



MARKED  
BY HIM

A GAMES OF THE UNDERWORLD NOVEL

DELANEY FOSTER

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***DEDICATION***

*This one's for the survivors.*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you. Those two words hold so much weight in my heart right now. Thank you for reading. Thank you for being patient. Thank you for coming on this journey.

I call this “the story that almost didn’t get told”. For those of you who have preordered, you know that I’ve had to push the date. Thank you for waiting. For those of you who have been watching and waiting for release day, thank you for continuing to watch and wait.

Without going into detail, there were a lot of obstacles along the way. Finding the will to sit down and write has been nearly impossible. But here we are—going down a path of survival together. And now Roman and Eve have joined us.

I truly hope you enjoy the story. I pray it gives you hope. I hope it helps you find some light in the darkness. I hope that by the end, you know that no matter your circumstance, **you are never alone.**

After all, this one’s for the survivors.

## **CONTENT WARNING**

This story may contain situations not suitable for all readers. It involves darker themes, including primal play (run and chase), blood rituals, violence and murder, and death (not of a main character). There is also an underlying religious theme. I trust you to know your limitations and read accordingly.

## GAMES OF THE UNDERWORLD



The shadows of the Underworld call your name.

The rise and fall of empires, the vengeance of leaders lost in a game of life and death, mercy becomes obsolete.

*Marked by Him* is one of sixteen books written within the Games of the Underworld shared universe. It is a standalone, dark romance with scenes of violence and CNC. It can be read independently, but in order to get the full story it is highly recommended to read all the books within the series.

Get them all [here](#).

**\*International readers can run a search for Games of the Underworld in their Amazon store.\***

Or start with the prequel [here](#).

Games of the Underworld are afoot.

Which side will you choose?

Join us here:

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Step into a world filled with bloodshed and rivalry. The battle between clans and humans will uncover buried truths and treachery.

The Games of the Underworld are coming.

Nothing is secure.



# Games of the Underworld World Map



## **Blooding**

Verb| meaning:

Smear with blood, as in a hunting initiation rite, where the face of a person is smeared with the blood of the kill.

# PROLOGUE

## *The Journal of David Alexander*

*I'M WRITING THIS AND PLACING IT WITHIN THE PAGES OF THE HOLY BIBLE. GOD knows we could all use a little faith right now. Hopefully, one day, I'll open this book and reflect on these words, knowing that we were able to find hope in the midst of destruction.*

*The world is chaos. A virus is spreading with no sign of a cure. Humans are behaving like animals, hungry for flesh, thirsty for blood and acting like savages. Buildings are burning. Neighbors are turning on neighbors. Nowhere is safe.*

*The military tried to intervene, but they were no match against these demons. They walk the earth like regular humans, but the devil's DNA runs through their veins. Their thirst for power is only outweighed by their thirst for blood. Politicians, bankers, CEOs—they're all among the infected. It's like an elite club for sinners and the world has become their playground.*

*We have taken our family and closest friends to a place we know well. It's a small community of cottages by the mountains. It's gated for security. There's a playground for the little ones and a stream for fishing. It's quiet. Solitary. Away from the madness.*

*I just pray we can survive.*

*Should something happen to me and someone else find this journal, heed the words of the book you found it in. I don't know what your world looks like now, but this book promises it won't always be this way. There is a paradise, a perfect world free from the monsters and sin that surround you. Read the Bible. Abide by its words. Stay vigilant.*

*Paradise awaits.*

# 1

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## *Eve*

I WAS CURSED. CURSED WITH A BODY THAT NEVER KNEW THE VIRUS THAT destroyed an entire world. Cursed to live my life in hiding because of a treasure that ran through my veins. *Liquid gold*. That was what my parents called it.

I called it blood.

Wars were fought over it. Humans were taken to places and farmed like animals for it. Those who had it were desperate to keep it and those who needed it would do anything to take it.

There were two types of beings in our world—the hunter and the prey. Because of my curse, I was the prey. Vampires were the hunters, and darkness was the kingdom that they dwelled in. The only safe place was the light, and there were even some who could withstand that.

They were faster, stronger, and viler than we were. So, we had to be smarter. We had to be fearless.

They needed to reign.

We needed to survive.

We were humans in a vampire world. We didn't have all the luxuries of the big cities. No cars. No big houses with swimming pools in the backyard. Nothing had changed for them. Everything had changed for us.

There were no sources for food or clothing. We didn't have modern technology.

We only had each other.

We survived by staying out of the way. We didn't bring attention to ourselves. We moved from place to place. We made our camps near the mountains, along the border of two vampire territories. And no matter what, we never went into the forest that divided the two clans. There were things in those woods, ancient stories of beings that also worshiped blood. Only these beings weren't vampires. They couldn't have been human, either. They had to be something in between.

We traded goods with other camps like ours, small camps along the same border.

I walked one of those camps now with my parents. We'd been here a dozen times before. Stories said it was once a prison, hundreds of years ago. Now, it was nothing more than a burned-out husk, a testament of pain and destruction. Doors hung loosely on hinges and the outside gardens were overgrown with weeds. All that remained was broken glass and scattered debris. Inside this camp, we'd once found a kinship that gave us all hope.

Too bad it wasn't hope that kept us alive.

It was fear.

Heavy silence fell around me as I looked around. It wasn't the type of silence that offered comfort. It was foreboding. Eerie. Like an omen.

Anytime we left our camp to do any kind of trade, there were three rules:

Cover as much ground as possible in the least amount of time.

Get in and get out.

And no matter what, never, *ever* scream.

My mother grabbed my arm, stopping me from going inside the building first. “Check the back. See if anyone got left behind.”

I glanced over at my father.

He gave me a small smile. “Do as your mother says.”

My parents never tried to outrule one another. What Mom said was law and what Dad said was law. They always had each other’s backs.

We *all* had each other’s backs, meaning we didn’t separate. We were a team.

Something was off. I felt it.

I nodded in agreement, even though my mind screamed in protest.

My eyes darted down the road, around every corner, to make sure it was clear before I left them. My palms were sweaty. My senses were sharp.

I pulled my long hair into a ponytail and made sure my tennis shoes were tied tightly in case we needed to run.

My heart pumped fast as I watched my parents disappear inside.

I took a deep breath.

Gravel crunched under my feet as I took a step forward.

Then another.

Apprehension churned in the pit of my stomach. *I don’t want to leave them.* There was no hydropower here anymore, leaving all the buildings dark inside. The only light came through the broken windows, and those were only in the outer rooms. The deeper you went, the darker it got. Even if there was anything left inside that building, there was no way for my parents to find it. It was a fruitless mission.

I knew it.

Surely, they knew it, too.

We’d seen camps that had been abandoned before. We’d abandoned our own camps before. I was twenty-six years old and had lived in seven different

camp. Things happened. People left. This wasn't new.

But it was *different*.

I turned the corner. The road faded into patches of Cassie White on the side of the building. The red-tipped petals looked like trails of blood across a stark-white canvas. *Another omen*. Tall grass brushed against my bare legs, tickling the skin as I kept walking. A gust of wind blew through the grove of trees behind the large concrete building. The fields were empty. The silence was absolute.

No one else was here.

The sound of a low growl immediately iced my spine, proving me wrong.

*No one human, anyway.*

I knew that sound. I'd been bred to recognize it my whole life.

I ran back to the corner of the building to find my worst nightmare standing in the middle of the gravel road. He was tall and muscular with amber eyes and auburn hair, typical of the Letos vampire clan. *A daywalker*.

Their territory was a sea away from where we were. Why was he so far from home?

He looked up at the sky as he wiped the front of his hand across his blood-soaked lips. Like he was thanking a higher power for his latest meal.

It would have been reverent except, there were no higher powers. The vampires were at the top of the food chain.

Panic surrounded me, cloaking me in darkness. Nothingness.

*No.*

*No, no, no.*

I knew by the color that it was fresh blood that he'd savored.

Other than my parents, I was the only human for miles.

*If it's not my blood...*



No. I refused to believe it. I'd only been away from them for a minute.

The growl vibrated again, a deep, feral echo that rumbled all the way to my bones.

My heart throbbed with terror. Fear made me desperate. Grief threatened to swallow me whole. Pain latched onto me. It clawed at my skin, tearing me open.

He stood there, in the center of the road, focused and intense. Wind blew pieces of trash and debris over the gravel.

The moment I saw what he was staring at, I clasped a hand over my mouth to hold back a sob.

My mother stood across from him, motionless. Her gaze was fixed on him with absolute stillness. Unblinking. Brave.

I had her brown eyes. Now, I'd see them in this exact moment every time I looked in a mirror.

The vampire cocked his head to one side and clenched, then unclenched, his hands into fists. I knew about Letos, about their ability to hypnotize.

*Look away, Mom. Please. Run!*

I wanted to scream, to run, to throw myself in front of him as a sacrifice. But it would have been pointless. He'd finish with me, then chase after her, anyway. *If he didn't use his mind games to make her kill me.*

He took a step toward her.

She didn't move.

She wasn't enthralled, not yet, anyway. She was baiting him, giving me a chance to escape. That was the plan. We'd gone over it a hundred times—every time we left the camp. If one of us got caught, we wouldn't run. *Become the prey. Make them take you first.*

He took another step.

The thick silence fell again, and I took the opportunity to do the only thing I'd been taught to do.

*Survive.*

## 2

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### *Eve*

DARKNESS CLOSED IN AROUND ME. THERE WAS NO MOONLIGHT. THE FOREST seemed thicker, more nefarious than I imagined. My pulse roared in my ears, amplifying each of my pounding footsteps as I ran.

God, I ran.

The air burned my lungs. My calves were on fire. Pain clawed at my bare feet as I raced over dead leaves and crumbled stone. *What happened to my shoes?*

My ponytail had come loose, and the night wind whipped through my hair.

Not far behind me were footsteps that were heavier than mine, faster.

*Someone was chasing me.*

I sprinted harder.

Adrenaline was like blood, thrumming through my veins. Fear pushed me forward. The forest was merciless. Branches lashed my skin, slowing my pace.

The footfalls grew louder, closer.

Even in the darkness, I felt his shadow creep in from behind me. I was afraid but not of him. This wasn't a monster. He wasn't one of *them*. I knew it.

I felt it in the way heat licked over my body and between my thighs.

I dodged left.

He went straight.

I didn't know why, but I stopped and pressed my back against a wide tree.

*You want him to catch you.*

I cupped a hand over my mouth, quieting my breath.

Leaves crunched under his feet as he slowed to a walk. And then he stopped. Slowly, he craned his head to look over his shoulder. He was big. Tall and broad. Massive. His presence was like the darkness, threatening to swallow me whole.

My heart pounded and my nipples strained against my shirt. My core clenched with aching, throbbing heat.

*Why am I excited?*

In a heartbeat, his breath was on my neck. "I caught you now, and I can't wait to make you scream."

I sucked a deep breath into my lungs as my eyes flew open wide, the way someone did after they'd been underwater for a while.

The trees were gone.

*He was gone.*

My head was throbbing... and heavy, so heavy that I struggled to hold it up.

When I tried to move my arms and legs, plastic dug into my skin, cutting my flesh. Everything hurt.

Panic wrapped its fingers around my throat as my eyes flashed wildly around the space.

*It's not a forest.*

I was in a dark room. Only a sliver of light shone through a narrow window at the top of the wall—a slim trail of pale, blue danced over the floor. There was concrete. The floor, the walls. I was surrounded by it. That much I could tell. The air was stale. Thick. Heavy. And filled with the metallic scent of blood.

The darkness thrummed with secrets. It bristled with menace and whispered ominous promises, trying to pull me in deeper. It felt like a void that would suck me in if I let it.

I didn't belong here.

I was a fighter.

I was a survivor.

I was strong.

*At least I thought I was.* Strong people didn't end up in dark rooms, strapped to wooden chairs. Strong people didn't run away while a vampire murdered their mother.

The pressure in my chest tightened at the memory. A shadow flickered in the corner of my eye, and a man moved into the stream of moonlight. His tall frame leaned against a concrete wall. His arms were folded across his broad chest. He wore tan linen pants that hugged his thick thighs, and a pattern of ink spilled from the sleeves of his black t-shirt. His feet were bare. He looked like he belonged here, like he belonged within the darkness.

*He felt like I knew him.*

I tugged and yanked my hands against the binds holding me to the chair. The plastic ties cut into my ankles when I tried to move my legs.

"You're going to hurt yourself if you don't stop." His deep voice echoed in the darkness, then cascaded over me.

*I know that voice.*

I scoffed. "I'm strapped to a chair, locked in a dark room, and you're worried about me hurting *myself*?"

He stepped forward in swift, long strides, stopping in front of me. His hands gripped the wooden arms of the chair as he leaned in. His breath was inches from my face. His scent swirled around me, filling the air with something dangerously intoxicating. It was clean. Masculine. Nothing like the pine needles and mud that I'd been surrounded by for hours.

But it reminded me of the woods and invoked something primal inside me. I held my breath to keep myself from getting wrapped up in it. This man—whoever he was—was dangerous, and I needed to be alert.

His eyes were as fierce and blue as the ocean. They seared into mine, pulling me under, deeper and deeper into their trenches.

"I'm not worried about *you* at all. You're strapped to that chair for my protection." *So, he's not a vampire.* "I don't know you, have no idea where you're from, who you are." A pause. "*What you are.*" *He thinks I'm one of them.* He looked me over. "What I do know is that you showed up at my gates, covered in dirt and blood. And you'll stay strapped to that chair until I find out why."

*Why.*

He wanted to know why. Why I was here, what I'd been running from. He wanted to know about the nightmare that had crawled out of the darkness and stood in the middle of the road, wiping my father's blood from his lips.

He wanted me to tell him how I'd found the strength to leave my parents with a monster. How I'd run through the forest until my lungs burned and every muscle felt like it was on fire.

I remembered it all now, every second of it.

Thorns from the Lawrence trees had torn open my skin. Branches had slapped my arms and face. The ground was still soft from last night's rain, leaving me stuck in the mud over and over again. Every step grew harder, heavier. Until finally, I took off my shoes and kept pushing, kept running. Sharp edges of rocks sliced the skin off my bare feet. I'd tripped on fallen branches, skinning my knees and scraping my palms when I'd landed on the ground. The scent of blood that surrounded me was my own.

There had been no one chasing me through the trees. No one's voice had

whispered against my skin.

*It was a dream.*

But one thing I knew to be real was the courage in my mother's eyes as I took a final look at her. There was the blood on the monster's lips and the very high possibility that it was my father's.

The reality was that I was alone.

I ran.

And telling him *why* meant saying those truths out loud. Saying them out loud meant living the moments all over again and that was not going to happen.

"Let me go, you sick fuck." I stared back at him, straightening my spine and holding my chin high, determined not to show fear. "I'll scream."

That was one of the three rules. *No matter what, never, ever scream.* Screams were like beacons of light at midnight. They attracted unwanted attention.

His eyes narrowed, as if he could break me with a simple stare.

"Did you hear me?" I gritted my teeth. "I said, I'll scream."

He grabbed my chin between his thumb and index finger. His gaze dropped to my mouth and my heart raced with a vengeance.

"Go ahead," he said. "No one will hear you. And even if they did, they wouldn't care. No one questions me."

*They.* I wasn't alone. There were other people here. Were there other prisoners? Or other people like him? People who didn't care about screams or rules.

He dropped his hand. "Where did you come from?"

I scanned the room for a hint of life, a weapon, a way out other than that tiny sliver of a window at the top of a wall.

There was nothing but darkness.

My throat closed. My pulse pounded in my ears. I was strapped to a chair, held captive by a man twice my size. I'd been running for hours. I had no idea where I was or how to get back to where I came from. My parents were dead. The only power I still had was my own mind, my thoughts, my voice. My memories. And I wasn't about to give those to him.

I clamped my lips shut.

“Have it your way.” He stood up straight and I felt his gaze like a thousand needles pricking my skin. “But this is not a game you want to play with me.”

Something in the cold, soulless depths of his eyes told me he was right.



### 3

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#### *Roman*

BEFORE I SENT HER BACK OUT INTO THE WORLD, I NEEDED TO KNOW WHAT she was running from. Before I let her go, I had an obligation to my people to make sure no one else was coming after her.

She didn't want to give me answers, and that was fine.

I'd take them.

I wasn't a patient man. I wasn't a lenient leader. There were rules, *my* rules. Soon, she would know that.

The wooden steps leading from the basement to my kitchen creaked under my weight. Light didn't flood the room when I reached the top of the stairs and opened the door. There was only darkness to match her silence.

The door clicked closed behind me. She couldn't get out of the restraints. I'd zip-tied her to the chair, but locked the knob just in case.

She let out a sound somewhere between a howl and a scream. It was futile.

I wasn't lying when I said no one would hear her. My cottage was set apart from the others, tucked in the back. Solitary. Alone, just like me.

Moonlight spilled into the kitchen from the window above the sink. Wood crackled in the fireplace. The fire released an amber glow across the living room. Days here were comfortable. Nights were cold. The girl wore nothing except a thin t-shirt and small shorts. She was still wet from crossing the stream that surrounded our community.

She had to be freezing.

*That's not your problem, Roman.*

Making her comfortable wasn't my job. Keeping our community safe was. We were a sanctuary, a peaceful paradise off the grid called Sanctum Sanguinem.

*Holy blood.*

The blood of the holy. The righteous. Those put in place to bring the world back to the way it was meant to be. Bloodlines chosen by God. Before the virus that sucked the soul out of men and turned them into monsters.

We were set up at the base of the Tecumholm mountains, surrounded by a stream and a chain link fence with barbed wire at the top. On this side of the fence and stream, there was a twenty-foot-high stone wall, covered in sweet-smelling honeysuckle and ivy vines. Between the chain link fence and stone wall, there was a stretch of garlic fields that surrounded our entire border. And just inside our gate was a single cottage with two armed guards and barrels of animal blood.

Centuries of hard work separated us from the rest of the world. We may not have had the modern luxuries of the bigger cities, like technology or hydropower. But we were happy. We were at peace. No one invaded our sanctuary.

There weren't enough resources here that were useful to the vampires. Even if they ventured along the border, they didn't come near the garlic. To the naked eye, it looked like nothing more than tall grass. To a vampire, the vapors alone from a field that size was deadly. If they ever did manage to get close enough, we shot tranquilizer darts filled with animal's blood into their veins, poisoning them from the inside out.

Humans rarely attempted to cross the stream. Those who did, never made it

past the guards. They always fought back, and they always lost.

There were only two reasons anyone ever came through our gate:

They were looking for war. They wanted to take, to destroy, or to ruin.

Or they were searching for peace. They needed sanctuary. Forgiveness. Escape.

This woman was a fighter, but she didn't come *here* to fight.

*So, what is she trying to escape?*

Humans?

Vampires?

I wasn't one of *them*, but I did prefer the night over day. That was when my thoughts were my own. My time was my own. While the community slept, I planned.

I protected.

I prepared.

I spent most of my nights sitting on my front porch with a bottle of whiskey, staring out over my domain.

*'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'*

It was in black and white, on the thin, worn pages of the leather-bound book my father gave me before he died. He'd said it had been passed down for generations. It was thousands of years old.

It was sacred.

He'd said no one else had the book. We'd gotten the last one.

The words were barely legible. The pages were bent. Some were torn. But I'd memorized it. I knew every word inside. It spoke of a paradise, of men ruling over animals—ruling over *every living thing*. Dominating. It spoke of plagues

that had been cast and sins that had been washed away. The virus that created the vampires was one of those plagues. It resulted from decades of sin and it was our job to have it washed away.

The book had been handed down to me, so it was up to me to make this world that place. It was up to me to save the lost.

I was the shepherd.

I opened the front door to look out over my flock.

Silas stood on the porch, like the faithful guard he was. His gray hair was long enough to pull back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. He wore dark blue pants and a matching button-up shirt. His dark brown eyes held the weight of years of experience, of intimate knowledge of all the things that were out there. He and my father were best friends. He made a promise to look after me when Dad died, and he spent every day in the guard's cabin up front doing exactly that. I trusted him. So, when he showed up at my door with a broken woman in his arms, telling me she needed our help, I let him bring her inside.

He would have killed anyone else, then given me a report the next day.

The end of a joint lit up as he breathed in, smoke swirling around his face and into the night air when he blew back out.

I nodded toward the front gate, where he'd found the girl. "Everything clear out there?"

"Yeah. It looks like she's alone, and whatever she was running from gave up on chasing her. You think she's part of the Resistance?" he asked, passing the weed to me.

The Human Resistance was an army of people who thought they had the power to go to war with the vampires. There was rebellion in her veins, but she wasn't one of them. I could tell.

I held up a hand, declining his offer. "No. And you know how I feel about smoking during a shift."

We didn't have things like modern health care. Our medicine was all herbal.

Sometimes, people like Silas—people who saw shit no one should ever have to see—took a stash for personal use. I didn't approve of it, but I did understand the need for it. So, I usually let it go. There were bigger things out there for me to worry about.

He took another drag, then blew out a puff with a smile. "And you know I'm an old man who doesn't give a shit." He flicked the joint onto the ground and stomped it out, anyway. "She's not a familiar. I can smell those wannabes from a mile away. Blood fuckers."

He was right. Familiars were humans who served vampires as though they were some kind of royalty. This woman served no one.

I leaned one shoulder against a wooden post, then stared up at the midnight sky. I couldn't stop thinking about her eyes, picturing their brown depths and the sadness within them. The cuts on her body. The blood and the dried mud. Her long dark hair, matted and tangled.

"Maybe she's just lost."

He chuckled. "Then, I guess it's a good thing we found her."

She might not think so once she learns who I am and what I'm capable of.

My gaze met his. "A good thing for who?"

He clapped a hand on my shoulder. "You're the smart one. You'll figure it out." And then he chuckled and walked away.

## 4

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### *Eve*

THE SOUND OF WOOD SCRAPING AGAINST THE CONCRETE FLOOR JARRED ME awake. I raised my head. My neck was sore from sleeping sitting up. The morning sun brightened the room.

The man from last night sat in front of me, straddling a chair the wrong way. The round wooden-spindle backrest faced me. His tattooed forearms rested along the top rail. His large frame swallowed the chair, making it look smaller than it probably was.

His sharp jawline was covered in dark stubble. His broad shoulders stretched the fabric of his dark blue t-shirt, making me wonder about the body that hid beneath those clothes. *For fuck's sake Eve. What is wrong with you?*

I tore my gaze from him, looking over his shoulder at a row of metal shelves lined up against the concrete walls. Each one was filled with jars of food and cardboard boxes.

I hoped I'd wake up and this would all have been a nightmare.

It wasn't.

I was hungry.

I was thirsty.

My ass and back ached from the wooden chair. My wrists and ankles hurt from the plastic ties binding them. The cuts on my legs and feet burned.

*And my heart was shattered because my parents were gone.*

It was the not knowing that hurt the most. Not knowing if that *thing* had left their bodies to rot, to decompose and blend with the earth. Or if he had spared them, had taken enough blood to quench his thirst, then taken them back to wherever he came from. Hope blossomed in my chest as though that should comfort me. Then, reality crumbled hope in its fist. Even if he'd spared them at that moment, they'd die eventually. Humans were disposable. We were nothing more than food, and those who weren't food were playthings. Because, physically, humans were weak. Because no matter how much we rebelled, we would always end up being forced to stay hidden in camps in the middle of nowhere, thankful to be alive.

Well, I wasn't thankful. Not anymore.

If this man wanted to kill me, I welcomed death with a smile.

He bent over and picked up a plate from the floor. He shoveled a forkful of scrambled eggs and held it in front of my face. "Here."

I narrowed my eyes at him, ignoring the cramping in my stomach at the smell of food. "You think you'll feed me some breakfast and we'll bond? That I'll open my heart and share my deepest secrets?" I wasn't sharing shit with him. I didn't know who he was, where I was, or what he had planned for me. I didn't even know his name.

"I think you'll open your fucking mouth and eat the food I spent the last ten minutes preparing." His gaze dragged over my face, stopping for a second on my mouth.

I felt that look *everywhere*.

The muscles in his jaw flexed. He swallowed, then moved his stare back to my eyes. "That's what I think."

I sat up straight. Stiff. Standing my ground in silence, even though I was

hungry enough to devour every last crumb on that plate.

His eyes fell to my chest as it rose and fell with every breath I took. A flash of something passed across the bright blue, darkening his eyes like the sky before a storm.

The air sizzled and sparked.

My heart pounded. My stomach coiled—from hunger, maybe. *Or something else.* Something deeper, darker. Something I'd felt in a dream the night before. Something I refused to accept because it wasn't possible. Something that would make me more screwed up than I wanted to admit.

He looked back up at me. “Open. Your. Mouth.” His voice was harsh, his breath ragged.

My pulse quickened, and I hated not knowing if it was in warning or anticipation.

“Or what?”

“Or sit here and starve. The fuck do I care?”

Outwardly, I didn't budge.

Inside, my stomach churned in protest.

My baser needs won out, and I opened my mouth enough for him to slide the fork inside.

He slowly slid it back out, wetting his lips as he watched me chew.

My stomach was in knots. My nerves were a twisted bundle of electric currents firing through my bloodstream.

He slanted his head. His gaze was laser-focused on mine, deep and penetrating. “Now, was that so hard?”

I wanted to spit the food back at him, reject his show of dominance disguised as hospitality. But I was too hungry. Too desperate. Instead, I savored the taste of butter, salt, pepper and eggs on my tongue before I swallowed. My stomach ached for more—a hollow, almost painful twinge that gnawed at my insides. And then, as if my body were punishing me for thinking of not



eating, a humiliating growl rumbled and echoed off the basement walls.

He chuckled, then plucked a plump, dark berry from the plate and brought it to my lips.

My mouth watered at the sweet smell of it, at the way it felt cool and wet against my skin. I parted my lips and he pushed the berry inside, letting my tongue sweep his fingertips before he pulled them back out. The air crackled again. Our gazes collided. My head spun.

And the moment I bit down and the juice coated my tongue, I let out a quiet moan.

It was a simple reaction that might as well have struck a match in a field full of dry grass.

The sound reverberated around us. Then, as swiftly as the snap of someone's fingers, my captor's expression changed. His face hardened. He shot out of the chair, spun it around and set the plate on the seat.

"Feed yourself," he said as he reached into the front pocket of his pants and pulled out a knife. He flipped the blade open and leaned down in front of me. The steel was sharp against my skin as he cut through the ties that bound my wrists. The flow of blood rushed to my fingertips, making them tingle and burn as I flexed my hands.

He kept my ankles strapped to the chair legs.

I sat there, staring at the food, speechless. Heart thundering. Partially free but frozen in place.

For a few long seconds, the air was heavy and quiet.

I said nothing.

He said nothing.

There was only the sound of our breathing.

His eyes narrowed, and he ground his teeth as though he were silently cursing me for simply existing.

Little did he know, I was already cursed. Cursed to live in a world I didn't

belong in. And now, I was cursed to live in it alone.

He moved his gaze to the plate. "I'll be back later to pick that up." And then he turned away. His bare feet whispered footsteps over the concrete floor when he walked toward the staircase.

The stairs creaked, then the door clicked closed and I was left alone.

He left me alone... with a metal fork and free hands. With two chairs and a window.

My heart jumped. All the hopelessness and sorrow from the past few moments melted into thin air.

I could use the fork to free my legs, then stack the chairs.

*Yes!*

Then, I would be free.

My excitement was short-lived as doubt quickly crept in.

Would the chairs stack high enough to reach the window? And if I did escape, would my captor be waiting for me outside? Did he know I'd try to run? Was I that predictable?

I wondered if he'd locked the door at the top of the stairs. My guess was that he didn't. I would have heard the hope-deafening *click* if he had.

This man had fed me, cut my ties, then left me unharmed with multiple ways to escape. And still, I sat there, unmoving, because the truth was suddenly clear.

I was tired.

I was broken.

I was weak.

And that wasn't even the worst of it. That wasn't the part where it seemed pointless to go on. That wasn't the reason that everything lost its purpose.

No.

The worst of it was the blistering realization that I was alone.

I had no home. Not anymore.

I was a prisoner with nowhere else to go.

*Roman*

THIS WOMAN WAS GOING TO BE MY UNDOING.

A strong leader would have never cut her ties. He would have left her to starve until he knew all her secrets. He would have done whatever it took to make sure she didn't bring harm to his people.

But there was this pull, this fucking force bigger and stronger than I was, screaming in my ear. *'Feeding her is the right thing to do, the humane thing,'* it yelled.

Her body was broken. She was weak. She needed food.

But when she parted her full lips, pink heat flushed her neck and cheeks. And then she made that fucking noise and a surge of need shot down my spine.

When she'd looked at me, her eyes grew dark. For a split second, I'd danced on the edge of temptation. I imagined doing things that weren't humane at all.

I could have taken her. It wouldn't have taken much to overpower her. I was twice her size, maybe more. She might not even have fought me on it.

*Or maybe she would have.* And that opened a can of worms that had my dick begging me to go back down there right fucking now.

I squeezed my eyes closed and pinched the bridge of my nose. *Jesus, Roman. What the fuck?*

I didn't do this. This wasn't me.

I knew sins of the flesh. Our community thrived on them. It was the way of our people. Reproduce. Be fruitful. Multiply. That was what the book said. That was the only way we would ever take back our world—to ensure there were more humans than vampires. Our obedience was going to wash away the plague.

Five hundred years ago, three families came to Sanctum Sanguinem for refuge, in the hopes of a new beginning. Because we'd been faithful to our purpose, today there were over sixty.

I was the keeper. The leader. *That* was my job. Giving a shit about a stranger had no part in it.

I'd earned the people's respect. I kept them safe. I watched from a distance.

I didn't engage in physical pleasure. Ever. Not since Eliza. I wasn't even tempted.

*So, why now? Why her?* What was it about this woman that had my belly clenching and dick hard? Even now, my cock strained against the confines of my pants as I stood in the middle of my kitchen.

I had a choice to make.

Option one: Go back downstairs, throw her over my shoulder and haul her back to the woods she ran from.

Option two: Strap her back to the chair, go get Silas and let her be his problem.

Or option three: Cut her loose entirely and let her become one of us. Let someone else claim her.

A possessive, predatory growl simmered deep in my chest.

*There's always option four.*

Option four was keeping her to myself, and that was as out of the question as

option three.

*Fuck.*

Obviously, option one was the only way for me to keep my sanity.

I headed toward the front door, my footsteps heavy on the hardwood floors, knowing she could hear them from where she was beneath me. I swung the door open and stepped out onto the porch. Every inch of me was coiled up tight, ready to explode. My fists balled at my sides. I breathed in, letting the fresh air clear my mind, praying for peace.

Maybe she would make my choice for me. I'd intentionally given her a chance.

I waited. Waited for the sound of broken glass from the basement window. Waited for the creaking of the basement door, followed by her footsteps on the living room floor. I stood there, quiet and breathing, until the waiting stopped and the chaos inside me settled. Like the leaves falling softly to the ground after a windstorm.

I leaned against one of the wooden posts and continued to wait. I'd seen the fire in her eyes. She wanted to run. I knew it. And when she did, I'd be here.

Maybe I'd watch her as she ran as fast as her feet would carry her, all the way down the road to the front gate. I'd smile as she tried to find a way back over it and into the wilderness. Or maybe I'd chase her. I almost felt it already, the adrenaline. The rush of blood through my veins as my feet pounded the pavement, closing the distance between us. I already heard the sound of her heavy breathing in my ear when I pounced on her, tackled her, threw her to the ground. Her chest would heave against mine. Her eyes would be wild, her hands clawing at my skin.

The thought of it made my body ache to claim her. Possess her. Ruin her.

*Fucking Christ.*

I closed my eyes, forcing away the thoughts that tainted my soul.

When I opened them again, I drank in the calm serenity of our community. We were mostly made up of white, two-story cottages with black shutters and

wrap-around porches. There were thirty white houses—fifteen on each side of one long street. Mine was in the back, looking out over the others like a beacon. A watchtower.

There were ten more cottages off to the side. Those were stained wood, smaller, and single-story. The road leading to them was made of dirt instead of asphalt, making me believe the white cottages were the originals and the smaller cottages were built later. There were already two families per cottage. If we kept growing, we'd have to find a way to build more.

We didn't do business outside of our community. We didn't barter with the vampires or other camps and settlements. Everything we had was our own. We grew it, made it, or found it. We used solar panels for power. We raised animals—cattle, pigs, horses, sheep and chickens. We fished in the stream. Around the borders of our community, between the houses and the fence, we had crops and barns for storage. There was even a distillery. The whiskey came in handy when someone needed to numb the pain, on the inside or the out. Medication for the body... and the soul. My soul was so damaged that I had my own barrel.

Directly behind my house was our church. It was a simple, plain white pavilion with a large open space underneath. There were chairs lined up in rows for our services and a podium at the front where the Priest gave his sermons.

In front of the church was a stone altar and a fire pit where our bleeding and claiming ceremonies were held.

We were far away from the wars that went on around us. We were a peaceful settlement and fought hard to keep it that way.

This wasn't only about me. Or her. It was about every person inside these walls.

Which was why I left the comfort of my front porch, collected the members of the council from their homes, then gathered them at the pavilion.

The citizens of Sanctum Sanguinem elected the council the same way most governments elected their officials. There was a chain of command, much like a president, vice president, and so on. Only our council was made up of

the Shepherd, the Prophet, the Priest, and the Speaker. The Shepherd was the leader. That was me.

The Prophet heard the voice of God most clearly, then used his gift to offer wisdom and guidance to the Shepherd.

The Priest made sure our people learned and adhered to the teachings of the book.

And the Speaker did exactly that—he addressed the community with anything important that we felt needed to be discussed.

Council meetings were typically planned beforehand and occurred at night, away from curious eyes and ears. Council members wore dark blue robes and always brought a gift for the Shepherd.

I'd gone knocking on their doors in the light of day with no notice or warning. There were no robes or gifts. There was only the three of them, sitting in front of me with blank expressions as I stood behind the podium.

The only other time the council had conducted a non-sanctioned meeting was after the sudden death of my father. This was completely out of line.

Fuck it. That was why I was the Shepherd. My rules.

I opened our meeting with a prayer, after which everyone repeated in unison, "Amen."

"There's been an incident," I said as my gaze met each of theirs. "A woman showed up at the gate last night. Silas used his own discernment and chose to let her live." *Stupid, stupid Silas.*

Joseph, the Prophet, shifted in his chair, then folded his arms across his chest. His salt and pepper hair was kept short and neat. He wore all white, looking like the voice of God that he was.

Jacob, the Priest, folded his hands together on his lap. He had curly, sandy blond hair and a smile that would melt panties—if he cared anything about that. While Joseph looked every bit his role, Jacob was a saint in a sinner's body.

Ezekiel, the Speaker—and also my younger brother—sat up straight and



pursed his lips. He was my mirror image, only five years younger and with dark brown hair and no tattoos. Apparently, the idea of a needle and soot piercing skin was only appealing to people who enjoyed pain—people like me.

They all watched and waited for my next words. Their curiosity didn't surprise me. Not only had I called a spontaneous meeting because of this woman, but no one got past Silas. Isaiah—my other younger brother—either, for that matter. Both of my guards were impassive, which was the very reason they were my guards.

I breathed an inhale through my nose and kept my tone level. “She’s in my basement.”

Ezekiel arched his brows. “Do you think that’s wise?”

“She’s not a threat.” *To anything other than me and my dick.*

“How can you be sure?” Joseph asked.

“I’m sure.”

He may have been the Prophet, but I was the leader. My judgment wasn't to be questioned.

“Then why did you call us here?” Jacob added.

We were the most alike of all the men on the council. He was my age. Single by choice. He had a firm countenance but was gentle when he needed to be. He also had a nonchalant way of calling people on their bullshit.

“Because, even as the Shepherd, I won't make a decision without your wisdom and approval.”

“If she’s in your basement, you’ve already decided,” Ezekiel said.

“What is it that you think I’ve decided?”

He smirked, something only a younger brother would get away with at a time like this. “That she belongs to you.”

## 6

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### *Roman*

“DO YOU AGREE WITH HIM?” I ASKED THE OTHERS.

Silence.

“Maybe if we could meet her, it would be easier to tell if she’s a good fit for our community,” Joseph said, finally. He was older, more experienced. He’d seen more death than I had. He’d seen more life. He liked to look people in the eye when he spoke to them. He was a lot like my father.

Jacob narrowed his emerald green eyes, studying me. “That *is* what you’re asking—if she should stay?”

*Is that what I’m asking? Do I want her to stay?*

She was hurt, inside and out.

She was different from the rest.

That was why Silas spared her. He saw it too.

She didn’t deserve our punishment.

She deserved freedom.

That was why I'd left her unsupervised.

Why did I call this meeting if I was just going to set her free?

*Because I wanted someone else to tell me what I already knew. She belongs here.*

"If you're asking if we should spare her life, I'll remind you of Matthew 5:21," Jacob said.

*'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'*

I didn't need reminding. I knew every verse.

I leveled my gaze on him. "And let me remind you of Romans 13:4."

*'For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.'*

It was no coincidence that the part of the book that mentioned the *one in authority*, the *agent of wrath*, was the same part that I'd been named after. I was the ruler who bore the sword, but I had no plans of using it against *her*.

"I'm not asking for permission to take her life." It pissed me off that he would even think that.

Joseph stood, resolute in his tone. "Make her presentable. Then, give us a time, and we'll all speak with her. Until then, I will pray you find the answers you're looking for."

I left the meeting without another word.

On the way back to my cottage, one of the younger farmhands ran up beside me. "There's something wrong with one of the heifers," he said, breathless.

Of course, he was nervous. This kid was barely sixteen. He'd only been out of the house and working in the fields for a few months, yet he had the good sense to come find me when something was wrong.

Our community was a machine that needed all its parts running smoothly. Everyone had a role that had been hand-selected by me. This was proof that—with him, at least—I'd made the right choice.

*Is that an answer? Follow my instinct?*

God, this woman had gotten in my head.

I followed the kid to the field behind the church. We hopped the fence and hurried through the grass to an old oak tree. A young heifer stood alone in the shade, not eating, not caring that we'd just invaded her space. She didn't even wag her tail.

"She's pregnant." One look and I knew.

"How do you know?"

I nodded toward her swollen udder, then around at the field full of other cattle. "She's developing. And the bulls want nothing to do with her. They won't try to mate and un-mateable female." Men were the opposite, it seemed. At least, I was.

There was once a time when I couldn't keep my hands off a certain pregnant woman. She was the only person to make me fulfill my purpose and question it simultaneously. She was everything pure and right in this world. She was also the reason I was alone. She was a harsh reminder of why I *had* to be alone.

It always came back to her.

*"You do realize you can't get me pregnant twice?" she teased as I brushed my hard cock against her ass.*

*"Is that a challenge?"*

"Roman?" the boy said as though he'd been saying it for hours.

I blinked out of the memory. "Yeah?"

"What should I do with her?"

"Make sure she has a lot of water and keep an eye on how much she's laying down. If it's more than usual, let me know." I ruffled his messy brown hair. "She's going to be fine. And so are you."

As I left him to finish his work with the animals, I was reminded of my role.

I didn't need to wait for the council to figure out who the woman in my basement was. The kid had found me to figure out what was wrong with the heifer because I was the fucking Shepherd. *Me.*

She might have thought she could hide from whatever brought her here, but she wasn't hiding from me.

That was my motivation when I went back inside. When I walked through the living room, then the kitchen, then opened the basement door. When I clenched my jaw as I went down the stairs. And when I stopped in front of her, sucked in a breath, and locked eyes with her.

She hadn't moved. She didn't try to escape like I thought she would, not even after I gave her every opportunity. I left the basement door unlocked, for Christ's sake.

She didn't run.

*Why did that disappoint me?*

I cleared my throat. "You didn't eat."

Her gaze never moved from my face. "Wasn't hungry."

She was a liar. I'd seen the way she responded to the first bite of food. I watched her inhale the scent as if she hadn't eaten in days.

I thought I'd earn her trust; show her I wasn't here to hurt her.

Apparently, it wasn't compassion she needed to make her open up.

Which meant cruelty was the way inside her soul.

And me being a fucked-up beast with carnal urges, that thrilled the hell out of me.

I picked up the plate and sat in the chair. "Well, I am," I said as I shoveled a forkful of eggs into my mouth. They were cold, and cold eggs were nasty as fuck, except this wasn't about satisfaction. It was about getting to the truth.

Her eyes were on me. Now I had her full attention.

I popped a blackberry into my mouth.

Her stomach rumbled. She wet her lips and shifted in her chair.

Neither one of us dared to look away. It was a game now, a battle of wills. Inside, I felt my resolve beginning to crack. Outside, I was a steel cage.

I picked up a slice of bacon, then slowly ripped off a bite with my teeth.

That was her breaking point.

Her eyes snapped to the floor. She lowered her head, and her hair fell, hiding her face from me. Her hands came together in her lap, locking her fingers the way we sometimes did when we prayed. She looked so vulnerable, so broken.

I watched as a lone tear fell to the floor, a single, wet dot on the dry concrete. And that was *my* breaking point.

I leaned back in the chair and set the fork down on the plate. “Tell me your name.”

She lifted her head and glanced over at me. The sunlight reflected in her eyes, her eyelashes glittering with the tears she’d blinked back. I wasn’t sure if it was the vulnerability, the sunlight, or some kind of cruel punishment sent here to torture me, but fuck, she was beautiful.

“Evangeline.”

There it was. The first secret. It was like that first sip of whiskey out of the barrel, and I was already addicted. I wanted more. I wanted to open her up and watch it all pour out. I didn’t just want her name.

I wanted everything.

“But people call me Eve.”

My heart shot to my throat. My blood froze.

*You wanted answers? There you go.*

The threat I thought she was before was nothing compared to what I knew she was now. Temptation in the flesh, as though she’d been plucked out of the pages of the book and sent here to test me.

*Eve.*

Fucking Eve.

With that one word, everything changed.

*Eve*

MY STOMACH CRAMPED AT THE SIGHT OF THE FOOD. I'D NEVER BEEN SO hungry in my life. I should've eaten instead of wasting time wondering how to survive. Survival was right in front of me. Now, I was going to starve to death by trying to prove a point.

My father always said I was stubborn like my mother. I'd rolled my eyes and argued. He'd laugh. Mom did, too.

Tears filled my eyes at the knowledge I'd never hear that laughter again.

"Tell me your name." The man's deep voice broke through the silence.

My heartbeat thundered in my ears as I looked up at him. I studied him. His blue eyes darkened again, the way they had earlier. That stare made me feel stripped bare. It held the kind of power that could make people do whatever he wanted them to, from a single look.

I'd been bred to fight. I'd been taught to never quit.

I should have fought to keep my thoughts my own, to keep my secrets locked away. But I had no idea where I was or how far away from home I'd run. Even if I did know, there was no guarantee I'd make it back through the



forest alive. There were bears in the woods. There were wolves. There were enemies outside these walls who were far worse than this man. Maybe if I gained his trust, he'd send someone with me through the woods. Someone would help me find my way back alive.

*Back to where?*

There was nowhere to go. There was only here. Only him.

So, I broke.

“Eve.”

It was just a name, but something changed the moment I said it.

He set the plate on the floor, then stood. His jaw tensed, as though he were clenching his teeth again. I'd known him less than a day and I was already picking up on his habits.

His body towered over mine as he leaned down, stopping an inch from my face, so close that his nose swept against mine. His hands gripped the arms of my chair. His gaze dropped to my mouth, and he bared his teeth like an animal uncaged. Intimidating and ferocious.

“Eve,” he repeated, and then barked a laugh.

Every wave of energy in the room was filled with possessiveness, rugged and raw and so damn palpable my body vibrated with it.

He was too close, too strong, too intense.

I'd never felt so powerless yet so willing to let someone else overpower me at the same time. My heartbeat thrummed in my veins, hot and fierce. I curled my toes against the concrete floor as if that would help me stand my ground and find my strength. The image of him inching closer, sealing the space between my mouth and his, flashed through my mind.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

There was a pregnant pause, a beat of a moment when I wasn't sure I was safe. Instinct told me he was not a gentle man. There was too much bleakness in his eyes. They were too haunted. And power pulsed from his pores. He

wielded authority like a sword.

I pleaded to him with my eyes. *Say something.*

He moved away, then pulled the knife from his pocket and panic coursed through me. And then quickly disappeared when he knelt and cut the ties around my ankles.

He looked up at me, his blue eyes etched with pain. Like somehow, he already believed he'd just made a mistake.

And maybe he had.

Maybe we both had.

I should've kept running. I never should have stopped at that gate.

“Come on, Eve. I'm taking you upstairs.”

I froze.

I was free, but unable to move. Funny how quickly the world changed. An hour ago, I wished for freedom. Now I wanted him to strap me back to the chair. I knew this chair. I'd memorized the basement. I had no idea what was waiting for me upstairs. *Who* was waiting for me upstairs.

My heart kicked. My spine straightened. “Upstairs?” I hated the hesitation in my voice, ashamed of the fear.

His eyes narrowed to slits. “Yes. You need a bath, a bed and a hot meal.” He turned to walk up the stairs. “Then maybe you'll be ready to talk.”

*Talk.*

He wanted to talk.

“Wait.”

He stopped walking but kept his back toward me. His shoulders lifted, then fell with an agitated sigh. “I promise you that up there—” He pointed where the light shone down the stairs through the open door. “Is a hell of a lot more comfortable than down here. Trust me.”

“You’re asking me to trust you. You want to talk. You expect me to tell you things, intimate things, and you haven’t even told me your name. You owe me that, at least.”

His voice dropped to a deep whisper. “You showed up at *my* gate uninvited. You are a stranger in *my* community. I didn’t bring you here. *You* found *me*. I don’t owe you shit.”

He scraped a hand over his face as if wiping the moment away. As if he were fighting his own battle between right and wrong.

His body was stiff. His stare was solemn as he spoke again, “However, for the sake of hospitality, my name is Roman.”

Roman was right. Upstairs was a lot better than the basement.

I followed him into a kitchen with stark white cabinets and floors. There was a small round table on one side, in front of a large window framed in dark blue curtains. The kitchen opened into a living room with another large window framed with the same blue curtains. There were two beige sofas facing each other, a colorful rug in the middle, a fireplace with a wood beam mantle and framed quotes on the wall.

*Love them anyway.*

*Created with purpose.*

Everything about it felt warm and inviting, such a contrast to the man who lived here.

My eyes stopped on the front door.

His gaze followed mine. “You’re not a prisoner here. You’re free to walk out that door as soon as I’m confident that no one has followed you.”

I scoffed. “If that’s all you’re worried about, then there’s no need to bother with a bath and a meal. I can ease your mind right now.” I met his stare. “No one’s coming.”

“How do you know?”

*Because anyone who might care enough to try to find me is probably dead.*

The camp we stayed in didn't get crippled by loss. People left and never came back. That was the world we lived in. When it happened, we'd light a fire, say a kind word of remembrance, then appoint another family to take their place on the next outing.

My parents were the only empathetic people I knew. They were flowers in the cracks of a sidewalk. They were the rays of sunshine that sometimes broke through the rain. They were light in a world of darkness. Now, they were gone.

“I just know.”

Roman stood by one of the sofas. His fingers clenched the back cushion as he tightened his fist. His gaze narrowed, a spear piercing the air between us.

I swallowed. “You think I'm lying.”

“I think there are things you aren't telling me.”

My world had been shattered. My heart was ripped to shreds. My mother sacrificed herself to save me. And I'd let her. Guilt clawed at my mind like nails on a chalkboard. I wasn't about to re-live all of that in order to satisfy some stranger's curiosity, no matter how drawn to him I felt.

I rushed from my side of the room to his, ignoring the aches in my legs and cuts on my feet. Our gazes locked and I felt it crash over me—the hum of his body that seemed to summon mine without a word.

I sucked in a breath. Blew it back out without blinking. My hands shook but I held my ground. “You wanted to know my name. I told you my name. You wanted to know if anyone would come looking for me. I told you they won't. I showed up at your gate, unarmed and half-conscious, and you threw me in a basement, then strapped me to a chair. Considering the amount of stress it caused you to simply tell me your name, I have a feeling there are plenty of things *you* don't want *me* to know.”

“You want to leave?” His shoulders bristled and he clutched the cushion

tightly with one hand. *I hit a nerve.* “Go.” He jabbed a finger toward the door. “Silas will walk you to the gate.”

“Silas is the man who found me?” I was worn out, paralyzed with fear, consumed by grief, but I remembered glimpses of how I’d ended up at that gate. And I knew the man who had picked me up and carried me was not the same man I was staring at now. That man was older, gentler. This one was distant and cruel.

Roman shook his head. “No.” His voice was cold. Dark. “You don’t get to ask any more questions.”

Our breathing was rhythmic. Shallow and heavy. The air around us felt as though it were laced with an explosive. Any sudden move would set it off. Silence stretched between us but the tension; the tension screamed.

I’d told myself my secrets were off-limits. That was my hard line. Only as I stood there facing the thought of walking out that door, of surviving on my own, the secrets grew heavier.

My heart slammed against my ribs. My stomach knotted. Black thoughts—memories—gripped me like a vise. It hurt, physically ached.

Our gazes danced over each other’s faces, a collision of blue and brown that swirled into a vortex and threatened to drag us both under.

My mouth opened. Then closed. Then opened again.

And then finally, I spoke, “They’re dead.” I nearly choked on the words. My heart was strangled by the horror of saying them out loud.

He let go of the cushion and took a step forward. “What?”

I braced my shoulders and swallowed my emotions. “No one is coming... because they’re dead.”

*Roman*

GRIEF DESTROYED PEOPLE. IT CHANGED THEM. IT TOOK SOME PEOPLE A lifetime to find love. It only took a heartbeat to lose it.

One. Fucking. Heartbeat.

I saw grief in her eyes, heard a pain in her voice that only *that* kind of loss could bring. Her face was a contrast of shadows and sharp edges. She was strength and softness. *She lost someone she loved.* I didn't need to ask how. The *how* never mattered. Only the loss did.

“How many?”

Her breath fluttered. “How many, what?”

“How many are dead?”

The question dangled like a worm on a hook. A stopwatch from a gold chain. Delicate. Quiet. Waiting.

“Two.”

“And yet you survived.”

Her mouth fell open and her eyes narrowed as if her patience had just snapped. “Fuck this.” She barreled forward, slamming her palms against my chest. “I’ve answered every question you’ve asked. And you’re still treating me like the enemy. Well, fuck—” She pushed me again. “You.”

I felt the blackness rising from the floor at my bare feet and creeping up my body, surrounding me, seeping inside me. The unwanted desire to claim. To own. It was a sickness, a hunger I fought to control. And she’d awakened the beast.

I wanted to strangle her.

And I wanted to fuck her.

But I felt as though I was called to save her.

Since the second I laid eyes on her, every need, every thought, every desire that involved this woman was twisted.

The air hissed between us. My father always told me if you want to find the truth, look in someone’s eyes. Hers were wild with the same fucked-up notions that were behind mine.

I snatched her wrists from my chest and locked them in my grip. Then, I walked her against the back of the couch, pinning her body with mine. With my other hand, I grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head back. Her pulse throbbed in that delicate little place where her neck met her shoulder. Proof of exactly how fragile she was. But she didn’t flinch. She didn’t try to break free.

She may have been fragile but she wasn’t weak.

I wet my lips. My throat was so thick with rage, the words were almost a growl. “I don’t think you get it, so I’ll explain it to you. Everything that happens in life is a tiny piece of a greater design. A divine plan. There is a reason for *everything*.”

Her breath came heavy and short. Her skin flushed the prettiest pink. Her breasts pressed against my chest. She was so soft, so feminine and delicate underneath all that fire.

My voice declared annoyance, disgust. My body revealed something else. My cock swelled, hard and pulsing, until it fucking ached. There was no hiding it. My pants were too thin and we were too close.

When the time came and I was called to judgment, I could honestly say I tried. *This is what Adam felt like.*

I pushed into her, tightened my grip on her hair and pulled her harder against me.

Her full lips parted as she sucked in a breath. That pulse point in her neck thrummed faster, which only made my balls ache for release.

“There’s a reason you survived when you shouldn’t have. There’s a reason you showed up at my gate and not someone else’s. And there’s a reason—” I hissed between my teeth, stopping my next words. *There’s a reason you belong to me now.*

“What?” Her breath was ragged. “Say it. There’s a reason for what? What’s the third thing?” Her voice was small, adding to the position of power I had over her, the power I never wanted but had been given anyway.

I felt my sanity slipping through my fingertips. Parts of myself that I’d resolved to keep hidden sparked to life, viciously lashed at the cage I’d locked them in. I’d endured years of self-discipline. Loneliness. Pain.

Bad things happened when I lost control.

People got hurt.

People died.

She did this. She’d infected me like the fucking virus that had infected the world.

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

She huffed and narrowed her glare. “I survived because I ran. And I showed up here because I ran. That’s it. It’s that simple.”

I didn’t expect her to understand. She was from the outside. Outsiders were selfish. They believed their purpose was the survival of one. Here, our



purpose was the survival of the many.

I let go of her wrists and her hair, then took a step back. “If that’s what you believe.”

Her stare dropped to my mouth, lingering there for a second before running down my chest, my stomach, stopping finally where I was hard as fucking stone. She shuddered. Her eyes flared.

I didn’t move, didn’t adjust myself, didn’t care that she saw what I felt, thick inch after thick inch pressing against the fabric, begging to be set free.

As if catching herself before falling, her head snapped up. She swallowed. “Am I still free to go? Or is keeping me here part of the *plan*?” She spit out the last word.

A smile stretched over my lips. “You don’t seem to want to leave.”

A challenge glinted in her eyes. “And you don’t seem to want me to leave.”

“Then, there it is.”

“There what is?”

“The third thing.” *The reason you’re here and I can’t let you go.*

My gaze locked and held with hers. Her chest rose with her breath. Her nipples strained against her yellow t-shirt. And time passed, aching slowly while I took back my self-control, willing my dick to obey. *Inhale. Exhale.* Steady and slow.

I needed to get a hold of myself. Because if I slipped, if I didn’t rein this shit in right fucking now, I was going to destroy her. From the looks of it, the outside world had done a good enough job of that already.

“There’s a bathroom upstairs,” I said. “You know how to work a bath, don’t you?”

Her eyes hardened. *There it is.* There was the fight I’d seen earlier. There was the fire that made me feel alive. It was the challenge that got my dick hard.

“Despite of how I look now, we lived like civilized people.”

“Good. Leave your clothes outside the door. I’ll get them clean, then hang them to dry.” I walked into the kitchen, straight to the cabinet that held my whiskey.

“That will take hours.”

“And?” I grabbed a glass, set it on the counter and opened the bottle.

“And I’m not walking around naked for hours.” Her words were punctuated by the sound of her footsteps on the wood floor.

*And I’m hard again.*

Fucking hell.

I filled my glass, then turned to face her. “I’ll find you something to wear.” I leaned against the counter and took a much-needed drink.

She folded her arms over her chest. “So, is this like, a truce?”

“I will trust you until you give me a reason not to.” I downed the rest of my drink, set the glass in the sink, then nodded toward the staircase.

“Same,” she said as she followed me to the other side of the living room.

I stopped at the bottom step, pinning her with a glare. “But try to fight me again, and you won’t like what happens.”

## 9

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### *Eve*

NEITHER OF US SAID ANOTHER WORD AS HE LED ME UP THE STAIRS AND TO the bathroom. The muscles in his back strained against his t-shirt as he climbed the steps. The linen pants held snugly against his thick thighs and firm ass. Roman wasn't just a man. His body rippled with power, every last inch of it.

He'd made no move to hide his erection earlier. He also made no move to do anything about it. He simply stood there, callous and cruel with his eyes licking over my body like fingertips trailing my skin. He'd pinned me with his solid frame and an unforgiving fist in my hair. He'd treated my body as though he owned it. And I'd felt him... *there...* in my core. I still felt him. My body throbbed with heat as liquid lust flowed through my veins.

He was unpredictable and untamed with his emotions. I wondered what kind of lover that made him, what his touch might feel like.

That was what I thought of when the door clicked closed and I was left alone. That was what I wondered as I undressed and placed my clothes outside the bathroom door. That was what I imagined as my naked body sank into the tub full of warm water.

What kind of person did that make me?

I was drained. Exhausted. Emotionally spent. My body and mind were broken.

That had to be it.

I knew what pleasure felt like. I wasn't a virgin. I'd given that gift to a guy named Jared in the middle of a field full of Queen's Lace when I was eighteen years old. Two years later, Jared went hunting with his father and never returned. I hadn't been with anyone else since. Other men had tried, but I never let anyone get close.

What was the point when everyone you met would eventually die?

Everything in our world was temporary—even this.

He would get rid of me eventually. This wasn't my home. No matter what his *reasons* told him, I didn't belong here. I didn't believe in *plans*. He'd figure that out and I'd have to go.

*That doesn't mean you shouldn't enjoy it while you can.*

When he'd asked if I knew how to work a bath, I never imagined this. Back in our camp, there was one shower. You got five minutes, tops, before the next person was moving you out of the way for their turn. In the camp before that, we washed off in a stream.

This was paradise compared to what I was used to. Even though the water stung the cuts in my flesh where the thorns and rocks had dug into my skin. The longer I soaked and deeper I sank, the more it soothed my aching bones and muscles. I closed my eyes and dipped all the way in. The water wrapped me in its warmth. My hair floated around me.

I was weightless.

For a moment, everything disappeared. The guilt. The grief. The loneliness. The confusion.

For a moment, I wondered if this was what it would feel like if everything wasn't temporary.

As promised, Roman left a pile of folded clothes outside the bathroom door. I slipped the oversized t-shirt over my head, wearing my own panties since there was no way I was letting him wash those. He'd left me a pair of shorts, but every time I pulled them up, they only fell right back down. I ended up tying the waistband in a knot on one side to hold them up.

I towel-dried my hair, then combed my fingers through it to get the tangles out as best as I could.

As soon as my feet hit the last of the stairs, I caught a whiff of something that made my stomach jump. It was smoky and peppery and absolutely divine.

I turned the corner and walked into the kitchen, and suddenly my breath caught.

Roman was at the stove, scooping some kind of meat from a pan and onto a plate. He peered over his shoulder at the sound of my footsteps on the wood floor. The moment his gaze found my face, he froze. His nostrils flared. His stare pierced the air, shooting a thread of heat across the room and coiling around my body. I was wrapped in it. Every inch of my skin felt the vibration of that thread.

"Thank you for the clothes." I walked further into the kitchen. "And for the bath. It's nice to feel human again."

He turned around and I smiled.

His gaze tightened as he walked over to the table in front of the window and set two plates down. "You'll feel even better after you eat." He pulled out one of the chairs. "Sit."

I sat.

He sat across from me.

I stared at the plate full of cooked carrots, bread and some kind of sliced meat. I ogled it as if I hadn't seen food in weeks.

I speared a carrot with my fork. "This is a big place for one guy."

His eyes never left mine as he tore off a piece of bread and shoved it into his mouth.

I held my tongue to keep from calling out the fact that he was blatantly ignoring me.

*Play nice, Eve. He's feeding you. He clothed you. He let you bathe.*

I tore off a piece of bread and tried again. "You said there were others. Where do they stay?"

"I also said no questions." His words were short and sharp as the knives in front of us.

I dropped my hands, my forearms slamming on the table and making the ceramic plates rattle. I stared directly at him. "That was before we agreed to trust each other."

He arched a brow as he cut into a slice of meat, unaffected by my actions. "There are other houses. Two families in each cottage."

"And yet you're all alone." I mocked the way he'd spoken to me earlier.

*That got him going.*

His jaw worked as he ground his teeth. The corded veins in his throat grew thick. The undecipherable hum buzzed between us again. His eyes had this look where thoughts and secrets battled behind them. Like he'd drawn an invisible line. On one side, he wanted to kill me and on the other—

*On the other, I wouldn't have to wonder about his touch anymore.*

Goosebumps scattered across my skin. I swallowed hard and regrouped. "It's okay. I get it. There are some things we don't talk about." *Like my parents.* I folded the piece of bread around a slice of meat. "How many people are in your camp? Unless that's privileged information, too."

He smirked. "Two hundred thirty-seven."

"People?" I choked on the bite I'd just taken. "In one camp?" My eyes bugged. "Holy shit. I thought ours was big."

"Yes, people." He chuckled and the sound made my heart stutter. "How

many are in your *camp*?” He mocked the word.

*Asshole.*

“Twenty-six.” I stabbed another carrot. “Well, twenty-four now.”

“Twenty-three,” he corrected me. “Unless you’re still planning on going back.”

He said it as though staying here was an option. He spoke as if everything wasn’t temporary. And for a second, I wanted to believe him. For a moment, I saw a world with hot meals and warm baths and soft chuckles.

Briefly, I let myself hope.

And something told me that hope was going to be the death of me.

I needed rest. I needed to be alone with my thoughts. I needed to be away from those eyes, those lips, and the silky sound of his voice. “You said there’s a bed? I didn’t get much sleep last night.” *Due to being tied to a chair.*

“It’s upstairs.” He slid his chair away from the table, then walked back into the kitchen. A few seconds later, he placed a clear glass full of amber liquid in front of me. “Here. This will help.”

I picked it up and inhaled the sweet, woody scent. It was like nothing I’d ever smelled before. “Help with what?”

“Everything.”

## *Roman*

I WAS THE OLDEST OF THREE BOYS. OUR FATHER DIED CLIMBING A MOUNTAIN, scaling for rocks. The men in our community climbed the mountains that surrounded us often. We were skilled, had been trained to climb since we were young. We used stone from the mountainside for buildings, pathways, altars, and fire pits.

All it took was a moment—one misstep, a seventy-foot fall, and a broken spine. One fucking heartbeat and our father was gone.

Mom died of a broken heart not long after that.

Death was the consequence of love.

Death left me in charge of a flock before I'd turned thirty years old.

Death was the reason I lived in this house alone, and it was the reason I had to stay that way.

All I needed to do was find Eve a family to stay with. The women would teach her to work the looms. She would meet a man who hadn't taken a wife yet. The ritual would bind them. My duty to her would be done.

That was what I convinced myself as I stood in the doorway of my spare



bedroom and watched her sleep.

I told myself she could never be mine as I drank her in. Her long hair fanned out on the pillow around her head. The shadows beneath her eyes had disappeared.

She looked so peaceful.

Fucking intoxicating.

If she stayed here, one day she'd be in someone else's bed, satisfied and content.

Jealousy was a foreign emotion for me. I was complacent with my life. I had known love once. Once was more than some people got. I was okay with being alone. I deserved to be alone. But as I imagined Eve naked, on the altar, while someone else claimed her, envy clawed at my insides.

She was mine.

She was sent to me. Given to me.

Her spirit, her fire, and that utterly sated look she had right now—the look she'd have after I fucked all the fight out of her. I wanted more of it. Me. Only me. And that was a fucking problem.

And then, like a warning bell keeping me from stepping over the threshold, there was a loud knock on the front door.

I hurried downstairs and opened the door before whoever it was knocked again and woke her. My two younger brothers stood on the porch, grinning like they had a secret they couldn't wait to tell.

Ezekiel was the middle child and the most mild-mannered of us all. He'd been married since he was eighteen years old. He had two children with another one on the way. When our father died, Ezekiel took his place as a craftsman. He'd also been voted as Speaker for the council. He was kind and smart and I'd never once seen him lose his temper. Sometimes I wondered if he should have been the Shepherd instead of me.

Isaiah was the youngest. He refused to get married because he preferred to fuck freely. And often. I selected him to be a guard because guards were

typically single due to the late hours they kept. Thankfully, Isaiah wasn't the one on gate duty last night when Eve showed up.

Ezekiel lifted a brow as he tried to peer over my shoulder. "Isaiah didn't want to wait to meet her, and I couldn't let him come unsupervised."

"She's asleep."

Isaiah shoved past me, letting himself inside. "I heard she's not bad to look at. Naturally, I had to see for myself." He had that mischievous gleam in his eye that said he planned on doing more than *seeing*.

I closed the door behind them. "You—" I shoved a finger at Isaiah's chest. "Stay the fuck away from her. And Silas talks too goddamn much."

Isaiah barked a laugh. "Can you blame him? There hasn't been a woman in this house since Eliza—"

I took a step closer, stopping inches in front of his face. "We don't talk about her and you know it."

His chest bumped mine, the arrogant fucker. "Fine. Can we talk about you, then? About how much of a fucking asshole you are. About how it's probably because your balls are drying up. One day, you're going to jack off and dust is gonna shoot out of your dick." He backed away and made an exploding motion with his fingertips. "Pffft."

"Say one more word about my dick..."

Ezekiel cleared his throat, attempting to be the voice of reason. He gave Isaiah a sharp look. "What he means to say is that you shouldn't live the rest of your life alone."

Who the fuck did they think they were? Coming into *my* house, telling me how to live *my* life?

"It's in the fucking book, Roman. God said man shouldn't be alone. He said it wasn't good to be alone. That's why he sent Eve," Isaiah said, as though it was the simplest thing in the world.

Mother of all fucks.

That book was our saving grace. All our lives, we'd been taught it held all the answers. I was a tortured soul, destined to be alone. My tastes weren't normal. My preferences were more animal than man, and God had punished me for it. That was what I believed.

But now, Isaiah's words rang loudly in my ears. For the first time in three years, I started to believe something else.

*That's why he sent Eve.*

## *Eve*

ROMAN WAS RIGHT. THE DRINK DID HELP ME SLEEP. BUT MY DREAMS eventually broke through the numbness. Vivid images suffocated me. I willed my eyes open, but I was trapped there. Like a prisoner. I felt every moment as if I were living it all over again. Darkness surrounded me, but I saw his face clearly. I watched him wipe the blood from his lips. I heard the growl, low and deep as if he were standing right behind me, growling in my ear. There was so much blood. And then my mother looked at me. Her eyes locked with mine. Fear clawed at my throat.

*No!*

I bolted upright as a shrill sound ripped through the air.

I looked around, trying to place where the sound came from, to see who broke the third rule. Then, I swallowed, flinching at the dryness, at the pain of needles in my throat.

It was me.

That was *my* scream.

My eyelids were heavy. Sweat coated my skin. Tears dampened my cheeks.

The darkness was still there, but suddenly something was holding me down. Hands gripped my wrists and braced my arms above my head. A strong body pinned mine to the bed.

*The bed.*

I wasn't at the abandoned camp. My mother wasn't here.

It wasn't real.

I struggled against the hands that held me. I kicked my legs, trying to break free. I blinked through the thick fog of darkness around me.

"It's okay. You're okay." There was a rough voice against my ear, hot breath against my neck.

*Roman.*

Roman was holding me down.

Roman was lying on top of me; his body crushing mine.

Roman was pressed against me, body to body. He was shirtless and at some point in the night, I'd thrown the covers back.

I tried again to free my hands, but his grip only tightened around my wrists.

His head fell into the crook of my neck. His breath tickled my skin.

I squirmed underneath him, bucking my hips upward—my first mistake. His body moved the slightest bit, wedging his erection between my legs, right above my clit.

Holy. Fuck.

I felt every thick inch of him, lined up perfectly between my pussy lips, and my entire body shuddered. My belly clenched. My skin blazed. Every cell hummed with need. It rippled down my spine, pulsed in my core. My nipples pebbled against his t-shirt. We stared at each other. Neither one of us moved. Neither one was ready to acknowledge what this was, what it had turned into.

It was quiet. Silent, except for the short, quick exhales of our breath. We were standing in a field of landmines. A single movement and this would all

blow up. There would be no turning back.

I swallowed. “Did I scream? Is that what woke you?”

“Yes.” His voice was guttural and low, strained as if he had to make himself remember how to speak.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

He cut me off. “Shhh, it’s okay. It was just a dream.” He slowly rolled off of me and onto his back, then stared up at the ceiling.

*Why did I hate that? Why did my body miss the feel of his?*

“No.” Guilt swept over me. Guilt for feeling things and wanting things when my parents would never feel or want again. My heart seized. My mind screamed how wrong this was. “It was a memory.”

“It’s over now. You’re safe.” He breathed out. “The demons won’t find you here.”

“Demons?” I turned my head to face him.

Our gazes collided. He licked his lips. Goosebumps pebbled on my skin, my body fully aware of just how close we still were.

“The vampires. They aren’t a threat to anyone inside these walls.” He propped a hand behind his head and looked back at the ceiling.

“How can you be sure?”

“Because it’s my job to be sure.” He turned his head, only slightly, but it was enough for his stunning blue eyes to lock with mine. “Nothing can hurt you here, Eve.”

The line between right and wrong was blurred. The only thing that was clear was that he was here, and I was here. He was alone. I was alone. Tension pulled us together. Heat coiled around us. We were two bodies craving attention, two souls seeking connection.

He sat up, then eased off the bed, snapping the invisible cord that tethered us.

“Wait,” I said when he started walking toward the door. I wanted more of his

warmth. I wasn't ready to be left alone in the cold again. "Stay with me, just for a little while. Until I fall asleep."

"It's better if I don't."

I sat up. "You said you'd make sure I was safe." I sounded like a pouty child.

"Yes, from *them*. There's no one here to protect you from *me*." His tone dripped with blackness.

"I'm not afraid of you." Even though every part of my body told me I needed to be.

He scoffed. "Then, that's your second mistake."

"What was the first?"

"Showing up at my gate." And with that, he walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

## 12

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### *Eve*

EVERYTHING ABOUT ROMAN WAS A CONTRADICTION. HE WAS HOT, THEN cold. He was danger and safety. He was hard lines and soft skin. Lust poured out of him while ice laced his veins. And I was drawn to him without reason.

The remainder of the night was restless. I couldn't stop moving, couldn't stop thinking about the things he said. I couldn't stop wondering why every cell in my body reacted when he was near.

He awakened me.

Now, the room felt cold without him in it. Empty. The night was eerily quiet except for a clock on the nightstand.

*Tick.*

*Tick.*

*Tiiiiiiick.*

I swear it taunted me. The seconds got slower. The night grew darker. My heart hummed, and my mind raced through a thousand thoughts.

*Was there a reason I ended up here? Was I meant to find him? Why did he*



*say I should be afraid of him? What secrets was he afraid to tell?*

The questions bubbled up inside until my head hurt. These were things a girl was supposed to talk to her mother about. But mine was gone. We wouldn't talk about men or love or life ever again.

That undeniable truth made my chest seize. My stomach sank. I felt gutted. Hollow. Skinned and hung. That was the thing about death. Those who were gone didn't suffer the loss of life. That fate belonged to the ones left behind.

My gaze drifted to the door, hoping it would swing open and Roman would walk through.

He never did.

I felt alone, and I didn't want to be alone.

I wanted him to make me forget the pain, and I wanted to cling to the memories.

It was a constant ebb and flow between anticipation and grief. Finally, I let it all go. My body sank deeper into the mattress. My head nestled into the pillow. The clock went quiet. My eyes fell closed, and I pretended my heart wasn't in a thousand broken pieces.

I didn't know how long I slept or what time it was when I woke. Thankfully, my dreams didn't drag me into the darkness again. There were no tortured eyes staring back at me or hands wiping a bloodied chin. There was only peaceful sleep the rest of the night.

I squinted my eyes, letting them adjust to the sun-filled room.

A few minutes later, I kicked the covers back and climbed out of bed. The scent of freshly brewed coffee hit me as soon as I opened the bedroom door.

Roman was in the kitchen downstairs, standing in front of the stove. The blinds were closed but the sun's rays crept through the cracks, painting the room in warmth and light.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs, letting my gaze sweep over him. The gray pants he wore hugged his perfect ass. His white t-shirt clung to his back and biceps, making him look intimidating and untouchable.

But dear God, I wanted to touch him. The memory of his body pinned on top of mine burned a trail across my skin. I wanted to ask him why he left last night, why he thought someone needed to protect me from him. I wanted to know why he felt my coming here was a mistake when everything about him drew me in like gravity.

He must have sensed my presence because he slowly turned around. His unshaven stubble shadowed his face. His gaze traveled the length of my body and I lost my breath.

He gestured toward a set of clothes stacked neatly on the breakfast table. "They're clean." His voice curled around me, deep and smooth.

Our eyes locked and something fierce and hot flowed between us.

I swallowed but didn't break my stare. "Thank you."

"Did you make them?" He didn't break his, either.

My heart galloped and throat tightened. "The clothes?"

"Yes. I've never seen that material before."

Here we were, talking about clothes as if the butterflies in my stomach hadn't burst into flames the second he looked at me. It was almost laughable.

"I wish. We make weapons. Then, we trade them for food, clothes, medicine, anything other camps can scavenge from the big cities." I spoke about the camp as though I were still a part of it, as if it were still my home. I should have said I *used* to make weapons. Now, I spent my nights running from bad dreams and my days wondering if I still had a purpose.

Roman studied me for a moment before finally tearing his gaze from mine. "Sit."

It was a simple command. A one-word order. The authority in it made my breath stall, but somehow, I managed to obey.

He opened a cabinet, then closed it, followed by a drawer. And then the refrigerator.

He walked over and set two glasses of milk on the table. Then, he turned

back toward the kitchen, returning a moment later. He sat across from me, then slid a plate full of eggs and fruit in my direction. It was like a dance I couldn't stop watching. Every move was full of confidence and grace.

“We don't trade. And we don't scavenge. Everything we have, we grow or make ourselves. Our ancestors did a good job of making sure we were equipped with everything we'd need to survive within these walls,” he said.

“You make your clothes?” *As in, from scratch?*

“The women do. From flax and wool.” He speared a forkful of scrambled eggs. “We farm. We build. We don't ever have to leave except to go get rocks or wood.” His hand froze mid-air and he got a faraway look, like he was seeing something that wasn't there. *Or someone.* He sighed and lowered his fork. It landed on his plate with a metallic clank.

Awkward silence thickened the air. The weight of all our unspoken words made my stomach drop. For several long seconds, we communicated with nothing more than a stare. Pain festered in his eyes. It was the kind of pain only loss could bring. I knew because I suffered from it, too.

*What hurt you, Roman? Who did you lose?*

I wet my dry lips. And then I plucked a berry from my plate and changed the subject, letting the secrets fall. *For now.* “Your camp must be massive. With all that many people doing all those things.” *Could I be any worse at small talk?*

But it worked.

The tension lifted.

The atmosphere shifted from feeling like heavy steel to calm waters.

A smirk tilted his lips. “When you finish eating, I'll show it to you.”

“Seriously?” It took everything I had to keep my tone calm.

He was taking me outside. He was showing me his world.

He bowed his head in a nod. “Seriously.”

Finally. He was giving me a secret.

# 13

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## *Eve*

I FINISHED THE EGGS AND FRUIT BECAUSE I WAS STARVED. THEN, I GRABBED my clothes, hurried upstairs and got dressed. The whole time, my heart fluttered like it had wings. I felt human again.

I felt free.

And as I bounded down the stairs and met Roman at the front door, a tinge of sudden worry shot down my spine.

*What if his people don't like me?*

*What if this is a trick?*

That would be the saddest, cruelest twist of all, wouldn't it? To hope for acceptance, to wonder about a future, to feel warmth in my bones for the first time, then find out I was truly alone.

Roman was cold, but surely, he wasn't *that* cold.

He stood at the door, arms folded across his chest, blue eyes piercing the space between us, pulling me closer to him with every step.

That pull was more potent than anything I'd ever felt. It was stronger than

fear, stronger than pain.

I hated it because I didn't understand it.

At the same time, I craved it because it made me feel alive.

Roman cleared his throat and looked away.

*He feels it, too.*

I straightened my back and squared my shoulders. "I'm ready."

Wordlessly, he reached for the knob, then opened the front door. He held it open, allowing me to walk out first.

I stopped beside one of four tall posts that lined the front of the wooden porch. My heart was pounding as I drank in the view before me. My breath hitched. There was a row of white houses on both sides of the street. The white paint wasn't chipped or peeling. The windows weren't broken and boarded up.

The asphalt on the road was still intact. There were no cracks in the pavement, no weeds growing through. The sun shone down on colorful wildflowers planted in flowerbeds in front of each home and manicured lawns of bright green grass.

It had been dark when I first got here. I was exhausted, bruised, and ready to die. I didn't bother taking in the scenery. But now—

My mouth fell open. "Wow."

"Your camp didn't look like this?" Roman stepped up behind me. I noticed he didn't mock the use of the word *camp* this time.

I snorted a laugh. "No." I shifted my weight on my feet, suddenly aware of how different our worlds were. "We stayed in tents. Concrete buildings. Caves. RVs. We even camped in underground bunkers once. But never anything like this." My words quieted to a near-whisper, awestruck, while I continued looking out over his community. "I didn't know humans could live like this."

"We can. And we will. Every human will live like this one day." He sounded

so sure.

I tried to visualize the future he saw—no fear, no running. No blood. There were only humans talking, laughing, and working. Living freely. Happily.

I wished my parents could've seen this. They would have loved it.

He brushed past me and our shoulders touched. I wanted to bathe in his scent—something like cedar and vanilla. Everything about him was intoxicating and virile.

My nipples immediately pebbled against my t-shirt. My stomach clenched. Awareness hummed between us as the ebb and flow between grief and desire sparked again.

His shoulders went tight and his jaw clenched. “Follow me.”

I followed him down three brick steps, onto a sidewalk, then to the street. I knew there were others here, but for the most part, it was quiet. Calm. Peaceful. Only a few people were outside, tending to their yards or simply walking by. They didn't speak. They only glanced, then looked away when Roman caught their eyes.

We walked past houses and I wondered what life was like inside them.

I was lost in a daydream when a woman's voice cut through the silence.

“Good morning, Roman.”

Roman stopped walking.

I whipped around to face her.

She cocked her head, studying me. Judgment saturated every second of her stare. She wore a simple white dress that clung to her curves. Her blonde hair was pulled into a braid that draped over one shoulder. She let out a ‘hmm’ and straightened her head. Her demeanor shifted as soon as she moved her gaze to Roman.

A bright, perfect smile spread across her lips. “You should drop by for lunch. I made roasted chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy. I know it's your favorite.”

“Thank you. Maybe some other time,” he replied, his tone void of any emotion.

“I’ll see you tonight, though?” Hers was hopeful.

“Of course.”

*Tonight?*

He had plans with her tonight. She’d cooked for him. She knew his favorite meal.

A sudden wave of possessiveness crowded my chest and squeezed my heart.

*He doesn’t belong to you. He had a life before you got here.*

The woman turned to walk away but smirked as she looked over her shoulder at me. I fought off pangs of jealousy as I watched her saunter back to one of the houses.

The shadow of Roman’s tall frame loomed over me, shrouding me in his presence, consuming me. I refused to look up. I didn’t want to make eye contact with him to reveal my insecurities.

But another voice slipped in between us. “God, it’s a beautiful morning. Don’t you think?”

My gaze shot upward, locking with a pair of blazing blue eyes that matched Roman’s. This man had messy blond hair and smooth skin. No baldness. No stubble. He was younger. Mischief glinted in his eyes instead of danger.

“Shouldn’t you be at the guard shack?” Roman asked him.

“My brother can be so rude sometimes.”

*His brother.* We’d just unlocked another secret. Another part of him had been revealed. It felt like I’d been given the end of a thread. I wanted to keep pulling it, keep unraveling it until we were both bare.

The younger guy held a hand out in an offering. “I’m Isaiah. The handsome one.” He licked his lips as his eyes swept over me. “I see why Roman wanted to keep you to himself.”

Wait. *He knew about me? He knew Roman had been keeping me.*

I accepted his hand. There was no sizzle of electricity when we touched. The air didn't buzz. My stomach didn't turn into knots. I wasn't sure why I expected it to. That only happened with Roman.

It had only *ever* happened with Roman.

I didn't see him watching as I touched his younger brother, but I felt his gaze searing through me.

"I'm Evangeline."

"Evangeline," Isaiah slowly repeated, as if rolling the name over his tongue.

I dropped his hand. "But you can call me Eve." *What did Roman tell you?*

"Eve." He clicked his tongue, then swallowed. "Now *that* is interesting." He faced his older brother. His brows drew together as they locked eyes. "You brought her out. Has there been a change of plans?"

*Plans? What plans?*

Roman's jaw clenched. "No."

"That's too bad. I might have finally done a claiming."

The air went frigid.

Roman's eyes went black. His nostrils flared. "The ceremony isn't a game, Isaiah." His tone was calm and quiet but the words rang loud and fierce.

"Who said I was playing?"

A chill darted up my spine, making the hair on my nape stand up. I had no idea what ceremony they were talking about, but I got the feeling it was important. My gaze ping-ponged between them.

For a long moment, they stared at each other in silence. Every look was a sharply forged weapon, a quiet war being waged. Tension wound up, tighter and tighter.

And then it snapped.



Isaiah's throat worked over a swallow, then his gaze drifted to my face. "It was nice to meet you, Eve. I'll see you again soon."

Roman sniffed loudly, then started walking back toward his house.

"Your brother is... different," I said, keeping my pace beside him. My strides were short and quick compared to his long ones.

A shadow danced over his features. "He's an asshole. Stay away from him."

I'd met plenty of assholes, and Isaiah didn't seem like one of them. He seemed like a younger brother who liked pushing his older brother's buttons. I wanted to know what those buttons meant, what started that silent battle back there.

"What's a claiming?"

Roman kept walking. "Part of our purpose."

We passed all the houses, including his.

"I thought our purpose was survival." At least that was what I'd always been taught.

I followed him past a circle of stones and a white pavilion. *Where in the world were we going?*

"It is. And until now, your purpose has been the survival of one. *Our* purpose is the survival of many."

*What did that even mean?*

"Are you always this intense?"

Finally, we stopped at a wood rail fence. On the other side, there was a big wooden building—bigger than any of the houses—and hundreds of horses, cattle, and sheep. The grass was tall in some areas and shorter in others. There were scattered trees with umbrellas of branches full of thick green leaves. It seemed to stretch for miles.

Men wearing the same tan pants and black t-shirt I'd seen Roman in last night moved around in the wooden building. Some carried buckets. Others shoveled hay. All of them looked perfectly at ease. They smiled and laughed

as they passed one another by.

They were happy.

Roman held onto the top rail and inhaled a deep breath. His body relaxed. The harsh lines of his face softened. The strain from moments ago seemed forgotten. The constant war in his mind seemed to quiet.

“Sometimes I just stand here and stare at it,” he said, ignoring my previous question.

I stood next to him. “I can see why.”

Roman was a man who carried the burdens of the world on his shoulders. I heard it in his words, saw it in his eyes. And although those shoulders were extensive, broad enough and strong enough to hold it, I couldn't help feeling that he deserved rest. He deserved these glimpses of peace.

I grabbed the rail and our hands touched. I ached for more. More touches. More closeness. More secrets.

The barn faded. The animals disappeared. Time blurred. The only thing that existed was me and him.

He stared out into the pasture, not moving his hand from mine. “The world wasn't meant to be the way it is.”

He spoke as though he could change it. And at that moment, as I soaked in the tranquility of my surroundings, I wanted to help him.

## *Roman*

WHO THE FUCK DID ISAIAH THINK HE WAS?

And why the fuck was this woman invading my every thought, commanding my actions, consuming my mind?

I should have left her in the basement.

*No.*

I should've let Silas keep her. Or leave her where he'd found her. I should have kicked his ass for opening the gate and letting her in. She should have been miles away, back at her own camp, with her own people.

*She would've died out there.* I knew it as surely as I knew anything.

Instead, here she was, fucking with my head.

I didn't sleep at all last night after I'd left her room. I kept replaying Eliza's final words over and over in my mind.

*"You're a king, Roman. God has anointed you. You are chosen like David. Don't let your kingdom fall."*

*“What good is a kingdom without a queen?” I didn’t want the world if Eliza wasn’t in it.*

*Her hand cupped my cheek. “He will send you a queen. She’ll be strong and fierce and worthy.”*

*I shook my head, blinking back tears. “No. There will only ever be you.”*

And until now, that had been true. I’d never even looked at another woman in that way. My dick sure as fuck had never reacted to anyone. Not even on ceremony nights when I’d stood there, watching in silence while everyone else writhed and moaned and fucked. But one touch from Eve and I was ready to throw her on the ground and fuck the life out of her.

Fuck a ceremony.

Fuck a claiming.

My cock went stiff with possessive need the second Isaiah touched her hand. It took everything in me not to shove her against the side of the closest house and fuck her until she screamed my name. *Mine*. Not his. I wanted to rip those tiny fucking shorts she wore right off her perfect body so that no one would ever see her wear them again. I wanted to wrap my hand around her throat to keep her from talking to him.

She stood there, holding the forbidden fruit in her delicate little hands and fuck me, I wanted a taste—even if it was poison.

*Christ.*

The heat of her touch spread from where her pinky touched mine, all the way up my arm, licking through my bloodstream, and blazing in my bones.

I moved my hand and scrubbed it over my face. “We should go back inside.” I needed a drink. And distance. I needed to think without her standing next to me.

“Okay.” Her voice was a gentle whisper, laced with disappointment. Whether she was disappointed I moved my hand or that I was dragging her away from this place of serenity, I couldn’t tell.

The sound of her footsteps trailed behind me all the way back to my house.

The door slammed closed behind her. I assumed it was behind her. Maybe she'd stayed on the front porch to pout. I didn't stop walking long enough to check. I headed straight for the kitchen, opened the cabinet and poured a drink.

When I finally turned around, I caught her standing in the living room, eyeing the bookshelves on each side of the fireplace.

I waited for the liquid to coat my throat and wash away my hunger. Then, I walked into the room and leaned against the back wall.

"Do you read?" I asked from behind her.

She didn't turn around to face me. "When I can. Mostly it's the same books over and over." She stepped closer to the shelves, running a fingertip across the spines. "They aren't really a priority where I'm from."

We lived in the same world. We had the same enemies. We had the same purpose. Yet our pasts felt lifetimes apart.

"Do you have a favorite?"

"The Old Man and the Sea." She said it without pause.

I took a sip of whiskey. "A tale of suffering."

She spun around. "A tale of *survival*." She used the word like a weapon. Her eyes landed on mine, full of fire and anger and need. She steeled herself. "He caught his fish. It may have taken him eighty-five days, all his strength, and almost cost him his life, but he caught his fish. He proved he was worthy."

I knew the story. It was about sacrifice. Redemption always coming with a price. There were so many parallels to that story and religion. Although, an outsider wouldn't have known it.

She argued it with a passion that would make Jacob proud. She argued as though she had something to prove. She wanted me to know she hadn't given up. She needed me to see her strength.

Little did she know that her strength was what made me want to break her. It was her fight that I craved.

Fuck. I needed to get out of here before I had her bent over the couch with my dick buried in her cunt and my bruises on her skin.

“I have some things to take care of. Feel free to pick something else to read. Maybe try something lighter this time.” I downed the rest of my whiskey, then headed to the kitchen.

“When will you be back?”

“Soon.” I set my empty glass in the sink. “And I won’t be far, so don’t even think about trying to run.”

“That’s not why I asked.”

“Then why do you care?”

Because she didn’t want to be alone?

Because she wanted my company?

“Does it matter?” she asked, as if the answer was simple.

Nothing about this was simple.

I walked to the door, ignoring my thoughts. Even if I was right, even if she would rather be with me than be alone, it was worthless. If any good came from the memories that tormented me all night, it was the reminder that I had been chosen. I was the Shepherd and I had a flock to tend. There were things more important than getting my dick wet. I had a ceremony to prepare.

I opened the door, stopping to look at Eve before stepping outside. Her dark hair cascaded over her shoulders, and all I could do was imagine it wrapped around my fist.

*There is no good way for this to end.*

A muscle ticked my jaw. “No. It doesn’t matter.”

I moved through the flock of lambs in the pasture. A breeze coming down from the mountains made the tree branches sway. Grass swished around my

ankles. The mama sheep around me bleated an anxious *baa*, as if they knew one of their young was about to be chosen.

Sacrifice brought forth blessings. Tonight, one of these tiny creatures would cleanse our bodies and purge our sins. There was a reason animal blood was poison to the cursed and used for redemption of the holy. It was a part of the plan. We only needed to be faithful.

Isaiah walked up to the fence. He bent down and plucked a blade of long grass, then rolled the stem between his teeth.

“You gonna tell me what all that shit with the girl was about?” he asked.

“I wanted her to see who we are and let her know this is a community, not a prison.” I stopped walking when I spotted a little lamb with perfect white fleece.

“I meant the whole growly-possessive-get-her-away-from-Isaiah-before-he-fucks-her thing you did.” He looped his legs over the top rail, then sat on the fence.

I lifted my head and looked over at him. “You’re not fucking her.”

He arched a brow. “Does that mean you are?”

*Yes.*

*Maybe.*

*Fuck.*

*No.*

“It means no one is.”

He pulled the grass from his mouth and tossed it onto the ground. “So, she’s just going to stand around at the ceremony and watch?” He laughed. “Good luck with that.”

“She’s not going to the ceremony.” There was no fucking way either one of us would survive it. I pointed to the lamb at my side. “This one should be good.”

“You mean for the ceremony that you’re hiding from Eve.”

“I’m not hiding the ceremony.” The claiming ceremony was part of our culture. It celebrated our purpose. It defined our future. I wasn’t ashamed of it.

“Then, you’re hiding the girl.” He raised an eyebrow. Cocky fucker. “Worried someone else might claim her?” His gaze was loaded with suspicion. It was a gift he’d inherited from our father. Isaiah had our mother’s sunny disposition and our father’s keen sense for bullshit.

I got the bullshit gene, but the sunny disposition must have skipped over me.

My skin bristled. The throb of a beginning headache pounded in my temples. I was one hundred percent certain anger glowed in my eyes as I glared at him.

Isaiah grinned wide as he hopped off the fence, then clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Oh, my brother, you are so fucked.”

I had a feeling that, for once, he was right.



## *Eve*

I TRIED TO READ, BUT I COULDN'T FOCUS. THE BOOK WAS ON THE COUCH, face down and open to the page I'd stopped on. The house was quiet. Sunlight seeped through open blinds and warmed the air. For the first time, I noticed how bright everything was. White and gray and pristine.

Roman left me alone, but I had no interest in snooping. All I thought about was him. Where was he? What was he doing?

Was he with *her*? Sitting at the table, telling her how amazing her roasted chicken tasted. Talking and laughing.

I wondered what it was like to see him smile, truly smile. I wondered what his laugh sounded like.

I wondered what his touch felt like. Would his kiss be gentle or fierce?

And I wondered how many women had sat on this couch, wondering the very same thing.

Was she one of them?

Had she started out like me? A prisoner.

Thinking about it made my heart sink to the pit of my stomach. A knot clawed up my throat. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to block out the mental image of another woman in the bed upstairs. Of his hard body on top of hers while he whispered comforting words in her ear.

*Stop it, Eve.* I was acting obsessed. This was crazy.

One minute I wanted to punch him in the throat and the next I wondered what he'd feel like inside me. And I didn't even know him.

I threw my head back against the couch cushion and let out a loud groan.

Was this a stage of grief? Or was it a part of recovering from being strapped to a chair in a stranger's basement? Or was I simply trying to adjust to a new environment?

Or was there another reason that had nothing to do with any of that?

Minutes ticked by, and Roman still hadn't come back. The longer I sat here, the more questions I had—questions I knew I'd probably never get the answers to. Roman was a vault.

He was protective of his secrets.

He was intense.

He was feral.

He was unapologetically erotic.

He was heartbreakingly beautiful in the most savage of ways.

And he was going to destroy me if I let him. I'd be like the woman on the street, desperate for his attention, roasting chicken and begging for a minute alone with him.

Fuck that.

I was better than that. I was stronger than that.

I tucked a foot under my butt and curled up in the corner of the couch. Then, I grabbed the book and started reading again, willing my thoughts to go anywhere but on him.

I got lost in the pages, sucked into the story. All my questions disappeared. My thoughts strayed to Reverend Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne and the affair that uprooted their whole world. Time was suspended. I was transported to a colony in Massachusetts. I met two lovers by a babbling brook in a forest. I was inspired by a heroine's strength. And my heart was torn open by the world's judgment.

I was midway through the book when the front door opened. Bright light filled the room, and every inch of my body tingled with awareness.

He was back.

The door closed behind him, and his eyes latched onto mine. Deep blue seas to rich brown earth. I was swept up in his rugged features. Heat flowed from his pores, sending goosebumps pebbling my skin in anticipation. He worked his jaw. The thick cords in his neck strained and flexed.

My lips parted.

I waited.

*Where have you been?*

The question was on the tip of my tongue, even though I had no right to ask.

I set the book on the cushion and angled my body toward him. "How many people end up here, lost and alone?" I asked instead.

*Was the woman from earlier one of them?*

Roman closed his eyes and blew out a breath, as though the question was a relief compared to whatever thoughts were running through his mind.

He opened his eyes again, then stepped into the living room. "As far as I can remember, just you." He stopped and sat on the arm at the other end of the couch, smoothing a hand over the linen fabric covering his thighs. "No one comes here. Sometimes a familiar shows up, pretending to need help in order to get inside. Then, they try to lure us into the forest, but we haven't had that happen in a while."

I uncurled my leg from under my butt and sat up straight. "You thought I was one of them." He thought I was a familiar—a pathetic human who followed

vampires around, hoping for a chance to become one of them.

“You were a stranger who showed up at my gate covered in blood.”

“And now what do you think?”

“If I thought you were one of them, you’d still be strapped to that chair in my basement, choking on your own blood. Instead, I let you drink my whiskey, wear my t-shirt, and sleep in my bed.”

His words rolled over me like liquid heat. Down my neck, over my chest, bringing my nipples to a peak, grazing my belly, then pooling between my thighs.

He made it sound sensual—me in his shirt and in his bed. I imagined it, the raw possession of what that symbolized. The air was so thick with need, I could barely breathe.

Roman must have felt it too because his pants tightened over his erection. Thin linen against sheer power. Every outline of the flared head and thick veins strained against the front of his pants. The fabric didn’t stand a chance.

He ran the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip, not making a move to adjust himself or hide it. It was crude, untamed, and vulgar.

And it made my stomach clench.

He glanced at the book resting on the couch cushion. “What did you choose?”

“*The Scarlet Letter.*”

He scoffed, then dropped his hand to his lap. “I could’ve sworn I said pick something light.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I think it’s deeper than you need to go right now.” The authority in his voice made the atmosphere more intense.

“I think it’s exactly where I need to go right now.”

For a moment, I’d escaped reality. *Or maybe I’d been reminded of it.* I’d been

immersed in a world much like the community he called home. Love was forbidden. Touch was a sin. And survival was the end game. Maybe it wasn't fiction at all. Perhaps that was why I chose it.

*Or maybe it chose me.*

“What’s wrong with *The Scarlet Letter*?” I grabbed the book and brought it to my lap as though it needed protection.

“Nothing if you enjoy reading about a man who was chosen by God to guide his flock and failed miserably.”

I knew nothing about God or what gave him the authority to appoint people.

If he was talking about Dimmesdale, I didn't see failure. I saw torment. I saw regret. I saw a man who wanted a woman but didn't *want* to want her.

*I saw Roman.* Every damaged, broken piece of him.

“How did he fail?”

His eyes narrowed. “Do you even understand what you're reading?” The question was drenched in annoyance.

“I understand it perfectly. He made a mistake. They both did.” I glared at him. “Do you have a problem with forgiveness?”

Was that what this was about? Was that why he wouldn't stay with me last night? He thought he was better than me. I was a tainted abomination in his flawless world. I'd dirtied up his immaculate little paradise.

My parents were my flock. I was outside the building. I should have seen the vampire coming. I was supposed to keep them safe.

I failed.

I jumped up, unable to sit still any longer. “Answer me. Do you think mistakes should be forgiven?”

“It depends.”

“On what?” I stood on one side of the couch, holding myself steady with a hand on the back cushion. My knees felt weak, my bones brittle, like they

were fighting to hold me up.

He gritted his teeth, his voice darkening. “When the price of that mistake is someone’s life, then no.”

*What did he just say?*

He couldn’t possibly have known about my parents. He had to be talking about the book. Maybe Dimmesdale failed, and that failure cost someone their life. That life had to be the mother of his child or the child herself.

Or both.

“So, they died?”

He froze. His face paled. His head whipped around to face me. “What?”

“Hester and Pearl. You’re saying they die in the book.” *Please, say that’s what you meant.*

“No.”

I swallowed past the thickness in my throat. I clenched the book until my knuckles turned white. “Then, what the fuck are you talking about?” *Tell me what you know and how you know it.*

*Did I talk in my sleep?*

“Nothing. Finish the story. I’m done with this conversation.” He stood up.

“Not until you tell me what you meant.” Tears burned my eyes but I blinked them back. I was hanging off the ledge of a cliff, clinging to the roots of self-control.

“I said, I’m done.”

“And I said no.” I was walking a line and I knew it. I teetered on the edge of sanity, but I needed to know if the one person who didn’t make me feel alone was going to hate me for what I’d done. If this man, who didn’t know my parents, couldn’t forgive me for letting them die, how was I ever supposed to forgive myself?

He advanced on me quickly. Viciously. Like a lion going in for the kill.

I backed away, knocking a lamp off a table and sending it crashing to the floor. The book fell from my hands and landed with a thud.

He didn't even flinch at the sound. "Goddammit, why do you keep pushing me?" His voice was low. His eyes were full of angry threats and violent promises. "Since the minute you showed up here, you've done nothing but test me. One after another."

He backed me against a wall. One thick thigh forced its way between my legs. I shoved at his chest but he didn't move. My fingers gripped his shirt, fisting the fabric. My nails clawed at his skin through the cotton.

He gripped my chin with one hand and dove the other into the back of my hair. "You keep fucking fighting me." He clenched his teeth and fisted my hair tighter. "You keep fucking testing my willpower." His gaze fell to my mouth. His chest heaved. His breath danced across my lips. "I'm about to break. I'm thirty seconds from—" He stopped. His head fell forward, pressing his forehead to mine.

My hold on his shirt went slack. My heart pumped. My bones melted. "From what?" *Say it. Just fucking say it.*

He lifted his head and the pain etched in his face was palpable. Wanting me caused him physical pain. He couldn't even say the words out loud.

I wanted to throw up.

"How did you find me, Eve? Who the fuck are you?"

I braced my shoulders, cleared my throat and forced my voice to cut through the gut-wrenching shame brewing inside me. "Someone who did an unforgivable thing."

## *Eve*

THE WORLD SHIFTED ON ITS AXIS. AN HOUR AGO, I LOOKED OUT OVER FIELDS of grass and believed it could be a better place. Now, I was reminded how cruel it was. It took and took until there was nothing left.

*I had nothing left.*

I shoved away from Roman. “You said I was free to leave.” I’d rather be alone than pushed to the brink of madness whenever I looked at him.

He ran a hand over his face. “That’s what you want?”

“You’ve made me painfully aware of what you think of me.” I tipped my chin. “So, let me go.”

His face contorted. The flash of pain from an internal battle flared in his eyes. He balled his hands, clenching and unclenching his fists. And then he roared.

“Fuuuuuuuck.”

My heart kicked against my ribs. My breath froze. I couldn’t move.

And then I *was* moving.



Roman grabbed hold of me. He marched me across the living room, then to the stairs. His fingers dug into my wrist as he took the steps two at a time. I had to practically run to keep up. A sharp sting of pain shot up my calf, making my stomach lurch when I stumped my toe on one of the steps.

I spit a string of curses. “Piece of shit, cocksucking, son of a bitch.”

Roman didn’t stop. He didn’t even turn around.

He jerked me into the bedroom where I’d slept last night and tossed me onto the bed. I bit my tongue as I bounced on the mattress. The metallic tinge of blood filled my mouth. I added it to my ever-growing list of injuries. My hair fell in front of my face.

I swept it away with one hand and sat up straight. “You said I could leave.” My hand flew to my mouth at the pain of talking. Fuck, I bit that bitch hard.

“I lied.” He held a hand on the doorknob. “And if you tell me you’d rather be out there with them than in here with me, you’re a fucking liar, too.”

*Them* could have meant the vampires, or the people from my camp, or any other humans in general. It didn’t matter because he was right. I may have been consumed by guilt, overwhelmed with self-doubt, and confused as fuck. But I didn’t really want to leave.

The door slammed shut. For several long seconds, I stared at the shadow in the crack underneath the door.

*He didn’t leave.*

The room went still. My stomach twisted. My heartbeat felt like a whisper.

*Come back inside. Talk to me. Tell me why you’re torturing us both.*

I waited.

The shadow disappeared. Heavy footsteps sounded on the wooden stairs.

*He was gone.*

I curled into the bed and buried my cheek against the pillow. I waited for my heart to beat again. I listened. The silence suffocated my thoughts.

And then it came.

One beat. Then two.

*Thwump, thwump.*

*Thwump, thwump.*

My chest opened with one breath. Then another.

I counted them the way some people counted sheep until my eyelids grew heavy and I fell asleep.

I woke to darkness and the faint sound of chanting coming from outside my window. There was a foreboding hum in the air that I hadn't felt before. It was almost as though the room was breathing around me, like the walls were whispering their secrets.

I peeled the covers back and climbed out of bed. My bare feet hit the cool wood floor. The sound drew me to the window. I closed the distance between the bed and the wall. My hand trembled as it held onto the edge of the curtain. There was a flicker of light on the other side of the fabric—something warmer than the moon.

My insides twisted and knotted. There was a brief second when common sense fought with curiosity.

*Go back to bed.*

I gripped the curtain.

*Unravel his secrets.*

Curiosity won.

I wrenched the curtain back, and my heart fell like a steel anchor to my stomach. My soul shattered. I grabbed the windowsill to keep my legs from giving out.

I couldn't breathe.

*I can't breathe.*

A fire in the middle of the stone circle I'd seen earlier blazed high and bright while people gathered around it. Naked people. Groping. Touching. Kissing. Fucking.

Women were on their knees, sucking off the men who stood over them. Others were bent over with their hands on their ankles while men devoured them from behind. Some had their legs wrapped around a man's waist while being bounced around in the air like rag dolls. Those who weren't fucking were chanting. They walked around dipping their hands into buckets, then spreading something all over the bodies of everyone else.

I squinted, focusing harder as the chanters dipped their hands into the liquid, then smeared it onto bare skin. The motion was ritualistic. There was a pattern—breasts, then stomach, then ass, ending with a symbol on the forehead.

In front of the fire circle was a large stone block shaped like a rectangle. I stood at the window, hand clenching the curtain, frozen in place as one of the men walked over to a woman and took her by the hand. He pulled her to the stone, then dipped his hands in one of the buckets. The woman laid back, letting him cover her in—

I sucked in a shaky breath. *No.*

It was blood.

They were all covered in blood. It was everywhere. There were buckets full of it.

*They're the forest people I'd heard about. The blood worshipers. The humans that couldn't possibly be human.*

I opened my mouth to scream, but the next thing I saw trapped the sound in my throat.

Any hope I had of calling this place home turned to ash with the flames outside my window. I needed out of this room. I needed out of this house. I needed to get as far away from this place as I could.

Roman stood at the head of the rectangle stone. He was the only one in the crowd still fully clothed. But he was there. He was watching.

He lifted his head. His gaze caught mine and his mouth moved with a single word.

*Run.*

## *Eve*

MY ENTIRE BODY WENT TIGHT. THE HUM IN THE AIR TURNED INTO A SCREAM. I dropped the curtain. My breath exploded in my lungs as I turned and lunged forward. I tore the door open, wondering if it had been unlocked all this time, if my prison was simply an illusion.

I bounded down the stairs, flung open the front door and bolted down the street. The once serene, welcoming community felt dark and ominous now. The crisp white cottages loomed over me. The darkness behind their windows taunted me with whispers.

My bare feet pounded the pavement. Tiny pieces of rock dug into my soles. Beads of sweat coated the back of my neck. My heart thundered in my ears with every step.

My calves ached.

My heart felt like it had been pummeled out of my chest by a freight train.

But I ran.

I pushed harder than I ever had.

I reached the arched opening in the stone wall that surrounded the

community. I passed the guard's cottage. I didn't stop until I reached the gate. The tall chain link fence might as well have been a brick wall. It was ten feet high with barbed wire rolled at the top. There was no going over it. The gate was locked. A stream of warm light glowed across the garlic field as the guard opened the door to his cottage. He stepped out onto the porch; his gaze trained on me.

I ignored him and looked out past the stream to the wall of trees on the other side. I knew how deep that forest was. I'd run through it once already. I knew the dangers that lurked in its depths.

The sky was dark. A blanket of clouds covered the moon.

The night air was chilled without the sun. Instinct told me I wouldn't make it ten minutes on the other side of this fence, but adrenaline pumped through my veins like fire.

*You can do this, Eve. You're not a quitter. You're a fighter.*

"Let her go."

The command was Roman's. I knew by the way my skin prickled in his presence.

The competent authority in his voice licked through my insides as I turned to face him.

The heat in his eyes blazed through the darkness. Even after what I'd witnessed through the bedroom window, I felt the cord that bound us pulling tighter and tighter.

I stood there, silent.

Breathing.

Waiting.

I thought everything had changed, but it was still the same.

I glanced at the forest and the mountains around us. Out there I was alone.

My gaze shot to the community behind us. In there I was alone.

*I will always be alone.*

My thoughts wreaked havoc on my emotions. My heart ached with sadness. The mental image of the fields, animals, pristine white houses, warm baths and soft beds floated away like smoke in the wind.

I didn't want to leave.

*I have to leave.*

I felt the tears threatening to fall. How could I mourn the loss of something that was never mine to begin with?

Walking through that gate meant leaving the last two days behind. It meant ignoring the hold that Roman had on my soul. It meant running from one uncertainty into another. But staying here meant accepting what I'd seen.

*What exactly did you see, Eve? What is it that you have to accept?*

And there it was, a sprinkle of doubt. A dash of hope that maybe I'd overreacted. That was the anchor that held me in place.

Depending on where the blood came from, there was no imminent danger in what I'd seen. It was just weird as fuck. *Or maybe it wasn't.* Maybe it was normal. From the stories I'd been told, I expected much worse.

*Did it get worse?*

I had questions. I wanted answers. I needed the truth. Within those walls was a vault of secrets, and the man standing in front of me held the key.

The tall grass of the garlic field swished around our legs with the midnight breeze. Tree branches swayed in the distance. Water rippled over the rocks in the stream.

The light from the guard's open door disappeared as it clicked closed.

We were alone.

My heart lodged in my throat. My stomach did somersaults. "What was that?"

Roman narrowed his eyes. "Leave, Eve."

I moved closer to where he stood. “What was it? What did I just see? Was it blood?” *Tell me there’s nothing to be afraid of. Tell me the stories aren’t true.*

“I told you we all have a purpose. The ceremony is a celebration of that purpose.”

“Blowjobs and kinky fuckery in the middle of a bloodbath? *That’s your purpose?*”

“Procreation. Reproduction of the anointed in order to outnumber the infected. Survival is our purpose.”

*Yeah, you mentioned that already.*

“And you need blood for that? You need an audience for that?” I took another step toward him. The dirt was soft and forgiving under my bare feet.

“Yes, and yes.” He let out a sigh. “Atonement requires a pure sacrifice. That’s why we use a lamb.” *Not human blood.* “It’s why God used His own Lamb thousands of years ago. The animal blood defiles the demons but it makes us clean. Their poison is our salvation.” His voice dropped lower. He licked his bottom lip, leaving a glistening trail over the plumpness. “What you saw was an expression of faith among witnesses. Sex isn’t shameful, Eve. It’s a gift. *People* put boundaries on sex. The world painted it black and white. Right or wrong. *God* designed it to be holy. Why do you think an orgasm is the most intense form of pleasure the human body is capable of feeling? Better than taste or sight or sound.”

All the times he’d fought the urge to touch me, I’d just thought he had some superhuman willpower. Assumed he wielded some kind of control over his sexuality. That the struggle with his body’s reaction had something to do with negative views on sex. But now he spoke about it so reverently. He called it *holy*.

“So, you don’t despise sex. You just despise sex with *me*.” My words weighed heavily against my beating heart.

“I don’t participate in the ceremonies.”

*Not the response I was looking for.*



“And outside of the ceremonies?”

“The location makes no difference. I don’t fuck.”

I scoffed. “Ever?”

“No.”

“Why?” I tipped my chin in defiance. “If it’s a celebration... If it’s your *purpose*—”

“I said, I don’t.”

I stormed forward. “Why?”

“Leave it alone, Eve.”

I stepped closer, close enough for the scent of bonfire, night air, and *him* to make my head spin. “Why?” I lifted my hands to grab his shirt, to shake him, to make him answer me.

His arms flew up and he snatched my wrists. He pulled until my body crashed against his. The air left my lungs. He stared down at me, his gaze savage and dark. The binds that had been holding his restraint seemed to snap.

“Because the last time I did, someone died.”

## *Roman*

WHAT THE FUCK HAD I DONE?

This woman blew into my life and churned up dust that had been settled for years. Her mere presence was a weapon, slicing me open and making me want to bare my soul. Everything about her was hypnotic and dangerous. She unraveled my secrets, then used the thread to tangle me in knots.

*Fuck.*

I grabbed her before I could stop myself. Her delicate body molded into mine, and a surge of power shot through my veins. A beast raged inside, thirsting to claim and destroy. She trembled as she looked up at me; her brown eyes flared as if she sensed its presence.

Too late to go back now. We were too far gone. The wound had been opened. The secrets were spilling out. She would either accept my sins or run.

*And if she runs, I'll chase her.*

“Her name was Eliza.” The wall I’d built around her memory went crashing to the ground.

“You loved her,” she acknowledged softly.

It wasn't a question, but my heart roared its answer.

*Yes, I fucking loved her.* The kind of love that was so powerful it was almost painful. A soul-consuming love.

“What happened?”

*I happened. She gave me her body and I stole her life.* Then, she left me behind to pick up the pieces.

“She was pregnant, and the baby came early. She made herself the sacrifice. She gave her body for his.” My words lingered in the air.

I'd spent months afterward asking God why He hadn't taken me instead. I'd spent the last three years wishing He had.

I poured everything into the community. I worked in the fields. I tended to crops and the animals. I turned every ounce of pain, heartache, and anger into purpose.

Eve's gaze locked on mine, full of so much despair that it ripped into my chest.

“You have a son.” Her voice cracked.

“No. I lost him, too. Eliza let them cut her open to save him. She bled to fucking death and he died anyway.” My throat felt lined with razors. It was hard to swallow.

She sucked in, then let out a shuddered breath. Her eyes glassed with pain. In them, I saw reflections of a broken man, a man who was foolish enough to believe he could conquer the world.

“I did that to her.” My heart fisted in my chest. “If I had just left her alone, she might still be alive.”

“The unforgivable mistake.” She said it so softly that I swore it was meant more for herself than for me. She shook her head. Blinked back her tears. “You can't live your life thinking like that.” Her hands broke free of my grip and moved to cup my face.

There was confidence in her voice and comfort in her touch. A contrast of

strength and softness.

“I lost someone, too.” She swallowed. “Because of sacrifice. Just like you.” She dropped her hands, then locked them together. “If I hadn’t run... If I’d been brave enough to fight, maybe my parents would still be alive.”

*Her parents.* They were the two people she’d lost. Their death was what she’d been running from.

I didn’t interrupt. Something told me she needed to let her secrets spill as much as I had.

“It was supposed to be a simple trade with another camp. When we got there, the camp was abandoned, except for a single vampire. By the time I saw him, he’d already gotten to my father, but my mom—”

She choked over her words and my stomach clenched. I knew the pain that thickened her throat. I knew the anguish that coated her heart like a sheet of ice.

She cleared her throat and continued. “She gave herself as a sacrifice and I *watched*.” She said the word as though it disgusted her. “I peeked around the corner like a coward as I looked into her eyes. She kept his attention on her, never even acknowledging me. I knew she was giving me a chance to run. And I did. Only I ran the wrong way.”

That was what she’d dreamed of the night she screamed in her sleep. It had to be.

She squeezed her eyes shut as a single tear rolled down her cheek. “I ran without trying to save her. I ran without knowing if she had gotten away. I ran without saying goodbye, and I don’t know if I can ever forgive myself for that.”

Her confession slammed into me. It tore me open, sank inside and infected my soul. *We are the same.*

She opened her eyes. “But we have to, Roman. We have to forgive ourselves because if we don’t, then those sacrifices were for nothing.”

The pain, the guilt, the anger—it all rolled off my shoulders and puddled at

her feet. I breathed for what felt like the first time in three years. Somewhere in the distance leaves rustled in the forest. A bear. A wolf. It didn't fucking matter. All that mattered was right here.

"I know you think it's easier to shut it all out, but—"

I cut her off. "It was easier. Until—" I paused.

"Until what?" She licked her lips and swallowed past the gravity of the secrets we'd both just shared. The pulse at the bottom of her throat fluttered.

She waited.

"Until you. You make me want things. You make me think about things."

"What kind of things?"

*Tasting you. Fucking you. Marking you. Owning you.*

Three days ago, I wanted nothing to do with sex. My reasons were mine. My past was mine. I shared nothing with no one. And I was content that way. Now, I walked around with a permanent hard-on. The need for release was fucking unbearable. Like right now. I was so hard it fucking ached. Drops of pre-cum soaked through my pants where the material rubbed against the tip of my dick.

My gaze connected with hers. The eyes never lied and hers were begging me to fuck her.

"Things I can't give you." *I'll ruin you, too.* "If you want to fuck, I suggest you go find my brother."

"I don't want your brother." She reached between us and palmed my cock through my pants.

"Fuck. Eve." I growled under my breath. "Jesus." I gave up control and thrust my hips forward, fucking her hand.

I couldn't stop it. Couldn't fight it. Didn't want to.

I fucking welcomed it.

Finally.

Fucking *finally*, I let her touch me.

Her fingers squeezed my length and it was heaven. It was holy. I was reborn. It pardoned my sins and absolved my shame.

My vision went black with need. I dipped my head. Ran my nose through her hair. She smelled so sweet, like the honeysuckle that covered the stone walls.

I brought my mouth to her ear. “You should go.” My throat worked over a swallow. “You should run. Far and fast. And you should pray I don’t catch you.”

“Why?”

“Because if I do, I won’t just fuck you. I’ll split you open, fill you up and live inside you.” I gave into yet another temptation and gripped her throat. My fingertips toyed with her pulse point, high on the power I held over her. “It won’t be blood pouring through your veins. It will be me. If I catch you, Eve, I will ruin you.”

## *Eve*

I BROKE INTO A RUN.

Not because I didn't want Roman to catch me, but because I *did*.

My bare feet sank into the soil as I took off in a sprint. Adrenaline shot through my body as I rushed through the garlic fields and out of the open gate.

*I won't just fuck you.*

The thrill of the chase coursed through me. I pushed harder. Ran faster. My breath came fast and heavy.

*I'll split you open, fill you up and live inside you.*

He would.

He would own me. I knew it.

But I would own him, too.

My skin rippled with anticipation, but I didn't dare look over my shoulder.

I stepped on rocks and hurdled fallen branches. Wind whipped against my

face. The night air chilled my skin yet need heated my veins. Need for him. I still felt him, thick and long, in my hand. *What would he feel like inside me?*

Heavy footfalls sounded behind me. *Thud, thud, thud.* Masculine feet on hard ground. Goosebumps ran over my flesh. *He's coming.* Just like the man in my dream.

I picked up my pace. The stream was only a few feet ahead. My heart threw itself into the chase. I braced myself, held my breath and plunged in. The waist-deep water chilled my bones and froze my skin. My feet slipped on the moss-covered rocks at the bottom of the stream, but I pushed forward. I shoved through the current. My teeth chattered.

Water sloshed behind me right as I reached the other side. My hands gripped the dirt and grass on the edge of the bank. I hoisted myself up and dragged myself out. My wet clothes clung to my skin. The air was even colder now. My bones were still frozen; my feet were still chilled, making it harder to run.

The water stopped sloshing. Footsteps crunched twigs and grass: mine and his.

I reached the first of the trees when strong arms wrapped around me from behind. This wasn't the grasp of a simple man. This was a mountain of power. A primal beast.

*He warned you.*

I held my breath. My heart strummed. My muscles screamed with both ache and delight.

“You told me to run.”

“And you thought I wouldn't chase you?” His words were a dark, deadly growl against my ear.

*No. I hoped you would. I dreamed of you, of this, before I ever knew you.*

He dragged me against him. One hand moved to my breast, and I shrieked when his fingers twisted my nipple. His teeth skimmed along the fluttering vein in my throat. “Especially when you ran the wrong fucking way.”

*Shit. Way to go, dumbass.*



I wasn't thinking.

Fear spiked through me, adding to the high of the chase and making my pulse go wild.

Roman pressed his weight against my back, making me achingly aware of how hard he was. "I'm not the only dangerous thing out here. But I am the only thing that can save you." His teeth sank into my flesh, hard and sharp. "You're mine now, sweet Eve."

"I believe she was mine first," someone interrupted.

Dread lodged in my throat.

Roman let me go, then stepped beside me. We both turned to the sound of the other male voice.

Jared stood at the edge of the forest, his dark hair longer now. The shadow of a short beard covered his jawline. He wore dark clothes that looked brand new. Nothing like what we had to scavenge from other camps. His mouth spread into a wide grin as his gaze slid over my body. Panic made my heart thrash against my ribcage. *I thought he was dead.*

"You know this man?" Roman asked, his voice drowning in violence.

*You could say that.*

Jared was my first. First love—if you called it love. First boyfriend. First lover. Then, he disappeared, leaving me to believe he was dead. *Until now.*

"Well done, Eve," Jared said. "We've been trying to get inside that camp for over a year. You managed to make it your home within days." *We.* He'd joined the familiars. *Or the vampires.* The darkness made it hard to tell if he was still human.

He ran a palm over his crotch. "Then again, you always were a hard one to resist."

*No. Tell me this isn't happening.*

Roman snarled as I looked over at him. He bared his teeth. "You lied."

"What?" No!" My stomach hollowed out. I wanted to vomit.

“You were never alone. When I told you to run, you ran straight to him. You’re one of *them*. You’re a fucking liar.”

I grabbed his arm. “No. Roman, please... that’s not what this is. I swear.”  
*Can’t you see my heart about to explode in my chest?*

“Was any of it real? Or was it all part of the lie?” He smiled coldly as a heartless mask slid over his face. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter because I’m going to kill him regardless.” He yanked free from my grasp. “And you better run, Eve. For real this time. Because you’re next.”

Terror—*real* terror—rolled down my spine, paralyzing me. I wanted to scream, to plead my case, to *make* him listen. But in a shot, he was gone.

His shadow was a blur as he darted toward the woods. Bone crunched as his fist connected with Jared’s jaw.

I ran forward, not caring that I was throwing myself into the middle of a lion’s den.

There was a loud groan and then another punch. A bone-chilling thud when Roman shoved Jared to the ground. His hand clamped around Jared’s throat.

Jared grunted and gasped for air. He kicked his legs, breaking twigs and crunching leaves. He thrust his head forward, crashing his forehead into Roman’s nose.

Roman’s howl tore through the darkness and I fell to my knees beside them.

“Stop!” My cries were wasted.

My tears were useless.

Roman growled as he squeezed Jared’s throat harder. Blood coated his hand, poured from his nose, painted Jared’s face.

I stared down at Jared’s eyes, once the color of honey, now bloodshot and almost lifeless. My heart cracked wide open, splitting me in two. I wanted to save Jared, but I knew doing that meant losing Roman.

“It’s almost fucking poetic,” Roman said, looking over at me as he drew the life from Jared’s lungs. “The moment I saw you, I knew.”

“Knew what?” Tears spilled down my face.

“That we were destined to destroy one another.”

*Roman*

FUCK.

Fuck.

*Fuuuuuuuck.*

My mind screamed.

My fingers tightened their grip. The pulse beneath my fingertips slowed to a near stop.

Rage swirled like inky blackness.

Like a demon threatening to possess my soul.

And then, light broke through with a gentle, tender touch on my forearm.

The calm, steady voice of a siren sang through the darkness. “You’re wrong.” Then she was behind me, straddling the limp, lifeless body we both sat on. Her hands circled my waist. Her breath ghosted my ear. “We’re destined to save each other.”

## *Eve*

MAYBE IT WAS SUICIDE.

But I had to try.

The moment the words left my lips, Roman let go of Jared's throat. He turned and threw me to the ground, pinning my hands above my head. He looked like a savage as blood trickled over his lip from where Jared had busted his nose.

I saw the moment his control snapped.

His eyes narrowed. His features darkened with feral, agonizing need. His body coiled with fierce power. Every muscle tensed against me. His cock was like granite, hard and heavy against my stomach. Every one of my nerves sprang to life. My body vibrated. My core ached to be filled.

"Is *this* salvation?" he growled.

*'Yes,' my body screamed.*

He pressed into me, agony flashing in his eyes. Like his body did things his mind begged him not to. "Because it feels like Hell to me." His nostrils flared and his fingers dug deeper into my wrists.

“Stop fighting it.” I lifted my hips off the ground, rocking against him. My body had never been so desperate. “Stop fighting *me*.”

“Do you see now? Do you see *why* I’m fighting it? I just killed a man. This was never supposed to happen. *We* were never supposed to happen.”

“That’s a lie and you know it.”

His tortured eyes met mine. The look he gave me ripped the air from my lungs. His gaze probed deeper than my skin, seeing all the way inside me, snatching me from my hiding place. Silence plowed into us, nearly shredding us to pieces. Air clogged in my throat.

*Talk to me.*

“Did you know he would be waiting here?” Roman asked, finally.

“No.”

“But you did know him.”

“He’s someone from my past. And until five minutes ago, I thought he was dead.” *Now I knew he was.*

His emotions painted his face—confusion, pain, regret. Acceptance.

“Would you really have killed me?” I asked him. Even at this moment, as I left my life in his hands, I still wanted him. My nipples pressed against his chest. The bottom of my belly clenched with need.

He swallowed hard. “No,” he said, and my heart lurched. “But you understand why I had to kill him?”

Understanding and acceptance were two different things. I understood why Roman had to kill Jared. If he hadn’t, Jared would’ve killed him and done who knew what with me. But in my mind, the man who’d stood at the edge of the forest and picked a fight wasn’t the same man I knew all those years ago. In my heart, he was still charming and witty. He was full of life and hungry for adventure. Now, he was gone—truly gone—and I had to mourn his death all over again.

“You heard what he said, Eve. He was one of them. They want our home.

They want to use my people to gain favor with the vampires they worship. I can't let that happen."

I wasn't sure if he was trying to convince me or himself.

"I know."

He let go of my wrists and swept the front of his finger down my cheek. "When I thought he was here for you, I wasn't just angry because you lied. I wanted to kill him for touching you. I wanted to punish you for letting him. The thought of someone else having you ripped my sanity to shreds." His gaze dropped to my mouth. "Even if it was before I knew you."

His hand moved to curl around the nape of my neck. My body arched into him and he groaned.

"Nothing matters before I knew you." I hooked my leg around his calf. "Only you. This. Now."

He lowered his head and kissed me. Not a gentle apology. A fierce claiming. A clashing of teeth and tongues. He pushed his erection into me and I pushed back, taking every ounce of friction he gave. He swallowed my moans, flooded my lungs with his breath, and filled my soul with his savageness. I slid my hands under his shirt, digging my nails into his back. He bit my lip with a growl, anointing our kiss in blood. Mine from my lip and his from the fight.

His other hand slid down my body and grabbed my waist, pinching me through my clothes hard enough to bruise. He pulled his mouth from mine. "I need to fuck you. And it might kill us both." He huffed to himself. "We're both vulnerable right now. To each other. To nature. To whoever the fuck might still be out there. It goes against everything I am, but I can't wait another goddamn second."

"Then don't."

I tore my shirt off, then my shorts and panties. He did the same, yanking his pants down, then tossing them to the side. We discarded clothes until we were both naked and panting with need. Wild. Primal.

His thumb skimmed my lip, smearing blood. "I told you I'd ruin you." He

gripped my hip, pinning me to the hard ground as he positioned his cock at my entrance. “And I’m just getting started.” He drove into me with a hard, piercing thrust as deep as my body would allow.

It hurt like hell.

And it felt like heaven.

His fingertips dug into my hip, while his other hand grasped my throat. And he thrust.

With vicious grunts and long, powerful strokes. Sliding out, leaving the wide tip at my entrance, then driving back in. Our bodies slapped together.

Over and over.

I was entirely at his mercy as he rutted into me like an animal uncaged. He filled and stretched and bruised me until I cried.

The ground scraped my back. The rocks and broken branches were unforgiving against my skin.

I opened my legs wider, offering him more, needing him to take more. He tightened his grip around my throat and white light dotted my vision. I fought to take in a breath.

“That,” he groaned. “I fucking love the feel of that. Feel how your cunt squeezes me? You were fucking made for me, Eve.”

The hand on my hip slid around to my ass, lifting me off the ground and holding me steady with his rhythm.

I dug my nails into his shoulders, giving him back a fraction of the pain gave me. He didn’t let up. It only drove him to fuck me harder.

“Fuck, I’m going to come.”

“Do it.” I grabbed his ass, holding him in place. “Come inside me. Let me be your second chance.”

He winced. His voice was strained. “I can’t. I won’t.”

“*Please.*”



“Fuck, Eve.” The grip on my neck loosened. “Fuck.” He dropped his head to my shoulder, sinking his teeth in as his body tensed and his cock pulsed inside me.

Tingling sparks of bliss shot from my belly to my toes. My body went taut as my orgasm crested and crashed. My pussy clenched around him.

He moved his lips to my ear. “You have my blood on your mouth and my seed in your cunt.” He nipped my tender skin. “You belong to me now.”

*Roman*

I MARKED HER.

With my blood. My sweat. My cum.

She was mine.

And I took care of what was mine. I'd kill for what was mine.

"We need to go." Before someone or *something* else showed up.

This was exactly why my urges were dangerous. All sense of self-preservation disappeared when they took over.

I lifted Eve into my arms, leaving our clothes in piles on the ground. Mine were replaceable and hers were evidence of another time, another life. They were soaking wet and covered in mud, anyway. It wasn't like we could put them back on.

She looped her arms around my neck, then glanced back at the body on the ground. "You're just going to leave him there?"

*Well, I'm not giving him a fucking funeral.* "Yes. Let the others see him. They'll know we're not to be fucked with."

“He’s a human, Roman. Just like you. Just like me.”

She was wrong. He wasn’t human. Humans didn’t betray other humans. We were all supposed to be on the same team. But these motherfuckers were out here trying to join the armies that threatened our very existence.

We were not the same.

I kept walking, stepping over broken branches. “And if he’d killed me first, he would’ve farmed you out to them. That’s what they do, Eve. They bring other humans to their vampire idols, hoping it will earn them a spot among the infected. Human lives don’t matter to them, not even their own.” I slowed when we got to the stream, careful about how I carried her through the water.

She shivered against me when we climbed back onto dry land, reminding me just how delicate and fragile she was. I held her close, breathing hot air on her neck to warm her up. Her hands tightened around me.

I walked past the guard’s cottage, through the stone arch and into the community. The clouds shifted and the sky opened up, bathing us in the moonlight.

The ceremony must have finished. Couples were heading back to their homes. They all wore the traditional white robes we put on before and after the ceremony. They each had the cross painted on their foreheads and a smile of satisfied bliss on their face.

They watched with curious stares as I walked down the middle of the street; my clothes gone, no robe. I didn’t give a shit about my nakedness. They’d seen it before—years ago. But the second their eyes raked over Eve, possessive rage throbbled at the base of my skull. My fingertips dug into her flesh as I curled her body into mine, hiding her from them.

*She’s mine.*

My back straightened. I politely nodded at each of them as they passed by. I’d run away in the middle of a ceremony, then shown back up naked with a woman in my arms. I owed them an explanation, but I didn’t owe it to them *right now*.

I stopped when I spotted Joseph. “Find Isaiah. Tell him to meet me at the

gate.”

He stared at Eve a minute too long before replying. “Everything okay?”

My head hurt. My nose hurt. My fucking body hurt.

All I wanted was to get the woman in my arms back home, clean her up, then make sure those assholes left our community alone once and for all.

I cricked my neck and rolled my shoulders. “Everything is fine. I’ll hold a council meeting tomorrow night to explain.”

Eve kept her head buried in the curve of my neck. She didn’t turn to the sound of voices or move her gaze to the flashes of white as people walked by. That comforted me in ways I didn’t know how to explain. I was her safety. She’d watched me steal the life from her friend. Her body was battered, bruised and bleeding because of me, yet she sought security in my arms.

Fuck, I was getting hard again just thinking about it.

I kept on walking, not stopping except to open the front door of my house. I kicked it closed with my foot, then carried Eve upstairs to the tub.

I kept holding her while I turned on the water and waited for it to warm.

“Why do you need Isaiah?” she asked, finally looking up at me with wide brown eyes.

“We need to get you cleaned up and warm,” I said as I lowered her into the tub and under the flow of water.

“Why is he meeting you at the gate?” She kept pressing, like she always did. It was one of the things that turned me the fuck on about her.

She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. That was when I saw the true damage I’d done. Teeth marks on her shoulder. Fingertip-sized bruises on her neck and hips. Cuts on her back. Her hair was soaking wet and full of mud and leaves. Her split bottom lip. She looked like she was the one who had been in a fight.

I kneeled on the floor beside the bathtub, and my eyes caught hers. “I did this to you.” I soaked a washcloth with warm water, then squeezed it over her

skin.

She winced when the water spilled over her wounds.

“I put you in danger. I put us *both* in danger out there. It just... I can't control it. It's like a spell washes over me, and, *fuck*.” I was consumed by the primal need to dominate, to control, to claim. I tasted it on the tip of my tongue. I breathed it in with every breath.

I'd never been ashamed of who I was, of the things I craved. But, Christ, I was beyond fucked up. Even now, as I stared at her broken body, my dick was aching to take her. The only difference was that I would never do it outside of these walls again. I would never make us that vulnerable.

I prepared myself for her anger. I deserved it. Look what I'd done, what I wanted to do again.

“Roman, nothing happened. No one showed up.” *But they could have.* “And I'm fine.” She gave me a half-smile. “I've had worse.”

My vision was a violent red haze. My heart clamored around in my chest. My fist curled around the washcloth. *Someone hurt her.* Someone who wasn't me.

She placed her hand on mine. “I don't mean like that. I mean I've been cut by branches before. I've had bruises. I looked just as bad when I showed up here two days ago.”

*Had it only been two days?* It felt like a lifetime.

She had been hurt. And now she was hurt again because of me. And eventually, I would kill her because I was too weak to tell her no.

## *Eve*

ALMOST EVERY INCH OF MY BODY WAS MARKED BY ROMAN.

I ached.

The cuts stung.

My throat hurt from where he'd squeezed so hard I could barely breathe.

My pussy was throbbing and bruised but still clenched at the sound of his voice.

Roman washed my hair and my body. There was pain in his voice, regret in the way he touched me ever-so-gently. The battle he'd fought with himself since the moment we met made sense now. But didn't he get it? I didn't need him to be gentle. I needed him rough. Until Roman, I had never felt more secure. I'd never felt more wanted. It was as if he couldn't take another breath without being inside me.

The forest, the danger, the vampires, the threats all faded away. Nothing existed but us.

I understood it now; the basic primitive need to claim. I understood the desire to mark and be marked. I understood how these people could leave their

inhibitions behind and lose themselves in pure, visceral need.

It was freedom.

It was holy.

Out there, he couldn't wait to rip me apart and climb inside.

And now, he was carefully putting the pieces back together.

He dried me off, then carried me to his bed. *His bed*. Not the one I'd slept in before.

This room was bigger. The wall behind the bed was painted black and all the others were white. The bedding was white with a dark blue blanket neatly folded at the end. There were two nightstands with silver lamps and a long dresser that matched. It was crisp and clean, just like the rest of his house.

He folded the comforter back, then lowered me onto the bed. "You belong in here now." He pulled the covers up to my chin and pressed his lips to my forehead.

"Where will you be?" I settled my head into the pillow, suddenly more exhausted than I knew. "And don't ignore me or I'll follow you." I would. I would follow him no matter how tired I was.

He chuckled as though he knew I was telling the truth. Man, his smile was beautiful. "To make sure there aren't more of them."

"Roman—" I threw the covers back.

He grabbed them and pulled them back over me, pinning me to the bed with his hands at my sides. His eyes held mine. "I won't put this community at risk."

I sighed, defeated. "Promise me you'll be safe. Promise me you'll come back."

"I'll be back. And when I get back, I'm going to fuck you again." He kissed one corner of my mouth. "And again." He kissed the other corner. "Rest, sweet Eve. Because when I get back, this—" He slid his hands under the covers and cupped my pussy. "Will be coming all over my cock. That's my

promise.”



## *Roman*

I'D TAKEN A BITE OF THE APPLE.

Now, I would tempt fate, test God, challenge Death, whatever it took to have another taste.

I left Eve naked in my bed, where she fucking belonged. Her scent was all over my hand, on the tip of my tongue, burned into my soul. I was already thinking of all the ways I wanted to fuck her again. I wondered if she was thinking of it too. Or if she was afraid of me.

Would she run again?

Fuck, I hoped so.

I threw on a pair of pants and a t-shirt, then pulled on a pair of boots.

The streets were quiet. Everyone had gone back to their homes by now. The lights were off. Only the moon lit the way.

Like I'd asked, Isaiah was waiting for me at the front of the community. He wore his guard uniform—dark blue pants and button-up shirt. The shirt was rolled up his forearms and his hands were tucked into his pockets as he leaned one shoulder against the stone wall.

“Joseph said you were naked earlier. With a woman—”

“I’m not talking about that with you.”

“But there *is* something to talk about.”

I ignored him. “There’s a body on the other side of the stream, a familiar. I killed him, then left him there to send a message.”

“And? What makes this one different from the last three?”

*He knew Eve. He had the balls to call her his. He threatened what was mine.*

“He talked like there were more of them out there. He made it sound like they’d been watching.” He knew exactly how long Eve had been here. Which made me wonder if he’d been watching *her* instead of *us*. I didn’t tell Isaiah that, though. “You get Ezekiel. I’ll grab Silas and some weapons. We’re ending this tonight.”

His face lit up and he pumped a fist in the air. “Fuck yeah, baby. I’ve been waiting a goddamn year for this.”

A few minutes later, the four of us stood at the gate, looking out into the darkness. I wasn’t the type to spook easily. I had no connection with fear. But I couldn’t shake the niggling sensation that something was wrong.

Silas brought us each a tranquilizer gun and three darts filled with animal blood, just in case.

We tucked the gun and darts into a fanny pack and strapped it around our chest, leaving the pouch part under our armpits.

With our knives in our hands, we made our way through the garlic fields. I thought about Eve and the look on her face when she’d seen that I’d chased her.

We crossed the stream and I remembered the way her tiny body felt when I’d carried her.

We stood at the edge of the forest, staring into the woods, and my dick twitched, remembering how it felt to finally be inside her.

The crisp night air made our wet pants feel like ice as they clung to our legs. I

looked back over my shoulder at the quiet community. It seemed so far away, even though it was only about one hundred feet. I clutched the handle of my knife as I turned back around and scanned the tree line.

The body was gone.

There was nothing but darkness in front of us. The moonlight didn't bleed through the thick branches of the trees. A wolf howled in the distance, making the hair on my arms stand on end.

"I thought you said you left the body," Isaiah said.

"I did."

Twigs and dead leaves crunched and crackled somewhere in the blackness.

Silas took in an audible inhale.

Coming here at night was dangerous. We all knew that. We never left the safety of our community once the sun went down. This was *their* time. We were in *their* territory. There were no fields of garlic or barrels of animal blood to keep the vampires at bay. We only had a blade and a few darts as our protection.

*Promise me you'll be safe. Promise me you'll come back.*

Eve's sweet voice played in the back of my mind.

I placed my palm on the weapons at my side, making sure they were still secure. *I promise, I'll come back.*

Five figures stepped out from the shadows. Five men dressed in all black, just like the guy from before. They stood tall, their spines braced, hands locked together in front of them, legs spread shoulder-width apart. They looked like soldiers ready for battle as they narrowed their eyes and studied us.

The air crackled with violent energy.

"You're a long way from home." I nodded back toward the forest. "The city's that way." There wasn't a modernized city for hundreds of miles. It had to have taken them days to get this deep into the middle of nowhere.

"We have a message," the tallest one said. His hair was lighter, almost gray, a

sign that he was older than the others. He was their leader. “There’s a war on the horizon. Corrus is going to crush everyone.” He took a step forward. “Queen Cassie is building an army. It’s not too late to join the winning team.” His face flashed with a smirk.

This wasn’t news. The vampire clans had been at war for years. Let them fight. They were doing us a favor by killing each other off.

I pointed to where I’d left the dead guy’s body. “Did you miss the memo? I’m already on the winning team.”

The man scoffed. “It doesn’t matter how many of us you kill. More will come. We won’t give up.”

“Then, you’ll keep dying.”

The quiet rage in his expression mirrored my own.

A flash of movement caught my gaze. Across the stream, on the outside of our gate, a man held a ball of white cloth at the end of a stick. He shoved it up in the air, waving it like some kind of warning flag, then brought it back down. A flicker of light broke through the darkness—a flame. He brought it to the cloth, setting the fabric on fire.

The older man laughed. “Did you really think we wouldn’t come prepared? We’re going to burn your settlement to the ground.”

As quickly as the fire appeared, it was cast across the sky and thrown into the water. The body holding the flaming ball of cloth fell backwards into the stream. A figure appeared on the bank, shoulders straight, chin lifted high.

*Joseph.* He’d followed us.

I gave him a single nod, a show of gratitude.

He nodded back as he stood there watching. Waiting for any sign of another threat on that side.

My attention went back to the man in front of me. “Not today, you’re not.” And then I took my knife and shoved it into his stomach, pushing upward with all my strength until my hand was smothered in his blood.

He gurgled and gasped.

A familiar sensation jolted through me as I pulled my knife from his gut. This satisfaction... this thrill... was the next best thing to the feeling of sinking my cock into a tight cunt. How fucked up was I that violence had the power to make me feel alive?

I watched as he hunched over, then tumbled to the ground.

“Anyone else have something to say?” I asked as I held my knife in the air.

The other four men rushed forward with their teeth bared and eyes glaring with rage. Silas, Ezekiel and Isaiah raised their knives and charged back.

They wanted blood.

So did we.

All around me were the sounds of struggle. Roars of anger. Howls of pain. Lungs seeking air. Flesh connecting with flesh. Skin crushing bone.

A sharp, stinging pain pierced my right side. The first warm trickle of blood trailed over my skin. My knife hit the dirt with a thud as I clenched my waist. Thicker, heavier blood seeped through my shirt and onto my palm. One of the men—this one short and stout with tattoos of tear drops on his face—muttered a curse under his breath as his eyes blazed into mine. Whatever he said, it wasn't a language I knew.

My fists struck his hard jaw. The bone crunched beneath my knuckles. Fiery pain shot from my hand all the way up my arm.

The man dropped to his knees and I grabbed him by his hair. My fist dug into thick brown strands as I dragged him across the grass and dirt toward the stream.

His knees scraped the ground. He clawed at my arms, trying to force me to let go. “They're going to kill you anyway,” he threatened, as if it made a difference whether he lived or died.

I knelt beside him when we reached the edge of the stream. The water rushed over the rocks. I knew from experience that it was ice cold.

“You mean the vampires? You know, I don’t even blame them for what they are. Not really. They were infected without a choice. But you—” I shoved his head into the water, then yanked it out and he gasped for air. “You choose to betray us, to betray God and worship *them*.” Blinding wrath boiled inside me. “You deserve this.” And then I pushed him back into the water.

His body struggled and fought to break free. His hands gripped at my forearms. His body tensed. His muscles flexed, then froze.

He was my third kill of the day, and I was immune to remorse. I would kill again and again if it meant keeping my people safe—keeping Eve safe.

I held tighter, pushed his head in deeper.

Until he went limp.

I pulled him out, just like I’d pull the other guy out before I went back home. We didn’t need the decay of dead bodies polluting our only source of water. I tossed him on the ground next to his friends.

Isaiah, Ezekiel and Silas stood in front of me, looking over their kills. Their chests heaved. Blood soaked their shirt and pants.

“Do you really think there will be more of them?” Silas asked as he wiped a hand over his face, smearing blood instead of cleaning it off.

“I think we have to fight to survive, whatever it takes, whatever that means.” I straightened my posture, taking back my role as leader. “But God is with us. We’ll always win.”

*Eve*

EVERYTHING HAD CHANGED.

I had changed.

I brought my hands to the bruised part of my throat and ran tentative fingertips over my skin.

He'd fucked me like a savage.

He'd fucked me like he couldn't go deep enough, couldn't go hard enough.

He'd fucked me like he was pouring every ounce of pain from his body into mine.

That, combined with the ceremony I'd witnessed, was enough to make anyone run. But I craved more. No more running. Not unless he was chasing me.

Time seemed endless as I waited for him to come back.

The moon cast a silver glow over the room.

The house was silent.

There was no chanting outside the window.

There were no footsteps creaking on the stairs.

Whoever said silence is golden was wrong. Silence was lonely. There was no louder sound than silence when you were waiting for your heart to come home.

Roman was more than any man I'd ever known. He led his people with courage and strength, leaving no room for uncertainties. I knew this because not long ago, I was an uncertainty. He sacrificed his own emotions in order to keep the wall standing—the one around the community and the one around his heart. He kept moving, kept breathing, even after his world had been ripped apart.

He was a tortured beast, trapped in the cage of his own heartbreak, and I wanted to be the one to set him free.

*If he makes it back.*

My heart lodged in my throat.

*He promised he would.*

He'd wandered into the darkness with no idea who else was out there, *what* else was out there.

I'd lived through a lot of things. Hardship. Doubt. Goodbyes.

People came and went. That was the way of a world ruled by beings who didn't value human lives.

I'd met people and wasn't afraid of losing them because I knew that loss was inevitable.

But this? Right now?

Thinking I may never see Roman again terrified me. It gutted me to the point of stealing my oxygen. Panic suffocated me.

*I can't do this without him.*

In a matter of days, he'd injected himself into my bloodstream.



He was my virus.

I couldn't lie here and do nothing. I wouldn't do nothing. *Like I did with my parents.*

I tore the covers back and the cool air rushed over my bare skin. *I'm still naked.*

And then the front door opened. Heavy footfalls took the stairs one at a time. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

My heart jackhammered.

*He's home.*

He was safe.

*What if it isn't him?*

It had to be him. No one else made heat blaze over my skin at their presence.

On pure instinct, I jumped out of bed and hid behind the door. Adrenaline replaced my blood, jolting me alive and awake and ready to run.

I could have waited in bed. I could have stayed under the covers while he climbed in behind me. I could have curled into his warmth and been perfectly content.

But I didn't want content, and neither did he.

It felt wicked and intense and thrilling to hide from him.

"Eve?"

He was in the doorway.

I held my breath.

I didn't want him to find me.

I wanted him to *chase* me.

He said nothing as he stepped deeper into the room, stopping beside the bed. He was covered in blood. His shirt was drenched in it. I hoped it wasn't his

own. His wet clothes clung to him from the waist down, where he'd walked across the stream. His boots left wet footprints on the wood floor.

He turned, not looking directly at the door. His eyes flashed as he cocked his head the slightest bit. Then, his lips spread into a wide grin and everything I thought I knew about him fractured and split.

He wasn't all malice and spite.

He was beautiful.

He was the man in my dream. His soul found me before his body did.

*Find me again.*

“Oh, this is what we're doing?” His smooth voice licked through the air and ran over every inch of my skin. “Okay, I'll play.”

And he did.

He walked out of the room, then disappeared into the darkness. His footsteps echoed down the hallway. Once he was far enough away, I bolted.

I ran into the bedroom across the hall and ducked into a closet, leaving only a small crack in the door. A rush of excitement shot down my spine.

It was quiet. For long minutes, there was only the sound of my ragged breaths and beating heart.

Then, there were footsteps, only they weren't as heavy this time. *He took off his boots.*

His silhouette appeared in the doorway and my body shuddered. He took slow, calculated steps into the room, trailing his fingertips across the dresser as he moved.

And then he stopped.

His back faced where I hid in the closet. “Sweet, Eve. You think you can hide from me? This is my house. I know every corner. Every room. What's behind every door.”

I heard the smirk in the last word.

*He knows where I am.*

There was a wooden door between us. I couldn't see his face. He couldn't see me. But the pure, carnal need was a visceral presence.

He reached around to his front. His arm moved up. Then down. His head fell back and he growled. It took all my willpower not to fling the door open to see what he was doing.

*You know exactly what he's doing.*

I swallowed the urges that were building inside me.

“You think you can keep your cunt from me?” His hand worked harder. “Ready or not, I'll find you.” He dropped his hand. “And I'll take it.” And then he lowered his head, then walked out of the room.

I blew out a breath. *Holy fuck.* And then I ran to the bathroom and hid behind the shower curtain.

Within seconds, Roman was there. “You like this, don't you?”

I held my breath as I peeked through a crack at the edge of the curtain.

*Holy. Shit.*

He was naked.

My gaze locked on his cock, heavy and hard between his thighs. Then, panic washed over my desire, clenching my heart.

*He's bleeding.*

Blood poured from a wound on his side, made a crimson trail over his hip, then dripped onto the floor.

I was about to tear the curtain back, forget the game and ask him what the hell happened. But then, he looked directly at where I hid in the shower.

“Run, Eve.” That wasn't the voice of a man. It was the call of a hunter. “Run, and don't fucking stop.” His tone was a combination of fascination and violent promise.

I yanked the curtain aside and broke out of the tub. His dark eyes caught mine as I rushed past him and out the door. I hurried down the stairs and sprinted through the kitchen.

I ran.

And I didn't stop.

I opened the door and fled to the basement, only stopping to breathe for a second.

His hands clamped my hips from behind, then slammed my body against his. He was hard. So hard.

His nose nuzzled my neck. His voice caressed my ear. "Got you."

"You're bleeding," I said.

This was wrong. He needed help.

"Shhh." His hand slid around my stomach, between my thighs and cupped my naked pussy.

My clit throbbed from his touch.

"Roman, you're hurt."

"It's just a cut." His hand cupped me harder. "And it didn't stop me from catching you."

He was right. He was hurt but not badly enough to keep him from chasing me down two flights of stairs.

"You need this as much as I do. The rush of adrenaline. The high from the thrill."

Yes. I needed this. I needed him.

He dragged his fingers between my folds. "See how wet you are?" He pushed me forward and pressed me against the wall. My body crushed against the concrete. His hand fisted in my hair. "It's because your pussy knows who it belongs to." He slid a finger inside, and I moaned. "Who it was made for."

I tried to hold onto the wall but there was no gripping the hard stone. It scratched against my sensitive flesh. It rubbed my hard nipples and soft stomach. Roman plunged his finger deeper. And then added another one.

I lost track of everything. Time. Place. Etiquette. All of it vanished. There was only this. Chemistry. Need. Fire.

His mouth was on my shoulder. His fingers fucked me without mercy. Hard. Fast. Wet. It was so loud that I should have been embarrassed. But everything about this man made me shameless.

“Oh, fuck, Roman,” I panted. “Shit.” I rocked against his hand, needing more. More friction. More pain. More pleasure. Just... *more*.

His tongue traced a hot trail up the column of my throat, stopping below my ear. His fingers hooked. “Break for me, Eve.” And then he brought his thumb to my clit. “Soak my fingers in your sweetness.”

That was all it took. His voice and that pressure *right fucking there*.

I came. Hard and violent. My body quaked and shattered as I cried out his name.

And he waited. With his fingers still inside me, not moving, only filling. With his lips dusting my skin, my shoulders, my neck, the side of my face. He waited for me to come back down.

“How can I not be addicted to breaking you when you fall apart so beautifully?” His voice was hoarse, raw with need.

I turned around as he eased his fingers out of me. His eyes burned with fire like some kind of angry god from Greek mythology.

My breath was shallow as I drank him in.

I reached out, cautiously. Carefully. My hand swiped over his wound. He didn't flinch.

I looked at the blood on my palm and my mind was transported back there, to the bedroom window. The fire. The chanting. The blood. The lust.

I brought my hand to my chest, smearing his blood over one breast, then the

other. “Is this how they do it?” I did it again, stealing the blood from his skin and rubbing it on mine.

He watched me. His eyes were glued to my every movement. His jaw gritted as though he was barely holding onto his restraint.

I swept my hand over my stomach.

“Fuck, I want to devour you. I want to steal every fucking piece of you,” he groaned, then his lips crashed over mine. His fingers were on my jaw, gripping hard.

His other hand grabbed my hip and shoved my body against him. His hard cock pressed firmly on my stomach. His tongue lashed with mine. He tasted and plundered and took. He stole. And I gave. My breath was his. My body was his. *Everything* was his.

I reached between our bodies, my hand coated in blood, and guided him to my entrance. My heart raced and I felt every thick pulse all the way in my core. I was throbbing. *For him*.

“Take it, Roman. It’s yours.”

“*Mine*,” he groaned, then pushed inside me. “Mine to taste.” His teeth nipped the curve where my neck met my shoulder. “Mine to fuck.”

But he didn’t just fuck me. He claimed me. He impaled me. As deep as he could go. He split me in two. He marked my soul, branded me as his.

The concrete wall assaulted the wounds that were already on my back. It would hurt like a bitch tomorrow but right now, I welcomed the pain.

His fingertips bruised my hips as he drove deeper into me. His body was slick with sweat when I grabbed his ass. Every muscle rippled as he growled and grunted and rutted into me like he couldn’t get enough.

I couldn’t get enough.

We were consumed by the fire, engulfed in the flames.

He wrapped a hand around my throat. “You have no idea what you’ve done. I won’t stop until I own you.”

He could kill me with his bare hands, and instead of being afraid of that kind of power, I was intoxicated by it.

My nails dug into his skin and he let out a hiss through his teeth. His cock rammed into me. His fingers clenched tighter on my neck. My back arched, pressing my nipples achingly hard against his chest while he fucked me.

“Please.” I had no idea what I was begging for. More of his slick pleasure. Release. Redemption. I just knew I *needed*.

“Please, what?” he growled against my ear. “I made you a promise. I said you’d come on my cock.”

My belly went tight. I felt the electricity fire through my veins.

“Do you remember that, sweet Eve?”

“Yes.”

My body rippled and quivered around him.

Everything crashed and burned and exploded inside me. My pussy clenched around him. My body spasmed and shook. Wave after wave rolled over me. The muscles and veins in his throat rippled with power as his orgasm came with a groan.

Still inside me, still stretching me, still filling and owning me, he brushed a lock of hair from my face. “How are you so fucking perfect for me?”

The corner of my mouth quirked. “I guess that was part of the plan.”

*Roman*

**THREE MONTHS LATER...**

The sky changed from bright blue to swirls of pink and orange as the sun began to set behind the mountains. The scent of freshly dug earth surrounded me as I drove my shovel into the ground, using it as a prop to hold my weight.

“That’s it. That’s the last pipe,” Ezekiel said as he stood up and wiped his hands on the front of his pants.

Joseph let his shovel fall to the ground, then wiped the sweat from his brow with the front of his hand.

I took a deep breath and looked out over the garlic fields. After the threat of fire from the familiars, we’d spent the last three months installing a system of pipes that flowed from the stream. When uncapped, these pipes would work as sprinklers around the entire border of our community.

“I hope those motherfuckers are watching,” Isaiah said. “You see that?” he yelled into the open air. “You can’t fuck with us.”



I grinned at my brothers and Joseph and Silas. “I told you. We will always win.”

The wind kicked up and the sky grew darker. A storm was coming. I smelled it in the air.

I pulled my shovel from the ground. “Let’s get home before the bottom falls out.”

Isaiah laughed. “You mean so you can knock the bottom out of Eve’s—”

“Don’t even fucking say it.”

Every day while we worked, they told their jokes and talked their shit. I didn’t care. For three years, I’d been a shell of a man. Ezekiel even told me I looked happy now.

So much had changed in such a short amount of time. I didn’t dwell on the mistakes of my past. I no longer punished myself for things I couldn’t control.

Eve had asked me to let her be my second chance, but everything with her felt like a first. She didn’t try to fit my broken pieces back together. She liked the edges rough. Yet she encouraged me to be kinder, at least to myself. She taught me forgiveness. She made me believe that every choice, every tragedy, every hardship had led us right to this moment. In the middle of hell on Earth, we found heaven.

We’d fallen into a regular routine. In the morning, we had breakfast and coffee. Then, she was learning to work the looms with some of the older women while I helped with maintenance and farming.

We took turns cooking, then we read by the fireplace. Then, I fucked her until tears stained her pretty face.

Tonight was her night to cook.

She stood at the kitchen sink, rinsing vegetables for dinner. She wore a white cotton dress that she’d made for herself. Her hair was pulled up into a pile on top of her head. A few rebellious pieces fell down the back of her neck.

Fuck, she was beautiful. Almost angelic. *And mine.*

I snaked my arms around her waist and leaned in to growl in her ear. She scrunched her shoulders when my beard tickled the side of her neck. God, her smell was intoxicating. Sweet like honeysuckles.

“I’ve been thinking...”

I pulled her closer. “Am I fucking you in these thoughts?” I was always fucking her in mine.

She tilted her neck, giving me access to nip her with my teeth. “You’re a great leader, Roman. You’re strong and wise and you care about your people.”

*I care about this. You. Making you come. Hearing you scream my name.*

Her head straightened right as I was going to bite her. “But what if you’re wrong?”

And she still challenged me every chance she got.

I lifted my head. My hands dropped from her waist.

“I know what it’s like out there. I’ve seen that world. Lived in it my whole life. Humans, vampires, animals—they all have the same goal. They just want to survive. Out there, it’s about self-preservation, no matter the cost. In here, it’s different. I feel it.” She spun around to face me. “The world doesn’t need more survivors, Roman. It needs love.”

“What do you know about love?”

“I know it is patient. It is kind. It does not boast.” She smiled and batted her lashes at me, knowing exactly what she was doing by quoting the book.

We’d spent the last three months reading it together. Eve had a lot of questions, and I took my time answering them. She was part of my purpose now. She was part of my plan.

“That’s not what I meant.” *Do you love me?*

She took my face in her hands. “I know that it feels a lot like this—the way my heart beats your name, the flutter I get in the pit of my stomach when you look at me like you’re looking at me now, the way every single part of me

throbs with need every time you're close."

I raised a brow. "Every part?"

"Every single part."

I owned her body because I'd taken it.

But that wasn't enough. I wanted her mind. Her heart. Her past. Her future.

"Even this?" I asked as I leaned my forehead against hers, indicating her mind.

She nodded.

"And this?" I brought my hand to her chest. My fingertips skimmed the bottom of her breast, indicating her heart.

She grinned wide. "Especially that."

"Good. Because I want all of you."

"Does this mean I'm going to the next ceremony? Will you claim me in front of everyone?"

"They know you're mine." I lowered my hand between her legs. "This is only for me."

She tipped her head back on a gasp when my fingers slid inside the seam of her panties.

"That face. That little gasp—" I rolled a finger over her clit. "That right there is mine and mine alone."

She took my other hand and flattened it over her stomach. Then she lowered her head and met my gaze. "This belongs to you, too."

The world stopped.

Time stopped.

My hand froze. My heart that beat in perfect cadence with hers now thrashed wildly in my chest. Fears and memories crashed and collided in my mind. The air was so still you could have heard a pin drop in the next room.

*I destroyed her.*

Eve leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed me. Her lips pressed so gently against mine. “It’s okay, Roman.” She pulled back. “I’m not breakable.”

*How did she know what I was thinking?*

Because she knew my soul as well as I did. She was a part of me now. My grief molded with her grief. My guilt blended with her guilt. My pain was her pain. Like two streams merging into a mighty river.

“You’re pregnant,” I whispered.

“Yes.”

This was my purpose. *They* were my purpose. It was everything I wanted and the very thing that terrified me.

I made a silent vow right then. To Eve. To our unborn child. To God. *I won’t let anything hurt you—either of you.*

I looked down to find my entire world staring up at me with a swarm of hope and questions and fear in her eyes.

“Are you ready for this?” she asked.

It was my turn to take her face in my hands. “I’ve been ready since the moment I met you.”

“I love you, Roman.”

“Again.” I swallowed. “I need to hear it again.”

“I said—” She peered up at me and chewed her bottom lip in that way that made my dick hard. “You’re going to be a dad. We’re going to fill this house with laughter and tiny little footsteps. Tons of them. Boys and girls. Oh, and I fucking love you.”

That was it.

This woman owned me. Mind, body, heart and soul.

“I fucking love you too.”

## EPILOGUE

*Eve*

**EIGHT MONTHS LATER...**

We got married in the white pavilion behind his house. Everyone in the community attended, even the children. Some of the older women I'd been making clothes with had put together fresh arrangements of honeysuckle as decoration. The whole place was smothered in the sweet scent. Other women got together and cooked a meal big enough to feed all of us afterward and Isaiah made sure there was music and dancing.

I'd made my own dress out of linen. It was sleeveless, with an empire waist and lace around the top. I'd even learned how to use berries and flowers to make dye.

Roman wore all black, looking like pure sin.

The moment I saw him, I thought my heart was going to explode.

He didn't just own my body.

He'd marked my soul.

We didn't need a ceremony or vows or an audience for me to know that.

I'd finally found my home.

*He* was home.

And now, I'd also found my purpose.

As I lay in bed with sweat soaking my face and hair, my body bloody and torn in ways I didn't want to imagine, I knew what he'd been talking about all this time.

The pain was forgotten. The tears had dried.

I looked down at the baby in my arms, into the brightest blue eyes I'd ever seen. Tears of joy spilled over my cheeks. "She's beautiful. What should we name her?"

Roman ran the pad of his thumb over her soft little eyebrow. His touch was careful and guarded, as if he could hardly believe she was real. "We'll name her Genesis. A new beginning."

"It's perfect."

He smiled down at me as he swept my hair from my forehead. "You're perfect."

Over the past year, I'd learned that loss didn't always equate to sorrow. Sometimes, loss brought strength. It bred courage. Sometimes, we needed to be broken and torn down in order to start over again.

This was it.

This was our new beginning.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Delaney Foster is a Louisiana native, not far from New Orleans, where eating, drinking, and dancing are pretty much a requirement for citizenship. She loves all things romance, a good mimosa, and Saturdays at the baseball park. She believes leggings are definitely pants and that there's a little bit of magic in every pumpkin spice latte. In her heart, Mr. Darcy will always be the ultimate book boyfriend. And in her books, you will find sexy morally gray antiheroes and the strong women who love them.

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