

THE

IN THE COMPANY OF KILLERS #8

DARKEST
HALF



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J. A. REDMERSKI

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J.A. Redmerski | THE DARKEST HALF
Fiction – New Adult Crime & Suspense



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Niklas

Francesca Moretti. I knew that killing her on that mission in Italy would come back to bite me in the ass one day. I just never expected it so soon. Or like this. And I really didn't expect that Jackie would get mixed up in it. But then nothing ever happens like we expect, either.

Hell, I don't know what's gotten into me. First, I have a thing for Izzy. Almost killed her once, then I catch feelings for her that I never wanted. Then I start fucking Nora Kessler, and even though I feel like I want to scrub my eyes out every time I look at her, I end up fucking her again. Nora's like getting so shitfaced drunk you puke your guts up all night and swear to the porcelain god you'll never drink again, only to sober up and buy a fifth of whiskey the very next weekend. Though I haven't been that drunk since my early twenties, nothing brings back memories of violent vomiting and toilet-kissing like Nora Kessler.

Now, I'm panicking about Jackie.

Women. That's my problem. I love them, though they are great at getting under my skin. I can't live with or without them, that whole cliché. But it's true. Maybe I have mommy issues. I should see a psychiatrist. Only problem there is that I'd never talk to a man about my shit, and if I got a woman, I'd probably fuck her, too.

Jackie.

I need to focus. She's innocent, and she's in trouble because of me. And it's because of her that I'm...conflicted about her being in trouble.

Shake it off, Nik. Shake it the fuck off.

I race past cars on the freeway for twenty minutes before seeing my exit out ahead shining green under my car's headlights. Another fifteen minutes down a dark, winding road, I arrive at the address Mr. Moretti instructed me to meet him.

Hmm. A psychiatric hospital. Coincidence? Or a big fucking slap in the face?

I park on the side of the road instead of out in the open because I have

plenty of time left before the forty-eight hours Mr. Moretti gave me are up. I want to see what I can see first.

I took a plane from Boston to Scranton, Pennsylvania, and the rest has been driving a rental. I realized on the way that the forty-eight hours seemed generous because it wasn't for my benefit. It was enough time for Mr. Moretti to drive to this place—more than enough, actually—as taking a plane with a kidnapped woman would be too risky. But why Pennsylvania? Why not pick somewhere closer to where he took her? And why forty-eight hours? It's less than a five-hour drive from Boston. I guess I'll find out soon. Maybe I got here before they did; that would certainly be to my advantage. It's even to my advantage getting here much earlier than expected; the element of surprise and all.

There are lights on, glowing in the plexiglass windows, so either the electric company has forgotten the old three-story building, or it's not abandoned. The unkempt grounds and the vines growing along the rock wall make it look abandoned, but people committed to mental wards aren't considered human by most of the population, so it's easy to overlook the upkeep. Like the ghettos, white trash trailer parks, and where the homeless sleep. Nobody cares about them, so why the hell would they put money into where the Forgotten are forced to live? Personally, I feel more comfortable around the Forgotten. Granted, I've got more money than I know what to do with, but that's just it—I don't know what the fuck to do with it. I give the shit away, and twice as much magically appears in my bank account the next day.

I imagine ninety-five percent of the population would love to have my “problem”. Maybe I'll give it to them. No, maybe I'll give it to Jackie when I get her out of this. *If* I get her out of this. She can take my millions and save as many girls as she wants, and I can find a nice little island somewhere and get away from all this. Maybe I'll go live among an aboriginal tribe somewhere, adopt their primitive culture, lose my boots and my leather jacket and my cigarettes; let my hair grow out, and my junk hang out; maybe I'll get a wife or two or three. Nah. I'd kill myself before I subjected myself to the nagging and drama of more than one woman.

And besides, I like my boots, leather jacket, and cigarettes. And, I admit, I'm a one-woman kind of guy when it's of the wife or serious girlfriend variety, which is why I've never had a wife or serious girlfriend.

After checking my gun's clip, I slip into the shadows and make my way

around to the back of the building. There's a small parking lot with weeds sprouted through potholes and chunks of asphalt scattered about. Only two cars are parked close to the building; a white transport van is parked underneath a portable metal garage; a blue dumpster sits next to it, overflowing with black garbage bags. Shadows move past one window on the lowest floor and two windows on the highest floor. And I smell food cooking. The heavy kind bubbling in giant pots, enough to feed thirty or more people. OK, so it's not abandoned. It's a fully functional, open-for-business psychiatric hospital, and what the fuck am I doing here? Why would they bring Jackie to a place like this?

Confused, I move forward, keeping to the shadows along the base of the building, gun in hand, finger near the trigger. As I approach the windowless back door, it opens.

I stand frozen; gun pointed at a man in a white T-shirt tucked into a pair of khakis; a garbage bag dangles from his hand. He looks like an orderly.

"You must be Niklas Fleischer," the man says.

Despite the gun pointed at him, he casually walks to the dumpster and tosses the bag atop the pile. What the hell is going on here? I could shoot him, but I need answers first. And he must know that, or else he wouldn't be so calm about the whole thing.

Wait...Mr. Augustin was the name I used when I went to Italy to find a kidnapped girl named Olivia Bram, when I was supposed to apprehend Francesca Moretti and bring her back to the United States for Olivia Bram's father to deal with in his own way. It was the name I used when I *didn't* bring back Olivia Bram—because she didn't want to come back—and when I *didn't* apprehend Francesca Moretti but killed her instead to get back at Victor.

Even though it's probably just that Mr. Moretti has discovered my real name, I got this odd feeling in my gut all of a sudden about why this guy used it.

"We've been expecting you," the man adds.

"Where is Mr. Moretti?" The pad of my finger brushes against the trigger.

The man puts up his hands in a semi-surrendering fashion. "Mind if I grab a smoke from my pocket?"

I glance at his pocket. No gun. Just the small rectangular shape of a pack of cigarettes.

“Sure. Go ahead.” With my free hand, and without taking my eyes off the man, I reach into my jacket pocket and get a cigarette for myself.

“Mr. Moretti will be here soon,” he says, and takes a long drag, holds it deep in his lungs. “You should come inside and get comfortable. Wait for him.”

“Where’s Jackie?”

The man smiles, close-lipped. He inhales another drag and takes his precious time before answering.

“She’s inside,” he says, smoke streaming from his mouth, “waiting for you.”

OK, I’m no idiot. I know that everything about this is wrong and suspicious. But worse is that I already know, not so deep underneath the surface, that I’m in a load of shit. The man is too composed. That smile on his face too confident. In the back of my mind, it’s why I haven’t moved backward or forward; why I haven’t pressed the trigger and put a bullet in this guy’s head already—because I know, without having to see or hear them, that there are more where he came from.

I’m surrounded.

I’m fucked.

So much for the element of surprise. The surprise is on me. Mr. Moretti is clever; I’ll give him that. He knew I’d get here long before the forty-eight hours he gave me were up, and he would be waiting. But I’m not dead. And neither is Jackie—I know this because they’d have killed me by now—so what does Mr. Moretti want? He definitely wants something from me.

“All right.”

I follow the orderly into the building; an offensive layer of bleach lingers on the air; the walls and ceiling are white-gray, the floor sterile white tile that makes the squeaking of rubber-soled shoes loud and annoying. I follow him down a long stretch of brightly lit hallway with doors on either side. Rooms. Unlit. Large, square-shaped plexiglass windows. But they’re all empty.

We round the corner at the end of the hall and step into a room with many tables. There are two doors: the one we entered and another obscured by shadow on the other side, which is closed and probably locked.

With that thought, I hear the door behind me close and then lock; the lights in the ceiling hum to life above me as someone flips a switch on the other side of the room beside a darkened door. It’s another orderly; he

remains standing there, guarding that exit; hands folded down in front of him. The only other potential way out of this room is through that elongated plexiglass window; it's as tall as I am from the waist up and stretches about twenty feet along the wall, revealing the hallway outside.

"Have a seat," the orderly says, pointing to a chair.

"I'll stand."

He shrugs with that "suit yourself" look.

He hasn't told me to get rid of my gun, and I find that both strange and my only relief.

I hear heels tapping, and then fluorescent light floods the hallway outside the plexiglass. The tapping gets louder as the woman approaches—I'm sure it's a woman and not a man wearing dress shoes because I know the sound of a woman's walk—and the distinct sound of a woman's walk in a pair of stilettos. Another Moretti sister, maybe?

A tall woman walks past the window; yellow-blond hair is pinned up at the base of her neck. She's wearing a black silk blouse with long flowing sleeves and a tight gray pencil skirt that hugs voluptuous curves and stops above her knees. The orderly standing guard at the door closes it behind her.

"Hello, Niklas," the woman says.

Niklas?

"Hello."

"You're probably wondering who I am." She moves toward me on those stilettos, pulls out a chair at the table and sits down, crosses her legs, props her right elbow on the table, and dangles her hand from it.

"No," I tell her, "I don't really care who you are; I'm here for Mr. Moretti and for Jackie."

The woman smiles, close-lipped; she licks the dryness from her lips and casually presses her back against the chair.

"Why don't you have a seat," she says, glancing at the empty chair next to her.

"Just like I told that guy, I'd rather stand."

"I'd rather you sit," she says, and although her tone never changed, I still felt the faintest hint of threat in her words.

I point my gun right at her face, finger on the trigger; the two orderlies move toward us, but they stop when she puts up her hand. Her gaze never moves from mine, and in it, I see nothing but bursting confidence and complete and utter fearlessness. She knows I'm not gonna shoot her—at least

not right now, while she has all the cards and I'm standing here trying to pretend I have anything. I don't have shit, and she knows it.

I lower my gun and sit heavily on the chair with a defeated sigh; my legs splayed out into the floor. I rest my gun on my lap but keep it in my hand, ready to fire.

"Where is Mr. Moretti?"

"He's not here," she says.

"Yeah, so, when's he gonna be here?"

"Oh. Well, Mr. Moretti," the woman says, "won't be coming, I'm afraid. He never was coming. I've never met him."

"What do you mean?"

One side of her perfect mouth lifts into a subtle grin; she casually crosses the other leg, and I notice a tiny hummingbird tattoo on her ankle. She takes her precious time to answer, which makes me want to put a bullet between her eyes. I grit my teeth instead.

"You were brought here under false pretenses, Niklas Fleischer. But it had to be that way, or you wouldn't have come otherwise."

I lean forward and look her in the eyes.

"Why wouldn't I have come otherwise?"

"Now you're interested in knowing who I am, aren't you?" she says.

"Yeah. Who the hell are you?" I inhale a deep breath, trying my damndest to keep from exploding. "And *why* wouldn't I have come otherwise?"

She leans forward too, as if to match me, to one-up me, still as confident and fearless as she was the moment she walked into the room. *Who the hell is this woman?!* She reminds me of Nora—the only difference is that Nora doesn't intimidate me.

"My name is Lysandra," she says. "And I'm the operative our brother, Victor Faust, was *supposed* to be in The Order." She leans forward even farther and stops just inches from my face, daring me, testing me, hoping I make a mistake so she can demonstrate how much higher on the scale she is than I am. "And you wouldn't have come otherwise because the only person alive in this world you would never betray or risk is the one person in this world that we want."

"You brought me here for Victor," I say, and I'm the first one to pull away and lean back against the chair again. "You're working for Vonnegut, and *you* kidnapped Jackie. You knew I wouldn't come for her if it meant

using me to capture my brother.” *Our* brother, seeing as how she is, apparently, our sister.

“Precisely.” She leans against the chair again and crosses her arms. “Letting you believe it was Mr. Moretti who kidnapped your whore, gave you plenty of time to ponder every scenario. You knew what to expect; you were given forty-eight hours to think about what you’d say, what you’d do, who in Mr. Moretti’s family you might use against him. You knew going into this that the Moretti family is powerful, but they’re not operatives. Mr. Moretti himself, although he’s a killer, is just a mafia bully. Any situation involving him you knew you’d be able to get yourself out of.” She cocks her head to one side. “But you never would have shown up if you knew The Order had taken her because you would have known right away *why* she was taken, and you would have known you couldn’t get yourself out of this under *any* circumstances. You would have had to accept that your whore, your woman, your friend—whatever you want to call her—was going to die, and there was nothing you could do to prevent it. So, showing up to rescue her would have been pointless. And we wouldn’t have you. Sitting here. Right now. Am I right, Niklas, or have I severely misjudged you?”

I swallow. And I hate this bitch already.

I look at my hands; the gun is still there, but it’s as useful in this place as an umbrella in a flood.

I set it on the table.

“Yes. You’re right,” I admit. “But there is one thing you did severely misjudge, *Lysandra*.” I smirk at her, then prop my left foot atop my right knee and cross my arms. “No matter how you managed to get me here, there’s nothing you can do or say that’ll turn me on my brother. I can’t give you what you want because I don’t know where he is. But even if I did—”

“Oh yes, Niklas,” she says, “I’m aware of that. I knew going into this that you’d never give him up and that you’d never cooperate with us in helping find him.”

“Then what are we doing here?” I ask. “You may as well kill me and get it over with.” I laugh mordantly under my breath. “Or do you plan to torture me? That’s what people like you usually do to those who won’t talk.” I motion my hands in front of me and scoff. “If you know me as well as you think you do, then you already know I won’t talk.” I lean toward her, darkness in my gaze. “Even if you skinned me alive. So, again, tell me, What. The fuck. Are we doing here?”

Lysandra glances at the orderly guarding the door; he nods and steps out into the hallway but not in view of the elongated window. A few moments later, the door opens, and another orderly walks in with Jackie. Her hands are bound behind her back; there's a cloth wrapped around her mouth, tied behind her head; her hair is disheveled and bloodied, and mascara is streaked and smeared across her face. She's still wearing the same clothes she was wearing when I picked her up at the airport.

Her screams are muffled beneath the fabric; the orderly wrenches her arms behind her, and she quietens down, but the tears flow unceasingly from her reddened eyes.

Lysandra takes my gun from the table and walks over to Jackie.

I shoot up from the chair.

She puts the barrel to Jackie's temple—Jackie's eyes plead with me to help her.

“NOOO!”

And she pulls the trigger; the shot rings out, temporarily deafening me; the sight in front of me temporarily traumatizes me.

Breath fills my lungs, leaving it in one desperate gasp as Jackie's body falls to the floor in slow motion. I feel like I'm running toward Lysandra—I even feel her throat crushed in my hands—but I realize I'm still standing in the same spot and haven't moved. Tears burn the back of my fucking eyes, and my hands are shaking.

Bright red crimson pools on the sterile-white floor. Without looking down, Lysandra steps away from it just before it can reach the heel of her stiletto.

“The example,” Lysandra begins, “was one-half of the reason you were brought here, Niklas.” She nods once more at the orderly standing by the door, and he goes out into the hall. “The other half is the threat.”

The door opens, and another orderly enters the room with another woman, bound the same as Jackie had been. At first, I feel...confused; I shake my head back and forth. *It can't be...* But then I feel the weight of reality, the weight of the truth, as it begins to crush me.

The woman is my mother, who I had been led to believe most of my life was dead, killed by The Order for being a spy.

And she's the only person I'd ever give my brother up for...

Niklas

I start toward my mother, a single train of thought blurring my vision: get to her first and kill everybody else in this building. But I don't make it five feet across the room before a white-hot pain strikes me in the back of my head, back, and ribs. My legs collapse, and I see the tile rushing up to meet me; the rock-hard floor first feels painful and then cool against my face as my cheek strikes and then settles against it. I cough and spit up blood; I try to focus my vision, but it takes too long for the room to stop spinning, so I just lay there, gasping, watching hazily through the shutter of my eyelids as they blink off and on.

When I can finally see straight, I count four pairs of rubber-soled shoes all standing around me, one pair of shiny black stilettos, and one pair of bare feet, which are my mother's, I know.

"As I said," I hear Lysandra's voice somewhere above me, "Jackie was the example—your mother is the threat. You cooperate with me to help bring Victor in, or she'll meet the same end as the whore."

I cough again and spit more blood onto the floor—my hands are being zip-tied behind me; I feel the tightness and the sharp edge of the plastic cutting into my wrists.

Someone pulls me into a stand, and my first instinct is to headbutt the guy in the face with the back of my skull, but I don't. I can't. I can't do anything stupid.

"Tell me something," I say. "Is my mother also your mother? I get the feeling you'd kill her just the same if she were."

"Yes. I would," Lysandra says. "But no, this woman is no relation to me." She steps around in front of me. "So, surely you see how much danger she's in."

I look at my mother; she's so frail and looks older than she is as if she's aged twenty years more than she was supposed to. But her eyes...those are still my mother's eyes, the ones I remember when I was just a boy. Goddammit!

“Nik,” she says weakly, and just hearing her speak my name after so many years fills me with unwanted emotion. I try to look away from her, but I can’t. “You don’t have to...tell them anything for me. You hear me, son? I’m ready to die. I have been...for a long time.”

I choke back the fucking tears and force my gaze to the floor. Blood sprinkles the tile beside my boots; there’s a faint reflection of my face there, within the tile, distorted, exactly how I feel at this moment.

I raise my head and look right at Lysandra.

“How long can you last?” I ask her.

She steps right up to me.

“Depends on the nature of the game we’re playing,” she says and then moves in so close I feel her hair tickling the side of my face. She whispers near my ear with her soft, warm breath, “But in any game, I can last longer than you can.” She pulls away.

I’m shoved back into the chair; the legs scrape across the floor. With a heavy heart, I watch as two orderlies carry Jackie’s body from the room, a trail of blood behind them. She never even had a chance. From the moment I met her, she was doomed to die just as she did—and I was doomed to have to watch. And to think, I started to feel something for her. A tear escapes down my face—not because of my feelings for her, but because I’m the reason she’s dead—and I wipe it away with my shoulder when it falls far enough to reach.

The orderly holding my mother sets her down roughly in the chair across from me. I glare at him, and he smirks.

“I’ll leave you two alone to get reacquainted,” Lysandra says. “And when I come back in thirty minutes, I hope you’ll have something for me.”

I never take my eyes off my mother—I refuse to give that bitch my attention.

Lysandra and the orderlies leave the room; two go through the door I entered from; two more follow Lysandra out the door near the plexiglass window. Both doors are locked, and both are guarded from the outside. Every move I make is being watched from four cameras mounted in the corners against the ceilings. And surely, everything I say is being heard by recording devices hidden throughout the room. I’m no stranger to all this, and Lysandra knows that. It’s also how she knows I’m not going anywhere. She has me by the balls, crushing them in her man-hating fist, and there’s not a damn thing in the world I can do about it.

“Nik,” my mother says, “what are you doing, son? You know, even if you give them what they want, they’ll kill you and me, and nothing will change that.”

“I know.”

“Then what are you *doing*?”

“Buying time.” I really don’t know *what* I’m doing—there’s nothing that can be done! They have us, and unless by some miracle someone swoops into this place and rescues us like they do in the movies, we’re going to die in here. The movies are stupid—nobody’s gonna save us from this. Not this time.

“Have you been kept here all these years?” I ask my mother.

“Yes. The years have flown by, really. They’ve...kept me drugged for most of it. But not today...” Her voice trails. “Today, they wanted me lucid.” She straightens up, pushing down thoughts that threaten to weaken her, and she looks at me with determination in her tired eyes. “Niklas, everybody in The Order loves somebody. They never wanted it that way—they wanted operatives who were emotionless, with no attachments. That’s why they started breeding them in the sixties instead of recruiting them.”

“Like the Shadow Sect,” I say, thinking of Nora Kessler.

She nods.

“But they’re all still human,” my mother says. “And no special breeding or training can ever take emotions and attachments away from humans—even terrorists have emotions. When The Order finally believed their plan would never work, they shifted gears. Instead of trying to breed emotional attachments out of their operatives, they utilized them instead.”

“And that’s why you’re here,” I say.

“Yes. That’s why I’m here and have been kept here all these years. For this very moment. And it’s why you—.”

I look up to face her sudden silence. And then I understand.

“It’s why they kept *me* alive,” I say, lowering my head. “Because I’m Victor’s only weakness—and here I thought all along it was Izabel.”

“She is a weakness,” my mother says, “but you are your brother’s greatest weakness; you always have been, Niklas.”

I swallow down the emotion congealing in my throat.

“You know about Izabel?” I ask, wanting to drop the previous topic.

“Everybody knows about Izabel,” she says. “She was a kink in the armor they never saw coming—were it not for that girl, none of this

would've ever happened. Victor never would've fallen so far—or at all—and never would've left The Order. There never would've been a bounty placed on his head; he would be next in line to run The Order when Vonnegut died or stepped down." She looks toward the door where Lysandra had left. "Instead of that woman. And you and Victor never would've had your falling-out."

It surprises me how much she knows being locked away in this place. But then again, I guess it doesn't.

"How do you know all this?"

"What else have I got to do in here?" she comes back. "Hearing and seeing and the occasional conversation is all I have." She shrugs. "And besides, Lysandra was sure to fill me in on a lot in preparation for your... visit."

I nod.

Then I raise my head with newfound energy.

"Where is Vonnegut?" I ask.

"That I don't know," she says. "I haven't seen him in many years."

I blink, surprised, and straighten my back against the chair.

"You've *seen* him? You know who he is?"

"Yes," she says. "He's your biological father. He's Victor's father. Lysandra's. Naeva's. I don't know how many children he's fathered, but I guess it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Our *father*...?" My eyebrows bunch in my forehead. "But..." I can't get the words out because I can't untangle my thoughts. That man I always knew...the one who I thought looked just like Victor and me...the one who hated me and had always favored Victor—the one Victor supposedly *killed* to protect me. He wasn't our real father? I want to punch a fucking wall, but my hands are tied behind my back!

"Did you know?" I look at my mother in a sidelong manner. "That he was their father too?"

I know the answer when she looks down and doesn't answer right away.

"I'm sorry, Nik," she says. "I never told you...not because it was forbidden, but because I wanted to protect you. If you knew, they would've killed you a long time ago."

"So...I'm just like Nora Kessler," I think out loud. "We were all just pawns, bred for one purpose—like fucking cattle!" I shake the chair; the legs scrape the floor.

“I’m sorry, Niklas,” she says. “But it doesn’t for a second mean I never loved you as my son. I wanted to take you away from all this. They wouldn’t let me. You were my son, but you were their property.”

I feel a warm sliver of blood fall from my wrist and down into my hand from where the plastic cut me, and I realize it’s due to absently trying to break my hands apart in anger.

Then I relax, but I still can’t look at her. I believe she loved me—this is all just too much to take in.

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted,” I say, the tiles blurring in my focused vision. “To get away from all this. To live a normal fucking life where all I had to worry about were bills and Jehovah’s Witnesses knocking on my door.” I laugh, gaze upward at the ceiling, and shake my head at the absurdity of it all. “This woman I...was with a few times”—I had started to say “fucked,” but this is my mother, after all—“ended up pregnant. I thought for sure it was mine, and she was still coming around because she wanted me to do something about it, but after a while, she never said anything. So, I came out and just asked her, ‘Is that mine you’re carrying in there?’ She looked down at her little rounded belly and then laughed. It kinda cut me, her laughter. And then she told me no, that it definitely wasn’t mine. She then reached for her cigarette on the bar and returned to what we were talking about. I hated her after that. I got up, took the cigarette from her mouth, crushed it in the ashtray, and then walked off. I never saw her again.”

“You wanted that baby to be yours,” my mother says.

I pause and then nod. “Yeah...” I say distantly. And then shake it off. “But I’m sure as fuck glad it wasn’t. A kid would just give The Order something else to use against me like they’re doing with you.”

Silence ensues.

“Niklas, I’m so sorry your life turned out this way. A normal life was all I ever wanted for you. Christmases and Thanksgiving dinners, vacations and school field trips, graduation, and college and your first shitty job in a restaurant; girlfriends and breakups and eventually kids; then that nine-to-five job and hiding from Jehovah’s Witnesses. If I could give my life for you to have that normal life, I would without thinking twice about it.”

Yeah, well, we can’t have everything we want.

After a moment:

“Niklas.”

My eyes meet hers.

“They’re going to kill us either way,” she reiterates. “Don’t let them fool you with my life into giving them what they want.”

Fool me...

Wait a damn second...

My instincts are kicking me in the back of the head with a steel-toed boot suddenly.

I play along for a moment to be absolutely sure of those instincts. What if everything she’s telling me is a lie? What if she’s on their side, pretending to be on mine and just playing with my emotions?

“I am going to give them what they want,” I tell her. “I’m going to strike a deal with Lysandra.”

My mother’s shoulders rise and fall; she shakes her head. “They won’t make any deals,” she says. “And if they do, you know they won’t honor them.”

Oh, I know...

After the thirty minutes are up, I hear Lysandra’s stilettos coming down the hall again, preceded by her shadow growing larger against the white wall beyond the plexiglass window. The door opens, and she enters with five operatives dressed in black military-style boots and black clothes and gear: tactical vests equipped with guns and extra magazines, knives, and all manner of things I once carried dressed like that, long before Izabel shook up The Order. *Izzy...I miss the hell out of her.*

I push myself into a stand, my wrists bleeding behind my back.

“I have a proposition for you,” I announce to Lysandra. “Are you ready to hear it?”

Lysandra walks across the room, her heels tapping against the tile. She stops in front of me.

“This isn’t a negotiation,” she says. “You will give me what I want, or the threat becomes another example.”

I don’t flinch; I keep my eyes on Lysandra, unblinking, untouched by emotion. And I negotiate anyway, for what little good it will do.

“How about you just keep me alive in this place until Victor comes for me?” I smirk and cock my head to one side. “Because he will. You should know that, at least.”

My mother, or whoever she is—I bet Vonnegut isn’t even my father—gasps, and her eyes veer toward Lysandra.

Lysandra grits her teeth and presses the barrel of her gun to my mother’s

temple.

“An example it is then?”

I wait for a moment, calling her bluff, and sure enough, just as I’d suspected, she’s reluctant to pull the trigger. She grits her teeth harder, and her breathing becomes more abrasive. My mother is her only bargaining chip.

“You *want* your mother to die then?”

I grin at her and shake my head. “You must really think I’m fucked up. Issues with women stemmed from mommy issues? Is that it?” I click my tongue and glance at the woman who may or may not be my actual mother. “She just told me that my father wasn’t my real father. Why should I believe this woman is who she claims to be?”

“*Niklas*,” my mother says with desperation, “I *am* your mother. I gave birth to you! Please don’t do this. Don’t let them get to you! Just tell them what they want to know!”

“So, then you *do* want me to tell them?” I ask, now more than ever, sure that my instincts were fucking spot-on. “Just moments ago, you didn’t want me to give it up. So, which is it, *mom*?”

Lysandra slams the gun against the side of my mother’s jaw, knocking her head back on her neck; the chair rises from the floor and wobbles before settling.

The next thing I know, I’m on the chair again, and Lysandra is straddling my lap, shoving the gun underneath my chin, forcing my head back. The smell of her minty toothpaste fills my nostrils, and fury swirls in her irises.

Despite being on the wrong end of the gun, I don’t back down.

“Maybe she *is* my mother, but we both know she’s not on my side.” (Lysandra’s nostrils flare.) “She works for you, or else she wouldn’t still be alive. And she conveniently knows a helluva lot of information for someone who has been locked up all this time in a mental institution.”

“*Niklas*! Please!” my mother cries.

I force myself not to look at her because I know if I do that seeing her will get to me—it already is. But I can’t fold. I can’t show weakness. I can’t ignore what my gut tells me—my gut is the only thing that’s never let me down.

I look Lysandra right in the eyes. “You killed the wrong trump card,” I tell her.

Jackie, I would’ve folded for. Because she was innocent and because she

had absolutely nothing to do with any of this. I hate to admit it, but it's probably best that she's already dead because it takes a huge fucking load off my shoulders. Yeah, Jackie is the one I would've folded for between the two. Victor would've forgiven me. He would've understood.

Lysandra moves from my lap and stands over me; the gun always pointed at my head.

"This is your last chance, Niklas," she warns, takes several steps backward to get away from my reach, and then trains the gun on my mother. "She is your flesh and blood, and I *will* kill her."

I shrug my shoulders. And I swallow my guilt because if I'm wrong, and that woman wasn't working for them—*No, fuck, Niklas! Stop doubting yourself!*

"It seems I have far too many flesh and blood relatives, and nearly all of them are worthless pieces of shit." My eyes sweep over Lysandra, from bottom to top. "And ass-kissing whores."

The shot deafens me. I never look over to see my mother fall, but the movement of her body hitting the floor in my peripheral vision torments me. Tears burn their way to the backs of my eyes and sinuses, but I hold them down. I will get over this as I've gotten over everything else. This is such a cruel fucking world, my life a dark fucking place I never asked for, with so-called family who has tried to kill me since I was a kid. And I can't even be sure that any of them are who they say they are. Naeva, Lysandra, my mother, my father. I can't be sure. I have to wonder if Victor is really my brother. No, he's definitely my brother; DNA has proven that. *Wait a second...DNA. What if that test James Woodard took on Nora Kessler was a fake? What if she is my sister? What if I've been fucking my sister?!*

"You look like you just shit yourself, Niklas."

Lysandra's voice snaps me out of the paranoid spiral. I raise my eyes to hers, sweat beading on my forehead and my heart pounding like a fucking speedbag in a boxing gym. "I think I kinda did," I tell her, though it has nothing to do with her killing my...that woman.

Screw this—I'm not going to start worrying about this shit.

I round my chin and taunt the bitch. "I guess now all you have left is my proposition. Are you prepared to wait? It could be days or weeks before Victor shows up."

Judging by the infuriated look in her eyes, she's not the patient type but knows she has no other choice.

“I should kill you,” she says.

“I died a long time ago, lady. So, go ahead. You’d be doing me a favor.”

There is movement behind me, and I feel a pinprick in the side of my neck, and the hazy room wavers in my vision. I see Lysandra’s lips moving, and I hear words coming from them, but they sound far-off, muffled.

Then that cruel world I live in goes black.

Izabel

A bullet rips through my hair and past my head, but it's only luck and a little instinct that keeps me two inches from its path, as I'd decided to spin out of the way before the guy even pulled the trigger.

I roll across the floor toward him and knock him from his feet with the sweep of my leg. I'm on top of him, my knees holding down his flimsy arms, and the barrel of my gun shoved underneath his chin before he knows what hit him; the *clank* and *woosh* of his gun as it hits the floor and slides across is always a pleasant sound.

"I-I don't know where she is!" he screams. "I-I never seen that girl in my life—"

"Stop lying," I say, shoving the gun deeper. His sweaty body reeks of fast-food cooking oil; the fingers of my left hand are wrapped in the top of his stinking hair. I bang the back of his head against the floor. "I know you know where she is—tell me now, or I'll scatter your brains across this restaurant."

He cries out when I bang his head against the floor again.

But then he...laughs.

I don't let him know I'm surprised by his reaction, but I sure as hell am because only deranged maniacs with nothing to lose and a sincere death wish laugh when looking death in the face. And I don't let him onto the fact that the second he laughed, I already knew where the woman was: dead.

The sun has already risen over the East Coast, the sky casting a pink-orange glow on the walls of the burger joint. The place opens at eight because they also serve breakfast, and that's in only one hour, not enough time for me to kill him, clean up the mess, and drag him out. I could leave his body here for the employees to find—they'd probably get a sick satisfaction from finding their misogynist manager dead, but bodies lead to quicker investigations. Missing persons give me at least forty-eight hours. However, I'd get more in his case because it'd be a long time before anybody thought it worth reporting him missing.

I slam his head against the floor, harder this time; his eyes flutter, and then he shakes it off.

“Go ahead,” he taunts me. “I *like* it.”

Yeah, a deranged maniac, all right.

“Where’s her body then?” I ask. “Because I know you killed her.”

“I didn’t kill her.”

He smiles; one of his incisors is decayed, and I can smell it, that single tooth putting off such a putrid stench.

Just as the guy’s eyes veer off to the right and I smell the perfume, I realize I’m in a bad spot, without enough time to move out of the way. Something strikes the back of my head, and streaks move past my vision; the ceiling spins as I roll off the guy and hit the floor—but no way does my gun fall from *my* hand.

Rolling onto my back, I blink through the blur and raise my gun to the woman standing over me—his girlfriend. She kicks it from my hand. *Clank! Woosh!* Fuck. Good thing I have another one on my hip. I feel the sole of her boot pressing against my wrist—the toe of the guy’s boot strikes me in the face, and blood pools in my mouth.

“You were more easily fooled than I thought you’d be,” the girlfriend says with laughter in her voice.

I smile up at her, not with the smile of a deranged maniac but with confidence.

“Now see,” I begin, “that’s where you’re mistaken.” In an instant, I wrap my legs around her waist, pulling her to the ground. A shot rings out, and the boyfriend hits the floor in the same instant, his hands covering the wound in his stomach. “I knew you two were a cheap, skanky version of Bonnie and Clyde and that you’d be here waiting for me.” I fall onto her chest, legs straddling her shoulders, pinning them to the floor; my gun shoved underneath her chin. “And I knew this was the only way to get you two together.”

“That bitch shot me!” the guy shrieks. Blood oozes from the cracks in his fingers covering the wound. He coughs and spits. “Baby, she shot me!”

“Shuddup, Levi!” She keeps her eyes on me. “What are you gonna do? Take us to jail?” The very thought made her laugh.

Hell, it made *me* laugh—I shoved the gun harder into her skin.

“Come on now,” I say, “you gotta give me more credit than that. First, you’re gonna tell me where the girl is—then I’m going to kill you.”

“Kill her, Dee! That bitch shot me!”

“I said shuddup, Levi! Just shut your mouth for once in your life!”

“Man problems?” I ask.

“Ain’t never been without them,” she says. “You?”

I cock an eyebrow. “Yeah, I guess we have something in common, after all.”

“Well then,” she says as if that should settle the matter, “since we’ve got some camaraderie, why don’t you let me go, seeing as it’s his fault I turned out the way I did? You do what you want with him, and we go our separate ways?”

“Dee! What the fuck?!” Levi coughs again; blood spatters his shirt.

I pretend to think on it for a moment, chew on the inside of my cheek for dramatic effect.

Then I say—lie, “Sorry, but I can handle my man problems,” and then I knock her out with the butt of my gun.

“Dee! Dee...wake up... Dee?” His eyes flutter.

“Great,” I say, jumping off Dee. “Don’t you die on me in here.”

“Dee...” And then he dies.

I sigh and look around the restaurant at the early morning sunlight pouring in through the tall glass windows. I glance at the clock. Twenty minutes until eight. I look up at the fake video surveillance mounted on the wall—I’d checked it the night before—and sigh again.

“We just got a hit,” Rayna, my new assistant, says from behind.

I look back at her standing near a booth seat; sunlight surrounds her body from the windows.

“Niklas or Fredrik?” I ask.

“Niklas,” she says. “And there’s no time.”

“Where is he?”

“Pennsylvania. A mental institution. Vara is waiting for us about a mile away from the facility.”

“A mental institution?” I laugh quietly, coming up with all kinds of Niklas-worthy insults. “What the hell is he doing there?”

“Not sure, but that woman you told me about—Hollis, the one Javier gave up information on—”

“Lysandra Hollis,” I say, though more to myself.

“Yeah, she’s holding him hostage.” She glances at Dee. “What are you going to do with her?” she asks.

I stand up and then put a bullet in Dee's head; the shot echoes throughout the restaurant. I put my gun away and then retrieve the one I'd dropped.

"You said there's no time, so I have to leave her here."

Rayna gives me a shocked, confused look.

I had been following Skanky Bonnie and Clyde for days. I'd first met Dee in the parking lot of this restaurant when Levi had beat the hell out of her after closing. I intervened, gave him back the punches he gave her, then warned him not to touch her again—or any woman, for that matter. Yeah, I don't know what possessed me to get involved in a lover's quarrel, and I'll never do it again, but that's beside the point. After I "rescued" Dee that night, I'd told her to call me if he beat her again. She'd agreed. But when I left that night, something about those two didn't sit right with me. So, I started following them, and I did my research. Turns out Dee and Levi had had plenty of run-ins with the law, mostly stuff like theft, bar fights, and petty things that don't usually interest me. But two things stood out: they always did them together, and Dee had been in jail four times for assaulting young women.

But the police didn't know those four women were fortunate to be alive. Dee and Levi had already killed three other women—I know of for sure—and no telling how many more. They had photos of the women they'd killed on Dee's smartphone, and the cops never thought to look when they'd confiscated her phone the numerous times she'd been arrested. But there they were, beaten and terrified, sitting against a cheap trailer park paneled wall with their hands tied behind their backs and tears streaking down their faces. Sixteen women total—all of them missing.

I never intended to take either of them to the police, but I didn't want to have to kill them here, either.

But as Rayna said, there's no time, and we need to get out of here. If the information is good and Niklas is at this mental institution, that doesn't mean they won't move him.

Lysandra Hollis. Supposedly, Vonnegut's liaison. Someone important to Vonnegut, who makes decisions without first consulting him, which leads me to believe she is related to him somehow.

I want this all over with. I want Vonnegut dead and his Order destroyed. I don't even want to see Victor controlling The Order anymore. Just destroy it!

Ah, Victor. The love of my life and the thorn in my side. I hate myself that I still love him after he left me. I despise myself and all I supposedly stand for because I can't be a stronger woman and just let him go. Part of me *has* let him go—the angry, unforgiving part. But the rest of me still aches for him, still searches for him, though not directly anymore. I don't spend time or resources hunting him down; I don't go out of my way to investigate rumors of his possible whereabouts. Hell, part of me hopes I never see him again. Because, like with this whole Vonnegut and The Order thing, I just want it to be over with so I can get on with my life. I don't want to love Victor, but I do. I don't want to find him, but I do. Sometimes I think he's watching over me from the shadows, as he always did. And sometimes I give him the finger. Other times, I say things out loud like, "How long are you going to hide from me, Victor?" And "I hate that I love you so much." I wonder if he ever hears me.

I leave the bodies of Skanky Bonnie and Clyde on full bloody display and exit through the back door next to the dumpster.

I hop inside Rayna's car.

"Let's go to Pennsylvania," I tell her, and we speed away.

Rayna and Vara aren't new to the assassin's life, but they are new to me. I found them through a clandestine government database after an arrangement with Kenneth Ware, a man who works for a secret activities division in the United States, gave me access. Kenneth Ware is also the same man fascinated with Fredrik Gustavsson and has been using Fredrik to help him track down an elusive serial killer. Now, he's looking for Fredrik, too.

I needed—well, wanted, anyway—company in my quest to become my own boss because nobody can do everything. So, I employed Rayna and Vara as my assistants. Since they were under the U.S. government's thumb, trained by them, and paid by them, they were more than willing to seize the opportunity to break free from low wages and the restrictions of government rules to work for me instead. Thankfully, Kenneth Ware had the authority to break their government contracts. The only thing Kenneth Ware wanted in return was that I help him find Fredrik.

Fredrik had gone missing around the same time as Niklas about three weeks ago, and we've been neither hot nor cold on either's trail—until today.

Two hours later, Rayna and I meet up with Vara in Pennsylvania, one mile from a mental institution near Scranton. Unfortunately, Vara thinks

Lysandra Hollis and her entourage made off with Niklas about forty minutes ago.

“I saw a blond-haired woman getting into a car,” Vara explains, “and two men dragged someone else into the backseat of another car, and they all drove away. His head was covered with a suit jacket, but I’m assuming it was Niklas. I waited around, watched the place a few minutes longer, then after no movement, I came back here to wait for you guys.”

“Are you sure no one saw you?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I was hiding in a tree with binoculars. There was no sign of anyone else. And if someone saw me, we probably wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“True.” I purse my lips. “But it bothers me they felt the need to cover his head if they didn’t suspect anyone was watching.”

Vara shrugs. “Probably just procedure.”

That could also be true, but it doesn’t ease my suspicions.

“And what of the facility?” I ask.

“It is a legitimate working mental institution,” Vara explains. “The employee and resident lists check out. Like many places, it’s probably used by The Order. But that doesn’t mean all the employees are involved.”

“No, but at least one of them is,” I say. “Which means, if three women who’ve never visited the facility before decide to waltz in there on the same day as members of The Order, and when they held Niklas hostage not even an hour ago, someone’ll be alerting The Order before we even step through the entrance.”

“There goes the plan to pretend to be visitors,” Rayna says. “So then, what should be our move?”

Vara glances at her clothes as if that should answer Rayna’s question. And it does immediately. When we first pulled up, I wondered why she was dressed in a white scrub uniform rather than her usual black operative attire. But now I know. The gist of the plan, at least.

“I’m going to be a temp-hire housekeeper,” Vara says. “The facility hired a temp agency to find new help. If I go in alone, I can stall anyone alerting The Order at least.”

“But for how long?” Rayna asks. “And what are you going to do exactly?”

“She’s going to find out who in the facility knows about The Order,” I say. “Then detain them, and we come in afterward.”

“What if there is more than one?” Rayna asks. “And what if Vara can’t figure out who it is?” These are perfectly valid questions, but sometimes Rayna forgets just how good Vara is at this sort of thing.

Vara grins and pats Rayna on the shoulder.

“Watch and learn, young Rayna, watch and learn.”

Rayna smirks but never takes offense.

Vara is older than Rayna and me by twenty years, but she could easily pass for age thirty. In her case, age does equal experience. And I’m not too proud to admit that she’s far more experienced than I am and that it should be me working beneath her and not the other way around.

If anybody can pull this off, it’s Vara.

We drive the mile to the facility, and Vara lets Rayna and me off at the road before the gated entrance. Then she disappears up the driveway as the gate closes behind the car.

Izabel

It took twenty-two minutes for Vara to figure out which employee was the link to The Order, detain him, and then call us in.

Rayna and I make our way inside the building and see that Vara has the place on lockdown. Six orderlies sit against a sterile-white wall with their hands zip-tied. Two housekeepers sit on the floor of the other side of the room. Some of these people have no idea what's going on, but they're as afraid as customers inside a bank with a robbery in progress. A few of them, however, don't appear to be particularly afraid, which leads me to believe they might also at least know about The Order's business with the mental institution.

"Apparently," Vara says, "this place is like a prison for family members of Order employees."

I give her a questioning look as I approach.

"Niklas' mother was being kept here," Vara adds.

His mother? But I thought she was dead.

"I guess it doesn't surprise me," I say. "They probably had her stashed away for this moment; a bargaining chip to use against him."

"That's exactly what she was," Vara says. "And you get one guess as to who they're using her against Niklas to lure out of hiding."

"Victor," I say.

"Ding-ding-ding! We have a winner!" Vara says, pointing upward.

"And what else did you find out?" I ask.

Vara reaches down and grabs one orderly by the elbow, and she pulls him to his feet.

"Tell her what you told me," Vara instructs.

He hesitates, and Vara shoves him in the back to help him along. He stumbles forward a bit and then straightens himself up.

"The woman," he begins, "Lysandra, is that man's sister."

"Niklas'?"

He nods.

“Lysandra shot and killed the man’s mother,” the orderly explains. “And some other woman. Jackie, I think he called her.”

My heart sinks into my toes.

“Where did they take Niklas?” I ask after a moment.

“I-I don’t know,” he says. “We just look after the patients here. They don’t let us in on the particulars.”

I believe him on that account, but I know he’s holding out, too. He has to know something more—*someone* here has to know something more.

Hmm. The patients.

I look to Vara and Rayna.

“If this place has been used to hold family members of The Order, then someone here has got to know something.”

Vara and Rayna nod in unison.

My gaze falls on the orderly standing before me, and he shakes his head.

“How closely do you work with the patients?” I look for a nametag, but there isn’t one, and he understands.

“Charles,” he answers.

“Charles,” I say, “what is the nature of your job here?”

He shrugs. “Not much different from everybody else. I clean and make sure the patients stay in line.”

“Do you talk with any of them?” I ask.

“Sometimes. But with most of them, I wouldn’t call it conversation.”

I pace around Charles in a slow, methodical circle.

“Do any of the patients talk about anything that could be related to what we’ve discussed here tonight? The Order? Vonnegut? Victor Faust?”

“Faust?” he asks, but I realize it wasn’t a question for me. He had only remembered hearing that name. His eyes narrow in concentration, and then he looks at me. “Actually, there is someone...”

Rayna stays behind to ensure the other hostages don’t leave the room while the orderly escorts Vara and me upstairs to the third floor with a gun at his back. His hands are not zip-tied.

“He’s in the last room in this hall,” he says, nodding in the direction just up ahead. “The patient’s name is Joseph Bilk. That Lysandra woman has visited him a few times in the past year, so he must not be any ordinary patient.”

We continue down the hall, and my nerves are split in half. Vara is on

high alert too, but then again, she is always on high alert.

“I’ve heard this guy mention the name Faust before,” the orderly adds.

“Who was he talking with?” I ask.

“Lysandra. But all I heard was the name. A name like that tends to stick out.”

Hmm...he sure is helpful. Though, he does have a gun on him.

We stop in the hall outside the door, and the orderly fumbles with the keys dangling from his belt loop.

“Wait,” Vara says and moves him aside. She pushes up on her toes to peer into the small plexiglass window set within the heavy metal door. I keep my gun trained on the orderly.

This floor is different from floors one and two—this place is more like a prison. It becomes apparent that the residents housed on this floor are more dangerous to themselves and others. It’s to be expected, being a psychiatric ward.

“There’s one man inside,” Vara says. “And either he’s asleep or drugged. Better hope it’s sleep, or we aren’t getting anything out of him.”

I look to the orderly for confirmation.

“I don’t administer drugs,” he says. “Only the nurses do that, and I have no idea when they drug whom. Want me to unlock the door or not?” He stands there with the keys, waiting.

Vara and I exchange a look; we nod at one another, and then I nod to the orderly, giving him the go-ahead.

He finds the right key and works it into the lock. The door clicks open, and we step inside.

“Joseph Bilk?” I say. “We need you to wake up.”

No answer.

Reluctant to get closer to him, seeing as how he might be dangerous, I resist the urge to kick his bed or, at the very least, shake it with my foot.

“Joseph Bilk, I need to speak with you,” I try again. “Get up now.”

Still no answer. He doesn’t even move.

This room smells of bleach and vomit, making my stomach roil. I swallow and try not to take too deep of breaths.

“Mr. Bilk! Hey, I’m talking to you!”

“He can’t hear you,” a voice says from behind.

I turn sharply to see a blond-haired woman standing in the doorway, several men behind her.

Lysandra Hollis. *Shit.*

Vara fires her gun, the shot deafening me in the small, enclosed space, but Lysandra is quicker. Everything happens too fast for me to keep up. One moment I'm standing in the room; the next, I'm on the floor, slipping in a bright crimson pool of Vara's blood. The scuffle between Lysandra and me is brief, and between our punches, I hear two more shots in some other part of the building, far off, muffled, but distinct.

Right before I'm knocked out cold, I remember thinking of my now-dead associates, Vara and Rayna, and how I wish I had never brought them to this place with me.

When I wake up hours later, it is dark outside. My head is still dizzied from the blow and some kind of drug I was injected with; it takes a moment to steady my vision. I'm in a familiar room. Small and sterile-white. There is no bed, no furniture of any kind, no toilet or sink; just four too-close walls and a high ceiling above me with a single elongated fluorescent light fixture. But the room is bathed in blue-black darkness; the only light is from the moon shining through the tiny box window covered by thick, unbreakable glass.

Am I still in the mental institution, in my very own third-floor cell?

Slowly, I lift my back from the hard floor, and my vision doubles and triples before leveling out. I feel nauseous, probably the remnants of the drug fading from my veins. I look down at my hands and my ankles, relieved to find them unbound, but that means there's no other way out of this room besides the heavy metal door locked from the outside.

But I'm still alive, and the only fact I can garner from my predicament is that I'm here for the same reason Niklas had been. To lure Victor Faust.

"I would say it's good to see you, but you shouldn't have come here, Izzy."

I turn so quickly that my head dizzies again from the movement, but I don't let it stop my train of thought, even for a second. I see a booted foot sticking out from the shadow in the room's darkest corner. I follow the length of the leg, allowing my eyes to adjust to the darkness to see a face, partially hidden in the shadow. He sits in the corner with the back of his head resting against the wall.

"*Niklas...*"

Fredrik

Years Ago – When I saw the light...

Drug houses are like being in another world, another dimension; what goes on between their walls is much more than smoking brain cells away, zoning out on a soiled mattress, or falling asleep next to living bodies that reek of disease and death. A drug house is a sanctuary. The walls are protection from the outside world—not even a bomb can get through them. A soiled mattress is just what sober people see, but the addicts don't see it at all—they *experience* it; they give in to the comfort it provides for free. No judgment. No expectations. And the living bodies that reek of disease and death: the addicts only see their damaged souls, not the disgusting human shells that confine them.

Humans become addicts for a few reasons: they're too weak to survive in this hellish world; they're different from ordinary people in one way or another; they're incapable of bearing the weight of the world on their shoulders; many have done things they regret and know the guilt will haunt them until they die.

Weakness. That is why addicts become addicts.

I was weak.

I was different.

I was incapable.

I woke every morning kissing the mouths of guilt and regret. The strange thing was I didn't feel guilt or regret for kissing them. What a fucking conundrum.

But there was one difference between the addicts and me. We went to the sanctuaries for the same reasons: like them, I was an addict; like them, I felt protected from the outside world; like them, I found comfort among the filth because it did not judge me and expected nothing from me; like them, I only looked to mingle with the souls, and not the disguises they wore.

The difference was that *they* were my drug of choice.

I sat with my back pressed against a wall; to my left, a woman was passed out on that heavenly mattress I mentioned; a needle hung from her arm. I thought she might've OD'd that time; she was still breathing, but it was shallow and getting harder to hear.

To my right, a man sat; the funk of his unwashed body surrounded me. He had been rambling for the past hour. I had been listening but hadn't offered a word since he'd started. He didn't seem to care.

On the other side of the dark room, across a landfill's worth of trash on the floor and two or three other addicts asleep among it, another man was sitting with his back pressed against the wall just as I was; his knees were drawn up with his wrists resting on top of them. He was shirtless and shoeless; a pair of holey blue jeans sagged around his one-hundred-fifty-pound frame. He had been looking at me for a long time. I wondered what he was thinking. I wondered if he could see my soul like I could see his. I wondered if he knew I needed to bleed him dry.

"Sixty-four," the rambling man beside me went on, pointing his finger into my view. "I made sixty-four dollars that day. Yesterday. I think it was yesterday. One lady told me to get away from her car. Bitch. I told the bitch I just was gonna wash her windshield. Fuckin' bitch."

I continued to ignore the rambler and kept my gaze on the quiet one across the room. *How am I going to do it this time?* I was always trying to find a way to do it that made me feel less...well, guilty and regretful. OK, so I did feel it, but the problem was I never learned from it. I'd always do it again. I'd never stop. That's where the conundrum came in.

"I asked this man in a suit," the rambling man said, "if I could wash his windshield." He pointed at me again. "Hey, that's a nice suit you're wearin'." I got the feeling he was interested in knowing why someone like me was in a place like this, but he didn't—no judgments, no expectations.

"But I asked the man: 'Hey, could I clean your windshield?' And he put a five in my hand and walked away without saying anything. Now, I'm happy and all that he paid me to do the job, but couldn't he at least acknowledge me? I mean, what does he think I am, his servant?"

The man continued to talk, and I continued to ignore him.

The quiet one across from me got up, and he disappeared around the corner. I waited a moment before I followed.

I found him in the bathroom taking a piss; the door was wide open. He

zipped up his pants and stood in front of the mirror.

“Why you followin’ me muthafucka?” He raised his hands and patted his wiry blond hair here and there.

“You intrigue me,” I said.

“Yeah, well, go stare at somebody else’s dick. I ain’t got nothin’ for you faggots.” He never looked at me; he didn’t see the knife in my hand or the blood in my eyes filling up my vision in a deep shade of crimson.

Finally, he did look at me.

“You a dealer, man?” he asked, poking his head around the doorframe. “You in here lookin’ for somebody who owes you? Ain’t nobody in this place can ever get anything on a tab.” He looked me up and down with judgmental eyes, which offended me in this holiest of sanctuaries. “Only people with money got a tab, man. Everybody else pays up front, or they go without. But ain’t that some shit, though? Why do people with money need a goddamn tab anyway?”

All addicts tend to ramble.

I shoved the man toward the toilet and closed the door behind me with my foot, the knife pressed to his jugular. His eyes widened with fear and anger; he wanted to run away from me, but he wanted to kill me too.

“What the fuck, man!”

Clumsily, I pushed the man against the sink; his hands came up wildly, swiping at my head. Distracted, I ducked to miss one hand, but I dropped the knife when the other hand caught me across the side of my head, causing my ear to ring.

In the scuffle, the mirror over the sink shattered; the rusted metal shelf standing over the toilet crashed onto the floor. I almost vomited when the side of my face was shoved close enough to the bottom of the toilet that I could’ve licked it. His fists pounded my head as he crouched on top of me; I could taste his salty sweat dripping from his soiled hair, making me frantic and dangerous.

I grabbed his elbows and pulled hard; he fell forward and rammed his head into mine. Spots melted in my vision, but I didn’t let it distract me this time. I shoved the man off me, and he fell onto the floor.

Scrambling to find my knife, I couldn’t get to it in time before he was on top of me again—it’s true about addicts being invincible—and we crashed against the door, his fists pummeling my face. I swung out at him, once, twice, the third time a piece of the mirror glass I’d swiped from the floor cut

him across the throat.

He stumbled backward and fell onto the toilet, his hand covering the wound.

“I didn’t want to kill you,” I said with heavy breaths. “I just needed... to...I just *needed* you!” I was only yelling because I was disgusted—outraged because I was disgusting.

Blood seeped through the cracks in his fingers, down his throat and chest; he choked, and his lips sputtered.

After a moment, his eyes rolled back, and his arms went limp at his sides.

It was over. It was done. What “it” was exactly, I didn’t know. I never really knew. For as long as I’d needed to find a release—since I was a teenager—I never did know what to call it. I wasn’t a serial killer; I didn’t need to kill to satisfy my inner darkness. (*Yes, you did.*) I did kill, like on this night, but it was rarely my intention to kill anyone. I just wanted, *needed*, to hurt them. (*To kill them.*) I needed to draw blood, to inflict physical and emotional pain. I often cut out their teeth, but I rarely killed them. (*You used to.*) I didn’t know what to call it!

Stumbling out of the restroom, I didn’t expect anyone to be waiting in the hall, and I was right. No one cared. These people tended to mind their own business in these places; all they cared about was the high, and not even a murder ten feet away in another room could drag them away from their blissful oblivion.

Trekking over trash and unconscious bodies, I made my way outside into the fresh, cool night air. It felt good on my face. I stopped on the porch of the dilapidated house, shut my eyes, raised my head to the sky, and inhaled a deep breath into my starved lungs.

I got a lot of stares on the subway on my way home. There was blood on my hands, and I stank of the dead man’s sweat and body odor and maybe even a little of mine, too. It always ended like this: me out of breath and filthy, bloodstained, and with a look on my face like I’d just escaped certain death or robbed and killed someone. I could see a dim reflection in the window to my left. I had been looking at myself for the past ten minutes since I sat. No one sat next to me. I was glad about that.

I spent an hour in the shower when I got home, crawled into the bed, and slept for two days. I always felt exhausted afterward, not from the act itself, I didn’t think, but from the satisfaction. My mind and body refused to let me

rest if I didn't feed them what they needed most. Sleep was the reward, just after the satisfaction, of course.

I was good to go for another three weeks or so before I needed to find someone else. It was a vicious cycle. Exhausting. Stressful. Disgusting. Unprepared. Amateur.

On-The-Verge-Of-Getting-Caught.

Mind-numbingly frustrating.

But I still had to do it. No matter what.

And I knew I always would.

Present day...

With slow, delicate movements, she reaches for her teacup on the table and brings it to her lips. She sips from it slowly and then sets it back down in the same spot, the little handle always facing the same direction.

She looks so...innocent sitting there, dressed in a white, sleeveless shorts-romper; her dainty shoulders and neck are displayed like a painting in a museum that you want to touch but know is forbidden. But I wouldn't be able to touch her if I wanted to anyway because I'm strapped to a dentist's chair in what looks like a basement, and I knew this would be my fate one day.

Willa. My dear sweet Willa. We were very close in my days with Olaf when I was just a boy. Like me, she had also been taken by those men, forced into a life of immoral servitude. But Willa was brilliant; she knew how to manipulate them, make them believe she was as cold and heartless as they were, and that she was invaluable, so they trusted her and made her Head Servant. But Willa was only cold and heartless in front of Olaf and Eskill; behind the face she wore was a caring young woman who tended to the boys' wounds, consoled them, and was always there to let them know they were never alone.

I was one of those boys who loved her like a sister or a mother. But most of all, she was my friend.

"I thought you were dead," I say to her once more—I've said it a few times since I woke up in this chair, but so far, she has refused to talk about anyone but me.

"I did die," she says. "I have been dead for many years, *Freedrik*." Her

accent is as heavy as I remember, especially how she says my name.

I close my eyes for a moment and recall the days I spent in her care, when she bathed me, laid my head on her breasts, and wrapped her small arms around my small body so I could cry.

“I died a long time ago, too,” I tell her. “But I’m guessing you already know that.”

She nods lightly. “*Ve* are different people now, you and I. Monsters *vearing* the flesh of humans. A man told me that once. Just before I cut out *hees* tongue.”

Every word she speaks is careful and deliberate; she’s incapable of casual conversation, laughter, smiles of enjoyment. I wonder how she gets along in the world, how someone like her, who ordinary people would instantly feel discomfort sitting next to, manages to move through society without raising suspicion. Oh yes—because ordinary people are blind to these things; they ignore their intuitions; they steer clear of anyone who makes them uncomfortable.

Willa stands. And she comes over to me, a knife in her hand. I don’t flinch. Because I’m not afraid of her, and she knows it.

She leans over me, inhales my scent like an animal, and then I feel the coolness of the blade against the side of my throat.

I’m still not afraid.

Willa pulls away slowly, then sets the knife on the shelf behind my head.

“Is that how you met her?” she asks, then sits down on the chair beside me.

“Why do you want to know about Seraphina?”

“I don’t,” she says. “I *vant* to know about you, my dear *Freedrik*. And to know about you, I must know about her.”

“But I don’t want to talk about her.”

“You will, or I will cut out your eyes,” she says so casually that it’s the part that stuns me, not the threat itself.

I sigh and look at the wall.

“I’ll tell you what you want to know,” I begin, “but I would like the same from you. Is that so much to ask? We had a bond, Willa, and I’ve never forgotten you and your kindness. I’d like to know about the girl who once cared for me. What happened to her? Which blade was it that finally killed her? And why has she been hunting me?”

I know she won't tell me any of these things. She won't because I doubt that she remembers any of it herself. I'm only trying to buy myself time.

Willa lowers her eyes; her folded hands move restlessly within her lap—it's the first sign of human emotion I've seen in her since I woke up as her prisoner. Restlessness. It's such an odd emotion. Then again, any emotion would seem strange coming from her because, in my heart, I know emotions are unnatural to her. It's not that she rejects them—she doesn't *understand* them. She isn't human. She is, as she said herself moments ago, a monster wearing human flesh. Maybe she's right, and I am too, but we are very different monsters, she and I. *Very* different monsters.

(But are you, really?)

The emotion is gone as quickly as I had seen it appear. Was it ever really there at all? Or was I just imagining it? Maybe it was a remnant of her old self before she died.

She smiles. Vacant. It raises the hairs on my arms.

Yes, Willa is definitely not human; there is nothing behind those eyes but madness disguised as innocence, frailty, and naivety. She is the epitome of darkness, a wolf walking among sheep, a demon wearing the skin of a young woman who was like everybody else once upon a time.

I realize in this very moment that there is no way Willa has only murdered criminals—there's *no way*. The men she killed and the trail of bodies she left behind for Kenneth Ware to hunt her were a means to an end; they were revenge killings. But she isn't like the rest of us in Victor's Order—particularly me and Izabel—she hasn't gone on this long, only taking out men who violated her and other malicious people. She has murdered innocent people, too, because she can't help herself. She needs to kill, just like I need to torture. I know it. I feel it. Like Seraphina, Willa is a danger to society.

Like Seraphina...

But *unlike* Seraphina, Willa is calculated and methodical; she isn't reckless or maniacal. And most of all, Willa is utterly devoid of emotion—Seraphina was inundated by it.

Seraphina was born insane.

Willa was *made* that way.

“How did you know about her, anyway?” I ask.

She hooks her fingers behind the elastic at the top of her one-piece romper and slides it down her body.

What is she doing?

She stands before me naked; a woman who is at least thirty-eight years old has the body of a twenty-year-old: soft and supple, unaffected yet by age; her breasts are perfect, her hips the smoothest hourglass. And she is so pale it looks as if the sun has never touched her. Even in her face, I see a young woman no older than twenty. It's as if time stopped when she died all those years ago, and because she is unaffected by the emotions and stressors of daily life, there's nothing left to age her but time itself.

Oh, if only we were all emotionless—we'd live for so long it would seem like forever. Perhaps we *could* live forever. Trade emotions for immortality.

Willa steps up next to me. She looks down into my eyes, searching them, but for what I can't even judge a guess. What are you looking for, my dear sweet Willa?

I take in her scent; I find comfort in the warmth of her body so close to mine. But it's all I do—it's all I *can* do, bound to this chair by my wrists and legs and torso. But a part of me wants to take her, to break her beneath me, to fuck the emotions back into her and give me the reason I need to let her live.

But I forget—I'm the one in the chair this time.

I wonder how long it's going to take her to kill me. I wonder why I feel anxious for her to do it.

Willa pulls away, taking her scent, heat, and nakedness with her. She isn't trying to be seductive—I doubt she understands the concept. I don't understand the purpose of her nakedness, but it's not seduction.

She sits on the chair across from me, pulls her feet onto the seat, draws her knees, and wraps her arms around her legs, which hide her womanly parts behind them.

I look away. I'm not sure why. It just feels right.

Knowing I will get nowhere with my questions, I give in to only giving her what she wants.

Niklas

I gotta say, things sure do feel like they're ending. It's an odd fucking feeling, the end, and so new and foreign, a once-in-a-lifetime event. I imagine it's how we all must feel when forced out of our mother's womb and into this strange, hellish world for the first time. The end. The beginning. In essence, there really is no difference.

Though I'm not sure the end of *what* exactly—maybe everything—but I know something is coming, a drastic change that can be felt before it happens. And as I look across the small, dark room at Izzy sitting there just like me, two pigs waiting for the slaughter, for the first time since I...grew fond of her, there's no sense of urgency in the need to protect her. Once that deep part of you knows that things are over, you kind of stop fighting against it. You accept it, and somehow with grace, you're ready to roll along with it instead. Maybe I do know "the end of what," after all.

"I guess you're not as crafty as you thought," I tell her in jest.

"I guess you aren't either," she comes back.

I shrug. "Guess not."

With a heavy sigh, Izzy relaxes against the wall, drawing her knees upward and resting her wrists atop them. I get up and join her there, pressing the back of my head to the wall; it falls to the side, and I look at her shadowed face.

"They must've smartened up," I say, "knowing if they have both of us in custody, my brother will come out of hiding with his hands in the air."

Without looking at me: "No, they knew that all along; it just took them a while to pull this off."

I nod and look ahead again; my wrists are propped on my knees, just like Izzy. I wish I had a cigarette. I don't guess we'll be granted any last requests. But that's what I'd ask for. A fucking cigarette.

"So, do you think he'll come?"

I pause, considering the possibility. "You want to know the truth?"

"Always."

I shake my head. “I think we’re on our own this time.”

“You’re right,” she says, and it stings, “he won’t be coming. Not this time...”

I get the distinct feeling something happened between them, Victor and Izabel, but I’m not going to ask. A fight? No, it was something more...final. I sense that Izzy has changed, not necessarily because of it, but she isn’t the same Izzy I once knew. I want to say she’s broken, but...no, I think maybe she’s finally been put together. People often mistake consciousness for brokenness: a woman gets her heart ripped out, and the endless fucking tears must mean she’s broken? *No*—they mean she’s awake for probably the first time in that shitty relationship.

“When did you speak to Fredrik last?” She looks over at me.

“You know, I don’t even remember,” I say. “Weeks. Months. I don’t know.”

“It’s been a long time for me too.”

Moments later: “I’m sorry about Jackie,” she tells me.

My heart wrenches, but only a little.

“Yeah, well, I knew her fate the day I met her. The same fate any woman I’d ever cared for. Any woman I could ever care for later will face the same fate.” I laugh bitingly, realizing. “Not that I’ll ever care for another woman again.”

“Because you’re going to swear off emotions like Nora Kessler?” she asks, and that fucking stings too, though differently.

I scoff. “Hell no. Because I doubt I’ll be alive after today.”

From the corner of my eye, I see her nod gently, agreeing.

“Was that Jackie in Mexico?” Izzy asks. “Did you send her?”

“Yeah. I did.”

“Then you couldn’t have cared much about her to send her to a place like that.”

Fuck, that hurt! Because it’s true. I don’t want to believe it, but it is what it is. I’d ignored the fact that I’d used Jackie to help Izabel. I didn’t really mean to. As much as I cared for Jackie, I care for Izabel more.

“Why did you send her?”

I didn’t expect that, although I should’ve.

“Well, I...”—I press my earlobe nervously between my thumb and index finger—“You wanna know the truth?”

“Always,” she echoes.

But she doesn't look over at me, which leads me to believe she already knows what I'm going to say.

"I sent her because...I'm in love with you." Fuck it, it's true. And since we're probably going to die, it seems only natural to be honest with her. And myself.

Izabel smiles faintly yet still doesn't grace me with eye contact.

But then, surprisingly, she does. She looks right at me, a softness in her eyes laced with intellect.

"You're not in love with me, Niklas," she says. "You're in love with the idea of me. I'm something you've always wanted, something you envied your brother for having."

"And what would that something be exactly?" I ask, feeling slighted.

"Someone to love you back."

Choking on the unwanted rush of emotion that raced into my throat from somewhere deeper in my body, I turn my head the other way so she can't see my glossed-over eyes. I swallow hard and try like hell to compose myself.

"You've been rejected and abandoned by everyone in your life since you were a boy," she says. "Your father. Your mother. The Order. The only person who has ever loved you unconditionally is Victor. And the one woman who did love you back, the only woman you ever truly loved—Claire—was taken from you tragically, unfairly. And I'm sorry for that, Niklas." I feel her eyes on me. "But you're not in love with *me*. And you never could be. Because you're incapable of betraying your brother, even for the sake of love."

"But—"

"No, let me finish."

My mouth snaps closed; I'm looking at her again, but I don't remember ever moving my head.

"Out of all of us, Niklas," she goes on, "you're the one who most fits in the outside world. You're the one who deserves a normal life, the one whose emotions have never been compromised by the darkness and cruelty of this world, the world behind the curtain. You're the only one of us who doesn't belong here."

"That's fucking bullshit, Izzy."

"It's not," she says and is about to tell me precisely why. "Victor wanted that for me, for both of us. It's why he tried to push us together, to save us both from this life. But I'm vengeful, Nik. I'm hateful. I'm cruel. I've

enjoyed killing some of the people I've killed—I've been corrupted by everything. And I don't regret it. I don't lament my old life or the life stolen from me. I don't want to live in that unconscious world where people work at the same boring jobs every day, go out on the weekends to party, go on vacations to relax, have kids, and get married and divorced and married again." She pauses a moment and seizes my gaze. "I could never be that person, even though I was born into it. I had a normal, fucked-up life before my mother took me to Mexico as a teenager. I went to school, played the piano, went to the movies and concerts, and graffitied a building or two. I had a *normal* life. But you..."

"I what? Go on and tell me." *Please, don't fucking tell me anymore.*

"You, Nik, never experienced life without The Order and all the shit that comes with it hanging over your head. Sure, you saw things and experienced things that were as close to a normal life as you'd ever get, but never without the baggage. The load on your back. The anvil on your head. Yet, somehow, without ever truly knowing what a normal life is and could be, you're the only one of us who *understands* it."

"So, did I win a prize or something?" I don't want to believe the shit coming out of her mouth, but it's kind of hard not to.

She nods. "Yeah. I think you did, Niklas. I think you won the biggest prize of all—your humanity."

I scoff. "Some fucking prize."

The pull of her sincere smile draws my eyes to hers again.

"It's what you love and cherish most of all, that humanity of yours that you had to work so fucking hard to obtain. And even harder to keep. But you never lost it. And it never faded or fluctuated or let you down. You did what you had to do to stay alive and to keep your brother alive, but you never gave in to it. You never let it break you. And for that, you are the most human of us all."

"So, then what does that make you?" I'm only trying to take the spotlight off me; the discomfort is, well, uncomfortable.

"Devils," she says. "We're all devils. Me. Fredrik. Nora. Victor. Hell, even James Woodard is his own kind of devil, has his own dark secrets, I'm sure. And Dorian Flynn, he was the most like you, but not as close to human as you are."

"Flynn?" I laugh out loud, recalling that asshole. But the laughter dies when I remember that he's dead, and I kinda feel bad for the way the guy

went out.

“You’re telling me all this because you know we’re gonna die, aren’t you? Getting all sentimental; rolling that thirty-minute-long part of the episode focusing on a character’s backstory before you kill him off?”

Izabel shrugs.

“A part of me believes that,” she says. “But really, I think they’re just things I’ve wanted to say to you since we came back from Italy.”

“Since I kissed you and betrayed my brother.” I point at her. “And you said I was incapable.” I laugh under my breath.

“You didn’t betray him,” she says, “no more than I betrayed him in Mexico. You were just doing your job.”

“I didn’t have to kiss you for the job,” I point out.

“Maybe not, but it never would’ve happened otherwise.” She looks away, and her breath falls lightly between us. “And besides, I kissed you back.”

A grin tugs one corner of my mouth.

“Wanna do it again?”

“No thanks.”

“Oh, come on. Two people alone with death at our doorstep—Victor would want us to!”

Izzy is on her knees in front of me before I realize what the hell is going on, my cock crushed firmly in her hand from the outside of my jeans.

She raises her body on her knees toward me, the sweet scent of her hair, skin, and breath wrapping me up in a fucking cocoon as she brushes the softness of her wet lips against the side of my neck. I swell and grow hard beneath her hand.

“You’re right,” she whispers near my ear, “he’d want us to.” Her tongue traces the contours of my lips and slips stealthily into my wanting mouth. It tangles with mine as I kiss her hard, my hands probing her thighs, fingertips pressed against her warm flesh.

“I want you to fuck me, Niklas,” she breathes, “right here on this hard fucking floor, in this tiny fucking room, at the end of our fucking lives.” She straddles my lap, pressing herself against me, and *myfuckingGod*, I don’t think I can handle it. The want. The need. The control. It feels like my soul is unraveling.

She kisses me harder, and I kiss her back.

She presses deeper, and I pull her closer.

Then I grab her arms, push her away, and look into her eyes; her dark-red hair cascades her shoulders, partially covering her face.

“No,” I tell her. “I can’t fucking do it. I hate myself because I can’t, but...no.”

Izabel smiles.

“And I knew you wouldn’t,” she says, moving off my lap—mission accomplished.

Izabel

Niklas Fleischer's heart is made purely of gold; his loyalty of steel; his devotion of fire; his emotions of chalk. He hides them well, his emotions, but on the inside, I can only imagine the crumbling and powdered chaos.

I knew he'd never in a million years fuck me and betray Victor, even here at the end of all things. He'd kill me before he ever fucked me. And I'm glad. I don't deserve him, nor does Victor—none of us deserve him. If it's the last thing I do, I'll fight like hell to make sure at least *he* gets out of here alive.

Faint footsteps echo down the hallway outside the windowless door; we fall silent and divert our attention, expecting someone to come inside any second, but after a few moments, they pass the door and fade away. Minutes later, the same thing: footsteps, some booted, some heeled, walk past without stopping. After thirty minutes, so many people move up and down the hallway that it sounds like we're in an airport terminal. But still, no one enters the room or so much as stops in front of it.

I get up and move toward the high window.

"I need your shoulders," I tell Niklas.

He stands beneath the window, and I crawl onto his shoulders, holding onto the windowsill with the tips of my fingers to steady myself.

"You've gained a few pounds, haven't you?" Niklas says with a grunt.

I readjust my position, dig a heel into the bend where his neck meets his shoulder, and then press up on my toes.

"Shit..." I gasp. I'd expected trees, recalling the forest landscape surrounding the mental institution, but all I see are buildings. Not skyscrapers like New York City, but more modest like St. Louis or Charlotte, North Carolina. Hundreds of little lights glow inside the windows, dotting the darkness. Moonlight reflects off the water's surface in the distance, a river cutting through the landscape. There are two bridges, one that looks like an old train bridge. I don't see any names on the buildings, no billboards lit alongside the highway, and the license plates are too far to see even if it were

daytime outside, so I have no idea where we are.

“I don’t think we’re in Pennsylvania,” I tell Niklas. “At least, definitely not at the mental institution anymore.”

“We’re in Columbus, Ohio,” he tells me.

I hop down from his shoulders.

“You couldn’t tell me that before I climbed on top of you?”

He grins.

I smirk back at him, realizing.

“Why Ohio?” I wonder aloud. “And how the hell long was I knocked out for?”

Niklas walks back over to his spot on the floor against the wall.

“We were both drugged good—you were probably out for a day at least. And Ohio because that’s where headquarters are located.”

“Headquarters?” I probe, though I have a feeling I already know. “You mean, The Order headquarters?” I find it a little hard to believe. *Ohio?*

Niklas nods. “Yeah. Well, one of them.”

“How can there be more than one headquarters? And why Ohio? That just seems...odd.”

“Does any of that really matter, Izzy?”

“Yeah, it kinda does. If we’re going to get out of here, I’d like to know everything about this place.”

Niklas laughs and brings his hand toward his mouth, index and middle fingers positioned as if a cigarette were wedged between them. When he quickly realizes there isn’t one waiting for him, he sighs and drops his hand again.

“What’s so funny?” I demand.

“You’re not getting out of here,” he tells me. He raises his hands in front of him and twists them at the wrists. “They didn’t even bind us. No cuffs. No rope. No trusty fucking zip-ties. We’re not getting out of this room without a dozen guns pointed at our faces, much less out of the building alive.”

I wave my hand about the empty room. “So, they’re just going to keep us here like this? No toilet. Nothing to sleep on.”

He laughs again, and I sense a hint of irritation. “You just don’t get it, do you? We’re *not* getting out of here *alive*. They don’t give two shits about how we sleep or where we empty our bowels—and they’ll starve us to death.” He points at me briefly. “They’ll give us water, though, at least. Can’t have us dying before Victor has had enough time to attempt a rescue.”

“Then that means they have to open the door to give us water,” I point out.

All smiles and laughter gone, his irritation takes over; Niklas sighs heavily and just looks at me.

“You don’t give up, do you?”

“No—*I don’t*,” I hiss angrily. “And what the hell happened to you, anyway—since when do *you* give up?”

His eyes stray toward the floor; his knees fall open, and he dangles his hands between them, propped at the forearms.

“I’m just tired, Izabel,” he laments. “I don’t want to do this shit anymore—fuck, I never *wanted* to do it.” He shakes his head with surrender and laughs mordantly. “The only way out is death—I’m ready to go.”

I march across the small space and fall into a crouch before him; the strident *smack!* of my hand across the side of his face zips between the confined walls.

“Don’t you dare do that, Nik!” I howl. “Not you! After I just told you how you’re the only one—”

“Yeah, I get it!” He pushes into a stand and maneuvers around me. “But you don’t think *I’m* broken? You think I’m the only one out of us who’s untouched by this life?” He steps into my personal space and leans over, pushing his eyes into view, full of rage and resolve. “Well, you’re fucking *wroong!* I’ve killed so many people, Izabel! Too many fucking people! With *these* hands!” He curls his hands into fists in front of him and grits his teeth. “And I’ve watched innocent people die! Just before I was shoved into this hole of a room with you, I watched a kind woman, who was my *friend*, die right in front of me! That bitch scattered Jackie’s brains *right* in *front* of me!” His face is so close our noses almost touch, but I remain still and steady, letting him get it all out. “And my mother...I betrayed my mother to that woman, and she was killed too—she begged me to help her, and I refused!”

He turns away from me in a whirlwind and paces the small room.

“You didn’t betray her.”

“HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT I DID OR DIDN’T DO?!” he roars, his face inches from mine again; it startles me, but still, I don’t flinch. “You weren’t there! How would you know?!”

“Because it’s who you *are*,” I tell him calmly. “And no matter what you’ve done or think you’ve done, you’re not broken by this life—you’re the

strongest one of us all. You're a human being. Behind that rough, tough, gritty, manwhore exterior, you're..." I don't want to say it, that he's a 'good' person, and I don't feel I need to. So, I'll spare him the actual words and, in turn, his pride.

He turns away from me again and spears his fingers through the top of his hair.

Seconds that feel like hours pass in silence; the only sound is the constant footsteps moving down the hallway outside the door.

"Izzy," he says, calmer now, though his voice heavy with dismay, "you want to know why my brother won't come for either of us?" He turns and looks at me. "It's not because he'll compromise himself—"

"It's because he knows that The Order will kill us whether he shows up or not," I answer. "They won't even give him a chance to free us—the second they know he's here, they'll kill us both."

"Yeah," he says, "so, if there's anything you've ever wanted to get off your chest, now's the time to do it."

Fredrik

Years Ago – When I saw the light...

I was in a bar the night Seraphina walked into my life. I had just killed a man. A drug dealer. It was self-defense—against his own self-defense against me, of course—and his blood was still on my shirt. And on my hands, blood had begun to dry in the bed of my fingernails. I didn't give a shit. I killed the guy and walked straight to the bar without first going home and cleaning up as I had always done. I was tired. So fucking tired. Not physically—I was *tired*.

A part of me hoped I'd get caught. That someone in the bar would see the blood and call the police. Then the rest of my life would be swept up in DNA evidence and court orders and arrest warrants and a trial and, ultimately, prison, where I'd be shanked in the showers and sent off to that world beyond the world we live and breathe and suffocate in.

But that's not what happened. Not even close.

The bartender slid my glass across the bar and quickly noted the blood.

"I'd hate to see the other guy," he said.

I didn't say anything back, just shrugged and took the glass into my dirty, bloody fingers.

The bartender walked away, probably thinking I had been in a fight. Because no one in their right mind would come into a public place after having just committed murder, at least not without cleaning the evidence away first, right? But I wasn't in my right mind—and really, who is if they've murdered someone, anyway?

The old man sitting next to me for twenty minutes finally glanced over, his deep-set eyes glazed.

"You got a sssmoke?" he asked, slurring.

I shook my head.

"Sorry, I don't smoke."

He returned to his drink; I noticed a pack of cigarettes in the front pocket of his dress shirt.

As I took another drink, the sweet smell of perfume and woman wrapped my senses in a cocoon. A black-haired goddess sat down on the barstool on the other side of me, tapped her fingernails on the bar once, and the bartender walked over.

“Surprise me,” she told him.

I didn’t look at her; I wanted to but was still wrestling with the images of my sloppy murder an hour ago. I couldn’t be the everyday charming, polished devil in a suit always looking to satiate my sexual needs. I looked and probably smelled like I’d just rolled through a landfill.

The bartender brought her drink over; I downed mine and got up from the stool.

“Mr. Gustavsson,” she said, stopping me in my tracks. “Please”—I looked over my shoulder to see her nod toward my stool—“sit with me for a while.” It wasn’t a request; she was confident I would “sit with her for a while.”

For a moment longer than it should’ve been, I was fascinated by her dark eyes and plump Cupid’s bow lips. I had never seen a woman so beautiful, and as crazy as it is, I admit I would’ve done anything she asked me to do in the brief few seconds she’d spoken to me—*anyfuckingthing*.

And so, I sat down, just as she’d asked. Little did I know it would be the fork in the road that would change everything in my miserable, pathetic life.

Present day...

Willa still sits naked on the chair near me, the sharp features of her face lost in the shadow as she gazes off at the wall. But with my fading words, she appears to come alive again, her features becoming ever-sharper.

She looks right at me, her eyes haunting and full of need; it’s as if she wants something else from me other than a story. Sex, perhaps? That would be my first guess looking into dark eyes like that, but no, it’s something else. I don’t want to know what it is.

“Vy did you stop, *Freedrik*?”

“Because I...I don’t want to talk about Seraphina.”

“But you must.”

Her soft lips slowly dab the ceramic rim of her teacup; her searching eyes follow mine in a way that appears they never really move. She doesn't seem to blink except on purpose; everything she does is methodical.

When I don't continue, Willa calmly sets the teacup on the nearby table, and she gets up from the chair. She takes the knife up again and stands over me.

"Is it because I frighten you?" She puts the blade to my chest and cuts open the buttons of my shirt one by one. "Or do you *vant* something in return?"

I say nothing; any answer I give, I feel like it will be the wrong one. I am threatened by her, knowing she will not hesitate to kill me. But at the same time, something about her would never harm me. Because I can't possibly understand why, there is nothing I can do to figure out a way out of this predicament.

With the knife, she cuts my pants away, down the center—and for comfort—and then cuts off my underwear, exposing me fully to the fluorescent light humming within the ceiling.

"What are you doing, Willa?"

I try not to look at anything but her face, but it's difficult to do when she takes my cock into her hand and squeezes it roughly. Not too hard, but almost to the point of pain. I'm hard within seconds.

"Is this *vat* you *vant*?" Her eyes never move from mine, never blinking, and the more I witness it, I realize how unsettling it is.

I shake my head and look up at the ceiling, eyes watering from the pain. And the pleasure.

"No, it's not what I want from you," I tell her.

"But it is *vat* all men *vant*." Her hand moves up and down the length of me, and I grow harder. When I feel her warm, wet mouth sliding over my cock, I gasp quietly, and my body tenses.

But it's hard to focus on pleasure when not so far in the back of my mind, I know she could, at any moment, cut my cock off with the flick of her wrist.

"No, Willa, just stop. I'll tell you about Seraphina, but only if you stop." Never in a million years would I tell a woman to stop, but there's a first time for everything. Because letting her continue feels...dangerous.

She raises, and I feel her hand move away, and only then do I open my eyes to look at her again.

“Continue the story, *Freedrik*,” she demands in a tone that could easily be mistaken for an innocent request by anyone unaware of what she’s capable of.

“What about Seraphina do you want to know exactly?” I probe. Telling her everything, from the moment I met her to the moment I killed her, would certainly buy me a lot of time, but it’s just not a story I want to relive, even to save my life.

Seraphina was my heart and soul. No matter how dark, she was the love of my life. No matter how twisted and insane, she was *mine*. And I killed her. And when I killed her, I killed a part of myself—if not all of myself.

Yes...I killed myself.

Suddenly, I’m starting to understand. Not Willa—I doubt I or anyone else will ever fully understand her, but out of nowhere, I’ve realized something that’s been staring me in the face all along: I am different. I have changed since Seraphina’s death.

(You’ve changed back into who you always were.)

“Vy did you love her? *Vat* made her so special to you? She *vas* mentally ill, *vas* she not?”

Mentally ill? I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone—even myself—use such kind words to describe Seraphina Bragado. Strangely enough, for the briefest of moments, it makes me view Seraphina in a different light. I shake it off quickly, as I don’t want anything to alter my memories of her, not even if it means shining her in a brighter light. Because I loved her the way she was, no matter how fucking “mentally ill.”

“Yes,” I tell Willa, my words laced with anger that I hadn’t intended. “She was...” I can’t force myself to say the words out loud. “Why did I love her? What made her so special? Seraphina was...real. She was the most devoted, most loyal soul I’ve ever known. She wasn’t *normal*, she didn’t fit into society, but she fit in my world—she *created* my world and then introduced me to it.” I grit my teeth, my anger not projected at Willa but society and myself.

Willa moves to stand next to the dentist’s chair and looks down at me, lying flat against it.

“You *vill* show me how to live in the *vorld* she created,” she says. “I *vill* replace Seraphina in the life of *Freedrik Gustavsson*.”

Ah. And so, now I understand Willa, after all.

Izabel

Niklas and I have been confined in this room for hours since I regained consciousness. Daylight slowly crept in through the tiny window and brightened the four walls of our prison and our predicament. The sound of footsteps in the hallway had died down about two hours ago—I take it that period, just before sunrise, is when much of the staff comes in to begin their workday.

I never imagined that would be how things worked in this place. Did they punch timecards and pass casually through security before sharing an elevator with ten other heavily perfumed people? Are they all dressed in nice office work attire and sitting at desks next to windows overlooking the city while they take phone calls and tap on keyboards? Are there interns taking notes and running errands, and serving coffee? Is there a bustling mailroom in the basement of the building where the newbies work their asses off so they can eventually move up to bigger and better things in the company? Like killing people for money instead of sorting mail? It seems ridiculous when I think about it all, but it makes the most sense.

An organization as dangerous as The Order isn't going to be obvious; they would need to appear as normal as everybody else. Its members aren't going to be passing out business cards that say: *Assassin-for-hire*. Their buildings won't be the tallest and fanciest, shining like beacons in the centers of the most famous cities in the world. No, they're going to be the most obscure, modest-looking. There will be water fountains that don't work properly, stairwells that nobody ever uses, elevators that pass up floors without letting anybody off, window cleaners, janitors, and food delivery drivers dropping off orders at lunch.

"You look constipated," I hear Niklas' voice beside me.

"I'm thinking."

"About how to get outta here?"

"Yeah. What else is there to think about?"

He doesn't respond, probably because he doesn't necessarily disagree.

This goes on for two more days.

No one has entered the room or stopped outside its door. We've had nothing to eat, nothing to drink, and nowhere to go to the...well, let's just say it's a good thing they haven't been feeding us.

But I'm dying of thirst; my mouth feels like I've been chewing on cotton balls, and my throat itches and burns.

Niklas isn't doing any better, though he's hiding his discomfort better than me.

"I don't understand why they're not at least trying to keep us alive," I say. "If Victor finds out we're already dead, there's no way he'll come here."

"He's not coming anyway."

"Then why are we even here? Why are we still alive?"

"Because they hope he'll change his mind."

I shake my head and pace the floor, arms crossed.

"But no one has even checked the room," I point out. "How would Victor know whether we're dead or alive if even none of them do?"

Niklas glances at the heavy, solid-wood door that we both know is tightly secured from the outside—we'd already tried to get out that way a long time ago.

"What about it?" I ask with a shrug.

Instead of giving me an answer, he looks up at the ceiling and then along the wall.

I'm getting irritated fast, and he knows it.

"We don't see it," he says, "but there's gotta be a camera somewhere in this room. One feeds into a bigger room, which feeds to all of Victor's last known contacts. He knows where we are and that we're still alive. And they know he knows."

I hate to say it, but Niklas is right. In the back of my mind, I knew this myself, but I tried to ignore it. I don't want to believe that Victor knows where we are and that he has no intention of rescuing us.

Day Four

My head is pounding. My tongue feels swollen behind my teeth. I need water soon, or this definitely won't end well.

Niklas has been lying on the floor, facing the wall, for several hours. I

thought he might be sleeping and didn't want to wake him, so I'd left him alone for a little while. But after another hour or so with no movement, I go over to check.

His eyes are wide open.

"Conserve your energy, Izzy," he tells me.

I shake his shoulder. "We need water—I can't stress this enough. Technically, we aren't supposed to survive longer than three days without it, but here we are, four days later, and—"

"It's been five for me," he says but still doesn't move. "So, if you'd be so kind as to get away from MY FUCKING EAR! I have a goddamn migraine from hell, all right?"

His reaction, and his voice, startle me. Five days? This can't be happening. Who even *does* this?! Lets the abductees die when they're the bargaining chip?

"You haven't had *anything* to drink in five days?" I ask quietly but with urgency.

"I had a few beers five days ago," he says, "but that was it."

I sigh with a slight sense of relief. "You do know beer is mostly water, right?"

"Yeah...I knew that," he says. "Now, please, just stop talking."

Yeah, I don't think he knew that.

I leave him alone, passing up this awesome opportunity to fuck with him.

I pace the room back and forth, left to right, corner to corner, even diagonally. I run my hands along every inch of the wall that I can reach in search of a hidden camera but find nothing. Gazing upward at the ceiling, which is too high to reach even if I stood on Niklas' shoulders, I believe that's where the cameras must be, way out of our reach.

Gesturing my hands above me as if I've found the damn camera, I do the only thing I have left.

"Can you at least give us some water?" I shout. "What good are we if we're dead?!"

A few minutes later, I try again.

An hour later, I try again and again.

It must've been five hours ago when I first stood in the center of the room talking to myself, and still, there's no sign of anyone coming to bring us water.

This is worse than any scenario I ever could've imagined. The silence, the feeling of absolute helplessness—the *fucking silence*. Maybe I've been too preoccupied with the dehydration to have realized sooner, but early yesterday morning and this morning, there were no footsteps in the hall. There hasn't been a sound or sign of *anyone* in this building in two days!

Now I feel even more trapped like I'm pinned underneath the rubble of a construction collapse. It's dark and stuffy, and I can barely breathe, and no one can hear me to find my location—no one even knows the construction site collapsed! Except for Victor Faust, who I'm starting to despise in my own sick, woman-scorned way. How can he do this!? How can that bastard let this happen?!

"Victor, do you hear me?" I shout at the hidden camera, wherever it is. "I'll never forgive you if you leave us in here to rot! I fucking mean it—I'll never forgive you! I'll hunt you down!" What, as a vengeful spirit? A poltergeist doomed to haunt this building in the afterlife, where VICTOR WILL NEVER SHOW UP?!

"Izzy! Calm down, all right?" Niklas says.

Calm down? But I wasn't even saying anything out loud. I look down at my hands when I feel a trickle of warm liquid seeping from my palm, and I notice my fingernails have found their way into my flesh. My chest visibly heaves with anxiety-filled, rapid breaths.

I collapse onto the floor, sitting upright with my knees bent behind me awkwardly, and I lower my head toward the floor, bracing it on my arms for support. And I breathe.

I am not locked inside this tiny room. I just think I am, I try to tell myself. I'm going to get out of here soon. Just breathe, Izabel—breathe.

"If it means anything," I hear Niklas' voice, "I'm not doing so well myself."

"Anxiety?" I ask, still with my forehead almost touching the floor. "Or is it the dehydration?"

"Both," Niklas admits, and I never expected him to have any anxiety issues.

"I refuse to die like this," I say.

"I don't think either of us has much of a choice."

I roll over, lay on my back, and look up at the ceiling, at that elusive hidden camera that I'm starting to believe isn't there. A tear slips down my cheek sideways. And then another. It causes my nose to itch, but

I'm too...everything to raise my hand and wipe it away.

“Victor...” I whisper, and, of course, there is no answer.

Niklas

I feel something shutting down inside of me; I don't know if it's an organ or just my will to live, but whatever it is, it's got about another day. I've pissed three times in the corner of this room, and I don't know *what* since I haven't had anything to drink in five—four—days. Izzy hasn't taken a piss once, a sure sign that her body will start shutting down soon.

I admit this whole thing is strange, even for The Order. I'm having a hard time figuring out their motives and their plan. Is that really what they aim to do? Just leave us in here to die of dehydration? It seems out of character for them. I think I would've preferred torture—at least then it wouldn't be so fucKING QUIET!

The silence is really fucking with my head. If I didn't have Izzy here with me—

"They don't want us to die," I tell Izabel upon realizing.

"Huh?" Her voice is weak; she's lying on her back in the middle of the floor.

"It's why they put us in here together instead of separating us in different rooms," I explain. "It's also why we weren't restrained. No zip-ties, no rope, nothing."

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she says, and I hear her readjusting her position on the hard floor, "but company and unhindered movement isn't going to keep us alive."

"No, but we'd die sooner without them."

"We *will* die without water," she points out.

"They're not going to let us die. They'll bring us water before it goes too far."

"I think it already has. I'm too weak to move. And this headache is unlike anything I've ever felt before. It feels like my brain is getting too big for my skull."

I manage to scoff. "Don't worry, Izzy, that'll never happen."

"Shut up, asshole."

“Seriously though,” I go on, “they’re not going to let us die. At least, not in here like this.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to put us in different rooms,” she says, “and give us water and food and a bucket to piss in, so at least we wouldn’t be on the verge of death? This crazy method is too risky. What if one of us *does* die? Look at how weak we are.”

“Weak is how they want us,” I tell her. “Think about it. The old-fashioned way, separating us into different rooms and having to open the door to toss food inside. Or, binding our hands and feet and sending someone in here to spoon-feed and hydrate us—that’s the risky way for them.”

“You’re right,” she says. “With enough time, I can get myself out of zip-ties or cuffs or rope.”

“They know we’re dangerous and smart—the less contact they have with either of us, the better,” I say. “And when the time comes to unlock that door and remove us from this room, we’ll be too weak to fight our way to freedom no matter who they send in to retrieve us.”

“Then they do plan to open the fucking door,” she says. “When they bring us water—which will have to be today, surely they know that—that’ll be our chance to get out of here.”

“That’s the only part I haven’t figured out yet,” I say. “We’re weak and not doing so great because of dehydration, but I still feel like I could take down anyone they send here with water. Rage and desperation can easily eclipse weakness in the right conditions.”

“Armed guards in the hall,” she reminds me, but I’m still not entirely convinced. “Neither of us has a gun or a knife—no weapons of any kind. A hallway full of guns will thwart an escape.”

“Maybe so,” I say, “but it’s still too risky. I’m sure they know about your mission with Nora to kill Randolph Pincer. The two of you took out an entire building of armed men. The Order isn’t stupid. This is the safest way for them.”

After a moment of thoughtful silence:

“Why didn’t they just keep us drugged then?” she asks.

I think on it a second. *Yeah, why not that?*

“Ah,” Izzy says, figuring it out before me. “Because if we’re too out of it, Victor can’t see us begging him for help. We can’t play on his emotions.”

“He can’t see *you* begging him for help,” I correct her. “I’m not begging nobody. But you’re right—they need us coherent but weak. So, again I say:

The Order knows what they're doing."

The sound of Izabel's clothes moving across the floor prompts my attention; I turn onto my other side to see her getting to her knees and crawling toward the door. She sits upright against the wall beside it; her legs are stretched out onto the floor.

"I'm going to be ready when they come," she says.

"I'll be ready too."

"You should move closer to the door," she tells me.

"I'm fine right here. I've been conserving energy, remember." I shake my head against the floor. "You, on the other hand, haven't stopped moving around or running your mouth since you got here. I doubt you'll be of much use when the time comes."

"Yeah, well, we'll see, won't we?" She may be weak, but she hasn't lost her attitude, so that's a good sign.

"Mmm-hmm," I manage, then shut my eyes to conserve more energy.

Nora

Ohio? Well, OK then...

A long time ago, I'd decided to pull a Victor Faust and abandon his dead organization, go out on my own—now with my new, dare I call them, friends, Osiris and Hestia—but I had a change of heart. I still despise Hestia, almost as much as she despises me, but we've managed to work together this long without killing each other, so that has to count for something. And Osiris—he's just a good lay, not much more. Truthfully, sometimes I want to kill them both just to get them out of my hair.

We stopped looking for Artemis long ago, assuming she's already dead, along with her twin brother, Apollo. Now, we've just been wandering together. I think that's where the change of heart comes in: I'm bored as fuck and need something else to keep me busy other than these two reckless heathens.

"I thought you gave Faust a metaphorical middle finger?" Osiris complains as he shoves his feet into his boots, preparing to head out.

"Is he at least paying you for this?" Hestia adds bitterly.

"Probably. I know that Izabel and Niklas have been captured and are

being held in a room on an upper floor—no idea which one.”

“Why does he always send you?” Osiris puts in.

I shrug, snap the band around my ponytail, and drop my arms to my sides. “I guess because I’m the only one who manages not to get captured.”

“That says a lot about Faust’s Order then, doesn’t it?” Osiris says.

“Who cares?” Hestia interjects. “Let’s get this over with; I’m fuckin’ starvin’, and there’s a Belgian waffle at Denny’s with my name on it.”

We’ve been waiting for nightfall because this building is full of average citizens, many of which live there. There’s even an observation deck open to the public during the daylight hours, so the later we go, the less chance of drawing attention. Though, something tells me there’s no way we’ll avoid drawing attention no matter what time of day we go.

“Y’know,” Osiris says, stopping just shy of the hotel room door, “why is Faust sending you anyway? Why isn’t he going himself? They’ve captured his brother and his woman, and he sends *you*? No offense, honey, but you gotta admit that’s a little fucking strange.”

“He’s probably going to meet me there,” I explain, though I have to admit that I didn’t think of that before, and it kinda bothers me. “He just gave the order, but I’m probably closer than he is. And even if not, I know he’s gonna need backup—I’m all he’s got left.”

“Still no word from Gustavsson?” Osiris asks.

He already knows I haven’t seen or heard from Fredrik in ages, so he must be referring to Victor.

“Victor didn’t mention anything about Fredrik,” I say, “so I’m assuming he hasn’t seen or heard from him either.”

“That guy’s probably dead,” Hestia says. “Like you’re gonna be because this mission Faust has you on doesn’t feel right.”

“Then we’re probably all gonna die,” I tell her, but really, it’s just to spite her.

Hestia blows a rather elegant raspberry. “I ain’t gonna die, honey. I’m just along for the ride.”

I might just kill you myself.

“Well, are you two ready for this?” I ask. “Last chance to back out, seeing as how both of you are having doubts.”

“Hell fucking no, I ain’t backin’ out,” Osiris says and steps out into the hall. “If I die, at least I die doing what I love best.”

“I thought you loved fucking best?”

Osiris blows a rather graceless raspberry, even spitting a little. “I don’t know if it’s because I’ve been fucking you lately, but it’s kinda lost its luster—I’ll go with killing.”

I roll my eyes and walk out the door. He always talks shit to get under my skin, so when we hop into bed together again, I’m pissed and focused on payback. That’s how he likes it—violent.

The three of us leave together, dressed as everyday citizens, with an armory of guns hidden strategically beneath our clothes.

Fredrik

Years Ago...

“Control,” Seraphina told me in her trademark poison-honeyed voice. “It’s what you lack, my love. You’re impatient. Reckless. Sloppy—”

“OK, I get it—I’m terrible at this.” I wanted to throw in the towel and return to impatience, recklessness, and sloppiness, but I knew that Seraphina was right. I had to learn to handle myself; I needed to *know* myself. I had to be able to trust myself—and Seraphina.

The woman strapped to the chair in the room we’d borrowed from a wealthy family on vacation screamed through the gag stuffed in her mouth. Sweat and blood ran down the sides of her face in rivulets. Seraphina had already beat her severely before I’d arrived. That was Seraphina’s way—everybody was fair game, so asking questions and whether or not someone was innocent or guilty beforehand didn’t much apply. But I have to say that Seraphina, for all the wickedness and cruelty for which she was capable, it never hindered her judgment—she was usually right about a person’s character without first needing to follow a moral procedure.

She did not seek out criminals or the “guilty” to torture and kill; they just always somehow fell into her lap. And also, unlike me, she didn’t need to inflict pain, to draw blood, but she sure as hell enjoyed it when the opportunity presented itself.

“But what has this woman done, Seraphina?” I asked. “Can’t you at least tell me that?”

“What has she *not* done?” Seraphina straddled the woman, their breasts touching, the warm, wet oasis between Seraphina’s legs that I was addicted to more than any addict to any drug pressed firmly against the woman. Her jet-black hair was cut in an artistic point just beneath high cheekbones; her eyes were as black as her hair; her lipstick as red as the blood trailing down her victim’s chin.

She caged the woman’s face behind long, graceful fingers and tore the

gag from her mouth with her teeth.

The woman did not scream; perhaps she already knew what Seraphina would do to her if she did.

“I can’t just dive in without knowing whether or not she’s done something to deserve it,” I point out.

Seraphina ground her lap against the woman’s; her tongue snaked out and traced her bloodied lips. I could’ve sworn I heard the woman whimper. Or moan.

Wait a minute...

Trust. Seraphina wanted me to trust her for fucking once. Stop questioning everything she did, stop doubting; stop contemplating right or wrong—and trust *myself!*

I realized at that moment that things weren’t as they appeared. The victim wasn’t a victim at all—she was a willing participant.

With that thought, Seraphina drew back her fist, and a sharp *crack!* rang out. The woman’s head snapped backward on her neck and bobbed a few seconds before she got control of her senses. Blood gushed from her split lip, and she appeared momentarily dazed. The words “victim” and “participant” traded blows in my mind. Which was she? At this point, I had no idea.

But I played along.

I trusted her. But more importantly, I began to trust myself, and that was what Seraphina wanted most of all, what she had been trying to teach me.

“What has she done?” I asked again, though this time, the question wasn’t meant to distinguish between right and wrong or to justify whatever was about to happen—it was my acceptance of the delectable gift Seraphina had presented me.

“What *hasn’t* she done?” Seraphina echoed, her voice spiked with seduction and cruel intent. “Listen to your instincts, my love—they are *never* fucking wrong.”

“What are my instincts supposed to be telling me?”

“Whether or not she’s innocent.”

Seraphina crawled off the woman’s naked lap and fell between her quivering legs tied to the chair’s legs. She dragged a blade over the damp flesh of her inner thighs and then father up, parting her womanly lips with it. The second I saw the pink flesh glistening with moisture, I was beside myself; every cell in my body ached and throbbed.

My dark love buried her head between the woman’s thighs, licking and

suckling and pulling with her teeth until the woman cried out in pain and pleasure. But Seraphina wouldn't let her come—she always knew when to stop—and this brought tears to the woman's eyes; she bucked her hips, trying to make herself come from the motion alone.

I only watched for moments before I fucked Seraphina from behind, and I forced *myself* to stop and learn control, which nearly brought tears to *my* eyes.

But Seraphina was always in control. And she could never *be* controlled. No matter how hard I'd tried in the few months since I'd met her and fell in love with her, I could not break her.

Present Day...

“You could not break her in *vat vay*?”

I look into Willa's eyes, still as dark and eerie as ever, but now with a tiny spark of interest instead of the typical vacancy.

“She was so strong,” I say, recalling her beautiful face. “When I met Seraphina, she was the teacher; she was the all-powerful and wise who couldn't be swayed, tempted, manipulated, or tricked; she was immune to weakness—Seraphina was immune to *love*.”

“I, too, am immune to love, *Freedrik*. Tell me more.”

Despite my gradual understanding of why Willa has brought me here, I don't press her for answers. I know I need to wait before I risk opening another vein and bleeding out in this room.

“I believe Seraphina wanted to love me the way I loved her in the beginning, but she knew where to draw the line. And that's how I couldn't break her. I wanted her to love me with the same passion and desperation with which I loved her. I wanted to know, to *feel*, that she couldn't bear the thought of losing me. It's what everyone wants, is it not? Someone who believes we are their whole world, who claim they would die without us.” The question wasn't meant for Willa since she wouldn't know how to answer it; it was more a statement of fact.

“Seraphina could love me and give her black heart to me, but she would go on with her life if she ever lost me. She would never kill herself over me, or any man, for that matter. She was not jealous; if I fucked another woman, she could never be hurt; she was far too strong and proud. But she was loyal to me. She was a woman addicted to sex but was in full control and never

slept with another man. At least, not until much later...”

Memories of Seraphina admitting to infidelity course through my mind. I shake them off.

“But I could not break her. Not in the beginning. Seraphina was the strongest woman I have ever known. But also the most emotionally unstable. And I had no idea how thin the edge was upon which she walked.”

Years Ago...

Without letting the woman come—none of us did—Seraphina plunged the knife into the victim’s heart. By this time, it was clear to me that she was, in fact, a victim. But a willing participant, too, at least for a little while, until she knew she was going to die.

I stumbled backward until the wall stopped me.

“Why did you...?” I couldn’t understand not only what had just happened and why, but everything about Seraphina both intrigued and shocked me. I got mental whiplash just sitting next to her at times. And this was one of those times.

First, she was beating the woman. Next, she was giving the woman pleasure. Then, without the faintest hint of what she was about to do next, she killed the woman.

Seraphina walked over and stood before me; she put the bloodied knife into my hand, and subconsciously, I accepted it.

“What happened to your instinct, Fredrik?” she asked, and I heard the disappointment in her voice.

I couldn’t look at her, not out of shame, but I was still reeling from the chaotic sequence of events that just transpired, all of which made no sense—the reason why it was so shocking.

She walked away from me; I only realized it when I felt the heat of her body standing so close disappear, replaced by the coolness of the air-conditioned room.

“You are too easily manipulated by your desires, my love,” she said.

She sat down on the end of a giant bed and lit a cigarette. I stared at the floor, seeing Seraphina only in my peripheral vision, too focused on the carpet to give her my full attention, though my ears hung onto her every word.

“For a moment,” she went on, “you knew that woman was guilty—you

never would've participated in hurting her if your heart, your instincts, told you otherwise."

I raised my head. And I looked right at her, understanding her words not because they were new and true but because they were *familiar* and true.

She was right. And it took me until this moment to see that, to believe something I already knew about myself.

"No, I wouldn't have," I told her—and myself. "I never would've let you hit her; I would've untied her from the chair and set her free."

"But you didn't."

"No, I didn't."

"You joined me."

"Yes, I did."

She took a long drag from the cigarette, and smoke streamed from her Cupid's Bow lips. "Then what changed, Fredrik? Are you only capable of following your instincts when you want to fuck someone or bleed them dry? Is that the only time when you have clarity?"

"I-I don't know."

"Think about it," she demanded in a calm voice. "You lose yourself the second you lose the craving to feed your ambitions, desires, and needs." She took another drag and then squashed the cigarette out on the expensive wood bedframe.

Then she came back over to me, still standing with my back against the wall.

She pressed her breasts to my naked chest, pushed up on her toes, and kissed my neck. "You need to learn control, more than anything, Fredrik," she whispered near my ear and tugged my earlobe with her teeth. "Control leads to clarity, and you need to possess these two things every second of every hour of every single day of your life."

I understood what she was saying, but I hated her delivery of the message. Was she talking about fucking? Killing? Torturing? Playing judge, jury, and executioner?

Oh, wait, yes, she was talking about it all.

"You need to know yourself," she said. "Once you know yourself, you can trust yourself. Once you trust yourself, you will control everything and everyone around you. Once you control your world, everything becomes clear, and you make fewer mistakes."

I grabbed Seraphina by the back of her raven hair and wrenched her

head backward on her neck, exposing her throat to me.

“Just say what you mean to fucking say,” I told her. “Stop talking in circles and give it to me straight.” I gazed into her black eyes that peered back into mine with all of the control, clarity, and confidence the world could offer—it was no wonder I couldn’t find any for myself.

A smile appeared in her eyes and slowly made its way to the corners of her delicious lips, still wet with the dead woman’s pleasure.

“Stop giving a shit,” she finally gave it to me straight. “Trust the first instinct you get and never look back; never question or doubt yourself, and always do everything with *purpose*.” She grinned seductively. “You learn to stop giving a shit about what the weaker half of you has to say, and you’ll realize how right you always were the first time.”

Everything became clear to me in that pivotal moment: all the times before when I made a mess of things; when I ended up killing someone I only meant to hurt; why I was so lost and confused and lonely, sloppy and insecure and without clarity—I didn’t know or trust myself, the weaker half of me, the half that all of us possess, ruled my life.

But for Seraphina, the darkest half was in control.

Until it wasn’t...

Izabel

I startle awake, my eyes darting all around the room. Somehow, I'd managed to end up lying on the floor again, though I'm still next to the door that seems more and more like it's never going to open. Not even for water.

How long have I been asleep? It's dark outside, but it feels much later than nine or ten o'clock. Not sure how I know that, but it's just a feeling. Many animals—or maybe all of them; I'm not a wildlife expert—have internal day-night clocks. Take roosters, for example; they know long before dawn that the sun will rise soon, and they let everybody know they know. Have I become a rooster? Maybe I should start crowing; maybe that'll get The Order's attention, and they'll send somebody in here to shut me up. Or give us water, at least.

Wow...I think I'm losing my mind—I just spent way too much time thinking about roosters...

Oh, right—I'd heard a noise.

Raising my back from the floor with difficulty, I sit upright and gaze around the room. Niklas is asleep against the wall—or he's pretending to be asleep.

“Nik—did you hear that?” I whisper. He doesn't answer or move. “*Niklas*,” I whisper louder. Wait—why am I even whispering at all? “NIKLAS!”

He jolts awake, spins around, and is on his feet in under two seconds, eyes wide, and although he looks alert, he looks half-dead.

“Listen,” I whisper again, and now I realize why I was whispering: I don't want my voice to drown it out if I hear the noise again.

“What am I listening for?” he asks.

Umm, well, I'm not sure exactly. I was asleep when I heard it, and I can't recall what it sounded like; all I know is that I heard *something*.

“I don't know,” I tell him. “Just be quiet.”

He stands there silent but not perfectly still; his body sways a little in the moonlight, probably both from the abrupt awakening and the dehydration.

After a couple of minutes, there is no sound other than our breathing.

Niklas, looking uncomfortable, sits back down on the floor, stretching one leg out, and drawing the other knee upward. He drops both hands between his legs, shoulders hunched. “I think you’re starting to lose it,” he says, resting his back against the wall.

“Probably,” I agree, thinking about roosters again. “Maybe it was a dream.”

Giving up, I lay back down and stare upward at the ceiling. Niklas closes his eyes and drops his head a little, ready to drift off again.

But then I hear the noise again—a tiny beep, so faint I have no idea how I ever heard it while I was sleeping.

Niklas’ eyes open, and he raises his head. He looks right at me. “I heard it,” he whispers, and we start looking around the room.

A slight grating sound and another beep, and our heads shoot up simultaneously toward the ceiling.

“Holy shit...” I try but can’t get the rest out.

In one section of the ceiling, the size and shape of a typical ceiling tile breaks away from the rest, and a surveillance screen appears in its place. The screen pops on, and the room is bathed in dim gray-white light.

I sense that Niklas and I want to look at each other to share our surprise, but neither can tear our eyes away from the sight before us. Not only is it the first sign of life outside our four-wall prison since the footsteps that disappeared days ago, but it is movement. It is change. And I feel like I never want to take such necessities for granted ever again.

My heart pounds feverishly behind my ribs and in my ears, fearful and eager, as I stare at the screen, waiting for whatever it’s about to reveal.

I see a room much bigger than our prison in full color, with office furniture and paintings on the wall. There’s a window—the screen changes. A long, empty hallway. The screen changes again. Another long, empty hallway with a water fountain at the end. Next, a stairwell with a fire extinguisher and a small utility closet door. And a blond-haired ponytail swishing against the back of a woman who looks like she just went shopping for clothes at the local mall.

“Is that—”

“Nora Kessler,” Niklas finishes for me. “I can recognize that ass anywhere.” He laughs, relieved. “I never thought I’d be so glad to see *her*.” He stands up now, pushing himself unsteadily to his feet. I realize I’m

already standing, unable to recall when I'd ever moved from my spot on the floor.

"Who is that with her?" I try to peer in closer, but it's impossible to do when the screen is on the ceiling, too high for us to reach, and with my head tilted backward uncomfortably on my neck.

"Osiris and Hestia Stone," Niklas answers.

"OK, that's odd," I point out. "But who cares? They're here for us, surely—I don't care who she brings along with her."

The screen changes again when Nora opens the stairwell door and enters a hallway. All the cameras are mounted on the ceiling, so the only viewpoint we have are the tops of their heads. And there is sound, at least; I can hear their shoes moving across the tiled floor and their slightly heavy breathing.

"She's looking upward at the ceiling," I whisper, "but she doesn't hesitate to move."

"That means she can't see the cameras," Niklas says.

"Just like we can't see the one in here," I point out and glance around the room briefly.

"Yeah, this place is high-tech without looking like it," he adds.

I point at the screen. "There aren't even guards in the hallways. Not one."

"Because they don't need them," he says.

"That makes me incredibly nervous, Nik."

"You're not the only one."

The slight sense of relief Niklas seemed to have upon first seeing Nora appears to drain from his eyes. It leaves me, too, replaced by a tense twisting in the pit of my stomach.

Niklas and I lay back down to better see the screen.

Nora, Osiris, and Hestia hurry down another hallway, stopping only long enough to stealthily peer around the corner at the end, and then they dart out and start running again. They check all the doors on both sides of the hall, but not one opens, and there are no windows to see inside the rooms.

"She has no idea what floor we're on," I say as they enter another stairwell and continue up to the next floor.

"This is too reckless even for Nora," Niklas points out. "Why would she go into a building of this size not knowing what floor we're located on?"

"I want to know how she knew what building we were in," I say. My head falls to the side, and I look at Niklas. "She wouldn't have been wasting

time keeping tabs on either of us, Nik, so that can only mean one thing.” I look back at the screen.

“Yeah,” he says, “Victor sent her here.”

My heart speeds up in record time, and I press my hand to my chest as if to steady it and catch my breath. This means Victor knows where we are! He knows we were captured, and he—wait. Why did he send Nora? And why the hell does he have contact with her and not anybody else—not *me*?! It’s not jealousy that provokes me suddenly, but outright anger.

“He sends Nora but doesn’t come himself?” I ask out loud.

“It *is* a little fucked up,” Niklas says. “But maybe it’s just that she’s closer.”

I shake my head against the floor, keeping my eyes trained on Nora running down hallways with the Stone siblings in tow. “No,” I say. “We’ve been here for days, and he’s had more than enough time to come. Maybe I’m not being fair because I don’t know the whole story, but you’re right—it *is* fucked up that he’s not the one here to rescue us.”

“You know what?” Niklas says thoughtfully. “Now that I think about it, more than anything, it’s...*odd*.”

“Odd?”

“He doesn’t come himself,” he begins, “but sends Nora, along with Osiris and Hestia—all three expendable in Victor’s eyes. They come, without even knowing where to look for us, into a building owned and operated by The Order—I doubt Nora knows that small detail. I don’t know, Izzy, but it kinda feels like a setup.”

“You think he’s using them as...infantry?”

“I don’t know,” he says, his voice distant and focused. “It just feels off—it’s all I got, Izzy.”

Something *is* off about this whole thing.

I watch the screen with passionate interest, still with a brutal migraine and ever-weakening body.

Nora

By the fifteenth floor, I'm beginning to lose hope in finding Izabel and Niklas before someone finds us. Even though it appears that there's nobody in this damn building anywhere, except on the lobby floor. How is that even possible? Businesses, offices, apartment units, and even a hotel are all within this building's walls. The coffee shop is still open downstairs, with two baristas working to fill drink orders behind the counter. When we emerged from the stairwell, an employee still had not left the lobby-floor gift shop and slipped past to find another stairwell. But ever since we left the lobby, there's been no sign of anyone, not even a janitor.

I'm about to beat a cliché to death but looking for Izabel and Niklas in this forty-something-story building is the epitome of a needle in a fucking haystack.

"I don't think they're even here," I tell Osiris and Hestia. "Everything about this feels wrong."

I stop in the middle of the brightly lit hallway, as empty as the last fourteen.

"Victor didn't give me anything else to go on," I ponder. "How does he know she's here if he doesn't know where?" I shake my head and pace, now thinking out loud. "No, no, that's not *impossible*. It might be his only information; otherwise, he would've given me more."

Osiris laughs. "You sure about that, doll?"

"No, not really."

"So, then you ready to get outta this place?" Hestia puts in, probably thinking more about waffles. "You should just let that girl die. Ain't nothin' but a nuisance, anyway; you said so yourself."

"I never said that."

"Well, you have in so many words," Hestia says.

"I like Izabel," I defend.

"Not enough to get her ass out of waist-deep shit," Osiris puts in. "Be honest—the real reason you're here at all ain't got nothin' to do with the girl;

you're here for your boy-toy, Niklas Fleischer." His laughter echoes down the hall.

I won't lie and say that's not partially true, but I don't want to save Niklas' ass for the reason Osiris thinks I do. Niklas is just...fun, but there are definitely no feelings between us, that's for sure.

"Let's find them," I say, ignoring Osiris' jab, "and then we can leave." Who the hell am I kidding? I make it sound like it's going to be easy!

Several more floors and hallways later, and still no sign of anyone or anything. No guards. No cameras, at least none that are visible to the naked eye. No sounds are coming from any of the rooms. There isn't even dirt on the floors or trash dumped in any of the dozens of small trash cans sitting against the wall outside every elevator door. I don't know exactly what this place is, but it's not a fully functioning building, even though it appears to be at first glance.

I stop dead-center in a stairwell; Osiris practically runs into me from behind, Hestia behind him.

"What's up?" he asks. "You hear something?"

"No, I just realized something." I turn my head slowly to look at them both, one and two steps beneath me, our voices echoing lightly in the confined space.

Osiris and Hestia wait impatiently for me to spit it out already; they each make restless faces at me.

"This entire building," I begin, "is a façade. And those employees downstairs on the lobby floor—the baristas, the gift shop clerk—fifty bucks they're operatives."

Hestia's face darkens. "Ah, hell no," she says. "You done got us into some fucked up shit, Kessler." She knuckles Osiris in the bicep. "This whole damn building is a trap, and you let this crazy bitch lead us right into it."

Osiris looks me in the eyes, his lips hitching up on one side. "This mission of yours just got a whole lot more interesting," he says playfully. "Fifty more bucks, there's no fuckin' way we're gettin' outta here the same way we came in."

Or at all...

I shake my head, thinking about it. "Once we walked into the building and passed through the lobby, the operatives locked us inside."

"A hundred bucks all the gun power is on the lobby and first several floors," Hestia puts in.

“Even if we had to,” I say, “we couldn’t escape through a window because we don’t have any gear.”

“What the hell kind of place is this,” Osiris says, “to be surrounded by other public buildings and bystanders?”

“The Order,” I tell them. “Victor Faust sent us right into the mouth of the beast.”

Hestia starts hitting and cursing Osiris again, but I leave through the stairwell door, knowing now more than ever that there is no time to waste. Victor might’ve used us as bait and sent us in first like an infantry line, but that doesn’t mean I have to get distracted by feelings of betrayal. It doesn’t mean I can’t get myself out of here alive. Osiris and Hestia are on their own in that aspect; I couldn’t care less what happens to them. It’s probably a good thing I have them with me, so I can use them the way Victor seems to be using me, at least.

But if I do manage to get myself out of here alive, Victor and I are going to have a little talk.

Izabel

“She thinks it’s a setup, too,” I say. “I hate to say it, Nik, but Victor is using Nora.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Yeah, honestly, it kind of does.” My head falls to the side, and I look right at him. “I guess I just didn’t expect Victor to betray any one of us.”

“She’s not family,” Niklas points out. “And she’s not you.”

“Still...it just rubs me the wrong way.”

“Izzy,” he says, “he’s doing what has to be done to get you out of here. My brother knows, the same damn way that I know, that sacrifices have to be made in a situation like this. He can’t come into this place on his own, guns blazing, and get you or himself out of here alive, much less the both of you. That’s why we’re not seeing *him* on that screen.”

“You sound like you don’t think it’s so odd anymore,” I say.

“No, it’s still odd for sure. *Something* about the whole thing is odd—I just can’t put my finger on *what*.”

Nora emerges from another stairwell door into another long, brightly lit hallway, with Osiris and Hestia following closely behind her.

Niklas and I watch, our unblinking gazes glued to the screen above us, headache still pounding inside my skull, heart wedged in the center of my throat.

“If all this is true,” I say, “then Victor will have to show at some point. Why send Nora if he didn’t plan to come himself eventually?”

“For your sake,” Niklas says, “I hope you’re right. Because Nora can’t get you out of here by herself or with someone as inexperienced as the Stone siblings.”

“Why do you keep saying *me*, Nik? He’s doing this for you, too.”

“Just watch the screen, Izzy.”

And that’s what I do.

Nora

Twentieth floor. It feels different here than all the floors below, cooler as if the air has kicked on. And the lights appear brighter, though it could just be my imagination too. But there's definitely something different about this floor.

The three of us make it to the end of one long stretch of the hallway when just as we round the corner, a bullet strikes the wall half a second before my head was to pass it.

"Shit! Shit-shit-shit-shit!" I crouch low at the corner; Osiris and Hestia press their backs against the wall beside me, guns ready in their hands.

"I think it's safe to say they're somewhere on this floor," Osiris says.

"Probably." I stick my hand around the edge of the wall and into the hallway just long enough to hear another shot; a bullet strikes the wall in front of me, burying into the plaster. "And now we know in which direction, at least." *And thankfully, that one, in particular, is a bad shot, or else I might've just lost a hand.*

"You got a plan?" Osiris asks.

"No," I say and roll fast across the floor and into the hallway, gun firing in the direction of the shooter at the same time. I strike the operative, and he drops dead at the end of the hall. "But let's go anyway," I shout. "Because we don't have time to sit here and come up with one!"

"Should've had one before waltzing into this fucking deathtrap of a building!" I heard Hestia say behind me.

We hurry down the hallway, and before even making it halfway, two more operatives round the corner out ahead, bullets sailing the distance to meet us. I fall and roll forward and fire two shots. Osiris drops to his stomach and lies flat, his gun pointed out ahead of him, firing three shots quickly. We take out both operatives, but not in time to save Hestia from a stray bullet, and she's hit and collapses against the wall.

"Oh fuck! Oh fuck, I'm hit! You let that bitch get me shot!" Bright-red crimson glistens and pools on the white-tile floor beneath her. "Don't you

fuckin' leave me here!" She tells her brother.

Osiris reaches for her arm, intent on dragging her along with him, but the second his hand collapses around her elbow, another stray bullet from the opposite direction buries inside her temple, killing her instantly.

"No! *Nooo!* Fuck this!" Osiris releases his sister's arm and just starts firing. He empties his gun into the shooter that killed Hestia, then reloads clumsily, barely getting the clip out of his pants pocket in time.

More shots deafen me as he moves past in the direction we were heading before, and he fires with reckless abandon at the operatives coming toward us.

"Muthafuckas!" He empties the gun again, then fumbles in his other pocket for more.

"Osiris! Get down! Get down, you idiot!" In a crouched position beside the wall, I try to grab him by the pants and pull him back, but he moves out of my reach.

As he continues onward, more shots pierce my eardrums, dropping more men ahead of us and a few more behind us. I take out one coming from behind Osiris, whom he doesn't see in time, but I save my damn bullets for the most part. Osiris can do what he wants. I knew when bringing him here that he and his sister were careless and could not be controlled or even reasoned with when in a rage, so there's no use in trying to reason with or stop him now. If he dies, he dies; at least he'll have taken out several operatives for me before he checks out. It was all part of my plan anyway, even if at first only subconscious. It wasn't until I realized that Victor Faust had used me that I gathered it was precisely what I was doing with the Stones.

We make it to the end of the hall, and suddenly all is quiet again. I can faintly hear a cell phone buzzing against the tile floor, probably in the pocket of one of the dead operatives, but it's all I can hear. Well, that and Osiris breathing like he just ran a marathon in a rage.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you?" I ask him while reloading my gun, snapping the magazine into place. "Can't avenge your sister if you're DEAD." I rise into a stand and get ready to round the corner again.

"It ain't vengeance," he says and pauses to catch his breath; his dark eyes swirl with...well, vengeance. "She was stupid enough to get herself killed, so it's her own damn fault."

I say nothing and let him believe that lie.

“Let’s go!” I turn the corner and am met with more gunfire. I know I’m running out of bullets—Osiris will run out before me—but I have to use them or die. Unlike Osiris, I fire with precision, making sure every bullet counts. One. Two. Three more men I take out before I feel a pinch in the middle of my thigh. The pinch spreads beneath my skin, deep in the muscle, to become a searing pain, and the leg betrays me. I see the floor rising to meet me before I realize I’m falling.

Another pinch strikes me in the shoulder, but this one becomes searing pain more quickly than the first gunshot wound. It’s enough that I lose motion in my entire arm; my gun falls from my hand and slides across the smooth floor, well within my reach, but I can’t move my arm to retrieve it. I try with my other arm and get it into my hand, finger on the trigger, but there’s no one left for me to shoot.

The sound of gunfire has stopped, leaving only my heavy breathing and the shuffling of my clothes against the floor as I crawl, though to where I have no fucking idea.

That’s odd...there’s a dull, throbbing pain in my abdomen, but I never felt a bullet enter there.

I look down to see my pretty mall blouse, once a pinkish rose-gold, now a darkish blood-red. The second I realize I’ve been shot much worse than in the leg or shoulder, blood rises from my throat, warm and metallic and salty; I cough, and crimson spittle sprinkles the floor.

“I am disappointed,” I hear a somewhat familiar voice say from... somewhere. “I thought you would make it farther than this.”

Finally, I manage to get a weak hold of my senses, though my hearing sounds dulled, and my sight is blurred—I’m losing too much blood and too quickly.

Dragging my good arm across the floor, I keep crawling, still to where I don’t know, but a wide doorway begins to materialize in my vision. *Wait—where’s Osiris?* Whoever the voice came from, he is just beyond that door; I know that now. I keep crawling, and he doesn’t try to stop me, probably because he knows that, in this state, I’m no threat to him or anyone else who might be here. And I know there are others. I can’t see them, but I can hear their movements behind and around me and even out ahead of me, positioned farther behind the one who spoke.

I lose my balance and crash to the floor, my cheek pressed against the cool tile. My eyelids open and shut, open, and shut, blinking off and on the

bloodied face of Osiris lying dead just feet from me. *You idiot...Yeah, well, you get what you deserve.* I ignore my hypocrisy, my sudden and unexpected desire to avenge his death, despite not liking him all that much. He was fun to be around and a god in bed, but... *Idiot!*

“She has a gun,” a woman’s voice says from behind me; I can’t see her, but she sounds like a real bitch, someone important, who is more to The Order than an expendable operative or unwitting ally.

“Her gun is empty,” the man says; his voice sounds too muffled for me to pinpoint.

I realize, too, that I’m not even trying to make him out anymore—all I can see are the tiny spots on the tile floor.

I can’t raise my head; I try desperately, but it feels like it weighs a ton. My breathing is labored. The gun is still in my hand; I can feel the cold, hard contours of the hilt, but...yes, the gun is still in my hand!

With all the energy I can summon, I raise the gun with a wrist that feels like a noodle, point it in the direction of the man’s voice, and pull the trigger.

Click!

He was right—out of bullets.

The metal hitting the floor so close to my head as I drop the gun is like an iron bell banging around inside my skull.

I’m dead. I came here today to die. Maybe I wanted to; I can’t be sure; I can’t pretend to know the inner workings of a mind gripped by darkness. I just always thought I knew myself better than anyone. But no, I was never the one in control—the darkness controlled me. I was incapable of love; I despised and spurned it at all costs; I killed to avoid its poison, its absolute fucking destruction of the emotionless machine I longed to be.

But maybe Izabel was right:

“I know that attachments to people are a hindrance in this line of work, but I also think it’s a disadvantage not to be able to love and feel love.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I believe love makes a person stronger.”

“Stronger? No, Izabel, it’s exactly the opposite. To love someone is to take on the responsibility of keeping them safe, of worrying about them. It’s just a burden.”

“Well, I think you’re wrong. To love someone means you have something in life to fight for, something to live for—I guess you wouldn’t know; you’ve never felt love, so you can’t possibly understand.”

Maybe if I had known love, I wouldn't be here, bleeding out and too weak to lift my head to face the one who intends to put me out of my misery. Maybe if I'd been a better friend, or opened my heart to others, then the ones I thought were my friends wouldn't have betrayed me—Victor wouldn't have betrayed me to save the one *he* loves. Maybe if I had only loved like Izabel...

Ah, seriously? I'm doing this shit now? In my final moments, I'm lying on the floor whining about love, emotions, relationships, and friendship. If death makes us that fucking weak, I want no part of it.

With strength I didn't know I had, I lift my head to face the one who means to kill me and—

“What the?! You—”

Izabel

The shot is quiet. Blood from Nora's head stains the wall behind her, and her body falls against the floor, an empty shell like she had always been in life. Lysandra steps to the side to avoid getting blood on her expensive stilettos.

I'm not shocked or very saddened by Nora's death, but I admit it is unfortunate. I did think of her as somewhat of a friend, but she never let me or anyone else get close enough to develop stronger feelings for her—much of the time, we weren't sure we could even trust her. I guess we could, after all.

"Did you hear what she said?" Niklas asks me.

"Yeah," I tell him; neither of us can tear our eyes from the screen in case we miss something vital. "Whoever it is inside that room, she *knew*."

We could barely hear the muffled, faraway voice of the person to whom Nora and Lysandra were speaking, enough to know that it was a man. And the mystery person never stepped into the doorway because he knew he would be in full view of the camera—in full view of us.

"It's Vonnegut," Niklas says.

"Yes. It's definitely Vonnegut," I say, then add with grave revelation, "And it's likely someone we all know."

"I don't even want to think about that." Niklas shifts uncomfortably next to me.

"Whoever it is," I say, "the bastard is here, in this building, just feet from us somewhere."

But he is not on this floor. The shootout in the hallway could be heard on the screen, but not from within our prison. Not even faintly, so there's no way it happened on the same floor or several floors close to us. But it is, without a doubt, the same building. The spotted tile on the floor in the camera is the same as in the room we're being held; the gray-white paint on the walls; the thick mahogany door—the door is the same as the one Nora just died within feet of.

“Nora was about twenty or so floors up,” I contemplate. “And judging the view from that impenetrable window over there, we have to be near the top, if not the very top.”

“That means floors twenty and up are heavily guarded.”

My stomach sinks. I’ve never doubted Victor’s ability to get himself out of pretty much any situation, but I’m not feeling so great about this one. The Order knows him better than almost anyone—they made him who he is. They know what they’re up against, just like they knew what they were doing when they imprisoned Niklas and me inside this room. Seems counterproductive to give us a room with a view, but it was smart. Because they have no intention of feeding us, possibly no intention of giving us water, so no reason to open the door. The window glass is made of half-inch thick polycarbonate; it would deflect anything thrown at it. There is only one ceiling tile—the one made to retract for the screen to appear—and, as I said, it is far too high for either of us to reach even if we stood on each other’s shoulders. And even if we could somehow reach it, I doubt there’s a way out through it. As Niklas said, the window view and us being thrown in here together, unrestrained, is simply for our sanity.

But we will eventually starve to death—if we don’t die of dehydration first like *I* keep saying. But that *would* be counterproductive to let us die so soon. So, they have to open that damn door and give us water! I can’t help it, but it’s all I can think about.

My chaotic thoughts are broken when the screen blinks off; the ceiling tile shifts mechanically back into place, camouflaging the opening to near perfection.

With nothing more to watch, we could move now, sit up, stand up and stretch our legs—whatever—but neither of us have the strength to do anything but lie here, same as we were before.

“I’m sorry about Nora,” I tell Niklas, my mouth so dry, my lips cracked and starting to split a little.

He chuckles. “Sorry for what? I couldn’t stand her.”

“If you hated her that much, you wouldn’t have slept with her so many times.”

“I didn’t have feelings for her if that’s what you’re implying.”

“No, not *those* kinds of feelings,” I say, “but you two had fun together. If anything, I wouldn’t put it past you to think you liked her, at least.”

Niklas hesitates, a small sigh disrupting the dense air between us.

“Yeah, I guess I kinda did.” He jerks his head to the side to look at me sternly. “But I wasn’t *in love* with her, so don’t throw any more of your therapist theory bullshit at me.” He looks back up at the ceiling.

“Don’t worry; I wouldn’t go that far with you and Nora Kessler.” I smile softly to myself.

“Besides, you can only really be in love with one person at a time,” I add in jest. “And since you’re so in love with *me*...”

“But I’m not really in love with you, remember?” he points out. “Miss, I know Everybody’s Heart. And what makes you think somebody can’t be in love with two people at the same time?”

I shrug my shoulders against the floor.

“I don’t know. I guess it just seems hard enough to be in love with *one* person. Two just seems overkill.”

“It’s the sex,” he decides.

“Oh, please do explain, Mr. I’m The Expert on All Things Sex.” I grin at him, and even though he’s still looking at the ceiling, I know he senses it.

“They just use it as an excuse to have sex with more than one person,” he theorizes. Then he looks at me and adds, “If I was in love with someone, really fucking in love, I can’t imagine even looking at another woman.” He looks back upward. “If you claim to love two people, neither is enough for you. And two people don’t make a whole one. It doesn’t work like that, no matter how hard you try to make yourself believe it.”

“Wow,” I say. “And you thought *I* was the know-it-all therapist. Sounds like you’ve spent a lot of time thinking about this kind of stuff.” I point at him briefly. “And you just proved my diagnosis, by the way.”

He looks at me again, eyebrows creased inward.

“What diagnosis?”

“About you not really being in love with me.”

One of his eyebrows hitches up. “Oh, please do explain,” he says, his eyes rolling in his voice.

“You said that if you were in love with one woman, *really* in love, that you couldn’t even imagine looking at another woman. When was the last time you had sex?”

He shakes his head, and a soft, sarcastic smile appears.

“But you and me,” he explains, “we’re not together. In love with you or not, I’m free to fuck whomever I want. Because a woman doesn’t love me back doesn’t mean I have to become a monk.”

I chuckle, and even that is uncomfortable in my weakening state.

“But you were right,” Niklas says. “I was only ever in love with the thought of you.”

He says nothing more aloud, but I get the feeling his thoughts are screaming at him.

There is a sound in the hallway—a sound!—though I’m not sure what it is at first; I’m so shocked to hear anything at all that it takes a moment for the stun to wear off.

Neither of us says a word, but we share the same thoughts and waste no time. Despite our weakened state, we get to our feet and rush over to the door, my head spinning and pounding; black and yellow spots appear in my vision. Niklas seems no better off; as he moves across the room to stand next to me at the door, he reaches for the wall to keep himself from falling.

The sound of boots tapping down the hallway draws nearer. Niklas and I glance at one another as if to ask if we’re ready for this, but we remain quiet. They’re going to open the door! For the first time in days—honestly, I don’t know how many—we’re going to see something other than these four walls and that ceiling. They’ll bring us water, and maybe even something to eat!

Wait, what am I even thinking? I’m contemplating food and water instead of escape? What the hell is wrong with me?!

I need to focus.

I swallow, and it hurts because my mouth and throat are so damn dry. I lick my lips, which hurts too, stings like hell, so they’re cracked worse than I thought.

The boots get closer, louder, and Niklas and I ready ourselves. No matter who comes through that door or how many people there are in the hallway with guns—wait!

“There’s only one person,” I whisper harshly. “Only one set of boots.”

Niklas nods but remains silent; he licks his lips and swallows, too, I notice, with the same level of discomfort I had felt. His body also wavers, and I can tell he’s fighting hard with a migraine that must be killing him.

Focus, dammit! I blink away the distractions and take a deep breath.

A shadow moves through the slim crack underneath the door, an individual passing beneath the bright light in the hallway. There is movement on the other side of the door—someone preparing to unlock it, perhaps—and suddenly, I can feel my heartbeat in my throat and my damn head; I fight to keep the pain at bay and the spots from my eyes that are blurring my vision.

Niklas is pressed so close to me now that I can feel his body heat, almost feverish; he touches my shoulder to get my attention. I look over, and he points to the spot in front of the door about two feet back, signaling that he wants me to position myself there.

I do as he suggests, leaving him beside the door. Neither of us could ever come up with any grand plans for this moment. It's just the two of us, no weapons of any kind; they even took his belt and my earrings before throwing us in here, so we have absolutely nothing to improvise with other than clothing.

Now we wait.

A few more seconds.

There's more movement on the other side; I lean forward, bracing my hands atop my thighs both for an attack position and to help hold myself up. Niklas does the same but stands taller, pressing his back and legs against the wall next to the door so as not to be seen when it opens.

Splash!

Stunned, it takes us both a moment to realize the sound and from where it came.

We look down at the floor to see water spreading outward across the tile.

No fucking way!

Realization dawns quickly, and without wasting another second or any of the precious water, Niklas and I abandon our attack-ready positions and drop to our knees against the floor.

Like dogs desperately lapping the remnants of moisture from a bowl, we press our lips to the floor and start sucking the water from its surface. How fucking degrading! The entire time I drink from the floor, my tongue licking the tile like an animal, I curse Vonnegut and The Order and that wicked bitch sister, Lysandra, who Niklas told me all about, but I never stop drinking.

Niklas does the same, and neither of us can bear to look at the other, too ashamed to meet each other's eyes. There's no need to say, "Never speak a word of this to anyone," because we both already know.

Fredrik

Willa had made it back to her chair with her dainty little teacup hours ago, where she sits now, watching me with those preternatural eyes, taking in the information I give her with a purpose of her own.

I told her everything I could about Seraphina: our time together, the dark souls we tortured, the lives we took, the people we fucked, and the dark love we shared. And during the story, Willa revealed another human emotion buried for so long: ambition.

I can see it in her seemingly vacant eyes, a growing need for change, something in her existence that could help her to feel human again.

She had begun to envision herself in Seraphina's place—this became clear to me in the beginning when she told me that she, too, was immune to love. The pieces slowly began to come together. Willa wants to know about Seraphina because she wants to *become* her. It's what my instincts tell me, and I learned long ago to trust my instincts and never look back.

"Then vy did you kill her, *Freedrik*? If you loved her so much and she loved you, the two of you who shared this...connection, vy *would* you *kill* her? I do not understand. Make me understand."

This is the part of the story I least want to relive. But I've gone this far in the telling, so I suppose I should get it over with.

"Do you want the truth?"

"Vy *would* I want a lie?"

Because the truth might kill your ambition; it might change your mind about wanting to change yourself.

I think on it for a moment, licking the dryness from my lips.

"Because, ultimately, the way it does with all of us who are human," I begin, quietly insinuating that she is not, "Seraphina fell too far in love with me, and her weaker half won. It took over to control her. She became all the things she fought so hard her entire life to reject: jealous, desperate, confused, distracted, attached. Seraphina began to imagine her life without me in it and the fear of that ever happening consumed her and all she was."

“I wanted to hurt you,” Seraphina had said the night she tried to kill me.

“Why did you want to hurt me?”

“Because love is pain,” she answered, and I swallowed down the truth of her admission. “Because love is the greatest scam of all time. And because as much as I fucking love you, I hate you for inflicting it upon me!”

I did not make Seraphina insane; I only brought the madness back, the madness that had been there since her birth. The little blond-haired girl who had been molested and beaten by her father all her young life. That little girl was the madness within Seraphina; she was the weakness that Seraphina worked so hard to choke. And I unintentionally removed the hands from around that little girl’s neck.

“But how can loving someone,” Willa asks, “make a person all those things?”

I don’t know how to answer her; I know the answer, but I’m not sure how to convey it to someone like Willa, who is, deep down, not human; someone who has never in her life experienced love. How can I explain to her the loss of something she’s never had?

“I don’t know, Willa,” I whisper into the darkness of the room, “but it happens to all of us, on some level or another. But for someone like Seraphina, to love is was death sentence.”

And to someone like Willa, who I’m beginning to realize isn’t so different from Seraphina, after all.

But she is not Seraphina. And no matter how hard she tries, she will never be.

*Niklas**Two or Three Weeks Later...*

The bastards have kept us hydrated and alive, but always with a gush of water underneath the door.

We haven't eaten in...I don't even know anymore. All I do know is that I'm too far beyond the point of helping Izabel out of this place. I've lost a lot of weight, and my muscles are so sore that just moving to adjust my position on this hard floor is almost enough to kill me. I'd hate to see my face if there was a mirror in this room, but I can imagine what it looks like just by looking at Izzy's.

She's as weak as I am, if not maybe worse. Her cheeks are sunken; dark circles have set underneath her eyes and all around them like a raccoon. Her lips appear shriveled, despite at least having water to keep them somewhat hydrated. She looks like shit. And so do I. We're starving to death, slowly but surely, so I don't know how else we're supposed to look.

But worse than the thought of death is wondering why my brother still hasn't come to rescue us.

That reality is, of course, affecting Izzy more than me, but I can't deny that it doesn't bother me, too. I gave Victor the benefit of the doubt; I knew in the beginning that a rescue operation like this wouldn't be easy or quick, but he should've been here by now. And all three of us should either be free or dead by now.

This kind of slow death...just fucking kill me already!

I feel my body shutting down, my organs rejecting me, the air in my lungs becoming something akin to porous cement. My teeth hurt. My head. My back. My whole fucking body hurts like hell. My bowels feel like mush.

"Niklas?"

Izzy's voice pulls me from my thoughts; she sounds so weak, and it just pisses me off whenever she tries to talk, and I have to hear it because I can't do a thing about it.

“You could eat *me*,” I tell her, and although I was kidding, a grim part of me meant it.

“That’s not funny, Nik...”

“Sorry.”

“Why hasn’t he come...Niklas, why hasn’t Victor come?” I can’t move my head to look at her, but I can hear the breathlessness in her voice, and I know she doesn’t have much longer, either.

When they poured water beneath the door earlier this evening, she was slow to move toward it. We’ve both made sure to stay as close to the door as possible at all times, not in case someone opens it—that’s not gonna happen—but so we don’t have to move as far to get to the water when they bring it. I know one fucking thing: there’s not a cleaner floor in this city, that’s for sure.

“I...don’t know, Izzy,” I finally answer. “But... as I told you when this all started...he’s not going to come.”

“I don’t...believe that.”

“You should start,” I tell her. “Erase him from your memory, Izabel, and accept that he never loved you enough—he never loved either one of us enough.”

“You’re wrong,” she argues. “You’re wrong...and you know it.”

“We’re still here, aren’t we? And...where is Victor? We’re starving to death, and my brother knows it—he *sees* it!” I stop to catch my breath; my eyes shut tight to let the excruciating pain pass. Then I continue in a calmer, quieter voice, “We’re going to die...in this room together, and Victor will let it happen because there’s nothing he can do. No sense in all three of us biting the bullet.”

“I wish it *were* a goddamn bullet,” she hisses, and her breathing gets choppy. “I’d rather a bullet than this slow, miserable death—hey, did you see that?”

The question catches me off-guard.

“See what?”

“A rat,” she says. “I saw a rat running across the floor.”

I lift my head and only manage to roll onto my side. I look right at her, lying on her side, staring in my general direction.

“Where?”

Izzy’s eyes dart around the small space between us, about eight feet. “There! It’s right there!” She lifts her hand and points at me.

Confused, I look downward at myself, but I don’t see any rats, just a

malnourished slab of meat in clothes, slowly deteriorating. If there are any rats in this building, they'll show up after my corpse starts decomposing.

"I don't see anything," I tell her.

Her eyes grow wider, full of anger and determination, and hell if I know what all else, but I do know she's starting to lose it.

"Izzy," I say softly, "close your eyes and try to sleep."

"I *know* what I *saw*," she insists, then tries to get up. "If we can catch it, it'll be something to eat, at least."

"Izabel, stop moving." I raise myself to grab her. "Seriously, lay the fuck back down and close your eyes—you're hallucinating."

She doesn't listen; she manages to prop her body by her hands, her bony arms shaking unsteadily in the moonlight. But she's too weak and can't hold herself up; she falls, her cheek slapping against the tile.

I make my way over and take her into my arms, and it takes every bit of strength I have left.

Izabel starts to cry, her face buried in my chest. But it's not sadness nor fear driving this emotion from her, but pure anger and feelings of betrayal. And frustration—a lot of frustration.

I know because I feel all of these things, too.

"He's not coming," she cries; her fingers claw my shirt. "He's left us here to fucking die, Niklas!"

"Shh! Please, Izzy, just calm down." I hold her close and tighten my arms around her to keep her as still as I can.

I don't like being so close to her. I want to shove her away from me and find a corner of my own to die in, but she needs me now more than anything I need. And I can't think of a better way to die than with her in my arms.

Hell, maybe I'm hallucinating, too. Maybe she's not this close to me, and I'm only dreaming.

"I'm sorry...Niklas."

"For what?"

"For...I'm sorry that I could never love you back."

I flinch at her unexpected words, and my heart seizes, and my breath catches.

"Just try to sleep, Izzy." *Please...spare me this emotion in my final hours. Let me die with some peace. And dignity.*

"No...it's important I tell you," she says, and I can't help but wonder if all of this is part of her losing her mind to starvation. "I need to tell you the

truth.”

“I don’t think you’re in any state to be—”

“Please, Nik”—her fingertips dig into my chest through my shirt—“I owe you that much.”

“You don’t owe me a damn thing,” I say.

“Yeah...I do. So, please let me talk.”

Against everything in me, I give in and let her have her way.

“A part of me,” she begins, breathing still irregular, “does love you...the same way that... I know you love me. In Italy, that’s when I knew I had... some kind of feelings...for you. Feelings more than”—she pauses to catch her breath—“more than family or friendship. I thought it was because of anger...for what Victor had done...trying to put us together. But...it didn’t take long to...realize it was more than that.”

“Izzy, you really don’t have—”

“I did love you—I *do* love you. But...I can’t explain it.” She stops, and while I want to wonder about what might be going on inside her mind, I can hardly breathe because of her admission.

“You have a love for me,” I say, “but it’s brotherly love or some shit, I get that.”

“No, I told you...it’s more than that, but...”

This has to be because death is playing tricks on her mind, making her say things she doesn’t mean.

“I can’t explain it, but all I know for sure is that...Victor is the love of my life,” she says at last, and my heart breaks further, my peace in death quickly slipping from my grasp with every word she speaks. “I could never love anyone the way I love him.”

I could have done without knowing this; I would have preferred not knowing, but word vomit is the number one side effect of drugs, alcohol, and death.

She loves me as I love her, but she’s not *in* love with me? She loves me, but she could never love me the way she loves Victor?

After a moment, I relax my arms and let go of her. She moves a few inches away so that we’re no longer touching; we look at each other, but that’s all we can compel ourselves to do.

“Is Victor enough for you?” I ask, “Is he the whole person you need?”

“He’s more than enough,” she assures me.

“Then how can you have feelings for me?”

“I...don’t know.”

It’s all she says. And the moment fades into the darkness of the late night and then early morning.

When I open my eyes, Lysandra is standing over me.

Fredrik

Two or Three Weeks Later...

I don't remember when I last saw or spoke to Izabel or Victor. I don't remember a lot of things. Even my memories of Seraphina have begun to wither away, slipping into the darkest corners of my mind.

I'm still strapped to a dentist's chair. How have I relieved myself all this time?

Wait a fucking second...

I blink away the haze in my eyes and look down at my bound hands and ankles. I'm still strapped down. But my clothes aren't soiled; I don't reek of shit or piss, but Willa has kept me fed and hydrated all the time she's had me here. I recall the soup...eggs another day...a breakfast sandwich with bacon another day...water given to me through a straw...beans and rice...more water...meatloaf and mashed potatoes...milk.

Wait...I remember sitting upright at a table. I look across the room. At that *table*. I was unbound. Ah, yes, I now recall using a urinal. Willa had helped me into the restroom; she stood behind me and even held my cock with me when I took a piss.

Willa has been keeping me drugged.

I remember now. The needle. I squeeze my fists and stretch the muscle in my forearm, and sure enough, I feel a twinge of pain there, somewhere. And in my bicep.

She has been drugging me all this time.

How long have I really been here?

I hear the creaking of rusty hinges as a door opens and then closes again softly. Light blinks on and off. Footsteps, small and dainty and dangerous, move across the hardwood floor like the pattering of children's feet.

I try to better look at the room where I'm being held and the things within it in search of anything I might be able to use. If I could somehow get my hands free, of course.

“You are awake,” I hear Willa’s voice. “*Would* you like breakfast?”

I look down the length of my bare legs as her form grows larger, coming toward me through the shadow. She’s carrying a restaurant bag in one hand, a fountain drink in the other with a straw poking from the top.

“You know,” I say, “It’s bad for digestion to eat lying down.”

Willa places the drink beside me, shuffles open the bag and reaches inside to retrieve an egg biscuit. She removes it from the paper wrapping; a little coil of steam rises from the top, so I know we can’t be very far from civilization, at least.

She ignores my comment and pinches off a bite-sized piece with her fingers, and places it into my mouth.

I chew quickly, swallow, and try to get another word in before she does it again.

“Willa, why don’t you let me out of these restraints? I’m not going anywhere. I want to stay with you,” I lie.

“But I can’t see your face yet,” she says. “I need to see your face before I let you go.”

“My face?” I look at her, bewildered. “I don’t understand.”

Willa sets the sandwich down on the chair beside her. She goes over to the table that I vaguely recall eating from in a drug-induced stupor, and she reaches inside a tote bag atop it. She comes back to me carrying a hand mirror with an elongated handle. She holds the mirror over my face.

“Look,” she says.

I look into the mirror at myself.

“Willa...I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be looking at.”

“Look closer.” She brings the mirror down farther, so close that my eyes cross.

I turn my head sideways to avoid the discomfort, and she pulls the mirror away.

“It’s *why* I brought you here, *Freedrik*...I *wanted* to see your face before we can begin our life together.”

“What about my face do you need to see? If you tell me, explain it somehow, I might be able to help you.”

She sets the mirror on a nearby shelf and then picks up the breakfast sandwich again. After pinching off another bite, she pushes it between my teeth, almost forcibly, and I, getting fucking irritated, force myself to eat it.

I picture Seraphina’s face; I recall more moments when she and I were

together, pivotal moments that I kept from Willa—and a few that I even had forgotten. Or maybe they were moments I've been intentionally keeping from myself.

Not long ago...

“Tell me about her,” Cassia said in such a soft voice. “What did Seraphina do to you? Why do you want to find her so badly?”

I got up quickly from the bed and walked away.

“I’ve told you—”

Cassia shot upward, stopping me mid-sentence, desperately needing to make me understand and talk to her once and for all. The chain around her ankle clanked as she forced herself across the few feet to stand in front of me.

“YOU TELL ME!” she screamed, tears pouring from the corners of her eyes. “PLEASE! I DESERVE TO KNOW!” she cried out. “You’ve kept me down here for a year. Took me away from...from whatever life I had before the fire. I may not remember it, but it was mine.” She pointed at her chest, her voice strained by pain and desperation. “You believe I know this woman well enough that I can lead you to her, that I can help you find her somehow. And I’m willing to do that...”

Present day...

Seraphina, as Cassia, reminds me of Willa; both so naïve and, dare I say it, innocent. They were oblivious to the real world, trapped in a mind and body that kept them safe from things like human emotions and reality. Neither knew anything but their agenda: Cassia’s was to hide from Seraphina—her darkest half; Willa’s is to maintain control of her darkest half and never to suppress it and become as weak as someone like Cassia. Because the Willa I knew when I was just a boy endured so much abuse and trauma, just like Cassia did, the Willa standing before me today is the only one she can bear to live with.

I needed Cassia to remember Seraphina, my black-haired beauty who walked, barefooted, upon the sharpest blade. I needed her to become who she truly was, the *real* Seraphina.

Is that why I’m thinking of the past? Does my present situation somehow remind me of that time? Is Willa keeping me her prisoner down here so that she can get what she so desperately needs from *me*?

Look at me, trapped in what could very well be a basement—as I haven't seen sunlight in weeks now—the same way I had Cassia trapped in *my* basement. As Cassia, Seraphina didn't understand what I wanted from her, what I so desperately needed from her to move on with my life. She didn't understand that I needed her to remember who she was, that I needed the Seraphina I knew and loved to emerge from that childlike mind of Cassia Carrington so that we could continue our life together.

I'd tried to convince myself that I needed to kill Seraphina, and a part of me had planned to do just that, but the...real Fredrik...the real Fredrik Gustavsson...the real...

Yes. The *real* Fredrik Gustavsson simply wanted Seraphina back. I wanted the love of my life back so I could feel free again.

Is that what Willa wants from me? To see the *real* me?

I suppose I needed to find him again before I could show her.

And now I have.

I finally understand—*everything*.

I understand that the Fredrik Gustavsson who loved Seraphina Bragado, who walked with her and killed with her and fucked wither her, *is* the *real* me. I understand now, for the first time since Victor Faust's friendship and my integration into The Order began to humanize me, that *I* am the one who fell. I am the one between Seraphina and me who changed. *I* was the one who betrayed *her* and let the outside world infect our perfect darkness.

Not long ago...

"Which side of her did, or do you, love more?" Izabel asked.

"I never said I still loved her."

"You didn't have to say it."

"I loved Seraphina because she was like me," I began. "I was a different kind of monster when we first met. She was the answer to everything. She helped me control my urges and showed me a way to still be myself without risking getting caught. We were perfect together, Izabel. I never prayed, and I never dreamed of anything, but she was both the answer to my prayers and a dream come true. She was everything to me."

"And what about Cassia?"

"Cassia gave me something that I never got from Seraphina. She gave me peace. She made me see a light in the darkness that is my life, and she

made me feel as normal as anyone else.” I locked eyes with Izabel. “She is my light.”

Izabel looked at me for a moment—pain and regret lay in her features.

“You need a whole person, Fredrik,” she said. “I have to believe that one day you’ll find her, a love who is both light and darkness, who understands you and fulfills you the way that Seraphina did, but who can also give you peace.” She interlocked her fingers on the table and leaned forward. “But you can’t do this with her, and you know it. She’s not a whole person. And she’s gone too far—in every way—to ever become one. She could snap and turn at any moment, and you know that, too.”

I looked away. I didn’t want to hear any of this. Because I knew it was true.

“You’ll find her—”

Present day...

Izabel was wrong that day in the coffee shop. She was wrong because I had *already* found her—the *real* Seraphina. I’d found her and fell in love with her, and then, like a train on its way toward a sharp corner at eighty miles per hour, I utterly destroyed her. I let Seraphina become infected with the same virus I’d allowed myself to catch: humanity.

I had always struggled with it before I met Seraphina. I needed to bleed, and torture to feel alive and curb other urges I kept hidden deep inside of me—the desire to kill. But when I met Seraphina, she helped me to understand that I could be both human and the monster I was made into at such a young age, but only if I did it the right way. I could have empathy, but I could never let it control me; I could have mercy, but I could never let it become me or change who I was.

I know now who I am, who I’ve always been.

And I will never turn on my darkest half again.

(Welcome back. Welcome home.)

“Willa,” I say, and she shoves the last piece of food into my mouth. After swallowing: “I want to show you my face.”

For the first time since she abducted me, I have the absolute, undivided attention of her monster; her eyes lock on mine, full of wonder and expectation but also full of the mysterious danger again.

And I understand now what makes her so dangerous, that eerie feeling I felt before but just couldn't quite place.

Willa was raped and abused repeatedly for most of her young life. She hates sex. She hates men. She despises, with every dark ounce of her being, anyone, man or woman, who loves sex, who gives in to it, who partakes, who *takes* without asking, who is weak to the temptations of lust. It's why she put my cock into her mouth—she wanted to gauge my reaction. She wanted to see if I'd give in to the desire, if I'd become stupid to the temptation. In short, if I'd given in to her sexually, even in the tiniest fraction, I'd already be dead.

"Let me show you my face," I tell her.

Willa's eyes become bigger and sharper, her pupils as black as infinite space; she swallows and begins to breathe with her lips parted; I see the veins in her temples pulsing. She's become a different person so quickly, so easily, in anticipation of her agenda. She's no longer the calm, childlike woman but has become the unstable, violent killer. And one wrong move, and she'll gut me like a pig.

"You *want* to show me your face, *Freedrik*? Are you sure?"

I nod.

"Yes, Willa. Bring me the mirror."

She takes the mirror beside us and moves it in front of my face.

I peer in at myself, searching my own dark eyes, my own dark soul.

(Hello, my old friend.)

And then, I give her what she wants by telling her exactly what she needs to hear.

"I never want you to touch me again," I say. "Do you understand? I wanted to cut you from stem to stern when you put me in your mouth, Willa." I grit my teeth and ball my fists at my sides; tears appear in my eyes and drip sideways down my unshaven face. "You made me feel dirty and ashamed, Willa—you made me *hate* myself, and I wanted to *kill* you!" I roar.

Her doe eyes grow so wide, so full of awe and wonder and hope. Her chest rises and falls with heavier, quicker breaths—she blinks; I can't fucking believe it, but she *blinks!* Several times at that.

"I don't care if you keep me down here forever," I go on, "but don't ever fucking touch me again because I'll never forgive you, and I'll never be yours."

She moves the mirror closer to my face again, just like before, and like before, I turn away from it, pretending that my reflection disgusts me now

and it's all her fault.

When I clench my eyes, I hear the mirror shatter on the floor. I keep my eyes closed when I feel her undoing my restraints, starting at the feet and working her way to my wrists.

And when I open my eyes, Willa is standing over me with a knife in her hand. A smile on her face, beaming with madness and anticipation.

And the old Fredrik Gustavsson, the weak one who killed the only woman he ever loved, is no more.

I take the knife from Willa's hand and dispose of him once and for all.

Izabel

At first, I think I'm hallucinating again. Those people standing inside our prison with us can't be real. But as realization dawns, my body catches up with my mind, and I try like hell to get up from the floor, but I think my muscles have atrophied.

"It's been a long time," I hear the woman say to Niklas, and it sounds like they're on the other side of the room but are just feet away.

It's Lysandra Hollis, the sister Niklas told me about; the one who shot Jackie and Niklas' mother right in front of him at the mental institution. She fits the description Javier gave me before I killed him, right down to the hummingbird tattoo on her ankle—although, her eyes aren't brown like Javier told me. Enraged, I try to get up again until I see that I never really moved, and the attempt only goes as far as my mind.

"I'm gonna kill you...bitch." Words are all I have the strength to pull off, and I don't care how ridiculous I sound.

Light laughter permeates the air, and Lysandra crouches beside me on her stilettos, the hummingbird so close I could grab her ankle if I could move. She reaches out and touches my face with the back of her fingers; her perfumed skin chokes me.

"It's nice to meet you too," she says, then pats me on the top of my head as if I'm a pet. "I've heard so much about you. I'm not impressed. Quite frankly, I'm surprised you're still alive."

"I am, but *you* won't be...for much longer," I try, but I know, not so far beneath the surface, that it's just trash-talk. In my condition, there's not a thing I can do to her or anyone else. But I'll be damned if I go out begging for my life, so trash-talk is all I've got.

Lysandra smiles, pats me again, and then rises into a stand, looming over me like a tree over a worm.

"Today is your lucky day," she announces. "That's if you're both still alive." She glances over her shoulder.

Niklas?

My mind starts racing because I haven't heard Niklas speak or seen him move since I woke up. Surely, even in his condition, he'd find some strength somewhere he didn't know he had, to at least spout off a few insults. He'd at least try to move to grab one of those tall heels of hers in an attempt to knock her on her skinny ass.

But he doesn't. He isn't moving at all.

"Niklas...?"

"Get him up," Lysandra orders two of the men with her.

They each take a side, grab Niklas by the arms, and pull him roughly to his feet. They hold him there because he's too weak to stand alone without falling.

I watch with dread and anticipation for any sign of life. Slowly, Niklas raises his head.

"Was conserving energy," he says, looking only at me.

I sigh with relief, although I don't feel much better, considering our circumstances. He might still be alive, but that could so easily and quickly change two minutes from now.

"Where are we...going?" I ask.

The other two men with Lysandra lift me from the floor and position me between them.

"Well, it seems no one is coming to rescue you," she begins. "So, before this travesty comes to an end, you have one last stop to make."

"A last meal?" I ask with sarcasm. "If that's...what it is, I'd rather you just...kill me and get it over with. I'm...not hungry anymore." Yeah, because I think my insides have started to digest themselves.

Niklas is led out of the room, my captors and me next, with Lysandra behind us, the sound of her stupid heels tapping so loudly it feels like she's stomping on my head.

The fluorescent lights in the hallway ceiling seem so bright that I'm temporarily blinded when I step through the doorway; my eyes slam shut, and I swear my eyelids feel like two slabs of stone on my face.

There's no way I can walk, although I try, barely dragging my feet behind me as the men pull me along. And down the hall, into the elevator, and up several floors—I guess we weren't on the top floor, after all—Niklas never says a word. I don't know if he tries to look at me, to signal if he has some kind of secret plan that he didn't discuss with me beforehand, because I can't open my eyes or raise my head from between my shoulders to see him.

The Order certainly pulled this off. Whatever it is. They got every part right—except the part where they capture Victor. In the end, Victor Faust outsmarted them all. He had to sacrifice us to do it, but such is the way of life in a world of crime and death. What did I *expect* would happen?

Sometimes I wonder why they could never catch him. How could a highly sophisticated assassin organization that has existed for decades, maybe even a century, never find and kill Victor Faust? An organization not only with highly trained assassins but spies, too? Victor is *one man*. He may be a ghost, but in hindsight, he is still just flesh and blood; he is still a man, and it amazes me that even after being compromised by me, no one in The Order could ever touch him.

What does that say about The Order? Are they not as elite as they appeared to be? Or is it just that Victor Faust, the assassin *they* created, is more sophisticated and skilled than an organization full of people?

I believe it's the latter. The son often exceeds the father; the apprentice outshines the master; the creation kills its creator. It is the way of the world.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

I clench my eyes thinking it'll somehow shut my ears to the sound of her damn shoes, but it doesn't.

"Hold him up," I hear Lysandra tell the men carrying Niklas.

I open my eyes a crack and lift my head just enough that I can see Niklas' bare feet—we took off our shoes days ago and never put them back on—and his toes are dragging the floor. He has let the men carry every ounce of his weight, and I wonder if that's part of this secret plan that probably only exists in my delusional, hopeful mind.

Delusion or not, it seems like a good idea: don't help them; let the men carry all our weight so they'll tire out a bit more. I'm not sure why, but something is better than nothing. A shitty plan is better than no plan. A possibility without a projected outcome is better than no possibility at all.

I let all my weight drop, but the change makes little difference to these much bigger men carrying me—I'm like a feather in their arms.

The elevator dings, the doors part like a stage curtain, and the seven of us step off into brighter, blinding lights and a much wider hallway. I want to keep my eyes closed, but the hostage part of me keeps them cracked so I can glimpse my surroundings. The tile beneath my bare feet has changed color from speckled white to gray marble, so shiny I can see my reflection as we travel across it. Even Lysandra's heels sound different here, more

pronounced, confirming my assumption of the much wider hall.

I raise my head a little, and I can see out ahead of us a giant double door made of the same thick mahogany as the door to the room where Niklas and I had been confined. Two men in suits stand on either side of the doors, watching us approach and no doubt ready to let us pass into the mysterious room behind them.

For the first time since this all started, I feel afraid.

Izabel

The double doors open wide, and more bright light gushes into the hallway; I squint my eyes but resist the urge to close them completely. I can't miss anything; I need to stay awake, focused, and *alive* for as long as possible.

We are dragged through the center of this enormous room with tall ceilings and bright white walls; the gleaming floor stretches out beneath me in all directions like a sea of marble. There is no furniture in this room except at the very end, out ahead of me, where seven chairs are positioned: three on each side, with a taller, more pronounced chair in their center. It and the one directly to its right are the only ones vacant. Three men and two women occupy the other five, but I cannot see their faces; I'm too far away, and starvation has severely compromised my eyesight. But I feel like I'm in a throne room and the middle chair belongs to none other than Vonnegut. The empty chair on its right probably awaits the toothpick-skinny ass of Lysandra Hollis, who has just walked past me in an arrogant whirlwind of Red-Light District perfume.

We approach closer, about twenty more feet, and then we are released onto the floor. I'm so weak that I don't catch myself in time before I fall forward and hit the cool, hard marble beneath me. Blood springs up inside my mouth as my teeth pierce my damn tongue. I moan against the sharp, burning pain, but it's all I can do.

I hear Niklas grunt next to me when he, too, hits the floor. The sound of his clothes shuffling goes still after a moment when he finally manages the least uncomfortable position.

With my cheek pressed against the coolness of the marble, I look across at him, and he at me. He looks terrible, as I know I must. His lips are dry and cracked and bleeding; his face is gaunt, cheekbones so pronounced he appears more skeleton than man. The whites of his eyes are gray, like plastic, but maybe it's just the offensive light playing tricks on my mind. It wouldn't be the first time I've hallucinated. I'm not entirely sure that *any* of this is real.

A part of me tells me it isn't—it feels artificial. Like once, when I didn't sleep for three days, my brain was so out of sequence that I felt like I was in another reality. So, maybe I'm still in the room; perhaps I'm not even in this building at all, and this entire thing has just been a figment of my imagination, a hallucination brought on by lack of sleep.

Or maybe I'm already dead.

The echo of dress shoes tapping across the floor pulls me back into the present, the one I'm still unsure is real or just a dream, and I raise my eyes, cheek still pressed to the floor. I hear Niklas moving beside me, so I assume his attention must be as piqued as mine.

Slowly, the tall, dark figure walks toward the center chair. The man is clad in the finest suit; a Rolex dons his right wrist—not that I can see it from so far away, but I do see the enormity of the object and the sparkling of the glass and can safely assume that it can only be a Rolex.

I try to adjust my eyes, and my vision is so blurry at first that all I can see is the man's figure. I can see that the other six people sitting in the chairs now stand out of respect.

Yeah, it's Vonnegut. I can feel the power in the room; I *physically* feel it on my skin in the form of goosebumps and sweat.

Taking a deep, steady breath, I try harder to focus, and slowly but surely, the faces start to come into view, like a reflection on the surface of water after it has been disturbed.

I keep my focus trained on Vonnegut, wanting to see him and only him. I couldn't care less about his henchmen, henchwomen, or that Nazi, Lysandra Hollis—James Woodard!

There he is, sitting at the end, his sausage-like fingers curled over the end of the armrest. He's dressed in a suit that just barely fits his round body.

I feel even more breathless suddenly and try to raise myself, but all I can lift is my head from the floor.

“James...”

“I-I'm s-sorry, Izabel,” he says.

“Shut your mouth,” Lysandra tells him, and his stuttering lips snap closed instantly.

He's sorry? Sorry for betraying our trust? Sorry for...oh shit...he's told them everything he knows about us. He's told them all they ever needed to know to capture us. Is James Woodard the reason Niklas and I are in this situation?

But his words, although so few, truly seemed genuine to me. There wasn't an ounce of malice in his apology—it was heartfelt.

And as I look at him, still unable to see his face, I can at least see that the only thing in it is remorse.

They threatened his family. In my heart, it's what I believe. He would have worked with The Order against us only if his wife and daughters were in danger.

I look at Niklas, and although he's as weak as I am, he manages a look of murderous rage in his skeletal features. I know that if he could move, James Woodard would already be dead.

Vonnegut. I panic a little inside when I realize I've been distracted by James Woodard. My gaze moves past the other figures again; thankfully, each of them is unfamiliar to me. When I get to Lysandra, I feel the same murderous rage I know Niklas is feeling, but I don't allow myself to linger on her more than I already have.

Vonnegut. He is the Man of the Hour. He is the source of all the death, chaos, and running that I and the rest of our closely-knit, albeit psychotic, family have faced and endured these past few years.

Vonnegut. He's the reason for so much strife and darkness in our lives. The reason we've lived in hiding for so long.

Vonnegut.

Vonnegut.

Vonnegut.

Somehow, I find the strength to lift myself from the floor, and I hold my body upright on my hands, attached to noodle-like arms with wobbly elbows that can collapse at any moment, and I fixate on the man in the center chair.

When my vision finally comes into focus, when the blur is washed away by my determination, I see that the man sitting there...is Victor Faust.

Izabel

Frozen and stunned, I can't fucking move or breathe or think straight; I swear to God my heart actually stopped and still hasn't started back up again. I can't feel my heart beating! In any other situation, I might panic, but I'm too...everything to panic.

Then, in a rush of adrenaline fueled by betrayal, it all comes back in a destructive flood of emotion. My heart beats madly like hummingbird wings; my breathing is rapid and desperate; I can see and *move* again!

I scramble to my feet, and like a fawn walking for the first time, I stumble forward on shaky legs.

"Victor! What—why are you here?!"

What? Why? How? I have all the questions, but I don't know which one comes first or if any of them will matter in the end. Nothing he can ever tell me, no excuses, no I-did-this-because-I-had-to reasons, will ever let me forgive him or believe any word that comes out of his mouth.

But something tells me that he will not provide any excuses; he won't try to explain why he had to betray me—something tells me he doesn't feel he owes me any explanations.

No one moves to stop me as I hurl myself across the floor, but I hear Niklas behind me, calling out my name: "Izzy! Just stop!" But he doesn't try to come after me either. For a moment, I wonder why, but I'm too hellbent to care.

Before I get ten feet, my legs buckle beneath me, and I fall hard against the floor. And I can't get back up. I try to raise my head, but even that requires more strength than I have, so I lie here, cheek smashed against the marble again, and I look only at Victor. The man I loved more than the world. The man I thought loved *me* more than the world.

Victor...no...

Tears burn the back of my eyes and threaten to rush to the surface for everyone to see—for Victor to see—but I swallow them down. I'll die before I let that bastard see me cry for him.

“So...it’s been you...all along,” I hear Niklas speak up; the hurt, betrayal, and anger in his voice are deep beneath the surface because he’s too weak to show it the way I know he wants to.

“Are you two that surprised?” Lysandra speaks up.

She stands from her chair and walks closer to me, her hands clasped on her backside.

“What kind of world were you living in, Sarai?” she goes on.

Sarai... It’s been so long since I’ve heard that name. A part of me wishes I never left her behind. The nobody girl who was somebody, even if only to a drug lord. At least Sarai knew who she was; at least Sarai knew her place in the world, albeit dangerous, it was stable. At least Sarai could trust the man who claimed to love her—at least he thought he loved her enough to never betray her.

Lysandra paces in front of me. I don’t look at her once, not because I don’t have the energy, but because I just don’t care. Even if she was in reaching distance and I could will myself to grab her, I wouldn’t try. Because *I just don’t care.*

I keep my gaze trained on Victor and give no one else in the room an ounce of my attention.

But he doesn’t look back at me...

Why won’t he even look at me?!

“Look at me, Victor...you fucking look at me!” Shouting steals my energy reserves, but I don’t care about that, either. “VICTOR! LOOK AT ME!” My entire body quakes with my voice, muscles trembling.

“I speak for Victor,” Lysandra says. “I always have. Everything he has ever said to you, all the sweet nothings he has whispered into your ear, had come from me.”

She crouches in front of me so I might look her in the eyes. I refuse. I... can’t. I just can’t. A fucking tear escapes and tracks down my cheek.

“He wouldn’t have known what to say to you, otherwise,” she adds. “And you know what that means, don’t you?”

She’s trying hard to bait me, and it’s already working, but I refuse to let her know.

When I don’t answer or as much as look at her, she says, “He never loved you because he, like every other *true* member of The Order, doesn’t know what love is.” When she said the word “true,” I had glimpsed her in my peripheral vision and saw her look briefly in Niklas’ direction as if to mock

him.

Wait a minute...

“Are you...Vonnegut?” I ask Victor.

I’m beginning to wonder. Because if he is supposed to be and has been all along, why would he be acting this way? Why would he be sitting there, letting this bitch do all his talking, refusing to even make eye contact with me and—

“I have always been the one you thought we were hunting,” Victor says, and the sound of his voice stuns me. Not only because it has been so long since I’ve heard it, but because it sounds so foreign to me—not to mention the admission that just came out of his mouth, which is all I can think about. Victor Faust is Vonnegut.

Trying to ignore the pain burrowing deeper and deeper into my heart, I continue, “What was the point of all this? I can’t even...I...I can’t even fucking begin to understand...a reason for *anything* you have done!”

Calm down, Izabel! Just stay calm...

Lysandra rises to a stand.

“Does it matter?” she asks.

“I wasn’t talking to you!” I scream at her. “Shut your cockhole and let the adults do the talking!” I couldn’t help it; I couldn’t resist—I’m so angry I feel like I’m going to explode.

Blackness covers my vision, a giant iron bell bangs around inside my skull, and I taste blood in my mouth. When I finally come to, I see the toe of Lysandra’s shoe in front of my face, glistening crimson, and only now realize she had just kicked me in the face.

The pain comes in a delayed reaction, pulsing and throbbing upward from my chin to my head.

In a blur of movement, I see Lysandra’s blond hair falling and her shoes coming out from beneath her; a hard *thump!* sounds as her body hits the floor, followed by a series of *thwap! thwap! crunch!* As Niklas’ bloody fist rains down on her face repeatedly. One man appears behind us and pulls his emaciated body off her.

“You disgusting, worthless piece of *shit!*” Lysandra hisses. She stumbles to her feet, surprisingly without losing a shoe, and rushes over to Niklas, held back on his knees by the operative who had pulled him from her. “Worthless!”—she kicks him in the stomach—“Piece!”—again in the gut—“of shit!” She kicks him in the face, and he drops, face forward, to the

floor.

“*Niklas!* Don’t you...touch him!” I try, but my voice is hoarse and my throat burning.

“Enough of this,” I hear Victor say.

All eyes in the room—many of which, including James Woodard, who I had forgotten entirely—turn to Victor Faust as he stands from his chair.

“Hollis,” he says to Lysandra, “find your seat.”

Without an argument, word, or hesitation, she does what she’s told.

The atmosphere in the room changes dramatically. Victor Faust is the leader here, and while Lysandra Hollis has been his voice in the past in all matters of love and emotion when it came to me, she is *not* his voice here and now or any other time. And he means to make that fact perfectly clear. To everyone.

“What was the reason for everything, you ask?” he says. “I will tell you.”

“Von—Victor, what are you *doing?*” Lysandra appears worried suddenly; her brows have drawn inward sharply. And she had started, I think, to call him Vonnegut instead of Victor.

Without looking at her, he says, “Questioning me, Hollis will only serve to sign your death warrant.” He turns his head slowly, threateningly, to look at her. “Is there anything else you’d like to say?”

Lysandra pauses, wanting, more than anything, to say *something*, but in the end, she chooses life.

Victor turns to me again. Those eyes look just like those I’d stare into when he was fu—making love to me, yet they now appear to be lacking something. Oh, yes, the fucking *love!* The subtle lines on his face are the same as I remember when I’d brush my fingertips down his smooth skin. The curve of his lips, the same ones I used to kiss with my own, is the same but seem so cold and uninviting.

I feel dizzy all of a sudden and lay my head back down on the floor. Victor’s face fades in and out of my vision; the room spins; voices sound so far away. Voices? But no one else is talking...

Is this real? No...maybe it is all just in my head.

I want to believe that so desperately, and I convince myself for a moment, but not long enough.

“You had to be tested,” Victor says, and his voice is what takes my hope of a hallucination away. “And this was the only way.”

Izabel

“Tested?” I grit my teeth, and it hurts my gums. “All of this...was just...a *test*? When...did it start?” I can’t catch my breath, and I don’t know how much longer I can do this; how much longer until I pass out or die. I think the only thing keeping me awake or alive is burning anger.

Victor glances over in James Woodard’s direction.

Why is he looking at James? It’s as though he’s searching for something—but what?

And Lysandra appears more worried than before when she spoke out against Victor explaining anything to me. She sits on that chair, shoulders rigid, the inside of her bottom lip tucked between her teeth, her legs crossed.

Victor turns back to me.

“It’s not important,” he says. “What’s important is that you decide now what path you’re going to take.”

“*Path*?” I blink, stunned and offended even. “You really think...after everything...you’ve done to me, to your brother...that I’d ever *choose*...to follow you?” I glare at him icily, and at the same time, my head spins, and I feel like I’m going to throw up, but there’s nothing in my stomach to purge.

“Not even to save your own life?” he asks.

“No! Fucking no!” I answer quickly, not even having to think about it. “I could never...work for...someone I can’t trust. And you—”

“What about someone you love?” Victor asks.

My mouth snaps closed, and I hear a sharp breath intake, realizing it is my own.

“You’re...talking to me about *love*?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me, *Victor*,” I spit his name out like something bitter on my tongue, “why in hell would you...want anyone working for The Order...who has been compromised by love?” It wasn’t the question I had been about to ask; I was going to ask him if *he* loved *me*, but at the last second, I realized I don’t want an argument like that to be on display for everybody else in this

room. And truthfully, I'm afraid to hear his answer. Because no matter that he betrayed me, I still love him. Love doesn't just vanish into thin air no matter what the other person has done; it takes time. But love him or not, I'll never forgive him for what he did, and I'll never follow him, or...be with him again.

Victor slides his hands into the pockets of his dress pants and paces a few times.

"Hollis was wrong," he begins, not looking at me, "when she said she spoke for me because I don't know what love is."

Lysandra's head snaps around; her eyes blaze at him, but he's not looking at her.

"She did speak for me," he goes on, "helped me to know all the right things to say to a woman, but she couldn't keep me from the inevitable."

Victor's eyes fall on my own, and I notice something...different in his. I can't seem to put my finger on what it is. Is he conflicted? Does he love me and isn't sure how to word it in front of everybody else?

Something is off...

All I do know is that I'll never allow myself to get involved with another man with so many fucking issues, a man who never really knew who he was or what he wanted in life. A man who went out of his way to put his brother and woman in each other's paths hoping they'd fall for one another. So that he could wash his hands of a situation that he regretted getting himself into.

Who am I kidding? I'll never be involved with another man because I know I'm not leaving this building alive.

"How was...she wrong?" I ask. "Enlighten me, why don't you?"

"Because we are all human," Victor says. "There's no way to strip emotions from humans—especially love."

Despite the unwanted audience, I scoff at the thought and ask the question anyway.

"What, are you saying you *do* love me?" I scoff again for good measure.

Victor nods. "Yes. I am in love with you, Sarai. Working so closely with you all this time left little room for denial or rejection of the feelings that grew inside me."

"You're full of shit," I spit out the words. *Why did he call me Sarai?*

"Perhaps," he says, paces past me one more time, and then stops. "I'm not here today to convince you of my love for you—I intend to rid myself of it, if anything. But I'll ask you again what path you want to take. Because of

my love for you, I'm giving you a choice."

Suddenly, I notice movement to my right and turn my attention to James Woodard, who has risen from his chair. The expression on his face appears panicked.

He points in Niklas' direction.

"Umm, forgive me for interrupting, but I think he's stopped breathing."

I flip my body to the other side so I can see Niklas clearly; the ceiling spins in my vision, and with the abrupt movement, I almost pass out.

James is right; I don't see Niklas moving.

"Please! Somebody help him!" I try to crawl on my stomach over to Niklas, but I don't get far as the weight and sharpness of Lysandra's stiletto presses into my spine, pinning me against the floor.

"Let me go!" I try to wiggle around to push her off me, but I can't move. I hate being so weak and helpless!

"Just be still," Lysandra hisses. "Or you're going to end up like him."

"Get off me, bitch!"

It doesn't stop me from trying despite knowing I'm not going anywhere, but she still holds me effortlessly.

Victor motions at two men standing near the door.

"Take him to the infirmary," he instructs, and his tone lacks the urgency needed to show he cares whether Niklas lives or dies.

This numbs me.

For a moment, I can't think; I just lay here on the floor, watching these men carry Niklas away. My heart aches for him, hoping he will live, but I know too that even if he survives the effects of starvation, he likely won't leave this building alive.

Finally, I look at Victor again.

"Don't you even *care*?" I lash out; I want to come off this floor and hook my hands around his neck. "HE'S YOUR BROTHER!"

Victor says nothing.

"What happened to you, Victor?! You can't tell me everything you felt for me, and your bond with Niklas was all just a lie! You can't convince me that everything we went through, all the times you put your brother's life before your own, everything that you and I shared and bled for, was just a performance! WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE VICTOR FAUST I KNEW AND LOVED?!"

And suddenly, amid the screams, blurry vision, pounding head, and

bursting heart, I realize what I should have known all along.
Holy shit...

Izabel

The very second it all becomes clear to me, activity in the room picks up. Men near the door press their fingers against their ears to better hear the voice speaking to them through their planted earpieces. Lysandra's shoe disappears from my back, and she walks briskly away from me, gun ready in her hand. Even Vonnegut—because he is definitely the infamous, elusive Vonnegut we have been hunting for so long—walks calmly back toward his chair and stands in front of it; everybody else in the room follows suit.

Even James Woodard, who I notice watches me more than he does the tall, heavy doors that every other eye in the room focuses on. He is the only one without a gun.

Gunshots. Bodies are falling outside the door. More gunshots. A few indecipherable shouts. More gunshots and more falling bodies.

I don't move—couldn't if I wanted to. Low against the floor is the safest place for me to be.

Silence fills the room, the only sound is heavy breathing, but it's my own and no one else's. Maybe James is as breathless as I am, caused by fear rather than exhaustion. But everybody else has prepared for this and shows neither fear nor concern. I know they all feel it but have been trained well not to show it.

With one heavy, rage-filled push, both sides of the large double-doors swing open into the vast room, bringing more bright light in from the hallway, and there stands Victor Faust. The *real* Victor Faust.

Truth and reprieve flood back into my body unlike I've ever known it; tears burn the back of my eyes again, but they are not tears of pain or betrayal this time; they are tears of rapture.

“Victor!”

In motion too fast for me to see or comprehend, several bodies fall in the room all around me: the guards and everyone who had been sitting in the chairs except for James Woodard, Lysandra Hollis, and Vonnegut, who can only be the identical twin brother of my beloved Victor Faust.

“DON’T!” Vonnegut shouts at Lysandra.

She drops her gun to her side that had been pointed at Victor, her face twisted with rage and contempt.

“He is *not* to be killed,” Vonnegut says icily. “You know the rules.”

Lysandra might know said rules, but she clearly disagrees with them, especially when it means life or death for her.

Vonnegut doesn’t want Victor dead, and I’m not sure I understand why. But it sure as hell brings mysteries of the past to light. It explains why Victor was never taken out by The Order sooner; why no one was sent to assassinate him. It’s why it took so long for them to make it to this moment; why they didn’t kill Niklas or me long ago, or when they captured us—they knew we were their only leverage. It’s why they played it perfectly, keeping us alive but too weak to pull off an escape, just long enough for Victor to reveal himself to save us. Vonnegut wanted Victor alive at all costs.

Now I just need to understand *why*.

“Hello, brother,” Vonnegut says; he opens his arms at his sides, gun dangling from one hand, and then casually takes a seat. He places the gun on his leg, removes his finger from the trigger and his hand from the grip.

Lysandra remains standing, gun still in her hand, and I know she’ll use it if she has to.

James Woodard is also standing, shaking, and he can’t help but look at me often while glancing between Victor and Vonnegut. The message he’s trying to convey through his eyes is the same as when I first saw him here: he’s sorry he had to betray us, but he had no other choice.

But how exactly did he betray us, I wonder. He is here with the enemy, yes, but why? I can’t find a reason to believe he had been a spy all along—implant spies would never feel the guilt he clearly feels at this moment. So, they must’ve gotten to him afterward.

Things are becoming clearer to me now: the unfamiliar look in fake Victor’s eyes that I couldn’t put my finger on before; the complete lack of concern about the well-being of his brother, Niklas; why he called me Sarai instead of Izabel. In the brief few seconds that I have to ponder this, I conclude it must’ve been James Woodard’s purpose: to teach Vonnegut about the relationship between Victor and Niklas and Victor and me so that Vonnegut could play the role accordingly. Only, he didn’t play the part accordingly, which leads me to believe—

“Izabel,” Victor says without taking his eyes or gun off Vonnegut, “how

do you feel?”

I can't even focus on what matters most right now, and I'm still unsure if any of this is real, but...

“I, uh...well, I feel like shit.”

“Where is Niklas?”

I swallow hard. “He um...they took him off somewhere; I think he stopped breathing.”

Victor takes two more determined, enraged steps forward, shoving the gun in the air toward Vonnegut in emphasis of his threat—now *that* is how the real Victor would act upon hearing such news of his brother, Niklas.

“He's being cared for as we speak,” Vonnegut ensures, not an ounce of fear for the gun pointed at him or what he knows Victor Faust is capable of. “I need you, Victor, so I never intended to let either of the ones you love most die?”

“You need me for what exactly?”

Vonnegut cocks his head to one side; then, he motions a hand at Victor. “Isn't it obvious? *Look* at you. *Look* at *me*. You're my double. You were trained the same as I was. We were separated at birth, taken to two different countries, and raised by The Order to be assassins. But at a very young age, I showed promise in another area: leadership. And so, they began to train me for succession.”

Vonnegut stands—Victor tightens his grip on his gun, and Lysandra raises hers on Victor. Vonnegut leaves his gun on the chair, perhaps an act of truce and goodwill.

“The leader of The Order at the time personally chose me,” Vonnegut continues. “He wanted me to rule in his stead after he died—and he had lived longer than any leader before him, so he knew he was already on borrowed time. And so, he began to...groom me, per se. Leaders usually die within ten years of taking the seat at the head of the international table—it's a dangerous job, as you are well aware. But he had controlled The Order for thirty-eight years before he finally died.” He motions a hand at Victor again. “Anyway, the fact that I had an identical twin, who just happened to be the most skilled assassin The Order had seen in decades, well, it was all just too perfect to ignore.”

“What is your name?” Victor asks, disregarding everything Vonnegut said—I know Victor better than anyone. While although he doesn't seem interested in the information, he's simply filing it away for future use.

Vonnegut smiles but doesn't answer.

"Leader of The Order has been known as Vonnegut long before you could have succeeded the one before you," Victor points out.

"Yes. You don't miss anything, do you?" He slides his hands into his pockets. "The name I remember as a boy was Benedict, but that was such a long time ago." He makes a displeased face. "And such an odd name, so I'm pleased to be rid of it."

I think Benedict Cumberbatch would have something to say about that!
Yeah, I've definitely lost my mind; I'm thinking about actors in a time like this?

"Vonnegut is truly the only name I know." He shrugs his shoulders as if to brush the whole thing off as inconsequential. "The Vonnegut before me wanted me not only because I was a born leader but because my twin was a born assassin and just happened to look exactly like me. If anything ever happened to me, you would be my replacement."

"And because I look like you," Victor speaks up with acid in his voice, "you need me as a decoy for those more deadly situations that you're too much of a coward to participate in yourself."

Vonnegut shrugs once more; the arrogant smile never leaves his mouth.

"I won't deny it," he admits. "I wasn't much cut out to be an assassin." He laughs suddenly, and I take immediate offense before he reveals what's so damn funny. "I was much better at it than our useless brother, Niklas Fleischer, of course, but you get the idea."

I must be psychic.

I hear a sharp *thwap!* and Vonnegut collapses onto the floor.

"D-Don't even t-think about it, you crazy b-bitch!" James Woodard is standing behind Lysandra, a gun now in his hand. Right after Victor had shot Vonnegut, James must've grabbed it from the dead man on the floor next to where he had been standing the whole time.

"P-Put the gun on the f-floor and k-kick it out of the way."

Lysandra does as she's told, the look in her eyes menacing and vengeful. Once the gun is out of reach, James releases a long, deep breath he's probably been holding since before Victor burst through those doors.

Vonnegut doesn't whimper or cry out or even as much as moan against the pain I know that he feels from the bullet wound in his thigh, but he does show discomfort in his expression. He presses his hand against the bleeding wound; crimson stains the shiny floor beneath him.

“I deserved that,” he says. “I’m not too proud to admit it. But you didn’t kill me. And that’s quite interesting, don’t you think?”

“Victor?”

“Wait, love, please...”

I don’t have the energy to argue, but I need to...tell him...

I...

Victor

It takes longer to notice than it should have, but Izabel is no longer conscious. I am panicking inside, but I cannot let Vonnegut or Lysandra know just how much. However, it is no use trying to hide it entirely because they know how I feel about her. And my brother.

“We can help her,” Vonnegut says, struggling to get to his feet despite the gunshot wound.

He attempts to stand and nearly falls, so Lysandra rushes to give him aide.

“Get away from me.” He shoves her aside; she appears shocked by his refusal.

I keep the gun trained on them both. I cannot allow anyone else into this room, or I will be outnumbered and distracted. But I cannot leave Izabel on the floor to die, either.

“Let me take her to the infirmary,” James Woodard speaks up.

“No. You stay right there. I need your gun on her.”

Until this day, I did not know I had a twin brother. Or a sister named Lysandra. None of this surprises me. It does not shock or astound me or even interest me very much, either. I am well aware of The Order’s breeding program, which is not much different from that of the Shadow Sect, in which Nora Kessler was a product. But I am, however, curious about the genuine possibility of there being more than one other who shares my resemblance. And I cannot have that. Often, artificial insemination procedures, which I am confident we were a product of, result in multiple births.

“Tell me,” I say, “am I the only one? Are there other...brothers who might have been born of the same litter?”

Vonnegut laughs out loud.

“Litter?” he says, surprised. “You are far more coldhearted than I ever gave you credit, Victor Faust. Truly, you should be standing here, wearing my shoes, and holding my power.” His laughter echoes throughout the room. “You are both a born killer and leader—I could only manage one.”

“Are there more?” I insist.

“No,” he answers. “There were only three in our...litter.” He smirks with his use of the word.

Three? I realize quickly, without having to inquire, that the triplet is none other than Lysandra Hollis. I guess she does resemble us, but it was more challenging to put it together with her being a woman and with the love of my life dying on the floor not far from me.

“So, now that you’ve met us,” Vonnegut says, adjusting his position on the floor, “what do you think of having more brothers and sisters? You *have* met Naeva, right? She was another”—he smiles slimly and looks at the floor to hide it—“well, she also wasn’t cut out. Where is she now, anyway? Last I heard, she was in L.A. somewhere with her Mexican fighter lover. Leo Moreno?”

He is trying to distract me. But from what?

“I have only one brother,” I tell him. “And his name is Niklas Fleischer.”

“But you can think of us as your family,” he says. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted, was to bring you in, tell you the truth about everything, and have you join us.” He cocks his head. “It would be so much easier than resisting.”

Izabel. Since she fell unconscious, I haven’t taken my peripheral eye off her. She is still breathing, at least, but her organs are likely shutting down, and I need to get her medical care.

“Call your medic here,” I order Vonnegut against my initial judgment, now having no other choice. “And *only* your medic. If anyone else comes through that door, you will die.”

Vonnegut makes a slight motion with his head at Lysandra, and she reaches down into the front of her blouse to retrieve her cell phone.

“On the speaker,” I tell her. I know I do not need to warn her to be careful of what she chooses to say into the phone: no code words, just simple, straightforward instructions. Besides, the entire building is already well aware of my presence. No one else has come to this room to protect Vonnegut, and it is clear why.

I cannot kill Vonnegut yet, because his being alive is the only thing keeping all of the other operatives I did not kill on the way in from storming into this room and killing *me*. And Izabel. And since I do not know where they took Niklas, his life is also tied to Vonnegut’s life. There is no way I can get Izabel and Niklas out of this building alive, unable to walk and on the

verge of death.

The Order knows this. Lysandra knows this. Vonnegut knows this. It is why no one else has come.

But he *is* telling the truth about not wanting me dead. If he wanted me dead, I would already be. Long ago, yes, but even tonight, as I entered this building. I may be skilled, but I am not a god; I am not immortal, and there were more than enough men that I should not be standing here right now. Not one operative raised a gun at me. Some pretended they were going to shoot me, and many shots were fired on their end, but all were terrible shots. And I know The Order—they do not train and mold operatives who cannot fire a weapon with accuracy. Those that are not, as Vonnegut recently put it, “cut out” are, more often than not, eliminated. Others, like Niklas and Naeva, are exiled or put into lesser positions within The Order.

Vonnegut absolutely wants me alive, and this is why although he has in his possession the only two people in this world whom I love, I am the one with the upper hand.

Izabel is my main concern. And I do so hope that Niklas is being treated just as Vonnegut had claimed. But, treated with a gun to his head, I am sure.

Lysandra runs her finger along the screen, and a voice streams from the device a few seconds later.

“Send a medical team with equipment to our floor,” she instructs. “And do it quickly.”

“Is that all you’ll be needing?” the operative asks—code speak for ‘do we need to send more men there with guns?’

Lysandra’s eyes skirt mine.

“Just a medical team with equipment—a small team.” She runs her finger across the screen again, and I see the call end. She drops the phone back into her blouse, eyes blazing with hatred at me.

Her repeat answer could have just as well been code speak for “yes,” but it is a risk I had to take.

Hold on for me, love. I want to look at Izabel, my eyes only on her, but I cannot. *Just hold on for a while longer.*

“If it is all you ever wanted,” I say to Vonnegut, “for me to be involved, cooperate, and be on your side rather than against you, then why are we here now? Why did it come to this?”

I want to know these things, but I only ask to keep him distracted.

“You were three weeks away from advancement,” Vonnegut begins,

“when you left with that runaway girl from the compound in Mexico and refused to take her back where she belonged. That day, that mission, changed *everything.*”

Victor

Vonnegut repositions himself again, struggling to move his leg with difficulty. He is losing a lot of blood; more has seeped through his pants and onto the floor, and if he does not get medical attention or at least tie off that wound, he will bleed out.

“You became rogue,” he continues. “But you were far too valuable to The Order to just give up on you and take you out. And so, I waited to see how it all would play out.”

His expression hardens with discomfort as he presses his hand over the leg wound. He is beginning to look pale.

“At least fucking let me take care of his leg,” Lysandra says. “He’s going to bleed to death.”

I think on it for a moment and then nod my approval.

Lysandra moves quickly to tend his wound, ripping off her blouse to bind it. Her breasts, cradled in a lacy black bra, are exposed, and her cell phone falls onto the floor in her rush.

Vonnegut allows her to work while he proceeds to explain.

“I gave you the benefit of the doubt,” he says. “We may be monsters, but we’re all only human at the end of the day, and every single one of us capable of falling in love or murdering our mothers. Why do you think it took so long for us to act this way? I have had eyes and ears on Niklas Fleischer and Sarai Cohen—”

“Izabel Faust,” I correct him.

He manages a smirk beneath his discomfort.

“*Izabel Faust*,” he echoes. “I’ve had operatives on them for much of the time since you went rogue, Victor. Even when they went to Italy. Now *that* was the perfect time to capture them both, but the soap opera between the three of you seemed to gather a bit of steam while they were playing their roles in Italy, so I chose to pull back, to wait and see.”

“You thought that if Niklas and Izabel became...more acquainted with each other,” I put in, “I would finally understand the consequences of

emotions such as love. And then I would go back to The Order.”

“Oh, dear God, please say it like it should be said,” Vonnegut moans his frustration. “I thought that if Niklas and Izabel *fucked* each other and betrayed you, you’d finally realize the consequences of love and a life in the outside world with the rest of the sheep. I was even more convinced you’d come back when I realized you put them in that situation on *purpose*.” He shakes his head and laughs, shoulders bouncing gently.

His words bite because they are true.

“I thought you wanted me to remain...inhuman,” I remind him and ignore the biting comment altogether. “But you criticize my manner of speech?”

Vonnegut sighs.

“I suppose you’re right,” he says; he grimaces as Lysandra tightens the fabric around his leg. “But I won’t lie and say the one thing that has always bothered the shit out of me about you is the way you talk.”

I look at him quizzically.

He shakes his head and explains, “You’re so proper all the time; you rarely even use contractions or curse words—you’re like a goddamn cyborg. It’s annoying. I wonder how that woman could’ve put up with it all this time.”

There is movement at the doors; an older medic in his sixties, wearing typical blue scrubs, enters, wheeling an IV stand alongside him and carrying a caddy with various medical supplies in his other hand. Another younger medic enters after him, wheeling into the room a machine sitting atop a gurney, and yet another medic behind that one with a large metal tray bearing two shelves chock-full of supplies and smaller equipment.

The three move quickly and go straight for Vonnegut, as he is the leader of the organization in which they are a part and is clearly in need of medical attention.

For a brief moment, when Vonnegut and Lysandra notice that they are not heading in Izabel’s direction, it appears they might say something, correct them and instruct them to help Izabel instead. But when they see that I seem to have no objections, though confused by it, they remain silent.

Lysandra moves out of the way, and one medic crouches on the floor with supplies and begins to tend to the wound. I watch to ensure no guns or ammunition clips are secretly passed to Vonnegut, but the man I am watching more carefully is the older one with the IV bag. He sets up the bag while the

third medic cleans the area with an alcohol swab and runs a latex-gloved finger along the compressed vein, preparing him to receive the fluids.

Then, a second before the IV is attached to the extension tube:

“No,” I tell them and point with my free hand at Izabel. “*She* gets the fluids and anything else she needs.” Anything is everything, I know, as she is so close to death, but I cannot think about that right now. I cannot look at her, focus on her, or tend to her myself—all things I want to do more than anything.

The medics freeze and look at Vonnegut with worry and confusion. The older man, who was about to attach the IV, looks at me.

“But he needs—”

“I do not care what he needs,” I demand and nod my head at Izabel. “Now help her, or you will also need medical attention.”

Still, the three look to Vonnegut for confirmation, and he gives it to them.

The medics switch gears and hurry to help Izabel instead.

Vonnegut smiles.

“You see,” he says. “*That* is why you are so valuable—you miss *nothing*.”

I do not respond. It seems, despite being twins, there are many differences between him and me, one being his need to talk while I prefer the silence.

“You wanted to make sure the IV wasn’t full of poison,” he says, and he is correct. “You knew, just by their willingness to put the fluids from that IV bag into me, that there was no way it contained anything more than electrolytes.”

“Finish the story,” I tell him, still trying to distract him and Lysandra.

Vonnegut continues to ramble on about the many times they *could have* captured Izabel and Niklas but decided against it and why. He telling me anything at all is just a distraction—we are both trying to distract the other, but I doubt *he* knows that I, too, am playing the same game.

I glance at James Woodard, the first time I have made eye contact with him since I arrived, and he immediately understands.

Vonnegut can no longer find any position on the floor that is the least uncomfortable; he struggles and then gives up and lies down on his side instead.

“Can’t I at least give him a chair?” Lysandra puts in.

“A chair will not make him more comfortable,” I tell her. “But I would like *you* to sit in one and shut your mouth.”

Lysandra’s fists clench tightly at her sides; the flames in her eyes that, I admit, are similar to mine burn so violently I know she would kill me in an instant if she could reach a gun.

I nod toward the nearest chair, and she sits after another second of raging anger that makes her fists shake. And she closes her mouth, but for how long?

I focus on Vonnegut, never having taken the gun off of him once since I entered the room. My arm should be tired by now, but I have too much adrenaline running through my veins like high-octane gas to notice.

It is odd to finally see his face and know the man who leads The Order. And even more bizarre—surreal even—to know that his face looks exactly like my own.

I look at the medics working on Izabel lying on the gurney—the IV has been positioned inside her arm, and fluid drips from the bag. EKG stickers have been pressed to her chest, arms, and legs, and the machine performs a diagnostic. She is so skinny and pale; her hipbones jut out like jagged rocks, and it kills me to see her in such a state. I keep telling myself, as I have done the past few weeks, that it was necessary, that everything had to be timed perfectly. I kept trying to convince myself that I had to leave her here and that I could not abandon my plan and attempt to rescue her sooner. Every day when I turned on my laptop or my phone and watched the live feed of her and Niklas inside that room, I witnessed how they got weaker, emaciated, and delusional; I tried to tell myself that they could get through this, that they would survive.

Perhaps I was wrong.

Now, I am fearful that I am too late.

Focus on the threat...

James Woodard, who has been working with me behind the scenes and relaying messages to me for the past three weeks, stands in the same spot closest to the elongated window overlooking the city; his gun still on Lysandra. Like those installed in hotel guest rooms, a decommissioned air conditioner sits beneath the window, mounted on the wall.

Woodard carefully drops the cell phone he had just stealthily used to send a text message back into the hidden pocket of his suit jacket.

“Tell me, Victor,” Vonnegut’s voice brings me back into the moment,

“has the outside world shown you enough? Are you ready to return to The Order, where you belong?”

I hear the central air conditioning system kick on quietly.

“I find it difficult to believe,” I begin, “that rejoining The Order will be a simple process with no repercussions.”

Vonnegut shrugs. “Well, that goes without saying. But you will live; Izabel Faust and Niklas Fleischer will live. You will be in a position almost equal to my own, and Niklas will also be promoted.” He shrugs again and purses his lips on one side. “Seeing as how Izabel was never a part of The Order, has no official training, and would only be a distraction for you, she will be relocated. She will be given a chance to live the simple, normal life she was denied when her mother took her to Mexico many years ago. Her protection and safety assured.”

There is no such thing.

“My brother,” I say, and already I am beginning to feel slightly...fuzzy, “wants no part of this life, so a promotion will not be necessary.” I pause and blink a few times to disperse the sleepiness—James Woodard has moved closer to the air conditioner mounted beneath the window. “In fact,” I go on, “Niklas is the one who will need relocation and the simple, normal life he was denied from the moment of his birth.”

Vonnegut’s head bobs slightly, but he regains control and appears to think nothing of it.

“And Izabel?” he inquires.

“Izabel goes where I go. If you want to officially train her to become a member of The Order, I am certain she will have few objections. Though, I cannot guarantee she will do *anything* you tell her without”—I shrug and think how stubborn and combative she is and the hell that she will undoubtedly give them—“well, *some* kind of argument.” In her case, that would entail a few broken noses and perhaps a couple of castrations.

“That all can be arranged,” Vonnegut says.

Lysandra’s head dips, and she jerks herself awake, repeatedly blinking and running her hands across her face and the top of her head.

I feel it, too, and there is little time left before the gas filtering through the air conditioning unit renders me as immobile as everybody else in the building.

Woodard now stands in front of the air conditioning unit, his upper body swaying somewhat to match my own but wearing a gas mask on his face.

Behind me, the cold, hard metal of a gun barrel presses to the back of my head, and a deep, male voice reverberates in my ear.

Victor

“The game is over, Faust,” he says, and my eyes avert to where the medics were standing as they worked to keep Izabel alive—the older one is no longer among them.

Lysandra takes advantage of the opportunity, and scrambles, due to the gas in her system, to help Vonnegut. She falls twice before making it only six feet from him.

I act fast and duck low to remove myself from the medic’s gun barrel, bury my elbow into his gut and then sweep him from his feet with an outward leg.

Everything from this point on happens so quickly that it is all a blur to me. Shots are fired from both sides, but most miss, even from my gun, because none of us can see straight. The medic somehow grabs me from behind and takes me down to the floor. We roll and swing fists at one another and roll and swing more fists until both of our noses are bloodied.

My gun fell from my hand at some point, and I never noticed, but I see it now, just inches from my fingers. With all my strength, I bring both legs up and wrap them around the medic’s thick neck; I pull him down and off of me, and I hear the back of his skull strike the marble floor.

I can no longer see straight. I blindly search for my gun on my hands and knees, sweeping my hands back and forth.

“Quick, Victor!” I hear Woodard’s voice.

The second gas mask hidden inside the air conditioning unit slides across the floor and between my arms. I fumble it into my hands and quickly put it on, adjusting the tight strap around the back of my head. After a few moments, I am not free of the gas I have already inhaled, but unlike Vonnegut and Lysandra, my lungs are no longer taking in more.

I stumble to my feet.

“We have to go, now,” Woodard insists, grabbing my arm. He inhaled the least amount of gas because he could hold his breath in controlled intervals and refrain from talking; he was also able to get his mask on before

anyone else noticed.

I turn to see Vonnegut, Lysandra, and the medic who had attacked me lying on the floor, trying desperately to hold their breath but only making it worse. Each time they need to breathe, they exhale sharply and inhale more deeply, taking in larger amounts.

Vonnegut. He is my brother, my twin, no doubt, but still, there are too many things that I want to know. I came here to kill him—I spent the past few years wishing only to kill him—but now...I cannot. Is it because he is my flesh and blood?

No, it is something so much more than that.

“Victor,” Woodard urges, the sound of his voice muffled inside the gas mask, “we c-can’t stay here long.”

Standing over Vonnegut, who struggles to stay conscious, lying on his back against the floor, I ask the only question that comes to mind.

“Why am I still alive?”

It is ultimately the biggest mystery, despite the story he gave me.

Vonnegut manages a weak smile; his eyes flutter, and he raises a hand as if to gesture while he speaks, but then it falls beside him. His eyelids win the war with his will to keep them open, and he is unconscious in under two seconds. Lysandra and the medics have been out for a few minutes now.

I hear Woodard in the background, yelling at me through his mask, but it is not until moments later that I acknowledge him, too lost in my contemplations.

“Take Izabel to the elevator as planned,” I instruct him. “Wheel her into the van waiting on the basement level parking deck. Mozart will be waiting for her.”

“What about Niklas?”

“Is he on this floor?” I ask.

He nods. “At the end of the east hall, just past the elevator,” he says, pointing in the direction. “W-What are you going to d-do?”

“Take Izabel,” I tell him. “Get her out of here. Wait for me at the van; I’ll bring Niklas. And give Jones your mask and tell him to find me on this floor and to be quick about it.”

The other operatives in the building will either be dead, shot by me on the way in, or unconscious from the gas filtering through the HVAC. But the gas is limited and will run out at any moment, and its effects will wear off within ten minutes afterward, so Woodard is right about needing to hurry.

He wastes no more time and gives the gurney a forceful shove out the door, taking an unconscious, withered Izabel with him.

Hold on for me, love...

I pull four zip ties from my suit jacket and bind the wrists and ankles of Vonnegut and Lysandra behind their backs. One by one, I drag them out of the room, down the hallway to the elevator, and leave them to wait for help from Jones while I find my brother.

Izabel

When I wake, I don't know where I am, how long I've been out, or even if I'm still alive. But when I see Victor sitting on a chair in partial shadow, the gray light from a cloudy, wet day bathing him from the nearby window, I think I must be dreaming at least.

I raise myself from the bed to sit upright.

"Nothing is waiting for you right now," he says calmly and then gets up from the chair, "that requires you to move from that bed."

"How long have I—"

The sweet warmth of his mouth I feel suddenly on my lips; the longing and relief pouring from him I can feel in the passionate movement of his tongue entangled with my own; the softness of his engulfing hands cradling my face.

I return his deep kiss with the same amount of passion, and for the first time in so long, I feel...at peace.

His lips pull away slowly, but I can still feel him there, his mouth mere inches from mine. I savor the moment behind the blackness of my eyelids, where somehow, I feel like only in my thoughts are such moments genuinely safe.

Finally, I look at him and am surprised by what I see. Because I've never seen it before. Not in Victor Faust.

"What is it?" he asks, detecting the wonder.

Lifting my hand between us, I place my fingertips lightly upon his cheek; his skin is stubbled and prickly; the look in his eyes changed, soft and affectionate rather than the severe and stoic man I've known all these years.

He places his hand on my wrist, a worried look on his features.

"If you are wondering whether or not I am the real Victor Faust—"

I touch my fingertips gently to his cheek and shake my head. "No," I whisper. "I know who you are, Victor. I've just never seen you this way before."

He leans inward and presses his lips to my forehead.

“What way, Izabel?”

I gaze into his eyes. “In *love*,” I say.

He looks surprised, and I do my best to explain.

“This moment, right here, right now, is the first time since I met you that I’ve ever...truly felt the love you have for me.”

His hand falls away slowly from my wrist; he tilts his head in curious contemplation. “But I never lied to you when I told you I loved you.”

I lean inward and kiss his lips.

“No,” I begin, “I never thought you lied to me, Victor. I always knew you told the truth when you said you loved me. Only now, I *feel* it.”

I drop my hand from his cheek.

“All this time,” I begin, “you’ve been fighting yourself. From the moment you saw me in the backseat of your car in Mexico, you fought against your feelings for me. You could’ve taken me back to Javier, but you didn’t. You could’ve given me over to Izel in that shitty motel room, but you didn’t. You’ve had so many opportunities to rid yourself of me, to go back to the only life you’ve ever known, but you couldn’t.”

I place my hand atop his on the bed; his gaze finds mine again.

“You told me often that you loved me,” I go on, “and talked to me, even with what seemed like passion at times, about how your love for me changed you, changed who you were, and while although I never once doubted the words, a part of me always questioned just how confident you were in saying them. Not that you didn’t believe them, but because being in love was a foreign and dangerous feeling you were raised and trained to reject.”

I slip my hand beneath his and interlock our fingers; he squeezes and swallows and never takes his eyes from mine.

“So, I only have one question,” I say.

“And whatever it is, I will have an answer.”

I smile softly and squeeze his hand in return.

“What changed? What happened to finally make you trust yourself and your feelings and reject the part of you that you’ve been fighting?”

He looks confused and thoughtful.

“I...I just could not bear the thought of losing you,” he says. “And I suppose I had more than enough time to think about everything when I left.”

When you left...

“Victor, did you intend to never see me again?”

He shakes his head.

“I left you because I had to,” he explains. “And I could not risk telling you the real reason why.”

“You needed everything to be authentic,” I say, already knowing. “You wanted Vonnegut and The Order to believe that I no longer had your protection. They needed to be confident in their ability to capture Niklas and me. If I knew it was all just part of your plan, my reaction to your abandoning me wouldn’t have been as believable.”

“Yes. That is...” He laughs lightly, and it makes me smile. “That is everything, in a nutshell, I suppose. But you knew all of that already, didn’t you?”

“I had a feeling. Though I won’t lie and say that too many times, especially when I was locked in that room starving to death, I thought that maybe I was just being delusional. My mind told me that you would never come, that it was over, not only between us but my life, too. But my heart, even if only deep down, knew otherwise.”

Victor stands from the edge of the bed, walks to the window, and pulls open the long curtain to reveal the cloudy sky. Far off in the distance, I see an airplane, almost nothing more than a dark speck, slip between thick clouds and disappear.

We must be in a tall building, a skyscraper, no less.

“Where are we?”

“New York City,” Victor says.

Then he turns from the window and looks at me.

“And our permanent home,” he adds with a smile in his eyes. “No more moving around. No more running.”

I get out of bed. My legs are still shaky, but I’m managing well enough. And I can now recall a few times before today when I woke up. Bits and pieces of my memory become more apparent as I walk across the room with my IV bag hanging from its wheeled contraption to join him at the window. I remember the IV being changed often; Mozart and a few male and female nurses coming in to tend to my needs. But this is the first time I recall seeing Victor in this room. He likely visited before to check in on me but never wanted to disturb me while I mended. I wasn’t recovering only from starvation but emotional trauma as well, and nothing makes everything worse than emotional trauma, stress, and anxiety.

“Niklas?” I ask. Whether he was alive or not plagued me, and I was afraid to ask until now.

“He is doing well.” Victor looks over at me. “But he is no longer here.”
I blink, confused.

“What do you mean? Where did he go?”

Victor’s gaze finds the concrete jungle of New York City again; he stands with his hands folded down in front of him.

“He was treated here for a few days but insisted he had other places to be. So, he removed his IV, dressed, and left the building. I have not seen nor heard from him since yesterday.”

“But...health-wise...should he have done that?”

“My brother is a survivor and always has been. He will be fine.”

I can’t believe Niklas just left. Wait, what am I saying? I absolutely *can* believe it because that’s what he does. He disappears for weeks or months on end, spending his days and nights out there in the real world, surrounded by people who don’t kill others for a living. But why does it feel so different this time? Why does it feel so...final?

“He will not be coming back, Izabel,” Victor says, inadvertently answering my internal dialogue. “This time, it is for good.”

“Did he tell you that?”

Victor shakes his head.

“No, but he did not need to. I saw it in his eyes. He is done with this lifestyle. Now that Vonnegut is out of the way and there is no longer a bounty on Niklas’ head, he has chosen, for the first time in his life, to live his life the way *he* chooses.”

I swallow a lump down my throat. I really can’t imagine a life without Niklas. *Why did he leave without saying goodbye?*

I know it must affect Victor more than me. I lay my hand against his back.

“Are you OK with his decision?”

He hooks a hand about my waist and pulls me against him. “Yes. I am happy for him.” He presses his lips into the top of my hair. “Things are finally how they should have been all along. That is if you choose to stay.”

“I go where you go, Victor. Since the day I met you, I’ve chosen this life. But...I thought you wanted me to abandon all this and live in the real world, too.” I wave a hand at the window.

“You belong with me,” he says and squeezes my hip. “Perhaps I am selfish, but I will not fight it anymore, my love for you.”

My cheeks flush with heat, but I lay my head on his chest to hide it.

After a quiet moment:

“I have but one question for you, too,” he says.

“And I’ll have an answer,” I echo.

He puts his back to the window and looks into my eyes, searching.

“Are you OK with Niklas’ decision to leave?”

My time in that room alone with Niklas is coming back to me now, the things we said to each other, my confession, and I know that Victor heard every word.

“I will miss him,” I say, “but I’m happy for him, too.”

“Are you in love with him, Izabel? I will understand if you are.”

I shake my head and step up closer.

“I love Niklas, but not the same way I love you. I...can’t explain it, but it’s all I’ve got.”

He pulls me close, wrapping his arms around me.

“I mean, even if you and I weren’t together,” I go on, “I honestly can’t imagine myself with him. I just...well, as I said, it’s hard to explain because I don’t understand it myself.”

“Do not try to understand it, at least not for my sake. I am content with the answer you gave me.” He takes my hand. “There are clothes in the closet,” he says, pointing at the closet by the restroom door. “If you feel up to it, get dressed, and I will meet you soon.”

“Where?”

“Mozart will be here in thirty minutes to remove your IV and to escort you to the meeting hall. I have to go prepare.”

“But what’s going on?”

He kisses my lips and then stands at the door, his hand on the lever.

“The beginning of the rest of our lives,” he says with a smile, opens the door, and then leaves.

I just stand here, watching the door close slowly behind him, cutting off the light from the hallway, a nervous but excited knot spinning in my stomach.

The beginning of the rest of our lives...

I go back to the window and peer out at the vast city as far as I can see. I wonder where in the city I am, which building, how far away or near Times Square. I wonder about many things in the short moment, but mostly I think about Victor. I think about how far we have come together, the things we’ve endured and faced, the impossible choices we’ve both had to make, even

against one another. I think about Fredrik, Niklas, and Nora, feeling a twinge of sadness at knowing at least two of the three will not be a part of “the beginning of the rest of our lives.” I even think of Dina and still miss her terribly. And my dear friend Lydia, who died before I could save her.

So much has happened, so many lives lost.

But life goes on. Things change—the *world* changes all around us, and *it* changes *us*, whether we want to change with it or not.

Still weak and shaky, I make my way to the closet, my IV stand alongside me, pushed on its little wheels. And I’m ready when Mozart knocks on the door.

We leave together; my arm is hooked within his because I still need a little help getting around.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks.

I look over. “Yes. I think I am.”

We walk down the hallway.

“You know,” he says, “I wanted to apologize for how I treated you when you came looking for Victor.”

“No apology necessary,” I tell him. “But if you’re the kind of guy who needs it, then you have my forgiveness.”

He chuckles.

“No, I’m not that kind of guy. But thank you just the same.”

“What kind of guy are you then?”

We round the corner at the end of the hall and wait for the elevator.

I feel his eyes on me, and I look over.

“I’m just like you,” he says. “A killer.”

I smile. “Then I guess I’m in good company.”

The elevator dings, and the doors part; we step inside, and it takes us up many floors to the very top; my heart...as calm as it’s ever been.

Izabel

The meeting room is more massive than those we've used in the past. It has tall ceilings and bright white walls, but just as clean and sterile and simple as any place we've ever used for times like this. But what makes this room so interesting and surprisingly intimidating is the approximately one hundred people standing around six twenty-foot tables.

I know that every person in this room is a killer of some kind. Whether they are like Victor and me and have killed with their bare hands, or they only aid in killing others and are guilty by association, they are all the same—we are all the same.

How did I end up here, among the elite? How did I end up counted among hired killers at all? I was just a teenage girl forced into an unfortunate situation. I wanted to play the piano and maybe get a job in fashion—fashion, really! They were just ordinary dreams. But I'm proof that not always—sometimes not even often—people get what they dream about having or achieving. So many people find themselves in jobs they never thought they'd work, in relationships with people they never dreamed or imagined they could love. Some people at the top of their game end up living on the streets, shooting drugs into their arms, while others who swore they'd never have children or be tied down end up with three children, a husband or wife, and a white picket fence and a dog.

But how many wake up one day and find themselves in a life like mine? Not many, I would assume, but that is really beside the point.

Mozart escorts me down the center of the room, and as I pass, those behind me finally take their chairs. I try to look at everyone, wondering if there are any present whom I already know or have seen before. There are a few familiar faces here and there, operatives who have worked with us in the past, but mostly they are new faces.

I'm disappointed that the one face I had hoped to see is not here. *Where are you, Fredrik?*

James Woodard can't make eye contact with me as I pass but looks

down instead at his shoes. I stop long enough to touch his shoulder, letting him know I forgive him. Because, unlike Mozart, James *is* that kind of guy. And besides, if James had betrayed us or been a spy, he would not be standing here now. He would never have left the building in Ohio alive, much less be here among the rest of us.

Victor is standing at the head of the centermost table in the room, looking out at everyone in attendance but mostly at me as I approach. His expression is stoic again now that he is in front of this large group of people he now leads. But behind those eyes, I see the Victor Faust that is madly in love with me.

He gestures at the empty chair next to his, and I sit down. Mozart sits next to me on my left, and everyone else still standing follows suit; the sounds of chair legs moving across the marble and shuffling three-piece suits fill the massive room.

“This,” Victor begins, pointing at me with an open hand, palm up, “is Izabel Faust. She would stand to be introduced, but she is on the mend.”

Everyone nods at me, and a few voices of welcome chime around the tables. My heart blooms behind my ribs and warms my blood upon hearing him call me by his last name.

“As you have been informed by now from various sources,” Victor begins, “your former leader, the one known as Vonnegut, has been killed in the line of duty. Those of you who knew him might be asking yourself the obvious question: Who am *I*, exactly? Aside from the obvious fact that he and I were twin brothers—if you were ever given the rare opportunity to meet him in person, it is obvious—I was also the one in line to replace him in the event of his demise.”

A susurrus of voices moves around the table.

“My name is Victor Faust.”

The susurrus rises and lasts longer.

“That is Victor Faust?” I hear one man whisper. “I’ve never seen him. Only heard about him.”

“I’ve never even seen Vonnegut,” another says, “so this is all news to me.”

“Faust is a legend,” says yet another.

“Faust was a *fugitive*.”

“Yes,” a woman with raven-black hair and crimson-red lips whispers. “The Order has been tracking him for years—but now he *leads* it?” Her eyes

move across the room to find Victor, and I don't like the suspicious glare she shoots him with.

Victor waits until everyone gives him their full attention again.

"Is this not the most sophisticated assassination and spy organization in the world?" he says aloud.

No one answers because they know that Victor is getting around to making a point. So, instead, they listen intently.

"I did go rogue from The Order," he continues, "and yes, there was a bounty on me for a time, but was the bounty to bring me in dead or alive?"

Still, no one answers.

"Precisely," Victor says. "If your former leader wanted me dead, do you not think I would be by now? That an organization as large and sophisticated as The Order would not have succeeded in eliminating me, a lone man, long ago?"

Many heads nod in agreement and the whispers around the table are more accepting than skeptical.

"I am in control now," Victor says with authority. "If anyone here has any objections, please make yourself known."

Not one person stands. But then why would they? To object publicly would be suicide. And Victor knows this, of course. But this is the way of things in this business; it always has been and will always be.

Almost everyone will fall in line with the changing of things; they don't care much who leads them so long as they are led and, more important, paid. A few will rebel and find themselves on the wrong end of a loyalist's gun. But at the end of the day, Victor Faust will still be the leader of The Order.

He is the leader of The Order...

A part of me will probably never fully grasp it after all we've been through to get here.

"Business will resume as it would any other day for most of you," Victor goes on. "Some will be assigned under new unit leaders. Others will find themselves in different departments and relocate to other countries. You will be notified."

One man sitting at table four presses the button on the microphone in front of him then leans forward and speaks into it.

"What of Lysandra Hollis?" he asks.

"Miss Hollis was also killed in the line of duty," Victor answers.

The man turns off his mic, but I can still hear when he says, "Well,

that's good news." The few sitting around him all nod in unison. It doesn't surprise me that Lysandra wasn't popular among these people.

"Any of you who reported to Miss Hollis for any reason," Victor says, "will only report to your unit leaders from now on."

He goes on and on for another ten minutes about the technical aspects of the business, and I'm relieved he doesn't put any kind of spotlight on me. This meeting isn't really what Victor brought me here for, anyway. Yes, he wants me to see how things have changed, to know that it's finally happened, that he has taken down Vonnegut and claimed The Order as his own—as *ours*. But he isn't stupid. He's not going to put me on a pedestal in front of a room full of killers and let it be known just how much I mean to him. Of course, there are people here who have heard about me and know that Victor and I are much more than colleagues—there's no way around any of that. But to put the wrong kind of spotlight on me will only serve to also put a target on me if anyone present ever decides to go that route. It's like passing a group of thugs on the street; they see you and know you're there, but chances are that if you don't make eye contact, they'll leave you alone.

After another fifteen minutes of Victor putting together a couple of new units, he finally turns to me.

"Faust," he says, and I suddenly feel the need to stand, despite the mending. "I am assigning you to unit seventeen."

He's assigning me a unit of my own...to lead.

I nod even though he wasn't asking me a question.

"Anders, Moore, Winthrop, Scholz, Gulsen, Moroz, and Azevedo." Each of these people, four men and three women stand from their seats upon hearing their names. "Izabel Faust is your unit leader. You will report to her Wednesday morning to get acquainted, and so that she may assign your first mission as a team."

I look at each of my team in the eye, nod, and feel them out briefly. All seven give me nothing but respectful vibes, nod in return—two even smile—and then they retake their seats. To say I'm relieved that I didn't get any stink-eyes would be an understatement.

Just then, the doors open, and a familiar face enters the room: Kenneth Ware from the Special *Special* Activities Division of the United States covert operations.

Izabel

Every pair of eyes turns in his direction, but I feel a strange pang in the pit of my stomach at seeing Mr. Ware, of all people, here at this meeting. Kenneth Ware seems only to exist because serial killers exist. And he has an unhealthy fascination with Fredrik Gustavsson—the reason for the pang. Maybe he has news on Fredrik’s whereabouts. After all, if anyone could find Fredrik, it would be Kenneth Ware.

I lean forward in anticipation of the announcement that Mr. Ware looks like he’s preparing to make.

“Please excuse the interruption,” Kenneth says to those in the room. “I can wait until the meeting is over.”

“I was just wrapping up,” Victor says.

I get the feeling Victor already knew that Kenneth Ware was coming here. I know he wouldn’t have been able to walk in on the meeting if Victor hadn’t already given someone on the ground floor the go-ahead to let him pass.

Kenneth nods and stands patiently by the wall.

Victor makes a few final announcements and then dismisses everyone.

“Woodard,” Victor stops James at the door while everyone else slips out, “I would like you to stay.”

Looking nervous, as he often does, James steps aside to let those behind him pass; he stands with an electronic tablet pressed to his full belly and a briefcase strap hanging on his shoulder. He still can’t make eye contact with me.

In anticipation of whatever Kenneth Ware came here to tell us, I give him my full, undivided attention, despite feeling like I need to hurry and put James’ mind at ease.

After the last of the crowd has left, Kenneth Ware adjusts his tie and begins. But not with what I had hoped he came here for.

Kenneth glances around the room and nods his approval. “This is a nice place you have here. Tell me, Faust, how you came to be in command of such

a massive undertaking so easily.”

Victor appears mildly surprised; one brow raised higher than the other.

“Easy?” he says. “Mr. Ware, I believe you must have suffered a head injury on your way here. Shall I call a medic for you?” He gestures with an open hand. “My personal doctor is still on the premises.”

It surprises me to see Victor in a jesting mood.

Kenneth smiles, maybe even blushes a little, feeling foolish, but then shakes his head.

“Well, what I mean to say,” he backtracks, “is how did you come to be standing here *right now*, so soon after taking out this organization’s leader just days ago? Was there no special procedure, trial, or an interview at least?” He gestures both hands. “Or is it like in the dynasty days of kings and queens, when one dies, a successor automatically inherits the throne?”

“It is...complicated,” Victor answers. “And I do not have the time to explain everything to you. However, rest assured Vonnegut is dead. And you need not waste any more time and resources hunting him.”

“Now we just have to keep our eyes on *you*,” Kenneth says, half joking, half serious.

“You can,” Victor says with a nod, “but you might find the job quite boring, seeing as how The Order no longer has dealings in weapons, drugs, or human trafficking.”

Kenneth smiles. “So, just a lot of killing, then? I doubt I’ll ever find that boring, Mr. Faust.”

Victor smiles, too, and I’m starting to feel there’s a lot of secret communication between them.

“Ahem.” I make myself visible. “Are you two on some kind of new terms now?” My eyes fall on Kenneth Ware, full of faux suspicion and jealousy. “Or is my relationship with Victor in...peril?”

Kenneth laughs—so does James Woodard standing off to the side. Victor smiles and shakes his head.

“No, love,” he says. “I can assure you that is the least of your concerns. But yes, we are on new terms—job-related only.”

I grin and leave it at that. I’d wanted to put in a few more playful comments about sexual orientation and whatnot, but I’m just wishing Kenneth would get on with the news he came here to announce.

“Have you found him?” Victor asks as if he’d read my mind.

Kenneth Ware appears stoic at first glance, but upon further

investigation, I start to see a fire in his eyes, a newfound obsession, the kind that only someone like Kenneth Ware can understand.

“We found a body,” he says, and my heart lurches. “But it wasn’t the body of Fredrik Gustavsson.”

“Oh?” Victor inquires.

Kenneth nods.

“My investigation led me to a basement inside a house in Virginia,” Kenneth begins. “Gustavsson’s car was found parked at a Burger King just blocks from the house. Employees had called the police, who called for a tow truck. The plates were run, and when Fredrik’s alias came up, I was alerted and took it from there.”

He paces, his arms down at his sides.

“After acquiring camera footage from the restaurant, I found that a peculiar person, not Gustavsson, had been driving the car. A small woman, who I later found out through a series of new crime scenes and evidence obtained from each of them, that the woman was none other than the serial killer I’d been hunting for years. To make a long story short—”

“I prefer long stories, Mr. Ware,” Victor puts in. “Pesky little details and all.”

Kenneth smiles and buries both hands in the pockets of his dress pants.

“Oh, yes, I’m well aware,” he says and paces again, “but I’m here on borrowed time. I can send you the full report this afternoon, but I don’t have the time to go that far into *pesky* details at the moment.”

“Very well,” Victor agrees.

Kenneth picks up where he left off. “Everything led to the Virginia house. The woman came and went from the home several times, but only in broad daylight. The neighborhood was always busy, with neighbors on all sides and kids playing in the street. I couldn’t risk entering the home while she was away in my search for Gustavsson because if she knew I was onto her, she might’ve killed or tried to move him.”

“Whose body did you find, Mr. Ware?” I asked, wishing he’d just get to the point.

He stops pacing and looks at me.

“It wasn’t Fredrik,” he repeats. “But the body of the woman who’d abducted him, the serial killer. She had been strung up inside the basement and sliced open from here to here.” He made a motion with his finger from his throat to his pelvis.

“So...Fredrik killed this woman in self-defense,” I try to tell them—and myself. “She was going to kill him, obviously, but he outsmarted her.”

Victor doesn't look at all convinced of my theory. And I don't, deep down, believe it myself.

Kenneth shakes his head.

“No, Izabel,” he says, “this was not self-defense. It was ritualistic. Calculated. Planned. And, quite honestly, vicious in nature.”

“So, what are you trying to say, Mr. Ware?” I ask, but I know what he's trying to say, and I just don't want to believe it.

“Mr. Ware is trying to tell us,” Victor puts in, “that Fredrik is no longer the man we once knew. And that, perhaps, the man we knew for a brief time was never who he really was to begin with.”

I get the feeling the last part was not what Kenneth was trying to say but something Victor has known all along and often thought about.

I thought that maybe my heart would break into a million pieces upon hearing news of Fredrik. But that was when I expected Kenneth to announce the tragic news of his death. I never expected *this*. And, quite frankly, I never expected I'd be unsurprised by such news, either.

Maybe, a part of me, like Victor, always knew this would happen to our dear friend.

“Now,” Victor begins, “the only questions I have are why you came all the way here to tell me? And why would you need to send me the detailed case file? Surely, Mr. Ware, it is not only because I asked for it.”

“No, that isn't the only reason,” Kenneth confirms.

He sighs, glances at me, and then says to Victor, “You are head of The Order now, Victor Faust. You take on the highest priority jobs and those in which others can't pull off.”

“You are hiring me to find and kill Fredrik Gustavsson,” Victor says.

“Yes. That is precisely why I came here in person. I know he was your friend. And yours.” He glances at me again.

“B-But wait a damn minute,” I say, stepping between Kenneth and Victor, “just because he killed a *serial killer*, even if he did it viciously, doesn't make *him* a serial killer. It doesn't warrant a bounty on his head.”

“She was not the only victim,” Kenneth says, and I gasp and step backward and out of the way again.

“Two days after we found the woman's body, another was killed precisely in the same manner in the house next door.”

“What?” I don’t want to believe it—I refuse to believe it.

But...I *do* believe it.

“And five days after that,” Kenneth continues, “another woman, strung up, sliced, the same as the two before, just two cities away. He is killing quickly, and they are innocent victims.”

“But how do you know it was him?” I ask. “That it was Fredrik who did these things?”

Kenneth turns to me.

“They were also missing all their teeth,” he reveals, and I swallow hard. “But even without that evidence, Gustavsson left DNA evidence at each crime scene. He isn’t trying to clean up after himself, so either he’s sloppy or wants to get caught.”

It’s neither, I tell myself. *And we’ll probably never catch him*. If it’s true, and Fredrik has become...himself...none of us—all of us working together—will ever be able to catch him unless he allows it.

I shake my head repeatedly. “I-I just don’t believe he’d kill innocent people—women, at that. Sure, I can believe that he’s become a full-blown serial killer—I always saw that possibility in him, I admit it, but *this*...No, there has to be a reason. Those women had to have been guilty of terrible, unforgivable crimes.”

“The women were clean. One was a housewife. The second was a prostitute, but that was the only thing on her record.”

“Then there had to be more,” I try. “These women must’ve done things we don’t know about, for which there is no proof. Fredrik—”

“Izabel,” Victor cuts me off. “We are taking this job. We will hunt Fredrik Gustavsson down and take him out like any other job. Is that understood?”

There’s a fierceness in his eyes that only I can see. They are reprimanding me and questioning their faith in my ability to carry the weight of the position I was recently appointed.

Victor is right. My God, he’s right...

I gather myself, straighten up, and let go of the old, inexperienced Izabel. In my first assignment, I let go of the Fredrik Gustavsson I knew and loved like a brother.

“Yes. It’s understood.” It’s all I can say.

Fredrik...I can’t believe it has come to this; I never imagined we would be hunting you. But if it’s true and you *are* killing innocent women, you

deserve to die.

The thing is, in my heart, I don't believe that's the case. Like I told Kenneth and Victor, those women had to be guilty of something unforgivable because the Fredrik I know—the dark or the light side of him—could never kill innocent people.

But, in the end, it doesn't matter what I believe. I'm a hired killer, and I'll do what I've been trained to do.

Kenneth Ware has a few last words with Victor before he leaves to take care of important business elsewhere. And that leaves James Woodard, who has been waiting impatiently since the night I saw him with Vonnegut—I guess my hand on his shoulder wasn't enough.

“Izabel—”

“You don't need to apologize,” I tell him. “You did what you had to do, and if you'd done it any differently, I know you wouldn't be standing here today.”

“B-But I just didn't want you to think—”

I place my hand on his shoulder.

“You're my friend, James,” I tell him with a smile, “and I wouldn't have it any other way.”

“If it were not for Woodard,” Victor says, “I would never have been able to pull off the plan to get you and Niklas out of that building.”

“I know. Thank you, James.”

He nods and smiles, and I watch the anxiety and feelings of shame lift from him.

James leaves us, shuffling out the door with his digital tablet and briefcase.

“So, what now?” I ask. I step up into Victor's personal space, which just so happens to be mine as well, and I tilt my head, looking at him. “And how does it feel to know that Vonnegut is dead?”

He isn't smiling or even in a lighthearted mood anymore.

I step back a few inches.

“Victor, what is it?”

“There is something I need for you to see,” he says.

I stand here for a moment, anticipating his coming words, and when they don't come fast enough:

“Well, what is it?”

“Come with me.”

Victor takes my hand and squeezes it, making me anxious about whatever he's about to show me, and we exit the meeting room.

We ride the elevator down to the basement floor, walk several hallways, and then through several locked doors guarded by men and women with guns.

"Where in the hell are we going?"

Victor doesn't answer, but wherever it is, as far deep underground and as dark and gloomy as this area is with only dull, flickering fluorescent lights in the ceiling, I can't imagine it's anywhere nice.

Finally, we move closer to a room out ahead with a wall and door made of thick, bulletproof see-through material, much like the window in my prison. There is a light on, and as we approach, I don't know why but I can feel my heart in the tips of my toes.

"Please don't tell me you have Hannibal Lecter down here," I say in jest, but I kind of mean it, too.

"Not quite," Victor says, and then we stop in front of the see-through wall.

"My God...Victor..." I can't get the damn words out; my eyes dart to and from Victor and the man who looks exactly like him, imprisoned inside the room. "You didn't *kill* him?"

I take a deep breath and then step backward, shaking my head.

"Why is Vonnegut *alive*?"

"He will be of use to me someday," Victor says.

Vonnegut stands from his prison-like cot and comes to the wall; several holes were drilled through the material, probably to allow air into the tiny room.

"What goes around, comes around, I suppose," Vonnegut says with a shrug. "Isn't that right, brother?"

"I suppose," Victor says. "The only difference is that you are not being kept alive to be my successor."

Vonnegut laughs under his breath.

"Whoever said that was why *I* kept *you* alive?"

"*You* did," Victor answers.

"Yeah, well, I would've told you anything at that moment." He scoffs. "I'm disappointed, Victor, that you actually believed it."

"It does not matter what I believed," Victor says. "You are the one behind the wall. And if you wanted me dead, then—"

“And I never said I wanted you dead, either,” Vonnegut cuts him off. “What I wanted was much like this scenario.” He waves his hands about the cell. “Only you in here instead of me.”

“You went through all that,” Victor says, “just to capture me and use me as your decoy? That is unnecessarily...extravagant, don’t you think?”

“Well, not just as a decoy, Victor,” Vonnegut says, “but I’d planned to use your DNA to make more of you. You *are* the strongest, fastest, and most intelligent of us, are you not?” He cocks his head. “Tell me, Victor, do you plan to keep the breeding program running? Or will you shut it down along with the other lucrative programs to which The Order owes its success?”

I’m still too shocked and frustrated to add anything. I just listen.

Behind me, a sharp banging sounds, and I almost come out of my skin. I whirl around to see Lysandra hurling herself against her prison door, made of the same indestructible material as that of Vonnegut’s. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* My eyes grow wider, my disbelief deeper.

“No...”

“Let me the fuck out of here! You piece of shit!”—she spits on the glass—“fucking let me out of here, or I’ll kill you!”

Why do they always say that? How can she kill him for not letting her out if he won’t let her out so she can kill him? Desperate people say the dumbest things.

I swing around to face Victor.

“Not that I agree with it, but I can understand Vonnegut, that he can be useful as a decoy,” I say, “but why her? Why in the hell would you keep that bitch alive? She killed Niklas’ mother and his friend, Jackie—an *innocent*—right in front of him.”

“And I’d do it all over again,” Lysandra says, her voice muffled through the transparent wall; she glares at us, her eyes feral and dangerous.

“She is alive for my brother,” Victor says. “Nothing more.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is Niklas’ job, his honor, to be the one to kill her for what she did.”

“Does he know you have her down here? Does he know she’s still alive?”

“No,” Victor says. “I was going to tell him, but at the last minute, when I saw that he looked at peace with the world for the first time, I changed my mind.”

“So, you kept her alive? For what? For the day he comes back? You said

so yourself, Victor, that Niklas won't be coming back—not this time.”

Victor appears to think on it a moment.

“Just in case,” he says. “Regardless, she is for Niklas to kill, and no one else may have that privilege.”

Lysandra laughs manically and then slaps her hands against the wall again. She continues to scream through the glass, and we turn our backs on her, ignoring her as best we can.

“Well?” Vonnegut asks once more. “Are you shutting the breeding program down?”

Victor takes my hand, and we slip down the hall away from their prison.

Victor never answers Vonnegut.

“And the breeding program?” I ask once we are in the elevator again.

Victor takes me into an aggressive kiss and pushes me against the elevator wall. “No, I will not be shutting down the breeding program,” he says hotly onto my mouth.

He strips off my clothes, and I wrap my arms and legs around him, feeling him hard and full inside me.

I wonder if he meant something more by his answer than expected, but I never ask; I just let him have his way with me all the way up to the top floor again.

Victor

Six Months Later...

Many things have changed, not just in The Order but in our personal lives. A few years ago, I never would have imagined we would be here now. I was never entirely confident that we would successfully take down The Order, much less build it back up again and control it.

I did, however, expect to lose people in the process, no matter the outcome. It was no secret that Nora Kessler always intrigued me, and a part of me is frustrated that she is no longer with us. In the end, I suppose she was loyal to me, but it was her fault we could not trust her fully. It is a shame she could not be part of our future; she made an excellent operative and vital asset to our team. But she died doing what she loved, and I can only hope for the same when my time comes.

Fredrik Gustavsson was an inevitability. I never wanted to believe it, probably in the same way as Izabel. She and I both lost a friend.

Fredrik always had the potential in him to become a serial killer. It was only Seraphina Bragado and his love for her that kept him in line, who distracted him from his dark, ritualistic urges. Were it not for her guidance and love for *him*, Fredrik would have succumbed to those urges long ago. Again.

The thing Izabel does not know about Fredrik, however, is that he was a serial killer from the age of fifteen until he turned twenty-eight, and he became overwhelmed by that conscience of his and did not want to kill anymore. He kicked the habit, so to speak, and successfully stopped killing for several years. But it was difficult for him, the same way it is difficult for a drug addict to stop using drugs cold turkey. The withdrawal was debilitating for Fredrik. He often would lose himself, and I did my best to keep him in line. I gave him interrogation jobs on my missions and tried to understand and be a friend to him. He kept himself going by hunting and torturing criminals, or “people who deserved it,” in Fredrik’s words.

And then there was sex. It was Gustavsson's other outlet, the one thing that helped distract him from his inherent need. Trade one addiction for another; it is what people with addictive personalities always do, and Fredrik was the reigning king.

But when he met Izabel, I thought perhaps she would be his moral savior. He loved her like a sister, and I saw a change in him when she entered his life that I had never seen before.

Unfortunately, it was not meant to be, no matter how much they loved and complimented each other.

Fredrik and Seraphina, *that* truly was meant to be. Despite Seraphina's violent and unhinged mind, she was the more balanced of the two. Between them, Fredrik Gustavsson was the darkest half, not the other way around.

As far as The Order, a name change was inevitable. I remember the day clearly when I first daydreamed about leading The Order. I thought to myself how I never liked what they, whoever 'they' were, chose to call it in its infancy. *The Order*. Izabel did not like it, either. She said it was too simple, too commonly used. Boring even. On the other hand, I only cared to change it because it seemed appropriate, given how everything else about it had changed the moment I took the chair at the head of its table.

Today, it is officially known in the underground world as The New Order.

"What?" Izabel asked when I'd told her; eyebrows drawn inward stiffly. "That is all you could come up with?"

"It does not need a fancy, standout name, Izabel," I told her in my defense. "We do not print out letterheads with a logo or even have our buildings named. It does not need anything more."

"The *New Order*?" She shook her head with disapproval, and I was a little offended. "I thought you were really going to *change* it." She threw her hands up in the air. "It's *still* boring and overused."

Despite her condemnation, The New Order remained.

She had been acting rather moody lately around that time, so I almost attributed her behavior to a pregnancy. Thankfully, it was a false alarm, and Izabel was not, in fact, pregnant, but just her usual, outspoken self. She had had herself sterilized some time ago and was not supposed to be able to get pregnant, but there have been rare cases where it has still happened, so the thought did cross my mind.

Izabel and I did finally do the most non-assassin thing ever and get

legally married. It was a small ceremony with a Catholic priest, James Woodard, and a few other people closest to Izabel from her unit.

Neither of us is entirely sure why we felt the need to be married—or why a Catholic priest. We love each other, there is no question, but we do not live as everyday citizens in the outside world. We do not need a legal marriage regarding filing tax returns, qualifying for programs, or the plethora of legal situations married couples face.

But we tied the knot, so to speak. And while we are unsure why we did it, we do not regret it.

Three weeks after Izabel met with her unit for the first time, she left with them for Germany on two missions that will take quite some time. I have not seen her other than through a live feed on a cell phone screen.

“A few more months and I’ll be back,” she had told me the last time we spoke.

I never ask questions that do not need to be asked. She knows what she is doing and how to lead and coordinate her missions. I do feel that the missions in Germany are taking longer than they should, but I will not interfere. I must trust both her abilities and her judgment.

But I miss her—that I cannot deny or ignore. I miss her and think of her every single day. And, of course, I worry about her. Because at any moment, I know one of a million things could happen, and I would never see her again. But it is the same with every other person in our line of work, including me—especially me.

It is what it is. We chose this life, even if I had less choice than she, and it is what we love. It is what we were born to do. And no matter what happens in life, the thing we were born to do will always find us. It will always find everyone. Even those of us who were only ever born to die.

I am glad that that nearly broken kidnapped girl escaped her captors in Mexico and hid in the backseat of my car that night so long ago. I am glad she put a gun to my head and forced me to take her with me. There is nothing in our time together that I would ever change if given the opportunity.

We complete each other. We are the same person.

We are Faust.

Niklas

Turns out, I did get what I've always wanted: a simple, uneventful, boring-ass life. Compared to a life of killing, running from killers, and always looking over my shoulder. And I'm lovin' every second of it. Or what's left of it anyway. I'm kinda pissed that it took half of my life to get to this point—that is, if I actually get to live until I'm eighty, then it'd be half.

I don't miss my brother or Izabel much, but that's mostly because I'm still exhausted by that life, and they were a huge part of it. Most of it I just want to forget, to put behind me and never look back, but it's hard to do when the only two people you care about in the world are still part of *that* world.

But in my time away, I've had many opportunities to think. And I've come to one conclusion: maybe I wasn't really in love with Izabel, after all. I was in love with the idea of her, with the idea of someone loving me back the way she loved my brother.

Yeah, sure, a huge part of me loves the shit out of her, and I can't deny that I wouldn't welcome a relationship with her if she weren't with my brother, but...hell, I don't understand it, really, what my feelings are for her. And I don't think about it much anymore. I think about her, but not so much about my feelings for her. Whatever the hell they are.

I think I'll just sit here and enjoy this early-morning Mexico sunrise.

I relocated to Yucatán, Mexico, to a city that never sleeps and is always alive with activity. I get woken up every morning at nine sharp by a man pedaling a covered street cart screaming into a bullhorn that he's selling *raspados*. I can't sit at a red light in my car without someone force-washing my windshield or back out of a parking space without a guy guiding me and yelling, "*Dale, dale, dale!*" These people never actually ask for money, and I imagine most who pay them only give them five pesos, but I always give them more. Much, much more. Last week, when I went to the same grocery store three weeks in a row, several guys scrambled toward my car when they saw me entering the parking lot. They cleaned the windshield, washed the tires, "guarded" my car until I returned, and even covered the windshield and driver's side door with cardboard to keep out the sun. And by the time I came outside, ten guys were yelling, "*Dale, dale, dale!*" and guiding me out of the space, fighting without actually fighting, for the job.

I paid each enough money to last them a year.

Some people might find these things exhausting, but I find them refreshing. Life is much simpler here. I can drive ninety miles per hour

through any part of Mexico and never have to worry about being pulled over by a cop—the cops tend to stick to checkpoints, where they make the most money. The only people who seem to be in a hurry here are the taxi drivers who are just as hotheaded as those in L.A. or New York City. Everybody else—slow as fucking molasses. I like that too. And not that “cheap” matters much to a guy with several million dollars in the bank, but it's kinda nice paying a street vendor with coins rather than bills for a complete meal.

I've been here for over nine months, and still no word about Izabel.

It's why I came here, to Mexico, of all the places in the world I could've chosen. Were it not for Izabel, then I would've gone to Australia. Not sure why other than Australia is just different from everything I've already seen and experienced.

But what does Izabel have to do with why I chose Mexico? Well, I know the woman, her past, what she endured, where she came from—what made her who she is today. I remember, on several occasions, hearing her talk about how all she wanted to do was help girls who've been trafficked for sex in Mexico. And her mission to Mexico with Naeva wasn't the last time she intended to come back here.

She'll be back eventually, and I'll most certainly hear through the desert grapevine about it when she does. I know my brother won't interfere or send anyone to watch her back—if he did, Izzy would be pissed if she ever found out. But I intend to be here to watch her back when she does show up—and I couldn't give a shit less if it pisses her off.

But for now, I'm just going to enjoy the peaceful life I've finally been granted.

Because I know it won't last.

Izabel

It's been nine months and six days since I came to Germany with my unit. I was glad Victor gave me missions so far away from him in New York City. Not because I wanted to be away from him, but because I had to be.

“Push, Izabel,” Yana Moroz, right-hand to me in my unit, tells me; all I can see through the slits in my clenched eyes is Yana's blond head between my legs. “It's almost here.”

I push even harder this time, and seconds later, I give birth to Victor's...

“Definitely a boy,” Yana announces, and the baby cries.

I name him Zuma Victorio Faust.

I never did get my tubes tied as I'd intended after leaving Mexico with Naeva and Leo Moreno. I told Victor that I did it, and I don't know why I lied other than I just didn't want him to have that much more to worry about. I never wanted to have more children, not only because of the life I lead and the dangers I face every second of every day, but because I had a daughter already and, to this day, have never been able to know her. I'll never pursue her, either. Not because I don't want to see her, or know her, or be the mother to her I was never allowed to be, but because I don't want to turn her quiet, normal life upside-down. It would be cruel to drag her into my world after living a completely different, *safe* life from the moment she was given to her adoptive family.

Perhaps it's also cruel to bring yet another child into my world, but at least Zuma will have been born into it; he will somewhat understand it.

I couldn't let Victor know about the pregnancy. He had just taken over The Order and renamed it the worst name I could ever think of. *Hmm*, maybe that's why I gave our son such an unusual name—subconsciously getting back at Victor?

In any case, Victor didn't need to have my pregnancy hanging over his head when he'd just taken over The New Order. He needed to focus. And besides, I wasn't ready to see Victor Faust, of all men, touching my rounded belly every time I walked by or acting like I was some kind of fragile ceramic doll afraid to touch me.

The strange and funny thing is that despite not being the kind of thing Victor would seem capable of, I know it's exactly what he'd do. Just like I know, when he sees Zuma for the first time, he will cry.

It almost makes me never want to take our son home. I don't know, but seeing Victor more...human, I guess is the right word, might scare me. I'm so used to his stoic personality and nearly non-existent smile that to see him any other way might be too much for me to handle. Maybe part of it has to do with the fact that his twin brother, Vonnegut, is still alive, and I'm still hating myself for not instantly knowing that Vonnegut wasn't Victor when I first saw him that day in Ohio. That will probably always haunt me.

Victor tried to make me feel better about the whole situation by telling me it wasn't my fault and that practically dying from starvation easily did a number on my ability to think clearly.

"It could have been Fredrik standing there telling you he was me,"

Victor tried, “and you might have believed it.”

But I couldn't be as easy on myself about what happened because I should've *known* it wasn't Victor. But what's done is done, and there's not a thing I can do to change it. I guess I can only hope to forget that it happened.

Though knowing Vonnegut is still alive and that he looks exactly like Victor...I just don't like it. Not one bit. It'll probably also always be in my head that he somehow escaped, took over Victor's role, and...damn, I need to stop thinking about it.

But I know I never will.

I know I'll never be an ordinary woman.

I know I'll never know what it's genuinely like to have a normal life.

I know I'll always be with Victor and Zuma—but no more kids after this one because I am getting sterilized soon, for sure.

I know I'll always miss Niklas and wonder where he is in the world and if he's OK.

I know I'll always believe in Fredrik's innocence until the day I die.

I know I'll never want for anything, except maybe, for all the things I cannot have—because no one is ever truly satisfied in life.

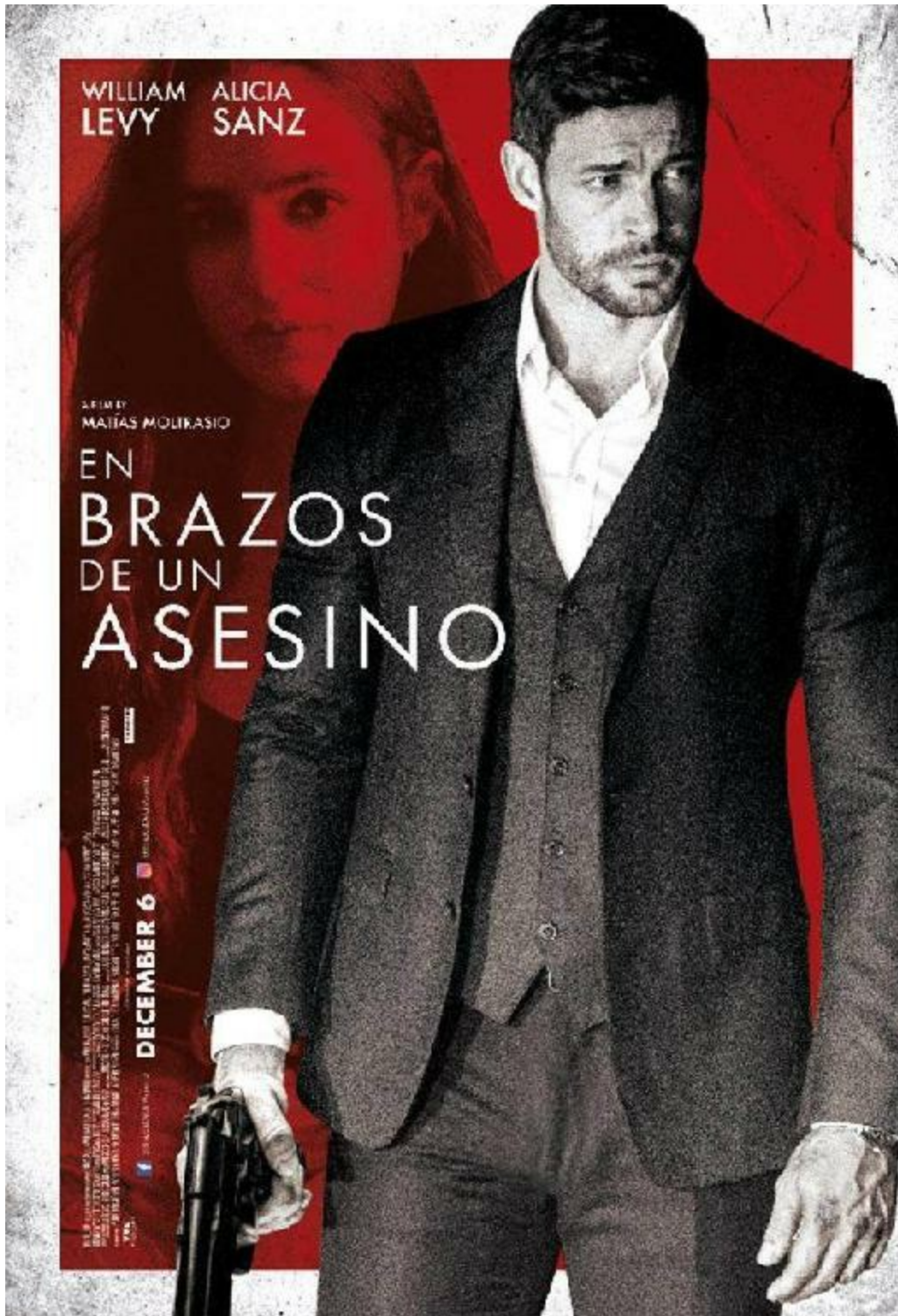
I know I'll always love Victor; he'll always love me, and we were meant to meet in that godforsaken desert.

And I know I'll always be in the good company of killers.

And that I am counted among them.

Check out the Spanish-language action film for *Killing Sarai* starring William Levy and Alicia Sanz.

Brazos De Un Asesino



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.A. (Jessica) Redmerski is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and #1 Amazon best-selling author. She is also an international bestseller and award winner. Jessica is a hybrid author who began indie publishing in 2012 and later signed several titles with a traditional publisher. Her works have been translated into over twenty languages and have been optioned for film and television.

In addition to writing books, she works with various programs to create her own cover art, interior art, design, formatting, and fantasy maps. Jessica loves *The Golden Girls*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, nature, the universe, anime, manga, bookstores, and fantasizing about the apocalypse. She is from the United States but currently lives in Mexico with her husband.

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