locked which is rather frustrating. I *left* it unlocked for a goddamn reason. My teeth grit, and annoyance floods me in a hot, relentless wave. My temper is a fantastic weapon, but only in the best of circumstances. Now is not the time.

I tamp that hot feeling down and save it for later, when I'll need it most in the heart of combat.

Logic prevails, and I realize that if this window is now locked, they all will be. The men that are patrolling this property now are just that good. So what do I do? I need to figure out how many men are strolling around and get rid of them *before* Shipman arrives.

It's sounding as if I might need all of my hunting skills for him, in particular. He seems a wily sort.

In the end, I decide to wait for a while, just to see if any of the men on patrol might pass by.

One does, but not in the direction I expected.

If I wasn't such a terribly clever demon, I might have died.

My head lifts up at the sound of a loose pebble shifting and rolling down the roof tiles. See, humans *never* look up. They're just not used to it. People don't expect threats from above.

But I do.

Because only the unexpected could ever get the jump on me.

There's a man crouched on one of the upper portions of the roof, but he at least seems as surprised to see me as I am him. That's what gives me the time I need to turn and rush him, vaulting up to join him on the higher level and knocking into him with as much force as I can muster.

His gun falls from his hand and clatters down the roof, but then, so do we. I've knocked into him so hard that we're rolling across the shingles and then there's this exhilarating breath where we're in total freefall.

I roll when I hit the ground, but so does the bastard I'm up against.

Uh-oh.

"Hello there," I say with a smile, and then I'm grabbing the man's face and slamming my skull against his. I've practiced this, too,

using the crown of my head to smash into the soft parts of another man's face. He grunts, and I most definitely smell blood, but it certainly doesn't incapacitate him.

Impressive.

I don't usually like to use guns—too messy, too easy to make mistakes, *way* too easy to have turned against you—but I pull my pistol out, outfitted with a silencer and subsonic ammo for optimum quiet.

There's a bit of a *zing* when I fire, like a videogame gun or a prop gun on a movie set.

But it works like magic, and the goon drops to his knees in front of me before slumping forward and twitching in that macabre sort of way that corpses do. I frown at him. Burying monsters is peaceful and quiet, just me and the moon and whatever stars are out. The smell of dirt, the sting of copper. In summer, there's oftentimes a symphony of crickets and frogs.

Killing monsters? It's only fun when I get to play first. This is utilitarian.

The sound of a boot snapping a twig draws me simultaneously around and also into a crouch. I fire off a second round and hit the newcomer in his black-clad thigh. He hits the ground with his other knee, reaching for his weapon as I slow down, breathe deep, and aim right.

*Don't rush these things; it's better to be precise.*

My finger tenses on the trigger, but my new friend is more skilled than my old one.

He brought backup.

There are footsteps on the gravel, coming at me loud and fast. The person behind me doesn't care if I can hear them; they know they can get to me before I can react properly. Since I know I can't stop them, I take the shot and hit the kneeling man in the throat.

I'm sure he's dead—or on his way there—but I don't have the leisure to check.

The best I can do is anticipate the nature of the attack from behind. I rise up and turn which was a smart move as the third goon has just grabbed me by the arm. His intention was to prevent me from using my weapon, to use his knee to crush my elbow to the ground. Instead, I'm in his face and, though he pulls hard and likely

dislocates my shoulder, I'm able to use the butt of the gun to hit him in the throat.

The sound of yet *another* goon comes from the direction of the woods but not before I feel this strange, sharp burst of pain in my right shoulder. *Gunshot wound maybe?* My fingers twitch and involuntarily release my own weapon as I use my knee to smash the crotch of the third guy.

The fourth one is on me before I can kill his buddy. His arm wraps around my neck which is fine; I can deal with that. But what I can't do is stop the man whose fertility I just decimated from stabbing a needle into the side of my neck.

There's a bright, hot rush, a sense of euphoria, and then, against my own will and better judgment, I'm collapsing to my knees, lurching forward, and hitting my skull on the edge of a paving stone.

That's not the worst part though, the passing out.

What's worse is when my captors stick a Narcan nasal spray up my nose to wake me up.

I come to like I've been kicked, sporting a raging headache, a rapid heartbeat, shivering wildly. Entertaining only one thought: *Scarlett.*

I'm tied to a chair; I'm bleeding everywhere; there's a man squatting in front of me.

When he speaks, he speaks with a Russian accent.

"Kellin Bohnes, is it? Would you mind calling Alexei for us?" He hands out my phone, already in the process of dialing the boy in question. There's not much else I can do but honor that request, now is there?

"Bohnes," Alexei greets and somehow, because I'm truly insane, I manage to get out a laugh. It's harsh and dry and grating. *What did they just drug me with?* I wonder, truly curious. Heroin, maybe. Narcan is a quick trick to wake someone up from an overdose.

"Alexei," I reply, coughing, my head swimming with nausea. I force a smile. If I'm going to die here under the hands of the mob, I may as well be proud of myself for killing two of their men at the tender young age of eighteen.

Then again, I won't let myself die here. I can't. Not when Scarlett needs me.

As I told her before, I will literally rise from the dead for her. I will be reborn. I will animate. I will haunt. Whatever it takes. Compared to all that, getting out of here should be a sweet slice of cake, shouldn't it?

“I seem to have run into some estranged family members of yours ...” I begin politely, my voice the harsh, dry crack of the undead. “By the last name of Borisov.”



The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by large, expressive splatters of bright red paint or blood, which drip down the page. The splatters are most concentrated around the word 'CHAPTER' and the hyphenated 'TWENTY-THREE'.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-THREE

## *Alexei*

My blood fires with a righteous heat and then dulls with an edge of freezer burn, ice-cold and sharp. My father's family—that is, the organized crime family that shares our last name—is here. They've kidnapped Kellin Bohnes which means they're looking for me, and not in a kindly or concerned sort of way.

They're here to kill me. Well, torture me first to see what I know and *then* kill me most like.

Was I wrong in thinking the mayor and his buddies were behind my father's death? Was it Papa's family all along? Or are they working together?

The thought's far-fetched but not impossible.

I sit down on the edge of my bed, staring at my phone, past it to the dirt floor, all the way down to the molten center of the earth as I pray for a volcanic eruption or some other force of nature that will save me from my fate.

Because, as I see it, the rest of my life is very plainly patterned before me: go home and face my family, watch Bohnes die, find myself tortured, killed, buried or burned. I swallow hard.

They're threatening to kill 'my friend' aka Kellin if I don't show up in a timely fashion. I don't care what happens to him—they'll kill him whether I show up or not, makes no difference—but I do care about what they said would happen after.

*"Then we'll go find that voluptuous young lady you were courting, take her out to the woods, bury her alive ..."* All said in Russian, just for some extra pizzazz.

Those are not empty threats. I know because Papa made sure to explain that to me at a young age, to drill it into my head over and over again until I understood it: we do not play games with the family. We do not insult the family. We do not tell the family no.

I drop my phone to the dirt floor, and even the rush of germs that must be oozing over it from the bare ground can't shake my focus. My latex-gloved hands come up to press against either side of my head, squeezing, wishing I could escape this moment and all its horrid choices.

Run.

Leave now.

Take the Miura—which is parked inside the warehouse with me—and drive off into the foggy night, sell it for parts, flee with the cash ...

Or save Scarlett Force.

If I go to the family now, as they've asked, I won't be able to save her boyfriend or fuckboy or whatever he is, but I'll be able to save her. The family doesn't waste resources on unnecessary things, and they must know that she isn't a part of this.

How they found me, I have no idea. All I know is that there's only one acceptable choice to make.

I have to go to them. If I don't, Scarlett is guaranteed to die, and I can't let that happen. I went to her first and begged for her help even when I knew what might happen to her if she were to be associated with me. Just as I took her to the country club and waited for us to be ambushed, risked her life on a bet ... I did that when I asked for assistance with my father's murder.

This is my fault.

I stand up, snatching my phone from the ground and ignoring the disgust that chases through me at the spots of dirt on the back side. I won't look at it. Soon enough, it won't matter. It won't matter if I'm infected or diseased, crawling or squirming, none of that will matter because I'll be dead.

Or I'll wish I were dead.

More than likely the latter.

I fish my car keys from a bowl on the small dining table, and then open the front doors of the warehouse as wide as

they'll go. Climbing into the orange Lamborghini, knowing it could be the last time, that's terrifying.

If I could, I'd sit here for hours, just to take it in. The smell, the feel of the leather, the rumble of the engine when I start her up and ease forward out the door.

But I don't have time.

As I'm rolling onto the dirt road, I make another call, putting it on speaker and tossing my phone onto the passenger seat.

"Hey there, Mr. Grower," Scarlett greets with a chuckle. It takes me a moment to understand the implications of the joke. As soon as I do, even in the face of fucking *death*, I get an erection. It's the worst I've ever had, fueled by adrenaline and despair.

I'm essentially driving myself to my own torture and death.

For a girl. A girl that I barely know. *This* girl, making such a stupid, fucking joke.

"Where are you?" I snarl out, my teeth snapping together on the end of the question. There's a strange silence on the other end of the line before Scarlett bothers to answer me.

"It's Friday. Where else? At the track, numb nuts. What's your goddamn problem?"

"I'll be there in ten minutes. Wait for me. It's urgent." I hang up before she can respond to that, and then I ignore her call twice over. If I answer, and she keeps talking to me, I'll talk myself out of what I'm planning to do.

I don't want to do that. Why should I? I'm going to die for her out of some strange sense of chivalry that I can't shake. Because I made myself available to her in certain ways. I knew I was doing it, even if I pretended that I wasn't. I made her think that perhaps, maybe, I was interested in her.

What if that was a factor in her agreeing to help me?

She ... may have seen me as a future conquest, a fuckboy, even a real lover.

That never would've happened, obviously, but I feel guilty now for leading her on, dragging her into this. Scarlett deserves to have one, last thing to remember me by, and I deserve to not die a fucking virgin.

If I'm going to die, I'm going down filthy and dripping from her pussy.

I cut corners and run stop signs, red lights, through someone's yard, knocking lawn ornaments into the street. I whip into that parking lot with a roar, sending the Miura skidding, and splattering the entirety of the Prescott crowd with mud.

Just not Scarlett.

She's standing on the opposite side with Widow and his '69 Corvette Stingray.

"Get in." I roll the window down a mere sliver, my gloved hands squeaking against the wheel. "Scarlett, please."

"Why don't you get out instead?" Widow encourages, scooting around her and putting his palm flat on the hood of my car. I almost do it, just as he suggested. Get out, stab him with the batrachotoxin hidden inside the metal thumbnail of my thimble. "I'm not sending her off with some rich boy like that again." He moves forward to whisper that last bit, putting his fingers around the edge of my window.

If he only knew what would've happened to him if I hadn't been in the middle of a crisis; I'd have sliced his fingertips off for daring to defile my car.

*My first fuck ... and then my untimely demise.*

I'm not sure which of those two things disgusts me more.

"Fine." I force myself to exhale, inhale, exhale. I don't have time to play with this fuckboy today. I drive down the dirt—or more accurately, *mud*—road that leads to the track, and Scarlett follows me in her Pantera.

We park together in the winner's circle, this small circular alcove that's been chiseled from the dirt slope above. We both

climb out and then come around to the passenger sides of our respective vehicles. It isn't much privacy, but it'll have to do.

I ... don't have fucking *time*.

"Dude, what is wrong with you?" Scarlett asks, and then she's biting back a gasp as I grip her upper arms in ebon fingers, dragging her close to me. I'm breathing so hard that she must think I've lost my mind, and surely, I look like a wild man with my eyes wide, and my heart in my throat.

I push her back against the dirt wall, and then I lean in, suddenly, urgently, as if I'm going to kiss her. Only, I can't make myself do that. I'm not ready for that. *There is no time for ready anymore, Alexei. This could very well be it. The end of everything.*

With Scarlett's pretty face tilted up to mine, how could I not?

"Alexei ..." she starts, turning her head slightly to one side, her cheeks pinkening with need.

Widow's pulled his Stingray down here as well, blocking us into the winner's circle as he climbs out and rests his forearms on the roof, watching.

I don't want to be watched, but I also don't believe I'll have any luck convincing Scarlett to come with me into the woods, or to drive down the block with me. Not after what happened with Ash and Aspen.

"I don't have an identical twin hiding anywhere," I say, my voice harsh and panting. Can she sense the fear in it? If she does, I believe she misunderstands it. "That much I can promise you."

"Oh, trust me: you are far too unique to have a clone running around out there." She reaches up to tap the side of my cheek with her palm, but I catch her hand, pushing it even harder against the side of my face. Her eyes widen slightly, and she parts her sweet mouth. "Are you ... what is this?"

"You said you wanted to ... devirginize me." I can't seem to make myself say it the other way aloud. It's far too filthy. Far too perverse. Already I'm quivering, both with adrenaline and

disgust. Maybe I *should* allow myself to die a virgin? “You said you wanted me to put my thick cock in your tight, little pussy, isn’t that it?”

*Where ... where did that come from?*

It feels like my mind is shattering, like I’m two people at once. I’m the Alexei Grove who should be normal, who shouldn’t have to wipe everything down and wear gloves, who could go out to a restaurant or kiss a pretty girl without wanting to gag. I’m him, but this is also me, the boy who watched his mother succumb to an invisible invader, the boy who’s disturbed and upset by the slick filth that coats the whole damn world.

“Yeah, obviously,” Scarlett says with a small snort, trying to push me off and failing. She’s strong; I’m stronger. Her face tightens up and she frowns at me. “But not here, not like this.”

“It’s now or never.” My tone is domineering and authoritative, absolute. It’s a command, not a gentle nudge.

“Now or never?” She finally jerks back from me and rubs at her right shoulder, smoothing out the slightly reddened skin where I left my fingerprints. She’s in a fifties themed swing dress with cap sleeves and an all-over cherry print. The dress itself is white, and far too pure looking for a dump like this, all that mud and the grumble of engines, the smell of oil and cigarettes.

I almost choke on all of it, but when I inhale ... I taste her on my lips and tongue. I remember the smell of the lubricant that I used to jack myself off with, the tight feel of my fist and how much tighter I knew her pussy would be. Inviting. Welcoming. It would cut me off from the rest of the world and lock me in violent, sweltering heat.

“Is something wrong.” It’s not a question. Scarlett is mad. Her lips are pursed, eyes narrowed.

“Now or never, last chance.” I move to pull away and she reaches out, grabbing onto my bare wrist, just above my glove. I stare down at her hand, rippling all over with revulsion, and

the next thing I realize, I'm picking her up and slamming her back to the wall.

She tries to kiss me, but I turn my head aside, reaching between us to undo my slacks.

“What the fuck is this?!” Widow roars, appearing on my left side.

Without warning, I slip the gun that Bohnes provided me from the pocket of my suit jacket. I hold it out on Widow with my left hand, my right arm still encircling Scarlett, gripping her ass, holding her up as I press our bodies together.

“Alexei Grove.” The four syllables of my name snap off her tongue like a whip. “Put that away.” She looks up and over at Widow. “He's not going to hurt you. Or me.” She glances back at me again, the sound of laughter and friendly screams, moaning and shouting drifting down from above us.

If someone were to walk to the edge of the circle where the rusted chain-link fence is and look down, they'd see us. Otherwise, it's more private than I suspected. Secrets in plain sight.

“I'm not going to stand there and let you fuck him.” Widow is serious.

So am I.

I keep the gun where it is, pointed right at him.

“Get your cock out.” Scarlett surprises me with her words, and I scowl. Already, I'm shaking my head.

“This was a mistake.” I drop the gun by my side, but she reaches out, sliding her fingernails across my face. The feel of that ... it breaks free some of that strange, dark energy in me. It wakes me up. It reminds me that I'm going to walk into a hostage scene with only myself as backup, with a single gun, a knife, a set of needles. The batrachotoxin will help, but it won't stop a bullet.

It won't stop the mob.

“I wasn't talking to you.” Scarlett makes me look at her and then peels the gun from my fingers, tossing it into the mud.



“Widow, get your goddamn cock out.”

“Fuck that.” He moves like he’s going to come for us, but a single look from Scarlett makes him pause, hesitate. He reconsiders. He paces like an animal.

He’s not the only one. My erection is as hard as it’s ever been, and it aches, and I can feel Scarlett’s heat pooling at the apex of her thighs, beckoning me. She grinds her hips against me, but she’s still staring at Widow, and I ... I suddenly realize that I’m standing in deep mud, that she’s touching me all over, that her back is pressed to a literal wall of dirt.

This is the most repugnant thing I’ve ever done.

If I weren’t about to die, I might kill myself after. Or die of sheer bliss, one of the two.

“Widow, now.”

“If I do this, then I want one of my feverish nightmares granted,” he grinds out, but he’s opening his jeans and I’m turning away. I don’t want to see his cock. I don’t want to believe I’m doing this. This is *not* how it was supposed to happen the first time for me. I had plans of wining and dining, of falling in love, of a soft bed, of ribald and lascivious experimentations in the dark of night.

To be fair, it is dark. It’s late, nearly two in the morning if I’m not mistaken.

But that’s the only concession the universe has granted me.

“Squeeze it hard, Widow, and watch me.” Scarlett’s voice is husky and warm, but I don’t want it directed at Widow. This is for me; this is my literal dying wish.

Teeth clenched, I reach down and wrap my fingers around Scarlett’s panties.

*This silk is cupping her cunt; it’s soaked; it’s wet with her juices.*

I’m simultaneously repelled and very, very excited. I tear the underwear with violent fingers, but it doesn’t come off, just rips and drapes off her other thigh. Good enough. My

body can feel hers through the fabric between us, and I can't wait a second longer.

I can't wait.

"Alexei." The sound of my name on her lips is a sweet song, a siren's call, an impossible demand. I heed it anyway. Tearing my zipper and briefs down, I release the aching heat of my erection and then naturally, easily, find her core.

She's so wet, and I need it so badly, it all just happens. I'm gripping her ass in tight fingers and driving deep. My knuckles sink slightly in the earthen wall behind her body, dirtying up her dress, painting her with mud.

I hate the idea of that so much that my skin becomes a cage I want to escape, and I do that by rutting into her like an animal. I'm unhinged and disturbed in my need, frantic. She keeps her hands on my shoulders, her head thrown back against the wall. I know she wants to kiss me, but I can't bring myself to breach that final barrier.

*This is everything I've ever wanted*, my dark side whispers, tearing away all of my frantic obsessions for the briefest of moments. It won't last, I know. But it doesn't matter. There won't be time to mourn the loss of my seraphic cleanliness, my perturbed need for sterile and undisturbed.

All there is left of Alexei Grove right then is his anger—and his *want*.

I want Scarlett. I want her to be mine. I'll take her home and make her my wife. Ash Kelly is wealthy, but I have more money. More influence. More power.

*Did, Alexei. You did have those things. Not anymore.*

And maybe I'll never have those things again? Yet I know that doesn't matter to her, that if she could love a street rat like Widow or a deranged drifter like Bohnes, she could love me.

*I don't care; I don't want that.*

I'm moaning wildly now, pressing Scarlett even harder against the wall, shoving my thick cock into the smoothest, silkiest channel I've ever experienced. Not that I have much to

compare her to except for my hand. But the difference is ... pure torture.

I'm dying. She's killing me. Because now all I want is to be dirty instead of clean.

"Filthy," I groan as she breathes against my neck, and my skin pebbles with goose bumps. "You're so filthy; I want more. More. More." I cup her ass even harder and pound into her, euphoria pooling in my belly.

"Anything you want," is what she pants back at me. "As much as you want. I will fuck you filthy, Alexei Grove." And then she's groaning so loudly that I slap a latex-covered hand over her mouth to keep the noises for myself.

There's a strange, slick sound coming from Widow's direction, and I know he's still jerking himself off to us, watching us, using us, making us even dirtier than we already are.

I ignore him.

Scarlett is coming apart in my arms, orgasming around me, on me, drawing me even more deeply inside of her. The euphoria I felt triples, and then my whole body is on fire; every muscle is taut and stiff, and I'm making terrible noises of my own.

Horrible ones. Repugnant ones.

Seed drips down around the base of my cock, spilling from inside of her.

*What the hell have I done?*

No sooner has the orgasm ripped through me than I'm pushing away from her, letting her red wedge heels hit the mud. I'm shoving my dirty, filthy cock into my slacks with gloved hands, yanking open the driver's door of my Lambo, and I'm gone.

I can't wait a second longer.

I can't look at her.

If I do, I'll kidnap her and drive away, thrust us both into the sunrise and do my best to start anew somewhere else. I'd do that, too, selfishly take her away from everyone she knows and loves, force her to live on the lam, keep her in shadows and under bridges to hide our identities.

I'd do all that just to have her.

Allowing myself to feel that slick, warm, entry, those desperate contractions, her breathy moans against the side of my neck ... that was a mistake.

I'm snarling in Russian and turning the radio up as loud as it can go, blasting that terrible local station with its self-righteous, incognito hosts. I don't recognize the song; I don't care what it is. It could be Gregorian chanting monks for all that it matters to me.

I tear through the crowd in an inappropriate manner, sending Prescott students stumbling out of my way as I struggle to get a proper head start on Scarlett Force. I don't doubt that she'll try to follow me, but I don't want her to. Her presence won't change a thing for the better: it'll only make it worse.

My family has found me.

Even if she joins me tonight, and Widow joins me, and God, if we called Ash Kelly to come, it wouldn't be enough. We could kill however many men are at the house, but the mob would send more. They'd never stop.

An infection works best undetected, in disguise, burning as a quiet fever beneath the skin.

Lifting my gaze to the rearview mirror, I see that Scarlett and Widow both are following me.

Since I don't know the layout of the city very well, I stick to main roads, places where I can gather speed and keep it. That's my best hope. Scarlett doesn't know where the house is. If I lose her now, she'll have no idea where I've gone.

An excited thrill chases through me, similar to the disturbing one I felt the night that Scarlett robbed me wearing a balaclava and holding a gun on my head. Being tailed by her, being hunted, it's *exhilarating*.

Especially after having fucked her.

That was a definite mistake. I didn't want to die a virgin, but now that I've had sex, I'm not sure that I want to die.

Not that I ever did.

Papa and I were supposed to build a new life together, experience things as a family instead of living in a world of jewels and tuxedos and poison.

I continue to push the Miura to dangerous speeds, lifting my eyes up to the mirror yet again.

Scarlett makes a terrifying right turn, far too fast down a very narrow passageway. Widow follows her, even worse off. I actually wonder as I continue on down the road if he crashed or not. Seemed as if he might.

*Her breath, warm against my throat. Her pussy, so tight. Unbelievably tight. Her ass, plump and overflowing my hands.*

A frustrated sound rips from my chest, but what can I do now?

*Idiot, moron. You tainted yourself filthy and foul, and now you'll go to the grave with that girl's toxins dripping down your cock and balls, ruined and contaminated and crawling.*

Wanting.

*Needing more.*

If I were to live, I'd try harder to push past this. I'd fight more. I'd let myself do things that scared the shit out of me. I would ... Would.

But I can't.

I yank the wheel to the right so violently that the car spins, the taillights painting strange red streaks in the night air as I fly backward. The acrid scent of burning rubber mixes with the strange musk of sex, the fresh reek of sweat, my own fear and arousal spoiling everything.

I manage to get the car under control, reversing our direction and springing forward, around the corner and—hopefully—out of Scarlett's sight.

That's when I see the flash of red on the small overpass above me. It doesn't seem to have any traffic or even any sides; it looks to be a private road that connects one part of the quarry to the other.

The Pantera launches off of that, and I curse, anticipating what Scarlett's going to do before she even does it. Her car lands on the road in front of me, skidding to the side and creating a horizontal block across both lanes.

I have no choice but to hit the brakes and turn into the slide, struggling with the wheel and the direction of the car's skid. Once again, I end up on the shoulder of the road, in the gravel next to the river. Its waters slither smoothly through the night, swollen and high but quiet on the surface.

It's only underneath that the current takes hold.

Scarlett rolls down her window to check her tires as the Stingray appears around the corner from the direction I just came, blocking me in. Trapping me.

Going to the track to fuck her was a bigger mistake than I anticipated.

I'm climbing out, struggling to control my own lividity—and failing miserably—as Scarlett moves her car and its rapidly deflating tire over to the shoulder beside me.

“Are you insane?!” I shout, getting too close, trying to keep my hands off of her by squeezing them into fists. It doesn't work. Nothing I could ever do from this point on would work to scrub this woman from my mind. It's too late. I've ruined it all. “You could've gotten yourself killed!”

“What does that matter to you?” she shoots back at me, and I lose it. I grab her even though I know I shouldn't, even though I know that I'm fighting with every breath to keep from fucking her again, to keep myself from making a different decision that I should.

Anything but confronting my family head-on tonight will end in Scarlett's death, as sure as the moon rises.

My gaze drifts down to her mouth and gets stuck there, imagining how beautifully grotesque it would be to feel her

tongue slick up against mine. The idea of it both frightens and excites me, and I know undoubtedly that a kiss with Scarlett will change me more than sex ever could.

“I’m putting my life on the line for you, Scarlett Force,” I tell her truthfully, pulling away before I can let my weaknesses overwhelm me. If I let her die or ruined her life, I’d be as bad as Chief Bolin, pulling the trigger on my father’s head. I’d be murdering Scarlett. “Please move out of the way and let me get on with my business.”

“Wherever you’re going, driving over a hundred miles an hour down a city street, it’s not somewhere that I want you to go. It sure as shit isn’t somewhere you’re going without telling me.” When she crosses her arms and glares at me, all I can do is stand there and wonder if she really tailed me all this way, really jumped off a bridge like a Hollywood stunt driver with my hot cum pooling between her legs.

Widow moves up beside us, adding fuel to a cold and angry flame.

*No, Alexei, anything but cold. Anything but that.*

“Tell her where you’re off to, rich kid,” he snarls, and my fingers twitch with the urge to poke his eyes out. It’s mostly the ick factor of touching him that stops me, not out of any regret for the violence.

“Where I’m going ...” I begin with a cruel laugh, raking gloved fingers through my hair. I look up, meeting Scarlett’s dark and inquisitive gaze. “It isn’t somewhere that I’ll be coming back from.”

She hesitates for a moment, shifts uncomfortably, and then she blanches. She swallows hard, choking on a sudden revelation, one that Widow iterates before she does.

“Your family,” Widow whispers, and then his amber eyes flick to Scarlett. “Get in my car; we’re leaving.”

“I can’t leave Alexei to deal with this alone,” she says which surprises me—in a cruel and terrible way. *She does like me, doesn’t she?* And yet, I have no room to pursue that. I can’t even save her fuckboy, and I have to explain that to her. *I must*

get her to leave with Widow, forget all about this, pretend as if she's never met me.

“Bohnes is being held at my father's house. If you don't let me go, I can't save him.”

That does it.

Her eyes widen even further and then she steps toward me, slamming her wedge shoe down on my foot. The pain is wild and immediate, and I want to scream because she smeared even more mud on my shoe ... but then none of that matters now, does it?

“Why didn't you think to *tell* me any of this?!” she shouts as I snap off one glove and then the other, tossing them onto the Miura's front seat. I step toward her suddenly and Widow cuts me off, as if he believes I would actually take off my gloves to *hurt* her.

On the contrary, if I were going to make her bleed, I most certainly would've left them on.

“Move, Mr. Lawless. Now.”

“Make me.”

All I want to do is touch Scarlett with my bare palms, to say goodbye to her, and this fool—

Our gazes lock and violence simmers between us as a police cruiser rounds the corner, moving far too slowly to be anything but a fucking *rat*.

The Miura. I have the Miura with me. License plate aside, it's a rare and outrageous car in a brilliant orange. Doubtless the chief would have his boys searching for it. For me.

Cornered on two sides. That's how I feel, and that's when I go for the gun. Because I won't go down like this, feeling helpless and overwhelmed.

Before I can grab the weapon off the passenger seat, Scarlett is shoving past me and climbing into the driver's side of the Lambo.



“Get in; I know the city better than you do.” She stares at me, and I stare right back at her. “I will get you to your father’s house but I’ll outrun these goons first. You don’t know all the shortcuts around here.” She wets her lips in challenge. “I do.”

“You’re going to dirty my seat with cum?” I ask, breathless but also nauseated. Am I disturbed or excited by that idea? I can’t help myself. If I’m going to die, I may as well let my last moments be as carnal and rotten as I like.

“Don’t make a fuss,” Widow tells her, his voice low, eyes on the cop car as it comes to a stop behind his Stingray—still parked vertically across the road, mind you—and turns its lights on. “Leave, and I’ll deal with this.”

“Don’t kill a cop, Widow—even one that deserves it. That takes planning and foresight.” Scarlett leans out the door and grabs onto his shirt, yanking him down for a quick but passionate kiss before she shoves him away. “If something happens to me, try and rescue Bohnes, will ya?”

She slams the car door, and I’m left with few good choices but to climb in beside her.

“My house is just up the road; I’ll point out the driveway when we get to it.”

“*If* we get to it,” she murmurs, cocking her head to one side. The sound of sirens in the distance is unmistakable. I grit my teeth and dig my bare fingers into the legs of my dirty slacks.

It’s crawling inside of me, that contamination, slithering down my throat and consuming me.

Its name? Scarlett Force.

If I’m so afraid of that, so afraid of being tainted and rotten, why then do I seem to open my metaphorical mouth all the wider?

The image features a dark, gradient background transitioning from black at the bottom to a lighter grey at the top. Overlaid on this background is the text 'CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR' in a white, serif font. The text is heavily obscured by large, expressive splatters of bright red paint or blood, which drip down the page. The splatters are most concentrated around the word 'CHAPTER' and the hyphenated 'TWENTY-FOUR'.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FOUR

## *Scarlett*

The very first thing I hear over the distant ring of sirens is the impossible echo of a gunshot.

*Widow.*

My heart lurches violently, stops briefly, and then starts up again at a rapid clip. I care far too much about that idiot parking space stealer than I rightfully should.

I almost turn around, but I'm not given the chance to breathe let alone flip a bitch on this stupid narrow road. On my left, there's a steep slope, dotted with trees, the twinkling lights of distant manors visible here or there. Driveways appear every now and again, but who knows where they lead? Are they just crooked and winding dirt roads that end in a three-car garage and a five-bedroom mini mansion? Are they narrow gravel ribbons that will dump me at a gate with a keycode I don't know?

I can't risk using any of them except to turn around. Only as I said, I don't get to that either. First off, the river would be right behind me, and there's not necessarily protective guard rails along the whole thing. The edge is muddy and close, and if I backed up too far, off we'd go into the water.

Would we even survive that?

See where I'm going here?

I need time to turn us around, and time I do not have.

*Why do we gotta be all the way out here in rich people country? It's so much easier to outrun the cops in my own neighborhood.* At the very least, one doesn't race in this town without at least a basic knowledge of car chases, regardless of zip code.

That's as far as my thought process goes, trying to decide how best to eat this shit sundae, when I see the flashing blue and red lights coming around the bend toward us. Not just one cop car. Like fuckin' six.

Each one is black and white, lights flashing, but they've turned their sirens off.

Still, not good. Like, what was that gunshot? What happened to Widow? Why are they trying to run us down without making a sound? Corruption and politics, baby, just synonyms for the same damn thing.

But really? That bitch of a mayor thinks he can murder Alexei's dad, kill my bestie, and then send a bunch of corrupt cops after me—in *cars*? I eat cars for breakfast. I am made up of molecules and car chases, stunts and muddy races, adrenaline and hard-won triumphs. That last one most of all.

So, Mayor Kelly, do your worst. You want to be governor huh? If so, it's going to be over this bitch's dead body and bright red heels.

"New model Dodge Chargers?" I murmur to myself as Alexei turns to peer out the rear windshield at our, um, complimentary motorcade. "Zero-to-sixty in what, six seconds or so? Same with the Miura." I muse on that as I pick up speed, trusting myself to anticipate the wild ribbon of the road and its many curves, lest we end up sunk at the bottom of the river. I can swim, but I ain't no pirate. *Har*. "Top speed ... a hundred and fifty miles per hours? Close enough."

I'm talking to myself, sure, but who cares. *The Lambo can reach speeds in the hundred and sixties, I'm sure of it*. More important: does it matter how good the car is if the driver shovels shit?

Don't think so.

I can outrun these motherfuckers any day of the week.

As soon as I hit the next straight, I'm blasting down it and Alexei is staring at his phone in a shaking hand, turning his gaze over to me.

"We can't go to the house with these men in tow; they could easily be working with my family."

He makes a frantic phone call as I suck my lower lip under my teeth and watch the police cruisers catching up behind us. Turning back to the front doesn't bring me any relief because I

know exactly where we're headed: straight for a T-intersection with Hill Road.

If I were the mayor, if I were the police chief, where would I send my men as soon as I got the call from douchebag copper numero uno?

Yep. Right fucking there.

I can see the cars waiting down the road from us, and I make a split-second decision to hook a sharp left, barreling up a steep drive that twists almost parallel with the pavement of McKenzie View.

"I need to know now: are you working with the police?" Alexei inquires politely. Only his quivering hand as it grips the phone gives away his true feelings. "If you are, this is irrelevant. If not, then I'm afraid I may not make it to the house."

I ignore him. I can't focus on him or Bohnes or Widow or anything else. All I can do is drive.

Up, up, up we go, higher in elevation, the river stretching like a living thing across the horizon. It's just barely limned in moonlight, a ragged gash through the tree line. The black and white Chargers are right behind us, just a bend or two behind.

As we come around another sharp curve, I feel my heart drop to my stomach.

*Aw, fuckballs and shit sacks.*

Of course. Like, of course. *Why do you hate me, life?!*

There's a dirt patch up ahead where it looks like a new house (of cheap and questionable quality copyright Archer Realty, I'm sure) is going to be built, but that's it. There are no other roads, no detours, and no way to drive the Lambo through the dense forest that surrounds us on three sides.

I could make a U-turn up there, sure, but then what? What do I do after that?

My attention becomes fixated on the river, on the space between us and it. We're about twenty feet above the proper road, parallel to it, and on the other side, the mighty McKenzie

River flows. There are some rocks at the edge of the shore, I see that. But it's not insurmountable, is it?

It's an opportunity, at the very least.

Because right now, we don't have a snowball's chance in hell.

Alexei is a prime target for the mob and the mayor—maybe because they're one in the same—and I'm collateral damage. I'm just Prescott trash. I killed Aspen. Everything could come unraveled in a single moment, and I won't let myself be gang raped and buried in a mass grave. I won't let Alexei be tortured and executed.

“Roll down your window!” I shout, and I don't even care what information he's gotten through that phone call. I'm reaching down with my left hand and frantically rolling my own down. Yeah, yeah, I'm driving one-handed *like a fucking boss*.

The nice thing about Alexei Grove is that—when he's not obsessing over microbes—he can be reasonable. See, here is a fuckboy who can listen to orders when he's told. He rolls the window down on his side as I make some quick calculations.

Speed. Distance. Survivability.

Like, I'm Scarlett Force, and I'm scrappy, right? I am. I'll be okay. Alexei, too.

And then I turn the wheel to the right and hit the gas at the same time. There's just enough space between us and the edge of the road to get some momentum going.

For the second time that night, I attempt a daredevil's task, sending Alexei's million-dollar Miura directly into the cold, angry arms of the river as the clock on the dash ticks over. It's three in the morning; it's the goddamn witching hour.

Some devout folk see the number three as a mockery of the Holy Trinity; this is the Devil's hour and the Miura, she can't swim.

There are five people embroiled in this mess, but one of them has to die.

Given the choice, if someone has to go, you know that I'd only ever pick ... me.

See, here's the thing. I was willing to give up my dreams to save Lemon.

I fall too hard, too fast, and I love far too fierce. Not just boys, but my girls (and Basti), too.

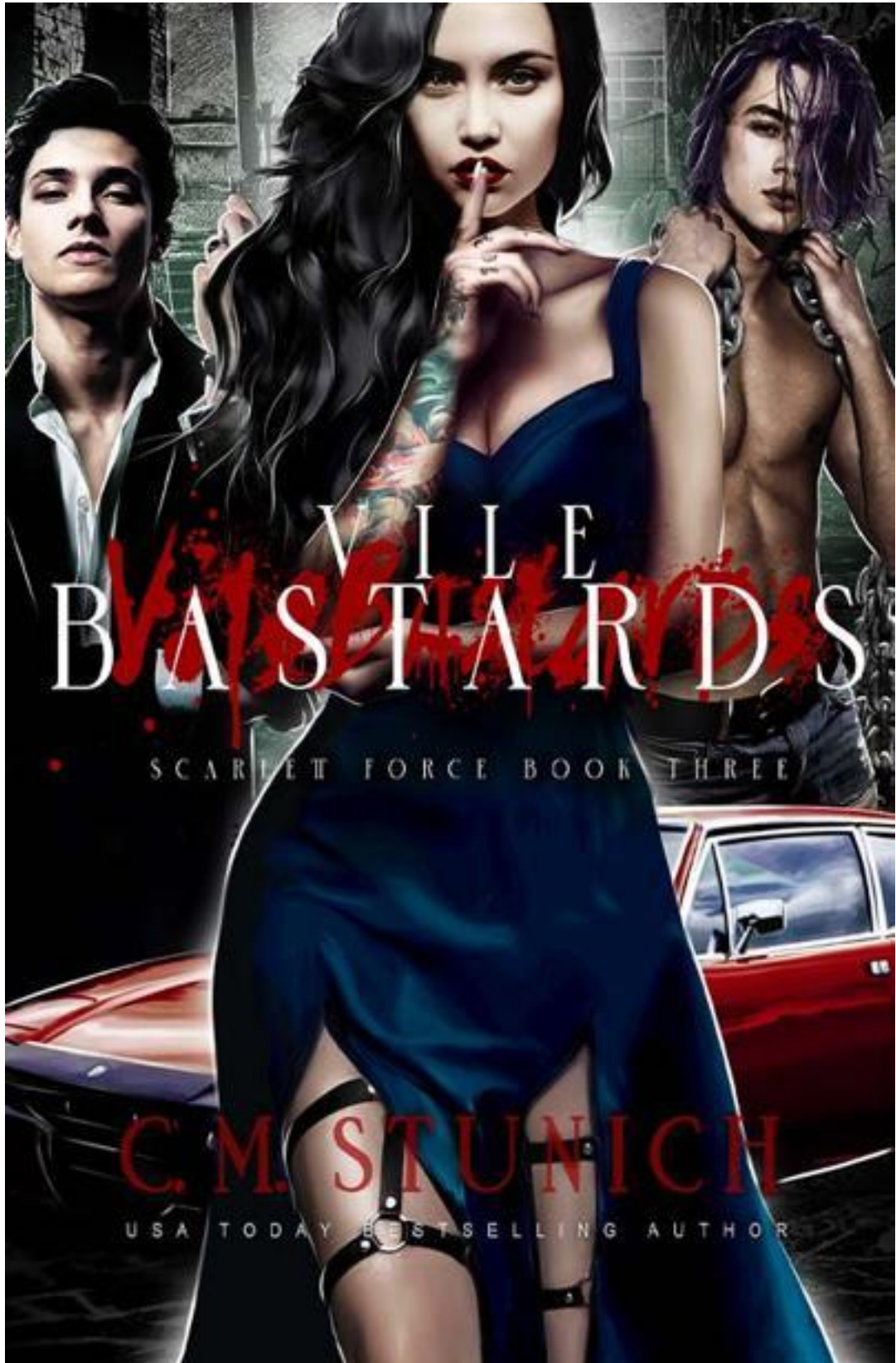
*I'm such a sucker for love and loyalty.*

This is where my warnings really kick in. Remember your promise: two can keep a secret if one of them is dead.

Did you think we were nearing the end? Bitch, we are *just* getting started.

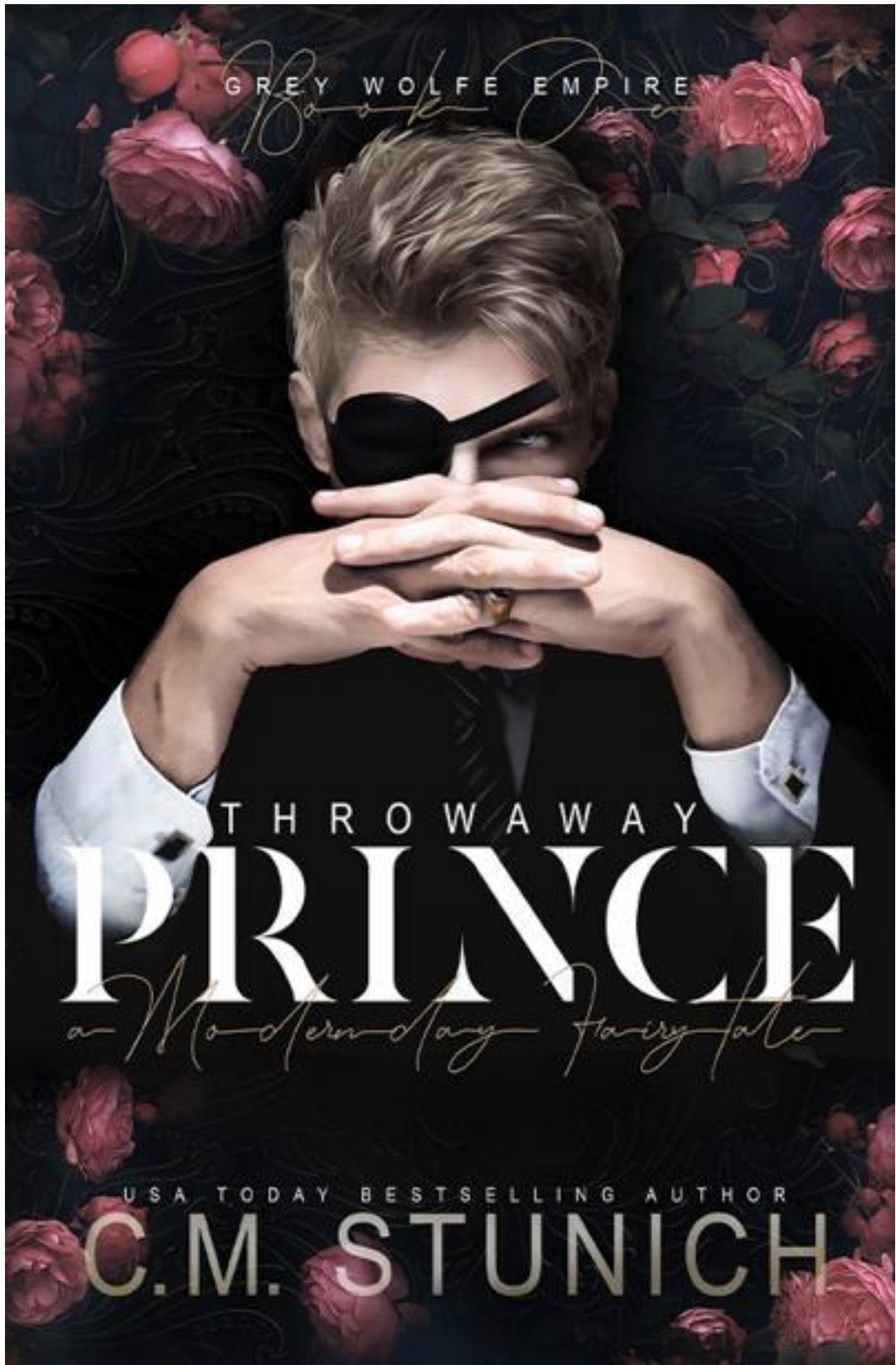
Warmest Regards (delivered straight from the river's icy waters), the Indelible Ms. Force.

To Be Continued ...

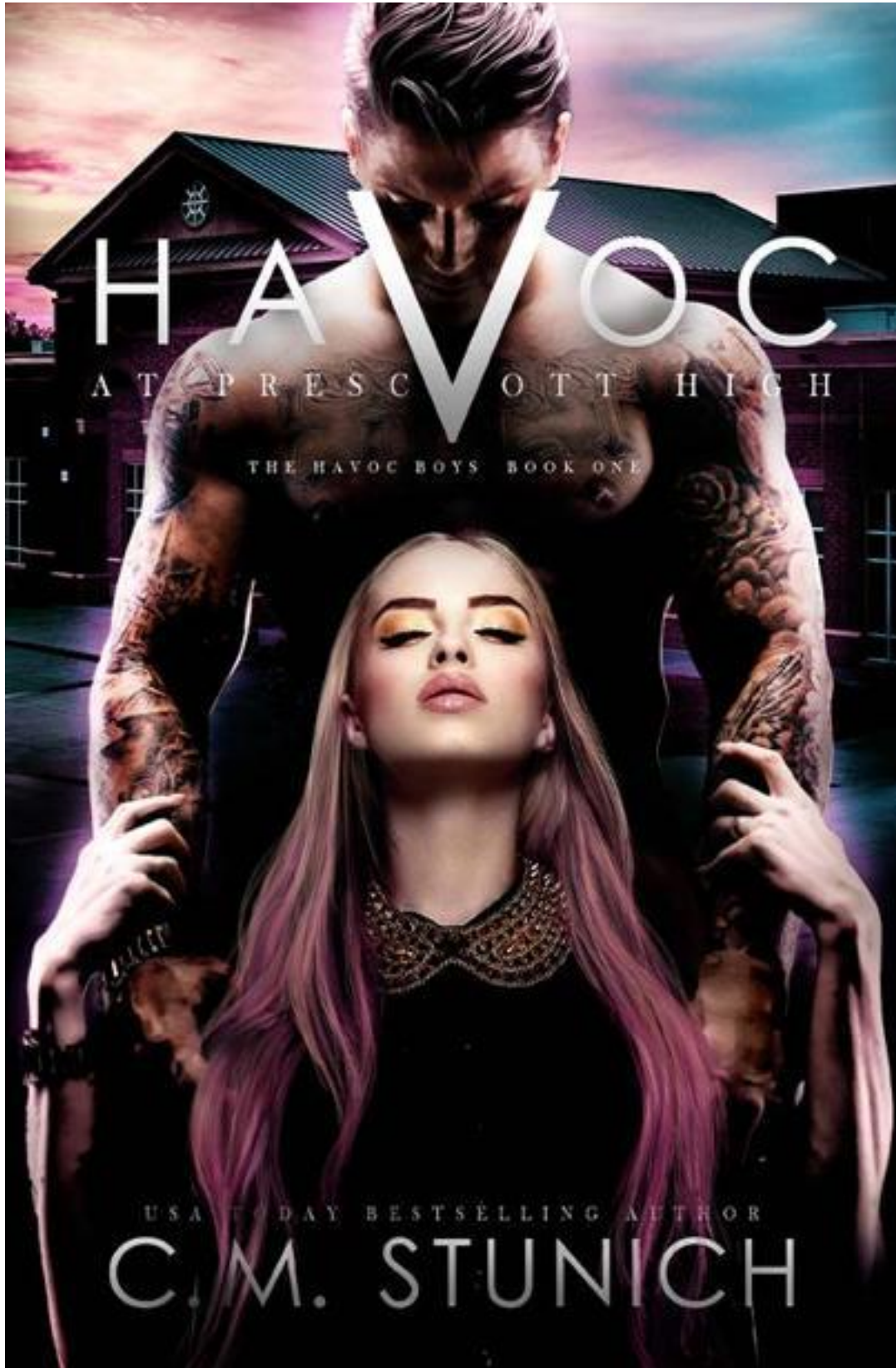


[Scarlett Force Book #3](#)



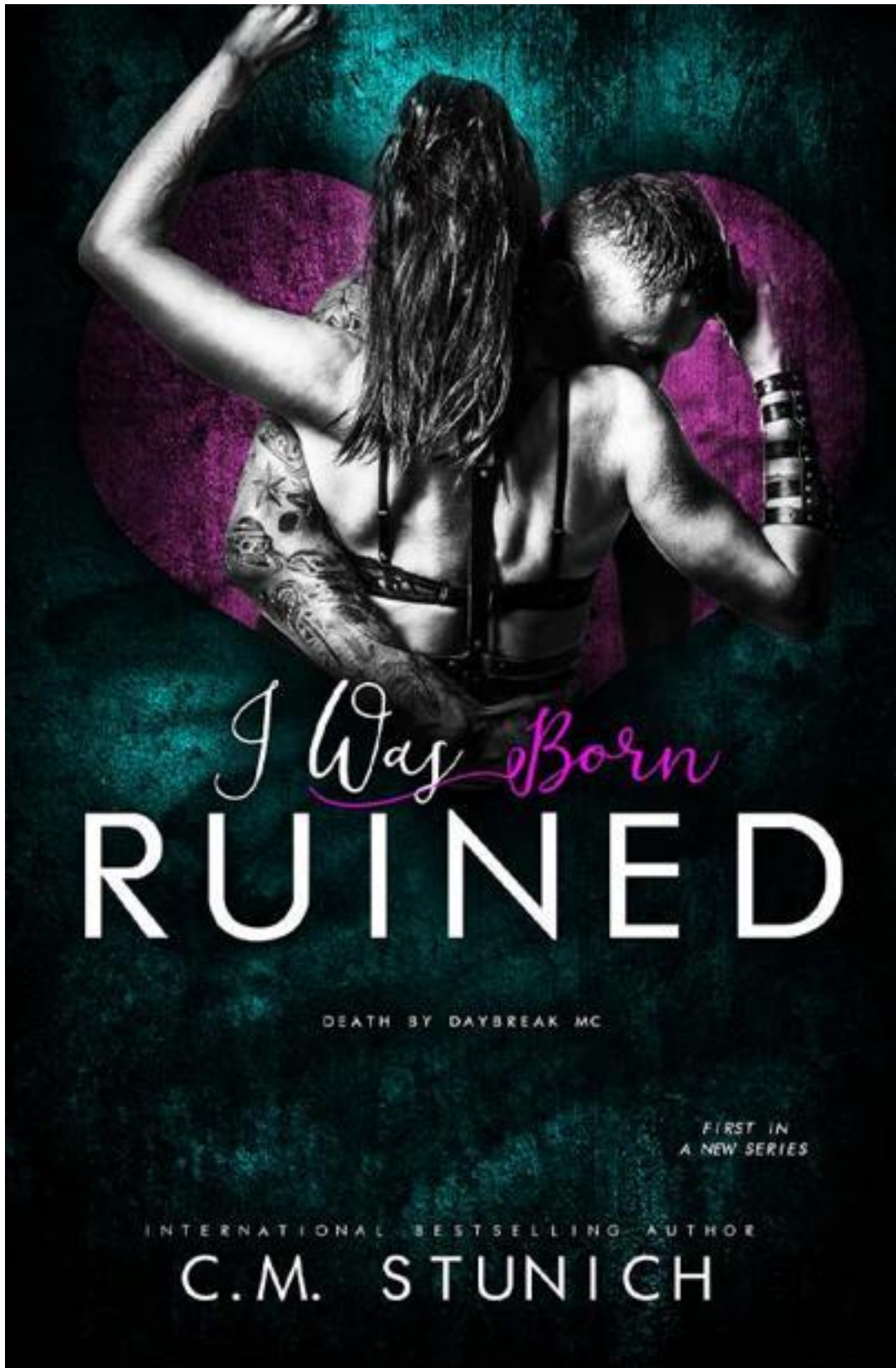


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### ***About the Author***

*C.M. Stunich is a self-admitted bibliophile with a love for exotic teas and a whole host of characters who live full time inside the strange, swirling vortex of her thoughts. Some folks might call this crazy, but Caitlin Morgan doesn't mind - especially considering she has to write biographies in the third person. Oh, and half the host of characters in her head are searing hot bad boys with dirty mouths and skillful hands (among other things). If being crazy means hanging out with them everyday, C.M. has decided to have herself committed.*

*She hates tapioca pudding, loves to binge on cheesy horror movies, and is a slave to many cats. When she's not vacuuming fur off of her couch, C.M. can be found with her nose buried in a book or her eyes glued to a computer screen. She's the author of over One Hundred novels - romance, new adult,*

*fantasy, and young adult included. Please, come and join her inside her crazy. There's a heck of a lot to do there.*

*Oh, and Caitlin loves to chat (incessantly), so feel free to e-mail her, send her a Facebook message, or put up smoke signals. She's already looking forward to it.*