MAYHEM MANUSCRIPTS SEASON 2: CRYPTIDS



Golden

B. RIPLEY

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Author's Note/ Content Warnings

This book contains the following:

-haunted house vibes and horror themes

-stalking and possessive behavior

-forced medication via syringe and confinement in a mental health unit

-murder, gore, death and violence

-scenes that could be considered dubious consent

Should any of the above cause issue for you, please take care of yourself first and foremost.

Self care is never selfish.

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Prologue

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

Eight boys all present and accounted for.

Exactly as there always has been.

They sit on long benches around a campfire as it crackles and pops, embers flickering off into the cool night air. They're exhausted from their day of swimming and collecting bits of nature to examine with magnifying glasses, but none of them will admit to it. Saying they are sleepy would mean they will be sent to their cabins to rest and they have been looking forward to this campfire all day long.

Scout Master Jeremy promised them s'mores.

A bag of marshmallows is passed around the circle where the boys rest on small benches made of wooden logs. They each take one, except for Michael who grabs two. He pops one into his mouth and grins at the boy beside him, pushing the gooey marshmallow between his teeth with his tongue. The boy next to him laughs, wishing he'd grabbed two as well.

He'll remember to do that next time the bag comes around the circle.

Scout Master Jeremy adds another log to the fire, sending embers flickering up into the dark night. The boys chatter about the day as marshmallows are slipped onto metal rods and placed into the flames.

Some of them will burn theirs.

Some of them will eat the burned ones anyway.

Nathan will not.

He sits carefully, toasting his marshmallow with precision as he rolls his metal rod between his fingers at the right speed. The boys chatter and laugh around him, but he is focused on making sure that his treat doesn't burn. He will not eat it if it has the tiniest bit of black on it.

"I almost forgot. Roll call, Troop 557," Scout Master Jeremy announces.

Each boy pipes up in order, calling out their assigned number. Nathan thinks it isn't hard to remember names, but Scout Master Jeremy gave him the number eight and that is what he will say when it is his turn to speak. His brain keeps attaching names to the faces of the boys calling out their numbers around the campfire.

One. Ethan.

Two. Jayden N.

Three. Gage.

Four. Jaydon P.

Five. Michael.

Six. Callum.

Seven. Andrew.

And eight. Nathan.

Eight boys all present and accounted for.

Exactly as there always has been.

"My dad says there's a monster in these woods," Andrew says. Nathan's ears perk up, because scary stories are his favorite thing. He knows many tales of horror that he is willing to share with his new friends in Scout Troop 557. All he needs is someone to tell one first.

Nathan will go second.

How the group reacts to whatever creepy tale Andrew is going to tell will let him know which spooky story he should share.

Sometimes, the boys aren't ready for the stories Nathan knows.

Sometimes, he gets in trouble for scaring other kids with stories of ghosts and blood and demons so he needs to be careful here.

Nathan is always careful.

“There’s no monster in these woods,” Scout Master Jeremy replies, with a small sigh. “Monsters don’t exist.”

“My dad says that Bigfoot is real,” Andrew insists, plucking his bubbly, blackened marshmallow off his metal rod. Nathan would throw that one away, but Andrew licks his lips, opening his mouth to pop the treat onto his tongue. He pants as he waves his hand at his mouth, the marshmallow clearly too hot.

“Don’t burn your mouth,” Scout Master Jeremy reminds them all, two seconds too late for Andrew’s poor tongue.

Nathan’s marshmallow is perfect now. Browned and warm to the touch. He pulls it off the metal rod and blows on it before he eats it, taking care to chew and swallow slowly.

Nathan is a careful boy.

He has always been a careful boy.

Scout Master Jeremy grabs the bag of marshmallows and passes it around the circle again, but follows this with a sleeve of graham crackers. “Everyone take two graham crackers and another marshmallow. I’ll bring the chocolates around in a moment.”

“Bigfoot is real,” Michael agrees, as he takes his graham crackers out of the sleeve. Nathan watches as Andrew smiles at him, but Michael agreeing with something he says is not new or special. Michael agrees to everything anyone says. He especially agrees with anything Andrew says.

Michael thinks Andrew is really cool.

Andrew likes that Michael thinks he is really cool.

“I could tell you the sky is purple and you’d agree,” Callum points out, saying what Nathan is thinking.

“I would not!” Michael protests, grabbing a marshmallow from the bag when it reaches him. He passes it on to Jaydon P. who is doing his best job of staying out of the way of this conversation.

“Would too!” Callum retorts.

“Bigfoot is real,” Andrew announces again, drawing the attention back to himself. “And so is the Loch Ness Monster and the monster that lives in these woods.”

Nathan takes another marshmallow, wondering where the graham crackers have ended up because he hasn’t had them passed to him yet. He scans the circle through the flames, looking for the plastic sleeve.

Ah.

Ethan has them. He’s taking two and passing them on to Jayden N.

Nathan won’t toast this new marshmallow until he has all of the pieces for his s’more in hand. He doesn’t want the marshmallow to cool down too much. The chocolate won’t melt well if things get too cold. He will time his construction of his bedtime snack carefully so that this s’more is the best s’more he’s ever eaten.

Scout Master Jeremy starts handing pieces of chocolate out and Nathan waits patiently for his to land in his hand.

“There is a monster in the woods,” Gage murmurs and everyone turns to him as they all go silent.

Surprise ripples through Nathan.

Gage never speaks.

Even when he shares his number during roll call, he always whispers.

This is a huge moment and the boys can feel the air shifting as even Scout Master Jeremy’s eyes widen like saucers.

“Told you,” Andrew comments, like Gage daring to speak confirms his words.

“It’s a terrible monster,” Gage continues, staring into the fire. “My brother says it’s kind of a bird, but it’s not really one. It’s shaped like a human but it’s got feathers and claws and talons like a bird.”

Everyone is silent.

Everyone is waiting.

Everyone wants to hear more.

“They’ve been around a long time, but nobody remembers seeing them,” Gage says. “That’s their trick.”

“If nobody’s seen them, how do we know they’re real?” Andrew says, because he doesn’t know anything about the monsters he said existed just moments ago.

“We see them. We just don’t remember seeing them.”

“Then how do we know they’re real?”

Gage shrugs. “Just because something isn’t remembered, that doesn’t mean it isn’t real. Just means it knows how to trick humans. My brother said that sometimes they live with us, right in our houses, and we don’t even notice they don’t belong there.”

“That’s stupid,” Andrew scoffs.

“Yeah,” Michael adds, nodding. “Stupid.”

“Language,” Scout Master Jeremy corrects, handing out chocolate to the boys.

Stupid is a word Scout Master Jeremy knows from his childhood. He doesn’t like when the boys use it because it reminds him of being pushed down on the playground and having his glasses stomped on.

Scout Master Jeremy wears contact lenses now.

“How can something weird live in our houses and we don’t even know it?” Callum asks, frowning.

Gage shrugs again. “I don’t know. They make us think they have always lived with us, I guess. Like they’re part of our families.”

“That’s stu…” Andrew starts, before a stern look from Scout Master Jeremy makes him stop talking. He swallows, then tries again. “I don’t remember living with a bird boy ever.”

“That’s the point,” Gage insists. “You wouldn’t remember. You’d forget. That’s the trick. They live with us and then they disappear and we don’t even know anything.”

Everyone is silent for a moment.

Nathan takes his chocolate from Scout Master Jeremy’s hand when it is his turn to be handed one. He takes the sleeve of graham crackers from Callum when they make their way to him. He finally has all of his s’more pieces and can start toasting his marshmallow, but first he must pass off the things he doesn’t need.

“Here,” he whispers, nudging the boy beside him with his elbow. The boy turns to him with eyes that look almost yellow in the firelight, his black hair flopping down onto his forehead. Nathan hands him the graham crackers and he takes the plastic sleeve, plucking out two from within.

Nathan slips his marshmallow on the metal rod and places it into the fire, cradling the rest of his s’more pieces on his knees.

He’s careful to not drop them.

Nathan is always careful.

“Okay, so let’s say these bird people live with us,” Andrew comments, disdain dripping off every word. “Why?”

Gage shrugs.

Nathan notices that Gage does that a lot.

“What do they want?” Andrew asks, like changing the question will change the answer.

Gage shrugs.

“Okay, well how come if they live with us, you said they’re in the woods?”

Gage… doesn’t shrug. “They can only live with us while they look like us. They have to leave when their feathers start coming in and come back to the trees.”

“Why?” Andrew demands.

“Yeah. Why?” Michael adds.

“I don’t know,” Gage replies. “My brother says they’re like cuckoo birds. Like how they sometimes trick other birds into raising their babies. They move in, live with us for a while, then come back to the trees when they become grown ups.”

“So they’re cuckoo birds?” Andrew laughs.

“Someone’s cuckoo alright,” Michael murmurs under his breath.

That is not even a good insult.

Nathan has heard better ones, but he knows to never say them out loud.

He will get grounded if he does.

“Language,” Scout Master Jeremy warns, giving Michael a look.

Nathan has seen that look before.

It says “knock it off, you’re being a jerk.”

He hopes Michael listens.

Nathan makes his s’more and takes a bite, savoring the chocolate and marshmallow sweetness on his tongue. It is perfect, because he has taken his time. He has been careful. Nathan turns to look at the boy beside him to see if his s’more is as good as his. The boy beside him meets him with a grin, chocolate stuck to teeth that look almost too white.

Almost too sharp.

“Good?” Nathan says to the boy.

The boy licks his teeth and nods, still grinning. Nathan turns back to his own treat, taking another sweet bite of the s’more he made to be just right.

He hopes Gage keeps talking.

He wants to know more about the bird people in the forest.

He needs to know if they’re dangerous.

The forest lives on the edges of his home and he spends time in the trees when his dad is out in the field with the farmhands.

“Why would a bird person want to live with a bunch of crappy humans?” Andrew says. “Humans are boring. If I were a bird person, I’d go live with Bigfoot or something. That would be cool.”

“Bigfoot isn’t real,” Callum comments.

“He is so,” Andrew says with a scowl. “I know he’s real. I watched a show about him and they say he is a real guy. They say he eats people who go too close to his cave.”

“The bird people?” Michael asks, turning to Gage with fear in his eyes. “Do they wanna eat us?”

“No,” Gage replies. “I don’t think so. My brother didn’t say anything about eating people but…”

He trails off, looking uncertain for the first time since he started talking. Nathan waits patiently for him to finish his sentence as he nibbles his s’more.

“But what?” Michael says.

“Sometimes they kill people.”

A hush falls over the group of boys as wide eyes meet wide eyes over the flickering flames. Scout Master Jeremy clears his throat like he means to speak, but it is not his voice that rises from the circle next.

“How?” Michael asks.

“My brother says they drink all our blood.”

“Birds don’t drink blood,” Jaydon P. offers, holding up a burned marshmallow on his stick.

“The vampire finch does,” Callum responds. “They live in the Glapghost Islands."

“Galapagos,” Scout Master Jeremy gently corrects before Nathan has a chance to speak.

Nathan knows it’s the Galapagos Islands.

“They aren’t really birds,” Gage says, with a small sigh. “They just have some bird parts. They have human parts too, but they aren’t human. They are their own thing and my brother says they drink our blood and then we die.”

Nathan finishes his s’more, then sticks his metal rod into the fire, letting the flames lick the remaining marshmallow bits off the surface. He doesn’t know if he believes that a whole living thing could move into his house and he wouldn’t notice it didn’t belong there. He also doesn’t know if he believes that the same living thing could disappear someday and he wouldn’t know it had even been there in the first place.

He doesn’t like the way thinking about that makes his stomach wobble.

It’s scary to not know these things, but even scarier to think about them here in the darkness of the forest with only the campfire light.

“What do bird people look like?” Michael asks, chewing on his s’more.

“Like you and me,” Gage replies. “Just like a regular human being, until they grow their feathers.”

“Can they fly?”

Gage shrugs. “I don’t know. My brother didn’t say. Maybe they can.”

“Not if they don’t have wings,” Andrew points out. “If they just get feathers and no wings, they can’t fly.”

“That’s true,” Gage concedes. He shrugs again and closes his mouth, focusing on the fire instead of the faces around him.

“Do you believe him?” Nathan whispers, turning to the dark haired boy beside him.

“Do you?” the boy whispers back, his voice a ragged hiss into the night air.

Nathan shrugs.

His stomach wobbles.

Gage doesn’t speak again.

Andrew and Michael keep talking about Bigfoot and other monsters in the world while the rest of the boys start to wind down. They are tired now. The deep kind of tired that comes from swimming and hiking all day long. Not even the sugar from the s’mores can stop the yawns that start to rise from their mouths.

“Alright,” Scout Master Jeremy says as he grabs the bucket of water beside the fire. “It’s time for bed, Troop 557.”

The boys don’t protest.

They rise to their feet, yawning and stretching like cats as the bucket of water is tossed over the flames. Nathan blinks his eyes as the embers flicker and sputter, the only remaining light the slow glow of the dying fire and the moon overhead. He turns to the boy next to him, but he is not stretching.

He is not yawning.

He is just smiling at Nathan, his lips curved upwards at the corners. Nathan stares at him for a moment, watching as the moonlight cascades over the boy’s fine cheekbones and glimmers in the odd golden hue of his eyes.

“You all better sleep tonight,” Scout Master Jeremy says, once the darkness has crept in. “No nightmares about bird monsters, okay?”

Nathan rolls his eyes and the boy beside him smiles even more, the tops of his white teeth poking out from between his lips. They almost look a bit pointy in this dim light.

They look a bit sharp.

Nathan shakes his head at himself. They're just regular teeth. He's too tired and the strange story Gage shared about bird people has rattled him a little bit.

Not that he'll admit that out loud.

He doesn't want to get called a baby by the other boys.

"You scared?" he asks, turning to the boy next to him.

"No," the boy hisses back. "Are you?"

His stomach wobbles, but he doesn't admit this. Instead, he thinks of other things. Worse things than bird people that fill his head with pictures that make goosebumps ripple down his arms.

"No. I know scarier things," he finally says, because that is the truth. Nathan knows about people who kidnap little kids. He knows about ghosts that haunt old mansions and demons that steal souls. Gage's bird monsters are creepy, but Nathan is sure he knows scarier things than that.

He reminds himself of this as his stomach swoops again.

"Roll call," Scout Master Jeremy calls out as the boys line up to leave the campfire area behind for the night.

One by one, the boys call their numbers out for his approval.

One by one, Nathan tries to think of the names attached to each of the boys but he's tired now. Too tired to remember who goes with each number. He will say his number when it is his turn, but everything else is hazy inside his sleepy mind as the group completes their roll call.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

Nine.

Nine boys all present and accounted for.

Exactly as there always has been.

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Chapter One

Nathan

This is where it happened.

I take a deep breath as I pull my truck over to the shoulder of the road and put it in park. Out of my cracked windshield, I stare at the battered guardrail covered in yellow caution tape, my heart racing in my chest.

I shouldn't be here.

This wasn't the plan.

It's pretty fucking morbid that this is the first place I was drawn to when I reached the outskirts of my hometown, but here I am anyway. I'll continue on to Coopman's Gap and the family farm nearby eventually. I just need to be here now by this road tucked into the copse of thick trees for some reason I can't really put into words. I take a deep, shaky breath as I reach for the door handle fully knowing that me being here at this bend in the road is fucking bizarre at best.

I'm not going to understand any more than I've already been told by being here.

There's nothing I'm going to learn by getting out of my truck to stand in the place my parents died only a handful of nights ago.

I get out of the truck anyway, drawn to the deep scrapes in the concrete at the foot of the guardrail. My heart bashes around in my chest like a bird in a cage as I move towards it, hand outstretched like by touching the metal I can somehow grasp their deaths in my hand and undo them. It's cool against my fingertips as I make contact, jagged and rough where the metal has crumpled from the impact of their car against it. Black smears of paint

linger in the crevices and I can’t stop myself from touching them. From tracing them into the grooves in the metal as I try to understand what happened and fail.

It makes no sense.

My father was a safe driver. He never sped a day in his life. Slow and steady was his way. My mother was a careful person who raised me to be the same and I can’t imagine my dad would speed with her in the vehicle. He knows better than that.

No.

Knew better.

He knew better than that.

When I got the phone call letting me know about the accident, I’d assumed they’d been struck and killed by someone else. Hearing that the prevailing theory of the accident is that a tire blew out and the car had tumbled ass over end until it smashed into the metal guardrail stunned me into silence. They’d landed somehow on the roof of the car, another fact that feels off though I can’t explain why. The officer who’d called me had said that for that to happen, a high rate of speed was assumed. Staring at the leftovers of the wreckage now makes me think a little less ‘high rate of speed’ and a little more Formula One racing.

“How fucking fast were you going, old man?” I mumble to myself, as I turn to stare at the gashes in the concrete that mark their trajectory.

I scrutinize that part of their final drive, following the scrapes in the concrete before turning around again to face the guardrail and it hits me that I’m quite close to the old Boy Scout Camp I used to attend during the summer months when I was a child. It’s not been in use since long after I’d outgrown being a Scout, but those were some of the best summers of my life. Being out in the trees felt like being in a different world, even if I always knew in the back of my mind that the camp was really close to my home on the farm.

Close enough, yet far enough away from my home that again I find myself questioning things about the car accident that took my parents lives.

There’s nothing out here, save for the trees and the old Boy Scout Camp. There is the campground nestled in the woods and this is the backroad that leads to it, but I doubt my parents would be going camping in the middle of fall when the air is starting to chill.

What the hell were they doing out here?

Silence surrounds me, no answer is provided to this new question. Not that I expected one, but the sheer lack of sound is starting to get to me the more I stand here. The trees behind the guardrail are eerily still in the early morning air. There isn’t a breeze, or even any wildlife sounds from within the woods to break up the heavy unease that settles into me as I stare at the spot my parents died.

I stand there in the bend of the road for far longer than I really should, telling myself the whole time I should leave to do the things that matter right now. Reminding myself that I am only here to finalize their affairs, plan for their funeral and start the process of handling the farm they own.

Owned.

It's hard getting used to the past tense, but if I'm being honest my parents have been in the past tense of my life for the last ten years. Maybe that's why I've been drawn here instead of heading to the places they existed long after I'd been sent away.

In this space they are as dead to me as I have been to them since I was fifteen years old.

As I turn away from the crash site and face my truck, a cool breeze kicks through the trees, quivering and shaking the yellowing leaves on the branches overhead. A few of them fall as I walk beside the path left behind in the concrete by the accident, sunlight shimmering through.

And then something catches my attention.

I stop where I am as a tiny glint of something within the long scrape of concrete glitters in the sunlight. Another gust of chilly wind swoops through and the sunlight catches it again, sending another glimmer of light reverberating off of whatever it is.

Probably just a shiny rock, but still. I want to know.

I step closer and crouch, running my hand over the rocky, jagged edges of the concrete scrape. I brush over loose stones and chunks of pavement, but when the sunlight catches it again, I spot it. Grabbing it quickly so it can’t hide again in the dull concrete, I pull it out of the crevice.

“What the hell?” I murmur as I rise to my feet, turning the object over in my hand. It’s small and thin, shaped a bit like a tube with one flat, blunt end and one pointed end that looks dangerously sharp. I get the feeling that if I poke at it, it will dig into my skin like a needle and make me bleed. It’s almost a porcupine quill, or it would be if it didn’t appear to be made of pure gold.

Or at least coated in gold.

It's fairly light between my fingertips and I have to think that if it were solid gold it would weigh a bit more. As I turn it over in my hand, I can hardly tell it's there.

I've never seen anything like it in my life.

I debate taking it to the police for all of five seconds before realizing that if they didn't pick it up when they came to investigate the crash, they likely won't give a shit about it now. Not saying the police around these parts are lazy, but they have been known to accept a simple answer for a complicated question and leave it at that. I've been away for a while, but I can't imagine much has changed in Coopman's Gap.

Not much ever changes in Coopman's Gap.

I put the quill into my back pocket so I can take a better look at it when I get to my destination and get settled in for the next few days. Heading for my truck though, I rethink that plan before I hop up onto the driver's seat. It does have that sharpened end, after all. The last thing I need is to be stabbed in the ass by it while I'm driving and lose control of the truck. The world has already lost two Conways to a car accident, they don't need to lose a third because of sheer carelessness, that's for sure. I pull the quill out of my pocket and tuck it into the center console, pointy end down, before firing up the engine and heading towards the family farm my parents no longer live at.



The drive from the trees to the farm takes far less time than I remember it ever taking before, and before I'm probably even ready for it, the forest around me recedes into a backdrop for the clear cut farmland. Tiny treed sections dot the landscape marking the households that own and operate the land I'm passing by until I finally come to the turn into Conway Farms. I travel slowly down the familiar driveway, scanning the fields around me. The old equipment barn sits nestled against the woods that border the edge of the property and I can see all the machines lined up along the outside, like harvest had just finished and they are ready for repair. I'll have to take a good look at them to see what's needed before I can sell them all and that

is what’s on my mind as I head for the house that I know lies at the end of this short gravel road.

And then it’s in front of me.

My childhood home.

The white painted front has been updated to include rock and stone that covers much of the exterior save for the large covered front porch that extends from one edge of the house to the other. That porch was added when I was a kid, my dad removing the plain steps that were once there to add a place for my mom to sit outside on one of her comfy chairs and read her books while he was out in the field and I was at school.

She loved that porch more than anything.

I remember getting off the bus back at the mouth of the driveway and running across the gravel to find her here, waiting for me to share stories of my day at school. During my ten years away, my memories of being here have become somewhat lost in the recesses of my mind, but that I remember vividly.

The chairs on the porch should be empty, but as I pull my truck in front of the attached double garage, I realize there’s someone there. My heart races in my chest as I put the truck into park and turn off the engine and I watch the person on the porch carefully, trying to figure out who it could be. A well wisher, perhaps, coming to drop off baked goods or a casserole. That’s the way of things here. Someone dies and everyone else lines up with food to get them through the loss as best as they can.

It doesn’t quite match up though, because nobody knows I’m here.

Or, nobody should know I’m here.

Sure, the police officer I talked with on the phone could have said I was coming home to deal with everything my parents left behind and arrange their funeral, but someone being here at the exact time I arrive is odd. As I climb out of my truck and make my way to the porch, the person stands up and I get a good look at them as they walk to the top of the steps.

His hair is pitch black and tousled haphazardly across the top of his head like he’s been standing in the wind, but it doesn’t look messy. Quite the opposite actually. It looks to me like it’s purposefully done. He wears a pair of black tailored jeans and a black button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, black sneakers on his feet with the white toe caps providing the only pop of something different.

Maybe he’s from the funeral home, because he sure as shit doesn’t look like he belongs here on the farm.

As I walk closer, I am struck by the fine lines of his face. His cheekbones carve out angles that give me the impression of something sharp, yet as I look at his slender frame I am faced with something delicate.

Something handsome and captivating.

I can’t quite manage to peel my eyes away from him.

“Hello Nathan,” he drawls as I come to stand at the bottom of the stairs, tilting my head up to get an even better look at his face up close, noting the curve of his jawbone and his plump lips.

He is strangely beautiful, but there is more to it than just that.

I’m struck with a sense that I know him, somehow.

That he’s familiar to me, though I can’t say why or how.

“Hi?” I reply, voice gravelly from too much coffee and not enough sleep.

“I’ve been waiting for you to arrive. It’s been too long.”

Again, I am struck with a pang of knowing. A hint from somewhere inside me that says this person is not a stranger though I can’t quite place his face in my memories. My stomach churns as he smiles, showing off a row of perfect white teeth. In response to his statement, I just nod and his smile widens the tiniest bit.

I know those teeth.

“Is that all you brought?” he asks, looking at my empty hands. “Just yourself?”

“No,” I say, finally finding something to mumble. “I got a bag.”

I turn and walk back to my truck, my entire brain firing off an odd angles as I try to place this familiar yet unfamiliar person into the story of my life somewhere. I make quick work of grabbing my duffel bag from the passenger seat and take a second to snatch the golden quill from the cup holder before heading back to the stairs to face this odd person at my house once more. He smiles at me again, showing me those same teeth and I get caught staring at them for a second before I am drawn again to admire the angles of his face. His honey golden eyes are strange, beautiful in contrast to his pale skin and the deep warmth of his black hair. I note that his ears have tiny rubber gauges in each lobe but my attention quickly snaps back down to his blunt, white teeth once more.

I think they should be sharp.

I think that is a weird thing to think.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“Rook,” he says, and my brain tells me that yes. He is Rook.

He has always been Rook.

I don’t know how I know that.

“I’m… sorry?”

“It’s okay,” he replies, with a smile. “It has been a while, Nathan.”

It has.

Ten years.

Did I know him before I was sent away?

He could be the son of one of the farmhands we had working here back then. Hank is the only one I can remember from back then.

I think he could be Hank’s kid.

I know that is wrong.

My mind is reeling as he steps away from the top of the stairs and heads for the door of the house. I stay stuck at the bottom of the stairs, clutching my bag and the quill tight in my hands, uncertain about moving, or thinking, or anything else at this point.

“Are you coming in?” Rook asks, turning around to find that I haven’t moved an inch.

“In?”

"It is your home, is it not?" he asks, his lips working into an amused smile.

"Yeah," I blurt, taking my first step into the porch. "It's my home."

"Our home, dear Nathan. I've gotten your room ready for you." He turns away from me and steps towards the door, reaching out a slender hand to grasp the knob and give it a turn.

I scamper up behind him, mumbling like some kind of cat caught my tongue. "Right. Uh... Yeah. Thank... Uh... Thank you."

Rook turns and gives me a small smile again over his shoulder as I follow him into the house.

My house.

His house?

Yes, my brain whispers as the familiar movement of his steps sink into my memories. This is Rook's house too.

I know this, somehow, deep in the marrow of my bones. This is our house. He belongs here as much as I do, I think. As I follow him into the house, the walls echo with hazy memories coated in gauzy fluff.

I think I remember him.
I don't remember him at all.

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Chapter Two

Nathan

Rook walks into the house like he's comfortable being here and I follow, uncertainty clouding my every move. Shuffling like a nervous toddler, I move to stand in the narrow entry way, scanning the house like it's the first time I've seen the place even though I was raised here.

Rook catches my eye and offers a small smile. "Nothing has changed in years."

I nod because I can tell that not much is different from when I was last welcome to be here. The scent of my mom's favorite cinnamon wax melt filters through the air still and for a moment I believe she's going to come around the corner from the kitchen on the left to greet me.

But she won't be.

Nor will my dad's footsteps come clambering up the garage steps beside the entryway, his thick work boots no longer needed for feet that won't walk again.

The gravity of it rattles me a bit and I blink fast to get rid of the tears that spring to my eyes. I haven't cried about their deaths once since the police officer called me and I sure as shit ain't gonna start doing it now in the presence of someone that fills me with so much uncertainty.

I'll have a shower and maybe cry later or something if I need to.

Instead of blubbering my sudden grief out in the fairly quiet house, I busy myself with tucking the quill in my hand away into a pocket on the duffel bag and pulling off my boots in the entryway. I drop them onto the boot rack, then drop my duffel bag to the floor too so I can take advantage of the

creeping need inside me demanding I stretch my body out. Now that I'm not traveling, the weight of everything from the day is dragging hard on me, muscles aching and pulling beneath my skin as I extend my hands towards the roof. I can feel Rook's eyes on me as I lower my arms.

His eyes snap to mine and he cocks his head a bit to the side like he has a question but he doesn't speak. I don't speak either and we have a strange little silent stand off in the main entryway before I stoop to grab my duffel bag again.

"You probably need some rest," Rook says, eyeing my bag before turning his odd eyes up to my face again.

"Nah, I just gotta ditch my stuff and have a shower. I should get to the funeral home before they close so I can get shit started and all." He tilts his head to the side once more and looks at me like I've just said something incredibly weird. "What?"

"I've done everything. The funeral is planned. The paperwork has been signed and everything has been paid for."

"How?" I blurt. It's my turn to be confused. As next of kin, I was told it's my job to make the final arrangements and handle everything.

"Mom and Dad were very clear in their wishes. They had a will drawn up ages ago to make us equal owners of everything that remains now, along with a step by step instruction of what they wanted for their funerals. Well, in this case, their funeral I suppose. Singular. I did not schedule them separately. It seemed… superfluous."

Mom and Dad.

Mom.

Dad.

I swallow hard as I eye Rook carefully, wondering at the names he's chosen to call my parents. I allow a pause for me to collect myself before I open my mouth and ask. "Mom and Dad?"

"Yes," he says, with a small smile. "Your parents by blood. My parents by choice. You do recall when they took me in when I was just a baby, yes?"

No.

No, I don't.

Yet… somewhere inside me, I do.

Somewhere inside my mind, that rings like the truth but it's hazy and vague when I try to grab the memory of it. I can't quite find it inside me. I

open my mouth to offer an answer, but nothing comes out so I just close it again. Rook continues looking at me with his odd eyes, nodding a couple times like he wants my agreement that we shared parents at some point.

Which we might have.

Which we probably did.

I don't know what the fuck is going on here and the more I think on things, the more jumbled up inside my head everything gets.

"It's been a long day," Rook murmurs, his tone soothing and soft.

His words ripple through me like a balm and I take a deep, peaceful breath to calm myself down. He's not wrong. "Yeah. It's been a real long day. Maybe I should get some sleep."

"Maybe you should," he agrees. "When you're done taking a nap, we can chat about what the funeral details are. If I've done anything you believe they'll hate, you can let me know and I promise changes can be made."

"Sure." But why would I make any changes? Rook clearly knows who my parents have been these last ten years, who am I to come in and demand changes based on what I once knew of them? The strange sense that I'm an outsider in this equation rattles through me and I have to take another deep breath to settle myself. Rook watches my face carefully like he's scrutinizing every move I make and it's only adding to the unsettled feeling slinking around inside me.

I wish he'd stop staring at me like that.

I don't dare speak that thought out loud though, instead I give him a smile I hope looks friendly enough and head for my room but I don't get too far. I'm halfway to my bedroom door when he calls out to me, stopping me in my tracks.

"I am happy to see you," he comments, his voice echoing off the walls of the quiet hallway.

"Yeah. You too."

Who are you?

Rook smiles and a shiver runs down my spine.



I sleep for what feels like hours, but when I wake up the sun is still shining through the slatted curtains on my old bedroom window. Yawning, I roll

over and look around the room, tucking the blankets up beneath my chin like I used to do when I was just a little boy. My duffel bag is where I left it, sitting on the floor by the desk that still holds some of my old 4H ribbons and baseball trophies. Everything feels familiar, but I am so removed from it all that even after my sleep I feel a bit out of place still.

With another yawn, I crawl out of the bed and head for my bag to grab some toiletries. Maybe a shower will help me unravel the rest of the unease lingering inside me so I can move forward with learning what Rook has planned out for my parents' funeral.

Our parents, I mean.

I frown as I consider that information because I can’t find a place for it inside my own memories even though I know it should be there. Rook should be there, but when I search for him, he isn’t.

The quill in my bag is there, however, and I reach into the pocket where I placed it, pulling it out to take a better look now that I’m away from the scene of a horrific accident. I don’t find anything new, but the weight of it in my hand is deceiving and I think again that it has to be hollowed out inside. As I turn it over in my hands, I look for markings of some kind to tell me what it is, or maybe where it came from but I find no answers in the gleaming, smooth golden surface.

“What’s that?” a voice asks from the doorway and I startle so much that I almost drop it to the carpet, but instead grab onto it with the palm of my hand on the wrong end.

“Fuck!” I cry out as the quill slides into my skin. Without thinking, I yank it free from my flesh with my other hand, leaving a throbbing ache behind along with a bit of blood that bubbles to the surface of my skin.

“What do you have there?” Rook asks, taking a step towards me. His eyes are trained on the quill and his lips are screwed into a deep, pouty frown.

“Just something I found,” I say, playing it off like it’s nothing. “Accidentally stabbed myself with it when you scared me.”

Anybody would apologize for inadvertently hurting someone else, but Rook’s eyes are still staring at the golden porcupine quill in my hand. I hold it up carefully for him to see it and he takes a small step towards me.

“Where did you find this?” he asks, reaching for it.

I debate not letting him take it because it’s slicked with my blood and that’s gross, but instead I give it over to him. He turns it over and over in his

hand, scanning it like he's searching for something, much like I did before he startled me.

"There are no marks on it or anything," I offer, as his attention strays to my face.

"Where did you get this?" he asks again, his voice hissing out of him with a slightly dangerous edge to it.

"Just found it on the road on the way here. Thought it was cool. I've never seen anything like it. Have you?"

"No. Never." He glances at it once more, his brow furrowing slightly, before extending it to me. "You hurt yourself?"

I take the bloodied quill from his grasp and place it on the dresser beside the door. "Yeah, you scared the shit outta me dude. I didn't hear you come in."

Rook laughs softly. "Apologies. I can be very quiet, even when I don't mean to be."

Well, that is not reassuring at all. I swallow hard and focus instead on the wound in my hand because I don't quite know how to respond to that.

"Come," he says, heading for the open bedroom door. "I'll show you where the first aid kit is kept. Unless you remember?"

There's a bit of humor in his tone, like he's somehow figured out that my memory is failing me. As with everything about Rook so far, it's oddly familiar to me though the haze that coats my memories remains.

"I remember. Bathroom cupboard behind the sink?" I ask, with a small smile.

He nods, offering a smile to me in return but it doesn't quite extend to his eyes. I catch a quick moment where he falters though, his eyes latching onto the quill where it rests on the top of the dresser and a frown creasing his brow again. He hesitates for a split second before walking out of the bedroom, clearly meaning for me to follow him. I do trail after him, but not before pausing to open the dresser and slide the quill into the top drawer.

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Chapter Three

Nathan

"Where have you been?" Rook asks.

We're sitting in the kitchen surrounded by my mom's collection of rooster knickknacks eating a lasagna that she likely prepared with her own hands. I didn't cry in the shower earlier, but this lasagna could just push me closer to tearing up.

Everything is too much.

The kitchen.

The meal Rook heated up for us to share.

The roosters on the shelf above the pantry.

It's too much and too big for me to handle all at once.

Only remembering that I was ejected from this place when I was still practically a kid helps me keep from breaking down over the meal on the table in front of me.

"Working," I reply, as I stab a noodle with my fork and lift it to my mouth. While I chew, Rook gives me an incredulous look, rolling his golden eyes at my lack of a real answer.

"Working where? Where did you go when you graduated?"

It's almost funny how blunt he's asked that question. Usually when the topic of my teenage years comes up, people get awfully shy about asking things. Even my boss who hired me right out of the residential program I was placed into was calculated and careful when it came to asking any sort of question about my past.

"I got hired on as a farmhand," I offer.

“Makes sense.”

“Yeah.”

Silence creeps between us again and I continue eating my food while Rook turns his attention back to his plate. He’s hardly eaten any of his share and his lasagna piece was far smaller than mine to begin with. I shovel forkfuls of cheese, meat and noodles into my mouth as he picks at his, carefully taking the tiniest little nibbles every time he raises his fork to his mouth.

“What was it like?” he asks, placing his fork down beside his plate and looking at me over the table. I stare at him, wondering how I can even possibly explain the things I experienced when I was removed from my house with no concept of why it was happening. Even now I couldn’t clearly say why I was carted off to what I quickly realized was a prison disguised as a caring home for troubled youth.

I don’t remember ever actually being a troubled youth.

“I learned a lot.” Like how to play nice when what I really wanted to do was punch someone right in the face. How to not get caught out of bed past curfew and how to hide in the few spaces on the grounds that the cameras couldn’t entirely peer into.

I learned how to exist and I learned how to survive.

I also learned that my parents were full of shit.

My two years at the Allworth Academy were marked by monthly phone calls with my mother in which she would ask polite questions and I would offer equally polite answers. Neither of my parents came to actually visit me during my time there, seemingly content with whatever information they were being given about my progress from the doctors, therapists and educators in charge of the place. When I hit seventeen and had the high school credits in hand to officially leave the program behind, Mom and Dad offered to attend my graduation but by that point the damage had already been done. Instead of pretending we were going to become one big, happy family again, I took the $500 cash they sent me and connected with Hopper through the job board in the common area on campus. I moved myself out to the small cabin behind the horse barn at his farm and until I got the call pulling me back here, I hadn’t really thought much about my parents.

I didn’t need them then.

I don’t need their memory now kicking up things that are better left untouched. Rook opens his mouth like he means to speak again and I turn

away from him, picking up my fork and scooping the last of my lasagna into my mouth. My clear signal that I'm done talking doesn't seem to resonate with him though because he speaks anyway.

"I am sorry that happened to you."

"I'm going to go for a walk," I comment, rising from the kitchen table and grabbing my empty plate. "I need to figure out what's good around here so we can get ready to deal with this damn farm and everything else."

"What do you mean?" Rook asks, training his eyes on mine.

"The estate. The farm. The… stuff," I say, gesturing around me at my mother's collection of rooster related items. "We gotta do something with it. Sell it or whatever. I'm sure we can get top dollar for this land, but I gotta take a look to be sure the old man took care of it the way he should have."

"I think you're a bit mistaken. This farm will not be sold."

"Why the hell not?"

"Dear Nathan," Rook says, with a small smile that curls his lips at the edges. "You don't really want to sell this farm, do you? Sell the legacy your father left behind for us to share?"

My heart squeezes in my chest as his careful tone filters through my ears. All I wanted when I was little was to be a farmer like my dad but then things changed and now… I don't know anymore. "I'm only here until the funeral is done and everything is settled with the estate. Even if we don't sell the place, you're on your own. I'll sign over my half or whatever needs to happen. I'm not gonna stay here and run the farm with you."

"We'll see about that," he comments as I head for the sink.

"What do you mean?"

He pauses for a moment like he's thinking before finally saying, "I think you'll find it hard to leave, Nathan, now that you are back home where you should be once again."

I place my plate in the sink as his words rattle through me, sending a small chill rippling down my spine. When I face him again, he is picking at the food on his plate, seemingly unaware that what he just said is beyond creepy.

I head for my bedroom and grab a hoodie from my duffel bag to combat some of the fall chill out there in the air. Throwing it on, I grab my wallet and my keys just in case I need them, before heading for the front door of the house where Rook is waiting for me. He's holding something in his

hands that nearly blends into the black clothing he wears but as he raises it up so I can see it, my heart knocks in my chest uncomfortably.

It’s a hat.

My dad’s black Stetson.

His most prized possession.

“For you,” Rook says, as I carefully take the hat from his hands. “Dad was very specific in the will that it belongs to you. I thought you might wish to wear it to the funeral.”

Tears prickle at the edges of my eyes and before I can ever stop them, they start silently trickling down my face as I stare at the black cowboy hat in my hands. I’ve never held it before and it feels heavier than I ever imagined it could be now that it's in my hands. I feel a bit off kilter as I break down in actual tears, sobs choking at the back of my throat, the keen awareness that Rook is watching me cry lingering in the back of my mind. I force myself to take a deep breath, holding tight to the hat with one hand while I use the other to wipe my tears away but I’m leaking like a sieve and I can’t quite get it to stop.

Rook steps forward and carefully takes the hat from my hand, placing it on a hook by the front door before wrapping his arms around my waist. I startle at the sudden contact, going as still as a stone in his arms while he rests his head against my shoulder.

He smells like a cold winter morning.

Like lemon and amber.

He smells like home.

I resist the urge to bury my nose in his hair as he squeezes me so tight in his arms I’m not sure how I’m still breathing, and I somehow know this sensation. My tears dry up as I try to process this strange notion that I’ve hugged him before. Been held by these arms before exactly like this.

Which makes no fucking sense because I can’t remember it.

My stomach wobbles as he leans into me, pressing his body against mine like he can’t get close enough. I’m sure he’d crawl into my skin with me if that was possible and it unnerves me to my core.

“Rook,” I murmur, tapping his shoulder gently. “I’m alright.”

He hesitates before letting me go, peeling off of my body slowly. Finally, I am free of his grasp and I inhale a deep breath, already missing the smell of his skin against mine. I clearly need some space away from him to collect myself.

“Sorry,” I say, wiping at the sticky tear tracks that linger on my skin. “I don’t know what that all was. Hit me in a weird place, I guess. Grief and all that. You know?”

“It is not easy losing a parent. I too have shed a few tears since learning of the accident,” Rook says, as he takes another small step back from me.

Has he though? I search for truth in what he’s saying but I’m left without any clue. He clearly knows this house well enough to know where my dad’s prized hat is usually kept, but everything just feels so… strange.

“When did you move in again?” I ask, knowing that I’m giving away a clue that says I don’t remember him at all.

“When I was just little,” Rook replies with a gentle smile. “My own parents gave me up and I was so happy to find a family like this one to make my own.”

Again I am left with the sense that he is telling the truth.

Again I am left with the sense that I don’t know if I can trust his word.

“I’m gonna go take a walk,” I say, placing the hat on the hook by the door and turning away from Rook. The sun is starting to go down, but I need some fresh air. I need to be alone for a moment to breathe away from all of these strange thoughts that tumble through my mind when I’m around him.

“Be careful,” he whispers, as I step out of the house and into the cool air outside.

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Chapter Four

Nathan

Lightning flickers in the bedroom window, illuminating the darkness around me in brief flashes. The storm crept in a few minutes ago and while I can usually sleep through anything shy of a herd of buffalo roaming my bedroom, tonight I can't find rest. The low rumble of thunder on the horizon followed by another flash of lightning seems to put an exclamation point on the lack of sleep I'm getting tonight and I sigh, rolling over in bed to face the window.

If I'm going to be awake, I might as well watch the show nature is providing.

Around me the house itself is quiet. By the time I had gotten back from my walk earlier, Rook had disappeared but the soft sound of music filtering down the hallway told me he'd headed into his bedroom. Everything went silent a few hours ago and since then it's just been me laying in my bedroom trying to find sleep I can't quite seem to catch. That nap earlier had felt amazing, but I'm likely paying for it now. Like jet lag, I probably should have pushed myself to stay awake.

Lightning flashes through the window again, lighting up the darkened corners of my bedroom once more. This time though, the rumble of thunder is accompanied by a small creaking sound behind me that draws goosebumps to my skin and sends alarm bells ringing in my head. It happens again, the squeak of old wooden floorboards like someone is stepping carefully on the hardwood and I go stock still, trying my hardest to stay calm and listen.

That sound doesn’t belong.

I’m not alone in this room.

I become a statue in my bed as the house makes noise around me in the storm, trying to see if I can catch the one sound that feels out of place again, but I have no luck. No more noise meets my ears other than another rumble of thunder, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen before.

Doesn’t mean it did either. I could be making it all up in my own damn head.

That’s probably what’s happening here. I’m tired and on edge from the strangeness of the day. It’s probably just the house settling and I’m freaking myself out for no good reason. I roll over in my bed to take a look anyway, needing confirmation that my imagination is running wild. My heart races in my chest as I stare into the darkness by the bedroom door opposite the window.

There’s nothing there.

Another creak meets my ears though and my pulse kicks up a notch as the sense that I’m being watched creeps along my spine. I can’t see anything in this room that shouldn’t be here, but the next flash of lightning illuminates what looks like two glowing orbs floating in the corner.

Yellow.

Golden yellow.

Eyes.

There’s someone there and they’re staring at me with odd, glowing eyes.

Rook.

My brain puts the pieces together and I scramble for the lamp on the bedside table, clicking it on to find… nothing. There’s nobody in the corner of my bedroom. Rook isn’t standing there watching me from the shadows. I scan the room again just to be sure I’m alone and confirm that I am. Unless whatever was watching me scrambled beneath the bed in the split second it took for me to turn on the light, my mind is fucking with me.

I check beneath the bed anyway, and come up with nothing.

“Fucking hell,” I mumble, scrubbing a hand down my tired face as I settle back onto my mattress.

Lightning flashes as rain starts to spatter against the glass window behind me and I again get a creeping feeling that I’m being watched somehow. The hairs on my arms stand on end and I pull myself up from the mattress because I’m not staying in this room any longer than I have to. My mind

might be messing with me, but I’m gonna just let it and cave to its demands to get the hell out of this room.

The living room couch and the TV sound like a much better option.

I grab my pillow and head for the closed door of my bedroom, reaching to grab the doorknob but my eyes catch on something I hadn’t noticed before.

There are tiny holes punched into the edge of the wooden door, just at eye level. Four of them, like something square was once screwed into the surface. I scan the door frame looking for more as the lightning outside flickers through the room behind me. I find a number of perfect little screw holes in the wood there as well. I reach up and touch them to confirm what I’m seeing, tracing the pattern of them with my fingertips as I realize the only explanation is a locking mechanism of some kind.

What else would be screwed into a door and its frame really?

At some point, my bedroom door had a lock on it and I quickly add this knowledge to the list of shit that I should be able to find in my memories, yet can’t. It could have been added after I was gone, but as I’m thinking about it my brain is urging me to remember something.

To recall a piece of hazy memory and pull it from the depths of wherever it’s been hidden inside my mind.

I close my eyes and try to find it but it feels like slogging through quicksand in my head. I push and pull at what I remember from my life before I was sent away until something finally sparks deep inside me.

“I did it,” I whisper, staring at the screw holes.

I put the lock on my door on purpose. I went to the hardware store in Coopman’s Gap and bought it myself with money I’d earned doing… something. That piece doesn’t matter, but I know with certainty that I installed this lock not to keep myself in, but to protect me when I was at my most vulnerable.

To keep something out.

To keep something away from me.

Rook.

But why?



The morning brings with it the end of the storm but no relief from the unease that lives inside me now. I watch from my spot at the kitchen table as Rook moves around the kitchen, making coffee and toast for breakfast. He asked if I wanted some, but I declined. I did accept a cup of black coffee though and every sip I take churns my stomach just a little bit.

The funeral is tomorrow and then I will leave.

I know I've only been home for less than a day, but it's been one hell of a day and I won't be staying any longer than I actually have to. One final goodbye to my parents, then I'll pack my shit and go. I texted Hopper this morning letting him know I'll be back sooner than I anticipated and though he replied that he doesn't want to see my face for a few weeks, heading back seems safer than staying around whatever is happening in this creepy fucking house.

I can't shake the tiny fragment of memory that came to me in the early morning hours.

I'm still running it through my mind as Rook joins me at the table, placing his coffee cup and a plate with toast and jam on it in front of him. I'm stunned by the amount of strawberry coating each slice and even a bit more surprised when he picks up one of the pieces and takes a huge bite of it. It's devoured in a few seconds flat and he picks up the next piece immediately after, polishing it off in record time. He definitely didn't eat his lasagna like this.

"Funeral tomorrow," he says, licking strawberry jam off his fingers.

"Yep."

"Do you know what you're wearing?"

"Yep."

Rook laughs softly, shaking his head. "Still not a morning person, I see. How did you sleep?"

"Were you in my room last night?" I ask, instead of answering his question.

His eyebrows raise slightly like he's surprised and I can anticipate his response before it even comes. "No, why?"

"I thought… my mind must have been playing tricks on me. The storm and all. I could have sworn someone was in my room and you're the only one in this house other than me so…"

"I assure you, Nathan," Rook says, his tone soothing and soft, "I was not in your room last night. I fell asleep before the storm even rolled through. I

didn’t even know it had rained until I woke up this morning and cracked my bedroom window open. I am a very deep sleeper.”

I search his words for a hint of a lie, but I can’t quite sniff one out of what he’s said. I have another burning question inside my head though and I figure it’s worth asking now. “Why did I put a lock on my door?”

Again, Rook looks surprised. “You remember doing that?”

“Yeah, I do, but I can’t remember why I did it.” Being able to have a memory from back then feels like a miracle that could be even better if only I had some context.

Rook pauses, looking down at his plate for a few seconds before turning his eyes back to mine. “You were… unwell.”

“Unwell.”

“Yes,” he says, adding a nod. “You never explained it to anyone and we were all really worried about you. Mom and Dad thought you were doing drugs in there.”

I have never done drugs in my life.

That’s not the reason.

“When you left, they removed it. I think they hoped you’d come back and not need it anymore, but you never did come back.”

“Until now,” I comment, taking a sip of coffee.

“Until now,” Rook agrees, with another nod. “You don’t have any recollection of why you did it?”

“No,” All I have is his name on my tongue when I think of locking myself in my room and I’m not about to admit that piece out loud to him.

“Ah,” Rook says, his lips curling into a small toothy smile. “That’s too bad. Perhaps someday you will remember.”

He goes back to eating his toast, but I get the sense that he doesn’t think it’s bad at all that I can’t remember. In fact, the grin on his lips says the exact opposite and that alone sends another ripple of unease through me.

He’s freaky, this Rook.

“I’m gonna head into town,” I say, rising from my seat and grabbing my mug of coffee. I down it in a few gulps, the almost too hot liquid crashing into my stomach where it bubbles uncomfortably. Rook looks up at me almost like he expects an invitation to join me, but I don’t offer it. Aside from the fact that I’m ill at ease around him, I’ve grown accustomed to my own time and my own space. Working for Hopper is like working for a

ghost, he’s hardly ever around and I spend much of my time either in the fields working or hanging out in the barn with the animals.

“Could you stop in at the florist and confirm they are sending the arrangements as ordered tomorrow?” Rook asks, still working on his stack of jam and bread.

“Yeah.” He wasn’t wrong when he said everything was handled. We went through the details of the funeral, but my mom had everything spelled out down to the exact number of chrysanthemums she wanted within each flower arrangement and which version of Leonard Cohen’s Hallelujah she wanted played.

Jeff Buckley’s, for the record.

The least I can do is check on some flowers while I’m out and about, avoiding the strange feelings in this house.

Rook smiles at me as he finishes chewing a bite of toast and my stomach nearly drops out of my body as an image of his bloodied mouth flashes through my mind. I take a small half step back as the smile turns to a wicked, toothy grin and red liquid trickles from the corner of his lips. My heart pounds so hard in my ribcage I can hear it in my ears as his teeth sharpen into points. Blood seeps out from between them, coating his chin and dropping in thick rivulets onto the table in front of him as I watch in silent terror.

Then it gets worse.

Rook lunges at me over the table, sending his plate and his mug crashing to the floor. His hands, now clawed and as dark as the night sky, reach for me and I shove myself backwards away from him so fast I crash into the edge of the doorway behind me. I cry out, nearly crumbling down to the carpet as Rook calls my name. His voice echoes through my mind, the world tilting around me as I close my eyes and fight to keep my balance.

When I open my eyes again, Rook is standing up, but he is still on his side of the table.

His plate and mug rest in front of him, the last of his breakfast still waiting to be eaten.

“Are you okay?” he asks, as my stomach pitches and rolls.

His teeth are normal. Blunt. Human.

There is no blood on the table.

There’s no blood trickling down his face.

“Nathan?” he prompts, the fear and confusion in his eyes deepening at my lack of response to his question.

I don’t know.

I don’t know if I’m okay.

I don’t know what that was.

“Yeah,” I lie. “I’m fine.”

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Chapter Five

Rook

He is home.

His scent fills the house with warmth and spice.

His blood calls to me, beckons me to follow wherever he may go.

He is grown much larger now, tall and broad. The years spent working out in the hot summer sun clinging to his frame of defined muscles and curved bones.

He is beautiful.

Eyes the color of the ocean.

Hair the color of wheat.

His return is a gift.

My heart has sung songs since the very minute he appeared on the property and I am alive with the tune that quakes through my bones when he looks at me.

It is a birdsong.

A love song.

One I have not heard echo in my body for ages.

I could weep with the joy of having him back, even though he is in pieces.

He is fractured.

Shattered.

But, he is remembering.

I know he is remembering.

Soon it will all come to him.

As much as I have tried to stop the unraveling of his memories, I cannot find the edges to pull it together tight again.

My truth is known to him in the dark pockets of his mind, and that is the undoing of all of my work. I never stood a chance of keeping my secrets locked up inside his mind. Not really. I can pretend all I'd like, but he knows me.

Bone and feather and quill and claw.

He will remember it all soon enough.

What has been done to him.

What I have done to him.

He will know and all I can do is hope that this knowing doesn't bring his sharpened knife back to my tender throat.

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Chapter Six

Nathan

Double deep.

That’s what it’s called.

Two coffins on top of one another.

How my parents will be buried in this hole in the earth I’m seated beside.

I sit on a shitty metal foldable chair placed at the graveside, Rook to my left and my father’s sister sat beside me. I haven't seen her since I was a child, but she’s the only family member I have left.

Aside from Rook.

Maybe.

Auntie Tara clings to my hand tight as she dabs at her eyes with a tissue that’s mostly just soggy scraps at this point. Every so often, her breath hitches and she hiccups softly, then sighs as new tears slip down her cheeks. I don't remember much about her but I remember my dad saying she's always been a crier. Today her grief is on full display and I’m pretending she's crying for both of us because I can't quite find any tears to shed. Seems like my little meltdown over my dad's old Stetson was the only amount of sadness I had inside me and now that that moment’s passed, I've become as numb as a rock.

Maybe that's actually my form of grief on display. Who knows?

I am wearing the hat today like Rook suggested I should and I’ve not taken it off since the minute it landed on my head earlier this morning. I likely should have removed it for the formal funeral proceedings at the church but I didn't. Being the kid of the dead people in the caskets offers me

a bit of leeway when it comes to being proper and having manners, I figure. Nobody said anything to me about it anyway.

Nobody’s said much of anything to me at all.

Behind me at this quiet graveside service are a few of my parents' closest friends, faces and names I knew once upon a time. None have spoken to me aside from nodding in my direction when I make eye contact, but every single one of them has comforted Rook. He's been yanked into hugs that he’s returned with a polite embrace and been offered words of condolence he accepts with a tender, practiced smile. Even now where he sits beside me, Hank, one of the farmhands that worked the land with my father, has a hand clapped on his shoulder.

Looks like everyone around here thinks very kindly about my so-called brother.

Not that he appears to think about them much in return. I caught Rook scowling at the touch on his shoulder a few moments ago and had to bite back the laugh that threatened to creep out of me. Laughing at my parents’ funeral isn’t something I’ll ever live down, but the look of sheer disgust on his face was priceless.

Jeremy Thornbill, former Scout Master of Troop 557 and current local funeral director, stands at the head of the gaping hole in the ground, chattering on about my mom and dad. So far he's covered the farm, their love of nature and their contributions back to the community. I tuned him out a few moments ago, my brain slightly unable to take him seriously even though he’s an adult now with a real job. He was my scouting leader when I was a kid and when I look at him all I see is Scout Master Jeremy in his khaki uniform with his bright green bandana tied around his neck. I wonder if he sees the number he assigned me for roll call when he looks at me or if after all these years he's finally connected a name to my face.

Am I eight or am I Nathan?

I glance at him then avert my eyes back down to the hole in the ground as Auntie Tara hiccups and sighs beside me. Rook shuffles on his seat, his knee knocking into mine. I move slightly away, but we are packed like sardines on these crappy chairs and for some reason not one of us thought to move them apart before we sat down. His knee hits mine again as Jeremy carries on about family bonds and how much my parents will be missed. I start to grow more and more restless inside with every bump against my

body. He shuffles again, knocking my knee once more, and it takes everything I have in me to not shove him away.

He's too close to me.

I swear I can almost catch the scent of winter wind, lemons and wild grass emanating off his pitch black hair.

Jeremy starts reading some poem my mom picked out for this occasion and I start getting a bit more antsy on my seat. I needed this shit to be done and over with hours ago. I have no idea why we bothered having a huge funeral at the church if we were just going to do all of this talking at the gravesite anyway. With nowhere to put any of my energy, my knee starts shaking, jittering slightly up and down like it's got a mind of its own, rubbing against Rook’s knee. A strange bead of warmth trickles down my throat to tangle itself in my belly, like I’ve just swallowed a mouthful of steaming hot chocolate after being outside on a cold winter day and I’m starting to think maybe I’m having a stroke.

Or a heart attack.

Or both, maybe.

The unsettling warmth settles inside me as the smell of Rook fills my head and I look back to Jeremy, hoping for some indication that he’s nearly done talking so I can stand up and move.

I need to move.

To get away from the intoxicating scent of cool winter beside me.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes for a moment while I exhale, but open them again when I feel something land solidly on my leg. My body stops all of the knee shaking at the contact which is a good thing, I suppose, but what I find confuses me a little bit. Rook’s hand rests on my thigh, his palm facing upwards as if he’s inviting me to take his hand in mine. I glance up into his eyes, startled at how bright they somehow look in this moment, brimming with unshed tears and nearly glowing in their sockets.

I blink.

He blinks.

When my eyes meet his again, they are not quite as bright. Not glowing at all. Tears stream down his cheeks and my heart does some kind of strange swoop it’s never done before as his sadness spills down his face. I’m compelled to touch him, to offer comfort and share the warmth inside me somehow. The urge that grows inside me to have his skin on mine is strange as fuck but without thinking twice, I place my hand in his. He

immediately curls his fingers tight around mine as he looks back to the hole in the ground, tears shimmering on his pale cheeks. His body rises and falls with a heavy, deep breath then he settles into his chair again, still holding me tight in his hand.

Auntie Tara hiccups and sighs.

Rook squeezes my hand.

I stare at the hole in the ground, my palm warming where his skin rests against mine.



“You hungry?” Rook asks, the minute we step into the house. We've just left the small reception we attended back at the church after the burial and traveled home in silence because apparently after a giant funeral and a gravesite service that took forever, we weren’t quite done mourning my parents and needed to eat shitty sandwiches in a cold basement. I almost left earlier, but I drove Rook there and couldn’t ditch out to leave him behind. He apparently does not have a driver’s license.

He does have a lot of opinions on my rusty old truck though, not that I’d asked for his running commentary on how shitty he found the seats and how every clanking noise had him assuming we were ten seconds away from breaking down on the side of the road. He’d offered the keys to my dad’s truck before we’d left the house, but with his hat already on my head, taking his truck felt like too much. My dad loved his trucks and the shiny, nearly brand new Toyota Tundra sitting in the garage is a beauty, but it’s not for me.

Rook says it’s mine, but I don’t want it.

Call it stubborn, but the less I have of this place, the better. When I leave, I mean to leave it all, save for the hat on my head and one of the rooster tchotchkes from the kitchen. I don’t need much to remember the parents I once had and everything else I could take is shit they bought when I wasn’t here to be part of it. I’m already having one hell of a time remembering the things I was here for, I don’t need to cling to moments I wasn’t.

“I’m gonna make some soup,” Rook comments, toeing off his black converse sneakers and heading towards the kitchen.

I kick off my boots and debate following him because I could eat, but now that everything is done with the required duties I want to get on the road back to my real home. I packed my stuff earlier this morning while I was getting dressed for the funeral and it's just a matter of slinking off to my room, grabbing my bag and leaving through the front door of this house.

Never to return again.

I swallow hard as I glance at the kitchen, somehow nervous about the idea of leaving. Rook's words to me about how I won't leave because I'm back home where I should be plays on a loop in my head and I know he's going to be pissed I'm proving him wrong. I head to my bedroom and grab my bag, my heart thudding a bit heavier in my chest like I'm doing something incredibly dangerous. I stand for a few moments in my old bedroom, taking stock of everything I put in my bag earlier and it hits me that I'm forgetting something.

The strange golden quill.

I place my bag down on the carpet again and head to the dresser by the door, sliding open the top drawer. Peering in I find a handful of socks, a few old t-shirts folded and… nothing else. Frowning, I pull the socks out, wondering if it fell down beneath them somehow, but it's still not there.

"It was here," I murmur to myself as I pull everything out of the drawer only to come up empty handed.

It was here.

I put it in the drawer myself.

I know I did.

That means someone took it and that someone is likely sitting in the kitchen making soup. Incensed, I head down the hallway and fly into the kitchen. Rook stands in front of the stove stirring a large pot with a wooden spoon and when I walk in, he turns to look at me.

"Where's the quill?" I ask, the accusation thick in my tone.

Rook stops stirring and turns his body towards mine, confusion in his eyes. "Where's the what?"

"The quill. The one I had when I showed up. It's gone."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Nathan." His tone is gentle, soothing, calm. It sinks into me and smoothes the edges of my anger the tiniest bit.

"The golden quill?" I ask, my own voice now uncertain.

“Nathan,” Rook murmurs, offering a gentle smile. “You didn’t have a golden quill.”

No.

No, I’m sure I did.

It was… the road. My parents. The scrapes in the concrete. Everything is hazy but I… I had a quill. It was golden.

I know I had it.

“Did you take it?” I ask.

“I didn’t take anything that belongs to you,” Rook says. “I promise.”

I look into his eyes, searching for a hint of a lie because maybe… maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I’m not remembering things right again. The more I reach for the memory of the night I arrived here, the more the details trickle away from me. I was sure there was a golden porcupine quill I’d found in the road, but… that doesn’t make any sense now that I think about it.

Porcupines aren’t made of gold.

“I’m… tired, I think,” I offer, with a small apologetic smile. My head is starting to ache, a slow, creeping thrum of pain emanating from the base of my neck and cascading over my skull. I wince, closing my eyes for a brief moment as stars burst in the darkness behind my eyelids. When I open them again, Rook is watching me carefully, concern marring his handsome face.

“Headache,” I offer, wincing a bit as the words leave my mouth.

“Come eat,” Rook says, returning to the pot on the stove and looking away from me. “You’ll feel better with something in your stomach.”

Yeah, he’s right. I probably will. I’m still leaving tonight, but leaving on an empty stomach with a headache is a recipe for disaster. I’ll eat and maybe have a quick nap before I get my stuff and leave for good.

That’s a better plan.

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Chapter Seven

Nathan

One more night here.

I'll stay one more night.

My headache is still thrumming in my head, the edges of it softened by the food now in my stomach but not enough to let me get on the road safely. I'm probably too tired from the day to be driving anyway. Leaving in the morning is likely the better choice.

I open my backpack and pull out a pair of pajama pants, slipping into them as I ditch my shirt to the floor. I'll clean up in the morning and re-pack everything after breakfast and a good, hot shower. Right now, I need some real sleep. Even though I crawled into bed after I ate the soup and buttered bread Rook made for me earlier, I haven't managed to string together solid hours of good rest.

I heard Rook as he shuffled past my closed door and my heart had leapt into my throat for some reason, anticipating he would enter my room, but he didn't. Instead, the muffled sound of music met my ears and I lingered in a weird half-awake space listening to the beats through the walls until he turned it off about an hour ago.

It's been silent here since.

Silent and a little bit too hot. The thick blankets on my bed were comforting earlier, but now I feel a bit stifled under the heat they've created. I head to the window that looks towards the front of the house and open it a crack. Enough to let the crisp night air inside. I inhale a breath of fresh, cool air before moving to settle back onto the mattress, my skin

happy to be out of the jeans and t-shirt I've been wearing all day long. Maybe that's why I couldn't get comfortable enough to get some real sleep earlier. I was still set on heading out tonight back to Hopper's farm and the cabin behind the horse barn. Now that I'm staying for the night, maybe I can settle in.

I feel like I could anyway.

I close my eyes and wish for sleep, anticipating to be taken away quickly now that it's decided that I'm staying until sometime tomorrow.

And that's when I hear the soft thud of a footstep on the wooden porch outside my window.

I go stock still as another footstep meets my ears, turning to look at the window. I pull the covers up to my ears like that will be helpful if something wants to break in. It could be a coyote, they're known around these parts to slink around farms in the night, but we don't have anything a coyote would want.

No chickens.

No sheep.

We're a crop farm not an animal farm, even though there is an old coop somewhere on the property.

The distinct scrape of footsteps against gravel meets my ears and I can't stay where I am any longer. Looking could get me in a world of trouble if someone is out there, but trouble could be coming anyway and I'd rather be aware. I slink to the window and pull the edge of the curtain aside, peering through the crack of glass I can see in front of me.

I scan the darkness, looking for movement and nearly fall on my ass as something really does move out there in the darkness. I can't tell what it is, but I definitely catch something out of the corner of my eye. I bet we're about to be robbed. It's not uncommon for someone to be skulking around a farm, stealing tools and other supplies from outbuildings. As far as I can remember, we've never been robbed before but knowing that the owners are dead has perhaps made someone bold enough to try tonight. My heart rockets into my throat as I watch carefully, trying to figure out if I should run and get Rook so he knows what's going on, or stay put and watch in case I need to call the cops.

Unless, my mind is playing tricks on me again.

I wish I could trust myself, but since I got home I've been off-kilter and I'm unsure if I'm making shit up. The doubt creeps in the longer I stay by

the window watching nothing happen. Maybe, I'm losing my mind because I see nothing else that would confirm that we are being stolen from.

No lights that shouldn't be there.

No sounds that seem out of place.

I linger for a few more minutes before carefully sliding the window closed and heading back for my bed, still uncertain about anything.



The morning arrives as I toss and turn, still unable to settle into any kind of real sleep. The sun peering through the curtain feels like a traitor, stealing the night away from me when what I really need is darkness.

I'm a fucking mess and there's no way I can drive the six hours home like this.

Footsteps beyond the door of my room let me know that Rook is awake and the sound of music that meets my ears just adds an exclamation point on the lack of sleep I've gotten. With a grumble, I pull myself from my bed and stretch out my muscles, but I can feel the desperate need for more rest lingering inside me.

I don't even bother to grab a shirt, or change my clothes. Instead, I shuffle across the room and open the door before heading out into the hallway. I yawn as I make my way to the kitchen, desperately needing either coffee or a strong sedative to wake me up or knock me out. I'm not sure which would be the better option.

Rook stands at the kitchen counter, preparing a pot of coffee. He's in pajama pants but like me, he is wearing no shirt. Unlike me, patches of his bare skin are covered in something fuzzy. I stare at his back, slightly amused by how hairy he is beneath his clothes until my entire body goes rigid with recognition.

Not hair.

Feathers.

His entire upper back is covered in a thick patch of pitch black feathers that extends down onto his shoulders. I make a small noise that draws his attention and the moment he connects eyes with me, the feathers on his back melt away revealing pale, human skin.

“What the fuck?” I ask, as the world feels like it pitches sideways and my head spins with sudden dizziness. I reach out a hand to steady myself against the wall and Rook steps towards me, concern written into his golden eyes.

“Are you alright?” he asks, reaching a hand for me.

“Feathers,” I blurt, staring at his perfectly unfeathered skin. “You had feathers.”

He cocks his head to the side like I’ve said something confusing or maybe even amusing to him. “Feathers?”

“Your back. It was covered in feathers. I thought… I thought you had feathers.”

Rook laughs, shaking his head. “No feathers. Just skin, I promise. What the hell kind of dreams were you having last night?”

“None.”

I scan his body carefully, unsure of what I’ve really seen while at the same time being very certain about it. I think I am anyway. No dream could explain the thick patch of feathers that disappeared into his skin because I haven’t really slept long enough to have any dreams.

I know what I saw.

Rook laughs softly again, then grabs my hand. I tense, intending to pull away but the moment his skin touches mine I am soothed somewhat. He lifts my hand and presses it flat against his bare stomach, stroking it down his chest and torso. “See? No feathers.”

I swallow hard as he lets go of my hand, leaving it pressed against his warm stomach. I carefully tun my fingers up his body to the base of his neck, then back down again to his stomach, stopping just short of dipping into the waistband of his pajama pants. His eyes meet mine and I’m a bit startled by the heat I see in them.

The want.

The need.

I leave my hand on his body as he steps forward the tiniest bit like I am not close enough already.

“Your back,” I whisper. “They were on your back.”

His eyebrow raises and he turns around in front of me, letting my fingers trail along the waistband of his pajama pants. I am met with smooth skin in front of me and I move my hands to run over both of his shoulder blades as I look for a hint of pitch black feathers but find none.

“No feathers,” he whispers, hands reaching back to grab mine as I trail them down to the small of his back.

“No feathers,” I confirm as he takes my hands and places them on his stomach again, pulling my body up against his back.

He holds me there as a strange warmth creeps through me, settling into my stomach as it did when I was at my parents funeral. It heats me from inside, emanating along my skin in the places we are touching and though I know I should let go of him, I don’t.

I can’t.

The scent of him fills my nose as he presses my hands into the skin of his stomach and I find myself slowly growing hard in my pajama pants. Alarm bells ring in my head, the notion that this is strange and unwanted flitting through me as I tilt my hips away from his body.

“It’s okay,” he whispers, gripping my hands and sliding them downwards. They trail over his pajama pants until they come into contact with his hard cock through the fabric.

“You’re my brother,” I comment as I pull my hands away.

He turns around and steps closer, his eyes darkened with desire. “I’m not though, am I?”

I swallow hard and shake my head. No. He’s not really my brother. He may have been raised in this house, but there’s no blood between us. Rook smiles and steps even closer to me, wrapping his arms around my bare waist. He leans in and places his lips by my throat and I am hit with a sense of familiarity.

His lips have been on my neck before.

I close my eyes, anticipating him biting into my skin for some reason but only his soft lips meet my flesh. He sucks at the skin of my neck gently, not hard enough to even break through as my hands find the small of his featherless back.

“Have we…” I trail off, shaking my head as the question dies on my lips.

“No,” Rook answers anyway, sensing what I was about to ask. “You never let me. You didn’t trust me.”

I don’t trust him now, but I do trust the strange thought that whispers to me that if he stops touching me now, I will die. When I don’t make a move to push him away, he returns to kissing and sucking at the skin of my throat. He moves us backwards as his lips move on my skin, my back now pressing against the wall behind me. His hand trails down my bare side, sending

tingles of warmth through my entire body and my head is a tangle of thoughts.

I shouldn't be doing this.

I shouldn't let this ever end.

His hips press forwards and I feel his hard cock against mine. A soft moan rises from his lips, sending a thrill through me that makes him do it again, harder. My head reels as he licks at my skin, then pulls away slightly to look into my eyes.

Neither of us speak as our hips move, meeting each other in little thrusts forward, our cocks separated only by thin fabric. Rook breathes heavy as he leans against me, pressing his forehead against my shoulder as my cock slides against his body, his against mine. Little puffs of air land on my chest as he presses his body towards me and I lean down to catch the deep lemony winter scent of him, drawing it into my body and holding onto it as I creep closer and closer to an orgasm.

"Close," Rook murmurs against my flesh.

"Yeah," I comment back because I don't have any better words. All I can feel is his movement against me, his body rocking into me and his cock sliding along mine. I hold him tight as he lets loose a soft moan that slowly becomes louder.

And then, his teeth sink into the skin of my chest and my body goes haywire as everything inside me lets go. I spurt my release into my pants as he holds me in his mouth, his own body rippling against mine like he's also coming, but something here is familiar.

Something here is terrifying.

He's had his teeth in me before and that knowing sends a shiver of unease rattling through me. Rook lets go of my skin with his teeth and I push him away from me. Not had, but firm enough that he takes a few steps backwards.

"What the fuck?" I ask, staring at him. His cheeks are reddened and sweat slicks his torso as he tilts his head up to look at me. A sense of hurt lingers in his eyes and I am compelled to try and explain this strange thought that drove me to push him away. "You bit me."

"I apologize," he blurts. "I didn't mean to. I just… I got caught up. I am sorry."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "You've bit me before. I know you have."

Rook pauses for a moment, blinking slowly as he scrutinizes my face carefully. “I have never bitten you before. We have never done that before, Nathan.”

No, we have never done anything sexual before. I know this to be true as much as I know that he has had his teeth in my skin before. As much as I know he had feathers on his back when I came into the kitchen.

“Nathan,” he coos, stepping forward the tiniest amount. “How much sleep did you get last night?”

“I know what I know.”

“I know what you think you know, but does it make sense?”

I swallow hard, sweat slicking down my body and cum soaking through my pajama pants. No. It doesn’t make sense.

Nothing fucking makes any goddamn sense.

I know what I know.

“All I’m saying is that maybe you’re a bit tired still,” Rook says, his voice sending warmth and comfort through me. “Maybe if you get some good sleep, you’ll feel better and your head won’t be so messy.”

“Maybe.”

He could be right.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes for a moment, my head spinning slightly from lack of sleep in my post-orgasm haze. He’s probably right. My head is a fucking mess and I do need sleep. Rook nods encouragingly at me as I take my leave of him and head down the hallway towards my bedroom.

I slip out of my pajama pants, leaving them crumpled in a heap on the floor. Grabbing the shirt I wore yesterday, I wick away sweat and cum from my body until I’m clean enough to crawl into bed again and try for some real sleep. My thoughts are a whirlwind of nonsense and I keep coming up empty when I search for answers to the questions I have inside me.

I know what I know.

But can my mind be trusted?

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Chapter Eight

Rook

He is as delicious as he ever was.

The tiniest bit of Nathan's blood lingers in the back of my throat and my entire body is alive with the taste of it. The soft sounds of his pleasure echo in my mind and I can still feel his hands on my skin, rough fingers on delicate flesh.

I shouldn't have done that.

I know I shouldn't have.

I'm playing a dangerous game here.

His mind is so fragile.

So confused.

So lost.

Even now as he sleeps, he tosses and turns in his bed. His hands reach for nothing, his breath hitches, his body tenses. I watch from my vantage point by the door, lingering in the shadows as I have done every night since he arrived back home where he belongs. He rolls over and opens his eyes, scanning the darkness like he can sense that I'm here but I know he won't see me.

I am very good at not being seen.

He stares into the far corners of the room before he sighs and closes his eyes again, drifting back into his broken sleep to toss and turn.

If I was a better person, I'd let him leave before it gets worse.

I'd let him have his freedom before he has to demand it from me.

Before he has to take it from me.

Before his presence draws danger to our door.
But I am not a better person.
I am hardly a person at all.

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Chapter Nine

Nathan

Even though my head is a fucking mess, a small comfort I'm finding comes with being back in Coopman's Gap is that nothing has really changed.

The main street still boasts the same line up of buildings I recall from years ago though there are some new names above the doors. The Pearl, the only pizza place in town, still exists but instead of the video rental store beside it, there's what looks like some kind of fancy home goods store. A flower shop with a brilliant pink logo sits in the space where a tiny convenience store once lived and beside it is a place called "Prairie Perk" which I assume is a coffee shop.

One thing that doesn't feel changed at all is the Nifty Fifties Diner.

The gigantic wooden cutout of Elvis Presley swinging his hips still sits on the side of the building, his head rising above the roofline and casting shadows on the parking spaces below. Though he could use a fresh coat of paint, he's in decent shape given that he's been there for as long as I can remember, enticing people who pass through Coopman's Gap to stop by and visit the diner.

Not that many people really come through the town.

Sitting alongside a single lane road that requires a turn off of the busy TransCanada Highway, Coopman's Gap only real draw is the campground nearby that sits in the same densely wooded valley as the Boy Scout camp I attended as a kid. You can bypass the town completely if you know where you're going and unless things have changed, most campers turn off onto

the back road before they even make it here to see this giant Elvis. That's the quickest way to get there and as that patch of highway pops into my mind it brings with it twisted steel and fractured concrete.

That back road is where my parents died and the mystery of why they were so far away from the farm, presumably on their way to the forest, prickles in my head.

"You okay?" Rook asks from the passenger seat of my truck as I swing into one of the empty parking stalls beneath Elvis' left foot.

"Yeah," I reply as I put the vehicle into park and grab the keys from the ignition. Rook watches me for a moment before he hops out of the passenger seat and I follow suit.

Elvis hovers above our heads as we round the corner to the front of the diner and push open the front door. Rook steps in first, the bell above the door dinging to announce our arrival. The place is fairly packed and as we step out of the cool fall air and into the warm diner, faces turn to look our way. Gentle smiles and warm eyes greet Rook, only to grow slightly colder as they see me standing behind him. It's a strange welcome, but not unfamiliar to what I experienced yesterday at the funeral. Rook is beloved here, apparently, and I am not.

I am the bad kid.

The one who was sent away for crimes I cannot remember. I am getting the feeling they were bad enough to justify an icy response from people in the town I grew up in though.

What the fuck did I do?

"So sorry for your loss," the lady behind the till offers as we pass by. I'm not even bothering to pretend she's talking to me. Instead, I start looking for the actual reason we're here while Rook handles the people here.

"Thank you, Heather," he replies, his voice calm and measured. "Thank you for coming to the funeral."

Auntie Tara waves from one of the booths at the back and a sense of relief flits through me. I glance at Rook, finding him occupied in small talk with a few of the people sitting along the counter on stools, then head away to join the only one here who has bothered to meet me with a warm smile.

"Social butterfly," she comments, looking past me at Rook as I slip into the seat across from her. Her eyes meet mine and she scrutinizes my face carefully. "How are you doing?"

Well, Auntie Tara, I may be losing my goddamn mind because Rook sometimes has feathers and he bit me after I got off in the kitchen by rubbing against his body like a cat in heat.

“Fine,” I lie.

She eyes me carefully and I wilt a bit inside under the scrutiny, but her smile warms. She reaches a hand across the table and rests it on my forearm. “We all missed you, Nathan. I am sorry that this is what brought you back, but I’m not sorry you’re here.”

I don’t have many words to offer so I simply grunt in acknowledgement as Rook finally makes his way to the table. I anticipate him slipping in beside Auntie Tara, but instead he nudges me so I shuffle over in the booth, making room for him.

“How are you doing today?” Auntie Tara asks, turning away from me towards him.

“Hanging in there,” he replies as his scent catches my nose. He is close enough here that I can almost taste the cool lemon at the back of my throat and I hate it.

I love it.

“Everything going okay with the lawyers and the estate?” she asks, glancing between us for an answer.

“Yeah. Mom and Dad had everything set up,” Rook replies, drawing her attention back to him as the waitress makes her way over. “Nathan and I split most of it, but there’s some things set aside for you. Photo albums and a few items from Grandma, plus a chunk of money.”

Auntie Tara nods like this is expected and for some reason, her easy acceptance irritates me. Everyone here seems to have this understanding and experience that slips through my own fingers like sand.

I wish I could remember… anything.

One thing.

Something.

The waitress, a young girl who looks vaguely familiar, takes our orders and I can’t find my hunger inside me so I settle for a cup of coffee and some toast.

As she walks away, Rook and Auntie Tara start chatting about the things left at the house for her to pick up and I let my mind drift as I look out the window of the diner at the fairly quiet main street. A few cars pass by as I mindlessly stare out the window, catching bits and pieces of conversation

but not really paying much attention until movement beside me pulls my attention back to the table. Rook slips from the booth and heads towards the back of the restaurant, disappearing into an alcove beneath the giant, green “restroom” sign on the wall.

“So,” Auntie Tara says as I turn to her. “How does it feel to be back?”

“It’s fine.”

“Are you staying much longer?”

“No,” I offer, with a decisive head shake. “I’m leaving soon. Gotta get back to work.”

Auntie Tara looks a bit disappointed, but slowly nods like she might understand. “Where are you working?”

“I’m a farmhand at a place in northern Alberta.”

Silence lingers for a moment and I can tell she’s waiting for more information, but I have none to offer. Finally she speaks again. “It’s good? You like it?”

“Yep,” I reply. “My boss is good to me. Pays me decent. Gives me a place to rest my head and all. I can’t complain.”

“Oh, that’s good,” she replies, with a smile. “Real good. Your parents had hoped that you’d find your way.”

I snort a laugh and shake my head. Auntie Tara gives me a questioning look and I sigh. “Forgive me, but I don’t really care what they wanted or hoped for. I did what I needed to do and I’m just lucky Hopper gave me a chance despite the place I was coming out of.”

Auntie Tara goes silent, nodding slowly as a grave look crosses her features and I think she’s about to leave it, but her hand sneaks across the table and rests on my forearm. “Was it really terrible?”

“It wasn’t a party, that’s for sure.”

“Did it help?” she asks, after another hesitation.

The truth spills from my lips before I can even measure out what I should be saying. “Auntie Tara, I don’t even know what I did to deserve being sent there in the first place. My memory of that night is shot to shit and when I try to make it make sense, I can’t come up with anything that doesn’t resemble swiss cheese. If you could fill the gaps, I’d be real thankful.”

Her eyes widen and I lean forward in anticipation because I can tell she’s about to open her mouth again. Fucking finally something might be coming that could poke my brain into remembering but my hope dwindles to nothing as Rook slips back into the booth beside me.

“No food yet?” he asks, glancing between Auntie Tara and I.

“None yet,” she replies, with a smile as her entire expression changes. “Not even a drink. They must be busy.”

“Must be,” he agrees.

I glare daggers at the side of his head as he starts a conversation that does not include anything about Allworth and then the moment is gone.

I was so close.

So damn close to something, I’m sure of it.

The waitress finally comes over to bring us our food and the drinks we ordered. I take a bite of my simple, buttered toast as Rook dives into his oatmeal, because apparently that’s what he’s decided to order even though we’re eating out. I watch him scoop up a spoonful, wrinkling my nose as he places it in his mouth and smiles like it’s the tastiest thing he’s ever had.

“It’s good for you,” he comments, catching my eye.

“You didn’t even add any sugar,” I point out, taking a bite of my toast.

“This reminds me of that cereal you used to eat all the time when you were little,” Auntie Tara says, with a small laugh. “It’s not quite the same though. That had more seeds or something in it. What was that stuff?”

Rook opens his mouth to respond but the answer pops into my head and I blurt out, “Red River Cereal.”

“Yes!” Auntie Tara exclaims as Rook gives me a small, interested glance. “You loved that stuff.”

He did.

I know he did.

I remember making fun of him for eating his cooked Red River Cereal every morning instead of whatever sugar bombed cold cereal with milk I was eating at the time. A memory of the two of us bickering over the kitchen table while my mom did her best to ensure we kept it civil slides to the forefront of my mind and I grab onto it tight as the conversation around me changes. I’m not willing to let this snippet go, it feels almost like a present that I hadn’t expected at all and I don’t want to lose it now that I have it.

I want to remember.

I close my eyes for a moment, turning my head to the window as I toss that moment through my brain.

Rook, scooping up cereal and threatening to drop it in my bowl.

Me, threatening to douse his warm oats and rye with my sugary milk.

Rook, flicking bits of his cereal at me across the table.

Me, chewing my brightly colored cereal with my mouth wide open just so he cringes a little bit when he looks at me.

My mom.

My breath hitches as I remember her at that moment.

My mom, sitting at the table.

Her blond hair tied up in a ponytail. Her eyes sparkling as she looks between the two of us. Her head tilted back slightly and her cheeks pinked with laughter she's holding in.

I can tell in this moment, in this gift of a memory, she wants to laugh, but is trying to be a good parent. She doesn't want us to think what we're doing is okay, but our advanced cereal warfare tactics have her on the verge of cracking.

We were happy.

Long before whatever happened that had me carted off to Allworth Academy, we were happy.

I open my eyes as tears prickle at the backs of my eyes, my throat swelling up a bit as I blink them away. Rook and Auntie Tara are still talking as I leave the memory behind, but Rook's hand has migrated onto my thigh. I reach down, intending to brush it away, but he catches my fingers before I can. I try to move my hand away, but he holds tight to me, wrapping his fingers around mine and giving them a squeeze.

I stop moving.

I let him hold me.

He keeps me there in his palm beneath the table in the back of the Nifty Fifties Diner until we are ready to leave and when he finally lets me go, a small ache radiates in the pit of my stomach.

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Chapter Ten

Nathan

Someone is screaming.

I can hear it echoing off the walls. The noise buries itself in the drywall, stretches along the corners and beckons me out of my bed. I creep across the floor to the door of this room.

This room that is somehow sideways.

The bed not where I remember it being.

The bedside table on the opposite side by the wall.

The window to the porch… gone.

Gone.

How does a window just go?

I stare at the wall where the window should be until a terrified scream from beyond the door shakes me out of my stupor.

Someone is screaming.

I put my hand on the doorknob and slowly turn it before pushing against the wood with my shoulder. It's dark beyond my doorway but the screaming grows louder and I start to pick up on syllables.

There's a rhythm to whatever is being said.

A cadence to whatever he is shrieking into the still, cold space beyond this room I am in.

As if I have blinked and brought the world to life, light begins popping on to expose a hallway that feels… familiar. Smooth gray tiles lie on the floor and the walls are painted a pale blue.

A familiar shade of calming blue that churns my stomach.

I don’t know why I know this blue.

A figure rushes past the crack I’ve made in the doorway, a blur of deep maroon as whoever that was heads for the place the screaming is coming from. I linger for a moment, heart kicking in my chest as I slip the door open just a bit more and take a step out of my room. The tile is cool beneath my feet as I move even further away from the quiet, dark bedroom to stand in the hallway, listening as the screaming echoes through the hall.

I shouldn’t go look, but when I turn around the door is melting into the pale blue wall behind me, so I must go.

I take a step.

And then another.

The screaming continues, rhythmic like a heartbeat, in cadence with my steps as I move down the gray tile. The syllables are swallowed by the walls and the floor, but I can feel them beneath my feet. Another blur of maroon rushes past me like I am not even here and I keep moving towards the noise.

I keep moving towards the syllables, my feet slapping on the tile in time with each one.

Step.

Don’t.

Step.

Touch.

Step.

Me.

“Don’t touch me!” the someone who is screaming shouts as I come to the only open door along this cold, empty hallway. Light shines from within the gap and I step into it, turning to see what is happening.

Two men in maroon stand by the bed.

One holds a syringe.

One holds a thrashing boy down on the mattress.

I hold my breath.

“Please,” the boy on the bed howls as he kicks his legs and tries to yank his arms free from the hands on him. “Please don’t. You have to believe me. I’m not crazy. I’m not. I swear. Why am I here?”

“You know,” comes the response from one of the men.

I crane my neck to look at the screaming boy, but I can’t quite make out his features.

One man in maroon murmurs something.

The other nods his head.

The boy thrashes on the bed but he is held down tight to the mattress.

I hold myself, placing fingers on my arms that match the fingers holding this boy.

“This will help,” the man with the syringe says as he leans down to jab the needle deep into the boy’s arm.

He flinches.

He howls.

I flinch.

I don’t make a sound.

The two men move away from him the moment the needle is pulled free. They wait a moment as the boy’s protests die down to mumbles and murmurs falling out of his now sleepy mouth. As they step away, they become maroon blurs again, passing by like I am not even here.

The boy’s head lolls on his shoulders and he sinks into the mattress, drool spilling from the corner of my mouth.

His mouth.

My mouth.

He blinks my eyes and tears spill down my cheeks.

His eyes.

My eyes.

“Why am I here?” I whimper as I lay on the bed in front of me.

The lights in the room fade away, leaving nothing but darkness behind.

Darkness and two glowing golden orange orbs watching from the corner. I hold my breath as they move closer, the sense of dread creeping up inside me but I cannot move.

I try to lift my feet, but my toes stay stuck to the cold tile beneath me.

I open my mouth to scream as the eyes draw closer, but no sound comes out. I can hear the click of sharpened claws against the tile floor with every step this creature takes and the scent of cold winter invades my senses.

A hand clamps down on my arm and I am yanked from the room I was in, my eyes flying open. I pull away from whatever is grabbing at me, screaming at it to stop touching me.

“Stop,” Rook says, as I thrash in my bed to get away from his hand on my arm. “Nathan. It was a dream. It was just a dream.”

Gasping for breath, I scramble off the mattress, heart pounding and head reeling. I wobble on shaky feet as my entire body quivers and trembles.

What the fuck was that?

"A dream," Rook says, as if he's somehow heard what I've asked inside my own head. "I heard you yelling and came to check in on you. Are you okay?"

"I don't… what the fuck?" I mutter, closing my eyes for a moment before opening them again to find that Rook is standing an arm's length away from me, reaching towards me. "Don't touch me!"

He drops his hand as my words hit him, taking a few steps back. "Sorry."

"No, it's fine. I'm just… don't touch me right now. I'm… I don't know what I am."

I tip from foot to foot because I can't seem to get my body to stop moving. I can't get my brain to stop thinking about the dream. Nightmare, really. But it feels… familiar like everyone else does. Another piece I know belongs to this strange puzzle growing inside my head that I cannot find the shape of inside my head.

"Where did I go before Allworth?" I ask, turning to look at Rook briefly as I take up pacing beside the bed.

"You didn't go anywhere before Allworth," he offers.

"No. I was somewhere. I know I was somewhere else first." If that was a memory, then it had to have happened at some point. "Somewhere with gray floors and blue walls."

I was terrified.

"Nathan, you went right from this house to Allworth Academy."

He sounds so certain, but I can't shake the feeling that I was at a different place first. A place with syringes and men in maroon scrubs. I fucking wish I could remember more. I let loose a frustrated sigh as I continue to pace the floor, stalking the side of my bed because it feels better than being still right now.

Rook lets me pace for a moment before taking a cautious step forward. I growl at him like I'm some sort of feral beast guarding its territory because in this moment, I am. He takes another step forward and reaches for me. I pull away, but he keeps coming and before I can get away, he has wrapped himself around me and forced me to be still.

I sink into his embrace, though I don't know why because I don't want to be touched. Not by him when it's become even more obvious that he's lying

to me and hiding things.

I don’t trust him.

I don’t trust anything here in this house.

But his arms around me make my heart settle down inside my chest. I take a deep breath and let myself tilt my head down into his thick, dark hair. Rook leans into me and I lean back into him, my arms as tight around him as his are around me.

“It was just a dream,” Rook murmurs, soothing and low.

It wasn’t, but I nod anyway as my body gives in to his comfort.



I wake up slowly, my body held down to the bed by a weight that has my blood pressure skyrocketing. Memories of being held down to a different mattress in a different room ripple through my brain and I jostle on the bed for a moment before a gentle hand skates down my bare chest, stopping me.

“You’re okay,” Rook says and as I come back into myself he smiles up at me, resting his head on my stomach. He’s laying oddly on the mattress, sideways with his feet curled at the edge and his upper half butted against my torso.

“I thought… nevermind. What the hell, Rook?”

“You had a nightmare,” he replies, offering a gentle smile as his fingers trail up and down my bare skin. Goosebumps leap to my flesh following his touch but I don’t make him move.

I don’t make him stop.

He turns his head and presses his lips against the skin of my stomach. I tense anticipating teeth again for some reason, then relax as he turns his head back to face me still tracing his hand up and down my chest slowly, soothingly.

“Did I wake you up?” I ask after a moment of silence.

“Hmm… no. I wasn’t sleeping.”

Rook offers no additional information and I don’t ask for more. The now familiar scent of winter wind and lemons meets my nose and I inhale it deep into my lungs, closing my eyes as Rook’s hand trails over my skin in this silence we’ve created. A small piece of me tries to ring an alarm inside

my head, but I push it aside, sinking into the comfort of his touch on my skin and the scent of him in my nose.

I know it's what I smelled in my dream.

If I even really smelled anything in my dream, that is.

But unlike my dream, I'm not scared by it here in the waking world where I can see his face and feel his hands.

Slowly, more of my body is starting to wake up under his hands. My cock starts to inflate as his hand strays from the center of my chest and moves to brush my nipples. I move my hand to stop him from touching me like that, but he pulls his hand free.

"Rook," I murmur, opening my eyes.

"You like that," he comments, surprised at what appears to be new information for him.

"Too much, I think." I laugh it off, but he offers a wicked grin in response as he lifts his head from my stomach.

Rook rolls on the bed and comes to rest on his knees before I can protest again that he should stop whatever it is that grin is leading to. He rises to hover over me, one hand resting on my chest and the other reaching for the blanket that covers my pelvis.

"Rook," I say again, but he grins and pushes the blanket down.

I grab for it, but his hand on my chest holds me firmly to the mattress. I glance down at the tented pajama pants then back at Rook's pale face. For a moment, a mere fraction of time, I catch the glint of sharpened teeth poking out from between his plump lips, but I quickly shake my head and his teeth become human again.

"I wonder… will you let me?" he asks, placing his free hand on the front of my pajama pants. The slight bit of pressure on my cock sends a small thrill rippling through me and instead of answering, I swallow hard.

I don't get the sense the question was meant for me to answer.

Rook moves to grip the waistband of my pants with both his hands, pulling them down just enough that my cock springs out, curving slightly upwards towards my lower stomach. He gives me a small crooked grin, then leans down, slicking his wet tongue up the underside of it as I shiver.

"Rook," I say for the third time because his name is all I have inside my head.

"Nathan," he replies, before licking a stripe up my cock again. I take a deep breath as he takes me in his hand, tipping the head of my dick upwards

so it’s pointing right at his chin. He rubs the tip of me against his lips before parting them and engulfing it in his warm, wet mouth. I groan as he swirls his tongue around the head, his one hand holding my shaft and the other sneaking up my inner thigh to gently cup my heavy balls. Again and again his tongue circles the head of my cock and I can probably finish like this alone, but slowly he moves down. His hand slips down to the base of my dick as he slides me into his mouth and I have to keep my hips from pushing upwards to demand more.

“Fucking hell, Rook,” I mumble as he pulls off of me, then takes me into him again.

Spurred on by my moans, he starts bobbing his head, moving on my cock with a rhythm that sends pleasure radiating through my body. I close my eyes and lean back as he licks and sucks at my length, the tip of his tongue swirling gently into the slit at the very tip of me. My entire body ripples with arousal and need, the cold winter scent radiating off of the top of his head filling the room around me.

It’s perfect.

This moment is perfect and that thought hits me out of the blue as Rook continues sucking and lucking at my cock, tiny slurping noises escaping the corners of his wet mouth. I open my eyes to watch and reach a hand down to rest against the soft pitch black hair on the top of his head. He hums approvingly as I twirl the strands in my fingers, taking hold of him gently but enough that he knows I’m here with him at this moment.

My body starts tensing and I can’t keep myself from pushing my hips up slightly every time he slides his mouth off of me. I’m chasing his warmth, chasing the heat of his lips wrapped around me and I swear I catch the corners of said lips curl like he’s grinning up at me.

I swear that’s what drives me even closer to release.

Heat pools inside me as the heady scent of him sinks even deeper into my body, fusing itself into me like it's writing itself into my bones and I gasp as I push my hips up again. I tip my head back and close my eyes to ride out waves of pleasure as everything lets go, my body releasing every bit of tension at the same time as my cock shoots into his beautiful mouth. I didn’t even give him a warning, but I know that doesn’t matter because I can feel him greedily swallowing every bit of cum I spill.

When I open my eyes again, Rook is sliding off my cock leaving behind a tiny string of spit that connects the top to his upper lip. His eyes are

darkened to the point that I can barely see the golden yellowy brown of them beneath his darkened pupils but when he blinks, I catch a fragment of something wild.

Something feral hidden inside them.

“I’ve wanted that for so long,” he murmurs, staring into my eyes.

“Yeah,” I comment, not knowing before now that I had been wanting it too.

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Chapter Eleven

Rook

My craving for his skin against mine will be the death of me.

It will be my ruin.

Right now, Nathan is taking a shower and I am meant to be making us breakfast.

Toast.

Eggs.

Bacon.

Jam.

These are the things I should be preparing but instead I have come to linger outside the door of the bathroom because he is in there and I cannot bear to separate from him any further.

I cannot allow it, no matter how much I should.

Again the taste of him lingers on my tongue.

Again it is not enough.

I am losing my composure.

My grip is slipping and weakening under his watchful gaze.

He knows the truth of Allworth. He knows the pills and medicines they shoved into his body to make him stable after I did what I had to do.

After I took what was necessary to take.

But what else could I do?

I could not have killed him.

I could not have drained his body to husk as I was intended to do.

To do as those who linger in the forest would have done.

Killing Nathan would have been like tearing my own beating heart from my ribcage. It would have been like plucking out my lungs, eyes, teeth, and bones one by one, then burning whatever was left over of me alive.

So, what else was I meant to do?

Tell me.

What was I supposed to have done that wouldn’t have killed us both?

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Chapter Twelve

Nathan

Allworth Academy is no longer operational, but the building still sits on a plot of land a few hours drive away from Coopman's Gap. It's crumbling away with no upkeep, being overtaken by the nature that surrounds it.

I scroll through my phone, looking at pictures of the inside hallways taken by some urban explorer about a year ago, trying to find memories that match the dream I had. Nothing is jumping out at me, but I keep scrolling just in case.

Rook left a few moments ago saying he was heading out to check the fields with Hank. He asked if I wanted to join them and looked hopeful that I would agree, but my head is pounding so I declined. Instead, I've come to sit on the porch in my thickest plaid jacket and boots, getting some fresh air while I try to put things together inside my scrambled egg of a brain.

My dream… no.

Not dream.

My memory of Allworth sits at the forefront of my mind and I feel like I could possibly get some answers if I keep peeling back the layers of dust it appears to be coated in.

I scroll through the pictures, not really paying much attention because they all look the same to me. Crumbling foundations, vines snaking through drywall, holes in the hallways where the floors have given way. It's all the same except for one image that sends a chill rippling down my spine. It's a decrepit hallway just like the rest of them, but this one is different.

Blue walls.

Gray tiles.

My heart squeezes in my chest uncomfortably as I stare at the calm blue walls that made me want to throw up and the gray tiles that looked dingy even when they were clean. The caption on the image written by the urban explorer sends another strange spiral of dread shooting through my body.

“Medical ward,” I whisper, as I scroll to the next picture of blue walls and gray tiles. I was in the medical ward.

What the fuck was I doing in the medical ward?

I could see going for a check up or whatever when I was first admitted to the Academy, but my memory says I had a bed there. A room with nursing staff or orderlies who wore maroon scrubs.

I think I have to go there.

I want to see it for myself to see if anything else sparks in my mind.

The sound of truck tires on gravel meets my ears and I glance up from my screen to see Hank’s pickup heading my way. The old Dodge sends dust shooting behind it and as they draw closer to the house, I turn my screen off and place my phone in my pockets.

Rook hops out the moment the truck is put into park and heads my way, but Hank just stares at me through the front windshield. I tip my head at him in acknowledgement and though he is slow returning the gesture, he eventually does. It’s odd really. I never thought of Hank that much when I lived here before, but it seems to me that he probably knows a great deal about what happened. If his hesitant reactions to me are anything to go by, whatever happened wasn’t good.

The moment I rise from my seat on one of the porch chairs, his truck lurches forwards, then he makes a quick u-turn and books it out of the farmyard like the devil himself is chasing him.

“You’re just sitting here,” Rook comments as he moves to stand in front of me. Like it’s just natural now, he wraps his arms around my waist and presses his face against my chest. I return the embrace as he tips his head up to see my face. “You alright?”

“I think I need to see Allworth,” I offer.

Rook scrunches his nose and takes a step back, loosening his grip on my body. I would say my skin calls for him to come back, but that doesn’t make much sense.

“Allworth is closed.”

“I know. I still want to go. Just to see it.”

“Why?” he asks, tilting his head to the side in question.

Because I’m sure I was held in the medical ward and I want to know why. I don’t say this out loud. Instead, I shrug. “Curious really.”

“It’s dangerous, probably. Last thing I heard, the place was falling apart.”

I nod, because I’ve seen it in the pictures. “I think I’ll go tomorrow.”

“Why go, Nathan?” Rook asks, stepping closer to me. “There’s nothing for you there.”

“Well, you’d know, wouldn’t you?”

I expect him to get offended at the insinuation in my tone, but am instead stunned as he wraps his arms around my waist and looks up into my eyes. “I would know, Nathan. There is nothing for you there. Do you trust me?”

I want to, but no.

Not one bit.

I swallow hard and nod again. “Yeah. Sure. You’re right. It’s probably shitty.”

Rook eyes me carefully, then licks his lips quickly like the taste of my lie lingers on his mouth. “There are better things to do than go explore some run down old building in the middle of nowhere.”

His voice slides down my spine and fills me with warmth from the bottom of my feet up. Maybe he’s right, really. Now that I think about it again, there probably isn’t much left to learn at Allworth that I don’t already know.

“I won’t go,” I breathe as the scent of him curls itself around me like a blanket. “I’ll stay here.”

“Where you should always be,” Rook comments, with a small smile.

“For now, anyway.”

I’ll still leave eventually. Just… later. I can’t go with so many mysteries unraveling themselves inside my head now. I need to have the answers first. Rook dips his head once in a nod then sinks into my arms as I wrap myself around him on the front porch of the family home I swore I’d leave behind days ago.



“What the fuck are you doing, Nathan?” I murmur to myself as I sit in my truck, staring out the windshield.

Ahead of me is the crumbling facade of what was once Allworth Academy, brick and rotted wood covering the exterior. The front door has been kicked open but the windows are boarded up, lending to the serious creep factor of what the Academy has become. Clearly, I’m a liar because I told Rook I wouldn’t come here, yet here I am anyway. If I’m being honest, I had really meant it when I told him I’d stay at the farm and not come out here to pick through my past. Not my fault that the moment he left my side, the urge to travel hours down the single lane highway to this place came back with full force.

The morning sun shimmers through the trees that surround the building somehow putting a highlight on exactly how broken down this place has become. As I kill the engine and step out of the truck, the heat hits my skin and a strange discomfort runs through me.

But that makes sense.

I’m about to wander through the now abandoned building where I spent four years of my life.

The prairie grass crunches under my boots as I start walking up the gravel driveway that leads to the main building. Birdsong rises from within the trees that surround the edge of the property, light and airy despite how ominous and heavy this place feels. Life surrounds Allworth, but I’m heading towards the decay and the ruin instead.

I pause for a moment, checking to make sure I have my phone in my pocket just in case I need to call for help at some point. I’m sure I’ll catch shit for being here, it is technically trespassing, but I’d rather not die if I fall through the floor or something. Feeling my phone in my pocket alongside the flashlight I also brought helps ease some of the discomfort inside my stomach and I move up the crumbling concrete staircase that leads to the main entrance.

I stare into the building’s entryway through the opening in front of me. Someone has definitely kicked it in to gain access to the building, what little remains attached to the brick frame is splintered and rough. With a deep breath, I step back into Allworth Academy for the first time in years.

Dust kicks up beneath my boots as I shuffle along the dirty wooden floor and the building comes to life in my memories. To the left is the reception desk and the hallway on the right leads to the library. There’s a set of stairs

towards the back of this entryway and I know they lead up to the classrooms on the second level. The dorms should be on the top floor, but I don't know if I'll climb that high.

I don't know if I need to explore every inch of this place, or if I'm going to be satisfied by just finding the medical ward.

I didn't really come here for a walk through the things I can remember. I don't have many good feelings about this place that are worth pulling up and examining. I'm here for the things I can't remember, to fill in the gaps I didn't know I had until I returned home.

"Where would a medical ward be?" I murmur out loud to myself as I pull my flashlight out of my pocket. The light coming in through the front door behind me doesn't travel far and with the windows boarded up the sun can't quite seep into this place.

Not as it once did, anyway.

Despite being a place for troubled youth to be kept away from the general public, Allworth Academy was once bright and colorful. Almost like it was hiding behind the facade of being warm and welcoming. I remember sitting in clean, white painted classrooms brimming with sunlight and green plants like that was somehow going to undo what most of the kids I was there with had been through in their lives. Yeah, they were troubled but as far as I can remember it was trouble that was taught to them by the people surrounding them.

But I'm not here for them.

"Medical ward," I mumble into the silence, reminding myself why I'm here in the first place.

If that gray tiled hallway exists anywhere within this building, it's definitely tucked into some corner that students didn't have access to so I head for the administration area behind the reception desk. Abandoned papers scatter the floor beneath my feet as I step into the space between the reception area and the half open door at the back of it that I know leads to the Headmaster's office, along with the rest of the staff spaces.

I inhale a deep breath as I nudge the door with my shoulder, paint flecking off onto my shirt. The smell of rot and mold lingers in the air and I probably should have brought a mask or something with me so I don't get sick. That's one aspect I bypassed entirely in the quick planning of this trip. I rushed out of the house while Rook was occupied in his room, knowing

full well that if he caught me leaving he'd discourage me from coming again.

I don't know why I feel like I have to do what he says.

Beyond the door lies a long, dark hallway with more doors lining the walls. I sigh as I click the flashlight on and scan the space, heart beating a bit harder in my chest. I knew it was going to be freaky being here, but I hadn't quite imagined it would feel quite like this. It's spookier in the sheer silence that seems to fill each room as I start walking down the hallway. The tiny hairs on my forearms stand on end and my entire body feels hyperaware of my surroundings as I cast the flashlight beam on cracked walls and dirty floors.

It's daytime.

The sun is shining.

Even though I can't see it, the sun exists and it is in the sky.

That's what I have to remember because the further I explore down this hallway, the more I start to debate turning back. Finding out if the medical ward from my dream-memory is real isn't as important as not shitting my pants out of fear, but I keep pushing myself down the hallway towards the darkened end. As I wander, I scan the rooms I'm passing by to find simple, small offices with desks that look like they could still be used but are probably full of mold and bugs at this point. It hasn't been that long since this place was shut down, but the decay of untended wood and creeping of nature back into the walls don't seem to care about how little time has actually passed.

I reach the end of the hallway without incident and find myself face to face with what appears to be a solid wall. Paint has flaked off the surface of it, littering the floor at my feet in shards of white that light up brilliantly when I run the flashlight over them but what catches my attention only serves to add to the creepy vibe of this place.

There's a latch.

A small handle laid into the surface of the wall in front of me. Had the paint not flecked off of it, I'm not sure I would have caught it, but there is clearly a handle on the wall at the end of the darkened hallway.

"A closet," I offer as an explanation to myself as I reach for it with shaking fingertips.

The moment I grip the handle and yank towards my body, I realize that my wish for a closet is a silly little lie. The door I didn't even realize was a

door opens with a loud scrape, the wood grinding along the hardwood floor beneath my boots. It's heavy to pull, but once I've got it open I scan the interior with the flashlight.

And peer downwards at a set of rickety metal stairs.

And beyond the stairs, gray tiled floors.

"Oh, fuck me," I mumble. "No fucking way."

Of course the medical ward would be in a freaky basement of an abandoned building. Since the moment I pulled up in the driveway, I've felt like I'm walking in a horror movie and the things I remember from my dreams existing in a creepy basement just make sense. Horror movie logic would dictate that I should head down the stairs to discover what I've been looking for, but I can't make my feet move. Something inside me holds me here instead of pushing me to take a single step downwards, but I also can't make myself turn around knowing that whatever is down there could answer some of my questions.

"Come down, Nathan," a voice whispers inside my head.

I don't want to.

But I do.

I get stuck here, breathing into the space beyond the hidden door, staring down as the scant pieces of the metal stairs and flooring light up in the beam of my flashlight. I don't want to do this.

I don't want to go down there.

Maybe Rook was right.

Maybe there is nothing for me to discover here.

Maybe that's a lie.

"Come on, Nathan," I murmur to myself, swallowing hard as I scan the basement stairs with my flashlight again. "You know scarier things. You can do this."

My pep talk does nothing to shake me from this spot and I almost laugh out loud at the sheer ridiculousness of this situation. I came here for answers, and now that they are a short staircase away, I'm not sure I want them quite that bad anymore. I take a deep breath and scan the bottom of the stairs again with my flashlight, the gray tile at the bottom striking a familiar chord inside my head.

It is the tile that I remember from my dream.

From my reclaimed memory.

“Come see,” something inside my head says as the urge to go down the stairs rises inside me.

I swing the light upwards to see if there’s a room beyond the stairs but I can’t see much. My light doesn’t penetrate the thick blackness of whatever else is hidden down there. I scan again, moving my flashlight slowly until a glimmer of something leaps out at me from the darkness below and a handful of words scream inside my head.

Golden.

Glowing.

Familiar.

Eyes.

Two orbs hover in the darkness at the bottom of the stairs, glimmering brilliantly as my flashlight hits them.

I startle, letting loose a tiny scream and nearly dropping the flashlight as my pulse skyrockets and my heart leaps to my throat. A sense of dread rises inside my gut and I whirl around, racing away from the door as fast as my feet can carry me. A shriek rises from behind me, but I don’t stop no matter how much a strange voice inside my own head is urging me to turn back.

To let whatever is behind me take me away into the deep, dark basement.

My boots scrape over the hardwood floors and dirty tile as the distinct feeling that I’m being followed creeps up my spine, pushing me even faster towards the light streaming in the front door of the building.

I throw myself out of the building and into the sunlight, but my feet keep going like they’ve grown minds of their own. Where before they couldn’t move an inch, now I couldn’t stop if you paid me and I race to my truck like the devil himself is behind me.

I fumble with my keys, cursing as they jingle in my shaking hands before I’m able to unlock the door and throw myself onto the driver’s side seat. I slam the lock on the door as I gasp for breath, sweat dripping down my face and my flashlight still clutched in my hands. With wide, terrified eyes I watch the front door of the building carefully but nothing emerges behind me.

Nothing has followed me out here.

I’m safe.

“Fucking hell,” I breathe as I reach for the handle to crack the window a little bit and peel off my heavy coat. I wipe at the sweat coating my brow as

the breeze ripples through the trees overhead, carrying cheerful birdsong to my ears to soothe the fear that still rumbles inside me.

The medical ward was real.

My dream was a memory.

I know this now with more clarity than I had before. It rings true inside my head and I know I spent time there when I was at Allworth. As I turn the truck on so I can get the hell out of here, another thing rings true inside my head that sends a shiver down my spine.

I know those eyes in the basement.

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Chapter Thirteen

Rook

He is spiraling.

Drowning.

I can see it in him when he returns from his trip to Allworth Academy. I know he went despite telling me he wouldn't.

I knew the memory would draw him there.

He sits across from me at the table now in the evening hours, silent and pensive as he picks at a bowl of soup.

Our mother's recipe.

One he loves, yet can't bring himself to eat.

"I went to Allworth," he says.

"I know."

He doesn't look surprised.

"Did you follow me there?" he asks instead.

"No. How would I have done that?"

He shrugs.

Eyes me carefully like he is searching for a lie.

Turns back to poking at his soup.

I take a bite of my strawberry jam toast as he lifts a scoop to his mouth and sips the broth before dropping the bits of carrot and chicken back into his bowl.

He turns his head down.

He stares at his dinner.

He's been down this path before, though he doesn't remember it yet.

I have tried to make it different this time, but I have failed.

I have tried to ease his worries, but what is coming is inevitable.

Unless I kill him and in doing so, kill myself.

Maybe that is the better option.

If I cannot live with him, I will not live without him.

We may both die anyway.

The forest is always watching.

“I was thinking we should take a good look at the fields before planting season,” I offer. “Some of the land could be sold, perhaps. Hank and I are working on coming up with a plan that should sustain the farm but let us sell off what we can’t manage.”

“Okay,” Nathan replies, staring down into his soup bowl.

He does not offer another word.

“How was your day?” I ask, taking a spoonful of too salty chicken broth.

“Fine,” he says, stabbing at a piece of chicken with his spoon.

“Are you not hungry?” I try.

He shrugs.

He doesn’t lift a morsel to his mouth.

He just sits and stabs.

Stabs.

Stabs.

My stomach flutters with unease as I watch.

This will end at the beginning again..

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Chapter Fourteen

Nathan

Pacing has become my friend instead of sleeping.

My bare feet know the path across the floor as routine now, from my door to the window and back again. Each step brings a hint of familiarity to it and I know I have done this before.

I have stayed up for nights on end, head full of too many thoughts that creep into my dreams.

Golden glowing eyes.

Feathers.

Quills.

Claws.

Teeth.

Things that are slowly starting to drive me a bit mad since the only other person here refuses to admit that I know what I know.

I know what I know.

And so instead of sleeping, I pace.

The house around me is eerily silent. Rook's music went off a while ago and I assume he is sleeping because I haven't heard a single footstep on the hardwood and I've been listening carefully.

I'm listening very carefully.

I've cracked the window that leads to the porch just in case I need to be listening to things outside too, but so far only the wind has greeted me tonight.

Tomorrow, I will leave this place.

I think.

I've packed my bags anyway and my intention is to climb into my truck and get the hell out of here. I need to be away from this house, this farm and everything else that comes with it.

Away from memories and dreams.

Away from Rook.

That last bit sticks in my throat, squeezing me from the inside until I feel like I have to puke, but I have to leave. No matter what pull he has over me that is keeping me here, I have to break free.

I have to go so I can pretend none of this ever happened and the family farm can return to simply being a place I lived once in my lifetime and I can choose the amount of information I share with people I meet. I can decide that my childhood was good.

That my parents loved me before they died.

I can pretend anything as long as I'm away from here and the feeling of sinking into deep water that has taken up residence inside of me.

My dad's hat sits on top of my packed bag and I pause in my pacing to grab it, running my fingers over the soft brim. When I start moving again, I bring it with me, adding a new element to my pacing by skating my hand on the edge of the brim over and over again.

It would piss my dad off to see it being handled like this.

But he's dead and that doesn't matter much anymore.

I grabbed one of the rooster knickknacks from the kitchen earlier and tucked that into the back pocket of my bag as well. It's a small ceramic rooster ornament I remember buying her for Mother's Day one year. Something to remember my mom by aside from the scrapes in the concrete I saw on my first day here.

Funny, now that I think of it.

Their deaths brought me back and I haven't thought of it much since the day we put them in the ground.

How sad.

I'll have more time to think about it when I get back to Hopper's farm and can breathe.

Yes.

I'm sure I'll have time to consider my dead parents when I can sleep without dreaming of golden eyes, claws and feathers in the darkness. When my brain has more to focus on than lies and medical wards at boarding

schools for troubled youth and the sick feeling of being watched wherever I go.

My chest squeezes uncomfortably as I again think of leaving Rook.

I'm still here and already I can feel a strange, sad loneliness sinking into me at even the thought that when I go in the morning, he will not be with me.

It's strange to miss something that is still here.

It's even stranger to miss something I'm fairly sure I need to get away from.

I think about that for a moment, the need to keep pacing dwindling inside me to be replaced with a sense of cold loneliness. A desolate wasteland opens in my mind and threatens to drag me under, tears springing to my eyes out of sheer nowhere.

I'm cracking.

I'm fucking cracking apart.

I don't even know why I'm crying. I'm not sad, but it feels like… it feels like my heart is tearing itself in half to even consider leaving Rook behind. There's an ache that's settled in behind my breastbone and I can hardly breathe around it.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Maybe… maybe I won't go. Maybe I'll stay. Keep trying to prod and poke at memories here with Rook. My traitor heart warms at the thought and I know now that I'm well and truly fucked.

Almost as fucked as I cam when my bedroom door opens and Rook walks in, arms crossed as he stares at my pacing back and forth for a few seconds.

"Can't sleep?" he asks.

I pull up to a stop in front of him, staring down into his golden eyes. Eyes that I am quite certain I may have seen glowing like Christmas lights in his skull on occasion.

Eyes that now are so full of concern that the ache in my chest is prodding at me again.

"Not really," I offer, even as part of my brain screams danger at me as loud as it possibly can. I ripple with confliction and start pacing again.

If I don't pace, I will either punch him in the face or kiss him to death.

One of the two.

Maybe both.

“I see you’re packed,” he says, trying to start a conversation as he did when we were at the dinner table. “Does that mean you intend to leave?”

“Tomorrow,” I reply, as half of me rejoices and the other half dies.

“Will you come back?”

No.

Never again.

Maybe.

I don’t even know how to answer that, so I simply don’t. Instead, I resume pacing, wandering this same path across the bedroom floor under his watchful gaze.

At least this time I know he’s watching me. Not like those other times where I think he might be watching me, but maybe he isn’t.

But maybe he is.

I catch a glimpse of his clawed, dark hands out of the corner of my eye.

I blink, and they’re gone.

I glance down at his feet and see long black talons.

I blink, and he has toes again.

Fuck, I’m so confused with what’s real and what isn’t. My head is a mess of memories and thoughts that spark and catch fire like that’s proof of something, only to die the moment I look at Rook and see his very normal human face.

And a very normal human body.

I stop pacing and move to stand in front of him, looking at the pajama pants and blue t-shirt he wears. The plugs are still in his earlobes and I’m sure those are human things.

Human.

Not bird.

I have to know.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I reach for the hem of his shirt.

He laughs softly, raising his arms as I yank up his shirt to his chest, staring into pale, smooth flesh.

“No feathers,” he offers, moving to remove his entire shirt. He drops it on the floor and does a small spin in front of me and I swear I can hear his talons clicking on the hardwood.

“I’m fucking losing my mind,” I say. Or mean to say, anyway. It comes out of my mouth like a cry for help. A wail born from sheer exhaustion.

“No, you’re not.” He moves forward to cup my head in his unclawed hands, placing his cool, smooth palms against my cheeks. “You’re not losing your mind, Nathan.”

“Promise?” I ask, finding myself desperate for his answer while knowing I can’t trust a word he says.

“I promise.”

A lie.

Or the truth. Either way it soothes me. Warms me up to hear his voice and sends my heart fluttering like a bird in a cage. He smiles at me, still holding me in his hands, his plump lips inches away from mine and everything inside me grinds to a halt. I breathe into the space between us as he examines my eyes with his and I am struck with a sudden yearning.

A need crawls up my spine and I can hear my breath falling audibly from my lungs as I stare at him. He moves his hands away from my face the tiniest bit and it feels like he’s ripping my skin away with his fingers, leaving me open and exposed. He moves his hands back to my cheeks and I am soothed, but it’s not what I want.

It’s not enough.

I want him.

My god, do I ever fucking want him.

A wild urge surges through me and I dive forward, slamming my lips against his and pushing his hands away from my face. He startles for the briefest of moments but as his arms move around my bare back, he leans into the kiss hard. His tongue snakes out of his mouth to wind alongside mine in the space between our sealed lips. I groan softly as he slides his tongue along mine, then pulls away because it’s heaven and hell at the same time and I’m burning for more.

Rook smiles his crooked smile, then reaches for the hem of his pajama pants. In a quick motion he strips them off, tossing them to the floor along with his shirt. With a small laugh, he spins in front of me slowly, giving me an eyeful of every inch of his beautiful body.

His human body.

Covered in human skin and complete with a pert, round butt and a thin, long cock that is slowly growing in arousal.

“No feathers,” he whispers, but it sounds more like a question than anything else.

“No feathers,” I agree.

He gives me a satisfied smile, then steps closer. Then closer again, each footstep a measured one against the hardwood of my bedroom floor. I glance down at his human toes, then back up at his beautiful face, the peaks and valleys of his fine features carved into his pale skin. Another step brings him against my body, the heat radiating off of him nearly burning as he raises his arms.

A quick movement I hardly manage to detect has my own pajama pants on the floor at my feet. My mind reels as Rook steps back and looks at me, casting his eyes from the top of my head to the bottom of my bare feet.

I am judged in this moment, by eyes that appear to capture far too much than they should and my stomach wobbles as my cock thickens. Rook grins and moves towards me again, invading whatever space I take up with his own body, his own heat.

And then, he's caught me.

Or is it that I've caught him?

He is in my arms, though I don't recall how. He is a chaos of teeth that nibble at my skin and lips that press against my neck. Fingers that dig into my arms as I cup his ass in my cheeks so tight that I fear if I loosen my grip I will send us both tumbling to the floor. Off-kilter I stumble backwards, my calves hitting the bed behind me but he doesn't stop moving on my body.

He doesn't stop kissing and licking and sucking at the skin of my neck and shoulders as I pull us down to the mattress. Instead, he shoves me down onto my back, perching on my hips with his knees bent, thighs splayed open wide.

"You smell like spring," he whispers as he licks a stripe up my neck and grips my earlobe in teeth that feel a bit too sharp.

I swallow hard and remind myself of human teeth as he lets go of my skin and rises to hold himself above me on his knees. He reaches out and places his hand on my chest, digging his fingernails in enough that I can feel the pinpricks of claws I cannot see in my skin.

I tremble with a strange mix of fear, uncertainty and sheer arousal as he cocks his head to the side slightly, feathers appearing on the tops of his shoulders only to disappear when I blink again. My head spins and he grins, reaching down between his legs to take himself in hand.

"Rook," I murmur as he gives his long, thin cock a stroke, his eyes stuck on mine so intensely I can feel my cheeks bloom with heat. The head of his

dick pops in and out of his tight fist and he writhes on my lap with every stroke, pressing down against my own hardened cock with his hips and ass.

It is torture.

It is perfect.

It's fucking madness and all I can do is reach out, place my hands on his hips and hold on tight.

I groan as his ass brushes my dick again and again, the tease winding me up into a coiled ball inside my gut. He grins, his lips curving upwards into a knowing smirk, as he strokes his own cock.

"What if I come?" he asks, his voice a low, dangerous growl. "What if I come right now without giving you anything in return?"

The only response I can come up with is an impatient groan that causes a laugh to burst from between his lips. Another cheeky, wicked grin follows that and he moves up my body faster than I can comprehend, placing the tip of his cock on my lips.

I open on instinct and he coos softly, running his hand through my hair as he pushes the head of his dick into my mouth. He tastes of salt and sweetness, of crisp snow and citrus against my tongue. I lap eagerly at what little of him I am given as he pulls out then pushes in a bit further. His gentle hold on my hair turns hard, fingers twining through the strands as he slips in and out of my mouth. Drool coats my chin and I tighten my lips, adding a bit of suction that sends a ripple through his body I can feel against my tongue. My own cock aches with neglect and I reach out to touch myself as Rook fucks into my mouth hard, his cock slipping so deep into my throat that I swear I'm losing the ability to breathe.

As if he can sense this, he pulls out of my mouth, loosening his grip on my hair as I gasp for air. A string of saliva links my mouth to his cock and he reaches out to gently run his hands over my face, tracing the curves of my nose, cheeks, lips with his fingertips. His eyes are darkened with lust, but I can see the glow inside the rings of gold that circle his pupils.

It should scare me more.

In the basement of Allworth Academy, it scared me more but here in this moment all I want is to crawl inside his skin and share the space with him.

I am losing it.

Clearly, I am losing my mind.

I don't have time to think more on that though because Rook takes his cock in hand and places it on my lips. I open my mouth and he grins, gently

patting my cheek gently like I'm a dog that's done something good but he doesn't slide himself into me again. Instead, he slips back down my body, to knock my hand off my cock and take it into his own hand.

I groan as he strokes me slowly, the pressure nowhere near what I want but enough to send a shiver shooting through me. I push my hips up, asking for more. Asking for faster, but he doesn't move any faster. He simply strokes me, long and slow in his hand as his eye bore holes into mine. Just when I think I'm about to die of frustration, he stops and raises himself high onto his knees. He hovers for a few moments before sinking down and my eyes bug out of my head as the head of my cock slips into his warm, slick hole.

How is he slick?

The question pops into my mind only to fade away as he cants his hips and more of my dick is engulfed in his body. He lets loose a soft moan as he rises the tiniest bit, then lowers onto me again. His hands move to my chest and fingers that feel too sharp dig into my skin as he moves again, sliding me further and further into him with each small motion.

My hands move to his hips and I hold on as he starts riding my cock, his eyes closed now and head tipped back. Sweat beads on his forehead and I get the odd notion that I want to lick it off of him but I am not close enough to do that. His body is tight around mine and far more slick inside than I had imagined it being. Every movement of my cock in and out of his body is fluid and warm and perfect.

This is perfection.

He is perfect.

As he rises and falls on my thick cock, the scent of pure winter and lemons seeps into my nose, sending my head spinning and thoughts reeling. He tastes like he smells and I don't know how I could ever go back to not knowing these things.

How could I ever leave him?

Rook opens his eyes and meets mine, the glow within them catching in the scant traces of light that filter through the bedside lamp. His body ripples before me as he writhes on me, feathers sprouting from his upper back that peek over the edges of his shoulders.

"Fuck," I murmur, blinking my eyes to make this vision go away.

There are no feathers.

There can't be any feathers.

Humans don’t have feathers.

His back fades to pure skin again, only to burst with pitch black feathers once more as he pushes himself down hard onto my cock. I close my eyes and let myself feel because seeing is not helping me.

Seeing is not my friend.

Feeling is.

His scent is.

I ripple with pleasure as I let go of what my brain is making up and linger in the moment of just feeling the slick, warmth of his body squeezing my cock tight.

“Fuck, Rook,” I mumble as he lets loose a moan, followed by a whimper of pleasure and desire.

“This is all I ever wanted,” he pants, hips working at a furious pace now. “All I have ever needed. You are mine, Nathan.”

A bold declaration, but it rings true inside me. I am his, but there’s more to it than simply that. He is mine.

Rook is mine.

I know what I know.

My body clenches and tightens as I draw close to release. Rook’s breath is falling in pants now and I take a chance, opening my eyes to look at his handsome face. I haven’t ever really thought that a man was beautiful before but that’s the only word in my mind as I gaze into his eyes.

“I’m close,” I warn. He nods, licking his lips as his eyes fall shut for a split second. When they open again, the glow hidden inside them seems brighter somehow. Bolder where it circles his dark pupils.

“Do you trust me?” he asks.

“Should I?”

“No.” Before I have a chance to even register his answer, he leans forward and sinks his teeth into my neck. I cry out in pain, digging my hands into his hips hard as a strange bolt of pleasure rushes down my spine. My body convulses and I come, a feral noise barking out of me into the stillness of the room around me. I shudder and writhe on the bed as my hips push upwards, my cock spilling into his body in bursts. Rook holds me tight in his mouth as a low growl escapes his throat, his cock spurting pools of white cum onto my belly as he buries my dick deep inside him. The ache of his teeth in me shoots down my neck and into my chest like a bolt of lightning, and I swear I can feel every pinpoint where they sit in my throat.

“Let go,” I whisper, pushing at his hips to get him off of me as everything crashes back down around me. Rook growls again and I can feel the strange pull of blood leaving my body. Feathers sprout over his back as he sucks at the holes his teeth have created in me, sending dread creeping down my spine. I push at him harder, my heart beating fast in my chest as panic slicks along my spine.

Feathers.

Claws.

Teeth in my neck.

Blood spilling into Rook’s mouth.

Not human.

Not human at all.

He lets me go as I shove at him again, eyes wide as he stares down at me. His hand covers my eyes and a terrified scream builds inside of me but I don’t get a chance to let it loose.

“Sleep,” Rook murmurs, and I slip away from all thought and reason.

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Chapter Fifteen

Rook

He will hate me for what I have done.

Yet, I cannot find it in me to care.

Still, I sit upon his softening cock.

Still, I lick at the wounds in his skin to close them up.

To hide my sins.

His heart trembles as he sleeps, and rightfully so.

I have done as monsters would do and in doing so, have become a monster myself.

Yet, I cannot find anything but peace inside me.

I am filled with desire and wanting, with a mountain spring and warmth. Becoming a monster is a small price to pay for this deep well of feeling simmering low within my bones.

If only I could will his cock back to life to fuck myself on it again and again until we die buried in each other, I would be even happier in this moment.

The forest may be watching but they can go fuck themselves.

I defy anyone to take him from me now.

"Mine," I whisper as I press my lips to his.

Forever.

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Chapter Sixteen

Nathan

I wake up with a gasp, tangled in my sheets. My heart races like a drum and I scramble off my bed, hand clutching at my throat. The world spins and dizziness takes hold. I wobble on my feet for a second at the edge of my bed, reaching out to steady myself with a hand on the mattress.

Breathing heavily, I rush to the door and throw it open, hand still holding onto my neck because the last thing I remember feeling is teeth and blood. I race to the open bathroom door and close it behind me, then lock it just in case Rook comes looking for me.

He's out there somewhere and that thought doesn't fill me with anything but dread.

Staring in the mirror, I carefully remove my hand from my throat, certain I will find evidence of Rook's lies in my flesh.

But what I find is… nothing.

Not a single wound, or scrape. No imprints left behind by teeth.

Nothing.

"How?" I ask my reflection as my face grows pale in the mirror. My eyes are circled with darkness like I haven't slept a night through in weeks and that tracks because I probably haven't.

I touch my neck, exactly where I remember Rook sinking his teeth into me, and find nothing. Not even a twinge to let me know that I'm not making this up. That my mind isn't creating shit that isn't real. That isn't possible.

“No,” I mumble to myself, as my search for something leaves me empty handed. “No, I swear it happened.”

“Nathan?” Rook calls from beyond the locked door and I startle, turning to face the white painted wood. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I call back, my voice hoarse and shaky. “I’m fine.”

There is a slight pause before he speaks again. “Breakfast is almost ready.”

“Okay. Okay, yeah. I’ll be there soon. I’m just… “ Pretty sure you bit me and drank my blood last night after we fucked, I add inside my head as I let the words I’m saying out loud trail off.

He laughs. “Do what you gotta do, then come eat.”

I call back an agreement, then force a deep breath of air into my lungs. I hold it for a moment, then let it go slowly. My head aches and I'm still a bit wobbly, but I’m sure I’ll be okay.

I think.

I linger for a few more minutes in front of the mirror, staring at my own face before moving back to the door. With shaky fingers, I undo the lock and turn the knob, stepping out into the hallway. The scent of bacon sizzling in a pan meets my nose and the sound of humming greets me as I make my way towards the kitchen.

Carefully.

Slowly.

“Morning,” Rook says, turning around as I walk into the room. He’s dressed in a pair of baggy black sweatpants and no shirt, human as ever with his perfectly pink nipples.

No feathers.

I don’t know if I should trust it.

He turns around and holds up a frying pan full of perfect bacon. “I made lots. Figured you might be hungry after last night.”

His cheeks pink slightly as he says it and I am struck with how lovely he looks and how terrified I am of him.

“About that,” I say as I slide my body onto my usual seat at the table. “Did we… uh…”

Rook laughs, his normal human eyes glimmering at me. “We did. Yes, and then you immediately fell asleep. Thanks for that, by the way. I suppose it’s a compliment but I would have loved a hug at least.”

“I fell asleep?” Wrong.

“Yeah,” he says, making his way to the table with a plate and the pan of bacon. “I went to get a towel to clean up and when I got back, you were fast asleep.”

That feels… wrong yet a piece of me wants to believe it.

I eye him carefully as he smiles, his perfect human teeth sitting perfectly within his human mouth. “I don’t remember.”

“Wow.”

“No,” I protest. “Not that. I remember that. I don’t remember… after.”

“Because you fell asleep.”

“Yeah.” Maybe, but what else can I say here? I remember you biting my neck and drinking my blood while my cock was still buried in you?

That is madness.

Rook piles my plate high with bacon, then heads back to the kitchen. He messes about with another pan and slowly the world around him starts to melt as feathers emerge on his upper back. I hold my breath as he moves towards me again, a bowl of scrambled eggs clutched in claws as sharp as razors. I stare at them for a moment, then follow the trail of scaled skin on his hands upwards to the patch of feathers that covers his forearms, trying my best to not scream. The sound of talons clicking on the tile floor accompanies him and I force myself to blink. It worked before to clear my head of the bullshit I’m probably making up, it should work this time.

Blink.

Feathers.

I blink again.

Still feathers.

I blink one more time and see feathers and claws.

“Something in your eye?” Rook asks, and I catch a glimpse of sharpened teeth nestled behind his perfect plump lips.

“No,” I choke out as I grab a slice of bacon and shove it in my mouth to keep from screaming.

He tilts his head to the side as he does often and I’m struck with a strange memory from my past. A campfire of boy scouts and a strange tale told by the quietest boy.

Bird people.

The ones that live with us without us knowing.

The ones that leave and take all memory with them.

It’s a bullshit campfire tale designed to scare little children, but what if…

What if it’s true?

My heart kicks up a notch in my chest as Rook sits across from me, putting a plate of toast and bacon on the table in front of him. He slathers the bread with strawberry jam and takes a big bite with his sharpened teeth, then smiles at me as he chews.

The scent of citrus and cold emanates across the table, tickling my nose and enticing me to take a deep breath but I don’t. Not this time. I feel like I’ve lost my mind and I don’t know what I can trust, but I know this much:

If he is a monster, this is a trick and I won’t fall for it again.

“Oh,” Rook says, rising from his chair. “I forgot your coffee.”

I don’t even want coffee. This bacon is already churning my stomach up into a frenzy but I don’t speak. He turns and heads to the coffeemaker on the counter, talons clicking on the tile as he goes. Sunlight streams in from the window above the sink and I catch a glimpse of something else entirely that makes my blood run cold.

Peeking out from deep within the patch of dense, black feathers on his back is a single, golden quill.



I can’t leave.

I tried to earlier. I grabbed my bag and loaded up my truck, intending to head away from this place forever. My stomach started churning the moment I stepped on the gas and my pulse skyrocketed, leaving me woozy and exhausted behind the wheel. In spite of all that, I still I tried my damndest to get the hell away from this place that was once my home.

But I’m still here.

I only made it halfway to the highway that leads towards Coopman’s Gap before my heart started burning up inside my chest like I was seconds away from a heart attack and my brain started screaming at me to turn around and go back.

I am stuck in this place.

I am stuck with Rook.

From my spot on the porch, I can see him in the fields chatting with Hank about the plans for next planting season. For some strange reason, my traitorous heart warms uncomfortably the moment I lay eyes on him, and

my stomach does an odd swoop. The memory of what he looked like the night he came to my room pushes itself to the forefront to make me forget what he looks like now.

I force myself to look past whatever image my mind is conjuring up to see the truth.

Rook is a monster.

A bird.

A creature with claws, talons and feathers like some kind of overgrown crow-human hybrid.

Something that only I can apparently see because Hank didn't seem to note anything being different when he showed up earlier this morning. He greeted us with the same smile he usually has on his weather-beaten face for Rook, the same stoic nod in my direction. I don't think he can see what I now can only see when I look at Rook because I'm sure he'd be running away screaming if he could.

I'm starting to wonder if I should be the one running away screaming.

Oh wait.

I tried and here I am, sitting on the porch of this house while my adopted half bird brother chats with a farmhand about how much wheat to sow once the snow melts. The adopted half bird brother I fucked last night, might I add.

In all of this, that is the one piece that keeps rattling inside me the hardest. How good it felt to sink into his warm, slick heat like I was meant to be there. Like it was inevitable that we'd end up joining in that way and once we'd done it, the world opened up my eyes so I could see clearly. It's at odds with how I feel here in the waking light of the farm at mid-morning.

It's at odds with the strange fear that creeps up when I consider that he has that quill growing out of his back. Every so often, it catches on the sunlight overhead and glimmers, attracting my attention instantly to it and pushing my brain into the recent past where I stood by a crooked guardrail and torn up concrete.

"Did you kill my parents?" I whisper, daring to say the words out loud for the first time since the thought first tumbled through my mind.

Is he capable of doing that and then crying at their funeral as he did?

Something about that whole scenario churns my stomach, giving me a deep seated sense that I am wrong but I have nothing else to go on.

I have a golden quill in his pitch black feathers that looks similar enough to one I swear I found where they crashed.

I have an adopted brother who has become a bird creature.

And in thinking that, I realize how wild it sounds.

I'm clearly losing my shit.

I need to back up, take a deep breath and remember that I don't genuinely know anything. I have feelings and my brain has been nudging suggestions at me since I arrived, but there's hardly been any concrete proof.

I'm not sure if it's really a quill or not.

Shit, I'm not even sure the rest of these bird features Rook suddenly has are even real. Maybe I'm manifesting this myself with my own fucked up brain.

For all I know, this is a hallucination and if that is true, anything is possible.

When I close my eyes, I swear I can still feel his teeth deep in my throat, but maybe that was a dream.

Or a memory.

Or something I can't explain.

I know what I know.

I know what I know.

I know… that I need to get away.

I need to get back to Hopper's place where everything made sense and Rook didn't exist, but how?

How can I go if the moment I try, all I want to do is turn around and come back here to him? I want his hands on my skin and his scent in my nose so bad that a deep yearning has sprung up inside me as I sit here and watch him.

And want him.

And crave him.

And hate him at the same time.

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Chapter Seventeen

Rook

There is a price to pay for all things.

A time to sow.

A time to reap.

A time to repay debts and a time to forge new ones.

I remember this as I stare into the mirror hung on the wall of my bedroom.

I remember this as I reach for the pliers and snake my hands behind my back, searching for what I must remove.

When I have finally found it, I place the pliers at the base.

I pinch them shut.

I grit my teeth, hold my breath and pull hard.

I have done this countless times, but still I am unprepared.

Pain bursts from my back, radiating down my arms and the pliers nearly slip from my grasp.

I gasp, letting loose the breath I was holding in.

This will not be easy tonight.

Sometimes, one quick yank is all it takes, but sometimes I have to pull at the damn thing endlessly with all my strength.

It seems this one is the latter.

With a small sigh, I grip my tool again, twisting my hands behind my back once more to locate the quill in my feathers with my fingertips. When I am successful, I make sure to keep my free hand on it and move the other to grip the base of it with my pliers.

I take a deep breath.

I pull.

And pull.

Until tears spring to my eyes and my skin screams at me to stop.

And then I keep pulling.

Finally, with a sickening crack that nearly echoes in the silence of my bedroom, it pops free from my body and I nearly fall over in relief. I drop everything I am holding to the floor and shiver with the pain that follows. My back stings and aches, blood trickling beneath my feathers and falling onto the hardwood to pool at my feet in hot, sticky droplets.

That one was deep.

Too deep, really.

I stoop to pick it up and hold it in front of my eyes, examining the length and width of it. I have not had one grow quite this long in a while. It is gorgeous, solid and heavy in my hand and I know why.

It is Nathan’s quill.

Created by my body with the blood I have taken from his.

It is not the hollow ones I create on my own.

This one I hold is pure gold, through and through, and I will not let it go.

I will keep it.

It will not go into the collection of hollows contained in a metal box at the bank.

It will not go into the hollow offering for the nest I did not return to.

Sometimes we keep what we sow.

Sometimes we keep what we reap.

This one is mine.

And his.

And ours.

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Chapter Eighteen

Nathan

There's a hush that sinks into this house at night that I used to find calming. Being so far out of town means that the sky is lit up with nothing but stars and the moon that lingers high overhead, shimmering and silver. There are no cars rushing by, no chatter of people, no dogs barking… there is nothing except the fall breeze that ripples through the trees lining the property and the sound of crickets in the fields meets my ears.

It used to settle me down when I was little, but now as I sit on the porch staring out into the darkness of the farmyard, I can't find that peace.

Rook went to bed a few hours ago and I snuck out here to sit and think the moment his music turned off. While it's not much better, the silence inside the house felt far more oppressive and thick than the silence out here does, so at least there's that. It isn't quite comfortable, but it's better than lingering in the house wide awake and waiting for Rook to realize how I see him now. I watched him all day, trying to make his body turn back to normal in my mind and failing, so either I've absolutely cracked or he really is a half bird monster.

I'm not sure which is worse.

I don't know if there is a worse.

No, actually there is a worse and as I think of it everything inside me wobbles like jello. The worse is that when I think of his body, feathers and all, a want flits through me like a bolt of lightning. When I consider the gentle way he smiles at me, even with sharpened teeth, warmth pools inside me and I have to stop myself from running into his room and demanding he

let me kiss him until we both can't breathe. He's my adopted half bird monster brother and apparently my dick is completely on board with every piece of that information, even if my brain is screaming at me to run as fast and as far as I can away from this place.

There is danger here.

I know there is.

I locked myself in my room before I was taken to Allworth for a reason and though I can't quite find that reason in my memory, when I do think about it alarm bells start ringing low in my brain and my body involuntarily stiffens like it's preparing for an attack that I can't see coming.

Or my mind is broken entirely and I'm on a path that leads directly to me being locked up for my own safety. Maybe something like this is why I was sent to Allworth in the first place. The line I've been fed is that I was a troubled youth, but maybe whatever was troubling me back then lies inside my own brain and being back here is picking it apart again.

Maybe this is why I was sent away from my home to whatever is at the bottom of the stairs with gray tile floors and nauseating blue painted walls.

And the glowing eyes in the darkness.

My entire body shivers in response as I recall those eyes. I'm sure they were real. Something was there to stop me from going down into that basement.

Or attack me if I did.

I think.

Maybe.

"You're fucking losing it, Nathan," I murmur to myself, my thoughts a swirling pool of confusion and body rippling with unease. I sigh, leaning back in my chair again as the cycle of thoughts starts again back at the beginning, running what I know and don't know through my head like a movie I can't seem to find the pause button for.

And then a flicker of light from the darkness catches my attention and I go stock still, heart clenching in my chest.

I grip the arm rests of the chair I'm sitting in tight as I stare into the pitch black space by the equipment barn. Even the stars don't permeate the shadows made by the buildings and machines clustered around the sides of it, but I am sure something is there.

Or someone.

My skin prickles with awareness, goosebumps dotting my skin beneath the thick plaid jacket I wear and drawing fear out to dance along my spine. I sit upright, braced like I could run away at any moment, eyes focused on the equipment barn as I watch and wait for another bolt of dim, golden light.

But what I am given instead is the slow creak of the screen door at the front of the house opening, the hinges groaning softly as it is closed again with a gentle thud.

Rook steps out of the house and I sink back into the darkness, heart racing as I try my best to not be seen here. If he turns his head right, I'm fucked. He'll spot me for sure even though I'm tucked back into the farthest corner of the porch. He lingers for a moment, adjusting the hoodie and jeans he wears that cover most of his bird parts and I almost believe I'm seeing a human Rook again until I look down at his bare feet anticipating toes and finding sharpened talons instead.

He steps down the stairs of the porch and heads out into the night, making his way away from the house. I follow him with my eyes until he disappears into the shadows alongside the equipment barn where that faint light was flickering moments before he stepped outside, then without thinking twice I rise to my own feet.

I should follow.

I should sneak over there and see what he's doing.

I should go back inside the fucking house and pretend none of this is happening.

Is it even really happening?

Caution ripples through me but curiosity wins and I slowly make my way down off the porch, taking care to step as gently as I possibly can so I'm not heard. I might be a fair distance away from where he went, but I have no idea if he has better hearing than the average human or not and I definitely don't want to get caught.

I carefully make my way to the darkness at the side of the equipment barn, tucking myself along the wooden wall on the outside as I search for Rook. There's a bunch of old machinery here that needs repair or sale, a combine and a few rusty attachments that sit in the tall grass. I tuck myself in between the wall and a huge CLAAS tractor, a bit amused to see it here when we were always a John Deere farm before. That tiny thread of amusement is snuffed out as I skirt the corner at the back of the equipment

barn and find what I've followed out here. A soft glow, like someone has lit a candle, emanates from the light above the back door to the barn and a murmur of conversation reaches my ears. I have to stop myself from throwing my body onto the ground like a baby deer that's spotted danger because there is clearly danger back here.

He isn't alone.

Rook is not alone back here along the tree line.

Fear races down my spine as I spot another… creature. A tall, thin creature that stands before him on two solid bird legs. Feathers sprout from his back and torso leading up to a chest and face that are oddly human, yet strikingly avian. His arms and coated in thick, black feathers and I catch a hint of a claw as he reaches towards Rook with his hand.

"How many?" he rumbles, the words nearly echoing out of him in the abject silence of the rest of the farm.

"Five," Rook says, holding out a burlap sack.

The creature pulls the burlap sack from Rook's hand, opening it to peer inside for a moment with eyes far more birdlike than Rook's. He reaches in with his claws and my entire body goes rigid as he pulls out a single, thin gold quill.

Just like the one I found at the crash site.

Just like the one Rook told me wasn't real.

My head spins as he lifts it to the scant light overhead, the gold shimmering in the darkness for a moment before he puts it back into the small burlap bag.

"Not enough," the creature squawks.

"It's all I have," Rook says, folding his arms across his chest. He cocks his head to the side, his lips drawn tight into a scowl.

"Rook. It is not enough. He will never accept this. We cannot sustain on five."

"I don't give a shit about the flock sustaining. This is a purchase, you know this as well as I do. Five is the price and five is what I offer."

"But you have more," the creature says, scanning Rook's body from top to bottom before fixing his horrid eyes on his face once more. "You must have more. You must have better. We know things, Little Rook. We know what has come home to roost."

"You keep him out of this," Rook hisses, lunging forward to grip the creature's feathered neck in his own claws. "He is none of your business

and you will leave him alone.”

“Will we?” the creature chokes out, defiant even as Rook is clearly squeezing breath from him. “Are you to feast at long last?”

“Nathan is mine to do with as I please,” Rook declares, dragging the bird human in his hand down to his height. He stares into his dreadful eyes as my blood runs cold.

A sound of amusement chortles out of the bird creature as Rook lets his neck go. He rises to his full height again, feathers rippling and talons clicking as he regains control over himself, all the while staring down at Rook.

“Careful, Little Rook,” he whispers. “The forest has many eyes.”

Rook stares up at the other monster and his face softens for a split second, scowl melting to a tender smile, before his expression hardens again. “Get the fuck off my property.”

The creature rumbles with laughter, then steps away from Rook, clutching the sack in his hands. I stay right where I am, heartbeat ringing in my ears and body tensing like it wants me to run, but I know that to run would be to make myself a target. Rook stays where he is as well, defiant with his arms across his chest and eyes hardened as the creature moves beneath the trees to be swallowed by the darkness. The crack of branches and crunch of leaves from within the woods follows his path until he is gone from sight and sound. Rook sighs into the darkness and deflates where he stands.

I do not move.

I do not dare.

The creature’s words spiral in my head, one of them screaming louder than the others.

Feast.

Feast on him.

Feast on me.

At long last.

“I know you’re there,” Rook says, sending a sliver of fear rushing through me.

I do not answer.

“Nathan, I do not mean you harm,” he continues, but I don’t believe him. “Believe that I have never meant you harm.”

Feast.

“I have only ever wanted to love you. To have you and keep you safe. My soul… it calls to yours. Your soul is mine. It always has been. Since the first moment I saw you sitting by that campfire, I knew it. I would do anything to keep you here. Keep you safe.”

“You’re a fucking monster,” I blurt out from my hiding space in the darkness.

Rook is silent.

He tilts his head up to the sky and I can see a small smile playing on his lips. He nods once, then takes a breath to speak.

“I am your monster, Nathan, and you are my human. Only death can part us now.”

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Chapter Nineteen

Rook

Only death can part us now.

Nathan's footsteps rush away from the side of the barn, echoing through the darkness as he races away from where I stand.

I hear the crunch of his boots on the gravel and the squeak of the wooden stairs at the front of the porch.

The door to the house slams shut.

And he is gone.

He is gone with the knowing of what I am, but more memory remains clouded inside his head. What I did to him on the night he was sent to Allworth is being unraveled thread by thread, but now that he knows what I am, the rest will come undone. I had hoped that things would be different this time.

That he would see that I am his.

And know that he is mine.

And that this seeing and knowing would be enough this time.

That this time, it would be right.

That this time, he wouldn't tear handfuls of feathers from my body.

That he wouldn't draw a blade across my throat.

The path is the same, but since the moment he started asking questions about the past I have tried to alter the outcome.

I have tried to keep us both safe.

I have failed.

Instead of the love and warmth I have tried to create, this knowing will be a tidal wave that rattles him.

Shakes him.

Terrifies him.

Makes him question and draws danger to me once more.

He is as he has always been and so am I.

This will end in bloodshed.

Again.

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Chapter Twenty

Nathan

Only death can part us now.

The words ring in my head like a warning and a threat. I can't seem to shake them regardless of how much I try to make it feel less ominous. There is no way of making them feel more comfortable, even though a piece of me is desperate to make it feel like comfort. I am torn between wanting to run to Rook and demand an explanation, and the way I'm sure he'll tear my throat out with his claws if I try.

He says he won't hurt me, but I don't trust that.

I don't trust anything except myself and even that is wearing thin.

I linger in my bedroom for days, sneaking out only when he's in the fields with Hank to use the bathroom and grab food. Behind closed doors, I spiral. I google search for information about bird people and stumble through articles about monsters, but none of them seem right. I read about Bigfoot and Mothman. Plant-like creatures that leech energy and crossroads demons that strike bargains.

None of it fits.

Not even the article I find about thunderbirds sheds any light on what to do about a bird creature living in your house. Nobody seems to know anything about monsters like Rook, except for a single boy in my memory of a Boy Scout campfire. Quiet and shy Gage telling a story of bird people who move into our homes then leave taking all memory with them lingers in my head long after I've run out of articles to read.

Only Gage may know what I have inside my home, but I don't even have his last name and searching for his first name brings thousands of the wrong faces to my screen.

I don't even know what I'd ask him if I found him, but knowing that one person understood would help ease my brain a bit. Maybe Gage would know if I'm in danger or not, even though that feels like a lot to assume from a conversation between children. Everyone else would think I need to be locked up in some psychiatric unit somewhere I'm sure. Shit, I was starting to consider that maybe I should be medicated myself before Rook confirmed with his own words that he is exactly what I am seeing him to be.

A bird.

A human.

Both at the same time, yet unlike that other far scarier creature that met him behind the equipment barn. I had anticipated Rook following me when I ran to the safety of my room that night, but he didn't.

I hate that being away from him now feels like opening a hollow pit of despair inside my own gut.

It's been days since I last saw him.

He doesn't try to come into my room, but sometimes he calls out to me, asking if I want to come out to the fields with him and Hank. Asking if I want food or if I've managed any sleep. Last night, I swore he was outside my door lingering in the hallway like he was as desperate to be near me as I am to be near him. Every night I hear his music filtering through the door to his bedroom and I am struck with that same sense of want and desire that feels more like a hostage than warmth these days.

I hate it.

I hate him.

I want him and I hate him for making me want him like this.

I am trapped here by the burning in my chest that nearly makes me sob in despair when I so much as think about leaving the farm behind.

I can't leave.

I can't stay.

Only death will part us now and I don't know why that feels terrible and wonderful at the same time.



The world swoops with ultraviolet haze, the sky shaded in brilliant purples and oranges. It’s like a paintbrush was struck over the sky and my head grows fuzzier the longer I stand at my window looking out at the farm. In the deep eggplants and vivid tangerines that bathe the fields, I can pick out the glow of golden yellow eyes, nestled among the branches and hollows of the trees by the equipment shed and I stare right back at them.

I don’t know how many there are but I stare right back at them.

A whisper filters through my mind but is it a voice from out there or something inside my own head speaking to me?

I don’t know.

As always, I do not know anything.

“End it,” the voice whispers, the command rippling through me and drawing me upright at the mouth of the window.

I search for the speaker, but there isn’t one.

“You are in danger,” it urges, the last word echoing through my mind like a record on repeat until my heart feels so shaky it might burst inside my chest.

Danger.

Danger.

Danger.

The world spins and plunges around me and then there I am.

In the hallway outside his room.

His music filters through the air and I sway for a moment on my feet as the beat catches me. Violins swell and my heart swells to match, a fondness trickling through me followed by a shade of doom. I waver on my feet and clutch what is in my hand tighter, feeling the smooth handle settle against my palm.

Safety.

It is safety.

It is ending.

The blade in my hand is everything I need right now to keep myself safe. To get away to where there is no danger.

“End it and come to us. There is no danger here,” the voice whispers inside my mind and I move forward, placing my hand on the door.

I can feel his heartbeat behind the wood, but I must be dreaming things because there is no way that’s real.

The wood pulses under my hand in time with his heart and I know it’s not real.

This isn’t real.

“End it,” the voice urges, insistent as the cries of fear rise inside my head.

My mother screams as the car careens towards the guardrail.

My father braces for impact.

Eyes glow in the darkness of the forest beyond the scrap of pavement that bears gouges and scrapes left behind by the tires of a vehicle rocketing out of control.

A golden quill sits in the concrete.

I blink and blood spills from Rook’s mouth in my dreaming.

In my memory.

In my dreaming memory.

I grip the knife tighter.

The screams get louder until my eyes burn with tears and my head shrieks with agony. My skin scorches in the fire left behind in the wake of the crash and I am standing on concrete and floor at the same time, my brain crashing memories together to create a view of the space around me that includes both a broken car and a door in front of me. Colors swirl in the air as my skin peels away from the heat of the fire and I know I’m dying.

Only death can part us now and maybe I have died.

Maybe this is hell.

“End it,” the voice whispers.

The knob on the door in front of me turns and my heart swoops with fear.

And love.

And revenge.

“Nathan?” Rook asks, as he opens the door.

I lunge at him as my head screams, as tears stream down my face. I aim for his chest, where his heart beats, sending pulsing waves through the room, echoing out in streams of gold and crimson that I can see lingering in the air.

He moves backwards, but I am faster.

I catch him with the knife and it sinks into his chest but the moment it lands in his body, the world rights itself.

The screaming stops.

The streaming of colors surrounding his heart blinks out to reveal the muted shades of wood and deep greens of Rook's bedroom. Cool air sinks in as I come back to my own body, back into my own unburnt skin, and realize what I've done.

Rook's eyes meet mine as the light fades from them and I fall to my knees, reaching for him, grasping at his body as he slumps down onto the floor. Crimson blood trickles from the space I have carved into him and a new scream echoes through the room.

My scream.

A mournful cry of ache and despair rises from my own mouth as I cradle his dying body on my lap.

"No," I whisper, staring down into his pale face. His lips keep opening and closing, eyes blinking fast like he's trying to figure out what happened while I try to figure out the same.

"Nathan," he mumbles, his lips stumbling over the syllables of my name.

"Rook, I didn't… I'm sorry. I don't… I didn't…"

But I did.

I stabbed him.

His hand scrabbles at the knife like he wants to pull it out, but I know that it's the only thing keeping him alive right now. I may not be a doctor or anything, but I know that removing something stuck in someone can be way worse than leaving it in and letting medical professionals handle it. If I yank it out, I'll be doing more damage. He will die for sure, but there's a chance he might not if I can get him help.

"Don't touch it," I say. "I'll call 911. They can save you. They'll take it out and save you and then you can live. I'm so fucking sorry, I thought I was dreaming. Or remembering. Or… I don't fucking know, Rook. I'm all fucked up."

"Nathan," he mutters, slowly fading in and out of consciousness as his hand tries to grab the knife. "Help."

I shake my head as he grows pale, blood trickling out of the wound I put in his chest. His breathing comes in fast, shallow breaths and every single one sends ripples of shame and agony through me. I feel like I'm dying

right along with him and when I blink my eyes, my tears fall onto his cheeks.

“Not the first time,” Rook breathes as his hand stops grabbing at the knife and falls limp at his side.

His breaths turn shallow and I cradle him in my arms trying to figure out why it feels like my own heart has stopped beating. Why suddenly, my own lungs are squeezing in pain like they are the ones that have stopped pushing air in and out of them. My veins are on fire and a silent scream leaves my own mouth as Rook fades away into death, leaving me behind to follow him.

“Foolish fucking humans,” a voice rumbles from within the room and the last thing I see before losing consciousness is a large, bird-like creature crawling through the window of Rook’s bedroom.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Nathan

I drift in death, grasping at shadows that pass me by, trying to hold onto one of them to gain my bearings.

Ahead a light shines and I am struck by a vision of Rook and I as children, playing in the old woods behind the equipment barn while Dad works with the men to repair one of the tractors that broke down during harvest.

We are running through the trees but my feet can't keep up and I have to keep thinking hard or I know I'll run right into one of the big trunks that jut out of the forest floor. Rook has no problem navigating, his feet are better than mine as taking him around each tree with an ease that just feels innate to him.

"I belong in the forest," he tells me when we stop to catch our breath.

I nod, because I agree but his face is sad now. He looks at me for a moment and I can feel something leeching off of him that makes my stomach ache. I don't like that he belongs in the forest because that feels wrong. "You belong with me, Rook."

"Yeah," he says, his face brightening as he grins. "I do."



The world around me spins, sending fractals of light scattering over the horizon and I find myself face to face with a new memory that crawls out of

the dredges of my mind.

I am ten now, walking home from school by myself because Rook is sick. He's been sick for a while now and Mom is really worried about him. She keeps taking his temperature with her hand and making him drink chicken soup which I know he hates. Whenever she talks about taking him to the doctor though, Rook makes her stop talking about it.

I wish I could make her stop talking sometimes like he can.

Dad isn't worried, he believes Rook when he says he'll be okay. I also know that Rook will be okay because we have a big secret that keeps him healthy.

Sometimes, Rook comes to my room and lays in bed with me as I fall asleep so that he feels better. He says my hugs have super powers and it sounded silly at first by when we wake up in the morning his cheeks are pink so maybe he's right.

There is one more big secret that I'm keeping from everyone though, including Rook.

Sometimes in the morning when I wake up, my head is dizzy and I feel like I could throw up.



Someone squeezes my hand.

I don't know if it's part of death or not, but it feels nice.

It feels like comfort and my head spins with the scent of cold winter lemons and amber.

"He's there still, Rook," a voice murmurs. "He's an idiot, but the universe has determined he will survive. Give him time and he'll come back."

I'm back, I wish I could say.

I'm here.

Except I'm not really. My head drifts again, mind unfolding like waves and I find a memory I didn't have before in front of me. As I step into it, I note my hands are smaller, my body shorter than I remember being but only a bit.

I know I am fifteen now.

I am fifteen and my world is falling apart.

In my memory, I am scared. I can feel the ripples of it along my spine as I turn the screws into the doorframe, each creak on the floor beyond my closed door bringing me closer and closer to a scream I keep swallowing. I turn the last screw and test the lock as a creak echoes from outside the door again followed by a knock.

When I don't respond, the door knob rattles like something is trying to get inside. I know it's Rook.

He's coming again to haunt the corners of my room until I fall asleep.

That's when he drinks my blood with his sharpened teeth.

But not tonight.

He won't get my blood ever again.

The memory shifts and I find myself pulled to another time and space, but I am still fifteen.

I am fifteen and things have gotten worse.

Nobody believes me that Rook is dangerous. My mom and dad think I'm crazy and are threatening to send me away to boarding school, but I know what I know.

I know that Rook is a monster.

I can see him now whenever I look at him. He has claws and talons, feathers and golden quills growing out of his spine. He is a beautiful madness of sharpened teeth and dread.

I fear him.

I love him.

I know that's a trick he has. It has to be. Even though a part of me wants to believe when he says he loves me, I know it has to be a lie. He's come to kill us all and take the farm, so I have to try to stop him while I have the chance. In my memory, I am standing outside his door with a knife in my hand and I intend to stop him from hurting my family even if it kills me in the end.

At least my parents will be safe.

I enter his bedroom and find him seated at his desk, writing in one of his journals as he always does. He looks up with his odd golden eyes and smiles like this is a friendly visit, but it isn't.

The moment I slash at him with the knife, he knows it isn't a friendly visit at all.

He shrieks and flies at me, feathers ruffling in anger as he tries to get the knife from me. I reach out and grab a handful of them, pulling them out of

his skin as he screams in pain and anger.

“Nathan!” my mom yells from the doorway as I try to get rid of this monster in our house. “Nathan, stop!”

I can’t though.

I can’t stop. Even though my own heart feels like it’s dying inside my chest, I can’t. I slash at him again, catching his neck with the edge of the blade and slicing it open. Blood spills down his chest and he grabs my arms in his claws, forcing me to drop the knife as my dad barges into the room. He rushes over to grab me and yank me back from Rook, squeezing me against his barreled chest as I struggle to get away.

He’s still alive.

Rook is still alive and we are not safe.

My mom cries out and rushes to Rook’s side, but he raises a hand stopping her in her tracks. She becomes a statue as I thrash in my dad’s arms, trying my best to get away so I can kill this monster hiding in plain sight. Rook murmurs something I can’t hear to my mom and she nods once, her eyes unblinking and her body rigid where she stands in place.

Then Rook looks at me.

He coughs, blood spilling down his chin.

He meets my eyes with a look of sadness on his face so deep that I can’t stop the sob that crawls up my throat. Tears stream down my face as he moves to stand in front of me.

“Monster,” I say, as he raises a finger to touch my forehead. “You’re a monster.”

He says nothing in response, but a heavy, mournful sigh leaves his lungs. I catch the sight of his throat stitching itself back together and my heart sinks. I know that whatever I could do to him would not be enough to rid us of his presence if he can put himself back together like that.

He was always going to win in the end.

Rook’s hand circles my throat and he squeezes it gently, with enough pressure that I can feel his claws digging into my skin.

“Make it quick,” I beg, tilting my head up slightly as my dad holds me in place like he’s become as much a statue as my mom. “Cut my throat. Please make it quick, Rook.”

“Nathan,” Rook breathes as his throat finishes knitting itself back together. “I am not going to kill you. I could never kill you, but I had not

realized the danger you pose to me. Forgive me, but I had not realized that seeing me as I am would cause you this much anger and turmoil."

A stray tear spills down his face as he speaks those words and I ache at the sight of it, but take a chance to ask the question that's been burning in my mind since I first started seeing snippets of his true form. "What are you?"

"I am something you will not remember," he replies, as he takes my head in his hands. "It pains me to do this, but I do not exist for you, Nathan Conway. You will not remember this night and when you wake up, you will be miles away from this farm where you can do no harm."

I barely have enough time to understand what he's said before everything goes blank and I fade into the darkness of oblivion.



I wake up in pieces, lungs aching and heartbeat faint in my ears. My throat is on fire like I haven't drank water in ages and my stomach is in knots that come from being unfed for far too long.

From being dead, probably.

Everything that happened crashes down around me as I blink open my eyes to find that I am in my bedroom, tucked into my bed.

I killed Rook.

And killed myself somehow?

Rook is a monster and… there was another monster?

I close my eyes as my mind works to put the pieces together and I'm pretty surprised that it is actually working now. I can remember everything that came to me when I was drifting in death, or wherever I was after I stabbed Rook.

"Not the first time," I murmur as I move to sit on the edge of the mattress, my head dizzy and spinning. "I killed him before, but he didn't die. He can't die."

"He cannot, though leaving a blade in a body trying to heal itself is a terrible thing to do to another," a voice says and I startle, reeling back on the mattress and grabbing at the blanket like that is somehow going to save me. The click of claws meets my ears as the creature from behind the equipment building unfolds itself from the shadows in the corner of my

room. He moves on his taloned feet to hover over me where I sit on my mattress, helpless.

“Corvex,” he comments as he looms over my quivering form. “That is the term you seek in your internet searchings.” He taps a claw on my phone where it sits on the stand beside my bed. “We are called Corvex or alternately, the Shrowd, though humans have scarcely reported our existence.”

“Okay,” I whisper as he stares down at me, his piercing eyes nearly boring holes through mine.

“I am Vaunt.”

“Okay.”

“Beware the weaver of words, little human. Do not listen to the things they whisper in the dark.”

That rattles deep inside me and my body lets loose an involuntary shake that has my teeth clacking together and my knees knocking against each other. He smiles, tipping his head at me like he’s pleased with my quivering and I shiver in fear at the sight of his teeth. They are far sharper than Rook’s and it unnerves me. He could kill me right here and now, and for my act of trying to murder Rook, I fear he just might.

“Vaunt,” Rook’s voice says as the door to my bedroom opens. “You are terrifying him.”

The bigger, somehow more birdy creature preens at this comment and I have to take a deep breath as I look past him to find Rook. My heart explodes with joy and warmth once I find the two golden eyes full of life that what feels like only a moment ago I watched slowly fade away to nothing.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, breath catching in my dry throat. “Please don’t kill me. Or… feast.” I am struck by a favor I asked when I was fifteen and am compelled to once again try for the same. “Make it quick, if you intend to kill me. That’s all I ask.”

Vaunt laughs, the sound rumbling out from deep within his feathers and Rook pushes him aside to move right in front of me. I brace myself for impact, waiting for his claws to slice against my throat or his teeth to sink into my flesh but none of that happens. Instead, he looks down at me and sighs softly, sadly, his feathers ruffling on his back like he’s irritated or perhaps uncomfortable with the suggestion that he should kill me.

“I owe you more than a death,” he comments, cocking his head to the side like a… well, like a bird.

“And this is where I shall take my leave,” Vaunt announces, stepping back towards the window. “Bear my warnings, Little Rook. I will do what I can to stop them, but they will come to claim what is theirs in the end.”

“They are welcome to try,” Rook comments, his tone deadly and dark. Vaunt grins in response, tipping his head before leaving through the bedroom window.

Leaving me alone with Rook, who is alive despite my best efforts to kill him.

Again.

“You took yourself out of my memories,” I say, turning to him. “When I was fifteen, I mean.”

“You tried to kill me,” he replies, crossing his arms and looking down at me. “What was I supposed to do? Let you try again and again until finally it took?”

“You can die?”

“All things can die, Nathan, if you know how to kill them. I’m certain you would have kept trying until you learned how and that would have been the end of both of us.”

I toss that through my mind and let it linger, because I know he’s right. I wouldn’t have stopped trying because I was certain he was there to kill my family. To kill me and take the farm away for himself. “How do I know you don’t want to kill me now?”

“Nathan,” he says. “I would never hurt you. I could never hurt you. All these years… what I did was to protect us both. I always knew someday you’d come back and I clung to the hope that when you did, you wouldn’t see me as a threat any longer.”

“So, you took my memories and sent me away to Allworth?”

“Your parents sent you there, I merely made the suggestion. I am sorry they sent you to the mental health unit in the basement, but you were out of your mind and wouldn’t stop screaming when you woke up in the back of the car they sent to take you there. You’re lucky they didn’t call the cops themselves after you busted the nose of one of the orderlies after you arrived. It was either that experience, or jail for attempted murder and how was I going to explain the lack of marks on my body? Mom and Dad were pretty sure they’d seen you slash my throat open, you should thank me for

taking that memory away from them and having them send you to Allworth instead. You'd be rotting in jail if it weren't for what I did."

"I'd have my parents if it weren't for what you did," I point out, as a trickle of anger rises inside me. "If you hadn't followed me home, they'd still be alive and Allworth wouldn't have been any piece of my past."

"I did what I had to do."

"Did you kill them?" I demand, rising to my feet. I'm shaky, but the anger rushing through me is fueling my entire body right now. I'm sure I'll crash later, but right now I'm getting the answers I've needed since the first hint of something being wrong on this farm entered my mind and I'm not stopping until I know everything.

"I would never," Rook growls back, clenching his fists at his side. "How dare you suggest that I could do such a thing?"

"You're a monster."

"And so are you," he hisses back, moving to grip my shirt in his fist. "Let's not forget who stabbed who, Nathan. Twice, might I add."

I scowl at him, but he's not wrong. He is made monster simply by biology, but I am made monster by my own deeds. "You didn't have to move into my fucking house, Rook. You could have picked someone else to fuck with."

"Who? Michael?" he asks, nostrils flaring in anger as a disgusted look creeps across his face. "He was a terrible child. He spent much of his time ripping legs off of bugs when the rest of you weren't around, but that's beside the point. I didn't pick you. The universe decided you were the one and your words confirmed it."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You told me you weren't scared. That you thought there were scarier things than bird people living in your house. You told me that and it was like the entire world opened up in that moment. I didn't know then what it meant exactly, but that's when I knew I was meant to find and follow you home."

"Because I wasn't scared."

"Because you're my mate, you asshole."

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Rook

And there it is.

The truth I have known since the first pure gold quill started growing in my spine hangs in the air between us.

Nathan is my mate.

I am his mate.

We are fated to each other and as much as he is looking at me now with contempt and hatred, I know he can feel it inside him. I know he can feel me inside his bones as much as I can feel him inside mine.

“That’s storybook bullshit,” he spits out as he stares at me.

“All stories come from somewhere,” I reply, with a slight shrug.

“Don’t shrug at me like what you’ve done is nothing. Don’t you fucking dare brush off everything like that.”

“Or what?” I ask, with a small edge to my tone. “You’ll stab me again? Kill me again? Try to rip my feathers out again? Nathan, just like you’re lucky you’re not in jail, you should consider yourself lucky that you’ve caught me off guard twice.”

“Not exactly the most observant, are you?” he snaps back.

“Perhaps I’m taken by surprise because to kill you would be like killing myself and I couldn’t fathom the idea of even trying it once, let alone twice.”

“I can’t fathom the idea of having some monster tied to me by fate, so we’re in the same boat,” he snarks, and I get the sense he’s mocking the way I speak. In the forest, we are formal. We are proper and courteous but

here in this human world things are far more relaxed. I've struggled over the years to rid myself of what was beaten into me as a fledgling when I lived among the flock.

"Is that why I can't leave without it nearly killing me? Is this mate thing the reason I'm stuck here?"

"Yes."

"Oh, fuck you. I have a job and a life to get back to, Rook. What did you do to me?"

"It is fate," I offer, with a small sigh. "I have marked you as mine and fate has tied the cord that binds us. Though I will always be your mate, the need to be here with me will fade in time and you can have your life back."

I won't pretend that stings to say. The thought of him leaving sends my heart into a panic, but I console myself with the knowledge that no matter how far he goes, I will follow. We are bound and I will always have a sense of the roads he travels. Our heartbeats will bring us back together, no matter how far he strays.

This I do not tell him.

This he does not need to know.

Not yet.

"Were you at Allworth?" he demands, changing the subject.

"No." Though that is not a lie, Vaunt has made me aware that Nathan was not alone in that building. I am thankful that he did not venture into the basement because he would not have returned to this house.

The forest is always watching.

"Well something was," he continues, glaring at me. "Some creature followed me and after seeing that thing that creeped out my window I know you're not the only one like you out there."

"That thing, as you so eloquently put it, is the reason you're alive now so I suggest you show some damn respect. His name is Vaunt."

"Fine," Nathan spits back though he looks a bit shamed. "Vaunt. He's one of you. Whatever you are. Corvex. Shrowd. Whatever you want to call yourself."

"You are not wrong," I agree, though he doesn't know the half of it.

He doesn't know what lingers on the edges of this property, hanging over my head like a noose I created for myself by not returning to the trees when I should have.

“How come nobody else can see you like this?” he asks, casting a glance over my body from top to toe.

“It’s a trick. I can project what I want people to see when they look at me into their minds. I create my human form in their mind’s eye and they believe it. They touch feather and feel skin. Touch claw and feel finger.”

“And you did it to me too.”

“I did.” And it failed. I should have known it would fail, but I had hoped.

I had hoped it would be different and that I could tell him what I was before he discovered it on his own. I will forever feel the shame and regret that I let him fall down this path of blood and madness again.

“You made me think I was losing my mind. Rook, I thought I was going crazy here at this farm. Why would you do that to me? Why, if I am your mate or whatever you think I am?”

Fear.

Regret.

The feel of a knife slipping against my throat when I was simply happy to see him come to me again after living in the shadow of his hatred.

I weigh my answer carefully, but he steps close to me, bringing with him the scent of home and a mountain spring I spent my younger years in. The only solace I ever found within the forest surrounded by the Shrowd.

“I hate you,” he whispers, his eyes full of hatred as he looks into mine.

“I know,” I reply.

He hesitates a moment, then a pained groan of frustration escapes his throat before his lips crash onto mine. I am lit up at the touch of him, my hand moving to grip his throat so he can’t move. He moans needfully into the kiss and I let go of his throat. There are other ways to hold him where I want him and instead I climb up his body like a cat, wrapping my legs around his waist as his hands move to cradle my ass. Slick slips out of my hole and I can feel my cock growing hard in the black shorts I wear. It takes everything I have in me to not rub off against the shirt he wears to relieve myself, but I need him inside me more than I need to get off.

I pull away, breaking the kiss as his breath lands on my face. His cheeks are flushed red and I can’t quite recall him ever looking so lovely as he does at this moment. His eyes are a swirl of want and need and anger that lingers behind all of it, and I meet him back with my own desire, canting my hips so he can feel the hard cock in my pants against his clothing.

“Fuck you,” he whispers as he drops me onto the bed.

I’m about to protest when he dives onto me, gripping my shorts in his hand and pulling them off. My dick springs up from my pelvis and more slick slips from my hole, my body ready to be stuffed full of his cock.

“Fuck you,” I reply with a grin as he takes my cock in his hand and gives in a stroke. His lips find mine again and he kisses me as he moves his hand on my length, fast and hard as if he is giving me what he wishes were happening to him. When his lips move away from mine, I am breathless and panting but he’s got far too much clothing on for my liking. I reach for his pants but he slaps my hand away, then moves off the bed to quickly take everything off. I almost drool when I see his thick cock jutting out from his pelvis, the head of it engorged and nearly purpled with his own obvious need.

I want it in my mouth, my hand, my hole… I fucking want him to stick it in me somewhere and be quick about it.

“You want?” he asks, wrapping a fist around himself and giving one good, long stroke.

“More like you want,” I point out, propping myself up on my elbows as his eyes nearly roll backwards in his head from pleasure.

He scowls, then reaches for my legs, gripping my knees in his hands. I let him spread me open, grinning because I know that my body does what human bodies cannot do and he is about to discover it. More slick slides from my channel as his eyebrows raise slightly and my heart almost squeezes in delight at the look of wonder on his face.

“You got some fucking tricks,” he comments, brushing the slick off the outside of my hole with the pad of a finger.

“Only for my mate,” I offer, like the words themselves are a challenge. If I hadn’t been certain about him being my mate before, the first moment he and I got off together in the kitchen would have confirmed it. Our mates drive our bodies to create slick. Typically it’s to ease the making of babies, but I do not have the ability to bear young. That I can produce this slick for Nathan is merely the sign of fate’s hand bringing our two souls together.

“I wondered why you were so wet before,” he murmurs as he slips a finger into my body slowly. I let loose a soft sigh as my hole clenches around him, then relaxes when he pulls it out.

“Slick.”

With a wicked grin, he grabs my hips and flips me over, catching me off guard again. A laugh leaves his lips as I tumble onto the bed only for him to

grab my hips and raise my ass into the air. “Caught off guard again, Rook. You think you’d see me coming by now.”

“What are you gonna do? Stab me? Rip out my feathers?”

“Something like that.”

I can feel the heat of him behind me and the heavy weight of his cock resting on my ass cheek as my hole lets loose another small bead of slick, hopefully enticing him to take me and fuck me hard. I take a deep breath as the head of his dick moves to rest against my hole, letting it out as he pushes it inside me. He lets loose a breath he’d clearly been holding in as he slips into my slick channel, filling me up as I need to be filled.

“Fuck,” he gasps as he slides his cock out a bit, then back in until he’s fully seated inside me. My hole flutters around the intrusion, my feathers quivering in delight as he pulls out, then pushes back inside harder. I can feel every inch of his cock as it slips in and out of my body, aided by the slick I am making for us to enjoy.

Nathan’s hands grip my hips tight as he starts fucking into me in earnest, the sound of his thighs hitting mine punctuating every thrust. I start pushing back against him, demanding even more than he’s already giving. He groans as his grip on my hips tightens and my head spirals with the knowledge that he may say he hates me, but he’s fucking me like I need and that’s all that matters right now.

It’s my turn to let loose a noise as he pulls out of me entirely, then nudges my hip to get me to roll over. I do and when I see his face I can’t help but grin at him. His cheeks are red and sweat pools down his forehead from the effort of fucking me and that pleases me greatly. He sits back on his ass and I scramble on top of him, pushing him down so I can sink myself onto his dick, but the moment I get there he fights back. I squawk in protest as he catches me and slips off the bed, backing me against the wall so I’m pinned between his broad chest and the gray paint behind me. My arms loop around his neck and my legs tighten around his waist as he moves to grip the backs of my thighs.

“The last time you were on me, you drank my blood,” he growls, staring hard into my eyes.

“I’ll do it again,” I promise, staring right back at him.

“Bloodsucking vampire.”

“Not even close.” I scowl at him but there’s playfulness behind it and he takes the bait, leaning forward to capture my lips with his. I let him kiss me

for a moment before the ache from my empty hole makes me let loose a very unbecoming whine.

Nathan snorts a laugh, then yanks me off the wall and hauls me to the bed again, slipping his cock into me as I writhe around him in pleasure. My entire body ripples with delight as he delves in and out of me, his eyes connected to mine like there's a thin string tying us together.

"I hate you," he whispers as he gently smooths sweat slicked hair off my forehead with his hand.

"I know," I reply as I tilt my lips towards him for another kiss.

Nathan lets me have it as much as he is giving me everything else I need, and taking what he needs in return. Heat rises between us as he breaks off the kiss and props himself up on his elbows. I turn my head and kiss the soft inside of his forearm as his thrusts grow quicker and shorter. His breath hitches and I can tell he's getting close.

"Come on," I murmur, reaching up to touch his handsome face. He nods, turning his head sideways and pressing a kiss to my palm.

"Rook," he says and that is all he says before a low moan falls from his lips and his hips stutter mid thrust. He slips into me all the way and tilts his head up, sweat slicking down his face as he spurts seed deep into my body. When he's finished, he lingers there inside me and I can't help but start touching his back with my claws, sending shivers through him.

He pulls out of me and flops onto his side leaving me coated in him, sweaty and cum soaked and happy.

So happy my heart feels like it's about to burst.

My own neglected cock juts up and I reach for it, taking myself in hand and giving a few quick strokes until his hand joins mine. I turn my head to the side and we move in tandem, our hands sliding up and down my dick until I can feel the oncoming orgasm. Nathan slides over on the bed and presses his lips to mine as my breath stutters and my hand slips off me, leaving his behind to stroke me towards my release.

I come with a small noise that is swallowed up between our mouths, his tongue licking at my lips and mine sneaking out to tangle with his. My stomach swoops as he lets go of my cock, drawing a cum soaked hand up my chest to rest at the base of my throat.

"I could kill you right now," he whispers as he slips his hand onto my throat.

"You could try," I agree. "You can always try."

He hesitates a moment, then presses his lips to my temple before letting go of my throat and rolling onto his back. I wait a moment before I roll onto my side and curl into the space beneath his shoulder, pressing my cheeks against his ribcage.

“Did I die?” he asks, as my eyes drift closed.

“Almost.”

The bed dips as Nathan moves beside me, then raises as he does. He stands for a moment at the side of the bed wavering on his feet and I know he’s exhausted. He had little left and that was before sex came into the picture. Now he’s an empty vessel in more ways than just one.

“Food?” I ask, yawning as I open my eyes.

“I need a moment,” he says, heading for the door. “Just… give me a moment, Rook. Okay?”

I nod as he looks back at me over his shoulder, moonlight cresting over the peaks and valleys of his body. He turns and leaves me behind on his bed, heading for a moment of silence that I will give to him after all that he has been through.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Nathan

I should be wearing pants.

It's odd that that thought is at the forefront of my mind as I walk down the hallway towards the kitchen when so many other things should be there. It's like my brain has died and all that I can consider is that the house feels chilly like a window was left open and my ass is getting cold.

Maybe I should have had a shower before coming out here.

I snort a laugh to myself as I consider that even now that I have more answers than I counted on ever having, I still don't know what the fuck I'm doing.

"Food," I say out loud because clearly my brain needs a reminder of some kind. "Food, then shower. Then sleep."

A solid plan.

My head feels fuzzy as I step into the kitchen and turn the light on, my stomach aching like I haven't eaten in years. I didn't ask how long I was lingering in that space between life and death, but I assume it was a while given how starving I feel.

And how thirsty.

The first thing I do is open the cupboards and grab the biggest plastic cup I can find before I turn on the tap and start practically waterboarding myself to get liquid into me. My throat is dry, but as I swallow everything starts to feel a little bit better. I take a break for a breath, the water sloshing around inside my stomach uncomfortably making me cringe. Everything spirals

and I lean over the sink to deposit most of the water back out of my system, wincing at the coldness of it leaving much like the cold of it entering was.

“Too fast,” a voice murmurs from the darkness and I jump, spinning around to find Vaunt standing in the doorway of the kitchen.

“What the fuck?” I bark, grabbing my dick in both hands to hide it from his view as he chortles a laugh at me. Footsteps thud on the floor down the hallway and the squeak of my bedroom door being opened lets me know that Rook has heard my shout and is on his way here.

“Do you want to forget?” Vaunt asks, taking a step towards me that makes me shrink back a bit where I stand.

“What?”

“Quickly now. Do you wish to forget? To go back to not knowing? To not remembering? I can take it away, if you wish.”

“No,” I say, taking a step back. “Why the fuck would I want that?”

Vaunt’s eyes scan mine and he nods, stepping out of the kitchen and into the hallway, coming face to face with Rook who looks pissed beyond all measure.

“Leave,” he says, pointing to the front door of the house.

“I was offering what you will not,” Vaunt murmurs, rising to his full height to tower over Rook. “What you cannot.”

“Leave, Vaunt. Now. I appreciate your coming to our aid, but your help is no longer required.”

“Little brother, you wound me. My help is always welcomed.”

Rook’s face softens slightly as he looks up at the much bigger bird creature and a sense of melancholy strikes deep within me. I don’t know where to place it, but in looking more at Rook’s handsome face I realize it is his sadness.

His loneliness and loss is what I’m feeling deep inside my own body.

“You must go,” Rook murmurs as Vaunt leans down and rubs his cheek against the top of his head. “You have helped us enough, Old One.”

Vaunt chortles a sound that falls between a laugh and a sigh. He reaches a hand out to rest on Rook’s feathered shoulder before dipping to brush his cheek against his head once more. “The forest is always watching, Little Rook.”

“I know,” Rook says, as Vaunt rises to his full height again.

His gaze lingers on Rook before he turns to me and offers a simple dip of his head my way. I return it with a small nod and he steps towards the front

door of the house. A squeak of the hinges and whoosh of chilly fall air signals his departure and I listen as his footsteps rattle and creak over the planks of the porch before disappearing entirely.

“Your brother?” I ask as Rook closes the door and locks it tight.

“My real brother,” Rook replies with a nod. “Older by one summer yet behaves like he’s far more elderly.”

“He has more feathers. Is that because he’s older?” In all the strangeness of this day, I can buy that maybe Rook isn’t finished growing his feathers yet. I could also buy that this is just one big hallucination and I need to snap out of it.

It’s been a very fucked up kind of day here at Conway Farms.

He shakes his head though, offering a small smile that doesn’t feel genuinely happy. “I am… not developed.”

“Not developed?”

“I didn’t… do what I must do to develop as Vaunt has. As the rest of them have. I am behind and always will be, yet I have more than they will ever have.”

“That’s very cryptic and I’m tired, Rook. Can’t you just tell me the truth for once? Please?”

“I should have killed you,” he blurts, eyes darkening as he speaks of it. “I should have drank you dry and left you behind as a bloodless husk. That is what I could not do. That is why I did not return to the forest to be among them.”

Sometimes they kill people.

A memory of words spoken by an eight year old boy around a campfire rings in my head and I take a small step away from Rook.

“You were supposed to kill me?”

“It is the only way to finish growing,” he says, offering a step away from me in return. “I fed on you bit by bit when we were growing up, but when the time came that I was to take your life I couldn’t. I just… how was I supposed to kill the one thing that meant more to me than anything else? How?”

His eyes seek mine like he’s waiting for a genuine answer, but I have none to give.

“I stayed here,” he continues when I don’t answer with anything. “I fed myself on the sips of blood I would take from you when you were sleeping but only enough to keep me going. To keep me growing, even though I

knew I would never grow the lush feathers that Vaunt has. I wanted… something. You may hate me for it, but I wanted to have even a tiny piece of what I should have been so I kept stealing pieces of you away to get it. When you locked your door, I knew I had gone too far."

"You knew you'd been caught," I reply, with a nod as I cross my arms in front of me.

Rook nods. "I knew you could see me. I drank from you far longer than any other Corvex I know of and Vaunt told me that was my gravest error. Had I killed you and left for the forest when I should have, all memory of me would have left with me."

"And my parents would be left alive with a dead kid to deal with," I say, but Rook is already shaking his head.

"No. I would have taken your body for burning. You would have been given to the pyre and all memory of you would have been wiped away as the town slept and you burned to ash."

My stomach twists at the thought that I could have just been gone like that rattles in my head. That I could have just not existed in anyone's memory… it aches inside me and I hate him a tiny bit more for telling me this. "Nobody would have known me. What about pictures? My mom always took pictures."

"They would have remained but when someone looked at them, they wouldn't have seen you there. Your memory would have been eaten up in their mind's eye along with all knowledge that you had ever been there. It is our way. We come, we take, we leave, we burn and nobody knows we were even there to begin with."

"Except Gage," I offer, because someone knew they were there to begin with. Two people, in fact. "Gage and his brother who told him all about your kind."

"Vaunt," Rook sighs. "Vaunt chose Gage's brother. Vaunt trusted Gage's brother with the secrets because he was foolish as I was. He believed he'd found his mate, but that trust ended with a shotgun being pointed at Vaunt's face and a body being husked to nothing."

"He ate his fated mate?" That's appalling. I don't know anything about mates, not really, but that feels horrific to me.

"Sadly, no. Gage's brother was not the mate in question, but that is a story that is Vaunt's to share and I won't tell it."

The gravity of that statement hits me and I cringe at the same time as my heart aches a bit for the shitty hand Vaunt was dealt. I can put the pieces together and come up with the conclusion even if Rook's words haven't led me directly there.

I wonder if Gage knew back then that the bird creature his brother warned him about is destined to be his mate.

Was destined.

Is destined.

I don't know what grammar to use with that statement.

"I am glad you didn't husk me and burn me to ash," I whisper as Rook takes a cautious step towards me.

"I am glad as well," Rook says, but his face looks uncertain and caution plays across his features like he's hiding more things inside his head.

"Is it life or death?" I ask, with a yawn as my stomach growls loudly.

"What?"

"Whatever secret you've got in your head right now. Is it life or death, or can I eat something and have a shower?"

"You can eat," Rook says with a slight laugh. "You need to eat, then have a shower before we both get some rest. It's been a long day."

It has been a long day but his words soothe some of the ache away from my body and mind. I yawn again as I wonder if that's another trick his kind possesses, this ability to soothe humans and make them keep from freaking the fuck out would be really useful, I think.

"Do you hate me?" Rook asks as I grab blueberries from the fridge and start chucking them into my mouth.

"Less," I answer, as I look at the bird person – the Corvex – in front of me. "I hate you less."

He grins a toothy grin, but for the first time I don't feel threatened by it. For the first time I feel a small tendril of warmth ripple through me when I catch the tips of his pointy, sharpened teeth nestled behind his plump, beautiful lips.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Rook

I can see them out there, crowded along the treeline.

Vaunt has kept them away for a long time, but my offering of five quills was clearly not enough to purchase their absence again and so they are coming.

It won't be tonight, but it will be soon. This show of glowing yellow eyes tucked into the forest is a threat and also a promise.

My show of my own glowing yellow eyes is a dare.

A challenge.

I am not scared of them, not really, but when I glance down at Nathan's sleeping form that thought wobbles inside my mind. In this bed beside me is where my fear lies. What they will do to him should they get their hands on him leaves me shaken inside, yet resolved to protect him at all costs.

I will burn this earth to the ground before I let them take him.

I turn back to the window and stare, unblinking, at the sea of yellow eyes staring back at me from the trees.

I do not flinch.

I do not move away.

I stare.

And stare.

Until the sun flickers on the horizon and they disappear one by one back into the trees where they belong.

"Rook?" Nathan yawns, rolling over in his bed. I step away from the window, blinking grainy eyes into the dim light of the room as the sun peers

over the horizon.

“Go back to sleep. It’s too early to be awake,” I whisper, padding across the hardwood floor to the side of his bed. He yawns again, rolling onto his back as his sleepy eyes fight to stay open. They meet mine and he offers a half smile before closing his eyes again.

“I couldn’t see your eyes,” he mumbles, half asleep. “Though you’d gone away.”

“Never,” I promise as I crawl beneath the sheets and tuck myself beside him. He quickly falls back into his sleep but I find catching some rest for myself to be a challenge. I breathe in the scent of Nathan’s skin, letting it soothe the frayed edges of my mind as I try to capture sleep and fail time and time again.

I don’t manage to fall asleep until the sun peers over the horizon and I am certain that we have escaped the death that lingers in the forest for one more night.



I wake up to an empty bed in a cold room.

An empty hallway in a cold house.

A front door left wide open.

A missing truck.

I wake up to a burning in my chest and an ache in my veins that nearly shatters me in half. Gasping, I reach for my throat as the burn spreads up my neck, sending alarm bells ringing in my head.

“Gone,” I murmur, head swirling with pain.

I stare at the space Nathan’s truck usually sits in, looking at the swirls of gravel left behind by the tires as he drove away and trying to figure out where he’s gone even though I know.

I know without having to think about it.

I know because my heartbeat aches and screams and tells me where he has gone.

Down the curved back road.

Through the woods.

He has listened to the words in the darkness.

He has followed his parents footsteps and traveled the path that killed them.

The Shrowd has him and he is in great danger.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Nathan

"Come," the voice whispers as I turn off the truck and unbuckle my seatbelt.

I step out into the small clearing in the woods and take a deep breath of fresh air as the trees overhead ripple with the fall breeze. Orange leaves scatter the ground at my feet, but I can still see green grass beneath them, poking up towards the sunlight overhead.

The sky is cast in shades of brilliant purples and reds that I know I've seen somewhere before but when I search for the memory, it disappears inside my head.

My head is a place memories go to die.

Golden lights flicker to life in the woods around the clearing and my heart rattles in my chest. Goosebumps leap to my skin and my body trembles as the lights- the eyes- peer out from within the darkened shadows beneath the trees. I take a step back, clutching my keys as the sky fades back to sunshine and my head clears like a fog is being lifted. I waver on my feet as fear takes me in its hand, holding me tight and all I can do is try to keep breathing.

I manage to take a small step away from the eyes, back towards my truck, before one set rises high in the darkness. I careen backwards as a creature emerges from the shadows, tall and thin, feathered and terrible. I make it to my truck, but he grabs my arm and yanks me away. My keys slip from my grasp as I am hauled away from the door and dragged backwards towards the trees.

I scream.

I kick.

I flail as much as I can to get away, but slowly the clearing fades from view and I am swallowed up by the forest.

I am taken by the eyes that have haunted me since the night I arrived back home.

“What do you want with me?” I demand as I’m dragged through the leaves that litter the ground beneath me.

The creature doesn’t respond, but another, far smaller one flits out from the darkness and slaps me across the face. I’m stunned, eyes wide as my head rocks sideways at the force of it. When I right myself again, he grins at me, showing his full set of sharpened teeth before diving left and disappearing back into the shadows. My cheek stings and I don’t dare make another noise. A spate of twittering laughter creeps out from the trees as I stare at the path I’ve been dragged through, trying to remember where my truck is in case I find a chance to get away while knowing that I likely won’t.

I will die, probably.

These bird creatures, the Shrowd, will kill me.

I know this as I’m dragged from the thick trees into another clearing that is far too familiar. A set of five derelict cabins sit in the distance, set a few steps away from the small firepit I have been brought to.

I know this space.

I don’t even need to search my memory hard for it.

This is the Boy Scout Camp I attended as a child.

It’s decrepit and run down now, the ground around the unlit firepit littered with bones and ash. The cabins I can see in the distance are all in need of a coat of paint and a few have sunken roofs, but some don’t quite look as rundown and abandoned as the rest. They didn’t live here when I was a child, but it’s clear to me that since the camp was abandoned in favor of the larger, more modern one, the Corvex have moved in.

They have taken a happy space and turned it into their nest.

The creature holding me lets loose a shriek that makes me jump, my stomach swooping and my heart racing. It’s a mixture of human scream and bird call, a terrible noise that is answered by more calls that rise from the grounds around us. One by one, more bird-shaped creatures appear, joining us at the firepit I once toasted marshmallows in.

“Him?” one of them squawks, stepping forward and bending down to put their face directly in mine. I can smell its breath as it lingers in the space in front of me, its shrewd eyes scanning my face like it’s searching for something in my features.

“This is the human,” a low rumbling voice seems to confirm.

The Corvex that’s close enough to me that I could count the teeth in its mouth if I wanted to lets loose a small noise that sounds unimpressed and I’m slightly offended and terrified at the same time. My heart trips over itself in my chest as the movement of my body along the ground begins again, my feet bumping over rocks and dirt as the Corvex holding me drags me away from the firepit and up towards the cabins.

I’m hauled to the front of one of the cabins that appears to still be in use. The Corvex holding me drags me up the stairs, my boots bumping against the wooden planks as we go until he reaches the front door. I crane my neck back to see what he’s doing, but don’t get a good look before I’m yanked forward and thrown into the cabin. I land in a heap on the dirty wooden floor, the timbers creaking beneath my feet as I try to rise up and make it to the still open door, but I can’t get there in time.

The last thing I see as the door swings shut is Vaunt’s face, his eyes wide and cheeks pale.

“No,” I cry out, rushing to the closed door. I kick at it but all that gets me is a shower of dirt that falls from the planks above and a sore foot.

“You can’t get out,” a familiar voice murmurs from behind me.

I startle, reeling around as memories crash through my mind.

A voice in the shadows whispering words I cannot hear.

A voice in the darkness demanding I end Rook’s life.

A voice that drew me from the safety of his arms and brought me here.

He is pale and gaunt, his chest littered with marks that look like teeth have chewed his flesh. His greasy hair is long and snarled in knots by twigs and leaves, and as I stare at him I swear I can count every bone in his ribcage. His knees knock as he shuffles forward out of the shadows and I take a step back, plastering myself along the wall as a creeping dread echoes down my spine.

“Hello Nathan,” Gage says, offering a small smile.

“You,” I gasp as he moves away, heading towards a mattress on the floor.

“Me,” he replies, folding himself into a seated position, his chest heaving and body trembling at the effort of it.

My head spins as he coughs, wiping his lips with the back of his arm. He looks like shit and I can't help but feel a bit sorry for the state of his body even if I'm pissed that I'm here because of him.

"You made me come here," I spit, moving to stare down at him on the dirty mattress.

"I did." The words are plain and simple as they fall from his mouth, but his eyes carry a shadow inside them that gives me pause.

"What the fuck is going on, Gage?"

He takes a deep breath, ribcage rattling beneath his pale, thin flesh. Just when he opens his mouth to speak, a cough barks out of his chest and he doubles over, burying his mouth in his arm. When the cough stops, he takes a deep breath and I can see bloodied spit lingering on his forearm. He wipes it away on the threadbare pants he wears, leaving a smear of blood alongside the dirt and grime.

"I have been here for… too long to remember," he says, his breath shaky and voice trembling as he speaks. "Far too long, yet not as long as it feels, I think. I… can't remember. I know I came here and… Vaunt was here."

"I thought he husked your brother and left you behind. I was told he took off back to the flock?"

Gage meets my eyes and I can see cracks in his irises like the brilliant emerald green is leeching out of him leaving a dull grey in its wake. "He came back to claim me. That was a mistake, but he couldn't resist knowing that I was out there. I am his mate."

There's a sense of warmth and comfort hidden in his words, a sort of pride in being Vaunt's mate, but that is dashed out quickly as his face falls.

"Soon, I will be gone," he says, staring past me at the door to the outside world. "Soon, I will be husk. It has been a slow journey towards death since the moment I arrived here. That is why you are here. You will replace me when I have nothing left to give."

"The fuck I will," I bark out, taking a step back from him.

"You will have no choice. I am sorry."

I reel back at his words. His shitty apology means nothing because it changes nothing. I'm still here. He still compelled me, somehow, to be here in this place, locked up alongside him.

"What do they want?" I ask, staring at the walls of this place for a way out. They've boarded up the windows but I could pry them open if I tried

hard enough, I think. If I could get through the thick wood, it's only a matter of shattering the glass behind it and escaping into the woods.

"Your blood," Gage says, tipping his head up to look at me. "Your mated blood is potent. It's how they survive. How they get the pure golden quills. Without our blood, the quills they grow are hollow. Not worth as much, but with mated blood..." He pauses, thinking for a moment. "You have been mated, correct?"

I have no clue what the fuck he's talking about. "I… have a mate?"

He shakes his head. "Mated. Bitten. During… sex."

A weight drops into my stomach and I reach for my throat. Gage nods, tilting his neck to the side and placing his bony fingers alongside a small mark in his flesh. I peer down into his skin and catch the outlines of teeth, right where Rook bit me.

"I don't have any marks."

"They can take them away," he says, with a cough. "They can hide them with their saliva. Only a mate can do it though, everyone else…" He gestures down at his chewed up torso, cringing as he looks down at his own skin.

"Oh fuck no," I murmur. "There is no way I'm becoming some Corvex chew toy."

"I'm afraid you have no choice. They will take what they want. They are working to create a nest here and need all the gold they can get. The numbers are dwindling, more and more young Corvex are leaving and not returning to the Shrowd as they are meant to. In your blood is their way forward. In our blood is the path to building up their strength again. I am sorry, Nathan. I was so hungry and they refused me any food until I called for you. I'm sorry…"

The sentence trails off, leaving me hanging in a space where I have some answers but not nearly enough. I have so many more questions, but Gage's face is drooping and his eyes are starting to close. He heaves a breath out of his lungs as he moves to lay down on the mattress, his head cradled by a pillow that is littered with flecks of blood and grime. He coughs as he drifts into sleep, more bloody spittle flying from between his lips to land on the fabric by his face and I take a step away from the entire scene.

There is no fucking way I am staying here.

The moment I get a chance, I'm breaking free even if it kills me.

A quick death would be far preferable to being husked piece by piece. At least my mate is not outside the doors of this cabin, watching as I get closer to death day by day. Why Vaunt doesn't step in is beyond me. If Rook is right, Gage's slow death has to feel for him like he's also dying, so why is he just letting it happen?

How could he stand it?

I know Rook wouldn't stand by and let me be eaten up piece by piece.

I know he wouldn't do this. Even as much as I hate what he's brought to the simple life I was trying to create, I know inside my heart that he wouldn't leave me here to die like this.

I can feel the burning inside my chest as I think of the distance between us and I know he is feeling the same.

He may be a monster, but he is my monster.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Rook

Fire.

They must be burned in fire.

Their hollow bones cannot withstand the scorch of flame. They will melt and collapse as they turn to ash and I will crow my victory from the rooftops while I watch them burn and die.

How dare they take him?

I haul empty gas canisters to the pump on the property, thankful that it was filled shortly before my parents died. The gasoline tank isn't as big as the diesel tank, but there is still enough to set every cabin on fire and that is my aim.

Hank stands idly by, holding the keys to my father's prized truck.

He doesn't know why he is here, nor will he know, but I need someone to take me down the curved road and I cannot drive myself. I have told him what he needs to know and cleared his mind of everything else. He is pliable in my hands right now, but he will return to his home safely the moment I have reached the camp and unloaded the truck bed.

He will survive tonight.

Others will not.

I have played nice time and time again.

I have met Vaunt in the woods to deliver my hollow quills month after month, year after year, buying safety for this farm and all who live on it.

I did not seek revenge after I failed to produce as many quills as they wanted and my parents were summoned to the Shrowd only to be murdered

in cold blood on the way there.

I accept that their deaths are on my head and will bear them for as long as I live as a reminder that I must pay for my abandonment of my kind.

But they have taken my mate and that is an error that they will pay dearly for.

I know I am seen as the undeveloped one. No more than a featherless fledgling who found his mate and started questioning the system.

But I have feathers.

I have claws and talons.

I have quills.

I may be a cautionary tale told to the young ones of what will happen should they not return to the flock as demanded, but I am not without my skills.

Nathan was scared of me, but the true terror I possess lies in what I will do to get my mate back.

I am coming.

And I am bringing ruin and destruction with me.

None will survive.

No elder.

No fledgling.

No returned adult.

The one who whispers in the darkness with his mockingbird tricks will also burn to nothing.

Not even Vaunt will live, should he step in my way.

None will survive this night.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Nathan

The door to the cabin opens and I rush to it, seeing my freedom only to be kicked back into the cabin by a taloned foot. I crash into the side of a rickety wooden table and crumple to the ground, pain radiating through my ribcage as a twitter of laughter meets my ears.

"Evro," Gage murmurs, rising on the mattress slowly.

"Feast," the bird creature replies, tipping his head as he steps into the cabin, followed by Vaunt. He closes the door behind him, nudging Vaunt forward. The clank of metal as it's locked from the outside echoes through the cabin and I slump in defeat.

"How could you do this?" I hiss, staring at Vaunt as he meets my eyes.

Sorrow lingers in his gaze and when he turns to face Gage, he nearly drops to the ground. Gage lifts a hand towards him, his face hopeful, but while Vaunt does take one step forward, he hesitates. His head swings to look at the other creature in the cabin who grins at him viciously, his lips curved into a sneer.

He stares at Vaunt.

Unmoving.

Unblinking.

For longer than I would have patience for before finally he chortles a wicked laugh that echoes through the cabin.

"Go," he barks, shoving at Vaunt.

Vaunt springs to life, crossing the room and falling to the mattress. He scoops Gage into his arms and pulls him onto his lap, cradling his

weakened body against his feathers. A small pang of heartbreak ripples through me as Gage smiles, turning his face into the creature that above all else should bring him safety.

I miss Rook.

I miss his eyes in the darkness and his talons clicking against the hardwood floors of our home.

I spent so long trying to get away from him, but now that I have, it aches like a wound when I think of his face.

“Do not be angry with him,” the bird creature, apparently called Evro, says, turning his gaze towards me. “Young Gage has only done what was demanded of him.”

“I’m not mad at him,” I reply, because I find that I’m genuinely not. We are both at the whims of these monsters here and hating the only other human in this place seems a bit like a waste of time and effort. There are much bigger things to despise. “Mad is an understatement anyway. I hate you and the rest of them out there.”

“Delightful,” Evro chortles, looking quite pleased with himself. “Tell me. Do you hate Rook as well? He followed you home. Drank of you. Had you sent away to that boarding school. Do you hate him for it?”

I don’t bother answering. How I feel about Rook is none of his damn business.

“Silence? Interesting. Do you think Rook will come for you? Is he going to save you?”

I stare into his beady eyes, weighing my answer carefully. “Maybe.”

“Maybe,” he murmurs, talons clicking on the floor. “Maybe, he says. Only a maybe.”

“Why does it matter?” I ask.

“Tell me, little human. Why did your parents die?”

“Because you killed them, probably,” I offer, staring up into his wretched, feathered face.

He towers over me and I am starting to see why Rook says he is undeveloped. The rest of these creatures appear to be quite tall, while he is even shorter than I am. I stare up at him as he reaches a clawed hand up like he’s making a threat, only to smooth out the black feathers on his chest.

“I did have them killed, but I did not kill them myself,” he corrects, like that somehow makes a difference. “They died because he did not return and he did not pay enough for their safety. How does that make you feel?”

I’m not sure if he’s trying to make me angry with Rook or what game he’s playing. How I’m feeling in this moment is complicated when I consider what Rook has done to my life, but I can’t find any true malice inside me when I think of him.

Just like I can’t find anything but hatred when I look at Evro. “You killed them.”

“Interesting.” He takes a step back, smiling as he scans my body. “You are strong.”

“I am,” I agree. Though I may be unmatched here, I’m not a weak human. Years of working on farms has given me a certain strength that other humans just don’t have.

“I am stronger.”

“No shit,” I comment, staring up at him. “Is this why you came here? To taunt me?”

“I merely came to see what Rook left us behind for. That is all. Nothing more but nothing less.”

“Gage tells me you’re dying out.”

“Does he now?” Evro hums, glancing at the mattress where Vaunt sits holding Gage. I chance a look over at them as well and find that Vaunt has not moved, but Gage’s face is buried deep in his feathers.

“Yes,” I say, looking back at Evro. “He told me that you’re desperate to keep whatever this bullshit is going. That you can’t make the ones who leave come back with this place being the fucking shambles it is, so you’re trying to build it up.”

“We will rebuild this nest,” he says, training his golden eyes on my face. “We have dealings with humans to provide lumber and seed to sustain us through. The flock will grow. The Shrowd will sustain. Rook will come home to roost as Vaunt did and we will build this place into what it once was.”

That strikes a chord within me. There’s something here that’s being unsaid. “Why does his return matter so much to you?”

Evro raises a hand and I don’t even have time to flinch before he strikes me across the face with his claws. I yelp and leap backwards, placing my hand against the sting in my cheek.

“Come Vaunt,” he demands, turning to the door. “That is quite enough.”

“No,” Gage whimpers as Vaunt slowly lifts him off his lap. “One more minute, Evro. Please.”

Evro doesn’t listen, instead he turns to glare meaningfully at Vaunt who places Gage back down on the mattress. He dips his head and presses a kiss to Gage’s forehead, then rises to his height, shuffling to follow Evro to the door. Gage lets loose a soft sob and I turn to find him, arms outstretched towards his mate who looks back at him like his heart is cleaving itself in half.

“He’s dying,” I say, staring at Vaunt. “He’s dying and you know it.”

“I-” Vaunt starts, but a backhanded strike to his face from Evro cuts his words off. He squawks and ducks his head, cowering beneath the bigger bird as Evro bangs on the door.

“Fucking coward,” I mumble as the lock on the outside clicks and the door opens.

“Yes,” Vaunt whispers mournfully as he follows Evro out into the cool night air.

As the door is closed behind them and the metal clicking of a lock sliding into place, Gage lets loose a soft sob, falling back onto the mattress.

“It’s never enough,” he says, curling into a ball as he draws his knobby knees up to his chest. “It’s never ever enough time.”

“Why doesn’t he break you free?” I ask, disgusted with Vaunt’s sheer cowardice. “You have to know that it’s bullshit that you’re locked up here when he’s right there. Why doesn’t he take you and run?”

“We are all prisoners, Nathan,” he says, coughing as he wipes his tears away. “That is what you do not understand. We are all prisoners here.”

“Vaunt told me to watch out for you,” I reply. “He told me not to listen to your voice.”

“But you did and now you are a prisoner too.”

“Not for long,” I comment, sitting down on the mattress beside him.

“You believe in Rook.” It isn’t a question, but a statement.

“I do.” Also not a question. I know Rook will come for me. He waited for years for me to come back home and there’s no way he’s going to just let me go now.

“I hope that you are right, because Vaunt came for me as well and now we are both trapped here.”

I don’t bother answering. Instead I start examining the cracks between the logs that make up this cabin, wondering if I could somehow pry them apart even though I know that’s impossible. I may be strong, but I’m no match for a log cabin.

“Rook was the first to go,” Gage offers. “That’s why he must return. To set an example to the rest who have fled. Evro believes Rook’s return will send a signal outwards and call the rest of the Shrowd home.”

“Rook will never come back to roost, or whatever the hell it is that Evro said. If he comes, it will be to set me free and that will be the end of it.”

Gage looks at me carefully, like he’s weighing my words. Slowly, he nods his agreement. “Perhaps I will live long enough to see this ending.”

He will.

I hope.



I drift in and out of sleep, half waking, half awake on the mattress beside Gage.

His breathing is shallow, lungs failing in his ribcage, and every now and then there’s a pause. There’s a silence that is only broken by a thick, rattled breath forcing his lungs to heave once more.

It is terrifying to watch knowing that this is what is intended for me.

When I close my eyes, I am given visions of eyes in the darkness, the sound of claws clicking against wood and whispers from the shadows. I don’t know if it’s a dream, a memory, or what other tricks that live in this horrible place taking advantage of my weary mind.

I don’t know if it matters that I can’t really tell the difference.

The sky has not turned to vivid purples or reds but that somehow makes sense if the one who caused that to happen is dying beside me on this dingy mattress.

“You never spoke,” I murmur out loud, looking at Gage’s pale, shallow face. “You were always so quiet.”

He doesn’t reply, but I wonder then if he somehow knew back then that his voice would someday be used as a tool.

As a weapon to kill.

I don’t even know how any of this works. As far as I know, Gage is a human like I am, but maybe I’m wrong.

I’ve been wrong about many things so far, and my head is a place where memories can feel like dreams and dreams can feel like madness. I may not be losing my mind, but I don’t quite trust myself.

Not anymore.

Not yet.



A shriek echoes through the cabin, yanking me out of my reverie and dropping me back into reality. My heart races as I push myself up off the mattress, scanning the darkness of the cabin and the scant traces of moonlight that creep through the cracks in the log walls. Another terrified shriek meets my ears and I drag myself to my feet while more shouts and screams sound in the night.

The scent of burning reaches me and I cover my nose, staring in alarm at the smoke filtering through the cracks of the wood.

“Gage,” I say, dropping to my knees and nudging at his shoulder. “Wake up. There’s a fire.”

He doesn’t move, but he does mumble something under his breath, his lungs flailing for breath. I don’t think he’s in any shape to outlive whatever is happening beyond the locked door of this cabin. This smoke will kill him before they have a chance to drain his entire life away and I know there’s nothing I can do to stop that. Instead, I take the small scrap of linen he uses as a blanket and pull it up to cover his face, tucking it around his head carefully so that he can still breathe. It might act as a filter, I’m not sure, but it feels better than leaving him here with nothing covering his nose and mouth while he struggles.

More screaming meets my ears, filtering in through the cracks in the cabin and I scan the walls carefully because if there’s a fire, we could both be fucked.

If this cabin catches fire with us locked up inside it, it won’t just be Gage that dies here tonight.

I head for the door and start kicking at it, doing whatever I can to get us out of here. I know it’s not likely to give way, but I can’t just sit here and wait for death to take a chance at coming for us. I’d rather go down fighting than sit and accept that I could die here.

At least Rook might know that I tried, in the end, to get back to him.

I kick at the door fruitlessly, the wood chipping off with every strike but nowhere near close enough to crack as I need it to.

“Come on,” I growl, booting the door again and again until my legs start to feel like jello.

The smoke in here is getting thicker and the scent of burning wood is growing stronger by the moment. My desperation grows and I haul back to kick at the door again, but just before I can, it flies open. Vaunt leaps through the door and rushes to Gage, tittering noises of concern and worry as he touches the blanket covering him.

“He’s alive,” I call out as I head for the open door. “Grab him and get the fuck out.”

I don’t bother waiting for him to pick Gage up and carry him out before I bolt through the door and into the open area in front of the row of cabins. Fire licks the sky and the smoke rises to the treetops as I turn in a slow circle, seeing the sight of every single cabin lit up in flames. The Shrowd screeches in pain from behind doors they cannot get out of, inside cabins they are barred inside of. Thick wooden logs hold them where they are, stuck inside burning buildings.

Someone has been busy this evening while everyone else was sleeping and my heart leaps as I catch sight of him. He stands in front of the destruction, arms crossed as the wind whips tendrils of fire upwards, sending sparks flickering off into the dark night.

Rook has come home to roost, and he has brought death with him.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Rook

Some shall live this night.

Vaunt spoke sense into me and some will live.

The children.

Only two of them exist and though they were told to stay put they escaped into the woods the moment Vaunt freed them from beneath one of the cabins. How the eldest in this community ever stooped low enough to keep their young hidden beneath the rotting wood of their dreary cabins is beyond me.

It was bad when I was a child here and it has apparently gotten worse since.

Though not for long.

The Shrowd is burning.

Their bones are melting.

Their screams are a chorus in my head, a symphony of joy and success that swells inside my chest and makes a feral crow escape my own throat.

Evro stands behind his glass window, his mouth open in a pained scream but he cannot break free from the flames that cover his feathers.

My oldest brother.

The one who started it all with a greedy demand for quills in exchange for safety he did not deliver in the end.

I stare at him while he burns, his hands beating weakly on the glass as fire consumes him and turns him to ash. When he falls out of view, I turn and look towards the one cabin that did not get the bath in gasoline and

spark of flame. I have been desperate to get to Nathan the entire night, but I had to take my time and do this right.

I had to make them burn before I got lost in him entirely and forgot my purpose.

Now with their screams dying in the night air as the flames consume them to the bone, I can find what I really came here for.

He stands against the darkened sky at the bottom of the steps of the one cabin I did not burn. Vaunt moves down the stairs behind him, carrying a body shrouded in dirty cloth, but I cannot focus on my brother's sorrow when my mate is so near.

My heart leaps as I take off at a run towards him, seeing him start towards me in return. We collide in the middle, arms grabbing as I jump into his arms.

Nathan catches me.

He holds me.

Buries his nose in my hair as I inhale the mountain spring scent of him into my lungs, undercut by the stench of burning wood. I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, clinging tightly to him as he cradles me tight in his strong hands.

I pull back and tilt my face up to him, relieved as he moves forward and presses his lips to mine. I preen and my feathers ruffle as he licks at my mouth, eager and hungry for me as I am for him. I pull back with a gasp because I need to look at his eyes, even though I could kiss him forever if he'd let me.

"You came," he breathes.

"I came for you," I reply, leaning forward and pressing my ear against his chest. His heartbeat is strong, sending waves of comfort and desire through me. My arousal is growing and I can feel slick trickling from inside me, but I know we can't do anything about it here as much as that pains me.

Sirens sound in the distance, announcing the pending arrival of the Coopman's Gap volunteer fire brigade. Someone must have spotted the blaze in the distance and called it in.

Nathan appears to hear it as well and loosens his grip on my legs as I move to stand on my feet in front of him. I regretfully let him go, turning to look over my shoulder to the clearing where I parked the shiny truck that carried me here.

"Is that Hank?" Nathan asks, squinting into the driver's seat.

“He won’t remember being here,” I offer. “I needed a ride.”

A soft laugh leaves his throat as he shakes his head. We take a step away from the scene of death behind us and I catch a glimpse of Vaunt in the distance. He is still cradling Gage to his chest like the precious cargo he is but when I gesture at the truck, he shakes his head. Tipping his head once to me, Vaunt disappears into the trees, taking Gage, or whatever is left of him, into the shadows.

“Fucking coward,” Nathan breathes, staring in the direction my older brother went.

“He has his reasons,” I offer. “But they are not mine to speak of. Vaunt story is his own.”

“I don’t fucking care either way, I just hope Gage survives.”

Hope springs in my chest for my brother and his mate hearing that Gage still draws breath, though I can’t be bothered to focus too much on their plight when my own is right in front of me. The sirens draw closer and I grumble because now we’re going to have to take the long route home instead of the quicker, shorter route.

“Let’s go,” Nathan says, grabbing my hand and giving it a gentle tug. “We don’t want to be caught out here.”

“No, I’m done with this place,” I agree.

I climb into the truck and Nathan follows behind. Hank wordlessly puts the truck into drive and takes us away from the death of the wickedness that has haunted us both for far too many years.



“He will be okay, right?” Nathan asks as Hank drives out of the farm yard.

“He will go home and think he’s been there all night,” I reply, as I move to stand beside him on the porch. “He’ll be okay.”

Nathan hums, moving behind me and wrapping his arms around me as we watch the headlights of his dad’s truck head off into the distance. Smoke rises from the east and I can’t stop the smile that crosses my face as I consider that I am the reason for it.

At long last, I got it right.

For him.

For my mate.

“Why could Gage call me like that? You called him a mockingbird?” Nathan asks, his breath tickling the fine hairs on the top of my head.

My mood sours for a moment as I consider that I’ve left him alive. One such as Gage is dangerous in the wrong hands, but comfort lies in the fact that he is with Vaunt.

If he lives.

Nathan informed me on the way back here that he was in a dire situation and he might yet pass away into shadow, taking my brother with him as he does.

Perhaps that is for the best, though that thought feels like betrayal when I think on it too long, so I push it down and turn to face my mate.

“He is something else,” I offer, though I don’t quite know how to explain the things the Corvex just instinctively know. As Nathan looks questioningly into my eyes, I find I must try. “Human. But different. Born with a curse in his throat.”

“Well. Shit,” Nathan breathes, his eyes widening the tiniest bit. “This world is so much more than I thought it was.”

“Yes, it is.” Humans are simple creatures, really. They know nothing of the world that exists beyond their human lives. Easy to fool. Easy to mislead. I have made my way by doing those two things, playing tricks and messing with memories to suit my needs.

All for an end.

All for this end, right now on this porch and what is to come.

Love sparks in my chest as I look up at Nathan’s face, the five o’clock shadow lingering in his skin and the flop of blond hair over his forehead.

This is what it was all for.

“That explains nothing,” he murmurs, staring down into my eyes.

“Do you really want to keep talking about Gage and Vaunt, or would you rather fuck me? I’ve been wet for you since we kissed in front of the fire and I’m dying to ease this ache inside me.”

His eyes widen again, then narrow slightly as he leans in and grabs me around the waist. I laugh as he hoists me into the air, placing me on his shoulder. He reaches for the screen door with his free hand and carries me like a sack of potatoes into our home, but we don’t make it far.

The moment we are inside he places me on my feet and leans down, capturing my lips in a kiss as heated as my body is growing. My feathers ripple with need, claws flexing as I resist the urge to pounce on him.

To take him and do what I want with him.

The burn rises inside me, the fire inside my soul catching spark as the scent of crisp water and mountain flowers rises from his skin to greet me. The scent of him is too much and I cannot keep my control.

I pull back and grab his shirt, tearing it away with my claws to reveal his chest, then reaching for his pants. He moves away though and smacks my hand, drawing a growl from the depth of my being.

“Needy little monster,” he mutters as he undoes the button and zipper, stepping out of the pants in a move that takes far too fucking long for me to bear. I growl again and grab his boxers, tearing them away from his body so that he is naked in front of me, his eyes narrowed in a mix of anger and lust. His cock lays heavy between his legs, half hardened and thickening, and I reach for it to draw his arousal forward, but again he smacks my hand away.

I’m about to protest, to call him a name or something when he spins me around and pushes me against the smooth wall of the entryway. Before I have a chance to respond, he is yanking my shorts down and reaching between my slick ass cheeks with a finger.

“This what you want?” he murmurs, placing his lips by my ear. I shiver in response as his breath tickles my skin, nodding eagerly because finally he is where I want him to be.

Finally, I will get what I want.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Nathan

Cool winter and oranges filter through the air, drawing me to attention and beckoning me to him. My mouth waters as I stroke the soft skin of his pert ass, dipping my finger into the smear of slick that's dripped down his inner thigh. Rook whimpers needfully as he turns his head to watch me lick it off my fingertip.

It is delicious.

Hints of cool, crisp water meet my tongue and I need more.

I get to my knees and grip his hips in my hand, pulling his ass out towards me as I lean forward. I place my tongue on the rim of his puckered entrance and lick the droplets of slick lingering there, the flavor of him bursting on my tongue. He moans softly and pushes back even more, opening up for me as I devour his hole.

"Nathan," he pants as I lick at him again and again, savoring every bit of this delicious slick he's making.

For me.

The slick he is making just for me.

It does my head in that this is all mine and nobody else will ever get to taste the core of Rook. I almost let loose my own growl considering someone else in my place, but I stop it before it can escape.

I am not a beast, but he makes me behave like one.

I lick at him again and he moans, his hole softening beneath my tongue enough that I can slip the tip of it into his body. He shudders and presses back, demanding more but I know what he really needs.

I stand and take my cock in hand, lining it up with his entrance. He rests his arms on the wall, ass jutted out and waiting for me to enter. When I do, he lets loose a sharp call that sounds like relief and pleasure mixed into one. I push my way inside, feeling the squeeze of him around me, body rippling with my own desire.

Aided by his slick, I pull back out, then push into the heat of his body again. He grips me tight like he wants to keep me there but I cannot stop stroking in and out of him, listening to the soft little noises he makes with every single one.

“I hate you,” I lie, gripping his hips tight.

“Good,” he barks back, looking at me over his shoulder with darkened glowing eyes.

I trail a hand up and grip onto his feathers, listening to the cry that echoes through the house as I hold onto them tight. I could pull them out and he knows it, but somehow that only serves to make him push his ass back against me hard. I let go, then move to grip another handful of his feathers. He whimpers, pushing back against me with every thrust as I hold him tight in my fist.

“Nathan,” he moans as I slip out of his body, letting go of his feathers.

He turns to face me and I anticipate a kiss. What I don’t anticipate is him leaping onto my body, wrapping his legs around my waist and arms around my neck. I catch him as he crashes his lips onto mine, taking care to not drop him onto the ground. I carry us to the living room and sit onto the couch, letting him splay his legs over my thighs, his hard cock slapping onto my belly. He groans into the kiss like he’s unimpressed and lifts his ass up, reaching between his legs to grab my cock. Breaking the kiss, he holds my length upright sinking onto it as his eyes roll back in his head.

“Better?” I ask as he lets loose a bird-like trill from the back of his throat.

Instead of answering, he starts moving his hips as more slick coats my cock deep inside him. Rook mumbles something, then leans forward, pressing his head to my chest. I take hold of his hips and move him up and down on my length as he lets loose another trill of pleasure. I could stay buried in his body forever, but my orgasm is slowly starting to rise along my spine, my body tensing as I bounce him on my cock.

Like he can sense I’m getting close, Rook raises his head and starts moving on his own. He writhes on my cock, pulling off and pressing back down with enough force that each thrust pushes tiny breaths out of his

lungs. I reach for his cock and give it a few strokes before I lose the ability to do anything but feel him around me. When I let go, he takes himself in hand and strokes, the head popping through his fist with every motion. He growls low in his throat, his head tilting back as cum shoots across my stomach leaving streaks of white on my skin. His body shivers and he leans forward, teeth grazing against my collarbone like he wants to sink them into my skin.

"Do it," I say.

"My mate," he murmurs before opening his mouth and burying his teeth in the skin of my chest.

I gasp as pain flits through me, followed closely by pure desire. Rook sucks at the wounds, his throat bobbing as he swallows my blood into his stomach. I moan, head spiraling with pleasure, body heating and trembling at the same time. He draws another mouthful and leans back, thin trails of red seeping from the corners of his mouth as his tongue snakes out to gather them up.

I come undone as I watch him savor my blood. Gripping his hips tight, I hold him on my cock as I thrust upwards into him in a quick, short rhythm. He licks his bloodied lips and closes his eyes as I fill his slick channel with my release until I am spent and he is left breathless.

When I let go of his hips, I am shaky and drenched in sweat but satisfied more than I ever have been before. I linger in his body, making no move to pull myself out of him just yet. Rook falls forward onto my chest, panting and cum soaked, a smile on his face that I am thrilled to have put there.

"I love you," I blurt, which would be an odd thing to say to a bird creature that just drank my blood if that creature wasn't Rook. My mate. I still don't know the depth of what that means, but when I think of that word, I know that this is what he is to me.

Rook turns his head up to look at me, resting his chin on my chest.

"I love you too," he replies, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

"Bloodsucking vampire," I whisper, reaching forward to brush his hair out of his eyes.

"Not even close," he says, offering me a grin full of sharpened, pointy teeth.

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Chapter Thirty

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Epilogue

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

Eight boys all present and accounted for.

Exactly as there always has been.

Exactly as there never will be again.

He does not know he has been spotted, but he has. Rook has seen him creeping along the edges of the trees and is waiting for him to come closer.

Waiting for him to move forward and join the group of unsuspecting Boy Scouts gathered near the fire.

Scout Master Nathan stands by the table, passing out metal sticks so the boys can roast their marshmallows. He remembers being in a similar place when he was this age, though that camp is long gone now.

Burned to the ground by the creature wearing a human skin seated on the bench beside him.

This is a new camp.

For new memories.

Scout Master Nathan knows how important memories are.

The boys poke at each other with their sticks, laughing and joking but they are tired now. It’s been a long day of swimming and looking at bugs under magnifying glasses. They can barely keep their eyes open but they are eager for the s’mores they were promised.

They will eat.

Then they will crash.

Scout Master Nathan and his partner Rook are counting on this.

Troop 557 is a busy group of boys.

When Hank approached Nathan and Rook about taking over the troop, they almost said no.

Rook wanted to say no.

Nathan hesitated.

Nathan wanted to say yes.

In the end, they agreed to supervise one camp-out a year on the back end of their property along the treeline. The rest of the fields are full of crops, but this space is reserved for Troop 557.

And whoever else may creep in the forest.

He is joining now.

The bird boy.

Rook watches him with shrewd eyes that almost glow in the darkness. The boy stops in his tracks as he spots Rook sitting there, watching him like a hawk.

Watching him like a crow.

The boy starts to turn like he means to leave, but a hand lands on his shoulder and he goes still.

He turns wide eyes up to the man standing with his hand on him as his tiny little bird heart flutters uncomfortably in his chest.

Nobody has told him how to do this.

He hasn’t been taught anything about the way of the Shrowd.

He hardly even knows what that word means.

He and his sister ran from the fire the night the nest burned and they have been starving in the woods ever since, eating berries and leaves to fill their aching stomachs.

But it wasn’t enough.

She fell into shadow a handful of moons ago and he buried her beneath the oak tree in the middle of the forest.

He will never see her again, but he is close to finding a host to follow home.

He is close to being able to live in a house instead of under it.

Or he was before he was seen.

Before he was caught.

The boys around the campfire don’t notice that he is there and he closes his eyes for a moment, wishing he could disappear for real but the hand on his shoulder doesn’t leave.

The danger doesn’t leave.

Seen and caught.

“Are you hungry?” a voice murmurs and he nearly falls over.

He would fall over but the man is holding him tight.

“Yes,” he squawks, his stomach growling as he looks up at the one who is speaking to him. This one is not the one holding him, that one is golden haired and bearded.

This one is dark haired.

He is thin and willowy.

He has tiny bits of rubber in his ears.

The bird boy doesn’t think he is as human as he looks but he isn’t sure so he says nothing.

“Come and eat, but do not think of leaving as a shadow with one of them, little bird,” the dark haired man says and he has no choice but to agree.

“How?” he asks, but the creature speaking to him merely lays a finger alongside his lips. The air around him ripples and he can see his feathers.

He can see his claws and his talons and his quills.

His beautiful, solid gold quills.

“I am Rook,” the creature says as his human skin melts back on. He looks up to the human with love in his eyes.

A love so deep that it would take years to burn it away and even then it wouldn’t be snuffed out entirely.

He wants that love and wonders how Rook got it.

Where he found it and how he kept it.

If he could be loved like that, he’s sure he’d never be lonely again.

“He is Nathan,” Rook says, gesturing towards the man holding his shoulder. “My mate.”

A mate.

A real mate.

No wonder the love shines bright here in this campfire space.

No wonder he was drawn towards the warmth.

A real mate.

A pair.

“Your number is nine,” Nathan says, as he lets go of the boy. “Go sit. Eat. Sleep. You are welcome here and we will chat in the morning about getting you a real home.”

A real home.

Could it be true?

He looks at Rook and the older bird smiles. He nods and agrees with his mate.

The bird boy will have a real home.

His little bird heart could explode with joy.

He scurries over to the empty spot at the fire side, landing on the wooden bench with the rest of the boys.

“Here,” the boy beside him says, handing him a stick.

“Thank you,” he whispers, taking it from his hand.

He follows the lead and mimics the human boys as they make melty, sweet s’mores.

He eats four before he starts to feel sick.

Before he starts to smile.

Before he laughs as one of the boys starts making fart sounds under his armpit.

Rook and Nathan watch him carefully, but he does not do anything wrong. He behaves as a human does.

He behaves as a crow boy in hiding does.

As the group starts to yawn, Rook and Nathan exchange a look and a nod. Rook moves to douse the fire but not before pecking a kiss to Nathan’s lips.

Nathan grins in response to the love of his mate.

Rook throws water on the flames, making sure none of them spread beyond the pit meant to contain them.

He knows what fire can do to fragile bones and tender flesh.

“Roll call, Troop 557,” Nathan announces as the fire dies down in the firepit.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

“Nine,” the bird boy says when it is his turn, happy to have a number. to call.

Nine boys all present and accounted for.

Two mates madly in love.

Exactly as there is now.

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Want More Mayhem?

Mayhem Manuscripts Season Two: Cryptids
Pareidolia by Lee McCormick
Mortis by Lily James
Hollow by MN Bennet
Palingenesis by Rae Stone
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Feral by Emmy LaRoux
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Solivagant by Ronan Marlow
Solais by C.S. Autumn
Golden by B. Ripley
Leech by Rikki Leighton
Marked by N. Boeyer

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Books by B. Ripley

The Boys of Horseshoe Lake

Halfway Down (Book One)

Red Door Daddies

One More Song (Book One)

One More Try (Book Two)

A Christmas for Morrie (Red Door Holidays)

Standalones

Haunting with a Ghost

Drop Dead Demon

Call to the Devil

The Cabin

To Wish Impossible Things (holiday novella)

* * *

Co-writes

Metamorphosis (with Lee McCormick)

Butterfly (Book One)

Dragonfly (Book Two, coming soon)

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About The Author

B is a self described weirdo from the wild prairies of Alberta, Canada who lives on a diet of coffee, hockey and horror movies. Along with her collection of increasingly strange art and slightly off-putting oddities, B lives with her husband and collection of pets in a house that looks like Halloween threw up everywhere. Her love language is music, and she collects coffee mugs and garden gnomes, but only really ugly ones.

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