

Loving him
was my only sin.



DEAD MAN WALKING

USA TODAY & WSJ BESTSELLING AUTHOR
giana darling

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The Fallen Men Series. Book Six.

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This book is a work of fiction. Any similarities to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

*For those that are never afraid and always intrigued by the things that go
bump in the night.*

*And to Allaa, for being my soul twin, my sounding board, and my best friend.
Bea and Priest will forever be yours.*

A NOTE TO MY READERS

This is a dark romance. Priest and Bea's story features graphic violence, kinky sex, and sensitive subject matter. Additionally, it deals with issues of religion, serial killing, and psychopathy. If you have a problem with any of these topics, please do not proceed.

“Wholeness for humans depends on the ability to own their own shadow.”
— *Carl Jung*

PLAYLIST

- “Spooky” —Classic IV
- “Sleeping On The Blacktop” —Colter Wall
- “Bleeding Out” — Imagine Dragons
- “Chasing Cars” — Snow Patrol
- “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper” — Blue Oyster Cult
- “Make It Holy” — The Staves
- “Watch Me” — The Phantoms
- “Dangerous” — Royal Deluxe
- “Can We Kiss Forever” —
- “You Want It Darker” — Leonard Cohen
- “#1 Crush” —Garbage
- “You’re In Love With A Psycho” —Kasabian
- “I’m Gonna Do My Thing” — Royal Deluxe
- “Dark Side” — Bishop Briggs
- “Crazy Town” — Ozzy Osbourne
- “Hypnotic” —Zella Day
- “Creep” — Ember Island

“Mad Hatter” — Melanie Martinez
“New Blood” — Zayde Wolf
“Bloodsport” — Raleigh Ritchie
“We Must Be Killers” — Mikkey Ekko
“I Will Follow You Into The Dark” — Death Cab for Cutie
“Graveyard” — Halsey
“Praying To A God” —Mr. Probz, LUKE
“The Groundskeeper” — David Keenan
“Bring Me Back to Life” — Ht Bristol, Charlie Bannister, Vincent Steele,
Nine One One
“Are You Even Real?” —James Blake
“Get Right Church” —Ben Miller Band
“Bodies” — Bryce Fox
“bury a friend” — Billie Eilish
“Graves” — Whiskey Shivers
“Angels” — Khalid
“Dust To Dust” — The Civil Wars
“Dear God” — Lawless, Sydney Wayser
“No Shade In The Shadow Of The Cross” — Sufjan Stephens
“Hide & Seek” — Imogen Heap
“The Prayer” — Bloc Party
“Ready Or Not” —Misha “Book” Chillak ft. Esthero
“Become The Beast” — Karliene
“The Killer Was A Coward” — Dermot Kennedy
“White Demon Love Song” — Vampyre Moon

Link to the full playlist [HERE!](#)

CHAPTER ONE

BEA

I WAS WEARING WHITE.

More specifically, I was dressed in the costume of an angel resplendent with feathered wings gracing my shoulders and a silk dress that fluttered above my knees. With my pale gold hair, my small feminine features, and my plush mouth painted pink, Brett had told me I looked descended from heaven.

I didn't bother to educate him on the irony of my guise. Yes, in most ways, to most people, I was Beatrice Lafayette, lover of all things pink, cute, and girly. I was virginal, by choice, during a time when most girls threw their first time at anyone who handed them a Solo cup of lukewarm beer, and I volunteered my weeks at First Light Church, where my grandfather had been the pastor for decades.

I was good enough to suit the wings.

No one knew the dark heart of me. It was a private secret I harbored inside me, attentive to it only enough to keep it barely alive.

Growing up as I did in the mayor's mansion, a white wedding topper of a house set in the middle of a relatively sleepy town on the west coast of Canada, I didn't have cause to experience much violence. We had a cousin, though, who played hockey down in Vancouver, and my mum, wanting to visit her sister but not particularly enjoying her company, often decided to visit during one of Ryker's games. I loved going to those games, not because I liked the sport or even my aunt very much, but because I loved to watch the fights. They broke out abruptly, little grenades of violence bursting forth on the frosted surface of the arena so suddenly it stole the cold breath from my lungs. There was so much power in the interchange, the vicious strength of seasoned athletes battering each other. It was moving to me in a strange way. I knew my mother noticed my fascination, the way my cheeks pinked from more than just the cold, and how I leaned forward in my seat to be closer to the action.

Even as a child, I was drawn inexplicably to those things opposite of me.

Violence and darkness, immorality and iniquity.

I was a good Christian girl with an obsession for those who sinned.

Which explained, imperfectly, how I felt when my older sister, Loulou, fell in love with an ex-con, outlaw motorcycle club president and in doing so, introduced me to an entire world ripe with deviancy.

The Fallen MC felt more like my home than that mayor's mansion ever

had.

These were people who understood the full spectrum of morality and cut their own rules and uses from it.

I loved the bloodthirsty nature of their revenge because it stemmed like a dark bloom from their deep-rooted loyalty. The way they proudly, staunchly wore their flaws the same way they did their values, daring you to accept nothing less than the full package of who they were.

These men, perfectly imperfect, compelling specimens of the ultimate alpha male who eschewed all judgments that were not his own? These men were my kryptonite and my family.

So was it any wonder I grew to love one of their own?

Maybe love isn't the right word.

I didn't know him well enough for that.

Obsession, probably, was more fitting.

I studied him like one, stalking him as much as I could over the years under the ever-watchful eyes of my blood and biker family, which wasn't as much as I wanted to but enough to sustain the vague image I had of this man and my yearning for him.

They called him Priest. As far as I'd ever been able to tell, no one knew his birth name. Beyond that, I knew nothing much of his history before he showed up at the club as a seventeen-year-old runaway. He was originally from Ireland and retained a lyricism to his speech that he obviously tried to curtail with that rough and gritty biker slang.

He looked exactly how I envisioned God must have wanted a man to look, constructed so beautifully he seemed almost preternaturally handsome. His otherworldliness cast a kind of confusion on those who looked at him; he was at once both divine and an invitation to sin. A magnet to even the most pious moral compass.

One look at him nearly shattered mine.

The silken red hair worn too long, kissing the tops of broad shoulders,

and the thick gleam of it along the curve of his jaw and upper lip. The endless constellations of cinnamon freckles scattered on every inch of available pale skin, and the shade of green in his eyes I sometimes fancied was emerald and other times darker, textured like wet moss.

I knew his looks as well as I could, having never touched him or seen him in anything less than a T-shirt, leather cut, and blue jeans.

My imagination, which my mother and sister had long called overactive, filled in the blanks.

Other details were gleaned over my years of living at the heart of The Fallen family where Loulou reigned with her husband, Zeus, as sovereign.

Priest was the club enforcer.

The death dealer.

The vengeful angel sent to collect the cost of betraying the club.

He was a loner, but comfortable in company, charismatic in a quiet way that didn't draw too much notice. I'd seen him make Cressida laugh when she was grieving for her lost husband, and I'd seen him touch his rough tipped fingers to the crown of Z and Lou's little girl, Angel's fair curls, as if anointing her with his protection, a knight in service to her since birth.

I knew he didn't drink, but he smoked cigarettes he rolled himself.

He played darts like a pro but was masterfully skilled with knives and often practiced on an old, rotting cross the size of a cow he'd leaned against a tree behind the clubhouse on The Fallen Compound.

Such a small collection of things, like seashells gathered along the shore, not nearly enough to claim notion of the entire ocean.

But I was desperate for more.

For him.

It was a fantasy I entertained only in the darkest hours of the night, alone in bed with my hand between my thighs or when storms tossed frightening shadows through my bedroom window and made me think of what kind of monsters inhabited the night.

It was a fantasy I'd determined, after four years of living with its burden, that I should cast aside the way children do childish things at a certain age.

I was almost twenty years old.

It was time to move on.

So I was out on a date with Brett.

Brett Walsh went to the University of British Columbia too, studying economics while I pursued my degree in psychology. He was cute in the way of a puppy still growing into his body, eager to please with a ready sense of humour.

He was, I thought, safer than safe.

The kind of man a girl like Beatrice Lafayette should date.

Loulou, protective as she was, had even agreed when Brett picked me up from her house so she could vet him before our date. Luckily, none of the Fallen had been there or Brett might have peed his pressed khakis.

He was nice, courteous, opening the car door for me, ushering me through the early Halloween party with a gentle hand on my back as he introduced me to his friends.

I didn't have any friends my age, and after meeting the drunk, foolish students at the party, I didn't wonder why.

They were boring, predictable.

I was bored too, at that party, holding my warm beer like a social prop inside of a fun libation. I didn't like the pop music playing or the amount of skin the girls were showing, even the way the men joked, easy sexism and homophobic comments exchanged as friendly insults while they played drinking games.

I looked around for Brett, who had left me for the bathroom almost twenty minutes ago.

Not that I was keeping track of time...but I figured another half an hour and I could get him to take me back home.

"Excuse me, have you seen Brett?" I asked a guy waiting in line for the

bathroom in the hall.

He stopped his conversation with another man abruptly and raised his eyebrows as he took me in. “Wow. So did it hurt when you fell from heaven? I could kiss you better.”

“Wow,” I mimicked sweetly. “Original.”

I turned on my heel without another word and pushed my way through the throng of people as I searched the house for him.

No Brett.

Unease turned my stomach.

Would he really abandon me?

I sighed, rubbing my forehead as I headed out onto the back deck for fresh air. My phone was burning a hole against my hip where I’d slipped it in the waistband of my panties beneath my dress.

I wanted to go home.

I wanted someone to pick me up—Loulou or Cressida or Harleigh Rose because they’d understand or, more, Zeus, Bat, or Wrath because they’d punch Brett in the face for leaving me alone.

But it felt babyish to return to my comfort zone, however strange that comfort zone might have been.

I was there to experience what it might feel like to be normal for a change.

My eyes closed as I leaned back against the stucco exterior of the house, the walls thrumming with the bass of the music from inside.

“That’s a rip!” someone shouted from deeper around the side of the house.

My eyes popped open.

“You’re jacking the fucking prices, asshole,” the same voice said again, the words accompanied by the *thwack* of a something hitting flesh.

“You got a problem with the price, get your shit from someone else,” another person offered with faux benevolence.

A person I recognized as Brett.

My skin prickled as adrenaline rushed through me.

Brett was dealing drugs.

Brett.

Slicked back hair, pattern button-up, and pressed khakis *Brett* was selling drugs in the backyard of a uni party in Entrance, BC.

Suddenly, impactfully like a punch to the solar plexes, I liked him a hell of a lot more than I did a moment before.

Because this? Dealing drugs in Entrance, the hometown of The Fallen MC's mother chapter?

That was just about as dangerous as it got.

My heart thumped loudly against my ribs, knocking to get out. I took a deep breath to settle my excitement and carefully walked to the end of the porch so I could peek over the railing at the men in the shadows.

Brett had the angry buyer pressed up to the wall with his hand shoved into his chest. His face, usually placid and pleasant, was ragged with fury.

I shivered, and it wasn't because of the cold autumn air against my bare skin.

"It's not me jacking shit, dude. I look like a chemist to you? I'm just the middleman. You wanna high like nothing else, you know this is the place to get it," Brett taunted. "So take it or leave. I got a girl inside waiting for me, and if I don't get laid tonight because I left her waiting too long, that's on *you*, Owen."

I arched a brow reflexively at his arrogance. This was our first date, so there was no way I was going to sleep with him. No way I was even going to do more than kiss him. But his arrogance reminded me of The Fallen, those bikers with all that swagger, and again, I found myself intrigued by him.

Brett was becoming a worse man and a sexier prospect by the second.

"Fine," Owen muttered petulantly. "Give me a quarter ounce."

"Brett," I called out sweetly, leaning over the railing so that my hair went

swinging over my shoulders, clouds of silver curls and wings behind my head. “I think it’s time you took me home.”

I almost laughed at the look of shock on his face, the way it paralyzed him for a precious moment.

Owen used the time to wiggle out of his hold and slink away into the dark.

I sighed when Brett just blinked at me, obviously searching for a way to play off the entire situation. With a little hop, I swung up onto the railing and jumped over it, my skirt catching on the wind so he caught a sight of my white, silk panties.

He swallowed hard when I looked up at him after I landed lightly in the grass and made my way over.

“You aren’t very discreet,” I said softly, almost kindly because I did feel badly for him in a strange way, and also because it amused me that I’d thrown him so off balance.

“I need the money,” he explained, a pugnacious frown settling into his features. “I’ve got a full course load and no time to work.”

I shrugged lightly. “I’m a full-time student, I volunteer at First Light Church, and I work.”

“You’ve got your daddy’s money,” he pointed out, hoping to cut me with the reference to my deplorable deceased father.

I smiled prettily at him, leaning in close up on my tiptoes because I was short even in heels, and he was taller. “Brett? You mention his name again, I’ll show you why I wore this costume to be ironic, okay?”

Confusion played over his face like shadows.

I laughed, pulling away enough to grab his hand and tug him toward the street. “You know, I didn’t think I’d have much fun tonight, but this was great.”

Brett shook his head. “You’re the weirdest girl I’ve ever met. You’re not like...angry that I deal? Most chicks get their panties in a wad over it.”

I laughed at him, feeling giddy and lovely. The night was clear and cold, the leaves wavering orange and red like flames flickering in the dark. I was out with a boy who was far less boring than he seemed, and I thought I might let him kiss me when he dropped me off at home.

“Honey, if I hated every man involved with drugs, I wouldn’t have much of a home life,” I explained as I pulled him into my body against his car and wrapped my arms around his neck. “You obviously don’t know Entrance well if you think I’m your average good girl.”

“Bea,” he said slowly, pulling at the end of my curls. “Look at you. How could you be anything but?”

I arched a brow. “And you? Khakis and cocaine?”

He laughed then, eyes crinkled shut, chin tipped back, and I liked him even more.

Almost enough to forget about my years-long obsession with another man.

But not quite.

Even then, pressed tight to another man, I felt the chains around my heart tug hard as if I’d reached the end of slack and journeyed too far from him. I struggled to focus on the feel of Brett’s linen shirt beneath my hands, then struggled again wishing it was leather under my touch.

“I’m dressed up,” Brett was explaining. “It’s a costume party.”

“Oh?” I pushed him away slightly to study his outfit again. “Are you Chandler Bing or something? I think you forgot the sweater vest.”

Brett laughed again, and the sound warmed my chest. It felt good to have one hundred percent of his consideration after a life of living in my lovely older sister’s shadow. It was such a simple thing, one man’s undivided attention, the *wrong* man’s regard, but I stretched toward it like a flower seeking the light.

“You wanna get out of here?” he suggested in a throaty voice as he ran his fingers through the ends of my hair.

“Yes, I was coming to find you so you could drop me off at home.”

He frowned, and I laughed because he was so adorable and predictable.

“I was never going to sleep with you tonight, Brett,” I informed him with mock solemnity. “In that way, at least, I really am a good girl.”

I laughed lightly as he shook his head in bemusement. It felt astoundingly good to be wanted. So good, I was almost tempted to let him touch me.

Maybe I would have if I thought he would do it right.

Not light and tender, as befitting a virgin.

I didn't want anything close to that.

Hard hands with rough calluses and strong teeth with a sharp bite. A man who would play my body not like an instrument, but like one of the weapons he wielded so well.

Brett watched me as I slid away and got into the passenger seat of his beautifully restored orange Camaro before he made his own way to the driver's seat.

“So what does a guy have to do to get close to you?” he said as he settled in the car and turned the ignition. “Are you a three-dates-before-fucking kinda girl?”

I almost gagged on the cliché. “I'm not going to give you a road map, Brett. Where's the fun in that?”

He slanted me a look but stayed quiet, obviously puzzling over the fact I wasn't as easy to manipulate as he previously thought.

I leaned back in the leather seat and watched as the rain started to ping against the windshield, fat drops round as human tears. It rained often in the autumn and winter seasons in Entrance, but I was filled with a renewed love for the weather whenever it came. I was enchanted by the rain, the way it washed things clean and nourished the land. Growing up in the church as I did, my biblical teachings had lent the rain an almost divine connotation, and since I was young, I'd always believed it heralded good things. For God withheld the rain when He was wronged and let it shed after a show of faith.

“You’re not as good a guy as I originally thought,” I pointed out. “To me, that’s a good thing.”

His laughter was edged with bitterness. “You don’t wanna know how bad I am.”

I rolled my eyes. “Trust me, I’ve known worse than you.”

“There’s not much worse than my family in this town, trust me. We haven’t been here long, but you’ll learn. If you’re so turned on by bad boys, you got that in me. Runs in our blood.”

“Mmm,” I hummed, trying to stave off my laughter. “And what, may I ask, makes you all so bad?”

Brett faced me, then stalled at a stop sign before a four-way crossroads. There was something dark in his face, something almost feral that made a shiver rip down my spine.

“The Walshes,” he said after a long moment. “We make the best designer drugs from here to Saskatoon.”

Fear skittered through me. “And you thought you’d expand west?”

He blinked at me, thinking, assessing whether to trust me. “Maybe.”

Suddenly, our flirtation, the slight frizz of attraction fell flat between us because I knew this boy sitting beside me either had a death wish or lacked a brain.

“Have you heard of The Fallen MC?” I asked softly, barely above the patter of water on the metal roof. “This is the territory of their mother chapter. I don’t think they’ll take too lightly to infringement on their land, especially when it’s their backyard.”

Brett laughed, his teeth flashing in the darkness, tinged orange by the lights on the dash. “We’ve been setting up shop in Vancouver for months now, and they haven’t done fuck all. We’re not afraid of them.”

“You should be,” I said flatly, suddenly and adamantly uninterested in him.

Foolishness was *not* sexy.

There was a difference between being dangerous and in danger, a fine line that Brett didn't seem to know he was straddling.

"Bea..." he said from beside me, but whatever he might have wanted to tell me was lost in a cacophonous roar.

One moment, I was staring out the passenger side window, fingering the silver streaks of rain on the pane of glass while we listened to the hard beat of Imagine Dragons streaming through the speakers.

The next, there was a terrible, ear-splitting *crack* and *boom*.

Then all I knew was pain.

It was too immediate to pinpoint where it originated, how Brett had lost control of the car on the rain-slicked road or if someone had barreled full speed into us. I had no eyes to see, no body to save myself from the all-consuming pain. It felt as though I lived inside a flame because everywhere burned. I thought I might be screaming, but then the hurt finally hit its apex and blessed black descended.

When I came to again, there was wind in my hair and rain on the skin of my right hand. I was unbearably cold after the heat of the fire that had consumed me. When I tried to stir, I realized my body was half in, half out of the car.

Not through the door.

But through the windshield, shattered completely, but somehow intact, crumpled around my body, both soft and sharp.

Pain ripped through my torso as I moved, breath wet and rattling as it exploded through my throat.

Idly, fogged by pain and shock, I wondered if I was going to die.

There was blood somewhere. I could smell the copper tang. It could have been mine.

It could have been Brett's, who was silent and somewhere behind the crushed glass in the driver's seat.

I opened my mouth to speak his name, but only blood came forth, salt and

iron on my tongue.

A sound drew me from myself. I angled my head, each minute movement hideously painful, to see a man walking toward the car. He was tall, all in black, covered in it as if cloaked.

I marvelled distantly that Death was there to receive me.

He walked purposely but not hurried, not panicked. I wanted to scream at him to hurry because there was pain and so much fear in my heart.

I didn't want to die.

I'd thought about it all my life, imagined its embrace, if it was warm or cold, sweet or shocking, but I found myself completely unprepared for it.

I wasn't even twenty-one.

I had a mother who had already lost her husband and her reputation.

A sister who had already been through more than a person should in a single lifetime.

They didn't deserve to mourn me.

Not yet.

"Help," I croaked as the man drew close. The fingers on my oddly tingling hand twitched as I tried to reach for him.

He didn't say a word. Instead, face blotted out by the ink of night on a street without lamps, he cocked his head as if studying me.

Then suddenly, an explosion of economic movement, he was on top of the car, heavily booted feet braced on the hood. I whimpered when he bent low and reached for me.

Death, death, death, I thought frantically.

I was going to die.

Only, the hands that reached for me were not ghostly.

They were lean, strong muscles over long bones, the skin white against the black of tattoos stamped on the knuckles, the back of the palm.

Blearily, I blinked at the sight of the Triquetra stamped on one hand.

I knew that symbol. Life, death, and rebirth.

A sob rolled through me and fell out of my mouth, my spittle pink as it exploded against the glass.

“Priest,” I rasped then whimpered as something shifted in my chest and seemed to stab me through the heart.

“Quiet,” he ordered calmly as he adjusted his body, leaning forward, arms descending into the car through the hole my body had made so he could carefully brace my chest and grasp my hips.

I sobbed as he started to shift me, and he stopped on a vicious curse.

“Gotta get you out of here,” he said. “The car’s gonna blow.”

As if coaxed by his words, my ears tuned into the sound of dripping, the hiss of something essential escaping from the car as blood escaped from somewhere above my right ear.

“Be still and give me your weight. Let me do the work,” Priest demanded coldly.

A surgeon at work. He had no empathy for me at the moment because his entire mind was fixed on the problem.

I held my breath in answer, then felt it rip from me like torn Velcro as he hoisted me carefully through the windshield. He had to shift back on his knees to clear me from the wreckage, but then he twisted to sit on his ass and carefully collected my limp, throbbing body in his arms.

He was warm, and for a moment, I was confused by that. Wasn’t this Death? Was I not on the way to Heaven?

“I thought death would be harder,” I admitted as my head lolled against his arm, my mind spinning in the confines of my broken skull like loose marbles.

“Oh, it is,” he agreed. “You aren’t dying.”

“Feels like it,” I said as I realized I was crying and that the warm darkness in my right eye was blood.

“I know about death. I won’t let it take you.”

I frowned because I was certain he had been Death himself, but then the

stabbing pain in my chest dug deeper, and I gasped before I forgot how to breathe entirely.

My world went black and white, then back into focus as he lowered us both to the sidewalk a good distance from the car. There was a calamitous sputter from the wreck, and the man only had time to curl over me protectively before there was a great *boom* as if a crater had opened in the earth.

I stared up at the man who was not Death, but my savior, watching as flames exploded behind him so his head was cast in a fiery halo.

Not Death.

Priest McKenna.

The Fallen MC's ruthless enforcer.

The man without a heart.

Kneeling over me like a knight pledged to serve me, to keep me safe from all harm.

I blinked up at him, his hair the colour of the fire behind him, and let myself touch his bearded cheek.

"You saved me," I managed to say even though my consciousness was circling the drain.

"No," he said darkly as I closed my eyes and let my hand fall to the ground, giving up my fight against the hurt to embrace the blackness behind my lids. "I did this to you."

CHAPTER TWO

PRIEST

THIS ISN'T THE STORY OF A GOOD MAN. A TALE OF REDEMPTION OR salvation. I require none of the former and seek nothing of the latter.

This is a story of a man without a conscience.

A part of me wants to state I am also a man without a heart.

But a very wise girl once told me, even Death has a heart.

And didn't that stick with me?

Once, a long time ago, I was more human than monster. Probably, I was born with psychopathic tendencies. My childhood in the Church only heightened them, stripping the flesh off my bones year by year until I was only bone.

When Zeus Garro, the prez of The Fallen MC found me, a bloodstained teen ravaged by scurvy and cramped from living in the hold of a freight ship for months, hiding behind crates, he took one look in my eyes and told me he thought I was a dead man walking.

He wasn't wrong.

He was from a culture that bestowed unique names to their brethren, a new moniker for a new life. Usually, they evolved organically, a trait or funny story that gave birth to a new character, one clad in leather and inked with a tattered, winged skull.

There was no waiting for me.

I took the name of the monster who made me, who stripped me bare straight down to the dark heart of me, and made it mine.

Priest.

The sweet irony of my blasphemy thrilled me as much as I could be thrilled by anything. It amused me to strip the skin off an enemy of The Fallen and hear them beg for absolution from God when I'd done much the same at my darkest moments of misery.

I knew, as they didn't, that I was as close to God as they would ever come.

After all, I was the one who escorted them to their Maker.

I was on one such errand that dark, biting cold October night in Entrance, British Columbia. Autumn had descended swiftly that first week of the month, wrapping cold, cruel hands around the warm remnants of summer and killing it dead in a matter of days. Wind rushed through the flaming leaves and tore them ignobly from their trees. They crackled and flared

brightly in swirls around my booted feet as I leaned against my 2009 FXSTB Night Train Harley, the matte black bike obscured perfectly in the shadows of the treelined suburban street. I was kitted out in black to match, a hoodie beneath my Fallen cut, leather gloves, and dark jeans.

It wouldn't do to be seen or, even worse, noticed.

I was waiting, and I had been for three hours in the very dead of night when the rest of the good citizens of town were long gone to sleep.

I didn't mind the waiting.

Predators never do.

It was an intrinsic part of the hunt. The lull before the strike.

It wasn't passive or boring.

It was tension itself, energy gathering momentum to unleash itself at the right moment.

To a man like me, the waiting was as heady as that lingering moment before the first kiss, all electrifying chemistry and eager anticipation.

Not that I'd ever felt that way about a kiss.

Only about the woman I imagined kissing.

The woman who was everything kind and lovely, completely devoid of sin.

So, my opposite.

We might as well have existed on different planets.

Beatrice Lafayette saw everything through rose-tinted glasses, sometimes literally because she had a habit of wearing ridiculous sunglasses shaped like hearts and flowers.

I saw everything as it was and would be. Waiting to die, tinged in the grey rot of time.

She was not for me.

To even entertain ideas of kissing that full, cotton candy pink mouth could have amounted to one of the most disturbed thoughts to ever cross my admittedly extremely disturbed mind.

I tried not to let myself think beyond the possibility of a kiss.

Because I was not a soft man or a kind soul.

I was a killer fashioned by the hands of monsters. When I fucked, it was just as brutal as when I fought or just as coldly efficient as when I killed.

I liked to choke the breath out of a pretty neck to heighten pleasure, paint pale skin in livid red bites, and play with a pussy until it was swollen, drenched in so much cum it ran down my wrist and my partners begged me brokenly to stop.

There was no romance or flowers, no intimate smiles or...cuddles.

All things Bea would want.

Things she deserved.

So I thought about that kiss for a fleeting moment as I leaned against my bike, then considered what a nineteen-year-old girl might be doing on a Friday night while I staked out my prey.

Leaves crunched behind me, alerting me to someone's presence.

I didn't turn, didn't even flinch when a massive frame moved into sight at my periphery.

"Looked for five minutes, could barely see you in the dark, and I was lookin'," Wrath Marsden grunted as he crossed his arms and stared into the dead street before us. "Gotta admit, you're good. Surprised your name's not Ghost."

I let out a sharp exhale that was as much effort as I was going to expend on my indignancy.

Wrath shifted beside me and irritation spiked through me. He was a big ass motherfucker, nearly as big as our prez, Zeus Garro, and he drew attention to himself through sheer size alone.

I was tall and compacted with lean, sharp lines of muscle, but I moved like a shadow while my brother lumbered like a bear.

"Don't need you here," I said, snapping open my curved Karambit blade while I fished the untouched block of cedar wood out of my pocket. I touched

the tip of the steel to the soft wood without thinking, my fingers moving it with efficiency and purpose. I never knew what I would carve before I finished it. My hands spoke to the timber in a language I couldn't translate in my head.

"No," Wrath agreed, crossing his thick arms over his chest, bracing his feet apart in a physical display of his desire to stay. "Asked Prez if I could come by. Figure I better start earnin' my keep if I wanna stick around."

"As I said," I repeated coldly. "I got this covered."

He ignored me. "Motherfucker dealers, eh? You think it's a requirement they're dumb as fuck or just coincidence?"

I didn't have an answer for that. In my opinion, most people were stupid.

"Sellin' drugs to minors, gettin' girls hooked on coke to lock them into prostitution. We gave them a warnin', they chose not to heed it." My voice shifted seamlessly into the language of my brothers. I was a chameleon, if chameleons were armed with teeth, claws, and deadly intent. "He deserves to die. They all do."

"How're you doin' it?" Wrath asked with mild curiosity, like we were discussing the weather.

He was the former enforcer for the disbanded Berserkers MC so he knew a thing or two about killing.

But he was a blunt force instrument, all muscle and fury. No finesse in his torture, no art in his murder.

He would never be as good as me.

Not many could be, no matter how hard they might try. Most people, like Wrath, had some kind of social conscience, a voice in the back of their head that whispered what other people might think or feel about them.

I didn't have that voice.

Just my own dark whisperings echoing in a vast, black abyss.

"Car bomb," I told him, looking down at my hands to see what they were fashioning. It was, unsurprisingly, a tombstone. I had a habit of carving them

and anointing them with the name of the victim I was going to murder. There was peaceful satisfaction in burning them after the deed was done. “Make it seem like there was a malfunction in the exhaust. It’ll blow out the windows, the engine, and then, finally, explode.”

“Not even a body to bury?” Wrath surmised with mild respect. “That’ll send a fuckin’ message.”

I didn’t respond because that was obviously the point.

“You gotta hand it to the Irish fucks, they’ve got balls,” Wrath mused as he shifted from foot to foot and cracked his knuckles. He was always moving, overfilled with restless, angry energy. The air around him buzzed like static and made my skin itch.

“The Irish usually do.” I had no loyalty to my Irish kinfolk. We may have originated in the same place, but I left for a fucking good reason and put that version of myself behind me.

Wrath’s eyes were hot on my cheek as he studied me, but I didn’t flinch or flap my gob just because his stare asked a question he was too chickenshit to give voice to.

“You ever get nightmares, man?” he ventured finally. “You ever mourn the people you’ve killed?”

“No,” I said flatly.

Silence and then, bitter as coffee grounds at the bottom of a cup, “Never lost someone as a consequence of your violence. You do, you’ll dream of horrors.”

“You need to sleep deep for dreams.” My voice was metallic, the clang of my robotic heart sharp in my speech. “I skim the surface of sleep, and I never fuckin’ dream.”

“Lucky you,” Wrath muttered just as the sky opened up and rain began to float down.

If I’d had a metaphorical heart, the kind poets and artists wax on about, I might’ve felt a pang in my chest of something like sympathy for my newest

Fallen brother. He'd loved a woman who had been ripped away from him ruthlessly by his enemies. They'd tried to kill them both, but only succeeded with Kylie.

It was a waking nightmare I doubted he had to sleep to dream of.

I could understand this, but I couldn't feel it.

Simply it had nothing to do with me so I couldn't bring myself to care very much.

"It's been a year and a half," I said blandly as my ears caught the faint rumble of a vehicle barreling down Everett drive. "You should get over it."

Wrath startled slightly, his muscles flexing with a surge of fury, the instinct to pummel me to release some of his angst. Then he stilled, logic dousing the inflammatory response.

He would not win if he tried to fight me and I would never forget that he'd tried.

So he froze beside me and chewed through the surge of passion until it passed.

"You're a fuckin' asshole," he mumbled finally before letting loose a ragged sigh. "Shits me, I like you anyway. Every other fucker treats me like a rabid beast or beaten dog. You? You just don't give a fuck about my past."

I shrugged a shoulder, mind trained on the car I could now see glinting orange down the street.

"Show me how you detonate the device," Wrath asked, and I could tell he was trying to bond with me, reach me on my own level.

It made me smile, even if it was a small, tight curve of my mouth and a minuscule flutter of good humour in my chest. I tossed him the burner phone. "Tried and true. Hit send when they stop at the sign."

It was my olive branch. My attempt at recognizing his friendship and accepting it.

Wrath stared at me again in that way he had, stripping away my skin like a scalpel to discover the contents of my blood. He nodded curtly, massive

hands cupping the phone gently, like I'd given him a gift.

I was glad he understood that I had.

Killing people was my joy, and I'd passed it over to him. In my world, that practically made us best mates.

The rumble of the old Camaro engine grew louder, taking up the entire airspace of the sleepy neighborhood. I turned to watch the car drive to its demise.

The target was Brett Walsh, twenty-two years old, just a kid really.

But that was the point.

We'd warned Patrick and Brenda Walsh twice, which was one too many times, to stop their operation from seeping into Entrance.

We'd heard even Javier Ventura, the mayor of Entrance and head of the Mexican cartel on the west coast of Canada, had issued his own warning.

They'd made the conscious decision to die by not obeying.

It was bad enough they were dealing their designer crap on our turf, but Brett had also sold to King and Harleigh Rose Garro's half-sister, Honey. She was just eighteen, and the club had been trying to keep her safe and get her clean for the last year.

Brett had ruined any progress they'd made with his cock and his coke.

He had to pay.

And I was the happy debt collector.

The car was closer now, almost level with where Wrath and I stood veiled by the night dark and massive oaks. They were going fast leading up to the stop sign, passing in a streak of orange-like paint smeared against the nightscape.

Too fast, really, to see the interior of the dim vehicle.

But I was a human predator.

A clinical psychopath.

I blinked half as much as the rest and had instincts keener than a room full of psychologists.

So I spotted something bright and glinting like moonlight caught in a jar on the passenger seat of the rigged Camaro.

I opened my mouth as my hand snapped out to still Wrath's fingers on the phone.

But that bastard, he knew death, and he didn't just embrace it.

He ran toward it.

His thumb was on the trigger before I could slap it from his fist, and a second later, my shout was drowned out by the muffled boom and sharp tear of the car exploding.

For the first time in a long time, I felt my heart in my chest, beating too fast, too hard against its confines like a rioting prisoner.

Something was wrong.

Sound was distorted in my ears as I shoved Wrath and stalked toward the car. There was the hiss of gas leaking, the scattered pop of hot metal peeling off the frame and the tinkle of glass falling to the pavement.

But no human noises.

I prayed to a deity I hadn't believe in since I was nine that my eyes had deceived me.

That my mind, broken and warped as it was, had only transplanted her at the scene. I thought of her often, at strange intervals, in odd places like a ghost haunting my thoughts.

That was it, I told myself even as I prowled toward the steaming metal wreck and rounded the front of the car.

It wasn't her.

It couldn't have been.

Beatrice Lafayette would never be seen with a motherfucking loser like Brett.

But there was no denying what lay before my eyes as I faced the car head-on.

The safety glass of the windshield was webbed with fractures, a gaping

hole blown straight through the middle by the body of a woman. Her blonde curls caught in the wind, waving like a white flag over her prostrate form. Bizarrely, she was wearing wings, giant feathered white things affixed to her back that wilted brokenly over her spine, the left one crumpled and tangled in the glass hole.

My eyes burned, and my heart, it throbbed.

Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

I felt painfully alive the way I figured most people did the moment before they died.

It was her.

Bea.

My Little Shadow, the woman who noticed me and studied me too much. The sunshiny girl who followed me around like a second shadow.

There she lay.

Broken and folded into the wrecked car like a savagely opened present.

I sucked in a deep breath that tasted of ash and rain, then decided my course of action.

The car was going to blow.

I'd rigged it that way.

And there was no way in fucking hell or heaven, any conceivable destiny on earth that I'd let this broken angel die like a criminal in the street.

My boots landed with a clamour on the hood of the car as I jumped up to extract her, almost drowning out a faint whimper.

Thank *fuck*, she was alive.

"Priest," she said, her voice so light, so sweet it unraveled like torn silk.

My heart punched against my ribs, but I kept my calm.

She was going to be okay.

I ignored her as she muttered nonsensically while I carefully cut the left wing off her back so I could gently pull her from the windshield. She was boneless in my arms, head lolling, pupils blown wide open with an obvious

concussion, but she was breathing.

I listened to her breath stutter wetly through her bloody lips as I slid off the hood and made my way quickly away from the car, my arms immovable so I wouldn't jostle her battered body. When I gauged we were far enough from the wreck, I dropped to my knees and curled my torso over her prone form seconds before the Camaro burped one last, rattling gasp and then tore into pieces from the force of the explosion.

I could feel the heat of it break like a wave against my leather-clad back.

"You saved me," Bea whispered, one hand reaching for my face, the bones in her index finger broken and spliced through the skin.

"No," I protested, giving myself one pristine moment to listen to her breath, to feel her in my arms in a way I never would again. "I did this to you."

A moment later, she was out like a light. I shifted her body onto the grass, then looked up just as Wrath stalked toward me, gun out and face fierce with a grimace.

"What a fuckin' shitshow," he grunted as he knelt beside me, his eyes running over Bea. "Fucking, *fuck*."

"I'm going to kill them all," I vowed as I moved a clump of bloody hair out of Bea's face and then shucked my leather jacket to put it under her head. "Every last Walsh and every single one of their associates."

"Priest, man..." Wrath tried to reason with me, but I couldn't hear him.

I was singularly focused on one thing.

Revenge.

Which is why I heard the cough and responded to it before Wrath could do anything to stop me.

Brett Walsh.

Somehow the cockroach had crawled from the wreck, or been thrown far enough to escape the flames that now leapt from the metal, as orange as the charred paint peeling off the exterior. His skin was all blood and abrasion.

Even from a distance, I could tell there was something impaled in his belly, that soft place that meant a long, painful death if it wasn't treated.

He deserved that, but I wasn't willing to give it to him.

Unthinking, unfeeling, cold and programmed by violence, I was up and stalking toward him. My Karambit blade slid from the sleeve of my hoodie into my palm. It felt good to wrap my fingers around it as I approached the sick fuck who'd put Bea in danger.

Who'd put her in the path of *me*.

I knelt casually over his broken, dying body and stared into his face.

One eye was swollen shut, but the other was clear, black with panic.

"Help me," he gurgled.

There was a large piece of metal, probably cast off from the door, in his left side, and his ribs were crushed from the impact against the steering wheel.

He was dying.

I ignored his squeal of pain as I stood, taking his foot with me as I went.

Then I ignored his howl of outrage as I dragged him over to where Wrath was tending to Bea. My brother watched me without judgment as I dropped the piece of shit to the ground at her feet. I squeezed his face in my hands and forced him to look at her.

"You see this?" I demanded coldly, my knife at his throat, already deep but keeping the blood at bay by sheer pressure. "You see what you've done. Women like this are untouchable, you motherfucking swine. Women like this are not for the likes of you or me."

"Don't fucking kill me for this, she's just a girl," Brett pleaded. "I have money. Lots of money! I'll pay you whatever you want. Fuck! Just let me go."

I barked out a cold, hard laugh that hurt my chest and sliced an inch across his butter soft neck, spilling blood down his front.

"You crossed The Fallen MC," I hissed into his ear, twisting my knife

just to hear him groan. “And now, you’ve personally crossed *me*. I’m going to end you here, and then I’m going to end your family and everyone you loved because this *girl* is worth more than you and your scum family combined.”

The sharp odor of urine perfumed the air as Brett Walsh whimpered and shook against me, tears falling from his one good eye.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“I’m not,” I said, levering him higher into the air by his hair, ready to end him.

I wanted to feel his blood flow hot over my hands. Maybe then I could rid myself of the vision of Bea, angelic as heavenly death caught up in all this ugliness.

“Priest.” The soft, silken voice of my broken angel cut through my laser focus.

I looked down at Bea, her head in Wrath’s lap, her big blue eyes gone black with terror and pain. She studied the careless way I held her date and the deadly intent in my gaze as I stared back at her. I let her see the depths of my black soul, the absolute resolve I had to kill this motherfucker in front of her, *for* her.

Wordlessly, she inclined her head.

A second later, before Brett could draw another breath, my knife was across his throat and his blood splashed to the ground, anointing the earth at Bea’s feet like a sacrifice made for the gods and goddesses of old.

And through it all, we watched each other, Bea and me, locked together in this death in a way I felt echo into the future of our lives, linking us in a way I’d never be able to forget.

I knew then, as I’d only been curious about it before, that Beatrice Lafayette was going to be *mine*.

CHAPTER THREE

BEA

THE SHARP, ANTISEPTIC SCENT IN MY NOSTRILS WHEN I FINALLY SWAM sluggishly from unconsciousness into a painful wakefulness meant I knew immediately where I was. The Garros visited St. Katherine's Hospital so frequently, I joked with Loulou that we should start a loyalty program.

She hadn't laughed. In fact, when I woke up in scratchy white hospital

sheets with a residual ringing in my ears and pain throbbing like strobe lights under my skin, Loulou was yelling.

My sister did not yell.

Mostly because people usually did what she asked. It had something to do with her intense beauty, but also her quiet confidence and kindness. She was the kind of woman who understood the power of the feminine mystique and had long ago learned to control it.

So, I was shocked she was yelling until I saw exactly who she was yelling at.

Priest stood just outside the door, hands loose at his sides, face completely placid even though a passionate, angry Garro was shouting in his face.

He just took it.

And Zeus, who sat in a chair in the corner of the room, let it happen.

“There is nothing you can say to excuse this,” Loulou was yelling, tears in her voice, her anger on the edge of collapsing into sheer grief. “There is nothing that will ever make me forgive you for letting this happen to her.”

Priest blinked.

“Easy, little warrior,” Zeus warned quietly, but he didn’t move from his chair. “Don’t say somethin’ you can’t take back.”

“He deserves worse than my words,” she cried dramatically, her arm flinging in my direction. “Look at what he’s done to her!”

Her eyes widened as she caught sight of me awake and watching.

“Bea,” she breathed before launching herself at the bed. Despite her eagerness, her hands fluttered gently against my face like butterfly wings as she checked me out. “Beatrice.”

“Hey,” I whispered even though my throat ached. “How’s my favourite sister?”

I watched her blue eyes, bright like the ocean under a noon sun, flood with tears.

“I thought you were going to die on me,” she admitted. “And I know, that is one tragedy I wouldn’t survive.”

“Don’t be silly,” I told her lightly, trying to reduce her angst. “You’ve already survived worse.”

Loulou zipped her mouth closed against the force of a sob and shook her head vigorously. “No, no. My man, my babies, and my sister. I couldn’t stand to lose any of you.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that today,” I promised as I raised my aching right hand, two fingers splinted against an obvious break, to touch her smooth cheek. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Her face collapsed into a scowl. “No thanks to Priest.”

“Hey!” The word exploded from my mouth like a dart. “Don’t you dare blame him for this.”

“Bea, don’t be ridiculous. He was *literally* the person who did this to you.”

“And Wrath,” Zeus added idly, some shadow in his eyes as he stared at us that I couldn’t decipher the meaning of. “He was the one to execute it.”

“Priest set it up. He did the legwork!” Loulou snapped.

Zeus cocked his head to the side and leveled a stern look at his slightly hysterical woman. “You don’t know all the details, Lou, and it’s not like you to make dangerous assumptions. Cool the fuck down, and you’ll see sense.”

My eyes darted to the empty doorway, wondering where Priest went. I ached to talk to him, to crawl into the embrace of his strong arms and feel safe once more.

I knew with certainty that the moments I’d spent held tenderly against his chest were the only moments of intimacy I’d ever share with him, and I wished, irrationally perhaps, that I’d been more lucid for the experience.

Zeus unfolded his massive frame from the plastic chair and approached, his mouth pressed tight, his eyes hooded. He was usually a fairly expressive man, but there was a tension to him I couldn’t understand.

Lou made room for him to bend down at my side, and he leaned so close, those dark-ringed silver eyes were all I could see. One of his massive hands gently pushed back my hair from my forehead, and when he spoke, it was in that low, intimate voice rough as gravel that he usually reserved for Loulou or his kids.

“This didn’t happen to you ’cause’a Priest. This happened ’cause’a my club and *me*. I’m the prez, so it’s me you gotta hold responsible for this fuckin’ tragedy, not Priest or Wrath, you hear me?”

I almost laughed at his martyrdom because it was so like him to take the blame on his monumental shoulders. It was easy to see where his son, King, who faked his own death to get Z out of jail, got it from. Sacrifice ran in the Garro blood.

“I’m not mad at anyone, Z,” I promised him. “I’m not half as dramatic as my sister, you should remember that.”

“Hey,” Lou protested, but there was a smile in her watering eyes that spoke to her happiness that I was well enough to tease.

“It’s kind of insulting, really,” I continued. “That you two want to place the blame anywhere but with me. I’m the one who decided to go out with Brett. Stupidly, I thought he was a good guy just because I always saw him wearing pressed trousers.” I grimaced. “Apparently, he just had bad fashion sense.”

“We’ll just have to get Lion to vet anyone who asks you out in the future,” Lou resolved, leaning over to kiss my cheek. “I won’t have you hurt like this again for any reason.”

“What’s the damage?” I asked, almost afraid to know because despite the drugs hooked up to my IV, my head pounded, and my body felt like a piece of overripe, badly bruised fruit.

“A severe concussion, four broken ribs, one of which punctured your lung, but it wasn’t bad enough to require surgery, two broken fingers, and a dislocated shoulder.”

“Yikes,” I breathed.

“Now you can understand why I’m so fucking upset.” Loulou scowled at me even as her thumb swept circles across the inside of my wrist just so she could feel the reassurance of my pulse.

“I can understand, but you can’t protect me from everything, Loulou.”

“Watch me,” she dared, baring her little white teeth.

I sank farther into the bed, feeling suddenly exhausted. “The truth is, when I thought Brett was a goody two shoes, he was dull. The second he showed his darker side, I was intrigued. I don’t know if you can save me from everything, especially my own mind. I think I like bad boys.”

“You do not.”

“Yes, I do.” I thought of Priest, and the way he’d slit Brett’s throat without remorse. The way he’d done it with quiet, loyal pride like a cat killing a bird for its master.

How could I resist a man who was so willing to kill for me?

“Well, *stop it*,” Lou snapped.

Zeus’s loud, rumbling laughter interrupted our tiff. His head tossed back, all that long brown and blonde hair shimmering in the yellow artificial light. His beauty and amusement filled the room with simmering energy that instantly made me feel better.

“Stop laughing, Z,” Lou demanded, but there was a current of laughter to her own voice as she leaned over me to swat at his chest.

He caught her hand and pinned it on his chest over his heart as he recovered himself enough to say, “Gotta admit, Lou, you’re not exactly in a place to judge. You fell for me when you were just a girl. And I’m ’bout as bad as they come.”

“You *saved* me,” she reminded him, but her hysteria, her anxious edge of anger wore smooth under the weight of his loving gaze. “You were never a bad man to me. Just my guardian monster.”

I watched them, the way the entire world fell away as they looked at each

other. My parents had never been very much in love. Instead, appearance and status were everything for them, and in the end, it killed my father and cast my mother into ruin. This, the love that radiated like a second sun between Zeus and Lou, *this* was what love should be.

Pure. Intense. A light that brought brightness to all the dark moments of life. One that could never be extinguished.

“You two have inspired me for years,” I said quietly as Zeus brought his wife’s hand to his lips to kiss before releasing it. “So if I like bad boys, it’s basically your fault.”

Loulou groaned, but Zeus winked at me, prompting me to laugh even though it ached in my ribs.

“Bea, honey.” My mum, Phillipa, swept into the room on a cloud of Chanel perfume, holding a tear-soaked silk handkerchief to her mouth.

Behind her, considerably calmer, was my grandpa.

I smiled as soon as I saw him. I always did.

He smiled back.

Pastor Lafayette was the only reason I didn’t change my name after my father was killed by the corrupt, criminal outfit he’d been colluding with. My grandpa was soft spoken and wise in the way of prophets and poets. He refined the complex world around him into clear paths and distilled emotions for his parishioners, and he never judged anyone, even the criminal who’d married his firstborn granddaughter.

“Grandpa,” I whispered, suddenly a little girl too shy to make friends who needed my grandpa to hold my hand.

“Sweet Bea,” he murmured as he moved to my bedside and leaned down to kiss my forehead.

He smelled of old paper, frankincense, and myrrh, the fragrance of the church and of my childhood.

Suddenly and strangely, I felt like crying.

“Move aside, Michael,” my mother demanded, hiccupping through her

tears, her hands fluttering and floating around me as if she wasn't sure where to land. "Oh, my goodness, Beatrice, you're absolutely wrecked. What would I have done if I lost you?"

"It's not about you," Loulou muttered. She'd never recovered from Phillipa's negligence and couldn't understand, as I did, that Phillipa was fragile. She'd been a show pony for so long that she didn't know anything else other than being loved for her beauty and engaged with because of her gossip.

She was harmless, if a little annoying sometimes.

I hushed her now, as she bent to kiss my cheeks. "I'm fine, Mum, please don't worry about me."

"Of course, I'm going to worry. You are my daughter, and I am your mother." She sniffed, shooting a little glance at Zeus. "I'm just glad those ruffians aren't crowding you. You need space to heal."

As if on cue, sensing the drama of the moment, there was a swell of thunder on the air, rattling the cheap windows in their frames.

It was the roar of Harleys. Dozens of them.

Phillipa looked sharply at Zeus, who shrugged unabashedly. "Might'a told one or two'a 'em that Bea here was awake."

My mother sucked in a breath to argue, but Grandpa beat her to it with a soft hand on her arm.

"They're here to pay their respects," he said softly. "They aren't just Louise's family anymore. They adopted Bea a long time ago. There is no space for judgment where there is love, Phillipa."

His words made warmth soothe the ache in my limbs and swell in my heart until it felt overfull. One more word of love or praise and I felt I might burst.

We heard them before we saw them.

The stomp of heavy motorcycle boots on laminate floors, the harsh metal jiggle of wallet chains, and the clamour of masculine voices speaking low but

rough as they descended the corridor to my room.

I was lying in a hospital bed, broken and battered, but suddenly, it felt like Christmas.

I was already smiling when the first Fallen brother breached the narrow doorway. Bat Stephens, the sergeant at arms, beside Dane Meadows, our newly returned war vet, then Curtains with his flaming red hair shoved off balance by Boner who swaggered in after him. Axe-Man and Wrath both so large they had to pass through the frame sideways, then Skell, so skinny he looked like he should be hospitalized himself. Nova was there holding Loulou's daughter, Angel, who stared up at him in awe because even at one year old, she knew beauty when she saw it, and King, sweet returned King, holding his new baby, Prince, in one arm, and Angel's twin, Monster, in the other.

By the time the entire Entrance Chapter of The Fallen MC had filtered into the room, it was packed like a can of sardines with large men and the scent of leather.

They took turns touching me, making space to squeeze or pat the places of my body not encased in gauze or plaster. I didn't respond to any of them because they were all talking over each other.

When they finally settled enough for me to speak, there were more people at the door.

Harleigh Rose and her fiancé, Lionel Danner, with Cressida and Lila, Cleo, Hanna, and Maja. My biker babes, the women who had raised me more succinctly than my mother ever could have.

They blurred in my vision, and I frowned, trying to blink away the obstruction only to realize I was crying.

No, *sobbing*.

Great tears of relief and joy that rolled through me like the waves off the coast.

Nova teased me for being a baby, and Boner laughed. Buck, the eldest

member and the club VP, slapped him upside the head and told him to have some respect even though it was Nova who'd said it. Harleigh Rose shoved Loulou aside so she could press my hand to her cheek and study me carefully with her own eyes to make sure I was okay. Cressida grabbed my only free foot and squeezed it, her wide brown eyes filled with tears and love.

It was calamitous. Utter chaos.

I could hear a nurse in the hall trying to tell Lila that too many people were in the room making too much noise. That I needed peace and quiet after my trauma.

She didn't know shit, Ransom, the prospect, said with a fierce glower. They were my family, and I needed them now more than ever.

I cried so hard, I thought my heart stopped.

Loulou's sweet, sugared cherry scent enveloped me as she leaned forward to tug me into her arms.

"It's okay, Bea," she whispered in my ear.

I couldn't stop crying for long enough to explain to her that this was what I had always wanted. Even with a mother and father, Loulou and I had never really had a family unit, not until a bullet connected her chest to chest with a man who would gift her not only his heart, but an entire community that would embrace us, and never, not through anything, let us go.

Maybe Lou thought she and The Fallen were the reason I'd nearly been killed, but I knew better.

They were the family that kept me alive and smiling every day.

The only essential piece missing was the man who'd quite literally saved me.

The man who distanced himself from his family, from *me*, as much as he possibly could.

I felt the emptiness in my chest, that small section I'd carved out as his when I was just fourteen, echo vacantly.

Priest McKenna had a home in my heart and I was aching to let him know

it.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRIEST

RATS LIKE SMALL, DARK PLACES. THEY LIKE TO HIDE, NOT RUN.

As any decent horror movie addict knows, you can always run, but you can't hide.

Not from a monster.

Not from me.

I found Patrick Walsh a week after the car accident hiding out in Purgatory Motel, a rundown pitstop on the edge of Entrance painted varying shades of pink. I'd spent the past five days hunting down the lower elements in their fledgling organization before turning my sights on the patriarch. He was known for his cataclysmic rages, ruthless business dealings, and cheating on his wife. I'd had hopes he would be a worthy adversary.

Regrettably, it was so easy to find him, I took a moment to feel disappointed as I straddled my bike staring at Unit 9 where his outline was clearly defined behind the sheer curtains.

I yearned for a real challenge for a split second before I remembered how dangerous someone like that could be. Javier Ventura, for example, the notorious cartel boss, had terrorized the club for going on four years, and we still hadn't been able to dismantle his organization or, at the very least, fucking kill the motherfucker.

So I'd take easy.

Besides, maybe he would end up being stronger than I thought, a wily fighter who would take more than a single punch to knock down.

The excitement I felt at being let loose to murder was a mental thing. It did not leech into my body, accelerating my heartbeat or coaxing a sheen of sweat to my skin. If I'd been hooked up to a heart monitor or a lie detector, I could have fooled experts without trying.

It was this dissociative behaviour that one of the nuns, a very, very long time ago, had told me made me such an easy sinner.

My body could perfectly execute what my mind allowed without trivial emotions ever sullyng the waters.

So as I stalked toward the motel, I felt only calm, cold and controlled. My mind cycled idly through the weapons on my person. The gun in my waistband was for contingencies only. I preferred to work with knives, and those I had in abundance. The bagh nakh slotted over the fingers of my left hand like brass knuckles only tipped with blades, the machete I wore strapped

to my back beneath my cut, the set of throwing knives I had strapped to my left calf, the curved hunting knife I had clipped to my belt, and the Bowie I wore on a chain around my neck.

I'd learned young it paid to be prepared for anything.

I'd learned early, too, I liked the intimacy of knives.

With a gun, you could kill a man at a hundred and fifty paces without ever seeing the details of his expression.

With a dagger, you could feel a victim die, his breath feeble on your face, blood pooling rich and wet over your hand, how their body went hard then soft as their pulse weakened.

I was looking forward to carving up Patrick Walsh.

It had been so long since I'd been able to let loose. A year since I'd sliced and diced up the motherfucker Staff Sergeant Harold Danner for trying to kill King.

My fingers itched to draw blood, and my mouth watered.

The door was flimsy enough, when I kicked it in, that it exploded into splinters, the heft of it flying back into the room with a force that knocked Patrick on his back.

He'd been praying.

There was an old, black leather-bound Bible on the pink bedspread flipped open, the nearly sheer pages torn by his hand as he fell.

"Fuck," he cursed as he scrambled backwards on his hands and arse.

"Where are you goin'?" I asked with faux curiosity as I stalked him deeper into the room. "There's no back exit. If it's escape you want, you'll have to go through me."

"You're one'a them arseholes who killed my son," Patrick growled, recognizing the flaming winged skull on my cut.

This seemed to energize him into finding a shred of courage. He lurched to his feet, wildly searching for a weapon.

To move things along, I tossed him a knife.

It clattered to the hard, thinly carpeted magenta floor at his feet.

He stared down at it, chest heaving with fright, then up at me.

I jerked my chin. "Go ahead."

"You're giving me a dagger?"

I adjusted my leather gloves and rolled my head back on my neck until it cracked. "You don't deserve to die quickly."

Patrick's fleshy, florid face, a typical Irish man if ever I saw one, crumpled like a sweat-stained napkin as he bent to pick up the weapon. He held it ham-fisted, completely incompetent.

He attacked straight on, hoping his weight would be enough to surprise me into fumbling. It was a method of brute force and idiocy.

I sidestepped slightly and braced. He impacted hard with my shoulder, which knocked him sideways so he went flying onto one of the beds.

It was so tempting to end him there against the bed, but it was all too easy. The insatiable darkness inside me was a black hole, voracious for more, and I was helpless against the need to feed it.

So, I wrenched him by the ankle off the mattress and his heavy weight *thwacked* loudly against the floor. Before he could right himself, I flipped his leg into the air over my shoulder and dragged his considerable weight easily across the floor into the bathroom.

It was easier to clean blood off laminate than carpet.

"Fucking Canadian cunt," Patrick spat as he tried to leverage his arms against the bathroom doorframe.

I cocked my head, studying him as he fought my grip, then swiftly kicked in his left arm with the heavy heel of my motorcycle boot. The *snick* of snapping tendons and the *crack* of bone was nearly as satisfying as the following roar of pain that ripped from his lungs.

"Actually," I told him conversationally as I hauled him across the bathroom floor. "I'm just as Irish as you." Then in rusty Gaelic I hadn't used in years, I insulted him in a language he would understand. "If only ye had

brains, you'd be dangerous."

I noticed the tension build in his muscles a hairbreadth before he launched himself at me. He was slow, the excess weight and a slow mind making him so. But I was bored with him, and I wanted to play.

So I let him take a swing at me.

It landed poorly on the barest corner of my chin, my beard taking the sting out of the bone on bone contact, the force only enough to turn my head an inch.

But the pain sang through me like a drug, exhilarating and *right* in a way not much in my life ever was.

A little laugh danced on my tongue as I made to swing again. I rolled to my toes and, just before his sloppy left hook landed, I ducked and came up with a hard jab to his right kidney.

He buckled, a slow sway like a tree just cut through the core of the trunk, and then the timber, his head hitting the porcelain pink tub with a sickening crunch.

Moaning pitifully, he tried to recover his equilibrium, scrambling for the knife that had fallen to the floor when I'd hauled him through the door. I bounced lightly on my toes as I let him grasp it.

He was bleeding from a gash over his left ear.

The same way Bea had bled in the wreck, her beautiful face transmuted horrifically by blood.

I hadn't allowed myself to think about her at all since I'd last seen her broken, her natural glow tamped out by the artificial yellow lights of the hospital room. I hadn't let myself think of her blood on my hands, both literally and figuratively as I'd pulled her from the car wreck I'd orchestrated myself, and I hadn't let myself visit her again, even though I'd done nightly drive-bys of her house after she was discharged.

I was a man who did not allow himself a lot of things, so I was surprised by the difficulty of this particular exercise.

Everything in me compelled me with some strange magnetic force toward the slight girl with a halo of curls who would forever be too good for me and therefore too wrong for me.

This pathetic excuse for a man bleeding on the floor before me was partly responsible for her injury. I could self-flagellate myself as much as I wanted to pay penance for my own guilt, but who was there to extract it from Patrick.

Me.

That's who.

Something in my chest ignited, my clear-headed rationale wavered, and suddenly, I was on him.

The time for fun and games had passed.

It was time for Patrick Walsh to meet his fucking Maker.

The bones in his hand ground together beneath my punishing grip as I smashed his hand against the bathtub to release his grip on the knife. He grunted and gasped, spittle flying, perspiration breaking out across his pocked forehead. All that energy so inefficiently expended.

In seconds, he was disarmed.

A moment later, I wielded that same knife in my own hand, the dangerous point tipped like a pen to the papery skin of his throat.

Soon, I would write the conclusion of his destiny in the ink of his blood.

“This,” I told him, somewhat merrily, because fuck, but I loved the hunt and that precious, poised moment before the kill. “Is what happens to those who go after The Fallen.”

“Fuck you,” Patrick said before spitting at me, the viscous liquid too heavy to reach my looming face so it landed pathetically on his heaving chest. “And your Fallen fucks.”

“Eloquent, if not boring last words.” I cocked my head to the side and twirled the blade slightly against his flesh, teasing open a small wound and a singular bead of garnet red. “Do you want to try again?”

He opened his mouth to say something, but it was too late.

With a flick of my wrist as graceful and studied as a dance movement, Patrick Walsh's thick throat split open easily under my knife and his last words drowned in one last, gurgling gasp.

I sat back on my haunches to watch him die more comfortably.

The blood flowed so quickly from his dissected flesh, rushing like a broken tap over his white dress shirt into the waistband of his black slacks, around the sides of his belly to drip steadily—*plink, plink*—to the laminate.

I watched as his extremities grew pale and mottled like old wax paper, how his breath stuttered, stuttered, stopped, and his chest gave one last rattling rumble before it stalled altogether.

When it was done, I allowed myself one moment of reflection because I knew, if I didn't now, I would suffer for it later.

“Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, no evil would I fear,” I blasphemed hoarsely. “For I am no longer Yours.”

CHAPTER FIVE

BEA

THEY WOULDN'T LEAVE ME ALONE. EVERY MOMENT DURING MY THREE-DAY stint in the hospital and every second since returning home to my small, pink heritage home just off Main Street, there was someone at my side. King and Cressida (because they were rarely parted) with their sweet baby, Prince, Harleigh Rose, Lila, and my best friend, Cleo, my sister or my mother and

my grandpa. The Fallen didn't linger long, but some of them came to check in, and Loulou, in a show of excessive protectiveness, even had Ransom do drive-bys at night to make sure I was safe.

I had no space, no privacy, and, most importantly, no Priest.

He was the only one in the entire thirty-four-man motorcycle club not to pay their respects to the prez's injured sister-in-law. And that included the more irascible shitheads like Heckler, Wiseguy, and Skell.

It would have been a sign of disrespect from any other brother. Zeus would've had words with them and they'd come crawling up my stoop carrying a ruffled bouquet or a cold six-pack of beer in apology.

But Priest was different.

There was a feared awe and reverence surrounding the club's enforcer. He was their death dealer, their toll collector, so there was respect there, but also a slight chill. Death was a word in every outlaw biker's lexicon, but for Priest, it was almost a mantra. The other men couldn't relate to him as easily as they could to each other.

And Priest, whom I strongly suspected after years of study was a clinical psychopath, could not begin to relate to them.

So he was given special dispensation from the normal social rules of the club. He flitted in and out like a ghost, never questioned, answering only to Zeus and, more recently, to King.

I'd always thought that for Priest, love wasn't impossible so much as it wasn't translatable. Whatever loyalty or kinship he felt for The Fallen and its brethren was communicated through action.

He'd hunted and tortured a man for Cressida.

He'd beaten the information out of an old enemy, Warren, who had betrayed Loulou to The Nightstalkers MC.

But would he ever show up at a hospital bedside or sing "Happy Birthday" in chorus with everyone else at one of the many parties held in the clubhouse?

Absolutely not.

These were the musings of a girl who had been obsessed with a mystery of a man for half a decade.

Before the accident, I'd be content with my daydreams and wanderings. I felt my obsession would always be intractably unrequited.

But now...

The cold viciousness in Priest's eyes as he'd slit Brett's throat and anointed my feet with his blood. The gentleness of his large, death-dealing hands cupping my broken body to his chest as he shielded me from the car blast and the tension in his jaw as he stared down at me, wrecked by the sight of my injuries...

Didn't that have to amount to something?

I wanted to ask him.

I needed to know.

At the very least, I felt compelled to thank him properly. Not only because he'd saved my life and deserved that regard, but because the burgeoning psychologist in me wanted to see how he would react.

How would a man more used to death than life react to a woman thanking him for saving her?

The unasked question burned in me like a banked fire.

"What do you think, Delilah?" I murmured to my sweet ring-necked dove as I hand-fed her from where she perched on my shoulder.

She cooed happily in response and preened as I gently ran a finger down her silky throat.

"I think he might like me too," I agreed on a whisper as Harleigh Rose and Loulou laughed over something in my kitchen. "I think it's about time we find out."

Carefully, I scooted to the edge of the couch I lay on then eased myself into a standing position in a way that wouldn't agonize my ribs. Delilah bobbed and weaved in the strands of my hair as I moved to her cage, but she

was blessedly quiet as I released her in its spacious confines.

“Wish me luck,” I told her as I closed the latch.

A ragged meow drew my attention to Sampson, my one-eyed albino rescue cat, who sat by the back door watching me judgmentally.

“Don’t give me that,” I scolded as I moved toward him and collected my white Converse from beside his swishing tail. “I’ll text them before they know I’m gone. I just need space.”

Sampson turned his snub nose up at me and then stalked off, clearly unimpressed.

I laughed softly at his attitude as I gently turned the knob on the old door and cracked it open just enough to slip through without making it creak on its lightly rusted hinges.

As soon as I was outside in the burning orange twilight of the autumn evening, I regretted not having a coat, but it was too late to turn back.

Free and giddy with it, I circled around the house to my trusty vintage pink Fiat. It was the bane of the brothers who worked at Hephaestus Auto because it was always breaking down, requiring them to send someone to pick me up and cart it back to the shop for another bout of work, but I loved it too much to give it up for something more practical.

I retrieved the spare set of car and house keys I kept hidden in a fake rock by the driveway and made my escape.

The curtains twitched as soon as I started my car, but I only waved blindly at the house as I reversed into the road and took off.

I laughed as I hit Main Street, and my stereo finally kicked on, appropriately spilling out the “Dark Side” by Bishop Briggs.

I didn’t have a destination in mind. I just wanted the drive to be alone and reflect further on how I would get Priest to notice me enough to want me. After stopping at Evergreen Gas to fill up my car, Mary, and grab a jumbo bag of Fuzzy Peaches, I cruised along the water. It never failed to amaze me how gorgeous Entrance was. To the east, the Rocky Mountains exploded

from the earth like the spiny backs of great dinosaurs fossilized in the soil. To the west, the glittering expanse of opalescent blue ocean beneath the rough-hewn cliffs of the coastline. Between the two, sprawling forest teeming with wildlife that had grown so accustomed to humans, we often had bears, deer, and cougars trolling through the streets on their way to greener pastures.

I adored it, every single inch of it.

This was why I chose to commute to university down in Vancouver instead of live on campus. I wanted this beauty as my backyard, and the love of my family to ornament it further.

I had so much goodness in my life, it was almost a shameful overabundance.

Despite growing up largely ignored by my parents with a sister who'd battled cancer twice, I was blessed more than most people ever would be.

I owned my house—thanks to the inheritance from my disgusting father—I attended one of the best universities in the world, lived in one of the most beautiful places, and had the loveliest, though perhaps unconventional, family.

So why did I have this niggling malcontent?

I popped a fuzzy peach into my mouth, savouring the sweet tang as it dissolved on my tongue and decided to be honest with myself.

I was lonely.

Not lonely the way I often wondered if Priest was lonely, as in without companionship.

It was possible for the most popular person to feel essentially lonely, even when surrounded by a group of friends.

I felt isolated because I was deliberately keeping the truth of who I was in my heart from those closest to me.

Yes, I was a good girl, a churchgoing, straight A-receiving, animal-loving blond with a serious penchant for all things pink and girly.

But I was drawn to the dark like a planet pulled irrevocably toward a

black hole.

I wanted more than sunshine and flowers.

I wanted to hone my edges against the whetstone of danger, test my mind against those who thought contradictorily to me. It was the reason I was studying criminal psychology.

And I couldn't decide what had come first, the chicken or the egg.

My obsession with Priest or my obsession with the deviant.

As if in answer, the universe offered me a gift...

The sight of Priest's all-black Harley Davidson motorcycle partially obscured behind a dumpster in Purgatory Motel's parking lot.

Instantly, my hands were moving on the wheel, turning my little Fiat into the lot.

It was dark now, the sunset only a smudge of grime grey light on the edge of the horizon, and the parking lot was poorly lit by three lampposts, only one of which was working. I shivered as I got out of the car, the fear and cold coalescing to pump adrenaline through my blood.

I liked this too much, I knew. The lack of safety.

But more and more over the years, I'd taken these risks, and I knew one day, these timid acts wouldn't be enough.

I'd want more.

I blinked at Priest's bike before walking over to the only lit room in the motel block. In all my years of knowing him, it occurred to me that I still had no idea where he lived. Maybe he stayed permanently at this pink shit stain of a motel.

The thought saddened me and spurred me forward.

I knocked at the door, but no one answered.

My heart was in my throat, my skin rippled with goose bumps.

There was something in the air here like static. Something that told me not to enter the room at all costs.

So, of course, I did.

The knob turned easily in my hand, but the door fell completely inward as I opened it, the entire panel crashing to the floor and alerting whoever was inside to my presence. It had obviously been knocked in before.

I froze in the doorway, my foot suspended in mid-air.

“Hello?” I called out softly. “Priest, are you in here?”

There was no response. Only the low throaty hum of the fan in the bathroom, a wedge of pink light triangulated against the opposite wall.

The air was stale and musky, but beneath, there was a different odor, something sharp and antiseptic as the hospital I’d just convalesced in.

Something like bleach.

My heart was in my throat, pumping so madly it was difficult to swallow. I dipped down to grab the little knife from the strap around my ankle, hidden by my frilly white sock. It had been a gift from Priest a long time ago, after I’d nearly died in a cabin fire with my sister, Harleigh Rose, and Mute. It was one of two gifts he’d ever given me. I kept it on my person all the time, even when I went to bed. It was a flat, straight blade affixed to a wooden base carved into an elaborate Celtic cross. My fingers curled easily over the hands of the cross, so it sat balanced in my palm.

This was the first time I was using it.

As I crept closer to the bathroom, my ears strained so hard they almost vibrated with the pressure.

Still, nothing.

With the toe of my shoe, I gently pushed open the bathroom door.

I don’t know what I expected, maybe a monster to jump out from behind the shower curtain.

Nothing happened.

The gaudy pink shower curtain was partially closed, but sheer enough that I could see there was no one lurking in wait.

The room was empty.

No monster, no Priest.

A wave of shame and disappointment ran through me like a ghost, leaving only a cold, clammy sensation all over my body.

How could I have been so stupid to follow a dangerous path just hoping Priest would be at the end of it? And what did I expect him to do even if he was? He was a murderer, a psychopath. What made me think he would be soft for me? Fall out of darkness into the light of love with me?

I was just a girl.

Apparently, a pathetic one with a death wish.

My shoulders sagged, and I suddenly felt exhausted, my injuries and the long day catching up to me in one nearly mortal blow.

I turned to go when something virtually imperceptible caught my eye in the mirror, just a glimmer of pink light on metal. Slowly, my heart a dead weight in my chest, crushed by the weight of my held breath, I looked back over my shoulder at the mirror across from me.

And screamed.

Because a man all in black was on the other side of the door from me, wedged between the wall and the shadows cast by the open door so that I hadn't noticed him at first glance.

It was only the telltale flash of a gun pressed to the wood aimed directly at my head on the other side that gave him away.

I screamed so loudly the sound seemed to tear through my lungs, shredding them like tissue paper. I only had time for that, the single bright exclamation of panic, but it was truncated by the hooded man.

The door flung into me, forcing me to stumble backward from the bathroom. Before I could recover my equilibrium, he was on me.

The iron cold weight of his hand wrapped around my throat so tight I could feel the force of each distinct finger. Using his momentum, he forced me against the wall opposite the bathroom and pinned me there like a butterfly caught in amber.

I don't know why I didn't struggle.

There was something there in the air, something heady and intoxicating. It was in the shallow drag of breath I swallowed before he squeezed my neck even tighter.

The scent of cloves and tobacco.

My body registered the scent before my mind did, relaxing like a ragdoll in his hold even though it made it harder to breathe.

Because I knew instinctively, this man wouldn't hurt me even if it was in his nature to hurt everyone else.

"Priest," I rasped.

His fingers flexed around my neck then loosened to a soft collar so I could breathe easy.

"You got a death wish I don't know about?" he demanded coldly, shaking his head once, hard enough to dislodge the hood. It fell back to reveal his thick, lush red hair and the pale, narrow set of his beautiful eyes.

He looked like the reaper come to collect my heart and put it on a string he'd wear around his neck. As if he wanted to punish me for my stupidity in the same breath he wanted to be the only one ever responsible for my pain.

"Maybe," I told him honestly. "Lately, I've been...restless."

"Death'll put an end to that sure enough," he agreed, but the tension in his jaw made his words click robotically against his teeth. "You can't do shit when you're in the ground."

"Actually, I'd like to be cremated. Maybe even made into a tree. Did you know you can do that now? Lila told me about it."

Priest blinked at my babbling. He had absurdly long, curly lashes the colour of fine copper.

"I coulda killed you, Bea," he told me as if I was an idiot. "I coulda killed you so many different ways, and you would have deserved it for bein' so stupid. What were you thinkin'?"

"I was thinking you were in here." I hesitated, then slowly lifted a hand, the way you would with a rabid dog, and wrapped it lightly over the wrist of

his hand that held my neck. “I wanted to thank you.”

His flinch was only a micro-expression, a tightening of his mouth, a flickering of his left eye that he couldn't quite staunch, but I was used to Priest. I'd become an expert at reading his minuscule ticks and mining them for gold.

“Nothin' to thank me for.” Abruptly, he let go of me and took a large step back, the wall at his back the only thing stopping him from retreating farther.

It was a narrow space. There was no place for either of us to run and it was difficult to tell, just then, who wanted to flee more badly.

In my own way, I supposed, I was terrorizing Priest just as much as he was used to being a terror to others.

My kindness toward him was an aberration he wasn't accustomed to.

It only made me want to swaddle him up in my love and never let him go.

I stepped toward him.

He scowled, his gorgeous face twisting into an expression that would have scared the socks off Jack the Ripper.

It worked differently on me.

I felt that intensity warm my belly, heavy between my legs. It made me want his hand back around my throat so he could feel the siren's call of my rapid pulse and know I was so affected by him.

“Of course, I have to thank you,” I said softly. “You saved my life.”

“I nearly killed you.” His voice was hollow without even a hint of emotion.

I bit my lip, then went for it. “Sometimes, a near-death experience can be eye-opening. It can make you realize things you never thought you could or should want.”

“Want is not need. Be satisfied with the essentials. Hopin' for more will only bring you sufferin'.”

“Is that what happened to you?” I asked on a breath, shocked by my audacity.

My gasp was cut off as Priest surged forward suddenly, his hand back at my throat, this time bringing me closer instead of pushing me away.

I didn't think he was aware of the way his thumb brushed back and forth over my jugular, testing my pulse. My mouth was open, breath hot and fanning across his face, so close I could've counted the cinnamon flecks on his cheeks if I'd had better light. I could taste him on my tongue, the spice of him, the faint bitterness of tobacco.

I wondered wildly how he would taste, of animal or man.

Unconsciously, my back arched to bring us closer, but he kept a careful distance between us. A sliver of air that had substance.

"You don't know anythin' 'bout me, Bea Lafayette," he growled, his voice so abrasive it scored goose bumps into my flesh. "You think you can follow me around like a little shadow and I wouldn't notice it? I notice everythin'. Even little girls without a brain in their head."

I tried not to let the insult land, but my parents had always called Loulou the smart one, the pretty one, better than me in all aspects. I didn't care about being pretty, though people seemed to think I'd grown into my looks. I did care about my intelligence.

I clung to the capacity of my mind the way a desperate, drowning man clings to the lip of a ship. It was the basis of my confidence, the crux I wanted my life to hinge upon.

So it damned me that in some ways, Priest was right.

I'd been a fool to sneak around some creepy motel room searching for a killer, even if I'd known that killer since I was a girl.

I'd been a fool to think that he could care about me.

A bitter little laugh plumed between us like toxic fumes.

Priest's scowl tightened, the creases between his brow black lines like horns in the shadows. He gave me a little shake as if to rattle something loose in my head. "You don't give a shit about your safety, but you care what I think about you. That's the problem right there. I exist. I am a valuable tool.

But I am not a man. Not like you think I am. Don't go expectin' anythin' like that from the likes'a me. You get me? There's nothin' here, and there *will be* nothin' here 'cause I got nothin' to give."

I swallowed thickly against the surge of disappointment that crawled over the back of my tongue bitter as bile.

Something in my expression made Priest even more frustrated, his thumb digging deeply into my pulse point. He studied me with those eerie, unblinking eyes for a long minute, the only sound the harsh rasp of my breath and the thud of my erratic heart I was sure both of us could hear.

"You're an eejit," he finally said gruffly, his eyes pinned to mine and so pale a green even in the shadows that they seemed to glow. Vaguely, I recalled *eejit* was Irish slang for idiot. "'Cause there's a mess'a people who care for you and you're willin' to toss it away for nothin'. You fuck with your life, you fuck with theirs. You think your family hasn't been through enough?"

"They feel the same way about you," I said once I found my voice, somewhere in the depths of my roiling belly. "Everyone cares about you, Priest. Not...not just me."

There was a second—blink and I would have missed it—when something like hunger flashed through his eyes. It wasn't a visceral, physical yearning, but something more metaphysical.

It occurred to me that Priest's greatest fear and greatest desire was accepting love and comfort. Perhaps he worried it would soften his edge, like a blade held too close to a flame. Maybe he'd been burned by it in the past and carried the scars under his skin like armour. Or, worst of all, I thought, maybe he had never experienced any kind of love at all.

"Loving me is a fate worse than death," he warned me, hatches batted down so he was once again a living sculpture, breathing but unanimated.

I felt his words like a blow to my chest. I ached for this man, this man who believed he deserved so little.

Before I could stop myself, I stepped back slightly, just enough to loosen Priest's grip on my throat, and then lurched forward, clumsily launching my mouth up to his. I landed awkwardly, my mouth parted around the surprisingly plushness of his lower lip.

I was kissing him.

Kissing Priest.

Like a struck flint, my body ignited in all-consuming flames. Thoughts burned clean to ash and all that remained was heat, fixed at the point of our contact.

For one glorious moment, the span of one monumental beat of my heart, Priest let me kiss him.

The next, there was a brief flash of pain at my lip, then I was moving.

Hand to my throat still, an iron collar, he propelled me back against the wall, and with a strange mixture of gentleness and rigidity, he pulled me forward and pushed me back again, as if to underscore his point.

Then he was on the other side of the narrow hall, staring at me like a cornered animal, vicious and unsettled.

We stared at each other in the grimy pink light.

I noticed, as I licked my lips, that he'd bitten me in his haste to get away. The tang of copper exploded on my taste buds. My hand flew to my mouth, thumb to the little, broken welt in my bottom lip. The pale pad came away smeared with red.

I looked over the small evidence of his violence into Priest's eyes.

There was a vibrating stillness to his posture, a coiling of muscles and potential energy just waiting to explode into action. He cocked his head slightly to the left, eyes narrowing as he watched me.

Slowly, deliberately, I brought my thumb back to my mouth and delicate as a kitten, licked the blood off my flesh.

He growled.

A low, barely audible purr of noise rolling through his chest.

As if a string connected us, I found myself shivering with the vibration of that sound and let out a resonant hum of pleasure.

Priest pushed off the wall slightly, then paused, as if caught between two dueling ropes.

I almost had him.

So close.

I was toying with a creature that was more monster than man, but I'd never felt more alive. More aroused. The place between my thighs I'd never been very interested in was slick with moisture, the tips of my breasts so tightly furled they throbbed.

I almost had him.

My heart thrummed like a hummingbird's wings as I brought my saliva-slicked thumb back to my lips and purposely smudged the blood over my mouth like macabre lipstick.

His chest was discernably rising and falling now, great, calculated breaths dragged into his lungs in an effort to calm the beast that stirred there.

I wanted him to come out and play so badly, I shook with it.

Still, he didn't move.

My tongue peeked out slowly, shyly, to prod at the wound as I assumed a more languid position against the wall, muscles lax, head tipped so slightly to the side to expose my throat.

The way a submissive wolf might do to its alpha.

The air went electric a fraction before he moved, sinuously, predatory, stalking the three paces across the hall. His hand went up to my neck at the same time his head bent to bring his mouth to mine.

He didn't kiss me.

Instead, he carefully took my split lip between his teeth and tugged slightly. A bead of blood pooled from the wound, and Priest, sensually, almost lazily, licked it from my mouth.

I gasped, my mouth blooming open naturally, begging for more.

And for the first time in all my years of knowing him, ascetic, controlled Priest, he indulged.

My God, he ate at my mouth as if it was a lush fruit, licking up my spilled blood, diving deeper to taste the silken edge of my tongue with his, to explore the recess of my mouth. He ate at me as if I was his to devour.

I made low, whimpering, shameless noises that I couldn't control. I was desperate to touch him, but too concerned it would shatter this perfect moment and remind him of his control. So I just hung there, pinned to the wall by the strong hand around my throat asserting just enough exquisite pressure to make my blood sing.

And I let him kiss me.

I let him ruin me so surely in that one, long, luscious kiss that I knew nothing else would ever do.

I needed this.

Priest and his dark, ferocious need. His cold, calculating mind locked like warring antlers with mine.

Lord, but I would eschew everything I knew to exist forever in this cruel, claiming embrace.

And then, it was over.

Even though our only points of contact had been our fused mouths and that straining, edgy hand on my neck, my body felt sluiced with ice water when he pulled away.

I watched, still mired in the aftershock of that earth-shattering kiss, as he wiped that cruel, lovely mouth with the back of his hand. As if he needed to be rid of my taste from his lips.

Boy, that hurt.

He stared at me, so completely dispassionate, I wondered woozily if I'd hallucinated the entire embrace. When he moved, it was back into the bathroom, his gait efficient and controlled as he disappeared behind the door. I watched through the thin crack between the door and its hinges as he

pushed the shower curtain back and bent to retrieve something heavy from the basin of the bathtub. He reappeared moments later with a large black plastic wrapped shape hefted over his broad shoulder.

There was no mistaking the shape of the body within it.

Or the slight splatter of blood on the white tape holding it closed.

In the hand not occupied in keeping the dead body balanced on his shoulder, Priest held a leather saddle bag, the white top of a bleach bottle poking out of the flap.

I pressed myself to the wall and my hand to my stomach as he maneuvered past me in the narrow space without hesitation.

Not one blink or acknowledgment of my presence.

Without a single look back, Priest stepped over the broken door to the room and exited with his bagged corpse into the ink dark of night.

I watched him go with my broken fingers unconsciously dipped in the blood of my torn lip, anointing the cast with my blood.

It didn't taste like blood in my mouth. It tasted like faith, like distilled divinity. It tasted this way, I knew with dawning rightness, because it tasted like *us*.

CHAPTER SIX

BEA

WHEN I WAS LITTLE, GOD WAS MY BEST FRIEND.

I was a lonely child. My sister was mostly in the hospital, my parents preoccupied with their respective social lives, our rotation of European nannies the only constant presence in my life.

So, my Grandpa became my closest familial bond and with him came

God.

He was my grandpa's first love, even before my grandma, who passed on when I was only six.

The first consequential book I read was the Bible and then, when I finished that and expressed interest in more, my grandpa gave me the Quran, the three sacred texts of Judaism referred to as the Tanach, and the Sutras of Buddhism. I can still remember being small, my legs too short to reach the floor when I sat in the pews, kicking my Mary Janes back and forth as I asked my grandpa all the spiritual questions of my youth.

Was there one God or different Gods for different religions?

Why did God let people die?

Where did they go?

Why was there so much suffering if God was good?

Why did God make Loulou so sick?

My grandpa didn't mind my critical questions. He was patient, calm, and filled with gratification as he spoke about his Christian God. Even later, after Loulou was diagnosed for the second time with Hodgkin's Lymphoma, after our father hit her for loving the wrong man and cast her out of the house, after he himself was revealed to be corrupt and then murdered in cold blood, my grandpa maintained that God was good, but he did not castigate me for distancing myself from the Lord.

By the time I was a teen, God was not my best friend. I'd shed that romanticism along with my perception that my father was a hero and my mother a princess, as well as that childish notion that good people deserved good things.

I'd learned the truth of life. That there was no great power looking out for you, no fate preordained in the stars that controlled your life to the letter.

Life was more luck than destiny, more choice than subjugation.

Life was quite simply what you made of it.

I'd determined to make mine happy, no matter the setbacks.

Still, I attended First Light Church every Sunday for service to listen to my grandpa preach about the finer points of his religion, about love and charity, about community and acceptance. I loved to sit in the same front pew I had as a girl, close my eyes, swing my legs and listen to that melodic, reverent cadence of his voice pulling wisdom from the Bible. I loved the echoing silence hovering in the peaks and turrets of the old stone structure and the veneration emanating from the walls as if years of worship had imbued the brick and mortar with sentient feeling.

It soothed that restless darkness in my chest, like a lullaby for my demons.

I loved the community too. My grandpa's flock hadn't turned their backs on my mother and me after the scandal of my father's death. Far from it, they'd turned up at our little rented bungalow after we were turned out of the mayor's mansion and brought with them food and endless support.

So, First Light remained an integral part of my life.

I sat in the front pew as my grandpa finished his sermon about embracing self-love. My mother was beside me, dressed beautifully, not a hair out of place, but I could see the shimmer in her eyes as the words resonated with her as deeply as they did with me.

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” Grandpa quoted from Romans 12:2 and then looked out over the gathering in that way he had of somehow looking everyone simultaneously in the eye. “We must not all be exactly alike to live a life worthy of God's grace. Instead, we must follow the path our hearts set out for us so that we might find fulfilment in ways more than just spiritual, but equally profound.”

I considered that as he said his final blessing, and everyone echoed, “Amen,” before dispersing into their social groups.

It shocked me to realize that I had been conforming to an old sect of beliefs and social mores that were no longer relevant. I was not the mayor's

second daughter, the good girl relegated to the shadows. I had things of import to offer the world, complicated, beautiful things as unique to me as my own fingerprint.

I'd chained my dark thoughts and natural deviancy like some rabid beast inside my chest and never given it room to breathe. It made me wonder if those predilections had grown stronger because of my neglect and now, temperamental and too big for that cage, they knocked recklessly at the door to my soul dying to get out.

Naturally, my mind went to Priest and our kiss the day before. My fingers traced the healing split in my lip as I remembered his sheer ferocity coupled almost contradictorily with his restraint. He was such a powerful man, strong enough to break my neck with a twist of his tattooed hands, but instead, he'd only shackled me with one. He let me feel all that considerable violence leashed tenuously by his control. Whether or not the control stemmed more from his loyalty to the club or from his lack of desire for me, I wasn't sure, but the romantic in me hoped it was the former.

Loyalty was an obstacle we could hurdle. I doubted my sister would be crazy about me hooking up with Priest, but in the end, she would want me to be happy.

And after that kiss, what I had always secretly wondered at had solidified into a real belief that Priest was the only man to help me break the constraints of my conformity and explore who I really seemed to be. It didn't shame me to admit I was too frightened to travel those potentially menacing recesses of my soul without a fearless man at my side holding my hand.

"Bea."

I jerked out my reverie to look up at Seth and Tabitha Linley. They were the best-looking couple I'd ever seen outside of the club, and also the kindest. They had been integral in keeping my mother together after everything happened with my dad.

I surged to my feet to wrap Tabitha in a hug that smelled of her candy-

scented perfume.

My ribs ached as she squeezed me, and she pulled back as soon as I hissed. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Bea!”

“It’s me,” I admitted sheepishly. “I keep forgetting it takes a while for ribs to heal.”

Seth clucked his tongue, handsome brunet brow puckered. “What have we told you about taking care of yourself? You’re always putting others first.”

“So says the doctor.” I raised an eyebrow at him, then looked at Tabby. “You two are the most generous people I know.”

Tabby ran a hand down my hair, a gesture that always made me preen. “Like is drawn to like, I suppose.”

“But honestly, Bea, what were you doing with such an unsavory character?” Seth asked, concern ripe in his lowered voice. “It’s not like you to get in trouble.”

“He was wearing pressed slacks,” I said with a sheepish shrug. “I thought he was one of the good ones.”

They both blinked at me before Tabby burst into laughter and Seth smiled, shaking his head in exasperation.

“You have strange taste in company sometimes,” Seth admitted fondly.

“This is true,” I admitted. “I’ve never really liked people my own age, and of course, when I tried it on for size, it backfired on me.”

In fact, Cleo was one of my best friends and the only one within a five-year age difference. I knew from my studies that it wasn’t unusual for children raised by older parents or guardians to experience difficulties with their own cohorts, and even though I’d been fourteen when Loulou married Zeus, it was that community that took me in hand more than my parents ever had. This deviation from the norm was something therapists tried to fix, citing it as a maladjustment to society.

Personally, I liked it just fine.

“I was referring more to the criminal gang your sister married into,” Seth corrected, but his voice held none of the scornful judgment I so often heard in reference to The Fallen at church. “I can’t say I understand the appeal, especially not for a nice girl like you.”

I fought my wince at being referred to for the millionth time as *nice*, the most lukewarm adjective to be known for, and therefore, in my mind, it was an insult. I affixed a plastic smile to my face. “They’re just a little rough around the edges, but so are diamonds before they’re polished.”

“Cute,” Tabby teased me lightly as she stroked my hair.

“Have they caught the criminal yet, the family of that boy?” Eric asked, stepping around Seth to give me his own hug.

I beamed at him.

Based solely on his appearance, Eric was the least pious-looking man in church. He wore his dark hair long and shaggy over his dark eyes, the gold bar through his left eyebrow glinting in the light. I’d yet to see him wear anything other than black, and he had a tattoo on the ridge at the base of his left thumb that said “Call Me Your Sky Daddy”. He was only a few years older than me and even though we’d known each other through the church for years, it wasn’t until he became TA in one of my criminal psych classes last year that we became close.

Seth and Tabby immediately took a little step away from him as if he reeked, and in a way, he did. He smelled of rebellion and fresh ideas, like a cold breeze sweeping through the warm, myrrh-scented church.

“Um...” I bit my lip as I hesitated, thinking of the body Priest had carried out of the Purgatory Motel. “I think it’s a work in process. Apparently, his parents split up and went into hiding.”

“Fuck.” Eric shivered dramatically, then shot Seth and Tabby a sly little look as he wrapped a hand around my waist and tugged me close to his side. “Maybe I’ll have to move in and protect you until they’re found.”

I rolled my eyes at his aplomb, but the Linleys were unimpressed.

“That would be incredibly inappropriate,” Tabby said primly. “If anything, Bea could come to stay with us.”

“Oh, yeah?” Eric lifted a brow. “And how would you protect her? Thump a Bible over the head of any intruder?”

“And you?” Seth questioned coolly. “Kill them dead with your stare?”

“Enough,” I said, laughing to defuse the tension. My three favourite people at First Light had never been able to get along, and I was used to the crackling tension. “I don’t need anyone to protect me.”

For once, they all seemed to agree on their derision of my words.

“Come on, Bea,” Eric said on a little laugh that stirred the long bangs over his forehead. “You probably weigh a hundred and ten pounds soaking wet.”

I tipped my chin up haughtily, but there was no denying the truth. I was slender, small boned, and delicately built without the kick-ass curves my mother and sister possessed.

“Honey, you really should have a man with you at home. Just in case,” Tabby fretted, smoothing my hair back like a woman with an anxious poodle.

“I can take care of myself just fine, thank you very much,” I said primly, but the words were sour with dishonesty.

The truth was, I occupied a strange space between being a damsel in distress and knowing enough about the evils of the world to realize my own vulnerability.

I had the club. The Fallen would never let anything happen to me if it was at all within their control.

But I didn’t want men to come to my rescue.

I wanted to be a badass like Harleigh Rose, who’d sacrificed her own safety and happiness to protect her family, like King, who had faked his own death to get his father out of prison, like Lila, who went undercover in a *sex trafficking ring* to take down Irina Ventura.

I wanted to be the hero, not the virginal bait or the dumb blonde who dies

first in every horror film cliché.

Uncharacteristically irritated, I flashed a tight smile at my friends and offered my abrupt goodbyes. I caught eyes with my mother across the pulpit where she was speaking with Grandpa and jerked my chin toward the door to let her know I'd meet her outside.

As soon as I hit fresh air, I felt better. I sucked in a handful of that clean, briny ocean air and leaned heavily against the rough stone wall beside the oak double doors.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

My eyes popped open, and instantly, I moved into a kind of defensive crouch.

A woman stood three feet to my left. She was middle-aged with the soft creases in her face that spoke of natural aging and a full head of gleaming auburn hair that contradicted the former.

I knew who she was instantly because, reddish hair aside, she looked exactly like her son.

“Brenda,” I said, my voice emotionless with shock.

She tipped her head in recognition, but otherwise continued to fiddle with the handles of her large black purse.

The skin on the back of my neck prickled with alert tension. I forced my body to relax back casually against the wall, hoping my façade of nonchalance would portray confidence when I felt anything but.

“How can I help you?” I inquired.

Brenda wrung the handles of her purse so tightly, the leather split over the cane. “Well, I wanted to say I'm sorry, really, for what happened.” A little sob interrupted her thickly accented apology. “My boy...he was a good boy. Truly.”

Sympathy carved itself into my heart, and I winced at the pain of it. “I thought so enough to go out with him.”

It was a small consolation, but she smiled tremulously at me. “We tried

for more, but he was the only. Such a good boy.”

I nodded carefully. There were charcoal smudges under her eyes from lack of sleep and probably nutrition. Red-rimmed, bloodshot, and darting across the lot erratically, her eyes themselves spoke volumes to her mental state. I wondered what stage of grief she was in, cycling through what I knew of Freud’s grief work and the evolution of grief theory since then.

When she reached into her purse suddenly, I froze with apprehension, ready to scream out for help.

But she only produced a crumpled packet of Marlboro cigarettes. Her hands shook so badly that her sweat-damp fingers broke the first stick of tobacco in two. A high, thin laugh punctured her second attempt to pull one from the package, but the moment she successfully placed the lit cancer stick between her lips, her fitful energy eased like a deflated balloon.

“Sorry, uh, do you want one?” she offered with a weak smile. “Started this shit when I was eleven. Not gonna break it now.”

“No, thank you.”

She nodded once, then again, almost to herself. “Yeah, well I wanted to have a kind of parlay with you. About this war we’ve sparked with your club.”

“They aren’t mine,” I countered automatically, both shocked that she would think so and warmed that she did.

Another helium-filled laugh. “Well, tell that to the bloke who dropped my Patrick’s balls off in a glass jar last night. Seemed they were bleeding, fucking pissed that we’d not only fucked around on their precious territory but with one of their bitches.”

“I am not one of their bitches,” I repeated the sentiment with a gesture at my string of pearls and white collared dress. “Do I look like a biker’s woman to you?”

“No.” She sucked in a ridiculously deep drag of tobacco and then expelled it in a rush, the smoke obscuring her drawn face. “But clearly my

Brett saw something in you to like beyond the prissy girl thing you got going on. And these bikers, they do bad shit for small reasons, but they made this personal.”

“You made it personal when you unwittingly attacked the sister-in-law of The Fallen’s prez.”

She blinked, cupping her sharp elbow under one hand to prop up her cigarette-holding hand. Though she was tired, I could see how she might have been beautiful once, even sharp and powerful. The queen of a criminal empire. It reminded me to be careful. We were outside a church, and she had a lot to lose, but wasn’t that when people act the most rashly?

I imagined what Loulou would do if someone took Zeus or her babies from her, and a cold shudder of fear rolled through me.

“Interesting, that,” she mused, sucking on her cig. “You’re not much to look at but that’s a lot of power for a wee girl. You can use it now to get them off my back.”

I cocked my head to the left, unconsciously adopting Priest’s habit. “Why would I do that?”

Brenda’s lips pursed as if I’d forced her to suck a lemon. “Because you killed my son.”

“You’re deluded if you think I killed him. You did that when you didn’t heed The Fallen’s warning. You might be from out of town, but their reputation should have given you serious pause. Their first warning should have run you out of town. This is on you and your husband.”

“You killed him too,” she continued, her voice almost conversational even though every inch of her tightly knotted form spoke to her tension and angst.

So, I decided, she was straddling the line between denial and bargaining in her grief.

I sighed tiredly, feeling the ache in my ribs and an itch too far inside my casted fingers to scratch. “Listen, if you want to attack me, do it. There are

about two hundred churchgoers inside who will hear me as soon as I scream, but if you're going to, let's get the show on the road. I'm tired."

"I'm not going to attack you, silly girl." Brenda shook her head, then flicked the ash off the end of her cigarette before moving toward me.

I let her because that feeling was back. The glorious growth of something like a dark bloom in my chest breaking through the crust of my soul—searching for the light.

Adrenaline sluiced through me. It tasted of iron on the back of my tongue, of blood.

It reminded me of Priest.

She stopped when our toes touched, my high-heeled patent leather Mary Janes to her pointed toe leather boots. Then she studied me. I felt her gaze in my hair, along the heart-shaped curve of my face, on the glossy I wore across my lips. I felt the weight of it invasively on my skin, touching me where her son only dreamt.

Finally, she bared her teeth at me in a semblance of a smile and grabbed my hand tightly in her free one. Her skin was cold, clammy, and the edges of her nails were yellow from smoking.

"Go to them with a *détente*," she said silkily, her previous behaviour only a memory. Now, her criminal regality was in full effect. "If they come for me, tell them my people will stage a full-scale fucking gang war, okay? I have the sense you're good at running to your big sister to tattle. Do that, and I won't come for you and yours, mmkay?"

There was a sharp, radiating burn on my hand held tight in hers. My gaze snapped down to watch as she extinguished her cigarette in the middle of the back of my hand.

It took everything in me to keep from flinching. Instead, I settled a cold stare back on her manic face, and said, "This is the third warning, Brenda. I urge you to take it when you didn't take the others. Get out of town as quickly as you can and don't ever come back to Entrance. In fact, don't come

back to Canada. That's all the help you'll get from me. Even then, they still might hunt you down for what you've already done."

Before she could respond, a tidal wave of voices poured out of the opening doors of the church beside us. The shadow of the heavy oak briefly obscured us from view, but soon, the congregation had spread out on the front lawn far enough for them to see us.

Instantly, a low murmur moved through the crowd.

Brenda and I remained close, almost like lovers, but the pastel-clad devotees knew better than that.

Suddenly, a half-moon of men in suits and ties surrounded us. It would have made me laugh under different circumstances. I was so used to men in leather cuts defending me—burly alphas with weapons worn all over their huge bodies that were weapons in and of themselves. It was both heartwarming and faintly ridiculous to see these pious, good Christians threaten someone now because they thought I was in danger.

It just proved heroes came in all shapes and sizes.

"Everything okay, Beatrice?" Seth asked politely, but there was an undertow to his tone that threatened to drown.

A spark of interest shimmered through me at that. Seth had always seemed so perfectly dull before now.

"Fine," I reassured with a broad smile, taking a cheerful step away from Brenda that bounced the curls around my head. "Mrs. Walsh was just inquiring about our church."

"Ah." Grandpa appeared just outside the doors of First Light, as unruffled and regal as ever in his cassock. "Well, God's heart is always open to those who are willing to repent their sins."

Brenda blinked at him as if she'd never seen a pastor before, then turned to me. "Remember what I said. We wouldn't want anything bad to happen to these good people."

Around me, my community shifted restlessly, the sound like ruffling

feathers.

“I learned a long time ago bad things happen to everyone,” I told her as she slowly began to walk away, still facing me. “This time, I think I’ll make certain they happen to the *right* one.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

BEA

“THIS IS WHY THE BARBIE & KEN SERIAL KILLERS ARE TWO OF THE MOST interesting cases,” I said into the microphone, my voice slightly dry after speaking for almost thirty minutes straight. “They highlight our societal blind spot. They were young, gorgeous, and seemingly head over heels in love with each other. Why would they resort to violence?”

I paused to let my words sink in, and Eric gave me a thumbs-up as he adjusted the sound slightly from his place behind the partition sitting at the soundboard.

“The thing we all need to understand is that for many psychopaths, violence is not a last resort. We need to rewire our thinking so it’s more along the lines of theirs. To a serial killer or a clinical psychopath, violence isn’t something they are forced to do because of unfortunate circumstances acting against them. By their very nature, psychopaths don’t tune into society’s frequency. Their environment does not act on them the way it would you or me. For example, it’s been proven that humans can smell fear in sweat. If you entered a room full of scared people, quickly, without even knowing why, you would become affected by it too. The exception to this rule is—no surprise—psychopaths. For whatever reason, they remain unaffected as they do from so many other examples of social pressure or influence.

“Understanding that, you know that violence is not a reaction, it’s an *impulse*. The need for it is always there in the hardwiring of their brain. While not all psychopaths are violent, because there is a spectrum as in most things in modern psychology, the ones who are feel possessed by it. They only need an opportunity, an opening, to let that instinct take over.”

I sat back in my chair and rolled my head on my neck to loosen the tension from sitting for too long in one position. Long ago, I’d kicked off my Converse, shed my fuzzy white cardigan and tied my hair up in the pink ribbon I always wore tied to my wrist. My eyes snagged on the poster on the wall to the right of the door. It was a photo of me dressed in a pink A-line mini dress with the same bow holding back the top of my blond curls. I had a finger to my lips, fake blood at their edges, and a poorly concealed knife behind my back. Across it all read “Little Miss Murder”.

It still astonished me that I had my own podcast not least of all because it was actually starting to become incredibly popular. I’d initially worked out of the UBC sound room, but after season one did so well, Eric and I rented

space above Honey Bear Café in Entrance and converted it to a studio. We were sponsored and had the money to kit it fabulously in pinks, whites, and vintage horror movie posters.

It was my home away from home. My happy place where the dark and light inside me unified as beautifully as the yin and yang.

“That’s why I find cases like Paul and Karla particularly fascinating,” I concluded. “Because it shows our folly in believing monsters must be ugly and warped by trauma. The truth is much more chilling. Some people are born monsters, and they are even more dangerous than those who are bred by circumstance.”

Eric played our little musical diddy through the speakers to signal the end of the podcast. I affixed a smile on my face so my listeners would hear it in my tone. They liked the contrast of my bubbly personality to the morbid content of my show.

“Thank you for joining us this killer Monday on *Little Miss Murder*,” I sing-songed. “Next week, we talk about Belle Gunness, the woman who was married to murder.”

I waited for Eric to signal, then flipped off my mic and pulled the heavy headset from my head. A long tendril of blond hair caught on the plastic, and I grumbled under my breath as I detangled it.

“You don’t seem yourself today,” Eric noted as he came into the booth and perched his hiney on the edge of the table. “Are your ribs bothering you?”

I simultaneously shook my head and freed myself of the headset, tossing it on the table so I could run my hands over my aching scalp. My hair was thick enough to give me headaches without the addition of the earphones, so I was used to the ache after an episode.

“No, I’m okay. It’s just been a weird few weeks.”

Eric pulled a face. “I’d say. Almost dying in a fiery car crash, then being accosted by your dead date’s mum? Weird is an understatement.”

“We produce a show about murder and study criminal psychology,” I noted dryly as I stood and stretched languidly. “It’d have to get a lot weirder than that to faze me.”

“Touché.” He watched me as I moved through my short stretching routine. Even though his hair hung in his eyes, I knew the cast of his gaze. His tongue toyed with the silver ring through his lip as he studied me hungrily. He’d been toying with the idea of asking me out for a while now and only my expert maneuvering had kept the opportunity from appearing.

“Auntie Bea,” a sweet, throaty voice called from the hallway, and a moment later, my sister appeared holding her son, Monster, on her hip.

Behind her, Cleo carried my niece, Angel, while Cressida, Harleigh Rose, Lila, Maja, Tayline, and Hannah brought up the rear.

My biker babes.

Instantly, Eric was forgotten as I skipped toward my family and embraced them each in turn. If I hugged Cressida a little longer than the others, it was only because she’d been gone for four months, and I’d missed her like crazy.

“How’s my grumpy nephew today?” I asked as I approached Loulou last.

We kissed each other loudly on the cheek before I bent to run a knuckle over Monster’s suede smooth cheek. He scowled at me, but I didn’t take it personally because that was basically his fixed expression.

I laughed when he grunted at me and shoved his fist in my hair so he could grab it in his strong little fingers.

“Sorry,” Lou said unapologetically. “He’s a possessive little monster, and he likes pretty things.”

“Do you think I’m pretty?” I cooed to him before sneaking a quick kiss to his chubby cheek that he immediately recoiled from. “I think you’re very handsome, too.”

“Isn’t he?” my sister declared proudly. “Just like his daddy.”

Harleigh Rose snorted as she bumped Lou gently with her hip. “Let’s hope he grows up prettier than that old guy.”

“If he’s ugly, what does that make you as his daughter?” Loulou countered sweetly.

H.R. flipped her the bird, and we all laughed.

For the first time in days, I felt settled, that disconcerting restlessness fading. This was the world I knew; this was my safe place in it all. These people—these fierce, feminine women—gathered around me because that was what they did during or after times of trouble.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked as Maja wrapped an arm around my shoulder and pulled me into her side so she could kiss the top of my head.

“Girls’ night,” she declared.

Maja had been Buck’s Old Lady for twenty years. She had serious biker babe attitude from the tips of her Farrah Fawcett-flipped hair to the end of her spike heeled feet. I’d never seen her in anything less than highly bedazzled, skintight jeans and heels at any hour of the day, even when shit with the club hit the fan, and everyone else looked like shit. She was our matriarch in a group of mostly young Old Ladies and their friends, but she seemed comfortable taking a back seat to Lou, who was technically higher-ranking because she was married to the prez, and even Cressida, who’d briefly occupied that role when King took leadership while Zeus was in prison.

I loved her with a fierceness that I didn’t feel for my own mother, probably because, unlike Phillipa, Maja was willing to fight tooth and nail for her loved ones, and she *never* took any crap from anyone, even Buck.

“We haven’t had one since Cress got home,” Lila pointed out as she took Cressida’s hand to give it a sweet kiss. “It’s about time we communed.”

“Bitch barely deserves it after abandoning us for months,” Tayline said as she rummaged in her massive hobo bag and produced packages of popcorn, Twizzlers, and a handful of Mr. Big candy cars. “But I’ll do anything that involves snacks, and the brothers have Church tonight anyway.”

“Oh, shut it.” Cress laughed, tossing her long golden-brown hair over her shoulder to shoot a megawatt smile at her best friend. “You cried when I

came home.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.” Harleigh Rose nodded sagely. “Saw it with my own two eyes.”

“You were probably too busy making out with your new fiancé to see anything,” Tay countered.

“She has a point,” Hannah agreed.

“I saw it too,” Lila said, then held up a hand. “And before you make some comment about how I was too busy making out with Nova to notice, he wasn’t even there when we saw you that first time. Besides, King’s resurrection and Cressida’s return definitely warrant unlocking lips even if it’s only for a minute.”

Tay pursed her lips in annoyance.

We all laughed at her.

“Fuck, you guys are a riot,” Eric said from behind us, startling me because I’d totally forgotten about him.

“Sorry, Eric,” I said with a wince. “This is my sister and her babies...” I hesitated over how to refer to the rest of my tribe.

Cleo piped up for me. “And the rest of her family.”

Eric raised his pierced eyebrow. “Eclectic family.”

Cleo giggled, which made me take a second look at her, but she was too busy making eyes at Eric.

Oh-kay, then.

“Let’s go. Ransom is going to come pick up the babies at your house in an hour,” Lou said, adjusting Monster on her hip. “Then it’ll be just us girls.”

“And Benny,” Cress added. “Carson’s officially a hang-around now so he’ll be at the meeting, and I didn’t want Benny to feel left out.”

“Awesome,” Tay crowed. “Do you think he could bring some focaccia from La Gustosa?”

Benito Bonanno was Carson Gentry’s boyfriend, and they both often ended up at club gatherings for their various connections to the group. The

primary one being that they were best friends with Cressida even though she'd once been their high school teacher. The other being the fact that Carson was my cousin, and it seemed lately that he was considering becoming a prospect for The Fallen.

“How are you so tiny?” Hannah demanded, waving at our diminutive friend before gesturing to her own gorgeous curves. “You eat like a horse, and I eat like a lady. We should have the opposite figures.”

Tay ripped open the wrap of the Mr. Big candy bar with her teeth, then took an outrageously large bite as she shrugged.

“You're perfect,” I told Hannah who was forty-something, but maintained every year on her birthday that she was thirty-five. “Let's get out of here before Eric discovers all our secrets because none of you can keep your mouths shut.”

They protested as I ushered them out, stealing Angel from Cleo as we went. When they all filed out, I looked over my shoulder at Eric who was studying me with an eerie intensity.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“You've got some bruising on your neck,” he said slowly, standing up from the desk and stalking toward me with his eyes fixed on my throat.

I held my breath as he carefully put his hand over my throat, palm first then finger by finger as if fitting himself to the bruises.

My breath arrested in my airway at the dark look in his eyes, something twisted like hot metal, sharp and warped. I'd never seen Eric look like that, like something other than human.

“Who did this?” he asked in such a heavy voice it seemed to press the air from my lungs.

“No one,” I said as I tried to peel his fingers off my neck.

For one second, he resisted, his grip tightening and eyes flashing, but then he released me. I stumbled backward slightly, my hand at my throat, eyes wide.

“You’ve never been a good liar,” he told me flatly as he crossed his arms over his chest and stared me down with those dark eyes.

“And you are?” I questioned, arching a brow at his strange behaviour.

A curious silence vibrated between us like a discordant note.

“Listen, no one attacked me, okay? I’m fine. Beyond that, it’s none of your business.” I finally said, moving to the couch to grab my purse and coat. “I’ll see you next week.”

“No kiss?” he asked because I was affectionate, and I almost always hugged him or tapped a kiss to his cheek in greeting or goodbye.

I slid him a sidelong glance as I pulled on my coat. “Not today.”



IT TOOK TWO HOURS, FIVE DEVoured PIZZAS, THREE EPISODES OF *HELL ON Wheels*, and four pitchers of Lila’s insanely strong margaritas for the topic to come up.

I was almost relieved when it did.

It had only been a matter of time and I was eager to get it out of the way.

“So Priest and Wrath tried to kill you,” Tay said conversationally as she rubbed her bloated belly and continued to eat from the depleted bowl of popcorn perched on Maja’s lap. “You know, with those two, I’m surprised you survived.”

Cressida winced. “Hey, we all know they did *not* try to kill, Bea. Those two might be scary, but they’ve earned our respect a million times over.”

“No shit,” Harleigh Rose added, leaning forward on the couch where she’d been snuggling with Lila to scowl properly at Tayline. “They love us. They wouldn’t knowingly harm a fuckin’ hair on our heads.”

I looked at Loulou, but she was chewing her bottom lip, conspicuously silent when she was usually the first to stand up for any of the club’s brothers.

“Foxy?” Hannah asked, pausing in her task of braiding my hair. “You got a problem with those two because of this?”

The pause was so slight, just a half second beat, but it resonated through the room like a struck gong.

“No,” she said slowly, staring at my feet in her lap as she painted my toes a pale pink. “No, I don’t have a problem with them. Wrath didn’t know what he was doing. He’s new and eager to prove himself after working with a club who tried to take us down. But Priest... he should have known better. He’s never made a mistake like this before.”

“So, you’re going to hate him for it?” I demanded, tensing so hard my muscles ached, and Cleo shifted up from her half-sprawl on my left side. “He’s human, Loulou. Everyone makes mistakes.”

Her mouth set in that stubborn line that had irritated me my entire life because it meant nothing I said would reach her.

Tayline sighed dramatically. “Okay, I admit I said what I said to get a little reaction, but I wasn’t serious, Lou. Priest is Priest, and he pretty much admits he doesn’t have a heart, but that’s not true, and you know it. I bet you he’s haunted by what happened.”

“And I bet you didn’t make it any better when you yelled at him,” I added, just to twist the knife.

“Or when you kept him from seeing Bea,” Harleigh Rose added.

Lou leaned over to slap her ripped jean-clad thigh, but the damage was done.

“Are you kidding me?” I asked, almost woodenly, because I couldn’t believe my sister would be so cruel.

She was *not* a mean-spirited person. It would have been so easy, almost cliché, for the many trials and tribulations of her life to hone her edges into sharp, lethal corners, but instead, they had worn her smooth like the velvet edge of rock weathered by a battering seas.

She was kind and good, beautiful in all the ways I knew a person could be.

“Why would you do such a thing?” Cleo asked softly, always soft because she was a girl of careful consideration and thoughtful silences.

Benny had frozen with a spoonful of ice cream half-way to his mouth. “Lou, that isn’t like you, at all.”

“She was protecting you,” Lila said, sympathy in her voice but a frown between her almond-shaped eyes. “At least, she thought she was.”

“And who was protecting Priest?” I countered, suddenly too hot and feeling too crowded. I surged to my feet, dislodging the nail polish all over the towel beside Lou’s lap, jarring Cleo, and ripping my hair painfully from Hannah’s grip.

Suddenly, I hated this scene and the intimacy of it. Because it seemed glaringly fake now after my sister’s cruelty. Were we all just playacting being a community, a family?

Because I knew after my parents, and I knew now with The Fallen exactly what was and wasn’t family.

“I’ve never known you to be cruel,” I whispered to my sister because something like brutal disappointment was choking my throat. “But you left

Priest out of that hospital room where our family and the club gathered like they always do when someone's hurt. You took that from him, and he didn't deserve it."

Finally, the impact of her actions seemed to hit Lou like a metric ton of bricks. Her features cracked down the middle, sorrow seeping through the fissures.

"You don't get to choose what kind of bad a man can be or what ways rebellion is acceptable to you. You fell in love with a man most people would consider a monster," I reminded her.

Instantly, anger fired her face with resolve. "Zeus is the best man I know. He does *everything* for our family."

"So does Priest!" I shouted, almost vibrating with something that felt like more than just righteous anger for the Irish enforcer.

It felt like anger for me. As if Lou was attacking *me* in her assessment of him.

Because I secretly identified with Priest's cold, dark mind, like the empty, creaking corridor of a haunted house?

Or because I secretly identified so much as *his*, the only person who dared to walk that frightening hall?

"How can you condone the way someone acts without even trying to understand their motivation?" I asked her. "We aren't the people we used to be, Loulou. Our lives aren't black and white. It's unfair of you to judge Priest because he doesn't make sense to you."

"And he does to you?" Her eyes narrowed, scraping back my skin with her teeth and nails like the skin of an orange, trying to see inside my flesh.

"Maybe," I dared, fisting my hands on my hips, trying to look forbidding in fuzzy slippers and a frilly white nightgown.

"Honey," Cressida said soothingly, standing up from her seat where she'd been breastfeeding Prince. She handed him gently to Harleigh Rose, who took him eagerly, almost reverently, then moved to take me loosely in her

arms. I looked up into her classically pretty face and tried not to be swayed by the wisdom in her gaze. “You know I get the fascination with him. He’s a broken man, but his pieces are beautiful. It’s hard not to be intrigued.”

“It doesn’t matter what I am,” I defied, even though my heart clunked like shoes tumbling in the dryer. “What matters is that Lou owes Priest an apology.”

We stared at each other then, my sister and me. If she was surprised I didn’t capitulate to her stubbornness the way I usually did, conflict adverse as I was, she didn’t show it. Instead, we locked eyes, mine only two shades paler than her cerulean blue, and we erected a wall between us.

If the wall had a name, it would have been Priest McKenna.

The doorbell chose that moment to ring throughout my little house.

“I’ll get it,” Cleo declared, popping to her feet instantly and then practically diving toward the door to escape the tension.

“Saved by the bell,” Harleigh Rose muttered to Lila, who giggled under her breath.

“Hey, Bea, you got a present,” Cleo crowed as she returned to my shabby chic parlour with a long, flat paper-wrapped box in her arms. “From a secret admirer!”

I blinked, but the women around me exploded into a flurry of teasing remarks and laughter.

“Who is it?” Benny asked me. “You never said a thing.”

“There’s nothing to say,” I responded quietly, trying to force down the hope savaging the inside of my chest.

Could it be?

Priest?

No. No, of course not.

He wasn’t a man of flowers and romancing.

He was a man of blood oaths and calculated seduction.

But he had given me presents before.

Two of them.

The Celtic cross dagger I always kept on my person, and the carved wooden Dara knot I kept in my keepsake box on the bedside table. He'd given me that knot after Loulou, Harleigh Rose, and I escaped the fire at Zeus's cabin when I was only thirteen. Loulou had been lying in critical condition in a hospital bed, and Priest had found me, curled up in a ball on the floor in the corner of the handicap washroom sobbing my weight in saline. I still don't know how he found me, and when he did, he almost instantly disappeared. When I opened the door later, after severely dehydrating myself, then washing my red face, I found the Dara knot on the speckled laminate floor outside the door on top of a badly crinkled note.

In cramped, severely spiked lettering, he had written: *you are not weak*.

Later, alone in the room beside a comatose Lou while Zeus took one of his infrequent breaks to shower and eat, I looked up the meaning of the knot of my phone.

Strength and power.

I clutched it so hard in my hands those next fretful days that the force of my hold cracked one of the thinly carved sections of wood. But it helped.

He never spoke of the gift, never even alluded to it.

Still, I knew it was from him, carved by his bloodstained, heavily tattooed hands. He was always whittling something, wood shavings caught at the ends of his hair and on the fabric of his jeans. It did strange things to me even at thirteen to imagine those big, killing hands carving something just for me.

"Open it, open it," Cleo demanded breathlessly as she tiptoed through our floor picnic and the women plus Benny lying on the ground against the pillows and each other to reach my side.

I got to my knees on the carpet, absently petting a yowling Sampson as I accepted the box into my lap. My cat batted at the box with extended claws and made that almost ear-splitting meow again.

"Hush," I told him. "You're being rude in front of our guests."

As if defending him, Delilah cooed from her cage.

My unfinished braid fell into disarray around my face as I bent to carefully peel off the black wrapping paper. My fingers encountered a little note taped to the box beneath it.

“And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, [together] with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel,” I murmured, reciting the quote from Judges 19:29.

I looked up at my biker babes to gauge their reaction, but they all wore the same look of suspended disbelief. The air in the room was taut but still, like the calm before an ocean storm.

My fingers trembled slightly as I slowly sliced through the tape with the tip of my nail then dislodged the lid. It fell away to reveal delicate tissue paper, dark at the center.

The only sound was breath and a slithering hiss from Sampson that seemed to be a physical thing, a serpent baring its fangs.

My hand shook, my breath stuttered, because somehow, I knew that whatever lay inside the box was not going to be a gift.

“Wait, Bea,” Harleigh Rose whispered because we were all caught up in this frightening moment. “Let me call Lion.”

But I didn’t wait, because the paper was already parting and inside lay something that made hesitancy impossible.

A woman’s hand and forearm, the skin around the fingers chapped and tinged yellow from smoking.

I knew before I began to scream exactly whose arm it was.

Someone had killed Brenda Walsh and sent me one of the pieces.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PRIEST

I WAS DISTRACTED.

Which wasn't completely uncommon.

Club meetings in the Chapel at the clubhouse were never exactly riveting unless we had serious shit at our doorstep. Since Irina Ventura was killed and Staff Sergeant Danner went down for killing Officer Gibson among a slew of

other crimes, life had settled into a boring kinda routine most people equated with happiness.

I was just bored.

My gaze fixed to the stained-glass window behind Zeus as voices droned on around me. I'd put it there. That window. When I started making serious cash with the club, I'd had someone ship it all the way from arsehole, Ireland. It'd been cracked, the glass mottled and faded in places, but it was easy enough to get fixed. Now the window that had haunted my youth in a completely different kinda church hung in my safe haven, a Chapel only to the rebel bikers who preached brotherhood and loyalty, who prayed to no god but themselves.

It was another form of blasphemy that got me hard.

So, I was bored, but boredom was a harbinger of peace, and I told myself to enjoy it.

The truth was, it wasn't antipathy that had me uncharacteristically disconcerted. No, I was distracted like a crow with a fucking shiny object, that shiny object being the crown of Bea Lafayette's shining golden hair.

It wasn't exactly the first time I'd been occupied with thoughts of the girl with the pink ribbon in her hair. In fact, I calculated—because I was bored and, admittedly, obsessive—the first time had been two years, three months, and twenty-seven days ago.

It happened one day when she was eating a peach. It was such an innocent, innocuous thing and she, such an innocent, relatively innocuous girl. Nothing about the situation called for my attention. We were celebrating some birthday. The women brought the cake, and we brought the booze. Everyone was happy, talking and laughing as classic rock pumped through the speakers of Z's oceanside home. I was even enjoying myself, talking to Smoke and Bat about the new advances in gun technology.

But then, something about the way she endeavoured to eat that piece of fruit drew my gaze from across the crowded kitchen of the Garro's house.

There was a knife in one hand, a sharp-edged paring knife with an ivory handle, and the swollen fruit in the other. Lower lip between her small, square teeth, Bea methodically cut into the fragile flesh and segmented it into clean sections that fell from the stone center into her palm. It was a shade too ripe, the seam of the skin splitting easily, juice splashing across her fingers to run down the slim, pale underside of her forearm. I watched raptly as she finished decimating the peach, then brought the blade to her full mouth, a small pink tongue flashing out dangerously close to the edge to gather the sweet liquid into her mouth. Greedy for the taste of it, she held her sticky hand bearing the fruit aloft and carefully dragged the knife up her arm, collecting the juice so she could once more lick it, kittenish, from the steel.

I wanted to be the knife.

It was, without a doubt, the single sexiest act I had ever witnessed. I felt like a voyeur standing in the kitchen of a family home lusting after the seventeen-year-old girl with a cloud of white gold hair as bright as a halo around her face as she sweetly ate a piece of fruit.

Then she did something very few people have ever successfully done.

She surprised me.

I watched with my head slightly cocked, alert like a bird braced for flight, as she sauntered across the tile on light, dancing feet with toes tipped in pink. She didn't make eye contact with me, and it was carefully done. The way someone avoided the eyes of a potentially dangerous animal even as they were drawn closer.

She used that knife, now licked clean, to pierce a piece of fruit and casually, just a lazy rotation of elbow and wrist, extend it my way.

I stared at the peach, the glisten of it mimicked on Bea's pale mouth. If there had ever before been a moment that felt more like a crossroads, one of those intensely crucial decisions in life when sound and time slow to a molasses crawl, I couldn't remember it.

The peach had become some forbidden fruit, like Eve's lusted after apple.

I did not believe in signs, omens, or myths, religious or otherwise. I believed in the power of action and base desire.

And even though I knew it was an idiotic idea, I wanted to taste the same fruit that glossed Beatrice Lafayette's bowed lips.

So I folded my large, cold hand over her wrist, prompting her to flinch slightly with fright or anticipation. Her eyes flashed to mine, fleeting and silvered like a fish caught in a net, struggling to escape. I let her look into my own gaze, let her see the echoing dark there, and then I leaned forward to pry the peach off the blade with my teeth.

She sucked in a barely perceptible breath and watched as I tipped my head back to release the morsel into my mouth.

Without chewing, I gently took the knife from her and punctured the soft belly of another piece before relinquishing the blade back to her control. To feed her would have been too much, but at that moment, to watch as she ate the same thing at the same time as I did felt excruciatingly intimate.

The feeling scoured through me, fraying my nerves until I felt exposed.

I was not a man who chose to emote.

This was not me.

But I stood there for another moment as I chewed and swallowed in tandem with Bea, and when I turned abruptly on my heel and left the house without another word, I did it with an elevated heart rate.

So, that was it.

The moment I finally saw Beatrice Lafayette and the obsession officially began.

But that was all before she kissed me.

Kissed. *Me*.

A wry smile tugged the edge of my lips as I thought about her surprising audacity and courage. Such a little thing and so brave, so willing to plunge headfirst into deep, dark waters.

It stirred something inside me to know she believed I was worth

something, worth that bravery.

Worth kindness.

It was stupid, the thoughts of an untried little girl speculating innocently at those things she knew lived under her bed in the night. I wondered, somewhat viciously, how she might react if I actually reached out and grabbed her around that slight, frilly sock-clad ankle one day and dragged her down to my depths.

My cock jerked at the thought.

Inwardly, I clamped down on my forbidden fantasies, striving to find that ocean of calm, unfeeling solace that lived in the center of my soul. It irritated me that Bea could rouse such waves in it. It made me want to rage against something that wasn't her, something bigger than both of us that some might have called God or fate or something useless like that.

“Priest, brother,” King muttered, knocking his fist into my own where it rested on the massive table. “What’s on your mind?”

I looked up to see everyone watching me and knew I’d been asked a question about the topic at hand. My brain ran through the last five minutes, searching for answers.

“Don’t see how what goes on up at the rez is any of our business,” I finally said as my memory conjured up what I’d been listening to with half an ear. “The Thunderbird Squad has never been a problem for the club, but they’ve never been a fuckin’ friend either.”

A handful of brothers nodded, thinking, no doubt, of the past ten years and all the shit we’d dealt with alone. Where was the T-Squad when Ventura was selling women, when Staff Sergeant Danner was running wild with his corrupt force?

“They got their own problems out there,” Zeus acknowledged as he crossed his huge hands, rings gleaming in the low light. “The rez is separate from Entrance, from the province even. We don’t know what shit they got goin’ there, and I betcha they don’t have a single fuckin’ clue what we’ve

been through down 'ere.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “So why merge the two now?”

The truth was, I didn't give a shit about people unless they were inside the club, and even then, some of them I ignored completely.

I was not like them, but I could pretend.

I'd been pretending my whole life.

The way they talked, the lopsided swagger, the cursing, and the biker uniform.

I got it all down.

It was the best costume I'd ever wear.

Couldn't say it was me, though, not to the bone.

I was still haunted by the affliction of the Irish brogue in the corners of my speech, and I woke up each morning with a prayer burned into my tongue waiting to be said even though it had been decades since I believed in an Almighty.

I was a collection of masks, perfectly presented. They hid nothing because I was nothing. Simply, I gave people what they wanted to see.

And they liked it.

Those closest to me might've guessed the truth, that I was a highly functioning psychopath, but even they did not hold it against me.

This was the magic of being what people want you to be while otherwise fading into the background.

They do not invade your privacy, and they do not judge you as the alien creature you are.

BAT'S LIPS COMPRESSED, JAW TIGHT. “SOMEONE MURDERED ONE'A THEIR women, a mother of three, in cold blood.”

I looked at Kodiak, wondering idly if he felt any sympathy for the First Nations group even though it wasn't his own. He never said shit all about his

upbringing on a small rez in Alaska, but he had tribal ink he took seriously and a set of customs we were sometimes witness to that spoke to his heritage. Of all the brothers, he was probably the most shrouded in mystery. He didn't talk much, and he kept mostly to himself.

It wasn't surprising I liked him a hell of a lot.

"Someone fed her to the wolves," Curtains confirmed, looking shaky and pale. He was a fellow redhead, but pasty as hell like he'd never seen the sun. Even on rides out, he wore his helmet or a beat-up Hephaestus Auto ball cap to keep that pallor from the fiery kiss of the sun. He was bleached white as bone now as he called up some photos on his computer and flipped it around to show us all. "He pinned a typed-up Bible verse to a tree beside the remains of her body. 'What peace can there be, so long as the whorings and the sorceries of your mother Jezebel are so many?'"

One of Zeus's hands clenched into a fist, then released, flexing so hard the veins and tendons stood out in stark relief.

"We got a murderer out there killing mothers, I got a problem with that," he growled. "Don't give a shit it's not one'a our women. When I took this club over from that piece'a shit Crux, I fuckin' vowed I'd keep Entrance safe for everyone."

"They don't live in Entrance," Heckler grouched. "We just fuckin' established that."

"What if it was Hannah?" King asked, as always, hitting at the heart of these men. He looked next to Skell, to Bat, to Axe-Man and Cyclops, to every single brother with family outside of these four walls. "What if it was Winona, Mary, or Cleo and Tayline? We don't let shit like this stand."

"We just got some peace," Kodiak spoke up uncharacteristically, his voice husky with disuse but flat with reason. "We start signin' up for every war in the province, we're gonna burn out."

"Live free, die hard," Zeus reminded him of the club motto, but it wasn't in the voice of absolute power. He wanted the discussion, and we were used

to giving him our opinions. We wouldn't leave here until it was settled and agreed on by the majority. That was just the way Z worked, even if it wasn't the MC standard.

This was why I'd stayed twelve years ago when I got off that godforsaken freighter and encountered Zeus in a narrow corridor between shipping crates. He'd taken one look at me and offered me a coffee. Didn't even wait to see if I'd follow, just turned on his heel and gone ahead, knowing somehow I'd follow.

The kinda man he was, he led like a general, not a king. First into battle, leading any kinda charge as the point of the knife.

"Let's vote it out, brothers," he suggested. "But I'll say right now, I'm inclined to help 'em. Somethin' happened to my family, I'd take any help I could get and make damn sure to reward the giver, yeah?"

There were some murmurings and nods, but a commotion outside the closed Chapel doors roused us all to something bigger.

Instantly, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

Because I could hear her.

Bea.

No one had a voice like that, so sweet and smooth like honey poured from a jar.

I was standing, pushing back from the table so I could vault myself over it, one hand to the wood as leverage to leap over the bulk. Curtains and Blade shoved aside to make room for me to land with a jarring thud on the other side between their chairs.

Because that sweet voice was raised in alarm and it was calling me to her like there was some direct link between us, some line only she could reach.

I was throwing open the doors before anyone else could get there.

Bea stood just inside the clubhouse surrounded by the biker bitches, tears tracking down her cheeks, voice raised as she demanded Ransom and Carson let her into the meeting.

Quickly, I scanned her for injuries, but aside from the small splint on her left hand, she seemed unharmed.

The great knot in my gut, as complicated as the Dara, untangled.

“What the fuck is goin’ on?” Zeus demanded from behind me.

Instantly, Lou went to him and fit herself into his ready arms, but I ignored whatever she said softly in his ear.

Because Bea was there, and something was wrong.

Alarm bells were still ringing, blaring so loudly in my head I thought it might explode.

Tired of waiting, of not knowing what I was killing for frightening Bea so badly, I stalked forward until I loomed over and demanded coldly, “Tell me.”

Her lips parted, so pink and soft I was almost distracted, but she didn’t tell me.

She showed me.

She lifted the flower box in her arms and pulled back the lid.

Inside, a perfectly severed forearm.

There was swearing and gasps around me, but I just studied the dissected limb for clues.

It had once belonged to a woman, obvious because of the sparse brunet hairs dusting the forearm, the carefully cut nails and the silver ring on her middle finger. It had been severed cleanly so the murderer had used a hacksaw, the only tool that could do a decent if arduous job of dismemberment. On closer inspection, it seemed the gift-giver had even cleaned up the edges of the arm with a scalpel or clippers, removing the ragged ends of flesh and sinew, and that they’d taken the time to drain the majority of the blood so the box wasn’t a soggy mess.

“This is fucked up,” Curtains said about two seconds before he puked into his ball cap.

“Fuckin’ evil, is what it is,” Kodiak said from beside me, studying the limb with the same cold deliberateness as I was. “It’s not easy to cut up a

body. You have to be fucked in the head to take the time and energy to do somethin' like this."

"It's her," Bea whispered softly, just for me. A single tear caught on the trough of her lower lid, amplifying the deeply saturated blue of her iris. I watched as it trembled on the edge, then fell down the soft slope of her pale cheek.

Even with everything going on, I wanted to lick that tear from her skin and taste her sorrow. She was even prettier when she cried.

"Brenda Walsh," she continued with a slow blink, reluctant to break eye contact even for that second. "Brett's mum."

"Jesus Christ," Boner mumbled somewhere behind me.

"Tell me everythin'," Zeus demanded.

"It arrived at my house. Cleo answered the door, but she said no one was around and the box was just on the stoop. She brought it inside and gave it to me." Bea hesitated, licking her dry lips. "She thought it was a gift from an admirer."

And Bea thought it could have been a gift from me.

Silly, overly romantic Little Shadow.

I shook my head just slightly, jaw clenched.

She sighed softly in answer like an audible, bashful shrug.

"So you touched it and so did Cleo," King confirmed, his phone pressed to his ear, his other arm around Cressida. Into the speaker, he said, "Yeah, Lion? You better get the fuck down here. We got a situation."

I was too busy thinking to entertain any of the nonsense emotional talk that followed. Kodiak was right. This was as premeditative as it got. Whoever had murdered Brenda Walsh had planned not just the killing, but the aftermath. The intent was clearly to send Bea a gift, a token of their affection or protection. It was not the act of a stranger, but of an admirer.

Someone was watching her.

Someone *else* was watching her.

But since that moment I'd watched Bea beautifully dismantle a peach with the sharp edge of a blade, I'd been following her too. Gentle stalking, nothing harmful. Every night like clockwork, I ran down to her house on my daily jog, stopping to run in place while I checked in the wide picture windows, past the fluttering gauze curtains into the warmly lit house Bea made into her home. I'd watch her for exactly five minutes as she spoke with her little dove or chased her one-eyed cat, as she danced around that atrociously pink living room with Cleo when they had their weekly sleepovers, or when she made dinner like a dutiful daughter for her mother.

It was like watching television, standing removed, but undeniably intrigued as I watched her humanity, her kindness and radiant personality more brilliant than the yellow light against the dark night.

Knowing someone else had been watching that, tuning into a channel I had long considered *mine*, made the tenuous grasp I held on my sanity tremble and quake.

I would find him, because I knew it was a him.

Bea was catnip for the freaks, the creeps, the deviants; a dark heart wrapped up pretty in a pink bow.

Of course, she'd attracted some other killer, drawn to her light in the darkness like some sadistic moth to a flame.

I'd find him, and when I did, I would dismember him just as he'd dismembered Brenda, only I'd do it with my bare hands and blunt teeth. He'd killed as a gift for a woman who wasn't his. He didn't know yet that she'd already been claimed by a psychopath, and I wouldn't give her up for fucking anything.

Before I could temper the impulse, my hand snapped out to wrap around Bea's long, delicate throat. There were gasps, but I didn't care, not even when a heavy hand tried to jerk me away by the shoulder.

I only cared about her.

The girl with the pink bow and the dark things lurking behind those light

blue eyes.

I needed to feel her alive, pulse beating against my flesh to settle the cold, murderous intention that seized every inch of my body from prickling scalp to clenching toes.

And Bea?

She didn't flinch.

Of course, she didn't.

Instead, she watched me unblinkingly as she slowly raised her small hand and pressed it tight to mine over her throat. The rightness of it surged through me, hot where I was cold, scorching through all the icy chambers of my heart until it burned. Until I was lit up like an old house and quickly going down in her flames.

"I will keep you safe," I said in a voice that sounded strangely like a vow. An oath when the last promise I'd ever made was to make promises no more. "Everyone who knows me fears me, and those that don't yet, will learn to."

CHAPTER NINE

PRIEST

“LIKE HELL YOU WILL,” LOULOU SAID, PUSHING BETWEEN BEA AND I SO THAT I was forced to drop my hand if I didn’t want to seriously hurt my Little Shadow. “You’re the one who almost killed her already.”

“She needs a man on her,” King acknowledged, stepping up beside me in a show of solidarity that meant something to me when it shouldn’t have.

“Whoever did this, did it for her.”

Loulou slanted me a suspicious look, but Bea poked a finger into her shoulder and hissed, “Don’t even *think* it, Lou.”

I blinked dispassionately at Loulou. “You think I’d hurt your sister?”

She tipped her chin in the air and crossed her arms over her chest. “I think under the right circumstances, you could hurt anyone.”

Everyone around us was quiet, interested. It was a stand-off between the club Queen and its leashed beast. The tension was palpable in the air, but it did nothing to stir my blood. What did I care if Louise Garro liked me or not? This was my club long before it had been hers and it would be for the rest of my fucking life. I’d lived for The Fallen when I had nothing else to live for, and I’d die for it, for them, even for this bitch staring me down, because that was my definition of loyalty.

Of love, if I had any of that in my metaphorical heart to give.

“I’d sooner hurt you than her,” I said finally, bored now. I took the blade from my pocket and flipped it open to clean under my fingernails. “I’d sooner hurt anyone else than Bea.”

I knew if I looked at my Little Shadow then, there would be hope stamped on her face, and I didn’t want to acknowledge I’d put it there. I was speaking the truth, but she was too ready to read deeper into it.

Thoughts were the echo of emotion. They were never eloquent, but they got the point across. In my experience, words were even more useless.

Loulou understood me in a way Bea couldn’t because she was too involved. Lou’s eyes flashed. She knew what I was, a stone-cold killer, and she knew what I had to offer, obsession, not love. She didn’t want that for her sister.

I couldn’t blame her.

“I guess that’s fair enough,” she conceded, looking over my shoulder at her husband. “But I still don’t want you on her for this.”

“Lou,” Zeus rumbled. “Priest is one’a the best brothers we got. You want

her safe, then he's a good bet."

"The best," I corrected.

Bat stifled a snorting laugh behind a cough.

"I could do it," Kodiak said in his monotone. "I'm not so good as Priest, but I could keep her safe."

A growl ripped from my throat before I could think to curb the impulse, and suddenly, I was lunging three steps across the room to get in the large man's face. "Like fuckin' hell you will. I'm the scariest motherfucker in this place. If it's good for anythin', it's this."

"Maybe you're too invested," King suggested mildly. "Never seen you lose your shit at a brother like this."

My eyebrow curved high on my forehead. "Oh? You think this is losing my shit, do ya?"

Cleo shivered behind her dad, Axe-Man, and moved closer to him, prompting a grim smile to cross my face.

I wanted to pound my chest, bare my teeth, and flourish my knives to prove to them all just how motherfucking dangerous I was. If something evil wanted Bea, they'd have to get through me first, and I doubted they would expect someone who could match the depth of their moral depravity blow for blow.

"Priest," Bea said softly, moving toward me with her hand extended.

I held still, vibrating like a plucked cord with tension as she placed that hand on my chest. It made me realize I was barely breathing and hardly blinking. The need to protect had brought the animal out in the man. I clamped my hand down on hers over my sternum and bared my teeth at her.

She smiled softly back at me. "We don't even know for sure what's happening, right now. Let's assume it's less about me and more about Brenda Walsh."

"There was a Bible verse," Cressida added. "Inside the box."

The energy between the brothers ramped higher, testosterone leaking into

the room like gas.

“Like the woman fed to the wolves,” Curtains remembered bleakly. “Up on the rez.”

“What?” Loulou asked, turning in Z’s arms to stare up at his troubled face. “There was another murder like this one?”

He nodded grimly, stroking his beard as he did when he was deep in thought. “Yeah, the leader of the T-Squad sent word about it today. Happened last week, but they’ve kept it quiet.”

“Could this be Ventura?” Axe-Man wondered aloud. It was weird to see him holding his daughter delicately, strange to think a man I’d once watched throw an axe ten metres straight into an enemy’s forehead care for someone more vulnerable than himself. It gave me pause because it begged the question, if Axe-Man could do that, could I too?

“He has come at us from all angles before,” Bat agreed. “But this doesn’t have his signature on it. I say we call Dane in on this. He spent years profiling in the military, who better to help us out now?”

“He ain’t a part’a the club,” Skell muttered.

“Don’t be a racist asshole,” Nova snapped, wrapping an arm around Lila’s waist so she wouldn’t physically defend her brother. “He’s a good man. I say, he wants a place in the club, he’s the kinda man we should take.”

“He’s got skills,” Curtains agreed, almost eagerly because he was a genius, and talent was his turn-on. “We could definitely use that.”

“He’s also got a good heart,” Lila drawled too mildly. “And he could use the brotherhood. He’s...he’s been struggling since he got back from the Middle East.”

“He starts answerin’ some questions ’bout what the hell he actually did over there, I’m open to it,” Zeus stated. “But that’s not up for discussion right now. We’re talkin’ ’bout a woman killer ’ere. Let’s stay focused.”

“In my experience with Javier,” Lila piped up, the clear authority because for some reason, the bastard had staved off murdering her when he had the

chance once. “He wouldn’t hide behind religious bullshit.”

Bea shifted, and I realized she was still holding that damn arm. My hands clamped down on her hips to turn her toward the pool table at our left, and she took the hint, gently depositing it on the felt as if it were a bomb. I didn’t take my hands away when she was done. They felt good in the subtle angle of her torso arrowing into her hips. Almost as good as the feel of a blade handle against my palm.

“Don’t cross it out yet,” Zeus said, stepping forward to gently clamp a warning hand on my shoulder. “Let’s wait until Lion gets here to jump to any conclusions.”

“Religious bullshit?” Speak of the devil. Lion held the door to the clubhouse open for Lysander Garrison, Cressida’s somewhat estranged brother.

The atmosphere went flat like old soda.

“What’s he doing here?” Zeus demanded.

Lion shot him a dispassionate look as he walked toward us and stopped at Bea, checking her over visually. When he reached out to touch her, I snapped my teeth at him. He rolled his eyes but didn’t try to put a hand on her again.

“Sander is my guy. He’s workin’ for me now.”

“Say the fuck what?” Boner asked, eyebrows raised. “You trust that motherfucker?”

Lion leveled his signature stern glare at the younger brother. “With my life. Now, what’s this about a Bible verse? There was a murder last month down in metro Vancouver that had something to do with religion. The details were hushed up, but I can dig into it.”

“You do that,” Zeus urged as Lila passed Lion a note that must have been the Bible verse.

They’d had the delayed good sense to put it in a Ziploc bag to preserve it for prints.

“It was a prostitute killed on East Hasting. Happens all the time. Only

thing that made it stand out was some quote from the Old Testament written in her blood on the wall.”

“He’s evolving,” Bea said quietly, then cleared her throat when everyone looked at her. “If the prostitute was his first kill, writing in blood on the wall is sloppy, not premeditated. He sent me a typed note and obviously knew about my history with Brenda Walsh. That suggests thought. Maybe the first kill was an accident or an impulse.”

“But this was theatrics,” I finished for her.

She looked up at me with a slight smile, pleased we were on the same page. “Exactly. It’s the classic evolution of a serial killer.”

“A serial killer,” Tayline said flatly. “What next?”

“I’d say that about covers the spectrum,” Boner agreed.

“Don’t fuckin’ jinx it,” Nova said. “We don’t even know if this crazy killer is one and the same.”

“Looks like,” Lion admitted. “But listen, we need to get the police involved here, Zeus. If it is a serial killer moving across criminal elements and municipalities, they need to know.”

“Fuck the pigs.” Wiseguy said what everyone else was thinking.

Sure, the corrupt sect of Entrance PD had been culled when we took down Staff Sergeant Danner, but that didn’t mean any of us liked the men in blue. With the exception of Lion Danner, who wasn’t even a cop anymore, but a P.I., as a rule, bikers didn’t take too well to authority.

Especially after Zeus had been put away for months for a murder he didn’t commit.

Looking at our prez, we watched his jaw work beneath his beard as he stared down at his wife then over at Bea who was still standing too close to me. I could feel the heat of her shoulder touching my lower left pec like a searing brand. I welcomed the pain.

“Do it,” he commanded like I knew he would because our women were in danger, and he would do everything in his power to make sure they were

safe. “Call Officer Hutchinson and get this sorted. The rest of you, get lost. We don’t need ’em seein’ the full club. Lion, Bat, Buck, and Curtains stay. We’ll reconvene Church tomorrow.”

With a low mumble of agreement, everyone started to move out, some of the brothers stopping to murmur words to Bea.

“I’m not fuckin’ leavin’,” I told Zeus.

He stared at me, studying me in that way he had of sizing up a man’s soul.

Finally, his lips twitched. “Yeah, brother, I figured.”

“You’re coming home with us tonight.” Loulou moved into Bea, taking her hands and pulling her out of my orbit. I bared my teeth at her, but she ignored me. “You can’t stay alone at your house when some creep knows where you live.”

“I’m sure Priest would stay with me,” Bea suggested, shooting me a look over her shoulder.

I knew from the dark, sticky clasp of her stare that she was remembering how I’d slit that motherfucker Brett Walsh’s throat at her feet after he put her in danger. I knew she was imagining with some dark joy what I might do to this new threat against her.

My cock stirred. It was hot as fuck seeing that wickedness in such an angelic face. Too heady to know I flamed those dark passions.

She was fascinated by the very thing everyone else saw in me and feared.

How was any man supposed to resist that?

“No,” Lou declared with all her biker queen authority. “You’re my little sister, and you’re staying with me. No one gets past Zeus.”

Bea bit the full, pink swell of her lower lip as she glanced back at me again with a question in her eyes.

I stared back at her implacably.

There was no sense in arguing with her sister about this. She didn’t like me for her sister, not even my protection was good enough. And she was

used to getting what she wanted with a man like Zeus wrapped around her little finger.

So, I wouldn't argue.

I would just spend the entire fucking night staked out on the beach beside their house, watching in the dark, protecting my obsession from whoever sought to take her from me.

In fact, I hoped they dared to try, because my fingers were itching for the hot touch of blood, and my knives, too, were thirsty.

Bea's mouth pressed into a thin line, but in her eyes shone a glimmer akin to contentment, and I knew she got me. It was the only reason she agreed to stay at her sister's.

We both knew I'd be watching.

But only I knew this wouldn't be the first night I'd stalk Bea Lafayette in the dark.

CHAPTER TEN

BEA

I COULDN'T SLEEP.

No surprise there.

I didn't have Sampson curled up on the pillow beside me because the Garro twins were allergic to cats, and I didn't have the resonant coo of Delilah echoing softly through my house.

Of course, that didn't have so much to do with my insomnia as the fact that a serial killer might or might not have chosen to fixate on me.

I stared out the open window passed the fluttering linen drapes of the Garro's second-story bedroom into the velvet night littered with stars. Another reason I chose Entrance over Vancouver every time. There was next to zero light pollution in our little town nestled at the base of the mountains at the last ocean bay before land took over in sweeping, snow-capped crests. I could see the Andromeda constellation in the clear autumn sky and thought about her story, its parallels to mine. Sacrificed to a sea monster, she hung suspended, a classic damsel in distress waiting for a hero to save her.

My teeth ground together painfully, but the hurt settled me. I didn't want to be useless, waiting for someone to attack me or someone to save me.

It was the 21st century, I wanted to be a woman in charge of my own fate.

I tossed off the sheets and padded over to the window, shivering in the knife-sharp wind whistling through the cracked open pane.

I knew who I would see when I looked down onto the ocean-glazed rocks of the beach.

A man people thought was a monster who I knew in my bones was really the man ready to save me from any kind of harm.

It was hard to make out his form in the dark, but the moon was a round mirror in the sky refracting silver light onto the glimmering water and Priest's long, lean form. He was moving, practicing some series of fighting sequences or throwing knives, I couldn't tell.

But I knew I wanted to be down there on the ground learning to defend myself, not up in the room like some princess in a tower.

So, silently as possible because Zeus slept with one eye open, I descended down the stairs, grabbed one of Lou's big, white puffer jackets from the hook by the door and a pair of her too-large UGG boots.

"Took ya longer than I thought it would."

I startled, a little squeak falling from my lips as I stumbled over the boot I

was trying to slip on. Looking up through my hair as I steadied myself, I saw Zeus sprawled in one of his leather living room chairs. The moonlight barely reached him, but I could make out the craggy set of his features, the low gleam of muted silver in his gaze.

I sighed heavily. “I feel badly for Monster and Angel. They’re not going to get away with anything in this house.”

Zeus’s smile was bright from the shadows. “Not much I don’t know ’bout in this house and in my club. When you give a shit ’bout somethin’ you pay attention to it. I give a shit ’bout you, Bea. You’re the only bright spot my girl’s got in her family, though Phillipa is learnin’, I’ll give ’er that.”

My lips twisted, sharp and malformed like a broken hanger in my mouth. “Yeah, well, Lou deserves the best.”

Zeus shifted his large frame forward in the chair, hands dangling between his spread thighs. “Fuck yeah, she does. But don’t mistake me, little Bea, the love I got in my heart for you isn’t just ’cause you’re my wife’s sister. It’s got fuckuva lot more to do with you as a woman, you hear me? Don’t think I know a girl so sweet as you.”

Something flipped over in my gut. I felt both sick and heart warmed, embarrassed that I needed independent validation and awed that I somehow elicited respect like that from a man who was larger than life.

“Which is why you’re guarding the door? Is it to keep bad guys out or me in?” I dared, fisting my hands on my hips.

A low, smoky chuckle. “Look just like Lou doin’ that. Nah, I’m not gonna pass judgment on ya. I fell in love with Lou when she was younger than you are now. Okayed my eighteen-year-old son datin’ his teacher. I’m a lotta things, but a fuckin’ hypocrite isn’t one of them.” He paused, then leveraged himself out of the chair way too gracefully for such a big man and came to me. My neck cranked back at an awkward angle to maintain eye contact and he stooped lower to chuff me lightly on the chin with his tattooed knuckles. “I gotta theory about you good girls ’cause I got experience with

one'a my own. A good woman sees the good in all kinds. She'll search the depths of a body until she finds some glimmer of light no matter how dark and broken a soul may be. It's just in her nature." He looked down at the thick wedding band on his finger and a smile of remembrance ghosted across his face. "Just as it's in the nature of a broken man to race toward her light. You ask me, there's a special kinda yin and yang in that. Two hearts find'a love like that it's fuckin' bindin'."

I blinked up at him, wanting to cry. At this moment, I didn't know if I'd ever felt so seen.

His voice was hoarse and sad as he continued, "But you gotta know, little Bea, a love like that scars as much as it heals, yeah? You don't get outta that alive. You think Cress would'a had any kinda life if my boy, King, truly died that night on the cliffs?"

I sucked in a shaky breath as I shook my head, remembering the spectre of a woman she'd been those desolate months when we'd all thought him dead.

"Yeah," Z confirmed softly. "So, you go out that door, I want ya to do it knowin' I doubt the same sweet girl is comin' back through it again."

I struggled to breathe through the pressure of my inflated heart pounding in my chest, so I just smiled tremulously and tapped my hand lightly on Z's tattooed chest. Backing up toward the door, I had my hand on the handle before I found the air to add, "If I ever have anything half so lovely as the love you and Loulou share, Z, I'll count myself one of the luckiest people on the planet. You'd probably be surprised how much I'm willing to sacrifice for something so beautiful. Not all love stories play out in the light. Some of the best romances occur in the veil of shadows."

Z's smile was bright and quick as a lightning strike against his dark face. "I don't fuckin' doubt it."

I nodded, smiling slightly as I turned around and left the warm house for the cold, dark night.



IT WAS EARLY NOVEMBER AND THERE WAS THE SCENT OF SNOW IN THE AIR, A tingle at the back of my nose that teased at a white winter. I huddled under the big jacket, hugging myself as I navigated the path from packed dirt to large, smooth pebbles. The *shush* of waves gently kissing the shore was the only soundtrack to the clear night, soothing me as I walked toward what I fiercely prayed would be my future.

He didn't stop as I drew close, but I had no doubt he knew I was there watching him.

I stopped a yard away, my eyes fixed to his form as his right shoulder reared back, torso barely following, and then whipped forward, the thin whistle of the blade slicing through the air only slightly higher than the hiss of the wind off the water. There was a *thunk* as it hit the target, an overturned trunk of a tree lodged in the rocks.

"Nice shot."

Priest didn't turn toward me or acknowledge my presence. Instead, he crunched over the shore to retrieve the five knives buried deep in the wood

and trudged back.

I waited and watched, settling down on a damp log.

He threw first with his right hand, then his left. The next round, he started facing away from the target, his gaze fixed away from me, and then in a flurry of efficient movement, he twisted and released, each and every knife landing unerringly in a dark, vaguely circular blotch on the tree.

“You’re very good,” I complimented again even though I knew Priest didn’t need validation for his skills.

No, he was the kind of man who needed validation for those things he believed he was incapable of.

Warmth.

Love.

Happiness.

I straightened my cold, stiff body from the log and padded across the beach to his standing point. When he returned, it was as if I was a ghost. He stood just in front of me and turned his back to face the target again.

“I wonder...” I said silkily as I dared to take that last step closer and pressed my chest lightly to his back. He didn’t flinch, but I could feel the tension in his powerful frame. “If you would be so good if I did this.”

There was a brief hesitation, and I knew he was deciding.

Not whether he could meet my challenge. No, that was child’s play to him.

Deciding on whether to enter this game with me, to indulge in me the way I yearned to indulge in him.

I’d felt nothing but the helium of hope lightening my bones, trilling like a high note in the beat of my heart since he’d grabbed me by my throat and swore to protect me in front of the entire club.

He wanted me.

He had to.

There was no way a man like him pledged himself to anyone unless he

was driven to, unless that person laid waste to his cold, clear mind and successfully wedged themselves beneath his iron skin.

I held my breath as he made the choice and promised myself I would walk away if he said no. I would stop stalking the poor man like his shadow and let him live his life. I promised myself I'd find a way to live mine outside of this feverish obsession I held for him, an obsession that burned so hot in my heart it warmed me even in the cold night on a barren beach.

And then he spoke.

“*A chuisle mo chroí,*” Priest said in what I assumed had to be Gaelic. The words, though indecipherable to me, held only warm, intimate praise in his cold, low voice. A juxtaposition that made me shiver with something more than the frigid night. “If you dare to test me, at least make it a worthy challenge.”

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

A brief pause for his free-form chuckle that warmed me like brandy.

Thunk.

All five knives outlining the dark circle in the wood perfectly.

I gasped when he turned against me and suddenly, I was *up* in his arms, my legs automatically wrapping around his waist, his hands beneath my nightgown, freezing and strong as they cupped my bare bottom.

“This,” he said gutturally, eyes edged with wildness as he looked down into my own. “This is a fuckin’ challenge. To hold you in my arms and focus on anythin’ else.”

I swallowed, but my heart seemed lodged in my throat, thrumming so hard it felt like I was choking. “You could focus on me instead.”

Priest’s smile was not a tame thing. It sliced across his freckled face, lips too red for a man, open over his white teeth like a wound over bone. When I touched my fingers to the edge of it, he snapped at me, catching the soft tips in his strong hold for an instant before releasing me. The pain sheared through me followed swiftly by heat that seared down my spine.

“You don’t want one hundred percent of my focus, Little Shadow. You wouldn’t know how to handle me.”

I sank deeper into his hold, pressing my groin to his torso in a bid to alleviate the tension I felt coiled there just waiting to spring.

“What would you do?” I dared to ask, vivid, almost violent images of passion morphing and breaking apart in my mind like a broken kaleidoscope tinged in red.

His lids lowered, eyes a narrow blade of pale green. “Just be grateful I don’t have my knives on me right now.”

I shuddered so hard he had to brace me tighter to his body so I wouldn’t fall out of his hold. “Oh.”

His laugh was sinister, the same hiss as the blades made arrowing through the air. “Oh,” he agreed. “You aren’t ready for that. You might never be ready for that.”

“For you,” I confirmed, watching the demons chase themselves across his eyes. I tightened my legs around his waist and slid a hand carefully into the side of his thick, surprisingly soft hair. He flinched slightly, eyes darkening with lust and something like panic, as if my touch was something to fear. “I’ve been ready for you for years.”

And just that quickly, Priest reverted to the man he presented to all the world. Cold, intractable as the blades he coveted. He dropped me without consideration, but waited until I landed on my feet before turning from me to retrieve his knives.

“It’s true,” I shouted to him over a gale of wind. “I’ve watched you for years. *Wanted* you for years.”

Priest scowled as he walked through the punishing wind, hair flying about his face, leather jacket flapping open to reveal the Hephaestus Auto hoodie beneath. He stalked right to me, his knives slotted between the knuckles of his right hand. When he raised them, the tip of two knives at my throat, I only canted my chin higher in the air to give him space at my neck to roam.

His eyes flashed and a low growl rose from his throat to be lost on the wind.

“I am not afraid of you,” I told him, my voice ironclad, the words tossed down between us like a gauntlet. “You can try to scare me all you want, Priest. I *like* it.”

I gasped softly as his other hand banded over my low back and hauled me up against him. I could feel every hard inch of his upper thighs and the thick bulge at his groin that was hard just for me.

He bent down to me, his face looming and dark as storm clouds rolling in. “Don’t tempt me. I’m not some untrained boy wrapped around your little finger. I’m not even a man. I kill for sport, I love pain and fuckin’ court death daily. You play with me, Bea, you knowingly play with a monster, something more dead than alive. I’ll ruin you,” he promised.

I arched my neck into the point of the blades, felt them catch and pull sharply at my skin. My heart beat fast and strong, a staccato beat on the tight skin of a drum, but my voice was sure as I breathed, “So, ruin me.”

The night was cold and metallic on my tongue as I inhaled sharply when Priest jarred me closer still and then the only thing I could taste was him.

Hot enough to burn, the edges of my tongue curling into the heat, my inhibitions disintegrating to ash he ate out of my mouth. His groan rolled through me, dark and deep like a great dragon claiming his treasure. He curled me closer as he plundered, careful only with the hand that held the knives, angled with precise pressure at the side of my neck so I could feel the threat, but know no true pain. The feel of the steel there and the iron pressed thickly to my belly scorched like dragon’s breath down my throat to warm the apex of my thighs.

“The things I want to do to you,” he growled as he pulled back only enough to run his nose along my jaw, down the line of my throat to the place his blades met my flesh.

I gasped when he minutely flicked the knife as he drew it away. A warm

bead of blood welled up, trembled over the wound then began to slide down my neck. The hot lash of Priest's tongue was there, dashing away the blood and its trail, his lips vibrating deliciously against my skin as he hummed his approval.

"You taste so fuckin' good," he murmured as he sucked at my neck hard enough to leave a bruise. I shivered when his teeth scraped over the sensitive, slick flesh. "Feels too fuckin' good havin' someone like an angel in these bloody hands." He pulled back to grin menacingly. "Feels like blasphemy to hold you like this."

I pressed my hips against his erection, blushing at my wantonness even as I said, "Either that's a knife in your pocket or blasphemy turns you on."

I felt his gravelly laughter against my lips as he kissed me hard like a punctuation mark at the end of his statement. "Fuck yeah, it does."

My giggle died as he opened his mouth over mine and stole the noise from my throat. We kissed there on that night dark beach as dawn bleached the stars from the sky and turned the water dull and grey as lead. I was so aroused I could feel the slick of it seep down my thigh. My nipples were furled into tight buds that ached for hard, plucking fingers. There was an eloquence in the sexual demands of my body I didn't know how to give voice to with words, so I just moaned inarticulately as I gyrated lightly against Priest's long, hard body.

A hand threaded through the back of my hair and tugged hard enough for my eyes to smart. I looked up at him, damp lips parted for my panting breath, fixed in position by his control and my own demanding desire.

He gazed down at me hungrily with a question in the quirk of his brow. "I don't know how you do this to me."

"Do what?"

"Make me feel," he said, as if that in itself wasn't tragic. "I'd thought I hunted down all emotion to extinction."

"No," I argued, softening in his hold to show just how much I trusted him

even if he didn't trust the goodness in himself. The roots of my hair stung and the knife at my throat was still and portentous presence. "You felt for Cressida when King was gone. You hunted down Staff Sergeant Danner for her, for Zeus, so that she could be free of her burden and he could be free from prison."

His mouth hardened, but the severity only made his handsomeness more palpable. "I understand revenge. I understand the concept of an eye for a fuckin' eye."

"You understand protecting the people you care about," I rephrased, reaching up even when he flinched, to place my hand on his cheek, running my fingertips through his beard. "It's why you spent the whole night out here."

His lips pulled back over a snarl. "No one is gonna hurt you. No one is gonna fuckin' touch you—" he cut himself off with a choked off curse in Gaelic.

"No one, but you," I finished.

He stared at me suspiciously as if I was a mirror held up to his face and he didn't trust the demons he saw lurking in his gaze. "No one, but me," he finally agreed with a solemnity that felt like an oath sworn to God.

"Good," I said casually, striving not to scare him away with the exuberance I felt in my chest, my heart a bouncy ball against the walls of my ribs. "Now, do you think you could teach me some of that fancy knife work? Just in case you can't be there, I want to know how to defend myself."

"It's six in the morning," he said flatly. "You should be in bed."

"With you?" I asked hopefully, springing up to my toes so I could smile closer to his face, hoping to blind him with it so he might forget himself.

"No."

I sighed dramatically. "Oh, fine. But I do want to learn. I suppose, if you don't want to teach me, I could ask Wrath for help at Box N Burn..."

Instantly, I was in Priest's arms again, his teeth over the hard pulse at my neck the way an animal might claim its mate. "No."

“So, you’ll teach me,” I breathed as he bit down hard then licked the pain away with a long swipe of his tongue.

“I’ll teach you,” he confirmed reluctantly as he collared my throat with his hand and stroked over my pulse. “Because you are not weak. I’ll teach you to yield that knife I gave you properly and I’ll teach you to defend yourself usin’ just your mind and body. But you should know, from now on, there won’t be a time I’ll be absent when you need me. I may be more death than man, but I can still haunt you.”

I wasn’t sure, but as Priest turned to set up a trunk as a target closer for me to practice on and I watched his cool, efficient movements, I wondered if that wasn’t the most romantic thing anyone had ever said.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BEA

ELEVEN DAYS, ELEVEN BODY PARTS.

As if the arm wasn't enough.

The killer placed them everywhere I couldn't avoid going.

One day, at the mouth of the driveway to Zeus and Loulou's house (sending Zeus and Priest into twin fits of rage, one hot with it, one cold).

The next, delivered to my lecture hall during my abnormal psychology class by a student who claimed someone paid him fifty bucks to get the gift-wrapped package to me.

One on the porch of my house, one at the library while I studied, another to the Entrance PD station while I was giving my statement to the police there, another to the parking lot of the Van PD station when I was there to give a separate telling of the events.

Body parts everywhere.

I didn't open the packages anymore, but the cops asked me to identify the body parts through pictures when they interviewed me after each delivery. They tapped my phone, sent cops on routine routes by the Garro's house, and informed the university of the situation.

Everywhere, people watched me, hoping to catch the killer.

In ten days, they'd come no closer.

Officer Hutchinson, a friend of The Fallen and one of the senior cops in Entrance, had told Zeus a profiler claimed the killer was most likely a middle-aged man who suffered socially, specifically with women, so he took out his aggression and repressed sexual desires on his female victims.

I'd researched murderers and psychopaths long enough in my studies and in my free time to know that the profiling was a template, one they applied to almost every serial killer before they garnered more details.

The police presence in my life did not make me feel safer.

Priest did.

True to his word, he haunted me.

Loulou didn't like it, but Priest acted as if she didn't exist. Where I went, he went, stalking me like it was his profession.

I knew he technically worked at Hephaestus Auto, that his exacting hands made him one of the best mechanics at the shop, but for the last ten days, he was with me nearly every moment save Sunday at First Light Church. We didn't discuss it, but Priest made sure another brother was available for

church duty. I knew there was something there, something sinister in his memory and its connection to religion, but I didn't press. I wasn't stupid. He was entertaining the idea of more with me only tenuously and there was no way I'd threaten it by asking invasive questions, by peeling back old scars.

It amused me to see how my university friends and peers responded to the long, red-haired man with tattoos of death motifs stamped all over his freckled flesh. Those who had the balls to look at him for longer than a second were met with those cold, pale eyes, unblinking and untranslatable. He always sat by the door to the classroom, thick thighs spread too wide in the little seat, large hands too big for the little desk attached to the right side of each chair. He whittled when he was bored, and the one professor who made a stink about it was subjected to his scathing glare. I'd had to share the note from the police allowing him in class with me in order to get her to let him stay.

Psychopaths, Professor Wells reminded me quietly after reading the note and handing it back, were chameleons mimicking our own emotions back at us. They understood feeling only in abstract, not in personal identification. Whatever trust I might have placed in this man, she urged me to reconsider.

I smiled at her, patted her hand in thanks, and flipped my curled ponytail over my shoulder as I'd practically skipped back to my seat. It was nice to know my armchair psychologist diagnosis of Priest as a psychopath was confirmed by a professional.

And when the professor looked at Priest?

He used the blade of the small dagger he whittled with to clean under his fingernails then winked—*winked*—at her.

I couldn't stop the giggle in my throat, though I did hide it behind my hand.

It was a weird time.

I was scared and uneasy, constantly vigilant about my surroundings, carving out time every day to practice defending myself with Priest. I hadn't

slept in my own home or been surrounded by my things for almost two weeks. Sampson was staying with King and Cressida, and I went by every day to feed Delilah.

But I had Priest.

Finally.

If one can even claim possession of a man like Priest.

At times, he looked at me as if through me, as if I didn't exist. At first, it hurt me to see that because I could feel the lurch of my heart every time I looked at him. But then I studied closer and noticed he only ignored me when he was focused on a task, when he was assuring we were safe.

That was what made him so savage and brilliant. He wouldn't let anything get in the way of his agenda.

It might not have been an average girl's dream, but I was freaking thrilled to be the obsession of this particular psychopath.

The other times, in the rare snatches of time we'd had alone together, I saw a different side of the Irish enforcer than I ever had before. He wasn't softer, because he didn't have that in him. If anything, he was more intense, scary almost in his laser focus. But that focus was all on *me*. As if his entire world had narrowed to the dimensions of my body, and his only motive in life was to get to the bottom of my soul.

It was exhilarating, as terrifying and intense as being the focus of the religious serial killer and only slightly different.

I tried not to dwell too long on the similarities. If I'd learned anything in my years studying psychology, it was to avoid self-diagnosis at all costs.

"Bea."

Eric's voice infiltrated my daydreaming, but it took me a second of slow blinking to pull myself from my thoughts and focus on the dark-haired man standing beside me at my desk in the sound studio.

I smiled at him. "Hey, honey, how are you?"

His scowl was fierce as he dropped to a crouch so he could be on eye

level with me in my chair. He turned my seat to face him then braced himself against the arms, effectively caging me in. Immediately, my eyes darted to the door, knowing Priest was just outside taking a call from Lion. He would *not* like Eric being so close, and I had no doubt he would make that clear to him if he returned to witness this scene.

“What the hell, Bea?” Eric demanded, moving one hand to my knee to give it a little shake. His hand was hot on the bare skin between my knee-high socks and mini skirt. My gaze fixed on the cross inked into the back of his palm. “You’re basically being stalked by a madman, and you don’t fucking come to me? I thought we were close.”

“We are,” I agreed with a bright smile, hoping to distract him as I shifted back slightly in my chair so his hand would drop. “But I’ve got it handled.”

“Bea, you’re five foot four and maybe one hundred and fifteen pounds with rocks in your pocket,” he observed annoyingly. “How the hell are you going to defend yourself?”

I bent closer to him, watching the way his gaze fell to my glossed lips, and plucked the knife from its thin holster around my thigh. He was leaning close, lips parted, when I pressed the dagger to his throat.

My smile cut into my cheeks painfully, wide and pretty. “Don’t judge a book by its cover, Eric. You’re the last person I would’ve assumed would do that. You and I both know monsters hide in all kinds of packages.”

“So, you’re a monster now?” he asked dryly, but his throat worked hard as he swallowed against the pressure of the steel.

I pulled away with a light laugh and spread my thighs to slot the knife carefully back into the pink holster. Eric watched me with dark eyes.

“No,” I agreed as I tossed my curls over my shoulder and crossed my legs primly. “But you better believe I know how to play with the best of them.”

Summoned like a demon by the mere mention of him, Priest appeared in the doorway. I let myself indulge in a long, reverent look at him. In his Fallen cut and a thick boiled cashmere winter coat I knew Cressida had bought him

for Christmas last year, he looked like a poorly civilized heathen, his hair pulled into a messy cue at the back of his neck, pieces falling into his glowering face, a lock stuck in the thicket of his russet eyelashes. I'd never seen a man with hair like that, a deep, dark red that look like spilled blood and rust and perfectly complemented the cinnamon freckles dusting every visible inch of his skin. I could see the handle of his curved hunting knife in its holster at his hip under the open jacket and the cling of mud to his heavy motorcycle boots from his nights spent on the beach and grass of Zeus's back yard.

His entire powerful frame leaned slightly forward as if into a howling wind, braced and ready to attack at any provocation and, seeing Eric, so close to me, it tensed further, a long, lean human weapon.

"Back the fuck up," he ordered in a voice that was both bored and threatening, as if the idea of enforcing his words was too easy to bear and he was aggravated he even had to voice them.

Eric glanced over his shoulder, irritation in every inch of his body, then froze when he caught sight of the large redhead. "I'm not even touching her. What the fuck is your problem?"

Priest cocked his head to the side in a movement that was more animal than human. He studied my friend with a long, unblinking stare and said nothing, letting his silence emphasise his original request.

I didn't interfere.

I'd seen alpha men operate enough to know they needed space to piss on the things they felt were theirs. It made them easier to deal with once it was done.

Besides, I was too busy mooning over the fact that Priest was staking that claim on little old *me*.

Eric looked back at me, choosing—unwisely—to ignore the threat at the door. "Listen, Bea, I just wanted you to know I've got your back. You can come stay with me, if you want. I've got a gun and licence, you wouldn't

have to worry with me.”

“You think she has to worry with me?” Priest asked in a monotone that hardly made it a question.

Eric, silly, sweet Eric, ignored him again. Instead, he placed his hand on my knee again for a little shake and beseeched me with his wide, dark eyes. “Don’t do anything rash just because you feel unsafe.”

“You seem like a stupid motherfucker,” Priest continued, deadpan. “So I’ll tell you one more time to get it into your wee fuckin’ brain. Back. The. *Fuck. Up.*”

“Listen, asshole,” Eric started to say, rising to his feet so he could turn around.

He didn’t get the chance.

Priest was there so suddenly, I couldn’t compute how it happened. He was just *there*, pressed to Eric’s back, his arm around his neck in a chokehold, his booted heel kicking out Eric’s long legs so he folded helplessly into the tight embrace.

“Seems your friend has a death wish, Little Shadow,” Priest said calmly as Eric fought the hold, hands tearing at Priest’s arm until it bled. “Should I play fairy fuckin’ godfather and grant it?”

“Priest,” I said, trying to bite back the lust warming my tone. “He’s my friend.”

His red brow hiked into his forehead. “He wants to fuck you.”

Eric gurgled in protest. Priest tightened his hold.

“Maybe,” I consented. “But if you killed everyone who wanted to sleep with me, you’d be so busy killing people I’d never see you.”

He blinked at me, but I caught the way his firm mouth twitched with humour. “I work quick,” he informed me.

“I don’t doubt it,” I agreed, having so much fun, too much, when my friend was clearly in distress. “Still, why don’t you put him down? I don’t have many friends and I’d like to keep the ones I do have.”

Priest considered it for a long moment while Eric turned a startling shade of red. Finally, he ducked his head slightly to whisper terrifyingly in Eric's ear. "I don't give warnings. I'm the man they send in once the threat's been laid out. I'm the man who finishes the job. Count your lucky fuckin' stars that today, for her, I'm exercisin' restraint."

Eric gasped as he fell to the floor, catching himself badly on one hand so he yelped with pain. I wanted to go to him, but the way Priest continued to loom over him, eyes dark and fixed on his prey, I decided it was best not to get between a predator and his meal.

I squirmed in my seat, thighs rubbing together to ease the ache between them.

I wanted him.

Oh, but I wanted him more fiercely than I'd ever craved anything else. In fact, I decided, watching as Priest crossed his arms and bared his teeth at Eric, I didn't think I properly understood the meaning of the word *crave* until I met Priest.

"Done playing?" I teased him, unable to curb my sunny smile.

Priest's eyes flicked up to mine and the hatred in his eyes eased into something just as dark, but totally different. It was the kind of darkness you wanted to fall into.

"No." But his posture adjusted slightly, shoulders pulling back, weight settling in his heels so I knew the imminent threat had passed. "Only 'cause you got a show to do and I got Lion callin' me back in five."

"So gracious," I said, deadpan, even though my lips twitched. "Can I get to work then?"

Priest inclined his head in agreement, but instead of leaving, he crouched down to stare at Eric who was massaging his neck and staring at his attacker with unveiled hatred. Priest studied him like a scientist with a bug under the microscope, no doubt detailing all his obvious failings. Finally, he grinned that horror fun-house clown grin and lashed out to grab Eric by the neck

again. Before he could react, Priest flicked his knife open with a sharp jerk of his wrist and pressed the tip to the exposed skin between Eric's clavicles above his tee.

Another quick flick and he was carving an inch-long gash into the skin there.

"Strike one," Priest intoned in that flat operator's voice. "The only one you'll ever get."

Eric tried to struggle away, but Priest dropped his hold, causing my friend to fall awkwardly onto his side again. Then Priest wiped the bloodied blade on Eric's head and turned on his heel to leave without a backward look.

"Wow," I whispered, reeling.

"No fucking kidding. That guy is a fucking *psycho*," Eric exclaimed as he stood, fingers pressed to the lightly bleeding wound at his throat.

A giddy little giggle boiled in my throat, bubbling up from a dark, heated place in my gut that Priest never failed to stoke into flames. I felt drugged by Priest's display of villainy, seduced completely by his demonstration of ruthless dominance.

I was *his, his, his*.

He might not have said it with words. He might never.

But that was fine with me.

Sometimes, actions were just so much louder.

And his said I belonged to him.

The Fallen's angel of death had claimed me and suddenly I had gone from property of no one, to property of Priest.

It was hard to curb the force of my smile pulling at my cheeks as I watched Eric put himself to rights and glare at me as if I was responsible.

I guess I was.

I shrugged and flipped my hair over my shoulder, wheeling my chair back so I could face the microphone and get settled for the podcast. "I told you I don't need your protection."

“You’re kidding me?” Eric’s mouth dropped open. “You need protection from that...that *freak*.”

“Hey,” I snapped. “Call him names one more time, and I swear to Heavenly Father, I will strike you down where you stand.”

Eric blinked at me then tipped his head back and roared with laughter. “Fuck,” he finally said as he wiped tears from his eyes. “Only you could make me laugh after something like that.”

“I wasn’t joking,” I pouted slightly, annoyed that I was constantly underestimated.

Women who wore pink were just as capable of defending themselves as women in leather and denim. If anything, I felt it gave me an edge. Let them underestimate me, I’d be only too happy to prove them wrong with a pretty smile and my deadly blade.

Unfortunately, stupid boys growing up fed stereotypical gender roles and misogyny with a silver spoon didn’t understand that.

I tipped my chin in the air like Loulou would do and ignored him.

Eric sighed. “Oh c’mon, Bea. Don’t be so sensitive. I’m the one who just got attacked by your feral guard dog.”

“If you think that was bad, how were you planning to protect me from a serial killer?” I countered as I put on my headphones. “Stop being sore. He warned you, after all, and you really shouldn’t touch me like that without permission anyway. It’s the 21st century, consent is everything. Now, are you ready for the show?”

“Don’t tell me you’re...what? Into this guy?” Eric ventured quietly, almost like he couldn’t believe what he was saying. “Bea, sweetheart, there’s a difference between being clinically interested in the psychology of serial killers and psychopaths and being fixated on them, romanticizing them. You know that, right?”

“You don’t know the first thing about Priest,” I refuted, checking my episode notes.

He was quiet for a long time. “Clearly, I don’t know much about you either. I thought you were a good little Christian girl, but you’re much more than that, aren’t you?”

“Women are complicated creatures,” I said in answer. “We’ve been friends for a few years, Eric, but that doesn’t make you an expert.”

“I could be,” he said quietly, voice strained by the weight of his hope. “If you let me. Maybe I’m not as good a guy as you think I am. Does that make me more intriguing?”

I could feel his stare on me, but I refused to engage in some childish stand-off. I’d done nothing wrong and, in my mind at least, neither had Priest.

It led me to wonder with mild apprehension, if there was a line Priest could ever cross that would be too much for me to handle. I thought about the hot blood on my ankles as he slit Brett’s throat for endangering me and I knew with cold certainty that there was not.



“OKAY, WE’RE GOING TO END TODAY’S EPISODE WITH OUR MONTHLY Q&A,” I

said into the microphone, my voice skipping over the words, bouncy and light. “If you’re new here, listeners submit their questions by email and my producer, Eric, reads them out for us to discuss. You ready, Eric?”

It said a lot about my friend that he remained professional throughout the episode about Richard Ramirez even though I felt his thoughtful stare on me more often than not. It probably helped that Priest remained outside the doors, probably whittling something in the hall to occupy himself.

“Okay, first question for Little Miss Murder,” Eric geared up. “Which serial killer would you be most afraid to encounter?”

I smiled because the theme of this question reoccurred every month. “Well, I think I’ve answered similar questions before, but I have to say again—because it bears repeating—Ted Bundy.” I twirled a lock of my hair as I thought about the world’s most famous serial killer. “He was prolific and even in the end, incredibly hard to pin down. He once said he would choose his victims just by watching them walk home from university. He was as charming and handsome as he was utterly ruthless and lacking in remorse. All those staple characteristics of a psychopath are clear in him, but what makes him the most terrifying in my eyes is that he was so able to adapt to normal social culture. He had a girlfriend, helped raise a child, had friends who respected him.”

I paused, gazing off as I thought about the difference between someone like him and someone like Priest.

There was an honesty to Priest. To look at him was to know you were looking at a man closer to the dead than the living. Every inch of him screamed *other*—monster, villain, abnormal man. There was no remorse in those cold green eyes, no animation in the full, firm mouth and sharp-edged jaw. He was vacant and deadly as a living weapon.

But killers like Bundy were wolves in sheep’s clothing. They hid in plain sight, they enjoyed playing games and proving they were cleverer than anyone else.

Like the serial killer who seemed to be playing games with me.

“Bundy scares me because he proves that monsters don’t just live in the dark,” I finished softly, my words chased by spooky music Eric played over the speakers.

“Um, Bea?” Eric said after a brief pause where he stared at the list of questions submitted by our listeners. “There’s something here.”

I frowned, but the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, this question is weird,” he said slowly.

“Read it to me.”

“Do you ever look under your bed before you sleep in it?” Eric read reluctantly. “Do you ever look under your desk before you sit down in your pink velvet chair and speak about murder like a perverted little princess?”

A thousand needles tattooed fear into my skin simultaneously.

Eric looked up from his screen into my eyes, mirroring my horrified expression.

I didn’t breathe, the air congealed in my lungs.

I didn’t blink, my eyes dried by the whirlwind of anxiety that seemed to sweep me up in its gale.

I only moved, slowly as if against a gravitational pull.

My Converse-clad feet pushed against the thin carpet, dragging my chair away from the counter that was my desk, and then I bent.

Down.

Down.

Down.

Head peering into the shadows beneath the table.

And there it was.

The twelfth piece of Brenda Walsh presented like a gift on the twelfth day of Christmas.

Her severed head in a sealed bag strung up to a cable.

A scream ripped from my lungs like torn Velcro, the sound thrown across the room violently so that it crashed into the walls.

A second later, the door to the studio hurtled open and rebounded so hard against the wall, it swung back. Priest stopped its progress with the side of his raised gun, shattering the glass as he moved into the room on long strides.

I was still screaming, doubled over in my chair, hair half-obscuring my gaze as I watched Priest come for me.

Eric tried to move into my closed portion of the room at the same time as my psycho, but Priest shoved him aside casually yet so powerfully, Eric went reeling back into his chair then toppled onto the ground.

Then Priest was there, hauling me up from my chair into his arms, perching me on one hip as he crouched to view the horror beneath my desk.

I clung to him like vines, so tight I probably made it hard for him to breathe.

But I didn't care, and he didn't complain.

If I could have, I would have crawled beneath his very skin and lived there.

He was the only place I felt safe. I wanted to make his body my address and his soul my home.

Priest growled so loudly it was almost a roar, rumbling through him into me. I watched as he lowered his gun back, tucked it into his waistband, and flipped open his ancient phone.

“Lion, they sent another motherfuckin’ piece’a that bitch to the studio,” Priest said so coldly, I shivered. “Get a unit down here right fuckin’ now, ’fore I kill whoever gave that motherfucker access to this studio.”

His head snapped to the side, pinning Eric in place where he had been making his way toward us. He blanched so white, I worried he was having a heart attack.

Priest closed the phone with his chin, then slid it into his back pocket while also lowering me to the floor, pushing me behind him as he started

toward Eric.

“Priest, *no*,” I protested just before he slammed Eric into the wall with an arm banded across his chest and a knife pointed at his throat.

“Who the fuck has access to this place?” he demanded.

“Just Bea, me, Mrs. Appleton because she owns the building, and maybe...” He gasped as Priest pressed the knife tighter to his Adam’s apple. “Maybe Catherine! She runs Honey Bear Café.”

“You let someone in here you shouldn’ta?” Priest asked as he ran the blade up his neck, so close he collected the ends of Eric’s stubble on the steel. “Or maybe it’s you. Fixated on pretty Bea, not a chance in the world of gettin’ in there with her so you resort to perverted ass shit like this to get her attention? Huh?” Another flick of the knife opened a thin slice along Eric’s jaw from below his ear to his chin. Priest shifted to run his thumb firmly over the wound just to hear Eric’s pained curse. “Which is it and I might kill you quickly. Don’t believe much in mercy, but we could make a trade.”

“Fuck!” Eric cursed.

“Priest.” My voice was heavy, so heavy it stayed his questing, blade-wielding hand. “Stop this. Eric did *not* have anything to do with this. He’s my friend. A good man and a good Christian. Please, put him down.”

“You think just ’cause he prays to God, he’s a good man?” Priest questioned icily. “Religion teaches you to sin and worry ’bout the consequences later. Teaches you to ask for a forgiveness that will always be givin’ by the grace of His goodness no matter the crime. Repent, repent. Sin, sin.”

Priest snapped his teeth so close to Eric’s face, it looked like he might chomp off a piece of him. Eric trembled so hard, his shoulders and head knocked loudly against the wall.

Downstairs, there was a loud commotion, and I figured they’d heard my scream, called the police, and they were on their way up. That or, hopefully, Lion was coming.

“You’re right,” Priest concluded on a low, menacing purr. “Asshole doesn’t have the balls for somethin’ like this. But he coulda helped whoever did this. And I’m gonna find out.”

“Priest.” I tried again, stepping forward to place a hand on his back.

He stared at me over his shoulder, eyes a swirling mass of green-tinged violence. He was gone to the darkness inside him, so ready to kill Eric, it was almost a foregone conclusion. I shivered lightly as I moved my hand over the leather of his cut, feeling the quilted, iron-hard muscles tensed in his back.

“Priest,” I whispered softly as boots thundered up the stairs down the hall. “Violence isn’t justice unless you can prove it’s founded.”

He cocked his head sharply to the side, that gesture that made him seem so inhuman. “What do I care about justice? He scared you, touched you. Even if he didn’t do this, which is a fuckin’ long shot, I still want him to suffer.”

“I don’t,” I asserted, stroking up his back into the ends of his hair so I could give it a tug, hoping to ground him with my affection. “Let him go, please. I just want to go home. With *you*.”

Priest hesitated, his entire big body thrumming with indecision as he battled his impulses. Eric barely breathed, eyes wide and gone to black with fear.

Finally, after an indefinite moment, Priest turned back to Eric, studied his face, and then reared back to headbutt him in the face.

I gasped as he stepped away, Eric collapsing against the wall, holding his broken nose as blood gushed down his front. He was swearing, the words distorted by the blood in his mouth.

I looked up at Priest who was watching me for a reaction, his breathing calm and even, his face in repose, but his eyes gleaming like the edge of a blade in firelight.

Being with Priest was like adopting a wild animal. I could try to domesticate him, train him, even love him, but at the end of the day, he was

still a wild animal with vicious teeth and claws. It was in his nature to use them.

And it was in mine, I found, to let him.

I held out my hand for him in answer to his unspoken question. He stared at it, then brushed it aside as he lifted his own to wrap around my throat and bring me close. His forehead pressed to mine, his breath soft and clove scented against my face.

I relaxed.

Against all odds, with a severed head secured under my desk by a crazy person and my friend bleeding beside me, I relaxed against Priest and let myself feel soothed by the presence of someone who was a monster to everyone, but a man for me.

When Lion, Bat, Dane, Boner, and Wrath appeared in the doorway, we didn't move.

They gaped for a moment, struck dumb by the tenderness of Priest against me.

I saw Boner look from us to Eric. "At least there's blood," he said in a stage whisper to Bat. "Otherwise, I'd think somethin' possessed the bastard."

"I'm thinkin' somethin' has," Bat murmured back, his black eyes thoughtful under furrowed brows.

"Enough with the PDA," Wrath grunted as he finally shoved farther into the room. "The fuckin' cavalry's here. Let's get to work."

Priest pulled away, pushing me behind him as he seemed wont to do. "Take that one." He jerked his head at Eric. "I'm thinkin' he needs a little talkin'-to. Someone get to Mrs. Appleton and Catherine Prescott. We're gettin' answers about this fuck fest *today*."

CHAPTER TWELVE

PRIEST

NOVEMBER WAS ALWAYS A BITCH. HOWLING WINDS RACED OVER THE OCEAN, collecting frigid water and speed before they dumped it all on the coastline, dousing us in fog, rain, and sometimes, pelting hail.

It was one of those nights. The sky was close-stitched with quilted iron-grey clouds, the air filled with needlepoint drops of icy rain. It was too cold, too wet for a man to spend the night outside essentially sleeping on the beach.

But I wasn't just a man.

I sat under a huge umbrella I'd thrust into the thick carpet of wet sand, my back braced against a soggy log, the collar of my cut flipped up against my throat and my chin tucked into the throat of my hoodie. I was cold but mostly dry.

And I liked the sound of the rain pounding with fury against the thin nylon umbrella, and the glass-like shatter of the waves hurling themselves at the rocky shore. It was all violence and temper, all passion. It made me feel human to sit there in the middle of it all and let nature batter me into feeling something.

Before, a night like this would have made me remember how it felt to live inside my own body, which always led to more. It was the key in the lock of the door securing my humanity in its vault inside my chest. Feeling of any sort only led to more feeling. The cold of my hands linked to the cold of the blood in my veins, the wrinkling of my skin to the atrophied set of my heart. I remembered why I was like this, not just broken in the way I'd been bred and born, but in the way I'd grown.

I wore the names of the dead on each knuckle like rings I would never remove. They were the heirlooms of the worthy dead. Some I had killed myself and some at other hands. They said serial killers often had keepsakes, mementos of their kills.

A perversion, they called it.

I called it *memory*.

It was my refusal to forget those whose death touched me in ways both good and evil.

It was my way of adding worthy scars to the others that riddled my skin like nightmares of the flesh.

There was my mother and my father, so poor that when they died there was no money for a proper burial. I dug out the earth myself, dragged their bodies through dirt turned to mud with rain, happy that the wet made their

transport slicker, and then tossed them into their ditches. I jumped down after them, landing in ankle deep mud that sucked at my boots like the hands of demons trying to persuade me after my parents. I jumped in so I might arrange them the way I'd seen at funerals before, their hands across their chests, lids forced closed. It seemed like the logical thing to do.

I said a few words in prayer that felt wrong in my mouth, but by the time I trekked home, thighs quivering from the fatigue of fighting the mud with each step, I'd forgotten tidily about their death and moved forward with my life.

It didn't do to dwell on the dead.

I don't know where I learned this or if it was a refrain born into my brain like salt in the sea.

It was good however I came to claim the philosophy because my two sisters, Danae and Keelan, five and three years old respectively, died two days after my parents.

I buried them too.

They died because my parents were sinners.

This I was told by Father O'Neal, the local priest in our parish and the man who ultimately took me into the church for sanctuary when I was orphaned.

I wore his name on my middle finger bracketed by the names of my dead kin on either side, penned in Gaelic, the ink bleeding now, so old and poorly done that my brother, Nova, who ran The Fallen's tattoo parlour, had begged to redo it for me.

I would not let him.

The tattoos I wore burned into my skin were not art.

They were not even scars.

They were living pain, hurts I chose to see every day because I lived them every day.

This was my self-inflicted torture.

I was equal opportunity about pain. I liked to give it only slightly more than I liked to receive it.

It reminded me, after all the horrors of my life, that I was alive, if only to feel it.

All I ever knew was angst so it became my only joy.

I felt it then, sitting on that night dark beach with cold in my bones and pain the only feeling in my chest. Usually, it didn't hurt to open a vein like this, alone in the shadows. To be isolated was to be safe. In control of my own environment, separated from the scrutiny and emotional outflow of others. It was in company that I suffered.

So, why did I feel acid in my gums, coursing through my muscles as I sat in the wind and rain and paid my own kind of penance.

Why did I feel so alone in a way I never had before?

Alone in a way that felt unholy and wrong.

Without thinking, I looked up through the sleet at the window to the second-story guest bedroom in Z's house.

The room was dark, the night darker between us, but I had the eyes of a predator, and I saw what stood in the window between the curtains.

Bea.

Watching me.

Always.

Much the way I watched her.

It should have shocked me, the little ways we mirrored each other, the slight similarities between two such vastly different personalities.

Yet it didn't.

It underscored why I didn't believe in religion. In the archaic notion of good versus evil, heaven versus hell. Because I was death and the devil, ruler of life's underworld, and Bea? Not even an angel fallen from God's own palace could be so bright and exquisite as her.

How was it possible that we could even co-exist on the same planet, let

alone fall into something that was more than that?

That was more than anything.

Before her, I had lived only to feel the pain I felt was my atonement and then, after Zeus, to serve the only family I'd ever really known.

Now, I lived for them still.

But if I had a metaphorical heart in my chest, it only beat for her.

Mo cuishle. My heartbeat.

I watched her through the rain, unable to see her expression but knowing somehow that she was calling for me, a siren luring me deeper into our shared fantasy.

I blinked hard and looked away.

She was *mine, mine, mine* in a way that echoed with every beat of my heart, but she could be owned wholly by me without sex, without greater intimacy.

I could protect her until my dying breath, stalk her through her life the way she liked to shadow me when she could. I could just *exist* as she existed, and the pleasure of that, of not being utterly alone, would be enough for me.

So much more than enough.

To have more was to sin in a way even I as a seasoned sinner was hesitant to do.

Because I would ruin her.

I would eviscerate her morals to ash until she giggled when I brought her a dead man's head just because he had wronged her. I would burn away her inhibitions until she begged me to desecrate all the holy places of her body with my tongue, my cock, and the cold edge of my steel.

I would, I knew, steal all her goodness, gluttonous as I was for her, greedy and depraved as I'd been born and made. I would devour her entire soul until she was just a husk.

Alive, but dead.

Like me.

And there was no fate worse than death than that for my sunny Shadow.

So I evaded my nature, ducked around the pitfalls of temptation, and exacted all of my iron will every single day I protected her to *not* give in to the monster inside me that yearned for just one taste of her flesh.

One taste would never be enough.

My cock hardened in my jeans at just the thought.

Even seeing that motherfucker Eric touching her knee like he had the right to know the texture of her bare skin had nearly sent me into a cold rage I couldn't recover from. I wanted to slit his throat for wanting her and, while he bled out, fuck Bea on the desk beside his body so she could watch him die and know that I'd always keep her safe from others even though the true threat to her safety was between her legs.

It'd made me feel a fuckuva lot better when I got my hands on the fucker later on at the clubhouse. When I strung him up from the ceiling and worked him over like a human punching bag. Normally, I liked my knives, but sometimes fists, intimate and painful pounding in a man's flesh, suited me just fine.

Unfortunately, he knew nothing. Or not nothing. He seemed to know too much about Bea. Enough to make me wonder if I wasn't the only one in her life with an obsession. Me and the serial killer. Eric didn't suit the profile for the murderer, but I didn't believe in psychology so much as I believed in my own intuition. And something told me that little creep was up to no good.

I warned him to keep the fuck back from Bea, but refrained from killing him then and there or threatening to do so if he didn't get the fuck out of her life. Bea liked the asshole for some reason, and while normally I gave zero fucks about what people thought, the idea of making that pretty face frown skittered disappointment down the piano keys of my spine.

When I looked back at the window minutes later, a routine check, Bea was still there.

And the light was on.

I blinked, hoping the image was a mirage, a hallucination cast by the devil to tempt me inexorably into the only sin I'd ever feared.

But she was still there in the window.

Even backlit, it was obvious what she was doing.

Undressing.

My mouth went dry as I watched her, unable to pry my eyes away for anything.

She moved slowly, sure but hesitant as if she had never taken off her clothes for someone before.

My cock turned to stone instantly at the thought. She was known as a good girl and just twenty years old, but the thought of her virginity had never truly crossed my mind.

I hadn't let it.

Now, it seared through my synapses, leaving lurid images branded on my consciousness. The sight of her face as I gave her the only pleasure she'd ever known. My dirty, bloodstained, violence-roughened hands on all that pure flesh, mapping it so I could claim every inch of it as my own. Pushing inside that tight, unbroken heat, then pulling out to see her blood staining my dick.

Fuck, but my skin burned as if I was being consumed in fire, already in the bowels of hell where I belonged for wanting—*needing*—to fuck and possess and *ruin* Bea Lafayette.

Still, I watched, shoving the fantasies out of my head so I could bask in the moment.

Good little Bea undressing for big bad me.

First, she pushed the robe off one shoulder, then the other. She shivered delicately in the draft from the window, and I knew her nipples would be hard little points just begging for my teeth.

Her hair shifted over her shoulder, pale gold curtains of silk parting over her breasts as she looked down her body at the nightgown and then, achingly

slow, gathered the hem to leverage the cloth up over her head.

My cock kicked with a pulse of its own, knocking brutally against the entrapment of my jeans, needing to bury itself in that sweet, tight little body.

Christ, she was fucking gorgeous.

All long, slim limbs, a nipped-in waist flaring delicately into rounded hips framing a smooth, flat belly. I knew without knowing that she would have silken peach fuzz beneath that little whorl of a belly button. That the skin on her inner thighs would be so pale I could trace the bluish veins there with my blade and feel them throb under the very tip of my tongue.

I was standing, the umbrella dislodged as I surged up from under it.

The wind slapped me in the face, pelting me with knife points of iced rain.

I didn't move.

I watched so hard my eyes burned.

Bea brushed her hair away from her chest, revealing the soft, small slopes of her breasts and those hard nipples I ached to feel under my teeth.

A growl was in my throat, rumbling through me.

That monster, that beast, that thing that was *not* human inside me roared and roared.

Take her, take her, take her.

Ruin, ruin, ruin.

All I could picture was her virgin blood on my skin, my cock messy with her juices. All I could think of was how much dirtier I could make her. I wanted to paint her sweet face in my cum, bite into her pale skin until it bruised like a peach, and slick my sweat-oiled body over hers until she reeked of me, of us.

I gnashed my teeth together, the pain grounding me.

Then she moved again, so sweetly, so hesitant, so goddamn virginal. One small hand moved up from her belly, between her breasts then back down all the way beyond my sight, beneath the window frame to rest only her God—

the lucky fucking bastard—knew where.

I pulled out the switchblade in my pocket and dug the end into the center of my palm, hoping it would calm me, call me back to rationality.

Fuck, but the pain only reminded me that hurt could be good, that there was pleasure in it and that my sweet little Bea didn't know that yet, but I could show her.

I could teach her.

No, not teach, I wasn't patient enough for that.

I would show her by example, take her there so she could see for herself just how good I could make her feel when I did bad things to her pretty flesh.

Courageous now, knowing she had me like a fish tugging at the line, she reeled me in. One step closer to the glass, her breasts pressed flush to the cold pane, bringing their round shape and darker tips into clearer definition.

I was moving.

My boots struck hard against the wet sand, kicking it up behind me as I stalked across the grains onto the rocks, then onto the beaten path up to Z's house. It was alarmed and locked, obviously, but I didn't care.

Bea would have to have been in Fort fucking Knox to keep me from breaking in and taking her.

I paced to the side of the house, studied which route I would take, then swung up onto the porch railing, grabbed the edge of the eaves in both hands and pulled myself onto the steep roof. The tiles were slick under my heavy boots, but I focused on the window I knew lay around the side of the house, the window where Bea stood naked for me, and I made quick work of the walk.

The hard part was falling off the side of the porch roof at the right angle to catch the windowpane in a good grip.

I didn't think about it, not discernably.

I just fell.

It was calculated, but Bea didn't know that. The yip of her anxious

squeak reached me through the glass just as I caught the jutting edge of the pane in one hand and adjusted to pull myself up with two. I held myself on my palms, arms popping with strain as I stared into the glass at Bea's startled face.

"Boo," I said, mouthing it dramatically in case she couldn't hear me over the clatter of wind.

Her frozen, anxious expression cracked down the middle and gave way to that smile that lit me up from the inside out.

"Open it," I told her. I was stronger than most, but the buffeting wind and the awkward angle of the ledge made it difficult to maintain my position.

Bea's pink mouth made a little 'o' as she scrambled to unlock and raise the window.

I swung into the room, still semi-hard until I smelled the sweet, fruity scent of Bea in the room, and then I was once again stone.

Before she could get a word out, I was stalking toward her.

She stared at me, eyes wide and dark with lust and fear. Instinctively, feeling stalked and vulnerable, she moved backwards across the room.

I smiled wolfishly at her, aware that I was dripping wet, clothed head to toe in black, and prowling toward her like a predator. I didn't stop, couldn't stop. Wouldn't. Not even if Zeus barged in with his brass knuckles and shotgun.

I'd gladly take buckshot in the ass if it meant I could just touch Bea for one fucking glorious second.

Finally, Bea ran out of room, her back hitting the wall beside the door to the hall with a soft *thunk*. A second later, I was on her, plastered to her naked body from thighs to chest. I collared her throat with my hand to feel her pulse against my thumb, to feel the fragility of her life in my hands. Her pulse beat a tattoo into my skin, a pattern I would wear inside my chest the way some people wore a religious cross.

This, this, this was why my own heart beat.

“You’re wet,” she panted softly, looking up at me with those big, silvered blue eyes fringed in thick gold lashes.

“You are too,” I noted, no inflection just fact. “I’ve made you wet for me, Little Shadow. You love to mimic everything I do, is this no different?”

She gasped as my other hand scraped along her right side, short nails pebbling the flesh in their wake, until I reached her hip. I watched her eyes dilate as I paused, then jerked them harder, searing pain into her skin, across the seam where her leg met her groin straight to the top of her pussy, soft with downy curls.

My fingers played there as I spoke against her parted lips. “Should I check to see if I’m right?”

She trembled against me, so warm and vivid against my cold, dark body. I had her trapped and ferocious animal triumph urged me to fuck her as the spoils.

I didn’t. I wouldn’t.

I was above base impulses, smarter than my body’s urges.

Almost.

My middle finger dipped down just slightly over the sweet swollen mound of her clit into the tight slit beneath it and then pulled back. It came away wet with her juice.

I grinned, the expression a knife’s slash across my mouth as I pulled my hand away to bring the evidence between us.

“Wet for me,” I said as my cock throbbed and throbbed, and still I didn’t grind it against her.

“I’m, um,” Bea gasped, flustered and flushed pink with embarrassment. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” I clipped, scowling. “I want you wet. I want you dripping down your thighs for me. This?” I held up the honey-dipped finger to my mouth and slowly ran my tongue up my skin, sucking over her juices with a humming groan of approval. “Fucking divine.”

She squirmed, thighs trying to rub together. I slotted my leg between them so she was forced up against my jean-clad thigh, damp cunt to the rough fabric. I ground against her until she whimpered then I took her panting mouth, devouring it the way I wanted to devour her sweet pussy.

“I’m gonna take you,” I growled against her mouth. “Last chance to stop this.”

“No,” Bea groaned against me, moving by her own volition against my leg, gyrating her little hips in a desperate bid for more leverage. “I want this. You. Please, I’ve wanted you since I knew what want was.”

Fuck, but the power of those words scored through me. The worship in them, the reverence. All those holy words I’d banished from my vocabulary came surging back with the taste of Bea’s cunt like holy water on my tongue.

“We do this, you’re mine,” I swore to her in a rough voice torn from my gut. The words pained me as they erupted, but I wanted the pain because with Bea, I knew it would only bring pleasure.

“Yours,” she swore, head tipped back so I could bite my way down her neck. “I already was.”

“No,” I disagreed as my mouth finally found a peaked nipple and my teeth gave in to the ache to bite down on it. She moaned loudly, head hitting the wall with a dull thud as she arched into my mouth. “If I make you mine, you stay mine until death comes for us. You’re mine in the night and the shadows where I’m fucking king. You’re mine in the light with your family and friends, standing beside Death as his queen. If I’m a killer, *you’re* a killer. Where I end, you fucking begin.”

“Yin and yang,” she rasped as I switched to the other breast, biting and sucking hard around the pale swell until it bloomed pink as an unfurled rose. “Persephone and Hades,” she said, voice dropping into low, velvet intimacy as she clutched my hair so I looked up at her through her breasts. “Bea and Priest.”

“I’ll ruin you,” I promised baldly, excitement in my balls, in my chest, a

percussion beat like ceremonial drums.

“So ruin me,” she agreed. “Pull my hair, bite my neck, leave me bruised and ruined by your love until every inch of my body is singing of you.”

I pulled back to arch an eyebrow at her, impressed by her dirty audacity. Her blush spilled like wine from her cheeks to her chest, but she maintained eye contact despite her embarrassment.

“Okay,” I drawled. “My shadow wants to be ruined, I’ll ruin you.”

She sucked in a little breath when I pulled my switchblade out and flicked it open, but she held still, breath stuck in her lungs, as I dragged it from her neck down her breastbone and quivering belly to the apex of her thighs. I dropped to my knees, my nose level with her pussy so I could lean forward and drag it through the top of her curls.

“Smell like heaven,” I grunted as I dragged that sweet musk into my lungs and let it make me light-headed with raging lust. I dragged the blade lightly down the edge of her bush to that delicate skin on the inside of her thigh and groin. “One day, gonna shave you here so you’re stripped and so sensitive. Every breath, every pass of my steel and my cock will make you shudder and beg for more.”

She shuddered then, almost violently as I pressed the knife a little harder into the soft swell of her inner thigh, hard enough to draw a thin, red line. I followed it with my tongue to soothe the ache, then did the same on the other side.

She tasted like a peach, the soft fuzz, the sweet sticky juice running out to leak down her thighs right onto my waiting tongue. The explosion of flavour made me growl.

“You like the pain, don’t you?” I asked as I carved a small line into the skin above her curls, blood beading lightly like jewels over the wound. She panted so loudly it echoed over the driving rain hitting the side of the house, the patter of it falling through the still open window onto the wood floors. “You like the idea of being a bad girl for me.”

“Oh God,” she stuttered as I finished carving my name into her skin. She was barely bleeding, the wound wasn’t deep, but I soothed it with my tongue, loving the tang of her blood, needing more of it in my mouth.

Wanting it on my cock as I took her for the first time.

“You got the devil between your thighs, Bea,” I informed her as I pinned her groin to the wall with my splayed hand, the knife pressed between us, and opened her silken folds with the other. “You worship anyone, it’s gonna be me.”

I dipped my head to run my tongue up the center of her cunt and groaned into her sweet, honeyed flesh. I ate her like a glutton, sucking hard at her clit again and again until it swelled and throbbed angrily beneath my tongue, lapping up the juice that flowed peach-sweet and sticky from her center.

Her hands went to my hair, stroking it back from my face, curling over my ears. It distracted me, wounded me in a way I wasn’t ready for and didn’t like at all. I ripped my mouth from her succulent cunt and glared up at her.

“No touching,” I ordered.

It was too much, nails on a chalkboard.

“What?” she panted, her lower lip swollen and dark as a plum, bruised by the way she bit it to keep quiet.

“No. Touching.”

She blinked. “Priest.”

“No,” I ordered again before diving back into her pussy, rabid for the taste and feel of her moving against my tongue.

Any man with a god-complex only had to put his mouth between a woman’s thighs to feel like a motherfucking king.

Then her hands, again, tucked into my hair, stroking my bearded cheek.

I reared back, the knife clattering to the floor as I spun her and thrust her hard against the wall. She shivered but let me do as I pleased. My cock wept salty tears in my jeans, begging for release. Instead, I undid the pink silk ribbon tied in its bow at her wrist and wrapped it thoroughly between her two

wrists after I crossed them. Once secured in an elaborately knotted bow, I considered flipping her back around, then caught sight of her arse.

Fuck. Me.

A true peach, round and perky, swelling from the twin dimples at her low back into perfect, bouncy relief. I groaned, adjusting my cock as I swiped a rough hand over the audacious fucking swell.

“You obey me,” I told her darkly, leaning in to nip her earlobe as I continued to massage her ass with both hands. “When you’re naked for me, your body is mine, and I’ll do with it what I want.”

“Yes,” she whimpered, so needy that she bucked back into my hands even though I was sure no one had ever touched her like this. “I want you to do whatever you want to me.”

“Dangerous,” I whispered before I bit into her neck to hold her still while I dipped my hand between the curves of her arse to slide a finger inside her tight pussy. “What if I wanted to keep you here pinned to the wall, hands bound while I wedged my thick cock into your pussy? What if I wanted to fuck you hard and fast even knowing you’ve never taken a cock before?”

We both moaned as she flooded with wet, leaking all over my hand. My good girl, dirty Little Shadow loved my filthy fucking mouth.

I’d teach her to love every filthy thing I could think of.

“Do it,” she begged prettily. “Please, I want it. I...I want you to be rough with me.”

I could feel the chains break, the beast rattling free and roaring with triumph.

And I was lost.

Lost to sense and reason.

Lost to anything but the feel of Bea’s nakedness against me as I unbuckled, unzipped, and slapped my freed cock against the crease in her arse, once, twice, so she could feel the thick, heavy weight of me.

“Gonna impale you on this dick,” I promised her as I drove two fingers

into her heat and watched her buck and writhe against them. “Can’t wait to see your blood on my cock.”

“Oh my God,” she breathed, pressing her cheek to the wall, spreading her legs farther apart. “I think I could orgasm just like this.”

“Just my voice in your ear and my teeth on your skin,” I coaxed as I pulled my fingers from her heat and wrapped them around my steely shaft. “Think about how hard you’ll come when I stretch you open on my cock.”

She continued to murmur to God as I slid the hot head of my dick through her slippery folds a few times before notching the head at her entrance.

I was done talking.

The sight of my dick notched against her tiny hole, knowing I was going to fill her light with my darkness, possess her like a demon from the inside out with my deviancy made my cock kick at the door to her cunt, precum adding to the mess there.

I lashed out to wrap the long tendrils of her silken hair around my fist, then held her arched like a bow, taut with tension, ready to spring forth into motion, into climax.

“Mine,” I growled as I thrust savagely forward, crushing the flimsy barrier blocking my entry as I imbedded myself balls deep in Bea’s snug pussy.

She made choked, gasping noises as she fought to keep quiet; a desperate, ball-tingling cry that made my mouth water for more.

I wanted her not only to bend under my hands but also to *break*.

Ruin, ruin, ruin.

I didn’t hold still. I didn’t give her time to adjust. I pulled her tighter by the hair with one hand and moved the other from her hip down to cover her damp curls, parting my knuckles around her clit, curling my fingers around the place where I speared her to add firm pressure to our connection.

For the first time in my life, nearly thirty years of living, I felt like I was exactly where I fucking belonged. Corrupting an angel into sin, chaining her

to me so she would never be able to go back from whence she came.

Ruin, ruin, ruin.

The mantra echoed with every beat of my pulse in my chest, in my dick, in my voice box. I wanted to roar with triumph, fuck her until she cried and screamed for me to stop even though she wanted more.

But Zeus was in the house. The taboo of fucking his much younger sister-in-law didn't even register. I didn't care if he heard us or if he saw us.

Let him.

She was *mine, mine, mine*, and I wanted everyone to be able to see that.

My bruises on her skin like stamps, my kisses on her mouth like lipstick the colour of a bruise. I wished my name carved into the skin of her hip was a permanent scar, I wished I could brand her, tattoo her, mark her in a way it would never die, even if I did. I wanted her to live the rest of her life with the mar of me on her previously pure skin.

"I-I-I can't," Bea whispered hoarsely as I ruthlessly used her tight pussy and angled a finger in over her clit. "I feel like I'm going to shatter."

I abandoned my grip on her hair to ruck her up against me, palming her throat in my hand so I could tip her head sideways to land a searing kiss on her mouth. I ate her gasping moans of capitulation of her tongue and felt her pulse flutter madly under my thumb. "So shatter. I wanna feel your cum and your blood drench my cock. And Bea? I'll reward you by comin' deep inside your snug cunt."

"Holy shit," she hissed as her pussy clamped down on my next thrust, and her whole body set to shaking. I had never felt more like a god of the underworld as I felt her quake open for me, and then, finally, in a series of breathy exclamations of my own name tangled with her God's, she came all over me.

The splash of her cum on my cock felt like a baptism, like a holy fucking revelation. I seated myself in her as my spine tingled, balls tightening, and then I came, hot seed spurting at the entrance to her womb. I held her tight to

me, so tight our hearts seemed to beat as one while we climaxed simultaneously.

And I knew heaven.

For the first time in my life, I knew why people believed in some fallacy, and I wanted to believe in it too.

Because this? Bea in my arms, on my cock, shyly, sweetly nuzzling her head back into the crook of my neck and shoulder as she gave me her entire, exhausted weight?

This was pleasure more brilliant than any I had ever known.

It blinded me, forcing me to blink, blink away the hot, prickling sensation at the back of my eyes. I felt something like the hand of fate fisted my heart in its grip and refused to let go.

Before Bea, I had never been so aware of the organ in my chest romantics loved to hyperbolize about. The idea that the heart could break or clench, skip a beat in a way that meant more than just a dangerous palpitation was just blatantly nonsensical. Now, I was learning there was some truth to it, a kernel, as there usually was, at the heart of every fable.

With Bea, I'd never been more aware of that blood pumping organ and its performance as played under the siren song of her influence.

"I don't think I can walk," Bea mused, sleepiness diluting her cheeky remark.

I ignored her.

Because something was happening to me, something that threatened to overwhelm everything. Those beasts in their chains and cages at the back of my mind rattled horribly, threatening to break free.

I pushed away from Bea as if scalded.

She turned to face me, instinctively covering her breasts and swollen, leaking sex. Something in my expression made her flinch, her full mouth flattening.

But I could only stare blankly at her, swallowing quick and thick again

and again to force the demons back.

“Priest,” she said softly, inquiringly, needing me to assuage her vulnerability.

I focused on my breath, the harsh drag of it into my lungs and out through my mouth. There was a crack in the foundation of my life threatening to collapse everything I’d ever known.

A previously unknown portion of my brain reminded me that life grew in the cracks, the earth pushing up through those imperfections to fill them with green and flowers.

Still, panic fizzed and popped between my ears, obscuring my vision with black splotches.

“Priest,” Bea repeated, stronger this time. She moved toward me, a blurry shape in my bleary stare. I flinched when she reached for me, catching her hand too hard in my grip. She didn’t shy away from the viciousness in my gaze when our eyes met. Instead, she tipped her chin up, little thing that she was, so she could maintain contact. “Priest, it’s okay.”

My lips pulled back over my teeth, my thoughts gone to static so only instinct reigned. I glowered at her, a low rumble of warning in my throat. I squeezed her hand tighter until I felt every contour of the delicate bones beneath her skin.

I wanted *something*.

Something more than *ruin, ruin, ruin*.

My cock, coated in her juices, in her blood, cooled in the frigid air pouring in from the open window, reminding me that I had just brutally taken her virginity from her. A normal man would have bundled her up and snuggled her or some shit.

I wasn’t that man.

Instead, I stood panicked and furious with someone, myself or some kind of higher power, for gifting me an obsession with a woman who deserved so much fucking better than me.

It was too late for that now.

I had the taste of her in the back of my mouth, the feel of her on my shaft, and that sweet, light voice in my head coaxing me to take her harder.

I'd be haunted by her forever.

And I was already haunted by so many demons, didn't I bloody well deserve to possess just one? To own just one glorious thing in my life all for myself?

Bea read the turmoil in my eyes and stepped closer, drawing her hand and mine along with it to her neck where she lay it flat against her throat. Only when my fingers twitched did she slide her hand out from under mine so I was collaring her again.

Her pulse thud, thudded against my palm. Her life in my hand.

I closed my eyes against the burn of that thought in my head, the way it seared into my grey matter and worked its way down my spine, vertebrae by vertebrae, before settling as a heavy weight in my gut.

"Better men could love you," I said, my voice guttural but strong. I opened my eyes and pinned her with the heaviness of my conviction. "But now, I'll kill any of them who try."

Bea made a soft noise in the back of her throat that somehow translated to sheer relief and joy. As if being possessed by me, obsessed over by a psychopath, was all she had ever wanted.

I stepped away before I could follow my impulse to fuck her into the bed, fuck her until she cried, fuck her until she was permanently changed by the shape of me in and against her body. I wasn't used to curbing my impulse, and it was harder than I would've thought.

"You won't stay the night," she whispered, not a question.

"No," I agreed, already moving toward the window knowing that the winter storm raging outside was safer for me than the sweet-scented interior of Bea's room. "But I'll be watching."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BEA

I WOKE UP ALONE AND ACHING. MY EYES FIXED BLEARILY ON THE WHORLS IN the wood beams across the ceiling as I ran my fingers lightly down my naked torso to the center of the ache. My pussy was tender, silk petals crushed under the force of Priest's savagery, opening torn by his thick, unyielding erection. I was still wet, leaking. My fingers played in the mess tenderly. It felt good, both the light stimulation of pleasure and the further provoking of pain.

I'd liked it.

No, “like” was too tame a word. Like “nice” or “okay”.

There was none of that moderation applied to what happened between Priest and me last night.

It had been base, savage, and animal, and completely out of my control. I’d submitted so easily to his demands as if he had a knife pressed to my throat in threat. Only, he didn’t have to threaten me. And the knife? It was pressed to my breasts and thighs, carving into my skin so lightly it barely left a scab. I shuddered as I recalled the way his hot tongue had lapped away the blood. It reminded me thrillingly of a predator at its kill, lapping up the residue before it consumed its prey whole.

Consumed.

That’s what he had done to me.

I was eaten up by his intense passion, wrapped in the flames of his burning need to take me however he could, to mark me and own every inch of me. He’d said none of those things in words, but I’d read them in the possessive grip of his hands and teeth on my skin. In the way he worshipped me to ruin me for any other man but him.

He’d succeeded. Wholly. Perhaps woefully.

Because then he’d left, gone into the night like some phantom dissolved in shadow.

No soft words, no kisses, no tender ministrations to my ravaged body.

Just something like a panic attack in his eyes, a hand at my throat, and one glimmering, shimmering phrase I held delicately between my hands as if it was some breakable glass orb.

Better men could love you, but now, I’ll kill any of them who try.

It wasn’t exactly a proclamation of love.

But it was close.

It was Priest.

And it was more than enough for me.

I grinned so wide my lips cut painfully into my cheeks, and then that

wasn't enough, so I started giggling. Then the giggles turned to full-blown, stomach-cramping laughter. I rolled onto my side in the bed as I laughed, clutching my gut as tears streamed down my face.

This was happiness, I thought. This was what all those ooey-gooey poems King wrote for Cressida were about. Because of *this* feeling that existed in my gut like a living breathing entity, Lila had continued to love Nova across years and traumas. This was what I saw whenever I looked at Loulou and Zeus in a room together—that indefinable look in their eye. The way Harleigh Rose and Lion's chemistry buzzed through any space they cohabited like an electrical storm confined to their orbit.

This. This. This.

And now, I had it.

Me.

Little Bea Lafayette. The afterthought, the “less than”, the second string. I had the attention of the most beautiful man I'd ever known.

No, more than that. Not just his attention, not just some silly crush or some transient bout of lust.

I had his obsession.

And unlike most, I knew just what an obsession was to a psychopath, to a man like Priest. He saw me when he closed his eyes, and he thought of me in the black spaces between other thoughts. He would go out of his way to stalk me, to watch me so he could know me and my life inside out. There was nothing I could do, I knew, that Priest would not be curious about.

I knew this because I was a student of psychology, but more, I knew this because I felt that way too.

It made me wonder if, beneath all the pink ribbons and white frills, I might just be a bit of a psychopath myself.

Two psychos in love, I thought and laughed louder.

“It's a good thing everyone was awake already,” Loulou drawled, drawing my attention to the doorway where she leaned with a hand on the

deep flare of her hip and her brows raised. “You’re shouting down the house.”

I snorted a little as I calmed down, dashing the tears from my face with my thumbs before I shot a massive grin at her. “Sorry.”

“You seem it,” she noted dryly. “Are you sorry for waking Z and me up with your midnight *rendez-vous* last night too?”

I blinked at her, shocked.

Honestly, I’d thought we’d been relatively quiet, especially over the calamity of the storm battering the house. I also would have thought, if they heard us, they would come to...I don’t know...investigate at the very least or shoot Priest in the face for touching me.

With a heavy sigh, Loulou moved into the room and closed the door, then made her way over to the bed where she sat down gingerly at my side. Disgust flittered across her beautiful face as she studied the covers, and I realized she was looking for evidence of sex in my sheets.

Quickly, I yanked the duvet up to my chin and glared at her.

“Bea,” she said on a beleaguered sigh, then paused to run her hand through her long blond hair, the same shade and thickness as mine. “Everything in me is hoping the man here last night was some mild-mannered college kid from one of your classes. Please tell me I’m right?”

I bit my lip, and it seemed to be answer enough for her.

She slumped slightly, and I watched her hand as it played with the edge of the charcoal grey duvet. “Yeah, well, I knew it was a long shot.” I watched as she sucked in a long breath to brace for our inevitable fight. “What the hell were you thinking, Bea? You gave yourself to Priest McKenna? He’s ten years older than you and about as outlaw as they come.”

I rolled my eyes so hard they hurt. “You have absolutely no right to chastise me. You aren’t my mum. And you really want to be a massive hypocrite? Your *husband* is nineteen years older than you, and you married him when you were seventeen years old and still a senior in high school!”

“This is completely different, and you know it,” she argued, leaning forward as if proximity to her argument alone would change my mind. “Zeus was a father, a loyal and loving man who just so happened to *go to jail* for killing a man to save me. He’s warm and loving, and he would do anything for me.”

“I’m not insulting Zeus,” I said, throwing up my hands in exasperation because my sister was always so damn quick to defend her husband. “He’s all of those things. But why can’t Priest be those things too?”

Loulou blinked at me. “He’s a killer, Bea. Not someone who’s murdered someone because they have to, but someone who chooses to end people’s lives because he *likes* it.”

“He kills people for the very club you love and champion,” I reminded her haughtily, hating her for one vicious, fleeting moment.

I’d hated Loulou before, so this wasn’t new.

We were sisters.

Whoever said sisters always got along was obviously not a sister. We fought hard, but in the end, we always loved harder.

I knew, in the end, maybe not today, but sometime in the future, Loulou would get where I was coming from.

“He would kill *anyway*. Zeus just gives him a reason.” Her eyes were so wide and sincere a blue they seemed child-like, reminding me of all those years she’d spent in the hospital, her eyes the only spot of colour in the drab white hospital room.

“*“And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.”*” I quoted from Revelation 6:8 in the Bible.

The verse had always resonated with me.

Even as a girl, I wondered why there was no sympathy for Death. He was

pledged to rule over a kingdom of restless souls who would never love his own.

How excruciatingly lonely was that?

“You’ve always worn rose-tinted glasses, even about morbid topics like this. You can’t make everything sunshine and roses. Some things aren’t meant to be romanticized, and Death is *not* romantic, Bea,” Loulou spat. “Trust me, as someone who has flirted with it much too closely, I know that for a fact.”

“Death makes *everything* romantic,” I retorted. “Don’t you see? The threat of death gives life meaning. It gives it all of its delicious tension. It makes a love like the one you and Z share epic. That man killed for you the first time he met you. He shaved his head when he thought you would lose your hair to chemo and he would lose you to cancer. And Mute? He died for you, and you know what we all know, which is that sweet, perfect man died *happy* because he knew he’d saved you.”

I paused to heave in a breath, feeling like I was unspooling my soul for Lou. Hoping she might finally understand Priest. Understand me. Maybe even understand *us*.

“Death is nothing if *not* romantic, Lou. And if you think it’s insane for me to love a man who personifies it, then clearly you don’t understand that it’s a man like that who makes the best lover. He knows the odds of getting out of this life alive are non-existent. He knows how to suck the marrow out of every moment, how to treat the good things that come as if they are miraculous because they *are*. He knows what matters because he gets the stakes, and he would do anything, literally anything, for the people he feels loyal to.”

I sucked in air and leveled my big sister with my final blow. “What pains me so much is that he’d do that for you. Anything. Absolutely anything just to make sure you were safe because you’re Z’s, but also because in other ways, you’re his too. Whether you realize it or not. Whether you accept it or

not, Priest is the kind of man who would just as easily die for the people he kills for.”

I stared at my big sister impassively as she stared at me, emotions playing across those cerulean blue eyes like a movie screen. Anger, frustration, sorrow, helplessness, and finally, a reluctant kind of temporary acceptance that turned that blue to wet stone.

“You’ve always collected strays, the more mangled, the better. You can’t make every monster a pet, Bea. I’ll admit, you haven’t been bitten yet, but that doesn’t mean you won’t. Priest isn’t broken just because he needs a home. Priest is broken in a way that truly, I don’t think you can fix.”

“I don’t want to fix him,” I told her honestly. “I just want to love him.”

Lou winced slightly then sighed, the long ribbon of it falling onto the bed between us, a kind of white flag. “It’s hard to watch the best woman I’ll ever know make a decision I honestly believe will break her heart or, worse, steal her life. I won’t lie. I don’t trust Priest with your heart, and I wish you wouldn’t either. But, you’re right, I’m not your mother, and I’m not your keeper.” Her smile was small, twisted, and broken as she recalled her past. “I would never want to keep you from what makes your heart sing. Phillipa and Benjamin tried to keep me from Zeus, and sometimes, on bad nights, I think about how hollow my life would be without him, without the family he gave me and the kids we made together. I guess, if there is even a slim chance you could have something like that with the killer of The Fallen, I won’t stand in your way.”

A flash fire or irritation prickled the back of my neck, but I bit back my retort. I wanted to tell her that she was wise, but in this, she was so wrong. So wrong it physically hurt me to hear her speak of Priest like that.

I wanted to tell her what I’d long believed.

That even Death had a heart.

He just didn’t have anyone who might accept it, so it went ungiven.

I didn’t say any of that.

We were sisters, but we were not the same. For a long time, I'd believed we were because people always told me I was so much like my sister. It was only implied, sometimes blatantly, that I was the pale imitation. But I'd learned the hard way to strip our relationship of comparison.

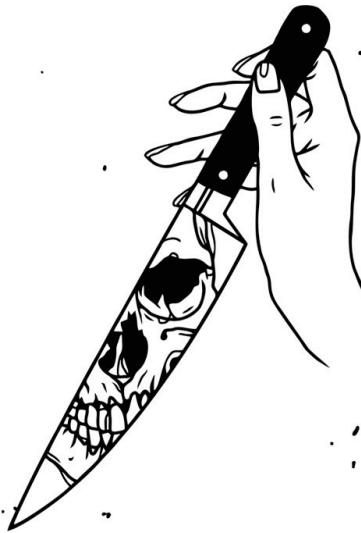
We did not have to be contrary traits. We could both be beautiful, smart, *happy*.

In our different ways.

I decided to take a page out of Priest's book and show her through actions, not words. They were so much more powerful.

So, I only smiled slightly, wrapping my sister's love around my aching heart, and leaned forward to tug her into a hug. She fell into it as if she had been poised and ready, exhaling into our embrace the way one did when they'd held their breath. I giggled slightly as she nuzzled into my hair, then sobered slightly to get in just one parting shot.

"If you stopped thinking about who Priest is and focused on who I might be, I think you'd have an easier time...You know, he calls me his 'Little Shadow'," I confessed into the soft cloud of her hair the way I might have in confession at First Light Church. "If it helps you, think of it like that. I may be your sunshine girl, but everything has a shadow. Priest is mine."



“WHAT IS FAITH?”

First Light Church was quiet, the echoing, almost resonant silence of a holy place that felt like velvet against your skin and soft stuffing in your ears. The faces of the eight-to-ten-year-old boys and girls in the semi-circle curving out from either side of my chair were placid with thoughtfulness. They considered my softly worded question as if it was scripture itself.

They were good kids—the boys with tidy hair and pressed button-ups that made them look like somewhat silly and adorable caricatures of older men, while the girls all seemed molded immaculately after their mothers just as I had once been.

Not a rebel among them.

Except...

“Faith is the belief in something you can’t see, hear, or touch,” Sammy Radcliff declared, his voice petulant, his chin at an angle of defiance. “Faith is for people who don’t care about getting real answers to their questions.”

I blinked at the red-headed ten-year-old boy who was one of my sister’s greatest friends. He was autistic but highly functioning, especially after

working for years with his therapists and Loulou at the Autism Center. I didn't know him that well. I tended to avoid close relationships with people Loulou had already bonded with to avoid the inevitable comparison.

"Don't say that, dummy," Ethan Mannix snapped, leaning forward in his seat to frown. "You want God to strike you down?"

"Hey, hey," I soothed. "How do we treat each other? With compassion and kindness, even if someone doesn't share the same views as us. Sammy, maybe you can explain why you feel that way?"

I wanted him to explain so that the children could have a true discourse on the subject, but also because I agreed with him to a certain extent.

Faith was not about receiving answers.

Sammy blinked his wide eyes. "If you want answers, why do you ask someone who will not give you answers?"

There was logic in that, at once simple and profound. I studied Sammy, with his unruly mop of hair and the stain of something on his shirt contrasted to the keen purpose in his gaze. He was a contradiction, and I found myself smiling.

I liked contradictions.

"Faith isn't about concrete answers, though, Sammy," I explained, leaning forward to increase the intimacy of our conversation. I remembered vaguely that Lou had once said Sammy liked to be touched and cuddled. My fingers twitched to push back a springy lock of that fiery hair only a few shades lighter than Priest's. "Faith is about sensation. You say you cannot believe in something you can't see or touch, but have you ever heard of a sixth sense? The sense of the spirit. You can feel faith in your body the way you feel sadness or guilt, happiness or wistfulness. When I think of those things I believe in, not just God, but my family, my friends and my faith in their love for me, I feel it radiate in my chest."

I thumped my hand over my heart, then splayed my fingers wide, watching as Sammy tracked the movement, as he cocked his head slightly in

another faint mimicry of Priest's more robotic movement.

The rest of the kids listened raptly, even Billy Huxley, wane and red-eyed from lack of sleep because his poor dad was dying of a heart condition, seemed animated by my words.

"Can you feel it, Sammy?" I asked softly. "Can you feel it when you think of someone you believe in?"

"Yes." His response was immediate. "My mum. My best friend, Loulou. My friend Zeus." He paused, looked out the stained-glass window across from him and gave a pained little shrug. "Loulou said my best friend, Mute, is an angel now and he watches over us. I believe in him."

My voice box had fallen out of my throat, plummeting to the floor like a broken elevator careening down the shaft. I swallowed compulsively to get it back in working order so I could respond to the boy and his lovely words. "That's how faith works, Sammy. Exactly like that. *'Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,'*" I quoted from Hebrews 11:1. "It's having an inexplicable connection with someone or thing other than yourself. For a lot of people, they feel that way about God. He might not always be benevolent, but in the end, He cares about those who believe in him."

Sammy's lips twisted up as he considered this, one leg kicking back and forth through the legs of the chair compulsively. "Okay."

How that one word could feel like a benediction was beyond me, but when I smiled at him, it was an expression of gratitude.

This was how I felt about faith too.

Faith in some higher power.

Faith in Loulou to come around to my point of view.

Faith in The Fallen to keep me safe from the serial killer with an eye for me.

Faith in Priest.

Always faith in him.

In fact, if anyone had taught me about devotion, it was the redheaded enforcer.

For years, I'd loved him from afar, investing myself in an idea more than the man just hoping that he might be who I believed him to be.

Now, my faith was being rewarded in ways I never could have known. Because he was not just the man in my shadowed fantasies. He was *more*. He was better than anything my brain had the capacity to conjure. Infinitely complex and mysterious, much like God.

I snorted under my breath and amended my statement.

Much like the God of the Old Testament: cruel and ruthless, a God who smote and struck nonbelievers down with unparalleled savagery and rewarded only a precious few with priceless recompenses.

This was also the God the serial killer seemed to follow. He was killing his victims, it occurred to me, the way God had killed sinners in the Bible.

The concubine was raped and consumed by a pack of dogs.

Jezebel murdered and was divided into *twelve* pieces.

I frowned, staring off into space as I followed the trail of the thought, wondering if I should give Lion and Officer Hutchinson a call to discuss it even though they probably knew.

“If I may?”

I startled as Tabitha appeared beside me with a soft smile, and then waved at her to continue.

She trained that lovely smile on my group, her own Bible clutched to her chest. “To add some debate to this conversation. I have a different theory on faith I would love to discuss. In James 2:20, it is written, ‘But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?’ What do you think this means?”

Billy stirred, his heavy lids widening with eagerness to prove his worth to pretty Tabitha Linely. “It means you have to prove your faith to God.”

She smiled warmly at him. “Exactly.”

“Why do we have to prove our faith in Him when He doesn’t have to do the same?” Sammy interjected with a frown. “That doesn’t make sense.”

Something flickered across Tabby’s face, a hesitation chased by something darker. I frowned at her, wondering for the first time if those placid waters hid something deeper. “You cannot maintain faith unless it is rewarded. God rewards us with His love, and in return, we show Him our love through action. Why do we pray? Why do we punish sinners?”

Sammy’s eyes went wide as twin coins. “We don’t punish sinners here, do we?”

“We should,” Billy declared, somewhat fiercely.

I wondered if it was Tabby’s good looks or his own association with his father’s condition that made him vehement.

“We don’t punish sinners here,” I agreed, sliding Tabby a side eye to slow her roll. “First Light Church is about acceptance and guidance, not rigorously following a set of rules.”

“Not all people who attend Church will go to Heaven,” Tabby announced. “Prayer is not enough to ensure passage to Heaven. You must pay tribute.”

“Tabby,” I said with a cautionary saccharine smile. She had always been a zealot, a topic we clashed on explosively though respectfully. This was not respect.

“How do you pay tribute?” Billy mused.

“In ancient Greece, they made sacrifices,” Sammy said helpfully.

“We do not sacrifice now,” I said firmly.

But they were young and unruly, puppies let loose in the yard of theological discussion. I’d lost the reins, and the conversation turned over to them.

“My mum told me someone’s killing sinners,” Ethan announced. “Is he paying tribute, Mrs. Linley?”

“No, that’s murder,” Cassie Aston argued. “You can’t murder people for God, that doesn’t even make sense.”

“It doesn’t,” Sammy agreed. “Death is bad.”

“Death is your reward for a life well-lived,” Tabby explained. “You get to go to Heaven.”

“Okay, enough,” I declared, standing up so suddenly my chair scraped against the stone floor in a way that made us all wince. “Mrs. Linley, thank you for your interesting theories, but the Bible group is done for the evening. If you have any questions or concerns about what we discussed today, please stay after to talk to me or seek out Pastor Lafayette, okay?”

The group looked at me for a moment with indecision. They had stumbled upon a sensational topic in an otherwise docile discussion group, and they didn’t want to drop it. Happily, Tabby took my lead and smiled at the group before saying goodbye and leaving our antechamber for the main chapel. After that, the kids dispersed readily.

All but Billy Huxley.

He lingered over the extra candles beside the votive candle stand, flipping a matchstick through his fingers clumsily as he waited for everyone to leave. I went to stand by him, placing a gentle hand on his bony shoulder as we stared at the many flickering flames on the staggered display of candles.

“I light candles for my dad,” he confessed, his voice cracking down the middle. “I know he’s still alive, but...I know it’s not for long.”

My heart trembled for him. “If it makes you feel better to do so, then do it, Billy. Mourning doesn’t have to begin after death. It begins when you start to accept it may be inevitable for someone you love.”

Billy shivered slightly and took a little side step closer to me so our hips brushed. He looked so wane and lonely in the orange candlelight against the dark wall of the church, like a boy anxious for sainthood.

When he looked up at me, it was with dark eyes glazed with exhaustion, both spiritual and physical. “Do you think he’s dying because he didn’t show God he loved Him enough?”

A little whimper of sympathy caught in my throat, but I didn’t release it.

Instead, I crouched down so I could be closer to eye level with him, then took his hands in my own, the matchstick caught between our fingers.

“No, Billy,” I said, silk over iron. “That’s not how God works, okay. In fact, that’s not how science works. Sometimes, we just get sick because of defects in our body.”

“Defects God put there?” The words were both a question and a statement, a crisis of faith expressed in one sentence.

Anger with Tabitha for confusing him with her extreme devotion burned through me like a lit wick. “No. Listen to me when I say this, okay, Billy? Good people get sick all the time. Good people have bad luck, bad days, and terrible, unfair ends. The truth is, everyone has misfortunes. Everyone dies. It doesn’t matter what kind of person you are. That’s how it works.”

Billy’s jaw worked as he chewed that over. “Then I don’t get it. What Mrs. Linley said made more sense.”

I bit my lip. It was true, Tabby’s view of religion was so much easier to distill into organized, succinct soundbites. But it was also much more horrifying, especially for a ten-year-old boy.

I smoothed his dark hair back from his forehead as I collected my thoughts. “Sometimes words aren’t powerful enough to describe the complexities of what we feel inside. Can you tell me exactly how much you love your dad?” Billy hesitated, then shook his head. “No, just like I can’t tell you how much I love my family. Some things are just inexplicable. You need to have faith in death just as much as you do in life. You love your dad and you know he’s a good man, so you have to believe when he dies, he’s only moving on to a good place.”

Billy sighed, his body deflating, sagging into my side as he did so. I hugged him tightly, wishing my affection was a physical thing I could use to shield him from pain.

He turned his gaze back to the candles and whispered, “Will you light a candle with me for him?”

“Of course,” I agreed, standing up to grab a tealight. I noticed Tabitha and Eric at the door to the room, discussing something quietly but watching us with intense stares. I rolled my shoulders back to dispel the trickle of eeriness I felt, and struck my match.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PRIEST

NO ONE OUTSIDE OF THE CLUB KNEW WHERE I LIVED. EVEN THEN, ONLY ZEUS, Axe-Man because he was our Treasurer, and Bat because he was Sergeant at Arms had visited my house. Any place of residence I needed to provide was the clubhouse.

That was how they got me. Before. So many years ago when I was just a lad.

They knew where I lived.

So, I stayed off the grid.

And far, far away from the nearest church.

My apartment was a converted loft in the heart of the industrial district north of town, the entire second level of a warehouse that had once been used to store imports from China, but now housed The Fallen arsenal. Technically, Bat was in charge of munitions and weaponry for the club as Sergeant at Arms, but he'd outsourced the more illegal items to me to be hidden in the way only I knew how to hide.

I'd bought the warehouse with cash from an old man before he kicked the bucket, converted it myself over the span of two years. It kept my nineteen and twenty-year-old self out of trouble, and in the end, I had a home that suited my needs.

There were no windows.

I didn't need light.

There was no television, no computer, no comfy lounge area.

A bed, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a massive gym.

The only indulgence I allowed was my library.

Floor-to-ceiling shelves in the area that should have been the living room. One deep, slouchy leather armchair and a side table where I sat at night under the dim light of the reading lamp in the otherwise pitch-dark apartment to read.

I didn't read fiction.

Mostly, I read religious texts and science toms. Technology, too, when it came to weapons, and history, if it was about warfare.

Yeah, religious texts.

The staunch fucking atheist reading about God.

Fucked up, but then again, I never claimed to be otherwise.

I read everything I could get my hands on about God, about faith, about why people subscribed to such nonsense. I read about the Catholic culture in Ireland, and happily, of its decline in the twenty-first century.

I read so I could understand.

I understood so that I could harness the demons of my past in thick rope and chains at the back of my mind and hope they never got loose.

Why can't I touch you?

Bea had said last night after I'd thoroughly ravaged her sweet body and made it intractably mine.

I didn't want her hands on my body. Honest as fuck, I didn't want her sweet words in my ear either, but I couldn't control that so well. Bea was everything light and good, of course, she wanted to lavish that on me. I could ignore those words, mostly, turn my head so they blew unheard past my year like a shout into the wind.

But touch?

My skin was only so seasoned. The feel of those soft, small hands tipped always in some outrageous shade of pink? They would devastate my walls, pull them down stone by stone until my barriers were all in ruin.

I couldn't be exposed.

Not again.

Memories rattled in their chains, flashes popping behind my lids.

The scent of dank, molding earth sharp in my nostrils, the feel of mud beneath my knees as I bent prostrate in prayer before a false god.

Pain, explosions of it across my flesh as if my very body was a battlefield, the Somme, craters blown out of muscles and fissures cracked into bone.

My hand slapped out against the wall of the warehouse beside my door to brace against the onslaught. I tried to tamp down the nausea that swelled high in my belly, lapping acid at the base of my throat, but I knew it was futile.

Seconds later, I turned my head and threw up on the frosty grass beside the gravel walkway. The putrid mess steamed in the freezing air, a reminder that my body wore more than just the scars they'd carved into my skin. I was diseased by my past. It was a cancer inside me, eating away at everything good I tried to produce. Sometimes, like when Bea tried to touch me with her

soft, tapered fingers, I could literally feel it gnawing at my bones.

I spit out the last of the acidic waste, then wiped the back of my hand across my mouth before I started to unlock the door to the warehouse. It was heavily alarmed with motion sensors, cameras, and multiple locks. A Fort Knox for me and my demons, as necessary to keep things out as it was at times to keep me locked within.

But then I saw it.

Such a little thing.

Someone else wouldn't have taken note. But I was The Fallen enforcer. I'd killed more men than I could ever tattoo the names of on my knuckles, and I knew I'd kill a hundred more. I was a predator through and fucking through. There was little in my environment I didn't catalogue, few times I missed something however small a change, in those settings that were both familiar or unfamiliar to me.

So, I noticed.

The patch of darker grass beside the derelict garage at the edge of my property.

It was a space I didn't use, leaving it purposely in disarray so that people would think the building next to it was just as abandoned and ravaged.

It could have been anything, maybe the drain-off from the day's earlier rainfall or the leftover of an animal passing through.

But I knew somehow it was blood.

Some people had an affinity for music and math; mine was more elemental.

They say blood doesn't have a smell, but I could smell it. More, I could sense it. Maybe because I'd spilled it one too many times and been consequently cursed to know it intimately ever after.

I stalked over to the shed, my heart beating like a steady metronome in my chest.

There was blood on that grass then, moving closer, blood on the door,

wrapped around it's open edge like bleeding fingers had fought to open it.

My thoughts whirred.

I dropped to the ground carefully and stuck my head closer to the crack between it and the asphalt. My nose pricked, stung by the metallic tang.

More blood.

"Fuck."

I hopped to my feet and flipped open my disposable cell. It only rang once before Zeus picked up with a laughing, "Priest, my brother."

Children laughed in the background, the faint trill of Loulou's voice talking to one of her babies.

Family.

The cancer inside me ate away with its vicious, poisoned teeth.

"Got a problem," I said, cutting to the quick, careful not to get blood on my boot as I stalked around the building, looking for a forced sign of entry.

It was there at the second garage bay, the corrugated metal lipped and distorted by what had to have been a crowbar.

"Give it to me," Zeus ordered, the humour stripped from his words. All business now. All Prez.

"Seems someone's been into the garage on my property," I told him calmly as I went back round to the front. My boots crunched in the frost-tipped grass, drawing my eyes to other prints that might've been left in its mold.

There, faint, earlier that morning before the dew froze in the anaemic light of dawn.

Wide, long footprints in running shoes of a kind. Too big for a woman, the tread sank deep in the grass. They disappeared quickly from the garage bay into the gravel drive.

"They get into the arsenal?" Z asked, shock in the question because it was me and I didn't ever fail in my duties to the club.

"No," I assured, my head cocking to the side as I heard the crunch of

wheels on gravel followed shortly by a familiar, dreaded *bleep*.

The short exclamation of a police car's sirens.

Seconds later, red and blue light spilled around the corner, illuminating the road that was more an alley where my warehouse entrance stood.

Illuminating me.

"It seems someone decided to frame me for murder," I told Zeus conversationally as a cop stepped out of the first of two cars.

"Fucking *fuck*," Zeus swore into the phone, the sound of dislodged furniture in the background as he gained his feet. "Don't fucking kill anyone. I'm comin' for ya."

I made a short exhale that was as close as I came to a snort. "If I was gonna kill them, they'd bloody well be dead already. I'll meet you at the precinct. And, Zeus, don't tell Bea."

There was a slight pause as the cop ordered me to put my hands in the air. I didn't.

Instead, I leaned against the front wall beside the warped garage door and crossed my ankles. "You hear me?"

"She's gonna find out, brother," Zeus finally said. "And you gotta know, Lou's a Garro now, but she was a Lafayette, and from what I know a those girls, they wanna do somethin', there's no fuckin' stoppin' them."

I didn't respond because I figured he was right. Instead, I flipped the phone shut and put it in my pocket.

"Put your hands in the air," Officer Talbot, a newer cop on the force brought in after the cleanup, called out to me again.

His voice shook just slightly.

A rookie.

I wondered for a moment why the hell it was the rookie speaking when the second cop got out of the car and I recognized Officer Travers.

Fucking pig.

Asshole, bully who was, shockingly, not on Staff Sergeant Danner's take,

just a grade a piece'a shite to everyone.

A bully who was, notoriously, afraid of me.

“Oh, it's my favourite copper,” I called out to him, drawing my hunter's blade, the long curving length of it, out of its holster so I could pick under my nails. “This must be a fuckin' social call.”

“Cut the crap, McKenna,” he shouted. “I'll draw my gun, you don't drop that fucking knife.”

I grinned, knowing the broken lamppost across the street would cast it in gritty yellow light. “This is private property. Thinkin' it should be me who makes the goddamn threats here. And I would, you get me? But I don't think that's necessary.” I cocked my head, pinning the rookie with my stare. “You know my reputation.”

Officer Talbot's heavy breath plumed in the cold night, giving away his nerves.

“Drop the shit, McKenna, I'll put you down,” Officer Travers postured.

I laughed, but I'd never had a very good one. It was loud and hollow, like shell casing releases hot and hard out of an exploding gun.

“I'll put *you* down if you take one more step on my territory,” I warned lightly.

A stand-off ensued, one that leaned heavily in my favour.

“Got a call about a possible assault here,” the rookie tried to explain. “We have a duty to check it out.”

“By all means, check it out from the property line,” I allowed, graciously, running a finger lightly down the razor-sharp blade. My skin opened up under even that pressure, a quarter-inch gash on the pad of my thumb. I popped the clean cut into my mouth, ran the iron solution against my teeth, then flashed another smile at them, this one tinged in blood. “You get a warrant before you take one more step toward me.”

The rookie took a step back when he didn't have one, his back slamming into the car so hard, he yelped.

Fuck, it was fun to play with cops.

“We got a right to check out the perimeter, McKenna,” Officer Travers pointed out gruffly, lowering his voice as if that would make me change my mind.

He didn’t get there was only one alpha in play here.

“Do what you want,” I agreed pleasantly, shrugging slightly to distract them as I adjusted my hold on the knife. “Already gave you my warnin’. You don’t get even that’s outta character, take whatever risk you want.”

Officer Talbot’s hard swallow was visible in the red light of his cop car lights, the vicious pull of his Adam’s apple dragged down by terror.

I pulled harder so he’d know for sure I wasn’t just some fish on his line.

I was a motherfucking shark.

“Come closer,” I beseeched, gentling my expression, swiping my tongue over my teeth to erase the eerie blood. “Please, do what you need to.”

Talbot hesitated, his survival instinct kicking in. Even though he couldn’t articulate it, his body knew what his mind disallowed. I was a threat he was not equipped to deal with.

Travers, on the other hand, was too much of an eejit to save his own hide.

Boldly, he stalked forward three large, exaggerated steps.

I smiled deep inside, but it didn’t grace my lips.

The knife in my hand was a comfort weight as I flung it end over end toward the advancing cop.

He yelled after it was already impaled an inch in front of his work boot. I watched placidly as he reared back, catching himself on the hood of his car as he lost balance in his hasty retreat.

“You’re under fucking arrest for assaulting an officer of the law,” Travers bellowed at me, but I was already stalking forward, collecting my knife before I swung back onto my Harley.

“I’ll meet ya there,” I shouted over the roar of the engine as I gunned it into life then peeled out of the drive, the tires spewing gravel onto their car.

Seconds later, the sound of sirens erupted in the night, and the chase was fucking on. I laughed into the glacial wind, the icy fingers tugging through my overlong hair as I kicked the engine into high gear and raced the fucking pigs to their pen.



IT WASN'T MY FIRST TIME IN THE ENTRANCE POLICE DEPARTMENT, AND IT sure as hell wouldn't be my last. As far as interrogation rooms went, it was run of the mill: a grey box with a one-way mirror the length of the left wall, four chairs, two on either side of a black table.

I sat in the chair facing the door, thighs spread, hands linked on the table, gaze fixed to the mirror and the people I knew lurked behind it.

There had been chaos when they brought me in, more people in the pigpen than there usually was.

The serial killer and his love for Entrance had brought the big boys to the yard.

I knew there were Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) special unit

officers in that adjoining room watching me.

Trying to learn me.

They'd learn nothing.

Cops put people in these rooms with one objective. They hoped the shake-up of being arrested and paraded through a cop's den would carbonate them like agitated soda, all those guilty emotions fizzing and popping to the surface so when they sent in the interrogator, all they had to do was crack open the cap and confessions would flood into their hands.

They weren't expecting a man to sit there like it was his living room and watch them like they were the entertainment playing on the television, like they were the subjects under observation.

I cracked a little smile, then cracked my knuckles as I slouched lower in the chair, getting cozy.

A moment later, the door opened, revealing a man I didn't recognize in a dark grey suit and Mr. White, the club's attorney.

I tipped my chin at White. There weren't many people outside of my brothers I respected, but he was one of them. We'd been through a helluva a lot together.

As I said, it wasn't my first time in an interrogation room.

White blinked at me and adjusted his glasses as he rounded the table and took a seat beside me.

The suited man stood behind the chairs on the opposite side of the table staring at me.

I stared back, expressionless.

He was short, but held himself rigid, chest puffed, shoulders pinned back like an ex-military man. Bat and Dane still stood like that, feet braced, faces stern, eyes an empty receptacle to place orders from their superiors. He had that vaguely traumatized depth to his gaze and deep grooves between his brows like he only ever frowned.

So, ex-military, probably divorced, definitely RCMP.

“How can I motherfuckin’ help you today, Officer?” I asked, cocking my head to the side as I addressed him with a close-lipped curl of my lips that might have been a smile on someone more pleasant.

“Priest McKenna,” he said slowly, tasting my name, making it Irish. “Good ole mick, eh?”

I didn’t flinch at the derogatory insult for Irishmen. I’d stopped identifying as one years ago, even if I couldn’t quite shake the song of it in my words.

The officer tried again, unbuttoning his suit jacket as he finally took a seat. “I’ve heard about you, you know? The maniac who kills for the notorious mother chapter of The Fallen MC. You take that name as a joke? The sinner Priest? Does it get you off to kill in the name of the Lord?”

I didn’t say anything.

This was more boring than I thought it would be.

I yawned widely, showing the man a nice view of my naturally sharp incisors.

“This is all speculation, Moore. Why don’t you speak factually from now on?” White suggested mildly.

Moore.

British, of course.

He had the pallor of spilled milk, ruddy with age and too much drink.

I yawned again.

The skin around his eyes tightened, the only tell of his irritation with my ennui.

“Mr. McKenna, we found a dead body in a garage adjacent to your property,” he stated dramatically.

“Oh?” I asked with mock and mild curiosity. “How strange.”

White cleared his throat, but it was too late.

I’d goaded Moore’s ego.

“Strange that you couldn’t be bothered to clean up your latest mess?”

Moore prodded me, thinking I was an animal in a corner he could provoke into violence with the end of a sharp stick.

I was not a reactionary man, some rabid dog looking for a fight.

I did not fight at all. I put men down. They came to me to die.

If Moore wanted to grapple, he'd be disappointed.

Though if he continued to be as irritating as he was proving himself to be, I'd be happy to find him an early grave.

"I'm sorry," I said, because I was not. "You think I killed someone on my own property and put them in the garage next door? Not to mention, the warehouse isn't even my own. It's held in trust, I believe, by a Double Edge International LLC."

Moore's jaw worked. "You were found on the property, about to open the door."

I hummed in response. "Very good detective work, Officer. Of course, that must mean I own it."

"Oh, were you breaking in, then?" he countered, leaning forward, his aggression getting the better of him. There was a brutish, almost pit bull set to his underbite and small, dark eyes.

Bea had told me once that there were two kinds of violent offenders. I'd listened, not because I was interested, but because I liked the way her mouth looked when it moved around the words, how her chest flushed pink when she spoke about her passions.

There was the pit bull and the cobra. The former exploded into brief, hellacious rages that brought violence down on everything around them. They often regretted their rages, felt remorse for the way they couldn't control themselves.

The cobra, on the other hand, was cold, calculated. They did not strike without intention and when they did, they went for the kill.

It was easy to draw the comparison between the likes of Moore and me.

I cocked my head as I absorbed all his obvious little tells, knowing that no

matter how loudly he barked, he would never be as controlled and powerful as he wished he was. He had a complex, this one. Wanted to make himself feel like a big man by putting down big criminals.

As I said, too fucking easy.

“Mr. McKenna was simply checking in on a building owned by a person of his acquaintance. If need be, we will sign an affidavit to that effect. Now, did you have any motive or evidence tying my client to this crime?” White asked, dryly.

Moore flipped open the portfolio he’d brought in under his arm and one by one, flipped the pages for me to view.

Blood.

Everywhere there was blood.

Oh, it was a messy crime scene, sloppily done, a crime of passion, not one of cold, calculated methodology.

I almost snorted. I’d never killed a man like that, not even my first kills that last day in my motherland. I’d been passionate then too, before the fire in my soul sputtered out forever, but even then, the kills were clean, thoughtful. I’d spent years planning them down to the very last detail.

The female victim was torn to ribbons by knives, a poor mockery of my form, but in one picture, a close up of her face, I recognized who it was.

Fuck.

The next picture Moore slid across the table with one finger, overly dramatic prick.

It was a photo of the victim days earlier at Hephaestus Auto, her gleaming dark hair catching in the pale winter sunlight, her smile soft as she waved goodbye to someone obscured just inside The Fallen clubhouse.

“Her name was Natalie Ashley,” Moore said, knowing that I knew. “She worked at Entrance Bay Academy teaching History and Social Studies, and, apparently, she was sleeping with a member of your club.”

I looked up at Moore calmly, but my mind was working, clicking and

whirring as I thought through the ramifications of this.

I was *not* sleeping with Natalie Ashley.

But Kodiak was.

“Mr. Moore, I’ll tell you once more, keep to the facts, or I’ll be leaving with my client. So far, I see no cause why you brought him in for questioning,” White warned, and for a pale, short, old suit, he didn’t do half-bad.

“He assaulted an officer,” Moore reminded him.

“Doesn’t have a fucking scratch on him,” I said mildly. “Listen, Natalie Ashley is friends with King’s woman, she visits her at the club sometimes. You gonna arrest me for that?”

“She was a good, churchgoing woman,” Moore attempted. “If she was lured into your club, I believe only a man could’ve done it. Women think with their hearts.”

Bea.

Her name sat on my tongue, burned there like a communion wafer.

She thought with her heart and it brought her to me.

It was sexist, the motherfucking prick, but he wasn’t entirely wrong.

“You wanna arrest me for shit I didn’t do just like you arrested Zeus for the murder of a man committed by a man in fuckin’ blue, get on with it so we can sue your motherfucking asses,” I suggested with a little shrug. “Otherwise, White and I are gettin’ outta this pigpen. It fuckin’ stinks.”

Moore glared at me. If this was a tug of war, he’d just lost hold of the rope.

“Did you find a note at the crime scene?” White asked. “As I understand it, they’ve been accompanying murders of late.”

Moore hesitated then nodded. “There was something written in blood, but it doesn’t exactly follow the modus operandi of the killer. It seems more likely the work of a copycat.”

He slanted me a suspicious look, but I ignored him in favour of the photo

he flipped over for us.

Written poorly in blood on the inside of the garage door was the phrase ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’.

For the first time during this entire tedious interchange, I frowned. Leaning closer, I traced my finger over the words on the photograph and muttered them under my breath.

This passion was unusual, the carelessness of the body hacked to pieces wasn’t biblical in any obvious way nor was the scripture left at the scene.

It didn’t follow the path of the previous religious kills. It could have been that this was a personal message delivered to me to warn me to stay away from their crimes or maybe away from Bea herself, if they’d fixated on her as solidly as I had. Or it was something else entirely, someone with a vendetta against me who was taking the opportunity to frame me because it had presented itself to them.

Either way, they’d done a piss poor fucking job. My DNA was probably at the scene but not in conjunction with the crime. I lived in the property beside the garage, but these fucks didn’t know that and they wouldn’t be able to get a warrant to search the property unless they had hard evidence I might be the killer.

Sloppy, amateur hour at best.

But interesting.

“Priest,” Moore said musingly, gearing up for some dramatic bullshit. “It all ties together so well despite what you say. A biker with a thing against religion, targets the pious people of B.C. to teach them his own kind of lesson. You got trauma in the church?” He paused to narrow his gaze at me, hoping that might magnify his intrusive stare maybe. I yawned again, so wide my jaw cracked. “I just bet you do. I bet some old priest back in backwater Ireland bent you over the altar as a choir boy and—”

His words transformed into a shocked shout as I hooked my foot around his leg under the table and jerked it forward. Moore went careening back in

his chair, his head hitting the top of the metal backrest with a loud smack. Before he could right himself, I was on the table, knees braced, hand at his fleshy throat.

We were close enough, I could smell the fetid coffee and fried lunch on his breath, but still I got closer, until my bared teeth were all he could see. “You’ve heard about me? Then you know a man like me doesn’t do shit like this.” I lifted a crumpled fistful of the scattered photos in one hand and shoved them into his chest. “Never killed a woman and never would. You’re so goddamn obsessed with takin’ down The Fallen, you can’t see what’s right in front’a your eyes? Why don’t you catch the motherfucker murderer slaying women from Vancouver to the Rez and then see if there’re any bodies still showin’ up?”

“Priest,” White suggested mildly over the cacophony outside the door of cops coming to their brethren’s rescue. “Release the man and sit down, will you? They have no cause to arrest you, but they will if you carry on much longer.”

I snapped my teeth in Moore’s face, delighting in his blown open pupils gone black with fear and the little diamonds of sweat crowning his lined forehead. He flinched in my grip, pulse a rapid tattoo against my fingers. I squeezed a little tighter just to see what exact shade of purple he would turn, then abruptly released him and swung off the table back into my seat as if nothing had happened.

The cops burst into the room, two with their guns raised, but I only sat there staring down the man who’d tried to use my past against me. I was the only one capable of doing that and one day, in the future when I could get to him without suspicion, he would know exactly why the scared Entrance cops sent him in to interrogate me instead of doing it themselves.

Moore sat there transfixed by the look in my eyes, fear gluin’ his pansy ass to the chair, his throat bobbing as he swallowed the tang of adrenaline off his tongue.

I leaned forward just slightly again to deliver my promise with a small, saccharine smile. “You don’t do your job and find ’im, I’ll do mine, you get me?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BEA

I WAS EXHAUSTED.

But I did not want to sleep.

There was a restlessness flooding through me like lactic acid after a workout, burning in my muscles, twitching at my fingertips. I couldn't sit, I couldn't eat or sleep. I had to move, but tired as I was, my body went sluggishly through the air as if catching the molecules there like wind in my

clothes.

Priest wasn't with me.

No one told me where he was, but it was club business, Zeus had assured me, nothing too serious.

A bold-faced lie if only because all club business was serious shit.

I hadn't seen Priest since the night before when he'd been inside me to the hilt. The ache of him still lingered there, a hollow pain that I somehow knew would ease if he would only slide back inside.

Harleigh Rose, Tayline, Cleo, Lila, and Loulou got tired of my pacing and daydreaming after I barely ate my dinner and hardly spoke to them while we sat around afterward playing with the babies. So, in typical Harleigh Rose and Lila fashion, they had declared we needed a night on the town.

I hadn't been out since that fateful Halloween night and I was absolutely not in the mood to go to some sweaty, crowded club when I didn't know where Priest was or where I stood with him. But they wouldn't take no for an answer.

So, now I was at Sugar Nightclub in downtown Vancouver with my biker babes and five of The Fallen brothers who had insisted they join us because they hadn't been out downtown in a while.

We knew they only came to protect us. The rough and tumble bikers so did not fit in at the hip, sleek downtown bar, but I kind of loved how everyone stared at them. They were gorgeous, but foreign, so of course, they had women all over them within minutes of entering the club.

I stood at the bar under the flashing coloured lights, the music vibrating the air all around me, Bat to my left with Dane, who wasn't a brother, but was rarely separated from his sister, Lila, or Bat, and Wrath on my right. The rest of the girls were out on the dance floor with Boner and Blade. I watched as Lila and Harleigh Rose jumped up and down, yelling the words to 'Crazy Train' in each other's faces. Loulou spun Cleo around under her arm then dipped her, laughing down at her as they danced together. A man tried to

grab Harleigh Rose's ass and Tay stepped in to push him away forcibly with a hip check.

I smiled slightly watching them, feeling joy move through me softly like water through rock.

"Not havin' such a good time," Wrath noted, forearms braced on the bar as he leaned beside me, his long, wild waves hanging in his gorgeous face as he looked over at me. "Don't strike me as a party girl."

I swirled the short straw in my Bourbon Peach Smash then blocked the top of the straw with a finger and brought the end to my mouth before I let go so the liquid trapped there fell between my open lips.

When I was done, I smiled wanly at the brother who never smiled. "You don't seem much for them either."

Wrath's eyes crinkled just slightly, but otherwise his permanent scowl stayed in place. "I'm not much for anythin' these days."

I nodded. We all knew Wrath's tragic story, the love of his life lost to gang violence when he was still patched in to the Berserkers MC years ago. I didn't know the devastation of losing your one true love, but the acute edge of agony I'd felt obsessing over Priest, unattainable and forbidden as he was for years had been bad enough. I couldn't imagine the pain Wrath lived with every day.

"Is it hard..." I started tentatively then took another sip of the sweet, boozy perfection and spoke strongly. "Is it hard to go on after losing someone like that?"

Wrath's thick brown brow arched, cutting lines into his smooth forehead. Sometimes, I forgot he was still in his twenties because he wore his grief so heavily in the lines of his glowering face. He seemed surprised I'd asked something so bold, his gaze assessing me with new eyes.

I thought maybe he wouldn't respond. It was an invasive question, but I was a student of psychology and I liked those kinds of inquiries best so I didn't take it back.

“S like I was run through with a sword straight through the chest,” he said finally, soft enough it was hard to hear over the bumping notes of music. He thumped his chest then reached down to slam back his shot of dark liquor before continuing. “And I gotta live with it there every fuckin’ day ’til I can join her in death.”

A shiver raced across my skin even though the air in the club was thick and close.

When Wrath tipped his head to look at me, his eyes were a dark pool, fathomless as the ocean bottom and just as filled with unknown terrors. “But I gotta keep on livin’. She...fuck, she was so young. She had stuff she wanted to do, so I’m gonna do it for her. Live for her, I guess you could say. The pain is the price I pay for not protectin’ her like I shoulda.”

“Wrath,” I said softly, wanting to touch him so badly my hand quivered even though I knew he wouldn’t appreciate it. “I know there’s nothing I can say to make you feel better. I can apologize and empathize all I want, but I know this is your cross to bear. All I can say is, I hope you know that the weight of your grief is a burden you can share.” I gestured to the men behind me and the girls on the dance floor, then flattened my palm over my heart. “Every single one of us would be honoured to help you carry it.”

Wrath’s nostrils flared at the tip of his roman nose, such a small tell for such a colossal man, but it told me my words were felt in his chest.

“Can see why Lou calls you her sunshine girl,” Wrath muttered. “Can’t just leave the dark well enough alone, huh?”

“Nope,” I agreed, popping the ‘p’ then smiling brightly. “I’m cute but psycho.”

Wrath’s whole mouth moved an inch to the left, curling just slightly. “Gotta be, you’re into Priest.”

I looked away, suddenly fixating on the straw in my depleted cocktail.

"Since I was a child, I've always been drawn to things that go bump in the night. So, is it any wonder I've gone and fallen for a man who's scarier than

most little girls can ever conceive of in their nightmares?" I mused.

"You're not reinventin' the wheel, Bea," Bat interjected, tugging on one of my curls the way he'd done since I was a kid. "Opposites attract is a pretty fuckin' classic adage."

I pouted. "Does everyone know I like him?"

Bat and Dane shared a look. They'd only known each other for half a year, but they were already thick as thieves, sharing a language of intimacy only they could transcribe.

"Not been here long, and I noticed it right off," Dane admitted, rubbing a hand over the cropped afro he'd grown since he'd been home.

"Cyclops only got one eye, and even he can see it," Boner joked as he appeared in front of us, leading Tay and Cleo through the crowd to our side.

"It's true," Cleo said with an apologetic shrug when I looked aghast at her. "You're about as subtle as a flashing neon sign."

"Damn," I muttered into my drink, embarrassed but also a little bit relieved.

Everyone knew, and it seemed no one cared.

Priest was ten years older than me and my complete foil, yet these brothers seemed to think nothing of our possible courtship. It made hope spring forth in the soil of my gut like a tender spring shoot.

The obstacles between Priest and I were diminishing by the day. Only one truly gargantuan one remained; Priest himself.

"Stop brooding; it doesn't suit you," Cleo teased, bopping me on the nose with her finger. "You look adorable tonight, and it's about time you had some fun! Come dance. Let some unsuspecting man check you out."

I laughed, smoothing a hand down my tiny white crop top and popping my hip so the short hem of my pleated black and pink plaid skirt flipped up over my pink fishnet-clad thigh. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

Cleo laughed with me as she linked our fingers and dragged me out into the mass of dancing bodies. Over my shoulder, Tayline said dryly to the

guys, “They’re so cute they make me wanna barf sometimes.”

I let the surging energy of the people on the dance floor around me infect me with vitality. We reached Lila, H.R., and Lou, who all hollered in greeting, not pausing as they danced their butts off.

Joy.

It pumped through me to the beat of the music that thrummed against my feet like a kick drum, urging me to dance harder. I held my heavy hair off my neck to cool the sweat gathering on the back of it, closed my eyes to better feel the music, and *danced*.

I wasn’t as graceful as my sister, the trained ballerina, but I could bust a move, and I loved to dance. The anxiety eating away at my body was stamped out with each beat of my high-heeled Mary Jane’s against the floor, and soon, I was singing along with my biker babes to the pop music that made the brothers at the bar cringe.

“Fuck, you’re sexy,” someone said from behind me a moment before fingers trailed down the exposed skin at my hip and curled in, pinning me in place so they could press themselves against me.

It was, clearly from the bulge, a man.

I tipped my head back. I was short enough to catch sight of his face even in my heels. “Hello,” I said with a little smile.

He was a gorgeous Asian man, his skin tanned and stretched taut over his slanting cheekbones. When he winked, I had to blink away my bemused delight.

I might have been taken by my very own psychopath, but I was still a woman.

“You move well,” he complimented as his big hands found my waist to better move my ass against his groin.

“Thanks.” I tossed my hair over my shoulder to smile at him and let myself enjoy the simplicity of dancing with a beautiful stranger.

“You should know,” he said after a moment, bending to speak into my ear

to be heard over the music. “A man over by the bar is watching you. He doesn’t look happy I’m dancing with you.”

I laughed lightly without looking over at The Fallen, who were no doubt scowling protectively at me in the arms of a stranger. They were doubly protective of me because I was Loulou’s sister, and because now, I might also be Priest’s woman.

I shivered with wholesale delight at the thought.

“Uh...” The guy I was dancing with shivered too, but from the way he suddenly pulled away, it wasn’t in a good way. “I’m actually gonna head out.”

“What?” I asked, a little bemused. I turned to ask what his problem was, but he was already gone, moving through the crowd without looking back.

I blinked as the space he’d left behind was swallowed up by dancers again and then shrugged as Cleo pulled me back into her body by my hips. We danced together, my girls and I, twirling and laughing, giddy on comradery and tipsy on good booze.

I closed my eyes again to absorb the feel of them against me, sweat-slicked and sweet-scented. It was what I imagined young puppies felt with their siblings, always touching, always playing, always together. This was the kind of life my outlaw friends and family lived, deep lows and soaring highs. They knew how to lock away grief and fear to suck the marrow out of life when it presented you with the opportunity to appreciate it. So many people believed MC life was about drugs, violence, and crime, but at its heart, it was always and forever about living together as a found family, the kind forged voluntarily by love and loyalty.

When Loulou danced my way, I snagged her wrists and pulled her close for a tight hug that stilled us both.

She didn’t hesitate to wrap me up in her arms, stamping her curves to mine. Tears pricked at the backs of my eyes as I held her, nose to her cherry-scented hair.

“Thank you for giving me this family,” I whisper-shouted into her ear. “It’s so much better than anything we ever had before.”

Loulou pulled away to smile in my face, her eyes fluorescent blue in the flashing lights. “We always had each other, though. I hope you know that would have been enough to make me happy forever.”

My throat constricted, a boa of emotion wrapped around it too tight. “Yeah, I know. But I’m glad you found this, for both you and me.”

“Yeah,” Lou agreed solemnly, tucking my damp hair behind one ear. “Love you, sunshine girl.”

It was an important détente in this little skirmish between us. I threw myself back into her arms, feeling her laughter move through me as she caught me and swung me around.

“Love you, back,” I shouted through my giggles before she put me down.

When we went back to dancing, we did it holding hands.

At some point, a tingle of awareness nestled at the base of my spine, then ran icy fingers up my hot back. I opened my eyes to half-mast, half-drunk on peach bourbon smashes and the heady bass of Bishop Briggs’ “Dead Man’s Arms”. Lazily, I swept my eyes over the crowd of churning bodies, moving over the sight of Lila in Nova’s arms with sudden excitement.

If Nova was here now, did any of the other brothers come with him?

Nova caught my eye as he hauled Lila up into his arms and minutely shook his head before devouring his woman’s eager mouth. I looked away, disappointment a bitter tang on the back of my tongue. I looked to the left to see Harleigh Rose being bent over Lion’s arm as he attacked her mouth and squeezed his big hand high on her thigh.

I closed my eyes again, my focus lost, the high of the music and my sisterhood collapsing around my feet.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” I shouted at Cleo as she spun gracefully beside me.

She frowned, tossing her sweaty light brown hair out of her eyes. “I’ll

come with!”

I shook my head, darting forward to kiss her sweat-damp cheek. “I just need a minute, okay? I’ll be right back.”

She bit her lip but nodded hesitantly, concern in her big grey eyes.

I ignored it, pushing through the crowd toward the bathroom, suddenly feeling emotional. How was it possible that amid all this humanity, I felt so wretched with loneliness?

It was simple, really.

I was obsessed, addicted really, to one man, and I always felt off-balance without his presence nearby, even in those years before he truly noticed me. It was as if he was gravity tethering my dreamy soul to reality, grounding my romanticism in truth, casting shadow and depth to my light.

Clearly, the drink was making me maudlin.

There was a line up to the girl’s washroom, so I delved further down the hall and turned the corner, searching for the handicap option. It was tucked just beside an emergency escape, and I was grateful when I found it unoccupied.

I closed the door, flipped the lock, and braced my hands on the basin as I stared into the mirror. I didn’t wear much makeup, but my gloss was eaten off my lips, and the mascara on my lashes smeared beneath my eyes. My hair was a fluffy mess of curls around my face, giving me a girly, almost childish air when paired with my outfit.

I wasn’t the bombshell my sister was, the badass queen like Harleigh Rose, the bohemian beauty of Lila, or the elegant Disney princess that was Cressida.

I was just me.

But then I imagined Priest behind me, his stern, unsmiling mouth in that lush, dark red beard, his unruly hair pulled into a messy bun at the back of his neck, his tattooed fingers wrapped around my throat like the sexiest accessory, and I thought, maybe, me was a good thing to be.

There was a sharp judder at the door as someone tried the handle and found it locked.

“Occupied,” I called out, turning on the tap to wash my hands.

Another fierce rattle of the metal handle.

“Occupied!” I shouted again.

Silence.

I adjusted my breasts in my crop top and flashed my reflection a sunny smile I didn’t feel. How could I be so desolate with yearning when I’d just seen Priest one day ago? Was it because I’d given him my virginity? I didn’t think so. Even though I’d been raised to believe sex was meant for a husband and wife, I didn’t subscribe wholesale to every Christian belief. I believed in gay marriage, in a woman’s right to choose, and in having sex when you felt beautiful and brave enough to engage in that intimacy with someone you believed was worthy.

I stared down at the pink ribbon I had tied on my right wrist and remembered the way Priest had tied it around my hands, binding them at my back so he could use me as he wanted.

Heat coiled low in my stomach and spread down my thighs.

I wanted him to wrap that ribbon around my throat just a little too tight. I wanted the tip of his knife against my skin cutting his name into my body to show his ownership over it.

Because he did own me, body and soul. The only thing I’d never known for sure was if we would be compatible in bed, and after last night, I was sure all of my darkest, most deviant fantasies could only be met and surpassed by the older enforcer with cruel hands and wicked eyes.

There was a loud *crack* against the door behind me as if someone had been pushed into the frame. I whirled around, my heart in my throat, hoping everything was okay outside.

Another massive bang shook the flimsy door but was timed perfectly with the bass of the loud music, so it blended with the melody. I doubt anyone

around the corner farther down the hall would hear the cacophony.

I realized as my breath clogged in my lungs that someone was trying to get *inside*.

Instantly, my heart set to racing, sweat breaking out over every inch of my skin. There wasn't much in the handicap stall to use as a weapon, but I was grateful as ever for the double-edged blade Priest had given me that I wore fixed to my upper thigh beneath my fishnets.

My fingers fumbled to break open the mesh to get to the knife as there was another bang against the door. The handle fell off from the inside, leaving a hole through to the exterior. In it, I could see the black-clad body of a man.

A second later, the door swung open on softly creaking hinges. The sound sent shivers scuttling down my spine.

I looked up through my hair as the man entered, his face obscured in the shadows of his hood. My numb fingers tore through the fishnet, but the knife clattered to the floor between my feet.

There was a split second that dragged out in slow motion as we both stared at the discarded knife.

And then we moved.

I ducked down to grab the knife securely in one hand just as he lunged across the space. One of his hands yanked me by the hair so viciously, I yelped, but I was already bringing the knife up to thrust it hard into his left thigh. A vicious curse tore from his mouth, but he wasn't deterred. I tried to pull the knife from his clenched muscle, but my fingers were slick with blood. They slipped off the carved wooden handle as he hauled me to my feet and backhanded me hard across the face.

Pain fizzed through my head, white and blinding.

There was the odd sensation of my body being moved easily without my consent, my brain momentarily disconnected from my body.

I came back into it with a jarring, painful suddenness that robbed me of

breath.

He'd lifted me onto the basin, the porcelain cold against my bare ass under the skirt. He was fumbling with my fishnet tights to get at my sex.

Resolve solidified every molecule in my body with vicious intent. Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, I leaned forward and clamped the bottom of his ear between my teeth. He tried to jerk away, which dislodged me from the sink and sent me sliding to my feet.

The extra force of my fall tore the bottom off his ear, lobe and cartilage, like a ripping stack of paper. The wet sound of it tearing was sickening, the splash of blood a rush of moisture like sea spray against my face. The taste of iron flooded my mouth, but I didn't spit it out immediately, too crazed with panic and self-preservation to care about the sluice of blood down my cheeks and chest.

My attacker staggered back, his hood dislodged so that a strange face glared back at me. I blinked, a little shocked because I'd assumed I would know my attacker; statistics stated that most people were assaulted by those they knew.

But this was some random white man with a shaved head and a tidy beard. He didn't look particularly scary, minus the blood coating the hand held to his semi-severed ear.

He just looked like a man I wouldn't gaze twice at on the street.

Then his face transformed, his teeth curling back on a growl as he lunged for me again, one bloody hand grasping and the other holding a knife I hadn't seen before.

His gait was awkward with the knife in his thigh, but I had no weapon, and I was cornered.

Fear crystalized my sight, turning everything into high definition, vivid motion. I wondered, calmly, if this was how I was going to die. If this was it, it, it, and I was going to be dead, dead, dead.

Before he could reach me, though, he drew up short, eyes blown wide

open, torso frozen and arched like a bow with tension. There was a stomach-turning, wet squelch and then the point of a massive knife protruded from his inner right shoulder. I watched it twist, watched my attacker gurgle and actually squeak with pain before he crumpled to the ground unconscious.

Behind him in the shadows of the open door stood Priest.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BEA

A SOB BOILED UP MY THROAT, BUT I CAUGHT IT IN MY HAND AS I STOOD, staring wide-eyed at my unlikely hero.

Priest was cloaked in darkness, only the end of his Roman nose and the steep edge of his taut jaw and high cheekbone caught in the artificial red light of the exit sign just behind him in the hall. He looked like an avenging demon as likely to slay you as to help you, dangerous and on edge despite his calm demeanor.

But something was in the wait between us, a vibrating energy like a

plucked guitar string that sang through my blood.

He took one step forward, pried the knife from my attacker's back, checked his pulse, then stepped over his prone body to get to me. His body moved so sinuously—a heavily muscled, grace-greased machine.

My mouth went dry, and my hand shook where it was still pressed to my blood-coated mouth.

He stopped only inches away, the tips of my leather heels against his leather boots. He wasn't breathing hard, but I could see the way his firm mouth parted over his breath, the way his chest moved beneath the familiar, stiff material of his Fallen cut. I soaked up every inch of him, counting the countless freckles on his cheeks above the beard, drawing the shape of his straight eyebrows and the exact angle of his square chin. Just the sight of him soothed the flapping, anxious bird of angry fear attempting to take flight in my belly on broken wings.

I sucked in a harsh gulp of iron-poisoned air as he slowly lifted his hand and took mine from my mouth. Every inch of me held precariously still as if I was being sniffed by a wild animal when he drew a thick, calloused finger along my already swelling cheekbone, then down to the corner of my mouth where he gently smeared the crying blood onto my lips like a morbid gloss. His gaze intensified as his thumb parted my lips, and the piece of my attacker's ear, still tucked into my cheek, became visible. Reminded of it, I spat the hunk of flesh out onto the floor to my side. Something in his posture changed, his body tightening and angling toward me.

Slowly, he turned his head to look at the prone body of the man he'd stabbed, noting the bloody mess at the side of his ear. When his gaze returned to mine, it pinned me as readily as bindings at my hands and feet.

Something flashed between us, a lightning bolt of lust catching fire to the blood-soaked room.

And then he was kissing me.

Kissingmekissingme.

Kissing me so hard I couldn't breathe, and I didn't want to. His hand was still at my mouth, tugging it open with a thumb pressed into the skin beneath my lower lips. I flicked my tongue over it, tasting the salty tang of his skin, the metallic bite of another man's blood.

It shouldn't have been sexy.

It was wrong, maybe even disgusting.

But it lit something in me I'd unconsciously been building into the makings of a bonfire for a long, long time.

I moaned and clawed at his leather clad shoulders, my leg hooking around his leg so I could climb him like a jungle gym. I was desperate for him, this man who was at once a hero and a villain, who was death to so many but so life-affirming for me. I needed him in me, on me, around me. I wanted him to fucking consume me.

He met my franticness with ease, that hand out of my mouth sliding down to my throat where he pressed hard into my jugular, I knew, to confirm my heartbeat. In his own way, he was frantic too, though more controlled, always more controlled than me.

His grip bit into my hip as he plastered me to the length of his body, grinding me into his thigh so I could have some friction against my clenching pussy.

It was wrong to be so turned on, to want sex more than my next breath after almost being assaulted and raped, after ripping off half of my attacker's ear, the remnants of his blood still on my chin, sucked away by Priest's mouth on my lips.

Instead, it was mind-blowingly hot.

I loved knowing the man we'd beaten was at our feet. I loved feeling like any future obstacle between us would meet the same fate.

My eager hands fumbled with Priest's belt but couldn't work it quickly enough for either of us. With a fierce growl, Priest tore his mouth from mine, finally faintly breathless. He stared hard at the sight of the blood on my skin,

of his macabre tombstone tattooed hand on my throat.

“Fuck,” he cursed in a low, panty-melting growl. “Even blood looks good on you.”

“I need you,” I begged, beyond the point of shame. Every learned thing I’d once known about purity and sin forgotten in the firestorm of a lust only Priest could bring. “Please.”

His hand spasmed on my throat. I’d never seen eyes at once so pale a green and so dark, the iris ringed in black, the inside verdant as freshly watered grass. “I fuck you, I’m gonna fuck you hard. Need to mark you after that motherfucker tried to take what’s mine.”

“If I’m yours, you can take me any way you want,” I promised, arching into his tight grip on my neck, rubbing myself shamelessly on his thigh while I groped the iron pipe of his hard cock at the fly of his jeans. “And Priest? I might look like an innocent little girl, but my fantasies have always been dark, sinful, and *rough*.”

I gasped sharply as Priest flipped me around and bent me firmly over the basin. My hair hung in my face as I braced my forearms on the sink, spreading my thighs wide as he flipped up my skirt. There was the *snick* of his switchblade as he jerked it open, then the cold edge of the blade was pressed to the inside of my thigh. I watched Priest’s face in the mirror as he watched his knife cut through the fishnet, slicing a line from thigh to thigh between my legs, and then a muscle in his jaw leaping as he carefully slid the metal beneath the placket of my ruffle-edged panties. The fabric whispered open as it parted under the sharp edge where he drew it up the crease between my ass cheeks.

Cool air wafted over my fevered, wet flesh, drawing my attention to just how ready and throbbing I was for him. The ache of that morning was back like a blaring alarm, warning me I would combust without him inside me just as I would combust with him seated to the hilt.

His hand was rough with callouses against my cheek as he palmed it

easily in one mighty hand, squeezing and massaging it roughly before giving it a little smack. When I only moaned and rocked back into him, he spanked me hard in sharp, staccato bursts of heat to each swell. Vaguely, I noticed the clang of his belt coming undone and the harsh rasp of a zipper undoing, but the beat of blood in my ears and that resonant smack of flesh consumed me.

“Holy God,” I gasped as I thrust back into him. “Oh, my God.”

“There’s no God in this house of worship,” Priest rasped, collecting my hair in his free hand to wrap it once, twice around his fist. He pulled me back by it like reins so I was staring at him in the mirror, back arched, ass tipped and exposed for him.

His grin was a dark, blood-red slice across his face. “Only the devil.”

And then the burning heat of his cock was at my entrance, thrusting inside my sensitive flesh so savagely, I belted out a ragged scream.

“Better than fuckin’ heaven and earth,” Priest ground out in that gravelly Irish voice as he pounded me into the sink, palming one ass cheek open slightly so he could watch his cock slide in and out of me. “Such a tight little pussy stretched around my cock.”

I whimpered, heat gathering at every sensual point of my body—in the furl of my nipples and the swollen weight of my breasts, at the backs of my knees, and in pulse at my throat. I’d never felt anything like this tight, hot twining between my legs.

Only the sun had ever kissed me there, the sun and the air and the cool touch of water. For nineteen years, nature had been my only lover, a shy thing, tentative and teasing. Priest was none of those things. He was anti-matter, sucking me up ruthlessly and refusing to spit me out, eating away at my edges until I was all core, all sensation. Heat and energy coiled up like a new planet blazing beside his black, fathomless depths.

This was better, this devastating intensity that razed me to the very ground of my soul. It was better than any poetry, better than any daydreams. It was too visceral to put into words, so I did not try.

I only moaned and thrashed and focused on the nearly painful pump of that thick, steel cock inside my newly taken body.

“Gonna fuck you every day now,” Priest threatened like it wasn’t the only promise it seemed I’d ever wanted to hear. “Gonna fuck you so hard and so long that you can’t walk right feelin’ the absence of me in your cunt. You’re gonna call me if it’s been too long, beggin’ me for a fix. You’ll be so addicted to the brand’a me on your body, you’ll do anything I ask, won’t you, Little Shadow? Sweet, little girl gone wanton just for me.”

“Yes,” I hissed so long I lost my breath and couldn’t find a way to gather it again. Instead, I started to pant loudly, chasing air and chasing my orgasm. “Oh, oh, Priest, oh my, fuck, I’m going to...to...” I couldn’t say, the words tangled up in my misfiring mind as fireworks started to pop and fizz in my belly.

“You’re gonna come for your Priest,” he finished as he yanked my hair so tightly tears sprang to my eyes and simultaneously landed another stinging slap to my ass. “Come all over my dick, pretty girl, and watch me as I come inside you. Want you to see exactly who owns this ass.”

I met his eyes beneath the dark, knotted brow, noted the sheen of sweat on his regal brow, and came as soon as I saw the blood gathered at the edge of his mouth, the way his tongue flicked out to taste it.

My womb tightened so hard, I worried I would implode, and then I did, every molecule of my body spiralling high and far. There was a keening in my ears I faintly recognized as my own voice calling out in hallelujah and a guttural groan as Priest fucked me somehow harder, then a roar of fierce, masculine triumph as he climaxed inside me. I could feel the heat of his seed against my tender walls, the trickle of it leaking from the seam of our joined bodies.

I sagged helpless against the basin, my limbs noncompliant, my pussy, pulse, and breath the only things still working, still throbbing.

There was a strange emptiness that made me flinch as Priest gently pulled

out of my body. I blushed as he cupped my pussy, smacking it lightly a few times the way you might a well-trained pet. It made my exhausted body tingle again, lit up with shame in a way I didn't know could be sexy.

I whimpered softly as he smeared his cum over my clit, then back up all the way to my asshole, which I clenched shyly. His soft exhale was a laugh for Priest. My panties and fishnets were ruined beyond recognition, so he tore them off my legs with efficient tugs, then flipped my skirt back down, smoothing it gratuitously over my ass.

Only then did he pull me up and turn me around, one arm banded around my low back and the other at my face, fingers abrading along my swelling, pink cheek.

“I'm gonna kill 'im for touchin' you,” he swore darkly, eyes a hot brand on my injury. “Gonna string that motherfucker up by his hands so his arms dislocate, then take my time slicin' him into pretty ribbons. When I'm done with that, when he's told me why the fuck he attacked you, I'll gut him like a fish, sliced right through the soft belly. I'll reach in and pull out his innards so I can feel him die from the inside out as I watch it happen.”

I stared into those luminous eyes with their long russet lashes, such pretty eyes for such a cruel man. I wanted him to read in my own gaze the words he'd carved into my heart long before he'd even touched me. Priest would never cross a line that would be too far for me to handle. He was capable of devastating violence, but he would never hurt my loved ones, if only because they were loved by me, and so was he.

Whatever I succeeded in writing on the screens of my blue eyes, Priest read the way a monk devours scripture. When he was done, his long sigh gusted against my face a moment before he tilted his forehead to mine. We rested there like that, his hand on my face, mine pressed to his chest, one over the rough woven badge on his breast that read “Enforcer”, until the cum between my legs began to dry and my heartbeat mellowed to match the steady thud I felt against my fingertips.

Finally, he pulled away to run his finger in the blood gathered in the hollow of my collarbone. With it, he drew on the only white corner left on my crop top. I let him, gazing up at him with all the bright, bursting love I felt in my chest radiating through my eyes.

When he was done, he gave me a slight curt nod. The passion that had suffused his face with human beauty was gone, leaving him once more cold and perfect as a statue. He flipped open his burner phone and dialed a number, bringing it to his cheek as he greeted Wrath.

I turned to the mirror, eyes already falling to the sketch he'd drawn on my shirt.

A wobbly, blood-drawn heart.

And just like that, Priest had once again turned one of the worst moments of my life into one of the very best.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PRIEST

THERE WAS AN ART TO TORTURE.

Few were natural talents and even fewer learned true skill.

It wasn't one's capacity for violence that made a torturer proficient.

It was one's capacity for patience.

A man in physical agony can withstand a surprising amount of physical pain before he breaks. It's the mental suffering that opens them up like a stuck lid banged against the counter.

In fact, it's a simple recipe, really. First, imagination. Nothing was

unthinkable; everything was geared toward the absolute desecration and dismantling of a human mind and body. Add that to prolonged time, both of inflicting torment for hours but also *anticipation*, so that they wonder themselves into madness guessing at when the next strike will land, and small hurts collected over time. Timing was everything, which explained why the tortured made the best torturers. Nothing counts more than experience.

With the hooded would-be rapist, I started as you might imagine, by targeting his erogenous zones. I strung him up in the barn on Angelwood Farm where the club often disposed of bodies or conducted illicit meetings. Manacled his hands in thick cuffs attached to chains on a pulley system fixed to the vaulted wood ceiling and strung him up until the satisfying pop of his dislocating shoulders echoed in the drafty barn.

Then I went to work on the bastard.

Now, he was naked and shivering in the deepening winter night, the chains chiming with his fierce shudders. It was like music to my ears, the rattle and the rumble of his pained groans, though they were warped by the screwdriver I'd driven through the soft underside of his chin into the roof of his mouth so it would stay open while I pried out his teeth with pliers.

He wasn't a seasoned con, a lifetime criminal, because he broke too quickly. Humpty fucking Dumpty tipped so easily over the wall, fracturing into pieces that were tediously simple to put together.

Four teeth gone, nipples sliced off and fallen to the ground like rounds of discarded pepperoni, pathetic excuse for his manhood beaten black and blue by brass knuckles, and he was blubbering.

"He fucking paid me," the motherfucker mumbled through the blood and metal through the center of his tongue.

"Take it out," Zeus ordered mildly, belying the leashed violence in every line of his posture where he leaned against my work table, watching me at play. "Wanna hear the bastard clearly."

My fisted hands shook with the need to disobey, with the need to make it

harder, not easier, for the man to talk, to think, to take one more breath, but I did as Zeus bid.

Not because he bid it, but because I wanted to know why this piece of shit had gone after Bea.

There was a cold, hard need in the base of my gut, a boulder of unsophisticated, almost primal yearning to rip this man and any other man who might desire Bea Lafayette apart with my bare hands. I wanted to fucking roar from every rooftop that she was *mine, mine, mine*.

I wanted her to wear my name on her skin, etched there forever by my blade. I wanted her name on my flesh in the same way, but visible, so that everyone who feared me would look at me and know they should fear her too.

Because if they fucked with Bea, they fucked with me.

And I wasn't a man you fucked with.

Ever.

With a vicious, slanted pull, I ripped the screwdriver from the asshole's mouth. His squeal matched the high yelp of the pigs in their pen outside.

"Please," he sputtered, bloody spittle spraying from his ravaged mouth. "Please, stop."

I cleaned the screwdriver on the bottom of my tee. Moments like this were why I tended to wear black.

"I'll stop, you tell me what I want to know," I said casually as I moved to my work table and surveyed the spread of my tools.

I always kept a canvas roll of my favourite torture devices and weapons in my saddlebags; a variety of blades from Karambits and gut hooks, scalpels and filet folding knives, bamboo for splintering fingernails, vials of poison, blunt instruments like hammers and mallets, various batons and whips, though I rarely used those. It was a collection I was proud of, one I'd collected over the years and took great care to keep clean and well-honed.

I held up a few different knives, listening to the sweet whimpers and

harsh exhales of my victim.

Considering the mood I was in, they weren't enough.

I eyed Wrath sitting on a bale of hay in the shadows. "Get me the chainsaw."

"Fuck!" Cal Mulligan shouted, tears coursing down his cheeks.

Curtains had worked his geeky magic and found old Cal online in about thirty seconds based on the driver's license we'd found in his wallet. He was a forty-three-year-old living outside of Entrance working for a local trucking company.

And he was a convicted sex offender.

"Fuck, man, please," he begged through his sobs. "Some guy I met paid me a fuck ton of cash to rape the girl."

"To rape Beatrice Lafayette," I confirmed. The chill in my voice had frost coating my throat. The cold cast of my heart was turning my blood to fucking ice.

When he didn't answer quickly enough, I slid the Karambit onto my right hand and punched a hole with the end of one knife just below his sternum.

Hot blood seeped out of the hole like sap from a tree and ran down his thick stomach to catch in the dense bush of his groin. Disgusting, pathetic excuse of a man.

I twisted the knife for no other reason than I wanted to crank up the volume on his screams.

"YES!" he hollered, sobbing so hard now his body shook and swayed, the bone in his dislocated shoulders grinding. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. Yes!"

"How did you meet him?" I asked flatly, leaving the knife in his gut, ready to unzip his belly with it and pull out his innards like I'd promised Bea I would. "Why did he want you to do that shit?"

"He-he didn't say," he panted.

I crashed my fist into his face, sending it careening to the left. "Try that again."

“Priest, brother,” Zeus tried to soothe me. “Don’t kill ’im yet.”

I couldn’t, *wouldn’t* be soothed. The image of the fuck’s hands on Bea’s pure, gorgeous flesh, the way he’d marked her fragile face with a vivid bruise, the fact that if I hadn’t been there, she might have been taken for only the third time in her fucking life by a worse kind of monster than me...

Fuck.

My eyesight tunneled.

I grabbed Cal fucking Mulligan’s fleshy cheeks in a tight grip and brought my snarling face an inch from his own. “You tell me everythin’ you fuckin’ know in the next ten seconds, or I’m gonna spend the next ten hours killin’ ya so slowly, all you’ll remember of your pathetic fuckin’ life is pain.”

“He paid me five grand to hurt ‘the pretty blond girl’ that spends all her time with Priest McKenna,” he spewed through his heaving breaths. “Told me I could find her by hanging out around Hephaestus Auto for a few hours. That you worked there.”

I stilled as everything in me centered around this new information.

Not the serial killer.

This wasn’t him. This wasn’t his gig or his motivation.

This was someone else entirely.

And just that easily, I knew who the fuck it was.

“What was the name of the man who sent you?” I demanded. When he hesitated, eyes rolling in his head like loose marbles looking for help from my witnessing brothers he would never get, I warned, “You tell me now, I’ll kill you in five hours instead.”

Cal’s bloody, torn lower lip warbled, his belly shaking under the blood like red Jell-O. Watching a man come apart at the seams was a special kind of headiness.

“W-Walsh,” he cried. “Sean Walsh.”

Adrenaline fizzed in my blood, urging me to hunt down Sean Walsh and splay him open with my knife, skin flesh from muscle, muscle from bone,

then whittle those into pretty fucking trophies for my fucking mantel.

“Sean Walsh,” I repeated just in case Curtains hadn’t heard.

A forgotten Walsh relative out to avenge his dead kin.

“He met me outside First Light Church,” Cal sang like a fucking canary.
“After a meeting.”

“Didn’t know they held Rapists Anonymous,” Wrath muttered darkly.
“Woulda made a point to hang out outside those buildings too if I’d known.”

The crack of his knuckles resonated through the barn.

Cal Mulligan sobbed louder.

“Enough,” Zeus ordered, already turning to clap a hand on Curtains’ shoulder and look over it at the computer screen. “Shut it down.”

“Gladly,” I said with one of my small curdled smiles.

Sinuously, I ripped the Karambit from Cal’s belly and dropped into a kneel in the pool of blood on the floor. A second later, his small cock was in my hands, the knife curling and cutting like butter through the appendage.

His howl rang through the damp wooden structure and sang through my blood.

“Leave him,” I snapped as Wrath moved forward to lever him down from the ceiling. “Let the motherfucker bleed out.” I flashed that little grin at Cal as he whimpered and shouted with pain. “This is my kinda mercy. Be grateful for it.”

I turned on my heel, boot squelching in the blood, and stalked out of the barn, needing the cold air to remind me I should have a cold heart. Instead, the traitorous organ thudded in my chest like a bellows, blowing hot blood through my entire body. I was on fire with something for the first time in my life, with passion instead of calculated ruthlessness. This violence wasn’t just sport; it was necessity.

He deserved to die again and again for laying a single finger on the angelic head of Bea Lafayette. Scum like Cal should run from her, knowing instinctively he was too fucking inferior to be within spitting distance of a

woman so pure of fucking soul.

I seethed against the side of the barn, leather back to the wet wood, the frigid fingers of the stormy night in my loose hair, whipping into my face. I welcomed the pain, but it didn't ground me the way it should have, so I pulled out my switchblade and cut a long, shallow gash in both my palms, tracing old scars. When I fisted my hands at my sides, the melodic drip of blood to the concrete beneath my feet calmed me.

The shivering of my thawing heart quelled with the pain, but I fished my tin of hand-rolled clove cigarettes out of my jeans pocket to further the calm.

The moment I took a deep breath of the toxic stick, I exhaled like a monk at prayer and closed my eyes to relish in the light-headed haze. The next, I was flicking the cigarette to the ground and stalking to my bike, mind clear and intent on hunting down Sean motherfucking Walsh so I could feed him his own bollocks.

A steely grip on my forearm stopped me in my tracks, causing my boots to slide in the frosted mud. When I turned around, King was there, holding fast to me even as I pulled away, his face set with that Garro look of determination.

"Don't go vigilante on this, Priest," King urged.

I blinked at him in answer, face held otherwise still.

He didn't get to tell me what to do, and he didn't get to act like he knew me well enough to map my goals. The bastard had gone and *died* for months, leaving the entire club shattered by his perceived loss.

Many of the brothers hadn't forgiven him yet.

Including me.

I wasn't the kinda man to form close connections, but King meant something to me, carved into the icy walls of my heart, and thinking he was dead had haunted me. I was a soldier of The Fallen, the leased beast of Zeus Garro, and most importantly, the wall anyone should have to get through to get to his fucking family.

And I'd failed.

"Priest," King repeated, pulling hard at me. "Don't go off fuckin' half-cocked. Something about this doesn't ring right."

When I turned around to swing a leg over my bike, King cursed. A moment later, he was on me, tackling me to the muddy ground. I grunted as I hit the soft earth, but I was already moving, rolling King onto his back before he leveraged me back onto mine. We went tumbling over the wet earth, our limbs lacking purchase in the slick, our intentions lost to the animal urge to overcome each other. Finally, I pinned him to the ground, reared back, and landed a punch to the square edge of his chin.

I snapped my teeth at him. "Only brothers get a shot'a reinin' me in. Last I checked, you were a ghost."

The starch went out of his muscles instantly, the cast of his features moving from snarl to shock.

I should've pressed my advantage, but there was something soft in his expression that made something sharp pierce through my thick skin.

"There it is, then," King muttered, angling his chin up again like a taunt. "Go ahead, man. If you need me to pay some fucked-up penance 'cause it's the only way you know, I'll fuckin' well pay it. Means we're brothers again, you can beat me into the fuckin' earth."

His words slotted between my ribs like a well-placed dagger, but it was the resolve in his face that twisted the knife agonizingly beneath my flesh.

He knew me too well. I wanted him to apologize with a pound of fucking flesh because that was the way I'd been raised. Father Hannigan's canes and ceremonial knives carving pieces out of my young, supple flesh.

No one knew even close to the full story of my childhood, and no one ever would, but King was a clever bastard, and he'd come close to guessing at it over the years.

Sickness bloomed like algae in my belly, turning my gut to acid.

I flung myself off King and rolled to a seat beside his prone form in the

mud, leaning against the cold chrome of my Harley.

“Get up,” I ordered, avoiding his eyes as he sat up and dragged his ass through the dirt to sit at my side.

Silence descended, the faintly buzzing static of a television with a lost signal. I propped my forearms on my raised knees and stared at the tombstone tats on my fingers. King’s name caught my eye, etched in black on the thumb of my right hand. The ink was still fresh, so clear it jumped from my flesh like a declaration.

The King is dead.

My throat burned with that long-lost fire that had cracked through the concrete foundation I’d laid in my gut a very long time ago. It had been boiling and roiling beneath the surface since that kiss with Bea in Purgatory Motel, growing in force every single day thereafter.

Truthfully, I missed being made of fucking ice.

“Ya know, bein’ dead was no cakewalk for me either,” King finally said.

The guy couldn’t stay quiet for long.

I made a kinda grunt in my throat that wasn’t affirmation or rejection.

King chuckled slightly. “Yeah, yeah. Listen, I made the decision; I gotta live with the fallout.” He paused, turning his head to look out over the freshly sown fields of wheat. The fingers of icy wind lifted his pretty boy hair and tangled it over the stub of a pencil he wore behind one ear. “Never gonna forget the look on my old man’s face when I came back. Thought I’d been torn straight down the fuckin’ middle by the agony on his face. Gotta son now, so I can guess better what kinda fresh hell Dad was livin’ every day I was lost to ’im.”

Yeah. There was no gettin’ past the nightmarish months King’d been lost to Z and the club. Z had Harleigh Rose, Ares, Angel, and Monster, and his Loulou to keep him going, but he’d been haunted by the ghost of his firstborn in a way that made even me believe in fucking ghosts.

King dropped his head back against the bike and looked up at the

heavens. The night was dark and cloud-strewn, but here and there, a glimmer of starlight pushed through its small, anaemic light.

“Missed my sister like a hole in the gut too. Missed out on the twins’ first months’a livin’, and that aches. Missed my friends. Fuckin’ longed for my brothers.” He paused, rolling his head against my bike in a way that made me want to snarl at him to take care, but the words turned to ash on my tongue when he tipped his bruising chin at me. “Missed you, Priest.”

My teeth clamped together against the surge of something rising up my throat. I tried to clear with a hard swallow and a short cough, but the feeling remained. It was as if the cancer of missing him I’d never really realized had infected me was purging itself from my body.

I fought it, angry for feeling anything, then angrier for heaping more emotion on top of that.

Then I opened my mouth, conceding defeat, and spat it out. “Feck off.”

King laughed. It was the Garro laugh, the sound that had roused me out of my stupor when I’d climbed off that freighter onto Canada soil and followed Zeus Garro for a coffee. It was that full-bellied, head lifted to the sky sound like it was some kinda offering to God, that made me realize even at seventeen, even neck-deep in trauma, that this was the kinda man anyone would follow.

His son had that laugh, and hearing it then was the final straw. I scowled at him as he laughed and flipped open my switchblade with a practiced flick of my wrist.

“I’ll gut ya, you keep laughin’ like that. ’S givin’ me a bloody headache,” I grunted.

The bastard laughed harder.

I ignored him, mostly, looking up at the stars, counting the few that sparkled in the dark. But that sound was a ribbon of silk in my bloodstream.

“Not a crime to love someone, ya know,” King said through his dissipating laughter. “Some say it’s the reason for livin’ at all.”

“We live to die.” There was no deviating from the truth of that.

“It’s not religious to think otherwise,” King poked at me.

“Religion isn’t the fuckin’ enemy,” I said, reluctant to share but irritated enough to do so anyway.

King arched a brow. “Coulda fuckin’ fooled me with the way you talk sometimes.”

“It’s the organized shit that gets me,” I muttered, staring at the edge of the blade between my hands, the way the moonlight made it iridescent like Bea’s eyes. “That shit’s been used way too fuckin’ much for evil ends. Believin’ or not believin’ in a higher power isn’t reason enough to ruin people’s lives.”

King blinked.

His shock made me seethe with bad-temperedness. Not at him, but with myself. When was the last bloody time I talked about any of this shit? The words I needed to articulate it were slow moving in my brain and thick on my tongue.

“Read about religion to understand it. For a long fuckin’ time, it was an obsession. Thought it’d make all the shit I’d been through make sense. It fuckin’ didn’t. But I learned all religions stem from the same place, like rivers flowin’ into the sea. People gotta believe in good and bad, in justice, to get through life feelin’ like the hardship of it is worth it.”

“And you, you think it’s worth it knowin’ it just leads to death?”

Bea’s face was there, summoned unwittingly to the forefront of my mind. The curve of her heart-shaped face so small palmed by my thick, evil-doing hands. The sweet form of her pink mouth smiling that smile with the curled edges, barely parted lips, like an inhale of hope was travelling through them. Like she couldn’t bear the thought of me not touching her, nor could she resist being wholly overwhelmed by the feel of me on any inch of her.

If there was a God, it was there in the way that angel looked at me like I was salvation itself.

I didn’t respond to King.

He didn't press.

The silence again, this time soft as velvet in the ink dark night. My ass was cold in the mud, Cal Mulligan's blood drying tight on the skin of my neck, cheeks, and hands. But I could've sat there, maybe for hours. Before he'd left, King would've sat there with me for all of them.

He was just that kinda guy. He was drawn to the quiet dark of a person's mind. Mute and me. The wild he'd pulled out of Cress like a black ribbon bound too tight around her soul that'd just been begging to unspool.

"Never really understood the phrase 'see things as they are,'" King mused, looking like some Hollywood actor playing at rebellion, all that hair and that smile. If I hadn't known the man since he was a preteen begging me to teach him how to yield a blade, I would've thought he was some kinda fraud. "People don't see things as they are 'cause there's no consensus on what the norm is. People see things as *they* are. Through the lens of their own bias."

I didn't say a word because I knew King. He'd eventually get to some kind of pivotal point.

He did so slanting me a clever-eyed stare. "Lotta people see Priest McKenna as a killer, as some kinda nightmarish monster. That's their truth. But pretty little Bea Lafayette doesn't see a monster when she looks at you, brother. She sees the man who makes her feel whole.

"We aren't just the things we present ourselves as. In my experience, the true key to knowin' someone is to watch what captures their attention. Bea might have this sunshiny disposition and wear those godawful heart-shaped sunglasses, but behind them, she's watched you since the day she met you." King shrugged as if he hadn't just handed me some serious as fuck wisdom. "I'm thinkin' that speaks fuckin' volumes, man."

"Already made 'er mine," I admitted gruffly. "It's done."

"But you aren't happy about it?"

"Don't know what happiness is, really." I tried to think of the times

before it all when I'd been just a lad, when Ma and Pa, Danae and Keely were still alive. The images I conjured were blurry, distorted by time and worn pale by frequent handling. When I was at the church, those memories were the only things that kept me going. They'd long since lost their magic, and that happiness was less than a memory; it was only a scar I could barely remember receiving.

King chuckled, running a thumb against the gold wedding band on his left hand. It was thickset and ostentatious because he was proud as fuck to be the husband of a stand-up woman like Cress. As he fucking well should be. "There was a time years ago I had to give the definition'a happiness to my wife too. I'm gonna give a different one to you, now, 'cause sure as shit, you're a different kinda soul than her." His eyes cut to me, so light they seemed supernatural, glowing in the moon the same colour as its light. "Happiness is lookin' into a woman's eyes and seein' the best version'a you reflected back at you."

There was a cramp in my gut as if the emotion coursing through me was giving me indigestion. I gritted my teeth through the strange sensation and glared at the biker poet beside me.

"Anyone ever tell ya you're wise for an eejit?" I asked dryly.

His chuckle was as familiar to me as the sound of my own breath. If I was the kinda man who had a best mate, King woulda been mine.

Until that moment, a small part of me had lived in fear that he'd returned from the dead wrong, a zombie like me at seventeen, like Wrath since Kylie.

But sitting there hip-deep in mud talking about shit that couldn't have been written in books under stars that felt all-seeing that night, it truly felt like our King had returned.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BEA

OKAY, SO I FOLLOWED HIM.

In my defense, I was worried.

Also, curious.

After seeing the tidy leftover of Priest's violence with Patrick Walsh at Purgatory Motel, then his barely leashed aggression with Eric when he thought he was involved in the serial killings, I had a strange yet insistent need to witness Priest in his element.

It was perverse, maybe, but it was like being with an athlete and not

watching his games.

I wanted to see the full extent of who this man was so I could love every single inch of his soul.

Angelwood Farms was a setting that had a place in The Fallen lexicon, but no one had expressly talked about it with me, and I had certainly never visited. From the outside, the towering white barn, fields of freshly tilled soil, and a pen filled with snuffling pigs almost looked the picture of pastoral peace.

But I could hear the screams from where I stood in the shadows of the forest off to one side of the road leading up to the buildings. The sound of the wind rushing flat across the fields and the rustle of it in the trees combined with the screams was oddly stirring.

When they stopped, I watched Priest stalk from the building, King following, then their short tussle in the mud. Logically, I knew watching two muscle-bound, gorgeous men fight like heathens shouldn't arouse me, but it did.

I wanted very much to be mud bound with Priest heavy on top of me, almost crushing the breath from me so every short pant was something like a bullet from the compressed chamber of my lungs. Something a little dangerous. It was the flint to the spark in my gut, that danger. I wanted a man most people feared to drill me just a little too hard into the dirt.

By the time they finished their mostly quiet requiem, and the rest of the men had filtered out of the barn like demons from the bowels of hell, I was edgy with lust and impatient for action.

It was almost too good to be true that Priest was left behind, leaning against his great metal bike with his muddy boots crossed, face a dark collage of drying earth and human blood, smoking one of his hand-rolled clove cigarettes. I could imagine the scent because I'd stolen one once when he'd left the battered vintage Irish breakfast tea tin on the bar top at the clubhouse during a party a few years ago.

The earthy musk of tobacco leaves, the sharp hit of cloves, and the muted notes of something kind of sweet, like amber or vanilla.

I'd smelled it before bed for so long, the paper had disintegrated under the natural oils of my reverent fingers like the pages of Grandpa's ancestral Bible. Even then, I'd collected the debris into an old Hello Kitty tin and slept with it under my pillow.

I was a girl obsessed and without shame. For a moment as I watched him with hungry eyes, devouring the dull glint of his red hair in the low light of the cloud-covered sky and the single lamp over the barn doors, I wondered why it was so taboo for a woman to have such an intensity of feeling, but so sexy for a man to be so possessed with longing.

I didn't care if it made me creepy or mad.

I was in love with a psychopath, after all. I figured I needed a pinch of madness to suit him so well as I did.

My gaze fell to my hands, the carved Dara Knot I fingered gently, rubbing my thumbs on the cracks I'd put there in my times of turmoil the way Priest had meant me to.

You are not weak.

With Priest, I didn't feel weak. I didn't feel as though my femininity, my sweetness, or my innocence made me silly or trifling. They made me strong, forged in love and kindness, and wasn't that so much more forceful than hate or trauma?

I was going to prove it, I'd determined, by making my broken Priest happy.

By making him fall in love with me too.

When I looked up from replacing the Dara Knot in my pocket, he was gone.

I blinked, wondering for one wild moment if I'd imagined the entire scene.

But then there was cold, hard pressure at the back of my head.

I'd never had a gun held to my skull before, but it was unmistakable. A sense of calm overtook me, a sensation like drowning, the pressure against my body of all that water above me, the knowledge I wouldn't make it to the surface, the hard stop of my breath, and the muted roar in my ears.

"Little Shadow." The voice slithered out of the darkness. "One day, following me will lead to your death."

A shiver skipped down my spine, a rock flung against water. "I could probably say the same for you. I seem to attract a certain kind of man."

"Killers, all of us," Priest agreed in that voice that could scare a seasoned criminal. "Like moths to an eternal flame."

"Light needs darkness in order to shine," I reminded him, feeling suddenly fearful in a way he probably hadn't anticipated.

My fear was not rooted in violence. Priest would never lay a finger on me I did not want. My fear was almost claustrophobic, as if my love was this great overflowing thing trapped in a room of ice. No one had ever yearned as I did for a spring thaw.

"I'm not poetry, Bea. I'm savagery. Don't pretend what we both know; no words can pretty up the ugliness of what I am." He sounded so cruel then, so condescending and old. I'd always been aware of the age difference—our personalities only proved to heighten it—but I'd never felt so young and girlish standing there with hope in my hand like a wilting flower.

"I don't need a reason to murder. I kill because I am capable of killing. It is my art, and in its own way, because of that, it's also my soul. I need death to remind me why I'm alive. This is *me*, Bea. Stained in blood and sin with zero fucking regrets."

"The heart of a killer can still love," I pressed, but it felt like pressure on a mortal wound, blood bubbling up too fast beneath my fingers. Futilely, I pressed harder. "Even Death has a heart."

He cocked his head, eyes blank behind his blink, hardly humouring me. "In storybooks maybe."

“In the *Bible*,” I protested. “Satan has human qualities. He sins because he is the most human of them all. He lusts and loves.” But religion was not the way to reach this man, so frantically, I continued. “Hades loved Persephone so much he ripped open the earth to steal her light for himself in the Underworld.”

The glimmer was faint, but enough. I used it as the North Star through his wintry heart’s landscape.

My hands on his were sweating slightly with my angst.

“You stole me away the moment I saw you,” I told him. “You didn’t mean to, but a crater opened up in the earth beneath my feet, and I fell into your world, desperate to be in it and in your arms.”

Swallowing the hard knot in my throat, I turned to face him. He dropped the hand holding the gun to his side, then seeing my gaze, he shoved it into the holster beneath his cut.

Gingerly, unsure of his response, I reached forward to collect his empty hands. They were cold and heavy in mine, but he let me lift them between us even though his stance was rigid.

He had such beautiful hands—long tapered fingers, thick and lightly furred with russet hair the same reddish-brown as the freckles marring the skin that wasn’t covered in dark ink. The tombstone tattoos were rendered beautifully, the names and dead clear even in their small script. I ran my fingertips over them, feeling the grooves in the skin, rubbing my nail over the names: *Mam, Pa, Danae, Keely, O’Neal, Mute, Garrick, King*. So many people he’d lost or killed, all worn on his skin like deliberate scars. There were those too, though, the wounds that had never healed to invisibility. Thin lines crisscrossed his palms in varying shades of nude, white, pink, and livid red, the latter fresh and obviously self-inflicted. A cicatrix in the shape of a whorl like some strange burn, the skin silky and fine. They were large, strong hands, murdering-men hands, but they had only ever brought me peace. They were storytelling hands, more eloquently speaking to Priest’s bleak history

than his lips had even given service too.

A killer's hands had never been so loved.

I stared up at his shadowed gaze as I brought the heft of one to my mouth, pressing a firm kiss to his palm that unfurled his stiff fingers like a blooming rose. Then I did the same with the right, then held them together so I could run my lips over those bruised, bloodied knuckles.

When I pulled away, his blood was on my mouth.

Anointed by his sins, I stared up at him clear-eyed and brimming full of intention. "The only nightmarish part in all of this is the idea that you'd leave me in the dark alone. I'm here, Priest. Even before you, I was *here*. I'm the sister-in-law of The Fallen MC prez. I'm in this life whether you like it or not. Loving you isn't a worse fate than death. The idea of not loving you? That's what makes me feel like I'm dying."

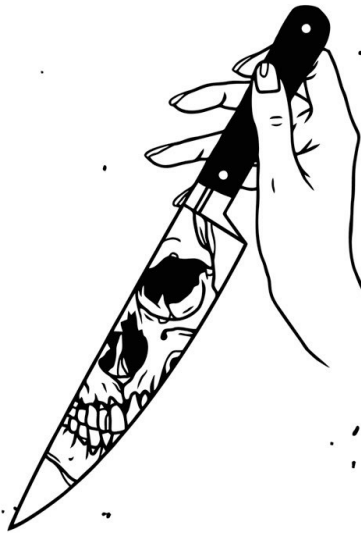
A cloud passed over the moon, casting Priest all in black, yet I felt as if I'd never seen him so clearly. There was need in his eyes. *Need*. So fierce and poignant it radiated off him like a scent, like a vibration. I could feel it with all my senses.

And knowing I was the one to make him feel so penetratingly?

It eviscerated me.

"Come," I said, softly, coaxing even as I pulled him inexorably toward the light. "Show me who you really are, only ever alone. Let me follow you into the dark."

He moved so quickly, I gasped in excitement and in shock. His hand was at my throat, squeezing just enough, settling me in an instant. When he spoke, it was a sinuous rasp against my parted, panting mouth. "You wanna see dark, *mo cuishle*? I'll show you every inch of it. Just remember, you begged me for it."



HE TOOK ME TO A GRAVEYARD.

It was a little plot close enough to the farm, but otherwise in the middle of nowhere.

We took my car.

My pretty pink Fiat that Priest folded his long, hard body into like a clown car after he put his things in the trunk. I didn't know what detritus an enforcer for a criminal syndicate carried around with him, but I could imagine.

Or I thought I could because when we finally pulled up to the barely illuminated graveyard, gargoyles and angel tombstones haunting the landscape, I wasn't prepared for what he pulled from the trunk and hefted over his shoulder.

The body of the man who'd attacked me.

He was wrapped in a serviceable dark blanket of some kind, taped close at the neck and feet. Priest carried him like a sack of grain, muscles bulging in the close-fitting black hoodie beneath his cut as he stalked off with his package into the dark.

With his hood up, he looked exactly the way most artists rendered the Reaper.

Priest didn't wait for me, and something was reassuring about that. He wasn't going to check in and make sure I was fine with anything. This was what I'd wanted, to know him not just carnally, but criminally, to know that complicated, substantial part of him shrouded in secrecy. Once he'd made a decision, he didn't falter, and he expected the same of me. There was respect in that, which buoyed me above the turbulent waters of fear and doubt in my belly.

As I'd been doing for years, I followed him, hastening after him into the trees.

The night air was bitter cold, the clouds over us condensed and quilted, overstuffed with downy snow. I wished I was wearing more than just my plaid skirt and cream peacoat with the super cute wooden buttons. If it snowed, I'd freeze.

But my discomfort was easy to ignore in the face of my morbid captivation. I was silent as Priest stalked up the slight incline, then cut through the haphazard plots in a way that said he'd done this many, many times before.

He stopped by an uneven row of crypts lining the back of the rusted wrought-iron fence. Easily, he balanced the body of a grown man on his shoulders, traded the black gym bag from one hand into the other, and fished a set of antique keys out of his pocket. The black scrolled gate groaned open ominously, the sound echoing in the empty interior.

Empty, but for the dead.

I shivered delicately, knowing whatever was about to happen was pure, unadulterated sacrilege. My spiritual soul quivered as I took my first tentative step into the freezing crypt after Priest, who had forged inside like it was his own home. When I was immediately struck down, I rolled my shoulders back and told myself to stop being such a ninny.

The air was so cold it burned my nostrils as I sucked in the scent of musk and wiped a cobweb from my nose. The stone structure was surprisingly large, almost cavernous, with dozens of slots for caskets and a little altar with an elaborate stone cross. Priest knelt beside it, his head bowed and hands raised, but obscured from me by his broad back, the fiery winged skull of The Fallen emblem laughing at me from the leather. If he had been anyone else, I would've assumed he was praying.

Instead, there was a metallic clatter, and seconds later, Priest was shifting enough to let me see the large, flat metal box he'd dragged out from under the altar. Inside, there were two shovels, rolls of canvas, rope, sheers, and a Mason jar filled with silver coins. I recognized the latter instantly as the coins Bat made for Fallen funerals, embossed with The Fallen emblem on one side and an image of a reaper on the other.

He didn't reach for those now. Instead, he shifted in his crouch to grab a shovel, then looked up at me with as happy an expression as I had ever seen. In fact, the sight of his crinkling pale eyes and slightly tilted lips nearly took my breath away, but it was the almost boyish mischievousness in his eyes that stole my heart.

He raised his eyebrows and extended one of the shovels my way. "Ever dug a grave before, sweet Bea?"

Oh, but this was a test, and he was enjoying administering it, pushing me hard to see if I would run crying back into the light.

I'd show him.

I hiked my chin in the air, quickly tied my hair back in its pink ribbon, and accepted the wooden handle of the shovel the way an incumbent queen accepted a golden sceptre on the throne. "No, but I'm an exceptionally quick learner."

There was laughter in Priest's voice, though his face was emotionless as he stood with the other shovel and moved to hoist the body into his arms once more. The sound of it made his voice rumble, abrading my skin until it

pebbled with lust. “Oh, I don’t doubt that.”

Armed with our burial weapons, Priest led the way out of the crypt and moved economically through the graves once more.

“So what’s with you using a creepy crypt as a storage shed?” I called ahead because he was moving fast and my high heels, though thickly wedged, kept slipping on the frosted mud. “Just for morbid kicks or what?”

Something like a snort was half lost in the wind as it rattled the dark arms of the oak and cedar trees surrounding us.

“Kodiak,” he explained when he came to an abrupt stop at a seemingly random grave in the middle of the unkempt cemetery. There was a massive stone cross nearly the same height as Priest with faint markings at the base that were too worn to read properly. “Kodiak’s family mausoleum.”

I blinked, blowing a lock of hair out of my face as it fell from my ponytail. “And he’s okay with you using it as a tool shed?”

“Was his idea,” he murmured as he laid the body down and arranged his tools in exact alignment beside it.

“Oh-kay,” I drawled. “I thought Kodiak was First Nations? Don’t they have different burial rights?”

In truth, I didn’t know much about the mysterious tracker in *The Fallen* other than that he’d appeared a few years ago and never left, and that he was decidedly beautiful with the thickest, longest black hair I’d ever seen. Truthfully, he was almost as scary as Priest, which was saying something, so I didn’t exactly make a point of prompting small talk with him.

“His dad’s white,” Priest grunted as he shucked his cut. “Hates him and that whole side’a his family. Think the idea’a this desecration gets ’im hard.”

His smile was a sharp slice of white teeth in the dark, a Cheshire cat grin that was slightly manic. He didn’t have to say the blasphemy turned him on too because that much was obvious.

I was about to tease him for it when he shocked me by taking off his black hoodie. The black, long-sleeved thermal he wore underneath kissed

every inch of his skin, highlighting the dips and hills of his beautifully honed muscles beneath the thin fabric. This was as close as I had ever been to seeing Priest naked. Even in the summer, he wore long sleeves and denim. I'd always wondered idly why, until recently when it became apparent something was going on beneath his clothes besides the ink of his tattoos.

I wanted desperately for him to show me his naked self in so many aspects, least of all the bare skin of his torso and legs, but he stopped at the tee and put a shovel over his shoulder as he walked out the dimensions of the grave.

My eyes hungrily mapped his sheer power as he reared back with the shovel lifted, then stabbed it deep into the hard crust of the earth.

He worked quietly for a few minutes, seemingly unaware of my drooling and shameless ogling before he graced a hand against the shovel where it was planted in the earth and cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Witnessin’ and doin’ dark deeds are two very different things. Told you once, I’ll tell you again, if I’m a killer, you’re a killer. Not like most men in the MC, *mo cuishle*. I got no plans to keep secrets from you, but this is an all or nothin’, you get me?” He jerked his chin at me. “Get goin’ or *go*.”

Harsh, but in his own way, with his own wisdom, fair too. I fished in the overlarge pocket of my coat, pulled out a handful of Fuzzy Peaches I always kept in my pockets, and popped them into my mouth with vigor.

“Okay,” I said with a mouth full of sugar. “Move aside; a new gravedigger is in town.”

He tried to hide it, but I swore I caught a glimmer of a smile in his beard.



APPARENTLY, PRIEST HAD MANY BURIAL SITES AND BODY DISPOSAL METHODS. He didn't go in-depth, explaining all the wonderful ways he covered up murder, but he grunted enough to paint a certain kind of picture. He used Evergreen Cemetery because it was at capacity and mostly forgotten save a few family crypts that still had space for more members. I was amazed to learn that up to six bodies could fit in a single grave. There was such resourcefulness in digging up someone already buried and forgotten to add more, knowing no one would ever look there again.

I lasted forty-five minutes, but it took almost two hours. It was roughly 150 square feet of dirt that needed to be dislodged, the night was cold and dark, and I was only five foot four with minimal muscle mass. My stamina was pathetic, but I was happy to sit on the flat tombstone wearing Priest's clove-scented cut around my shoulders while I watched him sweat and heave in the dirt.

It fascinated me to watch Priest open up about his dark deeds. The entire expanse of my skin felt electrified with desire as I watched him work calmly, efficiently, and somewhat brutally to bury his sins. It was erotic as hell to

watch him dig that grave, to see the sheer strength in that long, lean form, and the determination, the unwavering longevity he had. I wanted to pounce on him, to devour the grim line of his mouth and scratch at that deeply contoured back.

But there was such focus to his efficiency that I held myself in check. I'd never been a sexual aggressor. I didn't even know how to begin, especially with a man who was mostly unmoved by normal social cues.

So, I sat mainly silent, sometimes chatting mostly to myself about how I missed Sampson and Delilah, about how I was worried about Billy Huxley and his poor family, about why Fuzzy Peaches were a good substitute to real ones in the winter when it was hard to find the fruit. Priest didn't react, but there was a quality to him that somehow made me aware he was attentive to every word I spoke.

"Oh," I said at one point, a short exclamation of awed joy as I tipped my head into the sky. "Priest, look! It's snowing."

I laughed into the dark, crowded sky as soft, sugar crystal flakes of snow melted on my forehead, in my eyelashes, on my extended hand. Then, because sitting wasn't enough, not when it was snowing beautifully and the world was all draped in pressurized silence, waiting with bated breath to be covered in cold, I stood and spun around trying to catch flakes in my open mouth.

"It's silly," I called to him. "But snow tastes so sweet straight from the sky."

A cold hand wrapped around my left hand. I startled, painfully inhaling a large gulp of cold air.

Priest stood there, eyes dark under his furrowed brows, intensity radiating off him in tangible waves. When I tried to move, his grip on my wrist only tightened.

"Priest?" I questioned softly.

I gasped again as he suddenly tugged me hard into his body and slid a

hand into the back of my hair, clenching it hard enough to dislodge the ribbon and pin me in place. My hair fell in a sweet-scented curtain around us as he took my mouth in a deep, possessing kiss.

Instantly, I liquified, my cold body like soft wax against his hard edges. He kept me upright with only that stinging grip in my hair and a hard hand on my ass, kneading the flesh there as he held me close against his thigh.

When he finally tore his mouth from mine, I couldn't help but whimper instinctually, filled as much with yearning as I was with lust.

Priest's face was all shadow, the deep black valleys of darkness at his eyes, under the steep edge of his cheekbones making him look skeletal. In the middle of a graveyard, burying a body together, being kissed by a man who embodied death in so many iterations, somehow, I had never felt more alive.

"You're right," he said, so gruff his words seemed pained. "Tastes sweet on your tongue."

I surged at him, launching my body at his, scrambling inelegantly to climb his long torso and wrap myself securely around him. He didn't help; he stood there like a headstone of some dark angel and let me spend my enthusiasm on him like some untrained puppy. I peppered his bearded face with kisses, sucked at the lobe of one ear, ran my hands a little too hard through his tangled, long tresses. My hips canted and pressed awkwardly against his groin, eager for friction but unsure how to secure it. Growing frustrated with myself, my lust flaming higher as some perverse result of Priest's impassivity, I finally nipped at his lower lip to provoke him. The full swell broke beneath my little teeth, blood welling in the crease. I lapped it with my tongue and shivered with longing at the salt and iron tang.

Oh, but it worked.

His arms banded around me too tight, twin cobras suffocating my youthful, untrained fervour. When I grew still and pliant against him, he molded me deliberately with his cold strong hands in the position of his choosing, legs wrapped around his waist, hands linked around his neck,

throat exposed to the march of his hard teeth down my jugular. My pulse beat madly against his tongue.

“Oh my,” I breathed as he stroked one hand down the crease of my bum cheeks to the apex of my thighs.

With a quick, vicious tear, my underwear was gone, cold air wafting over my hot, wet flesh. Priest’s cool fingers felt divine as they parted my folds and played in the wet, swirling up over my clit, then down to dip and tease at my entrance.

“Gonna fuck you here,” he warned in that rough-hewn voice that felt like an extra set of calloused hands on my skin. “Gonna fuck you here, now, take you hard on the ground and fill you up ’til you can’t take anymore’a me.”

“Yes,” I hissed, trying to pump my hips against his excruciatingly light touch.

In retribution, he shocked me by swatting my entire sex with his big hand. I jerked at the sensation as heat sparked through my entire body. My eyes were wide, mouth parted as I pulled back to stare at him in awe.

Priest’s eyes glimmered, pale frames around dark pupils.

He slapped me again.

Breath exploded from my mouth. I felt a telltale trickle of wet down my thigh, the pooling of it in Priest’s cruel palm.

“Priest,” I gritted through my teeth, feeling dangerously close to electrocution. I didn’t understand what was happening to me; why such force against my tender clit could feel like an explosion of sparks. “Wh-what are you doing to me?”

“Owning you,” he responded instantly on a growl.

The next second, he was taking us to the dirt. The frosted grass crackled beneath my body as he lay me on the earth, propped up on one elbow just enough to keep from suffocating me while the other hand dove into his shirt to pull out a blade on a thin silver chain. I panted wildly, chest heaving so badly I worried he might nick my flesh for one mad second. Of course, he

didn't. The dagger was an extension of himself. He rucked up the sweater I wore beneath my coat and cut away my pink lace bra so my small breasts tumbled out, nipples hard enough to cut glass in the cold air. It was nothing compared to the cold of the steel against my trembling belly as he ran it around my belly button over and over and over.

He tipped his head down to watch it. "Such soft, white skin. Like fuckin' silk. Just a little flick"—he followed his own direction, his wrist twisting slightly to open up a tiny cut above the whorl in my belly then again below. I gasped at the sharp zing of pain that was all too brief before it morphed into pleasure—"and I could tear all that silk in two."

I frowned even though my mind was drugged with pleasure, my eyes heavy and hot in my head. "No, never. You'd never hurt me, Priest."

Something twisted flared across his features like lightning across a dark sky. The knife rasped along my belly, gently through my soft curls, then to my left inner thigh. My legs quivered as he drew hard lines with the side of the steel inside my flesh from upper inner thigh to the top of my knee.

"A line for every year you've been mine and haven't known it," he said, almost to himself, hypnotized by the sight of my skin raised and red in the wake of his blade.

"How many?" I wondered, breathlessly.

I couldn't conceive that he might have wanted me before now, before the accident. He was always so aloof, so impenetrable.

"Watched you eat a peach at sixteen," he muttered, shucking the chain over his head and dropping it along with the knife to the ground so he could undo his fly and bring his long, curved cock into the snow-bright night. "Cut it with a sharp blade into segments and licked the juice off the steel." He looked up into my eyes after he slotted the thick, hot head of his cock at my grasping entrance to growl, "I wanted to be the knife."

In one unyielding stroke, he seated himself to the hilt inside me. My head ground into the grassy mud as I keened long and low to the moon flickering

through the clouds. I clasped him to me, clinging so he would anchor me through the mind-rending sensation of his bulk splitting me in two.

“Hold tight, Little Shadow,” he warned as he fisted a hand in the back of my hair and pinned my hip to the ground with the other, rendering me immobile, perfectly positioned for his pleasure. “Gonna fuck you so hard, you forget there’s a God.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but there was nothing in my head but the acute stretch of him inside me, the way my womb seemed to contract and pussy pulse. He dragged his erection out of me on a slow, friction-filled glide, then thrust savagely back to the end of my sex.

Owning me, he’d said.

Well, I was owned then. He fucked me into the earth, pinning me, using me, but also letting me use him because he was giving me one of my greatest fantasies. The illusion of being taken almost against my will, the feel of a large, much stronger body trapping me with hard hands, strong teeth, and a plundering cock was too heady, too perfect to voice.

I made little animal noises in my throat that built in frequency and crescendo as he fucked me raw. Together with his harsh grunts and the heavy gasp of our breaths, we made a kind of animalistic symphony. I felt animal then or heathen, something base and dark.

I turned my head into Priest’s neck and bit into the straining tendons there. His cock *kicked* inside me as he groaned raggedly.

Somehow, he found the will to fuck me harder still. His thrusts pushed me into the earth, digging a grave of lust around us.

He liked the pain, I was learning, just as I did.

I dove beneath the end of his tee, raking my nails up his deeply delineated abdomen around to his back, scratching so hard I knew I was breaking his skin.

Priest *roared*. Head tipped back to the sky like a wolf howling to his moon, he roared and fucked me, displacing a hand from the ground to my

throat so he could choke me lightly. My vision sparked with white and black like static, but I didn't want to change the channel. I wanted that pressure in my head to break open and explode. I wanted the pain in my well-used, recently virgin pussy to fracture around him.

Vaguely, I was aware of the depth of my depravity, fucking like an animal in a graveyard. Vaguely, I wondered if I might be smote down by God.

Resolutely, I decided if I died there and then while impaled on Priest's long, ruthless cock, I'd die a happy sinner and live forever content in hell.

Those eyes you picture following you in the night, dark and feral, stalking you from the shadows? Those were the eyes looming above me now. The eyes of a predator pinning down its prey and taking his fill of the spoils. He fucked me with all the vigor of victory and the almost lazy arrogance of someone who was used to winning.

"Gonna come in this pretty, tight cunt," Priest threatened as if his words didn't bring me an inch closer to death.

I understood now why the French called it that, a little death.

It was fitting I was already in a grave of our own making.

"Gonna fill you up with cum so it leaks outta ya for days," Priest continued, his eyes glazed and darker than the night around us. "Your poor, swollen cunt is gonna ache after this, and the only thing that can fix it is me slidin' right back, isn't that right, Bea?"

"Yes," I agreed, head flopping from side to side, mud in my hair, snow in my eyes, my entire body focused only on the one central point inside my pussy he continued to drive against. "Yes, yes, Priest. Oh, my God, I love this. I-I love sinning like this with you."

"Say it," he ordered coldly, his words lashing harder than the wind against my face. His hand squeezed briefly too tight around my neck. "Wanna hear that sweet voice speak filth for me."

"I want your cum," I promised him, too far gone to feel the

embarrassment I might normally have been overcome with. Instead, the words felt sweet as Fuzzy Peaches on my tongue. Sweet and elemental as snow. “I want you to come deep inside me. I want to feel you own me.”

That was it.

For both of us.

The sound of Priest, usually so silent and taciturn, overtaken by desire, growling and grunting with it as he fucked me so hard into the dirt, snapped the elastic band holding me together and both of us went spiralling.

Wheeling.

Falling.

All of it in the dark, in the cold, the two of us the only two beings for miles. The air around us steamed, gentle curls of hot air dissipating into the sky.

We breathed each other, mouths open, foreheads aligned. I could see Priest’s gaze, but it was all in shadow.

“You may be a killer,” I said softly, risking the ruination of our intimacy by pushing for more. It was in my nature to delve deeper into someone’s psyche. I could no more stop myself from pressing than I could from loving erotically charged pain. “But you aren’t heartless.”

My hand moved from his hair, over the crescent moon of his cheek, down his neck to rest on the steady, hard beat of his heart.

“If you own me, doesn’t that mean I own you?” I meant it as a question, but the cast of my voice made it a plea.

The quality of his stillness changed then. It solidified like water into ice, rain into the snow now thick in the air all around us, settling into a thin blanket over his back and hair.

I thought I’d lost him. Closing my eyes, I steeled myself for rejection, even knowing it would obliterate me.

“The only thing I can give you is my darkness, my desire, and the endless hunger I feel for you in my gut.”

My lids popped open to see Priest staring at me solemnly, so sombre and acute with something like self-hatred it felt like we were in a confessional.

“Okay,” I said immediately, letting the joy ricocheting inside me burst across my face. He blinked as if into the sun. “Okay, then.”

He kissed me then, a hard stamp of lips against lips, and it felt like an official seal on our declaration. I wasn’t sure if we were dating or not, if this meant we could have sleepovers and go on dates—all the rituals of courting—but I didn’t care. Priest wasn’t a normal man, and I was discovering I was nowhere close to a normal woman.

It felt good to acknowledge my otherness. I was happy to live in the shadows so long as I could hold his hand.

As long as I belonged to the reaper of The Fallen, I was in heaven.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PRIEST

THE FEEL OF MY BIKE BETWEEN MY THIGHS, THE ICY TUG OF WIND IN MY unbound hair, and the endless scope of road to ride before me were three of my favourite damn things about my decidedly ascetic lifestyle. I couldn't concentrate on any of them at the moment. Not with Bea pressed to my back, not knowing she was wearing nothing underneath that little skirt. I'd left her so wet, so full of my cum, I knew it must've been leaking all over the leather seat of my bike. My cock was an iron bar in my jeans as I thought of how she was baptising it with her sweet fucking honey.

The entire ride was a battle. I regretted driving back to the farm to swap out her car for my Harley. It was her idea as much as mine, and now I knew why. The feel of her was a distraction I couldn't shake.

I intended to drop her off at her house, search it before she went in, then wait outside until some other brother arrived to safeguard her. She wanted to spend a night in her own bed, which was fair, but there was no way in hell I'd leave her without at least two of my most capable brothers as her guards.

Even then, I had no doubt I'd end up back at her little pink house later that night to stand sentry in the shadows myself.

But I needed space.

Suddenly, just existing in the same place as her, knowledge that had once brought me some kind of fucked-up solace, was too much to bear. My skin itched and burned the way it had years ago when I'd been scarred and torn and branded. All the old wounds of my flesh and mind were festering, blistering, and I knew they'd pop horrifically into open sores if I stayed a moment more with my angelic girl with the dirty mind.

But, but, but....

The refrain haunted my thoughts.

Memories of the night flashed through my brain each time I repeated the caveat.

Alone in a graveyard with a dead man and a killer, Bea had offered her hand in a way that implied she was willing to follow me wherever I went, and the courage of that action made the breath catch in my throat.

"Come," she'd said, ethereal in the moonlight, voice as sweet as some singing angel. "Show me who you really are, only ever alone. Let me follow you into the dark."

That this was Bea Lafayette, the sweet girl who led Bible studies and wore ridiculous pink bows in her hair, the girl who had studied me for years the way some monks dedicated their lives to the study of religion, the girl who seemed to know just exactly how fucked up I was. That this was *her*.

It rocked me.

Fucking *rocked* me.

I'd blinked because that was the only thing my body knew what to do as I attempted to process the sheer, over-fucking-whelming beauty of this girl and her trust.

I blinked, and I breathed.

Bea waited, patient as a saint.

In truth, I was in conflict with myself. I already considered her *mine* in a way I'd never be able to shake. It was scarred into my skin, my muscle and bone. I felt her possession of my body and whatever soul I might've retained just as I felt her like my obsession was something omnipotent, fateful and huge. I couldn't cut this feeling out of me neatly with a good blade and sheer will. It was too late for that, too inconceivable of me to even want to mire myself from such a miraculous thing.

Because her love was a miracle. I knew that, and I didn't even believe in such things. The love of a woman like Bea, like the women some of my brothers had been lucky enough to find, was a miracle. I'd just never believed in that for myself.

Miracles were for the good.

What did a damned man do when he was graced with one? If he had even a fucking ounce of goodness, he would turn and run from her, free her of his ominous presence and his death-dealing ways.

Oh, but there was not even an ounce of that in me.

Not even a fucking molecule.

I was all bad, and unfortunately or not for Bea, I was all hers.

If another man wanted her, I would kill him. I didn't care why or how or even if Bea would hate me for it. She was mine until my last breath. And if I had to die for her, protecting her from the savages like me who wanted to own her light, then so be it. I couldn't think of a better fucking way to go. Even after that, I'd haunt her until she joined me in whatever afterlife there

might be.

So why did I feel this trembling hesitation like some virgin on his wedding night? Why did I feel so recalcitrant in the face of her obvious love and years-long devotion?

Why was I *afraid*?

This slip of a girl with hair like moonlight and eyes a wide and unbeguiling blue somehow had the capacity to terrify me when no one ever had before. Not even the demons that haunted my past had held me so much in a fearful thrall.

I felt as though I was desperate for something I wasn't ready—might not ever be ready—to find.

And that little Bea Lafayette was offering it to me on a silver fucking platter.

“Priest?”

I blinked, realizing we'd pulled into her driveway and that I'd been driving on autopilot. Bea was stroking her hands down my abs, tracing the boxed muscles with her delicate fingers in a way that made me want to fuck her on the back of my bike. Instead, I froze, unable to withstand such tenderness.

“Goin' in to check out the place, then callin' in Wrath and Bat to stand guard with you tonight,” I told her, deciding it was best to lay out the rules from the get-go.

For such a sweet girl, Bea could be damn tenacious.

As if to prove my thought, she swung off the bike to face me and fisted her hands on her hips. She looked adorable in her muddy peacoat and destroyed girly shoes with her hair all dirty and tousled around her face.

I frowned, because before that moment, I'd never called anyone or anything “adorable” in my entire life. I hadn't even known what it meant until I saw Bea standing there like an indignant little girl about to stomp her foot even as my cum ran down her thigh.

“You are absolutely *not* doing that, Priest McKenna,” she warned me with narrowed eyes. “You just fucked me nine ways from Sunday in the middle of a cemetery.” She blushed fiercely but forged on. I wanted to lick the pink in her cheeks. “My pussy still aches from you. I think you owe it to me to at least come inside for a bit.”

I scowled, feeling like a bear caught in a trap. If I had to, I knew I’d gnaw off my own leg to escape. “Not gonna fuckin’ cuddle you or some shit.”

Bea rolled her eyes dramatically. “Like you’d even know how. I don’t need tenderness. I just need *you*. Now, get off that bike and come inside. I’m freezing, and I can’t wait to see Sampson and Delilah.”

With a flip of that long mane, she turned on her heel and practically skipped up the walk to her door. Amusement moved through my chest and maybe even a little awe.

No one talked to me like that. All sass and teasing.

Usually, people took one of two tones when speaking to me: awe and fear.

Bea wasn’t afraid of me, not at all, not despite my best efforts. There was awe there, though, in the way she muttered my name like a prayer when I was deep inside her, in the way she paid homage to my body like it was some religious artifact.

I didn’t want to get off my bike almost as much as I wanted to follow her inside.

The latter impulse won.

I gritted my teeth, swung off my Harley, and stalked after her. My hand stopped hers as she went to turn the knob.

“You got your knife handy?” I grunted.

She bit the slightly bruised lower curve of her mouth. Bruised from my kisses. I wrenched my eyes away with serious fucking effort.

“Yes.”

I nodded curtly. “Stay here, stay vigilant. Gonna check out the house.”

One of the biker babes who'd been coming by to feed the cat and check on the bird had left a lamp on in the living room and the lights on in the kitchen. The locks on the front and back doors didn't appear to be tampered with, and there was no sign of an intruder otherwise.

It was officially safe for me to leave her in the house and wait outside in the cold dark like I always did until someone else could take over watching her.

"All clear," I told Bea when she snuck her head inside around the door. "Get in here."

She beamed at me as if searching the house for her was some kinda heroic deed. Then I watched her actually *skip* into her house and sing out for Sampson, who I hadn't spotted at all in the house on my run-through.

A minute later, the old one-eyed albino cat swaggered out from the hall, tail high as he meandered over for love from his woman. He stopped mid-step when he caught sight of me and then deliberately turned farther away from me as he continued on his way to Bea.

"Cat's got good taste," I grunted, lingering in the doorway because some bizarre conviction told me if I ventured farther into the pink and white space, it would infect me even more with this sense of wrongness I felt gnawing inside me.

Bea tipped her gaze up through her long lashes as she crouched to pet Sampson. "He does. It takes him a while to warm up to people because he was abused as a kitten, but when he decides you're worth it, he's all sweetness."

I raised a brow, face cold. "That supposed to be some kinda metaphor?"

Her wide-eyed blink was all innocence. "I don't know what you mean. Now, I'm frozen. Why don't we have some hot chocolate to warm up?"

The suggestion exploded out of her and ended with a little giggle. She stood, moving into the kitchen without waiting for confirmation from me.

Hot chocolate.

I'd never had that shit in my entire life, and I doubted I'd like it. Sweets were not a staple of my diet. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I'd had anything sweet, discounting the sugary, sticky juices spilling from Bea's pink pussy.

I licked my lips unconsciously.

"Not gonna drink that shit," I called to her, staying in place at the door.

"I make it with those little marshmallows," she refuted as if that made some kinda difference.

She was visible from the open concept kitchen but not clearly from where I stood. I moved closer, drawn to her even as she hummed a Christmas tune under her breath. It was only late November, and she already had a box of seasonal decorations labeled in her neat, curling script out beside the coffee table. Of course, Bea loved Christmas. She loved any reason to celebrate life and be grateful for those things she loved in such abundance.

Which included *me*.

The soles of my feet itched, my hands clammy and twitching where they were fisted at my sides. I felt agitated by some electric current that stretched between the two of us, crackling in the air, fizzing in my blood. I needed to unplug. I needed *space, space, space*.

Yet I didn't take it. Instead, I moved into the living room to get a better look at it and Bea beyond in the kitchen, shaking her hips as she stirred something on the stove. Her bird, Delilah, was on her shoulder, taken from the large cage in the corner. Together, they cooed softly to each other.

How the fuck had I ended up obsessed with this girl?

She was something out of a fairy tale. The only role I should have played in her life was as the villain, but somehow, she'd cast me as the hero. How fucked up was that?

"Why the names?" I asked, surprised by my own question.

I wasn't curious by nature and definitely not intrusive. But I wanted every inch of Bea's body and mind to be owned by me. I wanted to be able to

answer any question about her better even than she could. Not to lord my knowledge over her, but to find some kind of fucked-up comfort in it. I wanted to hold everything Bea was to me like a blanket when I was inevitably alone again, in the dark and in the cold of my own necessary solitude.

Bea stopped messing about in the kitchen long enough to shoot me a surprised, happy little smile. She reached a finger up to stroke the dove's white head gingerly, and the bird, lucky bitch, leaned into the stroking eagerly.

"They were sinners in the Bible," she explained as she went back to warming milk on the stovetop. "But I think they were misunderstood. Sometimes, it seems like we only get one version of a story in the Bible, and I've always wondered about Sampson and Delilah, if they had their own voices, what kind of story they might tell."

"Always tryin' to make shit romantic," I muttered, staring down that one-eyed cat as he swished his bushy tail and glared at me from the coffee table. "Nothin' romantic in tragedy."

"I'm surprised you would even say that. Tragedy denotes an injustice to their lives. I thought you were more a 'whatever happens, happens' kinda man," she said, lightly teasing, but also obviously keen to uncover more of my personality.

Warning bells clanged in my ears, but I couldn't resist her pull, gravitational as it was. It took enough effort to remain in the living room while she did whatever the fuck she was doing in the kitchen.

I wanted my hands on her.

I wanted us close enough, always, to breathe the very same breath.

My hands fisted with need. I forced them to unfurl, staring at the mottled scars and tattoos on my flesh. Ugly hands for ugly deeds.

But the way Bea had anointed them with her lips, kissing them like a vassal at the hand of his liege, as if they were worthy and somehow

beautiful...

I shook my head so hard my neck cramped.

“You okay?” she called softly.

No, no, no.

I felt like I was coming apart at the fucking seams. I needed to *get out, get out, get out!*

“Here,” she said as she moved into my line of sight, rounding the atrocious pink velvet couch with a mug of steaming liquid in her hand. “Drink this, it’ll warm you up.”

She placed the mug shaped like a snowman on the coffee table before me.

It was hot chocolate.

With little multicoloured marshmallows.

When I didn’t answer, she shifted on her bare feet and made a little noise of contemplation in the back of her throat that reminded me of the whimpers she made in the graveyard.

Blood surged to my cock so quickly, I had to adjust myself discreetly in the denim.

“Okay...I’m going to take a shower. You sit here and warm up. Sampson will keep you company. He’s a doll.” Contrary to her point, the fat cat swished his tail haughtily and turned his back on me to face the fireplace. “I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

A jiffy.

Hot chocolate with little coloured marshmallows.

Pink couches, one-eyed rescue cats, a fucking *dove*.

A rosy mouth that tasted like sugared peaches and a pretty, tight, little cunt that’d only ever been touched by me.

My head reeled, thoughts battling like two boxers in a ring.

Absently, I was aware of Bea padding off down the hall to her bathroom, but I couldn’t take my eyes off that damn ridiculous snowman mug filled with hot chocolate.

I was fucking paralyzed.

The scene was too domestic. A warm house, a cup of steaming fucking cocoa, a woman taking care of me, and a cat with a serious attitude.

I'd never had that.

Not. Ever.

Life with Mam and Pa had never been like a fucking postcard. We'd had a small clapboard house on a few acres of poorly nourished land in southern Ireland. My sisters were kind, good little kids, but they were a lot of work. I had to help my mam as much as I could when I wasn't in school because Pa was always working the fields.

We didn't have family outside of our home, and we weren't liked in town.

At all.

Ireland was such a Catholic stronghold, especially back then, that the pope didn't even bother to visit. The Irish bled divine blood. They worshipped God zealously, especially in small country towns like ours.

Everyone loved Father O'Neal.

And Father O'Neal hated my parents.

Unmarried, living in sin with three bastard kids.

We were flagrant aberrations in his parish, and he made sure we were viewed as pariahs. We had none of the help the church reserved for the poor, none of the community enjoyed by his flock.

Once, when I was just a lad walking into town with my mam, a group of teen boys had thrown tomatoes at us.

I still didn't eat them to this day, and the acidic scent of the ripe fruit induced near-instantaneous rage.

And then, of course, they died, and everything changed.

I didn't even have the small comfort of Mam singing in the kitchen, the laughter of Danae and Keely as they played in the garden out back, of Pa coming home and sweeping Mam off her feet.

Maybe I'd imagined even those instances of peace. Maybe I'd created them to anchor myself to some semblance of joy when they'd gone and left me alone in the clutches of Father O'Neal and his parishioners.

I could barely recall those moments now. It was more like watching some grainy film on television than any kind of emotional remembrance.

I didn't know happiness anymore, if I ever had at all.

And this...this *scene* reeked of it.

My body felt *wrong, wrong, wrong* in this space that smelled of sugar and peaches, of a girl so sweet I felt the ache of it in my molars.

I surged to my feet so violently that my knee crashed into the table and sent the snowman cup crashing to the floor, where it sloshed its contents all over the pristine cream rug. My heartbeat was too loud and muffled in my ears, the air around me pressurized so my body moved too slow.

Automatically, my feet took me down the hall through her girly bedroom with the canopied bed into the bathroom, the door already ajar with steam billowing out like a curled finger beckoning me inside.

I stopped just inside the room, steam thick in the air along with the scent of peaches. My cock was hard from the fragrance alone, but I wasn't aroused.

For maybe the first time in my life, I was fucking panicked.

And then my eyes found her in the close air, her body all in watercolour pinks and creams behind the foggy glass of the shower door. She was washing innocently, bent away from me to clean her calves, so the shape of her plump ass was an exaggerated curve begging for a firm grip, a short slap.

All I could hear was the shush of the water falling and the harsh rasp of my breath through my lungs. Music played from a little speaker on the basin, but I couldn't hear the notes. I could only feel the throb of it mimicked in my dick.

I was meant to tell her I was fucking leaving. That I probably wasn't coming back.

Not ever.

I'd found I was allergic to pink, allergic to peaches, allergic to all things Bea fucking Lafayette.

But then she turned under the spray, eyes closed, mouth parted so water spilled out between her lush pink lips, hands raised to all that slicked back hair as suds raced down her body.

She looked like a statue of a nymph trapped in a fountain.

And suddenly, irrevocably, I needed to taste the water spilling out of her well.

I took the time only to shuck my boots and socks then I was stalking across the floral bathmat and entering the shower behind her. She didn't hear me over the water in her ears and the music pouring through the steam. I relished the idea of scaring her. That was just the kind of man I was, and it sent acid chewing through my stomach lining.

The boogeyman was in the shower with her, and she didn't know just how badly I wanted to sink inside her sweet heat and forget every nightmarish thing about myself.

My hand struck out to wrap fingers around her exposed throat.

Instinctively, she struggled.

Instinctively, I held tighter, then pushed her back against the wall past the stream of water. As I moved under it, my clothes waterlogged in an instant, and dirty water circled the drain.

Her eyes were wide, all dark, all terror as they popped open and fixed on me.

I bared my teeth at her, unable to articulate the fierce fear and boiling need churning up like a witch's cauldron in my gut. She'd cast some kind of spell on me, and as much as I fought it, I couldn't for the life of me resist.

I watched emotions move across her face, the pinch of fear, the softening of recognition, the high flush spilling from her cheeks to chest as she realized I had her trapped and naked, utterly vulnerable.

Fuck, she was perfect.

She loved to be preyed upon so long as I was the predator gnashing his teeth at her throat.

She loved to be yielded hard in my hand like a weapon and not played softly, tenderly as so many women I'd been with before her.

She was perfect *for* me.

She loved me.

With a ragged groan that tore up the inside of my chest with rancorous claws, I collapsed in on my impulses and surged against her slight body, plastering every inch of my clothed form to her naked one.

Then I was kissing her.

No, not kissing.

Savaging her mouth with mine. Eating it. Devouring it. Eviscerating it with my tongue, lips, and teeth.

Her pulse went mad against my thumb.

She writhed against my hold, half in lust and half in struggle because I knew, even if she didn't voice it, she liked to pretend non-consent.

My cock was an angry rod of pulsing flesh trapped in the sodden denim, but I relished the bite of pain as I ground against her, and the zipper bit harshly into my crown.

"You sore?" I demanded as I ran a rough hand down the notches of her spine to that plump ass. For a small girl, she had the roundest, fucking sexiest ass I'd ever palmed.

"A little," she admitted on a breathy little gasp.

I arrowed my hand around her waist and down to that soft, wet center. When I sank two fingers into her slick heat, she moaned raggedly as I said, "Good. Wanna fuck your swollen cunt again."

Her full-body shiver vibrated her hard nipples against my chest, and for one insane second, I wished we were skin to skin.

"Take off your clothes," Bea begged. "I want to feel you."

"Right now, I'm the one feelin' you," I assured her with a twist of my

fingers in her clutching pussy.

She rewarded me with a groan but then shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. Her little hands went up to my chest and pushed slightly. “No, Priest, please. We’ve been together three times, and I’ve never been able to really touch you. I want...well, I want to see what you look like.”

“My body,” I drawled, reading the blush in her cheeks. “Or my cock?”

That blush deepened and spread to her chest so that even her nipples flushed. I tweaked one hard with my forefinger and thumb just to watch her writhe.

“My cock,” I confirmed. “Fine, you wanna see it? Get on your knees for me.”

“H-here?” she asked, eyes blown wide.

“Here.” I arched a brow when she hesitated. “You want my dick, be a good girl for me and get. On. Your. Knees. Wanna see you worship me like you worship at your church. Wanna see how prettily you corrupt for me.”

With a trembling mouth and eyes gone to black with desire, Bea let out a soft, sweet sigh and sank sinuously to her knees on the tile. Instantly, my cock kicked against its confines, the heat of precum leaking from my tip.

“Take it out,” I said, my voice rough, so animal it was hard to make out.

But she got me.

Her small hands trembled like pale birds as she fumbled with my belt, then my fly, the harsh rasp of the zipper discernable even over the music and the water.

“Oh,” she whispered when she found I wasn’t wearing anything beneath the denim.

She looked up at me then, those big eyes so blue under those spiky black lashes. I grinned at her, a feral, menacing smile to remind her that I was more beast than man. I watched a swallow move hard through her slim neck as she bent back to her task, fingers reaching into the fold of cloth to wrap gently, so *gently*, around my throbbing cock and pull it delicately into the open.

We both watched as it pulsed in her tender hold, an angry red, the crown so deep a purple, so swollen with blood it looked like a perfect plum aimed at her lush, slightly parted mouth. It was not a pretty cock, nothing that suited the pretty girl on her knees for me. It was thick enough to stretch her lips too wide, to ache in her jaw if she took me too long or too deep. It was ribboned with prominent veins and long enough not to fit in both of her hands.

She held it like a weapon she didn't have the first clue how to use, but the salacious curiosity in her gaze as she devoured the sight of me said she was all too eager to learn.

The base of my spine prickled and tightened, balls drawing up as I thought about how I was going to ruin that pretty, inexperienced mouth.

"Lick it," I directed her, my voice the only cold thing in the steamy enclosure.

Slowly, she leaned forward to press a little pursed-lip kiss to the tip.

She moved back again, her pink tongue dipping out to taste me on her lips. "Oh," she said before smiling up at me. "You taste good."

A growl rumbled through me as my resolve to go slow cracked down the middle. "You wanna make me feel good?"

"More than anything."

"Hands behind your back," I ordered as I stepped closer, one hand fisting in the ropes of her wet hair while the other held the blunt end of my cock to her lips. "Open that sweet mouth, now, Bea. I'm gonna fuck your face, and I'm not gonna hold back, you get me?"

In response, she looked up at me and deliberately opened her mouth wide so I could place my dick on her tongue. I slapped it there once, twice, then slipped it deeper into her mouth. She closed her eyes and moaned all around me.

To look at Bea was to think instantly of sunshine. She was everything sweet and light, from the tip of her curled cloud of golden hair to the feminine little dresses she wore all in whites and pastels. Her voice was a

light lilt, musical enough to seem like the song of the Fae in the Irish hills, and when she laughed, it was just as beguiling.

The broken hardwiring of my brain compelled me to corrupt her, to bruise that peachy skin, bite the sweet line of that neck brutally until it bloomed, then grip all that hair so tightly she cried.

She would look even more beautiful, I always thought each time she smiled, if she had tears adorning those smooth cheeks like jewels.

So, I shed the last vestiges of civilization from my shoulders and gave in to my darkest impulses.

I fucked her mouth. Firm thrusts over that silken tongue, deep into the grasp of her hot mouth until I hit the back of her throat, and she clenched all around me, then slow drags back out as she sucked hard at my length.

Such a good fucking girl taking it even when she didn't know how, eyes weeping, cheeks reddened and slick with tears. She whimpered and groaned and gagged hard at the root of my dick, but not once did she ask for a reprieve. I watched as she slipped a hand between her thighs and played in the wet there and knew my girl loved to be used hard like this.

“Lose the hand,” I demanded, my voice a harsh whip cutting through the steamy intimacy. I thrust my leg between her spread thighs, offering the denim-clad calf for her use. “You wanna get off, you do it on my leg.”

Her eyes were twin silvered blue coins as she looked up at me, her lush mouth spread indecently wide around my dick. I flexed my hand in her hair just to see the tears pooling on her lower lids loosen and slip down her cheeks.

“You wanna come for me?” I asked and waited for her little nod to continue. “You do it usin' me like I'm usin' you.”

She vacillated again, but I noticed the way a shiver bit between her slender shoulders, how her flush deepened to merlot. With a hesitancy that gripped my balls in an iron vise, Bea shifted forward to tentatively press her wet folds into my jean-clad leg.

“Grind against me,” I told her roughly, the words tearing up my closing throat as I watched her awkwardly start to move against me. “That’s it. Love to see my good girl go dirty for me. Wanna feel you come all over my leg while I use this tight throat, yeah?”

Her response was a gargled groan, cut off by the girth of my cock.

Never in my fucking life had I been so damn aroused. And it wasn’t just the scene, Bea’s blond head bent in prayer over my dick, sucking it so well despite her lack of skill that I was already fighting not to come.

It was this trust she was giving me. The way she pushed past her own boundaries to follow me willingly deeper into my dark and depravities. She kept telling me she wanted *me* in all my fucked-up glory, and I kept trying to prove her wrong. But she hurdled over every obstacle I threw up in her path without fear and with so much grace it ached in my chest.

She was moving now, grinding her sweet pussy against my leg harder and harder so I had to brace. Her stuttered, eager breaths around my cock cooled the shaft every time I pulled out, and she groaned whenever I thrust back in. It was as if every stroke of my cock was stoking the flames of her lust higher and higher.

Sooner than I could have imagined, given her sore cunt and inhibitions, Bea was coming apart on my calf, soaking the wet fabric in the sweet nectar of her climax. She cried out as she came, tears gushing down her cheeks, juices down her thighs, until she was more liquid than woman.

Those tears, that eagerness, and the reflexive clutch of her throat around my head every time I went just a little too far coalesced as heavy, urgent weight in my balls.

I wanted to come too.

And I was going to do it all over that pretty angelic face.

The thought blew the dam holding my climax at bay. I pulled out of Bea’s mouth as she groaned in protest, fisting one hand tighter in her hair to pin her in place and the other hard around my shaft. Three vicious pulls and I was

coming, pearls of it landing on her smooth cheeks, glistening, swollen lips and small chin. I painted her in depravity and sin, glorying in my ability to do so, feeling like Satan must have when Eve took that first bite of the apple.

“Fuck, yes,” I growled and hissed as I squeezed the last of my seed from the head of my cock, then brushed it over Bea’s parted mouth.

With low lids and heaving breasts, she stared up at me like a fallen angel, dirty with my seed. I panted, hand still in her hair, the other braced against the wall as the water, now cool, continued to beat down my back, and I waited for her reaction.

That sweet, little tongue peeked between her lips then tentatively swiped through the cum glossing them so prettily. When she finished cleaning her mouth like a kitten, she raised a pink-tipped finger and collected a drop from her cheek. She studied it, head cocked slightly, rubbing it between thumb and forefinger, and then she ate that too, sucking the moisture from each finger like I’d seen her do once with a peach.

A shudder wracked my entire body, an echo of my climax.

“You taste good,” she told me in a fluttery, almost giddy voice. “You taste like I always imagined you would.”

“Killin’ me,” I told her as I leaned down to pick her up beneath her armpits and haul her easily into my arms. Her legs wrapped around me naturally, her ass cradled in my hands like she’d been made to sit there.

“Needed that,” I admitted reluctantly. “I hurt you?”

She nuzzled into my neck, then tipped her nose into my beard and rubbed it there, inhaling my scent. “Mmm, just enough, thank you.”

A hoarse chuckle left me. “Right. Got it that my Little Shadow likes it rough.”

“Only with you,” she agreed sleepily, settling into my hold as though she could sleep there.

A residual cramp of panic seized my gut, but I forced myself past it so I could turn off the water and get us out of the thickly steamed shower. She

protested in an exhausted murmur when I tried to let her down to dry her with a fluffy orange towel, so I did a half-assed job of it with her in my arms still pressed to my dripping clothes.

By the time I carried her to her canopied bed, she was passed out, soft breath fanning against my throat. My arms convulsed around her when I thought about setting her beneath the pink satin sheets.

I didn't want to let her go.

I didn't want to leave the house the way I knew I should, and I definitely didn't want to let her out of my sight now or *ever*.

She was *mine, mine, mine*.

I gritted my teeth as emotions bubbled and boiled in my gut. I didn't know what to do with them, so I was helpless to act against them. Instead, I sat my ass on the edge of that girly as fuck bed and held my girly girl in my arms for a long time as she slept. The night outside grew darker, Sampson stalked into the room and curled up on a pillow with a little glare at me for stealing his mistress, and still, I couldn't let her out of my arms.

She fit there.

She fit against my chest, in the space between my ribs, in the hole where there should have been a human heart. Maybe that was it—maybe *she* was my heart, living wrongly outside my body, and that was why I felt this way.

Like we should never be parted.

Like we should give in to our twin ambitions and stalk each other until the end of time.

Finally, when dawn peeked its pale forehead over the horizon, I made myself let her go. She slipped between the covers with a little murmur and a frown between her pale brows I smoothed with my thumb.

Then I found ways to stay in that absurd pink house with the vintage furniture and the girly décor. I cleaned up that fucking snowman cup, stared at Delilah as she cooed in her cage, and mopped up the spill of water in her bathroom with those fluffy ass towels.

Somehow, I found myself in front of the ornate gold mirror and caught sight of my reflection. Those empty eyes, pale and green as always, didn't look the way they usually did.

They weren't tired and wane, empty as jade vases.

They were bright, lit by some inner flame Bea had ignited like a torch that wouldn't extinguish.

Agony flared through me, followed swiftly by anger.

I couldn't feel again.

I couldn't go through that again.

Mam, Pa, Keely, Danae.

Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.

Mute. Dead.

Me. Dead. Having died in that church a long time ago beneath a stained-glass window that hung in The Fallen MC chapel.

Despite it all, I was being dragged, kicking and screaming, back into the land of the living by one much too young and entirely too naïve girl with moonshine hair and a soul drawn dangerously to my dark.

Without thinking, I reared back and punched my right hand into the mirror. It cracked into an elaborate web, my feral face at its center. My knuckles, already raw from beating in Cal Mulligan's face, were torn open and bleeding heavily.

I dipped my finger into one of the open wounds, pressing ruthlessly so my panic smoothed into pain. I took a few deep breaths through my gritted teeth to center myself in it and then resolved to get the fuck out of that honey-trap of a house.

Before I did, something in me forced me to stop.

To take my blood-painted fingertip and brush a message for Bea on the porcelain bowl of the sink.

A rún mo chroí.

Secret of my heart.

And as I left the house, locking the door behind me with the spare key I'd found in a drawer in the kitchen, and made my way to my bike where I waited until Wrath, Bat, and, surprisingly, Dane, turned up to take guard duty, I felt exactly as if I had left whatever semblance I had of a heart and soul curled up in a pink bed in that pink house.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BEA

I WOKE UP SUNDAY MORNING WITH A PRAYER ON MY TONGUE. IT WAS SO popular with Christians that it was almost a cliché. My grandpa often avoided the passage even though it was one of the most requested for him to recite at weddings. The passage from Corinthians began with stating love was patient and kind, but that wasn't what grew in my mouth like a newly budded rose when I opened my eyes and knew I was alone in my bed after a night of sin and sex with the love of my life who might never, through no fault of his own, love me back the same way.

It was the end, the whimper at the end of the bang.

Love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

It perfectly articulated the vast wealth of hope and patience I felt for Priest. My love for him was not something I could force on him, especially when he had no context for it. Instead, I chose to think of it as a home I created and tended for him, a place I fashioned like a haven where he might lay his weary head and be free of his demons. Where he might, one day, decide to live along with me, happy in our own way, in love under our own conditions.

I sighed wearily as I slipped out of bed, absently leaning down to pet Sampson as she snaked around my ankles on the way to my bathroom.

He ran from the room when I gasped as I caught sight of my shattered mirror. As I moved closer, I saw a single, long shard of glass in the basin, lying beneath the bloody entrails of words Priest must have written on the white porcelain.

A rún mo chroí.

I traced my finger over the dried blood and shivered even though I didn't know what the words meant. Whatever the Gaelic denoted, I knew it was inherently some kind of declaration. Of course, the only love letter a man like Priest would ever write was one penned in his own blood.

I fingered the shard of glass, shivering as I remembered the way Priest had used the sharp edge of his blade on my body. I'd never known such a thing could be erotic, but the feel of that cold steel was incendiary. Knowing he had the skill to split me in two, but the restraint and talent to avoid harming me was a heady combination. Somehow, he knew my darkest thoughts, the fantasies my brain concocted only in the deepest hours of night when I lay awake and dreaming with my hand between my thighs in bed.

I looked up at my reflection, noting the way my smile suffused every inch of my face with gentle contentment. Last night had been intense and glorious.

The evidence of it was stamped on my skin in the beard burn abrading my neck and chest, in the faint bruises decorating my hips like little bunches of grapes, and in the deeper bruises on my knees from kneeling in the shower to take Priest's blunt cock in my throat. I'd always bruised like a peach, and for once, I was proud to bear the wounds on my flesh. I shivered at the salacious image I made, watching as my eyes went half-mast with remembered lust.

I startled when someone knocked on my front door, then grinned cheek to cheek as I wondered if it might be Priest come back to see me. I practically flew to the door, hair flying, before I realized I was naked.

I bit my lip, then grabbed the knit cream throw Cleo had made for me from the back of my living room chair and wrapped it around myself.

"Hello," I sung as I opened the door.

Bat, Dane, and Cleo all blinked back at me.

The two men averted their eyes, covering their smiling mouths, but Cleo burst into delighted laughter and started clapping.

"Oh, oh, I just *knew* it," she crowed as she pushed past me into the house holding a picnic basket.

"It was pretty damn obvious," Bat told her as he followed her into the house, ruffling Cleo's silky hair. "Don't be too proud'a yourself."

Cleo just beamed at him. "I'm just so happy for her." She turned to look over her shoulder at me as she headed into my kitchen. "I'm just so happy for you."

I remained in the doorway, getting cold in the icy wind, watching as Dane grinned at me and knocked the snow off his boots before entering and closing the door behind him.

"I'm thinking you aren't used to being teased like this," he said softly.

I bit my lip, then nodded. "This is kinda new, you know?"

Something flickered in his eyes like a faulty light bulb. "Yeah, kid. I gotcha. I'll handle them if you promise me coffee. It's too damn early to function without coffee."

I didn't know Lila's brother very well. He'd been presumed dead, missing in action from the military overseas for all the years I'd known her, and when he returned, he'd mostly stuck to Lila, Zeus, Bat, Smoke, and one of the promiscuous club hangarounds, Tempest Riley.

But now he was there in my living room, tall, broad, dark-skinned, and as beautiful a man as I had ever seen. And he was looking out for me even though he didn't know me from Eve.

I smiled beatifically at him. "I make the best coffee. Harleigh Rose even says so and you might not know this, but she has a serious coffee addiction."

"First thing we bonded over," Dane told me with a wink of his absurdly curly-lashed, unusually pale blue eye. "Lead the way."

Bat and Cleo had already made themselves at home in my kitchen, Bat sitting on a stool at the island while Cleo unpacked her picnic basket.

"What did I do to deserve this?" I asked her as I leaned over her shoulder to press a kiss to her cheek as a distraction so I could steal a peach from the rattan basket.

"I saw that," she said mildly, but she let me take the fruit and continued to busy herself with breakfast. "You don't have to do anything for me to do something nice for you, Bea. You know that. But in this case, I figure you being obsessed over by a psychopath is reason enough to bring you breakfast."

I blinked with the fruit held to my mouth, the soft flesh as smooth as Priest's surprisingly plush lips.

Cleo caught my look and laughed. "I meant the serial killer, babe, not Priest. Although, after what seems to have happened last night, maybe this should be a celebratory breakfast instead of a consolation breakfast."

A blush fired my skin, making Bat laugh, and Dane shoved him with his shoulder as he sat down beside him.

"Why don't you get dressed for church?" Dane suggested, pointedly nodding at my blanket robed nakedness. "We'll take you after breakfast."

“Tempest’s bringing Shaw and Steele by too,” Bat told me, mentioning his twin sons, who I happened to adore. “Amelia’s got some appointment, but she wants the boys at church with her this mornin’, so we figured we’d go together.”

I blinked at the massive war veteran with tattoos from neck to wrists, trying to imagine him in the hallowed halls of First Light. “You’re going to church?”

Bat smiled sharply as he plucked the peach from my limp fingers and brought the fruit to his mouth, taking a monstrous bite. “Fuck no. But I’ll wait outside and shoot the shit with Dane while you do your business.”

“Where’s...I mean, is Priest going to meet up with us?” I questioned pathetically because I couldn’t help myself.

I knew he’d left because the intimacy had been too much for him. He was a wild animal, so it wasn’t as if he could be domesticated overnight. I wasn’t angry, and I wasn’t even really sad about his abandonment. I was just happy he’d opened up as much as he had the night before.

And I wanted an opportunity soon to take another crack at those concrete walls.

Bat’s lips tipped in a small, sympathetic grin. “Nah, man’s got club business this mornin’.”

I nodded with my lower lip pinned between my teeth, the pain a slight comfort. Without another word, I quickly put my white SMEG coffee machine on to drip and went to get dressed.

Surprisingly, Cleo followed.

“What’s up, honey?” I asked as she hesitated at the door to my bedroom, hugging the doorframe as if for comfort. “Are you okay?”

She bit her lip, a lock of short, rumpled brown hair swinging into her green eyes, tangling with the lashes. In the glamour of the biker babes, it was easy to overlook Cleo with her sweet, full-cheeked prettiness, the freckles on her nose and the shyness in her expression. But I’d always found her lovely,

her beauty growing on you the more you studied her. The problem was, with Cleo, she did not like to be studied at all.

“Cleo?” I repeated as I shucked the blanket and quickly pulled on a ruffled set of underwear. “You’re scaring me a little. What’s up?”

She sighed, pushing off the door to plod over to my bed and collapse on top of the covers with a gusty sigh. “I think I’m in love.”

I blinked.

She went into a half crunch on the mattress to look at my expression and winced, then giggled a little. “I know, I know, I’m sorry. I should have told you, but you’ve been busy with a murdering psycho and a certain redheaded enforcer.”

“Honey,” I emphasised as I quickly chose a wintry cream dress from my closet and dragged it on before going to her side and sitting on the bed. “There is seriously no excuse for not telling me! Even if I was busy, you should have hit me upside the head and told me your news.”

She laughed a little, relieved and also giddy, a happy little flush in her cheeks. “Honestly, it’s been a bit fun keeping the secret. I can’t even really tell you who it is.”

My eyebrows cut hard lines into my forehead. “Oh my gosh, are you serious? This is so unlike you.”

Cleo and I were best friends for many reasons. We were both fairly innocent girls brought into the club world by family ties without a man in leather to call our own. We both loved classic movies, though I skewed to the horror and Cleo loved old love stories, shopping at vintage stores, and basically anything and everything girly. We were two peas in a pod, Axe-Man had said once after walking in on us making heart-shaped pancakes at midnight during a sleepover.

And it was true.

So, I was both shocked by her secrecy and by the fact that she was dating at all.

She'd never had more than a crush as far as I knew.

"Is it Eric?" I asked, thinking about her blushing around him recently while we were wrapping up a *Little Miss Murder* episode.

Her laughter was embarrassed and stuttering with awkwardness. "Bea! I can't say, okay? Not yet at least."

"Why would you need to hide a relationship with him? Are you afraid Axe-Man wouldn't approve? I know Eric looks like a punk, but he's a really good guy. Heck, he's a dedicated churchgoer."

Cleo's blush intensified. She grabbed my hands and squeezed them tight, eyes shining as she leaned toward me. "He's amazing. No matter why I can't tell you the details, I was just *bursting* to tell you *something*. He makes me feel so good, Bea, like pure and beautiful and worthy."

"Aw, honey," I murmured, feeling the echo of that sensation in my chest as my mind instinctively turned to Priest. "I know the feeling, and it is awesome."

"So awesome," she agreed.

We beamed at each other for a long minute, then dissolved into giggles.

"I'm so happy for you," I told her, bouncing slightly on the bed to emphasise my excitement.

Cleo mimicked me, then bounced our joined hands up and down in tandem. "I'm so happy for *you*."

"You promise he's treating you well?" I demanded. "I'll kick his butt if he doesn't."

She chuckled, so carefree and beautiful, I wanted to squeeze her. So, I did, lunging at her to hug her so tightly, she wheezed in laughter and protest. We struggled a little in jest before I flopped onto my back, panting slightly as I stared at the pink canopy over my bed. Cleo's hand found my own and linked our fingers.

"Love isn't how I thought it would be," she admitted softly after a minute.

“No?”

“No,” she said on a dreamy sigh. “It’s more than just feeling happy. He makes me feel like I have a purpose now.”

I hummed as I thought about that, but I didn’t have a response to give her that she would have liked. In fact, I didn’t like the conflation of love with purpose. My life before Priest was filled with drive. I loved my podcast, my schooling, my family and friends. I had dreams and goals.

I existed outside of my feelings for Priest, a fully realized woman on an independent path through life.

Loving Priest wasn’t like finding the North Star, a guiding force to hold my hand through life and show me the way. I didn’t need his love to acknowledge the beauty and worth of my own existence.

But...

Loving Priest made everything I loved about my life and myself vibrant and clear, somehow simply and utterly more profound. All those traumas I’d bore alone before him, all those things large and small I’d always believed I hated about myself, were suddenly given new depth and compassion. He hadn’t changed my life. It was that he had given me new perspective, limning everything both good and bad in the golden light of his love.

When we emerged from my bedroom a while later, my hair curled and gloss applied, my kitchen was filled with people.

I blinked at the sight, trying to absorb the sheer number of massive, tattooed, and leather decked men cramped into my little space. Zeus was wedged in a corner of the counters with Loulou between his legs, held loosely in one arm while he held Monster in the other and my sister cradled Angel. Lila was beside them, cooing at Angel so she laughed and clapped while Nova watched both of them with obvious desire stamped on his gorgeous face. King and Cress were on the ground beside the island on some of my living room pillows playing with Steele and Shaw, who raced toy motorcycles over their limbs and a smiling baby Prince in his car seat.

Hannah was laughing with Harleigh Rose as they fixed coffee for everyone, moving between and around Lion and Lysander, who were making pancakes in my pink pans on the stove. Sander, massive, scarred and scowling, was even wearing one of my aprons, a white one patterned in red hearts. He looked ridiculous, but I knew he did it to make Honey smile because she was doing so, poorly hidden behind her hand as she pretended to be bored on a stool between Dane and Bat. It was rare to see her at Fallen functions even though she was technically Maja and Buck's ward, because she resented her half-siblings and had been poisoned against the club by her pernicious, now dead mother. But if she was there, so too always was Sander.

Boner and Curtains were in my living room playing video games on a console they must have brought themselves while Heckler and Blade cheered them on, betting on the outcome. Cleo went to Axe-Man, who sat in my window seat looking out at the snow falling lightly in the street as if each flake was a memory he was desperate not to miss.

Out the window on the back door, I could make out Kodiak teaching Ransom how to pull his gun seamlessly from his holster.

Everyone was there.

My entire biker family.

Except Priest.

"Hey, sweet Bea," Loulou called when she saw me standing silently in the middle of the chaos. She moved out of the circle of her husband's arms and came to me, kissing me on the cheek and offering Angel the chance to do the same. "How's my sunshine girl today?"

Angel pulled at my hair, then pulled at her own as she giggled, obviously delighted we shared the same pale curls. I took her from Loulou so I could drag in a deep breath of her sweet-scented hair.

Unsurprisingly, she smelled of cherries.

"I'm okay," I told her honestly. Even though I felt overwhelmed with emotion, it was mostly happiness tinged with a cloud of malcontent. I

wondered obsessively where Priest might be and why he was absent from such a gathering again.

If it was self-imposed isolation or deliberate on the part of the club.

“You look tired,” Lou noticed, reaching out to cup my cheek. “I wish you’d stayed with us again last night. I feel better when I know you’re safe.”

“I was safe.” There was nowhere safer for me than at Priest’s side. “And honestly, I loved staying with you guys, but I missed my own space.”

Lou bit her lip but nodded. “Okay, I can understand that. Did...did Priest stay with you last night?”

I ducked behind a sheaf of hair, ostensibly to pepper kisses all over pretty Angel’s plump cheeks, but mostly to hide from my observant sister.

She sighed, but then her arms were around me, and all I could feel was her soft embrace. “Oh, honey, I can’t say I don’t wish you could’ve picked someone a helluva lot easier to love, but you’re a Lafayette, so I guess I should’ve been prepared.”

I grinned at her when she pulled away. “We tend to like dangerous men.”

Both of us looked over at Phillipa, who appeared behind Smoke’s massive back, laughing at something he said. Maja and Buck sat with them at my dining room table, the older contingent of the club shooting the shit together.

“You think she’s finally going to agree to go out with him?” I asked Lou.

She shook her head, absently playing with Angel’s little foot. “She’s too scared to be different.”

“Different isn’t bad,” I declared even though I knew my sister had already learned that lesson. “Just because something is different than the norm doesn’t make it intrinsically bad. Why do people fear so much what they don’t automatically understand?”

“People want to be prepared. If they know what’s coming, they don’t fear it. People who act outside the law and normal social mores like the club are aberrations. They don’t know what we’ll do in any given circumstance, and

that's frightening to them."

"I wonder if that's why the killer is targeting people they feel are on the fringes of society. The prostitute, the First Nations' woman, the teacher who had an affair with Kodiak..." I mused. "Maybe the killer is trying to cull chaos."

Loulou snorted, eyeing the mess of bodies and noise surrounding us. "Good luck to them if they want to cull all this."

I shivered even though she was joking. I knew the mind of a serial killer. A massive, thriving outlaw organization like The Fallen would be a big, red target for someone obsessed with conformity.

"Don't look so scared, little Lafayette," Z said as he stalked up to his wife and claimed her again with a big hand at the dip in her waist. Monster scowled at me and shook his fist as if to emphasise his father's point. "We got the club on alert, nothin's gonna happen to ya, yeah?"

I bit my lip because I wasn't worried about something happening to me. I was worried about *them*.

"Why did you guys all come over?" I asked, desperate to change the topic and rid myself of this persistent forbidding chill. "You know I have to leave for Church in an hour?"

Harleigh Rose appeared beside me and slung an arm around my shoulders. "Are you kidding? You're being obsessed over by a killer. You're lucky we even let you out of our sight."

"Which is why you must be at our place for dinner tonight," Cressida declared from her spot on the ground, snuggled up at King's side. Prince babbled happily from her arms, and I felt something like envy tighten my womb. "I'm making apple pie for dessert."

"And seriously, we need to talk about my wedding," H.R. reminded me, fanning out her left hand so I could admire her diamond. "It's coming up quick, and there's still a fuck load to plan for my special day."

"Our special day, you mean," Lion reminded her dryly as he tugged her

back into him by her belt loop and pressed a kiss to her ear. “Or do I have to remind you of that, *again*?”

“Okay, gross,” Cressida teased, because Harleigh Rose was always complaining about her brother and father’s PDA. “Can you two get a room or something?”

“Yeah, seriously, H.R., you’re going to scar your little brother and sister,” Loulou teased, trying to hide their eyes.

H.R. stuck out her tongue at them, and we all laughed.

I wanted to have dinner with them. I wanted to spend the entire day with this family made up of ragtag misfits with the biggest hearts I’d ever known. But I still had one foot in another world, and that fact was rearing its head now. “I’m sorry, but Phillipa and I are having dinner with the Linley’s tonight after Sunday school.”

The Garros fell silent.

I shifted from foot to foot, fidgeting with my hands. “I’m sorry, I would way rather have dinner with you guys, but I already told them I would.”

“Seth Linley is nice enough,” Cress offered as an olive branch. “But his wife kinda gives me the creeps. She’s always so intense.”

“Dr. Linley was one of my doctors,” Loulou said softly, trailing a hand over Monster’s head as if to draw comfort from him. “Tell him I said hi.”

I beamed at my sister, loving her for trying to support me even when I made decisions she didn’t understand.

“We’ll do something this week,” H.R. declared, shooting me a wink. “If you aren’t too busy with your Priest.”

Everyone chuckled, even the other brothers who had been pretending not to eavesdrop.

“Where is he?” I asked Zeus softly under the current of laughter.

His concrete eyes softened. “Sometimes we live in a cage of our own makin’, little Bea, and sometimes, even though we got the key, we don’t wanna let ourselves out. You get me?”

I bit my lip, thinking of the haunted look in Priest's eyes, the panic I'd felt at odd intervals when we'd been having sex. It was a strange sensation to realize the fearless enforcer of The Fallen was afraid of little, insignificant me.

"I'll work on it," I told him with a stubborn tilt of my chin.

He chuffed it lightly with his massive fist and grinned at me all crinkly-eyed. "Got that Lafayette magic. I don't doubt you will."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BEA

SUNDAY MASS WAS A SPARSE AFFAIR THAT WEEK, WHICH PROMPTED ME TO look back at the past few months and notice a trend in fewer and fewer folks attending Grandpa's service. Something in the sacred space was wrong even amongst the few attendees, some edge of energy that buzzed like cheap overhead lighting.

Shaw fidgeted beside me, swinging his short legs in the pew, looking around the church as if searching for the boogeyman.

"You okay, little dude?" I asked him, dipping to look into his mismatched eyes, one brown, the other suffused on one side with green, an exact mirror of his twin brother.

Shaw startled even though I'd spoken softly, then looked sheepish. "S kinda creepy in here."

Steele leaned forward to look at me, and I noticed he had his little hand in Tempest's, squeezing tight even though he was ten years old and probably too old to hold anyone's hand in public. "Yeah, this place gives me the

creeps.”

“Hush,” Amelia Stephens ordered from the other side of Bat, who sat beside Tempest. She eyed Steele holding her hand, and the little boy reluctantly let go and curled his hands into fists on his lap.

Bat shot her a look of disapproval, his mouth mean with censure, but Amelia ignored them. They’d had a blowout in the parking lot when Bat refused to attend Mass with them, and obviously, Amelia had won. She’d made such a raucous, I thought he conceded just to get her to shut up.

Tempest shot me a little look of apology as if she was used to pardoning their discord.

“You sit still through this, and we’ll go to Honey Bear Café for brownies after, okay?” she offered the twins with a little wink.

They instantly straightened and stilled.

Tempest and I shared a smile.

Most of the women in the club didn’t like her because she’d started out as one of the club sluts hanging around just to sleep with one of the brothers, but she’d been the nanny to Bat and Amelia’s children for a couple years now, and whenever I saw her, I thought she was nice.

“Love prospers when fault is forgiven,” Grandpa was preaching in that smooth, worn voice as comforting as an old blanket. “But dwelling on it separates old friends. Let us remember this when we pray for Natalie Ashley’s soul. She was a good woman, no matter her past misdeeds. There is no need to memorialize her sin. Instead, we will remember how she was always eager to help her neighbour and support our youth in her well-taught high school classes. She will be missed by her family, friends, and certainly by this parish.”

“She was a slut,” someone muttered loudly enough to disturb the peaceful air. “Shouldn’t have been allowed through the doors.”

Shock rippled through the pews.

No one spoke like that in First Light. Not only because it was a heavenly

place, but because Grandpa had created an atmosphere of love and tolerance.

We were not hateful, and we were certainly not rude. Especially when the woman in question was murdered by a serial killer for the lowly sin of sleeping with a man out of wedlock.

Grandpa's mouth fell flat, but he continued calmly as if the man hadn't spoken. "Natalie's service will be held this Wednesday in the cemetery with a service at the community center. I hope I'll see you all there ready to pay your respects to a woman who was wrenched from this life far too soon by a violent, hateful act."

"Won't find me there," someone else, a woman this time, whispered behind me.

I cranked my neck around to attempt to find the woman, but only blank faces stared back at me, all watching Grandpa.

A shudder rolled fiercely down my spine. My teeth were set on edge, gritted against some promise of attack.

This wasn't right.

Nothing had been since we'd walked through the door, the parishioners whispering as they saw Bat with all his tattoos reluctantly dragged behind his wife, as they saw Loulou holding my hand in solidarity for the first time in church since she'd married Zeus.

There was animosity strong in the air like the stench of booze and smoke left over from a party we hadn't been invited to. I wondered wildly what I'd missed, what could have happened to turn the tide of the townsfolk against some of their own.

There were no more outcries as Grandpa tidily wrapped up his sermon and dismissed everyone with a blessing, but as soon as they stood, there were rumblings of discontent in the air.

Loulou squeezed my hand too hard and kept Phillipa close at her other side. "Is it usually like this, or do I just bring it out in them?"

"No," Phillipa said softly, her beautifully aged face creased further in

concern. “This isn’t natural.”

“Why do I feel like the angry villagers are ’bout to come at us with fuckin’ pitchforks and torches?” Bat muttered as we grouped together by the altar, both his hands protectively clasping his son’s shoulders.

“You’re being ridiculous,” Amelia chastised, brushing back her strawberry blond hair. “It’s the club. After so many years of looking over your shoulder, you’re suspicious of everyone.”

Loulou and I exchanged a look that was half-wince, but Bat took a deep breath to calm himself and just shook his head at his wife.

“It does feel a little hostile here today,” Tempest admitted.

Amelia looked at the redhead in her fairly form-fitting deep red cropped sweater, black skirt, and knee-high boots with critical eyes. “Yes, well, you’d know all about hostile environments, I suppose.”

“Amy,” Bat snapped. “Do not take out your frustration on her.”

Amelia sniffed but turned her head, pretending to catch the eye of someone in the crowd. “I’m going to go speak with Judy.”

Bat grunted in affirmation, but the moment she was gone, he started to usher the twins down the center of the pews. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

I agreed with him even though First Light had always been a haven for me. I followed them down the center, flicking a wave at Grandpa in farewell because he was engaged in a heated conversation with Bill Huxley’s mother, Margaret.

Bat tried the double doors, then frowned when they didn’t part. He shot a look over his shoulder at us, then took his shoulder to the door.

It didn’t budge.

The clamour drew the attention of the rest of our community, and soon a little half-moon of spectators surrounded us.

The door wouldn’t move even when Bat slammed his full weight against it.

“This isn’t right,” I muttered, my gut roiling as the atmosphere shifted

and crackled like the air before a storm descended.

“No,” Loulou agreed. “Let’s go out the side entrance.”

We moved together as a little family unit back down the aisle when there was a sudden *crack* and shattering. One of the stained-glass windows on the right side of the building had broken open in the bottom left corner by the impact of a thrown bottle stuffed with a burning rag.

“Oh, my God,” Loulou breathed, and suddenly, we were both thrown back to four years prior when a rival MC had tried to burn us out of Zeus’s cabin with Molotov cocktails.

Bat didn’t hesitate. He was running before I could open my mouth to protest, swinging off his cut to use it to stamp out the small fire where it burned next to a set of wooden pews. It went out with a faint hiss. Seth was suddenly there too, standing in front of Bat facing the window as if he was ready to catch whatever might come next. We all waited quietly, vibrating with fear, for more to be thrown inside.

None came.

Bat lifted his cut and crouched to check out the bottle. He nudged it over with his boot, and growled, “There’s a fuckin’ note inside. It’s a goddamn warnin’.”

“What does it say, Mr. Stephens?” Grandpa demanded regally as he swept down the pews to Bat’s side, chin held high without one flicker of fear in his Lafayette blue eyes.

Bat snapped his black gaze up and over to us. “Romans 5:19 ‘For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.’”

As if summoned by his words, the crash and shatter began again, this time from a window on the opposite side of the church.

Seth rushed to try to extinguish the flaming bottle with his suit jacket, but it immediately caught fire. A moment later, another one was launched through the other window and landed beside Bat.

“Get out!” he hollered as he fell over the bottle with his leather jacket to put out the flame.

“Come on,” Loulou ordered, dragging me by the hand as she bent to pick up Shaw and fix him on her hip.

He went willingly, Steele already up in Tempest’s arms and Amelia bringing up the rear with Cleo, who looked utterly terrified.

Grandpa was ushering the spooked crowd down the hall to the side entrance, which was blessedly not blocked off. Ransom, of all people, was holding it open for everyone.

“Priest made me wait outside,” he explained as we rushed past in a semi-organized stampede.

Of course, he did.

I didn’t have time to dwell on that, though. Immediately, we got to work organizing the chaos, making sure no one was hurt. Kodiak was also there, his massive black and silver bike in the lot, his big body disappearing around the corner just as we spilled outside.

Hunting down the arsonist, no doubt.

I had a sinking feeling he wouldn’t find him.

“Where is Tabby?” I asked after I tallied everyone, going to Seth, who was charred and coughing from his heroic deeds. “Where is she?”

“She didn’t come today,” Seth croaked. “Wasn’t feeling well.”

Something nudged at the back of my mind, but I forgot it when I saw Bat finally emerge from the smoking stone building. There was soot on his cheekbones, ash in his short, cropped black hair, and a livid burn already bubbling the skin over his right hand.

Immediately, Tempest, Steele, and Shaw ran to him.

Amelia fainted, but Seth reached over quickly to catch her as she did.

I took a moment to look at Amelia swooned in his arms, wondering why a woman like that had ever been drawn to a man like Bat. It occurred to me that some people might consider Amelia and I cut from the same cloth. We were

both petite and pretty, favouring feminine clothes and female companionship. But that was where the similarities ended.

Beneath the pink and silk, I had a spine of steel that had been forged in the fires of my neglected youth, the horrific betrayal of my father, and the illness that plagued my beloved sister. I was not so easily torn, so easily defeated as Amelia gone to raptures because her husband was burned.

I was the kind of woman who would stand in the fire with him if it meant being beside my man.

With a last—probably judgmental—look at Amelia, I went to Bat, noting that he was already being well cared for by his little crew.

“Fire’s out, but there is smoke and water damage,” Bat told me over the increasing roar of motorcycles.

The Fallen was coming.

On cue, a fleet of chrome and black Harleys rounded the corner onto Main Street and rumbled to a stop in the church parking lot. Zeus was off his bike before it was fully stopped, looping across the asphalt with eyes only for his wife. Loulou was already full sprint running toward him, hair flying, arms pumping until she could throw them around his neck as she hurtled into his open arms.

“Little Lou,” he growled, too angry and shaken to curb his volume.

I watched as Loulou successfully soothed him, hands in his tangle of gold-tipped dark hair, lips peppering kisses over his craggy face.

When I turned back, Bat was looking at them, then to Amelia, who was sitting up on the asphalt drinking the water Seth had found for her. Even from a distance, I could hear her wax on about Seth’s heroism and her gratitude.

“She’ll be okay,” I assured him, hoping he couldn’t hear what I did.

Bat’s coal dark eyes cut to mine, more eloquent than any words he could have said. This, somehow, at the end of many years of an unhappy marriage, was the end of the road for Bat with his wife.

Then Dane was there, jogging instead of sprinting, even though his face

was cast in marble, features fixed in anger. Steele, Shaw, and Tempest made room for him as he stopped a foot away from Bat and looked him over.

“You good?” he said finally in a tight voice vibrating like a plucked string.

Bat reached out to squeeze his shoulder, and I noticed they were exactly the same height. “Good, man.”

The tension in Dane’s shoulders eased, then fell slack entirely when Tempest stepped forward to give him a hug. Steele and Shaw, not wanting to be left out, hugged them too, then dragged Bat into the fold. The group hug made the back of my eyes burn, and my throat itch.

Everywhere around me, scared people were being consoled by their loved ones.

Except for me.

I turned to find my grandpa and saw him with Phillipa hugging him slightly awkwardly because she was not a hugger.

My throat closed up.

Tears threatened to overtake me, and I tried to breathe through the flux of emotion, reminding myself *I am not weak*.

But that voice was Priest’s, and it didn’t help.

I closed my eyes to count my breaths and my blessings.

I was safe. I was loved by so many. I was healthy.

I was *alone*.

Instinctively, I went back to the door of the church, needing the solace of its embrace to soothe me. Firemen had arrived out front and were going through the front doors to survey the damage, but I slinked through the back. The back corridor was empty, only a faint twinge of smoke polluting the air. I trailed my fingers along the stone wall, the rough rock like Priest’s strong, calloused fingers. I pulled away, chastising my thoughts for always leading like a one-way track back to that man.

The main chapel was coated in soot the length of both walls, and some of

the pews were damaged, but otherwise, it was blessedly intact. Firemen filtered in and out of the now wide-open front doors.

Out them, framed like a disciple of Christ in the wintery blue light, was Priest.

He stood on the sidewalk a few metres from the entrance staring into the hallowed space as if it was doomed to the foulest reaches of hell.

But he was there.

I blinked, wondering if he was a mirage conjured by shock.

The image of him remained, the long, dark-robed length of him stark against the snow-capped street tableau. He was too far away to see his eyes, but I knew somehow that they were pinned on me.

Deliberately, a booted foot lifted and stepped forward. He shuddered as if even this slightest movement closer to the holy place burned in him.

I'd never seen him within a block of First Light, and he was there, determinedly waiting outside, standing sentry as he had every night for weeks to make sure I was safe from harm, even if that duty brought him his own measure of pain.

Tears burned the backs of my eyes again, but this time they stemmed from the well of surging happiness and hope in my belly.

I ran.

Slipping slightly in the wet that put out the fires, stumbling over the uneven flagstones in my high heels, dodging past chastising firemen, I ran out the doors of the church heading straight into the arms of the devil.

And you know what he did?

After a brief, painful expression seized his stern face, he opened his arms *and caught me*.

I buried my face in the crook of his neck, inhaling the leather, clove, and sharp, bracing scent of fresh air imbued in his beard and skin. Vaguely, I was aware of him taking a deep drag of fragrance from my hair.

“You’re good,” he declared, strong hand flexing on my bottom, one of

them tracing the notches in my spine from tailbone to neck beneath my open coat where it fisted in my hair to bring my face out of hiding. His eyes burned on my skin as he searched my features for lingering fear and pain. “You’re fine.”

“Good,” I agreed, squeezing myself tighter around him to confirm it. “Fine.”

He nodded curtly, but that hand in my hair loosened so he could dive underneath the locks to find my pulse point with his thumb. His ruddy brow furrowed as he took a moment to feel the patter of my heartbeat.

“Fuck, *mo cuishle*,” he muttered on a staccato sigh that fanned minty air over my mouth. “Not lettin’ you outta my sight again. Not till this motherfucker is put down.”

“Okay,” I agreed easily, smoothing his messy hair down with my hands, staring into his gorgeous face with awe because I was currently living a miracle. A miracle where I had the right to touch him. “I’m good with that.”

“Should’ve known you’d be here,” a gruff, deeply unimpressed voice said from over my shoulder.

Priest didn’t put me down to address the man. Instead, he tucked me slightly to one side of his body so I could face the man too. There was a dangerous glint in his pale eyes, a promise that whoever was speaking to him was *this close* to being ripped to shreds.

“Tend to show up when I got family who needs me,” Priest agreed with faux ease as he ran a possessive hand down my hair and wrapped it languidly around his fist. “Can I help you with somethin’, Officer Travers?”

The cop squinted at him, hands on his gun belt, legs braced as if for war. He had the face of a pugilist and, apparently, the manners of one too. “Seeing as this is a crime scene, you can tell me what went down here.”

“He just arrived,” I told the asshole, sticking my chin in the air to glare down at him from my advanced height perched on Priest’s hip. “If you want a statement, ask me. I witnessed the entire thing.”

Officer Travers opened his mouth to speak, but Priest turned his back on the man, dismissing him. Before the cop could protest, my psycho moved us down the slight incline to the parking lot where the rest of our family milled together in the chaos.

“You called us family,” I said quietly, not wanting to spook him by repeating his words. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you refer to anyone as family.”

Priest slanted a look down the strong line of his nose at me. The skin beside his eyes and lips was smooth, no smile lines or brackets around that expressionless mouth because he so rarely emoted. But I could read the depths in those peridot eyes, and I saw the way they flickered with bank flames.

“Death makes you realize real quick how you feel ’bout someone. Lost Mute and realized what the club meant to me. Feels like I’m nearly losin’ you just as I got ya, and that did it too.”

“Did what?” I breathed as he manoeuvred through the clusters of shocked churchgoers to the far side of the lot where the club congregated, outsiders by their choice yet also ostracized by the parishioners. It was amazing to see social divides existed even amidst all the calamity.

“Made me realize you make me feel human,” he grunted without looking at me. “Not sure I like it, but there it fuckin’ is.”

“Human’s good,” I promised him, pressing a kiss to his beard because I couldn’t help it. Because joy was ballooning inside me with nowhere to go, and I needed some outlet for it.

“Human’s weak.”

“Hey.” I tugged on the short end of his beard, then raked my nails through it in a way that made him shiver despite himself. “You think I’m human, and once, you told me that I’m not weak.”

He considered me for a moment, a muscle in his cheek popping as he chewed over my words. Finally, he dropped me to the group and took a step

away as if I was suddenly infected with some highly contagious disease. As if he might catch my feelings.

“No, Little Shadow,” he murmured even as he turned away, only his fingers still connecting us together as they curled hard around my wrist. “You’ve never been weak.”

When we broke through the last of the crowd separating us from our chosen family, they were all watching us, clearly having tracked our progress from the sidewalk down to the lot. Priest hesitated, boot suspended mid-step. I watched from slightly behind and to the side of him as he cocked his head to study their varying expressions of confusion and open curiosity.

I waited, wondering how he would process their interest in whatever was going on between us.

Loulou broke free from Zeus to come toward us but stopped abruptly when Priest stepped in front of me, blocking her way.

They stared each other down, my big sister and my beloved psycho, communicating in the way of alphas, without words using only intense body language.

Slowly, Priest pulled me by the wrist to his side, then deliberately wrapped his big hand around the back of my neck under my hair to anchor me to him.

“She’s mine,” he said slowly, each word barely leashed with aggression.

Loulou mimicked him, cocking her head and narrowing her eyes. Her hip cocked to the side as she folded her arms across her chest and arched a brow. “And you’re hers?”

He shrugged one shoulder casually, but the hand on my neck flexed in spasm. “Whatever there is of me to have.”

I made a little noise of protest in my throat, but Priest only pressed his thumb tighter to my throat.

“Someone seems damn intent on hurting her,” Lou continued as if there was no one but her and Priest in the parking lot, no firemen or policemen, no

eavesdropping neighbours. I realized this was the MC Queen speaking to her soldier, seeing if he could be trusted with the biggest responsibility she had to dole out.

“I’ll kill them before they get to her,” Priest stated flatly.

A little shiver moved through my badass sister before she could quell it. “You’d kill me if I hurt her too, wouldn’t you?”

Priest just blinked slowly in answer.

A smile flickered around my sister’s lips. “Okay, then.”

“Jesus, you can smell the testosterone from the street,” Lion Danner announced as he parted the crowd behind him with some officers following. “If you lot are done showing off for the townsfolk, you mind telling me how you saved the damn day?”

Zeus laughed his great, bellowing laugh, drawing the attention of everyone who wasn’t already listening, though there were few. “Seems the damned saved the pious today. Maybe they’ll think twice next time they campaign against the club, eh?”

“Wouldn’t hold your breath,” Seth muttered from behind me, then smiled when I turned. “Just wanted to check on you, Bea.”

A growl built in Priest’s chest. I slapped my hand against it.

“I’m fine, thanks, Seth. I’m more concerned about you! You were a hero in there.”

He beamed at me, his face classically handsome even covered in soot. “You’re too sweet. Tell me you’ll still come to dinner tonight with Phillipa. We need to band together in times of trouble like this.”

I bit my lip, aware that Priest was still as death beside me. He didn’t want me to go. I didn’t want to go. But I wouldn’t cease being who I’d always been just because I was in love with a man who didn’t believe in some of the things that were dear to me. Seth, Tabby, Eric, Grandpa, my community at First Light were all important parts of my life, and I owed it to both them and myself to continue to prioritize them.

I tipped my head up to look at Priest, who was already gazing down at me, his face utterly expressionless. I thought, maybe, it wasn't because he was unmoved by the idea of me leaving his side, but because he didn't want to impose his own thoughts of the matter onto me.

In its own way, I thought that was awfully sweet.

"Drop me off and pick me up?" I asked softly, for some reason not wanting Seth to be in on this little moment.

Maybe because it felt so concrete, a normal conversation between a girlfriend and a boyfriend.

Priest's hand dug into the back of my head and tugged once, just hard enough to make it sting in a way that reminded me how much I loved when he pulled my hair like that seated deep inside me. I flushed then squirmed when his eyes grew dark with lust.

"Wait outside while you do your thing," he agreed, his eyes flicking up to shoot a glare at Seth. "But that asshole puts a single hand on ya, I'm breakin' in the damn door and slittin' his throat."

"That's reasonable," I confirmed, knowing my eyes were sparkling, that my entire body was bowed toward his like a magnet caught in his pull.

"She'll be in good hands," Seth replied in a way that implied I would be in *better* hands than I could've been with Priest.

My man didn't even grace him with a look. Instead, he reached into the pocket of his hoodie beneath The Fallen cut and produced something that flashed silver. It was a small switchblade in glittering steel wrapped up paradoxically in a pink bow. I recognized it as one of the many I kept in a box beside my bedside table. It warmed me to think of Priest plucking the velvet length from the wicker basket while he watched me sleep. There was something about the contrast, the knife and the pink bow, that perfectly symbolized us. Violence harnessed by purity, romanticism tempered by discipline. It wasn't the first weapon he'd given me, and I knew it wouldn't be the last. It was just another in a long line of actions that Priest had taken to

show me that he cared for me in his own dark and broken way.

“You are not weak,” he repeated the mantra softly, coarsely, palming my throat in one hand even though it made Seth gurgle in protest. “You’re strong enough to make a dead man walkin’ feel, Bea. You remember that you’re ever in a bad place and I can’t get to you fast enough, yeah? You remember not even the reaper of The Fallen can scare you, and then you motherfuckin’ defend yourself.”

When I only accepted the knife mutely, mouth trembling with the effort to hold back my sudden tears, Priest crowded closer, blocking me from Seth’s view. The hand on my neck moved up to grasp my chin to bring my gaze to his, which was bright with purpose, savage with a violent kind of truth he felt in his core.

“I’m a killer,” he reminded me quietly, words murmured into my open mouth like a carefully placed communion wafer. I felt it dissolve sweetly on my tongue. “You’re a killer.”

As I grasped the knife in my cold hand, felt the weight and rightness of it in my grip and remembered how scared my entire community had been locked in a burning church, I decided unequivocally that if I was faced with the serial killer that terrorized us, I’d kill him myself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BEA

BILE SURGED UP MY THROAT, PAINTING THE POWDER ROOM TOILET BOWL IN Seth and Tabitha's ocean-front mansion with my vomit. I clutched the porcelain in my sweating fingers as I retched and moaned, crouched over the toilet, alone and miserable in the middle of a dinner party.

I didn't want to be here.

My stomach wouldn't stop churning like the undertow of the Pacific Ocean outside the bathroom window, tossing and heaving up the walls of my gut. I was sick with uneasiness, with this foreboding sensation that slicked my skin with clammy sweat.

I couldn't shake the sense that the serial killer was just playing with us all. Setting the stage for his greatest act yet like some demented theatre troubadour. He'd almost burned down an entire church, something that

should have been sacred to a truly religious man, just to prove his point. He wasn't a cut-out killer from a textbook in my violent crimes class. He was a fully realized nightmare with complexities so vast, I found myself terrified just contemplating his next step.

All I knew for sure was that he seemed to know me, and more, he wanted to play this game with me. Aside from the stripper in downtown Vancouver and the woman on the reservation, every murder could be linked to me, and this latest crime, though without casualties, was no exception.

I thought, maybe, he was growing bored with me. Tired of my inaction, waiting for some specific reaction he felt I should be having as a result of the crimes, he was starting to deviate from his plan.

Deviation was worse than premeditated murder. Case in point, an entire church filled with people versus a single victim.

Bile surged up my throat, my stomach cramping so hard I cried as I threw up the last dregs of my lunch. Finished, I spat into the bowl, flushed, and washed my face and hands with icy water to revive myself for the rest of what was turning into a very strange night at the Linley's.

Truthfully, even though I loved Tabby and Seth, I never really enjoyed spending time with them together. It had always been my philosophy that a couple should bring out the best in each other, but some strange alchemy occurred when the Linleys were together that tarnished both of their good natures. They seemed tense and forceful, exerting too much energy just by being in the same room. This was especially true that night.

Or maybe it was the entire atmosphere of the dinner that had my teeth on edge. The Linleys were gracious hosts—everyone gathered at the beautifully set dining room table was dressed in elegant winter finery, laughing lightly as they drank fine wine and spoke just loudly enough to be heard over the murmur of Christmas music playing. It was all so civilized, so prettily manufactured, and so utterly fake.

I could feel the festering ugliness under the proceedings, the way

Margaret Huxley kept shooting me narrow little looks as if my presence offended her, the way Tabby kept touching the golden cross around her neck as if atoning for a sin she hadn't yet committed.

Only Seth seemed nonplussed, as charismatic and lovely as always. He carried the conversation even when his wife trailed into silence and entertained my mother with story after story that made her giggle like a teenager.

I walked back to the dining room to reclaim my seat in the guest of honour space to the left of Seth at the head of the table. Usually, I loved to hear stories of Seth's work at the hospital, but that night, I was worn down by the events of the day and distracted by the violet and blue bruises on my knees I'd tried to hide under my sheer black tights. My fingers frequently crept beneath the table linen to press into the bruises, loving the little tinge of pain as a reminder of my debauchery the night before with Priest.

It secretly thrilled me to wear the marks of such a man at a table such as this. If these people knew how much I loved to be choked, spanked, and generally fucked hard by a man who was devoutly atheist and entirely criminal, they would have had me committed for madness.

Maybe I was mad.

The problem with "madness" as a general concept was that there wasn't a base model for a "normal" psychological makeup. Each person was so uniquely different, each society with its own rules and cues, each culture with its norms and penalties meant there was no way to define normal. Yet so many people made a study of abnormal psychology. It was so much easier to focus on the "other" than what similarities we might conceive between them and us.

This, of course, was the problem with the serial killer the newspapers were calling "The Prophet of Death". Unoriginal and harmful. Giving serial killers a nickname was a horrible idea because notoriety for a killer like this who staged his victims was giving him exactly what he wanted.

Notice.

A spotlight to shine on the story he was determined to tell in blood and dead bodies.

“So morose this evening,” Seth noticed with a twinkling grin. “What’s going on in that smart head of yours? I hope you weren’t too traumatized by what happened at First Light today.”

I moved my broccoli around my plate with my fork, feeling nauseated. “Traumatized is a bit strong. I do think the cops are underestimating this murderer, though. It’s clearly more than just a disturbed man killing without consideration. He has some kind of agenda, and he’s clever. Maybe he even has more than one person helping him.”

“Is that typical, though?” Seth asked with a self-conscious laugh. “Forgive me, I can list every bone in the body, but I don’t know the first thing about crime and psychology. I’m afraid I always fell asleep in my psych classes.”

“I can’t imagine you being less than an A-plus student,” I teased because Seth was meticulous and incredibly smart. I’d once caught him reading the Bible *in Latin*. “And I thought you listened to my podcast every week? Or were you just being polite?”

I was used to that. Supportive friends and family claimed to tune in to *Little Miss Murder*, but most of the time, they were too squeamish to do so. I didn’t hold it against them.

Seth leaned forward in mock confession. “I do listen on my commute home on Mondays, but I’m usually too tired to do anything but register the sound of your voice. Do you forgive me?”

I patted him on the hand and clucked my tongue. “I suppose. I haven’t spoken about him on the air since he sent that gruesome...package to the studio, and we’ve suspended the show for a bit because I don’t want to give him another spotlight, you know?”

“Oh? You think that’s what he wants? Attention?”

“Yes, he seems like a classic clinical psychopath in that he’s narcissistic and very aware of his own heightened intelligence.”

Seth pursed his lips over his steepled fingers. “Clever enough not to get caught?”

“The entire provincial RCMP and the local PD are on it now, I think it’s only a matter of time and maybe a matter of a few more murders before he makes a mistake,” I hypothesised, enjoying myself for the first time that night.

So of course, my mother had to ruin it.

“Bea,” she murmured from beside me, her mouth covered by her napkin to hide her whisper. “This is not polite dinner table conversation.”

Irritation itched at the back of my neck. I arched an eyebrow at my beautiful mother, decked out in the pink pearl set my father had gifted her for their tenth wedding anniversary. How she could still stand to wear anything that he had given her was beyond my comprehension, but she always pulled out the relics of our old life when we dined with our friends from First Light Church. My mother could disassociate her two lives even easier than Lou once had between Louise and Loulou. Two days ago, she’d donned a classy leather jacket while shooting the shit with Maja, Buck, and Smoke.

Today, she could pretend that entire life had nothing to do with her.

I shivered as I realized I’d spent so many years doing the same thing, being ashamed of the person I really wanted to be and the people I honestly wanted to surround myself with. I was so afraid I wouldn’t live up to my sister’s glory that I’d unwittingly become my mother by attempting to straddle two very different worlds and, therefore, two different souls.

It was exhausting and ineffectual.

She’d have to make a choice at some point, and I’d just found I was more prepared than I’d thought to make mine.

“It’s fine, Phillipa,” Seth allowed, reaching over to squeeze my hand sympathetically. “If it makes Bea feel better to talk about it, I think it’s

healthy she should.”

“By all means, let’s listen to the sister of a whore talk about inappropriate topics,” Margaret snipped as she took a deep draught of wine.

“Excuse me?” I asked, honestly shocked by her rancour.

The older woman, beleaguered by long nights in hospice visiting her dying husband, stared me down without a shred of remorse. “You heard me, young lady. It’s obvious that the *club*”—she spat the word—“your sister married into has brought more chaos down on this town. It’s about time The Fallen were all incarcerated as they should be.”

I blinked, turning to my mother, who was looking down in her lap, wringing her napkin between her manicured hands.

But she remained silent.

Loathing burned through me, igniting something in my belly only Priest had previously had access to. My sister was my idol, my primary source of love and affection for my entire childhood. In marrying that “criminal”, she had gifted me a found family more exquisite than any I could ever conceive of being born into. In marrying that criminal, she’d given me mine.

I sat ramrod straight in my chair and sent Margaret a withering glower down my nose. “Obviously, you’re in shock, Margaret, because it was clear to everyone that one of those club members put out most of the fires in church today.”

“That was my Seth, I heard,” Tabby interjected, smiling lovingly at her husband across the table. “He’s always had a bit of a hero complex.”

My mother laughed, a little manically, eager to dissolve the tension.

I would not allow that. Margaret wanted to throw down with me, then she’d discover just how much like my “whore” sister I was.

“These killings have nothing to do with The Fallen. If anything, you should be thankful they are here to protect this town as much as they can,” I continued in a tense voice.

I was hot and cold with anger and disappointment, my unsettled stomach

clenching into a hard knot that made me want to contract around it in the fetal position. I hated conflict. I abhorred even the barest hint of friction in a social group. Yet there I was, practically provoking an altercation with a woman who was probably delirious with exhaustion and riled by the unjustness of losing her husband.

Beatrice Lafayette was known as the peacekeeper, the sweet girl with the ready smile.

But she was also the second-string choice, the sister in the shadows, the girl no one looked at twice.

I was tired of that, of the girl who conformed to fit into the small box people made for her.

I was ready to be noticed, and if need be, I was ready to fight.

I am not weak.

“I know you’re grieving, Margaret,” I soothed like silk over my iron words. “I know this year has been hard on your family. But The Fallen have nothing to do with your misfortunes.”

She sniffed loudly. “They’ve been a bane on this town for years. Just last year, they were involved in *sex trafficking*.”

A snarl built in my throat, but I swallowed it back and sent her a saccharine smile. “As a matter of fact, I think that had something to do with the mayor’s wife, Irina Ventura. Lila Meadows, an old lady in the MC, actually helped take them down.”

“You’re just defending them because you’ve been brainwashed by that man, Zeus Garro,” she claimed righteously. “He’s turned you away from God’s path. You’re hell bound now, girl.”

“Margaret,” my mum finally protested softly. “Bea is a good God-fearing woman. Please don’t conflate her with the club.”

“I wouldn’t be speaking if I were you, Phillipa.” Margaret’s eyes were narrow and dark reflections of her corroding heart. “You’re the one who let your eldest daughter marry that heathen. I heard they named their son

Monster. Fitting name for an abomination.” Her lips curled in a malicious, contemplative grin. “I wonder if sin runs in the family, and you’re next in line to become one of their filthy sluts—”

Poor Margaret’s words were cut off with a shrill cry as I lunged over the table at her. My knee landed in a cool bowl of mashed potatoes, and my thigh knocked over a bottle of wine, the force of my movement dragging the tablecloth with me so every dish dislodged haphazardly. One of my hands dove into her hair to squeeze in an unforgiving fist while the other reared back to deliver a punishing blow straight to her gobsmacked face.

The gold heart-shaped ring I wore on my right hand split open her cheekbone, and blood dribbled down into her open mouth.

I sat back on my haunches on the table and wiped my bloody, sore knuckles on Margaret’s discarded napkin. “Next time you speak about my family like that, I’ll do more than hit you, Margaret. I’ll grab those criminals you seem so fixated on, and we’ll do some real damage.”

My smile was hot and twisted on my face like a hanger forced between my lips, but it felt good. Anger and violence coursed through me, making my head spin merrily.

“Bea!” my mother cried as she had been since I started my attack. “Oh my gosh, Bea, get down from there and apologize.”

“No,” Seth said calmly, standing up and bracing his hands on the table to lean forward as he addressed us. There was a cold fury on his face as he studied us, some dark hole whirling in his blue gaze. “Margaret, I think *you* should apologize to Bea. She’s done nothing wrong, and though I do not condone her violence, you provoked her beyond all hope of passivity.”

When Margaret only blinked in shock at him, Seth rounded the table and stood a few feet away from her. He did nothing but maintain eye contact with her, his face composed, those eyes still as placid water, yet the energy radiating from him was so palpable, my skin pebbled into goosebumps. He had the same peaceful authority that my grandpa so often exerted over lost

people in his flock, nipping at their heels like a shepherding dog to bring them back into the fold.

Finally, she made a kind of whimpering sigh, clutching a hand to her hurt cheek, and turned to look at me with a petulant scowl. “I apologize, Beatrice.”

I glared back at her, unwilling to accept what was so clearly an insincere apology.

Seth cleared his throat. “Bea? Forgiveness is divine, need I remind you? I’d accept Margaret’s apology. You are above this behaviour. Above *her* acting out so childishly.”

I watched something like fear and disappointment war on the older woman’s face and felt a flare of pity in my chest. She was losing her husband. It was a normal part of the grieving process to feel angry even when there was no cause.

“I’ll forgive you if you promise never to utter another bad word about my family, which, just so you know, *includes* The Fallen,” I allowed graciously, looking down my nose at her.

She seethed, eyes flashing. “You’re a disgrace to our religion.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” I rebutted as I swung off the table. “I’m going to clean up. Seth, Tabby, thank you for having me for dinner, but I’m going to leave early. Suddenly, I’m not feeling well.”

Without waiting for their response, I sailed out of the dining room with my head held high even though my adrenaline was fading and shakiness was descending.

I’d just punched a middle-aged woman in the face.

But, but, but she’d called my nephew a *monster*, my brother-in-law a *heathen*, and my sister a *whore*.

That was unforgivable.

Suddenly, the anger was back, hot and tacky at the back of my throat, and impossible to swallow down.

I used the bathroom again, spitting out the bile lingering in my mouth, wiping the potatoes off my tights, and straightening the hem of my cream cashmere dress.

I didn't want to go back out there.

In fact, if I was being honest, I wished I'd never come to dinner. I wanted to be with Priest, with my friends and family who never judged and always supported me.

Without thinking, I left the bathroom and went into the front living room to peer out the sheer curtains at the street.

Priest was there, as he said he would be, waiting for me in the dark, clothed in black, drenched in shadows leaning against his Harley across the street. Attuned to even the slightest shift in the curtains, he snapped his head up from the wood carving he was whittling to lock intractably with mine.

Even from across the street, I felt that gaze on my soul, dark and claiming.

Mine, mine, mine, it seemed to say.

Yours, yours, yours, my heart echoed back.

I subconsciously moved toward the front doors, needing him more than I needed to heed my ingrained manners and say goodbye to my hosts.

But then I heard a girly little giggle and froze.

I knew that giggle.

It was my mother.

I crept closer to the kitchen and strained to hear more.

"Your daughter is fierce," Seth complimented softly from behind the swinging door. "It was something to see that."

"Oh Seth, stop being so kind. She acted terribly."

My heart clenched at my mother's words, hating that she would condemn me for defending our family when she hadn't condemned my dad all those years ago for hitting Louise after finding out about her and Zeus.

The hypocrisy of living two lives was an ugly, two-faced monster my

mother was adept at keeping hidden.

“She was beautiful,” Seth insisted with a smile in his voice, then softer. “Just like her mother.”

I blinked at the white panelled door, unable to compute the intimacy in his tone.

Seth was married—happily, I thought—to Tabby, who was just then in the adjacent room making nice after my incident.

And my mother?

For the past few years, she and Smoke had been flirting with something more than friendship. I always assumed my mum was gun-shy because Smoke had severe asthma and a significant heart defect. She’d already lost her first husband and nearly lost her eldest daughter, so maybe she wasn’t quite ready to sign on for more loss. I had understood that. My mother was soft, pretty, and as delicate as a figurine meant to sit on a shelf. She was not made for action or dangerous handling.

But this?

This, I didn’t understand.

Sucking in a deep breath that I held tight in my lungs, I pushed open the door a crack to peer inside.

Seth was holding my mother, who was at least twelve years older than him as if she was a young child, hands framing her gently lined face, forehead tipped to hers so all they could see was each other’s gaze. So intimate, like looking into a window I never should have opened, haunted with scenes I’d never forget.

“You’re so good to me, Seth,” Phillipa whispered, placing her hands over his. “What would I do without your guiding light in my life?”

I must have made some noise in my throat, but Seth’s head popped up, eyes unerringly finding mine.

“Beatrice,” he said, a puff of breath, shocked by my presence. He blinked once in bewilderment, then seemed to consider the situation before reining in

his emotions, all at once wiping his features clean.

“Bea,” my mother gasped, the pearl bracelet on her wrist clacking lightly as her hand flew to her mouth. Dramatic and elegant as Grace Kelly in a Hitchcock movie. “Oh darling, I’m so sorry.”

“What’s going on here?” I asked, struck dumb by the idea that my mother and Seth could be having some kind of affair.

They were both so devout, so entrenched in their beliefs that the sanctity of marriage was something I never believed they could break.

Seth laughed lightly, moving away from Phillipa to lean his narrow hips against the counter and cross his feet. “It’s good to see you shocked by the idea of adultery, Beatrice. I know you’re a true believer, but given the company you’ve been keeping lately, I wondered if you still upheld the strictures of God.”

“Do you?” I demanded, fisting my hands on my hips. “Explain, please.”

“Seth has been...” My mother sighed wearily, hands fluttering over her heart in affected distress. “He’s been helping me through these trying times since your father passed. I’ve been so confused lately about what is right for me, and he’s been invaluable...”

“Invaluable how?” I pressed, looking at Seth who seemed entirely unaffected by the proceedings, smiling a placid little grin as he watched us as if my outrage was only mildly amusing.

“It’s been hard staying true to God when I spend so much time with The Fallen,” Phillipa admitted softly. “I’ve been struggling for some time. I love my daughter, but the life she’s chosen gives me pause.”

“Okay...” My hackles shivered. I was ready to fight even my mother to her death in order to defend Loulou. Why was her lifestyle so flagrantly wrong? Yes, Zeus was the prez of a motorcycle gang that sometimes dealt in drugs and violence, but they protected the citizens of this town, and they stood for so many good values like love, loyalty, and family. I’d thought after all this time my mother understood that. “So you aren’t romantically

involved.”

Phillipa blushed and laughed, but Seth merely shook his head, a tender look in his eyes as he addressed me. “Do you really think so little of me, Bea? After all this time, I thought you’d know that nothing matters to me so much as God and his teachings.”

I released a shaky sigh of relief and smiled at him even though Seth’s strict devotion to God always seemed slightly at odds with his practice as a doctor. “I wish you’d just come right out and said it. The way you were standing together was very...intimate.”

“Have you never seen your Grandpa tend to one of his flock like that before?” he questioned, knowing the answer already.

Grandpa was a priest and a pastor, the spiritual leader and tender of his flock. I’d seen him hold a widow in his arms while she cried, tend to the broken skin on the knee of a youth, and press a kiss to the forehead of those who received his blessing. Physical affection was not untoward in the name of God, or so people often said. I’d frequently wondered if that wasn’t what priests and bishops told themselves when they exploited young girls and boys. Once, I’d tried to bring up the scandal of pedophilia in the church with Seth, and he’d immediately shut me down.

That was the difference between people like Seth and myself. I didn’t believe anything existed only in black and white; a degree of grey was where most of life’s lessons lurked.

“Bea,” Seth murmured, stepping toward me to collect my hands. His were cool, long-fingered, and smooth from repeatedly washing before surgery. “I would not have you think so ill of me when I think so highly of you.”

I thought of the things I had done recently. Of the bruises on my knees from taking Priest’s cock in my mouth, of the blood that had spilled on my feet like an unholy baptism when my psychopath had killed Brett Walsh for me, of my morbid, eternal interest in all things violent and nonconformist.

I was just a dark heart wrapped in a pretty pink bow. It astonished me

how many people chose to focus on the beautiful ribbon instead of what it harboured inside.

Seth and Tabitha had been my friends for years, but I wondered, as I said my goodbyes to Seth and promised my mother we'd speak later, how relevant our friendship was now. They didn't know me well, and that was both their fault and my own. We were comfortable with the illusion of Beatrice Lafayette, good girl extraordinaire, the girl who accepted life in a box constructed by Bible verse and society's judgments.

Or we had been.

Now, I wasn't so sure she even existed anymore.

If maybe, before Priest saved me, he was the one to break me. If I'd learned anything the past few years, it was that broken wasn't bad. It was a step along the road to healing and growth, a pause in the inevitable evolution of ourselves over the course of our lives. Priest had broken me out of my shell, and now that I was *free*, I vowed I would never go back.

When I pushed open the door to the Linley's, he was there. Standing up from his recline on his Harley, he was already moving toward me, pulled to me as if by some gravitational force.

The force of love, my romantic heart whispered.

I didn't care what name I gave to it: love, worship, obsession.

It all boiled down to one thing, one feeling that struck me the moment he clutched me in a hard, possessive embrace right there on the Linley's stoop. The feeling that with Priest, every piece of me, dark and light, sweet and bitter, saintly and sinful was glued together by his acceptance into a beautiful mosaic. That feeling that with him, I'd never been so beautiful and whole. We were two broken halves that locked together in a way that could never be undone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PRIEST

CHRISTMAS THREW UP IN BEA'S LITTLE PINK HOUSE. SOMETIME IN THE LAST twenty-four hours, my Little Shadow had managed to decorate her space with an explosion of seasonal décor. A snowman at the base of her white Christmas tree decorated in pinks and golds emitted a recorded version of carols when she pressed a button that timed the flashing tree lights to the music. There was a series of crystal reindeer cantering across her coffee table, fake snow, and fir-shaped candles on the dining room table, and pink tinsel on the beam across the kitchen. Sampson was curled up on that velvet couch playing with a candy cane pillow, and Delilah's cage was even partially draped with greenery and red ribbon.

Setting foot in the place nearly made my balls shrink back up into my body.

"You like it?" she'd asked as she tossed her keys in a little Santa Claus

bowl on her side table before making her way down the hall. “The girls helped me this morning when they came over for breakfast.”

I didn’t answer both because she’d disappeared down the hall and because I didn’t have a single fucking nice thing to say about the Christmas chaos. It was barely December, and she’d spewed holiday spirit all over her house.

I hadn’t been this close to an ornament in my entire life. I didn’t believe in Christ, organized holidays, or sentimental crap, so none of it resonated with me.

None of it, save the image of Bea in some kinda frothy lace nightgown going up on her toes to place the ornaments on the tree as high as she could reach from her slight height. One of the brothers must’ve helped her put the star on top and didn’t that make rage sear across my skin like a branding iron.

She was mine.

If she wanted Christmas crap all over the house, I should’ve been the man to reach the high places, to secure the heavy tree in its planter, to fucking deck the halls if she wanted me to because just existing in the same place at the same time as this slip of a blond girl made my fucking blood sing.

I was scowling into the empty fireplace, thinking foolishly that I should light the damn thing because my Little Shadow liked the warmth when there was a creak deep down the hall. My head snapped to the dark mouth of it, spine straight, muscles taut as wires ready to spring.

Bea’d almost fucking died that day.

I hadn’t been there.

And why?

Because I was too much of a fucking pussy to go inside a building just because it was designated as a church.

I hadn’t set foot in any kind of holy place since I was seventeen. It wasn’t that I had some irrational fear God would strike me down, or I’d burn up to ash for my sins the second I crossed the threshold.

I didn't talk about my past. I didn't even think about it. Sometimes, there aren't words big enough to describe emotions, to describe the way events carve themselves into your flesh, sinew, and bone. Why would I speak of my horrors only to diminish them?

The unspeakable had been done to me in holy places, in a church claimed for God. I saw that setting when I closed my fucking eyes every night to sleep. I felt prayer burned into my palate when I woke from restless slumber plagued by memories masquerading as nightmares.

Avoiding churches entirely was almost unnecessary when the echo of one haunted my every living moment.

Still, I was a man who enjoyed some pain, but I wasn't a fucking masochist.

So I avoided holy places, and until today, it had been fine.

But I'd made a mistake. I'd put my fears above Bea's safety like a fucking fool. I was smarter than that, better than that. I was not a man ruled by his past, by pain or emotions as fucking useless as fear.

Fear was a cage people willingly locked themselves into. I *knew* that. Or I thought I had.

Then today.

Today, today, today.

When Bea almost died because I was afraid of some stone and mortar.

"Priest?" her soft voice called, cutting like a beam of light through my dark thoughts, dragging my consciousness into the present.

She was standing in the shadowed mouth of the corridor wearing nothing but pink. Sheer fabric patterned minimally with tiny hearts. I could see her nipples peaked in the bra, the texture of her downy hair beneath the transparent underwear.

The tension inside me coiled tighter, my teeth aching as they clenched, my hands fisted so tightly they ached. I wanted to slice open my palms to release the strain and feel the heat of my slick blood trail between my

knuckles and *drip, drip, drip* to the floor like an incantation.

Instead, I stared.

I stared at the girl who was my heart displaced outside my chest. Only with her did I ever feel this agonizingly *alive*. Every beat of my heart, every molecule of blood in my veins, and breath in my lungs claimed and reanimated by her.

Little Bea Lafayette standing there in delicate pink scraps of fabric I could rend with a curl of one finger.

She was looking at me, tight-fisted, sternly scowling, cold as a column of ice chiselled into the form of man, as if I was something soft and precious. As if she could hold me in the palm of her hand and stroke me with her little fingers.

“I need you,” she murmured softly, holding out one hand, knuckles bruised from punching that badmouthing cunt at dinner. The evidence of her capacity for violence made me harder than her lingerie. I liked to think I’d planted that brutality in her along with my seed. That I’d infected her with some of my darkness just as she had with her obdurate light.

I didn’t move, focused on breathing instead of lunging forward to gnash my teeth at her throat, to open one of her veins just to see evidence of her blood, to know she was still alive despite my fuckup at the church.

The air between us seemed to whip and snap, crackling with dangerous tension.

Bea stepped closer, my brave fool.

“I want you,” she told me, curls tumbling over her small breasts in a shining sheet as she stepped into my orbit and up onto her toes. When she spoke next, she did it while grabbing one of my heavy, scarred hands and placing it on her chest, my fingers curling into the edge of each firm breast.

Fuck, but I could kill her with one hand, one push.

One mistake and she’d be dead under me. One rage, one nightmare, one moment taken too far and I could end the only reason I could think of to live.

I was a weapon, the sharp edge of a blade and the blunt force of a fist, and Bea was a silk heart. It would have been simple to assume she would be safer in a different man's hands, but who would protect her better than a weapon, than me? Truthfully, the tension that existed within me between her ruining her and cherishing her for the fuckin' miracle she was made my heart pound loudly in my chest, my blood roarin' through my veins straight to my cock. It made me feel so fucking alive.

"I see you," she told me, her eyes dark in the yellow lamplight, wide, dark pools I wanted to fall into. "I see you, Priest, even when you don't want to be seen. You cannot be invisible to me. Religion teaches you to covet the divine, to swallow it wholesale down your throat like communion. To seek it out for absolution. To me, you are divine, and my pursuit of you is anything but unholy."

I stood still as she began to explore my clothed body with tender, tentative hands. They fluttered like doves at my chest, plucking the gun from my holster, unclipping the hunting knife from my belt. She knelt at my feet like a servant, eyes shining with worship as she lifted the edge of my denim pant leg to release the dagger at my ankle, then slid the boot knife out of the heel of my right shoe.

She was disarming me, in more ways than I could count.

I was sweating, vibrating with the effort to stay silent and calm while she had her way with me. I slept with those knives. I showered with them collected on my sink basin well within reach. Being parted from my knives felt like an amputation, but I sensed it was important to her to see me without them, to have me defenseless under her soft hands.

I couldn't give her much, but I could fucking try to give her this.

There was only one weapon left, the matte black tang knife I wore on a chain around my neck. Bea's fingers hovered over the faint shape of it beneath my hoodie, then brought her gaze to mine in silent question.

I swallowed thickly and jerked my chin.

She didn't go for the blade. Instead, she tucked her little hands into the shoulders of my leather cut and pushed it over my back. Then she pulled the hem of my hoodie up, but I superseded her by pulling at the neck and shucking it myself.

We were both panting hard like we had run some kind of race. In a way, we were. There was only so much I could take, and we both knew it. Any moment, the beast in me would lash out and conquer her so she'd forget to conquer me in return.

Her eyes raked over my black henley, the way it flowed over the hard edge of my honed muscles like ink. I sucked in a sharp breath and fought a flinch as she trailed her fingers lightly up my forearm to my shoulder then over to my collar. The feel of her skin against my neck made me hiss, a bead of sweat rolling down my temple.

No one had touched my bare skin, save my hands, in over a decade. The feel of it seared through me like wildfire.

Bea made a whimpering noise in her throat but continued her journey, trailing a fingertip under the fabric to hook around the silver chain holding the blade. With one firm curl of her beckoning finger, the chain broke apart the way it was meant to into her hold. The slither of metal whispered between us as she pulled it gently from beneath my shirt and gathered the body-warmed metal in her palm.

Finished with my weapons, we stood there breathing heavily, eyes locked and dark, air pulsing between us to the rhythm of my increased heart rate. She didn't seem to know what to do now that she'd succeeded in her task. Indecision and excitement sent a flush spilling down her neck and breasts.

"Will you take off your clothes for me?" she asked softly, almost afraid to ask or maybe afraid of the answer.

I ground my teeth as I fought with myself. I wanted to give her everything, all of me, hollow bones and empty soul, but that was *too much*.

Too much, too much, too much.

I hadn't been naked since I was seventeen, that last time covered in the blood of holy men who had done so many unholy things to me.

A shiver tore through me so violently, I stepped backward to brace myself.

Bea's face contracted with sorrow.

And I was done.

Done being too broken to function. Done bringing sorrow to that angelic face. Done being passive.

What did it matter if I was unclothed? I'd never been more naked than I was standing there in that pink living room with my Little Shadow.

I snapped forward so quickly, she gave a little scream before she melted into my hard clutch like warm wax. Then I was kissing her, stealing the air from her lungs because I wanted to taste her breath, eating the sweetness of her tongue to swallow down the poison I'd just felt on my tongue.

"Gonna take you tonight like you've never taken a man before," I warned her between vicious little nips at her bottom lip. It grew swollen and bruised as a plum beneath my attentions. "You gonna let me take you like that?"

"Yes," she agreed instantly, arching into me, shivering as fantasies reeled through her deviant mind. "I want you to fuck me. Hurt me. Make me cry." She rolled to her toes to speak her next words against the corner of my mouth. "Show me how beautiful it can be to be broken."

A groan ripped from my gut. I fed it into her mouth with my teeth and tongue, hefting her into my arms as I continued to kiss her so I could walk us down the hall to her bedroom. I dropped her on the bed without care, watching as she bounced against the mattress, all that pale hair and paler limbs spread for me to plunder. I considered her for a second, head cocked, as I decided what I would do to her.

How I would own her that night.

There was Christmas here too. In the string of coloured lights draped through her bedframe, in the holiday-themed pillows on the bed, and the soft

music that spilled out of speakers somewhere in the room.

“Don’t believe in Christmas,” I growled as I decided on my course of action, kneeling on the bed on either side of her hips, leaning forward to unwrap a length of colour lights. “But I’ll always appreciate the things you do...in my own way.”

She squirmed beneath me as I wrapped the string of lights around one wrist, then back around the bedframe before moving to do the same to the other. The bulbs were warm, not too hot, and the idea of her held in place by her own design made me hard as iron in my jeans.

I knelt back on my haunches over her, peering down at the way her skin pinked with lust and her eyes went bright as cerulean with anticipation.

“You like bein’ tied down and helpless?” I taunted her as I ran the rough pads of my fingers lightly around her breasts before tweaking each nipple brutally between my knuckles. I spoke again over her hiss of painful pleasure. “You wanna know how it feels to give yourself over completely to the monster under your bed, Bea?”

Her response was cut off by a moan as I reached behind me to feel her pussy, slicking a finger down her already wet seam.

“You love bein’ bad for me,” I murmured, feeling heat coiling like a rousing dragon in my gut.

Oh, I was going to fucking eviscerate her morals tonight. I was going to burn her inhibitions to ash and raze all shame to the ground. When I was done with her, whatever tatters of her virginal bashfulness would be laid to waste.

She protested when I got up from the bed, turning my back on her to go back into the living room to retrieve something from my saddlebag. When I returned after a pit stop in the bathroom, she was peacefully lying on the bed for me, legs spread so I could see the glistening pink of her pussy beneath the curls. Her only imperfection was the mauve and blue discolouring on her legs from taking my cock hard in the shower the night before. I didn’t think I’d

ever seen anything so pretty as her bruised knees, milky thighs disrupted by the stamp of her immorality. I was ingloriously thrilled to know she would have knelt on those knees in church, the pain a constant reminder that she worshipped me before her God.

My mouth watered as I placed the bowl of hot water, the washcloth, and the sharp blade against the bed and settled myself between her thighs.

“Wh-what are you doing?” she asked softly, a little hitch of excitement in her breath as I brandished the straight edge blade above her pussy.

“I’m gonna shave you bare,” I told her as I placed the hot, wet cloth over her pussy and watched her shiver. “Then I’m gonna eat you until your leakin’ honey all over the bed, and you’re so swollen you can barely take my fingers. After all’a that, I’m gonna wedge my thick cock inside you and fuck you till you’re filled up with my cum.”

“Oh, my God,” she breathed, eyes wide as she lifted her head to watch me remove the cloth and apply shaving cream to her groin. “Why is this so hot?”

I grinned wickedly but didn’t answer, focusing inside on holding her flesh taut with one thumb while I carefully dragged the blade over her lightly furred cunt. The sight of the silver blade against her golden curls, the smooth cream of the skin beneath as I cut away the hair was fucking gorgeous. Having her trust to wield a blade so close to her fragile center sent power and lust reeling through me, my dick weeping in my jeans.

“You’ll be so sensitive,” I murmured darkly as I bent her leg back, waiting until she hesitantly held it wide herself. “Just the scrape of my teeth along the tender skin here...” I ran the edge of the blade lightly over her mound just north of her clit. “Will make you shudder.”

She shuddered then, a light trill of movement I quelled with my forearm banded over her hips. It was a delicate process, shaving her bare without cutting her with the sharp blade. I cleaned it every stroke or two in the bowl of hot water, smoothed the residue away with the cloth, then returned to my task, tongue sandwiched hard beneath my teeth as I study every inch of her

pussy.

“You’re makin’ a mess, Bea,” I noted, dipping one finger into her overflowing slit, following the slick from her clit down to her asshole where it pooled beneath her bum. A full-body blush sluiced down her skin, but I hushed her. “Don’t worry, I’ll clean you up with my tongue.”

When I was finished, I cleaned her gently with a clean, damp cloth and put my detritus in the bathroom before returning to stand at the foot of the bed. I loomed over her, the only light in the room tinged red and cast from those coloured lights securing her hands to the railing. She was breathing fast, so aroused by the intimacy we’d shared that her eyes were blown to black with greedy lust.

“I want...” She trailed off, tongue-tied with desires she didn’t know yet how to voice.

I’d teach her.

All those dark things she desired had names, and I intended to teach her the entire fucking alphabet of fuckery.

“I know,” I soothed, only my voice was cold and hard as I undid my belt, button, and fly so I could pull my aching cock into the light. It was throbbing angrily, precum pooling in the head. I swiped the tip with my rough thumb, felt the keen bite of pleasure that brought, then held it up between us.

“You wanna taste me?” I asked her.

I would not go gentle that night. I was a warrior set out to conquer. Every man’s Madonna fantasy was lying spread out and secured to this bed, the angel I planned to turn into my sweet little whore.

Bea swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes, please.”

“So polite,” I noted, but instead of feeding her my thumb, I dipped to scrape my tongue roughly through her folds, bottom to top, her sweet juice collected in my mouth.

I fisted a hand in the bed and leaned over her, my mouth hovering at hers. She watched with wide eyes as I popped my thumb into my mouth, combined

our flavors, and fucking *hummed* because the salty sweetness of us was too damn delicious.

“You wanna taste how good we are?” My voice was a rasp and a whisper, but she heard me.

She was already opening her mouth to accept my communion.

I bowed down to take what she offered, sliding my tongue over hers, painting her teeth and every inch of the inside of her mouth with the taste of us. When I broke away, her chest was heaving, her arms straining at their bonds.

“You like that?” I demanded, collaring her flushed throat in my hand as I straddled her hips again.

She was serene and beautiful, moonlight in my hands. The silver silk of her hair spooling in my cruel fists, so delicate I was sure I’d tear it with my big hands. The light spilling through the windows gilded her flesh, turned the pink of her aroused flush to glittering red, the small, pursed fullness of her mouth a rose limned in morning dew. She was so fragile, so pretty in all the ways a thing can be so that I ached just looking at her. The very sight of Bea made emotions burst in the fallow soil of my soul, giving beauty and fragrance to parts of me I’d long thought dead and gone.

“Touchin’ you feels wrong,” I admitted as I moved my hand from her neck between her breasts to the gentle slope of her trembling belly. Her skin felt like satin, the rough pads of my fingers catching on the spare downy hairs below the whorl of her belly button. “Feels like the purest form a sin to have these man-killin’ hands on such a fuckin’ angel.”

“I’m no angel, Priest,” she whispered into the close air between us, the words held suspended by our warm breath. “You have to remember that.”

I grunted my protest, too focused on the tapestry of faint lilac veins beneath the translucent, pale skin where her groin met her inner thigh. Her pussy was so pretty laid bare for me, and the knowledge that I’d been the one to shave her clean made my possessive blood fucking soar.

Her little hands dove into my hair over my ears and tugged so I looked up to meet her sombre gaze. She was a painting, just then, some antique portrait of a girl painted by a lusty, older artist trying to reclaim the sweetness of his youth through her nubile beauty.

Desire throttled me. So young, so innocent, so tainted now by my hands, my cock, my conquering teeth. She wore my marks on her otherwise unblemished skin, her lips swollen from my claiming kisses. Her snug little cunt would be full of my cock, then with my seed within the hour.

Mine, mine, mine.

“If I ever was an angel, I chose to fall,” she whispered. “Just as angels fell for Lucifer, Priest, I’d fall again and again for you.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” I grunted, the force of my need to own savaging my inside. There were still faint markings just above her mound where I’d carved my name into her flesh, and the need to carve it once more into her body burned through me.

The switchblade I kept in my pocket was in my hand before I could curb the impulse. The soft snick of the blade loud in the room. My Little Shadow didn’t flinch. Instead, she canted her hips up in offering, wanting the bite of the steel just as much as I wanted to give her the pain.

“Doesn’t matter if you’re angel or girl,” I repeated as I carefully flourished the knife over her thin skin, watching as it split open beautifully, little beads of blood decorating the pale flesh like jewelry. “You’re owned by me now.”

She gasped as I sank two fingers inside her heat and curled them up, stroking that spot inside her that made her squirm. I held her still with the weight of my torso and finished cutting my name into her flesh while I carefully dragged my fingers in and out of her greedy cunt.

“Gonna keep carvin’ my name here until it sticks,” I vowed. “You’re gonna wear my name on your pretty pussy for the rest of your fuckin’ life.”

“Yes,” she cried, head thrashing at the pleasure, as I held her still and

made her take it.

Finished with the knife, I folded it closed and pocketed it before I lapped at the wound with my tongue. She cried out at the first lash of warmth against her broken skin, head thrusting back into the pillows, legs shaking.

“This is the kinda beast you got in your bed, sweet Bea,” I growled as I followed a bead of blood into the crease of her hip and groin, then bit down on the tender flesh of her inner thigh. “The kinda man who likes to break you open just to fill you up.”

“Yes, please, yes. Fuck me,” Bea begged, her voice tight with need. “Please, Priest, let go. Fuck me the way I want to be fucked. Ruin me.”

A growl tore from my throat, her sweetness cutting through my control like a blade.

Snip, snip, snip.

I reared up, collecting her creamy legs over my biceps and pushing forward so she was splayed wide and completely vulnerable. She shuddered and moaned weakly as I thrust my cock against her sensitive, slick folds, not fucking into her, just sliding through that wet to coat my shaft in her.

“I love this,” she confessed dreamily in a lustful trance. “I love being so wanton for you. I love being yours to use.”

A shiver ripped down my spine almost painfully. A moment later, I was thrusting hard into that tight cunt, grunting as she clenched hard around me and tossed her head back to scream.

Yes.

I wanted her screams.

My hand went up to her throat, squeezing just hard enough to feel her pulse throb desperately against my thumb. Her pussy beat around me in time with that rapid rhythm, tight walls sucking at me, forcing me to pump harder and deeper. I was at the end of that snug channel, each hit against her cervix causing her to cry out in pain and ecstasy.

“Yes,” she chanted breathlessly, legs shaking as an orgasm began to

build. “Oh, my God.”

It wasn't enough.

The animal inside me, that beast that ruled my body in the deep dark, reared its ugly head and declared war on Bea's tight little body. I bent to savage the tips of her pink breasts with my teeth, grunting hard when she tried to thrash against me.

“Priest, Priest,” she chanted brokenly, tears gathering in her wet velvet blue eyes as I pounded into her pussy, showing my irrevocable ownership of it. “Please, I, I can't...It's too much. I-I-I—”

“That's it,” I rasped against her throat before I pinned my teeth there, biting hard enough to feel the tang of blood.

That did it.

The sharp, hard pressure broke Bea open beneath me like a Christmas cracker, her limbs shaking, pussy flooding around my pistoning cock.

It wasn't enough for me.

I needed more.

The total decimation of her sanity.

I wanted her to come apart on my cock and have to beg me breathlessly to stop.

She'd stripped me down to the studs tonight. I owed it to her to do the same.

I flipped her over before she could recover, her hands twisting in the lights, fingers wrapping instinctively around the headboard for balance as I rucked her hips up and back. My cruel hands on her little waist bit into the skin as I thrust her back on my cum-wet cock.

Her head tossed back, haloed hair flying as she grunted and cried out at the depth of me inside her. I wrapped a hand around that hair, using it as reins to pin her head back so I could watch passion contort that pretty face.

With the other hand, I tested the pliancy of her sweet, round ass.

Smack.

A sharp gasp giving way to a whimper.

Smack. Smack. Smack.

Her skin was deepening from peachy pink to vivid red, my handprint stamped into her delicate flesh.

Mine, mine, mine.

I must have growled the words aloud because Bea mimicked back, “Yours, yours, yours.”

I smacked her hard, loving the jiggle of that peachy ass, loving the fierce cries falling from her lips to the bed the way her wet cunt dripped to the sheets beneath my driving dick.

“You’re mine,” I ground out as my balls tightened, the base of my spine clenching hard with the need to blow inside her tight cunt. “You’re mine in life; you’re mine in death. We’re never gonna be fuckin’ parted, *mo cuishle*. I’ll haunt you, I’ll haunt you, I’ll haunt you.”

Tears streamed down her face, the red rims making her eyes so intense a blue they glowed neon as she looked over her shoulder at me, mouth swollen and blooming open around her harsh breath. “I’ll haunt you,” she echoed.

I landed one last resounding slap to her ass and clutched her hard to me with biting hands, forcing her to practically sit on my lap totally impaled on my cock. She cried out as I started to come deep inside her, palming her throat hard to choke off the cry and drive her higher.

She came seconds after I did, warmth flooding my cock and balls as I filled her up, and for a second, just a moment, all I felt was total peace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

PRIEST

I HELD HER IN THE COME DOWN, HAND STILL AT HER THROAT THOUGH SOFTER, thumb stroking over her jugular as I licked a bead of sweat off her jaw and nipped at the slanted bone there. She sighed frequently as she settled, little kittenish sounds that made my spent cock stir lazily inside her. One of her hands stroked over my forearm, rucking up the fabric so she could paint little circles with her fingertips on my wrist. It was a simple, intimate touch that almost rocked me more than my fucking phenomenal orgasm.

Bea wasn't the first woman who had touched me like this, but it felt as if she was. I hadn't known such tenderness since I was a lad when my parents were still alive and loving me. Each touch triggered an echo in my chest, sorrowful and pleasant all at once. The contraction was one of many between my Little Shadow and me, our opposite natures contracting into one whole,

shining thing that my inexperienced mind wanted to call love.

“Oh, Priest,” she gasped, drawing my attention to her dipped head, to the skin she’d revealed to her gaze on the inside of my arm.

There was a cacophonous clang in my ears as all my shields slammed down within me. I was up, pushing her off, backing up with a growl in my throat, teeth bared before I could think to stop myself.

I was panting even though I’d recovered from my orgasm, my chest tight and growing tighter. Shooting pains arched up my arms into my chest, reminding me that this and only this was a reason to feel.

Pain.

That was why I was alive.

To feel it.

“Priest,” Bea called, sitting up on her knees, dishevelled hair curling around her sweet face, a vicious red bite mark marring the long column of her throat, clusters of love bites like red roses on her breasts. So marked by me.

Marked as I was marked, but so different too.

Her marks would fade.

Her marks were made from whatever love I could dredge up inside me to give to her.

“Priest,” she tried again. “It’s okay.”

It wasn’t.

She’d seen only a glimpse of the tapestry of history I wore on my skin, but it was too much.

Without saying another word, I turned on my heel and went to the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. I hammered my hands down on the porcelain, fighting to breathe, but my eyes caught on the raised hem of my shirt, on the mottled skin at my wrist.

My vision went red, then blinding white.

I crushed my forehead into the already broken mirror, felt pain slice across the skin and warmth flood down into my right brow.

It wasn't enough.

The blade I'd used on Bea lay on the back of the sink. My clumsy, numb fingers found it, gripping it so hard the handle cut into my palm.

I sliced my left palm, then my right, sighing in relief at the crystal-clear pain.

I breathed, fisting my hands, the blood seeping through my knuckles.

Drip, drip, dripping into the sink.

The door opened behind me, Bea's pale head slowly slotting inside the gap. Her bottom lip was between her teeth, but her chin was tipped defiantly. She was scared to disturb me yet determined to bring me comfort in any way she could.

My brave Little Shadow.

I blinked at her, the only concession I was capable of giving, but of course, she understood. We watched each other in the reflection of her broken mirror as she moved to me and gently, so gently her touch was just a whisper, wrapped her arms around my middle before taking my big, scarred hands in the palm of hers. The tears that pooled in her eyes were not the kind of tears I liked to make her cry.

"You do this when you remember, don't you?" she asked in a whisper I felt through the cotton covering my shoulder. "You need the pain to forget?"

"No." I fisted my hands again, her little ones cupping my knuckles. "I need pain to remember."

"Can't you tell me what happened to you?" It was a question without pressure, floating between us in a way that defied gravity.

She would let me ignore it, maybe, but the question would linger under her fingernails, a splinter she couldn't get out. She was a curious girl, one of the more brilliant things about her, and I was the most monumental enigma she'd ever come across.

Of course, I fascinated her.

But how did I give words to things that no vocabulary could properly

express? To speak of them was to belittle them inherently, to get it wrong in the telling was a cross I couldn't bear.

So, I just stared at her in the webbed glass, my blood pooling in her palms.

She studied me, lip between her teeth, for a long moment.

"Self-harm isn't the answer, Priest," she murmured finally, curling her hands over mine so my fingertips pressed into the slices on my palms. I shuddered from the pain, but I liked it, and she knew that.

She sucked in a sharp little breath, steeling herself. "Would you...would you at least let me hurt you, instead?"

I arched a red brow at her, watching as she blushed that fine wine-tinged flush. "How would a little thing like you hurt big bad me?"

She bit her lip, hiding briefly behind my shoulder before finding the courage to say. "I think I know something that might help?"

Desire moved over me like a shadow.

"Oh?" I taunted, unfurling my fists to bring her fingers, wet with my blood, to my mouth. I sucked at the pinky with the pink nail, licking off the metallic slick of red. "My angel wants to play the devil, does she?"

"If it helps you. If you'll stop cutting yourself like this," she whispered in a raw voice as she watched me suck her fingers clean with dark eyes.

"I'm a monster, Bea," I reminded her. "You play with me, you gotta remember, I don't play nice with others. I'll try to give you some control, but in the end, you gotta know, I'll wrest it back."

"Oh, I'm counting on that," she agreed with an impish grin before pulling away to lead me back into the bedroom. "Lie down, let me get what I need."

Sinking into the rumpled sheets that smelled of sweet peaches and sweeter pussy, knowing that Bea wanted to torture me made my cock half-hard again. It arched obscenely from my open jeans. When my shadow returned, she had a black satin ribbon in her hand and a flickering pink candle in the other.

My kinky little thing.

She sat almost primly between my spread legs, tongue tucked between her teeth as she bent to tie that girly ribbon in a tight bow around my cock and balls. Immediately, the shaft surged with blood, the veins popping out in stark relief. Bea traced one with her fingertips, fascination rife on her face.

“Does it hurt?” she asked, so innocent it made my balls ache.

“Feels good,” I grunted, watching as she knelt up and hovered over me with that candle. “You gonna drop hot wax on me?”

“Yes,” she admitted in that contradictorily modest and lustful tone. “If you’ll let me.”

I rucked up the bottom of my shirt, watching her carefully to see how she’d react to the sight of my torso. Her eyes went wide as twin coins with shock as I unveiled the scars on my belly, the knife wounds and burns that mottled my skin so it was a patchwork of waxy whites, puckered pinks, and raised ridges as dark as plums.

“No sympathy,” I ordered so briskly, she flinched. “You promised me pain. If you don’t have the stomach for it, I’ll make sure *you* get what you promised me.”

She shivered delicately, liking the idea, but there was a little furrow of determination between her pale brows that spoke of her resolve. Slowly, she tipped the pillar candle, the pastel pink wax streaming down to paint my abs in livid heat.

I hissed, cock jumping, mind fizzing.

“Fuck, yeah,” I encouraged. “Jack me off.”

Her little hand wrapped around my tied-off cock.

“Harder,” I barked, torso bowing as more wax splashed hot pain onto the thin skin between my belly and groin.

She clenched so hard it burned, the friction exquisite as she pumped my dick with one hand and spilled that heat with the other. There was a high flush on her cheeks, curls falling forward to cast her face in shadow. She

looked like some dark nymph, some creature of the night come out from under the bed to play.

She. Was. Fucking. Gorgeous.

My cock was spitting precum into her hand, lubing her stranglehold on my cock. She watched my thick head move through her fist, moaning softly at the wet *schtick* of skin on skin.

“Climb on my thigh,” I told her through gritted teeth. “Grind against me until you drench the denim. When I come, Bea, I want you to drink it down for me.”

“Oh, my God,” she moaned as if I’d just given her some heavenly dessert.

“Candle’s not enough,” I panted as she jerked me harder and started to thrust her wet cunt against my leg, tossing her head back on a groan. “There’s a switchblade in my pocket.”

“I don’t want to hurt you too badly,” she protested even as she shuddered at the pleasure of riding me. She liked the shame, the darkness of doing as I said. Even though she hesitated, she blew the candle out and set it at the end of the bed out of our way.

“I’m hurtin’ just watchin’ you move on me like that. Just lookin’ at you, I fuckin’ ache, Bea. Take the damn knife and carve your name into my hip. Wanna feel you there.”

“You’re so sexy,” she confessed. “You make me do things I only ever dreamed about.”

“You dreamt of this? Of hurting me while you hump my leg ’cause you’ve got such a pretty, greedy pussy?”

She shivered again, bending to grab the knife from my left pocket. The snap of the blade extending was a tangible caress for both of us. We groaned together. When she doubled over to press the tip to my hip, I snatched her wrist and lifted it higher. Wielding her hand, I cut into the collar of my shirt to rip it down to my sternum and then pressed the sharp tip to the top of my right pec.

“Here,” I ground out as her fist spasmed around me. “Want you here.”

She didn’t hesitate. The pain was a sharp ache slicing my past to ribbons. If asked, I wouldn’t have remembered the name of my town in Ireland, the colours in that stained-glass window I’d looked through for seven years, the feel of a whip on my flesh or a branding iron inside me.

All I knew was this moment, Bea carving her name into my flesh to give me the pain she knew I needed. All I knew was this vivid, overwhelming sense of acceptance. This was me, scarred and monstrous, pain filled and pain giving, yet this woman with sunshine hair and a smile that lit up the dark thought I was worthy of her love.

There was cracking in my ribs, a yawning open of bones, and then with a brutal thud that robbed me of breath, I felt her there, my girl, my heart, slotted into my chest. I was destroyed by her love, the dead man murdered by sweet hands.

The flourish of the “A” in her name cut too deep, blood pooling around the knife, drenching my dark shirt. Bea dipped further, her tongue poking out to lap at the spill. Simultaneously, she undid the ribbon around my cock with a swift tug and then pulled hard at my shaft.

Dead, I thought madly as a climax ripped me to fucking shreds, and I began to spill hotly all over Bea’s hand, and reborn by her love.

“*Mo cuishle,*” I grunted as I came and came. “My heartbeat.”

My words triggered her own orgasm, her hips churning hard against my thigh, her bloody lips pressed in a grimace, then falling open in a cry to the heavens as she unraveled on top of me. Finally, she slumped against my torso, knife in one hand, ribbon curled through the fingers of the other. She blinked sleepily up at me, nose brushing the scarred skin beside my newly carved scar.

“Better?” she asked, mischief in her little grin.

Emotions were roiling inside me, stemming from that organ I’d never felt so keenly in my chest. Unable to voice them, I reached down to thread my

fingers in the hair over either ear so I could lift her heart-shaped face to my own.

“*A rún mo chroí,*” I muttered in Gaelic, then hesitated in my translation. “Secret of my heart. My secret heart living outside of my chest.”

Instantly, tears pooled in her eyes, glittering like diamonds in the sheen from the strand of Christmas lights.

“I love you,” she almost sobbed, clutching at my hands on her hair, pushing her forehead hard into mine. “I love you, Priest. Thank you for letting me.”

“I’m not easy.”

Her laugh was wet, but the smile that broke over her face was pure, unadulterated joy. “Oh, yes, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I didn’t have more words for her, exhaustion more emotional than physical darkened the edges of my vision and blurred my thoughts.

“Sleepy,” she murmured as if reading my mind, nuzzling into my neck with a soft sigh.

“Gonna get up,” I told her even though every bone in me ached to stay in bed draped with her warm, sex-scented body.

“Stay,” she said, squeezing me.

“Don’t sleep well with others,” I said, when I meant I’d never slept beside a soul in my life, and I wasn’t sure I could start now.

“Try?” she begged with the prettiest damn pout I’d ever seen. Her hair shifted over her shoulder as she lifted up to aim that expression at me, the scent of peaches wafting over me.

“I’ll stay,” I granted, “until you fall asleep.”

Her sigh was tinged with sadness, but she conceded without protest, already half-asleep on top of me. I stroked her hair back, the silk tinged pink because I hadn’t washed my bloody hands, and hummed one of the songs my mam had sang to me deep in my throat. Bea hummed in pleasure, squirmed a little, then settled into a dead sleep on my chest. The beauty of her trust felt

like a black satin bow wrapped too tight around my fucking heart, but I welcomed the ache and held her well into the night.



I WASN'T SLEEPING. IT WAS DEEP NIGHT, CLOSER TO MORNING HOURS THAN evening, but the sky outside Bea's window was dark as anti-matter, not a cloud in the sky. Too dark to see anyone. But something alerted me to a presence, some faint sound or shift in black on black outside the window.

Someone was there.

Instantly, cold calm descended on me. I shifted out carefully and efficiently from under the weight of my sleeping shadow, did up my jeans, and slunk into the living room to reclaim my cut and weapons. Armed to the teeth, dangerous with protective, possessive rage, I moved to the window at the side of the house to peer outside.

Nothing.

I went to the front door, knowing any intruder worth his salt wouldn't be near it, and slipped into the cold night. My boots were by the door, but I

didn't put them on. My bare feet would be nearly silent in the fresh, deep snow layering the garden, and I needed the element of surprise.

It was only when I rounded the house that I heard it, the shush and drag of something heavy through the snow. Peering out from around the side of the shingled house, I saw a blot of black in the grey light labouring over something on the ground, tugging it to the back porch.

I knew it was a body. Call it a premonition, experience, whatever the fuck, I knew that weight in the snow was a dead body being set out on the porch for Bea to find in the morning. Like a cat bringing its beloved owner a dead mouse, the killer had brought his obsession—*my* obsession—a gift.

I moved, cold and inhumane as the snow beneath my feet. The intruder was lingering over the body at the base of the stairs, arranging it, probably planting one of those sick as fuck religious quotes somewhere on their person.

They were too busy to notice a shift in the shadows, too narrowly obsessed to realize that the woman he lusted after already had a psychopath in her life.

I was just behind him, knife raised, a second away from striking when the light flicked on in Bea's room. The disturbance brought the man back to himself. Startled, he squatted to take off in a sprint.

I tackled him hard to the ground, his skull hitting the iced-over cobblestones on the backyard path.

He didn't pause to recover, already fighting viciously, rolling in the slippery snow so that he was on his back, a better position in any fight. There was a gun in one hand I hadn't seen in the dark. He swung it up, but I blocked it with my forearm so the shot he fired blew past my left ear and knocked out my hearing.

Vaguely, I was aware of the lights going on in the rest of the house, of Bea yelling behind the locked back door, hopefully calling the cops.

Or not hopefully, because I was going to slash this motherfucker to

ribbons.

He grunted hard, bringing his knee up into my groin, connecting with my balls in a way that ripped my breath from my lungs. Taking advantage of my momentary weakness, he shoved me and scuttled out from my hold, the snow easing his way. He gained his feet quickly, taller and more agile than I'd given him credit for.

He took off.

I followed, swallowing that bile that rose in my throat.

He was a fast motherfucker, supple on his feet as he charged into the street, zipping through parked cars, hurtling over trash cans, and sliding over windshields.

A grin worked its way onto my face as I gave chase. It had been so long since I had a real challenge. I knew I would catch him the way a lion knows it will get the gazelle. It was just a matter of *when*.

He turned the corner onto Main Street, and I knew it was over. Even at four in the morning, the street was too crowded with cars, mailboxes, and holiday decorations. There were even vehicles on the road from early deliveries and night workers.

He was fucked.

My mouth watered as I saw my opening. I had a gun and throwing knives, but I didn't use them. Why use an inanimate object when I was such a well-honed weapon?

He tripped over a crack in the sidewalk and stumbled.

I pounced, taking him to the ground so hard I heard the *crack* of breaking bone in his arm as we landed. He howled with pain as I turned him over and dragged off his hood.

I blinked down at the stranger, mildly surprised I didn't recognize him. Bea wasn't famous, despite the success of her podcast, and usually, stalkers were people known by their obsession.

I didn't care that he didn't fit the bill. I didn't care about anything except

discovering why he was targeting my girl, and then killing him.

I'd rip him open, cut him, bleed him dry.

My knife was in my hand, the blade digging into his throat so hard it punctured the flesh and blood leaked out like sap.

"Stop, stop, stop," he begged, thrashing in my iron hold. "It wasn't me."

I ignored him.

"It wasn't me," he chanted again and again as I tipped the knife deeper into his flesh. "It was the Prophet."

The idiotic moniker for the serial killer.

"If it wasn't you, what the fuck were you doin' at Bea Lafayette's house in the middle of the fuckin' night with a dead body?" I demanded, lifting him up by the throat just to crash his skull back into the pavement.

There were enough lampposts on Main Street to illuminate him now. A large cross fell out of his hoodie as I throttled him, the ornate gold glinting.

"A gift from the Prophet," he insisted. "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

I knew the quote was from Peter 4:10 because it had been a favourite of Father O'Neal, a way for him to explain he was a messenger of God, and through him, we could receive His holy gifts.

"A dead body is hardly a gift from fuckin' God," I ground out, deciding that the man didn't need his left ear. I began to slice through it methodically, knowing the cartilage took time to rend free of the skull.

He screamed manically. "Stop!"

"I'll stop when you tell me who the fuck sent you if you aren't the murderer yourself." His ear was slippery with blood, the top gaping from the scalp.

"No," he whimpered. "For He is divine, and He must be protected."

"Fuckin' crazy asshole," I muttered, tired of the religious babble.

I sliced his ear clean off.

Another magnificent scream.

“Why the fuck is he so fixated on Bea?” I ordered over his sobs.

“H-he thinks she is his holy wife,” he cried. “God s-sent him a vision.”

Fucking *lunacy*.

“Who is he?” I demanded, then when he didn’t answer, I slapped my open palm over his butchered ear.

His screams echoed in my blood, making it sing. I could do this all night long.

Caught up in the violence, I hadn’t noticed a few people trickle into the streets, including Stella from the diner with her phone pressed to her ear. As if on cue, the bleep of a police car sounded, dragging my gaze over my shoulder to see the vehicle pulling up.

“Put your hands up,” the voice demanded over the loudspeaker. “And step away.”

I didn’t.

The car doors opened, a gun cocked.

“Put your fucking hands up and step away!” someone shouted.

My knife was so close to his jugular, I could’ve swiped it cleanly across his neck without worry of reprisal until it was too late. But this motherfucker might have information I needed to keep Bea safe, so I growled and moved the fuck back.

“It’s fuckin’ Priest McKenna,” Officer Travers shouted as someone shined a flashlight in my face.

There was a chorus of swearing from the other three cops.

“I got a man here might be the serial killer,” I shouted to be heard over their idiocy.

They ignored me, too spooked by the idea of trying to arrest a man like me to do their damn jobs.

And the man I’d chased took advantage.

He staggered to his feet, holding his bleeding neck, and looked frantically

around the street. I shouted at him, lunging to keep him still, but he was just too far. One moment, he was at the curb, and the next, he was throwing himself into the street.

In the path of an oncoming car.

I watched the impact as he cracked against the windshield, then bounced hard into the street, twitching but otherwise immobile.

“Fuck,” I growled, moving even though the cops were yelling at me to freeze.

His legs were broken badly, one so mangled it made an “S” on the concrete, and blood pooled from his cracked skull. He stared almost dreamily into the lightening sky and blinked as he lay there dying.

I rucked him up with two hands in his collar and snarled in his face, “Tell me who the fuck the Prophet is.”

Blood gurgled in his throat, choking him so that he coughed in my face and red spittle flew onto my cut, dirtying The Fallen MC patch.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” He sputtered the verse from the Bible and then promptly, as if with the grace of his fucked-up God, he passed out.

Seconds later, I was tackled to the ground and arrested for the second time, for something I had no part in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BEA

IT WAS MARGARET HUXLEY.

The body laid to rest carefully at the base of my back porch had her hands over her chest, eyes closed, and mouth painted a harlot red. She could have almost been sleeping there, but for the tent peg stabbed through her right temple.

It was a tent spike from my own set, the one I kept in the shed in my backyard. Which, of course, meant that the killer had been in my yard before, perhaps watching me while he concocted his mad plans of murder.

She had been killed the way Jael had murdered the turncoat General Sisera in the Bible. The message couldn't have been clearer. In insulting me, she had insulted the killer, who felt we were somehow linked.

“As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then

twice, have nothing more to do with him,” from Titus 3:10 was typed out on the note she clutched in one hand.

I told the police who littered my house that entire Monday morning that the murderer might have killed her as a gift to me, but he would’ve had to know we’d had an altercation just the night before.

It made sense, maybe, that the man Priest had hunted down on Main Street was Owen Burns, the same young man I’d seen Brett give drugs to what seemed like years ago on Halloween at the college party.

Apparently, Owen Burns was the estranged son of Opal Burns, one of my mother’s old friends who had distanced herself after our fall from grace. She didn’t even attend church with my Grandpa anymore, though she’d always been a devout Christian. Though she was very good friends with Tabitha Linley, who was known to be a bit of a friendly gossip.

But I didn’t even know Owen Burns. Why would he kill Margaret for me like the misguided courtship ritual of a madman?

There was this weaving, this overlap of the Walsh family and the serial killer, as if they were linked intrinsically in a way I felt I should understand more clearly.

I didn’t understand any of it.

Neither, it seemed, did Lion or the club.

After the interviews with the cops, after I threw up at the sight of the dead body in my yard thinking about poor Billy Huxley without a mother and soon to be without a father, Loulou had insisted I go with them to the clubhouse to set up for the barbecue.

Only The Fallen would have a party when a serial killer was on the loose and a dead body had shown up on a doorstep. Truthfully, I loved that about them. They lived every single day as if it was their last. Taking nothing for granted, they sucked the marrow out of each moment.

The prospects, hang-arounds, and some of the old ladies were already well into setting up when we arrived, and Loulou immediately ushered us

into the clubhouse where the entire rest of the Garro clan was set up, waiting for me.

Mr. White was at the precinct representing Priest again as he was questioned. I'd wanted to go to him, but Zeus claimed Priest had expressly forbidden it. Normally, I wouldn't have heeded his protest, but Zeus assured me Priest would be freed shortly and brought immediately to the clubhouse.

To me.

Until then, I was happy to lounge between my sister and Cressida with Prince's gorgeous little face smiling at me from her arms. Sitting there with them, knowing they'd come together to support me yet again, made me feel seen and appreciated in a way I'd never known before meeting The Fallen.

Lion scrubbed his hands over his stubbled jaw, looking like a handsome cowboy even tired as he was. "The RCMP aren't getting anywhere. Seems they want to think this Owen Burns is the 'Prophet'. Makes it easier, that's for damn sure."

"There's no way," I insisted. "He doesn't fit any of the profiling. I think he's just some poor kid who made some bad decisions and got dragged into this."

Harleigh Rose stared to rub the tension out of Lion's back, making him groan and reach behind his chair to squeeze her thigh. "You and me both, Bea. I got no say with them anymore. I hung up my badge, and for the men in blue, that's a certain kinda betrayal they don't get over."

"Your dad was a corrupt cop who tried to force you to be corrupt too," Harleigh Rose grumbled. "Fuckin' idiots."

Lion grinned tiredly, pulling her around his front to sit in his lap. "Yeah, Rosie, idiots, the lot of them. But I'm only allowed this much access because Hutchinson is in with the club, and technically, I'm on the case. The T-Squad hired me."

"The fuck?" Zeus barked. "Why the fuck am I just hearin'a this, Lion? We're hostin' them for a damn meetin' and beers today, and you didn't think

I should fuckin' know that?"

Lion shot him a sidelong look, knowing he'd bought Z's wrath but not particularly cowed by it. "My business is private, as I think I've told you fourteen thousand fuckin' times, Zeus."

Zeus's scowl was interrupted by Angel, who played calmly on the ground at his feet until she decided she wanted some attention from her favourite man, so she stood on shaky legs to reach out for him. He picked her up instantly, face softening like melted butter as he brushed his bearded lips over her cheek to hear her giggle.

When he looked back at Lion, his glower was even more fierce. "They ask you anythin' 'bout club business..."

"I'll tell them the same as I tell you," Lion drawled. "It's private."

"You invited their prez for a meeting today, Z," Loulou pointed out from where we'd taken a seat on one of the four leather couches. "You were planning on telling them club business already."

"Shut your mouth, woman," he growled but with a sparkle in his eyes because he loved my sassy sister.

Lou winked. "Make me."

"Okay, ew," Harleigh Rose complained even though Lion was currently grabbing a handful of her ass in her lewdly ripped jeans.

Loulou rolled her eyes.

I closed mine, leaning back against the soft cushions.

"You okay, honey?" Cressida asked, stroking back my hair.

I murmured something, forgetting the words as soon as they were spoken. After a night of raucous sex with Priest and an early morning finding a dead body on my stoop, I was bone tired and shaken. Honestly, it was hard not to feel terrified knowing that a serial killer had been in my backyard, that maybe he was watching me live my life and taking fucked up notes on my habits. I almost wished I knew what he wanted with me to have some kind of context for his obsession. Being so in the dark was horrifying and cast new light on

the murders I studied for my podcast.

Surrounded by men who would fight to the death to protect me and women who would support me until their dying breath, I let myself relax again.

That was, until Ransom ushered Phillipa into the room, obviously sent out to bring her to the haven until we knew what was really going on.

Bitterness welled on my tongue, coffee grounds left over from our dinner with the Linleys.

She took one look at me sandwiched between Cress and Lou, and the look I must have had stamped on my face spoke of my unhappiness because she froze.

I did not.

I was on my feet, dislodging Cressida's soft hands and Lou's hip as I surged out of my seat. They called after me as I stalked to my mother, aware that in my pleated skirt and vintage University of British Columbia crewneck, I didn't exactly look threatening.

But I meant business.

The scowl on my face felt strange, the muscles unused to contracting in anger. I wasn't a woman who angered easily or held a grudge. Forgiveness, to me, was divine, and patience was the penultimate virtue.

I'd just run out of it where my weak mother was concerned.

She was already tearing up when I reached her, which took some of the wind out of my sails as she knew it would. I had no defense against someone crying, and she knew it.

"Beatrice," she whispered, "I'm so sorry."

I just blinked, watching the way she wrung her hands together, noticing the lack of a massive diamond ring on her finger. "You took off your wedding ring?"

She sniffed, eyes darting over my shoulder to the group that wasn't even pretending not to watch us. "Well, I figured it was time."

“Past time,” I scolded, which was about as strongly worded as I got despite my best efforts. Frustrated with myself, I forced my face into a fiercer glower. “You disappoint me, Mum. After all these years with The Fallen, the way they took us in and made us family when we used to stand against everything they were, when dad actively tried to take them down... I just don’t understand how you could not only stand by while someone talked badly about them, let alone seek out advice on how not to be...what? Corrupted by them?”

“Don’t judge me,” she whispered harshly. “You girls had it so easy because of your father and *me*. We looked after you, made sure you had everything a little girl could need!”

“We had *nothing*,” I shouted, eyes wide with shock as all the toxicity of my youth cracked through the surface of my gut and surged up my throat, hot and chemical on my tongue. “Loulou and I didn’t give a crap about diamond tennis bracelets and our wedding cake topper of a house. We wanted parents who kissed our skinned knees and held us close as we watched movies as a family on a Friday night. We needed quality time and affection, Mum, not just gifts and bragging rights. We needed *parents*, not society figures. If you don’t understand that after all this, after watching and feeling the way these *heathens* love each other and have loved us, then I’m sorry, but you don’t deserve them. Maybe you don’t even deserve Loulou and me.”

Phillipa blinked at me, huge tears rolling down her skin, crumpled softly with the years and sorrow like creased silk. To be so beautiful on the outside and so woefully weak, so *ugly* inside was such a tragedy.

Something tickled my cheek, and when I lifted my fingertips to my skin, they came away wet. Of course, I had to cry when I was angry. I couldn’t even be badass like my sister in anger.

Still, I tilted my chin and stared my mother down, refusing to feel guilty for speaking my truth even though it hurt us both to hear it.

“I love you,” I told her honestly, voice so soft and flailing I wondered if

she could even hear it. “I love you, Mum, but I love you because you’re my blood. I love *them*”—I gestured to the family at my back—“because they earned it. I hope one day, you can earn it too.”

A sob exploded from her throat and burst against her hands as she tried to catch it in her palms.

I forced myself to walk away, to channel my inner Priest and remain unmoved by her tears. For too long, I’d capitulated to Phillipa. Because she was weaker, she needed my love and patience, but it was long past time she stood up for her daughters and, honestly, for herself.

So I turned on my heel and moved over to the couch where my sister sat dumbfounded. I offered her my hand with a little smile. “Come get ready for the party with me, big sister? I think I left an old *Cosmo* here somewhere. We can take a quiz to see what kind of man you’ll end up with while you do my hair.”

Loulou looked up at me with glistening eyes just a shade darker than my own, eyes that were velvet with tenders and wet with pride. I knew she remembered that night so many years ago when I’d read that silly quiz, the last night we’d lived under the same roof before Dad hit her and kicked her out for dating Zeus.

“You know I love you, right?” she whispered through the lump in her throat I felt mimicked in mine. “You know I’m so fucking proud of who you’ve become, right?”

Hot tears pooled on my lower lids. I struggled not to blink so they wouldn’t fall. I’d just been as emotionally badass as I’d ever been, and I wanted to maintain that for at least as long as it took to walk back to Z and Lou’s room in the clubhouse.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “No matter how lonely I’ve ever felt, I always knew I had you.”

“Jesus,” Nova interjected with a little cough. “You tryna make grown men cry?”

We both laughed wetly at him as Lila punched him playfully in the shoulder, but it was a good way to break the tension. Maja went to console Phillipa, and I respected that. They had their own friendship, and truthfully, I was glad my mum had someone to comfort her because, for once, it couldn't be me.

“You ready to make a biker babe transformation?” Harleigh Rose crowed, jumping to her feet and rubbing her hands together with an evil little grin.

Lila whooped as she got to her feet and hip-checked H.R. “Yes! Let's get gorgeous.”

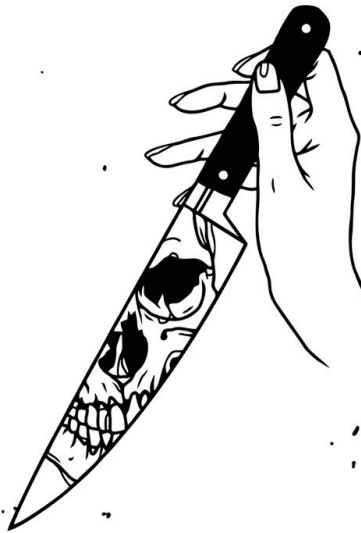
“Already gorgeous, Flower Child,” Nova noted with a lazy up and down look at his woman. “But you wanna lose some clothes, I'm down for that.”

“Me too,” Boner added with a lecherous wiggle of his dark brows.

Nova shoved to his feet and pinned him in a headlock. “You hittin' on my woman?”

“If I had a chance in hell, I would,” Boner asserted even though Nova was choking off his air.

I laughed; the feel of it, of them, warming my belly like a shot of Z's favourite whiskey. There was relief there too, knowing that in all the chaos and fear of the serial killer haunting my life, at least I'd found my place in life, the one home where I knew I'd always belong. It wasn't what I'd always imagined it would be growing up—a nuclear family, a stable job, a normal life—but thank God, it was so much more than I ever could have hoped for.



NO ONE KNEW WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE THUNDERBIRD SQUAD. THEY mostly operated on their reservation or within the network of other First Nations' communities on the mainland, so The Fallen didn't much care what they did so long as it didn't step on their toes. I wasn't even sure if anyone other than Zeus had even met one of their members.

It was clear, though, when they rolled onto the compound that they knew of The Fallen.

They rode in no clear formation the way our men did, just an amorphous mass of bikers in leather cuts and bandanas. However, one man was at the helm who radiated authority just seated on his Harley leading the charge onto the lot.

He was the first to swing off his bike.

The first to take off his half helmet and reveal the tanned, surprisingly young face beneath. He had to be around Zeus's age, late thirties or early forties, with a wide, strong body that made him seem shorter than he really was. His hair was cropped military short, an ink blot on his scalp, and his eyes, even from a distance, were a clear, pale brown like sunshine through

maple syrup.

He commanded everyone's attention instantly, and he was aware of it. His broad shoulders rolled back, feet braced, and he stared down the entire Fallen MC as if he planned to go to war against them.

For his sake, I hoped he didn't.

Zeus stepped forward then, his massive bulk dwarfing the T-Squad's leader, his swagger a smooth roll of his powerful frame. Just seeing him walk forward, proud, powerful, completely unruffled by a potential enemy rolling through the gates, released some of the palpable tension in the group.

"Nicholas Rivers," he greeted with an extended hand. "Pleasure to fuckin' meet ya."

"Not sure the pleasure is my own," Nicholas said, cutting straight to the chase. "You got a man here by the name of Priest?"

My man stepped forward from where we stood locked together on the stairs of the clubhouse. We hadn't separated since his return from the police station, and I wasn't eager to let him go then, but he moved away inexorably.

"You got a problem?" Priest called out casually, strolling down the steps as though he didn't have a care in the world even as he cut a menacing figure all in black, his red hair shining like blood in the bright lights of the lot.

Nicholas's eyes narrowed, and he moved beyond Zeus to face Priest. "You the motherfucker the police said were involved with these murders?"

Priest cocked his head to the side in that robotic, chilling way he had as he considered his opponent. Finally, he tucked his hands in his pockets and shrugged one muscle-heavy shoulder. "Think I'd be behind bars if they had any kinda proof of that."

"We've all heard the rumors about you," Nicholas fired back, rolling onto the balls of his feet as though he was prepping for a fight. "Maybe you're just clever enough to get past the fuckin' pigs."

"We can both agree on that," Priest practically drawled, obviously bored of this conversation already. "But this murdering asshole is obsessed with

my woman in a way he won't lose sight of her anytime soon. I got no reason to kill for her when she's already *mine*. You got an issue with me, though, I'm only too fuckin' happy to sort it out right here and now. 'S been a while since I had anythin' like a good fight, and you look like you can take a punch."

The entire compound, dressed for a party but ready for war, held its breath.

Nicholas Rivers glared at my unruffled Irishman for a long moment before he tossed back his head and roared with laughter.

I blinked in shock as he rocked forward to clap a friendly hand on Priest's shoulder before he walked back to Z and took his hand in a pumping handshake.

"Heard stories of The Fallen, but this shit is better than the telling," Nicholas said through his chuckle, his face made handsome with harsh smile lines. "I'm looking forward to cracking a beer and seeing what the rest of you motherfuckers are like in real time."

Zeus's face broke into his charming as the devil smile as he raised their joined hands and called out, "Let's get down to it! Someone start the fuckin' music and grab this man a beer."

Over the roar of the crowd and the churning of bodies as men swung off their bikes and The Fallen sluts rushed out to greet them in slicked-on halter tops and little miniskirts, I caught eyes with Priest and laughed under my breath when the left side of his mouth tipped in a minuscule smile just for me.

"I think he was always lonelier than he realized," Cress murmured from beside me.

It was one of the first times I'd seen her without Prince since she and King had returned from Alaska, and the beauty of her dolled-up biker style took my breath away.

"You look like a Disney Princess in the middle of a teenage rebellion," I

told her, noting her heavy eyeliner, painted-on jeans, and the little white crop top straining at her breasts.

She laughed, sliding an arm around my hips. “Baby-free, honey, I gotta make the most of it. The goal is always to get King to take me before we even leave the house and again during the party.” She leaned in conspiratorially, so much more open and freer than I’d ever known her to be before she married King. “So far, we are one for two.”

“Oh, my goodness.” I laughed at her as she ushered me into the party through the masses of bodies already smoking, drinking, and dancing to the music Curtains was playing through the surround speakers.

The winter air was biting, but the party still raged on the blacktop outside the clubhouse, lit with Christmas lights strung by old ladies that reflected off the rows of Harley Davidson motorcycles lined up like dominos to the side of Hephaestus Auto.

It was the first night in so many that the entire club let loose to party and relax. We didn’t get many nights without worries, not when we were in or associated with one of the most notorious criminal motorcycle gangs in North America, but when we did, we let *loose*.

Within two hours, half a dozen brothers were fighting for bets on the tarmac, still more throwing knives at Priest’s old wooden cross in the back with blindfolds on and beers in their hand. Women were half-naked and grinding on men’s laps or working one of two poles set up in the clubhouse, two of them putting on quite the show at the bar where my cousin, Carson, the new prospect and in a very committed relationship with another man, looked incredibly ill at ease serving around their mostly naked, writhing bodies.

I was used to it all.

A den of iniquity if ever I’d seen the definition of it.

Low rock pulsed through the space, my heartbeat thrumming to the same tempo as if I’d been entranced. I danced with my girls, with Lila dressed in

all fringe, Maja with her Farrah Fawcett hairdo, and Hannah in a pair of assless leather chaps, only a sequined set of panties beneath it.

Priest didn't dance, and I didn't ask him to, but his dark eyes watched me from the bar where he sat with Bat, Dane, and Wrath shooting the shit, and when a man from the T-Squad tried to claim me, Priest was out of his seat in a heartbeat.

The poor T-Squad brother took one look at Priest barreling toward him and turned on his heel to get the hell away from me as fast as he could.

I laughed and laughed, spinning in the mass of bodies, a little tipsy, but mostly just relieved to have one moment of fun, one second of total freedom I could only feel with The Fallen.

With Priest.

This was the reason I'd grown bored of being a good girl, they never had anywhere near as much fun as the bad ones.

Priest arrived at my side, instantly slotting a hand into the back of my hair and fisting tight to pin my head in place. A second later, his mouth was on me, eating at my mouth, devouring the lingering laughter from my tongue until I forgot everything but the press of his body, hard and honed as a human weapon, against mine.

"Sorry to interrupt," Axe-Man grunted from beside us, but he didn't look sorry.

For the first time since I'd known him, he looked ill at ease, his big body hunched and his Nordic features dark.

Priest went into predator mode against me, his body moving into a tight lean like a whip about to strike out. "What's up?"

"Can't get a hold'a Cleo," he muttered, running a hand through his curling blond mane. "Said she had someone to see 'fore she joined us, but that was hours ago. Not like her to just not show up. You think I'm worryin' over nothin'?"

"No," Priest and I said simultaneously.

Then my man continued, “Bat was sayin’ Amelia didn’t come home this afternoon either. Said she was havin’ a meetin’ at church or some shit.”

We all stared at each other, the party forgotten in the sudden thick, ominous silence descending upon us. As one, we moved to Bat at the bar.

He saw us coming, his posture changing from a slouch against the mahogany bar, leaning into Dane, to the erect stature of a soldier about to be called to duty.

“What’s up?” he asked instantly.

“Both Cleo and Amelia are missin’,” Axe-Man said, worry high in his usually gruff tone.

I reached over and clasped his hand, giving it a squeeze. I had to believe they were okay, and we were just being paranoid, but I’d learned the hard way that my hope was often misplaced.

Bat’s eyes twitched as he pulled out his phone and dialed a number, obviously trying Amelia again.

When there was no answer, he slammed the phone onto the bar top so hard, the screen cracked.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” I said, but there was no gumption in my tone.

Worrying was threading itself through every molecule, intuition screaming at me to find them as fast as we could.

I knew Amelia was religious where Bat was not. I knew she’d attended my grandpa’s service for years, and I wondered if the fucking “Prophet” could have lured her in.

Cleo went to Mass with me sometimes, but she wasn’t extremely devout. The only thing I could think of was...

“She started seeing someone. At first I thought maybe it was one of the brothers or Eric because she was so secretive, but now...” I trailed off, feeling my heart fill with lead and drop to the pit of my stomach.

“Get Z,” Bat barked at Carson behind the bar, then to Priest and Axe-Man. “Let’s roll out. Check their normal haunts. Call in if you find anythin’.”

I tugged on Priest's hand before he broke free to follow the orders. He gazed down at me with cold eyes, mind already tuned into the problem. I gave his hand another squeeze, and warmth started to seep back into the green.

"Tell me we're overreacting, and everything is going to be okay?" I whispered as terror cycled through me like the ocean's vicious undertow.

His eyes shuttered as he pulled me close to stamp a kiss to my mouth. "Not gonna lie to you, Little Shadow, not ever. You promise me right now you'll stay here so I can focus on findin' 'em, yeah? You stay here where no one can get you."

"I promise," I swore, tears in my throat because I couldn't shake the awful sense that the tragedies would just keep coming. "I'll pray for them."

"You don't need prayers when you got me," he said matter-of-factly. "But if it makes you feel better, you kneel, and you pray for them until I can get to them."

I watched as the partygoers parted for the men like the Red Sea, and then I went to get my biker babes to hold a vigil. Unfortunately, over the years, we'd gotten all too good at those.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

PRIEST

KODIAK AND I FOUND THEM THE NEXT MORNING AFTER A NIGHT OF THE entire club and the T-Squad rolling out to search for them.

The killer left a fairly obvious calling card.

In the middle of one of Brian Potter's wheat fields gone to mud in the winter season, a massive, crudely carved cross had been planted in the ground. Beneath it, crusted with dirt and dried blood lay Amelia Stephens and Cleo Axelsen.

"Fuck," Kodiak grunted from behind me as he drew close enough to see the bodies laid out in the mud. He hastened forward, dropping his big body between the two women to check their vitals. There was panic in every tense line of his body, a surprise given he was normally so stoic. When he looked

up from Amelia, I knew from the obsidian sharpness of his gaze that she was dead.

I ignored him to kneel beside Cleo. I saw the faint flutter instantly, as slight as a butterfly's wing beneath the skin of her neck.

"Get the truck," I ordered my brother in a cold, calm voice. "Drive it into the field and bring it here."

"Why?" he asked, hunched over Amelia with an anguished expression on his face. "Fuck, man, she's gone. Look what they did to her."

"Cleo's not," I told him without looking up, searching Cleo for wounds, finding seven, eight...eleven stab wounds. There was also no doubt from the way they'd torn her clothes to ribbons and the blood caked over her groin that they had abused her sexually too. "Get the truck *now*."

Kodiak stared at Cleo for a fractured moment, something shattering in his expression. Before I could order him to get his arse in gear, he leaned over Cleo to brush her matted hair back from her face tenderly, then shoved to his feet and began to loop across the field. He was swift, faster than any other man in the club, yet I still wanted to urge him faster.

Cleo was dying in my arms.

My girl's best friend was bleeding out into the earth, so close to earning a spot beneath it. I shucked my cut, then my sweater, cutting the latter into rough strips with the edge of my hunting knife so I could craft a tourniquet for her right thigh above the three stab wounds gaping open there. The wink of white bone was visible through the harshly torn flesh, the broken edge of her femur sharper than my blade.

This looked like the work of more than one man or the work of a man who'd gone manic with rage, the final threads of his sanity cut irreversibly. After spending the past few nights with Bea and running out after his accomplice in minimum clothing, the fucker might have deduced I was sleeping with his obsession. If he was so enamoured with Bea, so indentured to the idea of her as his "holy" wife, my corruption of her body and soul

would be enough to shatter any remaining semblance of his lucidity.

Amelia lay cold and dead beside me, pale eyes unseeing. It seemed she hadn't survived the same wounds as Cleo though they were more meticulously done, the knife wounds clean and deep, perfunctory where Cleo's were impassioned. Some old religious impulse urged me to close them, to place two of the coins I kept in my pocket to her lids and bless her way through death.

I didn't.

Cleo was still living, though barely, and I knew enough about death to know she had a slim chance of holding out.

When I rolled Cleo just slightly to wrap a scrap of fabric around her left arm, I noticed the crumbled, blood-soaked note pressed between her body and the earth like some kind of fucked up dried flower.

This one wasn't typed, the words penned in cramped, almost illegible script. Most importantly, it wasn't a Bible verse.

Submit to my love, Beatrice, as it will heal your multitude of sins. Submit to be my wife, and I shall make you holy once more, for you have sinned and are corrupted by the Devil.

The devil, of course, was me.

When I found this man, and I would, I would stab him eleven times, cut him into twelve pieces, feed those to the wolves, but keep his goddamn head for myself and mount it on my fucking wall with a tent spike.

He deserved to suffer in all the ways he'd made these women suffer.

Made Bea suffer.

Because I knew, staring at the blood-softened note on the ground as I tended to Cleo, that Bea would not recover from the responsibility she would mine from this.

This was the work of a seriously fucked-up psychopath.

The difference between us was that I was a psychopath tethered to the right path by good people who had somehow found a way to forge

connections with me against all odds. This killer had got lost in the forest of his own fucked-up mind, and there was no getting out for him now. No one could reach him there.

A rush of winter wind slammed into me, stirring Amelia's hair beside me and dislodging another note, this one typed.

"An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones." Proverbs 12:4.

Amelia's death had been premeditated, Cleo's had not.

One was an act of his fucked-up faith, the other an act of passion.

He was slipping.

And when he fell, I would catch him in my deathly claws.

I worked calmly, efficiently, cutting down on the bleeding in Cleo's extremities, then pressing against the worst of the lacerations in her torso with hard pressure that made blood bubble up beneath my fingers.

The pain spasmed in Cleo's face, her lids trembling and blue.

A second later, they fluttered open but unseeing, and a choked sob fell from her mouth.

"Cleo," I said, leaning down so she could see my face. "Cleo, it's Priest. We're gonna get you some help."

But those unseeing eyes, as light as the frost on the ground, didn't register me. Instead, her lips moved, her breath through them mumbled with speech. I ducked closer, almost pressing my ear to her mouth in a mad bid to hear what she spoke.

"I just..." she breathed wet and hoarse. "I just wanted to be closer to God..."

"Cleo," I demanded sharply, hoping to rouse her from her pain-induced stupor. "Cleo, can you tell me who did this to you?"

I watched with cold, deep fury as blood trickled from her mouth and her lashes fluttered over blown-open pupils. She struggled just slightly, and even that seemed to take monumental effort.

And then she stilled.

So fucking still, her pulse even slower, so weak I had to dig for it in her bruised neck with the pad of my thumb and I found the faint thread of it still gently pulsing.

I didn't know the plump, sweet-faced daughter of my brother, Axe-Man, beyond the fact he'd adopted her years ago. Over the years, I'd noted she chewed her fingernails when she was nervous, that she referred to Axe-Man as Dad every time she spoke to him, like she was relieved and grateful to be able to do so, that she never swore and often carried around self-help books even at club parties. I knew all of this, but I'd never cared.

I only worked tirelessly to save her now because of Bea, because they were best friends, and this death would break my sweet girl right down the fucking middle.

This was the thing about other people and me. I saw them just fine, all those obvious ways they didn't mean to express themselves but were helpless to avoid. The knowledge of them even lingered, catalogued and filed away in my head for future reference.

But I didn't care.

I made Stella over at the diner nervous. Whenever I grabbed a bite with some brothers, which wasn't often, she sent a male server to the table and always stayed behind the counter, probably ready to call the cops. Cressida asked me once when we went for lunch if it bothered me, and it honestly hadn't occurred to me to care.

Why the fuck would I care what Stella thought?

Honest as hell, I didn't care what happened to her—if she lived or died—so why would I care how she perceived me?

Human beings and their many interactions were like math to me. I was a hell of a mathematician, but it wasn't like the numbers fucking moved me.

It was my job to take notes as I read people. To be deadly accurate in my assessment so that I could be, frequently, deadly in dealing with them.

Only a few people actually existed in relation to me.

Zeus.

His family.

King and Cress, now their infant son, Prince.

Most of the brothers I gave more than a passing shit about, but only Nova, Bat, Axe-Man, Kodiak, and Blade could draw me into any kinda real conversation.

So I cared about this girl dying in the mud not because she was a human being and I inherently owed her some kind of empathy. I cared because we were linked together by the few bonds I had. Bea, Axe-Man, the entire club I owed my second life to.

“Don’t fuckin’ die,” I ordered her.

A faint, wet rattle of her breath was my only answer.

The rumble of the truck crunching over frozen ground grew louder behind me. I collected Cleo carefully in my arms so I was ready for Kodiak when he came to a dirt-flying, drifting stop a few feet from me.

He flipped down the truck bed, took one look at me, and extended his arms. “Give ’er to me. You drive.”

“I can handle it,” I told him, cocking my head as I studied the agitated way he bounced on his feet.

“You can handle it,” Kodiak agreed, already reaching for her, carefully pulling her into his arms. “But you’re too close to death, and you don’t believe in shit. I’m gonna hold her, and I’m gonna pray for her.”

My eyebrows cut into my hairline, but I didn’t argue. We were wasting time. Instead, I gestured for him to get in the bed of the truck, then closed the flap.

“Amelia,” Kodiak called.

“Leavin’ her for the cops,” I shouted out the window over the roar of the engine as I gunned for the street. “Gotta leave those dumb fucks some kinda crime scene.”

I drove like a bat out of hell to the nearest hospital, but it was a twenty-minute journey, and I doubted Cleo Axelsen had twenty minutes to spare. Over the harsh rasp of the overtaxed engine, I could hear the murmur of Kodiak chanting in his native tongue the entire drive before we pulled to a screeching halt in the emergency bay of St. Katherine's Hospital.

The only miracle I'd ever been forced to believe in was Bea's love, but when the hospital staff flooded out to get Cleo into surgery and found her still, somehow, breathing, I felt a stirring of faith as I stared at Kodiak covered in her blood in the truck bed reluctantly handing her over. There was sweat on his brow and a feverish gleam to his pitch-dark gaze, strands of his long hair glued to his face.

When he tipped it up to me, catching my eye as they sped away with Cleo on a gurney, his expression was fierce as a warrior set out to conquer.

"We're gonna slaughter this motherfucker," he said coldly.

I arched a brow at him as I reached out to help him down from the bed, feeling a comradeship I was rarely moved by. When he lashed out to grab me forearm to forearm, I tugged him closer and let the monster within me peek out in a feral grin.

"I call fuckin' dibs."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BEA

THE ENTIRE WAITING ROOM OF ST. KATHERINE'S WAS FILLED, NOT FOR THE first time, with The Fallen MC and their people. A murder of ravens clad in leather instead of feathers had descended on the orange chairs and cold linoleum floor, inactive with acute grief.

Cleo was still in surgery after six hours, and the doctors had stopped coming to check in with Axe-Man. He sat alone on a chair against the back wall, thick thighs spread, big hands covering his entire bearded face so we wouldn't see him weep.

A grown man, a cold man, weeping for his daughter.

I was helpless against the maelstrom of my own tears, seeing that and knowing my best girl was fighting for her life on an operating table.

Because of me.

Me, me, me.

I buried my head in my hands, inconsolable as I sobbed and sobbed until I felt sick. I'd thrown up twice since we arrived at the hospital, the force of my sobs upheaving everything in my stomach.

I couldn't stop.

Not when Loulou wrapped her cherry-scented arms around me, not when Cressida stroked my hair, and not when Harleigh Rose sat at my feet, wrapping a long arm around my legs to brace her cheek against me. Lila tried and Maja and Hannah and Tayline.

I could not be consoled.

Priest was out hunting for the killer with Kodiak, following whatever trail they could find back at the crime scene along with Lion and a select group of RCMP that Zeus cursed out as idiots for thinking the crimes would stop when Owen Burns was hospitalized.

But I doubted even he could comfort me.

I doubted he would even know how to try.

But maybe that was the point.

The shared grief and sympathy for my guilt were overwhelming. I didn't deserve their grace, and the heaps of it they lay at my feet only made me feel like some false saint.

I needed the intensity of Priest's fixed gaze to tether my restless, fighting spirit, the hard edge of his love to wear down my self-loathing like a whetstone.

My grief, though, was nothing to Bat's.

He'd arrived at the hospital on a chorus of shouts, yelling at anyone and everyone to tell him what room his wife was in.

She wasn't in the emergency room, a poor male nurse had to tell him. She was in the morgue.

I'd never seen a bomb explode, but I imagined it happened like that.

Bat grew so still with vibrating tension the air around him began to pulse as if he was collecting all the energy in the room to him.

We braced.

Not a single person moved. Not even Zeus, who knew him best.

It was obvious why the moment he shattered.

With a warrior's cry, he bent to one of the chairs bolted poorly to the wall and started to rend it from the wall. To my shock, it yielded to his brutal force, tearing from the wall with a spray of plaster and dust. Loose in his hold, Bat swung it like a baseball bat into the wall above the empty space it had inhabited, banging it again and again until rubble littered his feet, the chair was a mangled mess, and a hole the size of a child was blown through the wall.

He stood there then, heaving in a breath like he was a man in a burning, smoke-filled room, fired with rage so he wouldn't drown in grief. His eyes rolled madly around the room as he panted, looking for a place to lay his grief.

Harleigh Rose, once abused and now keenly scarred by male violence, shifted behind my legs in a small gesture of fear.

It was Dane, not Zeus, who stood to wave a red flag in front of The Fallen's stuck boar.

He stood slowly, unraveling the long, broad expanse of him. There was nothing meek in Dane Meadows, every inch of him a well-honed human weapon, but the way he stepped forward was a gesture in submission to Bat's rage. He didn't mean to douse that fire, his body language screamed, he only meant to contain it.

Bat growled as Dane drew closer, searching madly now for someplace to run or hide, something to destroy with the fixed point of his rage. As Bat lunged for another chair, Dane lunged too, tackling him hard to the cracked linoleum. They struggled powerfully, Bat throwing a brutal punch to Dane's jaw before he could be pinned then rolling expertly as soon as he was prone so Dane was on the defensive.

These were two men skilled in the art of war and combat.

They brutalized each other.

No one stopped them.

Zeus stood at one point, ready to interfere if he had to, but he held up a staying hand when Nova tried to do the same. A nurse picked up a phone at the nurse's station to call the cops, but King was there suddenly sweet-talking her into letting this scene play out.

Bat had just lost his wife, and his twin boys had just lost their mother.

For a man like him, a brother of The Fallen and a war vet, the knowledge he hadn't been able to protect his woman no matter the flaws in their relationship was toxic to his system.

So he fought.

And Dane let him take it out on him.

It felt like hours, but it was probably only ten minutes by the time Bat stopped moving almost violently, his still so sudden I gasped. Dane was behind him, having tried to secure him in a headlock, but the moment he felt his friend's motionlessness, he stopped too.

Then, gentle as a whisper, his hold turned into a cradle.

Soft as a summer breeze, he pressed the side of his jaw to the back of Bat's head and rucked his huge body back against him in an iron-clad hug.

The tenderness deflated him like a balloon, his tattooed limbs melting into the hold. He blinked blindly down at the floor as he rasped out, "Tell me this is just another nightmare."

"Can't do that, man," Dane said gruffly, tears in his own eyes, one already swelling from a well-landed punch. "There's no waking up from this."

Bat's entire face contorted, but he didn't cry. It seemed almost that he couldn't. But his eyes were red-rimmed, too dry in their sockets and his breath hiccupped through his lungs.

"Bat brother," Zeus said finally, moving forward to crouch before him. "I'm gonna take you home to your boys, yeah? We'll tell 'em together."

Bat's dark eyes closed, pain suffused in every inch of him. He nodded on a shuddering inhale.

Z and Dane took him home to tell his sons they lost their mother.

I cried harder.

I also prayed.

I prayed to *my* god, not the God this madman hid behind.

I prayed to the deity who had been my best friend as a girl, to the God my Grandpa introduced me to and loved so fully.

I prayed to Him that this madness would stop. I prayed to him with every ounce of my soul for the power to do something to stop the horror.

I apologized too, so deeply, ripping the regret from my heart with claws so my entire heart felt shredded. I apologized for whatever sins I had committed that brought this down on our heads.

I threw up again when he didn't answer, in Cressida's purse because I couldn't make it to the bathroom, and she held it open for me.

"Don't worry, honey," she said sweetly when I tried to tell her I was sorry. "With a baby, I'm used to it. I *am* worried about you, though. You can't possibly take this on, my darling girl. You aren't Atlas. This is too big a load for you to carry."

"It's me," I told her, the words scraping painfully up my tear-savaged throat. "It's me he wants, and he did this for me or to me or because of me. I don't know which, but it comes down to *me*."

I thought of Cleo again, her sweet face breaking open with laughter as we danced in my kitchen on one of our sleepovers, as she braided my hair, as I did her makeup because she always screwed it up. I thought of all the years of our friendship and wondered how she would ever forgive me.

If she would even get the chance to stay alive and try.

"Beatrice."

I looked up through blurry eyes to notice that Seth had come out to give us an update on Cleo. Axe-Man was standing near him, every inch of his six-

foot-four frame made small with his sorrow.

“News?” I whispered.

Seth’s handsome face was pale as he took in the sight of me curled up in my chair. He moved forward and squatted beside Harleigh Rose so we could be at eye level. His were clear and calm. He was in doctor mode, focused on saving a life.

“I’m hesitant to make promises, but it’s looking good. We managed to stop the bleeding and repair most of the damage to her major organs. Now it’s a matter of her will to survive the night,” he said softly, repeating the information just for me. “I’m truly sorry, Bea.”

My smile was a mangled thing on my face. “Thanks, Seth. I feel better knowing you’re in there looking after her.”

“I’m doing my best for you,” he joked, but it fell flat between us because he wasn’t particularly funny, and I wasn’t capable of laughter.

“I’m praying,” I admitted, staring down at my hands.

“Good,” he said, patting my hands. “Only God can help her now.”

There was a clamour at the automatic doors. I turned just in time to see Priest, Lion, Kodiak, and Wrath power down the hall, faces set in grim unison.

Priest’s eyes were already on me, instantly finding me like a compass pointing true north. They swept up and down, cataloguing every single thing about me in that brief survey. His mouth tightened.

Then he noticed Seth in his scrubs bent beside me, and his entire face transformed with untamed viciousness.

“Think I told you last time I saw your ugly fuckin’ mug that if you put a hand on my woman I’d slit your fuckin’ throat,” he said, the words so arctic I could almost see a chill in the air.

Seth cocked his head as he regarded my psycho, assessing the threat level maybe, or more likely, because Seth was a cocky man used to getting his own way, just lingering at my side to bug the hell out of Priest.

When he didn't immediately pull away, I moved my hands out from under him and stood.

I should have said thank you again to the doctor who had helped to save my best friend. I should have at least said goodbye.

I didn't.

Because suddenly there was no one else in the room but Priest and myself, safe in the shadowy embrace of our connection.

"Priest," I whispered past the obstruction in my throat as I went to take a step and landed on a wobbly leg, falling forward.

I was sick with grief and dehydrated from all the crying, nothing in my belly because I'd thrown up everything I had to give. It wasn't surprising I collapsed.

It also wasn't surprising that Priest caught me.

I was up and in his arms, tucked into his side with my bum supported by a strong hand and an arm wrapped around my torso before I could even think of falling. I tucked my sore nose into his throat, wishing it was clear enough to breathe in his clove and tobacco scent. His warmth and unyielding body against mine were enough to dry the trickle of wet still leaking from my eyes.

"Takin' her home," Priest told someone, probably my sister.

"She needs family," Loulou protested, but it was weak because she was as devastated by this as everyone else, as helpless as anyone to do anything about this tragedy.

"She needs me," he said simply, intractably.

And then he turned on his heel and left, not stopping until Lion called out and caught up with us.

"A second?" he asked of Priest.

I peeked out from my haven between Priest's beard and leather collar in answer to Lion's request.

His eyes were so verdant a green they instantly held me transfixed. I'd forgotten somehow how deeply magnetic Lion was, as if the force of his

goodness magnetized him.

He bent closer to me, a tanned hand hovering over hair for an instant before he awkwardly, sweetly, tucked a piece behind my ear.

“Gotta say this, Bea, because I know what you’re goin’ through, and I know who you are. This shit is not on you, you hear me?” He read the obstinacy in my eyes, and his voice went deep, dark. “This. Is. Not. On. You. Wanna know how I know that? Because I got a father who corrupted an entire force against the club my woman’s a serious part of. I’m the son of the man who shot King nearly dead, the son of a man who lied and murdered to put Zeus behind bars. You think I don’t know what it’s like to live half-choked with guilt?”

I was lost in his somber gaze, shivering with the cold shock of his words. Of course, he knew, and what a horrible cross to bear.

“You can tell me this is different, and it *is*,” he continued resolutely. “It’s different because you don’t know a thing about this madman who has decided to end lives for sport. I knew my father, so I should have done something a lot sooner than I did to take him down. I had the power, and I’ll bear the guilt of that for the rest of my fuckin’ life. But you? You’re helpless here, Bea. As fucked and horrible as it is to say, you gotta know, this asshole has stripped power away from us all, but especially you. The only thing you *can* do is forgive yourself. Be fuckin’ kind to yourself. He wants to damage. He wants you isolated so he can snatch you up and make you his. But I gotta tell you”—he sucked in a deep breath and looked up at Priest then back to me—“you are not alone. You are loved, you are strong, and your entire community is gonna come back from this. Including Cleo because that girl knows she’s got everything to fight for, and all of it is waiting for her in this room.”

My heart shuddered as Lion’s words fought for purchase.

Priest clutched me tighter, and I knew he was glaring at Lion. “Pretty speech.”

Lion shrugged, a little grin playing with his mouth even though his eyes were tired. “Knew she wouldn’t get it from you, so I figured someone should make it.”

“I’m a killer, not a poet or a cop. What I got is action, not words. Bea knows I’m gonna chop this motherfucker into little pieces and tie each one with a motherfuckin’ pink bow for her,” Priest said, bored of the conversation now, already moving again.

“Thanks, Lion,” I called over Priest’s shoulder as he walked us out the sliding front doors of the hospital. “Please, keep telling H.R. to keep me up to date on everything.”

He tilted his chin in acknowledgment, a wry smile on his handsome face.

“Honestly, he helped,” I admitted to Priest as we walked across the parking lot to his bike. There were still some patches of snow on the ground, but we weren’t due for more snow for another week and I knew Priest road his Harley whenever he could. The idea of clinging to him now while we rode through the night, the world a chaos of blurring colours in shapes flying by us, unable to touch us, made the frenetic fear inside me subside further.

Priest grunted in response, but when he gently slid me down the long line of his body to the asphalt, his eyes were fierce on mine.

“Honestly?” he mocked in a way that was almost tender as he grasped my chin in firm, tombstone tattooed fingers. “I’m gonna help more. Now, get on my bike, Little Shadow, I’m gonna take you home.”

For the first time in hours, tears prickled the backs of my eyes not because of sadness but because of joy. I’d dreamt most of my mature life of going home to Priest, and that had nothing to do with sharing a shelter and everything to do with feeling at home just like this, pressed to his strong, leather-clad back on his Harley surging fearlessly through the dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BEA

HE DIDN'T TAKE ME HOME.

At least, he didn't take me to my pink heritage home off Main Street that I'd painstakingly turned into my haven after moving out of Phillipa's house two years ago.

He took me to his place.

I was shocked when he pulled to a stop in the warehouse district in a long, gravel alleyway between two massive industrial structures. Theoretically, of course, I'd known Priest had a place to crash, but no one in the club seemed to know where that was. It was almost a running joke between the biker babes, guessing where a man like him would call home. A graveyard, a morgue, an underground bunker...

A warehouse seemed fitting.

Mutely, I followed as he collected his bags and my hand before leading

us to a door under a flicking light in the side of the otherwise window-less steel frame. He used three keys and a complicated alarm system I recognized as one of Curtain's creations before we finally proceeded into a glass antechamber that overlooked the warehouse's interior. Wooden crates, barrels, and steel storage containers were organized meticulously within.

I looked up at Priest in silent question.

"Weapons," he said, and that was it.

We descended a long, zig-zagging staircase that made me realize just how wholly exhausted I was, and then we reached another door with yet another series of locks and alarms.

My man didn't fuck around.

I was shocked by the inside of his apartment. Not the industrial ducts and exposed pipes, the lack of furniture, the spotless expanse of his steel cabinet kitchen, the woodworking station, or the knife-throwing target board set up along one side of the space beside a rack of display weapons.

That all made perfect sense.

It was the entire corner taken up by a library set with a single chair and reading lamp that drew me in. He let me explore, moving away to organize his saddlebags, leaving me to examine his personal space.

The trust took my breath away. That he would leave me in his haven, a place so few people even knew about. That knowing me and my psychological studies, he would let me roam and poke and prod into this sanctuary, into his innermost thoughts displayed as those few important things he would harbour in such a space...

I was crying again, annoyed with myself for being so emotional. I felt like one raw, stripped wire, exposed to every small interaction with anything I encountered.

And this was massive.

Monumental.

My loner, my psycho, a man who believed he was too close to death to

love anyone, had let me loose in his home.

I was only human.

So, while I cried, I took advantage.

My fingers trailed over the spines of some familiar volumes, different versions of the Bible, *The Tipitaka*, the *Quran*, and *The Tanakh and The Talmud*. Most, though, I hadn't read and barely recognized beyond the fact that they were clearly all religious texts.

He even had an incredibly old edition of King James's Bible in a hermetically sealed glass box on a lone table between bookshelves. I leaned over it, tracing my fingers along the script on the open pages.

"My mother's."

His voice startled me so badly, I nearly choked on a scream. Hand to my breast, I turned to him with wide eyes. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Ignoring my dramatics, he stepped closer so he was half an inch from pressing against my back. The space between us vibrated like a struck tuning fork. I'd turned the lamp on to illuminate the dark corner, and the warm light cast Priest in an orange glow, his hair pulled back by a bit of leather string, locks of red hair falling over his brow. He was achingly gorgeous but even more so in the shadows. I reached up hesitantly, suddenly needing to feel him to ensure he was real and not just some figment of my imagination.

There was a slight flinch when my fingers trailed along his beard, but he didn't move away from my touch. Like the wild animal he was, it was taking time to acclimatize him to my gentle handling, but that small feat felt monumental to me.

On a day when my heart felt rent in two by the tragedy of Amelia and Cleo, Priest was allowing me farther past his defences than he ever had before. Idly, I wondered if he was doing it to distract me from my pain and guilt, but then I decided I didn't care.

"Your mother's?" I repeated to goad him along.

Priest's pale eyes glowed, striated with darker strands of green like fallen

pine needles in a clear lake. There were graveyards in those eyes, haunted eyes that few people could hold for long in any kind of stare. I found them lovely, melancholy, and peaceful as walking through a cemetery at dawn when the sky is giving birth to day in direct contrast to the eternal dead.

“Mam,” he said lowly, voice deep as if dredged up from some forgotten well. “Her name was Aoife. She had hair like mine.” He reached up absently to brush back a piece of that copper hair behind one ear. A grim reaper was tattooed beneath it on the skin at the side of his neck, and his fingers went there next as if shaking hands with it. “She was the first to die.”

The warehouse apartment was almost too cold to be habitable, but that wasn't why I shivered. I held my breath as I waited for more of this veiled history to unravel.

His Adam's apple bobbed harshly in his strong throat, but he continued, eyes still fixed on the open Bible as if he was reading from the pages.

“I was ten years old that winter and it was a wet one.” He'd dropped the biker speech I'd always heard him affect, his voice richer with the Irish brogue he usually tried to quell. “There wasn't much to our life and home. We were poor. Da worked as a labourer at any farm that would take him and Mam stayed home with me and girls.”

His eyes flickered to me, gauging my reaction to the reveal that he had siblings. I kept my face carefully stoic, controlling my breath because I knew he could read more into a person than just their expression.

“Danae and Keely were four and six, still so wee. Pneumonia was common enough, especially in our home. You could feel the wind through the slates of wood.” His hand spread unconsciously as if he could feel the breeze move through his fingers. “Mam got sick first so she couldn't take care of the girls. I tried, but we didn't have the right medicines or the money to buy them. Da came home one day and the lot of us were sick, even me. We prayed.” He paused, jaw flexing, brows angled steeply over his eyes, pitted like a skull's with deep shadow. “We prayed because that was our only

fucking recourse. Other families, they had neighbours to help them. We were a religious county with a priest who was beloved. Father O'Neal. He dictated everything that happened and he could be benevolent."

His hard-bitten laugh scuttling shivers down my back.

"Never with us. My parents had me out of wedlock, when they were too young and even poorer than we were later, too poor to marry. Father O'Neal never forgave them for that. He wouldn't even marry them when the time came that they could. He made us pariahs and when Mam died, then Da right after, my sisters a few days later, no one lifted a hand to help us."

He stopped suddenly as if he'd run into a mental wall. I didn't push him to continue. I just stood there an inch away from touching him though I was desperate to wrap him in my arms. I wanted to respect this sacrifice he was making, summoning old demons just to show me why they existed.

"You're cold," he noted dispassionately. "Come."

He didn't touch me as he moved away to the back of the mostly open space to the only closed off room. I followed, floating over the floor feeling like a ghost mired in his past, watching it play out without the ability to do anything to stop it.

When I entered the bathroom, Priest was turning on the shower in a huge glass enclosure. Immediately, steam began to curl around him.

"Take off your clothes," he ordered blandly as he adjusted the temperature and stepped back to close the door to the shower.

He watched me with arms across his vest in his Hephaestus Auto hoodie and black jeans, bare feet oddly erotic braced against the dark tile, strong and beautifully arched. Looking at them, I understood the sexual, submissive impulse to worship someone's feet. I wanted to wash them and tend to them, thankful for their strength and surety as they carried Priest through his life to me.

I undressed for him, hands clumsy and weak as I shed the pink sweatpants and UBC hoodie I'd donned after the barbecue when everything

had turned to chaos. Beneath, I wore white underwear patterned with little peaches.

Priest's jaw clenched at the sight when I revealed it to him, but he did not move toward me, even when I was fully nude.

"Get in," He tipped his chin to the steaming shower.

I was trembling, my emotional equilibrium compromised, but I did as he said. The hot, punishing stream of water felt like a Godsend against my aching shoulders, my tear swollen face. I closed my eyes and tipped my head into the spray.

So, I wasn't prepared for Priest to step into the shower behind me.

I was even less prepared when the naked skin of his torso pressed against my back and his bare arms wrapped solidly around my waist. My mouth fell open on a gasp swallowed up by the rush of water as I looked down at his exposed forearms.

Mottled with terrible scars.

There were tattoos here and there, obviously done to avoid the scar tissue, but most of his skin was already tapestried with horrific markings. He shuddered violently as I slowly wrapped my arms around his on my belly, hugging those marred limbs tenderly.

We stood like that for a long time under water that was a shade too hot, scalding my skin to a high, sensitive flush.

Finally, he pulled away and began to perfunctorily wash my hair. His hands were efficient, clinical almost as they worked the suds of his masculine scented shampoo into my thick locks, rubbing hard and deliciously at my scalp. It was such a juxtaposition, this beautiful act done in such a cursory way. But it was so Priest, my psychopath tending to me in a way that was entirely outside his wheelhouse, but doing it anyway because he was keenly observant enough to know I needed it.

"After I buried them in the back, it was days before anyone came looking for survivors. I wasn't sick anymore, but I was hungry and weak. When

Father O'Neal arrived, I was delirious. He looked to me like some heavenly being come to save me."

Another hard, clanking laugh like hollow bullet casings falling to the tile floor.

He finished washing my hair and tilted me gently forward under the water before continuing his story in that hollow voice.

"I lived on a cot in one of the antechambers in the local church. There was this massive stained-glass window above me, an angel with yellow hair being dragged to earth by the hands of Satan."

"That's the one at the clubhouse," I interjected before I could help myself, soothed into a trance by Priest's hard hands washing every inch of my body.

"It haunted me there, I thought it should haunt me here," he explained obtusely. "I did chores for the church. Their little errand boy. Soon I became a kind of servant for everyone in the parish. Father O'Neal lent me out to his devotees when they were particularly worthy." He paused for so long I didn't know if he would continue.

Then, when he did, I wished he hadn't.

"They didn't abuse me, at first. It was only when I hit puberty at twelve that Father O'Neal claimed I wasn't capable of being saved. That I would always be an abomination in the eyes of God. A monster born out of wedlock pledged to Satan since birth." His voice was chilling, dead and cold as the arctic tundra. I shivered, trying to move away, but his hands grew more punishing on my body, kneading into my flesh as he washed me too clean. "First, he made me practice self-flagellation, hoping I could beat the devil out of myself. When that didn't work, he yielded the whip and then a knife, trying to cut it out of me.

"The parishioners lived and breathed his holiness. They followed by his example. I was kicked like a dog in the streets, beaten by teenagers for sport. I learned to defend myself quickly, but whenever I hurt others, Father O'Neal punished me bitterly."

His tone took on a dazed, almost dreamy quality as he sunk deeper into the past. He didn't notice when I leaned back against him in a silent offer of support or when I muffled my tears in an open palm.

“His favourite way to torture me was to hold one of the lit votive candles against my skin while I recited whole Bible passages. If I got one word wrong, he chose a new spot on my flesh to burn and it all began again.”

“Oh, Priest,” I whispered, the agonized cry caught in my hands.

Inexorably, he rotated me slowly to face him. I kept my eyes closed until I was fully turned, bracing myself for the sight that would meet me.

But nothing could brace me for the sight of him naked but for the cloak of scars he wore as regally as a king his mantle. He stood there before me with his chin tilted, shoulders pinned back, feet braced apart in proud defiance of my pity.

This was him, scars and all.

He wanted to scare me away almost as much as he wanted my acceptance. The war of conflict shining in his eyes, wrestling in his twitching jaw.

His flesh was a ruin of scars. So many, I couldn't begin to count them. My fingers fluttered between us like a butterfly afraid to land. His hand whipped out and grasped my wrist so quickly, so painfully I gasped.

He wielded my fingers like an artist with a brush, carefully using my fingertips to trace the thick lacerations carving up his belly, the whirling of burned flesh flaming up his chest, distorting his left nipple, the smooth trail of poorly healed skin that had burned away half of the hair leading down from his navel to his groin. Even his thighs were gashed and knitted back together, a long slash like a ladder mutilating the skin, clearly having been inadequately stitched back together. The flesh pulled over the strong swell of his muscle and I realized it must've pained him all the time.

Tears blurred my vision as he used me to trace every inch of his body. His hold was too tight, but I didn't complain. It was a kind of cleansing for

him, I thought, standing in the steam and water, exposing himself to my touch like a form of healing torture. So I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat at the sight of my beautiful Priest's mutilated body and I endured along with him.

When his front was finished, he turned and braced his arms against the tiled walls to let me explore his back alone. He shuddered viciously at my first touch, as I trailed my fingers lightly along the massive tattoo of The Fallen's flaming skull and tattered wings inked into his scared back.

"It's not as bad," he explained in a ragged, war-torn voice as I thumbed the ridge of a long scar. "He liked to look me in the eye when he forced me to pay his fucked-up penance." He paused, breathing so heavily his pants rose above the rush of water. "You see, *mo cuishle*. This is why I am a monster. This is why I do not have a heart. Father O'Neal cut it out of me."

A sob bubbled up my throat and exploded between us. I ached so fiercely for this big, achingly exquisite, irrevocably broken man that each breath I took felt like a blade to my heart. Unable to resist, I wrapped myself around his tapered waist, pressing my entire length to his scarred back, brushing my hands over the boxed muscles in his abdomen, knowing I'd never forget the exact way in which they'd been defaced.

He let me hug him, but his voice was a weapon when he lashed out, "I will not have your pity, Bea. I am not some broken victim. On my seventeenth birthday, when that motherfucker tried to rape my arse with a branding iron to exhume the devil, I impaled him on that spike and then cut him to ribbons with the same knife he'd used for years to cut the evil out of me."

He spun suddenly, sending me flying for a moment before he caught me and crushed me to his chest, one hand collaring my throat and canting my chin up so I was forced to meet his searing gaze. "I killed him just as surely as he killed me. And when two of the parishioners caught me trying to flee, I killed them too."

“If they weren’t dead, I’d fly over there and kill them myself,” I said honestly, trying to fill the screens of my eyes with the eloquence of my emotions. “You know Father O’Neal was a horrible man, a man who didn’t know anything about God, right? People try to subvert religion so often for their own gains. To use it as an excuse for their greed and sinfulness.”

“God,” Priest said the word bitterly, spitting it into the steam. “I will never believe in such a thing again.”

“Okay,” I agreed easily. “But then why do you have so many religious texts? Why did you marry King and Cressida? Why will you marry Lion and H.R., Nova and Lila? I think you want to understand how someone could love God in a healthy way. How He might heal someone or forgive someone who deserves it.”

“I don’t deserve it,” he retorted immediately. “I never did, and I certainly don’t now. I’m a killer, Bea. As Father O’Neal always believed, I’m a son of Death.”

“Even Death has a heart,” I pressed, moving my hand over the disfigured skin at his heart even though he bared his teeth at me. “You have one, Priest, you can’t hide it from me anymore. You love Zeus for taking you in, you love the club for giving you a healthy home and accepting you exactly as you are, killer and all. You love *me*.” I took a deep breath, feeling shaky and nauseous and filled with so much love I was close to bursting at the seams, everything inside me sluicing down the drain. Priest watched me raptly as tears began to fall. “You love me. I don’t care if you can’t ever bring yourself to say the words. What you told Lion today is true. You’re a man of action, not words, and you’ve shown me again and again that I’m in your heart.”

He laughed hard again, the end note cracking in two. “*Mo cuishle*, you are my heart.”

“I’ll keep it safe,” I pledged as I cried tears for him, the wet disappearing instantly in the shower torrent. “I promise, it will always be safe with me. I don’t care if you’re a killer, if you are scarred physically and mentally by

your tragic, brutal past. I love all of you, and no line you could cross would make me change my mind about that, okay?”

When he didn't respond, his eyes hot and heavy as coals burning in his skull, I shook him. “Okay?”

“Okay,” he agreed impassively, as if it didn't mean anything when it meant absolutely *everything*. “Okay, Bea. You keep my heart safe, and I will keep you safe.”

I trembled, fear rushing in as I thought of the serial killer, of his tenacity to strip my life of love so he could step in and plug in the holes with his mad need.

“He's coming for me,” I whispered. “He wants me to be his.”

“You're mine,” Priest vowed darkly, dipping down as he squeezed my throat to remind me just how owned I was by him. “If he has to learn that the hard way, he will.”

He kissed me then, sealing my lips with his promise and eating up the sobs from my tongue like they were sweets. Touching his naked flesh, knowing I finally had all of him wrapped up in my limbs, tangled irrevocably in my heart, made me dizzy with want, and when his fingers found my sex, I was already wet.

He grunted. “Good to know this doesn't disgust you.”

“We all have scars, Priest,” I murmured as he bit into my neck and pumped his thick fingers inside me. “You just wear yours on your skin.”

He moaned into my neck and lifted me easily by the hips to pin me against the shower. When he slid into me to the hilt, I cried out, the throbbing heat of him both settling me and soaring within me simultaneously.

“This is why I fuck you bare,” he explained over a series of short, hard thrusts that made my womb clench. “He beat me so bad, there's no way anything will ever come of it. But knowing I'm inside you like this, coming in this tight, sweet cunt makes my fuckin' head spin. Makes me feel like a fuckin' conqueror, like I was never someone's victim.”

I cried out in passion and empathy, clutching his hair so tightly it unraveled from the leather hair tie and spilled across my chest as he bit my nipple and held me high to fuck me deeper.

“You’re the angel with the yellow hair that haunted me from the stained-glass,” he confessed before biting hard into my neck, grunting as I spasmed around his driving shaft.

“Yes,” I hissed as his cock hit that spot inside me that made me see spots. “I’ve always been yours, just waiting for you.”

“Don’t believe in fate,” he protested as he tongued my pulse point. “But fuck me, if I don’t believe in you.”

He crushed his mouth to mine, his love searing from my lips down my spine where it exploded into flames between my thighs. I climaxed so hard, my vision went dark, and Priest savagely ate the little breath I could muster from between my lips as he drove harder inside me, chasing his own orgasm.

Moments later, I felt the flood of heat at the entrance to my womb as his dick kicked inside me, triggering a second, smaller climax to roll through me.

Shattered, I hung limp in his arms, head lolling on his strong shoulder as he spent inside me then pinned me against the wall to regain his equilibrium. After a couple of minutes, he pulled away to check my face for trauma.

“How’re you doin’, Little Shadow?” he asked, husky and tired.

I loved knowing I’d made such a strong man grow soft, if only for a moment, if only with me.

“Better,” I confessed as he turned off the water and carried me to the sink where he sat me down to retrieve towels. I watched him walk on that powerful, sensual gait like a predatory animal to the closet where he pulled down two dark towels, completely unselfconscious even barring his myriad of scars to me. They glinted against his pale, freckled skin like artifacts half unearthed in the dust of some ancient ruins. I pledge then to excavate each and every one until those painful stories were unearthed from his memories and laid properly to rest.

When he returned to perfunctorily dry first me, then himself, I stopped him from lifting me up again with a hand to his chest and told him the truth of what he'd done for me. "If you can survive what you went through and end up the most beautiful man I've ever known, I know I can survive this. Thank you for giving me that conviction. I know it cost you a lot."

Priest blinked at me, expression completely unreadable. Then he moved forward, grabbed my hand, and placed a swift kiss to the palm before turning around, buck naked, towel discarded on the wet tile to stroll into the bedroom.

"Sometimes, the cost is worth the reward," he tossed casually over his shoulder without looking at me before he disappeared out the door.

I sat there for a long while, legs dangling over the porcelain sink, wondering if it was Priest's close association to death that gave him this magical ability to turn the darkest days of my life somehow to gold.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

BEA

I SAT AT THE MICROPHONE BREATHING.

The podcast was officially on the air, the recording sign blinking unobtrusively over the door to the exit.

Eric was behind the soundproof glass window across from me, but I didn't look at him. We hadn't spoken beyond a few texts since Priest had interrogated him. I found I didn't have the energy to give the problem my attention in the grand scheme of everything else. It meant something, though, that he'd shown up for the first podcast since we'd discovered Brenda's head stuck under the desk.

Priest was there in the room with me, sitting on a chair he'd dragged up from Honey Bear Café. I didn't bother telling him to be totally silent because I knew he wouldn't make a sound. I also didn't bother to tell him I didn't

need him there with me because that was a lie I couldn't entertain for long, even in my own thoughts.

I felt raw, my skin scraped off with a scalpel, my heart scooped out of my ribs to beat its mangled murmur outside of my chest.

Loulou hadn't wanted me to continue the podcast. The funeral for Amelia the day before had taken the air out of my lungs, but it was sitting vigil at the hospital while Cleo fought for her life that left me anaemic as if the wound of that tragedy couldn't or wouldn't clot.

I bled and bled for her.

It was impossible to feel as if I wasn't responsible for my best friend getting nearly murdered. As I watched her in a coma in the hospital bed, hearing the news that she'd been stabbed too often in the belly to save her womb, that she would no longer be able to have children even if she survived, it eviscerated me.

The guilt was manageable, mostly, after Priest's confession and Lion's speech, but it was the fear that stalked me.

I was more afraid than I have ever conceived of being in my entire life.

I was the little girl who begged to watch rated R horror films, the woman who studied violent crimes and psychopaths in university, who hoped to one day be a criminal profiler.

But there I sat, randomly trembling with bouts of terror that moved through me like ghosts of the women who had already died at the hands of this madman.

Cops were listening in because this entire episode had been an idea they approached me with two days ago, but Lion had them grouped together on the other side of the glass, far enough from me I wouldn't have to focus on their presence.

I'd been quiet for too long. I needed to find the words I wanted to say, but they lay in graves dug six feet deep in my soul.

Finally, I sighed.

“Hey everyone, I’m Bea Lafayette, and this is another episode of *Little Miss Murder*. We usually start these episodes with a macabre storytime before we delve into the details of each murderer, their psychological profile, and how they were ultimately found out or brought to justice. Today, I’m going to begin in a slightly different vein by telling you all about a story that has no ending yet.”

I looked over my shoulder to reassure myself with a glance at Priest. He was standing in the back corner beside the chair we’d brought in for him, leaning against the wall while he silently whittled a block of dark wood. The moment I shifted my gaze to him, he looked up, eyes catching mine and tethering my floundering spirit to his so I could find focus.

I took a deep breath.

“For the past few weeks, Entrance has been plagued by the effort of a serial killer the press has dubbed the ‘Prophet of Death’. As you all know, giving serial killers catchy names plays into their psychosis, their need to be seen and acknowledged for their crimes. So, I will not refer to him by this name, but instead simply as ‘the murderer’ or ‘the killer’, so he understands that his violence doesn’t make him unique. It makes him plebeian, one of a score of faceless murderers now caught that the public conscious has forgotten about.”

Lion gave me a thumbs-up through the glass partition. We had gone over my talking notes before, how I would set up the podcast as a live stream in hopes of baiting the murderer into calling or writing in. It was clear to everyone that he was at his breaking point, and he just needed one last push.

Only, I knew what desperate men did when they were about to be pushed off a cliff. They took everyone in their sights with them over the edge.

“This murderer is perverting biblical scripture to his own ends, attempting to craft a story where he is the hero exorcising sinners from our community so that we will all live in a ‘better, more holy’ place. I don’t usually speak about religion on the show, and if you’re sensitive to this subject matter, I

understand if you skip ahead or tune out. But I have to say the work of this killer is not the work of the God I know. The God I've trusted since I was a child, whom I've looked to for guidance over the years and learned about from countless study does not sanctify murder by any means. He teaches us kindness, patience, and peace, even if it must come from forgiveness. This is my God, and I believe this is most Christians' God. I will not be idle while this murderer seeks to twist the words of a kind God into the mandates of madness."

I sucked in a deep breath, surprised to see my hand trembling on the white tabletop.

"'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves,'" I quoted from Matthew 7:15. "This man is hiding behind religion to mask his horrific crimes in misplaced holiness. If you know who he is, if you subscribe to his teachings or have any idea where he might be, please call in now to our line and help put a murderer behind bars where he belongs."

We waited for one, long, unendurable moment in buzzing silence.

Then Eric's switchboard lit up, and a second later, the old-fashioned landline began to ring. My friend looked up at me before answering, a wealth of hesitation in his eyes.

I nodded because while I'd been willing to bet that quoting scripture against the killer would incite him to action, I could only hope the goad would work.

Eric put them through and the cops started to trace the call. Lion had warned me that even if or when they pinpointed the location, they might not be able to get units to the scene in time to catch him, but it was worth a try.

"Hello, this is Little Miss Murder," I said merrily as I usually did.

Silence.

A shadow descended over me as Priest took up sentry behind my chair.

I cleared my throat and tried again. "Hello? This is Little Miss Murder

podcast. Do you have a tip or question about the murderer?”

“I think you mean the Prophet,” a deep voice answered back.

It was obviously put on, the depth and growl of that tone.

It was also, obviously, *him*.

“A prophet is an inspired teacher of God’s will and practices,” I responded carefully. I was terrified, but I told myself I had been preparing my entire life to negotiate with psychopaths. “The murderer who has been killing off innocent women for sport is not following any divine practices I’m aware of, and I’ve been a member of First Light Church since I was a girl.”

“Innocent women?” The chill of that voice spilled over me like a bucket of ice water. “These women were all sinners, and beyond that, they tried to seduce others to their unholy ways.”

“Cleopatra Axelsen was not a sinner,” I bit back, then dragged a deep breath through my nose to stay calm. It wouldn’t do to be hot-headed with this man. “She was the purest heart I’ve ever known.”

A silence seethed through the phone. Silence with texture and weight that seemed to pollute the entire room.

Priest stepped closer, the edge of his stiff leather cut brushing my hair.

“The others were sinners,” he said finally, resolutely. “And you, Bea, have sinned. I didn’t want you to have to pay for your crimes against God. I wanted to spare you. But, of course, someone needed to pay penance, and I understand that girl was very close to you...It seemed fitting to take my measure of flesh from her instead.”

A sob clutched my throat so hard I couldn’t breathe. Guilt submerged me like a tsunami wave. I floundered, eyes open and sightless, heart pounding an erratic percussion beat that throbbed painfully through me.

Priest’s hand went down heavily on my shoulders, pinning me in my seat, anchoring me back against him. Slowly, maybe so I could protest if I couldn’t handle it, one hand moved over my collarbone up to wrap around my throat. No true pressure, just a collaring, a reminder that I was not owned by

anything or anyone other than this man behind me.

Finally, I breathed, the exhale a loud whoosh through the mic.

The killer heard it and chuckled, a smooth rumble of noise that was utterly self-satisfied. “I know you are remorseful, and I am a forgiving man with the grace of God. You’ve been wicked, Bea, so wicked of late, but this time, I will give you a chance to confess and pay penance.”

Priest went static behind me, his hand on my throat flickering with the urge to crush the life out of the murderer. I reached up to put my own hand over his against my pulse.

“I’m hardly going to turn myself over to you. I don’t even know what you want with me. Why you’re doing this for me.”

That laugh again, this one tinged with hysteria. “I didn’t set out to do this *for* you. I am doing this for *God*, for Him, so that His teachings can be practiced as they should be.”

“And how do you know how they should be practiced?” I rebuffed, thinking of Cleo once more, her sweet face beaten in and misshapen with violence.

“God speaks through me,” he said simply with a finality reserved for facts and established truths of which this was absolutely not. “He sends me visions of how the world is supposed to be. In this world, you are my holy wife, meant to tend to me and our new flock.”

One of the cops, Hutchinson, a member of the local PD and a friend of The Fallen, held up a piece of paper that said ‘*ask about his flock*’.

“Do you have a flock?”

“Of course, there were many people in this town previously corrupted by criminal elements like The Fallen who were begging for my light. How do you think I found Cleo, hmm? She came to *me*. Amelia Stephens too. She was looking for some peace after a life with a criminal.”

I closed my eyes against the surge of molten anger that threatened to spew through my lips.

For the first time in my life, I wanted to kill a man myself.

“You think I would consent to be your wife?” I asked, flabbergasted by his gall even though I *knew* psychopaths could suffer from delusions of grandeur and severe narcissism.

“You spent the night with that murdering sinner from The Fallen!” he shouted suddenly, a crash sounding from the other side of the phone. “You soiled yourself with his embrace!”

Another pause, this one because I didn’t know what to say in response. The knowledge that he *had* been watching me left a thick residue on my skin, something like dirt I knew I would never be able to scrub clean.

“No, Bea,” he said again after a moment, all calm eerily restored. “I don’t expect you to consent right now, not when I haven’t been given the opportunity to make you understand. I’m confident you will when the time comes. For now, I have an incentive.”

Foreboding slithered down my spine like the cool skin of a serpent. “What are you talking about?”

I knew every single member of The Fallen and their family members were on the compound. There were enough beds to make it work between the clubhouse, Hephaestus Auto, and the house Z’s cousin Eugene spent half his time in on the edge of the property. It was cramped, but no one complained.

It was clear we were under attack. It wasn’t the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last.

So it couldn’t be someone from the club.

“I think you call her your Tabby,” he said with a little laugh. “You really are so expressive with your loved ones, Bea. It made it so easy to decide who to take from you.”

Eric and I looked at each other in blatant horror.

Tabitha.

The doctor’s wife, the woman who wore sugary perfume and taught music classes to the disadvantaged youth at First Light Church after Bible

study.

Sweet, meek Tabby.

Before I realized it, I was standing as if I could rush out the door and find her myself. Through the glass, the cops were already on their phones and typing into computers. Lion made a gesture for me to continue.

“If you don’t meet me in the clearing between Potter’s farm and Waverly’s apple orchard at eight tomorrow morning, I’m going to kill her, and you’ll have only your cowardice and sin to blame. Then tomorrow, if you still haven’t come, I’m going to take someone else you love, and I’m going to kill them too.”

“Why?” I breathed. “Why am I so important to you? I’m no one.”

“Ah...” He sucked in the air the way one did when they were smelling flowers, as if my words had a fragrance. “The way you belittle your light, such modesty, such purity. And you wonder how I know you were meant to be my spiritual equal.”

“But I’ve sinned,” I pointed out, trying to understand the loops and twists of his fevered mind.

“You have,” he said, almost cheerfully, still in that deep, booming voice that wasn’t truly his. “But I’m not worried. I’ll make you pay your penance and then we will move on as one.”

The dial tone clipped in as soon as his last word was uttered, the monotone noise perfectly matching the flatline of my failing heart.

“No,” Priest said instantly, irrefutably. “You are not doing it.”

“I am,” I whispered as I turned in my chair to look up at him. “I have to.”

“You are absolutely not doin’ this, Bea,” he repeated in that voice of titanium. “Not the kinda man who’d forbid you from much, but puttin’ your life on the line is one of those fuckin’ things.”

“We’ll organize it so she’ll be in minimal danger, McKenna,” Hutchinson said as the door between rooms opened and the cops came flooding in.

Priest actually growled and snapped his teeth, stepping in front of me as if

they were a threat. “I said no. You got lead in your fuckin’ ears?”

“Priest,” Lion tried, always the moderator. “We got this.”

“You do not,” Priest said—not angry but cold, so cold he emanated it like dry ice. “You have fucked up time and time again, not just with this, but with every fuckin’ thing to do with the club. I’m not puttin’ my fuckin’ *woman* on the line when I know it’s you lot in charge. Your incompetency will get her killed.”

“You watch your fucking mouth—” one of the RCMP officers stepped forward to say.

“Fine,” Lion interrupted. “The PD will coordinate with the club if they want Miss Lafayette’s coordination.”

“What the actual fuck?” the RCMP cop barked.

“You’re not even a damn cop anymore, Danner,” another one protested.

“No,” Hutchinson agreed, pulling out his phone. “But this retired cop took down an entire MC in Vancouver and helped clean up this damn department, so speak to him with some fucking respect. I’ll call Staff Sergeant Munoz and set something up.”

The two RCMP officers blinked, clearly shocked that a police department would ever let a private investigator take control *or* collaborate willingly with a criminal element.

This was Entrance.

Weirder things had happened.

Priest didn’t say a word, but his body language spoke volumes. Putting me in the path of danger went against every instinct he had and every bone in his body. Protecting me was the most important thing in his life now because, in a way, I’d become his life just as he had mine.

We were two very different souls who only made sense together. Yin and yang. Sweet and bitter. Light and Dark. Bea and Priest.

Now that we had connected, I wasn’t sure one could exist without the other.

All I knew was that if I didn't go to the clearing, I'd never forgive myself. I couldn't in good conscience let another woman I loved be hurt because of me, let alone die for me.

I'd never recover.

No matter what, and that included Priest's opinion on the matter, I was facing my demon in less than twenty-four hours, and hopefully, this would all be over.

CHAPTER THIRTY

PRIEST

FOR A MOMENT, I THOUGHT I WAS DREAMING. THEN I REMEMBERED, I DID not dream. I was so used to the sound of my own breath isolated from others to the absolute stillness of my unmoving body like a corpse in my bed that my sleep-drunk mind could not compute the noises of Bea beside me.

She was dreaming.

I opened my eyes to see the faint light of dawn spilling like milk through the single skylight I'd put in the roof of the warehouse directly over my bed. It was a stupid thing, a vulnerability if anyone truly wanted to attack me while I slept, but I'd always found the stars peaceful. Counting them helped me find whatever sleep I was capable of snatching.

I was grateful for it now as I turned to watch my Little Shadow bathed in the pale glow, her small, perfectly formed mouth the colour of the inside of a seashell, golden brow furrowed as she dreamt.

I never slept deeply enough to dream. As I watched her in the clutches of one, I was intrigued, a voyeuristic pleasure that mildly surprised me. It seemed I was obsessed with every single fucking thing about this woman. I wondered if I was in her dream, decided it was unacceptable if I was not, and then considered waking her just to ask the absurd question.

I decided instead to run my finger gently down the curve of her heart-shaped face and along the thick fan of the white gold lashes resting on her cheek. Sleeping there beside me in the black sheets under the pure glow of the rising sun, she'd never looked more innocent.

She'd also never looked more *mine*.

There was a love bite on the right side of her neck peeking beneath her silken hair, and when I pushed back the sheets from her skin, I traced the other reminders of my possession on her form. The bruised knees so pretty, the swollen nipples like raspberries under cream. I wanted to fuck her into the mattress so hard she'd forget any other thought in her head.

She'd forget in just over an hour she was meant to meet a madman in a clearing.

My jaw clenched so hard there was a painful pop.

A beep from my phone on the ground beside my mattress pulled my attention to it.

No surprise, it was Lion coordinating the last vestiges of what I was convinced was an idiotic fucking plan to take down this killer.

There was no way he wouldn't be prepared for us. This wasn't a backwoods hick set out to purify his race or some bumbling idiot with a knife in a dark alley.

This man had come to play, and he was doing it hard.

They planned to replace Bea with a lookalike cop, a young rookie by the name of Marla Bennet who was about the same stature and shade of blond as my girl. The cops didn't understand Bea had a special quality that couldn't be replicated. An innocent light that throbbed like a torch in the dark, attracting the creatures that lurked in the shadows inexorably toward her.

This man was obsessed with Bea. I was obsessed with Bea. In this way, we understood each other. We were both psychopaths set out to claim her, but the similarities ended there.

I would not relinquish my claim.

He would not have her. Not now, not ever.

The closest he would come to her was *me* when I ripped him apart with my bare hands for scaring her.

My brave girl, so sweet and courageous, was fucking terrified. I watched as the dream turned dark in her mind, as she whimpered and twitched.

He had followed her even there.

Unacceptable.

I put my scarred, inked hand on Bea's milky shoulder and shook gently before rolling her into my chest. Her body was boneless and sleep-warm against me. Without waking, she nuzzled into my body and gave a little, contented sigh.

Something turned over in my ribs.

"Bea," I called into her ear. "Wake up, Little Shadow."

"Hmm?" she murmured, cuddling so close it seemed she wanted to crawl under my skin.

The urge to laugh moved through me.

"Wake up, now. I'm gonna fuck you before we have to leave."

Instantly, almost comically, her eyes snapped open, and she tilted them up to mine. The blue was so vivid, utterly untouched by any other pigment but that pure, bright azure.

“Are you fucking me because you want to claim me before I go face my tormentor?” she questioned.

I didn’t answer verbally. Instead, I bent down and pressed a searing kiss to that pink mouth.

She hummed as I pulled away, lashes fluttering. “Right. Well, I’m more than happy to indulge you, but Priest? I want you to know, no matter what happens, I’m going to be okay.”

“There is no fuckin’ way you can promise that.”

Her hand lifted between us, fingers trailing in that way she’d made into habit along my bearded jaw. “It’s not. I couldn’t live with myself if I let another person suffer or die for me. I don’t have it in me to be so ruthless.”

“I do,” I suggested unemotionally. “I could stop you. If you think I haven’t been lyin’ here thinkin’ of all the ways I could forcibly stop you from doin’ this, you’re fucked.”

Instead of an insult, she found humour in that. “You wouldn’t do that.”

I snorted because that was fucking debatable.

“Tabby would do the same thing for me,” she continued. “She practically took Phillipa and me under her wing after everything happened with my dad. Without Seth and her, we might’ve been social pariahs even with Grandpa being the pastor.”

“You don’t know that,” I argued reasonably. “You don’t know what the hell someone’s capable of sacrificin’ until they’re faced with the hard choice and no option out of it.”

“Maybe that’s true. But this is my hard choice, and it’s the only one I’m comfortable making. You once told me you were a killer, sin-stained and covered in blood. I accepted that. Can you accept that I’m the kind of woman who will always put her loved ones first?”

I scowled because the fairmindedness of her argument was impossible to refute. How could it be possible that she accepted a killer with so much more grace than I could accept her saintliness?

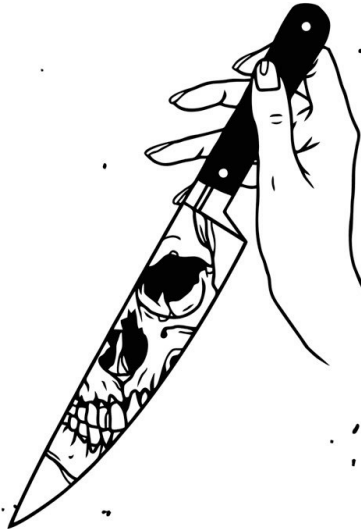
I grunted in affirmation. That was all I was willing to give.

She smiled up at me, brighter than the rising sun above us. “You can fuck me now.”

I rolled on top of her, already hard, hard since the moment I woke to her in my bed. “I’ll fuck you, and then we’ll do this harebrained fucking plan together ’cause I’ve got your back even when you make choices I disagree with. But you don’t leave my goddamn side the entire exchange, and if shit gets fucked, we’re outta there. No questions asked, Bea.”

“No questions asked,” she agreed a second before my mouth descended on hers, and all conversation was forgotten.

I should’ve known it would all go to shit and been better fucking prepared.



IT HAD SNOWED OVERNIGHT, A THICK BLANKETING OF STICKY WHITE THAT clung to every surface of Entrance and made it gleam diamond bright under the full light of a cool toned sun. The glitter of it in the pine boughs caught my eye as I stood at the edge of the forest backing the Waverly's property staring across the field at a rusted old car and two figures wrapped in dark clothes already waiting for us.

The cops had started setting up their scene deep in the night. The two forms and the rusty bucket had already been there. It irritated the cops, but then, at least they'd known better than to try to conceal their presence from the killer. He would know they were there no matter how hard they tried to hide.

He'd picked the right spot for the exchange. Aside from the copse of trees on either side of the clearing, the expanse was large and flat, unideal for snipers or any other surprises the pigs might've used against him. The forest at his back gave him the ideal cover to disappear, or at least get a head start in the chase. I traced the path of the trees over the flat valley up onto the incline of a decent mountain farther in the distance. Lion confirmed plainclothes policemen were surrounding the broader area too, but I had as much confidence in them as I did in any kinda God.

Again, the killer was proving smarter than the average lowlife.

"Got a bad fuckin' feelin' about this," I muttered as I leaned against the cop car harboring my woman.

If I had it my way, she wouldn't leave the damn thing until this was done. In my mind, there was no reason she even had to be there, but the cops wanted her there in case the killer requested verbal confirmation it was her.

"You gotta have some faith," Lion encouraged, even though he looked drawn and pale as he studied the maps on the hood of the car that traced out the area.

"He's got too many places to run from here," I pointed out, driving my finger into the map. "Fuck, Lion, how the hell do you think this is gonna go

down?”

“He’s *here*, man. This is as close as we’ve gotten to seeing the fucker. Even if we just get a visual, it’ll be fucking worth it.”

“If anything happens to her...” I growled, hand flexing so hard on the hood it made the metal pop beneath my grip.

Lion shot me an unimpressed look. “Rein it in, Priest. If the cops decide you’re obstructing them, they’ll arrest you in a heartbeat. You think they don’t want to already? You got a reputation, and any one of these men would be happy for the boost it would give to their careers to take down The Fallen’s enforcer.”

I grunted as I turned away to watch the faux-Bea shift on her feet at the front of the police cars and cops with equipment. She was wearing Bea’s puffy white winter coat and thick cream pattern tights under a pink dress that just peeked out from under the hem. Her hair was down and curled in the way Bea did hers and she was doing a decent job of affecting Bea’s innocent manner.

Still, she wouldn’t pass.

Maybe from three hundred yards.

Maybe from fifty paces.

Any closer and the killer would see the square face instead of the heart, the brown eyes instead of the blue, the pretty girl instead of the fucking angel.

“How’re you doing?” Hutchinson asked as he walked up to us.

I shot him a cold look.

He chuckled without humour. “Seems about right. Listen, we’re ready to go in. I know you’ll stay here with Bea, but I’ll put Moore on her too. He won’t leave the car.”

“Fuck Moore.” The bastard was the one to interrogate me about the murders.

“He’s on edge,” Lion explained calmly. “Ignore him.”

“We could use you up front,” he offered. “We’re sending Bennet out with Harcourt, but if you wanna go with, I won’t object.”

Lion cast me a sidelong glance, probably wondering if I would cause trouble unsupervised, but eventually, he nodded. I received a back slap as he moved past.

I’d never liked Lionel Danner before he hooked up with Harleigh Rose, and I barely liked him now. In my mind, once a fucking cop, always a fucking cop. But I got that he was looking out for the club, for Bea, and even for me, though before being with Bea, I wouldn’t have even acknowledged that.

As if my thoughts prompted her, Bea slid to my side of the car in the back and knocked on the window. I bent down to peer inside, catching sight of her smile. She pressed her hand to the window, and I got the idea she was thanking me for my trust.

I tipped my chin at her, then turned away, bracing my hips back against the door, blocking her from sight. Within the vehicle, I heard a little laugh.

At the front, Moore, Lion, and the fake-Bea started forward with five minutes left on the clock before the killer threatened to off Tabitha Linley.

Their slow march across the snow was difficult to watch in the bright, glittering light of the sun, but I narrowed my lids and hardly blinked.

They were halfway to the two unmoving figures when something glinted between the dark pair.

My mouth was open on a shout of warning only a second before a gunshot echoed through the clearing.

The faux-Bea crumpled to the ground. I could see the red of blood stark against the snow even from there.

I moved, rounding the car to get to the driver’s seat.

Officer Travers stood before me.

“Move,” I ordered. “We’re gettin’ outta here before this goes to hell.”

“I have orders to keep her here. We don’t know what’s happening yet,”

he argued.

Chaos erupted behind me as the cops shouted at each other, and the radios exploded with noise.

“I’m gettin’ my girl out of here,” I growled. “You have one second to move your ass, or I’ll gladly move it for you.”

He blinked at the feral expression on my face but didn’t move.

“Your funeral,” I promised as I bent slightly and barreled into him.

He tried to brace but went flying backward hard into a snowdrift.

I stalked forward, hand reaching for the handle when something sharp bit into my back. A second later, electricity jolted through my entire body, seizing my muscles, contracting them against my control. I fell to the ground, head bouncing against the side of the car as I went.

A fucking Taser.

I gritted my teeth against the sensation, trying to fight through it so that I could be prepared to move the second it let up.

Instead, a hard knee landed in my back the moment it did.

“Hold still, motherfucker, you’re under arrest for obstructing justice,” a strange voice said in my ear.

I recognized it only vaguely as belonging to one of the RCMP officers.

I fought his hold, surging to my knees, then lifting into a half-crouch with his entire weight clinging to my back. I reared back, slamming him into the car to shake him loose.

He fell.

But the commotion had drawn the notice of other cops. One came at me. I landed a hard punch to the corner of the jaw, snapping his head back so he went out cold before he even hit the ground. The next was smarter and drew his Taser, aiming it at me with a warning. I moved forward still, dodging the prongs as they flew toward me to tackle the asshole around the legs. As I straddled him, I said, “I just want to take my woman home. Let me get her to safety.”

He tried to punch me in the face, but I grabbed his fist and twisted so hard something popped in his wrist. He screamed just as another cop tackled me from behind, pinning me to the ground. I struggled, but there was another cop after that, Travers having recovered.

He snarled in my ear as I tried to get free. “You’re done, motherfucker. *Done!*”

Above the cacophony, I was vaguely aware of tires crunching in the snow. Panic like I’d never known spiked through my blood. I snapped my head back into Travers and heard him curse as he fell to the side. The other cop tried to pin my hands behind my back, but I was able to leverage my body into a roll that half pinned him beneath me. When he tried to get up, I elbowed him in the face.

I sprang to my feet, ready to turn around to face the car that held Bea, to fucking kill anyone who tried to get between me and that vehicle.

“Hold, you bastard,” someone seethed beside me as the cold press of a gun kissed my temple. “I swear to God, I’ll put you down where you stand if you try to assault any more of my men.”

I snarled. “Your operation is fucked. I need to get Bea out of here.”

“Officer Moore has her,” he said. “He’s taken her back to the department to keep her safe. The motherfucker in the clearing wasn’t the killer. Just a kid tied to a fucking stake and an older woman posing as Linley. She fired the gun, but the kid got shot in the crossfire.”

Winter settled in my bones, silent and deadly. “Radio Moore.”

“I just told you, he’s taken her to the PD.”

“Motherfuckin’ radio Moore!” I snapped, done with this shit.

I kicked out, catching the cop in the leg so he stumbled, then swiftly turned to grab the gun in his hand, releasing the mag with a quick jerk of my wrist. It fell to the icy ground with a clatter. I used the barrel of the weapon as a handle and swung it at the cop. He grunted as it contacted his jaw.

“Priest!” Lion yelled, jogging toward me as more cops converged with

their guns drawn.

The rest were in the clearing, an ambulance wailing in the distance, cops gathered around the fallen Bennet and the injured kid.

I stood in the semi-circle of men in blue, not breathing hard, just vibrating with coiled tension. I'd kill them all if they didn't get me to Bea.

"Priest," Lion barked, stepping through the ring to my side. "What the fuck?"

"They took Bea, they said," I ground out. "Moore took Bea to the station. Call that motherfucker, I want Bea's voice on the line."

Lion's eyes widened fractionally before he could curtail the expression. "I'm sure she's fine, brother. Just a precaution to get her outta here when shit went down."

"Call. Him."

Lion didn't hesitate again. He shouted for Hutchinson, who was running operations on this with the RCMP rep. Hutch took one look at my face and blanched before he called in to Moore.

No one answered.

Conviction settled over me like a heavy mantle.

I knew what had happened.

It was a trap.

Distract everyone so they could send in some fucked religious convert to take Bea away from me.

I knew it before Hutch tried again and then again. Before he called the PD and confirmed with the receptionist that Moore hadn't arrived.

In truth, I'd known it in my bones when I woke up this morning.

"Priest," Lion said through the muffled chaos of my own mind.

But I was done.

Done with the fucking pigs. Done with the rules. Done with everything.

This man wanted Bea?

He'd taken my woman from me? Torn my shadow from my side?

I was going to make him pay so painfully, he'd weep blood as he begged me for mercy.

"We'll find her," Hutch was saying.

The cops around me had dissipated, called to duty to find the girl they'd let go.

Hutch stepped closer to me.

A mistake.

I hauled him into my arms and snarled viciously into his face. "You did this, motherfucker. I told you all it was a dumb fuckin' plan, and you were too convinced of your own invincibility. Wearin' a badge doesn't mean *shit* if you don't protect the fuckin' innocent, and Bea was the best of that. I'm *done*. I'm gettin' her back before the motherfucker kills her, and I'm doin' it my way. You try to stop me, I'll end you too. You hear me?"

He swallowed thickly but held his hands up in surrender. "I hear you."

I tossed him away without another thought, stalking to my bike parked at the side of the ride. Bea's helmet was still attached to the seat. Fury crackled through me, searing my skin, burning the backs of my eyes.

I was *alive, alive, alive* with fury.

"Priest," Lion called.

I revved the engine of my bike to drown him out.

"I'm here," he persisted, raising his voice even louder as I spun out into the street. "You need me, I'm here."

I didn't respond as I gunned the bike down the road. This wasn't cop business anymore. It was club business. Family business. My *fucking business*.

I wouldn't stop until I had this motherfucker's blood on my hands and down my fucking throat.

My entire shite life had prepared me for this moment. It gave me all the fucking hard-earned skills I needed to hunt him down and end him. It taught me to embrace the pain instead of succumbing to it.

All the horror of my life was worth it if it meant I'd get my heart back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BEA

I COULDN'T WAKE UP.

For what seemed like hours, oppressive darkness weighed down my lids, pressing on my entire body like I was encased in a concrete grave, buried alive. I tried to fight the sinking, terrifying sensation, but there was no give in the blackness. I could only lie there wondering if this was death. Not the soft embrace of the Reaper the way I'd always believed, but a deep, dark hole you sink into and never return from.

Gradually, so gradually it seemed to take an eternity, sensation returned to my limbs. There was a tingle in my fingertips that felt like an itch. I wiggled my toes, finding them cold and stiff in my boots.

With wakefulness came pain.

Pain as I remembered Cleo fighting for her life in the hospital.

Pain as I realized Priest would be going quite literally crazy knowing I'd been taken, wondering if I'd been killed.

Pain as I thought about adding more grief to my family when they were already so mired deep in hurt.

Then the blinding pain in my head that robbed my eyes of sight even when I was finally able to pry my lids open.

I gazed unseeingly as I remembered the events leading up to my being there. The gunshot in the clearing, Priest trying to get to me, and Officer Moore driving the car, telling me he was taking me to safety, taking me to a haven. The word haven had hit wrong; a discordant note struck in my mind. I'd questioned him about it, leaning forward toward the console. He'd slammed the brakes so hard, I'd swung forward and hit my head with a hard crack against the plastic. A moment later, his hands were coming at me with some kind of syringe in his grip.

Now, this.

"Oh, God," I croaked, just to see if my voice worked.

It did, though poorly like a door creaking on rusty hinges. The words scraped through my throat.

No one answered.

I blinked rapidly, feeling tears flush away the dark and roll down my cheeks. Light broke through, images blurred and condensed into discernable shapes.

I was in some kind of backwoods church.

It was a shed, really, a lean-to built from old wood that was cracked and poorly insulated. The wind whistled sharply through the gaps, swirling in the little chapel like a harsh whisper so that the entire space seemed filled with ghostly voices. I turned my head on a wince to see the front of the space, a rough-hewn altar topped by a massive, crudely carved cross the size of a

grown man. There were rust-coloured stains on the cross.

I didn't know anything that left that kind of residue but blood.

A shiver rocked through me, black spots dancing in my vision as I gritted against the jarring pain in my head.

What had my abductor given me?

I sucked a freezing breath into my lungs, then watched the plume of hot breath billow around me. Deep breathing did nothing to calm me. I was alone in some Godforsaken shack in the middle of nowhere without a phone or any means of communicating with the people I was sure were looking for me.

I couldn't just count on them to find me.

I had to rely on myself to get out of this and get to them.

My hands were bound behind my back with rough rope that rasped over the thin skin of my wrists every time I shifted. I fell to one hip, hoping to get leverage to stand and try the door at the far end of the space even though I could clearly see chains around the handles.

A whimper from somewhere among the spare pews held me still.

"Hello?" I called.

My echoing voice returned in answer.

Carefully, I started to shift again onto my knees.

Another whimper, this one sharper, longer like a keening animal.

I looked around deliberately this time, trying to see into the shadows poorly lit by two halogen construction lights with exposed bulbs. To the far left, sticking out from behind one of two rows of pews, I saw a foot.

A foot wearing a high heel.

Instantly, hope overtook my panic and fear. I rolled forward onto my knees and started to shuffle across the packed earth floor toward that shoe.

As I drew closer, I saw a long, pale leg encased in nude hosiery and the hem of a black wool dress. It wasn't until I nearly fell around the corner of the pew, knocking my hip painfully against the corner, that I knew for sure who it was.

Tabitha Linley.

She was passed out on the ground with a large gash in her head, dried blood flaking off the skin of her left cheek and neck where it had spilled to pool on the ground beneath her.

I choked on a gasp. “Oh my gosh, Tabby.”

She didn’t stir.

I shuffled forward, desperate to get my hands free so I could check her breathing and perform CPR if need be. One of the lights was burning just behind me, prompting an idea.

I rocked to my feet awkwardly and backed up to the fixture. A hiss seared through my lips as I held my bound wrists to the exposed bulb and started to work the rope back and forth over the hot wire encasing it. Sweat popped along my brow and rolled into my eyes. The delicate skin of my hands burned and blistered, but I continued.

Finally, the rope splintered enough that I could snap it open with a jerk of my wrists.

“Tabby,” I called immediately, rushing back to her prone form. I kneeled at her side, lightly shaking her, then gently slapping at her cheeks to revive her. “Tabitha!”

She was breathing, which gave me hope, but it took a long minute for her to stir. First, a little groan worked past her chapped lips, then a harsher whimper. Her bruised face contracted in a pained frown as her eyes fluttered open.

“B-Bea?” she whispered hoarsely as she tried to sit up, but then collapsed back to the ground. “Oh my gosh, what’s going on?”

“We’re in some kind of ramshackle church,” I told her softly, worried she might have a concussion. I helped her sit up with her back against the pew, then wet the edge of my sweater with spit so I could wipe away some of the blood flaking over her brow. “I’m so sorry. We tried to make a switch for you with the serial killer, but he tricked us. Are you okay? Have you seen him?”

Has he hurt you?"

Seeing her bleeding on the floor made my heart clench with guilt. I'd known she was in pain, suffering some kind of horrible fate at the hands of the killer, taken because he wanted *me* and he knew I loved Tabby.

Tabby blinked owlishly. "What? I haven't seen anyone. One minute, I was getting into my car, and the next, I'm here with you. But why would he take us? I thought he only took sinners."

"Well, I've been dating a man in The Fallen MC. At this point, it's fairly obvious they're antithesis to the killer's beliefs, so he probably thinks it was a sin for me to sleep with him. He's obsessed with this idea of making me his spiritual wife.... He's clearly delusional. He took you to get to me."

Tabby blinked again. She had wide eyes the colour of soft clay, malleable, I'd always thought, very much like her people-pleasing personality. She ducked her head, tucking a lock of bloody hair behind her ear with a shaky hand. "Oh my gosh, I can't believe it. I-I was just leaving church when someone jumped on me from the shadows. I was so scared, but then everything went black. I remember thinking Seth would be so worried when I didn't come home."

"I only spoke to him on the phone briefly," I told her, remembering the quick call I'd made to him while Priest and I drove to the scene of the exchange. "But he's strong. He'll pray for you."

Tabby sucked in a ragged breath and turned her teary eyes to me. "He's so much better than I am. I never deserved to be with someone like him."

I frowned. "I didn't know you felt that way about him. To me, you always seemed so perfectly matched."

A little grin curled her mouth, but there was a manic light in her eyes that set my teeth on edge. "Oh well, thanks. I definitely try to be good for him. Better for him."

"Okay... Well, why don't we see if we can get the hell out of here?" I suggested as I stood, moving to offer her my hand before I remembered how

badly burned it was. “I don’t know how long we’ve been here for, and that lunatic could come back any minute.”

“Did you say you’ve been sleeping with a man from The Fallen?” Tabby asked as she worked her way slowly to her knees. “They’re all completely uncivilized, Bea. I know your sister made the decision to marry one, but I thought you knew them for what they were. Criminals and animals.”

I ground my teeth to keep from gnashing at her, trying to remember that the context of Tabby’s life was so much narrower than my own. She judged because she was afraid of the unknown, and The Fallen were impossible to predict.

“Let’s talk about the finer details of crime and sin when we get out of here, okay?” I recommended, already moving toward the entrance to examine the chains looped through the cut-out crosses on either side of the double doors. “I think this wood is flimsy enough to break down. If you help me with that light, I think we could use it to...”

I trailed off as the chains started to rattle, backing away slowly as they slid with an ominous hiss through the carved wood and disappeared into the darkness on the other side.

Then nothing.

I waited, breath suspended, heart stuttering in my chest.

But nothing happened.

I looked over my shoulder at Tabby who was still on her knees, hands held aloft as if in prayer, terror transforming her face into something grotesque.

Tentatively, I took a step closer to peer out the black cross-shaped wedge of space in the greying oak door, but only darkness met my gaze. I pressed my shaking right hand to the wood and started to press it open.

Crack.

The doors exploded inward, the panel hitting me square in the forehead, sending me careening backward. My ankle twisted as I tried to catch my

footing so I went down badly, head crashing into the back of the church bench.

Black spots riddled my vision as I blinked through the pain and the rush of sudden tears, desperate to see who stood in the open doorway looming over me.

“Beatrice Lafayette,” a cold voice intoned from above. “You are not going anywhere until you atone for your myriad of sins.”

Tabby scrambled forward and knelt beside me to help me into a seated position. The scent of her sugary perfume was a comfort as I fought through my disorientation. There was no doubt I had a concussion, my second in three months, and it was hard to focus through the dizzying pain.

I blinked hard, then looked up at the man who’d caused so much pain. He wore all black with a deep hood pulled up over his head, concealing his features.

For one dark, terrifying moment, he looked exactly like Priest. Elation and sickness surged through me because I knew it wasn’t my psychopath who came to save me even though he cut the same reassuring figure. It was on purpose, I was sure. This man was a psychopath who enjoyed playing games. He had a different collection of traits from the psychopathy metre than my Priest. They shared the same lack of empathy, desensitization to violence and death, and the shocking ability to fit with the norm when it suited them, but this man was also clearly self-aggrandizing, dramatic, and narcissistic. He thought he was cleverer than everyone else, more powerful, a total authoritarian.

I needed to remember that when dealing with him if I wanted to get Tabby out of this alive. I wasn’t naïve enough to think the same hope existed for me.

“Please, let Tabitha go,” I beseeched him, trembling voice and wide, terrified eyes so he would believe I was properly cowed instead of outrageously angry. “She’s a good wife, a pious Christian. Whatever sins she

might have committed are nothing in the face of her love for the Lord.”

Tabby made a little noise beside me, pressing closer in comfort. Her hand stroked over my hair in a gesture that was so familiar it made my heart burn. I wrapped my arms around her, tucking her head beneath my chin to shield her and comfort her in equal measure. She was older than me, but Tabby had always been soft. Age had nothing to do with the fact I was the stronger of the two of us, and it was up to me to protect her.

The man was silent as he hovered over us, clearly enjoying the headiness of his physical superiority and the power of his silence.

Finally, he crouched, careful to maintain enough distance so I couldn't see into the shadowy recess of his hooded face.

“She is a good wife,” he agreed in a chilling monotone. “Not good enough for the Prophet, but she does try.”

Tabby whimpered, clutching at me with sharp nails.

“She was never as good as you,” he continued, cocking his head in a faint mimicry of Priest. “The moment I met you, I knew it was you who was meant to tend to me and our new flock. Not her.”

Tabby shivered so violently, she moaned.

A niggle of terror worked its way like a worm into the soil of my mind.

This wasn't right.

This couldn't be...

“Isn't that right, Tabitha?” he asked silkily.

Beside me, my friend shivered again, then rolled back her shoulders, affecting a change to her entire demeanor. It was as if she'd pulled back the curtains to reveal the operator behind them.

The glint in her eyes wasn't fear. Maybe it never had been.

It was madness.

I flinched as she leaned forward to press a soft, sweet kiss to my cheek, then rolled easily to her feet as if she hadn't been badly beaten. I watched with my heart beating hard in my throat, choking me of breath, as she almost

skipped over to our abductor's side.

"I'm not worthy," she agreed simply as she leaned like a kitten into his shoulder and nuzzled. Then she looked at me with a soft, almost dreamy expression. "But you could be, if you would just repent."

"Tabitha," I said slowly, almost afraid of voicing my fears as if that would make a difference to the outcome of this nightmarish situation. "What are you doing?"

"Supporting my husband as a wife should," she explained with a little furrow in her brow. "Supporting him as *you* should, Bea."

"Oh, my God," I choked as bile clawed up my throat and my stomach heaved.

"Do not take the Lord's name in vain," the hooded man admonished chillingly, stepping forward to kneel so close to me I could feel the wash of cold air as he descended to my level. When he flipped back his hood with a jerk of his head and regarded me with lovely blue eyes gone to frost with chill, I wasn't surprised, only deeply, irreconcilably horrified. Seth Linley reached out to grasp my chin in a punishing grip in order to bring my face closer still. His breath, when he spoke nearly against mine, tasted of communion wine. "For the Lord's name is also my own."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BEA

HE EXPLAINED WHILE HE HAD TABITHA PREPARE ME FOR MY PENANCE. IT irritated him that I fought them both, especially when my foot caught Tabitha's chin and sent her crashing into one of the construction lights. So he produced a startlingly large syringe from inside his dark jacket, flicked it a few times, then stabbed it mechanically into my neck. A painful pressure popped in my veins, then I went lax, every muscle in my body melting to inactivity within minutes

A muscle relaxation, he told me in that monotone I'd never heard before, a strong one.

They didn't bother to tie me up, an oversight that I planned to exploit just as soon as I got sensation back in my limbs.

For the first time since his reveal, Seth touched me, leaning down to run his soft hands over my crown into my hair. The expression on his classically handsome face was so tender, a study in empathy. He looked so human then that it chilled me to the bone. Because I knew he was utterly inhumane, the worst kind of psychopath, who believed in nothing more than his own conviction.

And Seth? He was full of purpose.

He was God's mouthpiece on earth. The first modern-day messiah. He waxed on and on about the lessening of morality today, how corrupted people were, how much guidance they needed, how Entrance was a cesspool of sinners from The Fallen to Irina Ventura's pornography and sex trafficking operation.

"Your grandpa tried," he allowed with a smile that sliced sharply between his cheeks as he flipped through a worn, black leather Bible. "But his connection to God was lessened by the sins of his house. Your sister turned your family name to one of wickedness."

I wanted to speak, to tell him that my sister had done no such thing, that my grandpa was the saintliest man I knew, but my tongue was dry and heavy in my mouth.

Tabby was undressing me, I realized with a sharp stab of panic, cutting my clothes away until I wore just my underwear. Seth studied me almost clinically, but it was Tabby who spoke. "You and I will both tend to our messiah. I am his physical wife, tied to his bodily needs, and I will produce his heirs. But you will be his spiritual equal, his holy wife. He deserves this. God sent him a vision of it."

I was able to whimper, just barely, but Tabby only gave me a little smile warm with comradery. "It will be an adjustment as Seth teaches you our ways, but when you settle in, I know you'll love being with us."

"You'll recognize many of our flock from First Light Church," Seth boasted as Tabby pulled an old-fashioned white dress with a ruffled neck

over my head, pulling my arms through the long sleeves. “Opal Burns, of course, played Tabby so brilliantly in the clearing today. Her son Owen already sacrificed himself for our cause, so it was only fitting Opal should follow. And Eric...” He clucked his tongue. “Well, I tried with him, I really did. He came to our church so diligently at first, but then I sensed him turning from my light. His sacrifice was necessary.”

Seeing the panic in my eyes, Seth paused in his pacing and Bible skimming to bend down to me. “They shot him in the clearing, you see, thinking he fired the gun. It was Opal, good sweet Opal so pious for me. The women always are. It takes a little more to swing the men, but that is why I have Tabitha.”

Tabby laughed warmly, clearly delighted by the praise.

Eric.

Oh, my God.

Sweet, beautiful Eric with his plays at rebellion and his pure heart.

Tears burned the backs of my eyes and tipped down my cheeks. Seth tutted me as he bent to collect my now robed form in his arms the way grooms carried their brides.

“Don’t cry for him. He’s not worth your beautiful heart. You’ll learn, only the devout are gifted with God’s light.”

He was crazy. So crazy. Inside my frozen body, I shivered and railed against his tender hold. I imagined ripping out his throat with my teeth, cursing him to hell, breaking his neck. Instead, I lay limply in his hold as he took me outside into the brightly moonlit night and started around the back of the church. A river babbled through the snow, punctured with shards of gleaming ice.

“This is the moment I’ve been waiting for,” he said, inhaling deeply like a child on Christmas morning, filled with excited anticipation. “I will baptise you, cleanse you of your sins, and then you will be *mine*. My pure God-given wife. I’ll kill the man you sinned with,” he promised like a lover’s pledge.

“He doesn’t deserve to live after he’s sullied you.”

He stared down at me, his face hidden from the moon’s light, so dark he seemed like an abyss with a disembodied voice. “When she carried on her whoring so openly and flaunted her nakedness, I turned in disgust from her, as I had turned in disgust from her sister. Yet she increased her whoring,” he quoted from Ezekiel in the Bible. “I almost turned from you, sweet Bea, because of your sister and your filthy relationship with the biker, but that would have been a mistake. I am the Prophet of God, I have the power to cleanse you of your sister’s taint, of your biker man’s touch, of your many recent sins. I will help make you pure and whole again so we can be as one.”

Tabby hadn’t followed us, which was why, I’m sure, he felt secure in touching my cheek tenderly and whispering, “I’ll kill her, too, my sweet Bea. So we can be together in all ways as man and wife. Just be patient.”

Be patient.

I would be.

I’d wait until the moment presented itself, and then I would run. If I couldn’t run, I would fight. I would not go gracefully into Seth’s fucked-up night.

He stepped into the creek, wading into the middle where the water was hip-deep. He lowered me into the stream, the icy water shocking my system. The feeling began to burn through me, thawing my limbs of desensitization with the cold.

Hope sprang spring green and delicate in my chest.

I held very, very still as sensation returned first to my fingers and toes.

Above me, Seth began to spout scripture as he held me half-submerged in the arctic flow. “For we were all baptised by one Spirit to form one body...”

I tuned out his zealous babble, gently clenching the muscles in my feet, feeling the pull in response, then seizing the ones in my calves, forearms, and thighs.

My body was coming to life, not through God but through science and my sheer will.

I was going to get free.

I would *not* die here with this madman. I would *not* leave Loulou, not my niece and nephew, not the club I called my home.

I would absolutely *not* leave Priest without his heart, once more a dead man walking through his life without love.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” Seth finalized my baptism with a flourish of raised voice, plunging me completely beneath the freezing waters.

I held my breath and sent a quick prayer to *my* God that I would survive this.

Then I moved.

With still reawakening arms, I shoved violently at Seth’s hands on my shoulders. He was unprepared for any movement, so immediately, his grip slipped. My hand found a large rock by his knee and pushed off against it, propelling me down the river.

Spluttering, I breached the surface for a gasping breath and saw Seth powering through the currents after me. I prayed as I was pulled beneath the surface that God would make the waters quicker than the man.

When I scrambled to the surface again, I was three metres away.

Then four.

Then six.

The river bent, taking me around the corner and out of sight of Seth. I fought my uncooperative limbs, trying to make it to the river bank. The rocks were slippery in my weak hold, the cold water robbing me of breath even when I surfaced to gulp it into my tight lungs. The effort exhausted me, but I was able to drag myself over the rocks to dry ground. I lay panting for only a moment before I heard the shush and splash of Seth still chasing after me.

I didn’t hesitate.

Priest had told me once that people seemed the most lucid in those moments right before he killed them, even if he'd spent hours decimating their minds and bodies. A clarity and calmness overtook them, and they submitted almost peacefully to their imminent doom.

I felt the clarity, but I fought tooth and nail against the inevitability of my doom.

I pushed my numb limbs and started to run, straight into the dark forest.

The crunch of snow beneath my feet, the hard bite of cold into my soles, and the icy fingers of air clutching at my wet hair and my drenched clothes—none of it registered. As I tore over the ragged terrain and sharp branches of bare alder trees slashed my skin like tissue paper, all I could see was hope dangling at some interminable point in the distance, drawing me forward. My breath was a steaming hiss in the cold as I forced myself faster, harder.

I had to escape.

I had to.

He would kill me, I knew, if not the moment he caught me, then soon after. There was no reasoning with madness, no words I could use that would properly translate into the language of his insanity. He was gone to it, as lost in his own mind as I was in the thicket of dense, dark trees.

Behind me, the sound of crunching snow under his heavy tread and the sharp crack of tree limbs giving away to a moving force. He was gaining on me.

I started to shout for help, my voice breathless and too shrill to carry. It was my last hope. My body was flagging, feet dragging through the snow. I couldn't feel them anymore in the cold, and my head was spinning from the exertion and the remnants of drugs.

I wasn't surprised when the harsh puncture of heaving breath broke through the air behind me, and a few seconds later, after dodging around a tree to outmaneuver him, a heavy, cracking weight settled against the back of my skull.

My legs crumpled beneath me, my torso impacting with the cold ground before I could get my hands out to catch my fall. The air shot from my lungs in a painful, bursting exhale.

The next second, he was on me, pressing his full weight into my back, my relatively recently healed ribs aching with the pressure.

“You can run, Bea, but you are God’s plan for me. There is no escaping that,” Seth cooed into my ear even as he tried to pin my hands behind my back.

He was close enough I could reach him with my teeth. I lunged before he could process the movement in the dark, clasp my teeth over the edge of his jaw and jerking hard. Flesh came away in my mouth; his coarse cry blasted in my face before he reared back and away.

“Fuck that,” I said before I spat out the piece of him I’d torn away.

Using the slippery nature of the snow to my advantage, I rolled to my front and wildly scratched at Seth’s face.

He screamed as I caught flesh and tore from forehead to chin, his flesh collecting under my nails, his blood trailing after them. Taking advantage, I writhed out from under him, my hands burning in the snow as I struggled. When he lunged blindly after me, I kicked him in the chin, delighting in the way his head snapped back with a crunch before I flipped over and got to my feet.

I ran again, lungs burning with acid, muscles spasming as I pushed them too hard. Sobs racked my chest, tears falling hot from my eyes onto cold cheeks as I sprinted for my life.

If I could just get out of this godforsaken forest, Priest might have a chance of finding me. I knew he wouldn’t stop until he did, that every thought, breath, and action he took since I was taken would be in service of finding me.

I made it another kilometer, maybe, but my body was failing me, dark spots obscuring my vision, my feet so numb I could barely move over the

ground.

I collapsed before he could reach me, dragging myself by the fingers through the snow, hoping to find some kind of hiding place where he wouldn't find me.

God was not with me.

Something tangled in my hair and wrenched my head back, Seth's voice descending softly sinister in my ear. "Stop fighting me. You're only hurting yourself. You are mine, Bea. This is God's divine plan."

"You aren't a Prophet, Seth. You're a fucking madman," I seethed as I struggled.

It was too dark to see more than the outline of his face, but I sensed the twisting of anger in him seconds before he lashed out and hit me sideways across the jaw. Pain exploded in my head, my thoughts fizzing out into nothingness, white noise filling the space. His hand came up to grasp my chin, forcing me to look over at him, but he ventured too close to my mouth, and I claimed his thumb with my teeth. The hot tang of his blood flooded over my tongue as I dissected the pad with my bite.

He made a fierce noise of anger like a waking dragon, but he didn't release his hold on me. Instead, he picked up a loose rock and banged it against my cheek, the skin splitting open like an overripe peach. At that point, there was so much pain and numbness from the beating, the running, and the cold that I was beyond feeling it.

I had the sticky, iron slick of blood on my mouth, but I wasn't certain anymore who it belonged to. Both of us were bleeding from multiple contusions, a thick ribbon of it falling off his jaw from the deep gouge I'd made in his left cheek.

"Look at me," I demanded, wrenching to look over my shoulder at him as he successfully pinned my hands to either side of my torso with his knees. "Look at the blood on my hands, your skin under my nails. I am not what you want me to be. I never was."

He studied me in the darkness, shafts of moonlight cutting through the trees like knives. I shouldn't have taken that as a symbol of hope, those bladed points of light, but they were too much Priest, too much me not to take courage from them.

“Not now, maybe,” he conceded thoughtfully, hands twisting mine so painfully I cried out. “Not yet, but you will be again.”

And then he hit me over the head with a rock, and I descended into blackness once again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

PRIEST

THE FALLEN COMPOUND WAS LITTERED WITH BIKES LINED UP IN THE moonlight, the silver glint of it on the black tanks making them look insectile, some scene from one of Bea's classic horror flicks. Men in leather gathered in the garage bays of Hephaestus Auto, arming themselves while even more met in the Chapel, discussing tactics, poring over road maps and hand-drawn ones made by men who'd live so long in the mountains of the coast, they knew them better than cartographers.

Everyone was mobilized to find Bea.

We'd spent the day trying to track them from the field, but even Kodiak, who had a talent for such things, drew up blank after a few kilometers in either direction. Bea's friend Eric was in surgery for the bullet wound put there by the cops when they assumed he'd been the one to fire the gun, but

Loulou went to his house and spoke with his mother, looking for clues. She came back with an annotated Bible scrawled in splotchy ink, the notes in the margins all adjustments to God's scripture he'd been encouraged to make by the false fucking Prophet.

Opal Burns was in custody, cracked open like a nut crushed into the hard wall of police pressure. She was a rule-abiding woman who'd been led astray by the Prophet, and even though Officer Hutchinson told me she was remorseful, ashamed, and eager to talk about the teachings at this Prophet's 'New Church', she had yet to reveal a name.

Things were moving but not fast enough.

Not for me, not for Bea.

I did not imagine horrible deeds being done to her. It was easy enough to get into the mind of a serial killer when, by definition, I was one myself.

He did not want her to die. She was an essential part of his plan, and her purpose could not be achieved without her alive.

So he wouldn't kill her.

Not if he didn't have to.

I ran those words through my head like a chant to focus on the unbridled ferocity that raged inside my cold, hard shell.

Cressida and Lila kept asking me, when I stalked through the clubhouse on my way to weaponize the men or urge Z to get a fucking move on, if I was okay.

I didn't answer.

In truth, I'd never been *okay*. It wasn't in my goddamn wheelhouse.

But this gave a new definition to not okay.

If I'd been a breathing corpse before, I was a ghost now, haunting the earth with one purpose. To rectify a wrong.

Cressida stopped me again with a hand on my arm, Prince held in her other. He was a smiley kid, already looking the spitting image of his dad.

I almost didn't halt, and for anyone else, I wouldn't have.

Bea was the only thing that mattered.

What happens to a man who revolves around a singular obsession only to have it ripped away from him?

I blinked blankly at Cress.

She squeezed my forearm, brown eyes wide and pretty with sincerity. “I know you’re busy, so I won’t stop you from doing what you need to do to bring Bea home. I just wanted to say, Priest, if anyone can bring her back to us, it’s you. If anyone can descend into this man’s underworld and return with our sunshine girl, it’s *you*.”

I blinked at her again because I didn’t understand what she was emotionally implying. Sometimes, that happened.

A small, sad smile flirted with her mouth as she took her arm away to gently bounce a babbling Prince against her chest. “What I’m saying, Priest, is that you were a hero once for me, and I know you’ll be a hero today for her.”

The shutter speed of this blink was slow, stuttering as I fought to compute her words.

Hero.

The word made me want to laugh.

Killer. Psychopath. Enforcer of The Fallen MC.

These were my monikers. I was comfortable with them. Maybe I would have even been proud of them if I was built to be proud of myself for things.

Hero was not in my lexicon.

But something about Cress’s overly pretty speech, a habit she had from reading too goddamn much, resonated in my hollow chest.

For Bea.

Yeah, *for Bea* I could be whatever the fuck I needed so long as it meant she was back at my side where she belonged, shooting me one of those bright smiles for no reason other than that she was happy to be with me.

I jerked my chin up at Cress, but she got me, smiling the secret smile of

mothers that know better than the rest of us.

As if prompted by my thoughts, the door to the clubhouse swung open, inviting thick silence inside the walls. I turned, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end because instinct told me who would be standing there.

Phillipa Lafayette.

She seemed small in the same doorframe used by men twice her height and build, with three times the fucking gumption. The artificial lights beaming into the lot behind her cast her all in shadow, but I had good eyes for the dark, and I saw the way she wrung her hands and bit her lip.

I saw when she tipped her chin into the air the way her daughters did when they were convinced of their own argument before they even started to fight.

“Mum, what are you doing here?” Loulou asked, standing up from one of the couches where she’d been holding a biker babe kinda vigil with the other old ladies. Her eyes were raw from shedding tears, voice weak from the grip of them in her throat, but she still held herself like biker royalty as she stared down the mother that had disappointed both her and Bea.

A growl rattled in my chest. Phillipa’s head turned my way, a little shiver rolling through her. I grinned at her, fast and feral.

She rocked back a little step, then rolled her shoulders and moved farther into the room. “I’m here to help you get my daughter back.”

“You know something?” Loulou whispered. “How?”

I moved forward, not stopping even when Phillipa flinched at my approach.

“Priest,” Nova called as he left the Chapel. “Try not to give the woman a heart attack ’fore she can share her info.”

I stopped two feet from her, arms crossed over my chest, head cocked as I stared at her unblinkingly.

She wrung her hands so hard it looked painful. “Lately, I’ve been having a bit of a crisis of faith.” There were a few snorts from the biker babes. “I’ve

found myself enjoying the company of the club and I didn't know how to reconcile that with my beliefs...or maybe the beliefs I'd inherited through my marriage with Benjamin."

"We don't speak that fuckin' name in this place," Zeus said from the door to the Chapel, staring down his mother-in-law without sympathy.

"Well, that's understandable," Phillipa agreed awkwardly before dragging in a deep breath. "I turned to First Light for guidance, my community there. In particular, Seth Linley took me under his spiritual wing, and for a time, I thought he was helping me. Now, I see he just confused me, made me lose sight of everything important."

She hiccupped on a sob. "My daughters, most of all. Now, Bea's been taken by some killer, and the last words we would've spoken to each other were vile."

"Get to the point," I encouraged, baring my teeth.

Her eyes widened, but she swallowed her fear. "The point is, I was thinking about how I'd done Bea wrong because I'd followed Seth down this zealous path that wasn't true to me, and something occurred to me. Isn't that what this Prophet man is doing? Seth is so lovely, so charismatic. But Bea told me these psychopaths could be like that? It's one of the reasons they're so dangerous. And Seth? He's so close to my father's flock, with Natalie Ashley, who was killed, and Amelia Stephens. He was so close with Opal Burns, he offered to mentor her misguided son. I just wondered if that might be helpful."

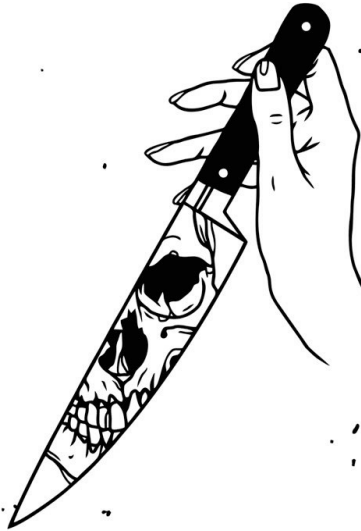
"Call Lion," Zeus demanded to no one in particular before turning to head back into our chapel. "Curtains will find this motherfucker's hidey-hole before the damn pigs."

Loulou went to her mother, softly thanking her for the information, but the rest of us ignored her. In my humble opinion, the bitch still didn't deserve Bea's affection.

"We aren't sharing this information with them yet, right?" Carson Gentry,

our new prospect, asked with wide eyes. “They did fuck all to protect Bea.”

“No,” I promised so darkly the kid’s eyes blew even wider. “We’re past cop justice. This is outlaw territory now, and that motherfucker Seth Linley will be judged by *me*.”



AN OLD CABIN HIGH ON THE MOUNTAINS BEYOND ENTRANCE OFF THE WINDING Sea to Sky Highway had once been owned by a prospector who made a minimal fortune in the 1862 Gold Rush. The forests and peaks were littered with abandoned structures built by outliers and rebels.

This particular one was built by a Ronald Havisham.

Tabitha Linley’s maiden name was Havisham.

That was how Curtains found the records, dug deep in the Entrance archives.

It was the perfect place to take Bea, utterly secluded from civilization and impossible for her to escape from on foot.

I walked out the door as soon as Curtains spoke the coordinates, already

armed to the teeth and ready to get my Little Shadow back where she belonged. I was swinging on my Harley, about to shove my helmet on when Kodiak, Wrath, and Bat appeared at the mouth of one of the garage bays. They each wore Kevlar beneath their cuts as their choice of weapons glinted in the silver light.

“We’re comin’,” Bat declared.

I stared hard at them as something moved in my chest, something painful and newborn, too vulnerable to weather moments like this.

Zeus emerged from the clubhouse with his arms crossed, bearded face somber as shit. “Take ’em, Priest. You need all the help you can get. Stayin’ here to coordinate the rest’a the men, but we’ll be right fuckin’ behind you.”

Burning down my throat like I’d sucked back holy water, and it rebelled against my sinner’s form.

Zeus pushed off the doorframe and stalked down the stairs until he was just a few paces from my bike. Under his furrowed brow, his silver eyes cut through my flesh and bone straight to the shadowy cavern at the heart of me.

“How many times since you came to us have you had our backs?” he questioned low, just for me. “How many times you put yourself on the line for this club? Got no doubt, you can slaughter this motherfucker the way he deserves, but Priest, for fuck’s sake, let your family help you for once.”

There were words in my throat, but I didn’t know how to give them air and voice enough to speak, so I just jerked my chin at my prez, the man who’d taken me in at seventeen and given me purpose.

Zeus, being Zeus, got me.

“Roll out,” he called to the others, who moved instantly at his order to their bikes lined up beside mine.

Wrath started his engine, his huge body and bike almost crowding me.

Words bubbled up my throat, and I decided not to curb them. “Thanks,” I grunted.

A grin flickered in his beard, but his voice was tight when he said,

“Woulda given anythin’ to have the chance to save my woman. I’m thinkin’, we’d been brothers back then, you’d’ve done the same.”

My nod was tight as I revved my engine and peeled out of the lot, my brothers following me without hesitation. If I’d been a praying man, I would’ve prayed with everything I had Bea wouldn’t meet the same tragic end as Wrath’s girl, Kylie.



THE SNOW WAS THIGH-DEEP IN PLACES, CLUTCHING AT MY WATER-LOGGED denim, making progress through the thickly treed hills slow and taxing. We knew the cabin's general proximity, but after two hours of searching the mountainside, we'd yet to come across any kind of human structure. The logical voice I'd relied on my entire life was failing me. It was not because of emotional paranoia, but because I knew how a man like Seth Linley worked and I knew my woman.

She wouldn't give in.

He wouldn't give up until she did or she was dead.

She'd been gone for seventeen hours, and I wasn't sure how long Seth's patience would last.

My gaze cut through the darkness highlighted only by the military-grade flashlight I swept through the close trees. The sharp scent of resin and pine underscored the burning wintery air that whipped through the trunks and tore at my clothes, my cut flapping like a bird's wings.

We'd spread out to cover more ground an hour ago, each of us taking control of a quadrant on the hilltop. We were about thirty minutes apart at a guess, connected by shortwave radios, but so far, we'd found shit all.

Then I saw it, just an inkblot in the snow, a dark splotch followed by three tiny drops.

Blood.

I trudged through the deep snow to the blood trapped under a light layer of new snow, my hunter's instincts trilling.

"Got somethin'," I muttered into the radio before checking my watch for the coordinates to relay to my brothers. "Headin' in."

"Wait for us," Bat replied. "I'm close, twenty minutes out."

"Not leavin' her for one more second than I gotta," I grunted. "I'll see ya when I see ya."

I switched my radio off so the noise wouldn't draw unwanted notice, and then I moved forward from the blood splatter, deeper into the thicket of trees. Silently, I prepared my weapons, a Wilson Combat handgun and my fixed blade dagger held at the ready, the flashlight in my mouth as I spotted a clearing through the interminable mass of trees.

After a few minutes, I reached the threadbare hem of the forest and stopped, transfixed by the run-down wood cabin in the clearing backed by a rushing river. A light flickered in the crude cut-out wooden crosses in both doors.

I slinked forward in the snow, the crunch of it only a whisper beneath my careful tread.

Five yards out, I heard the screams.

Not the high, sharp notes of new trauma, but the almost keening, animal cries of a person sustaining ongoing pain.

My heart rate slowed, my vision clarified, and whatever feelings I had previously grew frostbitten.

I was not a man now.

I was a killer.

Bea was not my woman, but an objective.

This was the way I operated, and this was the only way I'd get her out of there safely.

I was three feet from the structure when the light behind the crosses flickered. Someone was at the door. Quick as a breath, I ducked and flattened

myself against the wall beside the door, obscured by it swinging open as someone moved outside.

I had an instant, just that, to make a choice.

I lunged out of the dark just as the doors swung shut behind Tabitha Linley. She had only half a second to inhale to scream when I caught her in my arms before I banded a gloved hand across her throat to muffle her.

We waited, her pathetic struggles absorbed by my body tightening around her like a cobra.

Inside, the soft wails continued punctuated by the *slap, slap* of impact.

The sound haunted me. I recognized it instantly.

A whip against soft skin.

Seth was whipping Bea for her sins the way Christ was flogged by the Romans.

There could have been a better plan, perhaps, with more time and thought. But I refused to let Bea linger another moment in that room without me, alone with her suffering.

I pressed the edge of my clip-point blade to Tabitha's neck, and for the first time in ten years, I willingly entered a place of religion, however unsanctified.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BEA

WHEN THE PAIN STOPPED, I SLOWLY CRAWLED OUT OF THE MENTAL CAVE I'D hidden my subconscious in to avoid the worst of the agony. With awareness came a surge of fire licking at my back, the dull burn of it around my wrists where rough rope held my arms spread from the eaves on either side of Seth's fucked-up, makeshift altar.

Moments later, I peeled my eyes open, the room lit by bright industrial blubs and warmed by space heaters, and discovered why Seth had stopped his torture.

Priest stood in the doorway between the two crosses like some violent, vengeful angel all in black, his knife pressed so hard to Tabitha's neck, blood already flowed down a substantial cut.

A sob broke through my lips as relief punched through me.

Priest was there.

He'd actually found me.

His eyes were dark shadows beneath his brow, making him skeletal and inhuman as he faced off with Seth. Both of them were expressionless, two psychopaths locking horns.

"I should have known you'd come," Seth said blandly, idly flipping the blood-soaked leather flogger in his hand as he moved out from behind me to face the door and the man looming in it. "If she is an angel, you've always been Satan trying to lure her into sin."

"She's not Eve; you're not Adam."

"No." Seth smiled then, that classically handsome face creasing beautiful. It still hurt to know I'd been so wildly unaware of his madness. "I'm God's voice on Earth."

Priest raised a single brow. "Then in the spirit of fuckin' delusion, I'm the hands of Death."

Seth laughed, delighted. "And I suppose you think I won't hurt you because you have a knife at my wife's throat."

In answer, Priest wedged his knife deeper into her neck, making her whimper behind his hand clamped around her mouth.

Seth didn't even flinch.

"By all means, do what you must. My one true wife is Bea. Really, you'd be doing me a favour."

Priest blinked once, his mind working fast and hard, then the next second, his blade was slashing across Tabitha's throat. She collapsed to the ground, hands to her split neck, gargling as she bled out.

Seth didn't move an inch, his face almost peaceful as he considered Tabby. "You did well in this life, Tabitha. You were a good servant of God."

Tabby's eyes were wide with horror as her husband just stared at her. Blood bubbled from between her fingers and seeped from her gaped mouth.

Quickly, so quickly, the woman I'd once loved who betrayed me, died on the floor of her husband's church.

Priest didn't pause for dramatic effect. His gun was raised, trained on Seth in an instant.

Again, my tormentor seemed unfazed.

Priest couldn't see the reason, the small person behind me holding a knife to my back.

Seth smiled. "Billy, why don't you show this man why he won't shoot me?"

Billy Huxley moved out from the shadow of my body, his knife point still pressed hard to my side. He was trembling, the point of the blade vibrating against my skin, but there was so much resolve in his eyes.

His father was dying.

His mother had been killed.

He was so lost, and unfortunately, Seth had been the one to find him.

When I'd regained consciousness after Seth dragged me back to the chapel from the woods, Billy had been the one tending to my head wound, mopping up the blood with a dirty cloth.

He'd apologized softly, looking haunted but afraid.

Otherwise, he didn't respond to my attempts to reach him, always looking to Seth for affirmation.

That hurt almost more than the flogging. I felt I'd failed him in letting this happen, that I'd been too wrapped up in my own goings-on to recognize a lost soul when I was faced with one. I had no doubt that he was terrified and clinging to the only stable thing he'd known these past few months, Seth and his God.

Priest stared at the child, jaw flexed, gun still raised.

"It seems we're at an impasse," Seth said with glee. "Why don't you put down the gun?"

Priest cocked his head in consideration, his eyes flicking up to mine.

I didn't know what to say or do to reassure him. I didn't want him to drop the gun. I wanted him to shoot Seth in his stupid fucking face, but I also wanted him to spare Billy.

I had no idea what he would do, so I was shocked when he dropped the gun to the packed earth and lifted his hands in surrender.

“Priest!” I shouted as Seth laughed lightly and stepped forward to grab the gun, training it on my man.

Of course, it was too late. Seth leveled Priest's gun at him calmly. “This is almost too good to be true, but I should have had more faith. God always rewards his disciples.”

He continued to babble on about being the chosen one as he escorted Priest to one side of the room before directing him to spread his arms wide in a gesture of supplication. Priest obeyed every order, his face almost lax, completely placid.

My heart thrummed in my ears.

Where was my ferocious killer? What was his plan?

“Seth, stop,” I cried out, wrenching painfully at my bonds.

He smiled over his shoulder at me as he retrieved a tool kit from one of the pews and plucked out a hammer and nail. “Hush, Bea, I want this corrupt soul to watch as I bring you into the light. Then when you've finally been cleansed, you'll watch as I kill him.”

“No, please, don't hurt him,” I cried out. “I promise I'll do what you want.”

“Will you?” he asked in that low, deep monotone that sent chills down my spine. “I doubt you will. I think you believe you love this sinner, but your good heart has led you astray. Maybe it will do you good to see him hurt.”

Without hesitation, he placed a nail in the middle of Priest's palm and hammered it home through his flesh into the wall with a dull, meaty *thwack*.

Priest hardly flinched, holding still, his face utterly immobile even when Seth hammered another nail into the right hand, a matching set of crucified

palms.

Satisfied, Seth stepped back to survey Priest spread out for him the way I imagined he did as a surgeon clinically diagnosing his patients. Bile surged up my throat at the idea of Seth's hands on anyone, but mostly on Cleo, operating on her after he'd been the one to ruin her as if it was some sick joke.

I couldn't stand the thought of Seth adding more scars to Priest's riddled flesh, taking perverse pleasure in his pain.

"He isn't alive enough to feel anything. How can you think I have feelings for someone like that?" I cried out, trying to lace my voice with disdain. "Are you alive?" I addressed Priest in an angry yell. "Truly? Or are you just a breathing husk? So married to death, your life is as narrow as a coffin."

"Oh, bravo," Seth said without feeling as he clapped his hands together. "You're terrible at lying, Bea. It's that good heart of yours. Now, be quiet while I teach this man an important lesson about wickedness, or I'll have Billy find a way to quiet you with that knife, hmm? You'll learn, but a good wife always obeys her husband in all things."

"I'm not your wife," I spat, tugging at the ropes through the blistering pain. "I'll never be anything of yours except a fucked-up obsession."

Seth leveled me with a cool glare. "We'll see how you feel when he's gone."

I struggled, but Billy moved the knifepoint away from my skin so I wouldn't accidentally impale myself.

"Please, Billy honey, you don't need to help him," I beseeched again. "He's a very bad man."

"I know," Billy whispered on a warbled breath, tears in his eyes. "He killed my mum. He told me he'd kill me too if I didn't help."

"Oh, Billy." I sobbed, terror and hopelessness moving through me like poison, leaving an acrid, chemical tang on my tongue. "Trust me, Priest

won't let that happen."

Billy didn't look convinced, which was fair because when I glanced over at him, Seth had cut open his shirt with Priest's own knife and was dragging the edge clean through his skin while he explained where the vital organs are.

"If I stabbed you just here," Seth said almost lovingly as he stared at the blood seeping down Priest's torso. "You'd survive, but the pain would be exceptional."

"Do it, then," Priest offered dispassionately.

Seth stalled, confusion flickering across his face.

Priest answered his unspoken question. "You can hurt me as much as you want, motherfucker. So long as you aren't hurting Bea."

"Ah, you think you're in love with her," he taunted, digging the blade an inch into Priest's left side just below his ribs.

"I know nothing about love, but I know about death. And I am not afraid to die for her," Priest stated, his eyes finding mine over Seth's shoulder.

They were a deep, clear green in the yellow light of the construction lamps. I could read everything in that blank expression, the love he felt but couldn't explicitly voice, the resolve he had, and most of all, the confidence.

I breathed deeply, the dirty, bloodstained white gown torn to ribbons at my bloody back fluttering under my throat with my exhale. I'd been right. He did have a plan.

Seth's entire body seemed affected by a swift change brought on by Priest's declaration, his muscles curling his frame in on itself, his muscles straining too tight. When he plunged the dagger into Priest's side and twisted, he did it with a little hiss of pleasure.

"There are so many ways to kill in the Bible," Seth explained as he left the knife in Priest's torso and leaned close to preach in his face. "I wonder which God and I will decide on to kill *you*."

A smile sliced bloody and raw across Priest's face before he lunged forward, snapping his teeth at Seth's neck. They landed on the side of his

throat, and with one vicious jerk of his head, he tore a mammoth chunk out of the fleshy column.

Seth stumbled back, hands clutched to his throat, blood sluicing through his fingers and down his dark sweater with his mouth open in surprise.

Priest spat out the ragged lump of skin and grinned manically. "I doubt you'll get the chance," he finally replied with red-painted teeth, blood dripping from his lips as he smiled that feral animal smile.

I watched a red light dance through the cross-shaped windows on the front doors and land shakily on Seth's leg.

Seth followed Priest's gaze down to the red circle and blinked.

A moment later, a shot tore through the damp wooden doors and punctured Seth's right thigh. He screamed in agony as he fell to the ground, clutching the profusely bleeding wound.

Priest moved quickly then, wrenching his hands off the wall, then absently pulling out the nails drilled through his palms as if they were splinters. The broken doors crashed open, Kodiak and Wrath storming inside with raised guns.

Billy froze at my side.

"Billy?" Priest asked over Seth's pitiful wails as Wrath went to secure him. "Put down the knife, kid, yeah?"

He did no such thing, shaking so hard the knife pricked my dress and the skin beneath on my hip.

Priest took a step forward, but Billy held the knife up and pressed it against my belly in threat.

"Hey," my man called, his voice suddenly soothing, soft, and liltingly Irish. "I once knew a man like Seth, who pretended to be a priest when he was really a monster. He did this to me when he thought I was bad," he indicated the scars gleaming through his torn shirt. The blade was still in his belly, and he moved gingerly around it but didn't make a move to pull it out. "He told me, 'A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked

speech, winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, points with his finger, with perverted heart devises evil, continually sowing discord; therefore calamity will come upon him suddenly; in a moment he will be broken beyond healing.’ Do you know which Bible verse that is?”

A vibrating moment passed then Billy nodded his head minutely. “Proverbs 6:12-15. It was one of the Prophet’s favourites.”

A shadow passed over Priest’s face, and he fisted his wounded hands so tightly that blood rushed between his knuckles to wet the floor. “I’m not surprised. It was a favourite of my tormentor too. He tried to break me beyond healing, Billy, but look at me? I defied that man and his God, yet here I stand. You can do the same, trust me. Sometimes evil men use God as an excuse to do evil themselves. No one is going to strike you down.”

Billie shook so hard his teeth rattled, huge tears rolling down his face as he debated with his demons. Finally, he looked up at me, and whispered, “If he’s right, then my mum was killed for no reason.”

My heart broke for him, tears pooling in my own eyes. It was impossible not to draw parallels with the boy Priest had been so long ago, abused by the church, completely lost and alone. “Seth wasn’t right in the head, Billy. I think you know that. Let us help you, okay?”

His thin lower lip trembled as he looked back at Priest. “You won’t hurt me?”

Priest held his huge, scarred hands open wide. “No, kid, I’m going to help you.”

A moment later, the knife clattered to the floor, and Priest surged forward to pick Billy up, checking him efficiently for wounds before passing him off with a murmur to a waiting Kodiak.

“Get him outta here,” he grunted, already moving to me.

I sobbed the moment he reached me, the second his hands cupped my face and brought my forehead to his.

“Little Shadow,” he breathed into my face, his fragrance all around me,

and God, it felt like coming home after a nightmare. “*Mo cuishle.*”

I was sobbing so hard, my entire body was shaking, throwing my cut open back into agony, but I couldn’t stop.

He was there.

The man everyone thought was a harbinger of doom who was really, always and in so many complicated ways, my saviour.

“P-Priest,” I called again and again as if I could bind us together eternally with the sound of his chosen name.

He kissed me hard to stem the flow of words, his lips on mine settling me enough that I stopped trembling.

“Hold on,” he ordered as he pulled away to cut my arms out of the ropes.

I hissed as the hemp slid across my raw skin, but Priest was back, holding me carefully against his left side so he didn’t touch my torn back.

“Mine, mine, mine,” he chanted like a pledge and a reminder, like his ownership of me was a great gift and responsibility.

“Yours, yours, yours,” I repeated.

He winced as I shifted and pressed into the knife still sticking out of his side. “Priest! You need to take that out.”

“Was worried about blood loss. It’s not nicked anythin’ dangerous, Bea, don’t worry.”

“Still.” I moved my hand over the cold grip and shot him a questioning glance.

He inclined his head.

I pulled the blade from his flesh with a faint sucking sound that sent shivers down my skin. Immediately, blood seeped through his hoodie, drenching the fabric from chest to belly.

“I’m fine,” he reassured before I could ask. “But I got work to do. You wanna stay or wait outside with Billy?”

I blinked, my exhausted, pain-numb brain sluggish. Then I understood. Behind Priest, Wrath was tying a shouting Seth with some of the ropes flung

over a rafter. He was bleeding badly from his leg, the limb dangling uselessly as they hung him up by the wrists with his arms twisted backward, the sockets popping as they dislocated.

Bat appeared in the doorway with a sniper rifle slung over his back, took one look at the scene, and brought out his phone to text someone.

There was no calling the cops.

They didn't intend to turn Seth over to the authorities because, in their minds, they *were* the authority. At least, the only one that mattered.

They'd found me, saved me when the cops hadn't, and they were owed their retribution.

"Cleo?" I asked.

Priest's mouth flatlined. "She's gonna make it, but recovery isn't gonna go easy."

"I'll be there," I vowed.

Something like a smile moved in his eyes. "Don't doubt it. Now, Little Shadow, you wanna stay or go?"

I looked up into his pale eyes under those dark, slashing brows and knew if I stayed, I would become a killer. But hadn't I known that all along?

If I'm a killer, you're a killer.

I wasn't going to leave Priest to do the dirty work as if I could ever forget what he'd done, what Seth had done. Vengeance wasn't a God-given right. It wasn't, though Seth seemed to think it was encouraged in the Bible, but it was a factor of my life with the club, and standing there bleeding and woozy, saved by men who people assumed were villains, I knew I'd stay.

I loved Priest. Every single dark shadow and nook in his complicated mind and fragile heart. I wanted to see the depths of his ruthlessness. I wanted to witness him decimate a man who had decimated so many lives and tried to kill ours.

It wasn't pretty.

There was no romanticism in torture. The colour of the blood he spilled

was red, and there was a lot of it as Priest beat him until he confessed his crimes. Bat held his phone as the recorder. He confessed to the murders, confessed to seducing those women with his charms, and then with his piety before killing them for some perceived sins. He gushed about marrying Tabitha in Saskatoon and discovering the church, about moving away from his criminal family ties to drugs and sin to become reborn in God's vision.

He talked about the Walsh's, his aunt Brenda and uncle Patrick. He told me how easy it was to use their vendetta against Priest to manipulate them into helping him frame Priest for murder, how simple it was to get his cousin, Sean, to find someone to 'teach me a lesson' about what happens to sinful girls in that bathroom at Sugar nightclub. He spoke about how all criminals deserved to be expunged from the planet and all women brought under the heel of devout men.

He told Priest I was meant for better things than *him*.

Knives came out after that, weapons that Priest wielded like an extension of himself, cutting away and carving up bits of Seth until he wept and babbled in tongues about God and his own divine right. It was a symphony of cracking bone, slick, wet flesh parting to cold steel, and human cries decreasing in volume to whimpers and groans.

Not once did Seth show remorse.

Not even when death was looming, when he was one open wound hanging from the ropes muttering about God and Ruth and angels.

Priest gave him the opportunity to apologize, to exhibit grief, but Seth only laughed in his hair with blood dripping from his mouth. Some men were monsters straight down to their core, and Seth was one of them.

When it was done, when Priest ended things with his hands inside of knives and a quick, ruthless twist of Seth's neck, he turned to me, splattered with blood, gloved hands slick with it, face a mask of stone carved into human form. He didn't move to me or make a sound. He just stood there, more Death than man.

I walked to him instantly, carefully peeling off one glove so I could hold his naked hand.

Together, we walked out of the diseased chapel with Wrath and Bat following.

Kodiak waited outside with Billy, who was still shaking, but no longer crying.

We all stood facing the run-down wooden structure filled with evil masquerading as God, and when Wrath moved forward with a small canister of gasoline to drench what remained of the cross-carved doors, I knew it was right to raze it to the ground.

Bat handed me a skull-embossed lighter without looking at me, eyes trained on the building. A moment later, Priest handed me a small knob of carved wood, a tombstone he'd carved with "The Prophet" etched into the wooden grave. I held the cold metal and the warm wood in my hands for a long moment, Priest's strong body pressed into my shoulder with his hand on my neck.

And then I flipped the light open, sparked the flame with my thumb, and tossed it with the wooden tombstone against the doors.

We stood in the light of the flames as they ate up the evidence of so many crimes until the wail of sirens and the *whomp, whomp* of a helicopter sounded in the lighting dawn.

By the time the police came, all that was left were the survivors and ash.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

PRIEST

THINGS HAPPENED QUICKLY AFTER THAT.

Bea was rushed to the hospital for her wounds while Bat, Kodiak, Wrath, Billy, and I were escorted to the Entrance Police Department for questioning. An EMT had wrapped my skewered hands and taped gauze over my stab wound, but I wasn't in critical enough condition to get out of questioning, and I was eager to see this shit through the bitter fucking end.

They held us at the station for almost twenty hours, trying to untangle the mess of people involved in Seth and Tabitha Linley's web. Officer Moore had been found trying to cross the border into America, and many of the congregation at First Light Church were being questioned by officers as well.

Eric was awake and talking. Apparently, he confessed his limited involvement with the “New Church” to the cops from his hospital bed as he was confined there for the foreseeable future with a broken spine.

It was well into the evening the next day when Mr. White walked me out of the building into the cold, bright winter morning on Christmas Eve day.

Zeus was waiting.

He stood leaning against the railing at the foot of the stairs in a black knit cap from Hephaestus Auto. The man didn’t say a word as I stomped down the icy steps to his side, his eyes tracking me the way I might’ve done as a hunter faced with a worthy opponent.

I stood before him, expressionless, ready to receive whatever he felt I was owed for letting Bea get in the path of Seth fucking Linley.

He didn’t give me hell, though.

Instead, he took a forceful step forward, grabbed my hand in his meaty mitt, and tugged me into a back-slapping hug.

This was normal between brothers. Hugging, shaking hands, playful pushing, and shoving. For a group of alpha men, The Fallen were not afraid to be affectionate with each other.

I was not included in that.

It wasn’t something I ever considered doing, touching people in love or laughter, and as a result, they rarely tried to do so with me. I was not the most approachable man at the best of times.

But this?

Zeus Garro, one of the only men I’d ever admired, embracing me hard to his chest like a long-lost brother returned from war?

That moved through me like an earthquake, the tectonic plates of who I was shifting and grinding to accommodate this new sensation.

“Fuckin’ proud to know you, brother,” Zeus grunted as he slapped me on the back again, then released me. “Fuckin’ proud.”

I blinked at him.

A smile cut through his beard. “Why don’t I give ya a ride to the hospital in my cage? Fuckin’ hate the snow for cuttin’ into my ridin’ time, but it gets me from point A to point B.”

I nodded, still working through that tightness in my chest I knew Bea would call *feeling*.

Bea.

“How is she?” I demanded as I climbed into Z’s black truck.

His eyes skittered my way, then fixed back on the road as he pulled out of the lot. “She’s...doin’ okay.”

“Okay?” I echoed. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Z considered me for a second as we cruised to a stop at a light. “She your old lady now?”

“She’s mine, however you wanna state it.”

“Yeah,” he agreed softly with a little chuckle. “That’s how it happens with the Lafayette women, I’m thinkin’. You gonna marry ’er?”

“What is this?” I asked coldly, not hot on being interrogated about my fucking intentions.

All I cared about was getting to my girl.

“Bea doesn’t have a dad, figured I’d step in as her brother-in-law,” he said with a wide grin, obviously delighting in my discomfort. “So?”

“So, I don’t believe we gotta get hitched to show we’re gonna be together till the breath leaves my fuckin’ body,” I declared churlishly.

The fucking prick laughed at me. “And family, you want kids?”

I glared at him.

He shot me a glance, completely unperturbed.

Through gritted teeth, I said, “Don’t think kids are an option for me. She wants some, then we’ll figure it out. Though not thinkin’ I’m dad material.”

To prove my point, I unzipped the bag of weapons the cops had taken from me when I’d been questioned and started fixing them back on my person.

“Ex-con, killer, and continued criminal sittin’ right here, and I gotta say, I got some’a the best kids ever to grace the goddamn planet,” Z boasted as we pulled into the lot for St. Katherine’s Hospital. “It’s not who you are or what you’ve been through that matters so much, Priest, as it does how you love ’em when they’re born.”

“Thanks for the paternity lesson,” I quipped as he parked, and I made to get out of the car.

His hand clamped on my arm, stopping me. I looked up at him in warning because I did *not* like to be touched like that, but the look on his face stopped me from growling.

“She’s pregnant,” he said.

I blinked. “Lou?”

He barked a sharp laugh. “No, brother. Bea. She’s pregnant. They discovered it when they were checkin’ her out. Seems she’s ’bout five weeks along. The doctor told Bea, and she seemed fuckin’ panicked, didn’t know how you’d take it. My woman, bein’ my woman, who was there when this shit went down, she called me to suss out the situation ’fore I sent you in there. Bea’s been through a fuck ton. She doesn’t need more shit heaped on her plate, you get me?”

I blinked and blinked, eyes focused over Z’s shoulder into the frosted parking lot.

Bea was pregnant.

With my baby.

Me.

The death dealer, the walking dead man had created life with one of the most incredible women and beautiful hearts on this earth.

Me.

A baby.

“Priest?” Z called, shaking my arm before releasing it. “You good, brother?”

“Yeah,” I said, voice too hoarse.

I didn’t stop to clear it or to explain myself to my prez.

I was out of the car in an instant, stalking across the tarmac and then jogging through the reception to the elevator. I didn’t have to ask where Bea’s room was since the waiting room was filled with Fallen family.

I opened my mouth to demand King tell me where she was when I was hit with a ton of bricks. I stared down at Louise Garro as she clung to me with sharp, strong hands and wept into my dried blood splattered cut.

“Thank you,” she cried loudly, drawing the notice of the nurses at their station and some of the visitors walking down the hall.

I stood there like a wooden plank as she hugged me tight, looking up at King, Cress, Nova, Lion, and Harleigh Rose with wide eyes. The girls giggled at me.

“I’m sorry,” Loulou said, pulling back just enough to drop her head back to look up at me, her arms still around my waist. She had pretty eyes, a shade or two darker than Bea’s and nowhere near as large and fucking beguiling. But they were pretty enough and now filled with crystalline tears. “I’m sorry for being such a mess. It’s just, you know”—she flapped a hand in the air, then linked it back around me as if we often stood in a close embrace—“your sister gets abducted by a religious nut, you tend to lose your cool, you know?”

I didn’t respond because I didn’t want to be rude to Bea’s sister, but fuck, I just wanted to get to my girl.

“Anyways...” She sniffed delicately and then leveled a tremulous smile my way that almost had the wattage of one of Bea’s. “*Thank you*. I know I’ve been a bit of a dick, but Bea’s my sister and my best friend. We’ve been through a lot together, and as her older sister, I don’t want to see her go through anything else. I judged you unfairly, and I’m sorry for that. When shit hit the fan, it wasn’t your fault, and you didn’t hesitate to save her.”

She sucked in a huge breath, and I worried she was winding up for more,

but she only exhaled and patted me on the chest before stepping back to smile at me again. “Of all people, I should know that heroes come in all shapes and sizes. I’m just glad I’m not the only Lafayette with a guardian monster.”

“Okay,” I said, fucking relieved she was done but aware this was a big moment for her, if not for me. “Where’s Bea?”

She blinked at me, then burst out laughing, holding her belly as she did so. “I can see why my sister loves you. You definitely know your priorities. She’s in Room 207. Did Z, ah, talk to you?”

I ignored her, moving down the hall toward Room 207. The next person I talked to about this baby was going to be my woman, not another bloody member of her family.

Just as I reached the door, Pastor Lafayette came through it, looking weathered by the events of the last few days. He didn’t seem startled to see me. If anything, his expression questioned why it had taken me so long to get there.

“Priest,” he said tiredly, then laughed. “That can’t be your real name, is it?”

“It has been for twelve years. The boy before Priest died a long time ago, and with it the name I was born with,” I confessed reluctantly.

The pastor wasn’t a bad man. From everything I’d witnessed over the years, he was the only good Christian leader I’d ever met, but more than that, he was Bea’s beloved grandpa, and he deserved some of my respect just for that.

He smiled wanly. “Fair enough, my boy, fair enough. She’s exhausted, but she’s waiting for you.”

When I didn’t immediately blow past him, he frowned, considering me. “Is there something I can help you with?”

I hesitated. “I’m not any kinda good man.”

His Lafayette blue eyes scoured my face, my wrapped palms and tombstone-tatted knuckles. “If you say so, though I believe there is goodness

in every man.”

“Only goodness in me comes from the woman in this hospital bed,” I indicated with a jerk of my chin. “Maybe we split in two, the good and evil, but I’m the latter through and fuckin’ through. I got no regrets about it, but I’m wonderin’, you think a man like that, livin’ life the way he wants, sinnin’ and all, could be a good father? I got my doubts.”

“You’re asking me as a Pastor or Bea’s grandpa?”

“Both, I guess.” I wanted to know how much grace there was in his God, if what Bea said about Him was true, that He didn’t cast harsh judgments or write lost souls off as lost causes.

The pastor smiled, the lines beside his eyes fanning, brackets emerging around his mouth. His was a face that smiled often. “You know, Priest, I might be a holy man, but even I’ve made mistakes. I raised my own son to be a terrible man. I let him turn my grandchild out of his house. But I learned from my sins, and I truly believe that is the mark of a good man or woman. If we blunder, do we apologize to the wronged party sincerely? Do we move on, having learned more about ourselves and how to be better? You say you have no regrets about who you are. I see nothing wrong with that as long as you still allow for change. Has your love for my granddaughter not changed you for the better? I believe it probably has, and I believe that a man who can be moved by love is spurred toward greatness. If you have it in you to love your child, I have no doubt you will be a worthy father.”

I swallowed the acrid dryness at the back of my throat, grateful he hasn’t quoted scripture or referenced God directly. I was about religioned out at this point.

But his words struck a chord, however slight, especially when he peered up at me, not a small man, just slight and narrow, and added, “But what I think doesn’t matter nearly as much as Beatrice, and if I know my granddaughter, she wouldn’t have fallen in with you in the first place if she didn’t believe you were the very best of men.”

“Thank you,” I grunted, ready to get to my woman.

He smiled. “You’re family now, so I should think you can call me Michael.”

I nodded curtly, already moving into the hospital room, forgetting about his kindness and its direct contrast to Father O’Neal and Seth Linley the second I caught sight of my girl.

She looked so little in the white hospital sheets, her gorgeous mane of silver blond hair dull with blood and grime, pushed back by a pink velvet headband someone had brought for her. She’d been gazing out the windows at the snow starting to fall in thick white flakes outside.

She didn’t turn to look at me even though I knew she was aware of my presence. Instead, she stared down at her hands where she held the carved Dara Knot I’d given her years ago.

“It’s so funny because I know so much about you in some ways. I know the constellation of freckles on your cheeks and the exact ridges of calluses on your hands. I know you don’t drink and that you hand-roll your clove cigarettes. I know you’re from Ireland, that you snuck over on a freighter with the help of a kind stranger. I even know your address when so many don’t.” She tipped those huge clear blue eyes to me, each striation in the iris stark and visible beneath the lake water blue. “I know you love me. But I don’t know how you feel about marriage. I don’t know how you feel about babies, and...and I’m pregnant. Which isn’t really a surprise because we didn’t use protection, even though I know you thought you wouldn’t be able to reproduce and—”

I started toward her, done with her soliloquy but unable to stop the flow of her beautiful voice because I was just so fucking relieved she was alive to speak at all. So I moved toward her in three ground-eating strides and bent in half to grab her chin between my knuckles and seal that chatting mouth closed with a kiss.

She tasted of ash and sorrow, but also, as my tongue swept deeper as I sat

on the bed to press closer to her sweet body, I thought somewhat uncharacteristically that she tasted of hope.

I only pulled back when she was pliant as warm clay, and then I pressed my forehead to hers, tipping my gaze down to watch my hand slide over the flat expanse of her belly.

“I don’t feel anythin’ at all unless it revolves around you,” I said fiercely, hoping to brand the words on her soul. “And now, this baby. I might be a shit fuckin’ dad, but you gotta know I’ll try my best as long as you don’t mind havin’ a killer as your baby daddy.”

Then Bea did what she’d been doing since she was seventeen, and I noticed her eatin’ that peach. She surprised me.

Her laughter rang out like church bells, pure and chiming as she raised her hands to frame my bearded face, bringing me close so I could feel that humour against my skin. “I never knew the words ‘baby daddy’ could bring me so much joy. I don’t need marriage or anything. I know you would,” she allowed before I could interrupt. “But I don’t need it. I just want to be sure you’re okay with this? I’m only nineteen, twenty in five days, but I want this so much more than I ever could have known.”

“Then I want it too,” I said simply because that was the truth.

I lived and died by this girl with the haloed hair and angel eyes. I’d give her the fucking world if she wanted it, but somehow, she only wanted me. Moving over to collect her gently in my arms knowing her damaged back was dressed but sore, I swung my booted feet onto the clean bed and held my sweet girl in my arms against my bloodstained cut, thinking this was it.

This was us.

This was my life now, my heart alive and beating against my chest instead of inside it.

I collected her little, pale hand, the fingers red and scratched from clawing at the snow as she fought off Seth. I kissed the ends of those fingers, then sucked each pad lightly into my mouth, watching as her blue eyes went

black, loving how such an innocent act could affect my innocent Bea.

“I am obsessed with every inch of you. The fragile bones beneath your lean muscles, the entire expanse of your cream suede skin, and the way it bruises so pretty for me. I’m obsessed with the knuckles in these small hands,” I said, pausing to gently bite each hook of bone at the base of her fingers. “And every strand of this haloed hair.”

“That sounds an awful lot like love, Priest,” she murmured, almost dazed.

I cocked my head, considering it, the definition of love as I’d read it and how such a little word could possibly define the only emotion to ever take hold of my body and fucking soul. Finally, I shrugged one shoulder and dipped down to tongue at the pulse in her throat. “You can call it whatever you want, *mo cuishle*. That’s how I feel ’bout you. That’s how I’ll feel about this baby just knowing he or she’s a part of my Little Shadow, my fucking brave-hearted girl.”

“The Walshes are still out there. I know Seth orchestrated a lot of his atrocities under the guise of their name, but they still might come for us all the way from Saskatoon,” she interjected, biting worriedly at her lower lip. “And Javier Ventura. There will be more too, I’m sure, enemies of the club who show up to drive us down or kill us outright. We won’t ever be truly safe in this life. I’m choosing it, choosing you. For me, there is no other option. I just wanted you to know I’m going into this eyes-wide-open. I know the risks, and I know as long as you’re breathing, you won’t let anything take us from you.”

“I’d die for you,” I agreed easily as she trailed her fingers through my beard. “And I’ll live for you until that day. You don’t worry about anythin’, Bea. I’ll take care of anythin’ that comes.”

“I know,” she said, nuzzling into me, eyes heavy with the need to sleep. “I don’t have to be afraid of anything when I have my very own psycho.”

I chuckled into her hair, but safe in my arms, secured against my chest, my girl was already out like a light.

EPILOGUE

BEA

SEVEN MONTHS LATER

THE SUMMER AIR WAS THICK AND SWEET, SYRUPY WITH THE SCENT OF honeysuckle and lilac. I lay in the long, dried grass on a checkered pink

blanket with my eyes closed to savour the feel of the sun on my skin and that rich aroma of summertime. There was an ache in my back, a tight knot that seemed to clench tighter with each beat of my heart, but the soft ground beneath me and the soothing sounds of the buzzing bees lulled me into a kind of half-slumber. My hands smoothed lazily over my big belly, swelling almost comically from my slight frame beneath a white gingham dress.

“Swollen like a peach.” The voice of my partner, my old man, my psycho.

I smiled, hovering my hand over my eyes to block the glare as I squinted at Priest looming over me in a tight black tee. It was short-sleeved, something he'd taken to doing if he was spending the day just with me, unashamed of his scars now because I told him so often they were beautiful. To me, they were. Badges of the tragedies he'd overcome, marks of the making of this man who meant everything to me. I loved to kiss the ridges of his healed skin and rub my thumb over the silky pink burns as if my touch could soothe some phantom ache. Priest bared his arms now sometimes, so in a way, I think it did.

He didn't smile as he looked down at me because even though he was the happiest I'd ever seen, he still wasn't inclined to use expression unless it was in threat. Instead, his brows were loosened from their perpetual furrow, his lips full and soft instead of pressed, and his eyes, those pale green eyes like peridot, shone with tangible emotion as he looked down at my sun-warmed form.

I laughed when he pulled a bag from behind his back, reached inside, and produced a pint of peaches.

“Yes,” I cried, trying to sit up with some semblance of grace when my belly made it nearly impossible to do so.

Priest took mercy on me, dropping the bag on the ground beside me before offering me a hand to tug me upright. He then moved behind me, bracketing his long legs on either side of my body, so I was cradled against

his lap, his hand pulling me back to lean against his hard, carved torso. He did that, positioning me, often. He liked me as near to him as he could manage or people would allow in social situations—tucked under his arm, locked into his side, on his lap if he was sitting, or between his legs on a stool. Even if he was busy talking to someone else, he was aware of me in little movements, his hand tangled in my hair, a finger hooked through a belt loop, his lips moving through my hair as he listened to someone speak.

Loulou complained that there was no getting through to either of us if we were in a room together. We were caught up in each other, the magnetism between us had its own gravitational force, and we were happy to stay in each other's orbit.

I still worked at *Little Miss Murder*, which had exploded since the event of the Prophet, and now made me a tidy living on top of my inheritance from Benjamin, and Priest still had his dealings with the club and a job at Hephaestus.

But whenever we were free, we were together.

I'd always known some couples were like that. Though I'd never thought I'd be one of them, it made sense for us.

We were each other's obsession.

I watched Priest pluck a ripe peach from the box in his long, tattooed fingers, then flick open his switchblade with the other hand. With his arms wrapped around me, he cut it slowly, deliberately into a single segment, then pierced that with the end of the blade and held it to my lips. I pulled it into my mouth with my teeth, the sweet juices spilling out the corner as I chewed the large piece. Carefully, Priest angled my head back against his shoulder so he could use the edge of the blade to scrape up the wet from the underside of my neck to my jawline.

I squeezed my thighs together against the ache that bloomed when he brought that knife to his own mouth and licked up the juice.

His eyes were all darkness as they lingered on my lips while he fed me

another piece. My tongue lashed out to catch a drop of juice, and I felt his cock grow against my lower back.

“Only you could make eating a peach erotic,” I breathed as his strong fingers wrapped around my throat and tilted my head back farther so he could lick at my sticky sweet lips.

“You started it,” he claimed. “Seventeen years old and drawin’ my notice like you didn’t care I was a killer.”

“If I ever cared, it was only because I found it sexy,” I admitted.

I watched as he used the now clean blade to trace light patterns along the tops of my breasts visible above the cotton dress. They’d swollen heavily with my pregnancy, practically spilling from all of my old clothes no matter how loose they’d been.

Priest was enjoying them.

Shockingly, he enjoyed every moment of my pregnancy, relishing the changes, watching my body grow as if I was a rare and delicate flower in bloom. It was erotic as hell to have him worship me in bed, the swell of my stomach, the delicate, stretched skin of my breasts.

He palmed one now in his big hand, testing the weight. “Eight months pregnant and you’ve never been sexier to me.”

“Priest,” I protested laughingly.

“Truth.” He plucked my nipple hard between his knuckles. “You’ve never been more mine than you are with our baby growing inside you.”

I laughed then, falling into it, pushing my head back into his unyielding shoulder so I could share that laughter with the heavens. “Could you be more of an alpha?”

He grunted, ignoring me mostly, his eyes fixed on my breasts as he used the knife to slice off a button, revealing even more of my pale cleavage.

“Priest...” I warned even as my body went warm and pliant in his hold. “We’re in public.”

“In a park at two o’clock on a fuckin’ Tuesday,” he pointed out as his

hand dove into the parted fabric and pulled out my flesh, my breasts lifted and pressed together over the bunched fabric beneath. “No one’s gonna see me fuck my woman.”

“God will,” I half-teased.

Priest shifted out from behind me, laying me back on the blanket so he could settle in a half-sprawl on his side to cut off another section of peach. I watched breathlessly as he squeezed the piece of fruit between his strong fingers over my breasts, the sunset gold liquid running in rivulets down and between their roundness.

“Let him watch,” he welcomed in that raspy voice that abraded my skin and gave me goosebumps.

And then he bent his head to lick up every drop of that sweet nectar from my flesh. His tongue lashed hotly, teeth biting gently to test the firmness of my tit, his breath blowing coolly over the wet skin. I shivered and groaned, clutching him to me by two handfuls of his silken copper hair.

“My shadow loves the pain,” he hummed around my nipple before tugging it sharply between his teeth, then lashing the swollen nub with his tongue.

“I love the contrast,” I agreed, arching into the pressure. “The pain with the pleasure.”

He fed me his sticky fingers, sliding them over my tongue so I could suck off the juices. The taste of peach and man was heady enough to make me light-headed and almost dizzy. With his other hand, he rucked up the bottom of my dress, running his rough fingers along the edge of my panties, testing the placket of the cotton to see if I was already wet for him.

I was. Pregnancy had made me almost feverish with constant desire, and Priest had no problem fulfilling my every need. He began to then, fingers teasing beneath the fabric when a painful spasm ripped down my back into my belly.

I hissed. Priest recognized it instantly as a bad sound and pulled his hand

away. He cocked his head, locking his eyes to my wide ones. He didn't ask me if I was okay because he read me in an instant.

When he got up, I tried to protest, but he hushed me with a single frown. "We're goin' to the hospital."

"Priest, I'm fine. Pains are normal. Maybe they're Braxton Hicks contractions."

I tried my hardest not to laugh, but Priest had been the most detail-orientated dad-to-be I'd ever known. He read science books about pregnancy and childbirth, studying like a doctor for an exam. When we went to doctor's appointments, he actually scared the lovely Dr. Rosen with both his interrogations and his intensity.

"Describe the pain," he demanded then. Crossing his arms over his chest, he stared me down like I was the enemy.

My lips twitched, but I held back my grin. "My back's been hurting, but that isn't exactly unusual, and then there was this spasm in my belly."

His eyes narrowed, head cocked as he ran mental calculations through his head.

"I'm *fine*," I insisted. "Can we please continue our picnic?"

"If you have the same pain in ten minutes, we're goin'," he determined in a tone that brokered no argument. "Try changin' position. I read that helps if it's Braxton Hicks."

"Yes, sir," I muttered under my breath as I moved into a partial incline on my side, braced on an elbow.

Priest was suddenly there crouching before me, clenching my chin in his fingers so I was forced to meet the intensity of his gaze. "You and this baby are my heart, my pulse. Do you wanna fuck with that?"

My heart softened. Sometimes, I forgot how new this was to him, loving someone. There wasn't a moment or aspect of loving me he took for granted. For a man who didn't believe in miracles, he treated me like one every day.

He already felt the same way about our baby. I'd been surprised when he

didn't want to know the gender before the birth because he was so pragmatic, but in that way, it made sense. He'd explained his reasoning simply, finding out who our baby was when he or she was born was the biggest surprise, the biggest miracle he'd ever experience, and he didn't want to ruin that.

It was one of many moments in the past six months that made me realize there was a certain wisdom to be found in my man's psychopathic tendencies, that it was those very characteristics that made him so uniquely beautiful.

"Okay," I agreed easily. "Until then, sit with me."

Reluctantly, he sat. He was tense, muscles coiled with potential energy just in case any little thing happened that would need him to spring into action. Watching him, knowing how conflicted he was sitting there because I asked him to when he really wanted to rush me to the hospital, my heart clenched for one long, almost painful moment with agonizing love for him.

"I love you," I told him, feeling the words were so inadequate when it came to what we shared. "I love you with everything I am."

Priest blinked at me the way he always did when I was effusive as if he couldn't quite acclimatize to my professions or the truth of them. Then he shifted, a slow uncoiling of lean muscles so that he lay half-propped on a bulging forearm facing me.

"You are my whole heart," he explained factually without a shred of intonation. "And so is this baby."

He placed his large, death stamped hand on my belly, splaying his fingers. I read the names of the deceased on each knuckle, the newest addition on his thumb a constant reminder of what we'd been through.

Linley.

Surprisingly, it wasn't a painful reminder when I caught a glimpse of it as I often did, but a powerful one. It was a seemingly insurmountable obstacle we had overcome together, and maybe it was strange, but I was proud of that.

We were quiet then for a time, both sinking deep in our own thoughts. We weren't a couple who watched television or went out drinking at bars.

We were the people who threw knives at the old cross Priest had transplanted to my backyard, the couple who practiced self-defence for fun on the pink-patterned carpet in our living room, and the pair that sat quietly together while he whittled or read and I studied for classes.

It wasn't exactly a quiet life we led or a normal one, but it was the only life I'd ever wanted.

His hand was still on my belly when, minutes later, my abdomen contracted so hard it made my teeth ache as they ground together against the pain. He could feel the tightening of my womb under his fingers, and seconds later, I was being lifted up in his arms, extra weight and pregnant belly and all as easily as if I was a sack of flour.

"Our stuff," I cried out, looking over his shoulder as he stalked away from our blanket and picnic basket.

"I'll send the prospect to pick it up when we get to the hospital."

I sighed dramatically, but he ignored me as he walked through the long, swaying grass to cut straight to the parking lot.

It had been months since I'd been on the back of his bike. I missed it, but I loved the fact that Priest drove us in my pink 1982 Fiat 124 Spider. He didn't give a crap what anyone thought of it, so he was completely unfazed by the idea of folding his long body behind the wheel and transporting us around in the pink car. Boner had made a joke about it once but met with Priest's stone-cold stare, he hadn't uttered one again.

Only when I was tucked in the passenger seat with my belt buckled and Priest behind the wheel did he finally look at me again like I was human. I didn't take it personally. This was the makeup of his brain, to tackle problems systematically.

"If this is it, in a handful of hours you'll have given me the greatest gift I've ever known and always feared," he murmured as he squeezed my thigh before placing it on my headrest to check behind him as he reversed the car. "Thank you, *mo cuishle*."

I patted his hard thigh, then gave it a reciprocal squeeze as I stared out the window to hide my happy tears.



THIRTY-SEVEN HOURS.

Of course, no child of Priest would be easy.

The little devil took his time, and nothing we did would rush him.

“He likes it in there, safe with you,” Priest guessed at one point as he mopped my sweaty brow and fed me ice chips with his fingers. “Don’t blame him. The world’s not an easy place.”

“You’ll protect them,” I said because I knew he would do anything and everything to make sure our baby had the best life possible, a different kind of life than Priest had suffered through.

He grunted, but there was a softening to his mouth as he unpeeled a strand of hair from my slick cheek.

The entire club was outside in the waiting room of St. Katherine’s, this time, waiting for a birth instead of a possible death. Loulou filtered in to hold

my hand and make me laugh to take my mind off the pain and Phillipa too, though she was nervous around Priest even though she tried not to be. We were working on our relationship—my mum, sister, and I—being open and honestly communicative for the first time in our lives. It wasn't easy, but it was worth it in the end to try to earn each other's love and loyalty instead of just assuming it by proxy.

At thirty-six hours, Dr. Rosen declared we needed to do an emergency C-section because my cervix couldn't seem to dilate enough, and the baby was in distress.

Priest almost knocked over the table of medical instruments in his haste to get me out of the private room and into surgery.

"I'm scared," I confessed as they set me up in the operating room, a sheet veiling my belly from sight. Priest's hand was gripped in mine so tightly, I might have been causing him physical pain, but of course, he didn't say a thing.

He leaned close to my face in his blue scrubs, beard obscured by a mask, a cap over his long, thick mane of copper hair so his eyes were all I could see. Those pale green eyes ringed in a thick black circle I'd learned was called a limbal ring.

"You are not weak," he reminded me, voice full of vigor as if he could pass the strength of his conviction to me through tone alone. "You never were and now, after everythin', you're even stronger. You're gonna do this, my Bea. You're gonna bring our baby into this world."

I clung to his hand, to his gaze, the entire time they operated.

And then, twenty minutes later, the doctor declared we had a baby.

A baby boy.

I was crying before I even saw him because of the look on Priest's face. He could see beyond the veil where I couldn't, his gaze fixed on a single point that must have been our baby in the doctor's arms.

"Oh," he said, a single, small exhale of sound.

But that one syllable was so profound, a tiny halleluiah.

The entire expanse of Priest's hard featured, perpetually scowling face was alit with love, palpable love and awe, utter worship.

"He's..." he tried to explain to me as they cleaned and checked baby McKenna's vitals. He shook his head, unable to find the words for the emotions he felt. "He's just like you."

"He looks like me?" I asked, so eager to see him my heart clenched.

"No," he whispered, leaning down to kiss my hand he held through his mask. "He's an angel like you, not at all like me."

"Priest, if he's half you," I argued as they *finally* brought my baby over swaddled in a blue blanket to lay him on my chest.

Priest was there instantly, helping move the fabric of my hospital gown so the baby could place his red little cheek on my naked skin. He hesitated, a tombstone tatted finger gently, so gently, smoothing over that plump cheek.

I gazed down at the light face, eyes squeezed shut as he fussed, then settle slightly against me. He had such a little fist, half the size of his dad's one finger, and a small smattering of hair on his head the same shade of antique copper.

"He looks like you," I murmured, feeling love turn over every molecule in my body, turning me from plain old Bea Lafayette into something greater, made whole and invincible by my love for his baby and this man.

"Like you," Priest argued lowly as he peered down over us, smoothing back my sweaty hair while he ran his finger over the baby's downy head.

"Both of us, then," I declared on a weepy light laugh. "Look at how beautiful we are together."

Priest kissed my head, and I knew he didn't have language for the unprecedented feelings roiling through him.

"What should we call him?" he asked me a moment later.

We hadn't decided on baby names. I wanted to meet our little McKenna before we decided on anything, perhaps romantically thinking the right name

would come to us like a lightning strike.

I should have trusted my instincts because one did.

“Azrael,” I said reverently, anointing his forehead with the touch of my finger. “Azrael Axelsen McKenna.”

A little smile, small and newborn as our baby, flickered at the edges of Priest’s mouth. “The Angel of Death.”

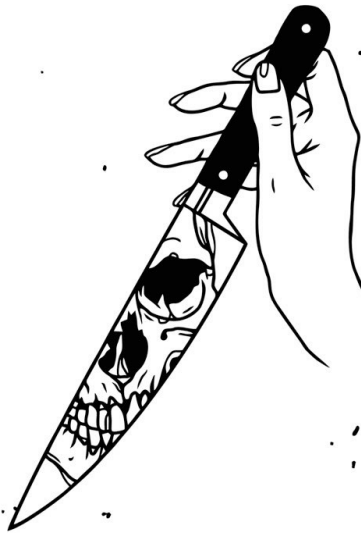
“You and me,” I repeated as Azrael made a little mewling sound. “I think he likes it.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “The benevolent angel of death seems about right. The product of life and death.”

I hummed, exhaustion and bone-deep contentment softening my body into sleepy wakefulness.

“Thank you,” Priest said again, tipping his head down so he could look me directly in the eye, his entire hand tenderly palming the back of Azrael’s head as he moved. “Thank you for bringin’ me back, for givin’ me so fuckin’ much to live for.”

Tears sluiced down my cheeks, cleansing and renewing as a baptism. I pulled my man close to me, pressing a kiss to his beautiful, unsmiling mouth as we both held our baby close, and I knew that no matter our unconventionality, the sins of our past, or the tribulations that faced us in our future, my psycho and I were deserving of a soft epilogue and a very fucking happy ending.



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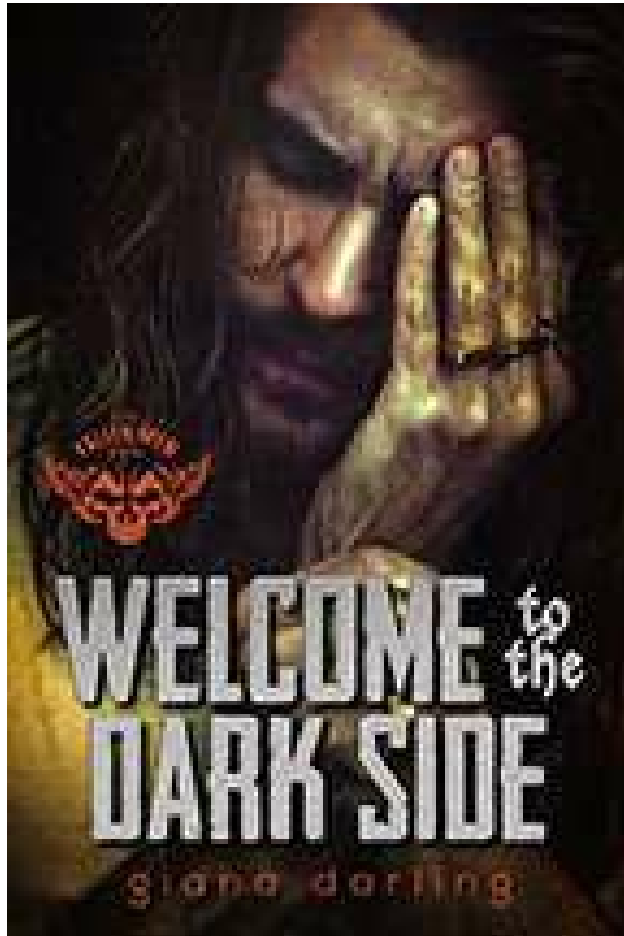
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Welcome to the Dark Side (The Fallen Men, Book #2) Excerpt



I was a good girl.

I ate my vegetables, volunteered at the local autism centre and sat in the front pew of church every Sunday.

Then, I got cancer.

What the hell kind of reward was that for a boring life well lived?

I was a seventeen-year-old paradigm of virtue and I was tired of it.

So, when I finally ran into the man I'd been writing to since he saved my life as a little girl and he offered to show me the dark side of life before I left it

for good, I said yes.

Only, I didn't know that Zeus Garro was the President of The Fallen MC and

*when you made a deal with a man who is worse than the devil, there was no
going back...*

A standalone in The Fallen Men Series.

WELCOME TO THE DARK SIDE EXCERPT

Prologue.

I was too young to realize what the *pop* meant.

It sounded to my childish ears like a giant popping a massive wad of bubble gum.

Not like a bullet releasing from a chamber, heralding the sharp burst of pain that would follow when it smacked and then ripped through my shoulder.

Also, I was in the parking lot of First Light Church. It was my haven not only because it was a church and that was the original purpose of such places, but also because my grandpa was the pastor, my grandmother ran the after-school programs, and my father was the mayor so it was just as much his stage as his parents'.

A seven-year-old girl just does not expect to be shot in the parking lot of a church, holding the hand of her mother on one side and her father on the other, her grandparents waving from the open door as parents picked up their young children from after-school care.

Besides, I was unusually mesmerized by the sight of a man driving slowly by the entrance to the church parking lot. He rode a great growling beast that was so enormous it looked at my childish eyes like a silver and black backed dragon. Only the man wasn't wearing shining armour the way I thought he should have been. Instead, he wore a tight long-sleeved shirt under a heavy

leather vest with a big picture of a fiery skull and tattered wings on the back of it. What kind of knight rode a mechanical dragon in a leather vest?

My little girl brain was too young to comprehend the complexities of the answer but my heart, though small, knew without context what kind of brotherhood that man would be in and it yearned for him.

Even at seven, I harboured a black rebel soul bound in velvet bows and Bible verse.

As if sensing my gaze, my thoughts, the biker turned to look at me, his face cruel with anger. I shivered and as his gaze settled on mine those shots rang out in a staccato beat that perfectly matched the cadence of my suddenly overworked heart.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Everything from there happened as it did in action movies, with rapid bursts of sound and movement that swirled into a violent cacophony. I remembered only three things from the shooting that would go down in history as one of the worst incidents of gang violence in the town and province's history.

One.

My father flying to the ground quick as a flash, his hand wrenched from mine so that he could cover his own head. My mother screaming like a howler monkey but frozen to the spot, her hand paralyzed over mine.

Useless.

Two.

Men in black leather vests flooded the concrete like a murder of ravens, their hands filled with smoking metal that rattled off round after round of *pop, pop, pop*. Some of them rode bikes like my mystery biker but most of them were on foot, suddenly appearing from behind cars, around buildings.

More of them came roaring down the road behind the man I'd been watching, flying blurs of silver, green and black.

They were everywhere.

But these first two observations were merely vague impressions because I had eyes for only one person.

The third thing I remembered was him, Zeus Garro, locking eyes with me across the parking lot a split second before chaos erupted. Our gazes collided like the meeting of two planets, the ensuing bedlam a natural offshoot of the collision. It was only because I was watching him that I saw the horror distort his features and knew something bad was going to happen.

Someone grabbed me from behind, hauled me into the air with their hands under my pits. They were tall because I remember dangling like an ornament from his hold, small but significant with meaning. He was using me and even then, I knew it.

I twisted to try to kick him in the torso with the hard heel of my Mary Jane's and he must have assumed I'd be frozen in fright because my little shoe connected with a soft place that immediately loosened his grip.

Before I could fully drop to the ground, I was running and I was running toward him. The man on the great silver and black beast who had somehow heralded the massacre going down in blood and smoke all around me.

His bike lay discarded on its side behind him and he was standing straight and so tall he seemed to my young mind like a great giant, a beast from another planet or the deep jungle, something that killed for sport as well as survival. And he was doing it now, killing men like it was nothing but one of those awful, violent video games my cousin Clyde liked to play. In one hand he held a wicked curved blade already lacquered with blood from the two men who lay fallen at his feet while the other held a smoking gun that, under other circumstances, I might have thought was a pretty toy.

I took this in as I ran toward him, focused on him so I wouldn't notice the *pop*, the screams and wet slaps of bodies hitting the pavement. So I wouldn't taste the metallic residue of gun powder on my tongue or feel the splatter of blood that rained down on me as I passed one man being gutted savagely by another.

Somehow, if I could just get to *him*, everything would be okay.

He watched me come to him. Not with his eyes, because he was busy killing bad guys and shouting short, gruff orders to the guys wearing the same uniform as him but there was something in the way his great big body leaned toward me, shifted on his feet so that he was always orientated my way, that made me feel sure he was looking out for me even as I came for him.

He was just a stone's throw away, but it seemed to take forever for my short legs to move me across the asphalt and when I was only halfway there, his expression changed.

I knew without knowing that the man I'd kicked in his soft place was up again and probably angry. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and a fierce shiver ripped down my spine like tearing Velcro. I didn't realize it at the time, but I started to scream just as the police sirens started to wail a few blocks away.

My biker man roared, a violent noise that rent the air in two and made some of the people closest to him pause even in the middle of fighting. Then he was moving, and I remember thinking that for such a tall man, he moved *fast* because within the span of a breath, he was in front of me reaching out a hand to pull me closer...

A moment too late.

Because in that second when his tattooed hands clutched me to his chest and he tried to throw us to the ground, spiraling in a desperate attempt to act as human body armour to my tiny form, a *POP* so much louder than the rest exploded on the air and excruciating pain tore through my left shoulder, just inches from my adrenaline-filled heart.

We landed, and the agonizing pain burned brighter as my shoulder hit the pavement and my biker man rolled fully on top of me with a pained grunt.

I blinked through the tears welling up in my eyes, trying to breathe, trying to *live* through the pain radiating like a nuclear blast site through my chest.

All I saw was him. His arm covered my head, one hand over my ear as he pulled back just enough to look down into my face.

That was what I remember most, that third thing, Zeus Garro's silver eyes as they stared down at me in a church parking lot filled with blood and smoke, screams and whimpers, but those eyes an oasis of calm that lulled my flagging heart into a steadier beat.

"I got you, little girl," he said in a voice as rough and deep as any monster's, while he held me as if he were a guardian angel. "I got you."

I clutched a tiny fist into his blood-soaked shirt and stared into the eyes of my guardian monster until I lost consciousness.

Sometimes now, I wonder if I would have done anything differently even if I had known how that bullet would tear through my small body, breaking bones and tender young flesh, irrevocably changing the course of my life forever.

Always, the answer is no.

Because it brought me to him.

Or rather, him to me.

Get it now for FREE on Kindle Unlimited!

THANKS ETC.

I woke up one morning this fall with my heart pounding so hard, I thought I was having some kind of episode. The aftermath of my dream was still burning at the back of my brain, tugging my consciousness along the path I'd taken while I slept. When I'd captured as much of the memory as I could, I shot out of bed and went to my office.

The opening scenes of *Dead Man Walking* were inspired directly by that dream I had of being pulled from a fiery wreck by a man obscured in a black hoodie.

This book is darker than the others in *The Fallen*, but at its heart the story is still about finding acceptance, love, and family no matter how broken or

how much of an outcast you are. I enjoy writing dark or forbidden themes because they make us question how far is too far when it comes to love. In my humble opinion, that line is very hard to cross.

I did a ton of research on psychopaths and serial killers so I could write about Priest, Seth, and Tabitha in a very real way. If you are interested in my research, I have a section on my website about it!

A note on religion, I am a big believer in freedom of religion and expression. Seth Linley and his practices are by no means how I view Christianity or those of Christian faith. He is an aberration and a horrific villain. When I think of good Christians, it is Bea's Grandpa that comes to mind. He embodies all the wonderful traits of forgiveness, love, self-awareness, and faith that I so admire.

To my girl, Allaa. As always, I wouldn't be able to do this job without your undying support and enthusiasm. Priest and Bea have been your babies since I first mentioned their story and your love for them made writing this book even more of a joy. Thank you for being my #twin and bestie.

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A massive shout out to the bloggers who signed up to promote and/or review *Dead Man Walking*! Without you, this book would never have been a success, so thank you! All my love must go first to @fansofgianadarling who made a special place on Instagram just for my readers. Emilie you are a true gemstone and I'm so grateful to know you and call you a friend. Special acknowledgment has to go out to Jessica from @peacelovebooksxo for always recommending *The Fallen Men* and Mary @makeupandmary for her hilarious and awesome videos about the series. Also, Weronica @littlesteamyreads for making me the most gorgeous flatlays and Pang @shereads.pang for my IG stories!

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just a child. Thank you for always standing by my side in support and cheering me on so loudly whenever I do even the most minute thing. You humble and buoy me with your love.

Armie, my love sponge, every time I sit down to write I imagine you in the room listening to the clack of my fingers of the keys, teasing me about the strange twists and turns of my mind. You mean everything to me.

To my pets, Romeo and Persephone, thank you for cuddling me while I'm writing. It's a very solitary pursuit made much more amazing by your companionship.

Finally, as always, to the Love of my Life. This year we moved in together and became parents our first fur baby, two massive steps that made the shit storm of 2020 somehow one of the best years of my life. Like Priest with Bea, you have the capacity to make me grateful for my life and your love even in the midst of chaos and sorrow. Thank you for being my dream man and helping me make all my other dreams come true.

ABOUT GIANA DARLING

Giana Darling is a *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, Top 40 Best Selling Canadian romance writer who specializes in the taboo and angsty side of love and romance. She currently lives in beautiful British Columbia where she spends time riding on the back of her man's bike, baking pies, and reading snuggled up with her cat, Persephone.

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