



THE
PLAYER

SOLDIERS OF ANARCHY

NIKKI J SUMMERS

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THE **PLAYER**

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THE
PLAYER

Playlist

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You've Created a Monster – Bohnes

The Summoning – Sleep Token

A Grave Mistake – Ice Nine Kills

She's so Mean – Matchbox Twenty

Fleabag – YUNGBLUD

Lovely (feat. Charlotte Buchholz) – Time, the Valuator,
Charlotte Buchholz

Can You Feel My Heart – Bring Me The Horizon

THE DEATH OF PEACE OF MIND – Bad Omens

Alkaline – Sleep Token

MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT – loveless

The Reason – Hoobastank

Just Pretend – Bad Omens

God Put a Smile upon Your Face – Coldplay

Never Know – Bad Omens

Iris – Goo Goo Dolls

Trigger Warning

Please read and take note of the trigger warnings listed below for *The Player*. This is a dark, vigilante, captive, slow-burn romance story. It is also written in British English; therefore, the spelling and grammar will differ from American English.

- Explicit torture scenes (vigilantes)
- Drugging
- Kidnapping
- Forced imprisonment
- Torture and mind games
- Murder
- Violence
- Gore
- Use of horror masks (for violence)
- Role-play using masks (non-violent)
- Child cruelty and neglect (one historical scene)
- Reference to historic child sexual abuse but not detailed on the page (no descriptive scenes)
- Scenes of a sexual nature (between the hero and heroine)

“Tell me every terrible thing you ever did, and let me love you anyway.”

Edgar Allan Poe



—

Prologue

THE TASKMASTER

“**Y**ou can leave work early, Isaiah. I’ll lock up tonight,” he says, but his thoughtful words are in stark contrast to the evil haze that’s misting over his eyes as he stares intently across the dusty, quaint little bookstore.

He doesn’t want him to leave.

Not really.

He thinks he’s being nice, letting him go a few minutes early.

Buttering him up for the future, perhaps?

But what goes on in his mind is anything but nice. There’s always an ulterior motive, and it’s usually as dark as the autumn night sky I can see outside the shop window.

He wants Isaiah to stay.

He wants to act out the filth that plays over in his mind on a daily basis like the dirty fucker he is. He thinks no one knows, but I do. I know exactly what goes on in his head.

But that’s not happening.

Not tonight.

Not ever.

I would never allow it.

“Are you sure, Mr Wilson? I don’t mind staying if you need me.” The voice replying is sweet and innocent, placing

trust where it doesn't deserve to be placed. It's the kind of voice he feeds off, like a virus bleeding its host dry.

I'm glad I chose tonight. Time might've aged him, but it hasn't changed him. The devil wears many disguises, and it seems plain and dull, elderly bookstore owner is one of them. He's so boring he couldn't possibly lead a double life, right?

Wrong.

"No, Isaiah. It's fine," he says, though reluctance burns in his eyes. "There's only one customer left. You get off. I can manage."

The way he squirms, adjusting himself in his trousers, thinking no one is watching, shows what sort of a man he is. Depraved, perverted and immoral in every way he can possibly be. Vermin that needs to be taken care of.

Standing in the corner of the bookshop, I can't help smiling to myself at how he's playing into my hands. He has no idea what lies in store for him tonight, and that's just the way I like it. Ignorance is bliss, for me, anyway. I don't think *he's* going to find it quite so blissful when his ignorance catches up with him.

I slide the hardback copy of *Frankenstein* back in its place on the shelf, tapping my finger on my chin, pretending to be lost in thought. But I'm not thinking; my mind is an empty cavern, a darkness waiting to be filled with his screams. My body might look calm, but every atom of my being is screeching, wailing like a banshee, begging for the beast to be released from his cage. I've waited a long time for this. That beast won't stay caged for much longer, but a few more minutes to bide my time won't hurt. And oh, what sweet torture it is, being this close to getting everything I've always wanted.

The tinkle of the bell above the door as it opens and closes for the final time tonight sends shivers down my spine. Sinisterly satisfying images of what I have in store play over in my head. The buzz from that alone makes me tremble with excitement.

Everything is coming together perfectly.

I've covered every base; no stone has gone unturned.

Earlier today, I disabled the CCTV both inside and outside the store. All the phone lines have been cut, and unbeknown to him, his mobile phone is currently sitting in my pocket on silent mode, but I'll dispose of that later. Mr. Wilson, the store owner, is well and truly fucked. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

Say your goodbyes, Wilson. Not that anyone will miss you when you're gone.

I stand back, skulking in the shadows for a while longer, watching him tidy around the checkout as he fills the last few minutes of his shift before it's time for him to lock up. I've watched him do this sad old routine more times than I care to mention. I've spied on him as he acted out his life like a normal, everyday, upstanding guy. He was a good actor, I'd give him that, but the cracks were beginning to show. It wouldn't be long before he was up to his old tricks again, and I couldn't, *wouldn't* let that happen. It was time to take back power.

He turns his back to me, busying himself with some boxes that are stacked up behind the counter. So, I choose that moment to stalk forward with purpose, heading for the door.

Three...

Two...

One...

Showtime.

"Have a good evening," he calls out as I stop dead in my tracks, a wicked grin spreading across my face.

I love that he has no idea what's about to happen.

This is my favourite part.

Oh, I'm not leaving, Wilson.

I'm only just getting started.

I take the shiny, gold devil's mask I've been holding, or rather, hiding all this time, and pull it over my face. I love how it shimmers in the moonlight, as I stand and stare up at the dusky night sky, taking a moment to enjoy the anticipation of what's to come. The sensation is exquisite; death is just a haunting, hollow breath away.

Carefully, I twist the lock on the door, and then pull the blind down. Lucky for me, the window displays are hidden behind shutters, shielding what goes on in the shop from the people outside. We're secluded, alone, and everything is perfect.

Slowly, for maximum effect, I turn around to face him.

The blood in my veins rushes freely now, my heart a steady beat, resonating from my chest into my ears, right through to the tips of my toes. I cannot wait for him to see me. I want to feel that sweet shot of adrenaline that only comes from drinking in the fear swimming in your victim's eyes. I'll admit it, I'm a junkie. And my drug of choice is taking sick fuckers like this down. I feed off the terror, terror they so readily inflict on others. But not today. What goes around comes around, and Wilson is about to find out how true that is.

A second passes, then he lifts his head, his body jerking back slightly as he notices me standing in front of the locked door with my head tilted to the side, staring at him. Confusion hits first, then exasperation, followed by anger that flickers in his eyes as he glares at me.

"Wha... what are you doing?" he stammers, his voice betraying him as he tries to appear confident, but I can tell it's a lie; his composure is wavering. It's evident in the way he overly swallows, like his throat is coated with tar. It's in the way his hands shake as he battles his fear, trying to stay calm. And then there's the tell-tale twitch in his eye, so subtle that most people would miss it, but I know it's there as he squints back at me. I know his reactions better than anyone.

He's weighing up his options.

Fight or flight.

Funny thing is, he has no options.

Flight is useless. I'm young and fit, and he's old and overweight.

Fight will only spur me on to be even more sadistic in my payback, which, if I'm honest, would be tough considering what I already have in store for him is beyond fucked up.

I smirk behind the mask. Wilson hasn't got a fucking clue what I'm here for, or why. He doesn't even know how to confront me properly. How to stand up and be a man.

Oh, how times have changed.

I love having the upper hand now.

I grin, taking a few steps forward and then stop, shaking my head slowly with regret and tutting, "Oh, Wilson."

He narrows his eyes like he's trying to solve the puzzle that is me as he says, "You're too early for Halloween." And then, gesturing to the door, he tries to dismiss me like I'm a nobody. "Go on, get out. Fuck off. I'm too busy to play games."

Games.

Wilson used to love playing games.

I think I need to remind him...

"But, Wilson," I taunt. "My games are only just getting started, and I know you're never too busy to play games with *me*."

He furrows his brow in morbid curiosity as he tries to process what I've just said. And I take a few more slow, measured steps forward, my eyes trained on him as my body hums in anticipation.

He's breathing faster now, visibly panting as he licks his lips, and then his thick neck bulges as he tries to swallow again. My presence is making his mouth dry. His terror is spiking, and I can see his pulse throb, coursing through him like a freight train that won't stop. Soon, it'll make him

explode. I can't wait for that to happen. I do love a macabre spectacle.

"I'm not in the mood for playing games," he snaps, irritation rising as he places his hands flat on the counter, leaning forward to try and make himself look more imposing than he really is. He glowers at me, giving me a steely, harsh glare, and I can't help but throw my head back and laugh at his weak gesture.

"Oh, come on. That's not the Wilson *I* know." I take another step forward. "The Wilson *I* know *loves* playing games." My eyes narrow behind my mask now as the words that haunted me for so many years drip freely off my tongue. "Are you ready for me, *little one*?"

Realisation hits him like a lightning bolt, and his beady eyes bulge out of their sockets. Then, he shakes his head vehemently, rancid spit flying from the corners of his mouth as he gasps, "No, no, no," over and over, trying to convince himself that the ghost standing before him isn't real.

"Oh yes, *Wilson*." I nod slowly. "Or should I say... needle dick?" I stand taller, revelling in the fact that my ghost is affecting him so badly. "Long time no see," I add with an evil snigger.

"Why didn't I? How? It can't be..." He takes a step back as he stutters, his body colliding clumsily with the shelving behind him as his mind scrambles and his eyes grow dark with panic. "But you... you're dead. They said you were dead."

"I am dead," I state, moving to block his only exit from the checkout. "And all this"—I gesture to myself, my hands moving slowly up and down my body—"is just a figment of your fucked-up imagination."

"What do you want?" he barks, his hands searching blindly for something, anything he can use as a weapon.

Too late, fucker. Your time is up.

"I thought it'd be fun to... catch up." I fold my arms as my body stills. My senses are on high alert and ready to attack, but my mind is calm, at peace with the sins I'm about to commit.

The scales of redemption need to be rebalanced, and that's what I'm here for.

It's payback time.

"I thought it'd be fun to play my own game tonight," I add. "Would you like that, *Wilson*? Would you like to be *my* plaything for a change?"

He sneers, squaring his shoulders, clearly misreading the room. He has no power here.

"You're gonna regret coming here. I'll make you fucking pay," he snaps as he lurches towards me, ready to fight.

"That's where you're wrong," I reply calmly, ripping the needle out of my pocket and stabbing it hard into his neck. A wave of sublime satisfaction flows through me as I push down on the plunger, grinding the needle into his flesh as he hits the floor. "You're the one who's going to pay. And I have a few friends of yours that're going to pay right along with you. Most of them are waiting for us right now." I lean down, and even though he can't hear me, I whisper the last part into his ear. "I'm gonna make you live to regret your own existence, *Wilson*. You deserve to die the worst, most fucked-up death imaginable, and trust me, I've imagined it *a lot*. But it won't be today. I'm here to make sure you suffer for as long as I deem necessary. I'm in control now. It's my game. Are you ready, *Wilson*? Are you ready to face me? Are you ready to take on *The Taskmaster*?"

Chapter One



“So, Bryony, do you want a general reading or are you looking for something more specific tonight?”

Despite the closed curtains and subdued lighting in the living room, I could see the cogs in Paula’s brain working overtime as a twinkle flickered in her eyes. “I could tailor it to your love life if you like?”

And there it was.

She was so predictable.

Paula, my mum’s best friend, feigned innocence as she sat opposite me at my mum’s dining table, nonchalantly setting out her crystals on the moon and star embroidered tablecloth. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders in wild brown curls that the flower hairband she’d put in couldn’t tame. She looked angelic, bohemian, like a flower child of the seventies. But then she peered up at me through her long, black lashes and grinned a wicked grin to show she had anything but angelic thoughts on her mind.

I was here for my monthly reading while my mum was out for the night at some seminar for work, and we always started these sessions the same way. Paula would hint at my love life; I’d try to shoot her down. Then she’d ignore my wishes completely and tell me about it anyway. Not that there was much to tell. I guess she was trying to live vicariously through me and my two sisters. She wouldn’t get much of a thrill from me in that respect, though. My love life was less romance and more horror these days.

I tried to hide the grimace threatening to break free as I fought against the ugly images infiltrating my mind. Instead, I smiled back at her politely and said, “I don’t think either of us are ready to go quite that dark tonight, Paula. Maybe it’s best to stick with a general reading.”

But Paula wasn’t giving up that easily. She cocked her head to the side and pushed a little further.

“Oh, don’t be silly. I always like finding out what’s in store for you, and it isn’t dark. Love never is. And look at you! You’re beautiful, with your lovely long, black hair and that gorgeous face. You remind me of a young Mia Sara.”

I had no idea who that was, but she didn’t elaborate, and clearly didn’t care that I was clueless about it.

“You need to make the most of it,” she went on. “I wish I was thirty years younger. I swear, youth is wasted on the young.” I kind of agreed with her on that one. “So, what do you think, sweetheart?”

I didn’t want to make anyone feel uncomfortable, especially when it came to my love life, but it wasn’t something I wanted to dissect either. I hadn’t had the best of luck with guys, but I wouldn’t dwell on it. I’d been stung a lot, and each time had made me toughen up a little more.

My last relationship was months ago, and it’d ended really badly. I’d been seeing a guy I worked with at the tattoo shop. He treated me like a princess, and I thought he was the one. That was until I walked in on him getting a blow job from one of our customers in the storeroom out the back. Worse than that, he had the T-shirt I’d bought him clenched between his teeth as he hung his head, watching her suck his dick on her knees in front of him. That was the worst twenty pounds I’d ever spent.

He took one look at me standing in the doorway and pushed her off, saying it was a mistake, it wasn’t what it looked like. It looked pretty clear to me what was going on, and I told him as much before I slammed the door on him and stalked back to the shop. I felt humiliated, but I wouldn’t cry. I

kept my tears inside as I took slow, deep breaths, hoping the fog in my brain would lift and guide me to do the right thing.

Moments later, the other girl came out, black mascara running down her cheeks as she wiped her tears away.

“I had no idea,” she said, stumbling over her words, unable to look directly at me. “He didn’t tell me he had a girlfriend. I’m so sorry. If I’d have known, I wouldn’t have gone near him. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Despite the sick feeling in my stomach and the rage burning inside, I couldn’t be mad at her. Not really. He’d fucked us both over. This was on him, not her. People are always so quick to judge the other girl, but he was the one who was in a relationship. ‘Was’ being the operative word. He owed me an apology, but I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting for it.

“He’s a dick.” I shrugged, pretending to be less affected than I was, and she nodded, snivelling and standing in front of me, looking as awkward as hell. “Here,” I said, taking a tissue from the box on reception and handing it to her. “He isn’t worth crying over.”

She took the tissue and wiped her tears, then blew her nose.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” she asked, peering up at me through her wet, clumpy lashes and frowning.

“I’m saving my anger for that fucker back there.” I nodded to the door behind her. “He’s the one that deserves it.” And he did. But I couldn’t lie and say her being here didn’t make me feel uncomfortable.

She tried to smile, but her lips were quivering because she was so nervous around me, and in a way, I felt bad for her. She clearly wanted to leave. Can’t say I blamed her. This was the last place I wanted to be right now too.

“Are you planning on seeing him again?” I asked, stepping to the side to let her walk past me. It was up to her what she did, but I couldn’t stop my curiosity from asking the question.

“God, no,” she shot back. “I told him he was lucky I didn’t bite his dick off after you found us. I feel like such a fool.”

“You’re not a fool,” I replied sadly, shaking my head. “He is.”

She nodded and headed for the door to leave; her shoulders slumped in defeat.

I wasn’t going to walk out like that.

I’d go with my head held high.

And I did just that, but I made sure to leave him with a lasting reminder of what he’d lost. I went back to his place and sprinkled pepper in his boxer shorts and cut the toes off one sock for every pair he had in his drawers. Then I unscrewed all his lightbulbs and changed the password to my Netflix account that he’d been using. Petty, I know, and I could’ve done more, but I didn’t want to get arrested. He wasn’t worth doing time for.

I later found out it wasn’t the first time he’d cheated on me, and everyone in the shop knew about it. The fact that they hadn’t told me pissed me off more than what he’d done. I thought they were my friends, and so I left my job. Walked right out and didn’t look back.

Loyalty means a lot to me, but so does honesty. If you don’t have that, you don’t have anything. Luckily, the boss caught wind of all the drama and offered me a job in his other store in Sandland. He said he didn’t want to lose good staff over a guy who couldn’t keep his dick in his pants. So, thankfully, I didn’t lose anything because of that asshole, except my pride, and I gained a new chink in my armour. Armour that I was fed up of carrying, but that’s life, I guess. You have to kiss a lot of frogs to find your prince charming in this life, and I’d kissed a fair few.

“Earth to Bryony,” Paula sang, pulling me back to the here and now. “Come in, Bryony.” I grinned back at her as she asked, “Are you sure you want a general reading?” Paula stared at me intently, waiting for a response.

I flicked my long, black hair over my shoulder and sat up tall and confident. That was the last time I'd let that prick seep into my thoughts. Onwards and upwards, that was my motto.

“Yes. Keep it general,” I told her, like I always did, giving her a cheeky wink and trying to appear playful and relaxed as she tried to hide her subtle eye roll. “Let's go for it,” I said, reaching across the table to give her hand a comforting squeeze.

She took a few deep breaths and closed her eyes to focus on whatever was coming through to her. And I sat back and stayed quiet, giving her the peace she needed.

“Okay.” She let out a long breath. “I'm getting that there's an apology coming your way. Someone wants to apologise for something they've said or done, or maybe there's a sense of wrongdoing by someone close to you. They're struggling to show you they're sorry. Does that make sense?”

I hummed a response. I could think of a few people who I deserved an apology from. Again, I wasn't going to hold my breath on that one.

“And I sense that you're experiencing some tension with a friend, or could it be a potential partner?”

And there it was, a potential partner. I rolled my eyes, grateful she couldn't see me with her own being closed.

“You're so independent, Bryony,” she carried on. “You always have been, but even though you're fun and tell everyone how laid back you are, you crave control. You like to have things your way.”

I loved Paula, but this wasn't new information for me. She'd known me for all the twenty-four years I'd been on this earth, and me being independent was old news. Growing up with a father who was mostly absent, and a mother that struggled to put food on the table, meant I often had to take care of my little sister, Shelley. Me and my older sister, Kate, were always looking out for her, scaring off bullies at school, making her food when she was too young to do it herself. We even took it in turns to read her bedtime stories. Mum tried her

best, but she had to work two jobs and she couldn't do everything. Independence was something you learnt early on in our household.

“Oh, wait. Hold on.” Paula lifted her hand up, and I noticed her shoulders hunch slightly as she took another deep breath, but then a shroud of darkness seemed to fall over her as her expression turned from calmness to something more akin to fear. The chilled atmosphere in the room suddenly shifted, becoming eerie and sinister. Paula never got spooked, so seeing her right now was a little unnerving.

Oh God, what had she seen?

She gave a thinly veiled smile to try and put me at ease, but the shiver I saw her suppress and the goosebumps now prickling her forearms made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and a chill trickled down my spine. She let her head fall slightly to the side as she tried to process what she was seeing, but I could tell it wouldn't be good.

“You need to be careful,” she stated abruptly, and I felt my heart stutter.

I stared back at her blankly, waiting for her to elaborate.

She winced and then added, “There are dark forces around you. Very dark. A threat.” She paused, then added, “I don't mean to scare you, Bryony, but you need to be really careful. Someone is watching you. Someone wicked.”

I held my tongue, fighting the urge to tell her that wicked people haunting my life wasn't new for me. I knew bad people. I knew a lot of them. Growing up in Merivale, you got to know who the good and bad people were. I'd dated a few of them too, but I decided not to share that part.

“You can't trust them. You need to stay away,” she urged, and I leaned forward again, patting her hand to try and soothe her as best I could.

“I'll be fine,” I told her, but she just shook her head.

“I've never seen anything as dark as this.”

“I did tell you to steer clear of my love life,” I joked.

But Paula's face screwed up, she was lost in another world, and from the look of it, it wasn't a walk in the fucking park for her.

"I'm not joking, Bryony," she chastised. "This is serious."

"I know. I am being serious, Paula." Guilt washed over me at the thought of upsetting her or coming across as fickle.

I took a moment to watch as she let the information filter through. My sister, Shelley, had recently gotten engaged to Colton King, one of the soldiers of Brinton Manor, and they weren't exactly angels. I wondered if that was who she meant to stay away from, because bad news followed them around and we had been spending a lot of time with them since Shelley had joined their inner circle.

"I'm trying to work out if it's male or female," Paula went on. "If it's one person or more, and I can't tell." The furrowed lines on her forehead deepened as she tried hard to concentrate. "Whatever it is, it's angry. Hurt, like a wounded animal, but it doesn't care who it lashes out at."

She made it sound like I was being hunted by a damn werewolf. Good job I wasn't averse to a bit of hunting myself.

"That *really* sounds like one of my exes," I retorted. "Animal? Lashing out? Whatever it is, I think I can handle it."

She tutted, ignoring my interruptions and my refusal to take her warnings as seriously as she wanted me to. Thing was, I was listening to her, but I didn't want her worrying for me. That's why I was giving her the response that I was.

"I don't know why, Bryony, but they have you in their sights." She lifted her head to give me a pointed stare. The intensity in her eyes made me clamp my mouth shut, and I swallowed to try and wet my scratchy throat. She must've noticed and taken it as a sign of fear, because she added, "I don't think you've done anything wrong. In fact, I'm almost certain you're the innocent one here. I'm sensing this is a caught-in-the-crossfire kind of scenario. Something has happened and you're taking the fall for it. Or at least, they want you to."

“I’ll bear that in mind, but please, try not to worry. I’m sure it’ll all be fine,” I replied, trying to put her mind at ease.

It didn’t work.

“You need to have your wits about you,” Paula continued with grave concern. “Don’t fall for their trap. Don’t trust them.”

I wasn’t a fool, and I didn’t trust easily.

“You know me, Paula,” I stated over-confidently. “I always have my wits about me. Wits, and a switchblade if needed.”

She nodded, but she clearly hadn’t heard what I’d said. If she had, she’d scold me for joking about carrying a knife.

It wasn’t a joke, though.

I always carried a weapon.

Paula stayed quiet, busy listening to her spirit guides, and I sat there contemplating what she’d told me so far. But there was one thing I knew for certain, *if* someone was out there watching me, then I’d say good fucking luck to them. I wouldn’t go down without a fight. If someone was out to get me, they’d have a battle on their hands. Yes, I was independent. And yes, sometimes in the past I’d trusted the wrong people. But I always stood up for myself. I would never back down or let myself be walked over.

Paula continued to warn me, but I wasn’t worried, and I told her as much. I was a firm believer in fate, and I also believed that we could navigate and change our future. Nothing was linear. At least, that’s what I thought. Life was a series of paths. I just had to make sure I chose the right one.

“I know sometimes I tell you things you don’t want to hear,” Paula explained with a weary sigh. “But you can’t let it get to you. Be mindful, but don’t be scared. Please.”

I sat back in my chair, my hands rested flat on the table as I huffed out a smile to try and reassure her. “I’m not scared, Paula. I’m a Masters. We don’t do scared. Remember?”

Paula’s head dipped as she grinned and nodded her approval. Then she peered back up at me.

“*I’m* scared,” she stated. “I don’t want anything to happen to you. You’re family to me, Bryony. I want to protect you. I love you.”

“I love you too. And I told you, you don’t have to worry. Nothing bad is going to happen to me.”

She bit her lip and then added, “I know you’re staying in Kate’s apartment while she’s away, watering the plants and taking care of the place, but maybe you should come back to your mum’s for the time being?”

I shook my head.

“There’s no need. I won’t alter anything in my life because of what I’ve heard tonight. Why should I?” I reached across the table and took her hand again. “I can handle anything that comes my way. It’s going to be okay. And anyway, there’s state-of-the-art security at Kate’s. It’s a hell of a lot safer than here.”

I didn’t add that the state-of-the-art security consisted of mock CCTV cameras over a communal front door that was never locked, and that those cameras only served to catch flies in the multiple cobwebs that covered them. But what she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her.

She sighed, squeezed my hand, and then smiled across the table at me. “You’re your mother’s daughter, that’s for sure.”

And she was right.

“Amen to that.” I smiled.

Paula always insisted on doing our readings for free, but she didn’t live in the nicest part of town, and even though she’d give you the shirt off her back, I knew she struggled for money. It was pointless asking her to take my cash, she’d refuse. I’d tried before. But she was providing a service and she deserved to be paid. So after the session, while she was taking our cups back into the kitchen to wash up, I slipped an envelope of money into her handbag. I’d text her later to tell her it was there, she’d tell me off for putting it there, but I’d do it the next time and the time after that. Paula was good people,

the best, and she deserved to know that, despite how dire the reading had been.

Chapter Two



Where my mum lived was the worst for parking, so I'd left my car a few streets away. I didn't mind walking back to it, though. It was a cool autumn evening, and there was no rain. Plus, I had nothing to rush back for tonight. A Netflix box set and a tub of ice-cream was all that was waiting for me back at Kate's.

Turning the corner into Coopers Close, I cursed the shitty streetlights and how dark and gloomy it was. I knew my way around here, but if you didn't, you wouldn't want to wander here alone; it was that dark. The streetlights were there, but the council never came out to fix the ones that were broken, and most of them were. They didn't care about a neighbourhood like this, a poor neighbourhood.

Why bother to fix it up?

Investing in the basics for a town like ours was money down the drain to them. We weren't the part of society they channelled their resources into. To them, we were best forgotten.

"Welcome to Merivale," I quietly mused as I stalked further into the darkness. "The town the rest of the world forgot."

I kept a steady pace as I walked with purpose down the street, past the scruffy terraced houses on the estate. Most of the windows were boarded up, and those that weren't had blankets or old newspapers plastered to them to hide the

inhabitants from the outside world. The pavements were uneven underfoot. Most of the slabs were broken, with weeds pushing through the concrete like they were trying to escape the drudgery of this shitty town too.

There was no one out at this time, and the only sounds I could hear were from the TVs blaring inside the houses I passed, and my own footsteps and deep breaths. There was also the occasional wail of a police siren and the hum of the traffic rumbling in the distance. But as I strode down the street and my car came into view, so did a shadowed figure leaning up against it.

I couldn't help but give an involuntary gasp as I felt a surge of adrenaline twisting and tying my stomach into knots. My footsteps faltered for just a second as the echoes of what Paula had said to me moments ago whispered in my brain.

You need to be careful.

Someone is watching you.

Someone wicked.

Maybe I was about to encounter that wickedness sooner than I'd imagined.

Or maybe they were about to find out that following me hadn't been their smartest idea.

I kept a hawk-like focus on that dark figure as my breathing remained steady. With determination, I continued walking forward, slipping my hand into my pocket and closing my fist around the cool metal of my knife. But most importantly, I stayed calm, the rhythmic beat of my heart reminding me that I was in control, I wouldn't be intimidated. Like a metronome grounding me; a gentle, natural timer maintaining my solid state of mind, it kept me focused and gave me clarity. I had to think like a hunter and believe in myself, because when all was said and done, I was no one's prey.

As I moved closer towards the dark figure, my fist tightened in my pocket, gripping the knife harder, preparing to defend and attack. The figure hadn't seen me yet, and they

continued to lean against my car, keeping their head down. I guessed it was a guy from their stocky build, but they had the hood of their jacket pulled low over their face, so I couldn't be one hundred percent sure. It didn't matter, though. Whoever it was, I'd fight them with everything I had. I wouldn't be a victim.

I took a few more steps, and as my feet crunched over pebbles and rubble, it alerted my awaiting shadow to the fact that I was drawing near. Their shoulders visibly tensed as they pushed themselves off my car and turned slowly to face me. Their muscly arms flexed as they slipped their hands into the front of their jeans. Not the smartest move if they were about to confront me, but I wouldn't let that simple act trick me into a false sense of security. I was alert and ready for anything.

And then, as I stepped closer and pulled my knife out, they took their hands out of their pockets and slipped their hood off. Instantly, the breath I'd been holding came whooshing out of me with a twisted sort of relief laced with fury and anger.

“What the FUCK are you doing, Will?” I snapped, pointing my knife at him regardless and spearing him with my most savage glare.

“Woah!” He held his hands up in surrender then nodded to my outstretched arm. “No need to bring out the big guns, Bee.”

My arm faltered, then fell to my side. There wouldn't be a need for knives tonight, not on the guy who was standing right in front of me, anyway.

Will Stokes.

A member of Brinton Manor's notorious vigilante soldiers and best friend to my sister's boyfriend, Colton. He was known as The Player, but from my experience, his game needed a little work.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing, skulking around my car in the middle of the night?” I cursed, closing my blade, and shoving it aggressively back into my pocket.

Will gave me an ironic smirk, his brows knitting together as he glanced at the watch on his wrist and shot back, “It’s eight o’clock, Bee. That’s hardly the middle of the night. And *skulking*? You make it sound like its Victorian Britain and I’m Jack the bloody Ripper.”

“If the cap fits,” I retorted.

But he just frowned back at me. Then, looking a little more contrite, he lifted his chin and asked, “What’s got you so spooked, anyway? It’s not like you to be jumpy.”

“I’m not jumpy,” I argued, folding my arms defensively over my chest. “I just didn’t expect to find some guy hiding under a hoody lurking next to my car like a creeper.”

I didn’t like him thinking I was anything other than cool, calm, and collected. Not that I was doing a very good job of showing that right now. I needed to get my shit together, and fast. But being around Will Stokes always did this to me. He unnerved what I thought was my impenetrable forcefield against bullshit, and boy, did he bring it sometimes.

I hadn’t forgotten one of the first times I’d met him at a Halloween party, when he’d dropped me into a filthy duck pond to impress everyone just because I was dressed as the Little Mermaid, and he was Mitch from Baywatch.

It wasn’t funny.

And I was still salty.

But I’d made him suffer for it ever since.

That’s who Will Stokes was, the guy who tried to make everyone laugh, but not everyone did. The subtle art of humour was a work in progress for him, and don’t get me started on his role-playing skills.

“It’s cold tonight,” he said, rubbing the tops of his arms for effect and grinning at me. “That’s why I had my hood up. And lurking like a creeper? That’s a bit harsh. My methods of flirting might be unconventional, but it comes from a place of love... not... *creeping*.” He shuddered as I rolled my eyes at him, then he winked and gave me that cocky half-smile that always made my stomach flip, even though I hated him for it.

“You know, I checked my receipt, Will. I’m pretty sure I didn’t buy any of your bullshit,” I snapped, giving a self-satisfied, smug grin.

“You love my bullshit. Besides, who would you bounce off if you didn’t have me? I bring purpose to your day.”

“You bring something,” I shot back, tapping my foot impatiently, waiting for him to get to the point. “You know, I’ll never forget how we first met... but... I’ll keep trying.” I cocked my head, and he started to laugh.

“See?” He pointed between us. “There’s nothing better than a truly inspired insult, don’t you agree? It’s a rare thing of beauty. That someone has gone to so much trouble to think of an expressive way to insult you.”

“I do agree,” I replied. “I love it. And you’re the easiest to insult because the opportunities are endless.”

“Anyway,” he carried on, ignoring my sarcasm and smiling like a fool, rocking on his heels. “I thought you’d be pleased to see me.”

“I’m ecstatic. What do you want?” I replied plainly, folding my arms and staring absent-mindedly into the distance, like him being here didn’t affect me.

It did.

“I wanted to make sure you got home safely.”

My exaggerated lack of focus changed instantly, and I glared back at him. The boyish grin he was giving me was aggravating but made my insides squirm at the same time. Will Stokes was a conundrum that confused me to the point where I didn’t know if I wanted to pull my own hair out or pull him closer so I could kiss him. He was so fucking infuriating.

I really needed to get away from here for my own sanity.

“And besides, this isn’t the best neighbourhood,” he went on, gesturing around him.

He had the cheek of the devil with the face of a rugged angel. He was the worst kind of boy to be stuck in a dark street

with when I felt both horny and utterly frustrated. Yes, that's right, horny. Don't ask me why, but every time I had him in front of me, I couldn't help but wonder what it'd be like to fuck him. But then I'd imagine I'd have to strangle him afterwards because the cockiness he'd exude would be overwhelming. He'd turn me into a black widow spider, and I wouldn't be angry about it. He'd probably deserve it.

"I live here," I shot back, challenging his assassination of my town even though I sort of agreed with him. But he came from Brinton Manor. He was in no position to judge. We were a shithole, but they were a huge, gaping crater that led straight to hell. "And this is my car," I went on. "I think I can take it from here. I appreciate the sentiment though. Thanks for stopping by."

"You can never be too careful, Bee," he replied, placing his hand on his heart like he actually believed that I was grateful for him being here.

"That's why I always carry my knife," I shot back. "Like I said before, you never know who's lurking."

He chuckled and shook his head, staring down at the pavement and then looking back at me from beneath lashes that were way too long and pretty for a man.

"What?" He shrugged his shoulders. "No, *'Thank you for coming to check on me?'* or *'I appreciate you putting my safety so high on your agenda for this evening, Will?'*" His face bobbed in front of mine as he spoke, irritating me and reminding me why I shouldn't be horny. He could be an asshole sometimes.

"Like I just said"—I smiled sweetly and completely falsely back at him—"thanks for stopping by. Thank you for watching my car and thanks for leaning against it while I was a street away, visiting my mum's house."

"Why are you parked here, anyway? I thought you still lived at your mum's?"

"I'm staying at Kate's while she's away backpacking across Europe. I'm watering the plants, eating her food, using

her electricity. I'm doing my sisterly duties. Plus, its six months living rent free."

He nodded, like what I'd said made perfect sense, and then asked, "Does that mean I can get a lift home?"

He was really pushing his luck.

"You came all this way to watch me walk to my car so I could drive you home?" I was moments away from getting into my car and leaving his ass behind.

"No. I came to give you this." He pulled a black envelope from his pocket and thrust it towards me.

"What is it?" I asked, taking it from him and turning it over in my hand. "Is this a list of all the asshole things you have planned for me? Your fucked-up agenda?"

"There's no agenda," he replied. "I'm just naturally gifted at pissing you off. Now stop stalling and open it."

I huffed, ripped the envelope open, and then slipped out the black card that was inside. It wasn't easy to see what was written on it in the dark street, so I took my mobile phone out and used the torch to illuminate the letters that were embossed in gold.

In a world where nothing is quite as it seems,

we invite you to become anything you want to be.

The Sanctuary is holding its Annual Masked Ball, and you are one of the chosen ones.

Be there, Saturday, October 26th at 8pm.

Are you ready to find out what lies behind the mask?

"You came all this way to give me this?" I waved the card in front of me. "I've already had one off Shelley and Colton." I could see the expectation and excitement that was shining in his eyes turn to a flicker of disappointment that he quickly hid.

He was like a kid at Christmas sometimes, and despite myself, I felt bad for not reacting in the way he'd clearly hoped I would.

“I mean, it’s nice of you to make sure I’m invited,” I said, backtracking. “But I already have been, so...”

“Not by me you haven’t.” He shrugged, kicking the ground like it meant nothing.

“Great. I’ll check my diary and see if I’m free that night.”

I was free.

I’d already bought my outfit.

“Oh, you’ll be free,” he stated, staring back at me, an evil glint now shining in his eyes. “Otherwise, I’ll bring the party to you.”

“And what if I bring a date with me?” I couldn’t help but tease him.

“Cool.” He grinned wide. “I’m sure he’ll love our unique way of welcoming unwanted guests. I think Devon is itching to put his katana sword to good use again.”

I ignored the threat involving his fellow soldier, Devon, and smiled back at him.

“Who said it’d be a guy?” I noticed the heat in his eyes flaring as he thought about what kind of welcome that might entail. I doubt Devon, the weapons expert of the group, would need to use his armoury if that were the case. “Jeez, you’re so fucking predictable, Will,” I said, shaking my head.

“What?” He shrugged, clueless.

“You forget I can see your thoughts as clear as day, and no, I’m not bringing a girl to feed your fantasy. If I did have a girl as my date, it’d be my own fantasies I’d be fulfilling.” I breezed past him to get to the car door.

“Like fuck you would,” he muttered. “That’s a fantasy I want in on...” And then, a little louder, he whined, “And what about my lift?”

I turned to face him and then huffed, “Fine. I’ll drive you home. But on one condition.”

“That I invite you in for coffee?”

“No. That you keep your mouth shut. I can feel a migraine coming on.”

“I’m great with migraines.” He laced his fingers together and turned his hands around to crack his knuckles. “I have healing hands.”

“And I’m not averse to pulling my knife out of my pocket again and reminding you why you should keep those healing hands to yourself.” I gave my own twisted smile as I cocked my head and said, “Your hands would look so pretty on my bookshelf. I need some new bookends.”

“And there was me thinking I was the creepy one.” He sauntered over to the passenger side of my car and then mimicked closing his mouth with an imaginary zip.

“Your silence is my favourite sound, Will. But I’ll believe it when I hear it.”

I clicked the lock on my car key to open the doors, and the lights flickered in response. As they did, I noticed the orange glow of a cigarette as someone further down the road stood at the entrance to an alleyway, smoking. But when my lights lit up the street, they stepped back, keeping their head low and their face hidden. I didn’t think any more about it, though. Smoking a cigarette in the street at eight o’clock was hardly a crime, and definitely not as creepy as leaning against someone’s car.

I climbed into the driver’s side but didn’t hear the clink as my knife fell out of my jacket pocket and landed in the gutter. A knife that I’d carried with me for years.

My security.

And in the blink of an eye, it was gone.

“So, what are you coming to the party dressed as?” Will asked, proving my predictions right and lasting all of twenty seconds in his vow of silence.

“I knew you wouldn’t last,” I said in a disappointed tone. “You know, sometimes it’s better to keep your mouth shut. Let people think you’re ignorant rather than open it and prove

them right,” I joked, trying and failing to keep the grin off my face.

“Whatever,” he shot back. “Takes one to know one.” He twisted to face me. “So... what are you coming as?”

“I’m coming as your worst nightmare.” I smirked.

“My mother?” He hit the back of his head off the headrest and then groaned, “That *will* be a fucking nightmare. Woman never knows when to shut up.”

“Runs in the family, then.” I pulled down the street, taking one last glance at the shadow smoking in the alleyway as they turned to walk away. “Could be worse...” I carried on. “I could come as *my* mum.”

“I hear your mum has a soft spot for me,” he said, turning his head and grinning at the side of my face as I drove.

“Yeah,” I replied, my eyes fixed on the road ahead. “It’s called the swamp at the bottom of our garden.”

That earned a chuckle from him, and then he plummeted to new depths of stupidity with his next question.

“Maybe we could do matching outfits, you know, a theme?”

I snorted.

“I’m not twelve, Will. That’s never gonna happen. There won’t be any theme. No matching. No nothing. And this...” I gestured from him to me. “Let’s be real for a second. This is never going to happen either.”

“You keep saying that.” His focus shifted as he peered out of the passenger side window and whispered, “But we both know that’s bullshit.”

I tried to think of a witty response. I tried to think of any response. But my brain, as always, was scrambled whenever I was around Will bloody Stokes. Sitting there, large as life, taking up all the air in my car and making me ultra-aware of his every move, every breath.

Did I mention that I hated him for that?

I should've thrown him out for breaking his no-talking promise and made him catch the bus.

In the end, I settled for an exasperated, "Whatever," muttered under my breath as I sped down the streets, heading towards Brinton Manor. That and an unsettled feeling that'd taken up residence in my stomach, telling me this masked ball would be a night to remember and probably for all the wrong reasons.

Things had a way of turning bad whenever the soldiers were involved.

What was I letting myself in for?

I guess, only time would tell.

Chapter Three



THE TASKMASTER

I watched the car drive away, speeding down Coopers Close as I took another drag of my cigarette. Then I flicked it into the gutter and turned to walk back down the alleyway. I turned left when I got to the end, glancing around to check there was no one there. When I was sure it was safe to do so, I climbed onto one of the bins lined up along the fence and then I scaled the fence, jumping into the backyard of my next target. My feet were nimble, agile as I landed with the quietness of a panther.

I pulled the mask out of my inside jacket pocket. This time, I'd brought a Guy Fawkes one, more synonymous with the Anonymous group these days, but it was one of my favourites. Black and white, simple yet effective. I slipped it over my head, the sound of my breathing amplifying as I did, filling my ears as the latex sat close against my skin. Then, I took my leather gloves out and pulled them onto each hand, flexing my fingers to make sure the fit was perfect.

I stalked to the back door, taking my nail file out and using it to pick the lock. Seconds later, I heard the familiar click that meant I could turn the handle and enter his home with ease.

A musty smell hit me as I walked over the threshold. The house obviously hadn't been cleaned in weeks, but I didn't flinch. I kept my breaths shallow, quiet. Stealth and silence were key. I didn't want him to know I was coming because I knew the shock and fear that followed would be worth it. Surprise attacks were always the best.

I placed each footstep down onto the wooden flooring slowly, carefully, mindful that the wrong step might make the floorboards creek and alert him to my presence. But I was lucky. I didn't make a noise as I crept closer to the sounds of crockery clinking as he washed up his dishes in the kitchen. Passing the living room, I peered around the door. The TV was on, and there was a single, threadbare old armchair with a folding table next to it where he'd probably sat to eat his dinner, but he wasn't there now. He was whistling without a care in the world as he washed his plates.

Three more steps, and I came to stand in the doorway of the kitchen. He was bent over the sink, oblivious to the world around him. The window he stood in front of was mirror-like, the reflections from the room more prominent because of the darkness outside. I took one more step into the room and positioned myself so that my masked face was clearly reflected in the window, and as he looked up and saw me for the first time, he gasped, dropping the plate in his soapy hands. He grabbed a knife from the draining board and spun around to face me.

“Who the fuck are you? Get out!” he shouted, brandishing the knife at me like it made a difference.

I cocked my head to the side and took another step towards him. Pointing to the knife, I said, “Now, that's not going to work, is it? I could have that knife off you and cut your throat before you'd even realised what was happening, so I suggest you put it down.”

He didn't respond, and his grip on the knife as he held it out to threaten me only wavered slightly as he swallowed and weakly stood his ground.

“Unless...” I took another step closer. “You want me to prove it, *Mario*?”

“How the fuck do you know my name, you fucking freak?” His outstretched arm flexed as he jabbed the knife pointlessly in the air.

“Oh, I know a lot about you, *Mario*,” I teased. “I know you usually prefer whips to knives.”

His eyes popped as the reality of what I'd said suddenly hit him.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," he spluttered. "But you need to get out before I call the police."

"Yes, do that," I replied, grabbing a mobile phone I saw on the counter beside me and throwing it his way. But he didn't move, just let it fall to the floor as he kept his eyes and knife focused on me. "Ring the police," I urged him. "I'm sure they'd love to hear my stories about playtime with Mario and his whips and how much you enjoyed the way *I* screamed for you."

"No..." He shook his head, his jaw flexing as he ground his teeth. "That isn't true. You're a fucking LIAR!" He was starting to lose it, his voice growing desperate as he fought memories of the demon he'd been to me back then. The demon he still was.

"I have some friends waiting back at my place that I know you'll be dying to meet again," I stated casually, thrusting my arm out, catching him by surprise and slapping the knife out of his grasp. He wasn't as strong as he used to be, or rather, I was stronger now, and the knife clattered to the floor as he backed away with terror blazing in his eyes. "You always did prefer to play as a tag team, but then, I think the games you're going to play with me now will require a little more..." I tapped my chin. "Solitary effort."

I didn't give him chance to reply. I was growing bored already, and I wanted this done. Not to mention, his home smelt like shit, so the less time I spent here, the better. Before he could move, I yanked the syringe out of my pocket and lunged at him, stabbing it into his neck with as much force as I could. Then I crouched down as he slithered helplessly to the floor.

"See? That wasn't so hard, was it?" I left the syringe in his neck as I slapped his cheek. His eyes were glazed over, his body limp and lifeless.

Leaning over him, I sniffed in disgust.

“You even smell like filth. The sooner you’re taken care of, the better.”

One more down, and only a few more to go.

But I wasn’t disappointed.

I knew the last collections would be the sweetest yet.

Chapter Four



WILL

I filled the drive back home with mindless chatter to try and impress her.

It didn't.

But I didn't care.

I couldn't change who I was, and I loved playing with her. I lived for our banter, the back and forth. Even if she kept shooting me down, it didn't matter. It only made the chase sweeter. I liked winding people up, and teasing Bryony had become my favourite thing to do. Had been since the day I'd met her, back when her sisters needed our help with a little blackmailing problem they'd had. But that was all over now, and even though we'd sorted it, we still kept them around.

What can I say?

The Masters sisters had grown on us.

Colton had claimed Shelley, or was it the other way around? Probably a bit of both.

And me?

I took one look at Bryony on the day she crashed into my life, heard her sassy mouth and sharp putdowns, and I knew she was mine. The fact that she answered back, fought me, questioned me, and wasn't afraid to call me on my bullshit made me want her even more. I loved a challenge, but pinning her down wasn't easy, and there was nothing I wanted to do more than pin that girl down. Literally.

I knew I annoyed her ninety-nine percent of the time, but I was okay with that. I liked getting a reaction from her. Any attention was good attention when it came to Bryony Masters. The girl was fucking stunning, with her poker-straight, long, black hair and the way she wrinkled her cute little button nose and huffed like an angry chipmunk when I teased her. She was beautiful, and she kept me on my toes. She was my sexy little nemesis with a body to die for.

I'd never had a problem pulling women before, but with her, all my rules flew out the window. The Will Stokes book of charm didn't work on Bryony, so I'd tossed it on the fire months ago. She was immune to it all, but it was all good. The longer she made me chase her, the more excited I got. I was playing the long game, and it'd become my favourite game to play.

When she pulled her car up at the side of the old asylum, I got out, telling her, "See you later, sunshine." To which she replied, "Not if I see you first." And I laughed, slamming the door shut and taking a step back.

I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my jeans as I moved to stand in the dark shadow of Sandland Asylum and watched her speed away down the drive. When she'd gone, I turned around and peered up at the building. I never grew tired of looking at this place, knowing what we'd done.

This asylum was our home now, mine and my four brothers.

A towering gothic landmark that stood guard over a town that didn't appreciate its existence. It was a building full of wicked secrets and harrowing screams from the past. A past no one wanted to acknowledge. Except us. We loved the history that bled from the old stone walls, we loved that we were adding to it too. Leaving our own twisted mark on the place. We were responsible owners, after all, and an asylum should always have a story to tell, no matter how disturbing it was.

When we found this place, it'd been earmarked for demolition. But with our unique powers of persuasion, we soon put a stop to that. Now, the asylum was our home, our

business, our sanctuary. We even used the name ‘The Sanctuary’ when we opened up the first two floors as an exclusive nightclub for the town. An asylum, by definition, didn’t just mean psychiatric support, it meant a haven too. A place of safety for those who needed it when they were at their lowest.

And that’s what it was for us.

We were five men who lived to expose the brutal truths most people scraped under the carpet. We were vigilantes. Bloody good ones at that, and we used this place to carry out our work.

I stepped further into the shadows, letting the darkness shroud me as I headed to the door that led to the asylum chapel. When we’d bought this place, we’d decided to keep the chapel. We renovated the rest of the building, but once a chapel, always a chapel, that’s what my friend, Devon, had said. We knew he’d fallen in love with that part of the building. He had visions of using the place as his armoury, and we were fine with that. A former symbol of hope being used for a completely different kind of worship. I’m not sure God would approve, but he was Devon Brady, Brinton Manor’s Reaper.

Who were we to argue?

We’d each put our stamp on the building, and that was his.

I creaked the old wooden chapel doors open and walked through. Devon peered over his shoulder as I made my way into his gently lit, sacred bolthole.

“Did you see her?” he asked as he polished the knives lined up on the stone altar in front of him.

He took such care over each one, twisting it to check it was spotless before laying it carefully back down. There was every kind of knife, axe, sword, every weapon you could ever think of in this chapel, and some you’d probably never heard of. Devon liked to be original, inventive, and a few of his own creations were hanging up on the walls, ready to be put to good use.

Death was an art to him, one he revelled in, and this armoury was his pride and joy. He'd earned his name, The Reaper. If something or someone needed taking care of, you could trust Devon to do a good job. He was the best of the best.

"Yeah, I saw her," I replied. "She just dropped me off." I shrugged, leaving it at that. I didn't feel like elaborating.

Devon hummed in response but carried on polishing his weapons, focusing solely on them. As he worked, I glanced up at the old stone walls of the church. There was always a chill in here, but it was a special room, with its stained-glass windows and stone carvings. It was such a shame that its beauty was currently marred by two men shackled to the wall from the chains we'd installed. Their heads hung forward, chins resting on their chests as the drugs they'd been given earlier kept them locked in a different kind of prison of their minds.

"I see our guests are making themselves at home," I joked, pointing up to the limp bodies hanging above us. They were lucky, they still had their clothes on. Dirty T-shirts and jeans, trainers that were caked in mud. It wasn't the best look, but it was better than stringing them up naked. But then again, that might come later. Sometimes, humiliation followed by a humbling bit of torture did men like them the world of good, cleansed their souls ready for their final reckoning. A reckoning they whole-heartedly deserved, believe me. We never killed unless we had to. And we always made sure we got the right guy... well, most of the time.

I picked up one of the throwing knives from the edge of the altar and took aim, flicking it through the air and watching as it landed smack bang into one of the guy's skulls. He didn't flinch, just slumped further into the chains that bound him as his life drained away, blood trickling from where the knife was embedded. I didn't know why I'd done it, but I couldn't stop myself from grinning at my killer shot.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Devon spat angrily. "Why did you do that?" He dropped the knife he was holding with a clatter and glared at me. There was a look of

pure anger on his face, and my fleeting victory turned to flickers of shame that I fought down.

I'd fucked up.

But I wasn't going to show it.

"I'm getting some target practise in," I replied nonchalantly, trying to play it down. I'd acted before engaging my brain. I knew that. It's what I did most of the time, but shit happens. It was done. I couldn't change it now.

"We were supposed to get some information from him. He might've known stuff, important stuff. Fat chance of getting that out of him now."

"There's still that guy," I said, backtracking and pointing at the other one.

"Well, let's hope he knows as much as his mate, or we've just wasted a lot of time and effort in tracking these fuckers down and bringing them here. The guy you just skewered was our main mark. Good luck explaining to Adam how you fucked up."

Devon was holding back. I could tell he was pissed off at me because his jaw was ticking. But even though he was probably picturing a thousand ways to make me suffer for being an ass, he wouldn't act on it. He never did.

"Adam won't mind." I smiled, picturing my mate, Adam, trying to suppress the nuclear bomb that'd go off inside his head when he found out what I'd done. "He knows when the urge takes hold, you've just gotta go for it."

Devon shook his head, irritation painted all over his face.

"He also knows it's important to work as a team," he muttered under his breath.

"I am a team player." I grinned back at him. "I just like scoring a few goals of my own."

Devon glared daggers at me.

He loved me, he just had a strange way of showing it.

I heard the click of the door unlocking behind me, felt the rush of cold air as it opened, and then I heard Colton's voice bellowing loudly, "You started without us. That's fucking rude."

I spun around to find him, Adam, and Tyler standing in the doorway.

All the soldiers were here.

Colton looked up at the dead guy with admiration in his eyes. "Damn! Good shot," he said, nodding in appreciation.

Adam just stared straight ahead. Admiration was the last thing on his face. It looked like he wanted to summon fire and burn us all to hell as he glowered and gritted his teeth.

And Tyler?

He just shook his head and strolled past me into the chapel.

"Another Will special, I'm guessing," Tyler droned sarcastically. "If we had a penny for every time you'd fucked up..."

"You'd have a lot of fun spending your pennies on the kid's machines at the arcade." I smirked back.

"You know..." Tyler narrowed his eyes at me. "There's a tree creating the oxygen you're wasting. You should go and find it and apologise."

Colton roared with laughter, and I laughed too. I loved it when Tyler showed us his snarky backbone.

"I would tell you to go fuck yourself, Ty," I shot back, a massive shit-eating grin on my face. "But I'm pretty sure you'd be as disappointed as your last girlfriend was."

Tyler went to respond, but Adam cut in.

"Enough flirting, ladies. Can we get to work? I have a man to torture and a wife to fuck when I'm finished. Listening to you dance around each other isn't on my schedule for tonight." He glared back at us. "But I can add a bit more torture if you keep pissing me off."

“Let’s have at it then,” Colton replied, rubbing his hands together.

And just like that, we moved together, gathering our weapons and working as a team. It was what we did best.

Adam was the psycho. Cold, calculated, a get-the-job-done kind of guy.

Devon was itching to add another notch to his reaper scythe.

Colton was here to kill, a joker who used his humour to twist the knife deeper, harder, more sadistically than anyone else, and he’d do it with a smile on his face.

And Tyler was our thief. He had eyes in the back of his head, and he could rip your heart out before you’d even realised he was there. A stealthy shadow, that was Tyler.

And me?

I was the player.

Put me in the game and I’d ace it, time after time.

Some might say I liked to toy with people’s emotions, and they’d be right. There was nothing I liked more than playing with our victims, messing with their heads. A true player doesn’t care if their victims get hurt; it’s all a game to them.

And I loved the game.

I was the best player of them all.

Adam yanked on the other guy’s chains to try and rouse him, then he took a bottle of water from the floor and opened it, throwing the contents into the guy’s face.

“Wakey, wakey, fucker,” he snarled. “Time to get up and start talking. The sooner you talk, the sooner this will all be over, and isn’t that what we all want?”

The guy spluttered as he shook his head, then he glanced to the side and saw his friend hanging lifelessly next to him, with my knife sticking out of his head, and he started to thrash in his chains.

“You’ll fucking pay for that,” the guy snarled, making us all laugh.

“I don’t think you’re in a position to threaten us, *mate*,” Colton jeered. “You’re about three minutes away from joining your friend in hell.” He nodded over to me. “Will needs a little more target practise, his aim can be shocking. The guy before him”—he gestured to the dead guy—“he caught him right in the dick.” He tapped his skull. “He got the wrong head, you see.”

“You don’t fucking scare me,” the guy hissed, bucking and thrashing harder.

Adam stepped forward, raising his fist and smacking it hard into the guy’s face, making him jolt to the side.

“You need to remember your fucking manners,” Adam growled. “Talk to any of us like that again and I’ll let Devon show you what he can do with his katana sword. That’s a samurai sword to ignorant fuckers like yourself.”

The guy snarled back, blood staining his teeth as he spat onto our floor.

Instantly, Adam stepped forward again and smacked him with another lethal punch to the gut, making him blow out a pained breath.

“Again, learn your fucking manners, *mate*. Don’t spit your filth all over our floor.”

Adam moved to stand right in front of him, his face close to his as he barked, “Let’s make this nice and easy, shall we? You and your friend here were caught in that house. The one where you’d kept all those women prisoners. So don’t even try to fucking deny it. You’re part of whatever trafficking ring is operating out of there. We know that. Now, what you need to tell us is who the top man is. Where’s your boss? Because we know for a fact, when it comes to food chains, you’re at the fucking bottom.”

The guy grinned like a maniac, then he tilted his head back and spat right in Adam’s face.

Tyler beat us to it and whacked his fist into the guy's stomach as Adam stepped away, wiping the filth from his face. Colton was next to have a go, grabbing the guy's jaw and digging his fingers into his cheeks as he told him in a calm and measured voice, "You really didn't want to do that. You've just made things so much worse for yourself."

"I don't care," the guy rasped. "I'm ready to die. And I won't tell you a fucking thing. I'd rather cut my own throat than help you."

"That can be arranged," Devon announced drily. "But just so you know, we have a one hundred percent success rate at getting our victims to squeal like a pig. Our methods are that good."

The guy rattled his chains again, snarled at us, and shouted, "Well you're about to lower your perfect rating, because I don't know a fucking thing."

"Don't you?" Colton grabbed his throat, choking him as the guy shook his head. His face became puffy, growing purple as Colton's grip got tighter. Then he let him go, and the guy spluttered, gasping for breath as he croaked, "They don't tell us anything. We watch the girls. They send someone to collect the money once a week. That's all I do. I don't know anything else. I don't even know the name of the guy who collects the fucking money."

"Is that so?" Devon walked slowly towards him, lifting the filleting knife he'd chosen from the altar and pushing it into his cheek. Blood trickled down his face as Devon moved slowly, carving into him and smiling as he did. "You know, I can do this all day. Carving is my favourite thing to do, it's so... soothing." Once the knife reached his chin, Devon moved lower, using the tip of the blade to lift his T-shirt and pierce the flesh of his stomach.

A dark, wet stain appeared on the front of the guy's jeans as he pissed himself, and Devon sneered and stepped back. "You filthy fucker," he said, screwing his nose up.

"I already told you, I don't know anything. It doesn't matter what you do. I don't have anything to give you."

“I believe him,” Adam stated. “He looks like a spineless twat, and he is one. A useless one. And you know what we do to spineless cunts like him.”

Adam stalked over to the altar, picked up one of Devon’s hunting knives and strode back to the guy.

“Any last requests?” Adam asked, but before the guy could respond, he stabbed the knife into his chest, and holding it with both hands, he pulled it down to his groin, yanking and tugging through his flesh until the guy’s intestines fell out with a sloppy thud onto the floor at Adam’s feet.

Adam stared down at the mess as the guy’s body slumped in his chains, blood and guts pouring onto the flagstones of our chapel floor.

“We really need to stop using this place for our kills,” Adam tutted. “The warehouse is better. Easier to clean up and less people around to smell the stench of death. We’ll dump these bodies back at their house. Leave a message for whoever finds them from their fucked-up operation. They might not have had anything to give us, but we can still use them as a message. Let the others know we’re onto them.”

He wrinkled his nose in disgust and threw the knife on the floor.

“Do you think you can manage the clean up?” he asked us, and we nodded.

“Good, because I’ve had enough for one night.” Adam charged away, slamming the door behind him as he left us alone with the two corpses.

But no sooner had he left, he came bursting back in again.

“Fuck it,” he snapped. “I can’t leave you guys to clean this up. I’m not that much of an asshole. Tyler, grab the tarpaulin. Will, can you find me a shovel?”

He started to bark orders, and we did what he said. I passed him a shovel, and he started to pick up the guy’s intestines, shovelling them onto the tarpaulin as Colton began to spray the flagstones down with a hose. When the guts were all piled up, I pulled the tarpaulin across the floor to the

doorway, ready to take outside. Tyler got to work getting the corpses off the wall, and Devon picked up the bloody knives and threw them into a bucket, ready to clean.

“See?” I said to Devon as I went past him. “I can do teamwork.”

“It’s what we do best,” he retorted. “We work together, or we don’t work at all.”

And he was right. Hurt one, hurt all, that’s what we’d always said.

I was lucky to have my brothers, because when all was said and done, any game worth playing was always played better when other people were involved.

And we were the best.

Chapter Five



BRYONY

It was the night of the masked ball, and I shivered as I approached The Sanctuary, pulling my jacket tighter around my body to try and fight off the chill in the air. Glancing up at the eerie dark building, I huffed out a low breath. This place was so much more than a club. It was home to the soldiers of Brinton Manor. Their base. Smoke and mirrors were the first things they'd installed when they moved in here. Not that they needed to hide their other business, everyone knew what they were.

Want someone to disappear?

They'll do it.

Need to fix what the police can't?

They were the men for the job.

They had a knack of rooting out the scum of the earth, torturing and maiming them until they were ready to be planted back into the soil. Those fuckers had to be good for something, right? And worms need food too, even if it was from the filthy trash the soldiers took out.

Justice and retribution were their forte, and looking up at the foreboding exterior, I could see the building mirrored its inhabitants perfectly. It was haunting, imposing, a monument that'd stood in this town as a warning since eighteen-eighty-two. It said so on the keystone over the entrance that had the year it was built carved into it.

Tonight, we were all excited to go in. Years ago, they'd be fighting, spitting, clawing to get out. If walls could talk, these grey old bricks would probably wither away and die just so they didn't have to repeat or relive all the trauma they'd seen. That was probably true today for some parts of The Sanctuary. I'd heard about the chapel and its unholy practises. If you found yourself in there, you'd still pray to God, but you'd be shackled to the wall, waiting on a medieval torture device to relieve you of your sins.

A paradox.

An oxymoron.

A complete and utter mindfuck.

This whole place and the men that ran it were all those things. None more so than Will Stokes.

I still couldn't work him out. Sometimes he was boyish, immature even. But knowing he was a soldier meant that couldn't really be the case, not all the time. He'd faced the worst of humanity. He was a vigilante. A fighter. He'd lived to tell a dark tale but didn't seem to want to dwell on it.

To others, he appeared to live his life like he didn't have a care in the world. But there had to be more to him than what he showed. Of all the conundrums, he was the one that puzzled me the most. He intrigued me. Not evil or laced with devilish thoughts like Adam and Devon. Not calm and calculated with a side of crazy like Colton and Tyler. Will was just... Will. Loose with his tongue, but you knew he meant well despite it all. An act first, think later kind of guy. To some, he was a villain. To me, he was a guy who'd lived through awful circumstances. That didn't make him a bad guy, just a tainted one. And at the end of the day, weren't we all tainted in some way?

Slowly, I moved closer to the entrance as the line of people that stretched around the perimeter of the building made their way inside. I peered up at the huge windows that ran the length of the building as I picked my way over the cobbled stones on the drive. The windows were blacked out on the ground and first floor, making them look like gaping holes of

darkness that led to Hades' underworld. A gothic palace hiding its deadly purpose; wickedness, and sinful debauchery that we were all lining up to be a part of.

The Annual Masked Ball, that's what we were all here for. It was the soldiers' twist on a masquerade ball, only there were no fancy masks, feathers, fans, and ballgowns here, only the most fucked-up and crazy outfits you could imagine. Demons, devils, and monsters were everywhere. It was a horror fan's wet dream.

I'd kept my outfit simple yet sexy. I was cat woman, but my black cat mask was leather studded with a collar fixed around my neck and a lead that hung right between my tits to give it a little bit of an extra something. My hair was tied up in a high ponytail and my black catsuit fitted like a second skin. From the glances I was getting, I knew I'd chosen right. Hannibal Lecter strolled past and peered over his shoulder to give me the once-over. Yeah. I felt good about tonight.

I reached the entrance and showed the doorman my invitation. My sister, Shelley, was already inside. Her and Colton were doing a Gotham theme with their outfits. He was going to be Two-Face, and she was Poison Ivy. Not that I'd see much of them. They'd probably be on the first floor, making use of the special rooms The Sanctuary had to offer their exclusive members, or as I called them, the sex rooms.

I found myself wondering what Will would dress up as.

Would he be using the first floor tonight?

And why did the thought of that make my stomach twist?

I didn't care.

I really didn't.

Oh, who was I kidding? I totally did.

As I walked through the doors, I noticed a familiar figure leaning against the wall opposite the entrance. In a sea of people gathered in the foyer, making their way to the main hall, he was all I saw. A blue boiler suit with his arms crossed over his chest. A Michael Myers rubber mask over his head, but I knew who it was. And as he pushed himself off the wall

and pulled the mask off, his hair sticking up and falling in messy waves all over the place, giving him a cute boyish look, I felt a flurry of nerves that I fought down as quickly as they appeared.

“Took your time, didn’t you?” Will called out as he sauntered through the small crowd to stand in front of me.

“Skulking in the shadows waiting for me again, are you?”

I quite liked that he’d been waiting for me. I wouldn’t tell him that, though. He’d probably struggle to get the mask back on for how big his head would grow.

“When you look like that”—his eyes moved up and down my body, and he bit his lip—“I’ll skulk anywhere you want me to.”

I stood back, folding my arms and giving the same assessment of his outfit that he’d just given to mine.

“Michael Myers, huh? Kind of ironic you chose to dress up as a guy who never speaks.”

“I’ll break the mould,” he announced with a grin, spreading his arms wide. “Show everyone what Michael would do if he had my charm and animal magnetism.”

“Michael on acid. I can’t wait,” I replied, dripping sarcasm.

Chapter Six



Michael on acid, indeed.

I swallowed; my throat dry as I tried to calm my nerves. Having her standing in front of me, looking like she did, made me feel all out of sorts, and I wasn't used to feeling like that. She was the one wearing a leash, but I was the one who felt collared. I'd have followed her anywhere, she had my total and undivided attention. I always was a sucker for black leather, and I was no caveman, but tonight I felt protective of her. I wanted her to be dressed like that for me and only me. I didn't want any other fucker looking at her, getting ideas.

She was mine.

She hadn't agreed to that yet, but it was only a matter of time.

"You look fucking sexy," I said, reaching forward to pick up the leash that hung between her tits, giving it a little pull. "This is... fun," I teased, but what I really wanted to say was, 'I'd love to use this later. Will you crawl on your hands and knees for me like a good girl and let me choke you?' I went with the safer option. But after a few drinks, who knew where the night would go?

"I might be on a lead," she purred back, leaning forward to pour her delicious, sexy voice into my ears and brush her tits against my chest. "But I know how to take control."

Fuck me.

I was hard before, but now I felt fucking feral.

She patted my chest as she leaned back and smiled. “So be a good boy and go and buy me a drink. You are the host, after all.”

“A drink wasn’t the first thing on my mind, but sure,” I replied smugly. “We can start there.” And I gestured with my arm for her to lead the way. I wanted to walk behind her, get the best view of her ass as she walked into the club. And I wanted to make damn sure no one else was looking at her.

We entered the main hall with its thumping bass, the strobe lights flickering over the crowd, making The Sanctuary look like hell’s rejects. In fact, hell would be quiet tonight. All the demons, devils, and reprobates had shown up here, and I loved it.

Pushing through the sea of people, we made our way to the bar, and I gestured to Jake, our head barman, to get us some drinks. I’d already decided I’d shoot my shot with Bee tonight. Hell, I went for it every time I saw her in my own twisted and not-so-subtle way, but tonight was going to be different. *I* felt different. It was fun to banter, but I wanted her to take me seriously tonight. To give me a chance.

When Jake put the drinks down in front of me, I slid hers towards her, then touched my glass to hers. Before taking a sip, I said, “So, here we are. What were your other two wishes?”

“Oh my God.” She gave me the side-eye and shook her head. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

“I know I could make you see stars brighter than the ones outside if you let me.”

“Wow!” She took a sip of her drink, then leaned into me, breathing down my neck and sending shivers down my spine. “As enticing as it sounds being the next notch on your bedpost, I think I’ll pass.”

“You’d never be a notch.” I stayed close to her, using the loud music to my advantage and pressing my body to hers so I could inhale her intoxicating scent. “Bee, you’d own the whole fucking bed.”

“You’re right, I would,” she replied in her flirty, sexy voice. “Too bad you’ll never find out.”

“Never say never.” I downed my drink and turned to face her, my body practically pinning hers to the bar. “I think we’d be good together.”

Her eyes narrowed, but from the way her chest rose and fell, I knew she was affected by me.

“It just makes sense,” I told her, giving her a nonchalant shrug.

“Why? What about this... us... makes sense?” she replied, pointing between us.

“You like me.” I grinned. “And your sister is dating my best friend.”

She placed her hand on my chest, pushing me back slightly.

“Will, if you think cheesy lines and dating by association like we’re back in high school is the way to go, you need serious help. Your game is weak as fuck.”

I had to laugh.

“There’s nothing wrong with my game, Bee. Give me a chance and I can prove it to you.”

Her eyes darkened as she purred. “I do love being proven right, or wrong, whichever one works out best for me.” And she sipped her drink again. My eyes stayed glued to the way her lips curled around the edge of the glass, imagining what they’d look like wrapped around my cock with her on her knees.

“Buckle up, Bee,” I teased, giving her a wink. “I’ve got a whole lot of fun planned for us.” I leaned into her again and whisper-yelled, “It’s going to be wild.”

Chapter Seven



Wild and fucked-up, I thought as he backed away from me and walked towards the dance floor, his eyes on me with every step. And boy, did the thought of what he'd implied make me shiver with excitement. I was starting to give myself whiplash with how much I protested but wanted to submit.

I shook my head.

"You're crazy," I mouthed at him, but I had to smile. He was keeping me on my toes. Wasn't that what I wanted?

"Come and dance," he shouted across to me, then pulled the Michael Myers mask back over his head and disappeared into the crowd.

"I think I'll stay here and finish my drink," I said quietly to myself, lifting my glass to take another sip.

I became aware of someone standing a little too close to me, and I sidestepped to give myself more space at the bar, but then a gentle voice asked, "Hey. I hope you don't mind me asking, but are you and Will together?"

I glanced to the side to see a pretty blonde girl standing next to me, dressed as schoolgirl Britney and sipping a cocktail through a straw.

"Why?" I asked, my eyes narrowing with distrust.

"I don't want to step on any toes," she said sweetly, and then, looking over at the dance floor, she sighed and started to

blush. "I knew Will from high school. I've always liked him. He makes me laugh." She gave a nervous giggle that made me feel like I was listening to nails on a chalkboard, and I tensed.

I felt my back go up, and jealousy I didn't want to admit to surfaced as I replied, "Yes, actually. We're together." And then, giving her a fake smile and tilting my head, I said, "I'm so sorry."

"That's okay." Her shoulders sagged despite her smile. I could tell she was deflated. "It was worth asking," she stated. Then she turned on her heels and walked away.

"Jesus." Another familiar female voice came from behind. "I never had you down as a cock blocker."

I spun around to face my sister, Shelley, dressed in her skin-tight green dress with ivy twisting around it, and a red wig covering her curly dark hair.

"I'm not," I snapped.

Shelley nodded to the girl retreating through the crowd with her head down. If she'd had a tail, it'd be between her legs right now.

"That could be the love of Will's life, his soulmate, and you just cock blocked him. You're not together." She glared at me with her eyes wide to prove her point. "Not unless something changed between this morning, when you said something about hell freezing over, and tonight."

"Maybe she *is* his soulmate." I tried not to let that thought get to me. "And if it's meant to be, they'll find their way back to each other." I bit my lip, staring blankly at the dance floor, pretending I didn't care. "She seemed like a lovely girl."

"I call bullshit," Shelley bit back.

I frowned, waiting for her to elaborate.

"If you like him, admit it. You basically did just that when you warned that poor girl off." She took a breath then tilted her head towards mine. "You know, a wise woman once told me to live for the moment. Have fun. I think she needs to start taking some of her own advice."

I always gave my sisters the kind of advice I'd never take on board myself. Didn't everyone do that?

"I didn't warn her off," I replied defensively. "And anyway, you needed that extra push when it came to Colton. I said it how it was. But for Will, it's not the same. He's a different creature altogether. Totally different species."

"He really isn't." Shelley fixed me with a pointed stare. "And you *are* a cock blocker, you're cock blocking yourself." She nodded to my drink. "Down that, have another, then go and find him. Life's for living, after all. Isn't that what you always say?"

I wrinkled my nose, giving her a friendly snarl as I berated her for throwing my words back at me. Then I downed my drink and turned to face the barman, asking him for a double. I felt like I needed the extra shot for courage.

"That's my girl," Shelley said, patting my arm.

"What are you drinking?" I asked her, but she shook her head.

"I've already got a drink over there." She nodded to where Colton stood across the room, and said, "You should come and join us. I don't like you standing here drinking on your own."

"Maybe later," I replied, picking up my drink and taking a large sip. "I need a little me time right now."

She frowned, not liking my answer, but she didn't argue.

"Okay. Well, you know where we are."

I smiled and watched her walk away.

Half an hour later, and still standing in the same place, propping up the bar, I felt the buzz from my mobile phone in my pocket. I took it out, tapped on the screen, and saw a text from Will. I glanced up and looked around before reading it, half expecting to see him standing watching me with that

stupid grin on his face. But he wasn't here. Not that I could see, anyway.

Meet me outside, down by the duck pond.

I had to admit, receiving a text from him made my stomach flip and my mind whirl with possibilities.

What had he got planned for this evening?

Why did he want to meet me down there?

The last time I'd seen him by the duck pond, he threw me into the filthy thing.

Was he planning some grand gesture to make up for that?

Or was he about to give me another reason to call him a clueless asshole?

Whatever it was, I couldn't resist the temptation. I always did like surprises, and when it came to Will, I could never second guess what he was going to do next.

So, I started to tap out my response with a wicked grin plastered on my face as I thought about the words I was typing.

Fine. I'll be there. And just so you know, I typed this out with my middle finger.

I pressed send, then downed my drink and placed my empty glass on the bar. I pulled my jacket on, then surged forward, pushing through the crowds.

I headed for the back door, a nervous energy humming through my system, making me hyper aware. From the corner of my eye, I saw Shelley watching me from across the room, her eyebrow cocked as she subliminally questioned where I was going. So, I winked back at her and gave her a wave to show her I was okay. I was off on a little adventure. Then I turned and let the crowds take me away.

The thump from the music mirrored my heartbeat as I pushed my way further into the throng of people. The swell of the crowd moved like the waves of the sea, and I started to

wonder if it was a metaphor for what came next. The dark, murky depths that Will was calling me into like a siren. Depths that I could very easily drown in.

Why did I always follow him?

He made me question my own sanity half of the time.

When I finally got to the back of the room, I found two security guards standing by the back door. They weren't expecting anyone to go out from the look of things, but when they saw me, they stood aside.

"Will asked me to meet him outside," I said, as if I needed to justify my being there, but they just nodded, letting me push my way through the rear exit and out into the darkness at the back of The Sanctuary.

Standing in the cold night air, I glanced around, but no one was out here. All I could hear was the hum of the party behind me and the people enjoying themselves inside. All I could see was a dark blanket of nothingness stretched out before me, lit only by the moon and stars in the sky. Whatever Will had planned, he didn't want an audience.

I waited to see if he'd appear in front of me, or maybe walk around the side of the building to join me, but no. I was alone. He'd told me to meet him at the pond, and there was a reason for that. He obviously wanted me to make my own way there, in the dark, in heels that really weren't made for walking over soft grass. It was classic Will. He didn't always think about stuff like that. Everything was a game to him.

I took a few steps forward, moving onto the grass that led down to the pond. I picked my way carefully over its dewy wetness and tried to stop my heels from sinking into the mud. The further I walked away from the main building, the deeper into the darkness I descended. My eyes slowly adjusted to the night as my ears listened intently for any unusual sounds.

I reached the bottom of the field and bore left, and as I did, I noticed floodlights shining down towards the ground, lighting up the grass hedges of a garden maze situated right next to the pond. I didn't know the soldiers had this set up out

here, but I was intrigued. I loved mazes, and I'd never been through one in the middle of the night before. I lived for new experiences, and something told me this one would be an adventure I'd never forget.

I stood still for a moment, taking it all in, and then I noticed Will emerging from behind a hedge. He stood waiting for me at the entrance to the maze. He was still wearing his Michael Myers mask and blue boiler suit, and when he saw me, he pointed at me, then curled his finger to beckon me forward to join him.

How could I refuse an invitation like that?

I loved horror movies, and this felt like it was tailor-made for me. An experience with a hint of horror and maybe a little something more sexy. Macabre madness with a hint of debauchery thrown in. With a guy like Will, you never knew what you were going to get, and even though I was still fully engaged in our game of cat and mouse, playing hard to get, I wasn't averse to pushing the boundaries a little tonight. Maybe I could take my own advice, like Shelley had said, and live a little.

I picked my way over the grass until I was standing right in front of him.

"This looks... exciting," I said breathlessly, peering up at his latex mask and giving him a sexy smile.

I expected a cocky response, but when he lifted his finger to his lips and shushed me, I had to laugh.

"Oh, so now you want to give me the full Michael Myers experience. You, silent? This should be interesting."

He nodded without saying a word and used his left arm to gesture for me to go ahead first and walk into the maze.

"If you say age before beauty, I will kick your ass," I joked, twisting my head to look back at him as I tiptoed forward. But he didn't reply, he just fell in step beside me.

The pathways were narrow, the hedges towering over us like dark demons in the night, but the floodlights helped us to find our way around, casting long, eerie shadows ahead of us.

We walked in silence for a minute or two, the maze well and truly swallowing us into its dark and murky belly the further we ventured. Feeling a strange unease in the quietness, I turned to look at Will's masked profile.

"I can't wait to find out what you've got hidden in the middle of this maze," I said, waiting for a response. "I mean, with you guys, it could be anything... a rose garden, a table set up for dinner, a crucifix to hang me on... who knows? But that's what makes it so much fun, right?"

He turned to look at me and cocked his head to the side, but that's all I got.

"You know, for a guy who can't shut up, you're doing a really good job of playing up to the whole silent serial killer thing," I joked, then sighed when he ignored me and carried on walking.

Farther and farther we went, twisting and turning our way deeper into the maze. My breaths appeared in front of me as white puffy clouds in the chilly air, but I didn't feel cold; suspense and intrigue had made the adrenaline block everything else out. All I felt was anticipation for what might happen next.

"Did you install this maze ready for Halloween?" I asked, and he nodded, but still, no words.

"Why haven't you opened it up tonight? For the party? Isn't it ready yet?"

He shook his head, no.

"I think it'll be a big hit. I know the Joker's fun house was the main attraction last year, but I think you could go one better with this. Maybe have a few live actors in here, jumping out at people. Really get people hyped up. Who knows, you could recycle your outfit. Come in here yourself and stalk a few people." He shrugged. "Are you going to chase *me*, Michael?" I asked in a husky voice. "Like in the horror movies?"

I stared at him as we walked slowly forward, and he held his hands out as if to say, 'I don't know, maybe.' And as he

did, I went to turn right, and in doing so, I bumped right into his chest.

We both stopped dead at the crossroads, neither one of us moving.

“You’re supposed to go right, aren’t you? Isn’t that the key to finding the middle of the maze?” I told him, remembering an old trick my mum had taught me years ago when we’d got stuck in a maze as kids. “Something about the right-hand rule,” I reiterated, but he shook his head and pointed to the left.

I wanted to argue. Tell him I was right. I wasn’t one hundred percent confident in his navigation skills, but this time I humoured him. This was his adventure, after all. He must’ve known where he was taking me. And if we got lost, I’d enjoy taking the piss out of him for the rest of the night. So it wasn’t all hopeless.

“It’s probably a dead end, but fine. Left it is then,” I muttered under my breath and proceeded to turn down the path he wanted me to take.

We walked right down to the end, and as I went to make another left-hand turn, I saw a clearing with what looked like a heap of something, clothes maybe, piled up on the floor. Will stayed in step with me as we moved cautiously closer to whatever was down there. And as I drew nearer, I realised it wasn’t something, but someone.

“Oh my God, who is that?” I glanced at Will, who’d stopped still in his tracks, and then back at the person lying lifelessly on the ground.

Dark jeans, a white T-shirt now covered in grass and mud stains, and trainers were all this guy wore as he lay curled up with his back to us.

I took two, three steps closer, and as I did, a feeling of dread and fear dropped hard into the pit of my stomach.

One more step, and then my whole world came crashing down around me.

Blaring screams of terror rattled through my body, squealing in my ears. Blood rushed to my head, making me dizzy and sick, and I dropped to my knees right there in front of him.

Soft brown hair, now caked in mud. A face I knew, now devoid of any expression or sign of life. A body slumped, waiting for me. The sickest discovery I'd ever make.

I reached out, every instinct inside me needed to help him, make sure he was okay.

My Will.

Lying there.

Dead.

I leant over his body, praying to every God there was that he wasn't dead, that he was still here with me. My fingers traced his neck, trying to find a pulse as I begged, "Please, Will. Wake up. Wake up." And when I found a weak pulse flickering under my fingertips, I let out a shaky, desperate breath.

Then reality hit me.

It gutted me right where I was kneeling.

I'd just walked through this maze with someone I didn't know.

Will was lying here.

So, who the fuck was standing behind me, dressed up to look like him?

A tsunami of adrenaline flooded my system as I reached into my jacket pocket for my knife, but it wasn't there.

Where the fuck was it?

I carried that knife with me everywhere.

Had *he* taken it? Reached into my pocket when I wasn't looking and stolen it?

I spun around, ready to confront him and fight for my life. Fight for us both. But it was too late. Whoever it was that'd

tricked me, they were already leering over me.

“Time to join your boyfriend,” he said in a deep, menacing voice.

And then, before I could do or say anything, I felt a sharp sting in my neck, and my whole world fell into darkness.

Chapter Eight



T hump.

Thump.

Thump.

The beat in my head was a dull ache, yet I felt it acutely through every inch of my body. A distant sound, but the pain that followed was clear, visceral, like a sadistic soundtrack, and I couldn't work out where it was coming from.

Had I passed out?

Was that the club I could hear?

The ringing in my ears made it feel like it was, but then the pain grew stronger the more alert I became, and it told me I was wrong.

This wasn't the bass from music I could hear; it was the thud of my brain. A reminder that something was very fucking wrong.

I was lying on my side, my mouth dry and my eyes burning behind my eyelids. I tried to roll onto my back but groaned as every muscle screamed in protest, keeping me pinned into the position I was currently in. I felt like I'd gone twenty rounds with a brick wall and lost every single round as a knockout.

What the hell had happened to me?

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

Despite the searing pain that made me wince, I tried to remember. To recall what my last memory had been.

I was at the masked ball.

I'd seen Bryony there and we'd talked. She looked hot, as usual, and I tried it on a little. I didn't think I'd been too pushy. Not as pushy as I could've been. Then I'd gone to talk to the others, make sure everything was running smoothly, and then...

I gasped, clutching my chest as I tried to breathe through the pain. My throat felt like it was lined with sandpaper, my lungs were sore and aching. My head was pounding like it was about to explode.

I'd wanted to toy with Bryony a little more. I'd thought about sending her a text, but I couldn't find my phone. Then I remembered I'd left it in the van earlier when we were out on a surveillance job. It was on the dashboard.

I'd gone through the back door, past our security guards and made my way around the side of the club to get to the car park. I'd unlocked the van, then...

A sharp, stabbing pain shot through my skull, making me grab my head, my fingers pushing into my temples to try and find some relief as I curled into a ball.

I rocked, my breath rasping as the pain coursed through me before it slowly ebbed away to a dull ache.

What the fuck had happened to me?

The van door opened. I reached forward to grab my phone and...

My eyes shot open, my hand flew to my neck after my hazy memory suddenly screamed with clarity.

I'd been stabbed there.

That was the last memory I'd had before I passed out.

Someone had been behind me, out in the car park, and they'd fucking stabbed me with a needle. Injected shit into my system and made me pass the fuck out. I didn't stand a chance. I'd hit the deck before I could do a thing about it. Now, my only saving grace was the CCTV we had set up out there. My boys would've seen it. They'd make sure whoever did this would pay. They wouldn't live to regret it. They would fucking die.

I blinked, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness. From the little I could make out, I was facing a concrete wall, grey and cold, but I could tell I wasn't outside. I was in a room somewhere that smelt stale and musty. I was lying on some sort of mattress. A shitty one that creaked as I tried again to roll onto my back, the springs beneath me squeaking as I managed to position myself to stare up at the same cold, grey concrete on the ceiling. But then, my body froze as I became aware of someone else lying next to me.

Slowly, I turned my head, and there, lying beside me on the mattress, was my Bryony, still dressed in her cat woman outfit.

Rage like nothing I'd ever felt before surged through me, and I tried to push myself up and over to her, but my body didn't want to work in the way my brain was telling it to. Feeling frustrated, I growled, hoisting myself up as much as I could to get closer to her. Gritting my teeth, I reached out, desperate to touch her, shake her awake and bring her back to me.

God, let her be alive.

Please.

She had to be alive.

"Bryony," I said her name like a prayer and held my breath. And then, as I shook her a little harder, I heard her let out a low, gentle gasp.

Her body shuddered, but her eyes stayed closed, and I felt a flash of relief, just for a split second, but it was rapidly doused by the inferno of fury that consumed me.

Why was she here?

Whoever had attacked me, taken me, they were a dead man walking.

But to take her too?

They'd just written their own fucked-up death warrant, because when I got my hands on them, there would be nothing I wouldn't do to make them suffer. I prayed that he hadn't touched her, hurt her before bringing her here. I'd gut the fucker like a fish if he had—I'd gut him anyway for this.

This was a declaration of war, and I was ready to tear this motherfucker apart.

Adrenaline and rage overpowered the aches I'd had as I'd come to, and I pushed myself to sit up. Peering down at her, I watched as she slowly came around, but I didn't want to spook her or make her feel worse than she already was. She needed to wake up in her own time. Me dragging her back to reality wouldn't help.

I glanced around the cold, grey room we were in. There were no windows, no visible door that I could make out in the darkness, just concrete and more concrete towering over us. This was a cell.

Bryony's arm moved, her hand going straight to her forehead as she groaned in pain.

"It's okay, Bee," I whispered, comforting her in the darkness. "I'm here. You're gonna be okay. I have no idea where we are, but I'll get us out. I will. I promise. Even if it fucking kills me."

"What happened?" she moaned quietly, trying to sit up but giving up when it became too much and letting her head fall back onto the mattress. Then her moan grew louder as the memory of what'd happened came trickling back to her, as mine had done only moments ago. "I saw you," she said. "You were on the ground." Then her voice broke as she added, "I thought you were dead."

"It'd take a lot more than that to get rid of me," I replied, giving her a wry smile in the darkness, even though I felt

murderous at what she must've been through, but she ignored me, instead recounting her recollections as they came back to her.

“I went outside to meet you. I saw you, or at least, I thought it was you, but it wasn't. Whoever it was, they had your outfit on. They tricked me.”

I wasn't wearing the Michael Myers outfit anymore, just my T-shirt and jeans that I'd had on underneath. The fucker had taken it off and used it to trick Bryony into going with him.

“Did you come to the car park to look for me?” I asked, needing to know more of her story and how she'd ended up here. She frowned in response, rubbing her forehead, digging deep into her hazy memories for the answer.

“No. You text me to meet you, at the maze. That's where you...” She corrected herself, “I mean, *he* met me.”

Fucker had used my phone to draw her out.

“Did he hurt you?” I tried to swallow, but my coarse throat just burned. I was scared to find out the answer to my next question. “I know he drugged you to get you here, but has he touched you, Bee? I need to know.”

“No,” she shot back. “He put a needle in my neck, but that's it.”

“That's enough,” I seethed. “And the minute we get out of here, I'm burning that fucking maze to the ground, right after I've burnt him.”

He thought he was so fucking clever, but he'd met his match in me. My rage was now morphing into something uncontrollable, a fury I'd never experienced before in my life. I had an overwhelming need to protect her, and he'd just activated a new level of crazy inside me. One that'd unleash every demon I'd ever tamed over the years.

Needing to be closer to her, I reached out my hand in the darkness to take hers, but she pulled away. Then she covered her face with both of her hands before using them to push herself to sit up.

“What the fuck has happened to us, Will?” she hissed. “Who did this? Why? Why us?”

“I have a million and one enemies, Bee. It could be anyone.”

“I fucking knew you’d be the death of me,” she cursed. “Never thought I’d end up in some sicko’s basement, though.”

“Not for long,” I replied. “They’ll be looking for us. Our club has the best CCTV. I know the others will be scouring every bit of footage to track us down. Tyler and Colton will be on that. Devon will be loading up the van with his weapons, and Adam, well, he’ll be thinking up some sick way to make this fucker pay. They’ll have a plan. They always have a plan. Don’t worry. It’s just a matter of time before...” In that moment, the strip lights overhead buzzed to life, casting an uneasy light over our dismal reality. And boy, was it dismal.

Upside down crosses were spray painted in black on the walls. The concrete was chipped, and the walls stained with filth. There were marks and scrapes where someone had probably tried to scratch and claw their way out. The floor was littered with empty wrappers, dirt, and rubble. But there were no windows, no vents, no door handle or lock where the doorway was. There was nothing that I could pinpoint as a possible escape route. Not yet, anyway.

The lights above us were flickering like they might give up and plunge us into darkness at any minute. And then, a clear light shone out from the corner of the room, where a television was set deep into the wall.

Bryony reached for my hand as a face filled the screen. I say face, but it was hidden behind a mask. One of those Halloween LED light masks with crosses for eyes and a sewn-up mouth. The lights glowed blue on the mask as he tilted his head. This guy really thought he was something special. Then his voice filled the room, making every nerve and fibre of my being buzz to attention, craving retribution. He wasn’t going to get away with this.

“How nice of you to finally join me,” he said, his voice altered by some kind of machine, making it sound deeper, low,

mechanical and menacing. “Now the games can begin.”

Chapter Nine



I didn't feel angry with Will, not really. None of this was his fault. I was angry at how confused I felt. How helpless and fucking desperate it all seemed. I was angry with our whole fucked-up situation. I didn't want to take it out on him. He was all I had in this concrete prison we'd woken up in. He was the only other human who knew where I was. And then, when the lights flickered to life, and a TV screen in the corner came on, I was reminded exactly why I was here.

I'd been so fucking stupid.

Rule number one: always have your weapon on you. I'd failed at the first hurdle. I'd put myself in danger by going out without a way to protect myself if anything happened.

Instinctively, I reached for Will's hand as we both stared at the TV, the hand he'd tried to offer me moments ago when I'd brushed him away, but he took mine now, squeezing me as a blue light-up mask appeared on the screen.

"How nice of you to finally join me," the voice announced, the mechanical way he spoke made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. "Now the games can begin."

"Let us out, you FUCKING FREAK!" Will shouted, his body tense as he sat forward. "Or better yet, come in here and face me, you BASTARD."

The voice from the TV gave a sinister chuckle.

"I'm afraid I can't do that. I have you here as my... guests."

“I’m gonna fucking kill you,” Will snarled, baring his teeth, his body trembling with fury beside me.

“You’re gonna do a lot of killing,” the mask replied. “But it won’t be me.”

“Why did you do this? Why are we here?” I asked in desperation. I couldn’t get my head around any of this. Locked up by a madman. Trapped at his mercy. And why? To play some sort of sick games, whatever they were.

“Like I said,” the mask answered. “Now the games can begin.”

“What fucking games?” Will spat. “You’re a fucking dead man. You do know that, right? When my brothers find out what you’ve done—”

“You can’t kill what’s already dead,” he interrupted, sounding proud of himself. “But that’s beside the point. Let’s get a few things clear before we go any further, shall we?”

I knew Will wanted to shout back, but I squeezed his hand and gave a gentle shush. I wanted to hear what this psycho had to say.

“First, don’t bother trying to escape. The room you’re locked in can’t be breached. I’m sure you’ve already noticed there’s no windows, very limited ventilation, and the door is set on a timer that’s controlled by me. I will feed you, give you water. There’ll be a set number of hours that I’ll allow you to have light, and when you eventually venture off the mattress, you’ll see there’s a toilet just behind the wall to your right. No door though. Can’t have you hiding from me in the bathroom and getting any ideas, can we?”

“They’re coming for you, you know. They won’t stop until they’ve found us,” Will seethed.

“Your soldiers? The Brinton Manor *boys*,” the man in the mask sneered, mocking us. “Do you really believe that?” He shook his head and tutted. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but that’s not gonna happen. The CCTV in your club was set on a loop by me. They have no record of you in the car park, or her at the maze. In fact, I wiped all the CCTV in the surrounding

area so no one will ever know where we went or how we got here. Yes.” He nodded his head. “I’m that good.”

He lifted his hand up to the screen to show us what he was holding and added, “As for your mobile phones, I have those here. All tracking on them has been deactivated and I took the liberty of texting those closest to you to tell them you were both going away for a while. A little... getting to know each other break away.” He shook the mobiles in his hands as he spoke. “They really believed it too. You know, there’s a lot of people out there rooting for you two to get together. What a shame that might all come to a gruesome end, here, in my basement.”

“He can’t have texted everyone,” Will whispered, and as if to prove he was listening to every word we said, the mask replied, “Oh, but I did. I’m very thorough. I always do my homework. Leave no stone unturned, that’s what I always say.”

He started to tap on one of the phones.

“You’ve already had replies. The King,” he said, meaning Colton. “Said about fucking time. Don’t come back till you’ve sealed the deal.” He huffed a low laugh. “I agree with him. You won’t leave here until your work is done.”

“Motherfucker,” Will hissed under his breath.

“The Psycho”—that was Adam,— “said I hope you’ve got someone to cover your shifts.” The masked man looked up like he was peering at us through the TV. “I sorted that out for you too. Tyler wasn’t impressed. He said you owe him big time. And... you’re welcome. But I’m sure I’ll find a way for you to thank me properly soon enough.”

“What the fuck do you want from us?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“I want you to make right the wrongs that need to be addressed. And yes, I know that sounds vague, but I promise, it’ll all become clearer soon. For now, all you have to worry about is getting some rest, you’re going to need it. I will be depositing food and water into the room shortly. Take it.

You're no good to me or yourselves if you're weak. If you want to win my game, you need to be strong, smart, and clever in the way you play."

He moved backwards, letting the rest of his body fill the screen as he held his arms out to the side. "Welcome to my game of consequences. Player one and two, are you ready for the challenge of your life?" He tilted his head. "Or death, whichever one it turns out to be."

"I'm ready to fuck you up," Will growled, and the mask threw his head back and laughed.

"I look forward to it." His mechanical voice cackled, then just before the screen cut out, he added, "And how rude of me not to introduce myself properly to my star players. I will be your host throughout this game, but you can call me..." He paused for effect. "The Taskmaster."

And then the TV screen went blank.

Chapter Ten



WILL

I wanted to tear that fucking television off the wall. Hell, I wanted to rip down every wall in this damn prison cell.

I was no one's plaything.

She wasn't either.

And if he thought he could use us, he'd have a fight on his hands. Whatever sick, twisted games this fucker was trying to play, I was ready for it.

"We're going to die here, aren't we?" Bryony whispered, and I felt a surge of protectiveness wash over me again.

I didn't like to hear her talk like that. It wasn't like her. She'd always been a fighter. I wouldn't let that change. No matter how shitty our predicament was.

"No. We won't," I stated. "I won't let that fucking happen."

"I don't think we're in a position to argue the point," she replied, but I wasn't having that. I wouldn't give up, and neither would she.

"It's not a case of *if* we get out, only *when*. Things might look hopeless now, but that'll change." I paused, taking a deep breath. "I'll make them change."

I stood up, walking towards the TV and peering up at it, seeing if there was some way of pulling it down, or ripping something off that could be used as a weapon, but it was set into the wall behind clear glass.

“Do you have anything we could use to try and smash this glass?” I asked, turning to see if Bee was still wearing heels, but her feet were bare. He wasn’t stupid. He’d stripped us of anything that could be used against him.

“If you pick me up, I could try and pound it with my fists.” She suggested, and even though I knew that was fucking useless, I nodded.

“Okay, let’s give it a go.”

She came over to me and I bent down, letting her climb onto my shoulders. Then I lifted her, bracing my arms on the wall in front of me to steady myself. But as I’d thought, it was hopeless. No amount of pounding on it was going to break through that glass.

“It’s reinforced,” she said as her attempts to smack it gave off a weak sounding bang that echoed throughout the room. “Even if I had something to use, I wouldn’t even chip this thing.”

She smacked her fist into it a few more times before realising how pointless it was, and then she tapped my head to let her down.

“Maybe there’s something in the bathroom,” she said, sounding optimistic as she stalked over to the narrow opening on the other side of the room.

I followed her, taking the few steps through into what she thought would be an adequate bathroom. It wasn’t. It was just a space adjoining the main cell, with a filthy toilet attached to the wall. No flush that we could see. No toilet seat. Nothing that could be pulled off or detached to be useful to us. It wasn’t even good enough to be given the name ‘toilet’. If it couldn’t flush, it was, for all intents and purposes, a toilet-shaped bucket with stale water at the bottom.

“He expects us to go there?” Her nose wrinkled in disgust as she took a step back, and then she cracked. “I can’t fucking do this. I can’t!” She ran her fingers through her hair, grabbing the roots and pulling as she spun around and charged away from me.

Marching back into the main room, she started screaming, “Let us out! Let us the fuck out! You can’t do this to us!” Over and over, she screamed into the void of our cell, and when her screams went unanswered, she moved closer to the TV, like she expected him to hear her and answer her cries. “Open the fucking door! Open it!” she howled, banging on the wall.

Then, she turned to face me.

“Aren’t you gonna help?”

The sheer panic on her face broke me.

“And do what, exactly?”

My fists clenched at my sides as I tried to hold myself back from overreacting. I wished I could do something, anything to help her. I wanted nothing more than to break through the walls with my bare hands and get her out of here. But that wasn’t going to work. I had to find another way to save her.

“Fight!” she snapped. “We can’t just stay here like sitting ducks, waiting for whatever the fuck he has planned. We have to make noise. Someone might hear us. We have to do something.”

“I am doing something,” I told her.

She scowled at me, clucking her tongue as she looked me up and down.

“From where I’m standing, it looks like you’re doing fuck all.”

“I’m thinking,” I hissed, tapping the side of my head and sinking down onto the mattress. “He said play smart, remember? Do you think it’s smart to lose your shit this early on? I know you’re pissed off, but shouting isn’t going to help. No one’s going to hear us. Even the TV is behind reinforced glass. The toilet’s a fucking bowl to shit in, there’s nothing here to help us. He’s thought of everything. This whole place will be sound proofed. Shouting for help is just fucking pointless.”

“How do you know?” she challenged, folding her arms over her chest and glaring at me.

“Because I’ve been in enough prison cells and torture chambers to know how this works. There’s no windows.” I pointed up at the TV. “He’s the only one who can see us, from whatever hidden cameras he’s got set up in here.” I glanced around, scrutinising the roof, guessing he’d probably fixed some surveillance equipment into the lights. Lights that were far too high for us to reach. “This place is sealed shut,” I went on. “The only way we’re getting out is if he opens up and lets us out. And then, maybe, if we’re lucky, we’ll find something he’s overlooked. A crack in his armour. But for now, we have to sit tight. The only way things are going to change for us is if we think smart, like he said. So that’s what I’m doing. I’m thinking. It might not look like much to you, but trust me, getting us out of this alive is all I’m focused on right now. It’s all I fucking care about.”

She dipped her head, her arms dropping to her sides.

“I’m not saying don’t fight,” I carried on, hating the defeat in her eyes. “But just know, by screaming and shouting, all it’ll do is frustrate you and give you a sore throat. There’s more than one way to skin a snake.”

“Cat.” She sighed.

“What?”

“It’s cat,” she reiterated. “The saying. It’s *‘there’s more than one way to skin a cat’*.”

“I know.” I gave her a sad smile. “But I changed it to snake, ‘cos let’s face it, this has to be someone we know.”

I knew she agreed with me, and I could tell from the concentration on her face that she, like me, was trying to think who could be behind this.

“I’m trying to figure out who it could be, but I’m coming up blank.” I exhaled as my mind skated over every enemy we’d ever made. “There’s just too many possibilities to narrow it down to one,” I answered truthfully, because in reality, this could be anyone. The only certainty I had was they were a

fucking maniac with a God complex. That really didn't narrow things down. I'd met a lot of those in my time.

Slowly, she walked over to the mattress to sit on the edge of it, next to me.

"It could be anyone," she replied. "Maybe he's working for someone else? Maybe he's a lone wolf? Who knows?"

At that moment, we heard the sound of a lock unbolting, and both of our heads swivelled to stare at the wall opposite. A small hatch, no bigger than a letterbox, opened at the bottom of the wall. Two water bottles were pushed through, rolling towards us into the middle of the room. They were followed by a paper plate sliding through the gap with two sandwiches on it. Then, the hatch snapped shut. No voice. No hands. Nothing to show that there was a person on the other side.

I half expected Bryony to start yelling again, but she didn't. She sat stone still, staring at the meagre offering like it was a grenade with the pin pulled out about to detonate and blast us straight to hell.

I went to stand up, but she grabbed my arm.

"Don't," she warned. "It might be poisoned."

"And if we don't eat or drink, we'll die before we even get a chance to fight this motherfucker," I stated, standing up anyway and letting her hand fall away from my arm.

I walked over to the bottles of water, bending down to pick them up.

"I'm serious, Will. He could've drugged those. He injected us to get us here, what's to say he hasn't stuck a needle through the plastic bottle and injected that too?"

I understood why she was cautious, but we had to weigh up the pros and cons here.

"He could have," I replied. "But I highly doubt he did. Like you said, he went to all the trouble of kidnapping us, drugging us to bring us here, and all because he wants us to be his star players and play his fucked-up games. Why would he

do all that just to kill us in the first few hours with poisoned water?”

“Because he’s a sick and twisted pervert?” she argued back. “Because he wants to get off on watching us die here in this room.”

“You could be right.” I shrugged. “But I’m going with my gut on this one.”

Her eyes went from pleading to piercing me with a don’t-you-dare stare.

“I guess there’s only one way to find out,” I said, and then, as I twisted the cap off the bottle, I told her, “I’ll take a sip. If I don’t die, you can drink the rest. Does that sound fair?”

“It sounds like fucking lunacy. I don’t want to drink anything he gives us.”

“So, you’re happy to go down the dehydration route instead, yeah? When he said himself, you need to keep your wits about you and be smart. Have you ever been dehydrated, Bee?” She just glared back at me.

“A person can go three days without water,” she told me confidently.

She had no idea what the reality of that would feel like.

“And in those days, you become tired and weak. You start to get really fucking confused, and then, you fucking die, Bee. Is that how you want to end this? The coward’s way?”

“It’s not being a coward, showing self-preservation.”

“Again, let’s talk about that snake we’re going to skin. Do you think you’re going to be the best you can be if you’re dehydrated? Will you be able to fight?” I shook my head. “You won’t even be able to fucking stand properly, are you—”

“For fuck’s sake, Will,” she snapped. “If you’re gonna do it, just fucking do it. Drink the bloody water. Leave me here to see this through on my own. I don’t care. Just stop talking and get it over with.”

I'd never leave her to fight this on her own, but I also stood by what I'd said. And so, I lifted the water bottle to my lips, took a gulp and then lowered the bottle and waited.

Seconds ticked by.

The silence was deafening.

And then.

"See? Nothing." It took everything in me not to fake choke and fall on the floor. Everything. Because usually, that's exactly what I'd have done. But even I knew not to push it in these circumstances. Who knew I could rein in the jokes when I needed to. Not me, that's for sure. But here we were.

"Now, will you take the damn bottle and have a drink, for me?" I held it out to her, and she faltered slightly, then reluctantly, with a huge sigh, she took it. I gave her a smile to say thank you and opened the other bottle to drink.

Once I'd almost downed the whole thing, I put it on the floor and reached for the sandwiches, plain cheese on white bread. I took a bite, passing the bitten half of the sandwich to Bryony so she might eat it with the guarantee that it wasn't tampered with. She took that too, taking the smallest bite then grimacing.

We sat together on the old mattress, me devouring the other sandwich while she nibbled on her half like a mouse.

"I knew we'd make a good team." I sighed as I chewed my mouthful.

"Didn't really have much choice, did we?" she replied, giving me a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

And then, the lights shut off, drowning us once again in darkness.

"I guess the Twatmaster wants us to sleep," I whispered into the darkness. A darkness that was so black it felt like you'd been snatched away from this world and plunged into something otherworldly. A place where your eyes were robbed of sight. "Could've waited till we'd finished our meal, the ignorant fucker."

“How the fuck are we supposed to sleep after everything that’s happened to us?” Bee whispered back. “There’s too much adrenaline in my system. I feel like shit, and I ache all over. The last thing I’ll ever do in this place is sleep.”

“Maybe. I know I won’t sleep,” I told her, reaching forward blindly and pulling her down on the mattress next to me. “But you might. I’ll watch over you. Don’t worry. Nothing’s going to happen to you. Not while I’m here.”

“I’m not joking, Will. I’m not sleeping.” I could feel how rigid her body was as she lay next to me.

“Then lie here with me and talk to me.” I sighed. “You don’t have to do anything else. Just talk.”

Chapter Eleven



Just talk.

That's what he said.

I felt like my throat was laced with razor blades and my mind was about to explode, but he wanted to talk.

“We could be bludgeoned to death at any minute, and you just want to talk?”

I didn't think I could string a thought together, let alone a sentence.

“If there's one thing I've learned in this life,” he mused, trying to pull me closer, then wriggling across to me when he realised I wasn't budging. “It's that you roll with the punches when they come. If you spend your time waiting for them, you'll drive yourself crazy.”

“I'm already driving myself crazy. We were kidnapped, Will. Drugged and locked in a basement. We've got a madman videoing himself in a mask to taunt us. I think the punches are already landing pretty hard.”

“It could always get worse.”

“Gee, remind me not to come to you for a pep talk.”

“I'm an awesome hype man. And look what we have... food and drink. A place to piss and shit. A mattress. Trust me, compared to some of the places I've stayed, this is a fucking palace.”

“I won’t be rushing to Trip Advisor to grade it when I get out.”

“See, that’s the spirit.” He chuckled. “You said *when we get out*. I like that positive thinking.”

There wasn’t much to feel optimistic about right now, but when he gave a low chuckle at my lame joke, my heart stuttered in my chest and a warmth that made me feel something radiated through me.

“I’ve landed at rock bottom and now I’m just digging through the rocks,” I went on.

“But you’re still digging.”

I lay silently, my mind struggling to comprehend what was going on. I didn’t know how all this was going to play out, but I knew for a fact it wouldn’t be good. It’d be gruesome, heart-breaking, and acknowledging that made my heart beat faster, the thump deafening in my ears.

“Tell me what you were like as a kid,” Will asked in the darkness.

I knew what he was doing. He was distracting me.

Could he hear that thumping too?

Was my heartbeat affecting him as much as it was affecting me?

“I don’t think a trip down memory lane is going to help right now.” I tried to roll away, curl into a ball so I could drown in the demons tapping away at my skull, begging to be let into my brain.

“It might help a little, if it takes your mind off where we are.”

I didn’t answer him, but he carried on, filling the darkness with his voice. A voice I found comforting, wrapping me up in its deep, velvety sound like a protective blanket.

“When I first met Adam”—he paused—“when I met all the guys and we started doing what we do...”

“Your vigilante shit,” I added, feeling like I should say something.

“Yeah. Adam told us his tips for survival in situations like this. You live by the sword, you die by the sword, and we were all aware that one day, something like this could happen to anyone of us. So, he prepared us.”

“How could you prepare for something like this?”

“I guess, in reality, you can’t. You don’t know what you’ll do when it actually happens. Theory is all well and good, but practise is something else.” He cleared his throat, his voice becoming grittier now as he spoke. “But that’s irrelevant right now.”

He moved closer to me, burying his face in the back of my hair, and then he moved his head away and began stroking my hair, soothing me.

“What did Adam tell you?” I asked, trying to ignore the way his fingers made my galloping heart change to a flutter every now and then as he teased my hair and tickled my scalp.

“Well, the first thing he said was to stay calm. Don’t panic. Keep your mouth shut and don’t piss off your captor.”

“You fucked that one up.” I gave a sad laugh, one I really didn’t feel.

“Yeah, I always knew I’d struggle with that one. Like I could keep my mouth shut.”

We lay together, my back to his front, both of us breathing deeply as he continued to stroke my hair.

“He said try to work out an escape route. If you don’t see one, be observant, listen, always keep a strong and positive survival attitude at the forefront of your mind. You might be held against your will, but you’re still alive, and if you’re alive, there’s always hope.”

“There’s always hope,” I reiterated. “Has Adam been in many hostage situations? Because it sounds to me like he was reading from the bullshit textbook of kidnappers anonymous.”

“You’d be surprised,” Will replied in a serious tone that I’d never heard him use before. “Adam has probably been through more than he’d ever admit. He doesn’t talk about himself much. But he likes to use what he knows to help others.”

Will moved his fingers to thread them through my hair and slowly massage my scalp. I couldn’t help but close my eyes at the feel of him.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say,” he carried on. “Is that Adam said to talk. Even if you’re alone and its only in your head. Think about your family and friends. Talk to them. Tell them what you plan to do when you get out. If you lose yourself or get lost in your mind, you risk losing everything. Remember,” he whispered into my ear. “That escape mentality, your survival, it has to win above all else.”

I suppressed a moan as his fingers rubbed and stroked me into a meditative state. Something I’d never thought possible where I currently lay, on a shitty mattress in a concrete cave.

“Adam makes it sound so easy,” I said, my voice sounding distant, like I was floating on a cloud and the world was falling away.

“Far from it. He knows how hard it is. But at the moment, I think we’re doing okay.”

“We’ve been here for a few hours.”

“That’s what I mean. In a few days, we’ll need to remind ourselves what he said. But for now, we’re being fed, watered, and the Titmaster is keeping a mask on to hide his identity. The day that comes off is the day we di—”

I didn’t hear what he said after that. His magic fingers had hypnotised me, sending me to a place where there was no captor, no filth, and no concrete box to contain us. Only dreams of hope and a future that didn’t make my chest constrict in pain.

Chapter Twelve



All night I was in and out of sleep, nightmares creeping over me. I'd wake up in pools of sweat drenching my body, only for Will to hold me, stroke me, and soothe me back to unconsciousness. If you'd asked me a day ago who I'd prefer to be kidnapped with, he'd have been way down on that list, but right now, he was surprising me. Showing me a gentleness that I never knew he possessed.

When morning came, it wasn't a hazy sunrise or the sounds of the world waking around us that pulled me from my dreams.

No.

It was the buzz of electricity followed by harsh lights overhead flooding the room with a brightness that made me squeeze my eyes shut for just a moment longer. I kept them shut, moving slowly on the mattress, but as I reached out, I realised the space next to me was cold.

My eyes sprang open as I sat up with a start.

"Eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five..."

Will was at the foot of the mattress, doing press-ups on the floor.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked, wiping the sleep out of my eyes.

"Ninety, ninety-one... I'm working out," he panted, then carried on counting, stopping when he got to one hundred and

lying on his front, trying to catch his breath.

“I call bullshit.”

“Why is me working out bullshit?” he asked, pushing himself off the floor and sitting on the edge of the mattress, wiping his forehead as he stared back at me.

“Not the working out. The number. I’d bet money on you doing twenty. Thirty, tops.”

He laughed, and for a split second I felt that warmth flow through me again. It didn’t last, though. Not when the reality of where we were was screaming at me from every inch of our shitty cell. From the lights blaring down on us, to the dirty walls with their crosses and scar-like scratches. Even the concrete had suffered from being here. It wore its wounds like a weary veteran.

Would we be the same after this?

Would we even make it out alive?

“Why are you bothering to work out anyway?” I asked.

“Because I’m keeping myself fit. Physical wellbeing is important in a situation like this.”

“Let me guess,” I ventured. “Another one of Adam’s tips for captives?”

“It is actually,” he replied, sounding way too cheerful, a fact that seemed to rub me up the wrong way.

“Why aren’t you raging?” I narrowed my eyes. “We’re locked in here. That fucker is going to do God knows what to us. Why are you acting like this is just another day for you?”

I could feel my blood starting to boil, my anger erupting, and I couldn’t keep it down.

Will twisted to face me.

“Just because you don’t see me raging, doesn’t mean I’m not burning with fury in here.” He banged his fist on his chest, his face contorting with what looked like pain as if to prove his point. “I feel just as much rage as you do, but I show it differently. I always have. To some, it comes off as flippant,

care less maybe. But it's there. It's always there. And when I'm ready to unleash it, I will." He took a breath and pinned me with the same narrow stare I'd just given him. "But I'm not about to release it on to you. In here. Why would I do that?"

I swallowed my discomfort at the truthfulness of his words and crawled off the mattress, standing and placing my hands on the walls. Clawing at the grey plaster, I cursed, muttering under my breath, "There must be something here. Something in this room we can use, chip away at, fucking kick it in and create a weapon. Anything."

"Keep clawing at those walls and you can gather the dust and throw it in his eyes," Will quipped, then added, "If you can catch him without the mask on, that is."

I ignored him, stalking over to the toilet area.

"What about this? We could find a way to kick it, smash it off the wall."

"And flood the room with shitty water?"

"It's worth a try. The cistern might shatter. Give us a shard we could use."

Will sighed and shook his head.

"I'm not saying that's a bad idea. Hell, any ideas are worth a try, but let's wait it out for a while. We need to know what we're dealing with."

"There you go again," I argued, anger bubbling to the surface. "Where's your rage? Why aren't you fighting?"

He shot up from his spot on the mattress, fists clenching as he gritted his teeth.

"I'm saving the fight for a time when it's needed." He tilted his head and glared at me. "Have you ever heard the saying, slowly, slowly, catchy monkey?"

I cocked my head, glaring back at him.

"We're more like the three wise monkeys, see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."

"But there's only two of us." He smirked.

“Three, if you include your ego,” I spat back.

Suddenly, the hatch near the floor opened and two water bottles rolled across the floor, followed by a paper plate with two slices of toast on it.

“Hey, open the fucking door!” I shouted, marching over to where the hatch that’d shut as fast as it opened was and pounding on the wall above it. “Come in and face us, you fucking coward!”

I stood banging and pounding on the concrete until tiredness and the futility of it all made me give up.

Turning and leaning against the wall, feeling helpless, I watched as Will bent down, opened a bottle, took a swig, then passed it to me. Seems his preservation techniques from the night before were still on red alert.

“Thanks,” I said, taking it from him and downing the cold liquid, closing my eyes and savouring how good it felt on my sore, scratchy throat.

“It might not look like it, but today is a good day,” Will announced drily. “He’s fed us again. He still wants us alive.” He shrugged, reaching for the plate on the floor.

“Yep,” I uttered to myself. “We’re the perfect fatted calves.”

“Maybe we can use the paper plates,” Will piped up, taking a bite of a piece of toast and handing it to me.

“For what? Makeshift fans to keep us cool?”

“For weapons.” He rolled his eyes, but so did I.

What the fuck was he on about?

Will took his piece of toast, put it on the mattress and started to roll the plate tightly.

“Years ago, my grandfather told me he always carried a rolled-up newspaper around with him. Whenever he was in a rough neighbourhood, he’d use it as a weapon. If it’s rolled up tight enough, it’s as hard as wood.” As if to prove his point, Will jabbed the edge of the rolled-up plate into his palm. “See?”

A deadly weapon made just for you.” He leaned forward, passing it to me, and I took it, twisting it in my hand.

“Great. The perfect weapon. Until it gets wet or meets an opponent that isn’t made of fucking jelly.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a pessimist?” Will arched his brow.

“No,” I snapped. “But being held hostage kind of brings that hidden side out of me.”

“It could be worse,” Will said, giving me a look that told me he thought I should think more like him.

“How could any of this be worse?”

“We could be chained up. Shackled together. Chained to walls, strung up and hanging or some medieval shit like that.”

He had a point.

“Yeah. That would be worse.”

In that moment, extra light from the corner of the room drew our attention away from our pointless bickering and towards the TV that flickered to life.

“Hold that thought,” I said, walking over to be closer to Will. “I think things are about to take a turn for the worse.”

Chapter Thirteen



She was like a pendulum, swinging from one emotion to the other. None of them helping her. All it was doing was making her worse. She hadn't reached the manic stage yet, but if I didn't step in, it'd come soon.

At the moment, she was panicking. I couldn't blame her. Nobody knows how they'd react in circumstances like this—most normal people, anyway.

Me?

I was born in this life.

It wasn't the first time I'd faced danger, and it wouldn't be the last. I had an inbuilt buffer, a filter, if you like, that kept the demons at bay. It was called not taking life too seriously and rolling with the punches. She thought I was being flippant, accusing me of not raging like she thought I should. I raged. I just didn't show it like other people. The Taskmaster wasn't the only one who could wear a mask. I had many of them, all stored deep inside.

So, to help her, I'd talked to her, told her about my grandfather, made her think about other people outside these four walls. Yes, the paper plate was bullshit, but I'd hoped it'd make her smile. Make her take the piss out of me like she always did. And I loved that. But her response had been irritable, accusatory, I would say hate-filled, but I don't think she was quite there yet. Perhaps the head rubs from last night had helped squash any anger that might've been directed

towards me, but that'd come. Maybe. If I didn't do something to help her through this.

I tried to get her to see that things could be worse. If we were still here, still talking, breathing, sharing the same air, there was hope. It could always be worse. We could be dead already. But I decided against sharing that nugget with her. She had enough darkness swirling around her mind; she didn't need more. So, I went down the medieval torture route. Aren't we lucky we aren't chained to a rack or locked into an iron maiden? Probably not the best alternative to the subject of death I was trying to avoid, but I never was good at thinking on my feet. Things came into my head, and I said them.

Just as she told me to 'hold that thought,' I noticed the TV in the corner come to life, and every muscle in my body tensed, my fists clenching as he came onto the screen. If she thought I wasn't raging before, I definitely was now. My teeth were clamped so tightly together they might actually crack. This guy had balls of fucking steel to take us, keep us locked up in here, and then appear on a bloody screen like he was a fucking God.

His appearance today was no different. He was wearing a black cloak over his head, and today's mask was some kind of animal skull with black horns. He obviously wanted to exude death. All I saw was a pretentious prick.

"Good morning, my star players," he announced, his mechanical voice making him sound like a B-list horror movie character. "I hope you're well rested and ready for what lies ahead for you today."

Bryony stood underneath the TV, peering up at it, hanging on his every word. I went to stand next to her, my arms crossed as I prepared myself to listen to more of his bullshit.

"In a moment, the door to your room will open, and you will face your first task. Before that happens, I need to remind you of a few rules. Follow them and you'll live. Fail to do so and you die."

I went to call out, but Bryony shushed me, so I stayed quiet, ready to hear what this fucker had to say.

“When the door opens, you will both leave the room and walk down the corridor to the task room. You may not take anything with you from this room. That includes”—he paused—“paper plates or bottles.”

He’d heard what we’d said. I didn’t care, though.

“Once you reach the task room, you will listen and follow the instructions given to you to complete your task. Succeed and you will live another day. Fail and you will die.”

“He likes repeating himself,” I cussed under my breath, earning another shush from Bee.

“You will work as a team,” he announced, as if he was proud of that fact. “And when your task is complete, you will leave the task room from the door indicated and make your way back here. Failure to do so will end in your death. Any effort to escape or flout my rules and you will die. It’s very simple. You are my players and I expect you to play by the rules.”

“Or let me guess... we die?” I asked sarcastically.

“Exactly.” And with that, the TV plunged into darkness.

“Is it wrong that I’m intrigued to see what this task is?” I asked, turning to look at Bee.

“There’s a million things wrong with this whole scenario,” she replied. “But us getting out of this room isn’t one of them.”

I hoped she was right because I had a feeling what we’d find in the task room might make us wish we’d stayed here instead.

Chapter Fourteen



WILL

We stood momentarily in silent anticipation, waiting to see what would happen next. When the wall groaned, a part of it sliding open to reveal a gap, we stepped closer, peering out into the dimly lit hallway. Strip lights, like the ones in our room, lit up the corridor, and I took her hand in mine as we walked forward. She didn't argue about us holding hands, just gripped my hand tightly in hers as we took each step slowly, with trepidation for what was waiting for us at the end.

The corridor was silent except for the buzz of the electric lights overhead. There were no other doors that we could see, only a light at the end of the concrete tunnel to show us where we were heading.

Our final destination.

Hearing her sharp breaths as she began to pant deeper, I squeezed her hand and told her, "We've got this. Stay calm. Keep your wits about you." I peered down at her as we walked. "*I've got you.*"

She nodded, visibly swallowing and whispered back, "I know."

Once we reached the end of the corridor, we walked through the open doorway at the end, into some sort of anteroom. As we did, the door behind us slammed shut, and a locking mechanism sounded, indicating we were stuck in here.

We stood in the middle of the tiny room, listening, waiting. And then a familiar mechanical voice flooded the area around us, speaking to us from speakers hidden way up the ceiling.

“Welcome to your game of consequences, Mr Stokes, Miss Masters. We’re honoured to have you here with us today.”

Lights flashed in front of our eyes, and I blinked, peering into a room that adjoined this one, hidden behind a glass wall. My eyelids fluttered, adjusting to the brightness as what was in that room became clearer. Behind the glass, displayed in front of us, was a man, an older, overweight man who was chained to the floor by his ankles and shackled to the ceiling by his wrists. Standing with his arms above his head, he had tape wrapped around his mouth, but from the bulge of his eyes and the sweat glistening off his body, you could tell he was struggling, yelling, desperate to escape.

Bryony gasped beside me, but we didn’t speak, just stood together, holding hands, waiting to find out what fucked-up game this was.

“Meet Wilson,” the mechanical voice announced, echoing around the room like a nightmare ready to infiltrate our minds and drag us to Hell. “Or as I like to call him, needle dick.” Hearing him use a nickname like that made my skin crawl and the hairs on my neck stand on end.

This wasn’t a good guy.

“I don’t think I need to explain to you, of all people, why this man is here,” he went on, mirroring my thoughts. “Life isn’t always fair, but sometimes, individuals like yourselves... and me, we step in. Realign the status quo, as it were.”

I could feel my nerves growing, fear multiplying. My leg was twitching as I watched the guy struggle. I’d taken care of scum like this a thousand times; this was nothing to me.

But I knew there’d be a catch.

He said this was a game.

It was obvious he wanted this man dead, but there was a chance we’d fail, and, well... I didn’t need to repeat what would happen if we did. He’d been clear enough about that.

“Here is your task for today. Listen carefully. Because in thirty seconds the door into his cell will open, and you will have two minutes to go in there and complete your task.”

Time stood still as everything around me faded into nothing. All I could hear was his voice. All I could see was our mark. All I could feel was her next to me, and she was all that mattered. I had to get her out of here.

“In the task room, on a table to the left, you will see needles, a lot of needles.”

I glanced to the left and saw a mountain of needles piled up on a wooden table.

“You have two minutes to inject these needles into Mr Wilson. Every single needle has to be pushed down, the contents plunged into his body for it to count. If you fail to inject all the needles in the two minutes allotted to you, you will stay locked in that room and a gas will be pumped through the vents. It’ll kill you. And it won’t be a pleasant, drift off to sleep kind of death. It’ll hurt, strip your skin, scald your insides, and make you feel like you’re burning alive. Time is of the essence.”

Two minutes.

A red two-minute timer appeared on the wall behind Wilson, ready to count down.

“When the task has been completed, the lights will turn green,” he added. “So, that’s it. Two minutes. All the needles for Mr Wilson. And if you do that, you live. Simple.”

We could do it.

I knew we could.

Time would be an issue, but we were working together.

That green light was coming on, no question about it.

“Are you ready to play my game?” he asked, then cackled with laughter as a door to the side of us opened, letting us into the room to start his fucked-up task.

The minute we stepped through, the red number started counting down.

I let go of Bee's hand and ran over to the table.

"Grab a handful, make sure they're all facing the same way, and stab on the fleshy parts of his body," I shouted, grabbing a bundle of needles in both hands and racing over to where he hung.

I couldn't give a fuck about some guy called needle dick. All I was focused on was getting this done and getting Bee out of here.

He squealed behind the tape like a pig, thrashing in his constraints as the sweat trickled down his body.

"Don't look at him," I commanded. "Just stab."

Bryony didn't answer, but I felt her next to me, thumping two fists into his stomach and then pushing as she plunged the contents into him.

"It's just meat, nothing else," I said, trying to help her through this.

Needle dick started shaking, his body reacting to whatever drug had been put into the needles, but I stayed focused, running from the table to him and slamming the needles in, pushing, then running to get more.

Over and over we went. Filling his stomach, his thighs, and his ass full of needles.

As we did, the time ticked down, but I focused on the table, feeling relief when I saw the pile diminishing as we worked as a team. Needle after needle after needle. So many fucking needles. But we were winning. We'd got this.

The guy swung in his chains, looking like a fucking pin cushion as he hung from the ceiling. His eyes bled as white froth that couldn't make it through his mouth came spurting out of his nose. The jerks from his muscles subsided as the drugs dragged him under, taking him straight to Hell, but we never gave up. Even when the stench of death and the filth that left his body as he died filled our nostrils and made it difficult

to breathe, we kept on. Our task was to dispense them all. We wouldn't stop until we did.

One minute passed, and the needles began to scatter on the table as they became fewer and fewer. We were on the last lap, and we were winning. We had to win.

I scooped up the last pile of needles and raced over to him, stabbing them into his chest and panting as I stood back.

But nothing happened.

No green light.

What the fuck was going on?

“We used all the needles!” Bryony shouted, spinning around to try and aim her voice to wherever he was listening. “Why aren't you turning the lights green, you fucking freak?”

“Maybe we missed one?” I replied, running back to the table, scrabbling around, checking every inch, but there was nothing. So I crouched down, looking on the floor, seeing if by chance we'd dropped one. But again, there was nothing.

Twenty seconds.

Nineteen.

Eighteen.

“No! No! No!” Bryony shouted, her hands shooting into her hair as she pulled the strands in frustration.

“What the fuck am I missing?” I shouted, my heart now pounding in my ears. This wasn't fucking happening.

Fourteen.

Thirteen.

And then I saw it.

A knitting needle lying at the edge of the room, hidden in the shadows.

“Fucking bastard,” I screamed, darting across to get it and then charging over to the mark.

Five.

Four.

With three seconds to go, I stabbed it into his eyeball, a primal shout coming from the depths of my soul as I inserted the last fucking needle.

And then, the room fell silent.

Two.

One.

And the green light came on.

I panted, doubling over and bracing my hands on my knees as I caught my breath.

“I should’ve known he wouldn’t play fucking fair,” I told myself. Then I looked up to see Bryony staring at the guy, tears welling in her eyes as she saw what we’d done.

“Don’t look,” I told her, walking over to her and using my body to shield her from it all. “Just look at me.” I took her face in my hands, stroking her cheeks as I forced her to look into my eyes. “We did it. We’re alive and he didn’t deserve to be. You know how it goes. You know how this works.”

She nodded, but those tears still clung to her eyes, threatening to break free at any moment.

“I know,” she uttered quietly. “I know.”

I knew she was repeating herself to make it sound right. To come to terms with what’d been the most stressful two minutes of both our lives.

“Let’s go,” I said, pulling her to me and leading her past the body so she couldn’t see it, guiding her to the door that’d just slid open.

Holding her up and close to me, we walked back down the corridor to our room. With each step we took, the protectiveness I always felt for her morphed into so much more. If I could’ve cut myself open and pulled her inside of me to keep her safe, I would’ve. I wanted to hold her in my arms and never let her go. Let my air be the air that kept her alive. I wanted to give her life. Because in that moment, I

realised something I'd been ignoring for a long time. Something I'd been kidding myself about for months.

Bryony Masters wasn't a girl I wanted to fuck.

She wasn't a girl I wanted to date.

She was the girl I'd fallen for.

I loved her. Had done for months, and I'd do anything for her, anything to make her happy and keep her safe. She was everything. And as I walked back into the cell, holding her close, I knew she'd make it out of here. Even if it meant I had to die to make that happen.

Chapter Fifteen



“**Y**ou don’t have to hold me up,” I told him, even though having him wrap his arm around me gave me a warm feeling inside, something I really shouldn’t have felt after what we’d done back in that room. “I can walk on my own.”

“I know you can,” he said but didn’t remove his arm from my shoulders. Then, leaning his head to speak in a whisper, he added, “Maybe I’m the one that needs the support.”

He was being sweet. I knew that.

As we arrived back in our cell, the door behind us closed, the seam so tight you could barely make out that the door was even there.

“So that’s what he wants us for. To kill for him in the most fucked-up ways he can think of.” I moved to sit on the mattress and Will joined me. “But why us?” I turned to face him. “Why were we taken and not Adam or Devon? He targeted us for a reason. I want to know what it is.”

“We might never know. That’s just the way it is.” He let his arm fall away from my shoulder, but he kept it behind me, resting it on the mattress. “We might never find out why he chose to take us, to bring us here, to do all this.” He smirked sadly and added, “Maybe it’s because he knows I’m the best.”

“At killing? That’s not something to brag about.”

Will had been a vigilante with his friends for years, protecting the streets of Brinton Manor. But choosing your

own mark and being forced to kill the way we just were was something else entirely.

“Do you know who that Wilson guy was?” I asked. “Have you ever met him.”

“Never,” Will stated, shaking his head.

“Then how do you know he deserved to die like that?”

“Call it a hunch. And the fact he was called needle dick. It’s not the best nickname.”

“There’s more to this,” I replied, ignoring his comment about the nickname.

“You’re probably right but try not to read too much into it until we know more facts. You’re gonna drive yourself crazy. He said that guy deserved it. We have to believe that. We did the world a favour. If you see it that way, it makes what we did feel a little better.”

“And if he didn’t deserve it? I mean, it’s not like that masked fucker tells the truth all the time. He tried to fuck us over with a fucking knitting needle.”

“That’s not our problem. Our problem is surviving. Living another day so we can get out of here. To me, that’s all that counts.”

We sat for a while on the mattress. I wrapped my arms tightly around my knees, rocking back and forth, and he chatted away, trying to distract me. Trying being the operative word. I couldn’t seem to shut down my emotions or my panicked thoughts. I needed to make sense of all this, but nothing was clear. None of it made sense.

Eventually, the hours passed. Water and stale ham sandwiches were slid into the room and reluctantly eaten. And then, the lights went out, bathing us in a darkness that never seemed to end.

I gave a low sigh into the blackness weighing down on me, and then I lay down. I felt the mattress dip beside me as Will lay next to me. Staring up at a ceiling I couldn’t see, I tried to dull the screams in my head.

“Tell me about your childhood,” he asked, and I knew right away what he was doing. Making me think about our loved ones on the outside. Reminding me of the life we had to go back to.

“Why?” I asked a little too sharply. I bit my lip with regret. Taking it out on him wouldn’t solve anything.

“Because I want to know more about what makes you tick,” he replied.

“Tell me about *your* childhood first,” I shot back. I didn’t have the energy to talk, not yet.

“My childhood was very wholesome,” he announced proudly. “And I’ve been trying to fill those damn holes ever since.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at him.

“Very funny, Will.”

“Being the son of a genie was pretty tough.”

“What?” I chuckled.

“My mum. She was a genie... she spent most of my childhood in a bottle.”

Well, that joke went south quickly.

“Oh my God, is that true?” I asked.

“What, the genie part or the alcohol?”

I lashed out, smacking him playfully in the chest.

“The alcohol, you dumbass.”

“Yeah, it was true. Can’t say I blame her though. She had it tough. My dad died of cancer when I was seven. She had to raise me and my little brother alone. It wasn’t always easy. We spent a bit of time in care in the early days after he died, but she did her best.”

“That’s terrible,” I replied, and I meant it. I knew all the soldiers of Brinton Manor had had a tough life, but it wasn’t something Will ever dwelled on. When you met him, you’d think he’d always been the happy-go-lucky joker he was

today. I guess humour could mask a lot of sadness, and he wore his with pride.

“But enough about me, what was it like growing up in the Masters’ house?”

I paused. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to open up a little about my childhood. It’d help pass the time away. But I wasn’t going into any great detail. I didn’t have the energy for that sort of soul searching.

“My mum was pretty much like yours, only without the genie part. Her and my dad had a rocky relationship. One minute they’d be arguing, fighting tooth and nail and saying how much they hated each other. The next, they’d be locked in their bedroom, leaving me and my sisters downstairs in front of the TV for hours. I wasn’t sure which was worse, the ornaments that went flying, smashing against the walls, or the bed frame banging against it.”

Will gave a low chuckle that, despite our dire and shitty circumstances, made my stomach do a little flip. I had to do something to distract myself from my traitorous feelings, so I turned the spotlight back on him.

“So, I have a question,” I announced. “Why did you throw me in the pond last year at your Halloween party?”

There was no low chuckle this time, and I could sense him tensing beside me. Then he cleared his throat before he began to give me an explanation.

“I guess... well, I know, I kind of...”

“Spit it out, Stokes. Why were you the epitome of an asshole last year?”

“Because I wanted you to notice me.”

His words struck me dumb. Totally floored me.

“Whenever you were with us, you and your sisters, you and I always seemed to gravitate towards each other, and yet, I never seemed to get any time with you, if that makes sense? You’d always be focused on what Shelley was doing with

Colton or where Kate was. So, I went a bit... rogue. I just wanted you to see me.”

I didn't expect brutal honesty, not from Will. He was always joking, teasing, making light out of anything and everything. I hadn't expected him to put himself out there like this.

“You know, there are better ways to get a girls attention than drowning her, making her look like a tit in front of everyone and having her literally fearing for her life.”

“You're being over dramatic. That pond is about a metre deep, maybe two at a push. You were never in any danger.”

“How do you know? People have been known to drown in puddles.”

“That was never gonna happen. I'd got you. Anyway, I thought you'd see the funny side.”

He still didn't laugh, though. He knew he'd fucked up, and he was backpedalling.

“I can say this now,” he carried on. “Lying here, because I don't know what tomorrow will bring. So, I'm gonna put it out there, live in the moment, like Colton always tells me to.” He paused, sighing before going on. “I like you, Bee. I always have. I'm just not great at showing it, but I do.” I was about to tell him I liked him too when he added, “I've never met a girl who could give as good as she gets. You're like one of the lads. We bounce off each other. You roast me better than any of the boys. You keep me on my toes.”

Will had always joked about us getting together. He said it made sense, seeing as his best friend was with my sister. But this speech sounded an awful lot like I was being complimented and friend-zoned at the same time. I was a little confused, and I didn't want to admit it, but I was disappointed too.

“I saw you at the Halloween party dressed as the Little Mermaid. I was Mitch from Baywatch. It made sense to me in that moment to do a little roleplay.”

“You're such a knobhead. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Yes, you have. Multiple times.”

I grinned to myself.

“I’d had too much to drink,” he said, sounding contrite all of a sudden. “I saw you and thought I’d impress everyone out there.”

“Everyone except me.”

“You didn’t seem that unhappy when I picked you up.”

I wasn’t about to admit that being held in Will’s arms that night had done things to me.

“I liked it though,” he said. I felt him shift next to me and then the warmth of his breath on my cheek as he lay beside me. “Having you in my arms, it made me feel...” He stopped for a moment, as if he was trying to find the right word to fit.

“Manly? Chauvinistic?” I offered.

“Protective,” he replied. “I liked how it felt to have your arms around my neck.”

“I could re-enact that with my hands if you like?”

He huffed a laugh.

“I knew the minute I’d dropped you in that I’d fucked up. I didn’t expect you to start thrashing around like you did, though.”

“I can’t swim, Will.”

“I know, and when those two guys waded in trying to get to you, I snapped, told them to fuck off.”

“And then you dragged me out covered in pond scum, while I yelled obscenities at you.”

“It was music to my ears.”

I turned my head to face him.

“I hated you that night.”

“I wasn’t that fond of myself either, although it did raise a laugh with some of the crowd.”

“I’m glad it was worth it.”

He went quiet, then with a hint of humour in his tone, he said, “Seeing your face when I turned up at your doorstep a few days later with a pair of armbands to apologise was priceless.”

“As gifts go, that was the worst.”

“Again, I thought it was funny.”

“I bet you weren’t laughing later that night.” I pursed my lips, holding in my laugh as I waited for his response.

“What? After you invited me in for a drink and laced my coffee with whatever evilness you put in there?”

“My mum’s laxatives. And you deserved it.”

“Those were your mum’s?” He gave another huff. “I don’t feel so bad about the brownies now, then.”

I couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“You mean the special brownies you sent me as a second apology because the first was so shit? The hash cakes that my mum took from whoever you sent as your delivery guy and fed to my Aunt Paula and the rest of her book club friends? Yeah, you should feel bad.”

He grew tense beside me.

“In my defence, those brownies weren’t meant for your mum.”

“Will, you have no defence. I got home to find the five of them giggling uncontrollably, eating the contents of the fridge ‘cos they had the munchies, and then I had to stay up all night babysitting them. My mum was convinced the walls were made of cheese. Have you ever tried wrestling a middle-aged woman who’s intent on licking the walls at three a.m.?”

“Can’t say I have, and I’ve seen it all.”

“It wasn’t pretty. She ruined her wallpaper.”

“And yet your mum still loves me.”

“I think her exact opinion of you, when she met you, was he thinks he’s a wit, and to be fair, he is half right. Or was it,

he's only got two brain cells and both of those are fighting for third place?"

"I love it." He laughed back. "Sounds like she got those lines straight from the Bryony Masters book of comebacks. Like mother like daughter, hey?"

"She can give as good as she gets."

We lay together, lost in our world of pointless, silly, practical jokes and putdowns. But then, all too soon, the reality of our situation came hurtling back towards us, drowning me in the horrors to come.

"When do you think this is all going to end?" I asked in a quiet voice. "A day? A month? A year?"

"It won't be that long," he replied, putting his arm around my waist and pulling me closer to him. I turned to lie on my side, tucking my hands under my head as my back rested against his front. "They'll be looking for us," he went on. "It doesn't matter what he's sent on our phones, they know us. They know our voices even through a text message. They'll know something's up, and they'll be tearing down the whole bloody town to find us."

"But what if they don't... find us, I mean."

He threaded his fingers through my hair at the nape of my neck and started to rub and massage.

"Then I'll get us out of here. This isn't forever, Bee. This isn't how our story ends. It's just a chapter. A really fucking shitty one, but that's all it is."

I lay still, enjoying the sensation of his soothing touches.

"You're good at that." I sighed, angling my head so he'd massage me where I needed him to.

"Told you I had healing hands. Aren't you glad you didn't cut them off and use them for bookends now?"

I grinned, letting myself get lost in the moment. A little moment in a sea of hopelessness, a moment that meant more than he'd ever know. His touch reminded me I wasn't alone.

“Will?” I muttered under my breath.

“Mmmhmm?” he replied.

“I noticed you. I’ve always noticed you.”

It went quiet. The only sound I could hear was our breathing and his fingers rubbing over my scalp.

And then... “I know. I just didn’t want you to notice anyone else. I wanted to be all you saw.”

And he was.

But I only nodded.

My heart was already fractured, breaking every minute that we were locked in here. I wasn’t sure it could take anymore.

Chapter Sixteen



WILL

Hours turned into days, but the seconds ticked by so slowly it felt like time stood still as we stayed locked in our room.

Waiting for something.

Anything.

Twice a day, we were given water and simple food, usually stale sandwiches. Day and night were only broken up by the lights suspended above us, controlled by him.

And then it happened again.

The television came to life.

Bryony sat beside me on the mattress as the TV showed us our captor, filling the screen with a different mask, Freddy Krueger this time.

“Always fucking hiding,” I seethed. “Why don’t you come in here and face me like a real man?”

Ignoring my challenge, he started his diatribe, that mechanical voice making me want to pound my fist into the screen and shut him up for good.

“Good evening, players. It’s time for game two to begin. But before it does, I had to come on here and address a few things.”

“Like the fact you’re a sick fuck who’s going to die a very long and painful death when I find you?” I hissed.

“No. The fact that you want to know if I picked you on purpose. And I did pick you. Both of you. I’ve watched you for a long time.”

We didn’t speak, both of us waiting to hear what he’d say next.

“There’s a very good reason why you’re here, and it will be revealed, all in good time. But not tonight.” Typical. He never answered a question with a proper answer. “Tonight, you need to play to survive another day. I have another task for you. One you’re going to *love* playing. In a moment, the door to your room will open and you will make your way to the task room. As I’ve stated before, you leave this room empty handed. Try anything stupid and you will be punished. You work as a team. If you don’t, you’ll fail. Instructions for the game will be given to you in the task room. Listen carefully. Do as you’re told and don’t try to be a hero. It won’t end well for you.”

The TV cut out with no further explanation, and I heard Bryony take a deep breath.

“We’ve got this, Bee,” I told her. “And when it’s done, I’m staying in that fucking task room and waiting for him. He’ll face me tonight if it’s the last thing I do.”

“You heard him,” she warned. “Don’t be a hero.”

“Fighting for our lives isn’t being a hero, Bee. It’s what I need to do.”

The door to the hallway suddenly slid open, the strip lights on the ceiling guiding our way to the task room.

“Let’s get this over with, shall we?” Bee stood up, but then, grabbing my hand, she stood in front of me and begged, “I want both of us to get back here alive. Please don’t do anything stupid, Will.”

I squeezed her hand.

“I won’t do anything to put you in danger.”

“And yourself?”

“I can’t make any promises there.”

“I can’t do this without you, Will. If anything happens to you, I won’t survive this.”

I didn’t know what to say back to her, I had no words. So I kissed her forehead and stepped forward, taking her with me as I walked out of the room.

It felt like we were walking to the gallows as we went down that corridor, our joined hands growing slick with sweat, our breaths becoming more laboured. My heart and hers beating a rhythm that was drumming faster the closer we got to the door that’d lead us to our next task.

When we got there, we both stopped, standing in the doorway, gawping at the horrific sight laid out for us.

This time, we found ourselves in the actual task room, not an anteroom. In the middle of the room was a naked man strapped to a wooden cross. His arms were outstretched, his legs strapped in place, and around his neck was a rope that was attached to the ceiling above, pulled tight but not tight enough to fully choke him. He was conscious, his eyes rabid with terror, bulging in fear as we took another step into the room. His mouth was taped shut, but he still gave a muffled cry as he glared at us, his eyes begging us to help him.

Behind him was the timer we’d had in the first challenge, with five minutes set on it, ready to count down. I glanced to the side, seeing a table set up against the wall, scattered with weird stuff like a candle, paper, a crayon, an old radio, a compass, and other things, all of it totally random and probably pointless to complete the task. The Taskmaster did love fucking with us, after all.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as his voice filled the room, and we both stood frozen to the spot, waiting to hear our fate.

“Welcome to your second game. May I introduce you to Fraser, or as I like to call him, the hangman.”

I stared at Fraser, bile rising in my throat, but not a shred of pity.

It was him or us.

“Don’t feel sorry for him,” the Taskmaster said, infiltrating my thoughts.

I didn’t feel anything for him.

“Fraser here has a very specific kink. He likes to choke people, but he doesn’t always stop when he should, do you, Fraser? Tonight, he’s going to find out what goes around comes around. He’s going to get a taste of his own medicine. He’s going to know what it feels like to go too far. Unless you fail, that is.”

“We won’t fail,” I hissed through gritted teeth.

“Good. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.”

The room fell quiet, a silence that was soon broken by Fraser’s stifled moans and muffled begs.

“Listen carefully to the rules and you will survive. Fail, and you will all die in this room tonight. Fraser has been mounted onto one of my favourite devices, a rack made just for him. As each minute ticks by, the rope around his neck will tighten. The wood where his arms and legs are attached will expand, and if he’s lucky, you’ll complete the task before his limbs pop out or rip free of his body completely. I’d like you to look above you,” the Taskmaster instructed, and peering up, we saw containers filled with liquid.

“If you fail to complete the task in the five minutes that I’m so generously giving you, the acid in those containers will be released. It’ll burn the flesh from your bones in seconds. Not the best way to go, so I suggest you work fast, work smart, and work together. There are things in this room that’ll help you succeed in your task, but all items must remain in this room. If you try to take anything out of here or use it for anything other than to complete this task, you will be punished, severely. You have been warned.”

“And the task is?” I asked, growing irritated, staring up at the acid and trying not to let the thought of what that could do to her affect my ability to think straight.

“He’s the hangman. You’re going to play a game of hangman.”

A screen above the table flickered to life, showing a hangman puzzle and a touchscreen keyboard underneath. There were seven words, so it was clearly a saying.

“Looks pretty simple, yes?” he asked, then sneered, “Unfortunately for you, it’s not. You’re only allowed to guess with the letters you find in the room. If you guess a letter that isn’t in this room, you will fail, and the acid will be dispensed. You have five minutes to find those letters and complete the saying on the screen. Good luck.” There was a pause, and then he asked, “Are you ready to play my game?” And suddenly, the whole room was plunged into darkness.

“What the fuck?” I shouted, seeing the red numbers on the wall behind the hangman begin to count down, showing the task had started, but I couldn’t see a fucking thing in the room.

“The table,” Bee cried, grabbing for me in the dark and pulling me towards her. “There’s gotta be something on here that’ll help us.”

We both felt our way over the objects on there, slowly, so as not to knock anything off. I twisted the knobs on the radio, but nothing happened. I squinted in the dark, begging my eyes to adjust so I could see if the letters were written on the objects, but I couldn’t see anything. And then I heard Bee gasp as she clicked the button of something she was holding.

“I’ve got it,” she said as a blue light shone from the torch she was holding.

I grabbed her arm, shining the light over the candle to see if there was a letter, but there was nothing. The paper, nothing. The radio... again, nothing.

“Why aren’t there any fucking letters?” she cried in exasperation.

“Because it’s a fucking black light.” I cursed myself for not realising and acting sooner. “It’s used to detect body fluids. Try the walls.”

Bee twisted, shining the torch onto the wall, moving it up and down, peering closely as she scanned every inch.

Then finally, we saw it.

A white letter 'E' glowing back at us.

I moved fast, tapping the letter 'E' on the screen, and the letters appeared in the puzzle. Six of them in total.

"That's it, keep going," I said, encouraging her.

She swept the black light over the wall, up and down. Side to side. And then, she found another one.

"S," she called out.

I couldn't see from where I stood, but I trusted her and tapped the 'S' on the screen. Four of them appeared.

"Any idea what it says yet?" she asked as she continued hunting, shining the light from floor to ceiling and then moving to the next wall when she couldn't find anything.

"Not a clue," I replied as Fraser's muted screams echoed around us. The groan of the wood expanding and the rope tightening reminding us that we had to work quicker.

"Come on, Bee," I couldn't help but shout out. "We need another one."

"I'm trying," she shouted back, frantically fanning the light up and down the wall. Then she called out, "I."

I tapped the letter 'I' and it appeared twice in the puzzle.

"Something is something, something, something, something," I said, frowning at the puzzle.

"That's really fucking helpful, Will," she spat.

"It'd be more helpful if you found more letters," I snapped back, Fraser squealing as the time ticked to show three minutes left.

She moved to the next wall, the light scanning the concrete like a laser. And then, "D!"

I tapped 'D' on the screen and three slotted into place in the puzzle.

"Something, is, something, dis, something... For fuck's sake, I don't know!" I ran my fingers through my hair, tugging

the ends as Fraser's restraints creaked but his moans subsided. Lucky fucker had probably passed out from the pain.

"Times running out, Bee." I felt frantic, and I had to stop myself from charging over to her and taking the torch off her to do it myself.

She panted as she scoured the walls, trying to find another letter.

"They're so small," she cried, crouching down to run the light along the bottom of the walls. "I'm scared I've missed one."

She moved to the next wall, the light skating faster now over the area, but I didn't want her desperation to make her sloppy and miss something.

"Slow down. We still have two minutes thirty," I told her.

Her breaths were ragged, her arm shaking as she moved sideways along the wall, checking every inch.

"B!" she shouted, and I tapped it.

"There's only one B," I replied. "That didn't help me."

"It's a letter, isn't it? I'm doing my fucking best."

I stared at the screen, trying to work it out. I knew there'd be a golden letter that'd make the saying fly out at me. But we had to find it first.

Two minutes on the clock and my heart was beating double time, feeling helpless as I stood there, waiting for her to find a needle in a fucking haystack.

She moved to the last wall, scanning it, but she wasn't getting anywhere.

"We're running out of time," I urged, the clock now down to one minute thirty.

"Try the ceiling," I called out, and when she came to the edge of the wall with no letter to show for it, she pointed the black light to the ceiling, and there, shining back at us, was the letter 'R'.

“R.... is a dis...” My brain didn’t work as fast as hers, and when she shouted out from her corner of the room, “Revenge is a dish best served cold!” Lights flooded back into the room and the rack Fraser was shackled to snapped hard, pulling his arms from their sockets and leaving his legs hanging limply. The noose around his neck tugged upwards, making his already purple face swell and bulge.

“We did it,” I gasped, turning to face Bee.

And then all hell broke loose as the containers above us burst open.

Chapter Seventeen



WILL

I gasped as ice-cold liquid cascaded from the ceiling, drenching us both in red, and for a split second, my worst fears came to life. Blind panic gripped my soul as my body froze. Then, when my adrenaline took hold, and I saw her standing there with her eyes wide, her screams echoing off the walls, I snapped.

She thought it was acid.

That fucker had played with us, and now she was stuck in her worst nightmare, terror ripping her from this room and taking her to whatever hell her mind was now stuck in.

“Bee, you’re okay!” I shouted, stalking over to her, grabbing her shoulders to shake her and bring her back to me. “It’s not acid. We’re not hurt.”

She gasped, the red liquid trickling through her hair, down her face, into her eyes and mouth as she frantically wiped it away. And as my words slowly penetrated through the fog of fear in her brain, she stared straight at me, unable to speak, but her eyes telling me how utterly terrified she was.

“It’s just corn starch,” I told her, using my finger to swipe through the gunk on my face and put it in my mouth. “You know, like they used for the pigs’ blood in Carrie, and in Scream. You’re okay,” I repeated, pulling her to me and wrapping my arms around her.

She panted, breathless as I held her in my arms.

“He’s a fucking animal,” I seethed. “And I’m telling you right now, we are never going to fail. He doesn’t want us to. He wants us to kill these people and let him watch it all like the sick fuck he is. He might be playing his sick torture games with these men, but he’s playing with us too. Playing mind games. Trying to fuck with us, and we can’t let him. Do you hear me, Bee?” I pulled back, keeping my arms around her but staring her straight in the eyes. “We can’t let him win. We have to stay strong and show him these psychological mind games won’t work on us.” I pressed my sticky, gunge-soaked forehead to hers and whispered, “You’re a Masters. Don’t ever forget that. You could walk through hell and come out the other side with a smile on your face. You’re strong. You’ve got this.”

She nodded, and as she leaned into me, I put my arm around her shoulder to lead her out of that room. Seconds ago, I’d wanted to stay in there. Wait for him to come out of the shadows and face me. He was a coward, and I wanted to prove it, have a showdown with him to end all of this. He couldn’t hide from me forever. But after seeing her standing there, looking so utterly frightened, terrified to the point of shaking, screaming, unable to hear me through her own cries, I had to leave. Get her as far away from this hellhole as I could.

She was all that mattered.

He could fuck with me all he wanted; I was used to this shit. But she was different. She wasn’t as hardened as I was. She was special. Mine to protect. And I wouldn’t fail at that job, not even if it killed me in the process.

I steered her to the doorway and out into the corridor. This time, she didn’t argue when I gave her support, held her up and walked her back to our room. She didn’t do anything other than take deep breaths to try and calm herself down and put one foot in front of the other. Sometimes, that’s all you can do, and tonight, that was enough.

Once we stepped back into our room, the door behind us slid shut. On the bed were two piles of clothes: one for her and one for me, toothbrushes and toothpaste, a washcloth and two towels, shampoo and soap.

He was evil, but he'd given us some grace and left things for us to clean up. I despised him and everything he'd done, but he still wanted us alive. That much was certain. Every cloud and all that.

"How are we... supposed to... clean this... shit with... bottled water?" she said, shivering and stumbling over her words.

I let go of her and stalked over to the toilet area to discover that the room had changed in our absence. He'd opened up a part of it to let us access a huge waterfall shower with a drain beneath it. No shower curtain or door, just the shower head with a lever to switch the water on and tiles around it.

"Come on," I said, picking it all up off the mattress. "We need to get this shit off us. The sooner we're clean, the better you'll feel."

I dropped the towels on the floor, away from the shower so they wouldn't get wet. Then I reached forward, twisting the lever to turn the shower on. I held my hand under the flow to test the temperature, and it took a little while, but eventually, hot water cascaded through.

Bryony stood at the edge of the room, her arms wrapped around herself as she tried to stop shivering, staring at me like she didn't know what to do next. I'd never seen her like this before, and I didn't like it. I hated what he'd done to her.

"It's gonna be okay," I told her, but she didn't respond.

I left most of the stuff on the shower floor, took both of the toothbrushes and put paste on them, then wet them under the water. I began brushing my teeth as I walked slowly over to where she stood, passing the other toothbrush to her, and then taking her hand in mine to lead her to the water. She started to brush too, and I muttered through my mouthful, "We're both alive. We can have a warm shower and brush our teeth. Life is good. Well, not good, but it's not as bad as some of the players stuck here."

Her eyes darkened as she got lost in her thoughts, probably picturing the guy, Fraser, moments before the syrup dropped.

Then she finished cleaning her teeth, dropped the brush on the towel nearby and peered up at me.

“Do you think there’s more? Like us, I mean? Do you think he has other players locked away?”

“Maybe.” I dropped my toothbrush next to hers, then manoeuvred her so that she was standing directly under the water. She closed her eyes as the syrup slowly trickled out of her hair and face. “But we can’t think about anyone else, only ourselves. Getting you out of here is all I care about.”

We stood together under the stream of hot water, the syrup washing down the drain as our clothes stuck to us like a heavy skin. The filth from earlier was draining away, but we weren’t clean. Not the way we needed to be.

I took a step back, pulling the now grey-white T-shirt up and over my head, before throwing the sopping wet shirt into the corner of the shower. Bryony stood still, watching me without saying a word as I undid the buttons on my jeans. Then I pulled them and my boxers down my legs, kicking them off and over to where the wet shirt lay. I stood for a moment, completely naked in front of her. Water streamed down my chest, over my skin, making me feel more alive than I’d felt in ages. I tilted my head back, letting the hot water drench my face, opening my mouth to take a gulp and then wiping my face to clear the drops from my eyes.

Then, with no words, I stepped to her, pulling the zip on the front of her catsuit down until the milky skin of her chest and stomach peeked through. I knelt in front of her, pulling the tight fabric down her legs and off, throwing the catsuit and her underwear to the corner of the shower to pile up on top of mine.

She stood still, naked, as I knelt before her, and as I peered up at her, I realised I’d never seen her look more beautiful than she did right now. Her lips were parted, her chest rising and falling as she panted out slow, deep breaths. Her hands hung at her sides, fists clenched, but then, she reached her left arm forward and ran her fingers through my wet hair, her eyes glowing with empathy that made my stomach clench.

We stared at each other, lost in a trance, held in a moment that neither of us wanted to break. Eventually, I stood up, taking the bottle of shampoo, and in a gruff voice I asked her to turn around. Wordlessly, she did as I said, and I felt myself grow harder as my cock brushed against her perfect round ass. I reminded myself that this couldn't be sexual. She was traumatised and she needed me, and not to fuck her in a shitty shower, but to tease her back to life. So, I ignored my raging hard-on and squeezed the shampoo into my palm. Then I rubbed it into her scalp, lathering until her whole head was covered in soapy bubbles. I rubbed down the length of her hair, cleaning her, making her my Bryony again. It felt good to cleanse her like this.

She gave a little moan, which didn't help in my effort to distract myself from how fucking turned on I was right now. Then she leaned her head back, enjoying the feel of my fingers on her, massaging her. When I was happy that her hair was clean, I turned her to face me and tilted her head back, rinsing the shampoo from her hair.

Her face was so close to mine, her lips still parted, just begging to be kissed, but I held back, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath to steady myself.

I picked up the washcloth and the soap, and gently, I began to clean her body, starting at her face, carefully wiping over her cheeks, her forehead, and those plump, full lips. As I did, she didn't take her eyes off me, and I swear she wanted more. Her eyes told me she did. But maybe I was wrong. I don't know. I couldn't risk it, though. I didn't want to be that asshole. Her safety meant everything to me. We were walking a tightrope, but it was one we had to walk. I couldn't afford to fuck this up.

I moved to clean her shoulders and then along her arms, covering her in soapy suds. She stepped back, reaching for the other washcloth, and then she began to mirror my actions. Wiping over my face, my shoulders, my arms, soaping me in the same way I was to her. She moved to my chest, using slow strokes to wipe over my pecs and down to my stomach. My muscles clenched as she touched me there, and then she

whispered, “You can touch me. I want you to. Make it go away, Will. Make me feel something else. I don’t want to hurt anymore.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I dropped the washcloth and placed my hands just below her shoulder blades. And then, as the suds trickled down her body, I slid my hands down, cupping her breasts, massaging, rubbing my thumb over her tight pink nipples, desperate to taste them. She arched her back, pushing her tits forward, and I kneaded them, I couldn’t take my eyes off them. They fitted in my palms perfectly. I always knew they would.

“We’ve just killed a man,” she whispered as the water rained over us. “Is it fucked up that all I can think about is how much I want you inside me?”

The fire I’d been holding back scorched flames through my entire body.

“You’d be surprised how much death turns me on.” I smirked, then dipped my head to lick over her nipple and suck it into my mouth, popping it out and licking over the tight nub again before moving to the next one.

She ran her fingers roughly through my hair as I tasted her, her head falling back as she let out a low and sexy moan, showing me exactly how much she was loving this. Those sounds did something to me, they turned me feral, and I grabbed the backs of her legs, picking her up and pushing her against the tiles. She clung to me, her arms around my neck, hands in my hair as I slammed my mouth to hers, kissing her greedily, desperate, flickering my tongue over hers to taste her. Our lips twisted and turned, sliding with an urgency we couldn’t control. I was desperate to get closer to her, be as close as I could be. It was like every fucked-up thing that’d happened to us faded away the harder we devoured each other. Nothing else mattered in this moment, only her and me.

Her legs were wrapped around my waist, and she reached down to take my cock in her hand, slowly stroking me and slipping the head of my cock through her pussy. I wanted to take my time, taste her, savour every moment, but at the same

time, I had to be inside her. My cock was aching, it was painful, and I needed a release. I needed her.

“I never wanted our first time to be like this,” I whispered in her ear. “But if I don’t fuck you hard against this wall right now, I’m gonna fucking explode.”

“Do it,” she urged, arching her back, pulling me closer and gripping me tightly with her legs.

I let her position my cock where she needed me, but I couldn’t stop myself. I slammed into her, hard. Her legs widened as she cried out, but I couldn’t hold back. Over and over, I rammed into her tight, wet pussy.

“Fuck, Bee, you feel so good,” I told her as I thrust in and out, her pussy walls strangling my cock as she pulsed around me.

“Faster,” she cried, and I pistoned my hips as fast as I could into her, my fingers gripping her ass, my arms holding her in place. Her pussy felt so goddamn good. I always knew it would, and I couldn’t get enough. I went harder, faster, losing all control, my hips working to reach the high she was taking me to. Climbing that mountain, ready to jump off the precipice right along with her.

I could feel my orgasm building. My balls were tight, my spine tingling as she started to shake in my arms.

“Oh fuck, Will. Don’t stop. Make me come,” she begged, and I moved my hand to reach between us and stroke her clit, circling slowly, rubbing her as she moaned and rocked her hips against me.

“That’s it, baby. Come on my cock like a good girl. Show me how much you love this.”

She buried her head in my neck, and then I felt her pussy contract as she came hard, her fingernails digging into me as she let the intensity of her orgasm take her away. The tightness I felt around my cock made my own orgasm explode, filling her full of my cum.

“So fucking perfect,” I groaned as my hips rocked into her, taking every last second of pleasure I could from her body.

We held each other as the euphoria began to subside, neither of us ready to let the other go. Eventually, she let her legs fall to the floor, and my cock slid out of her, missing her warmth, her tightness, missing her.

I kept my arms around her, though. I wasn't ready to fully let go yet.

"I think we both needed that." She sighed.

"I think you're right."

She tilted her head back to look up at me with a hazy yet fractured glow in her eyes. "Are we fucked up?"

"Probably, but right now, do we really care?"

She nodded back at me.

"This could be our last night."

I shook my head. "It isn't. But I like that we're living for us. Seizing the moment and all that."

"Seizing the moment, indeed." She pulled away from me and grabbed the washcloth, lathering it with soap and then wiping it down my stomach and over my cock. My cock twitched in response, ready to go for round two.

"I always thought shower sex was the best. Easier to clean up." She smiled, and then I noticed a slight blush in her cheeks.

"Let's hope he keeps this shower here indefinitely then," I joked.

But he didn't.

An hour later, once we were cleaned and dried, her wearing a yellow sundress and me in grey sweats and a T-shirt, the wall to the shower stall was put back into place, and all we had access to was the shitty toilet again. The toothbrushes and toothpaste were gone, the soap, shampoo, and towels too. Our existence was back to what it had been before the task tonight. It'd been nice while it lasted. But we didn't let it get to us. A line had been crossed tonight, but it was a line we'd both been teetering on. Our future wasn't certain. And nothing here felt

right, except her. The future we had in this room was all that mattered, all we could focus on, because tonight, I'd had her the way I'd always wanted to, and I wouldn't stop there.

I'd tasted her, and like a starving man, I was desperate for more.

Chapter Eighteen



I couldn't believe what we'd done, but at the same time, I couldn't have stopped what'd happened even if I'd tried. I wanted it. I needed it. I craved that connection to make me feel alive, and boy, did he deliver.

I guess being in a life-or-death situation changes you. It certainly made me want to do something to defy the chains that this evil fucker had put on us. But then reality came knocking like the reaper at my door, and I felt myself falling back into old habits. Hating where we were, questioning why us, trying to think of anything I could do to make it better. And as always, like my knight in grey sweatpants, Will always seemed to know when I was struggling. He'd find ways to pull me out of my stupor.

We lay in the darkness on the mattress, our bellies practically empty after eating half a stale cheese sandwich and drinking the water that'd slid across the floor through the hatch an hour ago. Our rations were enough to keep us from passing out or dying of starvation. The bare minimum.

“What's the first thing you're going to do when you get out of here?” Will asked.

I didn't need to think about my answer.

“See my family and eat a cheeseburger.”

I heard the gentle huff he gave, felt the warmth of his breath on my skin, and I knew he was smiling at me in the dark.

“You’re close to your mum and sisters, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” I took a moment, then added, “Mum is probably closest to Kate though. Kate helped her a lot when we were little. They did a lot of stuff together. Cooking, baking, moaning at me and Shelley to clean our room.”

The quiet chuckle he gave told me he understood where I was coming from.

“What about Shelley?” he asked.

“Shelley was always a daddy’s girl. She used to sit in the window for hours waiting for him to come home. When he did, she’d jump in his lap the minute he sat down. She idolised him.”

The room was silent for a moment, and then he asked, “And what about you?”

“Me? I guess I had the best of both worlds. I was the middle child who loved her parents equally.”

“But was always overlooked in favour of the other two,” he whispered.

“You make it sound worse than it was. I’m not mentally scarred because I sat in my dad’s lap a little less than Shelley and didn’t bake as many cookies with Mum as Kate did.”

“But it affects you in other ways.”

“Okay, Freud. How does it affect me?” I couldn’t wait to hear what he had to say.

“You’re independent, but you want to be noticed. You like knowing you can take care of yourself, but sometimes... you wish someone would take charge. Pick you up. Put you first.”

“My family do put me first,” I replied a little too defensively.

“Not always.”

I was done psychoanalysing my childhood. “I don’t want to talk about this. We’ll only end up arguing.”

“Okay, let’s change the subject. Tell me a little more about Kate. I know about Shelley through Colton, but I barely know Kate.”

“I don’t want to talk about my family anymore,” I said, because I meant it. Thinking about them was making me feel sad. “How about we talk about Shelley and Colton’s engagement party instead, and why you acted like a total dick to me again that night?”

He laughed loud, sarcastically, and I could already imagine the cocky look on his face right now.

“Oh, you wanna go there, do you?” he teased.

“I sure do.”

“Even after you turned up at the club with another guy?”

“Oh my God! That was Eric. Shelley’s best friend. Best *gay* friend. He was more interested in getting your number than mine that night.”

I felt movement beside me as Will turned to face me.

“Did you give it to him?”

“What?”

“My number. Did you give it to him?”

“No.”

“Good.” The mattress dipped again as he rolled onto his back. “He wasn’t my type.”

“You made that crystal clear by the way you were glaring at us.”

He huffed.

“You were dancing with him, getting all close and rubbing up against him. I didn’t like it.”

“Still couldn’t take your eyes off us though, could you?”

I felt his warm breath tickling my skin again as he turned his head towards me.

“I seem to remember your eyes were on me too. You were pushing me to get a reaction.”

He was right.

“Maybe,” I admitted reluctantly. “But in my defence, I thought you knew Eric.”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, I’m sorry I teased you, and thank you.”

“For what?”

“For not retaliating with another girl to try and make me jealous.”

He went quiet, then he said, “I thought about it.”

“Really?”

“No.”

I smiled, my heart skipping a beat as I lay there.

“I didn’t want anyone else,” he went on. “If I didn’t have your attention, I didn’t want anyone else’s.”

I felt my heart grow a little warmer, beat a little faster as I closed my eyes, letting his words wash over me.

“Captivity really agrees with you, doesn’t it?” I said. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say such lovely things before.”

He moved closer to me and whispered in my ear, “Don’t tell anyone, will you? I wouldn’t want to lose my bad boy reputation.”

I grinned.

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

He put his arm around my waist and pulled me closer, my back to his front—the way we’d laid together every night since we’d been brought here.

“Will?” I asked, twisting my head to speak to him. “Did you do something to Eric’s car that night?”

“No. I swear on my life.”

“Only, when he got a flat tyre on the way home and we had to stop, you turned up pretty soon after. It looked very suspicious.”

“Aren’t you glad I was there though? That guy had no idea how to change a tyre.”

“So you were following us?” I knew the answer, but I still liked asking the question.

“I was making sure you got home safe.”

“You could’ve text,” I said, the smile on my face growing wider as I thought about the look he’d had on his face that night when he pulled up behind us.

He was livid, his brow tightly knitted together and his jaw clenched shut as he stalked out of his car and over to where we stood, watching Eric faff about with his car jack. Will had pushed him out of the way and taken over, changing the tyre faster than it took Eric to smoke his cigarette. I had to admit, watching Will work, his arms flexing and muscles shining in the streetlights, had done things to me. He’d looked so sexy. Even Eric was drooling by the time he’d finished.

“I don’t trust phones,” Will announced. “I wanted to see you got home safely with my own eyes.”

“Jesus, Will. You watched me all night, thinking I was getting it on with another guy, and then you followed us home. Now I feel even more shitty about the way I acted.”

“You danced with him,” he replied calmly. “But you never kissed him, your eyes were always on me. You got into his car, but when I showed up, you looked at me in a way you never looked at him. I knew there was still hope.”

“You need to stop. You’re making me feel things here,” I whispered.

“I won’t stop. I can’t. I told you you’d fall for the Stokes charm eventually.”

“I don’t think I have much choice.”

“Exactly. You don’t stand a chance.”

Chapter Nineteen



WILL

I'd always been a light sleeper, but that had gotten worse since we'd ended up here. Having her lying next to me, I had to keep my wits about me. I knew she was here because of me, and it was my job to protect her. I ran in this world. Me and my friends were vigilantes. You live by the sword; you die by it. But I hated that she'd been dragged into this too. She was tough, but she didn't deserve this.

It was her moans I heard first, anguished and pained, and then she started to flinch on the mattress beside me. I turned to face her, pulling her back to my chest. She was having a nightmare. She'd had a lot of those recently, unsettled nights where she cried out, and my heart broke for her. But this felt different. This felt like a big one.

"No. Please. No," she cried, rocking in my arms as I held her.

"You're okay, Bee. I've got you," I whispered, but she couldn't hear me, not yet. She was still asleep. Fighting the demons in her dreams.

"I don't want this..." She began to sob, and so I shook her, only gently, but enough to bring her out of her hell and back here to me. Still a hell, but one where I could comfort her.

"You're safe, Bee. I'm here." I held her tightly, burying my face in her neck to breathe her in, whisper to her, shush until the devils that danced around her disappeared.

She shivered, wiping her face as she came around.

“I’m sorry.” She sighed. “Did I wake you?”

“I don’t sleep in here.”

She was still as I held her, her breaths coming slower as she calmed down.

“We’re going to die in here, aren’t we?” she stated. “I’m gonna die in this puke-coloured dress in a filthy, shitty concrete cell, and no one’s going to find us, not until we’re just skeletons left on this mattress covered in bad clothing that he made us wear.”

“Speak for yourself,” I replied, trying to make light of our dark predicament. “There’s nothing wrong with my grey sweats.”

But she didn’t laugh. And when I felt her shake as if she were crying, I nuzzled into her and whispered, “We are getting out. I don’t want to hear you talk like that, okay? Just trust me.”

“It’s been days, Will. Maybe weeks. I don’t even know how long it’s been ‘cos I’ve lost track of time. But nothing has happened. No one is coming to save us.”

“Then we’ll find a way out of here by ourselves.”

She hiccupped, her tears subsiding as she began to calm down.

“Please don’t start listing the ridiculous stuff you’re going to use to dig us out of here. I don’t think plastic bottles and paper plates are gonna cut it.”

She was right, I didn’t have a plan. Not yet. But I’d never let on about that. She didn’t need to know that most of the time I felt as hopeless as she did.

“There’s always hope,” I urged, even though I didn’t feel it. “Don’t give up on me.”

I could hear her sobs start up again, and they tore me apart.

I closed my eyes, losing myself in her scent and the feel of her in my arms. My little Bee. And in that moment, I wanted

to do whatever I could to stop her crying, make her feel good about herself.

So, I kissed her neck, soft little pecks as my fingers skated over her hips and down to her thighs. Then I lifted the fabric of her dress, brushing my fingers under the skirt, drawing slow circles with the tips of my fingers up her thigh, higher and higher until...

“What are you doing?” she asked breathlessly.

“Making you feel better.”

I pulled her thigh over my hip, opening her up to me. Then I used my fingers to explore, tracing over her delicate skin, teasing her with how close I was to her pussy.

“Will,” she sighed.

“Let me do this for you,” I said, half asking, half begging. I had to touch her.

I let my fingers brush along the inside of her thigh, soft touches that made her pant and open her legs wider for me. She wanted me, and knowing that, feeling her, made my cock strain in my sweatpants. I wanted to fuck her. Take her from behind. But I had to make this about her. She needed this. It wasn't about me.

“Close your eyes,” I told her. “I want you to focus on me and only me. Feel what I'm doing, that's all that matters. Let me make you feel good.”

She sighed and moved her hand so it covered mine. Then she coaxed me higher, showing me where she wanted me. I let her, groaning when I felt how wet she was. I traced my finger through her pussy, and her head fell back.

“Yes, Will. That feels good.”

“I know, baby.”

I soaked my finger, stroking her pussy and then rubbing over her clit in a gentle circular motion. Her hips rocked slowly in time with my hand as I moved. Her breaths rapid, panting, just like mine.

“Do you like that, baby? Do you like riding my fingers?” I asked, and she hummed in response.

I pushed two fingers inside her and she gasped, lifting her hips as I drove them into her, stroking her walls, curling my finger to hit the spot.

“That’s it, baby. Fuck my hand,” I growled as she pushed her hand against mine, using my palm to grind against her clit.

“Fuck yes,” she moaned, our hands between her legs, my fingers thrusting into her as she ground her hips forward.

I could feel her pussy walls tighten, the soft velvet gripping my fingers.

“You’re so fucking tight, you’re perfect,” I whispered, pulling my fingers out and then pushing them back into her, stretching her, coaxing the orgasm out of her.

“Come on, baby. Come for me. Come on my hand like a good girl.”

I thrust harder now, faster.

Using my thumb, I circled her clit. Her legs were wide open, her pussy soaked as she thrust her hips to match my fingers.

“Oh fuck, Will. Don’t stop. Just like that,” she begged, so close to coming.

Then she arched her back, her legs quivering and her body going stiff as she started to come, flooding my hand with her orgasm.

She cried out as she rode the high, her hand holding mine in place, using me to drain every last throb, pulse, and contraction that she felt.

Then she went limp, letting out the most satisfying sigh I’d ever heard.

“That was so good.” She gasped, her legs open, her body lying half over mine, and her arms resting limply by her side.

“I’m not finished with you yet.” I started to rub over her clit again, making her moan and shift her legs.

“But I’m too sensitive,” she pleaded.

“You’ll be a good girl and give me more,” I told her. “I want at least another three orgasms out of you.”

It didn’t take long for her to start quaking again, her legs quivering as a second orgasm hit only moments after the first one. And I could tell, from the way her thighs clenched around my hand, that this one was stronger than the last.

Her moans were the sweetest thing I’d ever heard. So fucking intoxicating that I’d have gone all night making her come just to hear those cries. She responded to me so well, and it spurred me on, made me want to pleasure her to the point where she couldn’t take it anymore. And that night, I almost did. After her sixth orgasm, she fell asleep. And reluctantly, I let her.

Chapter Twenty



BRYONY

I didn't know how much longer I could keep it together, being locked in here, never knowing what the day would bring or if we'd survive to see another. I was hungry, thirsty, scared to let my guard down. In reality, I was an emotional mess, and I couldn't survive without Will. He was my lifeline. My tether to the real world, yanking me back every time I fell down a hole of self-destruction or despair. He was my rock.

Days and nights merged into a never-ending monotony of lights on, lights off. It was all we knew. The delivery of meagre scraps of food and water twice a day gave us something to break up the boredom. That, and our time spent with each other, losing ourselves in the hopelessness of it all with the connection we had. A bond so strong even this room and our captivity couldn't shatter it. But it was tough. Our nerves were shredded, our resolve weakening every day.

So, when the TV lit up one morning after our stale, cold toast had been deposited into the room, we both stood still, expectantly waiting to see what he'd tell us today. His hockey mask filled the screen, the same mask worn by Jason in the Friday the Thirteenth movies. And I felt myself grow even more agitated. The dressing up, the ridiculous rules and games, the way he was messing with our minds, all of it was driving me to insanity. I guess that's what he wanted, and I hated that I felt powerless to stop it.

“Nice to see you both so... well rested,” he announced in his mechanical voice. “I’m glad you chose to follow my rules and be prepared for what comes next. A disciplined player is a good player, after all.”

Will tensed beside me, and I reached to take his hand in mine. His fists were clenched, but when he felt my hand brush against his, he laced his fingers with mine. The two of us stood together, united. We weren’t two people anymore, we were one entity. One mind, one heart, one soul, fighting for our freedom.

“In a moment, the door will open, and you will make your way to the task room.”

I heard Will growl beside me.

“Or we’ll just stay here and you can do your own fucking dirty work,” Will spat.

We watched as the Taskmaster leaned back, throwing his head back to laugh, and there, on the screen, as he tilted his head to mock us, we noticed a tattoo on his neck. A very distinctive tattoo of a spider’s web with the word ‘death’ written across it. It was the first time we’d seen anything that might help us work out who this was, and I glanced at Will, knowing he’d seen what I had. He was doing what I was right now, going through every memory he had of every person he’d ever met, trying to see if that tattoo rang any bells.

“It’s funny you think you have a choice.” Taskmaster’s voice boomed loud, bringing our attention back to the screen. “But you don’t. If you don’t leave this room to complete the task, you won’t leave this room ever.” He was silent for a second. “Go on... try me. I dare you.”

We didn’t want to test his theory, so we stayed quiet.

“Task three is one you’re going to enjoy. It plays to your expertise, Mr Stokes. You do like using weapons, don’t you?”

Will didn’t answer, only gritted his teeth, his jaw tensing as he stayed silent, biting down on the response he wanted to give.

“I think you’ll enjoy it too, Miss Masters. After all, who doesn’t love a power tool?”

The screen went black, and I turned to Will.

“Did you see that?”

“The tattoo? Yeah, I did.”

“And? Do you know anyone with one like that?”

“Not that I can remember. What about you? You work with tattoos. Did you recognise it?”

I’d been a tattoo artist for a few years now, but I’d never seen one like that in our shop. It was the kind of ink you’d definitely remember.

“No. But there can’t be that many people who have that art on them and live in our town.”

“It definitely makes it easier to track him down when we finally get out of here.”

Just then, the door opened, the lights in the hallway leading the way to the task room.

“I’m not taking his bullshit today,” Will stated firmly as he took long, purposeful strides out of the room. “I’m done with this shit.”

I agreed but I stayed quiet, walking beside Will and holding his hand as we made our way to the task room. I could feel the anger rolling off Will as we stepped into the room, ready to witness whatever atrocity he’d set up for us today, and he didn’t disappoint. In the middle of the room, suspended upside down from his ankles and hanging naked in front of us was a man, the usual tape stuck over his mouth as he struggled and filled the room with muffled cries for help.

In the corner of the room was a table loaded up with various power tools, weapons, everything Will was used to using in his vigilante work. The kind of table that’d make other people shudder, but not him.

The man strung up had his wrists taped together, and they hung helplessly over his head, scraping against the grate of a

huge drain in the middle of the floor. A drain that was made to collect his blood, that much was obvious. This guy had no way out, but he still struggled against his binds, his body twitching, making the chain he was suspended from rattle as he feebly tried to do something to save himself.

The room already stank of blood and that iron tinge in the air made me feel nauseous. But when the mechanical voice echoed off the walls, my nausea doubled.

“Welcome to your next task, players,” he announced. “Meet Mario, or as I like to call him, The Whip. Mario’s extensive whip collection is something he’s exceptionally proud of, but it isn’t just whips you like using, is it, Mario? Knives are also on the cards whenever you’re in the mood to play.”

Hearing that this Mario guy was a sick fuck with twisted kinks washed over us, the Taskmaster’s words held no weight anymore, not in our current state of mind. Just add it to the list of other fucked-up shit that’d happened to us over the last few weeks. It really didn’t matter. He was evil and we were put in here to kill him. End of. Only, it wasn’t going to be that easy. I knew that. The Taskmaster would have something up his sleeve. Something to fuck with us too.

“Today’s game is called Lingchi, a method of torture they used to practise in China, also known as slow slicing, or as we call it, death by a thousand cuts.”

I saw Will take a deep breath, his chest expanding as his face contorted in anger.

“Your task is to...”

Will charged over to the table, picked up a hunting knife and stalked over to where Mario was swinging from the ceiling. Without listening to what the Taskmaster was saying, Will stabbed the knife into the guy’s chest, pushing in with force and dragging it down his torso. Then he took the knife out and stabbed again, repeating the same track from stomach to chest, gouging at the man’s flesh as he tore through him. Blood spurted, pooling down the drain. The guy’s guts dropped out, splattering from his body and over his chest to

fall in a mess on the floor, but Will didn't give up. He did one more stab and slice right down his body, and then he stood back, throwing the knife to the floor and wiping the sweat from his brow on his sleeve, his fingers dripping with blood.

"There," Will snarled. "No need for a thousand cuts, I did it in three."

"YOU DIDN'T FOLLOW MY RULES!" The Taskmaster shouted over the speakers, his voice bellowing like a demonic madman.

I stood still, staring at Will. Will didn't look at me; just panted as he waited for what would happen next.

Seconds ticked by, and nothing. The growing stench of blood, guts and shit made me lightheaded, and I reached forward to put my hand on Will's back. Not only to steady myself but to reach him too. Bring him back from whatever hell he'd just dived head-first into.

Then, in a calmer, more measured voice, the Taskmaster spoke.

"You broke the rules, and for that, you will be punished. Make your way back to your room. Thank you for playing today."

That couldn't be it? He sounded too calm.

The calm before the storm.

What the fuck was he going to do to us?

I stepped forward in a trance.

What the fuck had just happened?

"Why did you do that?" I asked Will as he fell in step beside me, his face void of emotion.

"Because I'm sick and tired of this bullshit. He doesn't control me. He never will."

"We know that, but making him think he does is part of the plan, isn't it? We've pissed him off."

“It’s done now.” Will shrugged. “There’s nothing I can do to change it. If he wants a fight, then I’ll give him one.”

“But we need to fight clever. You need to talk to me about stuff like this. We work together. You can’t just go rogue like that.”

Will stopped and spun to face me, blood was splattered on his face, his hands red as he fisted them by his sides.

“Make up your mind, Bee. One day you accuse me of not fighting, the next you don’t want me to fight back. I won’t apologise for what I’ve just done, and I’d do the same again if I had to. What I did, I did for us. He needs to know who he’s dealing with.”

His words hurt, but I tried not to let it show. He was right. I had accused him, but arguing wasn’t going to help us. I knew being stuck in here was making us crazy, driving us insane, but I couldn’t lose Will to his demons. He’d saved me from mine enough times. I had to step up.

“He does know who he’s dealing with. That’s why he chose us. It’s a fucked-up compliment that he wants us to do his dirty work, you’ve said that yourself.”

“And now it stops.”

Will walked away, making my heart splinter as he did. This was a side to Will that I’d never seen before. A side he didn’t bring out often, and I marched after him, determined to bring him back. Bring back the Will who saw the positive in everything and always joked with me. The one who could make sunshine out of shit. The Will I was falling in love with.

My Will.

Chapter Twenty-One



“Don’t do that, Will,” I cried out as we walked back into our cell. “Don’t let him win.”

Will spun around, fury seeping from every pore.

“I didn’t.” He pointed aggressively at me as he spoke with malice. “That was the whole fucking point.”

The door slammed shut behind us, and I let out a deep, ragged breath.

“I don’t mean in there, in the task room.” I stalked towards him, forcing him to drop his outstretched arm. “I mean now. In here. With me.” I jabbed at my chest. “You’re letting him get into your head. Look at you.”

He was breathing heavily now, his eyes boring into mine.

“We’ve spent days, weeks, locked in this shithole,” he seethed. “The only fucking respite we have is walking down a corridor to commit a murder and then walking back down that same corridor to come here. There’s no windows, no daylight, nothing. So, forgive me if I want to go off script once in a while.”

“You have me,” I whispered, and instantly the tension in his body eased slightly, his muscles relaxing as he looked at me without the pure venom he’d had in his eyes only moments ago. “We have each other,” I went on. “I’m your respite, Will. Me.” I thumped my chest then took a breath. “And you’re mine.”

I could tell he was struggling. It was only natural. What we were going through wasn't normal, and it'd take a robot not to react to this. He was always so strong, so ready to pull me from the brink. And now, I had to do the same for him.

The room was silent except for our panted breaths. Will's eyes dipped, then spotting a bottle of water discarded on the floor with a little left inside, he reached down and grabbed it. He stalked past me over to the toilet area and I followed him.

Standing with his back to me, he leant over the toilet and used the water to wash the blood off his hands. Then, wiping his face over the arm of his sweatshirt, he tossed the bottle to the corner of the room and turned to look at me.

"I had blood on my hands before coming here," he uttered quietly. "But I've never felt guilty, not like I do now." He let his head fall forward again, his shoulders dropping as he whispered under his breath, "They're not coming to save us, are they? It's been too long. If they were gonna come here, they'd have done it by now."

Going to him, I lifted his chin, forcing him to look at me.

"I think I need to remind you what you said to me not so long ago. If they don't come, we'll save ourselves. We've been doing a pretty good job of surviving so far."

He let out a long, weary sigh, staring over my shoulder at nothing because he couldn't bring himself to look directly at me.

"You don't need this. You don't need my negativity."

"Yes, I do," I said, touching his face, bringing his eyes back to mine. "You hold me up and I hold you. It's what we do. It's how we survive. Some days are worse than others. Today is your bad day. But tomorrow, it won't be. And remember that. There will be a tomorrow, because we're getting out of here, Will. And do you know what I'm looking forward to the most when we do?"

"Cheeseburgers," he replied, giving me a shadow of that grin I loved so much.

“That is a pretty close second, but no. It’s going out with you. Showing everyone what you mean to me.”

The darkness weighing him down lifted slightly, and his smile widened, a cheeky half grin you couldn’t help but smile back at.

“I’ll take you out for a cheeseburger. Kill two birds with one stone.”

I held his gaze, my heart beating double time as my body ached for him, begging to feel alive.

I didn’t want to drown in this hellish abyss for a moment longer. I wanted to fight, to live the life we deserved. To take every precious moment we had and squeeze every ounce of happiness we could get out of it. We had to live for now.

I took a step closer to him, working hard to block out all the negative shit we’d been through, and I whispered, “I think you should know something. I think death turns me on too.”

The minute those words left my mouth a fire ignited in his eyes, and he reached for me, wrapping his arms around my waist, and pulling me to him forcefully. Then he grabbed my ass, and grinning down at me, he growled, “That’s my girl.”

He spun me in his arms until I was against the wall, his mouth claiming mine, devouring me as we got lost in each other.

Our oasis in this desert of nothingness.

His mouth opened wider to taste me, his tongue tangling with mine. And as he pressed against me, kissing me back to life, I felt my body weaken for him. I was wet, needy, and desperate to feel him.

“I need you,” I cried out as our kiss became more urgent, more aggressive.

I yanked his sweats down; his cock was thick and heavy as it sprung free. Taking it in my hand, I stroked him, running my thumb over the wetness at the tip and circling the head. He groaned into our kiss as I moved my hand down further, stroking his balls, playing with him, hoping he’d forget where

he was, just for a moment. I wanted him to focus on me and the way I made him feel, nothing else. He'd done that for me, when nightmares had taken hold, when life became unbearable. Now, it was my turn.

He rocked his hips forward, using my hand for relief as he kissed me harder, pushing his body against mine. Then he reached down to lift me by the backs of my thighs. I wrapped my legs around him, feeling his cock slide through my wet pussy, teasing me in the best way.

“Fuck me, Will. Now,” I begged, and he gave a sinisterly, sexy laugh.

“Whatever my girl wants”—he thrust into me, piercing me with his cock, making me cry out at the feel of him—“she gets.”

I clung to him, my teeth biting into his shoulder as he slammed into me over and over. Pinning me to the wall, rotating his hips and grinding against my clit. I didn't care if we were being watched. I didn't care about anything but him.

I threw my head back, my hand reaching up to grab a fistful of his hair as he rammed into me fiercely, almost violently, and I loved every minute of it.

“Harder,” I begged, my orgasm building so rapidly, I was craving it, chasing that high. Squeezing my legs around his waist, I yanked on his hair, doing anything I could to drive him over the edge with me.

His hips pistoned faster, and then, as my legs started to shake, I fell apart. My pussy throbbed, pulsing for him, squeezing his cock as he thrust into me, making me come hard, wave after wave of pure bliss that kept going on and on.

He held me up, his thrusts keeping a steady pace as he let me ride every second of ecstasy. Then, when it became too much for him, he pulled out of me, letting me go as he took a step back. I panted through the aftershocks of my orgasm as I watched him take his cock in his hand and give it one, two pumps, and then he came, in hot white spurts. The sight of him

holding himself, coming like that, it made me feral all over again.

“That’s so...” I gasped, my breathing still unsteady. “Fucking hot.”

“And it’s all for you.” He smirked as he stood there with his cock in his hand, staring at me. “This is what you do to me.”

I grinned back at him, my chest rising and falling as I tried to catch my breath. And then, like a strike of doom straight from hell, the lights went out, bathing us in darkness.

“What the fuck?” Will cursed, reaching forward to pull me to him.

“This is the start of our punishment, isn’t it,” I stated, and I was right.

We don’t know exactly how long he kept the lights off, but we knew it was more than a day. No food or drink was sent through the door.

Nothing.

Our punishment for Will flouting the rules was a taste of what he thought we had to come—eternal darkness. But all it did was make us more determined to fight. Will had said that getting fed showed he wanted to keep us alive.

He’d stopped doing that now.

And so, we both agreed, the next time we left this room, we were never coming back, no matter what the outcome was. There was more than one way to be a winner at his games, and we weren’t losers.

Chapter Twenty-Two



“**G**ood morning, players.”

The lights suddenly flashed on, making us both wince at the brightness we weren't used to. A brightness we hadn't experienced for days. We were tired, our bodies were weak, suffering from the lack of food and water. Our instincts weren't as sharp as we'd want them to be.

I rubbed my eyes, waiting for them to adjust to the light as we both sat up.

“Today's the day,” the fucking mechanical voice announced from the corner of the room. “The day the pieces start slotting into place.”

We couldn't give a fuck what he was saying. We were disorientated, agitated, more bothered about surviving the next hour without passing out than what tasks he had set up for us.

“I know you're not quite yourselves,” he continued, and I peered up at the screen. The Ghostface mask from the *Scream* movies he was wearing to hide his identity made no impact. I was starving, light-headed, and my concentration was at an all-time low.

“But you deserved that punishment. Don't you agree? I hope you've learnt from it.”

I wanted to say something, tell him I had learnt and I was done with his shit, but nothing came out. I didn't even have the drive or the energy to cuss him.

“I’ll give you a moment to compose yourselves, prepare yourselves for what I have in store today. But remember... you play by the rules. When that door opens, you will leave. You will do as I say. And if you don’t, then today, you will die. Both of you.”

The TV went black as it cut off, and I sat in a daze. The words he’d used to threaten us felt pointless. Like paper arrows hurtling into a flaming fire. I already felt like I was on a journey, halfway to hell. Whatever he had planned, it made no difference.

“We’ll get through this,” Bee stated quietly beside me. “We can’t let him win.”

I didn’t reply, and when the hatch opened and two water bottles rolled in, followed by bread and butter, she added, “See... food and drink. You said it yourself, if he’s feeding us, giving us water, he doesn’t want us to die. There’s still hope. He wants us alive, and if we’re still breathing, there’s always hope.”

I grabbed the water bottles and passed one to her. We’d gone past the whole me tasting everything before her phase. We’d been here long enough to get over that.

I put the paper plate of bread and butter on the mattress between us, and we both grabbed a slice, taking huge bites to try and counter the painful hunger we felt deep in our stomachs.

I chewed and swallowed way too fast, and the bread got lodged in my dry throat. So I twisted the top off the water bottle and gulped, trying to dislodge it.

Barely a minute had gone by and we’d wolfed down every crumb from that plate and drained our water bottles.

“This.” I threw my bottle onto the floor and stared at the locked door. “It ends today.”

Bryony reached forward, touching my arm.

“Please, Will. Just think about it. Think about what you’re doing. We don’t know what he’s got planned today. All we can do is take each moment as it comes.”

I turned to face her.

“I’m getting you out of here,” I stated. “Even if it kills me.”

“And I’m not leaving without you,” she replied stubbornly.

The sound of the door unlocking, sliding open to guide us to the hell he had planned for us made us both take a sharp breath.

We stood up, and I held my hand out to take hers.

“Will.” She squeezed my hand. “Please don’t do anything stupid.”

“There’s nothing stupid about fighting back.”

“There is if it means you die and I get left in a world without...” She couldn’t finish her sentence.

I swallowed down the lump that’d formed in my throat.

“Let’s just get this over with,” I snapped, feeling like wild horses were pulling me forward, egging me on to go to that room and do whatever I could to force his hand, make him come out and face me.

“Or we could just stay here. Forget his games. Stay in this room.”

She knew we weren’t going to do that. What was the point?

“And spend more days stuck in the darkness rotting away? No. We’re in control. We say how this ends.”

I walked forward, pulling her along with me.

Her movements were slow, reluctant; she didn’t want to leave, but we were seeing this through. That was the only plan I had left.

We walked into a side room attached to the main task area, and I spotted him first, through the glass partition, strapped to a dentist’s chair. There was a leather strap over his forehead to hold him in place and tape over his mouth to stop him from

crying out. Metal cuffs were wrapped tightly around his wrists and ankles to immobilize him.

At the side of the room, against the wall, was a table with the usual tools and weapons piled on it. But when I heard her scream as she pulled her hand free from mine, and her legs gave way from under her, the bottom of my world fell away. I felt physically sick seeing her drop to the floor, curling into herself, screaming as tears streamed down her face.

What the fuck was going on?

She buried her head in her hands, unable to look at the man in the chair or me.

I bent down to comfort her as she wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked back and forth, chanting, “No, no. Please, no.”

Then she looked up at me, and the pain in her eyes shattered my heart into pieces. She was broken. Totally and utterly broken.

“It’s playtime.” His fucking voice cut through the room as she tried to speak to me as I held her, her mouth unable to form the words she wanted to say.

“Meet Paul. Mister Masters. Or as you like to call him, Daddy.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, and she started to sob, agonising heartbreak pouring from her as she held my gaze.

It obliterated me.

I wanted to scoop her off the floor and get her as far away from this room as I could. Wrap her in my arms and shield her from what was about to happen. Wipe the filth from her mind, just take it all away. We’d lived through a nightmare, but today, he was dragging us beyond hell, to a realm more wicked than anything I could’ve imagined. He’d brought her father here, and that was beyond fucked up. It was unbearably evil.

“But to me...” he carried on, and I couldn’t stand to hear his voice any longer.

“Shut up!” I screeched. “Just fucking SHUT UP!” I was shaking with unbridled fury. I wanted to rip the speakers off the walls so she didn’t have to hear his fucking voice. I’d annihilate him for this. I’d make sure his payback would be more brutal than anything he’d made us do. There was a special place reserved in hell for this motherfucker, and I couldn’t wait to send him there.

The room fell silent as I panted furiously, not wanting to contain the rage boiling inside me. I held her close; the echo of her painful cries piercing me sharper than any knife. But then *he* carried on taunting us, and every nerve and fibre of my being sparked to life, desperate to charge forward and claw my way through this room to get to the Taskmaster and have my revenge.

“To me,” he announced. “He’ll always be the monkey. Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.”

“I can’t.” Bryony shook her head as I clung to her. “We need to leave,” she begged, grabbing my arms to make me listen and force me to act.

But as soon as she’d spoken, the door that led back to our cell closed, locking us in, and I cursed, “Motherfucker.”

He’d heard her, and he was making sure we didn’t escape. He was going to make us see this through to the bitter end. There was no way out of this.

All that separated us from Bryony’s father in that chair was a glass partition and a door leading into the room he was being held in, which was currently shut.

This sick motherfucker was enjoying every second of her misery, but he’d be the one screaming when I got my hands on him.

“We’re not playing your FUCKING GAMES ANYMORE!” I shouted, anger pouring out of me as I screamed. “Your freak show is over. I’m coming for you, you bastard.”

I gritted my teeth, lifting my head to peer at Bryony’s father, wishing the masked fucker was lying there in his place.

“You won’t leave,” he stated plainly, an amused calmness in his voice. “And you will do as I say. Because if you don’t, all three of you will die today.”

That wasn’t going to happen. I wouldn’t let it.

Bryony’s breathing was erratic, and I grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to look at me. She was all that mattered to me right now.

“Breathe,” I told her, trying to get her to breathe along with me, but it was useless. She was terrified, and whatever we had to do to survive today was on my shoulders. But I could take it. I’d do whatever I could to get her out of here, and I would, there was no doubt about that.

I stood up, fire burning inside of me as I put my arms up and shouted, “What do you want, huh? Do you wanna give us knives and watch us carve pieces off ourselves to satisfy you, you sick, twisted fuck?”

The sound of his voice cackling with laughter over the speakers made the dull screeching in my ears amplify, and my muscles tensed, ready to fight.

“You stole one of my game ideas,” he replied with a twisted sense of pride in his tone. “But I’ll forgive you. The flesh carving comes in a few weeks.”

There wouldn’t be any more weeks, or days, or hours for that matter. This ended today. She was getting out of here.

I could hear Bryony whimpering beside me, but I had to stay strong. The baton of survival had passed to me. It was my responsibility to get us through this.

“Don’t feel guilty,” he carried on. “Everyone who’s been in my task room, every one of your victims has deserved it.”

I didn’t like that he said ‘your’ victims. These weren’t ours; they were his. All of this was his fucking legacy, and I’d spend the rest of my life making sure he’d suffer for what he’d done to us.

“For years,” he went on. “He’s turned a blind eye to it all. He could’ve stopped it, but he didn’t. Your *father* isn’t the man

you thought he was, *Bryony*.”

Hearing him use her name, I snapped.

“You don’t fucking talk to her! If you want to say anything, you say it to me! Leave her out of this!” I bellowed, my chest aching as I screamed, but my body was taut and ready to face him.

“You’d better come through then,” he replied, and the door into the task room opened.

“Please, Will. Please don’t do this.” Bryony reached out her hand to me, her eyes pleading for me to stop and stay with her. I knelt in front of her, taking her face in my hands.

“I want you to turn away from the glass. I mean it, Bryony.” She started to cry harder, but I stayed firm, holding her face and stroking away her tears. “Turn your back. Don’t listen. Don’t look. Promise me.” She didn’t respond, but I kept on. “Whatever happens, I will get us out of here. But I need you to cover your ears, close your eyes, do whatever you have to do to block it out.”

She was breaking my heart, but when she nodded, I wanted to cut myself open right there in front of her, *for* her. I didn’t deserve this amazing, strong woman. But if, after today, she was still mine, I’d spend every minute of every day making sure I did. I’d do anything for her.

“That’s my girl,” I said, kissing her forehead, and then, as she slowly turned, sitting on the floor, facing away from the window to the task room, I stood up. “It’s gonna be okay, Bee. Trust me.”

I hated leaving her, but I had to end this.

Purposefully, I strode forward into the task room, and the door closed behind me.

I could hear Masters’ muffled cries, and he stared right at me as I stood in the middle of the room, focusing my brain, switching off any logic and rationality. It’d be easier that way.

The pleading in his eyes made me look away. This man was her father. Without him, there’d be no Bryony, and for

that, I owed him everything.

How the hell was I supposed to kill him?

“If his only crime was to look the other way, why is he here?” I bellowed. “He hasn’t committed a crime. He’s done what ninety-nine percent of people usually do when they’re faced with a situation that’s out of their control.”

“Ninety-nine?” the Taskmaster spat back. “That’s a very high percentage. I think I’m going to have to call your investigative skills... BULLSHIT!” He shouted the last word and every inch of my body stiffened; my jaw clenched so tight it felt like it could snap. “But I’m willing to overlook your shitty research for now.” He paused. “Tell me, Will. Do you think she’ll still love you when she finds out you butchered her father?”

On instinct, I turned to look over my shoulder and saw that the glass we’d been looking through in that anteroom was a two-way mirror. We couldn’t see her, and I prayed to God that she still had her back to us and couldn’t see us either.

“Don’t worry, she’s still facing the wall,” he stated. “And this room is sound proofed, so she can’t hear us.” And then he whisper-yelled, “Your secret’s safe with me.”

“And what happens if I don’t do it?” I glared up to where the voice was coming from. “What then?”

“But you haven’t heard my terms yet.”

“Kill or be killed, isn’t that how this goes?”

“Yes... aaaand no.”

I waited.

I knew there’d be a catch. He couldn’t help himself.

“There’s one murderer in this room,” he said. “And it isn’t the one in the chair. But sometimes, needs must. I get that. Life isn’t black and white, after all.” He paused again, then added, “You know, there was a reason I chose you to come here and play my games. I thought you might’ve figured it out by now, but it seems you need a bit more help putting the puzzle pieces together. When you and her became a thing, it

was like all my Christmases had come at once. Two birds and one stone. Poetic justice. The daughter of one of my guests with my star player. I couldn't resist taking you both."

"You fucking bastard," I hissed. "I'll make you pay for this."

"I'm sure you will," he replied flippantly, which only angered me more. "But let's get to the task in hand, shall we?"

My jaw ticked as I stood there, blocking out the dentist's chair and trying to shut off my emotions.

"Today you have a choice. She can leave today with you, or she can leave with her father. But whoever she leaves with, the other must die."

A whoosh of panic crashed into my ears, the head rush making me dizzy.

Did I hear him right?

Was he saying I had to kill myself to set her and her dad free?

Or I could walk out of here with her today. But if I chose that option, she'd have to live her life knowing I could've saved her father.

What the fuck was I supposed to do?

"Before you make your decision, let me outline the rules. This game is called hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. To complete the task, you must deposit two ears, two eyes and a tongue into the bowl on the table to your right. Then, if by some miracle whoever was chosen to donate those items is still alive, they must cut their throat. Look at it as an extra caveat for the 'speak no evil' part."

He spoke so matter of fact it made my stomach churn.

And all I could hear was my heart thumping out of control against my chest. The thought that her last memory of me would be when I walked away from her curled up on the floor to come in here and try to kill her dad twisted me up inside.

But I'd made a promise to her.

I told her I'd get her out of here today, and I would. I'd do anything to make her safe.

“So, tell me, *Will*,” he rasped. “Are you ready to play my game?”

He didn't need to ask me that.

He knew the answer.

“I'm ready,” I snapped, stalking over to the table to pick up a scalpel. I held it firmly in my hand, my knuckles white from gripping so hard, and I turned to face Masters in the chair.

“I hope you appreciate what an amazing daughter you have,” I told him, as his eyes filled with tears. “I hope you know how funny and smart, and totally amazing she is. She walks into a room and everything lights up, for me, anyway. She talks and I listen to every word. I have to, because she's all I hear, all I see. She's all I've ever wanted and I...” My voice caught in my throat. “I love your daughter, Mister Masters. And I'd do anything for her. *Anything*.”

I couldn't say any more; I had to get this over with.

So, I closed my eyes.

Lifted the scalpel.

Held my left ear between my thumb and forefinger... and I started to cut.

Blood oozed down my neck as I sliced through my flesh. Sweat pouring off me as I tried to ignore the pain, tried to focus on why I was doing this.

I was panting, shaking as I cut deeper, blocking out the agony that radiated through me as I sliced and carved into myself. And then, through the screeching sound in my wet, bloody ears, I heard muffled cries and a buzzing sound. I opened my eyes, my hand freezing as I saw the horror that was happening across the room.

Masters' whole body was rigid, his face contorted as he shook from the electric current flowing through him. When it stopped, he slumped limply in the chair, but then the buzzing

started again, his body buckling, bending out of shape as electricity ripped the soul right out of him.

“No!” I screamed, dropping the scalpel and racing over to the chair. “This wasn’t the fucking deal, you asshole!”

The electricity cut off, and his cackling laugh bounced off the walls.

“After a declaration like that, did you really think I’d let you kill yourself?” I went to touch Masters, but the Taskmaster screeched, “Don’t touch him! Didn’t anyone teach you about electricity at school? It’s not safe to touch someone who’s been electrocuted. Especially if their corpse is still in contact with the electrical source. Be smart, Will. Think what Bryony would say.”

The last shred of anything I had inside me snapped.

“I told you not to use her FUCKING NAME!”

“And I told you to play by the rules, be clever. Do you really think she’d want to leave here with her father instead of you?”

Suddenly, light spilled from a corner of the room, and I saw a door open, sunlight filtering in from the top of a short staircase.

“And on that note, I’ll leave you with this thought... death is a debt we all have to pay, but some have a greater debt than others. Thank you for playing my game.”

And then there was silence.

I stood for just a second, the reality of it all hitting me like a tonne of bricks.

That was it?

Game over?

It couldn’t be.

There had to be more to this than a brief, ‘thanks for playing’, and the door springing open. But then sanity and rationality took over.

The door was open.

I could see daylight from where I stood.

There wouldn't be a better opportunity than this. It might be a trap, but I had to take the chance.

Chapter Twenty-Three



WILL

I ran back towards the anteroom, bursting through the door. Hearing the commotion, Bryony turned her head, her body shaking with fear. When she saw me, her eyes widened.

“Oh my God, Will. Your ear. What happened?”

“Nothing,” I gasped, eager to make our escape. “We have to go.”

I didn’t give her chance to argue. I scooped her off the floor and into my arms, cradling her against my chest.

“Close your eyes and don’t open them until I tell you to,” I commanded, and she nodded, closing them tight. “Promise me you won’t look.” She nodded again, tears trickling down her cheeks as she held herself together as best she could.

“Is he... dead?” Her voice broke on the final word, but I wasn’t going to bullshit her.

“Yes.” Her sobs grew louder, and she shook in my arms. “But I didn’t do it,” I said, trying to comfort her, clinging to her and wishing I could take her pain away. “I promise you it wasn’t me.”

She didn’t respond, and I didn’t want to waste another second. We had to get out of here.

I pushed the door open with my arm, taking us through to the task room. The door to our freedom was still open, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I charged towards it. But as soon as

I did, her sobs intensified, and looking down, I saw she'd opened her eyes.

"Fuck, Bee. I told you not to look." I moved faster, heading for the door to escape, trying to get her away from the horrors as fast as I could, but the weight of guilt began to drag me down.

How was I going to get her through this?

What we'd been through was enough to destroy anyone, but seeing her dad like this... it was too much.

"What did he do? How did he..." She could barely speak.

"It was a fucking electric chair," I told her. She deserved to know the truth. "He didn't stand a chance."

She clung to me; her face buried close to my chest as my words penetrated her heart. It fucking shattered mine too, but I had to keep moving forward. All of this couldn't be for nothing.

I carried her up the steps, my arms locked tight around her like rods of steel. Each step purposeful, resolute, but still heavy and fearful of what lay ahead for us in the future.

Did we even have a future after what'd happened?

I knew one thing, if it didn't include her, I didn't want it.

When we eventually came up into the daylight, I blinked, and the feel of the cool air on my skin made me take a huge breath. My chest ached, my lungs burned, but the coolness from that breath reminded me that I was still here.

We were alive.

Frantically, I peered around at the dense forest where we stood, my body itching to move, to make the right choice and take us down the correct path, back to civilisation. But there was nothing here to help me, not even a hint of the underground fortress we'd just escaped from. All I could see was the hole we'd emerged from and trees that went on forever. That was it. I couldn't even hear traffic or any signs of life in the distance. So, I had to trust my instincts. Push

forward and run in a straight line in the hope that it'd finally lead us to a road or something, anything.

I started to run, but she shouted, "We need to go back!" Shocking me to my core. "I can't leave him there, Will. Please," she begged.

I knew she wasn't thinking straight. Grief was drowning her, and she wanted to do something for her dad, but there was nothing she could do.

I had to take charge.

I had to think and act for both of us.

"If we go back, we die." I put her down and took her hand, the urgency of our escape burning in my eyes as I pulled on her arm, forcing her to run with me. "This is our only chance, Bee. We have to run. Now."

She moved, but I could feel her resistance, so I begged her to listen to me. "He's gone, Bee. And I know the thought of that tears you up inside, but if he was here, he'd tell you to run, just like I am. He'd want you to get to safety. You have to do the right thing. Put yourself first and get the fuck out of here. If we don't run, he'll come back for us. Hell, he's probably watching us now. We don't have time for this. We need to go."

Tears streamed down her face as she stared back at me, and even though I knew it was the last thing she wanted to do, she nodded and ran.

We bolted as fast as we could over the uneven forest floor. Our bare feet were scratched, sore, and bruised, but the determination to get to safety drove us on like an unstoppable force. Running forward, we never looked back. My legs didn't even feel like my own as I powered through the undergrowth, pulling her with me. My eyes stayed fixed straight ahead, scanning the horizon for any signs of life.

I half expected him to shoot at us as we fled. Maybe this was another one of his twisted games. But to my surprise, he didn't. And eventually, after fighting our way through the

forest for what seemed like an eternity, we stumbled out of the trees, and onto the tarmac of a deserted road.

I heard the low rumble of a vehicle in the distance and my stomach rolled.

This was it.

The moment of truth.

Was *he* about to mow us down in the road? Kill us right after our escape and prove to us that he always had the last laugh.

Or was this our key to freedom? The freedom we'd fought so fucking hard for.

“Stay there,” I told Bee as I walked into the middle of the road, ready to find out. If he was going to aim his car at anyone, I wanted it to be me.

I saw a silver car barrelling around the corner at speed, and I braced myself, standing firm in the middle of the road as they drew nearer. But then, the car began to slow down, and when I saw a middle-aged woman behind the wheel, all the tension in my body slowly evaporated.

It wasn't him.

I stepped to the side of the road as the car rolled to a stop. The lady driving wound down her window and stared back at us, and with confusion and then panic in her eyes, she asked, “Are you both okay? Do you need me to call you an ambulance?”

I let out a breath.

A breath of pure relief.

We'd done it.

We'd fucking done it.

We were safe.

Chapter Twenty-Four



THE TASKMASTER

I was nothing if not generous. I always gave my players options, and seeing the look on their faces when they left made me grin.

But knowing that they'd played into my trap made me smile wider.

Did they really think I was going to let them go?

Just like that?

That they'd actually escaped from me?

That they'd won?

Oh no.

This was all part of my plan. They were still my puppets; I'd just moved them to a different stage. I still controlled the strings for my little marionettes, and I couldn't wait to see their faces when they found out what I had in store for them when they got home.

Paul Masters' game was over, but theirs wasn't. In fact, the fun was only just beginning.

Chapter Twenty-Five



I was surprised she stopped to help us, that woman driving on her own down a country road, no other drivers in sight, no buildings, just trees and bushes all around. That, and two strangers bursting from the undergrowth, barefoot. Will's ear was in a state. There was congealed blood all over the side of his face, and the evidence that we'd been to hell and back splattered over his shirt. Our skin was pale, our bodies still adjusting to the natural light and air around us. In short, we were a mess. We looked like something from a zombie apocalyptic movie, but she still stopped to help us, thank God. I'm not sure I'd have done the same in her situation, but I was so thankful she did.

I have to admit, at first, panic had taken a hold of me when I saw the car driving towards us.

What if it was the Taskmaster?

What if we were heading right into another trap?

We could be going from the frying pan into the fire.

But at this point, we had no other option than to flag the car down and get help. It was that or risk dying out here in the wilderness. And yet, the horror of what'd happened, of having to leave my father behind, cut deeper than any wound that sicko could've inflicted on me.

"Oh my God! What the hell has happened to you?" The woman glared at us with part horror, part pity on her face. She

didn't open her doors right away. Can't say I blamed her. She had to think of her own safety too.

"We got lost," I panted breathlessly, those words being the only ones I could think of to say. My brain and body felt like they were shutting down.

"I fell down," Will chipped in. "Cut my head." She winced as she saw the blood, and Will turned, positioning himself so she couldn't see it fully and it wouldn't look so bad.

"Please, can you help us?" I begged, taking her attention off Will, and putting it back on me. "We just need a ride out of here. Please." She hesitated then nodded, unlocking her doors for us.

I climbed into the back, and without hesitation, Will joined me. The woman turned to stare at us strangely, two misfits looking like extras from a Z-list horror movie, sitting in the back of her car. She probably felt uncomfortable having us both back here, having to drive with her back to us, but we weren't ready to be parted yet, not even by seats in this car. I needed Will beside me and I knew he felt the same.

Will put his hand on my thigh and gave it a gentle squeeze as I sat upright, my whole body tense. I couldn't even settle back into the seat; I was so on edge.

Was this going to be my new normal?

Living life like you're playing a part but never feeling like you're actually present? Because that's how I felt right now. None of it seemed real, and yet the reality of what we'd left behind was like a gaping open wound, and I wasn't sure it'd ever heal.

"Do you want me to take you to a hospital?" she asked. "Or the police station?" She swallowed nervously as she waited for our response.

"No," Will shot back, then in a calmer tone, he added, "It's okay. We just need to get home. Clean ourselves up. We're okay, just a little bruised."

Bruised was an understatement. The aches I felt weren't superficial, they were bone deep. Soul altering. Life changing.

But I smiled in agreement, pretending all of this was normal and we weren't escapees from a sadistic hell-game that beggared belief, and she smiled back, kindness shining in her eyes. Eyes that'd never seen the kind of brutality we had.

My head felt woolly, as if everything happening around me was happening to someone else. But when I heard Will start to give her the address for The Sanctuary, my world sharpened, noise screeching in my ears as reality came hurtling towards me. I went rigid, slapping my hand over his that rested on my thigh.

"Not there," I snapped, my eyes wide as I turned to face Will. Then I rattled off the address for Kate's apartment.

He nodded as realisation set in. He knew what I was thinking without me even having to say it. I wasn't ready to face his friends, and I really wasn't ready to see my sister, Shelley, who lived there now.

What would I say to her?

How could I look her in the face, knowing what'd happened?

The soldiers would be all over this, and I wasn't mentally or physically ready to deal with that level of attention. I needed time to myself first before we told anyone else what'd happened. I needed to process it, if that was at all possible.

Will leaned in closer to me and whispered, "Are you sure?" And I nodded.

I was adamant.

That was where I wanted—no, *needed* to go. He didn't argue. He knew I wasn't in the best state of mind. Neither of us were. But having the noise of the soldiers of Brinton Manor clouding our already foggy brains would only make things worse.

The lady turned her back to us, tapped the address into her Sat Nav, and then she pulled off, driving down the road, taking us away from the hell we'd existed in for weeks, to some form of salvation. As she drove, she tried to make polite conversation, asking us how long we'd been lost, what we

were doing in such a remote location, questioning why we didn't want to see someone to check us over. We gave her short, polite responses, but the less said, the better. I just wanted to get to a place of safety and solitude, and right now, that was Kate's.

It felt alien being in a car with a total stranger, no matter how kind she appeared to be. I'd learned the hard way that people couldn't be trusted. The last few weeks had only cemented that fact. I wasn't sure I'd ever trust anyone again, apart from my family and Will. I'd always trust him. I'd trust him the most.

Soon, country lanes turned to busier, built-up streets, and then, as she pulled into the road where Kate's apartment stood, the desperation to leave the vehicle and race inside overtook me. I grabbed the door handle, ready to push it open the second we stopped. And I did, the moment she pulled up at the kerb. I didn't care that I looked rude. I just wanted to get out. Get away. Be somewhere I felt safe.

"Thank you so much for your help," I heard Will call out behind me.

"Yes, thank you," I added, my focus solely pinned on the front door ahead of me.

"Are you going to be okay?" she hollered after us. But I didn't respond.

Will turned and said, "Yes," giving her a wave, but I just pushed the communal door open and sprinted up the staircase towards the apartment.

I heard Will's steps behind me as I charged up the stairs to the landing. Once there, I sprinted down to Kate's front door.

Kate always kept a spare key under a plant pot by the door, and I lifted it up, taking the key from underneath.

"Jesus, your sister has the worst security," Will scolded. "That changes. Today."

"I totally agree." I turned my back to unlock the door. "But at least we can get in without breaking the door down."

“Did you have a key on you that night?” he asked, and pure dread and fear flooded through my system, making me feel sick to my stomach.

“No. But he knows where we live. He knows everything about us.”

Is he on his way here now?

Or worse than that, is he behind this door?

I faltered, taking a step back, leaving the door unlocked, feeling too scared to open it to find out. Will let his head fall back as he gave a despondent sigh.

“I knew we should’ve gone to The Sanctuary,” he said. “We’d be safer there. In fact, I think we should just go there now.” Then, with determination on his face, he added, “I’m not running from that fucker again. I want to go back and track him down. I’ll scour the fucking forest if I have to. He won’t get away with what he’s done.”

“I’m not going anywhere else,” I argued. “Especially not there. We’re no safer there than we are here. That’s where we were taken, remember?” Just the thought of leaving here made me tetchy and nervous.

“Like I could forget,” he shot back, and from the way he gritted his teeth, his jaw flexing, I could tell he was antsy. “The first thing I need to do is burn that fucking maze to the ground.”

I sighed, the heaviness from the trauma I’d been thrust into today grew harder to bear with each passing second.

“I know you want to fight back. It’s in your nature. But please, just give me tonight. One night. That’s all I ask. Tomorrow, you can burn the fucking forest to the ground for all I care, but tonight, I just want to stay here. Please.”

“Fine.” He dropped his head, warring with the need to fight and the desire to please me. Then he stared up at me from underneath his long lashes. “But it’d make me feel better knowing there were four other men watching you. Protecting you.”

“I don’t want that.” I took a step closer to him, urging him to listen and really hear me. “I only want *you*. Please, Will. I know this place isn’t ideal, but where is? At this moment in time, this is where I feel the safest, and you are the only person I want to be with. No one else.”

“But Shelley would be there. She’s family,” he pointed out, trying to hang onto the last withered shreds of his argument.

“Exactly.” I felt my body tense at the thought of seeing her. “Do you think I can look her in the eye knowing what happened to our dad today?”

He baulked as I choked on my words, my eyes fixed on the floor. I couldn’t look at him, so I steeled myself and opened the apartment door, avoiding his penetrative stare as I stepped inside.

“She has to know some time,” he said quietly behind me.

“But not today,” I replied, walking into the apartment and throwing the key into the bowl on the coffee table.

The apartment smelt musty. The plants Kate had asked me to water were either brown and wilting or completely dead. But apart from that, everything was as I’d left it the night before the masked ball. Nothing had been touched. At least, that’s how it appeared at first glance. But we knew not to take things at face value.

“Stay here,” Will announced as we stood in the doorway to the kitchen, his eyes scanning everywhere, listening, assessing. “I want to check every room before we go any further.”

The apartment was tiny, but I wasn’t happy to let him walk away. He wasn’t going anywhere without me.

“No, I’m not staying here. I’ll come with you.”

I stalked over to the kitchen drawer, yanked it open and pulled a knife out, holding it up to show him I meant what I said.

He didn’t argue, instead he marched out of the kitchen, heading towards the bedroom. When he was satisfied it was empty, he moved to the bathroom, forcing his way in like a

cop from a TV show, bustling into the room like he expected to find the Taskmaster standing in the middle of it waiting for him. And as he cleared each room, he kept a firm hold of my hand, comforting me, touching me, making me feel safer just from him being close to me. He wanted to know I was there as much as I wanted him to be there.

Once he was satisfied we were okay, he stalked back into the living room and sat down heavily on the sofa, his head hanging low as he rested his elbows on his knees.

“So, what now?” he asked, lifting his head slightly to peer up at me.

“Now?” I sat on the edge of the sofa next to him. “Now you tell me exactly what happened in that room today, with my dad.”

He sighed and shook his head.

“Why? He’s dead, Bee. Why put yourself through it all again?”

“Because I need to know everything.” I don’t know why I felt that way, but I did. “I’m not sure...” I stumbled over my words. “That I’ll get over this unless I do. I’m not sure how I’ll come to terms with it if I don’t understand it all.” I turned to face him. “I mean, how do you go on living, knowing your dad is dead because of you? That you could’ve done something to save him.”

I couldn’t hold back anymore. I had to let the tears brimming in my eyes fall freely down my face. I had no choice.

“How can I do that, Will? Live a normal life knowing what I know. I can’t even imagine telling my sisters about it. I don’t think I can say the words, because if I do, they become real, and even though I need to know what happened, none of it feels real.”

I knew I was rambling; I couldn’t help it. And I knew my words were jumbled, but I wasn’t in control of my emotions or my tears. Both were cascading out of me like a waterfall.

Will reached out for me, pulling me to him as he spoke.

“First, you need to accept that none of this was your fault. There’s nothing you could’ve done to change the outcome today. He was going to die whatever we did. Second,” he said, his voice becoming softer. “It’s gonna take time, but it will get better. I know it’s not the same. My dad died of cancer. But talking about it does help.”

“You’re right. It’s not the same. Your dad was ill. Mine was murdered.” Guilt hit me right away, but the words had tumbled out before I could stop them. “I just want to know what happened.”

He stilled for a moment, and I waited. Waited for him to say why it wasn’t a good idea. Why I should forget what’d happened and move on.

But he didn’t.

Eventually, he opened up to me, telling me about the task room being soundproofed and how that sick fuck had messed with his head. He’d messed with mine too, and my dad’s. He’d promised to set my dad free, and then, when Will told me the trade-off, what he’d asked him to deposit in that bowl, my tears turned to sobs. Huge, ugly sobs for what he’d done for us.

Will had put me and my dad first, sacrificing himself despite everything.

I couldn’t believe it.

This man had skyrocketed in my estimations since we’d been taken, but now, he held God-like status.

They say you never truly know someone, and that was so true. I’d never have imagined Will was capable of so much humility and kindness, putting everyone before himself. I’d been naïve. So fucking naïve, seeing the façade and not the man behind it all. But I saw him clearly now.

He was all I saw.

“I can’t believe you did that,” I choked over my words.

“It didn’t matter though, did it?” He couldn’t look at me as he spoke. “*He* still did what he wanted. He electrocuted your

dad while I was..." He pointed at his ear. "Hacking away at this."

"Fuck, I need to clean that up for you."

I shot off the sofa, heading for the first aid kit in the bathroom cabinet. It wasn't the best kit, but it'd have to do for now.

I walked back into the room, telling him, "You should really get it properly stitched up by a nurse." I opened the box, spotting some Steri Strips I could use to patch him up. "But thank you."

He turned his head to look at me.

"Thank you for trying. But if you'd succeeded in what *he* wanted you to do..." I couldn't bring myself to say the words 'killed yourself'. "I would probably be even worse than I am now." I dabbed an antiseptic wipe on the side of his face, gently stroking up to his ear, and he hissed, but he didn't flinch. "I can't do this without you, Will. I need you here, with me."

"Your dad didn't deserve to die. Even *he* admitted that. Your dad was unlucky. Just a guy that was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I know. But you didn't deserve to die either."

He held my gaze for a beat.

"Didn't I? I've killed people. I'm not a good guy, Bee."

I kept stroking his wound, throwing the now blood-soaked antiseptic wipe onto the coffee table and taking another out of the packet.

"You're not a bad guy either. You're a guy caught up in bad things. The only person who deserves any kind of retribution is that masked fucker." Mentioning him made me shiver, and I wasn't even using his full name.

I didn't want to think about him anymore.

I didn't want to think about anything.

I thought getting out would feel different, but this, it was bittersweet. Not the homecoming I'd anticipated. Grief was knocking at the door, guilt was hammering at the walls, and despair had packed its bags, ready to move in. My world had changed forever, and I couldn't face it, not today. I'd probably choke if I tried to eat that cheeseburger I'd talked about when we were back in the basement, and I didn't want my family here to see what was left of the old me. All I wanted was him. And time. Time that I hoped would heal the wounds, but I doubted it.

I cleaned his ear as best I could and then dried it, applying the Steri Strips to help it heal.

"That'll have to do until we can get to a hospital."

"I don't do hospitals," Will replied, tentatively touching his ear. "If I need it cleaned up or fixed again, you or one of the boys can do it."

The boys.

I wouldn't be able to avoid his friends forever, and I knew an almighty war was heading our way when they found out where we'd been. Maybe they already knew and the war was in full swing, being waged with the enemy that was yet to be tracked down. But I doubted it. The soldiers were tenacious. If they knew one of their own had been taken, they'd have burnt the world to cinders to find him.

"I need to shower," I said, trying to distract Will and myself from thinking about the outside world. Not to mention, I could feel the filth seeping through my pores. Remnants of a place I knew I'd never forget, but I had to try, and washing it off seemed like the best place to start.

"I need a thousand showers." Will stood up, pulling his dirty T-shirt over his head, careful not to catch his ear, and then he threw it in the bin in the kitchen as he walked past it on his way to the bathroom. I stayed glued to the spot, watching him walk away. Wondering how he could appear so calm, so at ease with it all.

He glanced over his shoulder. "You coming?"

He was at ease because he kept it all inside. The rage he felt would be trapped, stored, ready and waiting for the day when he faced the Taskmaster again. It wasn't something he'd show me. He was a trained street soldier, a skilled fighter. He knew how to control his emotions better than I ever could.

"I've just put strips on your wound," I stated, sounding like an over-protective girlfriend. "They'll come off in the shower."

I really should've thought about that before, but I'd been working on automatic pilot. Of course we'd need to shower, but I'd been so focused on patching him up, doing something to show how grateful I was for him that common sense had gone out the window.

"If they do, we can put more on after." Will shrugged. "So, are you coming?"

I nodded, my feet following but my brain short-circuiting, because honestly, I didn't know what to do with myself. It felt like I had a huge mountain to climb, just to get through each minute, each second, each painfully searing flashback of what we'd both been through. I wished I didn't feel things so deeply, that I could be more like him. But today, I'd lost my dad. Today, the world got a little darker.

"Just put one foot in front of the other, Bee," Will whispered gently. "That's all you need to do."

"It's all I can do."

I remembered years ago, my mum telling me how she used to lock traumatic memories up in a box in her head, file them away, never to be reopened, and live her life like they'd never happened. I thought I had that skill too, but today, I'd learned that some things hurt too much to ever stay locked away. Some pain is too strong to ignore.

"I think I need to see someone," I blurted out, closing the bathroom door behind me. "Like a therapist."

"Like a therapist? Or an actual therapist?" Will gave me a hint of a smile as he reached into the shower and turned the water on.

“A therapist. A good one. One qualified to deal with the fucked-up shit we’ve seen and done. Someone who can help me come to terms with losing...” I couldn’t bring myself to say the word ‘dad’. My heart was heavy, and it hurt. It hurt so damn much.

Will nodded sadly, hearing what I said without me having to say it.

The water hissed as the room began to fill with steam, and he pulled his sweats down, kicking them off and standing in front of me naked. But the sorrow on his face made my heart ache because I knew that sorrow was for me.

“I don’t think there’s a therapist out there that can help me, I’m a lost cause.” He smirked, but I could see there was more behind his flippant remark. He hurt too, but he’d found other ways to cope with his demons. “But you? Yes, definitely. I think you should see someone. There’s no question about that.” He took a step closer to me. “Leah May, Devon’s missus, she sees a counsellor. Do you want me to ask her for their details? She said they’re good. They’ve helped her a lot.”

I hesitated, and he added, “I won’t say it’s for you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I sighed.

“Okay,” I replied, and he smiled, grabbing the hem of my dress and lifting it over my head, pulling it off, and throwing it on the floor. Then he took my hand in his. He was distracting me, but I didn’t mind.

“I’ll even come with you, if that helps. But don’t feel like you have to say yes. If you want privacy, I get it.”

Every minute of every day, this man continued to surprise me.

“Would you do that?” I peered up at him as he stepped backwards into the shower. Our hands joined as he led me forward like I was the most precious thing in the world. His eyes were kind, his face empathetic, and his hand squeezed mine as if he was reminding me that he was here. It was just us. No one else.

“I’d do anything for you, Bee.”

My heart melted, and I moved to stand under the hot water with him, wrapping my arms around him as we stood together under the stream, cleansing our skin, washing away the evidence of our sins. Filth could be cleaned, but the scars we held deep inside us would take a lot more than a hot, steaming shower to fix. Cuts that he’d given us that ran deep and would hurt for a long time to come, but the love I felt in this moment, it went so much deeper. Will and I had shared something that tethered us together. A link so strong it couldn’t be broken. There was no Bryony without Will. No Will without Bryony. That’s how it was now. We weren’t the same people we once were. Our trauma had bonded us, fused our lives, our souls, and now, we weren’t two people, we were two halves of a whole. Two hearts beating for one purpose, and that purpose was each other.

The water cascaded over us, but we didn’t move. The warmth of his body against mine was all I needed. The smell of his skin soothed me. Hearing his heart beat through his chest, listening to his steady breaths, it grounded me. I clung to him, and he clung to me, his face buried in my hair.

“Do you think I’ll ever get over this?” I whispered.

“Yes,” he replied, then hugged me a little tighter. “You’re strong, Bee. The strongest woman I’ve ever met. It might not feel like it now, but you will get through this. We both will. Together.”

Tears streamed down my face; silent, invisible tears that trickled freely then washed away down the drain. Emotions I couldn’t hold back spilled forth, and I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting to stay in the moment, to stay here with Will, away from that room, that cell. We’d been to hell, but I was determined not to live there.

“I love you,” I whispered as I held him close, breathing him in. I whispered it so quietly I wasn’t sure he could hear me.

But then, he replied, “I love you too, Bee. Always have, always will.” And the broken, shattered pieces of my heart

swelled just a little, showing that they were still working. I could still feel them. I wasn't broken beyond all repair.

I knew then that I had to fight. Fight for the life we deserved. It'd be a long and harrowing road, but I had to walk it. I couldn't let evil win. We'd seen the devil, played his games, and we'd lived to tell the tale. Now it was our turn to write the next chapters to our story.

We were the story masters now.

Chapter Twenty-Six



WILL

I'd never experienced anything like this before. I was hardened, a fighter. The guy who loved to love but only at arm's length. Real feelings weren't for me.

Why overcomplicate life when you can just have a good time?

But that had been a lie.

Because right now, it felt like I was holding my whole world in my arms.

She was strong, my Bryony. But at the moment, she felt vulnerable, fragile, and she needed me.

I needed her too.

I might play it off like it was nothing. I'd done some sick shit with my friends, running the streets of Brinton Manor. But this had been different. Our time in that basement had changed me. When you only care about yourself, when life is simple, choices become simple. You please yourself because that's all that matters; you and your boys. Fuck the rest of the world. Do what you want. But back in that basement, I'd realised my life wasn't mine to throw away, to be reckless with; it was hers. *I* was hers. And knowing that my decisions could have such a catastrophic effect on her affected me more than I'd ever dreamed possible. I lived for her now, not just me.

I'd meant it, when I told her I loved her. But that love wasn't what I'd expected.

Before, if you'd asked me what love was, I'd have said ripping each other's clothes off and the need to always be, well, fucking. Looking at that other person and thinking, 'Yeah, they're hot. And they're mine.' And I felt that, I did. But it was more than that with Bee. It was the need to protect her no matter what, even if it meant hurting myself. It was an overwhelming obsession to always be near her, breathe her in, touch her. She was an addiction, the sweetest addiction. My reason for everything, and for a guy who'd lived his life like he had no purpose, it meant everything.

Eventually, we started to clean each other, soaping our bodies, shampooing each other's hair. I loved taking care of her like this. Worshipping her. It wasn't sexual, it was sacred. She was mine to take care of, and I loved doing it.

Once we were finished, I wrapped a towel around her, drying her off before grabbing one for myself. Then, I led her to the bedroom, pulling her with me to lie on the soft mattress.

"My hair's wet. It's gonna soak the pillow," she moaned, but she didn't put up much of a fight.

"Do you care?"

"Not really."

We lay together, like we'd done every night since we'd been taken, and I held her. I held her, praying she'd fall asleep quickly and forget for a while. Forget that her father wasn't here anymore. That all of this was my fault. She shouldn't have been taken, and now, I'd spend my whole life making it up to her. But for tonight, I just wanted her to sleep in a warm bed, feeling clean and safe, with me by her side. I might've been the reason she was hurting, but I wanted to be the one who took that pain away too. That's why tomorrow, I'd hatch my revenge plan. I wanted to hunt that fucker down and bring his head to her on a spike. Slaughter the man that'd dared to shatter my girl's world.

"What if he comes here while we're asleep?" she asked, her voice a whisper of tense nervousness.

“He won’t. I’m not sleeping,” I assured her, kissing her head to give her some reassurance. The urge to soothe and comfort her overpowered every other emotion I felt, even the violent need for revenge that scorched my soul. “You’ll be okay, Bee. I’m here.”

She sighed, her hand finding mine as we lay together, our fingers intertwining. “I don’t think we’ll be okay for a long time. And knowing he’s still out there, it means none of this is over. It’ll never be over. Not until he’s caught. He could be out there taking someone else right now, playing his sick games.” Her body stiffened beside me. “He could be watching us. Waiting to strike, again.”

“If he ever dares to come near you again, I’ll be ready for him.”

The tension radiating off her was palpable.

“We weren’t ready the first time.”

“But we know better now. Which reminds me, I need to get us new phones.”

She squeezed my hand in response.

“That can wait. Let’s just see if we can get through tonight.”

We lay on the bed in silence, and then she asked me quietly, “What if we never find him?”

Failure wasn’t something I wanted to entertain. We would find him. There was no question about that.

“He might be finished with us, but I’m not finished with him,” I said, pulling her closer to me. “I won’t stop until I’ve found him. And vermin like him, they never stay hidden for long.”

She didn’t respond, and moments later, when I heard her breathing become steadier, shallower, I knew she’d fallen asleep.

It meant more than anything to know she was at peace. That’s all I wanted. Peace for her despite the war raging in my

head. My demons were mine to deal with, and so were hers. I'd take them both on.

But I should've known the peace we'd fought to get back to wouldn't last.

Hours later, in the darkness of the room, she started to cry out. A nightmare had taken hold, and I pulled her to me as she began to whimper and rock in her sleep. I hated hearing her like this, and as her cries turned more frantic, I shook her gently to wake her, pulling her out of the hell she was trapped in.

"It's okay, Bee. You're okay," I comforted. "I'm here. You're safe." Her body sank into me as realisation that she wasn't in immediate danger filtered through her foggy, sleepy brain.

"Is this ever going to end?" she whispered, her voice breaking as she fought tears she didn't want to shed. "Even in my dreams it's haunting me."

"It'll take time, but it'll stop."

"But I feel like I've lost all my fight."

"Give yourself a break, Bee. It's still early days. The fact you're here and we escaped says everything about how strong you are."

She stilled beside me, and I listened to her gentle breaths. Then, she rolled over to face me and I kept my arms wrapped around her as she cuddled into my side.

Her head leaned closer to mine, her delicate breath danced across my face, and then she kissed me. A slow, gentle kiss, her lips lingering over mine as we breathed each other in.

"I need you," she sighed. And the hope and desperation in her voice made something inside me contort and twist in pain. I wanted her too. I always wanted her. But I didn't want to take advantage. In the basement, our connection had been raw, visceral, a reminder of our need for survival. But her father's death had changed that. It'd changed me. I didn't want to be that asshole.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” I whispered as her hand trailed down my chest and over my stomach. My cock was rock hard, and I knew she could feel it pressing against her. Clear evidence to show I was a liar. My body betrayed what my mind was trying to shut down. She had a hold on me, and there was nothing I could do to change it; I didn’t want to.

“You say that”—her hand reached down to grip my cock, and she gave it slow, delicious strokes that sent shockwaves running down my spine—“but your body tells me something different.”

I rolled her onto her back, my body covering hers, pressing her into the mattress. “There’s nothing more I want to do right now than fuck you into this mattress.” I nipped at her neck as she arched her back, moulding her body to mine. “But what sort of asshole would that make me, if I did that, after all you’ve been through?”

“One that knows I need to feel something else. Something other than this gaping hole that’s been in my chest ever since you picked me off the floor of that room and took me out of there. I want to feel alive, Will. To feel loved. I want to just feel... you.”

I lifted up onto my elbows to peer down at her. Her eyes shined back at me in the darkness, brimming with unshed tears, and I couldn’t deny her. How could I?

“Well, when you put it like that”—I leant down to brush my lips over hers—“I can’t say no, can I?”

She threaded her fingers through the hair at the nape of my neck and pulled me to her, our mouths pressed close as we deepened the kiss. She let her legs fall open beneath me, then wrapped them around my waist, and I kept kissing her, my tongue tangling with hers as my hand skated down her body to rest between her legs. I slid my fingers through her pussy. Her wetness made my cock throb, desperate to be inside her. I rolled my fingertip over her clit, rubbing and circling, then pushing down into her pussy and stretching her on my fingers. She gasped, her hips bucking as I fucked her slowly with my

hand, my thumb flickering and circling her clit to drive her crazy.

“That feels so fucking good.” She sighed, her hips rocking on my hand as she reached for my cock and started to give me torturously slow pumps. It felt fucking amazing, but I needed more. I wanted to be buried inside her, feeling her warm tight walls gripping me, milking my cock.

She moaned, biting into my shoulder, and I nestled into her neck, biting and nibbling her as I curled my fingers inside her, turning her moans into louder groans and gentle begs for more and harder.

I thrust my hips into her hand as she pumped my cock faster, and I could feel myself losing control.

“Fuck me,” she begged, and I pulled my fingers out of her, slowly lifting them to my mouth, dragging them across my lips. I was teasing myself with her scent and the anticipation of her taste. Then I slipped my fingers into my mouth and sucked her sweetness off them, closing my eyes and humming in appreciation.

When I opened my eyes, I saw hers had grown darker while watching me.

“Fuck, that’s so fucking hot,” she moaned, pulling me to her for a kiss, swirling her tongue against mine to taste herself as she groaned and rocked her hips, greedy for more.

I reached down to take my cock in my hand and rubbed myself through her pussy, teasing her. Her slick pussy soaked my cock, her moans spurring me on to slide into her and fuck her the way I wanted to; hard, rough, and relentlessly. I wanted to own her tonight. Make her scream my name and forget every other damn thing that ever existed in this world.

I lined myself up, nudging slowly into her, teasing us both. With my elbows resting on the pillow beside her head, I watched her as I edged into her slowly, painfully so. Every emotion—frustration, anticipation, urgency, ecstasy—it all played out on her face, and I fucking loved it. I loved that I could do that to her. I wanted it all, every damn feeling, every

response and sensation. It was mine. Mine to own, mine to get lost in, mine to fucking drown in. And then, when I couldn't hold back anymore, I pushed into her in one hard, brutal thrust.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



I cried out as he thrust into me, feeling alive, feeling everything I wanted to feel and burying what I didn't. I clung to him as he continued to thrust into me over and over with a relentless pace, but my body loved it. It accepted him like he was meant to be there, like I was made for him. He'd said he didn't want to fuck me into the mattress, but the violence of his thrust certainly felt like he was.

But I'd wanted that.

I always wanted him to give me everything he'd got. No half measures. Because that's what it felt like to love Will Stokes. You had to jump in, drown in him. Otherwise, what was the point? He was an experience you had to ride with both hands clutched firmly on the rails. A rollercoaster unlike any other, because you couldn't see any of the twists or turns coming, but that's what made it so exciting.

My body moved in time with his, hips grinding as heat billowed through me. I moaned and cried at how good it felt, but words failed me. I didn't want to speak. All I could focus on was the feelings he created. My body was slick with sweat, every inch burning from the feel of him above me. He lifted my thigh, throwing my leg over his shoulder, ploughing into me harder, deeper, hitting that sweet spot every damn time. I grabbed his ass, my fingers digging into him, crying out for more. I was so close. And then, my walls tightened as my clit pulsed, detonating a mind-blowing, intense orgasm inside me. He moaned as my pussy contracted around him, blissful

shockwaves coming over me as I came hard. Flutters and fireworks that went on and on. His groans grew louder, and then I felt him come too, spilling everything he had inside me.

I panted, loving the feel of his body on mine. The weight of him was a comfort I'd always crave and never tire of. I knew we had some long and difficult times ahead, and I also knew this nightmare wasn't over, but there were faint moments of reprieve, tiny sparks of hope in the darkness. I wanted to get through this, be myself again, and maybe, with Will by my side, I would eventually get there. I had to. All of this couldn't be for nothing. We had a second shot at life, and I didn't want to waste it.

"I don't want to leave you, but I have to go," Will said the next morning as he pulled on an old T-shirt I'd found in Kate's cupboard. "I need to do something. I have to try and find him."

I felt all out of sorts. I understood he needed to go, but I didn't want him to leave. I didn't want to break the bubble we'd created less than twenty-four hours ago. It wasn't long enough, and it didn't seem fair. We'd been through enough. We deserved our happy ending.

"What about me?" I didn't want to use emotional blackmail, but I wasn't thinking straight.

He turned to face me; guilt burning deep in his eyes as he smiled at me.

"Come with me."

I shook my head and folded my arms. I knew where he'd be heading today, and it was the last place on earth that I wanted to be.

"And walk back into that forest like I have a death wish? No thanks."

"No." He walked over to me, pulling my arms free and then wrapped me up in a hug that I pretended to resist. "Come to The Sanctuary. Help me explain all this."

“I can’t.” I froze, my body heavy at the thought of telling the others, especially Shelley. “I don’t feel ready to talk about it yet.”

He pulled away slightly to peer down at me as he kept his arms locked tightly around me. “We have to talk about it some time. And I can’t keep this from my brothers. We share everything. They need to know. They can help us.”

“It’s not just your story to tell though, is it? What happened doesn’t just affect you, it affects me and my whole family.”

He lifted his head to stare at the wall, sighing and contemplating what I’d said.

“I know, and you’re right, but how else am I supposed to get help to track the fucker down? I can’t lie to them all. They’ll ask where I’ve been.”

“And when they do, you’ll think of something. Something that tides them over for a while. Please, Will. I know it’s a big ask, but just give me a little more time. I promise we’ll tell them when the time is right, but not now, not today.”

He dropped his gaze, his head hanging low as he gave a pained sigh.

“And then today turns into tomorrow, and the next day, and if we keep avoiding it, it’ll fester and grow, spreading like a virus that’s infected us. That’s not the way to deal with this, Bee.”

“I know that,” I snapped back a little too quickly, and instantly, I regretted it. “But I won’t let it go that far. I promise.”

He nodded, silent in his acceptance of my avoidance.

“Fine. I won’t tell them the truth for a few more days. But that doesn’t mean I won’t go looking today.”

Panic gripped me.

“You can’t go by yourself. I don’t want you to do that. It’s too dangerous. What if he takes you again?”

“I won’t be by myself. I’ll find a way to get the others on board without giving too much away. I’m good at twisting a story to fit my narrative.”

I’d heard him, but I still wasn’t convinced.

“It’s not safe, Will, however you twist it. You can’t lead them into something when they don’t have the full facts. Anything could happen.”

“I’m well aware of that.” He exhaled in exasperation. “Just trust me.”

He kissed the top of my head and stepped back, his arms falling to his sides.

“I always trust you,” I told him, and then, letting out a deep breath, I added, “I’ll stay here. I’ll lock the door behind you and when you’ve done whatever it is you need to do, come home. Please. I won’t rest until you’re back here.”

“I know you won’t.” He gave me one last peck on my forehead and then headed for the door. “And I won’t rest until I’m back here with you.”

He opened the door to leave, and I stood in the doorway, watching him walk away down the corridor. He wasn’t happy though, and he spun around, calling out, “I want to hear that door lock. I won’t leave until I do.”

I smiled and did as he asked. After all, it was the least I could do after he’d done so much for me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



THE TASKMASTER

I sauntered into the basement, taking my time as I scanned the area, appreciating it like it was the first time I was seeing it. The upside-down crosses painted on the wall added a certain flair to this room. The scratches and marks told a tale I'd enjoy listening to time and again. The aura of the place was one of macabre pleasure. It was perfect and I felt at home here.

My players had been lucky that I hadn't separated them. I'd allowed them to stay in here together. But now, the mattress they'd slept on, cried on, bonded on, it was gone. What replaced it was a semi-circle of chairs, each with one of my guests seated there, ready to greet me.

"Gentlemen," I announced, my arms rising as I gestured around the room. "I'm so glad you could join me here today."

I glanced from one putrid, puffy, grotesquely disfigured face to the next, slumped in front of me in their seats. I couldn't help but smirk at the fact that they couldn't respond.

The room was sour and pungent from the acrid filthy stench each of my guests were emitting. A stench that hung in the air like an unwelcome visitor. One I'd be all too happy to dispose of. It was a good job I'd worn my Ghost mask today; the skull faceplate helped me breathe a little easier. Not that I needed a mask to hide myself. It didn't matter if they saw my face. They couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't taste or touch or do anything.

How could they?

They were all dead.

“It’s nice to see some of you made it here in one piece.” Turning to face the hangman, I added, “Apart from you, Fraser.” I grimaced, my eyes trailing over the pile of body parts crammed onto the chair, his head perched neatly on the top. “But you have to admit, your ending was a fitting one. You broke me and countless others. And now, you’re the one who’ll spend eternity broken beyond repair.” I cracked my neck from side to side, stretching out the tension I felt. “I might go one step further and scatter you in different places. Rest in pieces.”

I laughed and stood back to admire my work.

“It’s been a job well done. They really rose to the challenge.” I looked at Mario, who didn’t quite get the death by a thousand cuts ending that I’d envisioned for him. “Apart from you, Mario. They fucked your chapter up, but then, I guess nothing is perfect. However, the story isn’t finished, so there’s still time to make amends.”

I strolled over to the table in the corner of the room. Scanning the tools piled up there, I chose a meat cleaver and picked it up, twisting it in the air as I headed to the first chair.

“Phase one is complete. Now it’s time to move to phase two, and you men”—I pointed the cleaver at each one of them—“still need to play your part.”

I lifted the meat cleaver up and slammed it down as hard as I could on Wilson’s rotting flesh. The blade lodged into his bone, but I yanked it out, slamming it back down again.

“You got the death you deserved, but retribution? That still hasn’t happened. Not the way I want it to. It’s time for the world to know who you are.”

Wilson’s body part eventually dropped onto the stone floor, and I moved to the next guest, chopping until I’d cut cleanly through the bone.

“It’s time to draw back the curtains and take your final bow. And do you want to know the best part?” I leaned down

to whisper in Paul Masters' ear. "Your daughter and future son-in-law are going to be the ones to do it."

Chapter Twenty-Nine



“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the ghost of fuckboys past,” Colton shouted across the main room of The Sanctuary as I walked in.

I knew I’d get flack for being away and I was fine with that. I expected nothing less. I’d rather they joked with me so I could avoid talking about the real issues weighing on my mind. Being flippant came easier to me. They knew that, and so I grinned back, playing up to it.

“Finally decided to give her a rest,” Colton went on. “Grace us with your presence and do a bit of fucking work?” He winked as he spoke, stepping out of the bar area where he was doing a stock take to head towards me.

“Gotta come back down to earth some time,” I replied, puffing my chest out like I was some sort of returning hero.

I felt the looming presence of Adam stalking across the dance floor that the cleaners were currently sweeping. Then Tyson, Adam’s rottweiler, came bounding in from the open fire exit at the back of the room. He ran to us, his sharp claws tapping the polished floors as he scampered across, stopping to sit at Adam’s side, his tongue hanging out as he panted and peered up at us. I reached down to scratch Tyson’s head, and as I did, Adam noticed the makeshift bandages on my ear.

“What the fuck happened to you?” he asked, pointing at it.

“It’s nothing, just a scratch,” I replied, trying to play it down, but he wasn’t having any of it. He reached up to yank

off the bandage that was doing a poor job of hiding my wound. When he saw the state of my ear, he grimaced, gritted his teeth, and I swear I was waiting for steam to billow out of his nose. He looked furious.

“It’s not fucking nothing. Who the fuck did this to you?” Adam couldn’t hide the venom in his tone, he was ready to go to war regardless of what’d happened. I was hurt and he wanted blood because of it. He didn’t need any more reason than that.

“It’s a long story.” I stepped back, trying to fix the bandage that was hanging off the side of my face back over my ear to hide the evidence. It was a pointless act, though. He’d already seen it.

Colton came closer now, his forehead pinched, eyes narrowed on me as he hissed, “Jesus. You look like shit, mate. I was joking when I said you’re a fucking ghost, but fuck me, that’s exactly what you look like. What’s going on?”

I couldn’t betray Bryony’s trust, but I hated that I felt torn between doing what was right and what was sensible. I’d never lied to my friends before, and I wasn’t about to start now.

“I can’t tell you,” I told them.

Colton folded his arms over his chest, his legs widening as he stood in front of me, waiting for me to elaborate. Adam let out a low growl beside me, but I didn’t let it sway me.

“It’s not my story to tell. Please. If I could tell you, I would. But I can’t. Not yet.”

Adam moved to stand in my eyeline.

“You come back here after weeks of complete radio silence, you look like death, and your ear is half hanging off, and you expect us to believe everything is okay and not question where you’ve been? Fuck that. We need to know. If something’s wrong, we fix it. Together. You know that. So, tell us, where the hell have you been, and who did that to you?” Adam wasn’t here to play games. He was deadly serious.

“Would you believe me if I said I did it to myself?” I shrugged, trying to underplay it.

“No,” Adam spat back.

I could feel the growing tension in the air. Tempers were rising. They weren't prepared to let me string them along and bullshit them with vague explanations, which was something I wasn't prepared to do either. Like I'd said, I didn't tell them lies, so avoidance was my next strategy.

“I need you to trust me right now,” I pleaded. “I will tell you everything, just not today.”

Adam still had fury burning in his eyes, but Colton just looked wary.

“Is Bryony okay?” Colton asked, his voice quieter now.

“She's fine.” From his expression, I could tell he didn't know whether to believe me, so I added, “I left her at Kate's. Honestly, she's okay.”

He blinked, taking in what I was saying, then he nodded.

“Okay. I trust you. I don't like it, and I want to know what's going on, but I trust you're doing the right thing and you'll tell us when you can. Whatever *it* is.”

“I'm not okay with it,” Adam barked. “You need to tell us what's going on, now. Shit needs dealing with, and we don't ignore shit like that,” he said, nodding at my ear.

Adam didn't wait for me to respond, he just stomped away, walking over to the bar to pick up his mobile phone, then he charged back over to where I stood.

“I'm really not fucking happy about this,” he seethed. “Something's happened and we work as team. You know that. Hurt one, hurt all.” He glared at me. “But I'll give you a day to think about it. One day. And tomorrow, we go hunting.”

“We can hunt today, if you'll trust me to take you somewhere, no questions asked.” I shrugged.

“That goes without saying,” Adam replied, his jaw ticking and his glare proving that he was firm in his offer to help me.

“Hear, hear,” Colton added with a smirk. “I’ll go and start the car.” But Adam grabbed his arm to stop him.

“We’ve got your back,” Adam said. “We’ll always stand by your side, no matter what. We’d start a war if you asked us to, there’s no question about that. But right now”—he started to tap on his phone—“someone needs to come and stitch that up properly before you get fucking tetanus or gangrene or something.” He glanced at my ear, then carried on typing. “Once its stitched and you’ve been checked over, we’re out of here.”

Adam was the guy who’d take a bullet for any one of us. He’d probably whine about our poor driving skills when we took him to the hospital afterwards, but he’d take that bullet, no question.

“It’s done,” he announced sharply, pocketing his phone. “The doc will be here in an hour.”

We had a few discreet people on our payroll that we used for medical emergencies. I didn’t feel like I needed it, but I nodded in agreement.

“Glad that’s sorted,” Colton replied. “And when we find out who hurt you, we’ll give those fuckers exactly what they deserve... the deaf penalty.”

And just like that, he was back to being the twisted joker that didn’t give a fuck what he said.

“Or we could just play it by ear.” He shrugged. “I would make a joke about Bryony chewing your ear off, but even I know where to draw the line.” Colton smirked, and I couldn’t help but smile too.

“I can’t wait to hear about where you’ve been,” Colton said. “And who we’re killing. When you’re ready to spill it, I’m all ears.”

“Will you just fucking stop,” Adam snapped as Tyler burst into the room, shouting, “Hey! You all need to come and see this. Now. This is some fucking twisted shit.”

There was nothing like the announcement of twisted shit to get our attention and make us follow to see what he was on

about. We knew it'd be worth our time.

Adam shoed Tyson away, and he trotted over to the bar, where Jake was refilling the fridges, and lay down on the cool tiles to watch him. We all followed Tyler through the door to the narrow hallway that led to the chapel.

Seconds later, when we got to the chapel, we saw Devon standing across the room at the open doorway to the side of the building. The doorway that led to the car park where I'd been jumped weeks ago. He was staring at a black backpack on the floor by his feet, and when he heard us approaching, he said, "This is fucked up and fucking intriguing, I can't lie. I kind of love it and hate it at the same time." He didn't take his eyes off the backpack the whole time he spoke.

Whatever was in there, it'd captured his full attention.

"Someone left that backpack on the step for us," Tyler chipped in. "No note. Nothing. Just that." He nodded to the bag in question, then turned to me, "Nice to see you bothered to join us again. You owe me about twenty shifts."

"Speak louder, he can't hear you," Colton muttered as he pushed past us to get to the backpack and see whatever it was that had Devon so enthralled. He peered in, then drew his face back, grimacing, "Fuck me. As gifts go, that one's really shitty."

"What the fuck is it?" Adam asked as we headed over.

I stopped when the backpack was at my feet, and as I glanced down, I felt a shot of adrenaline rush through my veins, sickness and fury swirling inside when I saw what was in there.

A pile of bloody, severed hands.

"Fucking hell." Adam stepped back; we all did. "Have you checked the CCTV?" He turned to stare at Tyler.

Tyler started to tap on his phone, scouring our CCTV, then he turned it around to show Adam what had been caught on there.

“Dark clothing,” he said as we watched a dark figure walk up to our back door, drop the backpack on the step and walk away. “Hood pulled up. Nothing that stands out. Except this.” Tyler clicked to freeze the video showing an angle taken from the other side of the car park. And there, staring back at me from under the hood, was a skull mask.

Cold shivers ran down my spine.

I knew exactly who it was that’d left the hands. I also had a pretty good idea whose hands they’d be.

“I think they were left for me,” I announced, and they all turned to stare at me, waiting for me to elaborate.

“Go on,” Adam urged when I fell silent.

“Like I said, I can’t tell you the full story yet, but I think he left those for me. He wants me to know he’s watching. That he can still get to me.”

They all growled and cursed, angry that there was an enemy out there, but they didn’t know who it was or what they were facing because I wasn’t talking.

“Fucking hell, Will. Just lead us to him and he’s dead,” Colton shouted.

“That’s my fucking plan,” I replied, feeling exasperated and torn, trying to navigate my way through this.

Adam took his phone out and started making a call.

“Hey, Tom,” he said when they answered. “I need you to come and collect something.” He went quiet as Tom, our inside guy in the police, responded. “I need you to take some fingerprints. Get a few IDs sorted for me.” He huffed and shook his head as he spoke. “No, the hands aren’t attached to the bodies. We just had a bag of them dropped on our doorstep, so no, no need for any arrests. We just need to know whose hands they are.”

Adam nodded as the conversation went on, then he tapped his phone abruptly to shut the call down and shoved it in the back pocket of his jeans.

“Tom’s gonna get us some IDs. He’ll say the bag was found by the lake in the local park. Stumbled upon by a local passer-by walking their dog. He promised to keep our names out of it.”

We all nodded, but I knew our names wouldn’t ever be out of it. He’d left those hands as a calling card. He was smoking me out, but this time, I was ready for him.

“Looks like it’s all hands on deck,” Colton joked, but for once, I didn’t laugh.

“Load up the van with whatever weapons you can,” I instructed plainly. I was all business, no time for anything else. “We’re going on a road trip. I hope you like Newgate Forest, because we’re about to be all over that fucking place.”

Chapter Thirty



The second he walked out the door, I faltered, questioning why I'd let him go. *Maybe I should've gone with him*, I thought to myself, because being on my own in this apartment didn't feel as settling as I thought it'd be. I felt anything but settled. I was constantly on edge, waiting for something to happen.

I tried to watch TV; I couldn't concentrate. Kate had some books in her bedroom, so I had a go at reading, but my mind kept wandering to darker places. Every creak of the building or gust of wind whistling through the windows and doors set me on edge.

I wasn't okay.

I was far from it.

I might've escaped that basement, but the basement still had its hold on me.

When I was at my weakest, I thought about my father and how he'd suffered in his final moments, experiencing agony that I knew he didn't deserve. That was his legacy now, leaving me with a millstone of guilt, pain, and regret that I'd carry with me and endure for the rest of my life.

Maybe it was time I looked for a therapist. The sooner I started to face these demons, the better. I couldn't go on the way I was because I knew I was spiralling, and I didn't want that. I didn't want to get trapped in another hell of my own making.

I heard a noise outside the front door; someone was trying to turn the door handle, and instantly it felt like my whole body had been plunged into icy water. Dread shot through me as fear twisted my stomach, and I sprang up from the sofa. My head spun around as every sound in the apartment intensified. My eyes darted about, my body jumpy as I started to plan an escape route.

He was here.

He'd seen Will leave.

He'd been biding his time to make sure Will was far enough away, and then he'd come up here, ready to finish what he'd started.

This was it.

My final reckoning.

The door handle rattled again, and I ran to the kitchen. Flinging the drawer open, I grabbed the first knife I saw, gripping it tightly as I looked at the window, trying to decide if it was a good enough escape route. Then I glanced at the door, contemplating facing him and ending this once and for all. I didn't know which one to choose, and time wasn't on my side.

My heart thumped out of my chest, and I was just about to dart for the window when I heard, "Bryony! Don't pretend you're not in there! Colton already texted me to tell me you're home. So, open the goddamn door, will you?"

I let out a breath of relief. It wasn't him. It was Shelley. But I didn't drop the knife. I kept a firm grip on it as I walked to the door to unlock it.

Swinging the door open, I saw Shelley standing there with her arms crossed over her chest, tapping her foot. Then her scowl disappeared, and her eyes widened when they settled on the knife I was brandishing at her.

"That's a nice way to greet your sister after bailing on her for weeks," she chastised.

I lowered my arm and stepped back from the doorway to let her in.

“Sorry, I thought you were someone else.”

She raised her brow at me as she strolled past, heading into the living room.

“Is Will into some kinky shit then? Does he like you to greet him at the door with a carving knife?” She dropped onto the sofa, then when she saw me walk in after her and sit down without giving her my usual sarky response, her face softened. “Colton told me you were back, but he said you didn’t want to see anyone. Thanks for that, by the way. That made me feel really special.”

“What else did Will say?” I asked, ignoring her dig at the fact that I was hiding, but hesitant to find out what she knew.

“He said he’ll tell the boys where you’ve been in a few days. He wouldn’t say any more than that.” She snapped her mouth shut, her nostrils flaring as she paused, then added, “Where the fuck *have* you been?”

I sat forward, opened and closed my mouth like a fool, and Shelley sighed. “I was all for you and Will having a bit of time alone, but you could’ve at least answered a few of my texts.”

“The Wi-Fi was terrible. I’m sorry,” I lied, hoping she wouldn’t see right through me.

“I texted you every day. You didn’t even read them.”

I hated that she was upset, and she didn’t even know the worst of it.

She took her mobile out to show me the evidence, scrolling through each message that showed it’d been delivered but remained unread. As awful as it sounded, that gave me some comfort. He hadn’t read those messages after the ones he sent out that first day.

“We lost our phones,” I told her, and she raised her eyebrows again.

“Both of you?”

“Yes. They were in the same bag, and we lost it at a local bar. We’d had too much to drink.” It was scary how easily these lies were rolling off my tongue.

Will had phoned our service providers and had both lines cancelled after we got home last night, but I didn't want to tell her that. A story about our phones getting lost after a drunken night was much more believable and came with fewer questions I'd have to think up more lies for.

"You could've used a payphone. I've been going out of my mind here. Two sisters going AWOL and here's me left behind to try and keep Mum from stressing out about you both."

"You haven't heard from Kate?" I asked, shifting the focus off me and onto my older sister.

Shelley shook her head.

"No. She sent an email about three weeks ago saying she'd be off grid for a while. Something about a wilderness camp, but I've had nothing from her since. She told me not to worry, but how can I not?" She let out a deep sigh. "I missed you, Bee. I missed both of you."

I put the knife on the sofa beside me and reached for her, pulling her into a hug.

"I'm sorry. I promise I won't ever do that to you again."

She hugged me back, reluctant to let go, and then she chuckled.

"All those weeks holed away with Will, the player. I bet you've got some stories to tell me." She pulled back and gave me an evil little wink.

"I think we'll need a drink before we have that conversation," I joked, guilt still hanging over me, but I fought it down as I headed into the kitchen.

I sat with my sister for a few hours, managing to keep up the façade that I'd been on some kinky holiday with Will. But the reality of what'd happened, that our dad was gone forever, stayed in my mind throughout, meaning I couldn't quite look her in the eye. When she eventually got up to leave, I asked her for a favour.

"Could you pick up some things for me? And don't judge me when you read my shopping list," I begged, going to

Kate's bureau and opening the drawer to take out a pen and pad. I jotted down a few things, ripped the page off the pad, folded it, and handed it to Shelley.

She quirked her brow at me and went to open it, but I put my hand up.

"Please don't read it till you leave. I know I'm not usually shy, but I am today, okay? And you might have to go to a few shops to find everything on there."

"Okay." She frowned, putting the list into the pocket of her jeans, and then she came to me for one last hug. "It's good to have you back, Bee. Don't leave me for that long again, okay?"

"Deal."

She left and I closed and locked the door behind her, checking and rechecking every single bolt. Then I turned and saw the knife I'd been holding earlier lying on the sofa. Maybe, for my protection, it wouldn't be such a crazy idea to hide a few knives around the place, just in case I needed them.

I stalked over to the kitchen, reopened the drawer, and grabbed as many knives as I could. Then I went around the apartment, putting them down the side of the sofa, in a plant pot, under the mattress, inside the bathroom cabinet. I'd have to warn Will about them when he came home. I couldn't risk him putting his hand somewhere and getting hurt because of me. But to my panic-stricken mind, this plan was a good one. A smart one. The next time *he* came for either one of us, we'd be ready.

Chapter Thirty-One



WILL

We scoured every inch of Newgate Forest, but we didn't find a fucking thing. I traced and retraced our steps several times from where the woman had picked us up at the side of the road, but there was nothing. No sign of a secret bunker, trap door, or any kind of opening from where we'd emerged only hours earlier. The ground didn't even look like it'd been disturbed. We searched until it became impossible to see with just our flashlights, and then the urge to get back to Bryony overwhelmed me, and we reluctantly called it a night. The search had been pointless, but tomorrow, I'd be back there, and I'd find him. Even if I had to tear through the mud with my own bare hands.

I dreaded telling her about the fucked-up delivery we'd had at The Sanctuary earlier. I knew how freaked out she'd be, not to mention the fact that her father's hand was probably in that bag too. Just another twist to the knife that sick fuck had stabbed into her, making her fight to get back to any semblance of the life she had before. So, I made a little detour on the way home, courtesy of Adam and some news he'd given me as we'd been tearing through the forest looking for clues. I'd do anything to make Bee smile. Absolutely anything.

When I finally got back to the apartment, I gently tapped on the door, conscious that I didn't want to spook her, and I called out, "Bee, it's only me. It's safe to open up."

I heard the bolts unlock as she started opening up, and I hid my surprise on the floor beside the door so she wouldn't see it right away.

“You took your time,” she chastised as she let me in.

“I had a lot of stuff to do. But don't worry”—I took the new mobile phone out of my pocket and passed it to her—“you can track me, message me, ring me every minute of every damn day from now on. I've programmed my new number in there for you.”

She smiled, looking apologetic. “That's sweet of you, thank you.” She placed the phone on the coffee table and then turned back around to face me. “Shelley came round earlier.”

I put my hands up, pre-empting any accusations. “I didn't say a word, I promise.”

“I know.” Her eyes dipped to the floor. “She said Colton messaged her to let her know I was back. I know you didn't tell them.” She faltered and then asked, “You didn't say anything else, did you?”

“No. I made you a promise and I wouldn't break that. You know you can trust me.” She sighed and smiled because she knew I was right. “Did you tell Shelley about... you know?” I couldn't bring myself to say, ‘What happened to your dad’. But she shook her head to tell me she hadn't. “We need to say something soon though, Bee. Especially after today.”

I saw her back go up, showing she didn't agree.

“Why? What happened today?”

I debated blurting it all out, ripping that Band-Aid off, but I stopped myself.

“There's been a development.”

“What development?” The panic that struck her then, making her look so vulnerable, sent shockwaves through me. The kind that made me want to turn right around and head back out to track the fucker down and give him the ending he deserved. But I stood my ground. I wasn't ready to obliterate her fragile peace just yet.

“It’s something we need to talk about, but I think it can wait a while longer. It looks like you’ve had a big enough dose of reality today, and anyway, I have something for you.”

“You have something for me?” She frowned. “What is it?”

I smiled wide, heading back to the front door and opening it to pick up the box and bag of provisions I’d been hiding there.

“What is all this?”

I held the box in my arms and kicked the door closed with my foot, hauling it all into the living room. She eyed everything I was carrying with suspicion.

“I bought you something.” I put the box on the floor and the bag beside the sofa, and then I knelt down and peered up at her. “It’s something I thought might help you. I know you want to try therapy, and I’m one hundred percent behind that, but there’s other ways we can heal too, and I thought this might be one of them.”

I lifted the flaps of the cardboard box as a soft little head poked its way out to see what was going on.

“Oh my God!” Bryony slapped a hand over her mouth, then knelt beside me and reached forward to pick up the rottweiler puppy that was scrambling to get out of the box. “Will, he’s so cute. Where did you get him? Oh my God, I love him.”

“He’s a she,” I corrected as she buried her face into the pup’s fur, cuddling her close. “Adam said Tyson was used to breed a litter. They were born just after we were... you know.” I didn’t want to say kidnapped, taken, or whatever, so I just shrugged. “I asked if we could have one.” I petted the pup’s head as Bryony clung to her. “She was the only one left. They called her Tiny, ‘cos she was the smallest of the litter, but we don’t have to stick to that name.”

“No. I love that. I don’t want to change it. Hey, Tiny.” Bryony nuzzled her, peppering her with kisses as the dog licked her face, loving her right back. “I’m your new mummy,” Bee cooed, and heat burst through me, seeing her

light up as she petted her. I knew then that I'd done the right thing. Bee always liked to act tough, but she had a strong, nurturing side. Tiny was one lucky pup to end up here. "But where's she gonna sleep? We don't have a dog bed. And what about food?"

I put my hand up to stop her, pulled the bag from beside the sofa and showed her the puppy food I'd bought, along with some chew toys, a water bowl, and a small fluffy dog bed the size of a cushion.

"It's all taken care of."

I smiled, seeing her look genuinely happy for the first time in a long time.

"I think this is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me."

Tiny yapped in agreement.

"You deserve the world, Bee. That's what I'm here for." I hated that I had to tell her about the delivery we'd had, but she needed to know. "Listen, I need to tell you about something that happened today, at The Sanctuary."

"Is it going to spoil this moment?" she asked, and I nodded. "Do I need to hear it now or can it wait just a little longer?"

I sighed. It was putting off the inevitable, but she was right. Maybe it could wait for an hour or two.

"Fine. We can talk about it later."

"Good." Bee snuggled into Tiny as she held her, giving me a look that was both sexy and mischievous. "Because I've got a surprise for you too. Well... not a surprise exactly. But there's something I thought we might try."

Chapter Thirty-Two



I swallowed, doubting myself and my sanity with each breath I took.

“Something we might try?” Will repeated back to me. “You’re not gonna make me do some weird voodoo shit, are you?”

I gave a hollow laugh, sitting down and holding Tiny in my lap to cuddle her as she tried to escape onto the floor.

“I suppose, in a way, you could say it has a similar vibe. I thought of a way I might exorcize a few demons. But we’ll get to that later. This little lady wants my attention now.”

I lifted Tiny up to kiss her, loving how soft and warm she felt in my arms. Soft, warm, and innocent. All mine to protect and care for.

I peered up at Will, feeling love burning fiercely inside me. I still couldn’t believe he’d done this.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I planted the hundredth kiss on Tiny’s little head.

“You already said that.” He sat down next to me, stroking her and smiling at me. “But you’re welcome. If something puts a smile on your face, I’ll do it. It’s worth it.”

We played with Tiny until she fell asleep on her little dog bed. Then, when I was confident that she was down for the night, I took Will's hand and led him into the bedroom.

On the bed was a bag full of the things I'd asked Shelley to get for me. Earlier, I'd thought this was the best idea in the world. A way to stick two fingers up at that fucker and what he'd put us through, or at least a damn good start to getting that way. I thought it'd give me control over some of my feelings, turn my nightmarish thoughts on their head, but now, I wasn't so sure.

I guessed Will could sense my apprehension and nervousness because he squeezed my hand, and with a gentle chuckle, he asked, "Are you okay?" Then he cleared his throat. "Stupid question, I know. You're not okay. But right now, you seem nervous. Why are you nervous, Bee?"

I let his hand go and rested my palms on his chest, gazing up at him and trying to predict how he'd react to what I'd say next.

"I'm gonna need you to keep an open mind. I had an idea today. It might be the dumbest idea I've ever had, but I had it, and I want to share it with you."

"Okayyy," he said, drawing out the word and cocking his brow at me. "You know you can share anything with me. I'm the last person you should be nervous around."

"I know," I replied, using the temporary burst of confidence to lean over the bed and turn the bag upside down, emptying the contents onto the duvet for him to see.

At first, his face glowed wickedly as he smirked, seeing the lube, beads, vibrators and other toys scattered on the bed. "Fuck me." He nodded, and his eyebrow quirked from how impressed he was. But then he saw the mask, and his jaw tensed. "What's that?" he asked, pointing at it, knowing full well what it was.

"It's a Scream mask. You know, Ghostface."

"I know what it is. I also know he wore one when we were in that... place. Why have you brought it here?"

My stomach turned.

He wasn't happy.

I wasn't sure how he was going to react when I showed him all this, but I didn't expect him to be angry with me.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, gathering it all up to stuff back into the bag. "It was a stupid idea."

"No." Will grabbed my hand to stop me. "It wasn't a stupid idea. I just want you to explain the mask to me. Please." He took the bag out of my hand, emptying it back onto the bed. Then he crumpled the bag in his hands and threw it into the corner. "Talk to me."

I took a moment, breathing in and out, trying to make sense of the random thoughts spiralling in my brain. And then, I just dived in, trying not to overthink what I was saying.

"Every night, when I close my eyes, that's what I see." I gestured to the mask. "Every time I fall asleep, that fucking mask haunts me. I can be standing in the kitchen, making a cup of tea, and that fucking thing pops into my head and I'm paralysed with fear. It's got a fucking hold of me, Will, and I hate it. I hate it because that's the mask he wore when he sent us to kill my dad. That fucking mask has me hostage, still stuck in that fucking basement, and I want out. I need to get out."

I didn't realise I was so breathless until he grabbed my shoulders and stared right into my eyes.

"It's okay, just breathe, Bee. Breathe." And then he started to breathe with me, his pants regulating my own, trying to calm me down.

I nodded and panted in time with him.

"Good." He nodded back. "That's good. You need to talk about these things. Facing them is good. It'll help. But you need to remember it's early days. You can't run till you learn how to walk. We need baby steps. That's how we'll get through this."

I knew he was right. But I also felt like I'd set my heart on trying this, and I didn't want to back down now.

"Tell me what it is you need," Will asked, as if he'd burrowed into my thoughts and could see that I needed more from him.

I held his gaze with mine, my heartbeat hammering as I whispered, "I want you to wear it."

He swallowed, but his expression didn't give anything away about how he felt.

"Why do you want me to wear it?"

"So I can be in control." I took another pause to gather my thoughts. "I want to replace the flashbacks and the images with something else."

"You do know that might not work. Or worse, you might put yourself back if you see me in that. It might trigger the trauma again. I'm not sure I'm willing to take that risk. Not yet. It's still so raw, Bee."

"But what if it helps me? What if the nightmares get better?"

My voice had turned shrill and desperate.

"You're gonna have nightmares for a long time. You've lost your father, and it was brutal and horrific. There's no hiding from that. No quick fix."

"But this might be the start of a fix of some kind."

Will let his head fall back, his eyes on the ceiling as he let out a low, heavy sigh. Then he dropped his head, focusing his gaze back on me.

"I can see your mind's made up. Nothing I say is gonna change it, is it?"

"You don't have to do it," I stated, and he grabbed my face in his hands, his lips brushing over mine as he said, "I'll do anything for you. But I need to know you'll be okay. I don't want anything to hurt you."

I leaned forward, kissing him and closing my eyes so that every one of my senses was focused on him. His taste, his touch, all of it. I wanted to drown in it.

“I don’t like feeling weak,” I whispered. “I don’t want anything to have a hold on me, except you.”

“You’re not weak.” His thumb brushed my cheeks as he kissed me gently, ghost kisses skimming over my lips. “You’re the strongest woman I know. Don’t mistake healing for weakness.”

“But will you help me? Heal, that is?” I opened my eyes to find him staring so intently at me, it made my heart flutter in my chest.

“Always. You know I’ll do anything for you.”

Standing here, I couldn’t believe how things had turned out. That this amazing man was with me, saying the kind of things I never thought I’d hear. His face was glowing with affection, his hands on me; warm and comforting, making me feel safe despite everything. I wouldn’t have been able to do this with anyone else. Only him. Because I trusted him wholeheartedly.

I’d been so nervous to ask this of him, but he hadn’t made me feel crazy. Sure, he questioned why I wanted to do it. He had my best interests at heart. But he didn’t make me feel like a freak.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling unworthy of him.

“No need to thank me, Bee. Whatever you need, I’m here for it.”

He gave me one last brush of his thumbs over my cheeks, and then his hands dropped, and he turned to look at the collection on the bed. Picking up the mask, he went to put it on, but I grabbed his hand to stop him.

“Not here,” I begged, and he cocked his brow. “I mean, don’t put it on in front of me. I need you to walk in wearing it.”

He frowned, worry etched on his face.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I want there to be some element of surprise.” I felt my cheeks flush. “Controlled surprise,” I added, and he smirked.

“Whatever you say, princess.”

He took one last look at the mask in his hands, then his gaze met mine, his eyes narrowed like he was trying to read something in my expression. Seconds ticked by and then he gave a slight nod. “I’ll be right back then,” he said, and turned to leave.

He closed the door gently, and I stood there flexing my fists, not knowing what to do with myself. I decided to take my dress off, pulling it over my head to leave me standing in my black underwear. I rubbed my hand over my stomach, nerves fluttering in my belly. Then I scanned the room, gathering the stuff piled up on the bed and placing it on the side table. A nervous wave rippled through me, my stomach performing somersaults as I smoothed down the duvet, trying to distract myself.

What was I thinking?

I shouldn’t have asked him to do this.

I was expecting too much of him.

Random questions and niggling doubts flooded my brain, but when I heard the click of the bedroom door opening, I shut them down, took a deep breath, and prepared to face my nightmare.

Chapter Thirty-Three



Turning around, my heart stuttered in my chest. Instantly, my lungs became heavy, and I found it hard to breathe. All I could do was gasp, gulping down air like I'd just emerged from water and needed that first sweet breath to bring me back to life. My chest panted and noise buzzed in my ears, ringing like an alarm to warn me and wake me up at the same time.

I stared at him.

I couldn't take my eyes off him.

My hands shook, and my body felt like it was spiralling, freefalling into panic and something else, something I didn't expect.

Lust.

I felt like I was having an out of body experience, but I wanted to be present, to step into this with both feet firmly on the ground and do what I'd set out to do when I'd had this idea. I didn't feel like my body was my own as I tried to move but stayed rooted to the spot. A mixture of danger and desire thrummed through me.

He was fucking stunning.

A vision of horror but so, so fucking sexy.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he stood by the door, his voice muffled by the mask.

"Yes."

I couldn't say anything else yet. I was still hypnotised by what I saw in front of me.

He only had his black boxer shorts on. The muscles on his stomach and chest shone in the glow of the subtle bedside lighting. Will had the kind of body you only ever saw in the movies or in a magazine. He was ripped perfection, with that perfect V and dark dusting of hair, the happy trail that hinted at what he had for me beneath those boxers. His skin was lightly tanned, and I couldn't stop myself from scanning his body, drinking him in. From his toned legs and muscular thighs, up to his tight abs and pecs, and then I stopped, staring at the black and white mask—the image that'd held me hostage since it'd appeared on that screen in the basement.

“Don't speak,” I told him. “Not yet.”

He nodded and stayed where he was, letting me lead. Giving me full control.

I glared at the mask, the silicone face that brought me so much anger and hurt. The mask that'd destroyed my life. One of many *he'd* used, but the one that stuck in my brain. My breathing became steadier as I studied every inch of it. From the sloping eyes, hollow and kind of sad when you looked closer. The nose, an empty space, a hole of nothingness. And then there was the mouth, that elongated scream, but when I stared at it, I imagined that it was screaming in pain, crying out.

Knowing it was Will beneath that mask helped make it less harrowing, but facing it today also made me see it in a different light. It was a mask, a cover, nothing else. And after tonight, that's all I wanted it to be. Not a nightmare, just an image.

“You look...” I went to speak, and Will butted in.

“Scary?”

“No.” I watched his chest rise and fall as he stood there, waiting for me to go on. “You look... hot.”

“You don't look too bad yourself,” he replied, scanning my body from head to toe. Then, in a softer voice, he added, “I'm

letting you lead, by the way. I won't move, or speak, I won't lay a finger on you unless you tell me I can."

"You can speak," I replied. "But only when spoken to."

I heard him give a low, barely audible growl at my command, and I took a step closer to him, his manly scent filling the air around me, making my head spin. Once I was standing close enough, his chest almost touching mine, I scraped my fingers down his pecs, trailed them over his abs, and then lightly, I ran my fingertips across the waistband of his boxers, fighting the urge to plunge my hand inside and touch him, grip him tightly, stroke his cock until he was begging for release.

"Do you like wearing this mask?" I asked, my voice husky with need.

"I like trying new things with you." He peered down at me but kept his hands by his sides. "I've always been adventurous, but I've never found anyone who feels the same. I like this. I like that we can be this way with each other."

I bit my lip, my eyes dropping to the clear bulge at the front of his boxers.

"What do you want me to do?" I brushed my hand over him, stroking the outline of his cock and then venturing lower to cup his balls. "Do you want me to play with you? Do you like it hard and fast, or soft and slow?"

"I want you to play with every inch of me. The harder the better. Suck me and fuck me until I can't take it anymore."

I grinned.

"Oh, I intend to do that." I gave his balls a light squeeze then rubbed over his cock again, feeling it grow and pulse beneath my fingers, making me hungry to taste him, do things to him that'd make him moan like he'd never moaned before.

I glanced to the side at the table of toys, and he asked, "Are those for you or me?"

"Both." I peered up at the mask, my need to dominate it overriding everything else.

“I guess I might need a safe word then,” he joked. “How about meatloaf?”

“Meatloaf?” I gazed up at him, giving him a questioning look.

“Yeah. You know, I’d do anything for love, but fuck me, I won’t do that.”

I snorted.

“I know you, Will Stokes.” I let my hand wander a little further, gripping and stroking his length through the black fabric, squeezing his hardness in my palm. “Something tells me you won’t need a safe word.” I leaned into him, my heart rate spiking as my face brushed the side of the mask to whisper, “I know you like it filthy, and I’m about to blow your fucking mind.”

He let out a long, low groan.

“Bring it on.”

I leaned back, the feeling of power and dominance washed over me, spurring me on to do and say things that’d push me out of my comfort zone. I wanted to fall over the edge and take him with me. I didn’t want any barriers, no walls between us. Nothing was off the table.

I ran my fingertips under the elastic of his waistband and slid my hands underneath, pushing his boxers over his ass and down his thighs. His cock was long, thick, and heavy, slapping onto my stomach as I freed him, leaving a wet droplet of precum on my skin. I slid my finger across the drop and then slipped my finger into my mouth, humming my appreciation as I tasted him. He growled in response, but he didn’t speak. He was sticking to my rules, showing me what a good boy he could be.

His boxers fell to the floor, and he kicked them off. His cock was straining, the veins throbbing, desperate for attention, so I lifted my hand, stuck my tongue out, and licked my palm. Then I gripped the base of his cock, telling him, “You’re wearing the perfect mask,” as I squeezed him, loving

how big he was, silky and hard, every vein popping as I squeezed harder.

“Oh yeah?” he moaned, his hips rocking forward, begging for more.

“Yeah. Because I’m about to make you fucking scream.”

He chuckled, and I gave him a long, hard stroke, running my thumb over the tip and then teasing the delicate underside as I circled the head. I was feeding off the power I felt in this moment, knowing I had so much control over him and my own fractured thoughts.

“I’m gonna suck your cock, circle the head nice and slowly with my tongue. Then I’m gonna take my time tasting you, teasing you. When I’m done, I’ll take every delicious inch of you right down my throat. My hot, tight throat will be the best thing you’ve ever felt. I promise. And when I’ve teased you, driven you wild with my tongue, my mouth, with how hard I can suck, I’ll let you come down my throat. I’ll take every drop you’ve got to give me, and I’ll love it. You will too.”

“I fucking know I will,” he rasped, reaching up to drag his thumb across my lips and then push it into my mouth.

I let him, sucking his thumb and swirling my tongue in the exact way I’d just described to him. Then I moved back slowly, letting it pop out of my mouth as I smirked up at him.

He gave a quiet groan, his need as desperate as mine, and excitement overtook me as I dropped to my knees.

I cupped his balls, gently stroking them as I licked from the base of his cock all the way to the tip. Then I used my tongue to circle the head, taking him into my mouth to taste him, using my tongue to swirl over and around him. He was delicious, and the feel of his skin against my tongue made my pussy tingle, wetness pooling between my thighs. I used my nails to gently tickle his balls, my fingertips grazing him, feeling how his skin tightened in response to my teasing. I loved that I could control him, make him react to my touches like this.

I licked and kissed the head of his cock, prolonging his sweet agony. My hand gripped the base to squeeze him, and then I pumped my hand up and down a few times. His hips rocked a little faster now, and I could tell he wanted more. But it was me setting the pace. I was in complete control. I pulled him out of my mouth, holding him and staring at how gorgeous his cock looked, hard, angry, and glistening with my saliva.

“I think this is my favourite part of you.” I sighed and then speared my tongue, licking his balls and running my tongue up the length of him.

I wrapped my lips around him, pushing his cock into my mouth and grabbing his ass with both hands. He was big and I had to swallow to fit him down my throat, but I wasn't a quitter, and even though my eyes were watering, I took him, pushing him into my throat until my lips were wrapped tightly around the base of his cock. I sucked, pulling back, withdrawing right to the tip, then I pushed back down again. The way he moaned as I repeated that action over and over made me dig my nails into his ass, forcing his hips to thrust into me harder, faster.

“Can I hold your hair?” he rasped, and I nodded as I continued to suck and bob my head up and down on his cock.

He threaded his fingers through my hair at the nape of my neck, gripped hard and then started to push me onto him harder. It gave him a little control, but he'd asked permission, so I let him. Plus, it was a fucking turn-on, feeling him push my head and thrust into me because he couldn't get enough.

His cock throbbed on my tongue, his balls slapped my chin, and his hand twisted and pulled my hair. I slid his cock down my throat and swallowed hard around him, making him cry out and throw his head back as he got lost in the way I was making him feel.

And then, doing what I'd set out to do, I pulled back, letting his cock fall out of my mouth. The orgasm he'd been chasing was still a whisper away, but he couldn't have it yet. Not until I was ready.

“Get on the bed,” I ordered as I kneeled in front of him, his cock pointing right at me. “Lie on your back and put your hands on the bed frame above your head.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, stepping over to the bed, climbing onto his back and positioning his hands the way I’d told him to.

“Such a good boy,” I teased. “A filthy, dirty boy.” I stared at the mask as I spoke, the chains that’d tethered me to the fear it’d evoked were now falling away, walls crumbling, and yet, I still had so much more I wanted to do.

“I’ll be as filthy as you want me to be,” he replied, and I climbed over him, braced on all fours as I stared down at him. Without taking my eyes off that mask, I reached for the handcuffs. Then I clamped them around his wrists, threading the cuffs through the bed frame to keep him secure.

I leaned down and whispered in his ear, “I’m gonna be the filthy one.” Then I crawled to the bottom of the bed and kneeled, looking at him chained up just for me, ready to take whatever I had to give him. His cock was resting on his stomach, still rock hard and glistening with my saliva, so I wrapped my hand around him, giving him a few pumps. He lifted his hips, trying to thrust up, but I tutted and shook my head, taking my hand away and chastising him. “You don’t get to control this. I say when you come. And when you do, it’ll be the hardest fucking orgasm you’ve ever had.”

He didn’t reply, but the moan he gave was reward enough.

“Open your legs,” I demanded, and he did as he was told.

I stroked over his balls, watching intently as the skin tightened, and then, as his cock twitched, begging for attention, I moved my fingers lower, rubbing and massaging his perineum. My hips rocked over the bed, seeking friction, as he let out a long and satisfied “Ah,” from how good I was making him feel. My fingers rubbed and explored lower and lower, until I touched him in a place I’d never touched any man before. And the power I felt as he let out a huge gasp was intoxicating. I pushed the tip of my finger inside him, and his

breathing changed, small pants and then deep sighs as I gently probed.

“Do you like this?” I asked.

“Yes.” He sounded like he could barely speak. “More than I ever thought I would.”

Interesting.

So, this was a first for him too.

I withdrew my finger and picked up one of the smaller, thin vibrators from the bedside table, uncapped the lube and squeezed it onto the vibrator, then drizzled some of it onto his ass.

“I’m gonna need you to relax for me,” I commanded, placing the vibrator at his entrance, waiting to see what he’d say.

He took a deep breath, and his legs widened a little more, knees relaxing as I pushed the tip into him. The veins on his cock pulsed as his length twitched on his stomach, but I didn’t touch him, and he couldn’t touch himself. I pushed the vibrator in further, my pussy throbbing as I watched him take it, and then, I switched the vibrate on, and his hips shot up, his back going rigid as he cried out, “Holy fucking shit. What the hell are you doing to me?”

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked, staring at the mask, smiling as I made that mask cry and mewl like an animal.

“No. Fuck no,” he begged, his hips rocking as I circled the vibrator inside him. “What the hell kind of voodoo shit is this? It’s like you found some hidden spot inside of me and... woah!” he cried out as I pushed in a little further, angling it so it hit that spot even better. “Fuck me, this is insane.”

Insane and the most erotically satisfying thing I’d done in a long time. Maybe ever.

“Looks like I unlocked a new level of freak in you,” I replied, my eyes focused on his cock and the place where I was penetrating him.

The mask meant nothing.

But this?

It was everything.

He writhed on the bed as I pushed and pulled, circled and rolled inside of him, teasing him until his writhing turned to spasms, his back arching off the bed, and without me even touching his cock, he came, white cum spurting over his stomach and chest. It was the hottest thing I'd ever seen.

His body went rigid for a while, his muscles taut as he got lost in his euphoria. And a tidal wave of satisfaction fell over me, knowing I'd done that. He felt that way because of me.

Eventually, his body relaxed back into the mattress, his legs trembling as I pulled the vibrator free, and then, because I wasn't done with teasing him yet, I ran it over his perineum, across his balls and up the length of his throbbing, spent cock.

"Woman," he gasped. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"This wouldn't be such a bad way to go, would it?" I chuckled.

"Not at all. I'll happily go like this, one mind blowing orgasm after another to push me over the cliff into hell."

"You're not going to hell," I told him.

"I am if it means I get fucked by you like this every single day."

"And night," I added.

I continued to tease him with the vibrator, and when he started to grow hard again, I smiled. His stamina was impressive, and I couldn't wait to test how far I could push him tonight.

"I think it's my turn now," I said, sitting up, ready to pull my underwear off slowly to please him. Reaching around, I unhooked my bra and let it fall down my arms.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," he groaned as I let my bra fall to the floor, and I grabbed my tits, squeezing them for him, pushing them together then using my thumbs to graze my nipples.

As I played with myself, I gave him a look that told him I wished the hands touching me were his, and that I couldn't wait to feel him inside me. This was the best way to torture and tantalise him. He couldn't touch me, but that only heightened the anticipation for what came next. I knew he loved it. I did too.

With my head down, staring at him through my lashes, my gaze dark and sexy, I skimmed my hands down my stomach then pushed them into my underwear. I slipped the black lace down my thighs and slid them off, throwing them to the floor. Then I crawled up the bed to rest above him, my knees either side of his hips, his cock almost touching my pussy. So close, but not close enough. I needed more.

“Ride me, any way you want,” he growled.

“Oh, I intend to,” I replied, taking his cock in my hand and rubbing him through my wetness.

Feeling him slide through my pussy, teasing my clit, it all became too much, and I couldn't wait any longer to have him inside me. So I positioned my hips above him, and slowly, I lowered myself onto his cock, closing my eyes and throwing my head back as his thickness stretched me in the most sublime way.

“You feel fucking amazing,” I cried, lifting myself up and then slamming back down onto him again. I let my head fall forward, and I stared at his masked face as I leant my body back, gripping his thighs as I fucked him.

His hips bucked up into me, but from my position above, I had the power, I was in full control. The way I rode him was raw and feral, but it couldn't be any other way. This was how I wanted him. It was perfect. It was us. I was taking every bit of pleasure I could get, and from the way he moaned, so was he.

The waves of pleasure were radiating through me harder now, and I knew I was close. I slammed onto him, over and over, and using my fingers, I rubbed my clit.

“That's it, princess. Come for me. Come on my cock.”

His words sent me over the edge, and I came hard, my pussy convulsing and gripping him as the explosions I felt inside made me quiver and go weak. As I savoured every delicious blissful moment, I felt his cock thicken and throb, and then he came too, crying out as his body bucked and writhed beneath me. His cock stayed buried deep within me as I slowly rocked my hips against him, squeezing every second of ecstasy that I could for both of us.

“Holy fuck,” he gasped. “This night is just full of surprises.”

“The best surprises,” I replied.

Reluctantly, I lifted myself off him, missing the feel of him as soon as I did. Still gasping, I lay on the bed beside him and took a moment to get my breath back.

Once we’d come back down from our high, I stood up and walked to the bathroom to fetch a wet cloth and a towel. Then I climbed back onto the bed beside him, and with the wet cloth, I wiped his stomach, chest, and cock. Taking care of him in the same way he always took care of me.

“Aftercare too. I am being spoiled,” he moaned. He was still chained to the bed, but he didn’t seem to mind.

I reached up to pull the mask off him, and as I did, his hair stuck up in all directions, making him look cute as hell, not to mention utterly satisfied and thoroughly fucked. It was a good look on him.

I glanced down at the mask in my hand, feeling an unwanted heaviness growing inside me. It was only subtle, but it was there, so I threw the mask into the corner of the room. It’d served its purpose for tonight; it wasn’t needed anymore.

Was I magically cured of my fear?

No.

Did I still have the weight of guilt, terror, and grief weighing me down?

Yes.

But tonight, just for a little while, I'd been able to forget. Distract myself and live in the moment. It wasn't a cure, but it was a start. One step on that long road to finding some kind of recovery. There'd be other moments, steps forward and back, but at least I'd be moving, and that was what counted the most.

"Next time..." I lay against him, kissing his cheek as I wrapped my arm around his waist. "I want to see your face when I do that to you."

He turned his head to look at me. "Next time, I want you to lick me clean after you do."

I smirked.

"Deal."

Chapter Thirty-Four



Fuck me.
Literally.

I'd just had the best night of my life, and it didn't stop there. We spent most of the night playing with her new toys. That was until Tiny grew restless and started to scratch at the bedroom door, crying to be let in. We couldn't say no, and we picked her up, putting her on the bed between us. The three of us slept huddled together. For the first time since I was little, I felt like I was part of a family again. Sure, my friends, brothers as I called them, were my found family, but this, it was something for me. *My* family.

In the morning, as the sun lightened the fabric of the curtains, waking us up, I grabbed my phone to find a load of missed calls from Adam and Colton. Then a text from Adam that read,

You need to come back. Now. We have the IDs back from Tom.

It's not good news.

I already knew it wouldn't be good news. I also knew exactly whose hands they were, and I had to tell Bryony. This couldn't go on another day because Colton would know her father was one of those victims, he'd feel torn about what to say to Shelley. It was only fair it came from us. That she was

told in the right way, and who better to know what that way was than her sister, Bryony.

I sat up, resting against the headboard as Bee stroked Tiny, playing with her on top of the duvet.

“I need to tell you what I meant to last night, before I got... distracted.”

She sighed, picking Tiny up and burying her face into the pup. She was avoiding me.

“I mean it, Bee. You need to hear this, and you need to tell Shelley today too. I need to tell my friends.”

“Why?” She whipped her head around to stare at me, questioning my insistence that it was done today.

“Because he’s back.”

I saw her eyes widen, rabid fear making her pupils dilate and her breath falter.

“Wh... what do you mean, he’s back?” Her body was rigid, and her grip on the puppy tightened as she processed what I’d said.

“I mean, he left a fucking calling card on our doorstep outside the chapel yesterday.” I paused, contemplating whether it’d be wise to tell her everything. But I couldn’t keep secrets, not from her. “A bag of hands, which I’m guessing belong to the people we, or rather, *I* killed.”

She swallowed, and I could see her shaking as she settled Tiny onto her lap and stared at the pup, avoiding my gaze.

“My dad,” was all she said, and I nodded.

“Yeah, I think so. Which means I need to tell the others what happened, and you need to speak to Shelley. It’d be better coming from you.”

She petted the dog, then let out a slow breath. “You’re right. I need to speak to her today. It isn’t fair.”

“This won’t be over until we find him and end this,” I stated. “Once I tell everyone what happened to us, we’re going

to head back to the forest and try again, scour that fucking place until we find that door in the ground.”

Her head shot up. “And then what?”

“Then... I kill him.”

She bit her lip, shaking her head. “Because it’s that easy.”

“It is when you’ve got a fucking army of soldiers behind you.”

“But you’re not an army, are you? You’re five guys with big balls and even bigger egos. What makes you think he won’t have an army of his own?”

“He might have.” I shrugged. “But we won’t back down. We never do. It’s him or us. And my money is on us.”

“I’m not even gonna try to talk you out of it. I know better than that.” She reached for her phone on the bedside table. “Just be careful, please. I’ll call Shelley and ask her if she’s free to meet me. I’ll sort it.”

I headed into The Sanctuary and took the steps two at a time to make my way up to the second floor, where our private rooms and living area were. When I pushed through the door into the living room moments later, I found all four of them sitting on the sofas, staring right at me.

“You took your time,” Tyler snarked.

“Whatever, he’s here now,” Adam snapped, leaning forward to tap on the laptop on the coffee table in front of him.

I sat down opposite Adam and waited, but when he twisted the laptop around to show me the screen, I wasn’t surprised at what I saw.

“Tom got an ID on the hands.” Adam pointed at the first photo on the screen. “This is Fred Wilson, a sixty-two-year-old book shop owner.” He moved to point to the next one. “This one is Harold Fraser, a sixty-eight-year-old retired residential

support worker. And this one is Mario Cane, sixty-five, a retired cleaner.” He glanced at Colton before pointing at the next photo from the montage on the screen. “And this is Paul Masters.” He ran his hand over his face and sighed, sitting back before adding in a quieter tone, “He’s Shelley, Kate, and Bryony’s dad.”

Colton hung his head, muttering, “I don’t know how I’m gonna tell her.” Then he peered up at me. “What the hell do we say to them?”

I knew I had to come clean. Tell them every last detail about what’d happened to us when we’d been taken. I wasn’t sure how they’d react, but I had to give them all the facts.

“You don’t need to tell her,” I replied. “Bryony’s doing that today. And there’s something I need to tell you. All of you.” I threaded my fingers together, apprehensive about coming clean and telling our story. But Adam knew I was hiding something. I could tell by the way he gave a slight nod and sat forward. I guess they all knew deep down that I was hiding something. They just didn’t know what it was.

“Bryony and me, we didn’t go away for time alone.” I took a breath, trying to figure out how best to word it.

“Go on,” Tyler urged, his forehead pinched as he waited for what I had to say.

“We were taken.”

After I’d explained every sordid detail, they sat in stunned silence.

Adam was the first to break it.

“Why didn’t you tell us this yesterday?”

“I promised Bryony I’d give her more time before I told you. It’s not just my story to tell. It’s hers too.”

Adam’s head fell forward. “You were waiting for us to come for you while you were locked up in there, weren’t

you?”

I didn't speak, just nodded, and he glanced up at me with regret, anger, and guilt.

“Fuck. I feel like shit. I can't believe you went through all that and we weren't there to help you.” Adam clamped his mouth shut, his jaw twitching as he gritted his teeth. “But we'll find him. We'll make that fucker pay for what he's done. We won't let you down again.”

“That's why we were scouring the forest yesterday, wasn't it?” Devon asked. “That's where he kept you.”

“Yeah.” I sighed, rubbing my hands over my face. “But trying to find the hole he let us out of was like searching for a needle in a fucking haystack.”

“We'll find it,” Adam assured me. “And him.”

“I knew something wasn't right.” Colton shook his head and clenched his fists. “I should've trusted my gut. I always trust my gut, but this time... fuck. I'm so sorry, mate.”

“No apology needed,” I replied solemnly.

I knew they always had my back. None of this was their fault.

“I need to apologise though,” Tyler piped up. “I gave you shit yesterday for bailing and for me covering your shifts in the club. I'm sorry, mate. I feel like a complete asshole.”

“I don't want anyone's pity,” I stated, standing and pacing the living room, feeling restless and exhausted all at once. “All I want is your help in finding who took us.”

“I can check the CCTV,” Tyler said, but I shook my head.

“It was hacked. Set to run on a loop. You won't find anything.” I gestured to the laptop. “Did you find out anything else about the victims?”

“We did,” Adam replied, tapping the keyboard to show me another photograph. “They all worked at Clivesdon House children's home at one time or another. That's the only link we have.”

“Tell them the rest, Adam,” Devon urged.

Adam stopped to compose himself, steepled his fingers together and added, “I was at that children’s home.”

“How long ago?” Tyler asked.

“About nineteen, twenty years ago.”

“Do you remember any of them?” Tyler asked him, but Adam shook his head.

“I don’t remember much about the place. Only a few scattered memories, but nothing solid. It wasn’t the kind of place you’d want to remember.”

They all turned to look at me.

“What about you, Will? Were you there?”

I tried to recall something from my past, anything that might trigger a memory, but the name didn’t ring a bell.

“When my dad died, we spent some time in care, but I don’t know if it was spent there. I’d have to ask my mum. Even if I was at that place though, I wouldn’t have been there long. And I certainly don’t remember any of those men. I hadn’t heard any of their names, not before I was taken, anyway.”

At that moment, Jake came into the living room, stepping cautiously towards us, holding his hands up to apologise for interrupting.

“I’m sorry to walk in on your meeting,” Jake said. “But I have someone downstairs who’s here for the bar job.”

“Not now,” Adam snapped.

“I know. I know,” Jake apologised. “But the agency doesn’t have anyone they can send out tonight, and with half the staff off it’s going to be me on my own, unless you lot can help me behind the bar?”

“Can’t you borrow some of the security guys to help?” Colton asked, but Devon butted in.

“We’re short on security as it is, and under the circumstances, that’s not something we should be cutting back on right now, agreed?”

Adam huffed. “Fine. I’ll come and see this guy, check him out. Are you sure he’s not completely shit?”

“He has bar experience, and I might’ve already asked if he’s free to start tonight.” Jake grimaced, hoping he hadn’t overstepped the mark.

“Why don’t *you* interview him then?” Tyler suggested to Jake.

“Because *we* vet all staff,” Adam replied. “And all things considered, we need to stick to that. We won’t be compromised. Not again.”

Adam stood up, cursed under his breath, and stalked out of the room with Jake following him.

“We need a plan,” Devon said, looking at each of us in turn. “Tyler, can you look into these guys?” He tapped the screen, pointing to the victims from the basement. “Find out about any police records, allegations, anything you can dig up.” He turned to focus on Colton. “Do you need to be with Shelley today?”

Colton looked at me. “Not until she’s spoken to Bryony. What time is she meeting her?”

“Not till early evening,” I told him.

“Okay. Then I’m here until she needs me,” he replied.

“Cool,” Devon responded. “Can you and Will focus on the forest? We need to be more methodical. Get a map of the place, chart where we’ve been and where we need to cover. Look for clearings, outhouses, anything where he could’ve hidden stuff. Once we get out there, we need to look for signs of vehicles, tyre tracks, anything. He had to have driven you both into the forest. How did he get you in and out?”

“We’re on it,” Colton stated. “We’ll do our best.”

“I’ll load up the van,” Devon said, assigning his role in our mission. “Get our best weapons and tools. Once we find this

fucker, he won't know what's hit him."

"We'll focus on this side of the forest today," Colton said, circling an area of the forest on the map we'd printed off and drawing arrows to indicate the direction we'd move. "If we split up, you and me here, Adam here, and then Devon and Tyler focus on this side, we should be able to cover more ground effectively."

"Sounds good to me. The sooner we get going, the better."

"We'll need water." Colton looked up at me. "We can't go hours on a search without some. Can you go and get some bottles from the bar downstairs?" I nodded, and he folded the map, heading for the door. "Give me two minutes, okay? I'm gonna text Shelley. Make sure she's okay. Then I'll head down to the chapel and help Devon."

"I'll see you down there," I replied and made my way out into the hallway.

As I walked down the staircase to the first floor, then the ground floor, I could hear Adam talking, asking questions.

"How many years bar experience do you have?"

"If you look on my resume, I've done three years in various bars and clubs around town. A few in Sandland and Merivale too."

I stepped off the last step and walked across the dance floor towards the bar. I could see Jake at the back of the bar, lifting crates of beer bottles. Adam was sitting to the side of the bar with the prospective new barman, a dark-haired guy who had his back to me.

"I'm just heading down to the cellar," Jake called out, and I put my hand up to show him I'd heard.

"It's been a few years since you've worked in a bar though, hasn't it?" Adam went on, giving the guy the third

degree. I highly doubted bar work had changed that much in the time this guy had been away.

“Two years,” the guy replied. “But I’ve always worked. I can deal with money, cash up, do stock takes, deal with customers. I’m a hard worker.”

I walked quietly past Adam’s table to get to the bar, reaching down to open one of the fridges and grab some water bottles. I started to pile them up on the bar, counting in my head, estimating we needed about ten, fifteen bottles to see us through.

“I don’t doubt you’re a hard worker,” Adam responded plainly. “But a book shop is a bit different to a nightclub. It’s a lot noisier for a start. More rowdy too. You’ll need a thick skin to work here.”

“I think I can handle it,” he replied, a hint of amusement in his voice. “The book shop could get quite heated when certain best sellers came into stock. We were a small independent business. There was only the two of us, and my boss, Mr Wilson, he was... challenging... at times. But it was nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“And you’re free to start tonight? For a trial run? We will have to do a background check first, ring some of your past employers for a quick reference. Is that okay?”

“Fine by me. In fact, I have a written letter of recommendation from Mr Wilson right here if you want to see it.”

I quickly counted the bottles on top of the bar, and then, as I walked back out from behind the bar, Adam stood up.

“Okay, well, welcome to the team, I guess.” He shook the guy’s hand then pointed over to me. “That’s Will, another one of the partners in the business. You’ll meet the others later tonight. Will, this is Isaiah.”

I turned to face them both, and as Adam stepped aside and Isaiah came into view, an atomic bomb went off in my brain.

My body ignited, my eyes bulging from my head when I saw the tattoo on his neck. A spider’s web with the word

‘death’ across it. He grinned back at me, the kind of grin the devil gave when he’d fucked over God and all the other angels, and he held his hand out to shake mine. I couldn’t believe he was here, and a roar of fury burst free as I launched myself at him.

“You FUCKING BASTARD!” I shouted, grappling to get at him. Adam went straight into psycho mode, slamming Isaiah against the wall and holding him away from me.

“It’s him,” I snarled. “He’s the one. The fucking freak who took us.”

Isaiah cackled, his laugh sinister and taunting.

“I thought I’d pay you a little visit, *Will*.”

Quick as a flash, Adam smacked his fist into Isaiah’s face.

“Shut the fuck up. You don’t get to talk to him.”

Isaiah grinned, blood staining his teeth.

“Is that all you’ve got, big man?” he taunted Adam. “You know I came for you too?” he hissed, spit flying from his mouth. “You were harder to pin down, though. You keep a ring of fucking steel around you, but him”—he nodded at me—“he was an easy target. He makes stupid mistakes.”

Adam smacked him again, and Isaiah’s face ricocheted from the impact. But he kept the grin on his face as he wriggled his jaw after taking the hit.

“I’m gonna enjoy making you suffer.” Adam stuck his face right into Isaiah’s as he threatened him. “We’re gonna make your death the most painful, torturous, fucked-up death you could ever imagine.”

“I hope you have good imaginations,” Isaiah spat back. “Because I can guarantee that mine’s better. Mine would make Satan blush.” His eyes left Adam’s and landed on me. “Just ask him.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Colton and Tyler run into the room, and Adam shouted over to them.

“Get over here. This fucker needs to pay a visit to our chapel.” He turned to press his nose against Isaiah’s, and growled, “He’s just dying to *hang out* there.”

They both ran over, dragged Isaiah off the wall he was held against, and pinned him to the floor. Colton knelt on his back, restraining his arms as Tyler grabbed a roll of duct tape from behind the bar. Then he wound the tape around his hands before pulling him up to stand.

I stood in front of him as they went to take him away.

“You’re a dead man,” I hissed. “The games you made me play will be nothing compared to what we’ll do to you.”

But he just laughed.

“I’ve already told you, Will. You can’t kill a dead man.” He looked me up and down in disgust. “You still don’t remember me, do you?”

“Why would I?” I sneered. “You’re nothing. A nobody.”

“Oh, I’m not a nobody.” He held his head high, staring down his nose at me. “And you know that.”

“Enough,” Adam snapped. “Get him out. Now.”

Tyler and Colton stood either side of him as they dragged him across the dance floor, towards the corridor leading to the chapel. I followed close behind, along with Adam.

“Revenge is sweet,” Adam said to me as we walked Isaiah to his final reckoning.

“Isn’t it just,” Isaiah said in reply, turning to give us one last grin.

Chapter Thirty-Five



“**Y**ou know, I’ve had a lot of fun these last few weeks, but this... I think it’s the most fun I’ve ever had,” Isaiah sneered as we dragged him down to the chapel.

“Get him to shut the fuck up,” Adam snarled back, but Isaiah just laughed.

“But if you shut me up, how will you find out why I did it? And you’ve gotta admit, that’s the part you’re itching to get at.”

He was right, and every word he spoke made the urge to torture him in the cruellest way possible burn deeper inside me. Every smirk, every tease, just him breathing the same air as us made me want to tear him apart limb by limb.

“It’s such a shame you didn’t join us in our last game.” He tried to look over his shoulder at Adam, but Colton smacked him in the face, forcing his head back. “Maybe next time.” He mocked, chuckling as he gave Colton the side eye. “I’ll reserve a special bunker just for you, *Adam*. I think you’d like taking part in my games.”

“If it involves disembowelling you and stringing your intestines up like fucking Christmas decorations then I’m all for it,” Adam spat back.

Isaiah wasn’t showing any signs of fear. In fact, he was relishing the fact that he’d been caught. He wanted to come here today, be seen, taunt us and get taken to the chapel. We

were playing into his cold, sadistic hands. But soon, he wouldn't be laughing.

We pushed through the old wooden doors into the chapel, and Devon, who was busy gathering his weapons, turned to face us. When he saw us hauling our prisoner in, he dropped the knives he was carrying onto the altar and came straight over to us.

“We'll fill you in later,” Adam stated. “But Will's kidnapper is going to be spending some time in here while we prepare for his stay. We're gonna give him the kind of welcome he deserves.”

Devon's steely eyes glared at Isaiah. “Perfect timing,” he said. “I've just sharpened my gutting knives.”

“Or poor timing,” Colton shot back. “I think a blunt knife would be much more fun.”

“You wouldn't know how to gut a fish properly, let alone a human,” Isaiah said, earning him a hard punch in the stomach from Tyler.

“You need to watch your mouth when you speak to us,” Tyler hissed. “You see those cuffs and chains on the wall?” He pointed up at the shackles, waiting for their next captor. “You're going up there, but whether its upside down, stripped naked, or with a few strategic cuts to make you bleed out as slowly as possible is entirely up to us.”

Isaiah sniffed, blood streaming from his nose, but his head held high and proud.

“Do your worst,” he said, baring his blood-stained teeth. “That's what I'm here for. I'm gonna enjoy making you work for the answers you want. I'm more than ready to play your games.”

“Just get him chained up,” Adam commanded, growing irritated. Then he turned to me and whispered, “Call your mum. Find out if that children's home has a link to you. I'm guessing it does.” He glanced back at Isaiah, who was being restrained by Colton, Tyler, and Devon. “He won't spill easily. The more we know, the more we can taunt him. He likes

having power, and what he knows is his power. Let's try and take that away from him."

I faltered, instincts telling me I should stay here, help to string him up. Be the one to inflict that first wound and smile as I did.

Reading my mind, Adam assured me, "We won't touch him until you've spoken to her. This one is all yours. We'll follow your lead."

"Thanks," I said, and taking one last look at him, I turned and left, taking my mobile out to call my mother.

I wandered down the corridor and out into the main hall as I tapped my phone to call her. After three rings, she answered.

"Hey, Mum. It's me."

"Will!" she called out, surprised to hear from me. "Either someone died, or you need money, which is it?"

"I never ask you for money," I replied. "And no one's died... yet."

"Well, now I'm intrigued. What are you ringing *me* for? Because the last time you called, you were about fifteen and needed me to pick you up from the police station. Have you been arrested?"

"Not yet." I sighed. My relationship with my mother wasn't the best. I didn't see her or my little brother very often. I felt awkward talking on the phone, but I needed answers and I was desperate to get back to the chapel, so I cut right to the chase. "I need to ask you about when we were kids."

The line went quiet, and then, in a suspicious tone, she said, "Okay. Why?"

"I want to know if we were ever sent to a children's home called Clivesdon House."

She huffed, and I was sure she was going to shoot me down, give me a vague answer or refuse to answer at all, but she didn't.

“Yeah, I think that was the place you went to years ago. But you weren’t there for long,” she answered defensively. “I got you out of there as soon as I got back on my feet. You couldn’t have been there for longer than two weeks, maybe three.”

“Why don’t I remember any of this?” I rubbed my temple with my thumb and forefinger, willing the memories to come back to me, but there was nothing.

“You were only about seven. Frankie would’ve been two,” she explained. “It was after your dad died. Social services came to take you both into care. They said I couldn’t cope.” She was quiet for a moment. “It was bullshit, of course, but I didn’t have a leg to stand on back then. I tried to stop them from taking you. I did everything I could.”

“I know you did, Mum. I’m not asking to make you feel bad. I just need to know about something.”

“I’m not sure why you’re dragging all of this up now. It wasn’t my finest hour, but okay, fine,” she moaned, then huffed before speaking again. “They came early in the morning to take you away. You were both still in your pyjamas. They put Frankie in the back of the social workers car, but you ran away from them, said you had to get your wrestling figures for Frankie ‘cos he wouldn’t go anywhere without them. But they were yours. It was your way of trying to escape and get back to me. They chased you back into the house, let you pick two wrestlers, and then they carried you away.”

And something, some small memory hidden in the recesses of my brain suddenly flickered to life.

Nineteen Years Ago...

The Story of Clivesdon House

We’d only just woken up when the loud knock came from the front door. We were sitting watching cartoons while Mum got herself ready. There wasn’t any food in the kitchen for breakfast, but it was okay. Mum said we’d go shopping later and get some. I wasn’t stupid. I knew she meant steal it, but I

didn't mind. Mum made it fun. Like a game. I liked running fast with my pockets full, knowing I was winning. They caught my mum a few times, but they never caught me.

When I heard the knock at the door, I did what Mum always told us to do and hid behind the sofa. We did that every time the landlord came around. We did it most times there was someone at our front door. Mum didn't like having strangers in the house. But when the people knocking this time started to shout our names as they banged on the windows, telling us they could see us and they knew we were in, I could tell this would be different. These weren't strangers, not the kind Mum wanted us to hide from. But then I heard Mum shout back to them from the hallway, saying she wouldn't open up. She told them to go away. They told her if she didn't open the door, they'd call the police to come and let them in, so she gave up. Mum didn't usually give up so easily.

I thought they were here for money. Mum owed a lot of people, but they walked right into the living room, asking to see me and Frankie. Everything after that happened in a blur. Frankie didn't really understand, but they told us they were taking us somewhere for a while, a new place to stay until our mum was able to care for us again. I didn't get it. Mum was caring for us now, and when Mum started to cry, grabbing for us and begging them not to take us, they stood in her way and told her she had to abide by the courts, whatever that meant.

They gave her papers and then picked up Frankie and took him out of the room. One of the women took my hand and led me out, following Frankie and the other lady, but I twisted and craned my neck, trying to see my mum. The way my stomach was churning told me this was wrong, I had to do something to stop it, but the woman holding my hand wouldn't let go. I tried to twist my hand, yank it out of hers, but she only held on tighter, using her other hand to grip my arm.

"I don't want to go," I shouted, kicking out. "You can't make me."

But she was stronger than I was, and she managed to get me outside.

From inside the house, I could hear Mum crying, "Please don't take my babies. I'll try better. I promise," but they just told her no, she had to work on getting herself clean, and if she could do that, then she could speak to her social worker about the next steps.

Get herself clean?

I don't know why they said that, she'd showered a few days ago. She wasn't a dirty mum. Sometimes the house got dirty, but she was a good mum and we helped as much as we could, especially when she'd had too much of her wine and fell asleep before our bedtime.

I always put Frankie to bed before I went back down to the living room and covered her with a blanket. I was the oldest now, and Dad had told me right before he'd died that I was the man of the house and had to take care of my mum and little brother. Maybe that's why they were taking us? I hadn't done a good enough job. I'd let them all down.

I saw the lady ahead of us put Frankie into a car seat in the back of her car, and a burst of defiance hit me. I got lucky when the lady holding my hand loosened her grip, and I was able to snatch my hand away and run back into the house.

I could sense her chasing after me, but I didn't slow down. If I could get back in to Mum, we could think of something to force them to bring Frankie back in too.

When I ran into the living room, I saw Mum lying in a heap on the floor as the other lady stood over her. Mum was crying and the other lady was going on about social services and standards of care. When she saw me burst through the door, my mum's eyes grew wide, and the lady standing over her turned to look at me.

"Don't make this any harder than it already is, Diane," the lady said to Mum. "You're upsetting the children. This won't be for long. It's a temporary arrangement to help you and them."

Mum nodded, and I glared back, begging her to think of something to say so they'd bring Frankie back. But Mum just

stared at me, her face wet with tears.

“Be a good boy and do what these ladies tell you, Will,” she said, sounding calmer than before but still hiccupping as she spoke. “Look after Frankie, and in a few days, I’ll come back to get you, okay? Can you be my big man and do that for me?”

I nodded, but I still didn’t want to go. I didn’t want Frankie to either.

In the corner of the room were some of the toys we’d been playing with this morning while we waited for Mum to wake up. My wrestling figures were on the floor and an idea hit me.

“Frankie needs his wrestlers.” I turned to peer up at the lady who’d run in after me, giving her what Mum always called my ‘puppy dog eyes’. They always worked on Mum, so maybe they’d work on her too. “You need to bring him back in so he can choose which ones he’s taking.”

But she shook her head, lines appearing on her forehead as she said to me, “Frankie is staying in the car, and you need to come too.”

Mum spoke up then, adding, “Frankie needs you, Will. Take two wrestlers, one each, and then go straight outside to him. He’ll be getting scared. You know what he’s like.”

I could tell she didn’t want me to argue. At least, not here in the living room.

“You need to trust me, little soldier,” she added. “Think of it as a holiday. And in a few days, when you’ve had fun with your brother, I’ll come and get you.” She stared at me, her eyes wide, begging for me to listen properly. “I will. I promise. I won’t leave you there. This is your home. With me.”

I looked from my mum to the other two ladies, and then back at Mum again. I didn’t have a choice here. I had to go. If I didn’t, they’d call the police, and I didn’t want them to arrest my mum. So, I nodded, ran to the corner to pick up two wrestlers, and then stood by the lady and took her hand. I didn’t even know which wrestlers I’d chosen. It didn’t matter.

“You did the right thing, Diane,” the other lady said, bending down to help my mum get up off the floor and sit on the sofa. “We’ll take care of your boys. You need to concentrate on you now. Use this as an incentive. Get yourself straight. Be the mother they deserve.”

I didn’t hear any more.

I didn’t want to.

I let the woman lead me away, walking down our path, feeling like my legs were made of stone; heavy and numb.

Once we were all in the car, the ladies told us they were taking us to a nice new home with lots of other children to play with. They said Clivesdon House was the best, and we’d have a brilliant time there. But when we pulled up outside and I looked up at the white building, and saw a kid sitting in the window with his head in his hands looking miserable, I knew they were lying.

It wasn’t much better when we went inside. Upstairs, we could hear shouting and what sounded like someone kicking the doors or walls. Deep voices were shouting back at whoever was up there, telling them they’d lose their game time, and the boy screamed back that he didn’t care. He told them to fuck off, and then, we saw two men rush past us in the hallway, racing up the stairs, saying that “Obi needed to spend time in the timeout room.”

Obi sounded scary. I’d make sure he stayed away from Frankie and me while we were here.

The ladies led us into a room with a TV and some sofas. There were some toys on the floor, boxes of jigsaw puzzles on the table in the corner, and Frankie soon got distracted by a toy truck and ran over to play with it. I wasn’t that easily swayed, and I stood in the doorway so I could keep an eye on Frankie playing on the floor and the ladies in the hallway who were talking to a man, passing him bags that I recognised from home.

Did they pack our stuff while we were waiting in the car?

I didn’t like that. That was our stuff. Not theirs.

I was about to shout out at them when I heard Frankie talking, and I turned to see him looking up at the kid who'd been sitting in the window when we first got here.

"Me Frankie," Frankie said, introducing himself. "What your name?" he asked, but the kid didn't answer, and that made me even madder. "Me like trucks," Frankie said, ignoring the fact that the boy was being mean, and he bashed his truck into the chair leg that the boy was sitting on.

Frankie made brum-brum noises, but the other kid didn't join in. He just stared at Frankie like he was a weirdo. I was about to go over to them, but I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked up to see a man standing next to me as the other ladies smiled at us.

"You'll be all right here," the man said, giving my shoulder a squeeze. "My name's Mister Masters, but you can call me Paul. I run the house in the daytime. At night, it'll be a man called Fred, or Mister Wilson as he prefers to be called, who'll look after you, but he's loads of fun. I promise. When he gets here later, I'll introduce you to him." He knelt so he was at my height and smiled. "Don't worry, Will. You and your brother will have beds next to each other. The dorms are all newly furnished." He nodded to where Frankie was playing. "And I think your brother will like the one I've assigned to you. It's got trucks on the wallpaper."

Paul seemed nice, but I didn't trust him. Not yet. So I just nodded.

"We're going to leave you with Paul," the lady who'd held my hand said. "We'll be back to check on you, but if you need anything, Paul can give us a call, okay?"

"When's my mum coming to get us?" I asked, not caring about anything else.

"Let's concentrate on getting you settled in here first," she replied, not answering my question. "Look, Frankie has made a friend already." I turned to where Frankie was, but the other kid was still sitting on his chair, staring at him. They weren't friends.

I turned back to ask them again when my mum was going to come, but they were already walking to the door and saying their goodbyes.

Once the ladies had left, Paul came back over to me and asked if I wanted to see my new bedroom, but I said no. Frankie was happy playing by himself, but I wasn't going to leave him. Paul said he'd put our bags in our room for us, and then someone shouted for his help from upstairs. They said Obi was out of control, and Paul apologised, saying he'd catch up with us later before he left to help with the Obi kid.

I walked over to where Frankie was crashing the truck into the skirting boards, and then I looked at the kid sitting in the chair at the window. He was watching too, but he wasn't smiling like people normally did when they looked at Frankie. He looked bored. Angry even. I didn't want him directing his anger at Frankie, so I stood in front of my little brother and folded my arms, staring at the silent kid. And silent kid just stared right back at me.

We stayed like that for a while, the two of us staring each other out, but then I grew tired and asked, "Are you waiting for your mum to come and get you? Is that why you're sitting in the window?"

He didn't answer at first, and I thought perhaps he wouldn't answer. Maybe he couldn't speak. But then he shook his head.

"I don't have a mum."

"Your dad then?" I shrugged, leaning against the wall now, trying to look cool in front of him.

"I don't have a dad either."

"Me neither," I said, then added, "He died a while back. Cancer."

I expected him to say sorry. People usually did, but he didn't. He didn't do anything.

Then, out of the blue, he said, "It's horrible here."

I was surprised he'd spoken again.

“Is it because of that Obi kid?” My eyes flicked to the ceiling where I could hear fighting upstairs, but the boy shook his head.

“I like Obi,” he said. “He fights back.”

“Will I need to fight?” I asked, feeling that scary twist in my stomach again. I always got into fights at school, but the Obi kid upstairs, he sounded tough.

“Depends,” the kid replied on a shrug.

“On what?”

“On whether they choose you.”

Chapter Thirty-Six



The Story of Clivesdon House

Nineteen Years Ago

We stayed in the games room on that first day. Frankie was happy to play on the floor, and when he got bored, he sat and watched the TV in the corner of the room. It hadn't been switched on when we came in, but the silent boy said it was okay.

I tried to talk to the silent boy, but I don't think he wanted to be my friend. Sometimes, he answered my questions with simple answers. Other times, he didn't answer at all. He didn't ask me anything, and he wouldn't tell me his name. He said it didn't matter.

He liked watching Frankie though, that and staring out of the window. I asked him if he wanted to go outside, but he said, "They won't let you." I found that strange because later, I saw older boys coming into the house. They'd been outside. Maybe it was just the little kids that weren't allowed to play out.

Later, a lady came in and told us it was time for dinner. She smiled at me and Frankie, beckoning us to follow her, but when I turned to ask the silent boy why he wasn't coming too, the lady said, "He doesn't like to sit in the dining room. He prefers to eat on his own in here." She looked at him with pity and added, "He doesn't like mixing with the other boys. He likes his own company."

Me and Frankie were hungry, so I followed her out of the room and down the corridor, following the noise to the dining room. Inside, there was a large dining table with loads of kids sitting around it eating sausage and mash with gravy. I found two chairs together and sat with Frankie next to me.

This room was busier than the games room, a lot noisier, and I glanced around at the boys stuffing food in their mouths, talking and messing about. One flicked some mash at another kid sitting opposite him, and the kid shouted at him, "Fuck off. Don't waste the fucking food."

The kid next to me must've seen me staring, and he whispered, "Dinner time is Obi's favourite part of the day." Then he gestured to the kid who'd said not to waste the food.

So that was Obi.

I nodded, making a mental note of the Obi kid so I could steer clear of him, and when the lady put a plate of sausage and mash in front of Frankie and me, we started shovelling it in just like the other kids.

"What's your name?" the kid next to me asked.

"I'm Will and this is my little brother, Frankie," I said through a mouthful of mash.

"How old's Frankie?" he asked, peering around me to watch my little brother spoon the mash into his mouth and dribble gravy down his top.

"He's nearly three," I said, leaning forward. This kid seemed okay, but I still wanted to protect my little brother.

"Have you just turned up?" he asked, and I nodded as I chewed my sausage.

"We came this morning."

"I didn't see you in the yard playing football." He frowned at me, and I shrugged back.

"Frankie was playing with the trucks in the games room."

He shuddered when I told him that.

"The ghost room, you mean?"

I stopped chewing, my mouth hanging open as I said, "There's ghosts here?"

"Yeah." He raised his eyebrows at me, and his eyes darted to the door then back at me. "Didn't you see him, sitting in the window, staring out?"

I swallowed, icy-cold spreading over me as I thought about the silent boy.

I leaned closer to the kid next to me. "Is he not real? He looked pretty real to me."

The kid laughed and shook his head.

"Oh, he's real. But we call him the ghost, 'cos he never speaks. All he does is wander down from his room every morning and sit in that window. He doesn't play with any of us. He rarely leaves that room." He leaned into me and whispered, "He's the ghost of Clivesdon House." And then he made a wooo sound like a ghost and started laughing again.

Suddenly, I heard someone shout across the table, "Shut the fuck up with your bullshit stories, Ricky," and I whipped my head around to see the Obi kid glaring at us. "Leave the kid alone," he snarled, and I couldn't tell if he meant me or silent ghost boy.

When dinner was over and we'd cleaned our plates, I left Ricky and his friends behind to argue over whose go was next on the Nintendo, and I took Frankie back to the games room. There was a plate of sausage and mash on the table next to where silent boy sat, and it looked like he'd had a few bites of mash, but nothing else.

"The sausages were good," I told him, but he didn't answer me, just sat watching the world as the sun was starting to set.

"Me have the sausage?" Frankie said, wandering over to the table and stealing a wet, gravy-soaked sausage from silent boy's plate and clutching it in his chubby hand.

"That's not yours," I chastised him, but silent boy shook his head.

“It’s okay.”

We sat in silence, except for Frankie, who was gobbling on his sausage, and then he started to make choo-choo noises as he pulled a toy train across the carpet.

Eventually, I couldn’t hold back any longer, and I asked one last time, “What’s your name? You need to tell me because the boys at dinner said you were a ghost, but I don’t want to call you ghost, and in my head, I’m calling you silent boy, but that doesn’t seem right either. So, what should I call you? If you don’t want anyone else to know, I can always just use it in my head. But I have to call you something, and I’d prefer to say your real name, not a made up one.”

I was rambling; that’s what Mum used to call it when I couldn’t stop talking, but I couldn’t help it.

Silent boy took in a deep breath, but he didn’t reply.

“Do you want to make one up? You can give yourself a cool name if you want, like Stone Cold Steve Austin or Kurt Angle.” I took the wrestling figures out of my pocket to try and prove my point, that they were cool guys with cool names, but he didn’t look at them.

“You could be Triple H or Batista,” I went on, and when silent boy cleared his throat, I shut up, waiting to hear what he’d say.

“Zye,” he whispered, then a little louder, he said, “You can call me Zye.”

“Zye,” I repeated, seeing how it sounded out loud. “That’s a good choice.”

“It’s not a choice. It’s my name. Actually, it’s Isaiah, but I prefer to be called Zye.”

Outside the window, it grew darker, and Frankie started to yawn.

“We go home now?” he asked. “Mummy come get us?”

“No, Frankie,” I told him. “We’re sleeping here tonight.”

“Here?” His little lip started to quiver. “Me no like that.”

“It’ll be okay,” I told him, sitting on the floor and pulling him into my lap. “It’s a sleepover, and it’ll be fun. I’ll be with you.”

“And Zye?” Frankie asked.

“I hope not,” Zye replied, his eyes still fixed on something outside as he stared out the window. “I hope you get to sleep in Obi’s dorm. You don’t want to be in mine.”

“Why?” I asked, because the thought of being in a room with Obi sounded worse than anything.

“You don’t want to know.”

At that moment, Paul came into the room to tell us he was about to switch with the night manager, Fred. He offered to introduce us to him, but Zye butted in, “Frankie’s tired. Just take him to bed.” And Paul nodded in agreement. “We can do introductions another day,” he said and led us out into the hallway.

As we started to climb the stairs, I saw a lady go into the games room after us and tell Zye it was time for bed. If someone else had been in that room, I would’ve sworn it was them that hollered back, “No,” and not Zye, as the lady shook her head and muttered, “Here we go again.”

Silent boy wasn’t so silent anymore, and I felt like I should run back down and help him, but I had to stay with Frankie.

“He’ll be okay,” Paul said, trying to make me feel better. “Zye doesn’t like being taken to his dorm. He has nightmares.”

I didn’t question him, just let him lead us to a dorm, and when we walked in, all the boys were sitting on their beds, some reading, some playing cards. Most were already in their pyjamas. Our bags were on top of two beds next to the window, and Paul walked us over to them and told us to get washed up ready for bed. He helped us to find the bathroom, stayed with us as we got changed, and then glanced at his watch and cursed that he was late. He told us he didn’t normally stay this long after his shift, but he wanted to settle us in for our first night.

I wanted to ask him if Zye was okay, but when he said, "If you have any problems, speak to Obi. He'll look after you," I froze.

I wouldn't speak to Obi. I'd rather figure stuff out myself.

But I smiled and said, "Thank you."

I asked him one last time if my mum was coming to pick us up in the morning, but he ruffled my hair and said, "She'll be here when she's here, but it won't be tomorrow."

I didn't know what he meant, but it wasn't a no. That was all that mattered.

Later, when the lights were turned out and all the other boys got into bed, I pushed my bed closer to Frankie's and climbed in, reaching across to hold his hand. Obi pushed his bed across the door so no one could get out. He was like the guard of the room. Then he whisper-yelled, "Be fucking quiet and we'll all have a good night, yeah?"

I didn't trust him, so I stayed awake as long as I could.

Outside in the hallway, I could hear other boys shouting, arguing, fighting, but in our room, it stayed quiet, and eventually, I fell asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



The Story of Clivesdon House

Nineteen Years Ago

The next morning, and every morning after that was like starting over again with Zye.

He sat in the window, refusing to speak. Occasionally, he'd look down at Frankie playing or watching TV, having a momentary break from his window gazing. By the afternoon, he'd open up a little and answer me when I spoke, but he only ever spoke in whispers. Then, at night-time, he'd scream at the ladies that he didn't want to go to his dorm. He hated them. Hated this house. Hated everyone and everything. He saved his big voice for them, and boy, did he know how to use it.

One day, when Frankie was playing with a tea set, he waddled over to Zye and gave him an imaginary cup of tea. Zye looked at the cup placed in his lap and said, "You're lucky." I thought he meant having my brother with me, but he sighed and glanced out the window again. "I wish I was in Obi's dorm."

I had to admit, Obi hadn't been as mean as I thought he was. He swore a lot and told the other boys off if they started anything. But he saved his own fights for the staff. I never saw him hit another kid.

"What's your dorm like?" I asked, and Zye's body went stiff as he took a sharp intake of breath.

"You don't want to know."

“You say that a lot.” I rolled my eyes, knowing he couldn’t see me.

“So, trust what I say then.”

I didn’t say anything else. Sometimes, it was easier to sit in silence with Zye. Talking was hard work.

Then suddenly, Zye added, “Obi takes care of you. If you’re close to him, you’ll be okay.”

“You should ask them to put you in our dorm,” I replied, but he shook his head.

“I’ve asked already. They always say no.”

“But have you asked Paul?” I pressed. “Paul is nice. He’d change it for you, if you asked him.”

“Paul might be nice to you, but he ignores me. He thinks I’m a troublemaker. He won’t listen. He never does.”

This was the most I’d heard Zye speak since we’d got here.

“Do you want me to ask him?” I suggested, but Zye spun around in his chair and gave me a stern glare.

“Don’t do that. If you do that, he might move you to my dorm. You need to stay where you are. That’s the best room. Don’t spoil it by making trouble.”

“But I wouldn’t be making trouble,” I argued.

“Everything in this place is trouble if it’s going against what they say.”

Zye turned back around and folded his arms over his chest. I tried to ask him why he hated his dorm so much and why he didn’t want to go into other rooms and look out of other windows, but he ignored me.

The conversation was over.

He was back to being silent boy again.

One day, as Frankie sat on my lap on the bean bags, watching Thomas the Tank Engine, one of the workers came in to give us cupcakes. It was someone's birthday and they wanted to share the cakes out as a treat before dinner. When the plates were placed on the floor by us, Frankie made a grab for the icing, his eyes lighting up, and the worker laughed and bent down to pick Frankie up.

What happened after that happened so fast that I could barely register what was going on. A flurry of movement distracted me, and I watched on in horror as Zye shot out of his chair and barrelled into the man, shouting, "Don't fucking touch him," pushing him away from Frankie and standing between the two of them.

Zye glared up at the man, panting, his nostrils flared. He looked like he wanted to fight with him, and the man... he just took a step back and laughed.

"Calm down, Zye," he said in a mocking voice as he stepped back towards the door. "It's just cake." He winked and then added, "See you later," before he turned away from us and left.

Zye stood staring at the door, standing with his legs apart like one of my wrestling figures, ready to jump on their opponent. Then he huffed, picked up the paper plates with the cakes on them, and threw them into the bin in the corner of the room. When Frankie saw what he'd done, he started to cry, and I stood up, ready to challenge him.

No one made my brother cry.

"Why did you do that?" I snarled, pushing Zye as he stalked past me. But he just let me push him, he didn't even attempt to fight back.

I followed him back to his chair, and with my fists clenched tight, I thumped him on the arm.

"You made my brother cry, you asshole," I thundered, pushing him again, trying to coax him into standing up and facing me, but he didn't. He just sat there and took it.

When I heard the crying had stopped, I turned to see Frankie standing over the bin, scooping the cake out to eat it.

“Don’t do that.” I ran over to him to stop him. “It’s dirty.”

“Anything from them is dirty,” Zye piped up. Then, as I sneered behind Zye’s back and wiped the cake off Frankie’s sticky hand, he added, “Stay away from Harold.”

“Who’s Harold?”

“That man that brought the cake. Stay away from him. Stay away from Harold, Fred, Mario, all the ones in charge of east wing. Your dorm is the west wing. Keep it that way.”

I wasn’t in the mood to argue, so I grabbed Frankie’s hand and pulled him out of the room to play in the backyard. I was done with trying to help Zye today.

Later that night, I was lying in bed, desperate for the toilet, but I was too scared to get up and go. The bedroom was dark, lights out had been ages ago, but I didn’t think I could hold it until morning, and I definitely didn’t want to risk wetting the bed. That’d make me a target to the other boys in here. I’d never live it down.

Quietly, I threw back the covers and sat up, then I stood up slowly so the springs in the mattress wouldn’t make a sound from me getting off the bed. So far, so good, no one had noticed me, so I crept over to the door, and suddenly, a hand shot out, grabbing my arm.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Obi hissed.

“I need a wee,” I said, jumping on the spot and holding my crotch to stop it from leaking out.

“No one leaves until morning. Pee out the window,” he snapped, pushing my arm to try and force me to move away from him.

“But I don’t want to pee out of the window. I need to go,” I whined, but he had no sympathy. He wouldn’t budge.

“You’re not leaving, and I won’t move.”

“Then I’ll climb over you,” I said defiantly, kneeling and clambering onto his bed that was blocking the door.

“Get off my fucking bed,” he whisper-yelled, forcing me off. Then he huffed and pulled himself up to sit on his bed. “Fine. If you want to go, go. It’s your funeral.”

He stood up and pushed his bed back towards the wall to free up the doorway.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he rasped, folding his arms and standing over me like the centurions I’d seen in my school books.

“I won’t be long,” I assured him, but he shook his head.

“The minute you leave this room,” he said, pointing at the door. “There’s no getting back in. I’ll be pushing my bed back in place and you’ll have to find somewhere else to sleep.”

“But why?”

“Because your piss isn’t worth any of us getting caught. Understood?”

“No.” I frowned. He was being an asshole for the sake of it. Nothing he said made any sense to me. I glanced back at Frankie, fast asleep in his bed next to mine. “I need to get back in for my brother. If he wakes up and I’m not here, he’ll scream the house down.”

Obi bit his lip, screwed his eyes shut, and then snapped them open.

“Fine. You have five minutes. But after that, the door stays locked.”

I nodded, relieved that he was finally being fair.

“I’ll be quick,” I shot back.

“And when you come back in, do this knock,” Obi stated, doing a special knock on the wooden post on his bed. He raised his brows at me when he finished and said, “Go on then. Chop chop.”

I grabbed the door handle and he whispered, "Don't flush the fucking chain. The quieter you are, the better." I gave him a nod and opened the door, closing it carefully behind me as I stood in the dark hallway.

I crept along the corridor as slowly and quietly as I could, and when I passed other dorms, I could hear arguing and noise coming from inside that made me question why Obi had insisted I was silent. The other boys here weren't being quiet. But I did what I was told.

I had to walk quite a long way through the corridors to get to the toilet. But I managed to find it, get inside, do my pee and then as I went to push the flush down, I remembered and left the pee in the toilet unflushed and turned to leave.

I stood outside the toilet, and for a moment, I'd forgotten which way I'd come. But ahead, I could see a light, so I walked towards it, confident that it'd lead me back to my dorm.

The light led me to the end of the corridor, but it wasn't where my room was. Here, there was a winding staircase and the light shone from below. I felt curious. I wanted to know what was at the bottom of those stairs. I liked spiral staircases. They always took you to magical places when you saw them on TV, so I wanted to explore and see where this one led. I'd never seen this staircase in all the time I'd been here. I still had a few minutes to spare before Obi's stupid five-minute curfew, so I had time to take a peek.

I gripped the metal handrail and crept down each step slowly. My feet only just fit on the narrow steps, and as I sunk deeper into the room this staircase was leading me into, I saw a few men standing around, laughing and talking quietly. I recognised Harold, the cake guy, leaning against the brick wall, grinning at the others, but I didn't know who else was there. They all had their backs to me.

I decided not to go down any further, but I wanted to listen to what they were saying and watch them. So, I crouched down and peered through the railings. And then I saw who was in the middle of the room and my body froze. My skin went all

prickly and my insides felt like my mum's washing machine when it went on a crazy fast cycle. I felt sick.

Zye was bent over some kind of wooden table, and there were leather straps like a belt around his wrists, holding him in place. The men's voices were muffled. I couldn't hear them, but the whooshing sound in my ears didn't help. One of the men with his back to me, picked up a whip like the ones they use on horses, and in that moment, I saw Zye lift his head slightly and he saw me.

His eyes widened, and I could see the panic on his face.

He mouthed the word 'go' to me, but I couldn't move.

I felt paralysed.

The man lifted the whip and then brought it down hard on Zye, and when the man stepped to the side, lifting the whip high again, I saw that Zye had nothing on, only a T-shirt. The sick feeling in my stomach grew stronger and I was scared I might wretch and they'd catch me spying on them. I wanted to help Zye, call out and make them stop, but if they caught me and strapped me down too, who would protect Frankie?

Zye's eyes were screwed tightly shut as he took another smack from the whip, then he opened them and mouthed, 'Please. Go.'

I heard Harold say something about a tight ass, and Zye started to thrash, yanking at the straps on his wrists and begging, "NO, NO, NO!"

I wasn't helping him, crouched here watching it all play out, so I did what I knew he'd wanted me to do, and I stood up, turned slowly around, and started to climb back up the staircase on legs that were so wobbly I was scared I might topple over or fall back down again. My hands were shaking, my palms sweaty as I tried to grip the railings. And then, I made it back to the top and I walked so fast away from that staircase, striding in the opposite direction like a zombie, unsure what to do next. But I knew I had to do something.

As I turned the corner, I saw Obi standing in the doorway, and when he noticed me, he hissed, "Get in here, quick."

I went over to him, but I shook my head.

“We have to go back. They’re hurting Zye. They’ve got him on a table and they’re whipping him. We need to stop them.”

“You need to get back in here before they hear you and take you down there too.” Obi snatched my arm, dragging me over the threshold into the room and then shutting the door. He didn’t listen to what I was saying, he just got to work, pushing his bed back in place.

“But we can’t leave him there. They’re hitting him,” I begged.

“Hitting isn’t the worst he’s gonna get tonight, trust me,” Obi said roughly, and I couldn’t stop myself. I punched him, hitting him square in the arm. He didn’t punch me back, just glanced down at where I’d hit him and then shrugged. “I’ll let you have that one. You’ve had a tough night.” He glanced up at me. “Maybe next time you’ll learn to go to the fucking toilet before lights out. Yeah?”

“Why aren’t you helping him?” I growled, itching to land another punch on him.

Obi was tough, he could do something to help. Maybe wake up a few of the older boys. Why wasn’t he helping? I didn’t want to walk away. I couldn’t ignore it, and I didn’t think he should too.

Obi stuck his face right into mine.

“I can’t protect them all. But I can protect all of you lot in here. So I suggest you go back to bed and count yourself lucky that you and your little brother found your way in here with us.”

“And what about Zye?” I asked, trying to keep the tears in my eyes and stop them falling down my cheeks.

“He has to make his own way. For now. It’s not ideal, but one day, I’ll help him too. But that day isn’t today. Like I said, I can’t help everyone.”

I swallowed, feeling torn between staying with my brother and doing what I felt was right.

“Kid,” Obi whispered. “Go to bed. Try and forget whatever it was you just saw. Do you think Zye wanted you to see it?” I shook my head because I knew he didn’t. He’d told me himself to go. “So do what he’d want and forget it. Cut it out of your memory. His time will come. He’ll get pay back. They all will.”

I backed away quietly, then turned back and asked, “Is that why you sleep in front of the door, to stop them coming in?”

Obi took a deep breath.

“No one’s being taken. Not on my watch.”

I turned back and went over to where Frankie lay fast asleep. Then, I climbed into Frankie’s bed and put my arms around him.

I always thought Obi was keeping us in, trapping us, but it was the other way around.

He was a guard.

Only he was keeping the wolves from the door. Making sure no monsters came to our room to steal us from our beds.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



The Story of Clivesdon House

Nineteen Years Ago

I felt guilty the next morning, going into the games room to find Zye sitting at the window. He didn't acknowledge me as we walked in, but he glanced at Frankie for a split second before turning his attention back to the world outside.

"That's why you sit in that window, isn't it?" I asked, but he didn't respond. "You're dreaming about getting away."

He didn't say yes or no, but he didn't need to. I knew.

"Why don't you tell someone?" I urged, walking to stand at his side, but his shoulders sagged, and he hung his head. "You could tell Paul. He'd stop it."

"Paul knows," he hissed so quietly I almost didn't hear him.

"Tell him again," I pushed. "He might've thought you were making it up before."

"I've told him more than once. He doesn't care. He's no better than they are."

Zye sat hunched over, and I went to put my hand on his arm, but he flinched, moving away from me. "Please don't touch me."

"Obi knows," I stated, but Zye didn't react. "He said he'll help, one day. He said he'd make them pay."

Zye shrugged. "Words are pointless."

I sat down on the carpet at Zye's feet.

"Do they do that every night?"

"Why does it matter?" he replied.

"There has to be something we can do." I felt helpless, and I didn't like it.

"There is," Zye said. "You switch off, take yourself somewhere else in your mind. They might be able to get to my body, but they can't reach my brain."

"Where does your brain go?" I asked.

"To the future, where I'm older and stronger than they are. And then, I make them hurt like they do to me. I watch them suffer and I enjoy it." He cleared his throat and glanced back at Frankie. "Or I go to the beach and imagine making sandcastles and a little moat around the edge that I can fill with sea water. Either place works for me." He shrugged.

"One day, we could go for a trip to the seaside, you, me, and Frankie, and we'll make some sandcastles just like the ones in your head," I said, to try and make him feel better.

"Maybe," he replied.

I didn't ask Zye again about what happened to him at night-time, not after that night when I'd crept down into the basement. And he didn't want to share it. I think, with me and Frankie in the games room, he found a different kind of peace, a sort-of-happy, if Zye ever could be happy. We were two friends that he could share his quiet times with; friends to share his space. He was still mostly silent in the mornings, and more willing to open up in the afternoon, but we didn't mind. Zye was who he was, and we accepted that.

Obi continued to sleep over the doorway every night, but he always made sure I'd been to the bathroom before lights

out, and he started to take more interest in Frankie, giving him high-fives and teaching him special ways to kick and punch.

I didn't like Clivesdon House. I hated it. And I asked every day when my mum was coming to fetch us.

And then, one day, she did.

I don't know exactly how long we stayed at Clivesdon House. To me, it felt like months, but maybe it was weeks. All I knew was that day, when I saw my mum standing at the bottom of the stairs as we came down to eat breakfast, I felt happiness like I'd never felt before.

I held Frankie's hand tight as I raced down the stairs to where she stood, and when we got to her, she grabbed us both in a hug. The kind of hug that hurt, it squeezed so tight, but I didn't mind.

"It's time to come home," Mum said as she kissed us both on our heads. "We have a new apartment. It's lovely and clean. Close to your school, so when the new term starts, you won't have to walk as far. I've decorated your room too. You're gonna love it."

I didn't care what the room looked like, I just wanted to leave here and go back to be with my mum. She looked different to how she looked before we'd left, and I stared up at her, noticing her hair was fluffy and she had makeup on. Her coat was new too. She looked nice. She smelt good too. Like home.

After hearing Mum gush over our new life, Paul appeared at my side, holding our two bags.

"I packed your things, boys," he said, looking down at Frankie and me. "I bet you're excited to go home."

He started to walk us to the door, telling us how much he'd miss us, and then, before I knew what was happening, we were on the path outside, walking down towards a taxi with the back door open and the engine running.

I turned to look back at the house, and spotted Zye sitting in the window watching us. Feeling a gut-wrenching pain in my stomach, I dropped my bag on the path and ran back in, ignoring Paul and Mum's shouts from behind me.

"I'll only be a second," I called out over my shoulder, and I ran through the front door and straight into the games room.

Zye didn't turn around, he kept his head forward, but I ran right over to him.

"My mum came back for us," I said, trying not to sound too happy. I was, but I didn't want it to make him feel bad. I'd miss him. I knew he'd miss us too. "Shall I ask her if you can come and live with us too?" I asked, but Zye shook his head.

"That's your mum, not mine. They wouldn't let me leave with her or you. But thanks for offering."

His shoulders dropped, and he kept his head down, which made me feel sad. I hated leaving him, but I wanted to go. I was glad to get away and be back with Mum and Frankie like a real family again.

"One day, your family will find you and come for you," I said, hoping it would come true.

"No, they won't," he replied. "I'm going to die here."

His words cut me like a knife, but I tried to keep smiling.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out one of my wrestling figures and put it in his lap, taking care not to touch him. Zye didn't like to be touched.

"Take my wrestler," I said. "And remember, he's a fighter, just like you are." Zye picked up the wrestler and ran his thumb over the figure's muscly arm.

"I can't take this. It's yours." He went to hand it back to me, but I put my hand up to stop him and stepped back.

"Yes, you can. And one day, I'll come back to help Obi, and we'll save you. You can hold onto him until then."

He held the figure in his hand and stared at it like it was treasure.

“That’s my promise,” I told him, and for the first time ever, Zye turned and looked me right in the eyes.

“You promise?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll help you. We’ll do what your brain told you. We’ll make them pay and then we’ll go to the seaside.”

In that moment, Paul burst in, telling me, “Time to go, buddy. The taxi is on the clock, you’re costing your mum money the longer you keep her waiting.

“I’ll see you around,” Zye said, staring straight ahead out of his window.

“See you soon, Zye,” I replied, running out of the room and down to where my mum was waiting.

As I got into the taxi, I looked back at the window, and Zye was staring at the wrestler in his hand, and I saw something else that day that I’d never seen before.

I saw Zye smile.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



Present Day

Before I hung up the call to my mum, she told me how traumatised Frankie and I had been after being away from her for so long. She said she'd told us to wipe our minds clean of that place. To forget it ever happened. We were starting fresh, and she wanted us to move forward, not back, and we did.

It's funny how a childish mind can embrace new memories and blank out the old ones. Throwing them out like unwanted trash. I guess I thought someone else would eventually help Zye, maybe Obi, perhaps. But not me. My place was with my mum and Frankie. I had to put them first.

I never did go back to Clivesdon House. And years later, there were so many other people to help and fights to fight. The past faded into nothing. Zye became a myth, a shattered memory, like Clivesdon House. A moment in time that never really was. But actually, it was, and now, it'd come back to haunt me.

I heard someone stalk into the room and turned to see Adam charging towards me.

"I need to go back to the chapel," I said, shoving my phone back into my pocket. "I know why he's here. I know why he did everything. I owed him a debt and he's here to cash in."

"No," Adam retorted. "It's our turn to cash in. He can't get away with what he's done to you and Bryony. He needs to face

the consequences.”

But I couldn't shake the nagging doubt in my head.

Yes, he was a fucking dead man.

He'd hurt Bee.

He'd killed her father.

He'd taken us and hidden us from the world, making us act out his sick and twisted fantasies.

But life had been unbearably cruel for him. It'd turned Zye, the silent boy, into Isaiah, the psychotic killer. I still hated him with every fibre of my being for what he'd done to us, but knowing the reasons why he did it made everything feel... complicated. Life was a bastard sometimes, and sometimes you had to take that bastard by the neck and wring it until the voices in your head told you it was all okay again.

Was this it for him?

Would those voices stop now?

Probably not.

If I'd learned one thing in life, it was that no matter how many demons you slayed, there were always more waiting for you right around the corner.

Isaiah had slayed some of his demons, but at the end of the day, he was still trapped in hell, still battling the life he'd left but it had never left him. Silent boy had gotten stronger, grown claws and fangs, but he wasn't free. I doubted he ever would be.

“I *was* at Clivesdon,” I explained, feeling guilt creeping into my bones because after all was said and done, I'd turned a blind eye to the pain of that place, just the same as Paul Masters. The only difference was, I was a kid when it happened. But I could've done more.

I gestured to the corridor that led to the chapel. “He was there too. That's why he did what he did. There were people there that needed to be dealt with.”

Adam's jaw clenched, the muscle twitching as he listened to what I said.

"How long were you at Clivesdon for?" I asked him.

He took a moment, let out a sigh then said, "I was there for two years."

"Jesus. That place was grim," I stated, and Adam nodded. "How did you manage two years of it?"

"Because I made sure no one ever messed with me. I caused fights, started shit. Animals prey on the weak, and I wasn't weak. But that's what they were. Animals." Adam gave the hint of a smile, and added, "I didn't tell them my real name. I thought I'd be smart and use an alias. I was mad on Star Wars, so I told them my name was Obi, you know, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

And just like that, all the puzzle pieces started to fall into place.

Recognition of what'd happened back then, that I'd met Adam before and I didn't even know it, knocked the wind right out of me.

Coincidences, fate, all that mystical shit never affected me.

I didn't believe in any of it.

But I was starting to now.

"I remember you." I stared at him like I was seeing him in a whole new light. "I slept in your dorm. You used to push your bed against the door at night."

"Mate, I'm so sorry," Adam replied. "I honestly don't remember. If I did, I would've said something years ago. I blocked out all memories of that place. It was a hellhole."

I heard what he said, but I carried on.

"I was with my little brother; you were ready to tear me a new one 'cos I went out the room after lights-out once. Don't you remember that at all?"

Adam shook his head. "Nope. Still doesn't ring a bell. Sorry."

I hesitated before asking my next question.

On the one hand, I didn't want to dredge it up, but at the same time, I felt like I needed to know, even though it was none of my fucking business.

“Is that why you slept against the door? Were you abused in that place too?”

Adam's body went rigid.

“Do you really expect me to answer that?”

I shook my head. I guess I'd got my answer anyway, only he'd never admit it, and now, I felt like an ass for asking.

“I dealt with that place years ago,” Adam stated, his expression cold and hard as he stared past me into space. “I burned that fucking house to the ground and made sure the ones who needed to attend that cremation were still locked inside.”

“But you didn't get everyone,” I replied. “Not the ones that Isaiah had on his list.”

“Then let's go back there and hear from the man himself. He came here for a reason, let's find out what that reason is.”

We both turned to head for the door. Colton was standing to the side of it, talking on his phone, and when he saw us approaching, he held his hand up to let us know he'd be with us in a minute. As we entered the hallway to head down to the chapel, we heard footsteps behind us, and turned to see Devon and Tyler coming towards us.

“I take it it's showtime?” Colton asked, ending his call and pocketing his phone.

“It's gonna be some fucking finale, all right,” Adam seethed as we stalked down the stone-lined corridor, our steps echoing to announce our arrival. The sound of Isaiah's fate grew louder, more sinister as we approached the wooden door to the chapel.

The shouts and taunts from earlier had stopped, the chapel was silent, just like the boy who'd sat in the window of Clivesdon House all those years ago. A boy who'd escaped the

prison of the children's home, but never the prison in his mind. Not until he'd completed what he'd set out to do, what he'd told me all those years ago. That he was going to have his revenge.

I was the first to push through the door into the chapel, and what I found in there waiting for us was complete and utter carnage.

I stopped in my tracks, standing frozen to the spot, my mouth hanging open as I took it all in.

What the hell?

How the hell had this happened?

The others gathered around me, the sight in front of them eliciting the same reaction from them as it did from me.

“Fuck me, what the hell happened?” Colton gasped. “We were only gone for ten minutes.”

I took a step forward, peering into the red plastic bucket and spade that'd been left on the floor. The kind of bucket and spade a kid would use at the seaside. But this one was filled with hearts, human hearts, bloody, veiny lumps of meat that looked freshly harvested. No prize for guessing whose hearts they were.

There were pools of blood on the floor, and I side stepped them as I moved further into the chapel, glancing up at the chains on the walls. The chains that we'd shackled Isaiah to, but now, there was a mannequin hanging there, a boy with stitches drawn over his mouth in black ink.

Silent boy.

But there was no Isaiah.

He was long gone.

And beside the mannequin, written in red spray paint over the walls of the chapel were the words,

God put a smile on my face

But the Devil poured joy into my soul.

Empty spray cans were scattered on the floor, the cans he'd used to leave his message.

Colton stood underneath the shackled mannequin. "Who the fuck are we dealing with here, Harry fucking Houdini?" He lifted one of the cuffs to inspect it, then dropped it and cussed, "Fuck me."

"Whoever he is, he's a fucking weirdo. What the hell is this?" Devon asked, and I turned to see him staring at something that'd been left on the altar.

Approaching cautiously, I stopped dead in my tracks, my body going rigid when I saw the wrestling figure I'd given him almost twenty years ago standing in the middle of the stone altar. All these years, and he'd kept a hold of it.

Until now.

"He's been planning this for years," I said, turning my back on the altar. "He's held onto all of it for twenty years, and now, there's no stopping him."

"Held onto what?" Tyler asked, but Adam and I ignored him. We'd fill them in soon enough.

"He was one step ahead," Adam snarled. "He's always been one fucking step ahead." He turned to face me. "He walked right into our home, knowing you'd know who he was. He wanted to get caught. He wanted to be brought down here, just so he could fuck with us and do this shit."

Devon lifted a backpack that he'd found by the empty spray cans. "He planted this stuff. It was all in here waiting for him to use."

"But how did he pick the locks on the cuffs?" Tyler asked.

"If you have the right tools, the right know-how, you can get yourself out of anything," Adam replied with caustic venom dripping from every word. "He thinks he's so fucking clever."

"But what does it all mean?" Tyler replied.

It was then that Adam started filling them in on the whole Clivesdon House of horrors story.

I left them to it. I wasn't about to take another trip down that memory lane that paved the way to Lucifer. So, I wandered back over to the bucket and spade.

"I said I'd take him to the beach," I mumbled to myself. "I told him we'd make sandcastles. This was his way of showing me he hadn't forgotten. One of his fucked-up calling cards."

I pointed up at the mannequin, knowing my ramblings weren't making sense, but to me, they did.

"He can't speak," I stated. "He's chained, hidden from the world. He's silent boy."

I turned my attention to the wall of words and whispered to myself, "The only time I ever saw him smile was when I promised I'd come back and help him. He thought I was going to save him. Am I the God he's talking about? Am I the devil too now? Or did *he* turn into the devil?" I knew I was talking in riddles, muttering to myself, trying to make sense of it all.

But then panic wrapped its ice-cold bony fingers around my heart and lungs, making it impossible to breathe as I noticed something hidden in the corner of the room.

Bryony's black cat mask that she'd worn at the masked ball was discarded on the floor, hidden in the shadows in the corner of the chapel. And lying next to it was a Barbie doll, no head, just the body.

This was his last message, and it was the worst one yet because it made my ears screech with terror and my heart race with panic. Everything else became a blur as I shot across the chapel, scrambling for the door.

"We need to fucking go," I shouted. "He's out there. The fucker's out there and he's gonna hurt Bryony."

I burst through the door, darting towards our van and flinging the door open as I tried to ring her on my mobile. It went straight to voicemail, so I left her a message, telling her to lock the door and stay where she was. I was on my way. Then I cut the call and tried again, but all I got was her fucking voicemail.

"I'll drive," Adam snapped, jumping into the driver's seat.

I saw the others clamouring in too as I got into the passenger seat.

“Fucking floor it, mate,” I growled, and Adam did just that, revving the engine and spinning the wheels on the gravel as he raced down the drive onto the road, hurtling forward at breakneck speed.

I rang her over and over again, my eyes pinned to the road ahead, willing us to go faster as I cursed the bloody voicemail that kept answering me.

I had to get to her before he did.

I couldn't bear to think what would happen if I didn't.

But one thing was sure.

This was Isaiah's last day on earth.

Chapter Forty



I'd had some pretty rough days lately, but telling my sister what'd happened to our dad was the worst. I'd sat Shelley down and explained as best I could about the absolute shitshow that'd happened to us and how Dad had been drawn into it all. She'd cried, sobbed in fact. She didn't understand why he'd been killed, and in all truth, neither did I. I knew, like me, it'd take her time to come to terms with it, if she ever could. I think you have to find a new normal after something like this happens to you. Life can never really be the same again. It was all so unfair, so utterly cruel.

Shelley had left, and I was in the bedroom, changing the sheets, when I heard Tiny barking in the living room. I say bark, but with her little lungs it was more of a yip.

"Hush, pup. I'm coming," I called out, and when she stopped, I figured she'd heard my voice, and it'd helped her to settle down.

I gathered the discarded bed linen off the floor and bundled it up in my arms, heading to the bathroom to put it in the laundry basket. Then, I picked up one of Tiny's chew toys from the bathroom floor and headed to the living room to find her.

As I stepped into the room, I stopped dead, fear pinning me to the spot as I saw a man standing in the middle of the room, holding Tiny in his arms. He was the same kind of build as Will, dressed all in black with a black leather jacket. His hair was dark and cropped short, and tattoos covered his hands

that stroked and held my puppy. But when he lifted his head to smile at me, staring at me with eyes that were black, soulless, evil to the core, my fear turned to a spiralling twister of rage and terror whirling inside me. Across his neck was a spider's web tattoo and the word 'death'.

He was here.

"Get out," I hissed, and he laughed.

"Now that's no way to greet an old friend, is it, *Bryony*?" He glanced down at my pup in his arms and grinned as he stroked her, scratching behind her ears.

"Let my dog go, you fucking freak!"

He sneered at my words, then said, "What kind of sick fuck do you think I am?" He lifted his head, staring across at me, and he sniffed in disgust. "Do you really think I'd hurt a dog? I'm not a fucking monster."

"Yes, you are," I rasped.

"To people, maybe. To you. But dogs?" He shook his head. "Nah. Dogs are special. They're a gift. We don't deserve dogs. They're too good for us."

"So put her down then," I hissed through my teeth, keeping one eye on my little pup and the other on the door behind him. I knew Will was due back any moment, and I was praying it was sooner rather than later.

"Did you know that petting dogs is good for us? It's good for them too. It releases a feel-good hormone in the person and the dog. Gives you both a little mood boost. Who wouldn't want to take advantage of that?" He continued to scratch and pet my pup, and I stood still, watching, feeling every muscle tense as I clenched my jaw and concocted an escape plan in my head as quick as I could.

Time wasn't on my side.

"Relax," he said, mocking me. "Don't you want me to be in a good mood? Lower my stress levels courtesy of your dog here?"

"Go to hell," I seethed, glaring at him.

He smirked, a half-smile appearing on his evil face, and he bent down to put Tiny on the floor. As he did, I took advantage of that millisecond of distraction and darted for the door, praying Tiny would run after me, but I wasn't fast enough.

"Yeah, that's not happening," he snarled, grabbing me from behind and pinning me to the wall, his front to my back. He pressed his body into mine, making me sick to my stomach at his closeness. Then he whispered in my ear, "You need to learn some fucking manners, woman. I'm a guest in your home."

He pulled me off the wall and dragged me back over to the sofa, throwing me down onto the cushions and leering over me.

"Bitch. Sit there and shut the fuck up. I'm doing the talking now."

He stood over me, folding his arms as he stared at me. Tiny strolled over and sat on his feet, and he grinned, looking down at her.

"They're a great judge of character," he chuckled. "She knows who she can trust."

"She's a puppy," I snapped back. "She's not old enough to detect a psycho fucking freak when she sees one, but I do."

"You know," he went on. "If your dog doesn't like someone, you shouldn't either, but your dog? She fucking loves me."

"And I fucking hate you, so give her time, she'll get there."

I sat there, breathing heavily as my hand slipped down the side of the sofa, trying to find one of the knives I'd hidden there. But I was careful not to show him what I was doing. I had to be smart.

He glanced at the door then back down at me.

"You think he's gonna come and save you, don't you?"

I wanted to tell him, no. I was going to save myself. But I just lifted my chin and glared back at him.

He huffed at my silence and nodded. “All right then. Looks like it’s time to wrap this up.”

He reached into his jacket pocket, and my whole body went into freefall, my breaths rapid and panic-stricken as I waited for him to pull a knife or gun on me, but he didn’t. He took out a pen and a folded piece of paper.

When he saw my fear, he laughed.

“You thought I was gonna pull a weapon on you?” His voice was taunting, mocking me. “Haven’t you heard? The pen is mightier than the sword. And you’re about to prove that.”

“I’m not doing anything for you, you fucking maniac,” I snarled back at him, and again, he smirked and chuckled to himself.

“It’s funny you think you have a choice.” He threw the pen and paper down onto the sofa next to me. “Now, here’s what’s gonna happen. You’re gonna write him a note, telling him how sorry you are that you had to leave. That you need some time on your own, and he shouldn’t try to find you. When you want to return, you will.” He paused, then with an evil grin he said, “You won’t. But he’ll work that out soon enough.”

“I’m not gonna do that. I’m not doing anything.” I pushed the pen and paper off the sofa, and he rolled his eyes and picked them up. In that split second, I managed to slide my hands down the back of the sofa, feeling the cool handle of the knife I’d put there days ago.

“You can do it yourself,” he said, throwing the pen and paper back to me. “Or I have one pre-written here in my pocket that I can use instead.” He patted his jacket pocket to indicate where. “Either way works for me, but I thought I’d be nice. Do you a favour and let you write it yourself.”

“What are you gonna do to me?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him as I leaned forward, trying to distract him so he wouldn’t notice my arm hiding the knife behind my back.

“I’m gonna use you to teach him a lesson.”

“Which is?” I was stalling for time. Waiting for the right moment.

“That there’s no such thing as hope. Hope can be given, but it can be taken away just as fast. And that’s what you are to him... hope. He thinks he has a future, but he doesn’t. He needs to learn that life has a way of coming back around full circle. I spent twenty years hoping, waiting for him to fulfil a promise. Now he’s gonna spend the next twenty with nothing but hope. Hope that you’ll come back. That he’ll find you or find out what happened to you. He won’t, by the way.”

He pulled out a huge hunting knife, and I gasped, drawing back as I stared at the serrated blade and tribal patterns carved into the metal. It was the kind of knife that made you nauseous when you looked at it. And thinking about what he’d do with it, how he’d use it on me, made an ice-cold knot twist in my gut, and my heart raced so hard it felt like my chest could explode. Sweat and fear trickled down my spine, and my hands grew clammy as I clutched the knife behind me. My knuckles ached from gripping it so hard, but I couldn’t show him how he was affecting me. I had to give the illusion of being calm.

“Do you want to know the best part?” he asked, running the blade across his cheek and down to his neck. “You’ll be right under his nose the whole time. When he goes outside, when he stands there smoking a cigarette, when he can’t be arsed to go upstairs so he takes a piss in the gardens where he thinks no one’s watching. You’ll be six feet under, and he’ll be pissing on your grave. Kind of poetic, don’t you think?”

The way he cackled sent shivers running right through me, like painful darts piercing my soul. I was immobilised with fear, trapped, suffocating under the pressure of when to make my move.

What if I’m not strong enough?

Not fast enough?

What if he overpowers me?

What if this is how it all ends?

“I thought you were better than that?” I taunted, lifting my chin in defiance, trying to play him at his own game while stalling for time. “You kill with purpose. There’s no real purpose here. Your whole hope speech is just bullshit.”

“IT’S NOT BULLSHIT!” he snapped, his cool façade dropping momentarily, before he took a deep breath, grinned, and cracked his head from side to side, righting himself. “The Gods visit the sins of the fathers upon their children,” he stated calmly, then he sneered, “That’s Euripides, by the way. Not that I’d expect you to know that.”

He placed the hunting knife on the coffee table and smirked at me.

“I’ll give you another quote,” he said, my relief at the knife being away from him well hidden as I leant forward. “Question everything. Learn something. Answer nothing.” He paused and glared at me. “I learned a long time ago that your boyfriend doesn’t keep his promises, but I’ll keep mine. I promise to make it quick for you when I slice that blade across your throat. You’ll barely feel a thing.”

“I have another Euripides quote for you,” I spat back, and he raised his brow at me, curious for what I’d say next. “The greatest pleasure in life... is love.” And with that, I launched myself off the sofa and lunged at him, swinging the knife from behind my back and stabbing it right into his chest.

He stumbled backwards, looking down at the kitchen knife sticking out of his ribs, and then he let out an almighty roar, dropped his head and began to cackle with laughter.

“Nicely played, Masters. I always knew you had more about you than your spineless father.”

I spun around, heading for the door, but he grabbed my arm, pulling at me to try and stop me from escaping. He was weakened though, and I soon shrugged him off.

I raced to the door, grappling at the lock, and then I flung it open, dashing out into the hallway and heading right for the emergency staircase.

I didn't turn around to see if he was following me. I couldn't focus on anything other than getting out of the building, my hand skating along the stair rail as I used it to keep me steady, jumping down the steps two and three at a time. I stumbled over a step, but I didn't care about the resulting shot of pain that flashed through my ankle. I blocked the pain out. It was a small price to pay for my life. And the faster I got to the bottom, the more chance I had to get help.

When I made it to the ground floor, I threw my whole body against the fire door, bursting through it to fall out onto the street on the other side. And as if the angels were shining their light on me, I fell hard into a body coming from the opposite direction. As I grabbed the stranger's arms and begged him to help me, I looked up into his face and saw my Will gazing back at me. His eyes were rimmed with tears, and his mouth formed words that I couldn't hear.

I let myself fall further into him, losing myself in the comfort of his arms, his smell, the sound of his voice telling me it'd be okay.

After the initial shock, I peered up at him and said, "He's up there. I stabbed him, Will. I stabbed him."

Will held me closer, burying his face in my hair as he whispered, "It's okay. We'll take care of it. We'll take care of everything."

I noticed Adam, Devon, Tyler, and Colton farther down the street, about to head into the building, and I wanted to go back too. I needed to see what they'd do to him. I had to know he was gone. Finally.

"Bee, don't," Will said, pulling me back as I went to follow them. "Let them sort it."

But I whipped my head around. "No, Will. I've got to go. I need to know it's over."

He gritted his teeth, then he nodded. He wasn't happy about it, but he wouldn't argue with me.

Holding my hand, he walked with me back into the building and up the stairs, my legs growing heavier with each

step I took. My chest grew tight as we came to the floor where Kate's apartment was, and I saw the door was still open.

One step, two steps, he squeezed my hand as we headed back into the apartment where my nightmare would be waiting for us. When we walked into the living room, I glanced around, but he was nowhere to be seen. Tiny sat staring at us from her dog bed, giving a little yip before she ran over to greet us. I scooped her up in my shaky arms and buried my face into her fur, breathing her in. Thank God he hadn't hurt her.

The others were stalking around, going from room to room, and when Colton called out, "I think we missed him," I shook my head.

"He can't be gone. The knife was still in his chest." I looked from one angry face to the next, but I couldn't accept what they were telling me. "He has to still be here," I shouted, placing Tiny back in her dog bed, and marching over to the bedroom to search for myself.

On the carpet was a small trail of blood, tiny specks that hinted that he'd been in here, and then the curtain at the window billowed out as a gust of wind blew in.

Will ran past me, pushing the curtain to the side and leaning out of the open window. There was a fire escape on the side of the building that led to the street. But he was injured. There's no way he could've climbed out and run away. He had to still be in here or hiding close by.

"I think he got out here." Will pointed to the windowsill, and I went over to find blood smeared along the sill. I leaned out, noticing the bloody kitchen knife lying discarded on one of the metal steps of the emergency staircase. He had been out here, and he'd pulled that knife out. Surely he'd be weaker now? The wound would be bleeding faster, internal damage crippling him as he tried to outrun us.

"He can't have gotten far," Adam said from behind us. "We'll head out. Scour the area. And when we find him, we'll kill him."

Will didn't argue. Just nodded and pulled me close to him.

"Do what you've gotta do," he told Adam. "I've had enough. I just want it over."

"It is over," I replied. "He wouldn't survive what I did. He won't get away. He can't."

"I know," Will said. "And I'm just so fucking thankful that you're okay. That's all that matters to me."

I wrapped my arms around him, my eyes closed as I held him tight.

"I love you," I cried. "And I hate how we got together, but I'll always love you. Always."

"I love you too," he whispered back to me. "And I don't give a fuck how we started. It's the end that matters. Our end. Whatever he put us through, what he made us do and what he said to us, it doesn't matter. None of it means shit. But this?" He held me so tight I could barely breathe. "It means everything. We're the winners, Bee. We played his fucked-up games and we won."

"We really did." I sighed; emotions I'd held in ready to burst free. "We won."

Chapter Forty-One



WILL

We never did find his body after he took the coward's way out and climbed through the window. We spent hours, days, searching the local area, but came up empty-handed. Nobody had seen anything, no one had heard anything. It was as if he'd just vanished into thin air. CCTV showed him stumbling away from the apartment block, but after that, the trail went cold. It fucking broke my heart that I couldn't give her the peace of mind she needed, that she fucking deserved.

After everything that'd happened with her father, Kate decided to cut her trip short and came home to be with her family. Bryony's mum had wanted her to move back in with her. Kate had asked her to stay with her too. But at the end of the day, we didn't want to be apart, so she moved in with me at The Sanctuary. There she could be close to her sister, Shelley, and it meant I could be with her. It was all I'd ever wanted.

Bryony started attending therapy sessions, and I went with her. In many ways, it helped me too. The games we'd played in that basement and the guilt I'd felt over what'd happened at Clivesdon House was something I needed to work through. Although I didn't tell the therapist about everything that had happened, talking about loss and grief and how the guilt eats away at you helped me to begin to process some of the feelings from my own childhood that I'd kept locked away in my head. Things I hadn't faced before, that'd stayed buried, forgotten like a bad dream. But nightmares from our past don't

stay buried forever. I'd learned that the hard way. Some things you have to face to finally defeat them.

We lived in a weird kind of limbo for weeks after he escaped, not knowing when the rug would be pulled from under our feet. That was until we had a visit from Tom, our local policeman, as well as our eyes and ears to what was going on around Brinton Manor. He came to see us on his own one day. It wasn't an official visit, and he sat with us in our living room, looking like he'd seen a ghost.

"What do you know, Tom?" Adam asked as we all sat waiting in anticipation.

Tom sat forward, his fingers steepled together as he took a moment to compose himself.

Then he lifted his head to look at each of us.

"We found a body. By the river. I think it's the guy you're looking for."

"You think? Or you know?" I asked, growing irritated by the second. I wanted this all to end. I wanted it for Bryony and for me. The not knowing was the worst part.

"We're pretty certain." He sighed, his eyes dropping to the floor as he spoke. "The body was badly decomposed when we found it. There was no way to identify it from scars or marks, tattoos, that sort of thing. The skin was... well, decomposition had fucked that avenue up for us. We did find one scar on his ribs. Conducive to a recent knife wound." He pointed to his chest. "Right here. But there was no weapon found near the body."

"And dental records? DNA?" Tyler enquired with a deep-set frown on his forehead as he tried to make sense of what we were all hearing.

"We tried to find a match, but nothing came up on the database. It's like he was the perfect John Doe. Digitally, he doesn't exist."

"It's too fucking perfect," Adam snapped.

“Yeah,” Tom agreed. “But we also found this, in the pocket of a black leather jacket that was hidden in the undergrowth nearby.”

He took out a plastic bag and opened it, pulling out the white paper inside.

“It’s a letter addressed to Will and signed from Bryony. And since you’re the only Will I know who’d have a Bryony that’d write letters to him, I thought I’d show it to you.” He passed me the note and I took it. “Chances are, you’ll get a call from one of my colleagues when they eventually put two and two together. What you do then is up to you. But I thought I’d show you first. Keep you in the loop.” He nodded to the letter in my hand. “You can keep that, by the way. It’s not the original.”

I didn’t open it right away. Instincts told me this wasn’t a letter I’d want to read in front of Tom, so we waited until he’d filled us in on a few other details. They’d found the remains of the men whose hands were left on our doorstep. They’d been left in shallow graves in Newgate Forest. There was an open investigation, but they were no closer to finding the killer. There was nothing left on the bodies or anything they could find in the forest to help in their enquiries. The only thing linking the men was the fact that they’d all worked at Clivesdon House, a children’s home that burned down years ago, along with any paperwork. The online data was brief, and according to Tom, it was pointless.

I listened to what he said, but I kept quiet. Those were Isaiah’s murders, not mine. Tom knew it was all connected somehow, but he didn’t ask questions, and we didn’t offer him any answers. But we could trust him. He would keep our names out of it, and cover for us if anything did come back on us.

When he eventually got up to leave, Adam stood too and walked him out. Then Colton came over to sit next to me.

“You don’t have to read it,” he said. “Burn it in the fucking fire if it helps. You know whatever’s in there is bullshit

anyway. Bryony told you he wanted her to write a letter, and she never did. Those are his words. They mean nothing.”

He was right, of course. But morbid curiosity meant I couldn't just burn it. I had to read what it said. So, I sat back on the sofa, unfolded the paper and read his words.

Will,

By the time you read this letter, I'll be gone. This isn't a decision I've taken lightly. In fact, this was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life.

I wanted to leave you this letter because I need you to know something. I haven't led a happy life. There are moments in time and things that I've done that I regret, words I should have said but never did. But the one thing I need you to know is this... having you in my life has changed everything. You turned my dark, grey, miserable life into something colourful, wonderful, hopeful. I use that word a lot when I think about you. Hope. Because that's what you are, it's what you gave me. The hope that tomorrow could be a better day. Hope that things will be okay just because you're there. You are my hope, Will. And I will always be grateful for that. I'll always be grateful for you.

*Don't try to find me. When I'm ready,
I'll come back to you. But I need you to do
something for me. I need you to keep hope
alive. Because if we lose that, we've lost
everything.*

Forever and always,

Your Bryony.

I folded the letter up and slipped it into my pocket. Feelings warred inside me, conflicting feelings about what it said, because after reading it, I'd realised something. That wasn't a letter from Bryony. It wasn't her voice that was speaking to me. It was his. That was a letter from the silent boy. One that told me how much he'd hung onto the hope that one day I'd go back for him. That I'd help him. But I never did. And that was something I'd have to come to terms with.

I'd played a part in creating a monster. The Taskmaster was born because of me, just as much as it was created to avenge those men.

I stood up, ready to go to Bryony and tell her what'd happened. It wasn't the ending we'd hoped for, but it was something, at least, to know her stab wound had been the final blow. That it'd killed him. I knew it'd help her too. Her way to make him pay for what he'd done to her father, to her, to us. But at the same time, I felt like we needed more. We deserved more.

Surely, after everything, this couldn't be the end?



Epilogue I

One Year Later

“**Y**ou know, when I said I wanted to change my surname and have a fresh start, I didn’t expect you to go to these lengths.” Bee stood opposite me on the steps of Brinton Manor registry office, looking absolutely stunning in a floor-length silk, ivory dress. Her dark hair fell in waves over her bare shoulders, and I swear, I’d never seen her look as beautiful as she did right now.

“And when I said there isn’t another woman alive that I want to spend the rest of my life with, I meant it,” I shot back, hooking my arm out, ready for her to take.

“And when *I* said there’s someone for everyone out there, I’d always thought that for you it was a psychiatrist.” She shrugged. “Or a cell mate. But now, I think you might be right. This”—she waggled her finger, pointing between the two of us, and her smile softened as she gazed up at me—“it works.”

“Of course it does,” I replied, giving her a cocky smile. “You have impeccable taste and I’m irresistible. I knew I’d wear you down eventually.”

I winked and led her into the building where our friends and family were waiting for us.

We hadn’t invited many people to our wedding. Just my brothers, Adam, Colton, Devon, Tyler, my mum, and my brother, Frankie, who I’d gotten closer to since everything

that'd happened. Bee had her sisters, Shelley and Kate, plus her mum, her aunt Rosie, and some family friend called Paula.

Apparently, Paula had done a reading for Bee a few weeks ago and told her a wedding was in her future. Bee thought she'd meant for her sister, Shelley, but I knew better. I liked surprising her and putting a smile on her face.

I'd already booked the registry office when she went for that reading. I'd sorted the invites, the flowers. I booked it all. All Bee had to do was say yes, buy a dress, and turn up on the day. Lucky for me, she had. And once we'd made it official today, and she was Mrs Stokes, we were throwing a huge party at The Sanctuary to celebrate.

I'd made it my life's mission to be better at surprising her, and today certainly beat my previous efforts. There wasn't a duck pond, a Baywatch lifebuoy or a pair of red swimming shorts in sight. From now on, my surprises would be tailored to her needs. Everything was for her.

We walked through the lobby and down the wood panelled hallway to where Colton and Shelley were waiting for us outside the room I'd booked for us to get married in. They were our witnesses for the ceremony, along with the other two special guests on the leads they were currently holding. I'd had the crazy idea of letting Tyson and Tiny carry the rings for us. To some people, it might look corny, but I didn't care. We loved those dogs, and I wanted them to be a part of our day.

"Are you ready, sis?" Shelley asked, giving Bee a pointed stare.

"It's your last chance to back out and see if David Hasselhoff is still single. I know how much you love a red swimsuit," Colton butted in, winking at her.

"I'm not going anywhere," Bee replied. "Except in there." And she nodded at the door and gave my arm a squeeze. Then she turned to me and smiled, making my chest constrict. "So, what do you think, pretty boy? Are you ready to get hitched?"

"I'm ready to fling you over my shoulder and show you who you belong to." I smirked. "But I'll do the whole vows

and rings thing first, just to make sure it's official."

"So bossy," Bee quipped as the double doors opened to the room with our guests inside, waiting for us, all dressed in suits and dresses. There were blue flowers attached to the back of each chair, and a small aisle ready for us to walk down.

"I call it aggressively assertive. But bossy works too," I whispered. "Now get your ass down that aisle, so I can start calling you Mrs Stokes."

She grinned back at me, and we walked the small distance past our loved ones, to stand in front of the registrar. Tyson behaved perfectly and sat at Colton's feet. Tiny tried to jump up at Bee and me, so Shelley picked her up to calm her down.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming here today to celebrate the wedding of William and Bryony," the registrar announced. "My name is Abigail and I'll be conducting the ceremony for you today."

The registrar gave a speech about love, marriage, and making promises. Then she smiled and turned to us, telling us it was our turn to say the vows we'd written for each other.

"Bryony, would you like to go first?" the registrar asked, and Bee nodded, taking a breath to calm her nerves. Then she looked right in my eyes as she started to speak.

"Will, I promise to love you today and every day for the rest of my life. I'll let you tell your jokes, and sometimes, I might even laugh. I'll support you in everything you do, and I promise not to watch the next episode of whatever Netflix show we're bingeing unless I'm with you. But... if I slip up, I'll watch it again and pretend I haven't seen it, just for you.

"I promise that I won't be annoying when we argue and keep score... because we both know I always win."

"I always let you win," I butted in, to a ripple of quiet laughter.

"You do." She grinned back at me. "And I love you for it. I also promise to wear your ring to show everyone that you have me wrapped around your finger."

“I think it’s the other way around,” I added, and she cocked her head at me.

“We’ll see.” She paused for a moment, then her eyes welled up as she said, “I can’t believe I’m marrying my best friend. That I get to wake up every day with you and be with you, forever. I feel like the luckiest girl in the world. I can’t wait to grow old disgracefully with you. I love you, Will. Never change, please, because I love you just the way you are. And that includes your non-stop talking.”

I chuckled, then leaned across to kiss her, hearing Colton joke, “We haven’t got to that part yet.”

I took a step back, wiped my sweaty palms down the front of my trousers and took a deep breath, ready to say my vows and hope I didn’t fuck them up.

“Bryony, I’ve never been a very good talker.”

“Bullshit, you never shut up,” Colton whisper-yelled, and I smirked. So did Bee.

“But today, I want to shout from the rooftops how much I love you. How proud I am of you. That I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you, Mrs Stokes.

“I promise to give you a head rub or a foot massage whenever you need one. I know the little things count, and I do have magic hands.”

“You do,” she replied, giving me a sly wink.

“I’ll be available to you, for you to use however you see fit from morning until night... and throughout the night too. If that wasn’t clear, I’m yours. Use me. Please.”

She threw her head back and laughed out loud. “Noted.”

“I’ll clean up after the dog, and you. I might not be great at cleaning up after myself.” I shrugged. “But I’m getting there.”

“You’re doing just fine,” she replied.

“I promise to keep surprising you every day, not the crappy kind that makes you serve me laxative coffee, but the good kind, that puts a smile on your face. The kind that makes you

excited to see what's going to happen next. I'll listen and I'll hold your hand when you need me. If you ever feel scared, I'll be there, ready to fight your demons. Because those demons are mine too, and I won't rest until they're gone. I love you, Bee, and I'll cherish you, always. I'd die for you."

"I know," she hiccupped, and I knew she was thinking about everything we'd been through. I hated that it still haunted her, but it was our story, our history. We couldn't change it, but we could rise from it.

"I'll take the darkness," I told her. "Let me carry that, you deserve the light. It's yours, take it. And let's be crazy together. Make stupid choices and laugh about them. Not Bonnie and Clyde crazy, more like Dumb and Dumber."

"Thanks." She laughed.

"I'm Dumber, obviously." I winked. "Let's forget being polite. We won't shut up; we'll be as loud as we want to be. We'll be that couple, the ones everyone else watches, talks about, envies. Because those people? They have the time of their lives right up until the end. They don't care about anything but making each other happy. And that's what I want for us. That's what I'll promise. Till death do us part, I'll be the man that makes you happy." I reached forward to take her hands in mine. "Now let's make this official before Tiny starts watering the flowers on the backs of the chairs."

Everyone laughed, and Shelley put Tiny on the ground so that I could bend down and take Bee's ring out of the pouch attached to her collar. Bee did the same, taking my ring from Tyson, and we stood in front of our loved ones, exchanging rings and smiling as the registrar said, "I now pronounce you husband and wife."

I never in a million years thought I'd be someone's husband. But it felt good. It felt damn good. And as I leaned forward, taking her face in my hands and closing my mouth over hers, I kissed her. I poured every bit of love I felt in that moment into that kiss. Every promise and hope. And as my lips grazed hers, I whispered, "You know it was always you, right?"

“I know,” she whispered back. “It couldn’t ever be anyone else.”



—

Epilogue II

“I have just officiated the cutest wedding ever, with dogs,” I announced as I walked back into the office.

“Dogs?” Jess replied, her brows touching her hairline. “We’re marrying dogs now?”

“No, stupid. I meant they had dogs at the wedding, carrying the rings. Two of them. An adult rottie and a puppy. It was so cute.”

“Sounds like the perfect wedding to me,” the IT guy fixing our network said from underneath my desk.

“It was,” I replied, and he crawled out from under it to glance up at me.

“Dogs are special.” He smiled. “They’re a gift. We don’t deserve dogs. They’re too good for us.”

I nodded, agreeing, kind of, but we did deserve dogs. Well, some of us did.

“Do you have a dog?” I asked him as he stood up and started typing something on the laptop he’d brought in with him.

He turned to look at me.

“No. I travel around too much. But I know people with dogs. Did you know that petting dogs is good for us? It’s good for them too. It releases a feel-good hormone in the person and the dog. Gives you both a little mood boost.”

“That’s so cute. I love that idea!” I beamed back at him, and he gave the slightest smirk and then turned his back on me to focus on his laptop.

As he was typing, I noticed his tattooed hands flying over the keyboard, and I became conscious of the fact that I was staring. I had a thing for hands. Men’s hands always looked so sexy, but even more so when they were covered in tattoos like his was. I was so transfixed I hadn’t realised he’d stopped typing and was staring at me again.

“You have interesting tattoos,” I stated, instantly feeling stupid at my ridiculous observation.

“She loves tattoos,” Jess butted in and then waggled her eyebrows at me from behind the IT guy’s back.

He didn’t say anything, just leaned over my desk and reached past me to get a pen from my desk tidy, and then he smiled down at me, and I swear a swarm of butterflies invaded my stomach, my heart, and maybe a little part of my lungs too. It had become hard to breathe.

“The one on your neck.” I pointed to his neck like he didn’t already know where it was. “It’s kind of scary and cool at the same time. The whole spider web and the word ‘death’. What made you get that?”

He didn’t respond right away, just scribbled something on a form he was filling out. I regretted the words the minute they’d come out. What the hell was I doing, questioning his choice of body art? I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

But then he spoke, and the deepness of his voice made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“At the time, I thought it was cool, edgy.” He shrugged like it was nothing. Then he turned around, leaning over me again as I sat at my desk, trying to play it cool, and I swear my heart skipped a beat as he brushed his arm against mine to put the pen back in the tidy. “Why? Does it scare you?”

The way he asked me that, with a hint of that edgy darkness in his eyes, made my toes curl, and I shook my head.

“I like scary,” I said, and he grinned.

“I like a girl who isn’t afraid to admit what she likes.”

“Ugh, enough already,” Jess huffed. “Just swap numbers or arrange a date. Then you can do this weird mating ritual on your own time.”

Jess rolled her eyes, but I glared at her until he turned back to look at me, and then I plastered a smile on my face. Mister Dark-Broody-Tattoo-God wouldn’t want my number, and I hoped he’d let me down gently, but he didn’t need to.

“I think I can manage that,” he rasped in such a sexy voice that I was glad I was sitting down; my knees wouldn’t have held my body if I were standing because they were now made of jelly.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Abigail,” I replied breathlessly.

“It’s nice to meet you, Abigail. I’m Isaiah. Are you free later?”

“I am.” I waited for him to say something, tell me where he was going to take me, or where we’d meet, anything. But he just grinned, shut his laptop, picked it up and sauntered to the door.

“I’ll see you later, then,” he said, and left me without a plan, a date, or the ability to breathe or think like any rational, sane person.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I turned to Jess, who was staring at the door, looking as clueless as I felt.

“I guess he wants to surprise you.” Then she gave a wicked grin. “He has tattoos, a bad boy air about him, and he’s a dog lover. He’s the perfect guy for you.”

I glanced back at the door he’d just walked through, with Jess’s words ringing in my ears. I hadn’t had the best of luck with guys. I always seemed to choose the losers, but he had a job, he seemed... normal. Perhaps she was right?

“Maybe he is.” I picked up the pen he’d used from my desk and twirled it between my fingers. “Maybe Mr Right does appear from under your desk one day, looking like every dirty dream you’ve ever imagined.”

“Amen to that.” Jess laughed. “But something tells me”—she pointed at the doorway—“with a guy like that, you’ll be the one getting down on your knees.”

“With a guy like that, I’d do it.”

The End.

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Thank you for taking the time to read Will and Bryony’s story. I really do appreciate it. If you think Isaiah should get a happy ever after, let me know. I’d really love to hear from you.



For Tyler’s story, [click here](#)

Five... minutes, that’s all I thought it’d take. Get in, get out. Job done.

Four... guns pointed at my head. It wasn’t supposed to go down this way.

Three... years old, and she clung to her mum as we sat huddled together on the floor, chained to the pipes on the wall.

Two... choices, when my time finally came. Let it all play out or fight with everything I had.

One... split second that changed the course of my life...
forever.

About the Author

Nikki J Summers is a British author who was born and raised in Birmingham, the home of the *Peaky Blinders*. She currently lives in Staffordshire with her husband, two children, a cavapoo called Poppy, and two guinea pigs, Cookie and Blaize.

She writes U.K. based new adult and dark romance stories about morally grey heroes who would burn the world to save their heroine. Those heroines usually save themselves, but the heroes are always by their side holding the matches.

Much like her soldiers, she wears many masks; schoolteacher, romance writer, wife, mother, daughter, sister... the list is endless, but she loves wearing every single one of them.

When she's not writing, you'll find her curled up with a good book or bingeing a Netflix box set.

She loves to hear from readers, so please feel free to reach out.

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