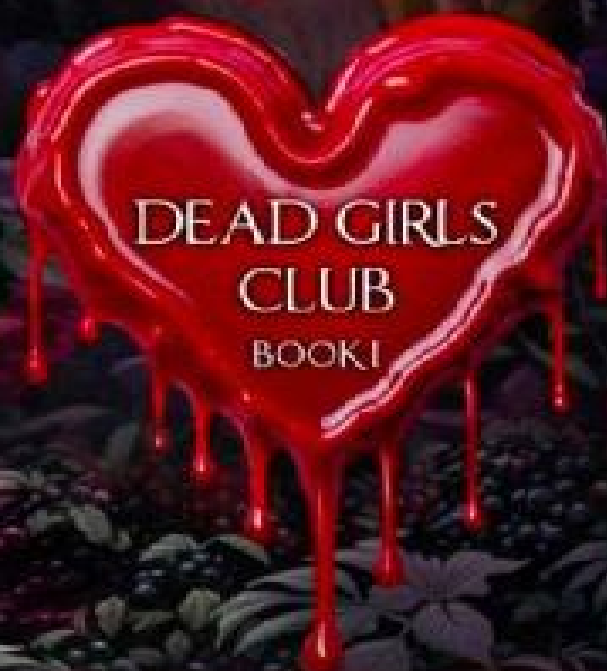


# VIRGIN SACRIFICE



DEAD GIRLS  
CLUB  
BOOK 1

L.M. RAMIREZ

VIRGIN SACRIFICE  
DEAD GIRLS CLUB  
BOOK ONE



BY LUNA MARIA RAMIREZ



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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

*To anyone who's ever felt sad and turned to their book  
boyfriends for comfort.*

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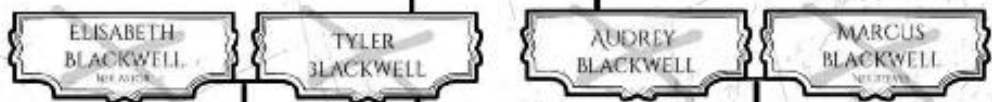
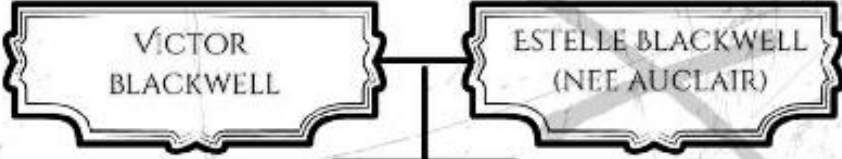
*Virgin Sacrifice* is the first book in the Dead Girls Club series, a dark, why-choose tale of murder, mystery, and love. While this first book does contain some steamier scenes (see warnings below), to tell Luz's tale properly, the series is by necessity a slow burn. The spice is coming in Book Two, *Lady Killer*, and I promise my girl's story is worth the wait. Luz will get her psychos in the end; however, *Virgin Sacrifice* does end on a cliffhanger.

This book contains depictions of bullying, child abuse, murder, stalking, gratuitous violence, dubious consent, racism/racial conflict, and death/dying, along with references to rape and sexual violence, that some readers may find detrimental to their health and well-being. It also contains descriptions of sexual acts, including spitting, groping, and oral sex. The people and dynamics in this book are fictional and should not be taken as depictions of safe or healthy relationships. This includes instances with substantial power imbalances and serious ethical concerns.

Please take care of yourself first and foremost.

# BLACKWELL FAMILY TREE

*Patriarch*



*Heir*



*Not Related! Best Friend*



*Out of wedlock*



*Twins*







## Prologue

**T**he first time I died, I assumed it would be my last.

Looking back on it now, it's almost embarrassing how naïve I was, all those silly fears and expectations.

*Death is scary. Death is painful. Death is irrevocable.*

What a whiner!

Nope, now I know better.

Death can be scary, sure, and in my experience, it's usually painful and irrevocable. But not always.

The first time I died, I thought it was an accident. A terrible mistake.

Now I understand that we are all destined to die from our very first breath.

To this day, I can still feel those large hands tightening around my neck, can see the spots in my vision growing larger and blurrier as the world around me starts to swim.

In my nightmares, the fetid scent of their breath poisons what little air I can gasp while the flecks of their spittle decorate my cheeks and eyes.

The fear from your first time stays with you forever. But the shame is far worse.

I peed my pants.

*Drip, drip, drip.*

It ran down my leg, ruining my new underwear with rainbows and hearts on it.

*Father is going to be so mad at me for having an accident.*

Death may not be forever, but the lessons it teaches you are.

# Chapter One



## Luz

Hollow Oak University

*“There is always a choice, and I choose to practice the ritual and embrace all the power it imbues upon me ...”*

My ragged breath and the rush of my blood pumping through me were all I could hear as I raced through the woods as fast as my feet could carry me. I ran as though the devil himself was at my back as the words echoed in my mind.

*“There is a sacred art to what we do, as women ...”*

It was a lecture my mother had delivered to me a thousand times. She believed wholly in the divine power of femininity, of beauty and a woman’s grace. So, when she spoke of the act of getting ready, of putting on her face and doing her hair, it was with all the reverence of a true believer.

I wasn’t quite as devout as she was, but the power of her practice was undeniable, which was why I was currently running through the backwoods of Hollow Oak University



before the crack of dawn, in order to make sure I had enough time to get ready properly for my first day of classes.

Light had started to creep into the sky as I headed back out of the woods. I was still learning the trails that cut through them and had kept close to the campus, not wanting to get lost. I slowed to walk as I approached my dorm, enjoying the easy warmth of late summer in Connecticut.

Back in my dorm room, which mercifully I didn't have to share, I quickly stripped out of my sweaty running gear and unbound my long, thick, dark hair. It was always the first step of the ritual.

Maybe there was something to Mami's worship. The women in my family were blessed with gorgeous locks that grew well past our waists. I kept mine cut to just above the bottom of my ribs, but it didn't matter whether I chose to wear it up or down, it was always a production. Which was why I needed to get into the shower and get it dried as quickly as possible if I wanted to be able to complete the ritual in time to get breakfast before class.

An hour later, my waves were brushed and fluffed to perfection, floating airily around my face, décolletage, and down my back.

*“The ritual gives us the ability to control how they see us, mija. It's a subtle, delicate thing, but it's power nonetheless ...”*

The second step of the ritual was always makeup, which for me was a well-practiced routine of tasteful minimalism.

Whenever I tried to go for a bold winged liner and crimson lip, it always felt like I was wearing a cheap mask, one that drew attention to me rather than diffused it. The red was too bright, or one eye was wonky looking. Most days, I preferred rosy cheeks, softly shadowed, lined eyes, and my full natural lips with just a hint of stain and gloss. The whole look was quite subtle, demure even.

Of course, sometimes the sharpest edges hid in the softest places.

Next was the clothes.

Mami hadn't necessarily harped on what I wore as much. She'd always encouraged me to embrace my own style, no matter what phase I had been going through at the time. Still, I'd watched her getting ready often enough to see how she put the same care into her outfits as she did everything else ...

For a moment, my eyes burned as I fought some of the tears that I'd been choking back for the last couple of days. All morning she had been on my mind, but the pain of her absence still managed to sneak up on me. Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I channeled my thoughts forward—more than anything, Mami would want me to put on a brave face and keep going. Hollow Oak was my fresh start. Succeeding here was the best way to honor all her sacrifices for me.

Shaking off my melancholy, I turned my eyes to the outfit I'd laid out the night before. I'd decided on an homage to classic East Coast prep style, choosing a simple, silk-and-wool blend, pleated skirt in a dark shade of camel combined with a

crisp white cotton blouse. We might not have had oodles of money to spend on fancy clothes, but Mami had taught me how to sew and fix up vintage clothes. The woman would never accept less than looking perfect. While I wasn't going to be whipping up couture dresses anytime soon, I was decent enough at sewing and had learned from a young age how a well-tailored outfit elevated any look.

Paying attention to the details helped as well and I rolled up a pair of creamy white stockings that came to just below my knees. My skirt hung tastefully a couple of inches above, and when I walked, the pleats swung back and forth, carefully exposing several generous inches of my brown skin. I left the top two buttons on my blouse undone, showing off only the slightest swell of my small breasts below. I wasn't so much one for modesty as I was for a touch of mystery. The people we forget, the ones hiding in plain sight, were the ones who held the most secrets.

Accessories were the final step, and I hung a plain crucifix on a delicate chain around my neck. The gold necklace glowed warmly against my skin, matching the stack of small gold hoops I wore in both ears. Mami wasn't religious, except about her beauty routine, but the necklace had been hers before it became mine, and I cherished it.

Finally, I slipped my feet into a pair of crisp, white Reebok Club Cs—I had a slight obsession with white sneakers—before giving myself one last assessing gaze in the flimsy mirror secured against the door of my room.

Looking at myself, I felt satisfied, perhaps even a bit pleased, with what I saw. My nails were painted a soft sheer pink that made them look natural yet polished, complimenting my makeup. The white sneakers and clean gold jewelry gave the classic look a slightly European edge to it. I reminded myself of a schoolgirl or postsecondary student in France. Timelessly feminine but without pretense. Attractive without appearing threatening or ambitious.

A sense of safety and security settled into me.

Hollow Oak University may not have been Yale or Harvard, but the small private school still held plenty of East Coast elite cachet.

And having survived my father's family as a child, I was no stranger to the social politics that seemed to consume the lives of those with money. The games these people played weren't meant for someone like me to win. The best I could hope for was to be a pawn. In my opinion, I was better off not playing at all.

The surest path to my success at Hollow Oak was to remain hidden away in plain sight. A polite stranger. And it wasn't so much that makeup or clothes would help me fit in as what they would say to others. That I wasn't trying to pretend that I had the money to blend in with my socioeconomic superiors. Nor was I deliberately trying to stick out because I resented that I didn't.

And the truth was that scholarship students like me had been propping up the GPA at institutions like Hollow Oak for

decades. We might be a small minority here and never afforded the same privileges and opportunities as our classmates, but if we could keep our heads up and stay focused, we could graduate with the same piece of paper.

Study hard and get a degree that would take me places. That was the plan. Simple, yet ambitious.

Despite my assurances, I felt the soft fluttering of butterflies in my stomach. I knew better than most that the best-laid plans remained vulnerable to calamity. Still, I forced myself to push them down, smoothing out the pleats of my skirt one last time.

If I played my cards right, I would survive here, even thrive, making Mami proud.

*Hollow Oak, here I come.*



*Someone has given these children far too much money.*

It was all I could think as I made my way across the sprawling quad, complete with cobblestone pathways, breathtaking stonework, and Gothic Revival buildings. It was warm for early September and the university's well-maintained gardens were still in bloom. Beds full of hydrangeas and daylilies lined the walkways, while the reddish leaves of baneberry peeked out over stone hedges. Beneath the large shady trees popped the bright green leaves of lilies of the valley, and I could imagine what a gorgeous sight they would be in the spring.

Still, it was hard to appreciate the natural beauty of Hollow Oak University when I felt so lost in the sea of ostentatious, youthful wealth.

Legally speaking, we were all adults here. But there were still so many awkward, lanky boys hovering around and so many shiny-eyed girls traveling in packs that, in some ways, it shouldn't have felt that far removed from my high school experience.

Most of the high schools I'd attended had been pretty privileged. They were in good neighborhoods, the kind that was full of your average entitled teenagers and their safely upper-middle-class parents who wanted "the best" for their kids and could afford the taxes to make it happen.

Some, but not all, of my classmates had a car. I certainly didn't. Of those who did, about half had saved up and bought a used one on their own, while the other half were lucky enough to be gifted one by their parents.

Privileged? Absolutely. Wealthy? Compared to the average American, yeah, incontrovertibly so.

Compared to the students around me now, however? My high school classmates may as well have been from the trailer park.

The most significant difference was that while some of the students may not have entirely shed the trappings of their youth, there were still more attractive people here than I had ever seen gathered in one place before. Not that everyone was drop-dead gorgeous or immaculately put together, but it was

undoubtedly a better-looking crowd than you would find hanging out on the average college campus.

Looking at the girls, their lips were fuller, their noses straighter, and their highlights ever so much subtler. Their nails weren't just done, they were covered with intricate nail art or tasteful French manicures. Every single detail about them cost just a bit more, and it all added up to looking like a million dollars.

The boys, well, I stood by my initial observations regarding their awkwardness. But even then, their T-shirts hung on their growing frames better, and it was clear that at least some of them were hitting the gym in an attempt to fill out.

As vain and pathetic as it sounds, I was reassured by the effort I had put in that morning, by the image I had created and deliberately wore like a shield.

It wasn't even that I fit in with the beautiful people. There was no hiding the lack of highlights in my hair or that my face lacked the almost unnatural symmetry of some of the other girls.

But I felt attractive enough, well-dressed enough, and intelligent enough that I held a small kernel of confidence inside me, although the tightness in my chest remained.

I wanted to stop at the dining hall to grab a quick bite before my first class of the day, Introduction to Japanese. After that, I had a couple of hours free to study and grab lunch before my macroeconomics class later in the afternoon.

A double major in global languages and economics wasn't for the faint of heart. Still, with four languages under my belt already and an appreciation for both math and social issues, it felt like a good fit. I was confident I could find good work as a consultant or specialized translator after undergrad, and I was considering going for my master's after working for a couple of years to save up some money.

I made my way to the dining hall, taking one of the main avenues across the campus. The cobblestone path was filled with excited students and lined with imposing academic buildings on either side before giving way to a stretch of palatial-looking fraternity houses.

The frat houses were all decked out in their respective colors for the first week of classes. Despite it being relatively early in the morning, groups of eager young men and women had already begun to gather in front of them, partying somehow already well underway.

With that in mind, I made a beeline to the other side of the walkway.

Drunk crowds weren't always the kindest to young women, and despite what so many members of our society believed, neither my gender nor my appearance was an invitation for sexual harassment. Guys may have been the worst for street harassment and catcalling, but the women who adamantly defended them and mocked other women for feeling victimized weren't much better. And since I wasn't looking to score an invite to any parties, my instinct for self-preservation



told me to put some distance between myself and that side of the street.

I'd almost made it halfway down the path when my eyes were drawn back again. Sitting smack dab in the center of the row was an imposing Greek Revival-style house that overshadowed all the other buildings nearby in both size and grandeur. Its large columns rose from an expansive porch in front of sand-colored brick and symmetrical white windows to support a towering roof complete with a piedmont gable and window.

But while the striking house caught my attention, it wasn't what held it.

Sprawled across the top steps of the mansion were two men leisurely taking in the festivities already underway around them. They were virtually identical in every way, and unlike most of the male students around them, these two were far from boys.

Long muscled legs, clad in denim that probably cost more than most people's rent, stretched out across the steps leading up to the porch. Both wore simple, yet perfectly cut, black crew neck T-shirts that hung with the weight of a fabric that probably felt even more delicious than it looked. It didn't hurt that the shirts hugged their lean but firm builds closely, allowing the cut lines of their chests and shoulders to show through the material.

Dark tattoos wrapped around their arms, covering most of their skin down to their fingers. The pattern was impossible for

me to make out from where I stood, but it almost looked as though even their tattoos were identical. Which was taking the whole twins thing too far, in my opinion. Even the way they had languidly draped themselves across the steps was symmetrical, their silhouettes creating a perfect mirror image.

I swallowed in vain against the sudden dryness in my mouth.

Tousled, dark champagne locks swept down into their eyes, and while their faces were all sharp lines and strong cheekbones, their matching set of lips were so plush and full that I licked my own reflexively before I could stop myself.

It wasn't my proudest moment.

Because something about the two of them was off.

Maybe it was the subtle sneer in their expression, the entitlement of their bodies sprawled across the steps, or their bored yet contemptuous demeanor, but everything about them gave me the sense that this was all an underwhelming game for them. That for all the wealth and power of the students milling around in front of them, they were barely worthy of being pawns. Someone like me wasn't even on the chessboard.

At that moment, one of the twins suddenly looked up from the drunken festivities in front of him to peer across the walk. His dark eyes quickly scanned through the crowd with an inscrutable expression before zeroing in on my own.

My stomach dropped like a weight, and a flush of embarrassment swept through me at having been caught. Mortified beyond reason, I wanted to whip my head away and

scurry down the path out of his sight. Maybe bury my anxiety under a generous serving of whipped cream and iced coffee.

Instead, my body betrayed me, and I found myself unable to break away from his intense gaze, even as I continued to walk obliviously down the path.

His expression remained unreadable, at least from a distance, but I wondered what I would see in those eyes if I dared venture closer. Nothing pleasant, to be sure. Derision and cruelty, without a doubt.

So why didn't I want to look away? Why didn't—

*WHOOMP!*

I was jarred back to reality as the wind was knocked out of me, and I flew through the air before landing hard on my back, the stones scraping roughly against my skin.

A grumpy-looking dude with glasses and shaggy red hair on an electric scooter glared down at me. "Watch where you're going," he snarled before buzzing away on his mechanical menace, muttering "dumb bitch" under his breath.

*Bâtard.*

I mean, I should have been paying attention to where I was going, but he wasn't the one left lying bruised on the ground.

My breath was irritatingly shaky as I pulled myself up and dusted off my clothes. My palms were scratched up, and I was going to have some bruises on my butt and back. Still, overall, I was fine.

Not a single person had approached me to see if I was okay, but I preferred that in some ways.

Still, I couldn't help but steal a last glance at the twins. I could have sworn I'd felt the one's eyes on my back the whole time. But when I looked, I found them both once again observing the partying in front.

Which was absolutely for the best.

Pulling my backpack up on my shoulders, I continued my trek to the dining hall.

It was bad enough that the one had seen me wipeout. From what my gut was telling me, I didn't want to catch any more of their attention than I already had.

## Chapter Two



## Luz

**B**reakfast in the main dining hall and my first class were both mercifully uneventful.

As a scholarship student, it was in my best interest to stretch out my credits by eating at one of the university's dining halls. While most of the cute cafés and some of the national chains sprinkled throughout the campus would happily take my student card, their premium prices would also burn through my funds well before the semester was over.

Fraser Hall was one of the many collegiate Gothic-style buildings on campus, and it housed the university's largest dining hall. For all the pomp of Hollow Oak, its food services were remarkably like any other college. Hot food was available from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Monday to Friday, with later hours on the weekend. There were also prepackaged foods and vending machines available twenty-four hours a day.

I took my chance with the hot meal for the day and was neither disappointed nor impressed by the scrambled eggs,

sausages, and pancakes. The fruit salad, although bland, was relatively fresh and chock-full of pineapple and watermelon today. I never turned my nose up at fresh fruit, especially pineapple. It was one of my favorites, and I had done enough grocery shopping on a budget that I appreciated its abundance here.

My first university class was, well, just that, a class. Despite not being as popular as Spanish or French, Introduction to Japanese attracted enough students for a small but decent-sized class of about twenty-five students. Given that most one-hundred-level classes were huge, I was happy to take advantage of the more intimate setting.

However, despite the exorbitant sum students paid to attend Hollow Oak, the class was taught by a passionate but overextended PhD student. With dark hair and eyes, Michael Schultz cleaned up nicely. Wearing a classic good-guy combo of dark jeans and a V-neck sweater, he was a decent-looking guy. And his zeal for Japanese was clear in the way his eyes sparkled when he explained why he chose to study the language.

But that was the extent of his teaching abilities.

As an instructor, he was prone to launching into monotone speech, overrehearsed and underdelivered. Some parts of the lecture were so rote it was clear he could have taught the class in his sleep, and not in a good way. Worse, he was one of those teachers who stringently insisted on holding all questions until the end, to the extent that he would brutally stare down any

student who dared to pop their hand up in the middle of his lecture.

Still, I had some empathy for the guy. If the large purple bags under his eyes and overgrown haircut were any indication, Michael looked to be exhausted. I wouldn't be nominating him for the professor of the year, but he did have a good grasp of what he was teaching, and his style was accessible if painfully dry.

Having successfully navigated my first university course, despite the inauspicious start to my day, I decided to reward myself with a sugary iced coffee from one of the many cafés around the campus. I should have made myself head back to Fraser Hall or one of the other dining halls for a proper lunch, but breakfast was still sitting heavy in my stomach, and I didn't want to waste money on both coffee and lunch.

*Sorry, lunch.*

Once I had finagled a fancy iced latte (that cost the same amount as my breakfast), I decided to hunt around campus for the perfect study nook.

After checking out a couple of different libraries and study centers, I finally found it in the Hunter Fine Arts Library. The building was a breathtaking sandstone and terra-cotta Venetian Gothic monstrosity full of sun-soaked reading rooms. The whole building had that deliciously old-school academia feel to it, and the nerd in me nearly exploded with delight.

Settling in, I quickly reviewed my notes from Intro to Japanese before beginning to work through the exercises I



needed to complete before the tutorial on Thursday. As underwhelming as the lecture had been, I loved languages, and it was too easy to lose myself in the work.

English was my first language, and I had been lucky enough to be able to study German independently throughout high school. Mami had insisted that I learn and speak Spanish at home with her, but it was French that gave me my love of languages.

Marianne had been my devoted childhood nanny and tutor. From the Loire Valley in France, she effectively raised me from ages three to eight years old. More often than not, she spoke to me in French, something my father and stepmother had been happy to encourage. As a small child, my love for her was fierce and all-encompassing, and it was natural for me to embrace and learn her language.

It was only now that I was able to fully appreciate the gift she had given me. Marianne not only opened up my world to the beauty of French language and culture, but she helped me build confidence and skills as a young child. I'd loved studying new languages ever since.

Lost in my Japanese studies and my memories of Marianne, time passed quickly. Before I knew it, it was ten minutes to two, and I was forced to sprint out of the library in a futile attempt to make it across campus in time for my economics lecture.

My only potential saving grace was that ECON200 was a required course for a very popular major and would likely be

in a large lecture-style hall. Hopefully, I would be able to sneak in late without drawing too much attention to myself.

Despite my best efforts, I arrived outside the class at 2:04 p.m., where I took only the briefest of moments to catch my breath before attempting to quietly, if not stealthily, make my way into the room.

The good news was that the class was being held in a hall.

The bad news was that the doors I'd chosen were directly next to the already-lecturing professor, forcing me to slink past him to get to the seats.

Worse, my supposition about the class being large and popular was also true, and that meant that most of the seats were already full. With no empty spots left near the aisles, I needed to squeeze myself past the students already seated to get to one of the few remaining seats available.

I had been trying to tip-toe up the stairs when a deep, arrogant male voice suddenly cut through the haze of my embarrassment and frustration.

"The class begins sharply at two o'clock, for future reference," the professor called out, apparently stopping his entire lecture to shame me.

"My apologies, Professor, it won't happen again," I rushed out as quietly as I dared, still edging my way up the stairs.

I finally made it to the row and started to awkwardly make my way past the seated students. Some of them looked at me with pity, some with scorn, but most of them remained entirely

apathetic to the situation, lost entirely in the screens of their laptops.

The professor spoke again.

“To be clear, this class is ECON200 Macro Economics, not ECON100. You are at least barging in late to the correct classroom, I hope.”

“Yes, sir, I am here for ECON200. Again, my apologies,” I replied hastily, finally arriving at an empty seat. My skin felt aflame, and I avoided looking back to the professor, instead sweeping my skirt under my legs to duck down into my seat, praying that he would back off and return to lecturing.

For several heated moments, the hall sat in silence while I kept my head down and focused on the task of retrieving my notebook from my bag.

My shame was quickly being paced by my growing irritation. Yes, it was poor form to arrive late on the first day of classes, but he was choosing to make a spectacle about it. I couldn't be the first student to ever show up late.

“Right, well, for those of you just tuning in, my name is Dr. Locke Blackwell, and I am your macroeconomics professor for this semester. I am also the Coty Research Chair for Neuroeconomics here at the Vanderhurst School of Economics ...”

A sigh escaped me, and I pulled out a mechanical pencil and notebook and began to get organized. Relief swept through me that I was finally out of the spotlight, and as Professor

Blackwell continued speaking about his background, I took a moment to tune him out and collect myself.

Taking ten slow intentional breaths, I allowed myself to enjoy the fresh scent of my brand-new notebook and the satisfying scratch of my pencil against the crisp white paper... it was one of those small pleasures in life that no one could take away from me.

When I felt settled again, I forced myself to look up and assess the man who had so desperately needed to exert his authority over me.

Dr. Locke Blackwell was both nothing and everything like I expected.

Like the twins I had spotted earlier that day, the quality and cut of his clothes spoke volumes about him, or rather the sheer wealth that must have gone into clothing him. He wore a sharp black three-piece suit over a perfectly pressed dove-gray shirt, both of which had tailoring that would make a seamstress weep.

Blackwell was young, younger than I would have imagined, but not so much so that it diminished his authority. Standing about six feet tall, he wore his pitch-black hair trimmed closely, ever so slightly longer on top. His jaw, covered in a neat, even beard, looked sharp enough to cut diamonds, but it was his eyes that he deployed as a weapon. Brilliant emerald-green irises burned with a ferocity that belied the easy arrogance with which he carried himself, a jarring dichotomy

that set off alarm bells ringing in my head as I found his eyes trained on me.

Against my instinct for self-preservation, the urge to hold his stare fluttered to life in my chest, and for a moment, I met his gaze.

Locke Blackwell was a traditionally beautiful man in every sense of the word. Pity, it did nothing to hide the ugliness inside him.

The corner of his mouth twitched in warning, and I forced my attention back down to my notes, glancing up only occasionally to focus on the slides projected at the front of the class.

I had demons enough in my past, I didn't need to play games with one now. Not even one as beautiful as Locke Blackwell.

## Chapter Three



## Luz

The rest of the class passed without incident, and another student might have been convinced that perhaps they had been hasty in their initial assessment of Professor Blackwell.

Outside of his reaction to my belated entrance, the man came across as both affable and knowledgeable. He delivered his lecture with easy charm, engaged students readily, and solicited more than a couple of laughs from the class. Despite my immediate dislike of Blackwell, he was a great professor, and the ninety-minute lecture passed more quickly than I wanted to admit. Before I knew it, he was wrapping up his lecture with a reminder to attend our weekly tutorial sessions and reach out to our TAs if we had any other questions.

“Oh, and late girl, remain after class to speak with me, please,” Blackwell called out in a tone that made the “please” he tacked on all but redundant.

So, I found myself standing awkwardly in front of the large lectern, waiting for the rest of the class to see themselves out

of the cavernous hall. Most hurried out, glancing back at me with a mix of pity and curiosity. But a handful lingered, some sneering down at me with unbridled animosity.

There was always someone ready to hate you simply for having the audacity to exist.

Waiting for the rest of the class to exit, Dr. Blackwell studiously worked away on his laptop, not even offering me so much as an acknowledging glance as I stood there. Gritting my teeth, I began to wonder how much longer I was going to have to endure the silent treatment.

By the time the last students had shuffled out of the room, my heart was pounding so loudly I could hear it echoing in my head.

“Name?” he barked suddenly, catching me off guard and making me flinch.

“Luz,” I exhaled shakily, barely able to hear my voice over the thrumming in my chest.

Swallowing, I cleared my throat and tried again.

“Luz Torres, sir,” I said, this time with more confidence.

Blackwell still didn't look up from his laptop, the clattering of his keys never ceasing.

Forcing a calming breath down my throat, I took the opportunity to better inspect this increasingly awful man.

His jet-black hair was thick and artfully undone in such a way as to look as though he had just run his hands through it,



even though I knew it hadn't moved all lecture. There was a traditional sort of beauty to his face, the kind artists sculpted and teenage girls wept over. Up close, I could see that the deep green silk of his tie was actually a shade darker than that of his eyes, and the contrast between the two only made the latter shine that much more brilliantly.

"Yes, here you are." He paused, squinting at the screen before him. "The system says you are a freshman. What are you doing in my class?" His eyes snapped up to inspect me, and displeasure shifted across his features almost instantly.

"I was in the International Baccalaureate program in high school, sir. I completed IB Economics in high school, and Hollow Oak recognized it as a credit for ECON100."

His expression remained less than impressed. "I see," he said as he began to stand from his seat behind the lectern.

This close, the man towered over me, and I reassessed his height as closer to six foot three.

"I think it's a mistake to allow a freshman such as yourself to opt out of ECON100 and enroll in my class," he began. "Overeager students like you show up every semester. You think that because you were the smart kid in high school, you are ready to be here." He placed two large palms on the table separating us as he leaned toward me. "You're not." His voice was steady even as his words cracked like a whip. "Pampered princesses like you, who have been told how brilliant they are their whole lives, are barely prepared to live independently as adults, never mind pass a rigorous second-year course."

If I had felt overwhelmed with embarrassment and frustration before, it was nothing compared to what I felt now. Hot angry tears welled in my eyes, and my throat was choked up with shame. Still, Locke Blackwell wasn't done with me yet.

“I have no patience for handholding in my class, Miss Torres. I would strongly encourage you to talk to your registrar about dropping this class and enrolling in ECON100.”

My vision was blurry with the tears I was holding back, and my jaw shook as I waited until it was clear he was finished speaking.

“Are you requiring me to drop out of ECON200, sir?” I asked, ignoring the tremble in my voice.

Blackwell arched one perfect eyebrow back at me. “I've given you my best advice, and that's what you choose to ask me, Miss Torres?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied with my lips quivering, my body betraying me even as mentally I stood strong.

Because even though I was physically racked with anxiety, I refused to grovel before this man. Locke Blackwell wanted me to cry, to beg to be allowed to stay in his precious class. To apologize endlessly for my perceived failures, for having the audacity to believe in myself and show up here, in his space.

I refused to give someone like him satisfaction.

I had no intention of being rude or confrontational. I couldn't afford to give him a reason to kick me out of his class. But I

also wasn't going to beg, or plead, or cry for him. I had earned my right to be here the same as any other student.

“No, Miss Torres, I cannot require you to drop out of my class, should you choose to ignore the advice I have given you in good faith,” he replied tersely. “I can, however, have you removed from my class for any number of reasons should I see fit.”

I said nothing.

I met all the prerequisites for the course, and we both knew that being late for one class was hardly grounds for my removal. However, that didn't mean he couldn't go above my head and make life very difficult for me if I didn't drop out of his class.

His jaw tightened ever so slightly, and the animosity in his eyes burned even brighter when it became clear I wasn't going to take the bait.

“Childish, really,” he murmured, staring past me for a moment before returning his gaze to me once more. “How old are you even?” he snarled, out of nowhere, with such force that I found myself flinching at the tone and taking a cautious step back. I was suddenly incredibly aware of the lectern between us and grateful for the barrier it provided.

My eyes flickered toward the doors, mentally calculating how long it would take to dash for one of the doors and if Blackwell would catch me first.

His eyes followed mine to the doors, and his demeanor suddenly changed as though a switch had been flipped when he saw how close I was to being spooked.

The good professor stepped back and cleared his throat as he smoothed out his tie, although he never took his eyes off of me.

“I can assure you, Professor, that I am old enough to be here,” I finally replied, keeping my chin held high. “And if that’s all, I really need to get to my next class . . . sir.”

It was a lie. I was done with class for the day, but I wanted to get out of there.

“Yes, of course,” Blackwell said, suddenly breaking his gaze from mine as he sat back down seemingly without a care in the world.

For a moment, his impassivity caught me off guard.

“But don’t come crying to me when you don’t like the consequences of your choices.”

*Ah, there he was.*

I bobbed my head in response, choosing to ignore the barb and instead making my way out of the classroom.

I had almost made it out into the hall when Blackwell’s voice rang out once more.

“I’m looking forward to seeing you next class, Miss Torres,” he called, followed by haughty laughter.

I rushed down the hall as quickly as I dared.

Once again, my instincts had been spot-on. Locke Blackwell was the devil.

## Chapter Four



## Luz

“**S**ac à merde! Pinche pendejo! Verdammtter Depp!” I hissed on my way back from dinner, cursing Dr. Blackwell in as many different languages as I could.

The meal of watery spaghetti and dry meatballs served in the dining hall had done nothing to improve my mood. Not even the chocolate pudding helped.

I wasn't stupid. I was well aware that as a young Latina at an elite university, I was going to run into privileged jerks, both young and old, on power trips. And like so many other women, I was more than proficient at remaining composed when faced with a raging dickhole.

But something about Locke Blackwell's particular brand of malice had gotten under my skin in a way the entitlement and lechery of the average frat boy didn't. No, he hadn't broken my composure, but it had been close, closer than I could afford with the weight of my scholarship on my shoulders.

My shame faded into a memory as my fury continued to build.

Clenching my fists as I stalked towards the dorm, I was practically vibrating with rage.

“Screw you, Locke Blackwell. Du Schwein!” I muttered to myself as I made my way through the double doors of Jackson College House, getting more than a few curious and concerned looks from other students.

*“Mija ...”*

I could practically hear my mother’s gentle voice echoing in my head.

*“So quick to anger, Luz, I raised you better than this ...”* she would softly chide me. *“As women, there is power to be found in our softness ... in the sweetness of our words.”*

And where had that gotten her? Bitterness and regret shot through me.

My breath was shaky as I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, and no matter how many times I tried to clear the weight of my tears from my eyes, they remained heavy.

By the time I exited the stairwell, I was slightly more under control. But I knew that as soon as I came down from the adrenaline rush of my anger, I was going to crash hard. I needed to get to my room, complete my skincare routine, and get under the covers with a good book.

With a furtive glance, I scoped out the floor. A suspiciously social-looking group of girls gathered in the small, shared



lounge on our floor. Jackson College House was coed, but for some reason, the girls on my floor outnumbered the guys four to one. This had led to some of my floormates crowning ours to be “the girls’ floor” during orientation. It also meant, for some unfathomable reason, swapping premature and saccharine promises to remain BFFs forever (making the effort to point out the fact that they were saying “forever forever” didn’t seem worth my time).

*Hard pass.*

Once I was satisfied that they were sufficiently distracted and unlikely to notice me, I dashed to my room and locked the door behind me, before leaning against it and finally allowing myself a deep breath of release.

For better or for worse, my first day at Hollow Oak was over. Only 599 more to go.



I tossed and turned for hours, only to finally fall asleep and spend the rest of the night trapped in an endless cycle of reliving my humiliation at Dr. Blackwell’s hands. Sometimes in my dreams, I rose up and put the demon in his place. But most of the time, I simply cowered and broke down in tears, begging as Locke told me that not only had I been kicked out of Hollow Oak but that police would be there shortly to arrest me for falsifying my transcript and pretending to be a student.

I woke up covered in sweat, my heart pounding. It took me a moment to realize that a sound had woken me up.

*Rap, rap, rap.*

It was the sharp, hard tapping of someone knocking insistently at my door.

I reached over for my phone that was charging on the small nightstand next to my twin bed, not sure if I wanted it to be early or late. While I didn't want to get out of my bed and face whoever was banging on my door, I wanted to fall back asleep even less.

My phone read 8:13 a.m., well before my first class of the day but not so early that I could afford to lounge around in bed much longer if I wanted some time to study before class.

*Rap, rap, rap.*

“Fine, okay, I'm coming,” I grumbled, heaving myself out of bed and making my way to the door.

Swinging the door open, I found an unfamiliar girl standing there with her hand raised as though she was just about to knock again. At the sight of me though, she dropped it and burst into a radiant smile.

“Oh goodie, you're awake!” the girl exclaimed, nearly bouncing up and down on her toes with excitement.

She was an adorably plump redhead who seemed to brighten the entire floor with wholesome energy. Her shoulder-length auburn hair looked freshly blown out, the color complementing her fair, freckle-kissed skin and sparkling green eyes. She was rocking a noughties-inspired look, wearing a cute black crop top paired with wide-leg white cargo

pants and chunky platform sandals. Silver hoops hung from her ears, matching the stack of silver chains around her neck.

She looked absolutely as cute as a button, and I had no idea what she was doing knocking on my door at eight in the morning.

“Um, hello,” I mumbled, unable to stop myself from yawning.

“Oh no, I woke you up,” she said, her face dropping with such genuine remorse that I found myself feeling guilty in turn.

“It’s fine,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “What’s up?”

She chewed on her lip nervously for a moment before beginning. “Well, you see, we’re like neighbors,” she hedged. “You’re room 406 ...” She pointed to me. “... and I’m room 404.” She pointed to herself with the sort of expectant look that made me feel as though I was missing a social cue. Was I supposed to have a response to that?

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” I tried with as much enthusiasm as I could muster while barely awake.

Her smile returned a bit more. “Well, I hadn’t really seen you around much, and I just thought, I should come over and introduce myself since, you know, we’re going to be, like, living next to each other for the next eight months ...” she said slowly, chewing her lip.

“Right, of course,” I fumbled.

“I’m Autumn.” She extended a manicured hand. “Autumn Morgan.”

“Luz Torres,” I replied, offering her a quick, if not awkward, handshake. Releasing her grip, I expected that to be the end of it. But instead, she just stood there, seemingly just as unsure of what to say as I was.

“I don’t suppose, you know, since you’re up,” she finally began nervously, wringing her hands. “Would you want to come to grab some breakfast with me?”

The temptation to stick to old habits, to politely decline her offer and hole up in my room until my class, was a strong one.

That she had just woken me up didn’t help.

I never had any real friends growing up. As a child, I was homeschooled by Marianne and rarely allowed to socialize with other children. And when I finally went to live with Mami, we were constantly moving for her work. After the first couple of schools, I quickly learned that I was better off focusing my energy on academics instead of attempting to make new friends every time we had to start over ...

So, it would have been easy to give Autumn a wan smile and brush her off.

But that wasn’t my life anymore ...



“I can’t believe you got in trouble with Locke Blackwell!” Autumn shrieked, drawing the attention of at least half of the

students seated around us. If it weren't for my tan skin, I was fairly certain my cheeks would be bright red.

“Shhhhhh!” I hissed at her.

At least this cafeteria was smaller than Fraser Hall, so there were only about a dozen or so students who were privy to my mortification this time.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered, mirth still dancing in her eyes. “It's just, it's like hearing you got into a fight with a Kennedy or something. The Blackwells are practically royalty around here.”

“Blackwells plural?” I asked, taking a sip of my smoothie. It was delicious. Even if the friendship thing with Autumn didn't work out, I would be coming back here for breakfast. Not only was it closer to my dorm, but it also had a smoothie station, for goodness' sake.

“Yes, Luz, Blackwells plural,” she said with an emphasis that made it clear I was missing something obvious. “As in the Blackwell family? East Coast industrial titans? Scions of Shady Harbor?”

I gave her a blank look and shrugged.

“What planet did you come from, and how did you manage to land at Hollow Oak?” she asked in disbelief.

I couldn't help the chuckle that snuck out of me. Coming from anyone else it might have come across as condescending, but with Autumn I got the sense that she simply lacked a filter.

“Texas, and studying my brains out. Didn’t leave much time for gossiping about the rich and famous.”

“Okay,” she said excitedly, “time for your first social lesson of Hollow Oak.” Her breakfast was all but forgotten. “As you probably know, the school is still pretty big for a small private college. There’s almost ...” She hummed. “Five thousand students on campus, I think. So, it’s big enough that there’s not really like one clique or a ‘queen bee’”—her fingers framed it with air quotes— “that rules campus or anything silly like that. But ...” she continued, watching me to make sure I was paying attention, “there’s definitely like different tiers of students here that tend to socialize together more. First, you have your generic, run-of-the-mill rich kids. The ones whose parents were rich enough to afford Hollow Oak, but they aren’t really rich enough to be considered new money. Like doctors and stuff.”

Probably where I’d have fit in if I had stayed with my father.

Although, I probably wouldn’t have lived long enough to attend university if that were the case, so then again, maybe not.

“Basically, they are a dime a dozen at HOU, so unless they are a jock, Greek, or a celebrity, their social capital here is minimal.” Autumn went on with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Then you have your new money,” she said with a sly smile, “which is where I fit in. My grandfather founded a cleaning supply company, Morgan’s, like a million years ago,

but these days we also own like a whole bunch of other things too, and investments and shit. Or my parents do.”

I nodded along as if I understood. My father’s family may have had money, but the most expensive thing Mami had owned was a used Toyota Highlander.

“Anyways ...” Autumn was still going. “It’s not as great as it sounds,” she said, picking at her cuticles. “There’s still, like, a lot of cliques within the tiers. Even though we’re only freshmen, a lot of people already have their people, you know?”

I could see what she was saying. Even at orientation, it was obvious when groups of people knew, or at least knew of, each other. The way they immediately bonded together with practiced ease.

“And finally, you have your old money. Your Vanderbilts, Gettys, Rothschilds ... The kind of families who either made their wealth by building this country or brought it over from the Old World.” She rolled her eyes. “They’re famous, not just here but around the globe.”

“And the Blackwells?” I asked, with more curiosity than I wanted to admit.

“Old money, some of the oldest,” she replied, “but they’re more than that.”

“What do you mean?” I said before slurping down the last of my smoothie loudly and without shame.

“Well,” she hedged almost furtively. “If there was one, you know, like a group you shouldn’t cross—”

“Wait, are the Blackwells the real queen bees of Hollow Oak?” I interrupted with a mischievous smirk, seeing where she was going with this.

“Shhhhhh!” Her eyes were wide and darting around to see who might have overheard me. “They’re not like queen *bees*,” she finally said, when she was satisfied no one was paying attention to us, before dropping her voice to a hiss. “But they are, you know, like, not people you want to upset ...”

“Let me guess, they run this school or better yet the whole town?” I asked wryly.

“Ugh!” Her face flushed red. “It’s not all, like, *obvious* like that. Although they did found both the school and the town. But they aren’t like the Illuminati or anything like that.”

“Then what makes them so scary?”

Autumn leaned forward, her voice barely perceptible over the din of the hall. “The Blackwells can trace their roots back centuries to France and England. They’ve always had land, money, and power, and they’ve accrued it differently than most families ...”

She paused, looking around again.

I gestured at her to continue.

“There are rumors that they are, like, killers,” she finally whispered.



I pursed my lips, slightly disappointed with the revelation.

“I mean, they kill people, but not just for anyone. Only for the, like, the elite. Billionaires and royalty, ya know?” she stammered with sincerity.

I shook my head with a smile.

“Okay, Autumn.”

She let out an exasperated sigh.

“All I am saying is to tread lightly with Locke Blackwell. Even if the rumors aren’t true, as the school’s founding family, they tend to get their way around here.”

“Thank you,” I said, meaning it. I appreciated the advice, even if I wasn’t convinced that the school’s founding family was secretly a group of exclusive killers-for-hire.

“Besides, let’s be honest,” Autumn joked, “you couldn’t actually afford to be killed by a Blackwell.”

“True.” I laughed. “Guess I get to live for another semester.”

## Chapter Five



## Locke

I was going to kill Luz Torres ...

Not in the literal sense, that would be like wasting my skills squashing ants.

No, in the sense that I was going to make her life a wretched hell, unworthy of living, until she came to her senses and dropped my class.

If only that insufferable brat realized how easy it would be for me to snap my fingers and take it all away from her. Her scholarship ... her reputation ... her place at Hollow Oak. I was a Blackwell. I would merely have to will it and it would be done.

But that wasn't the victory I craved. Oh no, not over her.

Pulling out of my private parking spot, I headed off of the university grounds to the family's estate. The Tesla Roadster was quiet on the backroads I took to get there, leaving me in silence to ruminate. Still seething, I reached over to turn on

some music, allowing Prokofiev's "Dance of the Knights" to wash over me.

The girl hadn't so much as buckled before me. Oh yes, I saw the tears welling in her eyes, the quivering of those plush lips as she bit down on them. But not a single tear had fallen. She never even raised her surprisingly husky voice. For all my so-called might and power, Luz Torres was still enrolled in my class.

My knuckles turned white as I gripped the steering wheel.

I was the fucking inquisitor of my family. I could make a grown man scream with my words alone, and yet this little creature had stood there before me, dressed like a fucking naughty schoolgirl in her knee socks and sneakers, and she had refused me.

Someone who had never had the pleasure of torturing someone to death, ensuring that their last days on earth were full of such profound, nauseating suffering that it would break a sane man to deliver such depravity, wouldn't understand that everyone buckled at some point.

I don't mean they broke. Speaking as a professional, I could say that there were some men who couldn't be broken.

I meant that they buckled; they cried, they whimpered, they flinched, they screamed. The truth of the matter was that some responses to pain were inevitable, primed into us on a biological level.

If I held a flamethrower to a man's flesh, he was going to scream, no matter what his training or background.

But Luz Torres didn't shed a single tear, no matter what the neurons firing in her brain were telling her to do. She didn't lose her temper, no matter how loudly the voice in her head whispered that I was a bastard.

So no, a simple phone call to the dean to have her removed from Hollow Oak would not suffice. I needed to break her on my terms, with my skills. It was the only victory that I would accept.

Slowing the car down, I turned down the sole road leading in and out of the Blackwell Estate. The pristine land that made up the oceanfront property included acres of woods on the three remaining sides and had ensured the seclusion and privacy of the Blackwell family since the 1700s.

The truth of the matter was that I hadn't picked on the girl for any particular reason. Or rather, I didn't single her out solely for the sin of being four minutes late to my class on the first day. I couldn't care less about when the students walked through the door of my classroom—they were the ones paying an embarrassing amount of money just to rub shoulders with the likes of me and my cousins.

What I did care about was maintaining my reputation and establishing control.

Every year, on the first day of class, I made a point of singling out one student for some perceived transgression and berating them into absolute submission. It was my gift, finding

those pressure points on any stranger in a crowd and breaking them down. The students I singled out almost always dropped out of my class, and several times they had dropped out of Hollow Oak altogether.

To the rest of my class, I was jovial, approachable, and knowledgeable, and would remain so for the remainder of the course. But they all got to witness a brief taste of my wrath that first day, thus ensuring they would do anything to avoid being on the receiving end of it. When you combined that with the Blackwell name, I was easily both the most respected and most feared member of the faculty.

So, when I heard the door to my classroom cracking open just moments after I had begun to introduce myself, it was an obvious opportunity.

And then I saw her, petite and curvy, with round hips swaying beneath her skirt in time with her long dark hair as she quietly attempted to sneak into class, and my mind was made up instantly.

I didn't fuck my students. It wasn't a matter of ethics. The university's bylaws forbidding relationships between faculty and students were of no concern to me.

It was the fact that the women of Hollow Oak tended to be relentless and volatile in their pursuit of anyone with a bit of money or clout who had the misfortune of sticking their dick in them. Between teaching, my research, and being a Blackwell, I had more than enough on my plate without having to fight off the attentions of some social-climbing

heiress. Not when there were so many other options available to a man like me.

Yet, there I stood, in front of my first class of the term, blood rushing to my cock like I was a fucking teenager as I watched her full ass climb those stairs. At that moment, it became inevitable that I would have to punish her for making me want her. And now, due to her own stubbornness, I had the entire term to do so.

I pulled up to the main building and parked my car on the far end of the stone-lined driveway that wrapped around a rather ostentatious fountain in the front. As I hurried up the marble steps, narrowly avoiding the rain that began coming down, a smile crossed my lips at the thought of having her under my thumb for the next few months. I wondered just what it would take to break those tears free of her.

Making my way through the main house, the house I had been raised in, I avoided the nearly invisible staff, heading directly to the study where I knew I would find my eldest cousin.

Lucian Blackwell was a creature of habit, and today, like most days, he could be found seated behind the massive oak desk that took up the center of his study. The study, including the imposing furniture, had been our grandfather's and his father's before him. Now, it was Lucian's.

"I see you got my message," he said, not bothering to look up from the documents that held his attention. I could only assume they were for one of the family's many legitimate

businesses. Our proudest family legacy involved less of a paper trail.

“I did. I take it the police have nothing so far?” I asked, helping myself to a glass of his forty-year-old Macallan single malt.

While the petty affairs of local criminals were so far below the Blackwells as to be comical, it was still necessary for us to keep a close eye on the less-than-savory elements in our town. How would it look if we allowed just any asshole with a gun to kill in our town, at our school? Victor would never let Lucian hear the end of it.

When Lucian informed me that somehow, over the last year, four different young women had disappeared, and it had slipped beneath our radar, part of me was irritated to say the least. The other part of me savored such a colossal fuckup occurring under my cousin’s leadership.

“The Shady Harbor police couldn’t find shit if it was coming out of their asses,” Lucian grumbled before finally sitting up to look at me.

I had settled myself into one of the leather wingback chairs that faced his desk, and I nodded at him to continue.

“The first girl to go missing was a scholarship student at the university, just after final exams—a Sandra O’Connor. The police figured she must have gotten caught up in something on her way home from school. Not their jurisdiction, not their problem. The next two were locals, so they assumed that the



girls simply ran away, ditched the small-town life, or something like that.

“Last month though, Glory Van Holt, the granddaughter of one of our preferred clients, returned to campus before the start of term. Her sorority had some sort of fundraiser or something. At a party the day before classes started, she disappeared seemingly into thin air and hasn’t been heard from since.”

“And we’re certain she didn’t just decide to take off on her own?” I asked.

Lucian snorted. “Townies and scholarship students might be able to run off on their own, but not a society brat like her. The Van Holt girl wouldn’t know how to wipe her own ass without her parents’ money. Not to mention that she would be running away from the \$10 million trust her grandparents set up for her to come into when she turns twenty-one.”

Lucian was right. Having met the girl a handful of times at various events, I highly doubted the insipid debutante could pull off a vanishing act on her own.

“The police reports have yet to hit the general public, or we’d be seeing something about it in the news,” I considered, rhythmically tapping my fingers along the arm of the chair. “Although, I imagine that with the students returning to campus, her sorority sisters will have started talking about her disappearance, and word will spread soon enough. It makes one wonder why the police are sitting on it?”

Lucian grunted in agreement.

“What have the twins heard?”

“Not much, exactly what you would expect ...” he said flatly. “No one saw anything out of the ordinary the night the Van Holt girl disappeared. Openly, her friends are worried about her and hope she returns safely soon. Behind closed doors, they’re still talking about what a bitch she was, but there are rumors circulating about the other missing girls and whether the disappearances are connected. Apparently, one of the townie’s brothers is at Hollow Oak on a sports scholarship, football I believe, and he’s calling bullshit on her running away.”

“And there are no other connections between these girls, besides the fact that they all resided around here?” I reiterated.

“None that the police have identified,” he replied, a familiar scowl on his face.

“Of course not,” I murmured, half to myself, “that would make our jobs too easy.”

“Indeed.” His dark eyes shuttered, hiding the violence I knew he carried within him. All Blackwell men did.

“Then I suppose we have work to do,” I said, watching as Lucian went to fix his own drink.

“I’ve tasked the twins with discovering what they can from the student body. I’ll need you to do what you do best with the faculty and alumni,” he commanded. “Everest will be in charge of working his way through the town for information. I’d like to clean this up quickly.”

He observed the glass of amber liquid in his hand carefully before turning his gaze back to me and raising his glass in a toast. “To blood and power,” he said, dipping his head. Our family motto.

“To blood and power,” I echoed.

# Chapter Six



## Luz

**D**espite my terrible first day, the rest of the week flew by like a breeze. Autumn popped by often enough that we fell into a sort of easy rhythm of eating and hanging out together. I wouldn't quite call her a friend yet, but for the first time that I could remember, I was spending time with someone my age and enjoying it. She was a fountain of knowledge regarding everything related to Hollow Oak, and there was something about her bubbly persistence that was slowly eating away at my resolve, like a corrosive acid.

Even my economics tutorial session was uneventful. I was worried that Professor Blackwell would bad-mouth me to the TAs or that word of my public humiliation at his hands would have spread, but luck seemed to be on my side for once.

I had to admit that the stories Autumn shared about the Blackwells left me more curious than fearful. We joked about me not being able to afford to be killed by a Blackwell, but in a sense, she was right. Part of what made my conflict with Locke so infuriating was that we both knew that he already

held all the cards—socially and academically. The idea that he would need to go so far as to kill me to destroy me was laughable. A life like mine was probably already a death sentence to someone like him.

Still, she wasn't wrong about the level of influence the Blackwells exerted on campus, and it wasn't just Locke. No, apparently there was a whole gaggle of entitled jerks.

The identical twins I had seen on the first day of classes were apparently the infamous Blackwell twins, Alister and Nixon. According to Autumn, they were babies of the family and the reigning kings of the campus. As Blackwells, they remained unaffiliated with any of the fraternities or any other associations on campus. Instead, they lorded above the rest of us plebeians from their private house on campus that was only ever available to Blackwell descendants. It didn't matter if you were new money or old money; everyone who was anyone was desperate for the twins to make an appearance at their parties.

“And practically every girl is just as desperate to get in their pants,” Autumn said with a dismissive roll of her eyes that said their appeal was lost on her.

So far, we had avoided discussing our own romantic inclinations, so I didn't know if her lack of interest in the twins related to them as individuals or as men more broadly. Given my lack of experience with the opposite sex, which, regrettably, was the one I was attracted to, I was grateful that the subject hadn't come up yet. Mami's experience with men

had made me want to stay as far away from most of them as possible. Still, even I could admit that Nixon and Alister had a certain allure, not that I had any intention of getting within ten feet of them.

I had enough Blackwells in my life already, thank you.

Dr. Locke Blackwell, economics professor and bane of my existence, was the twins' cousin and second in line to inherit the empire after their older brother. His mother was the only daughter of Victor Blackwell, the aging patriarch of the Blackwell family who had retired from Shady Harbor over a decade ago. As per family tradition, her husband took her name when he married into the family.

“It would be kind of, like, feminist and cool if only it weren't all based on making sure that any sons born to a Blackwell would carry on the family name,” Autumn said, wrinkling her nose.

Lucian Blackwell, the twins' older brother, was the eldest of the younger generation and the heir to the family empire.

“Lucian's mother died in a tragic accident, and his father was never the same after. After her death, he started drinking and sleeping with anything that breathed,” Autumn confided in me on the Friday night of our first week. We had decided to forgo the many parties that night in favor of crashing in her suite, eating junk food, and gossiping.

“My mom said that back in the day, the rumor was that Victor had ordered his son to get his shit together or he would disown him and leave everything to Lucian,” she recounted

with the wide-eyed credulity I had come to associate with her. I wanted to believe it was as much a measure of her sincerity as it was her naivete, but only time would tell.

Grabbing a bag of Sour Patch Kids, I began sorting through them, organizing them into color-coded pairs. “But you just said Lucian was the Blackwell heir.”

Autumn rolled her eyes. “Just listen and let me tell the story.” She pouted for a moment before continuing. “Okay, so, Victor threatens to disinherit Tyler, and so Lucian’s dad starts to, like, clean up his act. He signs up for rehab, says he is going to get sober and everything. But on the way there”—she paused for dramatic effect—“his car crashes, and he dies on the spot!”

“So then, Lucian moved up to inherit everything?”

“No, would you just shush and let me finish?”

I held my hands up in submission.

“No, apparently Victor’s threats were all bluster, because when Tyler died, he made Locke’s mom the heir instead of Lucian.”

“So, what happened to her?” I said, popping two red Sour Patch Kids into my mouth.

*Mmmm, the best flavor.*

“They said she died of breast cancer a couple of years later but, like, don’t you think it’s suspicious?”

“That she died of breast cancer?” I asked, confused.



“No, Luz,” Autumn said with exasperation, tossing one of the many neutral throw pillows that littered her room at me. “Don’t you think it’s suspicious, that like everyone who stood in the way of Lucian inheriting the Blackwell empire died young?”

I raised my eyebrow skeptically. “You said they died from a car accident and breast cancer and that he was only fifteen when his father died.”

“Well, yeah, but isn’t that exactly how you would do it?” she asked. “You know, if you were some kind of teenage murder prodigy like Lucian Blackwell probably was.” She rambled on, and for a moment, I wondered how much she really knew.

“Like maybe he cut the brakes on his dad’s car, and he found a way to poison his aunt but make it look like breast cancer,” she said, waving her hands with a flourish.

“Unlikely.” I snorted. “Most carcinogens are dangerous to handle and take too long to work. And a toxic poison wouldn’t be mistaken for breast cancer.”

Now it was Autumn’s turn to arch her eyebrow at me.

I shrugged. “My mami was obsessed with true crime podcasts, so I know all sorts of random morbid information. In fact, I am exactly who you want with you if you ever need to hide a body,” I added, wiggling my eyebrows devilishly and tossing the pillow back at her.

“Okay, okay, okay.” She giggled, raising her hands in mock defeat. “Maybe Lucian didn’t kill his dad and aunt, but I still

think it's weird.”

“Or pretty tragic.”

Autumn scoffed. “I don't think you'll find many people who feel bad for Lucian Blackwell,” she said with another roll of her eyes before turning around to change the music, and the conversation drifted on to other things.



Fortified by sugar and a good night's sleep, Autumn managed to convince me the next day that we should actually go out that night.

“It's the first weekend of the semester, Luz,” she had whined. “We have to go to a party, just one party, please?”

I found myself defenseless against her seasoned pouting.

So here I was in her room again, except this time we were getting ready to go out to my first college party. Technically, my first party ever, but I didn't share that detail with her.

“I need an outfit that says, like, ‘I'm cute and approachable’ but also, ‘Ew, don't grind up on me, please.’” She sighed as she held up different shirts, trying to find the perfect one.

One of the things I appreciated about Autumn was that she was just as passionate and detail-oriented about her outfits as I was. Over the last week, I had learned that she always needed at least twenty more minutes than she estimated to be ready, she was obsessed with Y2K fashion and shopping on Depop, and that she had forty thousand followers on her TikTok

channel, where she showcased her midsize noughties-inspired outfits.

“I wish I could pull off the, like, French schoolgirl, Lolita thing you have going on,” she moaned, now moving on to rotate between different skirt options. “It’s like you’re both effortlessly chic and adorable at the same time. It’s not fair.”

“I can promise you there is nothing effortless about me, and if anyone is adorable around here it’s you,” I said, mulling over my own options for what to wear tonight.

I didn’t have many.

With everything that happened with Mami, my last year of high school had been a nightmare, and I never made it to my senior prom. Although to be fair, I skipped my junior one as well. Still, with no parties to attend, no dances to go to, and no family beyond Mami to visit during the holidays, I didn’t own anything that seemed remotely fun enough for going out.

I mean, I had that one dress but I was saving it for a special occasion.

“Oh!” Autumn exclaimed out of nowhere.

“I just had, like, a total lightbulb moment!” she squealed, her head disappearing into the pile of clothes as she dove into her bed. “I have the perfect dress for you!”

“Nothing too bright, Autumn,” I said delicately, thinking about some of the color palettes I knew she favored. “I’m not really a bright pink or green kind of girl.”

“Like, duh, Luz,” she muttered, her voice muffled as various pieces of clothing flew up into the air around her with abandon. “I just said your style is all about chic meets cute, I’m not going to go and put you in, like, hot pink and orange paisley.”

Considering I had seen her wear a skirt with that exact print, I didn’t think my concerns were entirely unwarranted.

“Found it,” she sang, spinning up and around with a grin on her face and a saucy shake of her hips. “I bought it from an online seller who had it listed as fitting sizes XL to XXL, which to quote the great Cher Horowitz, ‘As if!’” She held up a simple white slip dress. “I think it would look amazing on your curves.”

The spaghetti-strapped dress had a cowl neckline and was made with a silky white fabric that looked synthetic yet expensive and would likely cling to every one of my curves. There was some ruching along the sides that would highlight my small waist and generous hips while the simple hemline looked like it would hit me about midthigh.

It was subtle yet stunning, everything I would have chosen in a dress if I had picked it out myself.

“Try it on,” she said, shoving it into my hands before turning back to the pile of clothes to continue her search for her own outfit.

Quietly, I slipped into her en suite bathroom. Autumn had previously demonstrated that she was wholly comfortable

stripping down in front of me to change clothes, but I wasn't quite there yet.

I took off my oversized band T-shirt and sleep shorts before pulling the luxurious-feeling garment over my head and shimmying it down my body. The exposed neckline of the dress meant a bra wasn't an option.

I decided to forgo peeking in the mirror and instead went for a grand reveal, popping the door open and striding into the room to get Autumn's reaction.

“Oh my God, Luz!” she shrieked. “It's perfect!”

Twirling around to look in the full-length mirror she had propped in the corner, I had to agree, I looked pretty darn good.

Now it was just a matter of finding the right shoes.

While Autumn went to work putting on her final selections, I dashed back to my room to grab a pair of shoes. Although I stood by the adage that clean white sneakers went with everything, I wanted something different for tonight. Scraping through my closet, I landed on a pair of limited-edition lug-soled Doc Martens with gold details, which I had scored from an online consignment store. Autumn wasn't the only one who could scrounge the internet for fashion finds.

The silky fabric hugged my body from my chest to my hips while the color popped against my warm skin and made my gold jewelry sparkle. The crucifix sat nestled between my

breasts and the pure white of the dress was juxtaposed by the sexiness of the cut and the attitude of my chunky boots.

I loved it.

Lost in the moment, I bounded out to the hallway without a second thought, excited to get Autumn's opinion on the final look.

Stepping out of my room, I was struck by how quiet the floor was for eight o'clock on a Saturday night. Scanning the corridor in front of me, nothing looked amiss, but a discomfoting awareness slithered across my consciousness. I could feel the creeping sensation of someone's eyes on me. The screech of aging hinges cut through the air, and I spun around to face the end of the hall in time to see someone in a hooded sweatshirt dash into the stairwell, the door slamming behind them.

A sensation of foreboding sank deep down into the pit of my stomach. The elevators and stairs all required a key card to access them. The only people who should be able to get onto the floor either lived here or worked for the school. Why would someone be lurking around and then run away like that?

Before I could worry more, the elevators pinged and a group of shrieking and dancing girls got off, the night's pregaming festivities clearly underway already. As their chatter filled the hallway with noise, my heart rate settled down. Shrugging off the rest of my anxiety, I turned to head back to Autumn's room to show her my outfit and finish getting ready.

I was being paranoid. Not everything that went bump in the night was a monster.

## Chapter Seven





## Luz

“Some of the girls can be kind of bitchy,” Autumn explained as we trudged across the muddy campus, the ground still soggy from the rain the day before. “But they know how to throw a good party.”

She had dragged me to the other side of Hollow Oak, which bordered the town. A couple of girls she knew from prep school had rented a stately-looking house just off campus for the year.

As we made our way up the steps and into the house, I scanned the crowds, not really sure who I was looking for. It wasn't like I had connected with anyone else besides Autumn. After my exchange with Dr. Blackwell, I found myself walking into all my classes with my shields up, wary of not just the professors but my fellow students as well. I still hadn't forgotten the group that had lingered to enjoy my humiliation.

“Autumn!” A shrill voice pierced through the air, causing me to wince.

“Oh my God,” she shrieked in return, with equal enthusiasm but less ear-damaging shrillness. “It’s so good to see you ... Hester ... Jade,” she cooed as she exchanged air kisses with a pair of tall blondes who looked suspiciously like any one of a number of social media influencers—cookie-cutter perfection.

“We haven’t seen you all summer, now have we, Hester?” blonde number one whined.

“It’s like you’ve been hiding from us,” Hester echoed with more than a hint of accusation coloring her tone.

Autumn shifted on her feet as her cheeks flushed a telltale red. I didn’t know what was going on here, but these two had my maybe-friend on edge. I didn’t care for it.

Stepping in front of her to command the blondies’ attention, I offered a soft smile.

“Hi there, I am Luz. It’s so nice to meet Autumn’s friends.” I beamed at them, watching their eyes zero in on me in a predatory manner.

Vicious people so often mistook politeness for weakness.

Hester offered me a crocodile smile and leaned in closer to inspect me.

“Luz, is it?” She smirked. “How lovely to meet you.”

“Oh no, Hester,” Jade chimed in, stepping nearer and unabashedly looking me over. “I am certain we’ve met Luz before,” she said with a sickeningly sweet grin, drawing out the z in my name.

Autumn spoke up from behind me. “Oh, I don’t think you would have,” she said nervously, snaking around to grab my hand. “Luz is my floormate, she’s new,” she stumbled. “Like new to here, to the East Coast, new to the scene.” She tugged at my hand, attempting to pull me back into the crowd around us.

I held both myself and my smile firmly in place.

Kill them with kindness, as Mami would say.

“T-Texas!” Autumn stammered out loudly when I didn’t budge. “She’s from Texas originally, so you know, you probably don’t know her.”

“Don’t be silly, Autumn.” Hester prowled around us in a circle. “We know people from all over, don’t we, Jade?”

“And all walks of life.” Jade followed.

“Hmmm,” I murmured, tapping my finger against the corner of my lips as I pretended to think. We weren’t drawing a crowd yet, most people around us were too drunk to pay attention. But there were a couple of social vultures lurking around us, hanging on to every word. “I don’t know ladies, I’m just so sorry. I’m not really one to forget a face,” I said earnestly, shrugging my shoulders with another smile.

“Oh, oh, I know, I’ve got it,” Jade said eagerly with a snap of her fingers, tossing her glossy long hair over her shoulder with a smirk. “Weren’t you the maid that everyone caught Donald Haverford fucking at his engagement party last year?” she squealed victoriously.

“No, Jade!” Hester waved off her friend, “She’s too young to have been the maid. Maybe it was her mother. She did look just like her. It’s so hard to tell the help apart ...”

I let an expression of pure confusion sweep across my face as I looked at the two with deliberate, wide-eyed ignorance. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure what you mean.” I kept my voice free of shame and full of innocent bewilderment.

Hester and Jade paused their smug giggling for a moment as their noses wrinkled with uncertainty at my lack of understanding.

“We’re saying you fucked Douglas Haverford at his engagement party,” Hester repeated slowly as if I hadn’t heard her the first time.

“But I don’t know a Douglas Haverford,” I said guilelessly as I screwed my face up in further confusion while turning my palms up to plead ignorance.

“No, we know that you idiot.” Jade was unable to maintain the charade of civility any longer in the face of my artless innocence.

“But then why would—”

Hester cut off me. “She’s calling you a poor slut, do you not get that?” she sneered incredulously.

“But what would this maid who slept with your friend have to do with me being a poor slut?” I said quizzically, looking around the room as if searching for the answer. By now,

several different partygoers had slipped their phones out of their pockets and were recording the ordeal.

“Because you all look alike! Ugh, stupid fucking Mexicans!” Hester bitched, stomping her foot and drawing increasing attention to her antics.

“Oh, I’m half Puerto Rican,” I replied with a cheery, candid shrug.

“Like I give a fuck what backwater country your mother crawled out of,” said Hester, her voice raising with irritation.

“Karen alert,” someone whooped out from behind, setting off a round of laughter at Hester’s expense.

“She’s the fucking border-hopping trash.” Jade scoffed as she turned around to face the increasingly invested crowd. “Wait, are you recording this?” she screeched at the spectators when she saw the cameras.

That was my cue to wrap it up.

“Sorry, Heckle and Jeckle,” I said with a shrug and an aw-shucks smile. “It was nice to meet you, but we’ve got some mingling to do,” I said before blowing them a kiss. “Besos, besos!” I called out as I swung around and disappeared into the crowd, dragging a dazed Autumn along behind me.

Making our way toward the back of the house, I zeroed in on one of the drink stations the hosts had set up around the party, a full selection of alcohol and mixers available for guests to choose from.

“What just happened?” Autumn asked, her eyes glazed in confusion with a touch of awe.

“Your so-called friends are a pair of racist, stuck-up dickholes,” I said without missing a beat as I perused the options, my eyes snagging on the sealed bottles of water I had been looking for.

Snatching up two, I passed one to Autumn and then stepped back from the table to meet her mystified gaze.

“Dickholes?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Everyone throws around *pussy* or *asshole* as an insult, but I personally think dicks have a whole lot more to answer for.”

Autumn blinked, shaking her head at my logic.

See, this was the risk of opening up to people.

“Hester and Jade are going to lose their shit if someone posts that video.”

“Probably,” I replied. “But no one can say that I provoked them or that they don’t deserve for the world to know how awful they are.”

“You know, I uh, I don’t agree with any of the horrible things they were saying ...” she said awkwardly. “I’m sorry they said those things to you.”

I shrugged, turning back around to face the party.

I wanted to press her on why she would ever consider those two vile humans to be her friends, but that wasn’t a

conversation for now. I understood that connections were everything for someone like Autumn, and I didn't want to put my only potential friend in the position of having to choose between me and fake friendships she felt obligated to maintain. I wouldn't continue to hang out with Autumn if she expected me to sit quietly and take that kind of abuse, but I still wasn't one hundred percent sure about her as a friend, so why ask for a commitment I wasn't willing to give her myself yet?

Plus, people were less likely to let you down if you kept your expectations low.

We stood in silence for a moment, watching the party unfold around us. We were almost surrounded by the masses of writhing dancers moving to the music, and part of me couldn't help but admire the way they let themselves go with such abandon, bodies grinding up against bodies, all their inhibitions muted by the alcohol and drugs, mixed with the rush of freedom that came with being at college.

"I can't decide if you are brilliant or suicidal," Autumn finally said with a shake of her head.

"Definitely brilliant," piped up a tall, slim guy as he approached the two of us with a warm smile.

"Aaron," he said, extending a hand to me. "Aaron Croft."

I took it with a wince, glancing over at Autumn, who looked just as lost as I was as to who this guy was.

With light brown hair that was slightly overgrown and curling a bit at the ends, matching warm brown eyes, and skin tanned from the sun, Aaron Croft was the spitting image of the boy next door.

“Luz,” I said, not bothering with my last name as I withdrew my hand. “And this is Autumn.”

“Autumn Morgan,” she said, her beatific smile firmly back in place.

“Sorry,” Aaron said sheepishly. “Ah, I know you don’t know me”—he ran his fingers through his hair—“but I figured anyone who could make a fool out of those two was worth meeting.”

“Pretty sure they made fools of themselves,” I said, “but in that case, it’s nice to meet you, Aaron.”

“Freshmen?” he asked, reaching around Autumn to grab a bottle of beer.

“What gave us away?”

“Nothing in particular, but it’s my third year here. You get a sense of who’s new on campus after a while.” He shrugged, tilting the bottle back to meet his lips.

“What are you studying, Aaron?” Autumn asked politely.

“Chemistry.” He beamed with pride. “I’m hoping to get into medical school after I graduate, and Hollow Oak has one of the best undergraduate programs around.”



“That’s cool.” Autumn bobbed her head. “Luz is studying econ and global languages; I’m still figuring out what I want to do with my life.”

“You can’t be doing that badly if you got in here,” he joked, making Autumn glow while I scrunched my nose. “So, is this your first official Hollow Oak party?”

Autumn shook her head. “It’s Luz’s first party,” she said, not unkindly, “but I went to Holland Prep, so I’ve visited the campus a couple of times before.”

“Oh,” Aaron’s face brightened with interest, “do you know Charlie Davenport?”

“Oh, my goodness ...” Autumn’s reply was lost on me as I zoned out of the conversation. I almost certainly didn’t know anyone they were talking about, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about Aaron coming over and interjecting himself into the situation.

I didn’t exactly get bad vibes from him and should probably give him a chance, but the harpy sisters had put me on edge again, and I knew I wouldn’t be letting my guard down anytime soon.

Friends, enemies, who cared? Until now, I had never considered getting close enough to anyone to know the difference. I just hoped that I wasn’t making a mistake with Autumn. For some reason, I didn’t want her to be another bridge I had to burn.

## Chapter Eight



## Luz

Aaron and Autumn spent another thirty minutes exchanging gossip and reveling in shared social connections while I idly observed the party unfolding around us. They were also drinking at a much faster pace than I was, both on their third round while I nursed a barely touched warm beer.

“Oh dear, Luz, I’m sorry.” Autumn hiccupped with the rosy glow of a happy drunk. “Here we are just chatting away and being terrible friends.”

I ignored the temptation to inform her that Aaron was absolutely not my friend and, instead, offered a placating smile. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve been enjoying people watching.”

“Why don’t we hit the dance floor and let loose?” suggested Aaron. As if he could read the protest forming in my mind, he rolled his eyes. “I’m not trying to get in your pants, Luz. I promise, scout’s honor.” He offered a three-fingered salute.

I crossed my arms, utterly unconvinced and doing nothing to hide it.

“Listen, I know most girls just want to have fun dancing with their friends. You and Autumn should get out there, and I promise I won’t be weird; I’ll just stay near enough to keep an eye out and ward off any creepers that come your way.”

Autumn started tugging at my arm. “Come on, Luz. It’s a party. We have to dance.”

I searched Aaron’s face for any traces of deception or insincerity. That I couldn’t find any irritated me to no end.

Gritting my teeth, I begrudgingly mumbled, “Fine.” This made Autumn’s night and she gave a shimmy of joy before dragging me into the thick of the dancing crowd, Aaron trailing in our wake.

The music washed over us, and I gave in to the urge to move my hips along to the pulsing beat of the song.

Looking over, I found Aaron exactly where he promised, standing just behind Autumn and me, close enough that it probably looked like we were dancing with him but far enough that he wasn’t in my personal space.

He tossed me a wink when he caught me looking him over. It came across as more friendly than flirtatious, but I couldn’t stop wondering what he was getting out of this.

One song bled into another, and with Aaron continuing to keep his distance, I began to relax a bit, allowing myself to close my eyes and just feel the music and the energy of

everyone around me. It was all too easy to lose myself in song after song, dancing my worries away.

Eventually, though, the night began to wear on me, and I tried in vain to get Autumn to come to the bathroom with me where hopefully I could convince her it was time to head back to the dorm.

“Not now, Luz, I’m having fun. Just one more dance!” she pleaded, giving me one of her signature pouts.

*Darn it, she’s good.*

“Here,” Aaron said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his iPhone, the latest edition, to hand to me. When I raised my eyebrows, he explained. “I know you don’t trust me, so take my phone as collateral. Go to the bathroom and I’ll look after your girl. You can trust that I’ll hang around to get my phone back, and I’ll have to trust that you’ll return for your friend instead of stealing my phone,” he said with a cheesy grin.

“A phone is hardly an even trade for a human,” I scoffed as Autumn pawed at my arm and encouraged me to leave.

“Go on, Luz. We’ll be fine. I, like, pinkie promise we won’t move from this spot.” She hiccupped again.

I didn’t know what the girl code was at this point. I thought we were supposed to want to go to the bathroom together. But maybe Autumn wanted to stay behind for a reason? Maybe she was into Aaron after all and wanted a moment alone with him?

Chewing on my lip, I mulled it over before relenting.

“Fine, but if either of you two moves so much as an inch from here I am holding you accountable, Croft,” I hissed, turning to flounce off through the crowd.

The line for the first-floor bathroom was excruciatingly long, and I liked to save my patience for when it counted the most. So instead of waiting, I made my way up the grand curving staircase that dominated the foyer. The top of the landing gave way to separate hallways, and I flipped a coin in my head before heading down the left side.

Most of the doors were closed, and it didn't take a detective to discern what was going on behind them from the sounds leaking through. Near the end of the hallway, I reached a door that remained open, and when I couldn't make out any signs of life, I peeked into the room.

A guy's clothes were strewn all about the room, and there was more than one set of dirty dishes stacked up on the dresser and desk. Gross.

Pinching my nose, I stepped around the piles of dirty clothes and God knows what else before finding what I had been looking for. An en suite.

As disgusting as the room was, the bathroom was worse. I quickly said a prayer to the bathroom gods as I hovered over the toilet, relieving myself at lightning speed all while I grimaced and whined.

As quickly as I could, I was washing my hands and running out of the room and down the hallway like a bat out of hell. I

didn't stop until I'd made my way to the other side of the landing.

I wasn't exactly a germaphobe, but Mami had been fastidiously neat due to her work and had ingrained the need for cleanliness and order in me. Shuddering, I forced myself to take a couple of deep cleansing breaths now that the air around me was no longer contaminated.

That was when I noticed one of the doors on this side of the hallway was open as well, a crack of light spilling out along with the hum of quiet conversation beneath music playing in the background.

A prickle ran up my spine, warning me to mind my own business, to turn around, and head back downstairs. And yet, the possibility of what I might overhear, the rush of seeing something I shouldn't, was too tempting to ignore. So instead, I silently inched my way closer until I could make out the sound of distinctly masculine voices.

"... you can't blame us for being curious. Surely, you've heard the rumors even if you haven't already sampled the selection by now ..." someone said, his voice dark and taunting.

"I'm not fucking stupid, Nix. I know better than to piss you guys off," an arrogant voice scoffed in return.

"Then lose the fucking attitude, Andover," the first man replied.

Needing to confirm my suspicions, I stepped closer, flinching when I brushed up against the door, causing it to creak open another inch. For a moment I stood there frozen, waiting with bated breath for someone to stomp over and catch me, but after a couple of harrowing moments, nothing happened.

Suddenly, a deep, throaty groan broke through the silence, and I found myself cautiously peering around the door, my eyes immediately drawn to the source.

Sprawled across an armchair, with a head full of long brunette hair bobbing between his legs, was one of the twins I had seen that first day of class: a Blackwell.

It was impossible to tell them apart. According to Autumn, even their tattoos matched, confirming my earlier suspicions. Whichever one he was, he was glorious in his wanton splendor.

His elegant white button-down was undone, exposing the golden skin of his chest. It was covered in the same black-and-white tattoos that wrapped around his arms, and from where I stood, I could make out the images of different chess pieces and playing cards set against a backdrop of swirling gray smoke and blackthorns.

Another ragged groan tore forth from him, and my own breathing became rough as I ground my thighs together in protest.

His head was thrown back in ecstasy, and my eyes involuntarily traced up the muscular column of his neck and



across his tension-filled jaw and found a plush mouth lax with pleasure. His dark eyes were barely slits as he chased after his high of choice, his dirty blond locks askew. Time seemed to have slowed down as I watched him piston his hips back and forth, fucking the brunette's face with utter abandon.

Gripping my shoulders, I fought back against the shivers threatening to run down my spine. It was absolutely time for me to look away, and yet I was unable to.

His elegantly tattooed fingers wrapped around the back of her head, cupping her skull in the palm of his large hand as he thrust himself violently inside her throat one more time before pulling out and spilling himself all over her face.

The sound of a man politely coughing made me jump where I stood. Fear constricting my chest, I looked across the room to find the other Blackwell twin sitting stiffly on the bed, placidly observing his brother while a couple of other guys did some lines off the dresser. None of them appeared to have noticed me.

The first twin never took his steely gaze off the girl kneeling before him.

“Open up.” His voice was somehow soft yet venomous as he pinched her cheeks together tightly, prying her mouth open and forcing her tongue out. I watched, mesmerized, as he leaned forward, indifference briefly clouding his features, before he sneered and forcefully spat in her mouth.

“Oh—” I whimpered before I could slap my hand over my mouth, stifling my involuntary moan.

“Swallow,” he commanded, and I was grateful I hadn’t yet removed my hand.

What was wrong with me that the scene before me brought tears to my eyes and aching in my core?

“Did you hear something?” one of the guys doing coke piped up from across the room, and I stepped from the door, silently backing away as quickly as I could, my pulse pounding, before making my way downstairs.

I could hear the sound of someone coming down the hallway, but I was already lost in the crowd by the time they made their way to the landing. One of the Blackwell twins, presumably the one sitting on the bed as he was fully clothed, gripped the edge of the banister as he glared down at the partygoers below.

Refusing to give him a second glance and risk attracting his attention, I marched confidently through the party, making a beeline for Autumn and Aaron, who were exactly where I had left them, to my relief. Slapping Aaron’s phone back in his hand, I grabbed Autumn, unwilling to hear any more arguments, and started to half drag, half carry her back to our dorm.

It wasn’t until I had finally locked myself in my own room, after tucking her into bed with a bottle of water and some aspirin, that I was finally able to really take a breath again. And when I did, I collapsed on my own bed in a fit of jittery giggles. Adrenaline was still surging in my veins, and my thoughts about what I witnessed were a wild, chaotic mess.

Glancing at my phone, I saw that it was well past one in the morning, and I chewed on my lip as I debated my options.

There was no way I could fall asleep right now, not with all this restless energy inside me.

Ultimately, I decided that a nice long hot steamy shower was the best course of action. It would calm me down and give me a task that could distract me from my warring thoughts.

Thirty minutes later, my skin nearly scalded but my mind quiet, and I finally made my way into bed.

Tomorrow was Sunday and I could sleep in. It would be a new day, a fresh start from the night's adventures.



An ear-piercing scream wrenched me awake what felt like only minutes later.

“Holy shit! Holy *fuck!*” a hysterical female voice cried outside, sounding as if they were standing directly in front of my room.

Instinctively, I bolted from my bed and put my ear to the door to listen before reacting.

“Oh my God,” another voice sobbed, distinct from the still ongoing screams of the first.

There was something terribly, horribly wrong out there.

I was reaching for the doorknob when I heard Autumn's voice, sounding low and scratchy, above the clamor.

“Guys, what’s going on, it’s— Oh my fucking God! Luz! Luz!” She started screaming, and I suddenly unlocked my door without hesitation as a bolt of fear I didn’t think I was capable of shot through me.

As I wrenched the door open, I was immediately overwhelmed by the distinctive copper scent of blood, and I half expected to find a dead body at my feet.

It was somehow worse.

## Chapter Nine



## Alister

“I’ll admit, I’ve done some twisted fucking things in my life ...” my twin said with a contemplative swing of his beer. It was barely nine in the morning. “But I’ve never nailed a heart to someone’s door before.”

This morning we woke up to the news that a bloody human heart had been found nailed to the door of a student in Jackson College House.

Initially, I assumed it had to be the work of my older brother’s pet serial killer, only to learn that he claimed to have nothing to do with the incident. Everest “Ever” Collins was many things—violent murderer, deranged psychopath, heartless monster—but he wasn’t a liar. Not about his “art,” not to my brother.

Which meant that we had an outsider running amuck on our watch.

“I think it’s incredibly romantic,” the devil himself piped up from the corner of our sitting room where he had made himself

at home. Ever was without a doubt the most twisted fuck I knew, so I wasn't surprised he saw it that way.

Nixon rolled his eyes. "It wasn't meant as a declaration of love."

"But, why else would someone give her a heart?" Ever asked, looking sincerely confused.

I ignored the two of them in favor of mulling over what I had been able to learn about the incident so far. Of particular interest to me was the girl whose door the heart had been nailed to.

Luz Torres was a freshman at Hollow Oak and a largely unremarkable scholarship student with a cute face and a generous ass. Hailing from a small suburb outside Houston, Texas, she graduated with a 4.0 unweighted GPA despite having to change schools often for her mother's work. She was doing a double major in economics and global languages. I knew that she spoke English, French, Spanish, and German, and was studying Japanese.

The girl was disciplined, I would give her that. But so were all the scholarship students who came here. It was the price of not having money or influence.

I'll admit, I was intrigued when I caught her lurking outside the door at the party last night, staring at my brother and his fuck of the night.

I recognized her immediately from the first day of classes. Nix and I had been attending one of the many frat parties that

dominated the beginning of the school year.

We were hanging out on the steps of Lambda Chi Alpha, watching a bunch of assholes getting drunk before classes had even started. The girls were huddled in clusters—gossiping and tossing suggestive glances our way. It was all so fucking mundane.

That was when I saw her, marching down the main walkway on campus, practically ablaze with studious determination. Even without looking up her records, I knew immediately that she must have been here on a scholarship. She looked fucking adorable in her white sneakers, knee-high socks, and pleated camel skirt. I was immediately struck by the sharp need to tarnish the pretty little vignette she made.

Then that prick on an electric scooter crashed into her. I was expecting her to cry, maybe even scream at him, and the thought of what that pretty face might look like with tears running down instantly had me hard. Instead, all I could see in her was steely fury as she picked herself up and kept storming down the cobblestone path as if nothing could stop her.

How boring. I would have preferred it if she had cried.

“What do you think, Ali?” Nix’s voice broke through to me.

Of the two of us, he was always the more ... present one. I’d always been most at home alone with my thoughts.

“We need to find the message behind the heart,” I finally said, not bothering to look at either of them.

It couldn’t have been random that it was nailed to her door.



Obtaining a human heart is no small thing. If you outsource it, you're looking at spending some decent money to steal one or find a "donor." If you go the DIY route, it's a bloody fucking mess, and it's physically demanding to crack a rib cage wide open enough to remove a heart. Even more so without surgical tools.

"Someone wanted to make sure *that* girl received it."

Nix considered what I'd said, quietly nodding along in agreement while Ever continued playing with his knife, tossing it up and down in the air without a care in the world.

"What are the chances that it's related to the disappearances on campus?" Nix asked.

It was an interesting thought, although a premature one. We didn't know enough about either incident to determine whether they were related.

"Disappearances began last spring. Why start now?" I wondered out loud.

"And if they were related, what was the girl's connection to it all?" Nix followed up.

I had started to investigate her after last night. When I watched her dart away from the door, I was already reaching for my phone to look her up, having filed the image of her face in my mind. I would have chased her down at the party, but we had been meeting with Miles Andover, one of the self-proclaimed party kings of Hollow Oak, to discuss the drugs infiltrating campus.

The Blackwells didn't personally engage in any of the more illicit trades outside of killing. The peddling of petty vices—guns, drugs, and women—was beneath us. But you couldn't build an empire on blood alone, you needed power too.

For centuries, all criminal trade along the northeastern seaboard, minus New York City and New Jersey, which was Cosa Nostra territory, paid a surcharge for the privilege of operating under the domain of the Blackwell empire.

So, when rumors started circulating about new, cheaper drugs flowing into Hollow Oak, being offered at a price point far below what we permitted, it was a direct insult to our family.

As a result, Nix and I had been forced to attend more parties than usual in an attempt to sniff out the bastards. So far, we had struck out, and the fact that these interlopers had managed to evade us was only adding to my frustrations. There was enough on our plates already with the disappearances. We didn't need the peasants getting rowdy. Now this heart incident?

“Do we know anything about her?” Nix tried again after it became clear I wasn't going to respond to his earlier question.

“Luz Torres,” I said, savoring the feeling of her name on my tongue. It was the first time I had spoken her name out loud, and something about it satisfied me.

Nix snorted. “I take it she's not from around here.”

“Texas, mostly. Her mother moved them around a lot until she died last year.”

My twin didn't question why or how I already knew so much about this girl whose name we only received a couple of hours ago when one of our many scouts on campus texted to let us know what had happened. Knowing was my job, and no one would think twice about how quickly I had managed to learn so much about her.

It wasn't hard. I had unrestricted access to the university's records. There was no one on campus I couldn't identify. All it took was a couple of minutes of quick scrolling through the incoming class to find her. There was no way the doe-eyed girl I saw last night was anything other than fresh meat.

The news this morning only fueled my need to know more about her.

Luz Torres wore her innocence like a well-crafted shield. She was trying to deflect attention from something, but what? Was it the righteous fury I saw simmering in her that very first day? Or maybe it was whatever drove her to spy on us last night.

It wasn't just the lust in her eyes that attracted my attention, although I would have bet good money that her pussy was dripping with sweetness when she spied on my brother. It was the mischief in them, the thrill she was visibly riding from playing voyeur, and then the violent, shuddering wanting that filled her gaze when she saw my brother finish and spit into the mouth of that girl.

“I take it she only arrived in time for orientation.”

I nodded. He knew that if I had thought she was a viable suspect in the disappearances I would have told him right away.

“Think someone followed her here then?” he drawled, placing his empty beer bottle on the coaster next to him before stretching out his legs on the leather ottoman at his feet.

“It’s more likely than someone meeting her on campus and escalating that quickly,” I said, theorizing out loud.

That was all I had at this point. Theories. Because despite everything I had pulled together on Luz Torres so far, I still didn’t really have anything that told me who she was.

I knew that she was smart, that she dressed conservatively but stylishly with a European flair, and that she was Puerto Rican on her mother’s side. Her father was unknown. There wasn’t even a name on her birth certificate, which was something I needed to look into further. I knew that she was eighteen years old and that her birthday was November second, All Saints’ Day.

Ever let out a low whistle, breaking my train of thought, his pale blue eyes taking on a starry-eyed look that was absolutely terrifying on him. “Either way, there must be something about her,” he said with a disconcerting smile.

Fuck. If we weren’t careful with how we handled things, he was going to wind up obsessed with this girl just because some other psycho found her first.

“You’ll continue to look into her, Ali,” Nix quickly said, not so much commanding me as trying to change the subject to avoid encouraging Ever.

I tipped my head in agreement.

Still, the lunatic had a point. Even if she hadn’t wound up with a heart nailed to her door, I would have continued to investigate her.

*What was it about this girl that drew killers to her like moths to a flame?*

# Chapter Ten



## Luz

The first couple of days after the incident were a blur. You might think that having a bloody heart nailed to your door would give you a pass on attending class for at least a few days. And most of my professors were surprisingly accommodating. It was something I was grateful for because between speaking with the police and university administrators, attending mandatory counseling sessions, and calming down Autumn, I barely had time to breathe, let alone study.

Unsurprisingly, Dr. Blackwell gave me the hardest time. Initially, he refused to excuse me from his lecture until I provided written documentation showing that I had a follow-up interview with the police that I was required to attend. I ignored the temptation to point out that according to *his* syllabus, it was only attendance of the tutorial sessions that counted toward our mark, nor had he taken roll the week before. With my luck, he would have revised the entire syllabus just to spite me.

Still, I would have rather been suffering under Blackwell's hostile glare and at least learning something than sitting through another pointless meeting with the police.

The good news was that I wasn't considered a suspect. The cameras on the floor had been recording that night, and they clearly showed me entering my room on Saturday night after helping Autumn into hers. About five minutes later, someone wearing a dark hoodie and jeans came out of the stairwell, stopping in front of my door and pressing their ear up against it to listen for some time before proceeding to pull a Tupperware out of the pouch. They kept their back to the camera the entire time, but a couple swings of a hammer were visible before they shoved everything back into their sweatshirt and rushed back to the stairwell.

I felt ill at the idea of how close they had been to me, separated only by a door. There was something incredibly violating about it. Hollow Oak hadn't necessarily felt like a safe space in the short time I'd been here, but suddenly it felt a lot more sinister.

The bad news was that, while I wasn't considered a suspect, the police believed I was deliberately targeted. Which meant answering endless questions about me and my past and anything else they could think of that might shed light on why someone had chosen my door, making me feel as though I was somehow to blame for the incident.

“Any ex-boyfriends, girlfriends, significant others who might be looking to scare you? Get back at you for



something?” the female detective across from me asked for the third time.

She was youngish for a detective, with short strawberry blonde hair and blinding white teeth.

“No, no one like that, I’ve always been kind of a loner,” I replied, repeating the same answer I had given them twice already while twisting my hair around my finger.

“I’ll be direct,” the other detective interjected. He was a grizzled-looking older white man with a paunch and coffee stains on his button-up shirt. “Are you sexually active, Miss Torres?”

“Um, n-no,” I stuttered. “No, I’m not.”

“So, no one-night stands who maybe liked you a little too much? Maybe had a hard time letting go?” he pressed again, and I felt flush with discomfort.

“No, nothing like that,” I said more firmly, fighting the urge to grind my teeth. “As I already said, I’m not sexually active.”

“And what about your family?” probed the other cop as she took control of the questioning again. Kimberly Marques, she had said her name was. “I see here that your mother passed away last year, and you spent most of your senior year living with some cousins.”

Technically, Amelia and Marco weren’t related to me and Mami at all, but I nodded along deferentially.

“What about your father? Did your mother ever tell you who he was?” Marques said, shuffling through some papers in her

file. “Do you think he could be involved in this?”

My father would have almost certainly been capable of doing something like this if he hadn't been dead for over eight years. And in the new life Mami had built for us, I didn't have a father.

“No, my mami refused to tell me anything about him, other than he was a pendejo who destroyed everything he touched and that we were better off without him,” I replied with a shrug.

Detective Marques nodded with knowing, sympathetic eyes while her partner, a Detective Ronald Denver, scoffed before muttering something like “typical” under his breath.

“Have you met anyone on campus since starting school who stood out to you? Anyone who stood out as odd or aggressive?” she continued.

“Like I said, there was that person I thought was watching me on my floor one day.”

I had briefly considered telling them about Locke's obvious dislike of me, but a bloody heart to my door really didn't seem like his style. The man wore a Kiton suit to lecture, it was hard to imagine him getting that messy. Even if I had believed he was capable of it, it was clear that his family was important around here, and I didn't need to attract any more attention from the Blackwells. I was also hardly in the position to start trusting cops.

“But you have no idea who that person was, and you couldn’t make out any discerning features on them,” she said.

“No, as I told you, they were at the end of the hall wearing a hoodie, and they ran away before I could get a good look at them.”

She frowned. It had become painfully obvious throughout these interviews that the cops wanted me to have more information than I did. At first, part of me was worried that they had figured out who I really was. But, had that been the case, I would have been answering an entirely different set of questions.

The other detective scowled at me; his disgust was as palpable as his partner’s disappointment. There was something else going on here, something behind the scenes that I wasn’t aware of.

After a moment of awkward silence, I cleared my throat before asking if we were through. “I’d like to get back to focusing on my classes,” I explained. “I have to maintain a 3.8 grade point average or I’ll lose my scholarship. I can’t afford to miss many more.”

“Actually, there was one other thing,” the male detective sneered while the other cut him a warning look that he ignored. “The results came back from the coroners,” he paused.

I looked at the two of them in honest confusion, uncertain what kind of reaction he was looking for.

“It turns out it wasn’t a human heart after all, just a pig’s,” he said with smug satisfaction, as though he was dropping a bomb on me.

*Oh, that’s all?*

I shrugged. “I guess that’s good news then.”

The female detective pounced on my admission instantly. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, the heart had to come from somewhere, right?” I replied, nonplussed. “Better a pig than a human, however it happened.”

“And knowing that, you still can’t think of anyone who would want to send you a message?” he growled.

“No,” I said truthfully. “But I feel better knowing that no one was hurt or lost an organ transplant or something awful like that.”

We continued to go back and forth for another thirty minutes after their grand reveal before the detectives would let me go. I could have probably made it for the last fifteen minutes of Locke’s class, but given his reaction last time, I didn’t think he’d appreciate me waltzing in seventy-five minutes late.

When I made it back to the dorms, I wasn’t surprised to find Autumn there, waiting for me, camped out between our two respective rooms.

You would think a rich girl like her would be more squeamish about hanging around a crime scene, but she’d been

determined to stick by my side and “protect me” since they found the heart nailed to my door.

“There’s strength in numbers,” she’d said with a dismissive scowl when I asked her how exactly she planned to do that. “I can’t, like, fight anyone for you, but someone will be less likely to attack you if you’re around other people.”

I had to resist the urge to point out that no one had attacked or even threatened me. And that I was certain that, if we got attacked, it would be me saving her.

Still, her commitment to standing by me, regardless of the rumors now swirling, was endearing.

Autumn jumped to her feet when she saw me get off the elevator. Ever since the incident, I had avoided taking the stairs.

“How did it go?” she asked as I let myself into my room.

I had briefly wondered if they might assign me a new one, but the administration had said there were none available at this moment. At least not in a residence that was covered by my scholarship.

“Apparently it wasn’t a human heart after all,” I said as I made my way into my room, Autumn slipping in behind me to come sit on my bed. A week ago, I would have been confused and irritated by her following me, but I was getting used to it.

“Holy shit!” she squealed. “Then what was it?”

I had to give her credit, she was a great listener, and her overreactions to nearly everything felt oddly validating at

times.

“A pig’s heart,” I said, dumping my backpack onto the floor before settling down on the bed next to her.

With everything going on, I hadn’t had the chance to talk to her about what happened with her friends at the party. Still, I was starting to suspect that somehow, despite myself, I was truly becoming friends with this girl.

“Ewwww.” She wrinkled her nose. “I guess it’s better than it being, like, a person’s but still gross.”

I nodded along. “It’s definitely better than it being a human heart.”

So far, I had managed to avoid thinking too deeply about what it might mean to have a human heart nailed to my door. Learning that it was a pig’s definitely downgraded the severity of the situation.

But as much as I had dismissed the possibility of someone targeting me to the police, if I was being honest with myself, I had to admit that was the most likely scenario.

That it was the Blackwells was an option I had to consider. While I didn’t think Locke had left the heart for me, he wasn’t the only member of the family I had encountered recently. Was it only a coincidence that I had seen the twins just hours before someone broke onto our floor to leave me a nasty message? Had they caught me spying on them and the heart was some sort of warning?

Then there was the other possibility that had been niggling away at my brain. One that I wanted to consider even less than having a family of professional killers threatening me.

*What if this has to do with Penelope?*

My stomach rumbled, forcing my attention back to reality.

“Oh my God, Luz, you must be starving after having been stuck with those nasty cops all day.” Autumn sat upright and grabbed my hand to gently tug me from the bed before I could even protest.

“Fine, fine, you know I can always eat,” I said with a genuine smile and grabbed an oversized collegiate crewneck to slip on before catching up with her outside my door.

No sign of the incident remained; Facilities had started working to remove the stain almost immediately after being given permission by the police. Parts of the door had to be sanded and refinished, and it had stunk up the entire floor.

I could still see it in my mind, though, clear as day. The sagging, distended flesh of the oxidizing organ, and the thick crimson blood running down the door to form a sticky puddle below.

*Some stains never come clean.*

# Chapter Eleven





## Luz

**T**hunder rumbled across the rapidly darkening sky as I headed to my ECON200 class. My umbrella was tucked away in my backpack, and I was hoping to make it inside before the rain began to fall. Racing across campus my focus was purely on beating the storm and not the pit of uneasiness sitting inside me at the thought of returning to Locke's classroom.

For the last couple of weeks after the incident, he had been disconcertingly well-behaved, effectively ignoring me every class since I didn't ever raise my hand. There was no need to. Participation only counted toward my mark in the tutorial sessions.

The danger that Locke posed was far from over. If anything, I suspected this false *détente* was a deliberate countermeasure on his part. Up until October fifteenth, I could drop a class without facing an academic penalty. After that, any class I withdrew from would go on my record as *incomplete*, dragging down my GPA and likely costing me my scholarship.

Only an especially cruel person would intentionally wait until after the fifteenth to try to get me to drop their class. I had no doubt Locke Blackwell was capable of that level of calculated cruelty.

I arrived at the class five minutes early—despite the fact that he had been on his best behavior lately, I refused to give him any ammunition to target me.

My worries were all for naught.

As I slipped into one of the middle rows, I noticed that Locke was nowhere to be found, and instead, my TA was leaning casually up against the lectern, offering entering students a warm nod.

When a few more students wandered in with quizzical looks on their faces, Dominic spoke up.

“Don’t worry folks, you’re in the right place,” he said with a wry grin. “Dr. Blackwell’s away at a conference, so I will be lecturing for him today. For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Dominic Carlucci, and I teach the Thursday afternoon tutorial session.” Pausing, he eyed the clock. “Let’s, uh, give folks another couple minutes to make their way in, and then we will get started with today’s lecture.”

Dominic was a pretty great TA, making his presence here a pleasant surprise.

From my tutorial sessions, I knew that he was finishing up his master’s degree in economics and that he was super passionate about global finance reform and hoped to complete

his PhD in that area. I also knew that outside of the classroom, he was passionate about his seven-year-old rescue pug, Queenie, and his boyfriend of two years, James, who was a philosophy graduate student here at Hollow Oak.

Dominic began to speak, and I quickly fell into the zone, listening to him wax rhapsodically about national income determination and different heterodox critiques he found to be of interest. It was lovely to sit and be able to focus exclusively on the lecture for once. Although Locke's sneering face kept invading my thoughts.

Class flew by, and before I knew it, the lecture was over and I found myself standing under the colonnade of Granger Hall, grimacing at the fall storm raging outside. Most of my classmates had already scattered or retreated back into the building, leaving me alone on the stone steps as I watched the strong winds viciously whip around sheets of heavy rain.

An umbrella wouldn't do me any good in weather like this, and yet I found myself unwilling to head back inside for shelter. Instead, I watched in admiration as the tempest unleashed its wrath on the campus.

Rain surged from the skies above and the lightning cracked through the darkness over and over again. There was something so captivating about a wild storm, a timeless display of nature's ferocity. This beauty was no different.

A sudden gust of wind caused the ancient oak doors of Granger Hall behind me to snap back and forth, like storm

shutters, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I sensed someone approaching me from behind.

Irritated at the loss of my sanctuary, I whipped around to confront the intruder ...

A large, inked hand clamped down on my mouth, and an arm wrapped around my chest, holding me tight like a cage. Rage tore through me, but before I could attempt to bite the hand silencing me, another large figure stepped out from the shadows.

In front of me stood one of the infamous Blackwell twins, and I could only assume the other was at my back.

Adrenaline surged through my body at my proximity to these men who were practically urban legends on campus. This was the closest I had ever been to them, and I found myself wondering which one was which.

*Which one had I watched?*

“Mmm, she may not be fighting you yet, Ali, but she’s a feisty one. I can just tell,” the one said, scrubbing his jaw with a hungry look in his eyes.

If looks could kill, I would have leveled him at that moment.

The twin at my back, Alister presumably, remained silent, the tightening of his hold on me the only indication that he had heard his brother.

Nixon Blackwell took another step toward us, coming into the light to inspect me.

“Luz Torres,” he rasped sardonically, reaching forward to tease one of the strands of hair plastered to my face while I struggled weakly in his twin’s grip.

I could have tried harder to escape, but I knew if I fled it would only serve to prolong their interest in me. There was nothing predators liked more than the chase.

Instead of fighting it, I took the opportunity to learn about the two men currently holding me against my will.

Nixon was tall and built like a swimmer, all lean explosive power that seemed poised to go off at a moment’s notice. With one arm lazily draped behind his head, he leaned casually against the stone pillar to our right. His black Henley rode up with the motion, and I could just barely make out a sliver of taut, tattooed skin in the dark. A shiver ran through my core as I forced my eyes to his face.

A light scruff of sandy facial hair covered his angular jaw and a smattering of golden freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose and cheeks. This close, I could even see the tiniest white scar, no more than a couple of millimeters, running vertically through his sumptuous upper lip. I also couldn’t help but notice that his clothes were dry, along with his still perfectly styled hair.

My spine stiffened as I realized that Alister, who remained tightly pressed against me, also felt dry to the touch.

They hadn’t just come in from the rain. They had been waiting for me. Watching me.

I swallowed, dizziness rushing through me, my senses heightened as my awareness of Alister's proximity to me began to register. Every inch of me was melded against the hard planes of his body, confirming that he was just as powerfully built as his brother.

It wasn't just the nearness of him that overwhelmed me—the scent of him seemed to envelop me and muddle my senses. He smelled earthy and raw, like the woods after heavy rain. It was hard to discern where he ended and the storm around us began.

Another pitch of lightning shattered the sky, and I instinctively pressed back into my captor. His hips thrust forward in response, and his hardening cock pressed firmly against me. I should have flinched, should have fought back against the violation, but something about the twins had me holding back.

My breath stilled in my lungs, and my nipples hardened as Alister continued to slowly grind his length into me. Despite the layers of clothing between us, I could feel the heat of him against me.

“Oh, look, Ali, she likes you,” Nixon crooned, a sadistic sneer marring his beautiful face. “Didn't you always want a puppy, brother?” He stepped even closer to me. Just inches away, he dropped his hand to hover just above my chest.

I flinched instinctively, even as something inside me reacted to his presence.

“Don't worry, puppy,” Nixon said softly. His fingers skimmed a hair's breadth away from my breasts, causing

another bolt of adrenaline to surge through my already overwrought body.

While the twins may have looked identical, their scents were a study in contrast. Where Alister's was caught up in the wild headiness of the storm, Nixon's burned brightly against it. Cinnamon, smoke, and char washed over me with every breath I took.

I was shivering now, despite Alister still holding me firmly in place, and I struggled to hold back a whimper as I watched Nixon's long, tattooed fingers dip toward the top of my breasts, only to stop short and reach down to deftly pluck my crucifix from where it hung. My skin burned even though he had barely grazed me and I watched with bated breath as he inspected the golden cross for a minute, before dropping it gently back down on my chest and taking a step away from me and his brother, leaving me feeling strangely deflated by his actions.

Narrowing his eyes at me, Nixon took me in once more, calculations visibly running through his cold blue eyes before he came to some sort of decision. He looked up over my shoulder to nod at his brother.

The hand covering my mouth suddenly relaxed and pulled away, and I choked back a breath of the cold damp night air before looking up to scowl at Nixon. Even though the sky was almost pitch black, his eyes shone coldly under the lights of Granger Hall.

“Now, now, pet,” he growled; the warning was clear in his voice. “This is just a friendly, getting-to-know-you introduction between students. Right, Ali?”

Alister said nothing behind me, but I could feel him nod his head once in agreement with his twin.

“You,” Nixon said exuberantly, a smile on his lips and violence in his eyes, “have been attracting a lot of attention here on campus.”

My throat dried up as my heart dropped in my chest.

*What did they know?*

“And my brother and I, we just had to meet the girl who’s the talk of Hollow Oak,” he continued, his hands steeped in front of him, drawing my attention back to them once again. Fear churned inside me at the sight of Nixon Blackwell, and yet I couldn’t stop taking in all the details that made him up. This close I could see the letters tattooed across his knuckles, spelling out the words *pure pain*.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I whispered, my voice rough from holding my breath under Alister’s grip. “And I’m not sure that it’s particularly nice to meet you, either.”

The lightning cracked through the sky again, illuminating the flash of anger in Nixon’s eyes.

“Careful, puppy.” His tone was severe and full of promise. “No one likes a bitch.”

“What do you want with me?” I refused to beg. The two of them had me at a disadvantage, and they would only let me go



when they were darn well ready.

“Tsk, tsk. I told you already, we wanted to come and meet you, Luz. After all, it’s not every girl on campus who’s got someone leaving a bleeding heart nailed to her door.”

“I already spoke to the police about it. Why would I tell you anything?”

Behind me, Alister’s free hand shot forward and wrapped firmly around my neck, forcing my jaw up and making me meet the pissed-off gaze of his twin.

“Don’t be a stupid bitch, Torres,” Nixon snarled, stepping forward once again, this time blocking out all the light as he boxed me in between him and his brother. “We already know everything you said to the police ...”

He was so close to me that he was practically on top of me now, those stormy blue eyes bearing down on me.

“You really don’t know who left the heart for you, do you, you silly little puppy?” he said mockingly, running his finger down the length of my cheek.

“It’s a shame really ...” Nixon went on tracing the lines of my face, the false softness returning to his voice. “... because Ali and I would like to have a word with whoever did it, and until we do, we’ll be having to keep a close eye on you.”

That was how I gained my first set of stalkers.

## Chapter Twelve



## Luz

The campus sustained some serious damage during the storm, and almost a week later, Facilities was still clearing out the remaining tree limbs that had been brought down. The largest branches, many torn from the university's namesake oak trees, blocked major pathways across the quad. The bold yellow caution tape wrapped around them made it feel like a crime had occurred.

Rumors were swirling about some girl who never made it back from her evening class the night of the storm. According to her roommates, Ainsley Phillimore, a sophomore fine arts major, had texted to let them know she was going to wait out the storm in the library. The next morning, her roommates realized she never came home. When she didn't answer her phone, they went to the library looking for her. There, they found all of her belongings—backpack, water bottle, laptop—but no Ainsley.

As a result, tensions were high.

Meanwhile, I had my own problems. Blackwells were buzzing about me like flies.

True to their word, I had spotted at least one of the twins spying on me, eyes trained like a hawk, almost every day since they ambushed me during the thunderstorm. I was quickly discovering that the only thing worse than the sneaking suspicion of being watched was knowing for certain.

Walking through campus, I dodged my way around another branch covered in yellow tape and nearly collided with someone attempting to pass by in the opposite direction.

“Holy shit, Luz. You nearly took me out there,” Aaron exclaimed, rubbing his arm where he had crashed into the broken branch in his attempt to avoid me.

“Sorry,” I muttered, “Wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.”

His face softened, and he stepped around to the side of me and picked up his bag. “I’m the one that’s sorry, Luz. I forgot how much shit you’ve been dealing with lately.” He ruffled his hair before offering to take my bag. I raised my eyebrow at him and shook my head.

“Thought you were heading the other direction?” I said pointedly.

Aaron had become a friendly, if not bland, barnacle that stubbornly clung to my budding friendship with Autumn. It wasn’t that I actively disliked the guy, but I couldn’t figure out

what he got out of hanging out with us, especially since he already seemed to have a large group of friends.

Sometimes I thought he and Autumn had a crush on each other, and sometimes they seemed more like awkward siblings together. I mostly tolerated his presence, but even I had to admit that he had been nothing but kind and supportive toward me since we'd met.

"Eh, I was just going to grab a bite to eat," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I can do that anywhere on campus, and I don't like the idea of you walking alone."

I bit back a derisive snort.

It was barely half past four, and there was still plenty of light out on campus. But ever since the incident, Aaron had been trying to insist on walking Autumn and me to and from our evening classes. Until now, I had managed to dodge him, going so far as to withhold my schedule from him, but with the news of Ainsley's disappearance, I suspected that he was only going to get worse.

"Fine," I sighed. "I was going to head back to our dorm and meet up with Autumn for dinner. Do you want to join us?"

*See, I was trying.*

"Of course." He beamed at me as we started walking toward Jackson College House. "I would never miss the chance for dinner with my two best girls."

I gritted my teeth. This was the type of stuff Aaron said that drove me nuts. I wasn't his "best" anything.

But instead of correcting him, I decided to play nice, slapping on a passive smile and remaining quiet for the rest of the walk. I could be polite for Autumn's sake, but I drew the line at small talk.



“I mean it, it’s not safe for the two of you to be walking around campus after dark,” Aaron said through a mouth full of mac and cheese, and I wrinkled my nose as bits of pasta and béchamel sauce flew through the air.

Apparently, money couldn’t buy good manners.

Autumn caught the expression on my face and shot me a look to cut it out, as if I was the problem.

“Aaron,” I said with a soft smile, making her blanch. She already knew me well enough to know kindness was often my weapon of choice and that I wielded it viciously.

The Labrador retriever-looking goofball looked up at the two of us with big brown eyes.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to ch—”

Autumn clamped her hand on my thigh in a stern warning. “Ignore her.” She squeezed tightly when I started to open my mouth again. “What Luz is trying to say is that, while she appreciates you looking for us, she doesn’t need you to walk her anywhere. I, however, will happily take you up on your offer.”

This is why I couldn't ditch Aaron, because, for some reason, Autumn seemed to like having him around. If that meant ignoring the occasional weird or smarmy comment from him, I would just have to grin and bear it.

*That's what friends did, right?*

An airborne french fry suddenly smacked me in the temple.

"Earth to Luz, are you there?" asked Autumn, another fry already in hand, poised and ready to be launched at me.

"Sorry," I said, shaking my head. "You know I get lost in my thoughts sometimes."

She rolled her eyes but smiled at me. "That's why I am here to bring you back to reality. Did you hear what Aaron was saying?"

I turned to look at Aaron, who was watching us closely, a grim look in his eyes.

"Ainsley wasn't the only person who's gone missing lately," he said solemnly, making me pause. "One of the girls in my Advanced Chem class said her sorority sister vanished before the start of classes, and apparently a couple of kids from town disappeared over the summer. At first the cops thought they ran away, but now they aren't so sure."

Food turned to ash on my tongue at his words.

"What do they think happened to them?" Autumn asked in a hushed tone, but a part of me already knew. There was no doubt in my mind that whatever happened to the missing girls it was unpleasant.

Instead of saying so, though, I simply squeezed Autumn's hand sympathetically while Aaron told us how no one knew what had happened to them, but everyone was starting to assume the worst.

I didn't eat much more, unable to stop hearing Autumn's question ringing in my head.

When kids who nobody missed went missing, it wasn't because they got taken away to a better place. And while Ainsley Phillimore may have mattered enough for someone to report her missing, it didn't mean she was any safer. The world was full of monsters, and despite the lies most people told themselves and their loved ones, none of us were ever truly safe. I knew that better than most.

The powerlessness that I felt at being unable to do anything brought back memories I would rather forget.

*Marigold, oleander, foxglove, lily of the valley ...*

I repeated the names of Mami's favorite flowers to calm myself down, another ritual I had picked up from her, while Autumn and Aaron quietly continued their conversation.

Walking Autumn and me back to Jackson College House from the dining hall, he took one last opportunity to try and convince me to let him escort me to and from class.

"At least let me walk you back to your dorm from your night classes," he pleaded, having insisted on seeing us to the elevator.



“I’ll think about it, Aaron,” I lied, wanting to get some space at this point. I offered him a halfhearted smile before making my way into the elevator.

I watched as Autumn awkwardly hugged him goodbye with a promise to text him her schedule before stepping into the elevator, brows pinched at me with worry.

“What?”

Had she noticed something off about my reaction to the missing students?

“Nothing,” Autumn said, chewing nervously away at her lips.

“You’re a terrible liar.” The doors opened, and we stepped out onto our floor.

Her cheeks turned red, and I struggled between feeling bad for upsetting her and feeling irritated that such a simple innocuous truth might have offended her.

“Sorry,” she mumbled. “I was just surprised that you’re considering Aaron’s offer.”

“Oh, I’m not really.” I shrugged. “I just wanted him to drop the subject.”

“Oh.”

“Do you really trust him to keep you safe?” I blurted out as we stood in front of our respective doors.

“W-what?” She seemed almost taken aback by the question.

“You agreed to let him walk you around campus, so you must trust him to keep you safe,” I said, unsure of what was driving me.

“Oh, um,” Autumn hemmed, apparently struggling to answer a simple question. “Sometimes it’s just easier to agree with him than to, like, argue with him.”

“So, I’m nuts for walking alone, but you’re letting some guy you just met a couple weeks ago chaperone you around campus like he’s your knight in shining armor.” I snorted, failing to hide the frustration in my voice.

“It’s Aaron,” she hissed, her eyes darting around to see who might have overheard us. “He’s our friend.”

I rolled my eyes.

“His parents just played golf with mine, like, two weeks ago,” she huffed, her arms crossed over her chest defensively.

“Oh well, if his parents golfed with your parents, they must be good people. No bad people have ever in the history of the world golfed with someone’s parents before,” I snapped back.

I couldn’t articulate why I’d started lashing out at Autumn, but in the face of her privilege and naivety, my indignation somehow felt justified.

“That’s not what I meant,” she sputtered, and I could see tears starting to well in her eyes before something sparked in them and her expression suddenly shifted. “Luz, do you ...” she paused, clearly reading the tension bleeding out of me and

trying to figure out how to proceed with caution. “Do you ... Are you jealous of Aaron walking me?”

I nearly choked. “Am I jealous that the human equivalent of a golden retriever without the charm is escorting you around campus?”

I didn’t like being mean, not like this, not to Autumn, but I was operating on instinct at this moment.

Autumn’s face was bright red at this point, and if my goal had been to make her feel as shattered as I was, I was doing a great job of it, if the tears and anger building in her eyes were any indication.

“It’s just ...” She stumbled, unable or unwilling to finish her thought as her chin wobbled, but still, she refused to look away from my gaze.

The silence churned furiously between us, and I couldn’t even remember what had started our fight, but I found myself unable to back down.

After a couple of heavy moments, something in Autumn relaxed and her heavy sigh broke the quiet as she took a step back and placed her hand on the doorknob.

“Maybe we should, uh, just take the night ...” she said softly, and the nerves in her voice struck me like a dagger to the chest.

“Right,” I said tightly, swinging around to get to my door before either of us could say any more.

I winced as the door closed behind me with more force than I intended. Seconds later, Autumn's did the same about eight feet to the right of me, sending vibrations through the wall.

Overwhelmed with exhaustion, I slid down to the floor, no longer bothering to hold back my tears.

## Chapter Thirteen



## Luz

Sitting at my desk the following day, I was reviewing my notes from my Japanese tutorial, when there was a familiar knock on my door. I had successfully managed to avoid Autumn until now, but it appeared that my time was up.

I opened the door to find her standing there looking bashful but determined.

“I’m sorry!” she blurted out before launching herself at me and wrapping her arms around me in a binding hug. For a moment, I stiffened up and struggled with the urge to push her away, but as the warmth of our embrace washed over me I found myself softening in her arms.

“I’m sorry too,” I mumbled through a mouthful of her hair.

I wasn’t ready to share the story of my father’s abuse or why thinking about the missing women triggered me, but in the harsh light of the morning, I could admit that my behavior last night had been more about my issues than Autumn.

Pulling out of the hug, we both sniffled and wiped our eyes, wearing matching bleary but relieved smiles.

“Autumn, there are some things I haven’t told you about ...” I paused, struggling to find the words. “Things, that, well, I can’t or don’t want to talk about ... yet,” I stuttered some more, the taste of bile rising in my throat.

I wasn’t entirely sure what I thought her reaction would be. Curiosity? Maybe pity, suspicion, or dismissal? What I wasn’t expecting was genuine compassion.

“You don’t have to share anything you aren’t ready to tell me, Luz,” she said, and something in my cold dead heart shattered at her easy acceptance. For the first time in years, I reached to hug someone other than Mami.

“That doesn’t make me lashing out at you okay, though, and I’m sorry,” I repeated, squeezing her close to me.

Autumn patted me softly on the back before letting me go and taking my hand.

“I know I’m pretty spoiled and privileged,” she said, chewing on her lip again, “but if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that almost everyone has *something*.”

“Something?”

“Something,” she replied, looking at me earnestly. “You know, it’s like that thing that weighs you down. Maybe it’s a secret, maybe it’s a lie. It could be in your past, your present, or maybe your future. But it’s that thing, that reason, that *something* that makes you not okay some of the time,” she said

solemnly before adding, “And if you don’t think you have *something*, well then chances are you probably are someone’s something.” She scrunched up her nose, causing us both to giggle. “So, are we okay again?” she asked tentatively after a moment. “Like, friends again?”

“Like, friends again,” I said with a smirk, eliciting one of her trademark shrieks.

Later that evening, as we hung out in her room doing our nails, I found myself wondering about what Autumn hadn’t said. What her something was.

Then again, if she wanted to tell me, she would have.

“How did you become so wise about people and their *somethings*, Autumn Morgan?” I had asked, unable to resist poking at her.

“Oh, that’s easy, TikTok.”



“*Luz Cornelia Torres!*” Autumn bellowed loud enough to draw the attention of a couple of other students who were scattered about the dining hall with us. We had made it over in time to grab smoothies before the bar shut down for the night.

“Keep it down!” I hissed at her, mortified. “And my middle name is Amelia, not Cornelia.”

Autumn remained uncowed. “Don’t you dare try to change the subject on me. Your birthday is, like, barely two weeks



away and you just weren't going to tell me anything?" She looked more upset than she had the night of our fight.

"I wasn't planning on celebrat—"

"Your eighteenth birthday!" she shrieked, and this time I shot her a glare of my own.

"Keep it down, please. And it's my nineteenth birthday."

"Sorry! I'm sorry! I just, like, can't believe you were just going to sweep your birthday under the rug," she whined, unwilling to let it go.

"It's not like we talked about it. I don't know when your birthday is!" I tried to argue.

"February twenty-third." She didn't miss a beat. "I'm a Pisces sun, Leo moon, and Virgo rising."

"Am I supposed to pretend I understood what any of that meant?" I responded with an arched brow.

"Tell me you at least know your sun sign, Luz!" She clutched her hand to her chest dramatically.

"I think we both know the answer to that," I said, rolling my eyes.

She threw her head back over her chair in despair. "You're breaking my heart here," Autumn whined, before sitting back up with a determined look on her face and snatching up her phone.

She typed away furiously for a couple of moments.

“Okay, so November second means you are a Scorpio, which is a water sign like Pisces—probably why we vibe so well.” She kept tapping away at her phone before finding what she was looking for. “Got it. Okay, what time and where exactly were you born?” she said without looking up.

If she had been, she might have caught the momentarily blank look on my face as I realized I had no idea what time Luz Amelia Torres had supposedly been born. November second wasn’t even my real birthday, although it was close enough that it had made it easy to learn.

“Oh um, Almeda, Texas, and um, I’m not sure about the time,” I said, hoping that was normal.

“Well, why don’t you just ask your—” Autumn cut herself off abruptly. “Shit, Luz, I am the worst. I am so sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up your mom.”

“It’s fine,” I said, waving her off.

Autumn knew that my mom passed away unexpectedly last year and that it had been hard for me to go off to college on my own.

“Shit, I’m like the worst friend ever,” she mumbled, concern weighing heavy in her eyes.

Something in my subconscious caught my attention, and suddenly I was back at the party with Autumn’s so-called friends, Hester and Jade. We had never spoken about what happened after that night, even though I had made a promise to myself to bring it up with her when I was ready.

Might as well rip off the Band-Aid since we were apparently going all-in on this friendship thing now.

“You’re actually a pretty great friend.” I paused to take one last gulp of my smoothie. “Which is why I wanted to talk to you about something,” I continued, working to keep my expression and tone friendly even if my palms were sweating on my lap under the table.

“Of course,” Autumn replied, looking back up from her phone. “You can talk to me about anything.”

Swallowing nervously, I forced myself to push on.

“The party that we went to, that first week of school, where we met your friends, Jade and Hester,” I began.

Her face instantly fell, and she turned ashen. The temptation to sweep it under the rug and avoid another round of conflict between us was there. But if I protected her feelings at the expense of my own over this, it would forever be a toxic undercurrent in our friendship.

“They said really horrible things to me, racist things,” I went on, my voice soft yet strong despite the shaking of my jaw. “And you just let them.” Tears were welling up in my eyes again in earnest.

*Did friendship always involve so much crying?*

“That wasn’t okay.” I finally laid it out there. Hanging out with Aaron was one thing, but I refused to spend any of my time with the Hesters and Jades of the world.

For a moment, Autumn sat with a slightly slacked jaw as she processed what I said before she bit down on her lip, looking at me with watery but determined eyes.

“I’m really sorry, Luz,” she started. “What Hester and Jade said was disgusting and racist. I should have said something to them, and I should have said something to you.” She picked at her napkin before continuing. “I didn’t because I’m a coward, and selfishly I didn’t even consider how awful it must have made you feel.”

Her voice was more hushed now, and I could see the tears forming in her eyes as well. “I don’t agree with anything they said or did. And I should have done something or said something to them.”

“Why are you friends with them?”

“I’m not, not really,” she said, wiping away an errant tear. “Like they said, I’d been avoiding them all summer. I only took us to that party because I wanted to show you that I knew people on campus and knew how to, like, have fun. I haven’t seen either of them since.” She paused, sniffing, before adding firmly, “And I don’t want to.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“Jade has texted me a couple of times since the party, but I haven’t responded.”

“Mmm, probably for the best,” I said, considering the woman’s behavior at the party.

“Their families have been doing a major PR scramble since the videos surfaced from the party,” she added with a small smile. “I guess some clips found their way into some Karen videos on TikTok.”

“It’s not justice but I’m not mad about it,” I replied, making Autumn chuckle as we finished up our smoothies.

I officially had my first real friend.



We entered the building of Jackson College House, and I remembered that I needed to check my student mailbox. I didn’t get a lot of mail, but I was expecting some documents regarding my mother’s estate. She hadn’t left much behind, but what was left had needed to be sorted out, and a year later I was still tying up loose ends.

“Do you mind if we swing by the mail room real fast?” I asked Autumn.

She shook her head, following behind me.

While I didn’t need Aaron to walk me around campus, I was wary about being caught alone in an isolated corner, and I needed to take the stairs to the basement where the mail room was located. It was late Saturday night, meaning most students were either already out for the night or safely tucked away in their rooms, and the basement was completely void of other people.

“Ugh.” Autumn shuddered as we entered the mail room. “It’s creepy down here alone. Hurry up, Luz.”

She wasn’t wrong, so I fished around in my pocket looking for my key, relief filling me when my fingers wrapped around it right away.

“I’ll be super fast, just give me a minute,” I replied, pushing the heavy metal door to the mail room open with Autumn following quickly behind me.

My unit was tucked away in the back corner, and I half expected to find my mysterious stalker lurking in front of it as I turned the corner.

Of course, there was no one there, although the sigh Autumn released told me she had been on edge as well, and I made my way down the row to my mailbox.

That was when I noticed it.

“What’s wrong?” Autumn whispered behind me, nerves creeping back into her voice, and I realized I had stopped suddenly in front of her.

Understanding rushed through me, and I hurried over to my mailbox, shielding it from her view with my body.

“Nothing,” I lied. “I just had a moment of school panic. Couldn’t remember if I had forgotten to turn my last Japanese assignment in.”

I discreetly flicked the cheap sticker off the front of my mailbox and watched as it fluttered to the ground before casually stepping on top of it.

“Oh my God, I get those all the time,” Autumn replied, as I opened up the metal locker and retrieved my mail.

“Just last week I woke up in the, like, middle of the night terrified that I had overslept and missed my Marketing 101 exam.”

“It’s the worst,” I said, flashing the letters in my hand to let her know that I had gotten what I came for. We headed back to the main lobby before taking the elevator up to our floor.

“Luz,” Autumn said when we reached the doors to our rooms, “I’m really glad we talked about everything today.”

“Me too,” I replied sincerely. As uncomfortable as it had been, it had felt good in the end.

We split up and said good night before heading in.

Once I had locked the door, I made my way over to my bed before slipping off my Reeboks and turning them over to inspect the soles.

There, stuck to the bottom of my shoe, was the small sticker.

It was cheap and sparkled with a sort of holographic design. It looked like you could get it at any Dollar Store or find it in any teacher’s craft cupboard. And had it been any other sticker, on anyone else’s locker, it probably wouldn’t have stood out in the least.

But it did, at least to me.

A cute, sparkly little heart sticker.

## Chapter Fourteen





## Luz

I didn't tell Autumn about the sticker. For all I knew, someone put it there by accident and it was pure coincidence that it happened to be a heart. At least that was what I was trying to tell myself. The alternative was that I was attracting creeps at an alarming rate.

It was the following Tuesday, and I'd been planning to grab a quick lunch with Autumn before facing off against Locke Blackwell for the first time since the course drop date had passed. So, I was surprised when Aaron and his friends, Melody, a pretty blonde biochem major he often hung out with, and another third-year student named Hale, also joined us. Still, it wasn't too bad. The four of them lost themselves in idle chatter, leaving me to enjoy my cold noodle salad and crispy roll as I ran through this week's ECON200 readings in my head.

"You know, we never decided what we were going to do to celebrate your birthday," Autumn said casually. To be fair, I was surprised that she had let it go for this long already. I

suspected her timing was deliberate and she was counting on Aaron and Melody to hound me into going out to celebrate.

“Like I told you,” I said dismissively, hoping to avoid it becoming a thing, “I’m not a big birthday person, and I don’t really want to celebrate.”

“Wait, when’s your birthday?” Melody asked, oblivious to my desire to drop the subject.

“November second,” Autumn replied before adding, “she’s a Scorpio.”

Melody raised one eyebrow at Autumn but nodded along as though she understood what that meant.

Across the room, I spied a flash of dirty blonde hair, and I zeroed in on a tall guy, my nerves firing up as I prepared myself for another encounter with the Blackwell twins.

Before I managed to get a grip on myself, a brief twinge of disappointment went through me when I realized it was someone else. Alister and Nixon had been conspicuously absent the last couple of days, and I was loath to admit that a part of me had started to become accustomed to catching one or both of them lurking in the background.

Aaron spoke up. “I think that if Luz doesn’t want to celebrate her birthday, then as her friends we need to respect that.” I was surprised to see him coming to my defense.

“But it’s her birthday, and it’s, like, Halloween.” Autumn pouted, unwilling to let it rest. “It’s going to be absolutely

epic, and as her friends, it's our responsibility to make sure that she has fun and makes memories."

"She had some psycho leave a heart on her door, Autumn. I think if she says she feels safer staying in, then we should listen to her," he pushed back.

The two of them could argue all they wanted, but ultimately, it was my decision, and right now I had to leave or I would be late for Locke's class. Something I refused to do again.

I quietly packed up my belongings, while the two of them went back and forth, before clearing my throat.

"Gotta run to class. Talk to you guys later," I said and spun around before anyone could say anything, ignoring their protests as I power walked out of the dining hall.

Having left early for ECON200, I was able to walk across the campus at a leisurely pace and take in all its autumnal glory.

It was mid-October, and despite the damage done by the storm earlier, the trees were peaking in their colors. The university's oaks were especially breathtaking with their mighty crowns of orange and red setting the canopy ablaze. Acorns littered the pathways, and I took note of the last elderberries of the season still hanging ripe on the branch.

Halloween decorations had sprouted up all across the campus. The university looked exactly like one might imagine Halloween in a quaint New England town should. Neatly carved jack-o'-lanterns sat on the steps of the smaller

buildings, and the lanterns that lit up the campus walkways had been decorated with ornate displays of ribbon, straw and what looked like tiny pumpkins. Silhouettes of witches and bats hung from the porches of Greek row with fake spider webs covering every nook and cranny.

There was something off-putting about the frivolity of it all, given that several women were missing. At least the university seemed to prefer more traditional Halloween decorations and had spared us from anything too gory or creepy.

Before I knew it, I was across campus and making my way inside Granger Hall. Checking my phone, I saw that I still had at least five minutes before class began.

A breath I didn't realize I had been holding was released when I walked in and saw no one standing at the empty lectern. Realistically, I knew it was unlikely that Dominic would be teaching two weeks in a row, but that didn't mean a girl couldn't get her hopes up.

I chose a seat in a row a couple down from the middle, just off-center, and pulled out my spiral notebook and favorite gold mechanical pencil.

I'll admit that in the sea of laptops favored by my classmates, the notebook stood out, and I wouldn't be surprised if my classmates chalked it up to me being a scholarship student. But what they didn't know was that studies have shown that people retain more information when they write it down by hand than when they type. My beautiful,

refurbished MacBook Pro was saved for my trips to the library to study. Otherwise, I kept it safely locked up in my room.

Over the next five minutes, I watched as the empty hall slowly filled with students but still no Locke Blackwell. I kept checking the time on my phone and when it hit 3:00 p.m. and our professor was still nowhere to be seen, I felt a smug sense of vindication.

*Even the great Locke Blackwell was late sometimes.*

Another five minutes passed, and I started to wonder if he might not show up at all. I had read the student handbook from cover to cover, including all the university procedures and policies. If an instructor failed to show up within twenty minutes of the start of class it was automatically canceled.

Another five minutes passed, the noise level in the room progressively rising as the space filled with hushed voices of students wondering where the professor was. Ten more minutes and I could have an entirely Locke-free afternoon.

At 3:16, the door to the lecture hall swung open, crushing the dreams of probably most of the class, myself included, as Locke confidently strode in.

Another person might have started their lecture by apologizing, or at least acknowledging their tardiness.

Instead, without so much as a glance at the class, he went straight to the lectern and began setting up the laptop.

“Professor?” a student called out from somewhere in the small hall, only to be met with Locke’s palm raised sharply in

the air in the *stop* gesture, effectively silencing them. The man never even looked up from his device.

After another couple of moments, slides filled the large screen behind him, and he finally stood up to acknowledge the class.

“I hope you’re all prepared for today’s lecture on contemporary drivers of macroeconomic instability and leading solutions in the current market,” he said, immediately turning to flip through the slides.

“Uh, sorry, Professor,” the same voice called out again. Looking over, I could see it was a pretty brunette I didn’t recognize. “Can we talk about what’s going to be on the midterm next week?” she went on, shamelessly batting her eyelashes at Locke.

“I’m sorry, Miss Cantwell, is it?” he replied.

“Yes, Isabella Cantwell,” she cooed as she leaned forward in her seat, granting half the class a generous view of her cleavage.

“Ah, yes, I believe we met at your grandmother’s event in the Hamptons,” he said with a charming smile. I may have been on a scholarship, but most of the students here were literally paying thousands of dollars for this class so that these two could reminisce about their social lives.

“... but all of that will be covered by your TAs on Thursday, Miss Cantwell.”

“Thanks, Professor Blackwell.” The poor girl practically swooned.

After a couple more questions, where Locke again pretended to be a benevolent educator and everyone ate it up, his late start was wholly forgotten, and we finally began.

He was a good lecturer, I had to give it to him. And while he occasionally asked questions of the class, he never pressured students to answer them. There were more than enough eager hands raised every time he did.

Still, he rarely ventured beyond the confines of the textbook and prescribed course outline, which meant that since I was four weeks ahead with my reading, I had already reviewed everything he was covering.

I zoned out at some point during the lecture, lost in my own thoughts. Of course, Locke chose that moment to call on me.

“Miss Torres,” he called out, his voice devoid of any of his usual charm.

I startled. “Yes, uh, Professor.”

“Care to answer the question?” he drawled smugly.

“Apologies, Professor Blackwell. Could you repeat the question?”

He tsked at me with disappointment painted over his face, but I only saw the satisfaction and delight dancing in his emerald-green eyes.

“Care to offer your thoughts on the state of the domestic labor market and the risks and opportunities it poses to the US economy, Miss Torres?”

“Oh yes, of course.”

If Locke Blackwell had been planning to humiliate me further by showing my supposed ignorance, he was going to be greatly disappointed.

“Over a million Americans have died from COVID-19, and we know that racialized and low-income Americans were far more affected by the virus in terms of deaths. Both these groups are overrepresented in low-wage sectors, meaning the market’s supply of labor decreased with the losses. At the same time...”

By the time I was finished Blackwell’s face was tight, and I could see the discontent in his eyes.

He took a moment before he spoke.

“Yes, well, thank you for your thorough, if not tired, critique of contemporary economics. Though, I suppose it’s hardly surprising that someone with your background would come to such conclusions.”

“Do you mean middle-class or Latine, Dr. Blackwell?” I shot back at him, my usual control having vanished in his presence.

The collective inhale of my classmates’ gasp rang throughout the hall.

“Miss Torres!” Locke thundered. “That sort of insinuation is unacceptable and inappropriate,” he all but snarled, “and I



won't have it in my classroom.”

I knew better. I really did. I had played it smart and sweet my entire life, just like Mami taught me. But something about Locke Blackwell made me want to fight back. “Then perhaps you should have left my background out of the classroom to begin with.”

This time my declaration was met with shocked silence. Apparently, it was beyond my classmates' comprehension that someone would stand up to the great Locke Blackwell.

“That's enough!” he bellowed, slamming his hands down onto the lectern, unable to maintain the cool professor charade any longer.

“Pack up your belongings, Miss Torres. If my classroom is that intolerable to you then it's time you leave it.”

I bit down on my lip hard enough to draw blood. As much as I wanted to fight back some more, this wasn't the time or place to do it. I knew what Blackwell had done. I knew he would start baiting me once the course drop date passed, and still here I was letting him get to me.

So instead of calling him out on his pathetic elitist nonsense, I packed up my things, well aware that most of my classmates were glowering at me while Locke stared me down, refusing to continue his lecture until I had left.

It wasn't until I had packed up all my stuff and made my way down to the floor of the lecture hall that he spoke again.

“We’ll need to discuss this incident further. You can wait for me at my office until I can speak to you after class,” he ordered, as if my compliance was assured.

I guessed it was to a certain degree unless I wanted to drop out of the economics program.

“Looking forward to it, Professor,” I snapped before marching out of the room.

## Chapter Fifteen



## Locke

I tried to glance casually at the clock in the back of the classroom for the hundredth time since I had kicked Luz out of the class. It felt like it was late on Christmas Eve, and I already knew that Santa had come and laid out my presents. I could barely contain myself at the thought of rushing over to rip them all open.

What would I find when I tore Luz Torres wide open? Pulled apart her mind piece-by-piece?

The thought was so fucking alluring to me that if I didn't get a grip on my thoughts, I was going to be caught with a hard-on.

When the class finally came to an end, I barely made it two steps from the podium before the Cantwell girl was getting in my way. I'd rather fuck my hand any day over an insufferable twat like her, but it was my second nature to keep the society bitches charmed and complacent.

Everest was dangerous because you could spot his crazy from a mile away, but I was the one they never saw coming. People gravitated toward me. They invited me into their homes, their trust, their confidence, and then, finally, their hearts. I used that to destroy them.

“Locke,” the Cantwell girl whined, making my left eye twitch. Unlike Everest, I could control myself when it came to killing, although wretched things like her tested my restraint.

“I meant, Dr. Blackwell, sir,” she simpered before biting her lip and ducking her head in a transparent attempt to appear submissive while taking another step forward into my personal space.

“Yes, Ms. Cantwell?” I gritted out.

“I was wondering if you might have any office hours available for one-on-one tutoring with students,” she said, once again fluttering those inane eyelash extensions of hers.

“I’m struggling terribly with the material, and I was hoping you might be able to—”

I cut her off sharply before she could continue, all my customary kindness gone. I was bored with this charade and had neither the need nor desire for Isabella Cantwell’s attention.

“I’m sorry Ms. Cantwell, but you’ll have to see your TA for that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a student who requires discipline.”

The girl's face turned vermillion at my dismissal, and I spun around, uninterested in seeing any more of her response.

Taking out some of the tension roiling within me on Isabella served more than one purpose.

It was doubtless that every single student in ECON200 knew who Luz Torres was, or at the very least knew her to be on the receiving end of my wrath. Isabella would know that Luz was the student I was on my way to discipline, and there was a chance that she would decide to rain hell down on her for it. No one loved putting a scholarship girl in her place more than a rich bitch with something to prove.

I made my way over to my office quickly, all too eager to finally begin breaking Luz Torres in earnest.

Before I turned the corner, I took a moment to adjust my cuff links, check my suit over for lint, and run my hand through my hair. Part of maintaining control of others was maintaining control over oneself, and I would slit my throat before letting a common creature like her see me disheveled.

Satisfied that I looked every bit the man I was, I strode around the corner, practically salivating at the chance to begin sparring with her.

And there she was, in all her fierce glory.

Anyone else might pass by the diminutive woman seated on the leather bench in front of my office and dismiss her as a timid, unassuming thing. She certainly played the role perfectly.

Her long hair was down, falling in shiny, dark waves with a few loose tendrils artfully framing her heart-shaped face. She wore a simple black wool jumper dress with a white button-down shirt beneath it, the top couple of buttons undone to highlight the gold crucifix she always wore and show off the slightest hint of her curves. Underneath she wore sheer black tights that failed to conceal the shapeliness of her legs paired with neatly folded white ankle socks and lug-soled oxfords.

With her backpack gripped tightly in her lap and blazing amber eyes wide with concern, most people would see an innocent creature in distress.

But unlike everyone else, I saw the rage and entitlement roiling away beneath the pretty facade that the girl wore. Like called to like.

“Inside my office now,” I barked at her after unlocking the door and stepping inside.

She followed behind me silently, her mask of innocence remaining firmly in place as she took her seat.

I briefly considered locking the door behind me, interested in seeing what kind of reaction I could provoke from her. Would she continue to play the guileless student, or would she unleash that sharp tongue of hers again?

Still, there was plenty of time for that later. For the last month, I had mulled over my plans for her. My initial inclination had been to lull her into a false sense of security by ignoring her until the course drop date passed, and then forcing her removal from the course.

But when the twins informed me about the heart that had been nailed to her door, it caused me to change my plans. At first, I was livid. I wanted her gone from Hollow Oak, yes, but by my hand, not the reckless efforts of some common sociopath.

However, she surprised me.

Instead of fleeing, as any sane person would, she remained at Hollow Oak. It made me even more intrigued as to what kind of secrets she was hiding that she appeared unfazed by the incident. How was it that she continued to march around the campus as if she owned it, her head held high with that subversive confidence still shining in her eyes?

Bleeding hearts would credit the resiliency of the young woman from a marginalized community. But while some became stronger in the face of adversity, I knew that others, like me, were made in the dark. The girl sitting in front of me, with the big amber eyes and soft pouting lips, she was forged in darkness. I wanted, no, needed to expose her secrets to the light.

From that moment, my ambitions shifted.

“Why are you here, Miss Torres?”

She looked at me with a true sense of confusion in her eyes. A fucking viper dressed like a schoolgirl. “Pardon me, Dr. Blackwell,” she said, her eyes wide like saucers, “but I believe I’m here because you asked me to be.”



Her tone was plaintive, but the subtext beneath her words was defiant to the end.

“And why did I ask that of you?” I said, my voice clipped.

For the briefest of moments her mask shifted, and I watched as she bit down on her tongue harshly before blinking a couple of times and taking a deep breath.

“It appears we have some profound differences in our approach to economics, Professor,” she finally replied after a moment, her voice soft.

“How dare you?” I hissed, my own wrath unleashed by her pretense of subservience. “I’m a tenured professor at one of the top universities in the world, Miss Torres, and you’re a first-year undergraduate student. I’m a leading authority in my field, and you’re a pathetic child who thinks she’s smarter than she really is.”

If I had hoped to provoke her temper with my own, I was sorely disappointed. Instead of firing back at me, she merely shrugged and turned her eyes down toward the floor.

Taking a deep breath of my own, I forced myself to sit back, my hands still gripping the arms of the chair tightly. Seasoned killers wept at my feet; I would not let my emotions be controlled by an insufferable child.

A change of tactics was required.

Commanding myself to relax, I sank back into my chair.

“Drop out of my class,” I said with a casual nonchalance as if discussing the weather, “and I won’t have to tear apart

everything you hold dear trying to figure out what you are hiding.”

There it was, for the briefest, most delicious of moments. In her eyes, I saw not quite true fear but anxiety, apprehension—weakness. Her walls were back up within seconds, another woefully sincere look of bewilderment painted across her face, but we both knew what I had seen.

“I’m not sure what you mean, Dr. Blackwell.” She spoke carefully, looking up at me from under her lashes with the same curiosity one might study a lethal predator with from behind the safety of the glass. “But I’d very much appreciate the opportunity to remain in your class.”

My cock twitched to life, and although I refused to allow myself to succumb to the impulses creeping through me, a shiver of pleasure ran through me nonetheless. If Luz Torres wanted to keep playing games, then indulging her was only the gentlemanly thing to do.

I stood up, leaning forward on the palms of my hands. With less than the width of my desk in between us, I was close enough that I could make out flecks of gold and umber scattered about her whiskey-colored eyes, and my nostrils instinctively flared as I took in her sweet citrus and lavender scent.

A growl tore forth from the base of my throat. “I can promise you I won’t force you to drop out of my class,” I snarled. “I won’t have to.”

She started to open her mouth again, likely to protest her innocence once more, but I wasn't done talking.

“You will keep those poisonous little lips of yours closed until I am done speaking!” I roared, causing her to shrink back. I was practically in her face at this point, and if she didn't let me finish, she would quickly find my hands wrapped around that elegant neck.

Just because I enjoyed playing the game with her didn't mean we were following the same set of rules.

Her eyes narrowed at me in response, and I watched as her shields suddenly dropped into place, the fire wholly extinguished from her eyes. She was retreating, for now, behind some mental wall. While it was clear that her withdrawal was strategic, what I couldn't decide was whether she was aware of what she was doing.

In the end, it didn't really matter. I wouldn't get much more out of her like this unless I wanted to escalate things drastically, and it was far too early in the game to pull out all the stops.

I stood back slightly from where I towered over her and took a moment to straighten my tie before I finally continued. “As I was saying, I won't have to do anything, Miss Torres. Because it's obvious that you're hiding something. And there's nothing I love more than a secret ...

“And when I find out yours, nothing will be able to protect your place here at Hollow Oak.”

## Chapter Sixteen



## Luz

I raced through campus. The cobblestone paths and concrete sidewalks that wove between the manicured lawns and gardens of the main campus quickly gave way to unpaved trails that cut through grassy fields before disappearing into the dense woods that surrounded Hollow Oak to the northeast.

My chest ached and my heart pounded furiously inside me as I sprinted through the trees. Adrenaline surged through me even as my lungs cried out for oxygen—I couldn't allow myself to slow down. Running was my only chance of escape.

I ran, as fast as I possibly could, from Locke Blackwell. From Alister and Nixon. I ran from the growing sense that something dark and malevolent was chasing after me, the promise of my suffering on their lips. I ran from all my monsters, both past and present, who consumed my thoughts and haunted my dreams.

When Mami first rescued me, we struggled together. Her with the guilt of having left me with my father, and me with the trauma of what I had endured at his hands. Therapy had

never been an option. Even if we could have afforded it, we couldn't risk anyone finding out what Mami had done.

In the beginning, we muddled through it together, just the two of us.

She poured herself into empowering me, empowering herself, to take back what we had lost. She began by teaching me Spanish, insisting it was the first step in connecting me with the parts of myself my father had denied. Next, she shared her love and knowledge of plants, of their many different uses in medicine. She taught me what she knew as a nurse about the fine line between life and death so that I would never have to fear it again. When I grew older, she coached me through her rituals, sharing with me the power of beauty, of wearing a mask.

*Death is inevitable, life is the contradiction.*

Time passed and her work started to pick up. It felt like she was on the road more and more. I don't know if she threw herself into it to cope or if it was just her way of taking control of our lives, but I was increasingly alone as a result.

All the skills and knowledge Mami passed on to me helped to heal me and make me strong. But I needed more. I could only channel so much of the chaotic energy inside me into school.

I needed my own rituals. So, I took up running, among other things.

Over time, I built up my speed and stamina, and I was decent enough these days. I wouldn't make the cross-country team or anything like that, but my thick thighs could carry me pretty swiftly for a good hour or more.

I wasn't sure exactly what it was about running that soothed my troubled mind. Maybe it was because I could pretend that I could finally escape the way I never could as a child. Maybe it was just that the endorphins soothed my central nervous system in a way nothing else could.

Regardless, it was one of my coping mechanisms of choice, and since I had come to Hollow Oak, I found myself in the woods often enough that I had learned the many trails that wove through them like the back of my hand.

My encounter with Locke had once again left me agitated and unsure, even days later. At the same time, I could feel the heavy weight of the twins' eyes on my back with increasing frequency. The unease I had initially felt at the attention of the Blackwell men was slowly transforming into an obsession.

I was starting to wonder if there was more to Autumn's rumors about them than I had initially assumed. I couldn't say exactly what it was that changed my mind, but it was becoming clear that the Blackwells were more than capable of having blood on their hands.

Two days ago, I found a heart sticker on the bench outside Jackson College House, and this afternoon, I found another one inconspicuously stuck on the frame of the door to my Intro to Japanese classroom. In any other life, I might have

dismissed it as a coincidence. But after what I had survived, I had to be smarter than that. I couldn't dismiss the possibility that it was the Blackwells who were targeting me.

What I couldn't figure out was why. They hadn't uncovered Mami's and my secret. There was no way Locke wouldn't have used it if they had. But there was no denying that I was on their radar, and it was a decidedly unfortunate thing.

At least the twins didn't follow me out here, and I could run in peace, soaking up the beauty of the dense woods that surrounded me. Out here, the forest included maples and hemlocks, but it was the massive red oaks, with their wild, twisted branches, that gave the woods an almost wicked feeling.

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.*

*But I have promises to keep,*

*And miles to go before I sleep,*

*And miles to go before I sleep.*

Although Frost's words were written for a snowy evening, they felt right for the magnificently ominous woods that surrounded me. Some of the trees were older than the university itself, and I could only imagine what crimes they had silently witnessed over the years. I liked to believe that, like a quiet stranger, the woods held more dark secrets than most of us could conceive of.

According to the university historians, Hollow Oak's namesake tree was a magnificent red oak that had stood in the



northwest corner of the main quad. The mighty giant had been felled by lightning in 1986, and today, a small sculptural oak stump, complete with a commemorative plaque detailing its storied history, stood in its place. As the plaque would tell it, long before the university was founded, the large tree had been a meeting place for the locals to gather to share news or readings. Folks would meet to read scripture, to announce a birth or a death or a wedding. It was said that when the Blackwell family came to colonize the lands in the mid-1700s, they founded the university around that very same tree.

It was a cute story, but anyone who had spent time in the woods surrounding the university would have taken the tale with a grain of salt. More than one mighty oak stood in the woods, hollow and proud, and I imagined that many a darker deed than the simple sharing of news had transpired in their presence. Especially if the Blackwells were involved.

I was aware that my musings were entirely without evidence—the products of my overused and abused imagination. I supposed my daydreams were my first escape long before I took up running. Logically I knew that I was no safer in these woods than anywhere else on campus (if anything I was more vulnerable out here alone), there was something about the darkness of the forest that soothed me.

Despite my romantic delusions, I wasn't entirely foolish. I ran without earbuds and did my best to remain alert. While I tended to lose myself in my thoughts, I kept both my eyes and ears attuned to the quiet woods around me. Though I might

feel at ease out here, I couldn't forget that girls were disappearing from Hollow Oak.

Sometimes I crossed paths with other runners. However, today I was alone. The only sights and sounds came from the woods themselves, as squirrels chattered away over the quiet hum of bugs, and an easy evening breeze shivered through the trees.

The sun was just beginning to set in the sky when I finally made my way back to the main campus. It was late October now, and the air was starting to feel cooler as dusk crept in earlier and earlier. Compared to the suffocating heat of Texas, the chill here felt like a welcome respite. As my feet padded lightly and swiftly through the now-quiet campus, I felt something as close to peace as I could get.

I knew it wouldn't last.

As I turned down the final stretch toward Jackson College House, I wasn't surprised to see a familiar figure leaning against one of the glowing lampposts that lined the walkway. His face was obscured by the shadows, but even from a distance, I knew who it was.

I refused to slow my pace as the winding path drew me nearer and instead headed straight for the man not so subtly watching me. Most of the time I ignored the twins' looming presence, but today I found myself unusually irritated by it.

Killers or not, they were getting on my last nerve.

I kept my gaze narrowed as I slowed to a stop in front of him before planting my feet and crossing my arms to make my stand.

“What do you want, Alister?”

I wasn't expecting a reaction and I didn't get one. Still, part of me took smug satisfaction in being able to easily tell the twins apart, despite their clear efforts to appear identical in every way, from their clothes to their matching tattoos. Ridiculous, really, if you thought about it.

While physically the twins appeared identical on the surface, there were several small differences between the two of them. The first and most obvious one being the tiny scar on Nixon's lip. It was barely noticeable, but once I latched on to that detail it was easier to see more of their individual quirks.

For example, while the black-and-grayscale tattoos covering the backs of their hands were identical, the way the ink had faded over time wasn't. Human hands took a lot of wear and tear, and tattoos there tended to fade quickly. Nixon cracked his knuckles a lot, and the Gothic letters that decorated them, spelling out *pure* and *pain*, were worn down and faded in comparison to Alister's.

The biggest difference between the twins, however, was their personalities.

I had yet to hear Alister utter a single word, while Nixon was almost obnoxiously verbose. It was as though he couldn't help himself when confronted with silence, all too delighted to fill it with the sound of his own voice. It wasn't necessarily

charming, but it was distracting. I could see how easy it would be to give in to that distraction and forget how dangerous he and his brother really were.

The two of us remained facing off under the sickly orange glow of the streetlight, staring each other down in some sort of silent war of wills.

As I stared up into his eyes without hesitation, I was struck by the complete lack of anything that might resemble compassion or empathy in them. It was as if whatever spark of life that awoke humanity within the rest of us had failed to light inside him.

More and more, I was beginning to understand just how dangerous the Blackwells were.

It should have scared me. It would have scared a saner person. Instead, it simply fed the rage that had smoldered inside me since I was a child. I supposed, with everything that had happened to me since arriving at Hollow Oak, it was a miracle I hadn't snapped sooner.

Then again, until now, I hadn't had such a well-deserving target of my anger right in front of me.

Haunting me.

Taunting me.

Which was how I found myself rushing toward *the* Alister Blackwell, rumored professional killer, in a haze of adrenaline and ill-formed rage. Blind to rhyme or reason, I flew into the

shadows at him, furiously and ineffectually attempting to shove him in the chest.

He disarmed me before I could even get close, snatching up my wrists and yanking them up above my head with a single hand, a move which forced my body nearer to his while simultaneously keeping us at a controlled distance.

Up close, for the first time, I could see something written in his cold eyes.

It wasn't good.

## Chapter Seventeen



## Alister

Luz's whiskey eyes turned golden under the lamp light, and they were ablaze with a righteous fury despite the slight tremor in her plump lower lip. Even still, this tiny thing, with her delicate wrists strung up in my grasp, like a rabbit caught in a snare, had more steel in her spine than 99.9 percent of the population.

I was used to being attacked. Men who lived with violence in their lives rarely met death peacefully, and my family brought a lot of violent men to their deaths. I knew all too well what it was like to go head-to-head with another killer. The rush that came from looking each other in the eye and knowing only one of you would walk away alive.

It might be my favorite feeling on earth.

Or at the very least, it was one of the few things I felt.

But here at Hollow Oak? No one on this campus would so much as dare to raise a hand to me, never mind flying at me in a rage.

And Luz Torres wasn't just any student, she was a scholarship student. A straitlaced, high-achieving, brown noser, determined to capitalize off the university's wealth and good name.

Yet here she stood, looking at me with death in her eyes, as seriously as any seasoned killer despite being completely at my mercy.

With one flick of my wrist, I could break hers. It would only take one easy move to yank her down over my knee while swiftly bringing it up to knock the wind from her, incapacitating her. A moment would be all I needed to snap her neck on the spot. Or worse, knock her unconscious so I could inflict untold horrors on her later.

I didn't do any of those things, though.

Because despite all my digging into her, the countless hours Nix and I had spent watching her, I still couldn't figure out what had happened to a girl like her that she could look me in the eye as though she had nothing to lose. As though death was nothing to her.

Maybe the promise of murder written in her eyes wasn't intended for me. But then who did Luz Torres wish dead?

I waited for a moment to see if she would continue her attack, but instead, she stared at me, chest heaving, in a simple white spandex workout top that hugged every sinful inch of her.

"It's you, isn't it?" she hissed.



As I looked down at her, I realized that she was still hanging from my grasp, the tips of her toes barely touching the ground anymore at this point.

She started to shout at me.

“It’s you and your brother and that raging dickhole cousin of yours!” she yelled, well past the point of being embarrassed if anyone was near enough to hear.

They weren’t. I picked my post for a reason.

“It’s not enough to harass me in class or stalk me in the hallways, you have to leave your sick souvenirs all over campus for me to find!”

She was practically vibrating with the intensity of the emotions that overflowed from her, and something in me wanted to pull her body flush to mine to see if I could catch even the slightest taste of the passion she was feeling.

I didn’t.

I kept her at a distance, although I relaxed my grip, allowing her feet to touch the ground again.

I watched with clinical detachment as she stood there, quiet now but still seething as I considered my priorities.

As much as I was drawn to whatever damage she was so skillfully hiding, the girl would have to be punished for her transgressions here today. No one tried to lay a hand on a Blackwell and got away with it.

However, her claim that someone else was stalking her on campus, leaving things for her to find, piqued my curiosity.

I knew that none of my family members were involved, but given the earlier incident with the heart, I was curious, to say the least, as to what else she had been receiving.

There was also the fact that she lumped my cousin in with us.

I had known that Luz was in one of his classes, but when Nix asked him about her, Locke claimed to barely remember the girl. Someone had been keeping secrets, it seemed.

I had a choice. I could show her exactly what happened when you came at a Blackwell man. Or I could satisfy my curiosity about whatever it was she was squawking about.

The first option was tempting, very tempting.

I may have been the quiet one, but I was far from a fucking monk. And despite the fury still simmering in her eyes, she had made no effort to escape me, which made me wonder how much closer she would let me get to her.

Unfortunately, there was no way she would be forthcoming with me after I did the things to her body that I was currently imagining.

Keeping my grip firm on her wrists, which had to be getting sore by now, I tugged her farther into the darkness with me. Step by step she yielded cautiously, until she was toe-to-toe with me, looking up with wide eyes filled with an intoxicating mix of rage and curiosity.

My patience was waning as I relaxed my grip on her wrists and moved to hold her hands loosely at her sides. I watched as her head tilted ever so slightly as confusion overtook curiosity in her for the briefest of moments before she schooled herself.

No wonder she'd caught Locke's attention.

Without warning, I yanked her firmly up against me, at the same time taking a step forward into her space so that every inch of her exquisitely curved flesh was forced against mine. I barely managed to contain the groan that rose up at the sensation of her warm curves pressing into me. When a throaty gasp escaped those perfectly plump lips of hers, I lost it.

"Petite diablesse," I rumbled, sounding more like a monster than a man.

My voice was rough from disuse, but it was worth seeing the mask of anger she wore so brilliantly slip for a moment. For a single breath, her eyes flooded with amber and her petal-colored lips curved into a soft O before she caught herself.

Again, I waited for her to struggle or cry out in vain.

Nothing.

My cock, which was hard from the moment I saw her tight round body bouncing down the path as she ran toward me with murder in her eyes, grew even stiffer at her oddly indomitable response to me. Did she even understand who she was with?

"I should take your hands for attempting to strike me," I mused, my voice low. "However, I am far more interested in

correcting these lies you're telling yourself about my brother and me."

Her nose wrinkled, drawing my attention to the cinnamon-colored freckles dusted across it and along the tops of her cheeks. I wondered what they would taste like if I licked them.

"Are you saying that you and Nixon had nothing to do with the hearts?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Hearts? Plural?"

"Not like that," she muttered in frustration, shaking her head. "There have been no more real hearts." She paused, nibbling on her lower lip. "There's just been a couple of stickers, like dumb sparkly sticker hearts. They keep popping up in places where I can't miss them, and I thought ..."

I snorted with derision. "We were playing some sort of childish game with you?"

She narrowed her eyes at me in response, but still didn't attempt to shake my grip. "And lurking around in the dark to intimidate me isn't?"

I didn't respond. Nix had already explained why we were observing her, and I refused to repeat what he said to satisfy her temper.

"And what about Professor Blackwell?" she pushed.

I shrugged, not loosening my hold on her.

"You said that you needed to correct the lies about you and your brother, but not him?"

I bet that if I released her, the little demoness would stay and stand her ground. Not that I intended to give her so much as an inch. I was enjoying the feeling of her against me far too much, and it was clear that she was just as unwilling to walk away from our confrontation as I was.

“Not Locke’s keeper,” I replied.

The odds that he was the one harassing Luz were small. He couldn’t have been the one to leave her the pig’s heart. Locke had been in NYC that night. And as far as the stickers, I couldn’t imagine the uptight prick touching one even as a small child. So, while I had every intention of digging into why he had downplayed his interactions with Luz, I doubted he was working behind Lucian’s back to secretly terrorize her outside the classroom.

Not that I would tell her any of that.

Locke was in fact the walking definition of a “raging dickhole” as Luz had called him, but he was still a Blackwell.

“Of course you’re not,” she hissed, her lips pursed tight in frustration. Her muscles tighten up in anticipation, and I knew that for the first time that night, she was considering fleeing.

I couldn’t have that, not when I wasn’t done with her.

Moving faster than she could, I roughly pulled her in closer to me, this time grinding my hips forcefully into her soft stomach so there was no ambiguity about my body’s reaction to her.

Unfortunately, I needed to figure out what the hell was going on at Hollow Oak more than I needed to get my dick wet, so there would be no pursuing this any further tonight, even if I felt the pulse point in her wrists surge and the arching of her hips as she tried to fight off the urge to push up against me in return. If she opened those round thighs just a couple of inches wider, I bet I could have her riding my leg, grinding down on me as she chased her pleasure ...

Instead, I simply stared down at her, trying to solve the puzzle before me wrapped up in such a sumptuous package.

“If it’s not you ...” For the first time since I’d met her, there was real doubt in her eyes. “If it’s not you and your brother, and I don’t ...” she stammered on, suddenly tearing her gaze from my own for the first time that night.

I didn’t like it.

“... I don’t think it’s Professor Blackwell either,” she admitted in a hushed tone.

I didn’t acknowledge her with words, but my hands crept up her arms of their own accord until I was gripping her biceps tightly.

She didn’t flinch. If anything, something inside her gave way as she sank deeper into my hold, and every part of me went rigid at my desire to bear the weight of her entirely.

Her forehead came to rest on the center of my chest, and there was something so natural about what should have been a wholly foreign sensation that I allowed it to continue. I waited

patiently to hear her ask aloud the same question that I had long been pondering myself.

“If it’s not you ...” she whispered, “... if it’s not the Blackwells, then who is it?”

## Chapter Eighteen





## Luz

I thudded my forehead against the hard surface of my door, releasing a deep shuddering breath when the lock clicked into place.

My confrontation with Alister had been ... unexpected, and I found myself incredibly charged up as a result.

Going for another run was out of the question. It was too dark to run in the woods safely, and I didn't want to drag myself across campus to the gym to use a treadmill. The thought of some mouth-breathing meathead trying to speak to me when all I wanted to do was escape had me wanting to commit murder.

What I needed to do was get myself under control, and then I could formulate a plan. I had reacted without thinking when I saw Alister earlier and look where it landed me.

I rolled my shoulders and cracked my neck as I paced my room, trying to unpack what had just happened.

I should have ignored him and jogged past like I always did. I shouldn't have given him a second thought as I finished up my run.

*“Let them chase after you, mija. A man that sees only beauty is blind to a woman's cunning.”*

Mami's words echoed in my head. If only it were that simple.

While there was no doubt in my mind that part of Alister's fixation with me was sexual, especially after today, it was also clear that he was just as obsessed with finding out my secrets as Locke.

Then there was the added complication of my actual stalker, and whether I could trust Alister when he said it wasn't him or his brother.

What was worse? That the psychos I knew were playing a more twisted game than they would admit, or an entirely different kind of monster was hunting me for reasons I didn't understand.

And I attacked Alister. Why?

Nerves ran down my spine. I was mortified. What had I been thinking?

Despite being okay with what Mami had done to my father and stepmother, I never really considered myself to be a violent person. I had certainly never physically attacked someone in a blind rage. I was neither naïve nor in denial about the darkness inside me, but I had never allowed it to

manifest so rashly before. My confidence in my control wavered as I wondered if I was more like my father than I had ever wanted to admit ...

I tasted the coppery tang of blood and realized I had inadvertently ripped off the cuticle on my thumb. Zut, that stung.

I rushed to the en suite and stuck my still-bleeding thumb under the running faucet while I scrambled through the medicine cabinet with my other hand, searching out the antibiotic ointment and the small box of Band-Aids I kept in there.

Methodically, I applied the ointment, then the bandage. There was something meditative about the process, or maybe even just seeing blood itself, that always made me calm down. Before I knew it, my thumb was dressed, and my breathing was back under control.

Deciding to embrace the serenity, I turned to fill up the small bathtub that took up one side of the bathroom.

I stripped down as the tub filled up quickly and the air in the bathroom grew heavy with steam. When I stepped into the tub the water was so hot that it was barely tolerable, which meant it would be absolutely perfect for about three minutes.

I slipped my body under the scalding water up to my neck, humming softly as I did.

My thoughts slowed down along with my breathing, and as my sense of control returned, I could finally inspect them

without the fear of self-recrimination.

Lashing out at Alister had been foolish. He was twice my size, and I was more and more certain that he was an experienced killer, if not a seasoned one.

I couldn't do it again, especially since I suspected that he hadn't even begun to make me pay the price yet.

Did my attack on him really make me like my father?

No. My father was an entirely different breed of monster, the kind that reveled in the cruel torment of his own child and thought himself nearly a God for it.

However, I could no longer deny that someone at Hollow Oak was circling me, taunting me, like a predator hunting its prey. Alister, Nixon, Locke ... the stranger in the hoodie ... they all had me in their sights, and I needed to figure out exactly what kind of beasts I was dealing with.

*Never underestimate the monsters hiding in plain sight ...*

My mother did, once upon a time.

It cost me my life.



Despite my efforts to slow down, before I knew it, it was October thirtieth, the day before Halloween and three days before my birthday on All Souls' Day. Before Mami rescued me and I became Luz, my birthday had been on Halloween.

My attempts to convince Autumn that I wasn't interested in going out to celebrate either Halloween or my birthday were

even less successful.

It had gotten so bad that I'd taken to camping out in my room to avoid her. Clearly, I hadn't mastered the whole friendship thing yet.

Part of me knew that avoiding her was immature and ultimately unhelpful. Still, Autumn was my first real connection since my mother, and I wasn't ready to risk another confrontation with her so soon. Not when both Halloween and my birthday would pass in a couple of days, and this would all be behind us.

She would forgive me this one weekend.

On the bright side, being a coward gave me plenty of time to catch up on my schoolwork. I was still about two weeks ahead in most of my classes, but I knew we were heading into midterm season, after which it was a mad rush of assignments and presentations until the end of the term.

Part of me was also frustrated that Autumn was pushing the whole thing so much. It was as if she had completely forgotten what a mess it had been the first and only time we went out.

Unfortunately, I knew what her argument would be in response.

*"But at least we got to meet Aaron ..."*

I still didn't get what it was about his friendship that appealed to Autumn, but at least he had stuck to his word and escorted her to and from most of her classes after dark. The Phillimore girl remained missing, along with the others, and I

couldn't shake my suspicion that something horrible had happened to them.

Just because I didn't want to go to a Halloween party with Autumn didn't mean I wanted anything to happen to her.

Which was exactly why I shouldn't have to justify my desire to stay home to her. Students were missing, some psycho was nailing animal hearts to doors, and she wanted to put on costumes and go to a party and pretend like nothing was wrong?

Sometimes I wondered if I wasn't the only one playing a part here and failing horribly at pretending to be normal.

I chewed on my lip and tried to force my mind back to my studying.

It wasn't just the ominous sense on campus that we were all just waiting for another student to go missing, or even worse, a body to finally turn up (although that should be reason enough for a girl to want to stay in).

What Autumn didn't understand, and what I couldn't tell her, was that this was my first birthday on my own since Mami had died. The idea of celebrating the beginning of the life she created for me was too much now that she was gone. I wasn't ready to think about it, not with everything that was going on.

No, all I wanted to do was spend the weekend cozied up in bed with my sweatpants, some horror flicks, and a large stash of Halloween candy, pretending nothing was wrong in the world.

Refusing to let myself dwell on it anymore, I decided to try switching up what I was studying. Maybe next month's reading for Intro to Japanese would prove to be more interesting than chipping away at my final essay for ECON200. I had been working on it since my first week of classes, determined to put together a paper that not even Professor Locke Blackwell could find fault in.

When my readings failed to hold my attention, I wound up procrastinating and wasting time online by window shopping. I would go to a store, fill up my shopping cart with all sorts of beautiful things, head to check out and then just walk away. I was on a strict budget, but there was something oddly satisfying about the fantasy of it all.

The twins would no doubt be out at the parties this weekend, which meant I probably wouldn't have my usual shadows lurking in the background. If Autumn went out with Aaron and Melody, which seemed likely, I would be truly and utterly alone for the first time in a while.

The thought left an uncomfortable sensation in my stomach, and I wasn't sure if it was fear or disappointment. For so many years, it was just Mami and me, and in the last couple of years, it was often just me.

Now, I had barely been at university for two months, and suddenly, I was panicking about spending the night safely behind a locked door.

*Was I becoming a coward? Or worse, a people person?*

I shook my head and decided it was time to admit defeat on the studying front. I needed a proper break if I was getting this distracted.

Just then, a familiar knock sounded, and Autumn's voice came from behind my door. "Luz, are you in there?"

I sighed and saved my notes on my laptop before shutting it down.

It was time to face the music.



## Chapter Nineteen



## Luz

“**A**nd oh my God, I have to show you the wig I got for tomorrow. It’s, like, pure mermaid hair heaven!” Autumn said with a dreamy sigh.

I didn’t fight the grin I felt forming at her unbridled enthusiasm. She seemed to finally be making peace with my homebody ways, and now the focus was on her costume for tomorrow night. Even if I wasn’t going out, I loved a good fit-planning session, and I was more than happy to indulge her.

“I went down to the city to pick up the stola from the costume designer yesterday, and Luz, it is like tailored to perfection. Oh, and the backdrop I found for the photo shoot is perfectly scaled to me, so I should be able to create an exact replica of the original painting ...”

Autumn had decided to go as Venus, the Roman goddess of love, as depicted in Sandro Botticelli’s famous painting, *The Birth of Venus*, “but, like, minus the nudity.”

Instead, she found a period costume designer from NYC through TikTok and hired them to create a custom stola for her, which was apparently the name of the style of dress that women had worn during the Roman Empire. The girl knew how to execute her vision, I had to give her that.

“I know you don’t want to go out, but do you think you would be willing to still help me get ready for the party?” she said, flashing me those big, wounded eyes that she knew I couldn’t say no to.

“Hmmm,” I grumbled, pretending to play hardball. “Will there be snacks?”

Autumn faux gasped, clutching her hand to her chest dramatically. “Luz Torres, of course there will be snacks. What sort of tacky ill-bred hostess do you take me for? I am a Morgan!”

I snorted at her antics, happy to feel at ease again with her.

“Yes, yes,” I said, waving my hand at her. “Of course I’ll help you get ready; I’m dying to see your costume, and I have a whole speech for Aaron about making sure he keeps an eye on you.”

Autumn rolled her eyes at me, unimpressed. “It’s Halloween, Luz. There will be lots of people out.”

My eyebrows went up. Sometimes I couldn’t tell if her ignorance was willful naïveté or all just an act.

“That’s part of the issue—there isn’t always safety in numbers, especially if everyone’s going to be wasted because

it's Halloween, and you don't know who else is going to be out there.”

She sighed, twirling her fettuccine noodles around on her fork aimlessly.

Now that I had the chance to study her more closely, after having avoided her the past couple of days, I realized how tired looking she was.

“How's life outside planning your Halloween costume?” I asked, hoping to get a better sense of what was going on with her as guilt started to eat away at my appetite.

“Hm? Oh, it's been all right, I guess,” she replied without much enthusiasm, still twirling the same piece on her fork.

“Your classes?”

She shrugged. “They're going fine. Although I still can't say that I, like, love any of them, but my parents won't stop pestering me about picking a major and ‘getting serious’ about school.”

Autumn had never been the most enthusiastic about school, even if she was clearly pretty smart.

I knew that she had been taking some communications and marketing classes, with the hope she might like them or at least find them useful with her TikTok channel.

“Anything else going on? I'm sorry I've been MIA this week, I just desperately needed to catch up on my studying.”

She didn't call me out on my lie, even though we both knew that I had been ahead in all my classes since the beginning of the term.

"No, not really." She finally placed the fork down on her plate, leaving the pasta untouched. "I've been busy with school too," she said with a wave of her hand, and I realized that my concern for her must have been written all over my face. "You know how it is," she continued, "midterms are, like, right around the corner."

"Totally. I've basically been locked in my room studying all week."

*What if she's been avoiding me just as much as I've been avoiding her?*

I didn't like that thought, and I couldn't help but worry what secrets Autumn might have been keeping from me. Was it something related to Aaron and she thought I wouldn't approve? Or maybe her disagreements with her parents were more intense than she made them seem ...

Dios knew Mami had a temper on her sometimes, and her expectations for me were high. Though, they were probably very different than the Morgans' were for Autumn.

Autumn was the one to break the awkward tension that had gathered in the air between us.

"I know you said you don't want to go out to celebrate your birthday ..."

I went rigid in my seat, my jaw tight and my hands clenched at the thought of her trying to convince me again.

She held up both of her palms placatingly. “I know, I know, just listen to me, okay?”

The cheerful sparkle was back in her eyes, which was the only reason I bit down on my lip and forced myself to remain quiet and let her continue.

“Since you don’t want to go out, which I have learned to respect,” she said with pointed diplomacy, before getting visibly more nervous. “I was wondering if you would, like, maybe want to go out for brunch to celebrate instead?” Autumn stammered, and the tension I had been carrying melted. “You know,” she went on, “or something else, that’s just, like, super low-key, where we can relax and have fun. No pressure to even acknowledge it’s your birthday, even. Really, it could just be girl time.”

I reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “Brunch on Sunday sounds wonderful,” I said with a real smile.

Maybe she wasn’t a perfect friend. But neither was I.



The next day, when Autumn texted me around four to come over to her room “ASAP,” I assumed it was because she wanted to get an early start on getting ready to go out that night.

I loaded up one of the cute reusable shopping bags I always seemed to have lying around with all my different styling tools and products. Then threw in a bunch of my own snacks just to be safe, before making my way over to her room.

You could never have too many snacks.

I was surprised to see that she had left the door deliberately unlocked. I opened it up and stepped in, preparing to scold her for being so lax with her safety.

There was no one there.

My heart dropped inside my chest as my bag crashed to the floor.

“Autumn!” I yelled immediately, more than willing to be guilty of overreacting if she would just answer me and be okay.

My heart pounded in my chest as silence filled the air until ...

“BLETCHHHHHH!”

I rushed over to the bathroom to see a familiar set of auburn tresses bowed deeply over the toilet bowl.

“Luz ...” she whimpered.

I grabbed the nearest towel and dropped down onto the floor beside her. “Shh,” I said, delicately gathering her hair back and gently securing it into a ponytail. “It’s going to be okay, sweetie. How long have you been throwing up for?”

“It started about thirty minutes ago.” I noticed how clammy and pale her skin was. “I feel like death,” she moaned.

I got up to put together a cool washcloth for her before returning to join her on the floor. “Do you want to go to the campus clinic?” I asked.

“No,” she replied, eyeing the toilet as though she might need it again shortly. “It’s probably just food poisoning or a stomach bug. There’s not much they can do for that beyond fluids and pain meds.”

“I can run to the nearest pharmacy and pick up stuff if you need—”

At that moment, her face turned an alarming shade of green, and she quickly turned back to the toilet, where she proceeded to puke her guts out for the next five minutes.

There we sat for the next ninety minutes as she suffered through bouts of vicious vomiting before it finally seemed like her stomach settled.

We got her cleaned up, and I helped her into bed and cajoled her into drinking some Gatorade and a water before setting up the largest garbage can I could find next to her.

“I can’t believe I’m going to miss Halloween,” she whimpered.

“I know, sweetie, it’s not fair.” I perched on the bed next to her and began stroking her hair. Mami would play with my hair whenever I was feeling sick, and it always made me feel



better. “Want me to message Aaron and let him know that you are sick?”

“Yes, please,” she mumbled, her face half-buried in her pillows.

I texted Aaron to let him know that Autumn was sick and wouldn't be making it out tonight.

*Aaron (party): Oh shit, poor Autumn!*

*Aaron (party): Is she OK? Should I com over?*

*Aaron (party): Do you nedb anything?*

I sighed.

We had seen Aaron earlier that day for breakfast, and he had been almost as excited as Autumn to get out and blow off some steam. Even if he wasn't my favorite person, there was no need to ruin his Halloween as well. I really didn't mind keeping an eye on Autumn, and it wasn't as though I wasn't already planning to stay in.

*Me: Slow down there, cowboy! We have everything under control here.*

*Me: Autumn is sick but resting. I will stay with her. You go out and have fun.*

I could see the three dots indicating that Aaron was typing out his response, probably to argue with me, so I countered before he could.

*Me: Please, I mean it.*

*Me: She needs one of us to have fun stories to tell about tonight.*

I looked over to Autumn to ask if she wanted to put a scary movie on in the background or just sleep, but she was already snoring quietly. My phone chimed.

*Aaron (party): R u sure?*

*Me: 100% she is already asleep. I am just going to watch a movie.*

*Aaron (party): Okay, LMK if u change ur mind*

I put down my phone, not interested in chatting further. From his texts, it looked like he had started pregaming early.

With Autumn settled and Aaron dealt with, it was time to figure out my own plans for the evening.

If I was going to camp out in Autumn's room to keep an eye on her, I needed some supplies, including my laptop, comfier clothes, and some pillows and blankets to sleep on. I should also probably order some dinner at some point.

If I did that, I would have to go downstairs to meet the delivery guy, and I would need to be able to get back into Autumn's after.

I scanned the space and quickly located her key card on her desk, pocketing it as I made a mental list of things to grab from my room.

I stepped out of the room only to nearly fall back in when I walked into someone standing directly outside.

“Happy Halloween, puppy,” purred Nixon.

## Chapter Twenty



## Luz

“**W**hat do you want? I’m busy.” I pushed past him to get to my door.

Nixon wore head-to-toe black, including a thin cashmere turtleneck that more than hinted at the delicious muscles that lay below, fitted black slacks, and patent leather derby boots. His golden locks were mussed and mostly covered by the cheap plastic skeleton mask that was pushed up off his face.

When he didn’t respond, I sighed with irritation and went to let myself into my room.

Most days I had enough sense to at least pretend to play the deferential ingenue around Nixon, who was more reactionary than his brother. Tonight though, something told me I was in for a long one, and I had already spent the better part of the evening surrounded by vomit. My patience was worn thin.

I swiped my key card to open the door, the familiar clank of the lock unlatching music to my ears, only to be stopped in my tracks.

“Now, now, pet, what have I told you about playing nice?” Nixon’s breath was hot against the back of my neck, as he reached around me to grasp the hand that was about to open the door. I closed my eyes and straightened my spine, refusing to let him see the shiver I was fighting off.

“My friend is sick,” I said, still facing my door, “I’m just grabbing some things from my room so that I can head back and take care of her.”

I didn’t know why I was explaining myself to him. Despite what he and his brother believed, I didn’t actually owe them anything.

“Please, just tell me what you want.” My voice was softer than usual as I took a different approach. I would rather die than beg Nixon Blackwell, but I didn’t have it in me to square off with him again tonight. Snacks, sweatpants, and scary movies were all I wanted.

I could feel him shift behind me, and I suppressed the urge to shiver as he grazed the side of my face with his hand, collecting the strands of my hair that had fallen loose and carefully pulling them back behind my ear. He repeated the process two more times until he had smoothed back all the hair on that side.

For all his condescending and vaguely threatening banter, Nixon was far less physical than his twin, or at least he had been. This close, I could smell his expensive cologne, although I couldn’t place it. It was intoxicatingly lush and masculine, with heavy notes of tobacco and cinnamon.

“No Halloween festivities for you, then?” he asked. He sounded sincere. Suspiciously so.

“No, like I said, my friend is sick. I’m staying in with her.”

“The Morgan girl?”

I should have expected that Nixon would know who Autumn was. While they didn’t run in the same circles, at least according to Autumn, the twins had been following me for long enough that it made sense they would have dug into my friends. Well, friend.

“Yes, the Morgan girl,” I replied, trying to restrain the sarcasm in my tone. “Can I go now?”

He didn’t release me.

Instead, he reached back with the hand that had been playing with my hair, and I felt him shuffling it around behind me.

“Found this on your door, puppy,” he said, then paused for a moment. “Alister said that it’s happened before.”

There was no question there, but it was clear from his tone that he was expecting some sort of explanation.

I looked down to confirm that it was what I so dearly hoped it wasn’t.

Another small, sparkly heart sticker sat on the tip of one of Nixon’s fingers. It had collected some lint from sitting in his pocket and was looking worse for wear, but there was no denying it was identical to the other ones I’d received.

“Want to tell me what that’s all about?” he finally asked, irritation creeping into his voice.

For a moment, I briefly considered trying to flee. It had been one thing to blurt out what was going on to Alister in a fit of rage. It was another thing to be forced to articulate my worries and vulnerabilities to his volatile doppelgänger.

“Don’t even think about it,” he hissed, reading my body language.

I gritted my teeth and took a deep breath as my frustrations started to rise to the surface.

He was right, though. Not only would I never make it into my room before being incapacitated by the much larger man standing directly at my back, but even if I did, what then? Was I going to spend all night locked up in my room to avoid Nixon when Autumn was sick next door?

I forced myself to turn around and, as a result, found myself staring directly into his chest, my body caged in between him and the door.

“What’s going on, puppy? Catch another admirer?”

I snorted. “Is that what they’re calling stalkers these days?”

I lifted my eyes to see a scowl on Nixon’s face, which made me feel a mild tingle of

satisfaction, but also, a little worried.

“You’re supposed to be a smart girl, Luz,” he growled.

“I a—”



“You know that we’re interested in who left you the heart, so why wouldn’t you tell us about this?”

“There was no way of knowing if the stickers were from the same person,” I argued passively.

He rolled his eyes. “Do you really think it’s a coincidence that someone left a bloody pig’s heart nailed to your door, and now you keep finding these stickers all around campus?”

No. But that didn’t mean it was my responsibility to tell them anything.

“I know you can’t be that stupid,” Nixon huffed with exasperation.

I said and did nothing in response.

I didn’t have any answers he would find acceptable and despite—or perhaps because of—the weird energy between us, right now I wanted nothing more than to retreat and prepare for a long, uncomfortable night on Autumn’s floor.

My lack of reaction hung heavy in the air, and I watched Nixon’s expression closely. Like a prey animal observing a nearby predator, frozen, waiting rigidly for them to make their move.

It was only because I was paying such close attention that I caught the twitch in the outer corner of his right eye. The sneer on his face transformed into a weary expression, and he sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

*Interesting.*

“Look, I don’t have time for our usual banter, as much as I enjoy it. Has anything else happened to you that we should know about?”

It was a marvelous performance on his part, breaking from his cruel rich boy persona in an attempt to evoke reciprocal honesty from me.

“I told the police everything I know, Nixon,” I said, looking down at the floor submissively, “and you said that you knew everything I told them.”

*Two could play this game.*

Technically, I had told the police everything I knew about what had happened to me since my arrival at Hollow Oak.

At that moment, Nixon’s phone chimed loudly from the front pocket of his pants. He cursed under his breath at the interruption before retrieving it from his pocket.

His brow furrowed slightly as he read it, and I held my breath, hoping that whatever message he had just received would call him away. Even if there was something about his physical proximity that made a part of me only want to step in closer.

He cursed again before sliding his phone back, and I wondered if my prayers had been answered.

I looked up again to see him looking at me quizzically, something I wasn’t sure how to interpret.

“You said you’re staying in tonight, correct?” he asked sharply, the sudden change in conversation throwing me off.

I nodded, not sure where he was going with this.

He took a step back and looked at me with careful appraisal before sucking on his teeth and releasing a heavy breath. “Alister and I have social obligations to attend tonight. We won’t be around,” he stated, as if we often shared our evening plans with each other.

“Um ... hope you have fun?”

Nixon shook his head while mirth danced in his eyes. His bad boy smirk was firmly back in place, and I swear he swayed his hips on purpose as he walked backward away from me down the hall.

“Stay out of trouble, puppy,” he called out, reaching up to slip his skeleton mask down over his devilish expression. “We won’t be watching you tonight.”

He stepped into the elevator and disappeared behind the sliding metal doors.

“Happy Halloween to me,” I muttered to myself before turning back to my door and finally letting myself into my room.



After my exchange with Nixon, I grabbed what I needed before returning to Autumn’s room. I had been pretty careful with my credits, so I could afford to splurge on some of the overpriced but accessible sodas from the vending machines in the common room, along with some extra snacks.

I set about arranging my duvet cover and some pillows on the floor across the room from Autumn before curling up in the armchair she had managed to squeeze into a corner and pulling out some treats and my laptop. The plan was to take a well-deserved break from studying and watch some of my favorite Halloween movies.

It was time to settle in for the evening and get scared.

## Chapter Twenty-One



## Luz

Autumn continued to snore softly away while I watched *Trick 'r Treat*, a Halloween horror-comedy from the noughties that I had seen a million times before. Anna Paquin's character, Laurie, was my favorite, dressed to kill as Little Red Riding Hood.

Although the sun had set long ago, the steady hum of students heading out for the night drifted up from the quad.

My limbs ached from being curled up in the armchair, and my stomach was telling me I needed to eat some food that wasn't pure sugar.

I stood up and stretched out like a cat, cracking my back and neck before tiptoeing over to Autumn's side to take a quick look at her.

The dark circles were still heavy under her eyes, and her skin remained pale. But her lips were looking better, not so dry. She was starting to rehydrate, which would help a lot.

She probably needed rest more than food at this point, so I let her sleep, creeping back to the armchair, and scrolling through my phone, trying to decide what to order for dinner.

I started three different carts at three different restaurants before finally making up my mind and placing an order for Pad Kee Mao from the only Thai restaurant in Shady Harbor. The app said that the food would be arriving in about thirty-five minutes, which was perfect because if I was peckish now, I would be starving by then.

Shifting back into the now less-than-comfortable chair, I turned the movie back on and settled in to watch as Anna Paquin's character prepared to meet her sister and friends at a bonfire in the woods all while being stalked by a dark, dangerous stranger.

A while later, my phone buzzed. I furrowed my brow and paused the movie; it was too early for my food to be here.

*Aaron (party): Hows she doinhg?*

The drunken text was followed by several images of him, Melody, and some of their other friends, all dressed up for Halloween and in various states of intoxication. He had dressed up like a cowboy while she had gone as a naughty firefighter. With her long blonde waves, she looked pretty cute, and they appeared to be having a great time, their cheeks rosy and eyes glassy as they beamed at the camera without a care in the world.

*Me: Sleeping, still recovering but doing better.*

*Me: Looks like you are having a blast :)*

See, I could be nice. I used a smiley face.

Turning back to my laptop, I was surprised that it was almost ten o'clock. I hadn't really noticed the time when I ordered my food and couldn't believe it was this late already.

My phone continued to buzz, but it was probably just Aaron sending more pictures, so I switched back to the movie. I could look at them after my food arrived.



I watched the final gruesome scene in the movie, and my phone buzzed again, reminding me that I had food coming soon ...

*The food!*

I jumped out of the chair and grabbed my phone, practically halfway across the small dorm already.

I snatched up Autumn's key card and quietly slipped out of the room, making sure I heard the door lock behind me before turning to my phone to see what was going on with my dinner.

Sure enough, there was a notice from the app that my food had been delivered, roughly twenty minutes ago, along with multiple missed calls from an unknown number, likely the poor delivery person trying in vain to reach me.

“Zut alors!” I hissed under my breath as I walked as fast as I could over to the elevators and slammed on the button.



The delivery person wouldn't have been able to get into Jackson College House without a key card, but they could get in the first set of glass doors of the vestibule. I crossed my fingers that they left my food in there and that no one had stolen it. Unfortunately, the chances of some drunken college student snatching it on their way in or out of the building were pretty high.

The doors opened for the lobby and I practically sprinted out of them, taking the corner fast enough to slide around it in my slippers.

I swung open the glass doors of the vestibule dramatically, scanning the area up and down for a take-out container. It took my eyes a second to adjust, one of the overhead lights was flickering irritatingly while the other was out completely, but after a couple of moments, it was clear that there was nothing to be found here.

“Mierda carajo,” I muttered under my breath.

There was always a chance that the delivery person had left it outside the building, although there was probably an even greater risk of it being stolen out there. I had to go look, unwilling to accept that my delicious drunken noodles were gone. Pushing the swinging glass doors open, I stepped out into the darkness.

It was an overcast night, the moon mostly hidden behind the clouds.

Jackson College House was a large brutalist-style building, set back about fifty feet from the main walkway, with a large,

paved avenue surrounded by high hedges leading up to it. On the other side of the quad, I could see a couple groups of students milling about in front of Gabriel College House, although they were too far for me to really make out their costumes.

I was surprised to find myself alone outside my own dorm, not a soul in sight.

Unfortunately, neither was my food.

I was basically delusional with hunger now, and even though I knew, logically, that my food was long gone and I should give up and return to Autumn's room, I couldn't stop myself from stalking down the avenue looking like a maniac in my slippers and sweatpants as I popped my head under the benches and peered into the bushes on the off chance that the delivery person had left my food there.

They hadn't.

I almost reached the main path and was going to have to concede defeat when I heard the quiet but familiar *whoosh* and *click* of the front doors of Jackson College House. I hadn't noticed anyone else walking by me on their way into the building, so someone must have been coming out, but when the sound of the doors closing was followed by silence instead of banter or footsteps, I was confused.

I turned around expecting to maybe see a student stopped in front of the building, probably on their phone, distracted, but there was no one there.

Nor was anyone in the vestibule or even in the lobby from what I could see through the glass doors, which was odd.

Frowning, I looked around to see if there was anyone else about, but it was unusually quiet, and when I turned back to face the quad, even the revelers across the way had disappeared out of sight.

A gust of wind suddenly picked up, whipping my hair into my face and temporarily blinding me. At the same time, my arms prickled unpleasantly as I broke out in goosebumps, and I was struck by the sudden desire to return to the warmth and the safety of my dorm.

I started to make a quick retreat when I heard the shuffling of footsteps behind me. Irrational hope flared in me, and I spun around, only to stifle a scream as the air rushed from my lungs and my stomach lurched.

Someone was standing just off the path, silent and unmoving, obscured by the shadows that hung between the lampposts. The darkness and the distance between us hid every discernible detail about them beyond their general form and the stark contrast of the light-colored mask they wore underneath their hoodie.

It was the mask that had frightened me. Made of cheap, shiny plastic, it looked like a goat or maybe a sheep. It resembled something that a child might wear, and the initial sight of it floating in the dark was disturbing. The wretched thing reminded me of my own horrific childhood for reasons I couldn't articulate.

The person in the mask stood almost preternaturally still, and my heart thudded uncomfortably in my chest. The urge to turn around was nearly unbearable, but I made myself stay calm, taking a slow, steeling breath in through my nose, then out through my mouth.

“Sorry about that, you startled me. I didn’t realize anyone else was around,” I called out nervously, trying to assure myself that this was just some random student who had drunkenly stumbled onto me and didn’t realize how creepy they were behaving.

The sheep didn’t respond. It just stood there like a grotesque statue, staring at me.

My chest tightened in warning. Something felt very, very wrong. It was time for me to leave.

Girls were trained to be nice, to stay in dangerous situations because it was more important to be polite than it was to be safe. It got them killed.

Nice girls were dead girls.

Without knowing who was hiding behind that mask, I didn’t want to risk sprinting away and provoke someone like the twins, who would only chase after me if I ran.

I hadn’t heard anyone approaching me from behind, so I took a couple of tentative steps backward before slowly turning around, all while keeping one eye on the sheep. When they didn’t immediately move, I started walking as quickly as I could back toward the safety of the dorm, glancing back

every couple of steps to make sure that my observer remained in the shadows. My heart continued to race as I narrowly avoided tripping over my own two feet.

Where was everyone else? It was Friday night, Halloween for goodness' sake, and yet here I was, all alone except for some psycho in a mask.

My breathing was heavy, even though I hadn't been running, as I approached the shiny glass doors of Jackson College House. I only had to make it into the vestibule.

Palms sweaty, I reached into my sweats to fish out Autumn's key card, and it slid out from between my fingers twice before I managed to get it out, only to nearly drop it.

"Merde," I muttered as I darted my head around one last time to check on the sheep.

They had disappeared.

Adrenaline tore through me. I spun around to sprint the last couple of yards.

The flickering lights beckoned to me as I rushed forward, slamming my hands into the metal push bar as hard as I could, only to come to a jarring stop. Pain shot up through my hands, and I could taste blood in my mouth as the door reverberated violently with the force of my impact but remained closed.

I screamed loudly, in both pain and shock, as I slammed my fist into the still-shaking glass doors.

Locked. The doors were locked.

I whirled around, my thoughts spinning out as I watched the masked sheep come to stand in the middle of the avenue leading up to Jackson College House. The bones in my wrist burned with a fuzzy sort of pain that tugged at my attention, but I couldn't take my eyes off them.

I rubbed my right wrist absently. My mind churned, trying to make a rational decision despite my near-overwhelming desire to flee. The sheep hadn't moved again, but they continued to stare at me. If their goal had been simply to scare me, then they had succeeded. But with everything going on, and Nixon's ominous order ringing in my mind, I couldn't ignore the voice in my head telling me that this was more than a drunken fraternity prank.

Then I remembered what I had forgotten in my haste. Only the inside doors of the vestibule were locked during the day, but at 10:00 p.m. the outer doors locked automatically as well. All I had to do was scan Autumn's card across the pad a couple of feet away on the other side of the doors, and I would be able to make it safely inside.

Hope surged in my heart as I lunged toward the keypad, never taking my eyes off the sheep. They watched me with what felt like cool detachment as I slammed the card against the pad, their head ominously tilting to the side as I let out a strangled cry of victory when the light finally turned green and the distinctive clank of the door unlocking followed.

I finally tore my eyes from the creep in the mask as I ran forward to open the doors, albeit more cautiously this time.

I had just started to swing the tall outer glass door inward when someone stepped out from around the corner in the lobby and stood in front of the doors on the other side of the vestibule.

This time I couldn't stifle my scream.

## Chapter Twenty-Two





## Luz

**S**tanding inside, behind the glass doors, was the very thing I had been running from.

This close, the hooded figure loomed tall and dark, the flickering light of the only adding to the malevolent atmosphere. But it was that creepy plastic child's sheep mask peering out at me emotionlessly from under that black hoodie that sent a shudder through me.

Confusion had me whirling around stupidly, exposing my back to them, only to be stopped dead in my tracks when I saw that the first sheep was still in fact outside and was now creeping up the avenue toward the dorm.

*"Mira stupida,"* I could hear my mother hissing at me.

There were two of them.

The sound of the lock unlatching seemed to echo behind me, and my heart convulsed as real fear gripped me and left me nearly frozen in place.

My moment of foolishness cost me.

I stood there, halfway in and halfway out of the vestibule, unable to make the choice to save myself, as the sheep from inside the building swung the door open with a flourish and began stalking toward me with much more intensity than their companion outside.

For a second, I was there again, in my childhood bedroom, watching in terror as a monster—not of my nightmares but very much of my reality—sprang toward me, eyes lit with violence and cruelty. The only choice I'd been able to make back then was how much I wanted to fight back. Which was really a matter of how much more violence I wanted to suffer at the hands of my father, because he always hurt me more when I fought back. Although sometimes, when I did nothing at all, that also seemed to spur him on and make him madder. Truthfully, there had been no choice at all ...

But now there was, and while I could fight back if I had to, I had also taken enough self-defense classes to know that my first choice should always be to run away, that fighting a larger, unknown opponent was a last resort.

I turned around, doing my best to wrench the glass door shut behind me, before taking off running as fast as I could around the side of Jackson College House.

The hedges that decorated the avenue leading up to the dorm wrapped around the sides of the building, obscuring the rest of the campus from view. I kicked off my slippers, knowing they would only slow me down, and swung around the corner, glancing behind me to see both sheep at my rear, the one still

chasing after me aggressively with the other following in their wake, slower but just as dogged in their pursuit.

*Who are they? What will they do if they catch me?*

Questions I didn't have time to answer.

I needed to focus. I needed a plan. Running in circles, hoping they got tired and gave up, wasn't one.

My lungs burned and my feet hurt from the gravel that filled the path that wound around the building, leading to the back where the heating and cooling units stood along with a massive garbage dump. The smell was overpowering and choked the air from my already-struggling lungs.

I ran on, spotting the gap in the hedges that connected to one of the smaller trails that wove through the back of campus before heading out to the woods. It was dark out, and I could only hope that I knew the forest better than whoever was hunting me.

I raced toward the gap as quickly as I could in my socked feet. The bushes were just an arm's length away. Fast, heavy footsteps came up behind me, and the larger of the sheep rounded the corner, now running flat-out.

Without a moment to lose, I pulled myself through the gap in the hedge, ignoring the way the rough branches of the too narrow passage scratched my skin. It didn't matter, and as I broke free out the other side, I could hear the footsteps behind the hedge coming to a pause.

The moon had made an appearance out from behind clouds, and I could see the trail that led to the woods clearly. Which meant my pursuers would be able to see me just as well.

Not wanting to waste my lead, I took off as quickly as I could, constantly scanning the area around me, hoping to see someone else, anyone else, other than the wolves dressed in sheep's clothing behind me.

As the tree line drew near, I nearly stumbled.

*Autumn.*

The second sheep had come from inside our dormitory. She was still there. What if they had done something to her?

For a moment, I almost turned around to go back, but as I slowed to look behind me, I saw both sheep at the top of one of the other trails that connected to the main one that I was on.

I didn't like that they had so easily figured out where I was going, but it was too late to change course now. I couldn't do anything for Autumn if these two got their hands on me, and the idea that this might be a Halloween prank gone too far now seemed like a far-fetched dream.

Mind made up, I picked up my pace again and ran straight into the woods.

My feet were already tender from running on the gravel, and I had to bite down on my lip to silence my cries when I sliced one open on God knows what as I hurtled down the familiar trails as fast I could. I blinked back the tears threatening to

well up in my eyes. There would be time to cry later, when I had escaped.

I took the main trailhead into the woods behind Hollow Oak. The trail I was on started out as a single path before splitting into a loop, which meant that if I stayed on it, the sheep would only have to wait at the start to catch me.

However, having spent countless hours out here, I knew that there were also smaller, less-maintained routes that branched off the loop and came out of the forest at various locations around the northern campus. The question was which of the smaller paths to take.

I weighed my options, the heavy thumping of my heart making it hard to collect my thoughts, and I kept running until I could make out the fork in the road where it split.

To the right, most of the smaller trails would take me deeper into the woods and past the largest hollow oak trees on campus. I could probably hide out in the base of one of the trunks and wait the sheep out.

To the left, I could take one of the other trails that crisscrossed through the backwoods before coming out near the athletic field. If I lost them in the forest, it would be easy enough to make it over to the main quad from there, where there were bound to be people out celebrating and I could seek help.

I was about to commit to my decision when my right foot slid out from under me. To keep myself from falling, I shifted my weight on to my left. I overcorrected, and my ankle twisted

sharply, sending me down hard onto the rough forest floor below. Pebbles tore through the soft flesh of my palms, and it felt like electrical pulses were shooting through my already tender wrists.

A whimper tore from my throat despite my best efforts to remain silent.

Two sets of footfalls were coming up the path, and I had to shove down the pain and scramble back up. A tentative step forward on my left foot sent a searing shock up my leg, nearly sending me back to the ground. There was no way I could make it through the woods and back to the athletics field like this. My only option now was to hide in one of the trees before the sheep found me and hope that they walked right past.

Refusing to give up, I half ran, half dragged myself as fast as I could, down the trail to the right. I had enough distance on the sheep that they would probably only just catch the back of me as the path turned sharply after the fork in the road, and I hoped I would be out of their line of sight for long enough to get myself hidden away.

The moonlight was fading again as I veered off the beaten path and into the woods, searching for one particular oak that I had discovered early on in my runs. If I was lucky, I could make it inside before the moon disappeared behind the clouds entirely.

My ankle banged against a root as I hobbled as quietly as I could through the trees, sending another blinding wave of agony through me. My stomach roiled and my head throbbed,

and I knew that if I didn't give my body a break soon it would revolt.

I couldn't hear anything over the sound of the blood rushing through my ears, but I kept on moving. I had to get out of sight.

The outline of my favorite tree came into view, offering me a dash of hope. Its gnarled limbs twisted out across the black sky, welcoming me into its embrace.

Clutching my battered hands to my chest, I dropped down onto my knees in front of the hollow and crawled in awkwardly on my elbows. Inside, I shuffled backward on my bum until I hit the rough inner walls of the tree. I leaned back, taking a deep stuttering breath as I tucked my legs up, wincing as I brushed my injured ankle along the ground. My white sweats were covered in dirt and leaves, and my filthy, bloodied socks looked even worse.

Sitting up straight, I drew a hushed breath and got into as comfortable a position as I could before settling in to wait.

The forest was far from quiet as insects hummed and an owl screeched. Still, when I slowed my breathing and forced my attention outward, I could hear the sheep approaching from a distance.

Heavy footsteps followed by slightly lighter ones sounded evenly, without the crunch of leaves, which told me that while they had managed to follow me from the main trail, they hadn't set out into the woods in search of me.

I listened as the heavier footfalls came to an abrupt halt first, with the softer steps continuing for another couple of seconds before stopping as well.

They had paused in the middle of the trail, and for a few terrifying moments, there was nothing.

I closed my eyes and rested the back of my head against the inside of the ancient oak as I counted to twenty in my head, forcing myself to take deep, slow, even breaths.

The sound of leaves crackling and twigs snapping ripped my attention back to reality. My heart hammered so loudly in my chest that, against all rational thought, I worried that they might be able to hear it.

*Is this what happened to the girls who disappeared?*

I took another measured breath, in through my nose, out through my mouth, as the sound of boots crunching through the woods echoed in the oak's hollow.

The only things I had on me were my phone and Autumn's key card.

I silently debated the merits of throwing my phone at the sheep versus keeping it on me in case I got far enough away to call for help, but one thought kept creeping back into my mind.

If they found me, I was a dead girl.

Just then, the distinctive melody of a phone ringing broke through the night.



My heart seized and my throat closed up as I looked down at my phone, wondering who it was that I was about to die for.

The chimes continued to ring out, but my screen didn't show an incoming call...

It was one of their phones, not mine.

A rush of relief shuddered through me.

I tried to listen to the sheep's voices, to catch anything that might help me identify them if I ever escaped this nightmare, but they both remained quiet. So quiet that I could make out the barest sounds of someone speaking through the phone, not that I was able to understand a word.

After a couple of minutes, the garble of faraway speech stopped, only to be momentarily followed by the distinctive crash of someone stomping through wood. Each step slightly fainter than the last, as if the sheep were moving away from me.

Abruptly, the sound of detritus crackling underfoot was replaced by the quieter thump of shoes on unpaved but well-traveled ground.

Could they really be leaving?

I didn't move, didn't even release another breath as I waited for the footsteps to disappear. Sure enough, after a couple of minutes, the forest fell quiet around me once more.

I didn't move.

For all I knew, this was a trap. Instead, I sat there until my butt and legs were numb from the cold ground and my ankle had swelled up to the size of a grapefruit. I didn't lift my phone to call the campus police, or to text Autumn. I didn't even dare clear the dirt from the injuries on my hand.

I watched the clock on my phone as the minutes slowly ticked by. Only once it turned midnight, an hour after the sheep had followed me into the forest, did I allow myself to start making my way out of the woods.

I had survived the night.

## Chapter Twenty-Three



## Luz

**B**y the time I limped my way out of the woods and back to Jackson College House, it was past one in the morning. My adrenaline had long since crashed, leaving me bone tired and with a pounding headache. It didn't help that my ankle screamed at me in protest anytime I tried to put any weight on it, meaning I was forced to sort of hop and shuffle my way back, stopping every couple of minutes to rest.

I briefly considered calling the police when I first dragged myself out of the woods. But I hadn't heard from the detectives since the final interview, and the last thing I wanted to do was drag their attention back to me and have them start digging deeper into my past.

The bigger question was, what was I going to tell the twins?

There would be no hiding my injuries from them. My ankle would need at least a couple of weeks to heal. I should probably visit the university clinic and get it looked at, but I couldn't think any further ahead than getting home and getting to bed.

I had half expected the sheep to be there waiting for me when I returned, and if it weren't for the group of students returning from a Halloween party at the same time that I limped up to the building I didn't know if I would have been able to force myself inside. I felt terrible knowing that Autumn was in there, vulnerable and alone, and I desperately wanted to go check on her, but the possibility of another run-in with the sheep had me wary. I nearly cried with relief when I saw the other students making their way into the building.

If anyone noticed my disheveled state, no one commented on it. They probably thought it was some kind of Halloween costume. That or they were too drunk to notice.

The elevator pinged for the fourth floor, and I had to pull myself out of it and over to Autumn's door. I was filled with a sense of dread and I wished some of the partygoers had gotten off on my floor as well.

I let myself into her room, sick with apprehension, half certain she had fallen victim to sheep. My hands were shaky, and I dropped the key card three times before I managed to unlock the door.

For a moment, the darkness of her room took me back to the woods, and I was tearing down the path, feet bleeding, my chest tight with adrenaline and terror.

Then I heard the soft rumbles of Autumn's snore, and I grabbed onto her desk for support as my knees nearly gave out. My eyes adjusted and as I started to make out the sight of

her signature red hair peeking out from under the cover, I swayed once again.

I hauled myself the last couple of feet to her side, needing to see her face to know she was truly okay. I teased back the covers and was rewarded with the sight of a still pale but healthier-looking, and most importantly untouched, Autumn, causing several silent tears to escape as I choked back a deep breath.

*She's okay.*

Knowing she was safe, another wave of exhaustion rolled over me, and I had the urge to crawl up into the bed with her right then and there.

I scrounged around Autumn's desk for paper and a pen to leave her a note.

*You were looking better, so I went to sleep in my room, text if you need me.*

*Best,*

*Luz*

I winced as I reached down to pick up my bedding from her floor. The throbbing pain in my ankle was by far the worst, but I couldn't ignore the stinging of the cuts on my feet or that every part of my body was stiff and achy from exhaustion of having spent half the night in the cold.

By the time I made it back into my room, I had nothing left to give. I knew I needed to clean up the cuts on my feet, but I couldn't resist the temptation of crawling into my bed for just

a couple of minutes to rest. Then I would shower, clean myself up, and wrap up my ankle ...



The sound of my phone ringing jolted me from my sleep, although the bright rays of the sun pouring in through my window were the first thing my foggy brain processed. I closed my eyes, the light causing my head to throb painfully, before fumbling for the source of the irritating noise as I tried to make sense of what was going on.

My fingers wrapped around the slim, vibrating rectangle, and my brain caught up to reality as the events of last night rapidly reloaded in my head.

*Halloween ... Nixon... Autumn was sick ... someone chased me ... the woods ... no, they chased me, the sheep ...*

The noise came to a sudden halt, my mind still whirring a million miles per hour, only for the ringing to start again less than a minute later.

I groaned, lying back deeper into my pillows, wishing I could hide from reality forever. Instead, I flipped my phone around to see who was calling and slid my thumb over the Accept button when I saw it was Autumn.

“Hey,” I muttered, still half asleep.

“Oh, thank goodness!” Her voice rang out so loudly and I had to pull the phone away from my ear.

“Ouch,” I hissed. “Indoor voice, please.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” She continued, at a much lower volume, “I was just worried when you didn’t answer my texts and calls. I thought that, like, maybe I got you sick too, and I was getting ready to kick down your door to make sure that you were okay.”

I cringed. “Ugh, no, please don’t do that.” I flipped through my phone to see what I had missed.

It was well past noon, and in addition to three missed calls from Autumn, I had more texts from Aaron, one from Melody, and another from an unknown number.

“Is everything okay?” asked Autumn.

“Hmmm,” I murmured as I scrolled through Aaron’s increasingly incomprehensible texts, before realizing she had asked me a question.

“Oh, yes, rough night, but how about you? Are you still feeling sick?” I said, hoping to shift the focus back onto her. I had no idea what, if anything, I should tell Autumn. I was going to have to come up with an explanation for my injuries at some point, but right now I needed to buy myself time to think.

“Oh yeah, loads better,” she said, her voice brightening. “It must have been some weird twenty-four-hour bug. I still feel, like, tired and achy, but the vomiting stopped, and I managed to eat some crackers this morning.”

“That’s wonderful. I was so worried about you last night,” I replied, smiling. I was relieved to hear that she was doing well



even as I continued to look through my messages.

Melody had sent me a photo of her and Aaron in their costumes. It looked like they had a hell of a time last night.

“Thanks so much for taking care of me.” Autumn kept talking, and I tried to listen to her, but I was distracted by the last remaining text I had, the one from the unknown number.

*UNKNOWN: Did you have a happy Halloween?*

A shiver ran through me as I stared at the odd message, trying to figure out who it was from.

“Luz?” Autumn’s voice pulled me away from the message.

“Yes, sorry,” I responded, rubbing my eyes blearily. “I zoned out. What did you say?”

“You really do sound like you had a rough night,” she said sympathetically. “I’m sorry I was such a wreck.”

“Oh no, that wasn’t it at all,” I stammered, feeling bad. “I just rolled my ankle in the dark and was having a hard time sleeping on the floor, so I came back here early in the morning, when I figured you were better,” I blurted out. “You were basically the perfect patient, really, couldn’t have asked for better.”

“Oh no. Poor, Luz, your ankle. What happened?”

“I tripped.” I went with the easiest lie, the one grounded in the truth. “Tripped over my own two feet, scraped up my hands pretty badly too.”

“Oh no, what can I do?” she asked, and I heard her rummaging around, no doubt getting ready to march over here and take care of me like I had done for her.

“Honestly, I just want to rest,” I said, hoping I could convince her I just needed more time to sleep.

“Are you sure?” There was a hint of disbelief evident in her tone.

“Absolutely.” I only half exaggerated the yawn that popped out of my mouth next. It wasn’t entirely a lie. I felt like I had been through the wringer, and after I looked at my injuries and stuffed my face with whatever food I could get my hands on, I planned on going back to sleep. If I had truly been in danger last night, and the sheep weren’t some weird prank gone way too far, that fact wasn’t going to change in the next couple of hours.

“All right but, you *will* text me if you need anything?” She still sounded not quite pleased but didn’t push it any further. “I mean it, Luz. You took care of me last night, so if you need anything, like anything at all, you text me right away, understand?”

“One hundred percent loud and clear.” I giggled. She sounded better, and I could only hope that maybe her being quiet and out of sorts earlier in the week was just her being under the weather before really getting sick.

*Or someone made sure she was sick last night.*

It was an unnerving thought.

Shaking off my worries, I got off the phone with Autumn and hauled myself into the bathroom, biting back a cry every time I so much as grazed my foot along the floor. My ankle was a mess, and I would need to make an appointment at the university's medical center for Monday morning, the soonest I could get one.

The cuts on my feet and hands turned out not to be nearly as bad as they had felt the night before, and I cleaned them up easily, although I would be wearing thick, cushy socks for the next couple of days.

Unfortunately, while the scratches on my face were superficial, they would be obvious to anyone who got close to me. Eventually, I would be able to cover them up with makeup, but until the skin had healed, I didn't want to put anything other than ointment on them.

Finally, after taking a slow and awkward shower where I had to balance entirely on my right leg and nearly fell over several times, and digging deep into my snack stash, I curled back up into my bed and quickly fell back into a deep sleep.

It was only when I woke up that evening, groggy, disoriented, and starving again, that I remembered the weird text I had gotten from that unknown number.

*Did you have a happy Halloween?*

My stomach turned queasy. No, I most definitely did not have a "Happy Halloween" but who would be messaging me?

My first, horrifying thought was that it was the sheep, or even worse, whoever it was who had called them off last night.

Because that was what had happened, the more I thought about it.

My stomach turned. Who had enough influence and cruelty to pull off that kind of stunt?

The obvious answer was the Blackwells. Just because Alister claimed they weren't behind the hearts didn't mean he was being honest with me.

I was going to have to start getting some answers of my own.

## Chapter Twenty-Four



## Alister

**S**tanding in front of Gabriel House, resting against a tree, I kept my eyes trained on Luz's residence across the quad.

It was late Sunday afternoon. I hadn't seen her all weekend, and I was starting to get irritated with her for hiding from Nixon and me. She never avoided us before, preferring rather to stare the two of us down with disapproval written across her face whenever she caught us watching her. That or ignoring us as though we were utterly inconsequential. It was part of her charm.

Today though, I had been waiting out here for a couple of hours, knowing that she usually went for one of her runs after sleeping in on the weekend, without so much as a glimpse of her. The minutes ticked by, and I was getting closer and closer to inviting myself into Jackson College House and tearing it apart until I found her.

Not to mention that she hadn't responded yet to my text.

*Did you have a happy Halloween?*

Halloween was one of the biggest, most profitable nights of the year in terms of the drugs that ran through campus. Normally, I couldn't have cared less. Blackwells were killers, not drug dealers. Still, we hadn't made any progress figuring out who the fuck was stupid enough to try to peddle their crap under our noses. So, Nixon and I needed to be out with our loyal subjects, making sure that they were still just that—loyal.

Nixon had gone over early on Friday night to “pop in on our pet” before we went out for the night. When he returned, I was pleased to hear that she was planning to spend the night in. Too much weird shit had been happening at Hollow Oak lately, and Nix and I had enough on our plates Halloween night without the chaos that seemed to follow Luz everywhere she went.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see what my twin wanted. It was almost always him texting me. My older brother, Lucian, communicated with me almost exclusively through Nixon, having confused my silence with being unable to listen. Locke was a pompous fuck who only ever texted when he needed help to dispose of a body.

*Nix: Big bro says family meeting*

Everest did text me sometimes. It was almost always some obscure pop culture reference that was wholly lost on me due to the decade-plus age gap between us. That or a wildly incriminating photo of his latest art installation.

I didn't respond to Nix's message, knowing he would follow up with the relevant information when he had it.

Instead, I returned to staring at the building in the distance, my eyes narrowing at the thought of needing to leave before getting a chance to see her.

I owed her one punishment already, and if I didn't see that pert fucking ass soon, she was going to incur another one.

My growing obsession with the little devil had not gone unnoticed by me, and I wasn't sure what to make of it. A fact I didn't care for.

Sometimes I found myself replaying our interactions in my head with my usual sense of objective detachment. I wondered what would happen if Everest ever got his hands on her, if he would make a masterpiece of her from the inside out.

Other times, I found myself irrational, possessive, and entranced by her. I masturbated to the memories of her soft curves and sweet citrus scent—imagining how fucking lush those plump lips would feel servicing me—with increasing frequency, and even now my cock stiffened at the very thought of her.

I was also getting more and more annoyed by how much the Croft kid hung around with her and the other two. Autumn Morgan and Melody Thomson.

The Morgan and Thomson families were both new money, although from what I heard, Melody's was in a bit of financial trouble these days. While I didn't particularly care to know either of them, at least they weren't social-climbing leeches like Aaron Croft.



The only thing that kept me from ruining that prick's life was that Luz appeared to be, at best, ambivalent toward him. I sometimes caught her rolling her eyes or wrinkling up her nose at some moronic thing he'd said. I didn't know if she realized she was doing it, and the idea that she secretly found him as irksome as I did was a satisfying one.

I looked back down at my phone again to check the time. What the fuck was wrong with this girl that she hadn't left her dorm all weekend long?

Usually, I didn't give a shit what the holes I fucked were doing, provided everyone got tested regularly. I didn't do commitment. I didn't care who else they fucked. So, why the hell did I care what Luz Torres was doing in her spare time when I wasn't even fucking her?

My phone buzzed again in my hand.

*Nix: 35 mins @ the manor*

My grip tightened as I read his message.

I would have to leave soon if I wanted to make it to Blackwell Manor in time. Lucian didn't tolerate lateness, and in my current mood, if I had to sit through one of his lectures, one of the only times he spoke directly to me, I was likely to explode.

I slid my phone back into my pocket and waited another fifteen frustrating minutes before I was forced to turn around and start walking back to where I had parked my Ducati.

I turned the engine on and felt the bike vibrate to life in between my legs. I was in a foul mood and had to hope that flying down the winding roads that led to my family's ancestral home would mellow me out enough to handle whatever shitty news big brother would most likely be delivering.

I sped out of the parking lot, only one thought mollifying me—Luz was racking up quite the list of transgressions, and I couldn't wait to show her what it really meant to suffer at my hands.

By the time I arrived at the estate, the sun was sitting low in the sky, and against the vibrant reds and oranges of the trees, it made for the sort of vibrant autumnal sunset that had tourists driving hundreds of miles to visit in quaint New England towns like our own. Nixon was waiting for me, smoking a joint, and remained seated on the top steps, back against one of the massive pillars.

“You're on time,” he said with a cheery smirk. Nix was always smiling.

I nodded, squatting down to sit next to him.

He took a long, slow drag of the blunt before holding it in my direction. I considered it for a moment, studying the intricate smoke patterns rising from the burning cherry, before plucking it from his fingers and taking two deep hauls before passing it back.

Unlike Nix, I wasn't a daily pot smoker. I preferred it when my mind felt clean and organized. Sometimes though, I

needed an outlet, something other than killing, and then I supposed that I enjoyed a good drink or a toke as much as any other red-blooded male out there.

“Our pet didn’t make an appearance then?” he asked, although he already knew the answer. I wouldn’t be smoking to calm myself down before meeting with Lucian if I’d gotten to take some of my frustrations out on Luz.

I didn’t respond. He passed me back the joint.

“Maybe we can pay the birthday girl a visit after big bro tells us whatever’s got his panties in a twist this time,” Nix offered optimistically.

I shrugged him off.

That had been part of my motivation in looking for her today. It was Luz’s birthday, and I’d thought it would be the perfect occasion for a punishment. Now she had gone and earned herself another.

Nix’s phone buzzed, and he released a heavy sigh as he read the incoming message before putting out the joint. “Lucian’s ready. We’ve been summoned.”

My twin led the way, and I walked behind him, deftly navigating the wide hallways that wound through Blackwell Manor. The estate may have been our late-childhood home, but it held no sense of warmth, no nostalgia. We both had rooms here, but Nix and I rarely stayed at the manor anymore.

The two of us were the official bastards of Tyler Blackwell.

As the story goes, after the passing of Elisabeth, Lucian's precious mummy, Tyler turned into a degenerate manwhore, basically fucking any woman who gave his drunken, disheveled ass the time of day. My mother was one of many who he screwed around with in exchange for him supporting her drug-fueled lifestyle. When she found she was carrying not one but two of the sons of a wealthy man, she thought she'd hit the jackpot.

Unfortunately for my mother, Tyler didn't give a shit about us or her, and he happily left us to suffer together for the first eight years of my life. It wasn't until several years after he died that CPS suddenly decided that they cared for our well-being, thanks to a hefty bribe from our grandfather, who had decided more Blackwell heirs were always better, and we were violently ripped from the arms of our drug-addled mother.

I didn't have many particularly fond memories of the woman. She was an addict at her worst and a shitty mom at her best. When she died of an overdose a couple of years ago, I felt nothing other than the same small satisfaction that I would at the passing of any other miserable soul. The world was a better place without her.

Victor Blackwell may have been the devil, but unlike with my mother, what Nix and I suffered at his hands gave us purpose, it made us stronger. We were never going to be anything other than killers, but my grandfather made us masters of our craft, giving shape and meaning to what would have otherwise likely been a short, dull, violent life.

Nix prowled languidly into Lucian's office, and I stalked in behind him, making a beeline for our usual seat, a small tufted brown leather sofa. It sat several feet in front of the far wall, which was covered from floor to ceiling with books like most of the room save for the massive fireplace behind Lucian's desk.

The others were already there, also in their usual places. Locke sat with perfect, albeit rigid, posture, holding a glass of Scotch in one hand, inspecting the neat manicure of his other.

In contrast, Ever was languidly draped across his chair with his head hanging off one side and his legs lazily cast over the other. Anyone else and my oldest brother would have reamed them out, but with Everest he had long ago learned to pick his battles.

Then there was the heir apparent himself, Lucian. While we shared the same dark blue eyes and tall frame, that was where the similarities between us ended. Lucian had thick black wavy hair he wore brushed back from his face, although a couple of pieces always seemed to fall out of place. His nose and jaw were wider, giving him more of a brutish look, and where Nix and I were strong and fast, built like swimmers, Lucian was a mountain of a man. With about fifty pounds of muscles on us, he always seemed to loom large, even though we had been the same height as him since we were teenagers.

I made myself comfortable next to my twin, assessing our fearless leader, always trying to see what he wasn't saying.

Lucian sat perched on the edge of his desk, a massive oak piece that dominated the large room. He had removed his suit jacket, which was unusual for him, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. Like Locke, he was already deep into a tumbler of Scotch, one that he gripped tightly while he observed the rest of us in return.

Whatever the hell was going, it had him riled up.

After a couple more beats of silence, he took a swig and placed his glass back on the desk, leveling all of us with a dark look.

“They found a body today.”

To my right, Nix scrunched his face up. Blackwells were many things, but sloppy wasn't one of them. If one of us had left a body behind, then they were in big trouble. Locke and I didn't make those types of mistakes, but the other two had in the past. As far as I knew though, my twin hadn't killed anyone lately, so I didn't think he had much to worry about.

“The first of the missing students, the one from the spring,” Lucian continued.

Ah, that made more sense.

“And that requires an urgent meeting?” Locke scoffed.

Lucian said nothing but cut my cousin a look that said his disrespect had not gone unnoticed.

“The body was found in an alleyway in town; the girl's heart had been removed from her body and placed on top of her chest.” Lucian's voice was dead of any emotion.

Locke kept his mouth shut, realizing, as we all did, that changed things.

Smiling eagerly, Everest spun around in his chair to land on his feet. Lucian now commanded his full attention. “Sounds messy.”

“It was,” my brother replied matter-of-factly, “although, from what I understand the heart was removed postmortem. They believe she was suffocated to death.”

Ever steeped his fingers, nodding along thoughtfully.

“I’ve yet to receive the photos from the police, but they’ve told me she was found deliberately arranged on the ground, almost ritualistically dressed in some sort of white, old-fashioned-looking nightgown.”

Everest’s eyes went wide. “A sacrifice?” he whispered dramatically.

Lucian ignored him. “I think we all know what this means.” His gaze burned into each of us.

There was officially another killer at Hollow Oak.

## Chapter Twenty-Five





Luz

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you,” Autumn crooned, loudly and off-key as she marched into my room carrying a cake, complete with candles.

“Happy birthday, dear Luz!” she trilled as I pretended to cover my ears with my hands. “Happy birthday to you!”

When I explained to Autumn that I wouldn’t be going anywhere for my birthday, she took it in stride and, before I could even get into the details of my flimsy explanation for spraining my ankle, she had our brunch reservation canceled and was placing orders for some of my favorite foods to be delivered the next day. In less than twenty-four hours, she had put together an impressive spread, including my favorite kind of cake.

She sat on the edge of my bed, holding it in front of me. “Make a wish!”

Smiling, I closed my eyes and blew out the candles, nailing them all on the first go.

“Yay!” she squealed, jumping up and down in her seat.

“Easy there,” I warned, reaching out to protect my precious cake.

Autumn had made it clear that we would be celebrating my birthday “come, like, hell or high water,” forcing me to push everything that had happened on Halloween to the back of my mind.

I couldn't avoid it forever. Friday's events had made it clear that I was in more danger than I had thought. But Mami always said that there was a time and place to make a plan, and just as we waited for the right moment to act, sometimes we needed to wait for the right moment to make a decision.

For today, all I could do was celebrate my birthday.

"Big slice or little slice?" Autumn asked.

"Big, please," I said cheerfully, making a grabby gesture with my hands as I watched her carve a large slice of strawberry layer cake.

She was dressed in what she called "birthday-in-bed chic," which apparently meant an emerald-green silk pajama suit, complete with marabou cuffs and matching high-heeled slippers. She looked incredible and put my simple white shorts and sweatshirt set to shame.

"Gimme, gimme," I said, snatching my plate and fork from her hands when she offered it to me, then immediately diving in. I moaned around a mouthful of strawberries, whipped cream, and angel food cake. "Sooo good."

"You know, I really would have thought you were, like, a chocolate cake girl," Autumn said contemplatively, as she sat back down next to me, her own slice in hand.

"Mmm, don't get me wrong," I mumbled, talking around the cake. "I love chocolate too, but this is my all-time favorite."

What I didn't say out loud was that it was one of the few childhood experiences that my father and stepmother hadn't

ruined for me. We didn't have it often, and certainly not to celebrate my birthday, but I never forgot that first taste of rich cream and fresh strawberries against the subtle sweetness of the sponge.

"I'm sorry I couldn't find any of the food you said your mom used to make," she said quietly.

For my birthday, Mami always made us pernil, arroz con gandules, tostones, and an apple and cabbage salad. It was always way too much food for just the two of us, so after we had our celebration, we usually would make up plates for whoever our neighbors at the time were and share the leftovers.

They were good memories, some of my best with her ...

But Mami was dead, and I was alive. It was time for new traditions.

"Aaron and Melody seemed to have a pretty good Halloween from the photos they sent," Autumn said as we continued to enjoy the food.

I snorted. "If by 'good time' you mean they got absolutely wasted, then yes, yes they did."

Autumn had offered to invite them over to join us but was wholly understanding when I said I wanted to do something with just the two of us. It was a relief since a small part of me was worried that she might not take no for an answer after having to miss out on Halloween. Not only was my dorm room too small to really host the four of us, but I was on edge

and didn't feel comfortable inviting either of them into my personal space.

"I am still upset that I got sick and missed Halloween," she said with a pout. "My costume was absolutely epic."

"That it was," I said, nibbling on two red Sour Patch Kids.

I was conflicted about the nature of her sudden illness. Autumn had recovered incredibly quickly, and I couldn't stop thinking about how easy it would have been for someone to drug her to deliberately make her sick and keep her in. But why?

The other part of me was happy that despite the price, she had been safe and sound in her bed all night. What would the sheep have done if they had caught her with me?

It wasn't as though I could tell her my suspicions. What would I say? That someone had poisoned her, but it was for the best, otherwise she might have wound up chased through the woods by creepy sheep-mask-wearing psychos with me?

At this point, the less she knew the better.

"So ..." she hedged, flashing me her best pout as she gingerly picked up a perfectly golden cube of pineapple. "WhatsgoingonwiththeBlackwelltwinsstalkingyou?" she blurted out so quickly that I barely heard her, before she popped the piece of fruit into her mouth, giving me a chagrined closed-mouth smile with a shrug.

I coughed as a piece of cake got caught in my throat.

“Do you really think I haven’t noticed them hanging around the background, like, half the time we leave this place? I’m pretty sure I just saw one of them lurking out in front of Gabriel House across the quad when I went to go pick up the food.”

“What?” I managed to wheeze out as I reached for some of my water.

“The Blackwell twins.” She smiled mischievously, rolling her hand at me. “You know, like, Nixon and Alister? Tall, blond, creepy. Virtually indistinguishable and fond of staring intensely at you from a distance?”

“Which one was it? In front of Gabriel House?” I asked, after choking back some water.

Autumn furrowed her brow in confusion. “How would I know? Like I said, virtually indistinguishable.”

“Oh, right,” I mumbled lamely.

“You can tell them apart?”

I shrugged, not comfortable explaining how I did, since that would require telling her about just how close and personal I had gotten with the twins in the past.

Both of our phones started buzzing repeatedly at the same time, causing the two of us to exchange a curious look before we picked them up to see a series of automated text messages from the university flood in.

“Holy shit,” she whispered as she read what I was reading.

*CAMPUS WIDE ALERT:*

*Early this morning, police recovered the body of missing Hollow Oak student, Sandra O'Connor.*

*At this time, the Shady Harbor police are treating her death as a homicide.*

*Anyone with any information related to the death of Sandra O'Connor or the disappearances of Glory Van Holt and Ainsley Phillimore should speak with the police immediately.*

*Students are encouraged to remain calm and visit the Martin Kleinfeld Mental Health Center to speak with a counselor if necessary.*

*Hollow Oak University takes the safety of its students, faculty, and staff seriously. Effectively immediately, security will be increased on campus, with a zero-tolerance policy for loitering enforced after 10:00 p.m.*

The room spun around me, and the taste of strawberries and cream crept back up my throat, burning me with its sickly sweetness.

“I can’t believe they found her body,” Autumn said quietly, unable to tear her eyes away from the messages in front of her.

I didn’t know what to say or what to do.

When I first heard about the missing girls, I knew, in my gut, that something horrible had happened to them. But, like everyone else on campus, I compartmentalized my worries, locking them away so I could continue to go on with my life. There was nothing I could personally do for them.

With the discovery of a body, my worst fears for the missing had come true, and I was drowning in the growing sense of dread that this was somehow tied to everything that had been happening to me.

My phone buzzed again in my hands as another message arrived, and I immediately looked to see what it was ...

I scrambled for the bathroom, as fast as I could on my busted ankle, ignoring Autumn's concerned shouts in the background. All the food I had eaten was now rushing back up my throat, and I only just made it to the toilet in time. Over and over again I retched until all that was left of Autumn's carefully curated feast was a noxious mess of bile and vomit.

When I had finally finished puking my guts out, I reached out to pick up my phone again with a trembling hand, careful to shield it from Autumn who had come to join me on the bathroom floor.

It was still there, a photo of a young woman, dead. Her light blonde hair spilled out around her head like the sun, and her body was arranged with her arms spread wide and her legs tucked tightly together. It almost looked as if she had been crucified, although there wasn't a single mark on her hands or feet. She was dressed in a long white cotton shift that was soaked crimson and on top of her chest, was a dark, bloody heart that looked all too familiar. Except this one wasn't a pig's heart.

*UNKNOWN: Happy Birthday Penelope, hope you liked my gift.*





## Chapter Twenty-Six



# Penelope

Sherwood Oregon, Ten Years Ago

“*Penelope ... Penelope ... Penelope ...*”

I sat up in bed. Any minute now I would hear my father’s heavy footsteps pounding down the hall to my room.

I pulled up my knees and tucked down my head.

I liked to pretend that if I squeezed hard enough, I could make Bunny and me disappear. Poof! Gone.

Rocking back and forth across my soft pink flannel sheets, I realized that there were no footsteps, no slamming doors, no angry voices.

“*Penelope ...*”

Only that voice.

It was feminine and soft. The only person who ever said my name that way was Marianne. It wasn’t her. She wasn’t allowed here after dinner. I asked Felicity, my stepmother, why. She said it would look bad if they left me with the nanny

all the time. I think it was because if Marianne stayed, she would find out who my father really was.

*“Penelope.”*

I didn’t make a sound. I couldn’t be tricked. No one was coming to save me.

Father beat me long before his “experiments” started. The ones he did in the basement. I couldn’t remember the first time he hit me, but I did remember the first time he broke my nose. Felicity had to clean me up. She never did that.

My stepmother never liked me. She made sure I knew I wasn’t hers. That her husband had an affair. That he brought me home even though she didn’t want me.

She never hurt me like my father, but she never stopped him. When she gently wiped the blood from my nose and offered me an ice pack that time, I thought that maybe she finally felt bad enough for me to care.

Then she told my father that he couldn’t hit me in the face anymore. She didn’t want the neighbors to talk. Didn’t want to have to waste money on plastic surgery to fix me.

*“Penelope, where are you?”*

The voice was getting closer.

Marianne joined us when I was a toddler. It wasn’t as bad. My father was barely around.

But as I got older, it got worse. And it was made painfully clear to me that if I ever said anything to Marianne, she would

never believe me. And even if she did, no one would believe her.

I never said anything. I wouldn't say now.

*“Penelope?”*

Sometimes my father brought a guest over to see his experiments. I never saw who it was, but I could hear my father explaining his “work.”

“While cardioversion and defibrillation are well understood as medical interventions, the same cannot be said for induced cardiac arrest ...” he lectured as he secured the thick leather straps that he used to keep me bound to the steel table in our basement.

The other person never spoke. Not that I could hear, but I knew they were there. The shifting sound of pant legs crossing over one another, the scratching of a pen on a paper, the heavy sigh of a deeply expressed breath.

What if my father's guest had returned to conduct their own experiments?

*“Penelope.”*

The voice was closer. They would find me soon. I dug my fingers into my stuffed animal. Velveteen Rabbit was my last line of defense against the monsters in the night, but not even it could protect me from my father.

I wanted to go hide under my bed. Not it would do me any good. Hiding only made him angrier. He always found me.

So, I sat there, in my third-favorite pajamas, the ones with the pink and purple clouds on them, clutching my bunny tightly, waiting for death to come for me.

*Stop ... start ... stop ... start ...*

I don't think my father meant to kill me the first time. He was just so mad. He kept squeezing my throat ... *tighter ... tighter ... tighter ... tighter ...* until *poof!* I disappeared. He said that he brought me back to life. That he saved me.

The next time I died, he wasn't so angry but he was just as scary. He kept saying how easy it had been. How I slipped away before his eyes and just as quickly, my young heart sprung back to life.

"It was like watching a miracle," he whispered to me as he wrapped his hands around my throat again.

After that, he built his lab.

He needed to be able to "control" his experiments, he said. There were lots of different ways to kill me, he explained, but it was harder to bring me back to life.

*Stop ... start ... stop ... start ... How many times could you stop a heart?*

I had stopped counting how many times I'd died at his hands.

Back in my room, the door cracked open quietly as a sliver of warm golden light cut through the darkness. I'd been found.

“Penelope, is that you?” The woman’s voice sounded funny up close.

I didn’t respond.

She pushed the door open and stepped into the room. My eyes struggled with the sudden brightness. I couldn’t see her face. All I could make out was the shape of a small, curvy woman in front of me.

Marianne and Felicity were tall and willowy.

She walked into the room. The smell of copper in the air scared me. I scrambled away from her in my bed. I knew what blood smelled like. My back hit the wooden headboard with a heavy clunk. The woman stopped and let out a soft cry that startled me.

“Oh, Penelope, mija, it’s you.”

I could see more of her now. She was short. Much shorter than Felicity, with round hips and a small waist. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun, but it was so dark that it stood out even in the shadows. Her face was harder to see, but her lips were full and her cheeks were plump.

She looked a lot like me.

“Penelope,” she said again, this time more urgently but still softly, “I’ve come to take you away from here, but we need to go now. We need to hurry.”

She took another step toward me and reached out with her hands. I didn’t move. I couldn’t. I was still looking at the stranger in front of me.

She was covered in blood, except for her hands. It didn't bother me as much as it should.

“Whose?” It came out scratchy and hurt my throat, and when she didn't respond I worried I wasn't loud enough.

“I won't ever lie to you, Penelope,” she said. “This is the blood of the hijo de puta that was your father, along with your stepmother.”

She stopped for a moment and looked at me with big eyes. “They both deserved so much worse for what they have done to you, Penelope, and if time was on our side, I would have paid that monster back blow-by-blow for every time he laid his hands on you.”

Her words were scary, but her voice was kind. I could tell she was trying hard to be nice to me. I didn't understand why.

“Who are you?” I whispered a bit louder, trying to sound as brave as I could.

“Oh, mija,” she said, sitting next to the bed. She went to hold my hand. I pulled away. Out of her reach.

Her brown eyes got even bigger. It looked like she might cry. But she didn't try again. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't have ...” She didn't finish. Just shook her head. “Do you know who I am?” she said after a minute.

I shook my head.

She looked tired, and she let out a heavy sigh before she spoke. “I'm your mother, Penelope.”





She and I watched as the big house I had lived in with my father and Felicity burned up. I could smell the smoke even from far away. The firemen would come soon.

“I hope you burn in hell, you hijo de puta,” the woman said, sounding angry again.

She spat on the ground through the window of the car we were in. I had never been in one like this before. It smelled a bit funny, and you had to roll the windows up and down by hand. There was a wooden rosary and a paper pine tree hanging from the mirror.

I wanted to ask her what that word was.

“It’s time to go, mija. Are you ready?” She looked worried. I wondered if she was scared I would disappear.

I fell asleep, and when I woke up, we were far away from Oregon. The woman kept on driving. She told me how I had to be Luz now. Luz Amelia Torres. She told me that Penelope Callister was dead now.

I didn’t tell her Penelope died a long time ago.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven



## Luz

Hollow Oak, Present

It took me a while to reassure Autumn that I was going to be all right, that I was just reacting poorly to the news about the body and had overdone it on the birthday treats. Eventually, I got her to accept that I needed to rest some more, although it still took her several trips in and out of my room to clear up the birthday buffet, and several pinky promises on my behalf to text her if I needed anything, before she finally retreated back to her own room.

“I mean it, Luz, anything at all, you text me!” she warned with all the fierceness of a mama bear as the door shut behind her for the final time.

I waited for the familiar sound of Autumn opening and closing her door. Once I knew that she was safely back in her own room, I released a deep sigh, collapsing in a heap on the bed as I ran my hands tightly through my hair.

*Penelope.*

Dr. James Callister had been a brilliant and respected cardiologist who had all the charming ease of someone raised with a silver spoon in their mouth. While his family was nothing compared to some of those who attended Hollow Oak, the Callisters had been in Oregon for several generations. Every boy had gone on to have distinguished careers, usually in medicine or local politics. Every girl married well. The family had roots in the community, the respect of their peers, and enough influence in local affairs to make sure their dirty secrets remained just that, secrets.

Like so many men of a certain kind of class, when he married Felicity, a former Miss Oregon runner-up, it was unsaid but understood that he might stray outside of their relationship so long as he never brought it home or into the public eye.

His affair with my mother, who had been a young nursing student at the hospital where he worked, ruined all that when she got pregnant with me. Mami was a proud woman, even then. At twenty years old, she was living on her own, estranged from her family in New York City and Puerto Rico, and was putting herself through nursing school. The first of her family to attend college, she was ambitious, dedicated, and impressionable.

According to Mami, when she first told my father that she was pregnant and planned to keep the baby, he told her that he supported her decision. He convinced her that the three of us would be a real family one day. She knew it had been wrong to

start an affair with a married man, but my father had pursued her heavily. It seemed like all her dreams were coming true.

But the pregnancy progressed, and my father became more and more distant and withdrawn. He began dropping hints that it wouldn't be possible for him to leave Felicity, that if he did, she would take him to the cleaners, leaving us in poverty. Which didn't make sense. My father was one of the most highly paid doctors in the entire county.

I was born, and he showed up at the hospital with a lawyer and papers drawn up to terminate my mother's parental rights. She refused to sign and kicked them out.

But then she lost her student placement at the hospital and next her scholarship. Next, her friends suddenly wanted nothing to do with her, and she was a single mother with a newborn baby all on her own. Still, it wasn't until her landlord informed her that her lease was terminated, giving her only twenty-four hours to vacate the property, that she realized just how powerless she was against James Callister.

When she called my father, broken down, she tried furiously to argue for shared custody. He wouldn't budge. He told her that as his child I would be afforded a lifetime of privilege, have access to a quality education, and want for nothing. In short, he could offer me the best possible life there was. But only if I was his child, a Callister. On that he would not compromise.

So, in a moment of desperation, my mother signed the papers and walked out of my life. But she never stopped

thinking about me, never stopped planning how she would get me back. It took her a while, but she eventually moved away from Oregon and re-enrolled in nursing school, completing her degree.

During those years apart, spent thinking and planning, Mami came to one unavoidable conclusion—she would never be able to go against my father and win, not legally. The system simply wasn't designed to protect someone like her. No, if she wanted her daughter back, there was only one way to do it.

James Callister would have to die.

It took her another couple of years to put together a plan that could work. It wasn't just the issue of killing my father, but what came after. We would need a new life, a fresh start. It would take her another year to find the right person to create new identities for the two of us, ones that would stand up to scrutiny and allow us to really move on, and three more years for her to save enough money to put everything in place.

But she worked endless overtime, scrimped and saved, plotted and schemed until finally, she was ready to return for me.

She spent a month watching me and my father, waiting for the right opportunity. The night she killed him, she had been spying on the house from the woods that surrounded it. My father was a busy man, who rarely saw me, so it wasn't unusual for weeks to go by without his abuse. But that particular evening, he was home for dinner, and I dropped a ketchup-covered fry on the antique carpet in the dining room.

My mother had wanted to observe us for another couple of weeks before putting her plans into action. But when she watched my six-foot-tall father stalk across the room and shove her only child to the floor and begin to beat her with his fists, she'd known the Callisters would have to die that night.

A warm trickle of blood running down my hand pulled me back into the present. When I looked down, I saw that I had again picked my thumbnail cuticle raw, ruining the manicure I had given myself earlier in the week.

“Merde,” I whispered before lifting my thumb to my lips and sucking the blood off it.

There were too many things going on, too many variables to account for.

My stomach lurched, and I felt sick all over again.

Mami had given me back my life and then taught me how to take control of it.

Because that was what my life was—the good grades, the accomplished resume, the polished looks—I didn't need a psychologist to tell me that it was all about creating for myself the sense of control and safety I'd never experienced as a child. Maybe in another life, I could have afforded to work through my issues in therapy, given myself some grace, and learned to be okay with just being. But that wasn't in the cards for me now, not with the things that Mami and I had done.

“I wish you were here,” I cried, releasing the tears I had been holding at bay, my voice cracking.

“You would know what to do, you always knew what to do ... You would see what I’m missing, you wouldn’t be so hesitant to do what needed to be done ... you never hesitated ...”

An uncomfortable tightness started to work its way up through my limbs as the urge to scream or slam something built up in me, and I had to dig my nails into my palms, using the bite of pain to ground myself.

I had almost regained a semblance of calm when my phone vibrated again, immediately sending my heart rate spiking. I could have turned it off, but I was worried about what Autumn would do if she couldn’t reach me.

With a shaky hand, I picked it up and turned it over.

*UNKNOWN: We need to meet.*

I blinked at the message before I realized that it was from the first unknown number, the one that had messaged me yesterday about Halloween.

The uncomfortable sensation of anger surged through me again, and before I could think better of it, I found myself furiously typing back.

*Me: And who the hell is this?*

Mami would be disappointed with my coarse language, and frankly, I knew better than to antagonize a possibly dangerous stranger. I didn’t care.

*UNKNOWN: 3:00 PM Thursday, Baldwin Hall, south doors.*



“This cryptic pendejo,” I growled, typing rapidly as I prepared to take out all my pent-up frustrations on my mystery texter. Before I could, another message came through, causing the air to hitch in my lungs.

*UNKNOWN: Don't make me wait, petite diablesse.*

I shouldn't be surprised he had my number. What I didn't understand was why he wanted to meet. Usually, the twins simply popped up whenever they felt like it.

I fired back.

*Me: Why?*

I stared at the phone intensely, as if I could force him to respond, but those telltale three dots never popped back up.

“Bâtard ...” I grumbled as I lay back down on my bed, massaging my temples.

It would have been nice to eliminate Alister as my stalker since he messaged me from a different number, but I wasn't that stupid or naïve.

I also didn't think the timing was a coincidence. Everyone on campus just learned that the police found Sandra's body, and suddenly one of the men rumored to be one of Hollow Oak's most infamous killers wanted to see me.

*Does he know about the photo?*

Despite what people believed, it was more complicated to hack into someone's phone than it seemed. Just because it was easy for skilled hackers didn't mean every single computer

science major was running around cloning phones. Still, this was Alister Blackwell. If anyone could do it, it was probably him.

Which raised another concern, a much more pressing one—what to do with the incredibly incriminating photo on my phone?

Rapping my nails across the shiny plastic case of my iPhone, I considered my options.

Walking around with a photo of a murder victim on me was a dumb idea. The police hadn't released any images of the body, and I doubted they would. I knew in my gut the one I received had been taken by the killer or killers, and trying to explain how I came into possession of it would only cause more problems.

On the other hand, I also couldn't afford to delete it—it was one of the few clues I had to go on.

Someone had killed Sandra and wanted me to know it in the most graphic way possible. They wanted me to see her body, the still-bleeding heart on her corpse. They wanted me to know they were capable of murder. That they knew who Penelope was.

*Who I was.*

One of the things Mami had taught me when we rebuilt our lives from scratch was how to hide information for a rainy day, so I saved the photo and the message from my phone to a

secure cloud location and then used a program to permanently wipe the data from my phone.

The bloody heart, the stickers, the sheep, and now my birthday message. Someone wanted me scared.

That would be their mistake.

I had died too many times to let fear hold me back now.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight



## Luz

**D**espite my protests that my ankle was starting to feel better, Autumn took me to the campus medical clinic first thing on Monday morning. After a two-hour wait to see a very curt university doctor, I left with an ankle brace, crutches, and strict instructions to stay off it for the next few weeks and not to even think about going for a run for at least a month.

“Oh, careful,” Autumn said, offering me her shoulder for support when I lost my balance for a third time walking home from the clinic. I was quickly learning that cobblestones and crutches didn’t go together.

“Sorry about that,” I mumbled, embarrassed to need her assistance. The doctor had given me a note excusing me from classes this week while I was supposed to be taking it easy, but I couldn’t afford to sit around in my dorm room doing nothing.

“Holy shit, Luz, what happened to you?!” a familiar voice called out from across the way.

Aaron bounded over with the energy of a Goldendoodle but with concern written all over his face. “I know you said you hurt your ankle, but ...” He trailed off as he took me in with wide eyes, brown hair falling in front of them.

I plastered on a grimace and offered a shrug. “It’s not as bad as it looks. I’ll be back on my feet in no time.”

Autumn coughed behind me while he looked at my crutches skeptically.

“Can I offer you a hand?” he said earnestly, causing me to roll my eyes.

Ignoring his offer, I pushed my crutches into the ground and propelled myself forward. The only way I was going to get used to the things was to keep using them. That and something in my gut still told me to keep Aaron at a distance.

He and Autumn followed me cautiously, one at my side and the other at my back, and I pretended not to see their outstretched arms as they waited for me to topple over at any moment.

There were a few more close calls, and by the time I finally arrived back at the dorm, my armpits ached, and I was uncomfortable and sweaty despite the early November chill in the air. But I made it on my own. At this rate, it would only take me another couple of hours to recover before my evening class.

Aaron stood outside our dorm, rubbing the back of his neck as he took in my flustered state.

“Are you sure I can’t give you a hand getting to class later, Luz? I feel bad watching you hobble around campus.”

I attempted to wave him off and nearly lost control of one of the crutches, barely managing to stop myself from tumbling over. “I’ll be fine, but the three of us should grab breakfast tomorrow. It’s been too long, and Autumn and I need to hear all about how Halloween was.”

Aaron’s eyes lit up like a small child’s at Christmas. “That sounds great! Our usual spot tomorrow, then?”

I nodded along with a big smile and left Autumn to wrap up some pleasantries with Aaron while I made my way to the elevators, knowing she would catch up with me.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, as the saying goes.



The days dragged by slowly.

Locke was conspicuously absent once again, leaving Dominic to lecture in his place, which somehow felt less satisfying than it did before. Although my ankle was already starting to feel better, it still took me three times as long to get anywhere, so most of the time I resigned myself to studying in my room.

Having been cooped up all week, something inside me was looking forward to the meeting with Alister, though I was

loath to admit it, and I found myself nervously counting the minutes until three o'clock on Thursday afternoon.

It was an unseasonably warm day, so I had chosen to wear a pair of bike shorts with an oversized collegiate-style Hollow Oak crewneck and my birthday present from Autumn, a pair of white-and-green New Balance 550s.

Bader Hall was on the southwest side of campus, and I cursed Alister's choice of location nearly every step of the way. I approached the nondescript brutalist structure, paying careful attention to my surroundings and those around me.

I had to consider that the text might not have been from Alister at all and that this was another attempt by the sheep to get me alone and vulnerable. After the events of the weekend, it was clear that there were multiple people targeting me.

I turned down the path to approach the south doors and found the area conspicuously empty, which only heightened my sense of alarm. If this was a trap, it was a bold one in the daylight. Then again, murdering a woman and cutting out her heart didn't exactly scream subtle.

Preparing myself for the worst, I gripped my crutches tightly and planted my weight as firmly as I could on one foot, hoping I could stay steady long enough to use one of the crutches as a weapon.

Silence hung heavy in the air as I waited for the telltale crunch of gravel. It never came. I heard the faintest shuffle, but before I could react, a hand wrapped tightly around my shoulder. Spinning around, I swung the opposite crutch out in



front of me as hard as I could. The lightweight metal collided with a solid trunk with a satisfying *thwack*, and the heavy quiet I had been suffocating under was broken by a rough, masculine growl.

Alister rubbed his ribs with one hand where the crutch had connected, while his other remained firmly on my shoulder, tugging me near to him.

“Let go,” I hissed, raising my crutch up to swing at him again. I was in no mood to indulge the twins’ penchant for manhandling me after the week I had just lived through.

He rolled his eyes as he seized my makeshift weapon with his free hand and forced me to lower it to the ground with a firm grip and a dark expression written in his deep blue eyes.

I leveled a fiery stare back at him.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I seethed.

Alister’s eyes darted back down to my crutches, his brows wrinkled. “You’re hurt.” Once again, his voice was both deliciously deep and raspy.

“Trou du cul...” I muttered. I was supposed to believe this man was some sort of professional killer, and he only just noticed I was walking around with a bum ankle.

If he heard or understood my muttered curse, he didn’t acknowledge it. With a now-pronounced frown on his face, he slipped his phone out of his pocket and typed out something quickly before pocketing it again.

When he looked up, the frown remained, and he studied me with a growing intensity that had me shifting back and forth in place nervously.

“You’re hurt,” he said again in the sort of straitlaced tone that made it clear he expected an explanation.

“And you’re more talkative than usual,” I griped before trying to step out of his hold, only to nearly lose my balance all over again.

Alister scoffed as he caught me before I could fall to the ground, and I found myself hyperaware of the large, warm hand he placed firmly around my waist.

“Umph!” My crutches were violently yanked out from under my arms, and the world suddenly spun around me before I landed, my butt in the air, hanging off Alister’s shoulder.

“Put me down!” I spat out at him as soon as I had caught my breath. It was already too late. The quiet and clearly psychotic Blackwell twin strode toward the door of Bader Hall without a single regard for my furious indignation.

“Putain de merde ... If you don’t put me down!” I yelled as I began pelting his back with my fists ineffectively. I knew that my efforts were futile, but that didn’t mean I had to make this a comfortable trip for the overbearing jerk.

I continued my farce of an assault as he swung open the wide glass doors that led inside before he made a sharp right, heading down a disconcertingly empty hallway. The current of electricity that ran down my spine was far from unpleasant.

“Alister!” I hissed, a bit softer. Something about the weighty silence of the empty building made me want to lower my own voice.

He said nothing in return, and I started to consider the odds that I might truly be in danger and how I could increase my chances of surviving this encounter.

Alister came to a halt in front of a door before marching us into what appeared to be an empty classroom. In one swift motion he deposited me onto a dusty-looking desk, placing the crutches that I hadn't even given a second thought to next to me, before spinning around and marching back to the door. I couldn't see what he was doing, but the ominous clanking of an aging lock gave it away.

He turned away from the door, his eyes sharp and his head cocked as he meticulously inspected me from head to toe. It was both predatory and deliciously sumptuous, this beautifully dangerous man so voraciously consuming me with every beat of his stare.

He began to approach the desk, and I could feel my heart vibrating deeply in my chest. It wasn't the same as the terror I felt on Halloween night, but adrenaline rushed through me all the same.

“Why am I here?” I said, sweeping off some of the dust that had collected on my shorts with a graceful flick.

He tilted his head farther to the side but didn't respond.

I huffed, reaching for my crutches. “Fine, if you don’t want to talk, then I don’t even know why I—”

“You’re not who you should be,” he said abruptly, setting off alarm bells in my head and stopping me in my tracks.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” I shot back, not bothering to hide my defensiveness. He had thrown me over his shoulder and dragged me into an abandoned classroom; I was entitled to defend myself, secrets or not.

“Luz Amelia Torres, born 2004, Almeda, Texas, to one Sofia Torres, no father listed on the birth certificate. Until the fourth grade you lived in Houston, after which you began moving around approximately 1.27 times a year for the next nine years, up until the death of your mother last September ...”

My stomach turned as he continued rattling off the half facts of my life story as though they were common knowledge.

“Despite this, you maintained a 4.3 weighted GPA, speak four languages fluently, and spent extensive time volunteering at the closest local retirement home, well beyond what your average high achiever would need to polish up their college resume.

“You have extremely limited social media, although you do have a burner account that you use to follow your friend Autumn Morgan on TikTok, along with some other more well-known fashion influencers.

“Your actual social life is even more pathetic if the words of your former classmates are to be believed. By all accounts, the

Morgan girl might be your first ever real friend, although, by the waves you made at the party at the beginning of the year, it's not entirely surprising. You don't seem to suffer from the same pointless desire to be liked that everyone else does. Yet you allow the Croft boy and that sniveling blonde to continue to hang around when you so clearly dislike them."

I kept my spine straight as he continued to monotonously deliver a horrifying amount of knowledge and introspection into my life. I knew that the twins had been stalking me, but I had no idea the breadth of knowledge Alister Blackwell had managed to collect on me. If this was what he knew now, it was only a matter of time before he started uncovering my past, if he hadn't already.

"I know that you are at the top of all your classes, except Macro Economics where you're only in the top ten percent, due in part to my cousin's entirely unprofessional obsession with you ..."

He finally paused, letting a heavy exhale out through his nose as his eyes crinkled in a rare expression of emotion from the taciturn twin, although what precisely he was feeling was indecipherable.

"Nothing about you is remarkable, Luz Torres, not based on the facts available. You're intelligent, physically attractive, and disciplined, I suppose, but so are many people. So, what is it about you ..." he said, stepping closer to block me in. "What is about you, petite diablesse, that chaos and death follow so faithfully in your wake?"

## Chapter Twenty-Nine



## Alister

I watched with satisfaction as her pupils dilated, blotting out her amber irises like an eclipse. Her lips were slightly parted, to accommodate the increasingly deep breaths she was trying not to take. The dim light of the room made it difficult to see, but I was certain that if I were to wrap my hands around the soft flesh of her thighs, I would be rewarded with the pebbled sensation of goosebumps on her supple skin.

Her fear was absolutely captivating. Combined with her fiery determination not to give in, it was intoxicating and I found myself less and less interested in trying to maintain my objectivity around her.

I wanted to drink in her terror like a fine wine, and if it helped me get the answers I was looking for as well, even better.

“Va te faire foutre!” she snapped at me, and I suppressed the urge to smirk at her bravado. “Like I’ve already told you, your psychotic brother, your dickhole of cousin, the police, and everyone else, I don’t know why someone is stalking me.

More to the point, I still don't see why it's any of your business.”

She didn't have any of the traditional tells that most people did. Her breathing and pulse remained relatively even (though she had been attempting to regulate her breath for a while now), and her eyes remained steady, earnest even. Still, I knew, in the way I just did, that she was lying to me right now.

She'd told us before that she didn't know why she was being targeted, and at that time it was the truth. Now it wasn't. Something had changed, and I was excited to have a targeted secret to extract from her.

It wouldn't be easy. Particularly given what a skilled little storyteller she was. Few people took to lying that easily without some sort of underlying psychopathy. Which meant that either she was hiding darker secrets than I had imagined, or that someone had coached her on how to lie convincingly under pressure. Both were enticing possibilities. Either way, she represented a challenge.

I stepped forward into her space, unapologetically wedging myself in between her legs, deftly moving the crutches out of her reach. She wore those flimsy cotton spandex shorts wrapped around her like a second skin, and the warmth of her pussy was unmistakable even against the thick denim of my jeans.

She was cursing me out, again, this time in German.

“When did you learn to speak French?” I interrupted her without a second thought.



“Wh—what?” she stuttered, finally giving me an honest reaction.

I slipped my hand around the base of her neck, wrapping my fingers around her back and caressing my thumb along the length of her collarbone where I could lightly feel the thrumming of her pulse under her skin.

“You’re fluent in Spanish and German, but you favor French. You studied German in high school, and your mother taught you Spanish based on your accent and the colloquialisms you favor. How did you learn French?”

“A family friend,” she said defiantly, telling me nothing.

I counted the steady beats of her heart. *One ... two ... three ...* before murmuring, “Not a lie,” more to provoke her than anything.

She snorted at me as she rolled her eyes, and my already rock-hard cock twitched uncomfortably in my pants. “Is this supposed to be some sort of interrogation?”

That was Locke’s forte, although I was skilled at it myself. I shrugged. I wasn’t the one giving answers today.

“Then what the hell do you want—”

I cut her off, uninterested in hearing her petty protests anymore. In one smooth movement, I slid my thumb in between those devilishly plump lips, the ones that her lies fell from so beautifully, nipping her wicked little tongue in its place.

It was an intrusive, violating act, the kind that provoked the basest kind of reactions in people.

Sure enough, her eyes flared brightly, and I felt the pulse of her body as she instinctively rocked her core toward me even as she bit down viciously on my flesh, drawing blood. Submission and repulsion, in equal measures, a delicious harmony for me alone to appreciate.

I didn't flinch, and my lack of response to her frenzied attack left her unsure for a moment, debating her course of action.

“You are racking up quite the list of punishments, *ma petite diablesse* ...” I whispered, watching with satisfaction as her eyes widened impossibly further at my promise. “Suck,” I ordered without hesitation.

Her nostrils flared with anger, and yet I immediately felt the rough pad of her pretty pink tongue lap at the tip of my finger.

I didn't usually like to play with the women I fucked. Head games, domination, control—that was all more Nix's style than mine. Most of my sexual encounters were perfunctory in nature, a transactional release. But something about the bratty submissive I saw peeking out of Luz held my attention.

“Good girl,” I purred smugly, confident in the reaction I could provoke.

Sure enough, she took my thumb in deeper, biting down viciously on my knuckle and dragging me into her wet, hot mouth. This time I decided to reward her deviance, allowing

myself to hiss with pleasure at the small measure of pain she gifted me.

Then, as rapidly as I had invaded her mouth, I withdrew from it, taking advantage of the shock of my abruptness to press her further.

“There’s almost nothing to be found about you before the age of nine or ten.” Not a question, but a statement most people would naturally defend against.

“Do you even hear yourself talking?” she sputtered.

I didn’t respond. I knew what I said.

“No, Alister, I don’t know why your psycho-stalker skills can’t find anything interesting about my childhood. Maybe because it was just that? A boring normal childhood. We can’t all start off in Ivy League feeder schools playing hopscotch with future titans of industry.”

It was my turn to snort in disbelief. I had never played hopscotch in my life, and I sure as fuck didn’t spend my childhood rubbing elbows with the rich pricks who cowered beneath me now.

Instead of dignifying her outburst with a response, I drew my thumb into my own mouth, making a show of licking it clean of the taste of her lips along with the still-fresh blood running from it. Once I was satisfied with my work, I withdrew it with a pop before raising it back to her lips with a single command.

“Suck.”

This time she hesitated, her lips trembling against me as she weighed the rewards of disobedience versus submission. There was something inside her that was deeper and darker than the ambitions of your average scholarship student, and I wanted to crack her mind open like an egg and play with the goopy mess of it.

She bit down on her lip, her eyes like saucers while she avoided the task at hand. That wouldn't do.

“I said *suck*, diablesse. Don't make me repeat myself again.”

She bit down even harder on her lip as her eyes shot daggers at me. It didn't matter. She still opened that succulent mouth of hers and wrapped her warm tongue firmly around me, practically inviting me back in. For the briefest moment, her eyes flickered shut and I knew I had her.

*Good girl.*

This time I pulled away from her mouth slowly. It wasn't in my nature to do so, but the back-and-forth, the hot and cold, it was all part of the game, how you broke the fragile shells of delicate pretty things.

“How did you get hurt?”

This time I expected an answer. I had tolerated her deflection and defiance up until this point because I would expect no less, and this was just the beginning of all the ways I planned to extricate the truth from her. However, on the matter of her injuries, I would be getting answers today.

“I sprained my ankle running through the woods,” she replied without emotion.

*Truth but ...*

“What aren’t you saying?”

Looking up at me from under arched eyebrows, she somehow managed to look both impetuous and assessing. “It was late at night on Halloween, and it took me hours to drag myself back to my dorm.”

Frustration shot through me at her cavalier attitude. “You were told to stay inside,” I said through gritted teeth, my hand sliding back to its earlier position around her neck.

This time she didn’t respond but merely pursed her lips.

My grip tightened around her delicate collarbone. She rolled her eyes again, and for a moment, the world faded to black around me.

“You’ll have to forgive me for not taking advice from one of my stalkers.”

I increased the pressure around her neck. “Need I remind you whose campus this is?” I enunciated each word deliberately.

“Oh, it’s yours. That’s been made very clear to me, and I think we can both agree that I won’t be running in the woods anytime soon, *Ali!*” She hissed my name like a curse.

Where was that delicious fear I had come to drink down, and why did I find a measure of satisfaction in her petulant

defiance?

“Is there anything else you want to tell me? Think carefully.”

She sat in silence, her lips pressed into a thin, pensive line. I didn't like that. I much preferred them full and trembling.

Part of me wanted to stay here and play with the little devil well into the night, but as I much wanted to see tears running down those pretty cheeks, something told me it wasn't the time yet. She was playing at being cocky now, and I needed her to sit with the aftermath of our encounter.

I wanted my questions in her head. I wanted her to worry about what I knew and what I would learn. I wanted her to know that I was looking for answers, and that I would find them. I wanted her fear because her fear would make her sloppy, and that was how I'd get what I was looking for.

That, or I'd hire an even better hacker than me to dig into her past. I was good at that side of the business, but I had no delusions about being the best.

“It was my birthday last week, but I suppose you already know that.” Her voice was softer and seemingly without guile, which warned me she was up to something.

“November second, All Souls' Day.”

“Mmm, yes,” she said. “All Souls' Day, when good Catholics remember and pray for their departed loved ones. Especially the poor souls trapped in purgatory.”

“I didn't take you for a practicing Catholic.”

Luz smiled at me, a wry, bitter expression that twisted something sharp inside me. “Not at all. I can’t even claim that my mami dragged me to Mass against my will. But she still taught me some things. I may not have been raised a good Catholic, but she was.”

There was even less on her mother, Sofia Torres, and for the first time, I considered that I was missing something there.

“Aren’t you going to wish me a happy birthday?”

“Belated birthday,” I corrected her.

“Fine, belated birth—”

The sound of a door slamming shut nearby cut her off and sent me striding across the room to investigate. Bader Hall was closed for renovations, and no one else should be here right now.

A quick scan of the hallway turned up nothing, but by the time I had assessed the situation, she was up on those stupid fucking crutches again and was nearly at my back, trying to make her escape.

“If that’s all, I need to head back across campus. Autumn’s waiting for me,” she said, dismissing me.

I was tempted to snatch her back up, throw her on the desk, and show her just what I thought of her attitude. It was what Nix would do. But I wasn’t my twin, and I had my own plans for Luz, and I wouldn’t abandon them in a hormonally driven rush.

She clomped away from me and down the hallway. I would follow her at a distance to make sure she did indeed arrive at her destination. I had too many questions left unanswered for her to disappear now.

One way or another, I would get what I wanted from her. Whether it was at my fingertips or at my blade, only time would tell.



## Chapter Thirty



## Luz

**M**y heart felt heavy in my chest, causing me to sway back and forth on my crutches as I stumbled back to Jackson College House. I could feel the specter of Alister behind me at a distance, and I tried to remember when I had become so accepting of his and Nixon's constant haunting.

*Probably around the same time that you began to accept that they most likely weren't your stalker ... or at least not the most concerning of your stalkers.*

Only an idiot would feel safe around the twins. Nixon was a charming viper, and my exchange with Alister had shown just how dangerous he could be—knowledge was power, and he had dug up an impressive amount on me ... How much longer would it take him to find out about Penelope? And what would the consequences be when he did?

Heat flashed through me, rushing through my face, down my neck, and across my chest at the memory of him ordering me to *suck*. For a man I once thought of as quiet, Alister's voice had a commanding, no, dominating presence that overtook me

in the moment. It should have felt degrading, but there was something heady about obeying, about surrendering to a worthy adversary.

The heat of his gaze bore down on me, intensifying the flush I felt even as the fall winds began to pick up. Always there, always watching ... How much of me had he seen?

A quiver ran through me as I finally entered the dorm and headed up to my room. Once inside, I was quick to ditch the crutches and flop down on my bed, seeking the comfort of warm sheets and soft pillow. Running the forest trails behind campus had been my escape, my safe place. Now, I had this.

My heart continued to thump viscerally, keeping time with the throbbing in my ankle. Fatigue tugged at my mind. I was on the verge of crashing from the adrenaline high of Alister.

I closed my eyes. Sleep should have come easily. But instead of giving in to the exhaustion, it was as though my brain was defenseless against ruminating over everything that had happened. Apparently, my subconscious had decided I'd avoided dealing with the implications of Halloween and Sandra's murder for long enough.

Despite the lack of evidence linking them, I had to believe the two events were related. It wasn't clear what the connection was between the sheep and Sandra's murder, but there was something there ... Maybe whoever had called off the chase that night.

If the goal was to scare me, both the sheep and the killer had succeeded. Just as I couldn't stop thinking about Sandra's

death, I couldn't get the sight of those masks—the horrible emptiness of them staring back at me—out of my head. The desperation I'd felt when my ankle gave out, knowing that my pursuers were at my back, took me back to when I was a child, the same as seeing the name Penelope did.

Even now, trapped inside my dorm room, cocooned in my blankets, I was protected, less exposed, but was I any safer? The sheep had been able to get into my building. The killer had been able to nail a bloody heart to my door. Stickers were popping up all over campus. Was the lock on my door really enough to keep away someone who wanted me dead?

I shuddered, burrowing deeper and blinking back the watery sensation in my eyes.

Mami had made me strong enough that I rarely let myself feel helpless, and I hated that Hollow Oak had brought me back to that place.

Dead girls had nothing to lose, so we never gave up. Not to sheep and cowards who hid in the shadows. Not when we had lost so much already at the hands of the devil himself.

*Death was inevitable. Life was the contradiction.*

I didn't look forward to the suffering that would likely accompany my end—I had a functioning nervous system—but I had always told myself that I would welcome my final death with open arms.

*But what about Penelope ...*

Sometimes I wasn't sure who had died and who lived.

I was the dead girl, but Penelope was the one who died.

I was alive, but I died so Penelope could live.

Penelope couldn't die again, but I could.

Someone had to die and someone had to live.

*So why did I have to be the one to die?*

It felt petulant, whiny even, to ask the question. A woman had been murdered; her heart ripped out for the world to see. Why did I deserve to live any more than her? Death came for everyone.

*Stop ... start ... stop ... start ... How many times can you break a heart?*

I never understood the goal of my father's experiments. I think he just liked playing God. But I couldn't deny that he had mastered the art of bringing someone back from the brink of death. Under his careful eye, I was strangled, suffocated, and drowned before being resuscitated, over and over again. He learned to restart my heart with almost surgical precision. Considered it his gift. Were the hearts the killer was sending me some sort of twisted homage to his work?

It didn't entirely make sense. There was no reviving someone whose heart had been removed from their chest cavity. But then again, Sandra had been missing for months, not to mention the other girls.

*What had she suffered during that time? What was happening to the others at this very moment?*

I rushed for the wastebasket. My stomach was empty but that didn't stop the bile from rushing out of me, burning my throat with its pungent, mineral taste. My stomach cramped in protest, and tears ran freely down my face. My cheeks swelled, causing blood vessels to burst as I expelled what felt like every last drop of fluid inside me.

The idea of someone else being subjected to the same experiments my father had put me through terrified me more than any mask or bloody bits. Ripping someone's heart from their chest was a barbaric and horrifying act. But at least they only suffered through it once.

Forcing someone to die again and again ... to make them experience the agony of knowing they were living their last moments, over and over. It was evil in a way I couldn't put into words.

When my body finally had nothing left to give, I was left shaky and weak on the floor, unable to distinguish if my tears were from vomiting or fear.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there, broken like a rag doll, staring blankly into space, unable to see what was in front of me. Time shuffled forward and the sun set, slowly pitching the room into shadows. In front of me a single light shone, a tiny blue oval burning against the darkness, and my mind vividly latched on to its existence.

I stared at that tiny blue light as the hours wore by and until my brain finally shut down, and I crawled aimlessly back into

my bed barely conscious of my own existence. At last, sleep came for me.



When I woke up the next morning, the air in my room was stale and smelled of vomit, and the scent triggered a rush of memories from yesterday.

*Alister ... Sheep ... Blackwells ... Dead girls ... Broken hearts ... Bloody killers ...*

I choked down a gag and plugged my nose as I sprang from the bed, needing to dump the bile and clear out the air in my room immediately.

Only after I had gotten the window open and sprayed a lavender mist everywhere did I get a glass of water before slumping on the floor in front of the bed. Chugging it down, I closed my eyes as I leaned against the bedframe. I could feel my brain pounding painfully inside of my skull, and even after drinking water, the taste of chalk remained in my mouth. A quick look in the bathroom mirror confirmed that I looked as terrible as I felt, my cheeks puffy and my eyes swollen.

For a moment I sat, considering the weight of my fears.

Mami and I had so carefully crafted the armor we needed to survive that in some ways my feelings of frailty felt like a betrayal of all she had done for us.

She had given everything to save me. In her quest to protect me from the monsters hiding in plain sight, she could have

easily chosen to retreat and pull us back from the world.  
Locked me away for my own good like a princess in a tower.

*“But we were never meant to be princesses, mija ...”*

Instead of locking me up in a tower, my mother gave herself over to her work, and she poured the knowledge that she acquired into me. I may not have been a master of life and death like my father, but she had given me my own set of skills. Ones that she had always intended for me to use to stay alive ...

My eyes fluttered open as I sank back into reality, my attention snagging on the tiny blue indicator light on my mini fridge, causing a grim smile to break out on my face.

*Marigold, oleander, foxglove, lily of the valley, belladonna, elderberry ...*

My mother was gone. No one would be coming to rescue me. I had to save myself.

It was time for me to do some hunting of my own ... starting with some sheep.



## Chapter Thirty-One



## Luz

“Hey, you’re the one with the bum ankle, I should be getting that for you,” Aaron said as I slid his smoothie across the cafeteria table we were sharing with Autumn, Melody, and some of their other friends who popped up from time to time.

“It’s fine,” I said with a teasing roll of my eyes. “It’s been almost a month, and I’m practically good as new. I don’t even need my crutches anymore.”

“She wants to start running again,” Autumn said with a frown. Not because she thought it was too soon, but because she couldn’t fathom wanting to run in the first place.

Aaron choked on some of his smoothie, causing Melody to look over at him with concern. “You okay there?”

“Yes.” The tips of his ears turned red as he continued to cough awkwardly into the crook of his elbow before finally managing to clear his throat. “I just think it’s too soon for Luz

to start running again, especially in those creepy woods. It's not safe."

I clamped my jaw shut. Aaron was the last person I intended to take safety advice from. "I won't start running again until I get the all clear from my doctor," was all I said, hoping to wrap up this conversation.

Still, he pressed. "And you'll stay out of the woods?"

"I'm sure I'll need to work back up to trail running," I said with a wave of my hand, promising him nothing. "The doctor will probably want me to stick to even ground at first."

His brows remained creased.

Where others might find his incessant focus on Autumn's and my well-being endearing, I found it odd and almost stifling. His sense of responsibility for us was both unearned and unwanted. Aaron may have come across like a harmless puppy, but even a well-trained dog could still bite you.

Mercifully, the conversation moved on, with everyone talking about their plans for fall break.

Autumn had tried to convince me to come home to Rhode Island with her for the holiday, but I politely and steadfastly declined. Frankly, her parents sounded ... intense, and the idea of having to navigate another family's dynamic felt like it would only make Mami's absence more profound.

That and I had work to do while the campus was empty, including visiting the deep, dark woods that everyone was so insistent I stay away from.

“And what about you, Luz, what are you doing for Thanksgiving if you won’t be going with Autumn to Newport?” asked Melody.

Aaron’s brows furrowed even deeper at the implication that I was staying on campus. “Tell me you’re not—” he began before another mouthful of smoothie got caught in his throat, causing him to begin hacking forcefully again. Melody worriedly reached over to pat his back. He shoed her away and reached for a glass of water.

I waited patiently until he had it under control again before answering. “No, actually. I’m going to New York City to visit some extended family,” I said with a smile. “I’m looking forward to getting some arroz con gandules with my turkey,” I added rubbing my stomach.

Autumn nodded along happily. Admittedly, I had lied to her about my plans earlier, but her easy acceptance of my story only helped my credulity now.

“I didn’t know you had family in the city,” Aaron said, still looking skeptical.

“Mmmm,” I hummed, taking a large sip of my own smoothie before answering. “Not the cousins I stayed with after Mami died, different ones.” I couldn’t help but wonder if he would push for more details. Like a dog with a bone.

The truth was that I had no family besides Mami. Having been extremely paranoid about what would happen to me if something ever happened to her, she’d put detailed plans in place to make sure I would be safe. On paper, a network of

family members existed— titís, tios, and cousins once, twice, three times removed. None of it was real, though.

The “cousins” I stayed with after her death had been contacts through the same network that she used to create our new lives. They had been paid in advance to care for me if anything ever happened to Mami. In her line of work, you couldn’t be too careful. Amelia and Marco had been nice enough folks. But what they had provided me was shelter, food, clothing ... the basic necessities, and only until I left for Hollow Oak. They would never be family.

Eventually, breakfast wrapped up, and Aaron and Autumn left for their classes, along with most of the crowd, leaving me alone with Melody as I packed up my bag and prepared to head to the library.

“Do you think Aaron’s looking ... unwell lately?” she hedged, doing up the straps of her bag.

“Hmmm, what do you mean?”

“I dunno,” she said, as we made our way out of the cafeteria. “I feel like he’s been weirder and more intense lately ...”

Oh, that I could see.

“... and he’s been complaining about being nauseous and dizzy a lot,” she continued.

“Maybe there is a bug going around. Autumn’s been under the weather too lately.”

Autumn had reverted to her pre-Halloween state of distress, and I was truly worried about her, unlike Aaron.

“Oh yeah,” Melody said, “I’ve noticed that too. Maybe they both have something ...” She trailed off, seeming unconvinced.

I was similarly unconvinced, not that I would confide in Melody. Whatever was wrong with my friend, I would figure out on my own, and whatever was wrong with Aaron, well, I was confident it wasn’t related to Autumn.

“Maybe they are just stressed from school and need a break. We can see how they are doing after the fall break,” I suggested. It seemed like something a friend would say, right?

“Hmmm, I guess you’re right.”

We said our goodbyes, wishing each other a happy Thanksgiving, and I hugged the willowy blonde far longer than I was comfortable with, which seemed to make her day.

By the time I made it back to Jackson College House, the sun was low in the sky. Lots of students had already left, and there was a quiet energy to the rapidly darkening campus.

I settled down for the evening, and I found my mind wandering, as it so often did these days, back to the Blackwells.

I had started paying more attention to the whispers circulating around campus; Autumn was far from the only one gossiping about the “assassins of the elite.”

Scrunching my eyes closed, I tried to imagine what a family as infamous as the Blackwells did for a holiday like Thanksgiving. The idea of the twins sitting side by side with

Professor Blackwell, passing the gravy boat back and forth made me chuckle.

Alister would be sitting there in silence, shrewdly observing everyone around him, his beautiful machine of a mind always working. Nixon would talk and drink the night away, serving to both irritate and charm his audience to distraction, subtly easing the pressure off his twin to participate. Locke, I could only imagine sitting there scowling in disdain at whatever lewd joke Nixon had just told, fussing with his cuff links while searching for something to complain about like a heat-seeking missile.

I wondered who carved the turkey.

I tried to conjure up an image of the mysterious oldest brother—and rumored father-killer—Lucian Blackwell. There were no recent photos of him online, and all I could see in my mind was an impossibly large, imposing shadow of a man who somehow managed to dominate a room full of professional killers.

Perhaps he would leave the carving to the rumored fifth member of the Blackwell boys—Everest Collins. Autumn hadn't yet mentioned the man that most people on campus would only speak about in a whisper, for fear that the boogeyman of Shady Harbor might hear them. If what they said was true, then Everest was the deadliest of them all, a monster that Lucian just barely managed to keep leashed.

He was the most likely culprit behind Sandra's death and the other missing people. Not to mention that nailing a fresh heart

to my door seemed very on-brand for a man multiple people had described as a “horrendously depraved psychopath.”

But something about that logic didn’t sit right with me.

Nixon and Alister had been very clear that at least part of their motivation was to get answers about whoever else was stalking me. And during my most recent ... conversation ... with Alister, he had linked the deaths and disappearances occurring on campus with me—meaning that at least he and Nixon suspected that whoever had been harassing me was also involved.

Wouldn’t the twins know if their family’s pet serial killer was behind it all? Plus, if Everest was as deranged as they said, surely I would have received a *human* heart, right?

Back and forth my mind went, combing through the possibilities, until I finally fell asleep, as visions of murderers and bloody hearts danced in my head.



I saw Autumn off to Rhode Island the next morning with lots of hugs and promises to take care of myself and be safe in the big city. As if the danger lurked there.

Once she was gone, I hastily retired to my room for the next two days, only venturing out to grab snacks from the vending machines on the floor.

It wasn’t my favorite way to pass the time, but I wanted to be sure that anyone who might be keeping an eye out for me



would assume I was off campus at this point.

By the third day, I was all but finished with my assignments for the rest of the semester and going stir-crazy. If I didn't get out of the confines of my dorm room today, I was liable to start making rash decisions, and I wasn't about to waste all my careful planning due to a bout of cabin fever.

So that afternoon, I decided it was as good a time as any to stretch my legs and go for a walk. I hadn't been exaggerating when I told Aaron I was practically good as new. I had been religious in doing my rehab exercises and had slowly been spending more and more time on my feet.

It was late November in Connecticut, and the trees had begun to lose their leaves in earnest. Once I left the well-maintained paths of the campus, a thick blanket of red, brown, and orange leaves covered the ground, and I had to pay close attention to where I stepped to avoid slipping on them.

With the sun out and the temperature shockingly mild, the woods were quiet and peaceful on the uncharacteristically beautiful fall day. Birds filled the empty space in between the trees where the leaves used to be with their chirping, and chubby squirrels darted out across the path in a desperate bid to store a last couple of nuts before winter.

When I came to the fork in the trail this time, I headed decisively down the right path.

The woods had saved me on Halloween night, and I would continue to put my faith in them.

Last week, Autumn took me into Shady Harbor, where I managed to snag a spare backpack at the local thrift shop, along with some other supplies. Tightening up the straps on the bag, I headed toward the bend in the woods where the massive hollow oak stood.

Leaves crackled and snapped underfoot as I left the main trail, gingerly weaving between saplings and elders. The distinctive caw of a crow stood out—they tended to prefer farmlands and the suburbs—making me smile. I wasn't the only odd bird out here.

Coming into the clearing during daytime, the massive oak looked even more impressive. Its knotty branches, now completely free of leaves, spread out across the crisp blue sky like a dark network of veins, mirroring its roots below. From death came life and from life came death.

I crawled back into the hollow, appreciating the splendor of the ancient tree all the more without the weight of the hunt on me, and snuggled back up against the very wall I had found myself pressed up against that night.

It was cathartic.

Mami never made me feel weak for feeling fear. She understood what a powerful motivator it was. But she did teach me how to take action in spite of it. How to confront it.

I sat there, deep in the heart of dark woods, for another hour or so, doing nothing more than listening to the subtle chatter of the wildlife and the swishing sound of the last remaining leaves in the wind. By the time I had set up my supplies and

left, dusk was creeping in, and my ankle throbbed from overexerting myself, but a sense of satisfaction hummed in my veins.

It was only the very beginnings of a trap, but I couldn't help but wonder who it might catch.

## Chapter Thirty-Two



## Luz

The rest of fall break was mercifully uneventful. I finished up my coursework for the semester and began working on my notes for final exams, along with wrapping up some minor errands and chores.

Autumn was even more uncharacteristically subdued after her visit with her family in Rhode Island, and part of me felt guilty that I hadn't gone with her for support. I tried to rationalize it. I was dealing with a psychotic killer stalking me, but the impostor syndrome I felt at being her friend was real.

Aaron returned looking a touch better, although the stress of school was clearly weighing on him, and it wasn't long before his sunken eyes and pale complexion returned. Melody continued to fuss over both of them as winter crept up on us, the nights getting longer and the days colder.

Hearts continued to pop up all over campus with troubling regularity. Not the porcine or human variety, but the stickers had escalated from an occasional to almost daily. Since Sandra's body had been found, whoever was stalking me was

upping their game, a sign that they were beginning to build up to something bigger.

I wasn't surprised when the next body was found in early December. It was one of the young women missing from town, Rachel Taylor.

This time I only *nearly* vomited when I saw the photo the killer sent me. Like Sandra, she had been dressed up in a pure white gown and left ritualistically posed, with her heart left to rest atop her.

The pageantry of it was designed to attract attention, and it worked. Security was increased yet again on campus, and posters popped up encouraging students to remain aware of their surroundings and report any suspicious activities. Rumors of serial killers and satanic cults spread like wildfire, and fewer and fewer students could be found milling about after dark on campus.

Technically, a serial killer was someone with at least three murders under their belt and our killer only had two, as I explained to Autumn, who was less than reassured by my fun fact of the day. Still, I somehow doubted that whoever had killed those girls was a murder virgin before all this started.

Removing a human heart like that wasn't amateur stuff. You either had to slice up into the chest cavity through the soft tissue of the gut or saw open the victim's sternum to access the heart. No matter which way you cut it, it was an extremely messy and time-consuming procedure that was still likely to

damage the organ when performed outside of an operating room.

The hearts had been meticulously intact. Someone involved in the killings had to have surgical experience to execute that kind of organ retrieval. More so than the average medical student or family doctor.

*UNKNOWN: The heart wants what the heart wants, Penelope.*

Cute, grim, and utterly uninformative.

Then there were the twins ...

I hadn't seen them during the fall break, although I couldn't be sure whether that was due to my own efforts to conceal my presence on campus or their absence.

Alister reappeared the week after, returning to lurk in shadows from a distance. I wasn't sure how I felt about his semi-avoidance of me. Relief certainly, but also irritation. I wasn't under any illusions about what had happened between us. Even if he was the quiet one, he still had a reputation, although not quite as prolific as his twin's. I wasn't even really sure what had happened, and I wasn't prepared to tell Autumn that I had sucked on my least problematic stalker's finger. Or worse, that I couldn't stop replaying it in my head.

Despite appearances, I wasn't some doe-eyed innocent (my virginity notwithstanding), and I could recognize that someone like Alister Blackwell existed in a class all on his own.

Then there was the fact that my only two previous experiences had both been more of a means to an end.

Still, if I had hoped that the appearance of a second body might spur Alister into seeking me out again, I wound up being sorely disappointed.

“Long time no see, pet.” Nixon’s voice broke the silence of the library with alarming confidence, causing me to jolt up in my seat.

The other Blackwell twin stood on the other side of the large table I was sharing with Autumn, Aaron, and Melody, one inked arm crossed behind his head as he leaned casually against one of the rows of bookshelves that served to obscure the study nook. His lopsided grin was borderline feral as he took in the four of us, like a lion surveying the lambs before the slaughter.

My eyes darted around the table, quickly inspecting my friend and the others.

Melody seemed to be stuck somewhere between fearful and flirtatious as she bit her lip and batted her long lashes despite the nervous tremor in her hands.

Aaron, by contrast, was doing his best to keep his face neutral, but the tension in his jaw and the whiteness of his knuckles told another story.

Autumn’s expression, though, was one of genuine fear and my protective instincts reared up.



“What are you doing here?” I hissed, shoving myself to standing.

Melody’s jaw dropped, and Autumn’s face turned impossibly whiter.

Other than Autumn, the group had never commented on the Blackwell twins’ dubious presence in my life, something that struck me as odd given Aaron’s “protective instincts” and Melody’s general nosiness.

Before I could so much as take a step away from the table, Nixon had stridden over, pulled out the empty chair next to mine and deposited my backpack on the floor without so much as a care.

“Sit,” he commanded me as he took his own seat, and though I considered defying him, I ultimately obeyed.

“Nice study group you have here.” He waved his hand dismissively, then turned his gaze back to me. “I’m kind of hurt I wasn’t invited,” he said with a pout. It looked far too believable with his angelic features.

“Oh, you’re totally welcome to join us.” Melody giggled, earning a heated glare from both Aaron and me.

“No, he is not,” I cut back.

Nixon ignored Melody, his eyes never leaving mine. “You wound me, pet,” he said dolefully. He might have been convincing if it weren’t for the devilish glint in his eyes. “I’m going to start to think you like my brother better than me if you’re not careful.”

“What can I say? I appreciate his taciturn nature.” I broke his stare to turn back to face the group.

Autumn looked at me as if she were seeing me for the first time, somewhere between curiosity and concern, and if Aaron gripped his pen any tighter, it was going to snap.

I was usually much more careful with the twins, but I was starting to run out of patience with all the psychos popping up in my life. Plus, there was part of me that wanted to see how Nixon would handle me uncowed.

“Hmmm, I’m certain that’s *all* you appreciate about him,” Nixon cooed suggestively, reaching over to play with my hair as I batted his hand away with a frustrated sigh.

“Is there something I can help you with, or did you just come over to discuss how your brother is the superior twin?” I baited him, looking down and pretending to focus on my notes, not that I could read a word of them at the moment.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him shift his body toward mine before I felt his other hand wrap firmly around my thigh. The thick wool tights I wore did nothing to ward off the warmth of his palm on my leg.

“Luz.” Aaron’s voice was abnormally harsh, and I looked up to see his eyes zeroed in on Nixon’s hand on my leg as though he could burn away the offending appendage with the heat of his gaze alone.

The killer next to me went almost preternaturally still, and the hairs stood up on my arms as he slowly turned his sights to

the now clearly scowling Aaron, the mischievous glint in his eyes having turned into something dark and far more predatory.

“Croft, is it?” he asked coldly.

“Aaron Croft,” the idiot replied with an irritated surety, and I ignored the desire to roll my eyes at his bravado. I really didn’t want the Labradoodle to die today.

“Hmmm.” Nixon’s storm blue eyes took in Aaron’s rigid posture and puffed-out chest with casual disdain before he languidly eased back to rest deeper in his chair, then turned back to face me, his hand still on me. “Methinks your guard dog is all bite and no bark, Luz,” he drawled.

Aaron turned an alarming shade of red and leaned forward, nearly spitting. “And I think you should—”

“It’s fine, Aaron,” I said, holding up my hand to stop him when he started to protest. “Nixon and his brother have a tiny stalking problem. It’s nothing I can’t handle.” I kept my tone even and cool, even though he squeezed my thigh almost painfully tight in warning. Or approval. It was hard to tell sometimes with the twins.

“*Tsk, tsk,*” Nixon clucked at me. “I told you sweet pet. If you want to be rid of us that badly, all you need to do is tell us all your deepest, darkest secrets.”

Somehow, I doubted that very much.

“Okay, you first,” I countered with a sugary smile.

“In front of the plebs?” he scoffed, provoking my ire again.

“Again, no one asked you to come and slum it up with us, *Blackwell*.”

“Luz ...” Autumn’s voice was a pleading whisper.

“Not sure how you can say that when those lips of yours are practically an invitation themselves,” he replied airily, tugging hard on the strand of hair he still had coiled around his fingers.

The slap of Aaron’s palms coming down on the table cracked through the space, causing Melody to nearly jump out of her seat.

“Listen, Blackwell, if you don’t—”

“If I don’t, what?” Nixon spat, whipping his attention back to Aaron, like a viper preparing to strike. “What will you do, Croft? Tattle on me to the librarian? And what do you think would happen to poor Cheyenne Willis if you did that? She’s a single mother with her two children. Life can be terribly cruel to orphans.

“Or maybe you’ll run to the head of campus security, Jonathan King, a lifelong bachelor with a terrible gambling problem. Not sure anyone would be that surprised if he met with a nasty end,” he continued with ruthless sincerity dripping from every word. “Or perhaps, you’ll just call and complain to Mommy and Daddy? Alicia and William, correct? 55 Meadows Lane, Westchester, New York. Your mom’s quite the fetching woman, Croft. I wonder if she’s a natural redhead?”

Aaron choked at the last remark, and the mood at the table took a sour turn. Even Melody had paled, and I hoped she was reconsidering her interest in Nixon.

I deftly plucked my favorite gold mechanical pencil from the table before turning to give Nixon a patently disingenuous smile. Biting down on my lip, I reached for the lock of hair he had been twirling, this time gently plucking it from his fingers with a caress.

“All right, it’s time to go,” I said in a sickly sweet voice.

Then I drove my pencil decisively into the soft fleshy part of the hand still wrapped around my thigh, stabbing him right between the thumb and pointer finger and forcing him to let me go. Nixon yanked his hand away from me with a muttered curse, and I stood up without hesitation, sending my chair sliding out across the floor behind me.

Before he could utter another word, I strode away from the table into the stacks. I was counting on him to abandon terrorizing the group to follow me, although I refused to look back to confirm it. I would know soon enough if my plan worked.

Sure enough, I had barely made it three rows deep when I found myself painfully yanked backward by my hair.

This time I didn’t argue with him. Instead, I submit fully, letting him lead me backward through the row like a dog on a leash. With a swift tug, he spun me around and backed me into the corner between two of the stacks where I landed harshly against the wall, my scalp now throbbing.

He was immediately in my space, slamming his palms onto the wall above my head to cage me in, his nearness making my breath catch in my throat. Trapped between those deliciously inked arms, the scent of cinnamon and flames swirling in the air brought me back to Halloween night. This time, the coppery scent of his blood hung in the air too.

Looking up to meet his eyes, I wasn't surprised to find his usual playful mask missing. There was also none of the rage one might have expected—I did just stab him with a pen. No, there was nothing in Nixon's expression but cold, utter indifference.

Could he murder me in broad daylight in the middle of the library and walk away scot-free? Probably.

But would he?

I didn't plead my case. There were no pretty words that would charm a master manipulator like Nixon Blackwell. Nothing I could offer him other than truths I was unwilling to give. I simply stood there in silence and let him come to whatever conclusion he may. His decision would determine my actions.

I had no doubt that Aaron, and maybe even Autumn, was looking for me by now. Panicked whispers calling out my name began to fill in the silence surrounding us, but it was nothing but static to me.

It was hard to say how long we stood there. It could have been a minute, it could have been an hour.

But eventually, suddenly, and without warning, Nixon simply turned and stomped away.

I was surprised to find that, as difficult as it had been to breathe with him there, his absence felt as though all the oxygen had been suddenly sucked out of the room.

Or maybe it was just the rush of having survived the Blackwells once again.

## Chapter Thirty-Three





## Everest

London

“**S**omething, something, cornflake curl ...” I crooned loudly, my fingers banging away on the invisible black and white keys that only I could see.

Singer-songwriter. Piano virtuoso. Feminist icon. Master of her craft. Terpsichore reborn.

In my head I was right there with Tori, sweating it out under the bright lights of the stage.

Or at least I was until the gurgling scream of a man with more blood in his mouth than teeth rudely interrupted my moment of melodic transcendence.

With a heavy sigh and a crack of my neck, I swung back around atop the wheeled stool I sat on to face my heckler. Slash victim.

Pieter Sidorov, aged fifty-three years, was born in Kolomenskoye, a small town outside of Moscow in Russia. He

emigrated to the United Kingdom thirty years ago where he built a sizable fortune in supply chain management, importing and exporting goods. Unfortunately for him, it was through this line of work that he managed to make some significant enemies. The kind who had hired the Blackwell family to end his life violently and painfully, thus bringing me to his doorstep.

*Everything happens for a reason, am I right?*

The large, hirsute man lay on top of the glass dining room table where I currently had him trussed up like a turkey. He continued to struggle, not that it would do him any good.

I mean, sure, yeah, maybe he could escape, but he was going to find it damn hard to walk without his kneecaps.

I hummed along as Tori continued to jam out in the background, looking over my tools of the trade and wagging my fingers in the air as I tried to make up my mind.

*Rusty grapefruit spoon to the eye or disembowelment with a sharpened ice cream scoop?*

The killer-for-hire market had exploded over the last decade. With practically everything online these days, almost any idiot could figure out how to get away with murder if they knew the right places to search for information. And how to properly clear their browsing history, I supposed.

More and more boutique and mom-and-pop shops cropped up. You had your trained professionals—the ex-military bros and the former spies. Then there were honey trappers who

used their charms to lure their victims to their untimely ends. And of course, there were always ambitious local crews looking to make a name for themselves. My personal favorite were the cute little old couples who decided to get into the game late in life because they had nothing else left to lose. True love did exist!

One of Lucian's better decisions had been to treat the family business like just that, a business. Instead of the needless infighting and underground wars of the past, the Blackwell empire now functioned with ruthless corporate efficiency, buying out any potential competition and subsuming their businesses. The bottom dwellers and middle-management-type players were free to operate independently, so long as they paid their due when we came calling, just like any other criminal organization.

All of which was to say that, since Lucian had decided to acquire some sizable assets in Europe, I didn't get to travel abroad as much as I used to. And while usually I would be delighted, nay, thrilled, for the opportunity to splash some blood around merry old England, I was on edge about having to abandon my latest passion project back home to take care of Sidorov.

But when our clients pay for the best, they expect the best ... And that was me.

“What is it they say, Petey? ‘It ain't bragging if it's true ...’” I said over my shoulder before finally settling on the ice cream scoop.

Pieter began to thrash even harder against his restraints as I turned my attention back to his soon-to-be pale, bloated corpse.

“I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream,” I sang merrily as I set to work, using a bread knife to cut into the outer layers of muscle and adipose tissue I would need to get through before we got to scooping out all the sweet organy goodness on the inside.

“When you think about it, we really only spent a tiny fraction of our existence alive, and then we’re dead for eternity. So, if anything, death is our natural state and life is the perverse anomaly,” I explained as Petey continued to scream.

Unfortunately, there were far too many interesting things going on back home for me to dillydally exchanging pleasantries with a dead man. And most importantly, that was where Starbright was.

I had about as much respect for the twins as I did for anyone besides Lucian, but I didn’t like the idea of them being responsible for Luz on their own. Not that they knew I had taken to stalking her almost as much as they had, although I would be surprised if Alister didn’t at least suspect me. And it certainly wasn’t my fault that I was better at it.

I was pretty sure neither of the twins had caught her trip into the forest a couple of weeks ago when she was supposed to be in NYC with her cousins or some shit like that. I didn’t know exactly what she had been doing all alone in the woods, but I

wasn't worried. I had already deduced that my star only burned brighter when darkness fell.

I had been struggling to come up with the appropriate romantic gesture to begin wooing her. Something that could top nailing a pig's heart to her door. A human one was the obvious choice, but I suspected that Luz was picky and wouldn't be impressed by any old heart. It would have to belong to someone whose death was worthy of being part of what would one day soon become the story of how we fell in love.

"Oh goodness, sorry about that Petey," I said when I realized I had gone clean through his stomach and back out the other side. The poor man was still breathing, although each breath grew labored, his eyes had rolled to the back of his head and he no longer had the strength to struggle against his restraints.

"I don't know if you've ever lost your head over a girl before, but, man, it's a doozy."

Ali, and to a lesser extent Nix, were so blinded by their obsession with her past that they couldn't see the gift of her being here right now. That was why they were making mistakes, and letting others continue to slip by them and get to her.

It ended when I got back home, I had decided.

Luz was one smart cookie, but I didn't like that she didn't have all the information. I knew that she had been alerted about the discovery of the two bodies with their hearts removed, but Lucian had directed the police chief to hold back

notice of the third body they had found, Gloria something or other.

While the other girls had been ritualistically laid out with their hearts displayed, the third victim had been found washed up along the coast, long dead, with her head bashed in. Unlike the other murders, everything about this one was sloppy, from the obvious cause of death to the failure to account for the ocean currents and tide. She had also been raped, where the first two victims were untouched, and her heart was in good condition, you know, for a dead person.

As one of the world's most prolific killers, I had more than passing knowledge of what went on in the darkest of men's minds. Ritualistic murder and opportunistic rape were two vastly different types of crime, done by two very different killers. The former spoke to a bigger plan and calculated control, while the latter was likely just your run-of-the-mill power-obsessed piece of shit who liked to hurt women. But I couldn't allow either one to get close to Starbright.

I found myself reaching deep into old Petey's insides, looking for something to squish. If he wasn't dead already, he would be soon, and I needed that satisfying squelch of blood and viscera in between my fingers like some people needed a smoke. By the time I was done using his kidneys as stress balls, the poor fella had finally left this earthly plane.

Standing up to admire my handiwork, I couldn't help but be impressed by the sheer depravity of the mess I had left behind. No doubt about it. This was art. For all we knew I could be the

next Jackson Pollock, but because my medium was blood and guts, instead of paint and canvas, the world would be forever denied my gift.

I let out a deliberately heavy sigh.

Pity looked good on me, so I liked to practice faking it when I got the chance.

Thank goodness I wasn't responsible for my own cleanup anymore. Even if Lucian and I weren't besties (which we were, no matter what he said) I would happily work for the Blackwell family gratis for the rest of my life if it meant I didn't have to clean up my own messes. Do you think Picasso cleaned his studio?

All I had to do was wash myself up and then the professionals would come in and do their magic. Sometimes the client wanted it set up so that it just looked like the victim was missing, other times they needed the body found. Often, they wanted proof of death. The cleaners would take care of all of it. From removing the evidence that I was ever there to documenting Petey's final condition.

Making my way over to the apartment's fancy digital shower, I realized that the music had shut off at some point.

"Siri, play Tori Amos 'Cornflake Girl' again," I barked out as I set the shower to a nice scalding-hot temperature and began stripping down. The sleeves of my button-down were soaked past my elbows in blood, and the shirt landed on the marbled floor with a satisfying plop. Unfortunately, it also sent a spray of blood across my shiny brown loafers.

*Sorry, Lucian, guess these ones will have to go too.*

Luckily, I always traveled with a spare.

I stepped into the shower and began systematically scrubbing away the blood from my flesh. Most people didn't understand that in large volumes it was pretty sticky stuff, far more viscous than water, and once it started to congeal you had to really work to make sure you got it all off. It would hardly do to leave bloody prints all over Heathrow as I made my way out of town.

Once I was assured that all evidence of Petey had been removed and was safely swirling down the drain, I allowed myself to relax and let my mind wander back to Hollow Oak.

I had never cared much for the female offerings of the university before. When Lucian and Locke attended, I had declined to enroll, choosing to focus on the more hands-on aspects of the murder-for-hire business. Regardless, I would have had a buffet of beauties available to me due to my association with the Blackwells, but I never had even the slightest urge to indulge with one of the many attractive coeds on campus.

I wasn't a saint, far from it. But the vapid viperous women of Hollow Oak did nothing for me.

Until her.

I'd admit, when Nix first started going on about the girl who found a heart nailed to her door, I was far more interested in



meeting her suitor than her. But the question of *why her* stuck with me.

I found myself taking a stroll through campus, eager to find out what kind of woman invoked such a passionate, arduous act of love. Oh, I had the dossier Ali had put together on her, photos included, but nothing gave me insight into a person quite like seeing them IRL.

And then, when I saw her, I just knew.

It was a balmy fall day, and there she sat on one of the benches outlining the quad, talking to some red-headed girl. She was practically incandescent in gentle sunlight, her long dark hair falling in shiny waves down her back, the ends floating around her tiny waist that was only further accentuated by the neat-fitting tartan skirt she wore. Her golden-brown legs were crossed at the ankle, which, when paired with her crisp white sneakers and ankle socks, was unbearably coy and sexy at the same time for some reason. Paired with the simple cream crewneck she wore over a sharp white button-down, it gave off serious naughty schoolgirl vibes, a fantasy that I had found utterly uninspiring until her.

Oh, she was beautiful, all right. Juicy-looking lips and apple-shaped cheeks that had me wanting to take a bite out of them. But it was her brilliant amber eyes that captivated me. Even at a distance, they sparkled like dark champagne sapphires in the sun. Gorgeous but canny. I got the distinct impression that those little peepers caught everything going on around them.

I let out a groan, my cock stiffening rapidly as I imagined what sort of cunning Starbright was capable of. I was going to find out for myself soon, even if the twins didn't like it.

Taking my now stiff cock in hand, I imagined her standing in front of me dressed all in red, dripping from head to toe in nothing but beautiful, beautiful blood and those wily, witchy eyes staring me down.

What was one more mess for the cleaners?

## Chapter Thirty-Four



## Luz

Nixon's *introduction* to Autumn, Aaron and Melody had a ripple effect on our little group that extended beyond that day in the library.

Autumn, predictably, was more scared of the Blackwells than ever, and convinced that I had barely escaped death at Nixon's hands. No matter how many times I tried to assure her that the loquacious twin was all bark and no bite (something I didn't entirely believe, myself), she continued to beg me to stay away. As if I was the one chasing after them.

Melody, on the other hand, seemed to have rewritten the entire episode in her head. Her infatuation with Nixon had grown stronger and she had started hanging around us even more, I suspected in the hopes that he would pop up again. A development I didn't care for.

Mercifully, both of the twins had returned to stalking me from a distance, making her efforts for naught.

The most dramatic change, though, was in Aaron. Something about his showdown with Nixon (or lack thereof) seemed to eat away at him. Masculinity was fragile like that. He spent the days after our encounter alternating between stewing in anger over how “bastards like Blackwell get away with whatever they want” and living in jittery paranoia over my safety.

“It’s not safe for you to be wandering around campus, Luz. Can’t you see he’s fucking obsessed with you?” he shouted angrily at me, slamming his hands down on the weathered dining hall table, attracting more than a few concerned stares.

“I think he enjoyed getting a rise out of you, and I was an easy means to his end,” I replied coolly.

If Nixon wanted me dead, Aaron wasn’t going to be the one to stop him.

Aaron continued to sputter and rage, mostly to Autumn who was sympathetic if not distracted. She was still withdrawn and quieter than usual, and I was starting to worry that I shouldn’t put off finding out what was going on with her for much longer.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t going to happen today. I had been summoned back to the station by Detectives Marques and Denver. I was surprised it had taken them this long to reach out to me given that I had received a heart, and now they had dead girls with their hearts ripped out popping up all over the place. But I guessed the good detectives had been busy.



“Once again, Miss Torres, you have no idea why anyone would have targeted you at the beginning of the semester?”

The Shady Harbor police force was, if nothing else, consistent. Thus far, my meeting with the detectives was more of the same questions as before, over and over again, as if the sheer monotony and repetition of it all might get me to crack.

“No, Detective Denver, I don’t know why anyone would have left an animal organ on my door.”

I suppose I could have told them about the stickers. Maybe even the sheep. But the reality was that the more information I gave them, the more questions they would have. And the last thing I needed was the two of them digging deeper into my past and finding out about Penelope.

The police, like the rest of the justice system, weren’t interested in the truth. Their practice was limited solely to evidence and the law—neither of which had anything to do with reality or even right and wrong. If they found out about my history, what Mami and I had done, they wouldn’t hesitate to arrest me and I had no intention of becoming a casualty of their investigation.

As before, Detective Denver remained unimpressed with my lack of useful information, and he muttered something under his breath to his counterpart before abruptly standing up and stalking out of the room.

Marques, who looked more tired and run-down than the last time I’d seen her, looked at me with a weary smile before letting out a quiet sigh.

Oh goody, it was time for “girl talk.”

“Sorry about that, Luz. He’s feeling the pressure—hell, we both are—to bring this monster to justice,” she said, her eyes crinkling warmly as she worked to establish mutual sympathy between us. “We need to cover all of our bases to make sure we aren’t missing anything, you understand, right?”

I offered her a supportive looking smile and nodded along. She brightened up visibly at my apparent compliance.

“Thank you so much for your assistance with all this. We have a couple other questions for you that are more delicate in nature. That’s partially why Detective Denver stepped outside.”

*Right, because my secrets are safe with you. Girl code.*

“Luz, are you a virgin?”

I was taken aback by the question, and for once I didn’t work to school my natural reaction—I was pretty sure anyone would be caught off guard in my situation.

“A virgin?” I asked, my brows furrowed as I tried to make sense of where this was going.

“Yes, are you a virgin, or perhaps I should say, have you had penetrative vaginal sex?”

“I’m not sure what that has to do with anything,” I answered earnestly.

She let out a heavy sigh and sat back in her chair, running a hand through her hair and chewing her lip. After a couple

beats of what was supposed to look like contemplation, she leaned back in toward me conspiratorially. “We haven’t shared this information with the public yet, but we have reason to believe that whoever killed those girls targeted them because they were virgins.”

Of all the explanations she could have offered, that was probably the last one that would have come to my mind, and once again I let my genuine shock and confusion shine through. “But why? How do you even figure that out?” I sputtered.

“I’m not at liberty to say, unfortunately, but you can understand why I need to ask. If there is a linkage between the heart you received and these girls being murdered, there’s a chance that you could be targeted next, so we need to know if you fit the killer’s profile.”

“I, uh ...” I was rarely at a loss for words, but I had no idea what to say to the detective.

Fortunately, Marques seemed to take my flustered state and lack of response as embarrassment. She reached across the stainless steel table that separated us to give my hand a quick squeeze, and I repressed the desire to pull away from her. “I know it’s uncomfortable to talk about,” she said, “but we really do need to know if you are at risk.”

*And what if I am?*

I only had a split second to make up my mind, but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew it was the right decision.



“Well, I guess it’s lucky for me that I’m not,” I said, pasting on a deprecating half smile.

Marques frowned before quickly schooling her expression.

“So, you are saying that you are not a virgin?” she said, some of the facade of her friendliness giving way.

“No. I mean, I haven’t been sexually active since I came to Hollow Oak, but I lost my virginity back in high school. That counts, right?”

It was an inane question, but I had long since gotten the impression that the detectives thought of me as no more than a silly little girl, so who was I to disillusion them?

She sighed and began shuffling through her notes. “I suppose we don’t really know, but for now, let’s say yes,” she replied, clearly unimpressed with my response.

The detective wrapped up the rest of the conversation fairly quickly, prodding at me with the occasional mundane question that I responded to with the obligatory “yes” and “no” where appropriate.

Once she dismissed me, I made a pit stop at the station’s bathrooms to collect myself. My mind was spinning at a million miles per hour even if I remained collected and docile on the outside.

Why did I lie to her?

It would have been an easy thing to tell her the truth, that I was very much still a virgin by her definition or almost any

other's. Sweaty groping was still just second base these days, right?

But if I had told her the truth, what good would it have done?

The police didn't protect you from crimes that might be committed. Ask any woman or queer person who had ever been on the receiving end of harassing or threatening behavior how reporting it to the police had helped. And even if the detective had been sincere, what could they really do to protect me? Somehow, I doubted the small-town police force of Shady Harbor had the budget to post an officer outside my dorm to protect me.

Washing up my hands, I did a quick inspection of myself in the mirror before exiting the washroom. I quickly made my way through the precinct, keeping my head down lest I catch Detective Denver's attention again.

It was early December in Connecticut, and while it wasn't properly winter yet, it was well on its way.

As I stepped out of the station, I wrapped my thin wool coat tightly around me to ward off the vicious winds blowing in from the harbor front. The weather app said that the temperature should have been just above freezing, but windchill made it much colder.

*I wonder if we'll get snow for the holidays.*

I reached for my phone to order an Uber back to campus, and my rapidly numbing fingers fumbled trying to select the

app. The sun was setting earlier and earlier these days, and the parking lot in front of the station already seemed sinisterly dark and empty.

I shivered against the cold as I saw that it would be six minutes before my ride arrived. I thought about going back inside the station to wait. It was warmer, well-lit and arguably safer, although I supposed that depended on whether you were a criminal or a victim.

I found myself stubbornly waiting it out, shrugging my shoulders tight to preserve my body heat while alternating between rubbing my hands and shoving them into my pockets to keep them warm. I needed a better coat and gloves if I was going to survive the winter here.

The telltale buzzing of my phone had me pulling it out again to see that my ride was two minutes away, along with the standard warning to check the plates every time.

The distinctive sound of footsteps on gravel pulled my attention away from my phone. Looking up, I was surprised to find the parking lot still empty.

While the lights from the station cut brightly through the dusk, the lot itself was poorly maintained. At least a third of the thinly scattered lampposts flickered erratically, if they weren't out altogether, and the potholes outnumbered the parking spots. A heavy copse of trees on either side of the lot obscured it from any neighbors. Combined with the handful of cars in the lot, there were plenty of hiding spots for someone to approach the station undetected.

Another crunch of footsteps to my left had me whipping around to confront whoever was creeping about, likely one of the twins, but once again, there was no one there.

The hair stood up on the back of my neck, and suddenly I was all too aware of how vulnerable I was, alone in the dark.

Shivering, I took a couple of tentative steps back toward the station, if only to firmly plant myself in the light and dissuade any would-be attackers.

I was about to succumb to common sense and retreat inside the police station, when two bright lights shone through the growing darkness, and I released a small sigh of relief as a car matching the description of my ride turned into the parking lot.

The driver pulled up to the curb where I was waiting, and once I had confirmed that it was in fact the Uber I had ordered, I quickly tucked myself away in the warm back seat.

Still, the sense of someone else out there watching me in the dark didn't fade, and I peered out the window, scrutinizing every inch of the lot as we made our way through.

We were about to turn onto the road and I looked back one last time. That was when I saw him.

Standing near the trees, under one of the flickering lights, was a strange man, watching us intently. He was a study in contrasts, simultaneously striking and utterly mundane. Both his height and build were nondescript. I would have put him at maybe five-ten, five-eleven and 170 to 180 pounds. His attire

of loafers, chinos, and a generic blue jacket would have allowed him to blend in seamlessly almost anywhere in town.

But his hair was the whitest blond I had ever seen, and even under the orange light of the lamp it shone angelically. His face was all sharp angles and a satisfied smile.

As if he could see me looking at him, he smiled even wider, and that was when I saw the madness in his grin. Instinctively, I pulled myself back into my seat to avoid his gaze, and before I could peek out again, the car had turned onto the road and was pulling away from the station.

We had made it back to Jackson College House without incident and it wasn't long after that I found myself back in my dorm room, safely tucked away in my bed.

Why couldn't I shake the feeling that I was still being watched?

## Chapter Thirty-Five



## Luz

Aaron's mood continued to decline toward the end of the term, along with his health. While his rattling cough had started to heal, he continued to suffer from intense spells of nausea and dizziness. It didn't help that he and Melody had started studying to prepare for the MCAT in the spring, adding another layer to the crushing stress of their junior year.

He hadn't been around as much these days, and I found myself enjoying his absence.

"Why do we hang out with him and Melody, again?" I asked Autumn one day.

I was genuinely curious. As much as my friendship with Autumn had felt foreign to me when we met, there was something easy about spending time together. Hanging out with Aaron and his friends wasn't unpleasant, but my reactions to them felt mechanical, forced, like I always had to think of the right thing to say.

Autumn had tried to explain it to me—something about being nice, open-minded to making new connections, giving people a chance. I would have thought that a couple months of grinning and bearing Aaron’s over-the-top moods would have been enough of a chance, but apparently I needed to try harder ... if I had any intention of following Autumn’s well-meaning advice.

“You know, for a moment, I kinda thought something might, like, happen between you two,” she said, as we sat down for breakfast, Aaron and Melody conspicuously absent.

“No, Autumn. No,” I said definitively. “There is no version of this world or the next where I would be interested in Aaron.”

“Why not? He’s a good-looking guy, nice, smart. Everyone seems to like him ...”

“If you’re looking to play matchmaker, you’d have a better shot of setting him up with Melody,” I said dryly.

“Nah.” She ripped off a piece of her chocolate croissant and popped it into her mouth. “They’ve been friends for, like, years. If it was going to happen, it would have happened already.”

It was a solid assessment. The two of them had zero chemistry. Plus, if Melody’s reaction to Nixon was any indication, she clearly had a thing for bad boys.

“Where are the gruesome twosome today, anyway?” I asked.



“Melody had to meet with the prof she’s working as a research assistant for, and Aaron said he wasn’t feeling well and was planning on just staying in and, like, studying,” Autumn said, before frowning and adding. “He’s been feeling sick a lot more. I told him he should go see a doctor at the campus clinic, but you know how stubborn he is. I don’t know who’s worse, him or you.”

“Me, definitely me,” I replied with confidence as I finished up my breakfast. “What’s the rest of your day like?” Together we moved to clear our dishes.

“Ugh. I have a meeting with a career counselor this morning. My parents are on my case to pick a major, so at this point, I will take all the help I can get. Then just, like, classes for the rest of the day. Why? What devious plans do you have today?”

I clutched a hand to my chest, feigning shock and outrage. “Devious? Moi? I am hurt, dear Autumn.”

“Mm-hmmm.” She smirked back at me. “Don’t think you have me fooled. I know that under your sweet and docile Lolita persona, there lies a dark and twisted mind.”

*She really had no idea.*

“Yes, well, this dark and twisted mind needs to catch up on her Intro to Japanese homework before heading to the library to do some research for her final papers.”

“And by catch up, I am sure you mean to finish your assignments for the rest of the term.” Autumn snorted.

“Guilty as charged.”

I dropped her off at the career center before heading back toward the dining hall. The air was crisp with cold, just sharp enough to sting my cheeks, but there was no snow to be found yet. The trees had all long since lost their leaves, and the plants around looked dried and decayed as life began to hibernate for the winter. The sky was a dreary gray that added to the almost morose energy in the air.

I pulled my phone out of my coat pocket.

*Me: Where are you? Autumn said you are sick :(*

*Aaron(party): @ my place studying. Y?*

Humming to myself, I slid my phone back and continued down the path back to the dining hall. As much as I had been enjoying the distance from Aaron, a good person would check in on her sick friend. That was something normal people did, right?

I dashed back into the dining hall and picked up one of his usual blueberry smoothies before making my way to his apartment.

Aaron's place was on the border between the university and the town, in a dilapidated brick colonial that had been converted to apartments about forty-five years ago and hadn't been renovated since. Everything in the building was covered in aging white paint, and the crevices in the ancient woodwork had turned a yellow-gray due to the decades of dust accumulated there.

I made my way up the worn, carpeted stairs and knocked on his door. I had only been to Aaron's apartment twice before. In theory, he shared the place with another chemistry student, Jason something or other, but I had never seen the guy and wasn't entirely convinced that he existed.

"Just a minute," I heard him call out, his voice lacking its usual enthusiasm, followed by the sound of feet shuffling to the door and a multitude of locks being undone.

The door creaked open to reveal Aaron, dressed in dirty sweatpants and a faded white T-shirt with Hollow Oak 2021 Orientation Volunteer printed on the front.

He looked rough. His pale skin was damp with sweat, the bags under his eyes were a concerning shade of violet, and his usually well-groomed hair looked greasy and stuck out in several directions.

"L-Luz ..." he stuttered, clearly surprised to see me, which was exactly what I had hoped for.

"Here," I said, thrusting his smoothie toward him and taking a step into his apartment before he could say no. "I brought you a nutritious treat."

*Totally what a normal person would do.*

The condition of the apartment matched the rest of the building. It was clean enough although not exactly tidy with books and notes scattered across various secondhand Ikea furniture, along with a sizable bong on the coffee table and a

collection of dirty dishes piled up in the sink. Combined with the scent of Aaron's sickly sweat it was ... off-putting.

"Shit, sorry." He stumbled behind me, grasping at his smoothie as I marched into the room. "The place is a mess and I wasn't expecting company ..."

"Don't be silly," I said with the best smile I could muster, taking a seat at the kitchen table across from where his laptop was parked. It seemed like the safest choice. "You're sick, and I came to surprise you."

"Yeah, well, I'm still embarrassed," he said, flopping into a chair across from me and running a hand through his hair before taking a big sip of his smoothie. "Thanks for this." He raised up his cup in acknowledgment. "I skipped breakfast and didn't realize how hungry I was."

"Of course, that's what friends are for," I replied, perhaps too brightly.

Aaron offered me a weary smile that didn't quite meet his eyes. "What brings you to my humble abode?" he said with a touch of sarcasm as he leaned back in his chair and spread his arms wide to gesture to the space around us, showing off the sweat stains on his shirt.

"Autumn said you were feeling under the weather again. I had some time this morning, so I thought I would see how you were doing."

"Awww, I didn't take you for the nurturing sort." He smirked as he reached forward and then took another long sip of his

smoothie.

“I get it from my mami,” I said honestly. “She was always taking care of those around her, and she inspired me to do the same.”

Aaron frowned slightly, maybe unsure of what to make of my response, before pursing his lips. When he finally did speak, he no longer tried to hide the bite in his tone. “Like Nixon Blackwell? You’d take care of assholes like him, too?”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Nixon is a pendejo whose presence is wholly unwelcome in my life.”

Aaron looked like he wanted to debate me on that, but I held up a hand before he could interrupt me. “If you have any ideas on how to get one of the supposedly most powerful men on campus to leave me alone, then please, by all means, tell me what to do.”

The energy between us shifted, and I watched Aaron’s brow wrinkle thoughtfully, his irrational irritation with me mollified by the illusion of having been handed control. “I just don’t like how he treated you at the library. You deserve better than some spoiled wannabe thug harassing you,” he said seriously.

Nixon was many things, spoiled certainly being among them, but Aaron was dumber than I thought if he truly believed that Nixon was nothing more than a “wannabe thug.” Killer or not, Nixon had more than enough power to be dangerous. Still, correcting Aaron was hardly going to soothe his wounded ego.

“I appreciate you protecting me,” I said, trying to channel the gentle energy I had seen my mami use to disarm men so many times, “but I could never forgive myself if Nixon harmed you or anyone else we care about. What if he did something to hurt your chances of going to medical school?”

“Fucking prick would do something like that,” Aaron muttered, running his hand over his face. “What kind of nutjob looks up another student’s parents and threatens them?”

*The kind you should leave alone, estúpido.*

“A loser with nothing better to do than terrorize those he sees as less than him,” I said. “Hopefully, he’ll lose interest soon and all we’ll have to worry about is the killer stalking campus,” I tried to joke, although Aaron didn’t seem to find it funny.

“Don’t remind me,” he grumbled as he absently reached down to play with his phone.

“Sorry, but seriously, thanks for standing up for me at the library and for always looking out for Autumn and me.”

His smile returned and his chest puffed out. “Gotta take care of my girls.”

*Barf.*

“Who would have thought Hollow Oak would turn out to be such a dangerous place?” I said out loud.

Aaron shrugged. “There are psychos everywhere. It was only a matter of time before one of them decided to take on the Blackwells. Not sure who I’m rooting for, to be honest.”

It was an interesting way of looking at it—similar to how the twins had described it—that whoever had kidnapped and killed those girls was doing it to spite the Blackwells. Except that theory didn't account for where I fit into the puzzle, and it certainly didn't make me feel any better to think of the girls who had lost their lives over a pissing contest. Still ...

“You don't think the Blackwells had anything to do with the murders?” I probed.

Aaron snorted. “The twins are all talk, no action. And you have class with Professor Blackwell. Can you ever imagine the uptight asshole getting his hands dirty? Nah. I suppose some other bastard could have done it for the family, but why draw so much negative attention to the school and Shady Harbor?”

I nodded along dutifully as he continued.

“This is someone else, someone who doesn't give a fuck about the so-called *assassins of the elite* ...”

*Or, you know, innocent women.*

Aaron's phone buzzed in his pants pocket, and he pulled it out, only for his frown to return as he looked at the screen.

“Damn it, sorry. I gotta make a call,” he said, standing up from the table.

“No worries, take your time,” I said sweetly as he headed out of the room for some privacy, closing the door that led to bedrooms behind him.

I sat quietly for a minute, unable to hear anything being said, and simply took in the space around me. Most of the cabinets

in the kitchen hung loosely from their hinges, painted, of course, in the same ubiquitous white as everything else. The faded laminate countertop was chipped and peeling in places. The sink dripped in the background, and the refrigerator hummed loudly.

The only things in the entire apartment that appeared new were a large TV in the living room and a mini fridge, half tucked under a shelf in the pantry.

Tapping my buff-pink nails against the table, I debated how long I should wait for Aaron.

*Maybe I need a glass of water ...*

Steeling myself, I stood up and began searching the cupboards, quickly coming upon a collection of filmy-looking pint glasses. I picked up the least-offensive-looking one, debating whether or not I should give it a good scrub. I didn't see any dish soap near the sink, and I wasn't sure I wanted to start digging underneath it given the state of the cupboards.

I chewed on my lip, lightly holding the glass in between my fingers.

I decided to check the refrigerator first for some bottled water. I opened the door and was immediately inundated by the sight and smell of rotting food sitting in half-opened take-out containers. I closed it as quickly and quietly as I could, trying to suppress my gagging, not wanting to attract Aaron's attention.

*Disgusting.*



The mini fridge was my last hope. I wasn't optimistic.

I shook my head in one last attempt to get the scent of the refrigerator out of it and headed for the pantry. Kneeling down to open the small appliance, I prepared myself for the worst again.

It wasn't at all what I expected.

Compared to the rest of the apartment, the inside was practically spotless and nearly empty, save for a couple of bottles of Gatorade and a lone beer. It was all very anticlimactic.

Except, as I took another deeper look into it, I saw what I had missed at first glance.

*Very interesting.*

Hidden behind the Gatorades were a dozen small, clear glass vials. Now what were those?

My attention darted back to where Aaron remained, and I strained to listen. It took me a moment, but sure enough, I could still hear the telltale murmur of his voice coming from behind the door.

I slid one of the Gatorades to the side and gingerly picked up one of the vials. It was about thirty milliliters, full of a clear liquid, and topped with a black plastic lid, which I carefully unscrewed before cautiously taking a sniff.

*No scent.*

Humming to myself, my brain started to run through the possibilities. In terms of poisons, thallium was colorless, odorless, and tasteless, and it was used in medical imaging, so it wasn't impossible for Aaron to have gotten some.

But it also could be a street drug. Or something totally harmless.

*Or not ...*

My mind jumped back to Autumn's unexpected illness on Halloween.

Unfortunately, I didn't have forever to figure it out as I heard the sound of someone moving around behind the door where Aaron had gone.

Mind made up, I grabbed a couple of vials and slipped them into my coat pocket. Then I repositioned the Gatorade before closing up the mini fridge and heading back to the counter to fill my glass up with water after all.

I had just sat back down at the table when the door opened up and Aaron made his way back out, looking flustered and sweaty again.

"Sorry about that," he said, wiping at his face with both hands.

"It's okay. Although you're looking a bit pale."

"Call took longer than I thought it would," he mumbled, "and I'm starting to feel like shit again."

I clucked like a concerned mother hen. “You should probably lie down.”

“Shit, yeah, you’re right,” he replied as he wiped his brow. “Raincheck?”

“Of course,” I said sweetly, standing up to make my way to the door, trying to hide my eagerness to get out. “You just take care of yourself.”

“Right, yeah,” Aaron muttered, looking already half asleep.

I was just about to shut the door behind me when he suddenly called out again.

“Luz?”

I turned around, plastering a placidly curious look on my face. “Yes?”

“Stay safe out there. Like I said, there are psychos everywhere.”

## Chapter Thirty-Six



## Luz

**W**ith all the murder and mayhem, it would have been easy to forget that finals were rapidly approaching. But as the days got colder and shorter, the libraries became more packed. A general sense of anxiety had descended on campus as we entered the last couple weeks of the semester and professors attempted to cram as much information into us as humanly possible.

Locke seemed to attend his own lectures as infrequently as some of the students did, often letting Dominic cover in his absence. Another stark reminder that Blackwells could do whatever they wanted.

Ever since our heated exchange in his office, he had stayed away from me. I was happy to reciprocate the distance. With only a couple of weeks left until the final exam, I had begun to hope I might be able to ignore him entirely until his class resumed after the winter break.

I should have known I wasn't that lucky.

“All right folks, that’s a wrap on today’s lecture. As a reminder this week’s readings are Chapters 24 and 25 of the textbook, and please be prepared to speak to Piketty’s work on income inequality at your tutorials this week,” Locke said, wrapping up his lecture, before adding, “Miss Torres, a word if you please.”

I did not. But considering how close I was to pulling off an A in this class despite Professor Dickhole, it was in my best interest to play nice.

I took my sweet time making my way down to speak to him, waiting for the bulk of our class to exit the lecture hall before I even got up from my seat.

“Sometime today, Miss Torres,” Locke grouched, tapping his foot impatiently while he waited for me.

“Apologies, Professor,” I replied in a saccharine tone, “I didn’t realize time was of the essence.”

Locke huffed. “I’m a busy man, Miss Torres. Surely even you can appreciate that.”

I shrugged noncommittally. “What is it you wanted to discuss?”

Locke clenched his jaw, his eyes darting around the classroom as he waited for the last couple of stragglers to leave the classroom. For all his bluster about wasting his time, apparently this wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have in front of the other students.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't feeling a surge of nerves, despite my blasé attitude. I couldn't forget his earlier threats, after that first class, when he all but promised to force me out of not only his class but Hollow Oak too. So far not much had come to pass, but I wouldn't put it past him to try to finally make good on his promise now that I had put so much effort into proving him wrong.

The door swung closed behind the last remaining student with a heavy thunk that reverberated through the now-empty lecture hall.

Rising up to his full height behind the lectern, Locke took me in, looking me up and down in a manner that might have felt leering if it weren't for the perpetual scowl on his face.

I crossed my arms and met his eyes with a stony gaze. I hadn't broken under his cruelty before, and I wouldn't start today.

"It's come to my notice that you have been associating with my younger cousins."

I arched my eyebrow and let out a quiet huff under my breath. Of all the issues I might have anticipated Locke raising, Alister and Nixon were at the bottom of the list. "I think you'll find that it's your cousins who have been associating with me, *Professor*. I can promise you that I have never sought out either of them nor done anything with the intention of seeking their attention."

Locke scoffed loudly. "Alister and Nixon have far better things to do than trawl for scholarship trash. I don't know if

you think you can get at me by harassing them or if you simply believe they're the ticket to elevating your social standing, but I am telling you that it won't succeed and for your own safety and well-being, you would be wise to stay away from them.”

My nails dug harshly into the meat of my palms. The brass balls on this man. If he was trying to provoke me into saying something rash and getting myself thrown out of his class, he was doing an excellent job of it.

Forcing a steady breath in and out through my nose, I hiked my backpack up and rolled my tongue across my teeth before moving to speak again. When I did, my words were deliberate, my tone deceptively calm.

“Let me assure you, Professor, nothing would make me happier than to see your cousins find a more suitable target for their stalkerish tendencies. Be that as it may, I hardly see how my relationships outside of this classroom fall under your purview. So, if you've nothing to say regarding ECON200, I have a study group to attend to. Thank you.”

I turned and spun on my heel to march out of the classroom before I could even hear his response. At the beginning of the term, the drama with Locke had seemed all-consuming; all I could think about was how this one man had the power to destroy all my academic dreams. But so much had happened since then, and I had too much at risk now to worry about his petty squabbles. If he wanted to get me thrown out of Hollow



Oak, the onus was on him. I refused to give him any more fodder.

I had barely made two steps down the hall when I heard the heavy footsteps of an irate male coming up behind me, and I swiftly dodged the outstretched hand I felt reaching out for me before spinning around to confront Locke. “Don’t you dare touch me!” I hissed.

For a moment he froze in place, his usual mask of stormy contempt shattered, replaced by something very close to confusion. It only lasted a heartbeat before the sneer he usually wore in my presence was firmly back in place, and he opened his mouth to deliver what was surely another venomous accusation against me.

I steeled my spine, but before the cruel words I anticipated could come flowing from his mouth, his eyes shifted to something behind me, and he promptly snapped his mouth shut.

I swung around to see what on earth could have compelled Locke Blackwell to shut his mouth but was surprised to find only an empty hallway.

“Good day, Miss Torres,” Locke gritted out to my back, stomping back inside the classroom before I could even look back at him. It was unnerving, seeing him retreat, but I wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, and I power walked down the hall as quickly as my legs could carry me.

By the time I met Autumn at our favorite coffee shop on campus, the rush of confronting Locke was fading, and I was

in desperate need of a caffeine fix if we were going to get some serious studying done.

I grinned when I saw her waiting there for me. While Autumn's mood may have been suffering lately, her fashion sense had not. It had yet to snow here, but she had still chosen to go full après-ski bunny in spectacular fashion. She had paired a soft white and silver cashmere cowl-neck sweater with a pair of buttery lavender-gray leggings that she wore tucked into a pair of authentic Moon Boots in pure white, complete with silver detailing to match her sweater and signature jewelry. Her auburn locks were curled and piled up in a high ponytail. Sipping on a hot chocolate, she looked as though she had just stepped into the chalet after a long day of hitting the slopes.

Autumn looked to see me approaching, and her face lit up.

“Hey there, you finally made it,” she said with an enthusiastic smile that warmed my heart. This girl, with her earnest heart and bold fashion sense had become the bright spot I didn't know I needed in my life.

“Sorry I was late, Professor Dickhole wanted to speak to me again,” I groused, sliding into the seat across from her. Autumn frowned, pushing the second cup of hot chocolate she had ordered in my direction.

“Drink,” she ordered sternly. “Peppermint hot chocolate makes everything better.”

I took a tentative sip to avoid burning off my tongue and was rewarded with rich chocolaty goodness, followed by a sharp

bite of peppermint. I let out a happy sigh. Hot chocolate might not have made everything better, but it didn't hurt.

“What did he do today?”

“Oh, you know, accused me of stalking his cousins,” I replied casually, with only a hint of bitterness in tone.

“Seriously?!” Autumn exclaimed, drawing the attention of tables seated around us. I had long come to accept that the girl had no volume control. At least this time, she wasn't yelling out embarrassing information.

“Yes, he told me, and I quote ‘my cousins have far better things to do than trawl for the scholarship trash.’”

“I would think he would have been more upset about you stabbing Nixon in the hand,” she said contemplatively.

“It was barely a puncture wound,” I pushed back. “I don't think you can really call it stabbing.”

We had had this argument before.

Autumn rolled her eyes at me. “Only you could stab a Blackwell and live long enough to downplay it.”

I shrugged. “Nixon got what he deserved. Maybe next time he'll think twice about where he puts his hands.”

It was doubtful, although I had been seeing less of the twins, so maybe it had gotten through to him.

“I don't understand how you can be so cavalier about the two of them stalking you. Even if they aren't, like, really

hitmen or assassins or whatever you call it, they still give off total psycho killer vibes.”

She wasn't wrong. And as someone who had been raised by a killer, I was probably too comfortable with the idea of murder compared to the average person. There were a lot of different reasons someone killed. I tried to only judge those with poor ones.

“Enough talk about the Blackwells,” I said, reaching into my bag to fish out my books and laptop. “Between the twins and Locke, the whole family is taking up way too much of my mental bandwidth, and I have finals to survive before anything else.”

“Ugh.” Autumn grimaced. “Do we really have to study?”

“Well, my scholarship depends on my maintaining a 3.8 GPA, so maybe you don't but I do,” I said firmly but not unkindly.

“Fine, fine,” she huffed, pulling out her own bedazzled laptop, and we set to work.

We settled into a quiet lull, and the clatter of our typing faded into the background noise that was punctuated by the occasional increase of chatter in the coffee shop.

After about an hour, hot chocolate long since gone, Autumn pretended to dramatically slam her head down on her keyboard.

“Can't ... fit ... in ... any ... more ... knowledge,” she moaned, making me laugh.

I'd missed hanging out just the two of us. When the body parts started arriving and people started disappearing, Aaron had used it to insert himself more and more into our lives. Sometimes it felt he was constantly hovering around us, and while Autumn might have appreciated his overprotective nature, it continued to rub me the wrong way.

"I need to grab something with more caffeine than the hot chocolate. Let's take a break. Can I get you anything?" I asked.

Autumn was well aware of my scholarship status, and she had a sneaky habit of trying to pick up small things for me here and there, like the hot chocolate earlier today. It was hard for me to accept at first, and from anyone else I would have rebuffed their kindness. But Autumn was, well, Autumn. While I could never match her level of generosity on my current budget, I could absolutely get her a coffee.

"Nothing for me, please. If I have caffeine now, I'll be up all night and I need to be up early for class tomorrow."

Nodding, I headed over to the counter to place my order, surreptitiously observing my friend from the distance.

Autumn was on her phone a lot, which wasn't remotely unusual for someone our age, especially since she had her TikTok. But I couldn't help but notice how often she seemed to be checking it with a morose expression when she thought no one was paying attention.

All my efforts to find out what had been bothering her were unsuccessful. She complained about her classes and about her

parents' expectations for her, all of which would have understandably brought even the happiest person down, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something else I was missing.

Sitting back down at our table, I watched as she scowled at her phone before hurriedly tucking it away.

"Everything okay?"

"Hmmm ..." she said distractedly before looking up and catching the concern in my eyes. "Oh yeah, it's nothing. Just my parents being parents."

It was times like these I wished I had more experience with the whole friendship thing. And normal parents. Was I supposed to push back? Call her out on downplaying whatever it was that was clearly eating away at her? Let it go?

Peopling was hard.

"Well, just remember you can always come to me, right?" I said, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

She smiled back at me, even if it was a tired one, and returned my squeeze.

"There is actually something you can help me with," she said, a borderline devious glint appearing in her eyes.

"Anything," I said with a confidence that perhaps I should have checked.

"Well," she drawled, jutting her lower lip out into a pout, telling me I was in big trouble. "There's going to be a final

blowout party on the sixteenth. One last rager before exams start. I know you hate going out, but we haven't gone to a party since the beginning of term, and I need to blow off some steam."

I knew I was going to regret unconditionally supporting my friend.

"Please, please, please," she begged, dramatically grasping my hand in both of hers as she pleaded with me. "You're my bestie, and I need you there. Consider it your Christmas present to me, please."

My gut reaction was to desperately find an excuse to say no, but something nagged at me from my subconscious.

Tapping my teeth together, I weighed my desire to avoid people against my need to be strategic.

Earlier this week, I had determined what was in the vials I had stolen from Aaron. The results were ... alarming and a reminder to always trust my instincts. It also meant that the importance of the trap I had been laying had evolved, and my plans needed to shift accordingly. There was more at risk now than ever.

"Let me guess, everyone is going?" I said sardonically, looking to confirm my suspicion.

"Yes!" she yelped. "Everyone!"

"Even Aaron and Melody?"

"*E-VE-RY-ONE*," she said emphatically, drawing out each syllable.

“Hmmm.” I tapped my finger slowly against my cheek, pretending to think about it and let Autumn sweat it out. “Well, then, I guess we will have to make an appearance,” I finally said, causing her to leap out of her chair shrieking as she wrapped me in another hug.

It was better this way, that she didn't know. She deserved to have a fun night out and I could keep her safe without breaking her heart, right?

Despite my worries, a sense of rightness settled in me as I sat back down in my seat, only half listening to her ideas on what to wear that night. Having a concrete plan gave me back some of the control that had been stolen from me at Hollow Oak. Bit by bit, things were coming together, and for the first time in a while, I was excited about what came next.

I was about to trap a sheep.



## Chapter Thirty-Seven



## Luz

The last week of classes wound down, and I found myself inundated with messages from Autumn about the party—what would we wear, how should we do our hair, when should we start getting ready, was velvet too on trend? Honestly, if Mami hadn't raised me in her own little cult of vanity, I might have been driven mad. Fortunately for Autumn, I loved it all and embraced the distraction.

Unfortunately for Autumn, disaster was on the horizon.

"They won't deliver my packages to the dorm, Luz!" she wailed as she entered my room. I looked up with bleary eyes from the paper I was working to watch as she flopped dramatically onto my bed like a Victorian ingenue passing out on a fainting couch.

"I'm sorry, what? Who?" I mumbled, rubbing my face. I had bigger issues than what to wear to the last party of the semester, but that didn't mean I couldn't be sympathetic.

“I ordered, like, maybe a couple different outfits for the party, you know, along with some shoes and accessories,” she said. “And stupid campus mail says they have too many packages this time of year, and I have to go into town to pick mine up at the post office.”

I suspected that Autumn’s definition of *a couple* was probably closer to half a dozen, but who was I to quibble with her?

“Okay, well, we can just go into Shady Harbor to pick them up, right?”

“Ugh, I know, but it’s so far and it’s getting so cold out. They say it’s supposed to snow soon.” She pouted.

“So, we’ll take your car and pick up treats while we’re in town. We can make a whole official study break of it.” I needed to grab a couple last minute items myself.

“Really?” She perked up. “You’ll come with me?!”

“Yes, of course. When do you want to go? I’m free tomorrow after my Intro to Japanese lecture.”

She jumped up from my bed and enveloped me up in yet another warm hug, and I didn’t even try to shrug her off. I really was getting better at this.



Despite the lack of snow on the ground, Shady Harbor had fully transformed into a winter wonderland. Twinkling lights covered every tree, evergreen or not, and it looked like

Christmas had exploded all over the main street. Wreaths and colorful ribbons hung from every lamppost, and it seemed like every shop was trying to outdo the last, with frosted glass, elaborate window displays, and holiday music seeping out into the street every time a door opened. I half expected Santa himself to pop out at any moment to wish us season's greetings.

"Isn't it so cute?" Autumn asked as we walked down the street, arms linked at the elbows.

"It's definitely Christmas." I wanted to embrace her unbridled enthusiasm for the holidays, but for me, they were just another reminder of Mami's absence.

"Okay, the post office closes at five, and we can't be late, but we probably have time to pop into a couple of stores first."

I nodded and let her drag me into a small boutique full of the sort of cute kitschy stuff that wealthy women snorted up like crack. Scented candles, artisanal soaps, and handmade ceramics filled the shelves, while Egyptian cotton hand towels and vintage reprints lined the walls. Autumn swanned about the store, quickly filling the arms of the enthused sales associate following in her wake, all while I avoided thinking about how much of this would end up in a landfill in the next couple years.

"Oh Luz, look how cute these ornaments are! We really should have decorated our floor, or at least our rooms," I heard her call out from behind the fully decorated Christmas tree standing in the middle of the store.

“I think we’ve had enough on our plates,” I responded dryly, earning a dour look from another sales associate.

After Autumn bought out half the store, they graciously agreed to package it up for her and allow us to pick it up on our way out of town, so we could keep shopping without being slowed down.

Before I knew it, we were on to the next shop, where Autumn continued her shopping spree in a truly stupendous fashion. I didn’t even know what she was going to do with all this stuff. The only people she really hung out with besides me were Aaron and Melody, and I was having a hard time imagining the former needing small-batch handcrafted pine soap wrapped in hand-dyed linen.

We finally made it to the post office with fifteen minutes to spare and the temperature had dropped significantly. I found myself regretting my choice of coat, and I made another promise to buy something warmer after the holidays when everything went on sale.

“Do you mind if I pop over to the drug store to pick up some basics while you wait in line?” I asked Autumn.

“Go, go,” she said with a wave of her hand, already lost in her phone.

I slipped out of the aging post office and headed to the drug store.

As I crossed the street, a particularly strong gust of frigid wind sent my long hair flying all over the place, and for a

moment, I was blinded. I could hear the sound of a car approaching as I stumbled forward, trying to clear my hair from my eyes.

The sound of tires got nearer, and I was starting to panic. Just then, someone roughly grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the street and onto the curb, nearly sending me to the ground.

Furiously batting my wayward locks out of my face, I spun around to face my rescuer.

Standing there, glaring, was Alister. He jerked his head toward the road where the car was now speeding by, somehow scolding me without having to say a word.

“Yes, well, luckily my favorite stalker was here to save the day,” I mumbled, pulling my hair back out of my face. The initial shock was wearing off, and a sense of nervous embarrassment was now rapidly setting in.

The corner of his mouth curled up the slightest bit. On anyone else the expression would have been unnoticeable, but on Alister, it was the closest thing I had ever seen to a satisfied smirk.

As always, he was dressed simply but impeccably. He wore a sharp black peacoat and a Thom Browne scarf, along with his signature jeans and black boots. Perfectly tailored black leather gloves hid the delicious ink I knew covered his hands. It was a look that was both practical and stylish for the professional killer.

“Don’t look so proud of yourself. Your only competition is your evil twin and the nutjob leaving me body parts.”

Plus, whoever that guy was in the parking lot of the police station. He absolutely gave off psycho killer vibes. But whoever was behind the murders knew about Penelope, which meant they were linked to my past, and I would swear on my life that I had never seen him before.

Alister merely shrugged, still looking far too pleased, or as pleased as the typically stoic male could.

“Well, thank you for ... that,” I said with a wave of my hand, “but I’ve got errands to run.”

Stepping away, I started to walk toward the drug store, only for him to follow behind me. I let out a frustrated sigh, Locke’s harsh warning still fresh in my mind. “Did I invite you to join me?” I snapped.

Alister shot his hand out in front of my chest, forcing me to a stop and irritating me further.

“Seriously?” I huffed, looking over my shoulder to give him a frosty glare.

The stony bastard simply arched a single brow at me.

“No, nope, that’s it. I’m done with you Blackwells. First, Nixon harassed me in front of my friends, and then your dickhole cousin had the audacity to accuse me of stalking you and your brother. There’s a killer running loose on campus and —”

Alister looped his warm gloved hand over my frigid bare one, dragging me away from the sidewalk and down the alley next to the drug store as I continued my tirade.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” I sputtered indignantly as he pulled me into the shadows with him. “You better not be about to murder me because you have had so many better opportunities—”

I didn't get to finish my rant.

Before I could get another word in, Alister was spinning me around to wrap me in his arms, and I was pulled snug against his unbearably firm chest, the scent of rain and earth enveloping me as his lips descended on mine.

It was surprisingly tentative at first, like the first puff of wind on a cold day, the kind that had you drawing a bit nearer for warmth.

His lips skated across the surface of mine teasingly, and I found myself chasing after them for more. Steadily though, the intensity built as he captured my lips fully, gently but forcefully opening me up to him. Something wild grew between us, a feral need inside me that made me ache. I felt the sharp gnash of his teeth against my lips, and I whined as he snapped and nipped me with increasing ferocity like the winter wind howling around us.

A gasp escaped my throat, and Alister growled deeply against me with satisfaction. Deeper and deeper he took our kiss, stepping me slowly backward as I playfully retreated



from his icy advances until I felt my back hit the rough wall behind us.

He pressed into me, capturing me firmly between him and the wall. My tongue fought back against his as if I could repel him at the very same time that I clawed against him for more. The copper tang of blood danced across my tongue as the lines blurred between us, and I couldn't tell if it was his or mine.

“Petite diablesse,” he rumbled aggressively, catching a handful of my hair and yanking it firmly. Delight filled me, and I hummed against his mouth.

Of all the pet names I had been called, I had to admit that I liked his best. In one of my favorite languages, no less.

*Little demoness.*

Unfortunately, this demoness worked hard, and I didn't have time to play with Alister.

Autumn would be looking for me soon if I didn't turn up back at the post office, and I wasn't sure how I would explain making out with one of the Blackwell twins in a dark alley to her. Especially when she had seen me stab his brother a couple of weeks ago.

I whimpered in protest at my own actions but planted my hands firmly on his chest and pushed myself back from him. “I have to go,” I attempted to say steadily, though the huskiness of my voice betrayed me.

“No,” Alister rasped, chasing after me again with his lips as I turned to give him my cheek, shoving uselessly against his

chest.

“Yes,” I commanded more firmly this time. “Autumn will be looking for me soon, and if she finds me here with you, she’ll have me put in protective custody and you’ll never see me again.”

An exaggeration, although not a large one.

He scoffed. “There’s nowhere you could hide from me.”

“Hmmm.” I slipped out from between his arms like a cat. “You’d be surprised.”

He choked out a deep, ragged breath of discontent, and I half expected him to follow me back out onto the street, stalking my every step. Instead, he merely glowered at me from the shadows, hands fisted tightly at his side as he struggled to restrain himself.

Maybe I was finally getting into the holiday spirit, or maybe it was because death was nipping at my heels, again, but once I made my way to stand under the bright lights of the street, I couldn’t help myself, and I turned to look back at him over my shoulder.

“Good boy,” I said with a mischievous wink and disappeared into the night.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight



## Locke

The tall orange flames that filled the fireplace crackled and danced in a timeless choreography, casting wicked shadows about Lucian's office. A fitting backdrop to the wicked deeds that went down here.

“The toxicology report from the latest victim was finalized. Glory Van Holt was found with large quantities of GHB in her system, which she would have consumed shortly before her murder. Given that she was last seen at a party on campus before she disappeared, someone could have slipped her the drug there.”

“This is the townie with the brother, the sports guy, right?” Everest interjected.

“I think when you say ‘the sports guy’ you mean the starting quarterback at Hollow Oak, and no, this is the shipping magnate's granddaughter,” Lucian replied drily.

My cousin had no patience for theatrics, except for Everest's. The man could get away with murder, quite literally, and

Lucian wouldn't bat an eye.

“Which raises the question of who provided the drugs. Everyone knows that the Blackwells don't allow for the sale of date rape drugs in town or on campus; it's distasteful.”

“Looks like your competitors found a market you weren't meeting the demand for,” I said, earning myself a dirty look from both Lucian and Alister. “Don't blame me for pointing out the simple rules of supply and demand.”

“You would be correct if this were a free market, but it's not. Our town, our land, our rules,” Lucian said dismissively.

“It's like Criminal Enterprises 101, Locke.” Nixon snickered. “Or do you not teach that in your classes?”

“Maybe if you had ever attended classes, you would know,” I sneered.

“You barely attend half your own lectures,” he shot back.

“Must be nice to be able to bully your TAs into doing all the heavy lifting. Maybe they should name you the Fancy-Pants Chair of Delegating and Avoiding Responsibility.”

“Listen, you pompous little shit,” I ground out. Nixon knew damn well that Lucian had been keeping me busy this semester, and my work at Hollow Oak had suffered for it.

“Enough,” my older cousin barked out. “If you've done your petty squabbling, we need to focus back on the matter at hand.”

“It seems most likely that whoever killed the girl acquired the drug from whomever has been running drugs under our

noses. If we find the killer, we can find the source of the drugs and put an end to this.

“Nixon and Alister, I want you to find out everything you can about the Van Holt girl and what happened the night she disappeared.”

“Maybe if they had been doing their job all along, we wouldn’t need a dead body just to find a simple drug dealer,” I muttered under my breath.

“Locke.” Lucian’s tone was severe and vicious. I was pushing my luck, but I was sick to fucking death of the whole mess.

Luckily, before I could open my mouth again and dig myself deeper into trouble, Everest decided to speak up.

“I don’t like this. I want to tell her,” he announced, fiddling with his phone. I had a sickening feeling in my gut that I knew exactly who he was talking about.

“You will stay the fuck away from her,” Alister rasped, confirming my suspicions.

The insidious minx had managed to crawl her way into my classroom, corrupt my cousins, and now even Everest Collins, the most remorseless, sadistic killer I had ever had the displeasure of knowing, was caught up in her orbit. With any luck he’d kill her eventually as his obsession waned, but right now, I wondered if it couldn’t come soon enough.

“What, worried you can’t handle some healthy competition, Ali?” Everest said with a manic gleam in his eyes.

“No, he’s worried that she is going to wind up in itty-bitty pieces on your basement floor,” Nixon snorted before throwing back the rest of his drink and turning to look at his twin. “You’re getting soft on her Ali, better to let Ever have her.”

“You’re just bitter she only stabbed you with a pen,” Everest muttered, turning his attention back to his phone.

“As opposed to what?” Nixon grumbled while his twin merely sat stewing in silence, glaring at Everest as if he had any influence over what the madman would do.

Lucian slammed his hands down on his desk. “I said *enough!*”

“So, you agree, I can tell Luz about the third body,” Everest said, looking up with a cheery smile, clearly hearing a wildly different conversation in his head than the one going on around us.

Lucian let out an exasperated sigh and ran his hands roughly through his hair, messing it up. It warmed my heart to see my older cousin so frustrated.

“Please tell me you’re not talking about the Sanchez girl,” he gritted out.

“Torres,” Everest corrected, wholly oblivious to Lucian’s tone. “Her name is Luz Amelia Torres, and she’s my Starbright. Although I would be willing to share with Ali if he would stop being such a negative Nancy.”

“You don’t even fucking know her,” Alister seethed.

“Hmmpfh,” Everest snorted dismissively. “Shows what you know.”

“Please tell me you are not proposing releasing confidential information to some random girl you want to fuck.” Lucian looked at his pet killer incredulously.

“Lucian, please, did you not just hear me?” Everest began to ramble on. “I said she is my Starbright. Luz is one smart cookie, but I don’t like the idea of her not knowing that there’s a murdering rapist running around campus. The twins are doing a piss-poor job of stalking her, and as much as I would like to be there all the time, I’m a busy man—”

“How the hell would you know what we are or aren’t doing on campus?” Nixon interjected.

“Told you to stay the fuck away from her,” Alister said, gripping the arms of his chair so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

Taking a sip of my Scotch, I didn’t bother trying to hide my amusement. In the battle of the twins versus Everest my money was always on the psycho, but the two of them would put on a good show for sure.

“Because I’ve been stalking her too, duh,” Everest said with a roll of his ice-blue eyes. “And much more effectively than you two. Really, it’s no wonder you haven’t sorted out the drug problem on campus ...”

Alister shot up from his chair, only for Nixon to haul him back.



Oh, this was getting good.

As much as I was inclined to despise the wholly unwarranted attention Luz had attracted from my family, I was enjoying this particular bout immensely.

“All of you shut up and sit the fuck down!” Lucian yelled, holding his crystal tumbler so tightly it looked as though it might shatter in his hand.

Alister retreated to his seat, although his jaw remained tense, and he stared at Everest with the promise of pain in his eyes. Everest merely sucked on his teeth like a petulant child.

“Alister and Nixon, what more have you learned about this girl and her connection to the murders?” Lucian said with exasperation.

“Not much, beyond the fact that Ali wants to fuck her, and now apparently Ever does too,” Nixon said in a pissy tone, earning himself a rare look of rebuke from his twin.

Interesting.

Usually, the two of them were in agreement about everything, but apparently Miss Torres was a point of contention.

“Pretty sure you want to fuck her too,” Everest whispered in a singsong voice.

Alister clenched down hard on his jaw, clearly forcing himself to ignore the taunts. “She is hiding something; we’re working on it,” he finally admitted.

“See,” Everest said to me in a hushed tone with a knowing look, “Piss-poor stalking.”

“Ever,” Lucian warned.

“What?” he replied innocently, batting his eyes like a deranged schoolgirl. “I’m not even supposed to be stalking her, and I already know more about her than the twins do.”

“Bullshit!” Nixon hissed, with Lucian quickly raising a hand to silence him.

“And what is it that you think you know?”

“I know her favorite color is a warm camel, that she is obsessed with white sneakers, and that she has impeccable taste for a girl on a budget, really, her tailoring skills are top-notch. I know that she routinely pisses Locke off in his class and that he wants to fuck her just as badly as the twins do, if not more—”

“Everest, I won’t ask again,” Lucian cut him off, causing Everest to let out a heavy sigh.

“Ugh, fine.” He pouted.

“I know she is definitely not who she says she is. Luz Amelia Torres from Almeda, Texas, doesn’t exist before 2013, although I haven’t figured out who she was before that. Whoever forged her identity did excellent work, and honestly, I got bored with the whole paper trail thing before I could see it through and figured it was really more of an Alister job anyways.”

“And you didn’t think that was worth sharing with the rest of us?” Lucian gritted out impatiently.

“I wasn’t the one tasked with finding out more about her,” he replied with a haughty shrug.

My cousin pinched the bridge of his nose. You could practically see his headache forming in real time. “Is there anything else we should know about this Luz?”

Everest started rattling off facts, using his fingers to count them off.

“Hmmm, she genuinely likes the Morgan girl ... She’s faking her friendship with the dude that’s always following them around and his sidekick ... She prefers running the trails in the forest behind Hollow Oak to hitting the gym ... She stabbed Nix in the hand with her favorite gold mechanical pencil ... Oh! And she’s hiding something out there. I can’t wait to find out what it is.”

“What do you mean, she’s hiding something out there?” Alister asked, sitting forward in his seat.

“Dunno yet. All I know is she worked very hard to cover up where she went during Thanksgiving weekend. It wasn’t New York, and she only left her dorm to go frolic in the deep, dark woods. What I can’t decide if she is Little Red Riding Hood or the Big Bad Wolf ...”

“And you didn’t follow her?”

“Obviously, but she lost me pretty quickly after she left the main trail. I don’t know the last time you were out there, but

there is a lot of trees. Anyways, I can't tell you how glad I am to have this all out in the open now. Ali, Nixie, I guess you can include me in the schedule now that I don't have to hide my presence from you. Oh, and we should definitely dig deeper into the whole false identity thing, check out that mother of hers, too."

"Everest, enough," Lucian snapped.

"Fine," Everest whined like a spoiled child. "But I can tell her, right Lucian? Pretty please?"

Fucking nutjob was as audacious as he was insane.

"Absolutely not."

"But—"

"No."

At last, Everest let out a sedated sigh of defeat. "All right, but there is one last thing you should know," he said solemnly.

Oh fuck, what now.

Everest paused dramatically before plastering what appeared to be his best attempt at pouting, a look that was entirely disconcerting given his dead eyes.

"I already texted her. Oops!"

## Chapter Thirty-Nine



## Luz

**M**ichael Bublé’s distinctive baritone crooned smoothly from the speaker, singing about Christmas, causing me to frown. I preferred the Bing Crosby version, but this was okay. I guess.

It certainly made Autumn happy as she bobbed around her room, loudly singing as we got ready together for the party tonight. Thank goodness fashion was her thing and not music.

“Have you figured out what you’re wearing tonight, Luzie Lu?”

“If you put down the curling iron until you sober up a bit, I’ll show you,” I baited her.

The doe-eyed beauty scowled at me. “You’re no fun.” She pouted but acquiesced. The girl would do anything for her sartorial fix.

I was actually pretty pleased with my outfit. It was a beautiful vintage piece I found back in Texas, in one of those

small towns rife with old oil money whose thrift stores were a hidden gem, and one of the few nice dresses I owned.

The clingy velvet dress was reminiscent of Mireille Darc's iconic backless dress in *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire*, except it was a plush white instead of pure black and slightly more modest. The version I was wearing still retained the turtleneck design but hit just above my knees, allowing for more mobility than Guy Laroche's original floor-length version. I'd planned to pair it with black tights and black over-the-knee boots to complete my dreamy Christmas-chic look.

"Oh, Luz," Autumn cooed as I held it up to her, and she gingerly fingered the nearly fifty-year-old velvet. "It's stunning."

"Thank you. I've been saving it for a special occasion, and I think tonight's the night."

Autumn snorted and went back to curling her hair. "You sound like you're planning to get lucky."

"Luck has nothing to do with it, my dear friend," I said as I went back to applying my makeup.

A couple of days ago, I'd received yet another series of mysterious texts, the contents of which raised as many questions as they answered.

*UNKNOWN: Third girl dead!*

*UNKNOWN: Drugged and raped.*

*UNKNOWN: Heart okay.*

*UNKNOWN: Be careful!*

*UNKNOWN: No! Be smart.*

I had no idea who had sent them. It was a new number and the speech pattern was wholly different from Alister's or the killer's. I couldn't imagine Nixon or Locke caring enough about my well-being to warn me. So what other psychos were left?

“Do you think the twins will be there?”

“They hardly keep me apprised of their schedules. They're my stalkers, not my boyfriends, Autumn.”

Although the kiss with Alister had definitely blurred some lines, I wasn't so naïve to believe I had any real standing with the Blackwells. If Nixon and Alister were at the party, it would be with their own agenda, not because they were there for me.

Frankly, it would be better if they weren't in attendance. No matter who the latest texts were from, the news that another girl was dead, likely at the hands of her rapist, only solidified my own plans for the party. The last thing I needed was the Blackwells getting in my way.

“Well, from what I've heard, it sounds like half the college will be there,” Autumn said, finally putting down the curling iron and fluffing her elegant waves before pinning up one side with a gold starburst-style hair pin.

I had helped her pick out her outfit earlier that day, a stunning emerald-green two-piece set in crushed velvet. The top had a deep square neckline, which showcased her generous



curves and décolletage. The bell sleeves visually balanced out the flare of her wide-legged trousers that exposed just a hint of her midriff. She had abandoned silver as her signature accent and paired the outfit with chunky gold platforms. It was giving Christmas at Studio 54 vibes, and I was here for it.

“You look like the goddess of Christmas’s disco past,” I teased.

She had chosen to go with a dramatic red lipstick, and on her eyes she wore rich, sparkly golden eye paint in an elaborate design that looked like something the cast of *Euphoria* would rock.

“Key word there is goddess, my friend,” she said with a giggle.

We left the dorm to head to the party around ten thirty. Like Shady Harbor, the university had gone all out with its holiday decor.

“Luz!” Autumn shrieked excitedly, rushing out the doors past me. “It’s snowing!”

Sure enough, a light flurry of tiny snowflakes had begun to fall from the night sky. Autumn spun around in circles like a child, sticking her tongue out to catch the snow.

Yeah, this girl had won my heart and I would protect her at all costs.

“Come on, Frosty,” I said, linking my arm into hers.



Perhaps not surprisingly, the party was being held at the same stately colonial on the main walk of campus where I had first spied the Blackwell twins. Much like that first day of classes, the crowds had already spilled out from inside the house onto the steps and into the front yard. The snow softly falling from the sky seemed to encourage the revelers rather than dissuade them, and Autumn and I skirted our way through the sea of bodies to make our way inside.

“Aaron’s already here with a bunch of friends. We need to find them, and drinks.” Autumn hiccupped.

The heady scent of pot filtered through the air, and in every corner I looked there was someone doing a line—off a table or a body.

Autumn giggled. “Nothing says the holidays like some snow.”

I rolled my eyes. She was already half in the basket already, the last thing she needed was to add party drugs into the mix.

“Okay, let’s find Aaron and the others, and then we can discuss your plans for debauchery,” I argued, tugging her along behind me as we wove our way through the crowds.

If the first party we had been to this semester was wild, tonight’s was hedonistic. I didn’t know if everyone was just blowing off end-of-semester stress or if there was something in the water.

“Pretty ladies, do a shot with me,” a drunk guy shouted in our faces as he stumbled into our path, the telltale cinnamon

scent of Fireball on his breath making me want to vomit.

Autumn blanched uncomfortably, giving me all the ammunition I needed to shove him out of our way and continue on. I could hear his sputters of protest in our wake, but luckily, he didn't follow us.

The heavy thrum of the bass in the air had Autumn swaying to the beat with every step, and slowly but surely, we found ourselves in the back of the house in the kitchen.

“Autumn! Luz!” Melody's voice rang out from across the large kitchen space where she was seated on the island, legs swinging, arms spread wide in welcome. “You made it!” she said in a simperingly sweet tone.

As we got closer, it was clear from her dilated pupils and glassy eyes that the girl had been enjoying herself.

“I'm soooooo happy you're here,” she slurred, wrapping her arms around both of us to bring us in closer. “You, like, never come out, and it's so much fun, tonight is so much fun, it's gunna be the bestest.”

I shrugged her off, leaving Autumn to her drunken embraces so I could survey the room. Aaron was nowhere to be found, which was odd. Usually, wherever he went, Melody was not far behind.

“Luzie, come do a shot with us,” the girls cried out in unison, pulling my attention back to them.

Putting on my best party-girl face, I turned to them with a wide grin and shouted, “All right!”

“Three, two, one,” chanted Autumn as we raised our shooters up to toast before tossing them back. Autumn and Melody threw them down the hatch, far too drunk to notice me tossing mine over my shoulder.

“Oh my God, that’s strong,” I whined, pretending to shiver with the burn of the alcohol.

Melody poured us another line of shots before passing them back to Autumn and me, this time not even waiting for us before taking her own.

“Where’s Aaron?” I asked casually.

“Ugh, he’s been Mr. Mopeypants.” Melody pouted. “He’s off”—she slurred unintelligibly— “but don’t worry, he’ll be back soon. Don’t worry, Luz,” she said, placing a hand on my shoulder, which I fought the urge to shrug off. “He’ll, uh, take care of you if those Blackwell—*hic*—jerks bother you tonight.”

The idea of Aaron Croft protecting me at this point was beyond absurd, but I knew better than to argue with a drunk girl.

“If you’re—*hic*—looking to have some more fun, we brought some party favors,” Melody said with a sly smile, confirming what her eyes had already betrayed.

“Ohhh—” Autumn started enthusiastically before I cut her off.

“Not tonight, Mel, maybe some other time. Autumn, come on, I want to dance.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her back

from Melody before she could get another word out.

“But, Luz, I wanna ...” Autumn began to whine as I dragged her out of the kitchen.

I didn’t want her to make a scene, so I turned to her, placing my hands on both her shoulders.

“Not tonight, Autumn, please. Do you trust me?” I tried to imbue my stare with all the sincerity and seriousness I could muster.

“Yes, of course, Luz, but what does that have to with—”

“I’ve just got a bad feeling about tonight, and I need to know you’re safe. I promise we will go to the next party of your choice, and I will be right by your side while you engage in whatever recreational drugs you want. Just not tonight,” I pleaded, trying to convey how serious I was to her.

“Fine,” she said, still pouting.

I wasn’t one hundred percent convinced she was going to listen to me, but it was the best I was going to get out of her.

“Thank you,” I said, and I meant it. “Now, I believe the dance floor is calling our names.” I tugged her down the hall and into the large living room at the front of the house, most of which had been converted into a dance floor. Dua Lipa’s “Physical” was playing, and it didn’t take much to get Autumn going once she heard the music.

Looking around, I inspected our fellow dancers, maneuvering the two of us through the crowd until I found what looked like a relatively safe group of mostly young

women dancing together in a corner. Deciding to trust my instincts, which hadn't let me down yet, I led Autumn there, far away from any particularly gross-looking guys, before tapping on her shoulder.

"I'm going to run to grab another drink quickly. You stay here," I said, praying that I wasn't making a mistake.

Autumn nodded euphorically, already lost in the heady daze of alcohol and music, as I turned to a slim brunette dancing next to us.

"Keep an eye on her for me, please? I'll be right back."

She assessed me critically for a moment before offering a friendly but serious nod. "All right, I wasn't drinking tonight anyways," she said, her voice subdued but measured, her soft English accent giving her an air of authority.

I let loose a cautious sigh of relief. So far I had only collected one real friend, but I wouldn't let anyone hurt her, and I was counting on girl code to keep her safe for me tonight.

"Thank you so much. I'm Luz, this is Autumn," I said, pointing to my languidly gyrating friend.

"Simone," the woman replied, still assessing me curiously.

I didn't have any time to waste.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you. I will be right back," I said before adding, "Try not to let her have anything else to drink, if you can."

I turned to dive back into the crowd and made my way out of the living room. I was searching for one of several punch bowls I had seen out, full of what looked like either mulled wine or punch. Either would do the trick.

I cut through a large dining room and found myself back in the kitchen, where I had recalled one of the bowls being earlier. Sure enough, there was one parked on the counter behind the island where Melody had been sitting. While there were several groups of people milling around the kitchen, our friend was conspicuously absent and I wondered if she had found Aaron.

Standing at the punch bowl, I got to work. Most of the people hovering around the kitchen were drunk, high, or some combination of both, but no one was too sloppy. Not yet. Although one of the couples making out in the corner was well on their way. Still, no one there was paying any attention to little old me.

I quickly finished up and poured myself a generous cup to use as my token drink for the night. Like Simone, I wasn't planning on imbibing either.

With a final sigh, I raised my cup in a silent toast to the oblivious partygoers around me.

*Merry Christmas to me.*

## Chapter Forty





## Luz

**M**egan Thee Stallion played as Autumn and I danced our hearts out. The heat from all the bodies packed together was undeniable, and I regretted wearing my hair down as it plastered itself to my neck and exposed back.

Quite a few of the male partygoers had taken the sight of my skin as an invitation to touch. While most had taken my more subtle hints to step away, some had required my heel grinding into their foot or other more aggressive maneuvers to get the message.

Eventually, though, we reached that state of celebratory nirvana where all the immediate vultures had been scared off and we had managed to find ourselves in a small group of like-minded revelers, where the dancing was good, the music even better, and everyone was just living for the beat for one beautiful moment.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied Aaron making his way through the living room toward the hall that led back to the kitchen. Even from here, I could tell he looked terrible. His skin had an almost deathlike pallor, and I watched as he was forced to stop and lean against the wall for support as he swayed in place. Still, he caught my eyes and offered me a grin, gesturing for me to cover over.

The poor guy looked as though he was practically on death's door, and he was still trying so hard to be a nice guy.

I tapped Autumn's shoulder, giving her the universal girl gesture for *I'm going to grab a drink*, rather than shout at her over the music.

She nodded and turned back to her dance partner, the increasingly friendly Simone.

With rich, warm skin the color of burnt umber and closely cropped black hair, there was no doubt she was strikingly beautiful. There was something incredibly captivating about how she and Autumn moved together. It wasn't exactly sensual. Unlike nearly everyone else around us there was no grinding of their bodies, they never touched. But yet, watching them dance together, it felt incredibly intimate ... connected, as if they anticipated each other's every move. Honestly, if I didn't have Aaron to check in on, I could have watched the two of them dance all night.

Happy that Autumn appeared to have forgotten about the drugs and was now chasing another high, I stepped away from

them, bobbing and weaving my way through the crowd to follow Aaron out into the hallway.

“Luz!” he cried out, enveloping me in an overly familiar hug. “Where’s our girl? The party is just getting started.”

“Oh, you know Autumn. Miss Congeniality is over there making new friends, but I was looking for you,” I said sweetly.

Aaron’s haggard eyes lit up. “Really? What’s up, baby girl?” He slid an arm around my waist. Sober Aaron was never much one for pet names, but apparently intoxicated Aaron was an entirely different beast.

Leaning close, I whispered in his ear, allowing my breath to tickle his neck and my lips to brush against his skin ever so slightly. “Melody said that you brought some party favors,” I said teasingly before pulling back to give him my best baby-doll eyes while biting my lip.

He took in a deep, appraising breath, his normally expressive eyes rolling over me from head to toe without betraying so much as a single emotion. For a couple moments he said nothing, and I briefly considered that I might have miscalculated.

Then a satisfied smirk broke out across his face as he tugged me even closer. “I didn’t know you liked to party,” he said with a devious grin. “You’ve been holding out on me all semester with the goody-two-shoes routine.”

“Oh please, Mr. Premed, your nose is stuck in a book just as much as mine, but even tryhards like us need to let loose once

and a while,” I said, bumping his hip as he started to lead me away from the kitchen and back to the front of the house.

“Oh, sweet Luz, you have no idea.”

We started to make our way up the sweeping staircase that dominated the frat house foyer. As we rounded the bend, I was able to look out across the party, all the way into the living room, where I could still make out Autumn dancing with Simone. The other woman caught me watching them as Aaron leaned into me, whispering nonsense into my ear, and I swear I saw fear building in her eyes. Her body went rigid, and she went to reach for Autumn.

I swiftly shook my head as I continued to climb up the steps, praying she would understand me. She froze in place, looking surprised and confused, worry still etched on her features. I shook my head at her once more, just as we rounded the bend and disappeared from her line of sight.

For the first time that night, my heart thrummed nervously in my chest. I hadn't accounted for Autumn's mystery woman, and her sudden concern presented a whole new set of issues. All I could do was hope that she stayed where I needed her, by my best friend's side.

Aaron paused at the top of the staircase, needing a moment to catch his breath as another cough racked his body.

“Are you sure you're okay?”

“Peachy,” he said in a hoarse voice, tugging me down a dark hallway that took me back to the night I stumbled on the

Blackwell twins.

Grunts, and the sound of flesh slapping on flesh bled out into the darkness as we passed by closed doors, and not for the first time, I considered the risk of venturing into a quiet corner alone with a male much bigger than me. Eight out of ten sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows. It wasn't the stranger in the dark you had to fear, but the friend at your side.

“Here we go,” croaked Aaron as we came to stand in front of one of the last doors at the end of the hall. Much like every other door we had passed, the sound of sex coming from within was unmistakable, and I stilled for a moment as a female participant let out a particularly loud moan.

“Awww, don't be scared, baby girl. I'll protect you. Besides, that's just for cover.”

“Cover?” I said, confusion evident in my voice.

“You'll see,” he replied with a casual confidence before swinging the door open.

As anticipated, a small orgy was fully underway in the nondescript bedroom in front of us. Two girls screamed, semi-believably, with pleasure while two different guys railed them each from behind and a third guy kneeled behind the couples, dick in hand, occasionally trying to coax one of the girls to suck him off, only to be brushed off and relegated back to jerking off.

Guess five was a crowd in this case.

“I wouldn’t have guessed you like to watch,” Aaron said with leer, and as much as I wanted to roll my eyes and inform him that I enjoyed this the same way a crowd gathered around a trainwreck, I simply giggled and shrugged.

“Come on, this way,” he said, stepping to the side to place his hand on the small of my back. His palm felt clammy against my sensitive skin, and I suppressed a shudder. Aaron was sick; it wasn’t his fault he felt disgusting.

He led me across the room toward another door, swinging it open to reveal another, smaller bedroom, furnished simply with a futon, some side tables, and a dresser. I was just about to make a smart remark about this not being up to code when I noticed the large window opened up to what looked like a fire escape.

“Cool, it’s snowing,” Aaron said, sidling up behind me and wrapping his hands around my waist to pull my back flush with his chest. I tried to take a step out of his grasp, but he dug his fingers painfully into my hips.

“Snow and dark, and the winter comes. Nothing remains the same,” I whispered as he pressed himself up against me.

“What was that?” he muttered as he started to nuzzle me with his nose.

“Elyne Mitchell, Australian writer, celebrated children’s author, champion skier, and accomplished horsewoman,” I said almost clinically.

“What?” Aaron said, grinding himself aggressively against me despite my complete lack of responsiveness to him.

Rolling my neck to avoid his lips on me, I decided to briefly attempt to gain his attention one more time. “What do you have, Aaron?”

“Huh?” he mumbled into my neck.

“What drugs do you have?” I said loudly, enunciating each word as if he were a child.

“Is that the only reason you came up here?” He snickered into my ear.

“Come on, Aaron, you know it is.” I allowed a hint of exasperation to creep into my voice.

He stilled behind me for a moment, as I stared out at the falling snow, before removing his hands from my hips and placing them on my shoulders. He started rubbing softly up and down my arms, and when he finally spoke it was with an unsettling tenderness. “It’s cause you’re fucking those Blackwell psychos, aren’t you?”

A shiver of ill omen ran through me, settling in my stomach with a heavy weight. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m not fucking anyone, Aaron.”

His strokes grew ever so slightly rougher, more agitated. “Are you a virgin, Luz?”

“Again, none of your business,” I replied sharply.

Aaron stopped caressing me, his grip now frozen tightly in place, and the beats in my heart started counting down solemnly toward the inevitable conclusion of our discussion.

“I’m afraid it is, baby girl. Now I will only ask you one more time—”

His first strike caught me completely off guard as he suddenly threw me hard into the futon midsentence, slamming my ribs into the metal frame with such force that it knocked the wind out of me and made me cry out in pain.

“Are you a virgin, Luz?”

I wheezed painfully against the tightness of my lungs as I scrambled to get away from him and catch my breath. He stalked ominously after me, climbing on the mattress to bear down on me before he grabbed me by the throat and shoved my head roughly back up against the wall.

Tears welled in my eyes as Aaron’s drilled into mine with a chaotic intensity. The puppy-dog eyes, the boy next door charm was all suddenly gone, ripped away like a cheap veneer, and all that was left was this pathetic excuse for a villain.

“You’re ... going ... to regret this,” I choked out, refusing to back down in the face of the monster in front of me.

He snorted and thumped my head harshly against the wall again in retaliation. It landed with a crack that reverberated through us and the hand at my throat shook. He was bigger than me and running on rage and madness, but he had also



been deeply ill in a way he couldn't hide. At least not from me.

When I first began slowly poisoning Aaron after Halloween, I didn't quite have an endgame. Part of me was convinced he was one of the sheep. The other part of me was just tired of having him around.

It never hurt to have a deserving victim at the ready.

I just had to hope that the elderberry and nightshade toxins I had been hiding in his smoothies had made him sick enough that his strength would fail him soon and my trap would be sprung.

Still, I couldn't deny the fear building inside me, like a pressure cooker about to explode. How many times had I died with my father's hands around my throat?

Aaron's pupils were almost completely dilated now, and he tightened his hold on me even as his arm started to shake. My head began to spin from the lack of oxygen.

"Last chance, Luz. Are you a virgin? Or are you mine?"

It wasn't much of a choice.

So instead, I chose to let go of all of my fear, and I filled my mind with all the girls who had suffered at the hands of monsters like him.

I thought about the girls who were missing. The ones who had been found. I thought about Sandra and Rachel and what they must have suffered at the hands of the killer. I thought about the third girl, whose name I didn't know, who had been

drugged and raped, most likely using the GHB I had found at Aaron's place.

I thought about Penelope ...

I thought about my very own club of dead girls and let a vicious smile creep across my face.

"I'd rather die."

## Chapter Forty-One



## Everest

I didn't recognize the music thumping loudly through the party, although the various students grinding up on each other seemed to be enjoying it enough. It wasn't for me. And if I could find the source of this inferior beat, I'd happily teach these kids something about real music.

Prowling through the crowds, I began whistling to myself the opening bars of the seminal noughties' classic "Get Low" by Lil Jon and the East Side Boyz. The few partygoers who crossed my path were quick to scurry away from me before I got too close. Like itty-bitty mice-ies.

I started singing loudly about windows, walls, and balls as I poked my head in and out of different rooms, causing the various partygoers to look at me with horror and confusion.

I may not have been known on campus like the twins or Locke, but I'd been told I had the sort of natural charm that made people want to run for the hills screaming.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Nix hissed, following in my wake as I made my way into the kitchen.

Maybe they had snacks in here?

“Your job, if you recall, but better,” I said as I began opening cupboards and rifling through them, almost knocking over a large crystal punch bowl that was nearly empty. Which might explain why everyone was three sheets to the wind here. Seriously though, what kind of idiot would drink from an open punch bowl at a party like this?

The supposedly quieter twin stalked up behind me, slamming the cupboard door shut before I could fish out the Oreos I had spotted in the back.

“Rude,” I muttered as I twirled out from between Ali’s arms and started to shimmy my shoulders as I danced my way across the kitchen.

“We’re here to find the bastards who have been dealing drugs under our noses,” growled Nix, “not get a fucking snack.”

“Wrong,” I called out, dropping down to inspect the cupboards underneath the kitchen island. “You’re here to find the bastards who have been dealing drugs under *your* noses. I’m here to keep an eye on Starbright.”

This time it was Ali who growled. “Stay the fuck away from her, Everest, I mean it.”

I ignored them while doing my best white boy attempt to shake my hips to the beat playing in my head. We could only

have the same argument so many times before even I tired of it. Ali wanted me to leave her alone, Nixon pretended he didn't care ... blah, blah, blah.

Alister took a step toward me, his fists clenched tightly and violence written in his eyes, before Nixon stopped him.

“Leave it. We have our orders, and he has his.” Turning back to me, he sneered, “If he kills the wrong person tonight it will be on Lucian for letting him off his leash.”

I popped up from behind the island to correct him. “I would have you know I am on strict orders not to kill anyone tonight,” I said haughtily, before diving back down to see if my eyes had, in fact, deceived me.

They had not.

Humming happily to myself, I snatched up the bag of Cool Ranch Doritos and tore into it.

Ali looked on with distaste while Nix rolled his eyes at me. “Good luck with that, Ever.” He gave me a mock salute before placing his hand on his brother's shoulder to usher him out of the kitchen.

“Luck.” I scoffed at their backs in between handfuls of chips. “Luck has nothing to do with it.”

One of the fraternity brothers, or at least I assumed so from his shirt, stumbled his way into the kitchen, smacking his shoulder on the refrigerator before making his way over to the sink without so much as noticing me.

Odd.

While I was skilled at blending in when I wanted to, right now I was standing here practically oozing serial killer vibes. With a wicked grin, I began loudly sucking the ranch seasoning off my fingers, slurping and popping like Lecter with his fava beans.

The drunken fool didn't even so much as glance my way as he stood bent over in front of the sink, propped up on his forearms and swaying back and forth.

*Irritating.*

"Hel-lo," I called out in a high-pitched voice, hoisting myself with one hand to sit on the island, my other still holding on to my chips.

Slowly, the oaf started to turn around, his head bobbing back and forth precariously.

I waited with anticipation for the appropriate reaction to finding someone like me standing behind you. He took me in with barely a passing look before his eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he lunged back toward the sink before violently puking his guts up.

"Now that's more like it," I said, throwing back another handful of Doritos.

Usually, people didn't start vomiting in my presence until after I started talking about my latest art project, but maybe the lad wasn't as dumb as he initially appeared.

Over and over again he vomited while I sat patiently waiting for him to finish.

Finally, he finished, his chest heaving as he desperately tried to catch his breath, and I let out a sigh of disappointment.

Shakily, he forced himself upright, and turned around to face me, blinking his eyes rapidly as if to clear the vision in front of him. From this angle, it was easy to see that his pupils were the size of saucers, and I wondered what awesome sights he beheld in front of him.

We managed to stand in silence for several moments before I needed to break it.

I slid off the island, taking a couple of slow, cautious steps before coming to a halt about two feet in front of him. “Boo!” I said with a fiendish leer and was rewarded with the sight of the blood draining from his face as he stumbled backward over his feet to put some distance between us.

“Fuck, man,” he muttered, wiping a hand over his face with disbelief. He backed up against the sink before starting to edge his way along the counter in a vain attempt to try and escape me.

If I wanted him dead, I could have killed him before he took another step. I was bored now, but luckily for him, I had much better things to do than end his likely noxious excuse of a life.

Taking my chips, I ignored the now blubbering mess creeping along the perimeter of the kitchen trying to escape me, and I headed back toward the front of the house, chips still in hand.



Before I had even made it a couple of steps down the hall, I was confronted with a blonde girl lurching out of one of the side rooms, rushing toward a potted plant just in front of me. I sidestepped her as she began to hurl into the plant, only narrowly avoiding a splatter of vomit on my shiny new loafers. Some things were just never the same after getting blood or other bodily fluids on them. Italian leather was one of them.

Shrieking peals of laughter rang out from the room that the blonde had just exited, and I poked my head in curiously.

The scene before me was a raging sea of chaos, revelry, and bile—Dionysus would be proud. Nearly half the room was tripping their minds out, girls batting at the air like cats while others giggled to no one in particular, and a boy in the corner licked the wallpaper voraciously. The other half looked exactly like the guy from the kitchen and the blonde in the hall—ass up, head down, vomiting.

*Interesting.*

Sure, there was a handful of students in better shape who were trying against hope to corral their friends, but by-and-large most of the party appeared to have been drugged ... or poisoned. Either way, it was an unexpected but not unwelcome turn of events.

Bobbing and weaving through the stupefied masses, I made my way back to the front house. I was on the hunt for one very specific student body. One that was petite and curvy with the most delicious-looking warm brown skin that I had ever seen.

Alas, my Starbright was nowhere to be found.

Feeling put out, I followed the music into the living room where I spotted Alister sulking away in a corner, staring coldly at the various people around him as if their very existence was a personal insult to him.

The crowd up here was in notably better shape. The occasional dancer was peeling away from the crowd clutching their stomachs or chasing colors on the wall, but most of the partygoers seemed content to boogie the night away without a care in the world.

Finding a clear stretch of hardwood floor, I took a couple of nimble steps before sliding across it to Ali's side, stopping just short of the broody baby with a flourish. "Why so glum, chum?"

The corner of his left eye twitched, and I wondered if he would take a swing at me right there. Lucian said no killing, which meant that maiming was still on the table.

"She's not here," he ground out, and all sense of mirth left me.

"What do you mean?" I said through a tight smile as I stood up straight, tossing the now-empty bag of chips to the side.

"She's not here," he repeated.

I knew Luz had come to this party. I had followed her and the redhead here myself. "Then where the fuck did she go?" I hissed.

Ali said nothing, his chest heaving with rage. He didn't have to. It had been my job to keep tabs on Luz tonight, and now

she was missing and at least half the party had been drugged.

“Where’s the redhead?” If anyone knew where my Starbright was, it was that one. She was practically attached to her hip.

Ali jerked his head toward the corner, where a large group of girls was still dancing, oblivious to the party collapsing into disarray around them. I quickly zeroed in on the auburn locks of Luz’s friend and started cutting my way through the crowd, hands shoved deep into my pockets to resist the temptation to start cutting out the answers I needed. As best I could tell Luz cared for this girl, and I suspected it would put me at a disadvantage if I carved her up.

“You, redhead,” I barked as soon as I was near her, the ice in my voice carrying above the music. Everyone around immediately stopped and turned to face me warily, Luz’s friend included.

“Oh,” she squeaked at the sight of me as she reached back to grab the hand of the woman standing behind her, shielding her from me at the same time.

Maybe it would have impressed someone else, but I had no patience for such sentimentality. They would all die tonight if Luz had been hurt.

“Where is she?” I snapped.

For a moment she just stood there, looking like a fish as she opened and closed her mouth in silence before choking out, “Wha— Who?”

“Luz!” I said, fisting my hands tightly in my pockets.

The redhead's eyes widened in fear that I couldn't even enjoy at this moment.

“She—uh—went ...” she began to stammer. The woman behind her watched on with fear evident in her eyes before something shifted in her and she stepped forward.

“She disappeared upstairs, with Aaron Croft.” The other woman's voice quivered as she spoke, but she held her head up and answered with as much surety as she could muster. The redhead spun around to face her, the look of betrayal forming across her face, and I briefly wondered what lie she had been concocting in her head.

It mattered not.

Turning away, I marched toward Ali who had been joined by an expectant-looking Nixon.

“She went upstairs with Croft and disappeared,” I bit out furiously.

“I didn't see either of them upstairs,” Nix said, his voice thick with irritation.

“Then let's look again,” I snarled as I went for the stairs, climbing them two at a time.

I didn't trust the Croft bastard at the best of times. I sure as fuck didn't trust him with a drunk, possibly drugged girl and I'd let Nixon burn this house down with everyone in it before I trusted him with my girl.

The twins and I made quick work of searching the upstairs. Room by room we flung open doors and swept in, sending

those occupants still sober enough to flee running down the stairs.

Still, no Starbright.

I stormed over to the final door and kicked it open with a righteous fury, interrupting what looked like had started out as an orgy but had since devolved into a similar state as downstairs.

“What the fuck, dude?” one guy whimpered from beside the bed where he was seated, buck fucking naked and cradling a trashcan.

“Where the fuck is Croft?” I roared, removing my hands from my pockets as I stalked over to him, kicking his equally naked buddy passed out on the floor on the way. Nixon and Ali followed in my wake, walking in perfect unison, as one of the two girls huddled over in the corner started to cry.

“He ... he ... took some chick in there,” he stammered, waving his hands toward the door at the back of the room.

The twins were on it instantly, Nix breaking down the door with a single kick before Ali stormed inside first, while I continued to stare down the quivering fool at my feet, the scent of piss filling the air.

A sharp whistle broke the tension. “You’ll want to see this, Ever,” Nixon called out.

I was through the door before he even finished speaking.

The room was a mess, glass everywhere and snow and wind whipping through the space from a shattered window. The

wall behind the futon was cracked, as though something heavy had been thrown against it, and there was a distinctive red smear of blood.

More distressingly, there was no sign of Luz.

“She’s not here ...” Ali said as his brother swiped at the blood on the wall with his finger and then licked it.

“And he hurt her,” Nix added, sending my blood rage wild as the need to inflict pain started to consume me. Fighting for reason, I strode over to the broken window to inspect the snowy yard below.

Of course, they weren’t there, I thought, smashing my fist into one of the hanging shards of glass in front of me. My knuckles sliced open, and I watched indifferently as my blood fell to the ground below, dotting and sprinkling the fluffy white snow that covered it. The wind whipped the falling flakes into flurries, obscuring my vision one moment before clearing the next.

That was when I saw it. A path in the snow made up of two sets of footprints, with spots of crimson scattered about. My Starbright had left us a trail.

“Don’t worry boys, our girl’s got some tricks up her sleeve,” I said as I climbed out onto the fire escape, eager to begin my pursuit.



It didn't take long for the three of us to follow the prints to the woods at the back of the campus. The snow made for easy tracking. Luz's footprints were smaller and set wide apart, indicating that she was running away from Croft, whose footprints chased behind her, closer together but sloppy and inconsistent, as if he was staggering to catch up with her.

The woods were dark and formidable at this time of night, and the twins and I pulled out our guns and flicked on the small mag flashlights we all kept on ourselves. When you lived in the dark like we did, it was always best to be prepared.

This end of campus was quiet, and as we followed the tracks deeper and deeper into the woods, the heavy snow absorbed all sound as a sinister silence enveloped us.

That was when I heard it. The distinctive squelch of flesh slicing open followed by a harsh shearing sound, like nails on a chalkboard, and finally, the sharp crack of bones breaking.

Usually, it was music to my ears, but tonight it shocked and unnerved me.

"This way," I barked out as we started to sloppily make our way through trees. The snow was up to my ankles, and I'd undoubtedly ruined another pair of loafers, but I wouldn't stop until I found her. We'd lost the trail of footsteps now, but we didn't need it anymore as the gnashing of bones called out to us across the snow and trees.

And then, as suddenly the grisly noise started, it stopped, just as we broke through into a clearing amongst the trees.

The scene in front of me was nothing like what I was expecting. It was everything I could have ever hoped for and more.

Glowing like a specter in the waxing winter's moonlight, bathed in blood from crown to heel, and standing over a dead body like the avenging angel of my nightmares was Luz.

Her carefully styled hair had fallen loose, hanging around her blood-splattered face like a halo. Her arms were soaked nearly up to her shoulders in blood, her pristine manicure now stained red, her stunning dress now ruined.

In one hand, she casually held a set of heavy-duty bolt cutters, which were covered in bits of viscera and gore. In her other, she held the still-steaming heart of Aaron Croft.

Sweet goddess, I was in love ...



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## About the Author

Luna Maria Ramirez is the pen name of one very tired mom living in Toronto, Canada. Analyst by day, voracious reader by night, this Latina decided to take a stab at writing her own book after reading over 1500 why-choose novels. Having grown up in both the USA and Canada, she uses a weird mishmash of Canadian and American English that she hopes you will forgive. In the rare moments when she isn't working, mothering, or reading, she enjoys knitting and is only a little obsessed with skincare, nails, and all other sorts of beauty rituals. She spends a frankly unhealthy amount of time on social media and is always looking for new bookish buddies. Come hang with her on the following platforms:

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