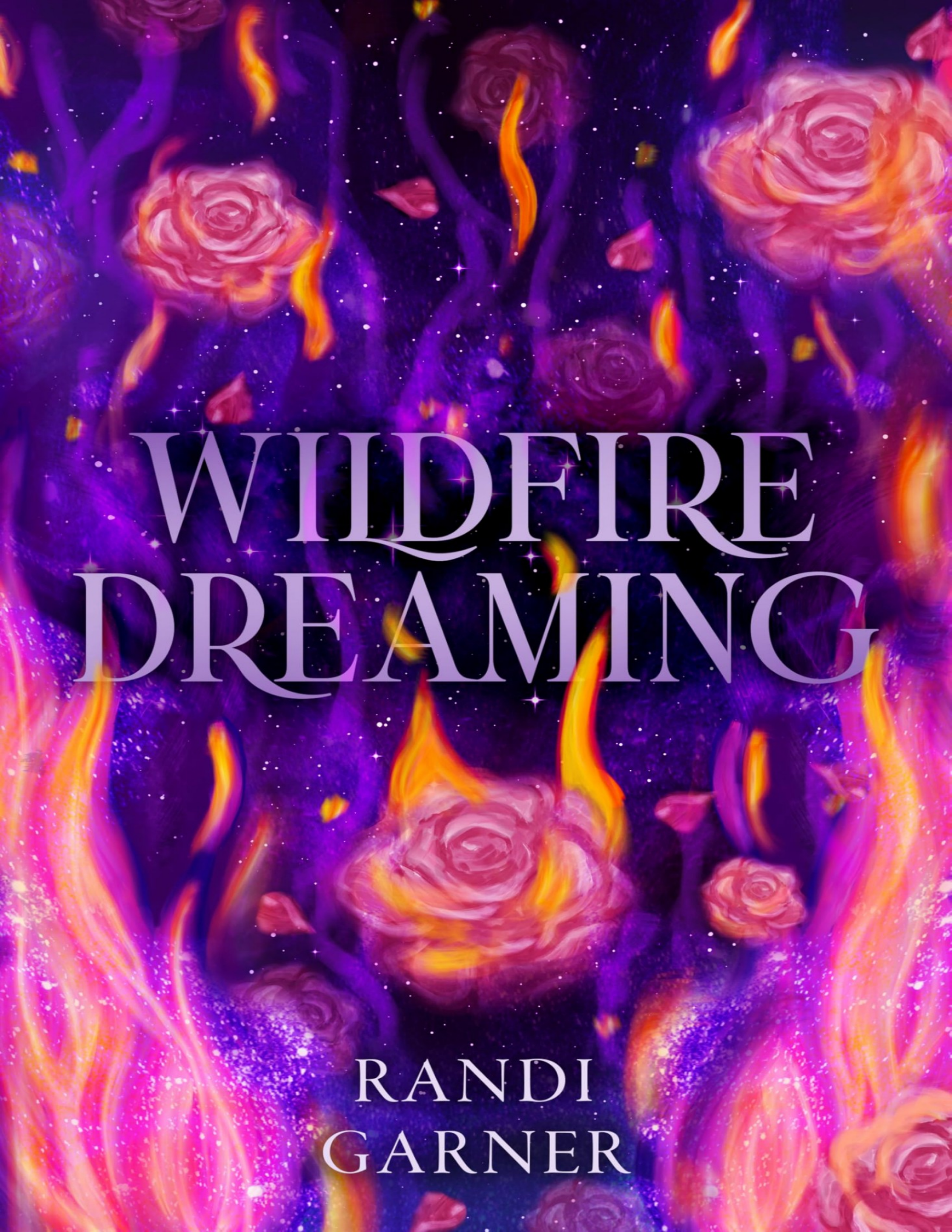
WILDFIRE
DREAMING
RANDI
GARNER

PRAISE FOR WILDFIRE DREAMING

“Lush, atmospheric, and addictive, WILDFIRE DREAMING is a dream I never want to wake up from. This is more than just a high stakes, gritty dark romance—it’s a masterclass in yearning, second chances, and turning a genre on its head.”
— Gillian Eliza West, author of WHEN THE UNIVERSE SINGS

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“I lost about 14 hours of sleep, cried over a fictional fish on an airplane, may or may not have yelled and thrown my phone once, considered smoking a cigarette, but 100% would let Randi emotionally destroy me again. I’m as obsessed with this story as Nico is with Tommy.”
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"So much raw emotion wrapped in a dark, whimsical atmosphere. I was obsessed from start to finish and so emotionally devastated I couldn't sleep. But you know, in a good way."
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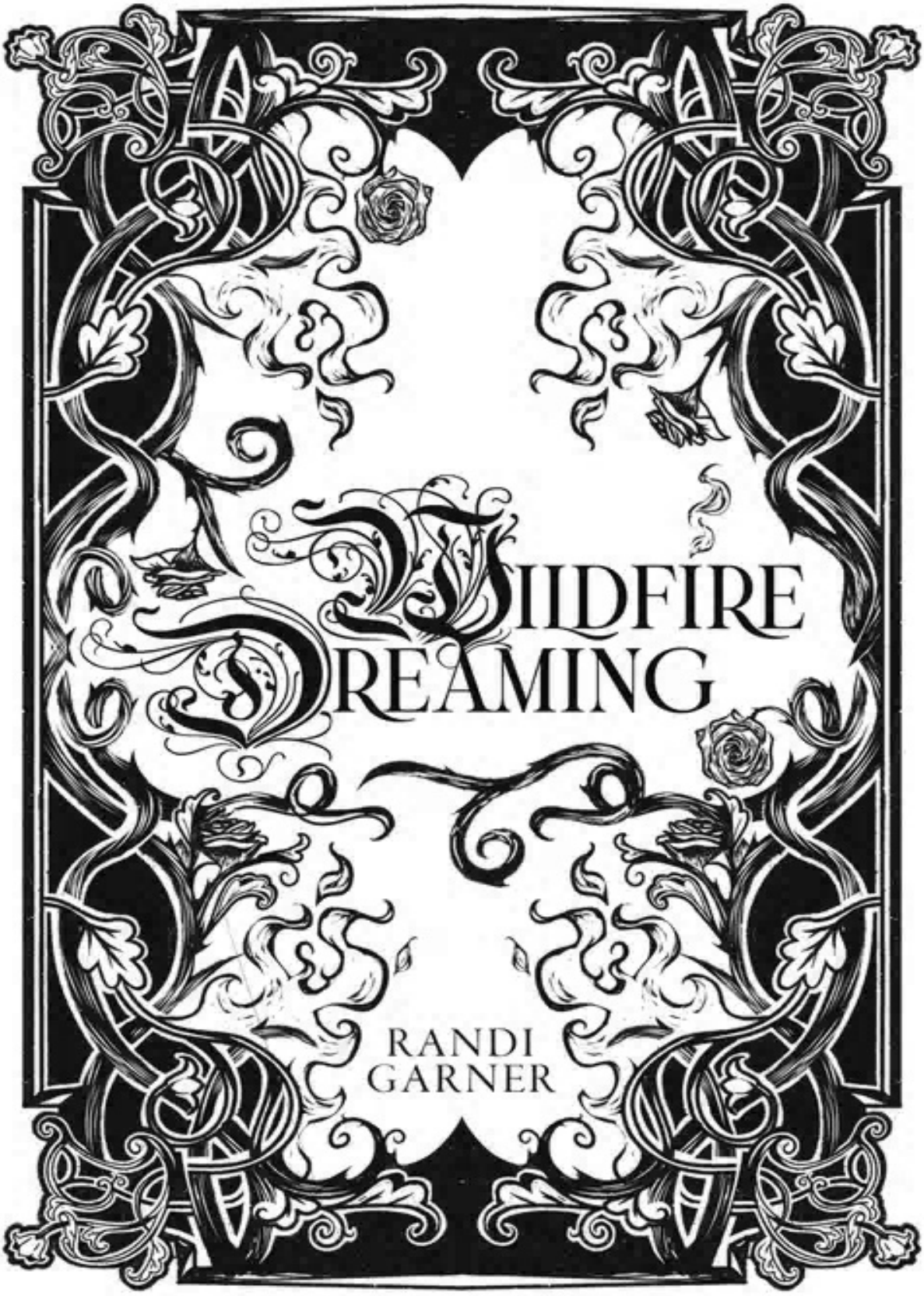
WILDFIRE
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Acknowledgments
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CONTENT WARNING

Before stepping into this book, I want to give a gentle warning that this story contains dark themes and mature content not suitable for readers under the age of 18. Below, you will find a list of the trigger warnings. Nico and Tommy are both morally gray, unhinged, and display toxic behaviors that are in no way meant to inspire you.

Also, it's been brought to my attention by my early readers that I wrote smoking a cigarette a little too convincingly, so for this I must issue an apology beforehand. While they make it look cool, don't be like Tommy and Nico. Smoking is terrible for your health.

Do what you need to preserve your peace.

Trigger warnings include: *physical, emotional, and psychological abuse from a parent, death of a parent (off page), threat of sexual assault (not heavily shown on the page), trauma, bullying, depression, grief, explicit sexual content (primal play, cum play, biting), stalking, drugging, heavy smoking, alcohol consumption, blood and gore, torture, swearing, violence, murder, and death.*

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To those who carried the burden of the ones who came before them, carved a new path, and broke the shackles of their generational curses.

May this be a resting place.

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PART 1
THE NIGHTMARE

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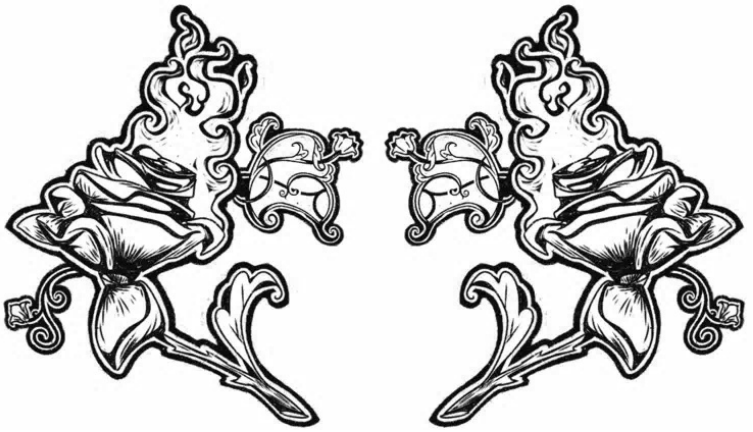
CHAPTER 1



EL OLVIDO BLACK 1005

THE LUCID DREAMER

7 DAYS BEFORE THE NIGHTMARE

"You are both dismissed."

My father's goodbye is formal, detached. He rises from the leather chair, fastening the button in the center of his crisp suit jacket, then departs without another look at his two sons.

I watch from my place on the sofa as the barricade of men in pressed outfits flock to his sides like wings of a plane, exiting the threshold of the sitting room.

It's been nearly a year since I last breathed the same air as my father, a lapse of time that has seemed to stand still. Everything is the same. His presence weighs like steel shackles, the kind of aura dripping in blood and twelve-thousand-dollar cufflinks. A man who would gouge out an eye for information and slice the other once he's received it.

The room is filled with imported leather furniture that smells like new car chemicals, crystal bottles housing amber liquor lined across a shiny bar cart, and a handcrafted Valentine humidor stocked with luxurious cigars—an heirloom my great-great-grandfather got god-knows-where.

Everything is just as it was when I was a boy.

And I fucking hate it here.

I want to leave now that the meeting is over.

But one look at my big brother hunched over the coffee table, his elbows propped up on his knees, glaring down at the little bit of whiskey left in his glass, tells me I'll need to deal with him before I go.

Mattia is the oldest, and he's used to being in father's favor. This change of rank is a blow to his pride, and he's surely to respond in an impulsive, devious way that will only give me a migraine.

"Don't take it personal, Matty." I reach across the table to snatch one of his cigarettes. "You're better suited for work in the office anyways, the front man of the company. What was it you used to say?" I pretend to think about it as I tuck the filter between my lips.

I beckon over one of my guards with a wave of my fingers.

Gabrielle, or Gabi as I've always called him, strikes a flame from the base of his boxy lighter. A whisper of heat grazes my cheek.

I lean over and ignite the tip.

Gabi whips the lighter closed and steps back to his station alongside Caleb.

This cigarette is my reward. I finally did it. After all these years, I am the one Father chose.

I readjust my attention back onto my brother. For the first time in his fucking life, he's quiet.

I inhale, and the paper burns away as the nicotine rushes down my throat. My head spins. The instant hit of serotonin in my bloodstream tingles my limbs.

Fuck, it feels good.

It's been at least two months since I lit one up.

"Oh, that's right." I hold the cigarette between my forefinger and the pad of my thumb, using it to gesture to him as I blow smoke from my nostrils. "You used to say you have the prettier face between the two of us."

It's a jab to his ego, given how often we are mistaken as twins. We both inherited the Valentine charm, and we were both taught to use it to our advantage.

He grabs his whiskey glass, gripping it so tight the veins in his forearms bulge under his skin like worms flailing in the sun.

Mattia has tormented me my whole life. Since we were children, he's had this ridiculous drive to beat me in everything. And what better way to beat someone than to forcibly make them weak?

To see him on the verge of breaking stirs a sinister desire in me to unravel that thread. He's used to getting his way, and this time, he's lost.

"Two whole minutes, Matty." A breathy chuckle mixes with my smoke, and I cock my head. "I don't think you've ever kept your mouth shut for this long."

He throws back a swig of his whiskey and hisses through his teeth, his face contorting in an ugly, demented smile. "You get one fucking promotion after all these years running Dad's syndicate, bloodying your hands so we didn't have to. I'll be sure and arrange a congratulatory gift for you."

It's supposed to be an insult, but I've always been harder around the edges, better suited for the dirty work the cabal requires. Meanwhile, Mattia sits up in V Group's shiny tower, running the family business on the topside. He's been the face of it since he was in his early twenties, fresh out of college, right next to our father.

I take another drag, holding his deranged glare.

The inside of my chest constricts despite the steady flow of nicotine. For a split second, I am eight years old again, enduring Mattia's violent spells of beating me until I blacked out. He's sick and has always relished in superiority over me, over everyone.

Another dance of gray vapor trails from my nostrils as I widen my grin.

"How does it feel, Matty?" I ask, deliberately slow and suffocating. "To no longer be Dad's favorite?"

He lets out a humorless laugh, running a hand over his chin. "Wow, you really think you have a big dick just because Dad chose you for this. It's one fucking job." He levels me with an unhinged cut splitting apart his lips. "You're still just as worthless as you were back when we were kids, Nico. Don't you get it? This is Dad's way of proving that. He expects you to fail, just like I do."

I scoot up on the edge of the cushion, stealing one last smoky inhalation. The pleasureful rush and my new promotion and Mattia's rambling warms my blood with a short-lived euphoria. But the nerves coiling in my stomach are a buzzkill.

"Regardless, he chose *me* for this, and I know you're smart enough not to interfere. At least I hope you are." I put the cigarette out in the crystal ashtray on the table and regard him with a low-lidded, deadly look. "Throw your fucking tantrum, but if you so much as come into my lane, it'll be war.

One you won’t win. There’s a fucking reason Dad put me in charge of the underground.”

Before he can reply, I reach over and flick my cigarette butt into his diluted whiskey.

He lunges at me.

Expecting this kind of reaction, I’m already up and strolling toward the doors.

Gabi and Caleb are at my side by the time I turn the corner into the hallway.

Glass shatters against the wall inside of my father’s study.

“*Get out!*” he roars.

The guards stumble to obey Mattia’s orders as the violent echoes of wood splitting carry down the staircase.

I tuck my hands into my pockets, purposely dissociating during my stroll through the marble halls of my family home. I’ve intentionally avoided this place. These walls know too much, have witnessed too much of my suffering. It feels intentional, like a test of will for Father to call me back just to hand me a promotion.

Real men swallow their weakness whole, he always says.

“Mattia runs out of that room for Nico and I’m knifing him,” Caleb mutters as we take the stairs.

“You lay a hand on the boss’s brother and the Chairman will have you gutted,” Gabi aggressively whispers back at him from my other side.

I chuckle a little to myself.

“He can try.” Caleb continues to stroll with a perfected nonchalance. “I’d like to go against the old bastard for making the order to mark up my pretty face.”

I make the mistake of flitting my attention onto the puffy, white strip of skin running through Caleb’s brow, over his eyelid, and down his cheek.

I was there when it happened; when the sutures sucked the gash back together; when the wound in his eyeball healed and dulled to an opaque white speck in the dark blue of his iris.

Gabi cuts his eyes at him, the sharp motion barely detectable from the chandelier lights reflecting in his lenses. “Fucking hell, you always have a death wish,” he mumbles under his breath.

“We’re not out of the den just yet,” I say as we approach the armed sentries stationed at the front doors.

Like second nature, Gabi and Caleb's expressions convert back into emotionless stares.

Right now, none of the wolves are hungry, but that could change quickly. Until we make it out of the gate, nothing is certain.

We cross the large, scarlet foyer and exit in a peaceful exchange. The men in tight-fitted suits bow their heads as I step past them and into the cool night. Distant thunder rumbles from the nimbus clouds above. I feel it vibrate the soles of my shoes.

Caleb opens the car door for me, and Gabi gets into the driver's seat.

I inhale the petrichor coating the moist air. Small droplets fall onto my hair and the tops of my shoulders. The chill rushes up my spine and damn, it feels good. A reminder I'm alive, and everything I've ever wanted has fallen right into my hand. All I have to do now is grasp it.

Without looking back at the mansion, I dip inside of the car.

Caleb takes the passenger seat. Once the door is closed, he angles his head to where the men lining the entrance of the mansion can't read his lips.

"Get us the fuck out of here," he mutters.

"For once, we agree on something." Gabi puts the car in drive, and we coast down the cobblestone.

I've known Caleb and Gabi since we were children. Their parents work in the mansion. A cook, a maid, a gardener, and a blackjack dealer. The boys were both roped into my father's syndicate at an early age, and the three of us stuck together.

It's been us against the world for as long as I can remember.

The iron gates, refracting in the rainwater, creak open for the vehicle to exit.

Distance collects between us and the gilded home.

I watch the muscles visibly relax in the back of Caleb's shoulders as he rests into the seat.

Gabi's grip loosens on the steering wheel, and one hand pushes back the blond waves from his face. They're already a frizzy mess from the humidity.

He locks eyes with me through the rearview mirror. "Where to?"

I rub my thumb over my lips and peer through the tributaries trailing across my window, watching the blur of the emerald pines and bronze oaks outside.

"Take me to her."

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5 DAYS BEFORE

On Wednesdays, she likes to go out.

More specifically, she leaves work and walks home four blocks from the office like some kind of reset after a long day of bullshit, as if the city smog and crowded sidewalk could provide such respite.

She enters her apartment building and, within the hour, comes back out, abandoning her corporate attire of a fitted skirt and tucked-in turtleneck for something a little less restricting.

Today, it's cargo pants, a cropped sweatshirt revealing the gem dangling from her belly button, and a leather purse. Every so often, when she walks, I catch a glimpse of the tattoo on her sternum—edges of ink I can't make out this far. There's a fresh glow to her makeup, a darker shade of pink painted over her lips.

She glances at her surroundings before pointing her nose to her phone screen.

A vehicle pulls up to the curb, and she gets inside.

Without a word, Gabi swiftly pulls out of our parking spot and tags the vehicle.

"You know, one day she might notice your stalking," he says, looking in his side mirror before switching lanes. "It's going to freak her the fuck out."

I stuff my hands inside my hoodie pocket, grinning a little. "It's been years and she's never caught on."

Gabi shakes his head, changing the subject. "What's the plan tonight?"

Some days, she meets up with a woman from her office and they gorge themselves with tacos and two-dollar margaritas. On those nights, I watch as she staggers drunkenly from the cab—clutching her pepper spray—up

the stairs of her apartment complex, before she jabs her finger clumsily into a keypad until her door opens.

1969. Her father's birth year.

Other days, she leaves with her hair thrown in a bun, clothes two sizes too big for her physique, and strolls through whatever event her favorite art gallery on the corner of Marques and Ninth is hosting. She attends at least twice a month.

However, tonight seems to be the thing she does on rotation. *At least* once every month.

"A date," I reply, my jaw setting at the lewd visuals of her atop another man, pulsing in ecstasy.

She's a one-and-done type. Dinner and a hotel. Leave before sunrise. Each month, the guy is different. And each month, I have to refrain from killing them.

A few minutes later, Gabi parallel parks across from Bay Leaf Indian Grill. It's her favorite restaurant. She orders take-out once a week, typically on Friday nights.

I watch through the car window as she gets out of her cab and meets the *fuckboy* for this month at the entrance. He's smiling, and she's nodding, and then they're both laughing. The guy is tall and muscled, wearing a button-up and some pressed chinos. Classic *I'm on a date, everybody* clothes.

He places a hand on her back and leads them inside.

My stomach coils, and the irritation pulls my mouth into a tight line.

It's been *years* yet she still affects me this way.

I push a hand through my hair and huff out a laugh, sickened by how pathetic I am.

"Guess we are having *vindaloo* for dinner tonight," I say.

Gabi hangs his head. "Jesus Christ."

I rest my palm on my knee, tapping my fingers to distract myself from the urge to disrupt her date. "Make the order."

Gabi grabs the tablet in the empty passenger's seat and starts swiping away. "I'm getting extra garlic naan to survive yet another voyeuristic outing."

"I want my usual." I push back in my seat, scrutinizing the passersby on the street outside the restaurant. Four individuals enter, and from the looks of their apparel, they're college students, half-drunk already.

I hunt for any motion tucked in the crevices of the dark alleys between the buildings. It's second nature for me to scope out my surroundings, given my line of work and the number of enemies I've collected—but tonight, it's strictly because of Mattia.

Gabi locks the tablet and places it aside.

"Caleb is nearby," he says, as if he can hear my worries.

I survey the crowd through the four windows of the restaurant, unable to make out where Tommy and her date are seated.

I unlock the door. "Do me a favor, yeah?"

Gabi looks over his shoulder at me, the passing vehicles' headlights glinting off his glasses. "Can you really call a command a *favor*?"

I ignore his smart-ass reply. "Go sit at a table inside."

He must notice the change of my tone, because he nods once without questioning it.

It's been two days, and I'm uneasy. My gut is in knots. Something feels off.

Gabi gives me a head start.

The October chill slips underneath my hoodie as I jog across the busy street and enter the restaurant.

The smell of the turmeric and cilantro chutney, the sound of the searing meat in the kitchen, they meld and start a salivation in my mouth. The coffee and breakfast sandwich Gabi fetched for me earlier this morning are the only things I've had today.

I step up in the line behind a man currently paying for his food. My hands stay in the pockets of my joggers as I casually inspect the restaurant.

I spot her wild mane of curls first.

In the back corner, seated at a small table, is Tommy and her date.

The man ahead of me finishes paying and leaves the line.

"An order to pick up, for V," I tell the host.

She gives me a polite smile and replies with *one second* before disappearing into the kitchen.

Another host escorts Gabi to a table placed diagonally from Tommy and her date. His position gives him a clear view of them.

Tommy sips on her riesling, intently listening to the guy talk. Though, the smile she wears is stiff. She holds her wine glass close to her face, fidgeting with the hooped piercings on her nostril, zoned out, like her mind is drifting from the table.

Under the dim lights, her strawberry blonde curls are darker at the roots, and her complexion has a silky, sun-kissed sheen to it.

I think about what she would do if I were to go over and interrupt her date. Would she notice me right away? Look at me as a stranger, confused?

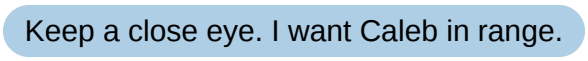
I've obsessively turned over the scenarios in my head hundreds of times. It's been thirteen years since we last saw each other. I hardly look the same as the young boy she once knew.

Her date drops his napkin and bends in his chair to grab it. The motion raises his sleeve up, exposing the flicker of tattoos on his forearm, and more importantly, the handle of a knife tucked in the waistband of his pants.

He sits up and slips the napkin under his water glass. Then, he points to Tommy's with an inquisitive look. *Is it good?* I think he says from reading his lips.

She nods, deepens her bullshit smile, and takes another generous sip.

Suspicious, I get my phone out and send a quick text to Gabi and Caleb.



As I put my phone away, a loud melody rings over the chatter of the restaurant.

Tommy startles from her daze and sets her wine down on the table, glancing from her date to her purse. "One sec."

She digs for her phone and answers it in a clumsy rush.

I saunter across the waiting area, pretending to be immersed by the cultural paintings and decor.

"Lola? What? Wait, slow down, I can't—" Tommy gasps.

I peek around the wall.

The blood drains from her face with the phone still pressed to her ear.

"Hey, is everything okay?" The man brings his hand across the table for her arm.

She jumps up, pushing out of her chair. "I'll be right there!" Tommy's voice trembles, though she doesn't hang up the phone as she spins toward the exit and leaves behind her date.

She whisks past me in a fading cloud of candied strawberries and caramel espresso, muddling my senses.

The guy jumps up and chases after her. "Wait a second!" He catches her wrist, forcing her to halt. "Let me give you a ride."

She yanks her arm from his stern hold, her phone still glued to her other hand. “No. I have to go.”

His dirty fucking fingers wrap around her arm again. “Seriously. I’m just trying to help. Let me.”

“I don’t need your help.” Tommy’s lips quiver, but the steel in her eyes slices straight through the man. “Now let me go!”

The hosts and some of the nearby customers eye the scene without intervening.

Gabi’s tall, suited figure reappears as he saunters into the waiting area and shoulder-checks the guy, knocking his grip loose from Tommy.

“Oh, sorry about that.” He places a hand on the guy’s arm, ensuring he can’t reach for her again.

Sometime between entering the restaurant and taking his seat, Gabi loosened the tie around his neck and disheveled his gelled hair, resembling a typical nine-to-five worker, exhausted from a long day of grinding in the corporate machine.

The bell on the door dings, announcing Tommy’s rushed departure.

“Yeah, whatever.” The guy is already side-stepping Gabi, his sights still set on Tommy.

Gabi’s eyes cut to me.

I hold them, giving him the okay.

It’s the guy’s built frame, the stealthy way he glides, how fast he caught her in his grasp, the knife covertly buried under his belt, and the desperation he masks with concern to get her alone with him—I don’t trust any of it for a second.

Gabi retightens his tie around his collar, his daunting demeanor returning as he exits the restaurant.

I give it a minute before slipping out.

Gabi and the man are gone.

Tommy sits beside the curb of the street, hugging her phone into her chest, her entire body shaking from quiet sobs.

I slip around the corner of the building and into the shadows of the alley. I’ve watched her from afar for so long that it’s become a daily affirmation to look but to never be seen.

The sound of her tears is like a blade puncturing to its hilt inside of my chest, twisting and tearing.

I clench my fists in my pockets and let my head fall back on the brick, exhausted by this compulsion to get rid of her pain when it's safer to stay away.

Her sniffles echo in her hand, tears and snot garbling like blowing breath underwater.

No longer able to take it, I prop sideways, shifting my weight onto my shoulder against the building to look at her.

She's crouched, folded in on her knees and balancing on her heels. People continue to pass by her without so much as a glance as she cries into her palms.

Such heartless assholes.

My feet start to move, carrying me to her.

She doesn't notice I'm approaching. Her long curls drape over her arms, their ends grazing the grimy sidewalk.

I extend my hand, my fingertips only an inch from the top of her head.

A car pulls up to the curb.

She quickly rises and fumbles forward for the handle, climbing inside.

I curl my fingers into a fist, watching as the car speeds away.

A familiar dread, a longstanding sense of yearning, and resentment, they all battle inside of me. The agony of it all aches like a green bruise, the way it always does, but this time, a fleeting elation joins in because this is the closest I've been to her in years.

I take out my phone and dial Caleb's number.

He answers on the first ring. "Yeah?"

"Go to Tommy," I order. "I'll be there soon."

"Already on it," he replies with a *you should know this* attitude to his tone.

I hang up and open my texts.

GABI

I'm waiting in the car.

I think about this time when Tommy and I were younger, when I cried and she held me, the copper taste of blood stuck on my tongue, and I was unable to escape the torment of my life. Back then, she tried to save me from it.

Funny how much has changed.

Now, because of her, I end each day in a hellfire.

Slipping my phone in my pocket, I return inside the restaurant for my to-go order, still warm inside the plastic.



I EAT my take-out on the drive.

"The lamb *vindaloo* has a perfect spice level." I lean up and offer some to Gabi in between the seats. "Want a bite?"

The blue glow from the dashboard lights illuminates his flat expression. "Little busy driving at the moment. Don't want to re-stain my suit after your last pasta offer."

"I'll save some for you then."

Like me, he hasn't eaten since breakfast. I know he's starved after the long-ass day we've had.

I continue shoveling scoops of clay-red curry and basmati rice into my mouth with the plastic spoon.

When I am finished, I slide the to-go box across the backseat and pull my hoodie up over my head. Tossing it aside, I grab the button-up hanging on the coat hook.

"Time?" I ask, working my arms through the shirt.

"Two minutes," Gabi says.

I fasten the buttons as the car turns off the highway and onto a gravel road.

Once I'm done rolling up my sleeves, I slip out of my joggers and into the clean, black trousers. My long legs bump into the back of Gabi's seat as I maneuver around.

Once I'm dressed, I fish my phone out from my hoodie pocket.

CALEB

Out of city limits.

Where the hell is she going?

I push a stressed hand through my hair.

It's fine. Caleb is with her. He's cutthroat and heartless when it comes to his work. They call him *the Ripper* for a good goddamn reason. I'm confident nothing will happen while I'm not there.

I let my hand fall onto my knee as I peer through the windshield. The headlights flood the thicket of trees that circle the clearing ahead.

Gabi slows his speed when the road becomes uneven dirt, filled with holes. “One minute.”

I rotate my head to look out my window. The abyss swallows everything in its mouth. And here we are, driving deeper into it.

Sixty seconds until business.

I pull the handgun out from under Gabi’s seat and secure it in the back of my waistband.

Flashes of my childhood plague me—scared and helpless, attempting to run from this life. I was stupid to believe I ever could. From the day I was born as a Valentine, this was providence.

Gabi parks the car, exhales a breath in preparation, and then gets out.

He opens my door.

I slip my hands inside of the pockets of my pants, transitioning into my *business* persona. It requires a deceptively listless look, dripping with mystery, which is intended to draw someone in and unnerve them at the same time. The talent was forcibly taught to me by my father until I got it right. I witnessed him in the mask many times during deals and killings from the corner of the room.

Across the small, graveled clearing is another one of our cars. Three silhouettes emerge from the center of the blinding headlights.

I relax my weight on the hood of the car, crossing my ankles as I watch two of our members drag another in between them by his arms.

Gabi folds his palms in front of his torso beside me, wearing an intimidating expression.

My members toss the man down at my feet. His knees scrape the gravel, the heels of his hands biting into the rocks.

I acknowledge the two from the syndicate as they step back. They’re dressed in dark formalwear, arranging their bodies into professional stances. Olivia and Michael, both in the lower ranks. They work directly under Gabi and Caleb.

And the man at my feet, glaring up at me with a swollen face, is the unfortunate asshole from Bay Leaf.

“He refused to talk,” Olivia, the one with the buzz cut, says. The result of a poker game she lost a few days ago. Her squad mates had too much fun

shaving her curly locks off. She shed a few drunken tears, and then recovered by serving them cookies laced with laxatives.

“Sorry, Boss,” Michael adds. I’ve known him since he was a boy, skipping through the halls of the servant quarters on my father’s property. Now, he’s six foot two, covered in tattoos, and looks like he could fistfight a bull.

“Is that so?” I cock my head down at the guy, intrigued by his defiance. He glares up at me as if I won’t slash the smile from his face. “Want to save the theatrics and tell me who sent you?”

He snorts out a sound that says *go to hell*.

Loyal and stupid—two of my favorite qualities.

His response lands him a kick in the side by Olivia. I hear the splitting of bone against the steel toe of her boot.

The man lets out another winded groan and folds forward into a ball, holding his side, wheezing.

After a few seconds, he forces out through gritted teeth, “I don’t know who you are or what you’re talking about.”

I reach under the back of my shirt and pull the heavy pistol out of my waistband, kneel beside him, and jam the barrel in between his eyes. “Mattia really doesn’t know when to just sit down and shut the fuck up, does he?”

I don’t give the man an opportunity to react as I click the safety and pull the trigger.

It’s over in less than a second.

Wasting time to get him to talk would be pointless when I already know why he’s here. Stooping this low is a specialty of Mattia’s. It’s a silly fucking game he will continue to play until he gets his way.

The man collapses on the ground, and blood quickly pools in the veins of gravel around him.

I push the small button back and readjust the gun into my waistband. “Take his corpse to my brother’s men.”

It’ll serve as a display to anyone else he dares to send, like a deer’s head adorned to a plaque.

Michael is the first to jump into motion, hands slightly trembling as he reaches for the body.

Olivia moves slower, her face pale.

It’s refreshing. A sign they’ve still got good in them. Or maybe it’s just a reminder of how I’ve been swallowed by this shit entirely.

I barely give the corpse another look before I push off the hood of the car for the backseat door.

The light pang in my chest thrums louder until I can feel it vibrating my teeth.

My tongue aches for nicotine, to feel it soak through my skin and meddle deeply in my bloodstream.

I rummage in my pocket for one of my suckers.

Gabi appears next to me, shifting his focus from me to the two subordinates as they drag the body away with shivering hands.

He’s uptight with shit like this, a vulture circling, ensuring it gets taken care of with perfection. He’s definitely an *I’ll just do it myself* kind of guy, never leaving room for error.

Right now, though, I can see the conflict, the slight frown curling at his mouth. It’s the need to go comfort them after witnessing what had to be one of their first dances with true death. Yet, he knows that doing so would only set them up for failure. They need this experience to survive.

I’ve had thirty years of this life, my hands coated crimson, unfazed by the light exiting another’s eyes.

A soul-consuming exhaustion spreads throughout my limbs, and I swear I could sleep for days despite the insomnia ripping me back from that cliff each time.

I unwrap the sucker, its color an odd, artificial pink, and pop it between my lips. The chemical, strawberry taste spreads in my mouth, providing some solace against my overwhelming desire for a cigarette.

When Olivia and Michael make it back to their vehicle, a clear distance away, Gabi asks, “Should I send a report to the chairman?”

He hovers at my car door, waiting for an answer before opening it. His voice is as emotionless as my demeanor, but I can easily detect his unrest by the way his eyes scour my face at the mention of my father.

My heart beats fast and hard, flexing the muscles in my chest. I resist the urge to press my knuckles into my sternum by focusing on the weight of the sucker against my tongue.

Strawberry, just like her perfume.

“This doesn’t involve my father.” A bitterness wraps around the word *father* as it leaves my mouth.

Gabi doesn’t dispute or ask questions. He simply nods once and opens the car door for me. “Caleb dropped his pin. Would you like us to head that way?”

“You read my mind, Gabs.” I give him a reassuring pat on the shoulder and a smile to lighten the mood before slinking into the black leather.

Gabi situates himself in the driver’s seat, simultaneously pulling up the location on his phone. “He’s thirty-seven miles out.”

I press the sucker against the roof of my mouth.

It seems she’s on her way home.

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4 DAYS BEFORE

One hour and twelve minutes outside of the city.

That's how far she goes. Back to Brownwood, a quaint, heart-warming, rom-com movie town where everyone knows each other. The kind with autumn murals painted on the windows of the only two restaurants or pumpkins stacked on hay bales in the lawns of suburban neighborhoods. The town advertises their Fall Festival in hand-drawn posters of animated, golden leaves, pinned all up and down Main Street. The perfect place for a family to root and raise their children.

I wonder if Tommy enjoyed it, if she returns with a sense of nostalgia, like the kind I get when I see her.

"I don't understand why you came all the way here," Gabi says from the driver's seat, still alert and analyzing the parking lot of the hospital through the windshield. "You're an executive now with shit to prepare for. Caleb could've handled this."

I sit with my legs spread in the backseat of the car, peering out the tinted window up at the hospital's seemingly endless stories. She's been in there for hours now.

"Hard to say." I rub a hand over my face with an exhaustion that may as well be jet lag. I'm lethargic and tired, but I couldn't sleep if I tried. Though, it's nearing close to the forty-eight-hour mark since I had decent rest. "Guess I'm just obsessed."

Gabi shifts in his seat to look back at me. Since parking, he's removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, displaying the canvas of ink up and down his arms. His blond hair is pushed back from his repetitively surfing

hand—a stressed-out tic he gets from me—and he's looking at me with a serious line across his brow.

"You're going to crash, Nico," he says. "Let me take you back. Caleb will keep an eye on her. Please."

I stare at the top story windows of the hospital, and for a brief second, I imagine doing what he suggests—letting him take me back, relying on updates through Caleb's texts, the air in my lungs constantly tight at the idea of something happening and the massive space between us. Caleb is more than capable, but I need to be able to breathe. And to do that, I need her in my sight.

My phone dings.

I look at it.

CALEB

Her mom died.

I clench my jaw.

"Fuck," Gabi murmurs, reading the same text on his own phone.

I let out a deep, exhausted breath. The pinch in my chest is faint. I don't ask Caleb anything else. I'll see it firsthand anyways.

"We stay here until she returns to the city," I tell him.

Gabi lets out a sigh but doesn't rebuke me as he straightens in his seat.

I pull another sucker out from my jacket pocket and run my fingers over the loose wrapping. The sound of crinkling paper fills the car.

I imagine she's crying again, just how she was at the restaurant. It makes sense now, why she looked so freaked out on that phone call.

The muscles in my neck clench, and I have to name a million different reasons why it's unwise for me to get out of this car and go inside to take Caleb's place. He's the best one of the three of us when it comes to being out in the field undercover.

Gabi can blend in, but Caleb can go unnoticed. Meanwhile, I attract eyes everywhere I go.

I pop the sucker in my mouth.

Blue raspberry.

Not nearly as good as the strawberry.

Memories that can never be stored away haunt me once again: she's younger, her eyes, shining like orbs of amber and emerald, reach for me, and I cling to them like a flower phototropic for sunlight.

We’ll find each other outside of here.

I am no stranger to longing, caught in a bleak loop of staying just out of reach of what I want most.

But she is hurting, and that cycle is waiting to be broken.

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THE NIGHTMARE APPROACHES

She stays in a motel. A clear indication her childhood home isn't a place she wants to revisit.

I pay to secure the room beside hers—and for the manager to look the other way from his suspicions.

At night, I hear her sobs through the thin, peeling walls of this shit hole.

When dawn crawls over the peaks of the mountain overlooking the town, she leaves.

Her days are filled with calls and trips to the funeral home and the church.

When she returns to the motel, she shuts off the engine and sits in her car, mindlessly scrolling on her phone. She smokes and stares absent-mindedly through the windshield.

After getting out, she drags her feet along the sidewalk with a brown paper bag tucked under her arm and disappears inside of her room. I am always a few paces behind her.

After day two without seeing her eat, I order delivery from the nearest taco truck—her second favorite—and make it out from Lola, her useless cousin who spends most of her time crying while Tommy takes care of the arrangements.

I sit on the community terrace of the motel with a bright pink sucker in my mouth. Periwinkle and rose gold explode across the horizon, and if I gave a damn about stopping to appreciate the glorious sights such as this one, it might even move me a little. However, I hate mornings. The world is quieter without the sun.

I read through Caleb and Gabi's messages in our group text.

GABI

Taking a leak and then I'll be back.

CALEB

TMI

The town is all clear. Grabbing breakfast. Want anything?

GABI

Vanilla latte, four shots, for Nico. I want a plain matcha with oat milk.

CALEB

The green drink that makes you shit yourself?

GABI

Just bring me the damn caffeine.

After you deliver, head back to the city and oversee the shipment coming in today. Gabi and I have her covered.

My fingers glide sluggishly across the screen, a side effect of my fatigue. Every muscle in my body feels heavy, like I've been injected with the sedatives we use to make our enemies talk.

I close my eyes, hang back my head, and release a long breath, annoyed that the two-hour cat naps throughout the day aren't enough to sate my insomnia.

When I looked in the mirror this morning, the shadows under my eyes were like bruised plums.

I rub my knuckles into them. The craving for a cigarette burns on my tongue. I haven't smoked since my chat with Mattia.

The rusted hinges on Tommy's door emit a sharp shrill as they open.

I lower my hand back to my phone, investing my attention onto the screen to look somewhat normal as her footfalls grind against the concrete.

Out of the side of my eye, I see her figure round the corner, a silhouette of wild curls strolling for the vending machine.

Does this girl ever eat anything with nutritional value in it? It's six in the morning, for fuck's sake.

She shimmies in her dollar bills and enters a cryptic combination on the button pad.

A few seconds pass.

The machine groans.

Then nothing.

She mutters something to herself and gives it a soulless kick.

I lock my phone and slip it inside my hoodie pocket, intrigued by her response. It’s the most life I’ve seen out of her in the past few days.

Instead of retreating to get the manager of this fine establishment, she shoves another set of dollar bills inside of the money-eating machine.

To no one’s surprise, it repeats itself, failing to spit out her snack.

A long beat of silence.

She slaps both of her palms on the edges of the machine, hanging her head toward her chunky boots. They’re paired with slouchy sweatpants and a baggy black shirt with holes throughout the material, as if it's been washed too many times or eaten up by rats.

I’m not sure if she’s crying or if she’s about to snap and bust the glass in on the machine. After the pantheon of days she’s had, either would be possible.

Not to mention, today is her mother’s funeral.

Unable to ignore the compulsion squeezing my insides, I adjust the collar of my hoodie to hide the bat wing tattoos at the base of my throat and lift from the table.

It’s just the two of us out here, stuck between the trucker on the first floor and the drug dealer that lives in the room four doors down from mine. I can play the role of a stranger, return some of her kindness that she gave me all those years ago.

As I approach her, a cold sweat lines the inside of my palms. It’s been over a decade since we last spoke, but she could easily remember me. I’m not the lanky kid with short hair and patchy facial hair anymore. Surely she won’t.

But what if she does?

I’m not sure what reuniting with an old lover on the day of her mom’s funeral would do to her.

Against all my better judgement to just stay put and let her be, I ask, “Do you need help?”

She looks up at me with bloodshot eyes, and gives a half-hearted smile, leaking with sadness. “Yeah. Lots of it.”

Not a flit of recognition passes over her face as she pulls her gaze away from me.

My heart shrinks.

Of course she doesn't recognize me.

A bitter taste coats the back of my throat.

She shifts on her feet to lean on the brick before pulling out a pack of El Olvido Black 100 cigarettes from her pocket.

I watch quietly while she plucks one out with her lips and lights it. The smoke breezes over my face, and my mouth goes dry despite the glaze of sugar pooling idly on my tongue.

She sucks in a deep drag, eyeing me. "You're up early."

A stream of smoke curls from her nostrils. One side is double pierced, two black hoops glinting under the flickering lamppost.

"I could say the same about you."

She must notice my hungry gaze flitting to her cigarette because she takes another long drag and then offers it to me. "Want a hit?"

More than you fucking know.

I pop the sucker out from my lips and twirl the paper stick in between my thumb and index finger. "Trying to kick the habit."

"Good for you then." It comes out genuine, though still lacking energy.

She peers out at the pastel sunrise as if I'm not there, lost in her own world.

I assess her cracked lips, her short nails bitten down to their beds, and how she's standing out in the fading darkness with a stranger, not the least bit worried about her safety.

My jaw tightens, sinking my molars into the sticky, strawberry sphere.

I jerk my chin up toward the vending machine. "What were you trying to get?"

"What?" She rotates back to it, blinking, as if I've interrupted her thoughts. "Oh. The brownie. There." She flicks her wrist to the crooked package, half-in and half-out of the steel spiral. "Shitty week to be *PMS-ing*."

I debate my next move.

And by debate, I mean that I take my wallet out of my pants pocket. Inside one of the slips, I keep a thin pin. Usually, it's to open a locked door leading to classified intel or to some bastards already aiming their guns at me. Never in my life did I think it would be useful in a situation like this, though.

"Whoa, wait. What are you doing?" Her eyes bounce up from the pin to my face, mouth parting in confusion. It's cute, her looking at me like that. A

small glimpse of the Ella I once knew.

She chose to stay in the shittiest motel in Brownwood, one that can't even afford the upgrade to modern security cameras. There's hardly anything to worry about.

I flash her a sly wink as I crouch down. "*Shh*. Don't tell."

She gapes at me while I work the rusted lock undone with the pin. The embers of her cigarette collect at the tip. "Um, I appreciate it, but I don't need chocolate that bad. I can just go to the store a few blocks—"

The lock clicks and the front of the machine opens, granting full access to all the snacks inside.

I snatch a few of the brownies and a bag of gummy bears, recalling her obsession with the combination back when we were kids, and hand them to her.

"I gotta say, this looks like a hearty breakfast."

She blinks at me, speechless.

I reach over and lightly flick the end of her cigarette to keep the cinder from burning her hand. This seems to spur her back to life.

"I… Um, do you— Actually, you know what, I'm not even going to ask."

I give a breathy laugh and lift my hand higher, gesturing for her to take the sweets. "Probably wise."

She stuffs everything into the baggy pockets of her sweatpants and then gives me the rest of her cigarette. "Consider it a thanks. We all deserve a break every once in a while. You can quit tomorrow."

I should be reluctant to take it, but my hand has a mind of its own and moves without permission. Up against hers, my resolve has always been too fucking weak.

"Thanks."

She gives me a small smile before turning to leave. "Have a good day."

I reply with a faint nod, reeling at how little she's changed. Clearly depressed and dealing with grief, yet she somehow has the ability to wish *me* a good day when she has every right to be cynical instead.

And just like when we were younger, I am compelled to protect that generous quality of hers, tooth and nail.

I stand there and watch her walk away under the bright glow of the awning lights until she makes it down the long stretch of sidewalk to her door.

She doesn’t look back before stepping inside.

Her cigarette still burns halfway, the markings of her lip balm circling around the butt—a faint red tint.

Gabi emerges out of the shadows to stand at my side. “I thought you were going to keep your distance until tomorrow.”

He’s going on as little sleep as I am, but his appearance would never suggest as much. The tie around his neck is still tight and right in place, each strand of his blond hair glossy and tamed, and there’s not even a hint of stubble on his jaw. I don’t understand it, unless he has some secret to pissing and grooming himself simultaneously.

I toss my sucker in the trash and place her cigarette in between my lips. The fruity taste mixed with the nicotine erupts across my tongue. I take a long breath and fill my lungs, detonating a divine bliss down my arms and legs.

My muscles grow heavy against my bones, coaxing the tired weight in my body to take over.

Smoke exits my open mouth in lazy clouds. “Go buy me a pack of El Olvido Black 100s.”

“You hate the way smoking turns your fingernails yellow.” He recites my own bullshit words to me, a speech I commanded him to feed me if I fell back into the habit. “It also decreases your lung capacity and stamina drastically. You age quicker as well.”

He’d know, given how he loathes smoking more than I say I do. Out of all the men in the syndicate, Gabi is the only one who doesn’t cope with our lifestyle using vices, technically speaking. I’m not sure if grinding an old MMO counts.

I take another puff. “Yeah, well sleep deprivation can make me go insane and fuck up, so I’ll just wash my hands more often and do some yoga.”

I can’t avoid it forever. Unfortunately, I am not some immortal being who can live without a break to my brain.

“Just give up quitting. Each time you cycle back around to it, you guilt yourself. It’s annoying.” Gabi crosses his arms, flexing the shoulders of his suit, and rests against the side of the building. He looks out at the sunrise, the sight highlighting the perpetually serious expression he wears.

The stages to curb my insomnia, he means.

Tiring myself out at the gym is my go-to.

Cigarettes are the second option.

“If there was ever a night to sleep, it would be this one,” he continues. “You have to report to DVC tomorrow morning for your first day, bright and early.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I wave him off, taking another hit.

As much as I hate it, he’s right. I can’t waltz in the company my father just bought looking like a cadaver. This is everything I’ve been working for.

The high of Tommy’s contact and a pack at my disposal will get me through the day. I’ll observe from afar, like always, a shadow unnoticed. And when night falls, the flow of nicotine in my bloodstream will be enough to lull me into a decent sleep.

“I’ll get some shut-eye tonight.” I flick the cigarette butt into the trash and turn my back to the warm strokes of amber and gold streaking the sky. “But for now, we have a funeral to attend.”

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CHAPTER 2



FUCK REALITY

THE TRESPASSER

I hold half a bottle of vodka in a vice grip as I stumble through the front door of my childhood home. It's early October, and the crisp autumn air kisses gooseflesh down my arms despite the alcohol breathing fire into my bloodstream.

"Did you make it home?" Lola, my cousin, asks through the phone.

The screen is sticky against my ear. Too focused on the overstimulation from it, my body starts to tilt forward. A dizzy spell wrecks my vision, and the entryway before me transforms into a vortex of shadowed blurs.

"Whoa." My reflexes swiftly kick in, and I throw an arm out to steady myself against the doorframe.

I cease all movement, letting the violent roll of gravity level me back out.

"Tommy?" Lola echoes.

"I'm home, *Lolly*, *Lolz*, *Lola-bug.*" A giggle-hiccup combination echoes in my throat.

The alcohol is doing its work. Everything feels lighter, funnier. In fact, I have to stop the words, *I'm safe*, *Mom*, *don't worry*, from slipping out between my teeth. It's a joke, fitting for Lola, since she's more uptight and worrisome than me, but given the circumstances right now, a mom joke would be a bitch move.

Lola lets out a gruff sigh, her breath crackling through the speaker. “Just lock the door behind you. I’ll come check on you tomorrow. I need to clean up here, then I will head home for the night.”

“*Oh-kay*.” In an animated motion, I turn and click the deadbolt into place.

The sudden movement rustles my equilibrium again.

I laugh and grip the knob as best I can with the bottle still in my grasp. “Tell Johnny he’s a great man. The way he read Mom’s eulogy, she’d be so proud.”

I can hear the mockery in my own voice. I’m being insensitive and uncaring, and I have no idea why. Johnny has been nothing but kind to me. He doesn’t deserve my belittling. Neither does Lola. She’s been by my side, helping with all the funeral arrangements. Though, the liquid numbing my system makes it hard to care, or to stop myself, or to even apologize.

“I’ll tell him.” Lola’s voice is faint. And in typical fashion, she doesn’t take my rage bait. Whether she believes I’m being sincere or not, that’s how she plays it off. “Now get some sleep.”

I left her to clean up after the wake. She should be annoyed with me at the least.

Her kindness only fuels my need to provoke her.

I kick off my heels and stumble through the entryway. “Yes ma’am!”

The other side of the phone goes quiet. Her silence paired with the journey down the hallway of my old home deadens the euphoric state I’m relying on.

I haven’t been back here since I left, nearly a decade ago.

The prodigal daughter returns.

The family portrait on the end table slices through my alcohol-laced reprieve like a knife to a birthday balloon.

I lose my breath for a second.

I’m four years old, my curls braided in pigtails, propped up on Dad’s knee, and my smile shows the gummy pink of where my two front teeth used to be. Mom has her hands on his shoulders, her eyes squinting from her laughter. And he has a goofy look on his face, no doubt spouting some lame dad-joke about *walnuts* or whatever stupid shit he heard at work that day.

This was taken a few months before he died. Some guy was on the phone, fighting with his ex, and he ran a red light. My dad was flattened

like a goddamn crêpe.

The picture is a visceral reminder that I am truly alone now.

Both of my parents are gone.

I bring the bottle back to my lips like it's automatic, curing the sensation.

"Tommy." Lola's voice is thick with tears.

"Hm?" I halt at the threshold of the living room. My fingers cling even harder around the glass neck of my liquor.

It's like I've gone back in time.

Everything is the same: the mustard shag carpet and velvet green furniture; Mom's basket of threads and yarn off to the side; a half-finished quilt strewn on the coffee table; her favorite pack of cinnamon gum near the coaster, knitted by her own hands, the one with little sunflowers on it.

A burn crawls up my throat.

I try to swallow but my synapses struggle with the command, fighting the whirlpool churning in my stomach.

The agonizing length of Lola's silence tenses the muscles in my neck.

Sick of waiting, I snap, "*What*, Lola?"

"I am here," she sniffles, and my chest clenches, "if you need someone to—"

"I'll talk to you tomorrow."

I hang up before even more venom reaches my tongue.

I can't talk to her. Not like I want to. It's why I hold her at arm's length, why I hold everyone at a distance. I was forced to, ever since I was born.

Nobody else can know. A vow branded on all the Willow women. The fucking covenant that ran my mom's life.

Growing close to another only makes hiding a vital part of myself that much harder.

I hate secrets, almost as much as I hate her for forcing them inside me.

The tips of my ears grow hot, and the ache in my chest pulls taut, attempting to hold in my furious scream. Carla and Robert, the old couple next door, would inevitably hear it and call the cops for a noise disturbance.

Being back under this roof is worse than I thought it would be.

I should've returned to the cheap motel I've been holed up in. The risk of bed bugs is better than this.

I toss my phone in my purse and drop my arm. The multi-colored canvas bag slides down onto the floor. I leave it and drag my feet deeper

into the living room, taking another swig from the bottle.

The house still smells the same—notes of paprika and spring onions, as if there is a fresh batch of vegetables spread out on the kitchen counter, each one graciously picked from my mom's garden.

It was a hobby she picked up when I was around the age of five. A way to *distract her busy mind*, she always said. Worming her fingers into the ground apparently did that. So did the dirt that collected under her fingernails, or the calculation of whether the carrots were ready to be plucked from the cushion of the earth.

Though, I knew then that her newfound hobby was really just a way for her to cope with the grief of losing my dad.

Tears prick my eyes.

Through the books of memories this place holds, mostly dark and withered pages, there are few that are still crisp and full of life—Mom knitting patiently on the couch, sipping her spearmint tea, or Dad lounged in the recliner, hugging me in his lap, both of us laughing at something on the TV.

After he died, Mom was never the same.

It became just me and her, and the warmth faded into the page like embers to rain.

I plop down on the sofa, the old metal under the cushion squeaking from my weight, validating how ancient the piece of furniture is. It was an antique lugged from the first apartment my parents lived in to this house, where I sat crisscrossed during every birthday celebration, the worn fabric providing a comfort I didn't know existed until now.

I watch the ceiling spin, wishing it would open its mouth and suck me up just to cap the bullshit swirling around in my head. All the conflicting feelings of my mom that I don't want to deal with, they're drowning me.

My dead Mom.

As of five days ago.

I clumsily lift the near-empty vessel to my mouth, cool against my lips.

The liquid fire swells in my stomach.

My mom is really dead.

What the fuck?

I throw the crook of my elbow over my face to stop the hot tears from welling in my eyes.

Why couldn’t I have cried earlier today? While Johnny, Lola’s pastor husband, read his stupid speech inside that stuffy, overfilled church, with Lola sobbing beside me? I just stared silently at the massive, tree-like cross hanging behind the altar, wondering if Mom did the same when she attended every Sunday morning.

When I was seventeen, I asked her why she started going. Much like the coping exercise of her garden, her dive into religion was another form of enduring for her. And back then, after losing someone else so close to me, I needed my own way to heal and move on too.

I thought she would say something earnest, like, *it’s a way for me to feel close to your dad.* How else did the living spiritually connect with those who were dead?

I wanted her advice, to tell her about the love I’d lost.

Instead, she barely gave me a look. “I’m absolving the sins of our family.” It came out of her the way everything else did when she spoke to me: grumpy and disappointed, as if *I* were what needed vindication.

Her answer was vague, which was nothing new. She could never be direct with me.

I knew what she meant, though.

It was because of me and what I’d done.

The accident.

That’s what she always referred to it as.

And I could never just leave it alone. We always fought until either she left to the back yard or I stormed away, enraged and in tears.

The bitter moment is what lingered in my head while staring up at the colossal crucifix looming over the church nave. Somewhere in the recollection, I fully dissociated as Lola’s arm, pressed against mine, shook against her sobs.

I could hear the words Mom would’ve said if she were there.

This is how a daughter should *be reacting.*

Expectation: the over-sized, menacing cross I’ve always borne. It was fitting to have the visual tower over me as she was put to rest.

My streak of apathy continued through Johnny’s words, the picture slideshow that Lola smattered together of my mom’s life, a collection of distant relatives and visitors’ hands dropping on my shoulders, and the pitiful gazes and frowns of those giving their condolences.

For the rest of the day, I operated on autopilot, ignoring my emotions as they quietly festered and multiplied like ants under my skin.

Friends, neighbors, and the remaining family on my father's side crammed into the church's auditorium for the wake. They nibbled on the assortment of foods Lola prepared—cheese cubes, crackers, frail slices of cold meat, fruits and a fluffy, white sugar-dip, cupcakes with cream cheese frosting (Mom's favorite), and fat chocolate-chip cookies. And as they ate, they sipped on the liquor that I provided against my cousin's approval. I listened to people, whose faces I didn't recognize, reminisce about Logan Willow, a beloved soul in Brownwood, and a stranger to me.

Each story painted how kind-hearted she was, disgustingly so.

Logan brought me a basket of vegetables from her garden every week.

When I built my shed last spring, she volunteered to help paint it.

Every Easter, she knitted the children in Bible Study little rabbits.

She drove my niece to her piano recital when I wasn't able to make it home in time.

At one point, they all turned my way, waiting for some equally profound story.

I powdered the bone of my jaw.

She lectured me about moving into the dangerous city once again while we were visiting Dad's grave this past spring. It was the last we spoke to each other before she ended up in the hospital.

They gawked like stray dogs waiting for dinner, all hopeful for Logan's daughter to share *one good thing* about her.

I couldn't do it.

Logan Willow was many wonderful things, but she was never any of them to me.

Saying something so insensitive would've killed the mood and earned me the same disappointed stare from Lola that she learned too well from Logan herself.

So I stalked away, and on my way past the liquor table, I snatched the vodka, and now here we are.

I'm drunk. On my dead mom's couch. Back in my childhood home, after eleven years as the virulence of the Willow family.

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, unable to feel a damn thing.

My arm droops over the side of the couch. The glass of the bottle *clinks* harshly on the floor, but I can't muster up enough care to check if I broke it.

What does it matter if I make a mess? This house is empty now. There is no one to clean it, no one to fill the silence.

In the darkness of my arm over my eyes, I see Mom in her hospital bed, the rough fabric of her gown rustling against the scratchy blanket as she reaches for my hand. Her skin was thin and wrinkled, like if my nail caught it just right, I could tear it open.

“The monsters, Tommy. Our family’s greatest sin. You can’t let them find you.”

Those were her final words to me.

A warning she’d spouted all my life.

These *monsters* were why Logan Willow despised our family gift. They were a myth passed down through the generations of some supposed fiends hunting us down. Though she never saw any sign of them, she believed they were real.

Her stories and perpetual warnings of them lost merit with me through the years, and they became just another one of her attempts to dissuade me from entering dreamscapes. A way to control her reckless daughter.

And yet, in her final moments, I got another bullshit warning, while Lola got a tender smile and an: *I’m so proud of the young woman you’ve become*.

A lump forms in the back of my throat, and I suck a breath into my heavy lungs.

Tears slip down my temples.

Lola’s mother was with my dad when the car accident happened. After they died, Lola came to live with us. I never stood a chance against my cousin.

From day one, Mom gravitated to Lola. Her true desire to separate herself from our ability and everything along with it—including me—became impossible to ignore. Lola was *normal,* her blood free of our curse.

My mom left this world with her morals intact. The Willow women’s ability never appealed to her. Not once was she ever tempted to escape the harshness of life through the lush world of dreams. It was a notion we did not share, and a continuous wedge between us.

The day I refused to give it up was the day she turned her back on me.

I roll my head to the side, sweeping my gaze over the picture frames on the shelf around the television.

My vision still swirls and bounces, but I don’t need to focus to identify the people in the photos. Lola’s dark hair, Mom’s golden curls, they’re easy to notice when they’re always right beside each other.

Some of the photos have my dad’s burly figure posing with a fish or dipping my mom into a kiss. Others are of me as a child in my Halloween costume, holding up my art project from school.

The burial ground of my unresolved feelings toward Mom is unearthed again. The emotions are too hard to separate, and I’m too tired to try.

Fuck reality.

I want to escape this rock that keeps sinking down on my chest. So, I stop thinking and tune into the way my body feels like it’s floating up past the cushions, melding with the gentle warmth of my nerves.

I give into the weightless pull and let the alcohol lull me home.



I OPEN MY EYES.

My body feels transparent, like my soul has slipped out of my skin and replaced my sinew with vapor. The drunken haze of my mind clears, distant from the current of liquor in my veins.

An elongated hallway stretches out before me. Hanging roses decorate the wallpaper, their vibrant pink petals sparkling like layers of moonlight.

The plush grass wilts over my sneakers. Wildflowers run along the baseboards, their blooms reaching toward the hazy violet glow of the light overhead.

Wide windows with open shutters line both sides of the hallway, absent of glass, each showcasing a different dreamscape.

This is the entrance to the Library of Reverie.

On the closest sill, Noir, my black cat, lounges like she’s unimpressed by my appearance. Her long tail flicks and sways as she looks back at me, yawns, and then resumes peering out at the dreamscape through the window.

Smiling, I step closer and snuggle my cheek into the side of her head. “What are we looking at today?”

Noir has been a part of my dreamland since I was eight. It started as a trip to a Farmers’ Market where the local shelter just so happened to be

hosting Adoption Day. I begged Mom for a cat the entire time she perused fresh produce and homemade soaps, only to come home empty-handed.

That night, I manifested Noir inside of my own dreamland, and since, she's chased at my heels in between my nocturnal adventures.

I rest my elbows on the sill and marvel at the lavender-soaked clouds, whirling and thick, leaking down the crevices of the dreamscape like foamy bathwater. The cotton candy wonder inspired the mural on the ceiling of my apartment's living room.

I skim my knuckles over the distressed wood of the windowsill.

This dreamscape belongs to an older lady who lives in the Blue Peak Mountains up north. She mostly dreams of her youth, frolicking in a rose-gold stream with her pant legs rolled up to her knees, kneading her fingers into the wet soil on the bank and planting rows of herbs.

The oregano and parsley and dill all sprout from the ground the moment she packs the seeds into the earth, and when she extracts them, they come alive in the form of little faeries and flutter around her like fireflies.

I usually come here when I miss my mom. The Library gives me this one a lot, like it's hooked up to my subconscious and knows when I need the comfort.

Today, though, I want to forget her, so I push off the windowsill and continue ahead.

Hundreds of open windows beckon me as far back as my eyes can reach. Each one holds a different terrain, and tonight, it appears, there are many people dreaming.

Noir jumps down from the windowsill and follows closely at my feet.

As I walk, I let my fingers graze along the tips of the wildflowers. Vines of honeysuckle trickle over the crease of the ceiling, and the sweet, ripe fragrance lingers alongside me.

"Which one are we thinking?" I glance down at Noir, lacking my usual passion when it comes to selecting my refuge for the night.

She picks up her speed, prancing ahead in the lead.

As I trail behind her, my eyes skip from window to window.

Behind them are whimsical worlds filled with floating whales, nightmares of oversized helminths, gaming sims, labyrinths with no escape, and bouts of everyday life playing out perfectly. These eternal universes do not bend by the logic of reality. Limitless dreamlands are crafted by heart and imagination instead.

They’re qualities that I’ve spent my whole life wishing applied to the real world.

Noir leads me to the end of the hallway. Its threshold is carpeted by thick moss, and on the other side is a sparkling galaxy filled with a starry abyss that Noir does not hesitate to leap into.

It’s been days since I’ve entered the Library of Reverie.

For the last week, I’ve remained in my own dreamland, or as I like to call it, my *oasis*, to recover from the long hours of preparation for Mom’s funeral.

However, I’ve missed traipsing in another mystical land that isn’t my own. Something new.

For now, I can forget about my life as Tommy. In this place, I am nothing more than an adventurer, quenching my wanderlust to explore and stumble upon captivating sights.

My pulse picks up. I grin widely and push off my feet, diving off the ledge into the night sky.

I open my arms, resisting the impact of the wind as it beats against my stomach and between my outstretched fingers. The gust rips my hair back, and I can see the bottom clearly, approaching fast.

My heart palpitates in wild strides.

I use my control within this place to bend gravity, slowing my speed into a gentle landing. The floor is solid but ripples like it’s made of water.

Columns levitate in the outer space of the Library. Window frames float atop them, invisibly tethered to their platforms like planets in a neat row.

These are the shelves of the Library and their respective books, worlds created by all the people dreaming at the moment.

I watch Noir skip from one window to another, floating up to the highest stage at the top.

She prances to a particular window and hops up on its sill. A window I haven’t seen before.

The entrances of the dreamscapes shuffle and filter in and out of the Library. When they do, I lose access to them. Everyone wakes eventually.

But when a new one arrives, Noir and I are attuned to its presence.

It was one of the rules recited to me by Logan herself: *absolutely no exploring outside of what the Library gives you. If you do, you will lose your way.*

None of my follow-up questions were ever answered, but from what I gathered, the Library works similarly to an inventory being restocked. When one *book* is checked out, another appears in its place.

Intrigued, I jump onto the scaffolds, one level at a time, to Noir.

When I make it up to her, I inspect the edges of the weathered white oak, tinged in charcoal. I rub my finger over it, smudging the soot across the lighter shade of the wood.

Tendrils of smoke twist out from the corners and curl up in the air, dissolving into nothing. The intoxicating fumes drift across my face without repercussion.

I lean in, squinting in an attempt to puncture the raid of smoke. It fills the dreamland in a dense, opaque cloud.

I inhale deeply through my nose, sucking in air that should make me cough.

“I can’t see anything,” I say to Noir. “Do you think it’s a bad one?”

There is no crying, no screaming. No sounds of chaos or destruction. Not an incendiary nightmare, but something else entirely.

Its ominous gravity coaxes me to climb inside of it.

Noir bunts her head back and forth between the trim of the window, *meowing* loudly.

I give her a suspicious look. “You’re never this excited.”

She shoves her cheek against my arm, dragging it up to my shoulder.

“Okay, okay.” I nudge her off and wave my hand forward. “Let’s go then.”

It’s been a while since there’s been a change in the Library.

With my permission, Noir jumps through, her onyx fur disappearing into the sea of gray.

I crawl through the window frame, dropping my feet down on the crunchy grass. The adrenaline lapping in my veins is enough to carry me for miles, but I take my pace with caution, unsure of this dreamscape and what it holds.

Nightmares are fragile. They can crumble at any moment. If that happens, I have to avoid falling through the rubble. Another rule where Mom never elaborated on what would happen if I failed.

Trial by fire, then.

The singed grass tickles my shins as I walk.

“Noir!” I hiss, transitioning my attention from the fog in front of me to the crisp weeds below. “Don’t leave me…”

I step out of the haze and the land stretches out around me.

The wall of smoke wraps around the meadow under a dark, blood-tinged sky, its land wide and its color grim, like dusk has hovered over it for far too long.

And it is burning.

A monstrous glow pours out of the heavens, like magma streaming down from the clouds and purging the land. The sheer wall of flame consumes the murky backdrop of the sky in a voracious dance. Firelight beams down like the sun and slaps a furious heat against my cheeks.

What is going on?

Usually, nightmares rumble the ground like earthquakes or beat like heavy rain. Subtle warnings that something is wrong.

The barbarities of the mind are loud and hold negative auras that I’ve learned to identify by the way they bite at my nape. But here, no nefarious energy hangs in the air; nothing seems eerie or *off* about this dreamland at all.

The neutrality worries me more than anything else. The quiet and the stillness, the heavy air breathing flames and smoke in a distant, muffled roar.

Embers drift in the blackness like shimmering snow. They collect in the thick branches of the forest encircling the field.

Noir meows off to the right.

I twist and find her a few yards ahead in the dehydrated tendrils of grass, her vermilion eyes glowing in the twilight.

“What?” I ask.

She looks straight.

I follow her line of sight.

Tucked in a secluded grove of evergreens is a small cottage, off to the side of the inferno.

Surely the dreamer is inside of it. Maybe hiding from the fire?

I have to know what the hell is happening.

Noir starts toward it, and I trudge behind her.

As I approach, the distressed brick exterior and the soft porchlight glow become clearer.

I come up to one of the windows and curl my hands around my face to peek through the glass.

The space is small and open, filtered by an amber tint. An old, plaid sofa sits in the center. In front of it is a wooden coffee table with a half-empty glass on its surface, and nearby is a crystal decanter filled with a shiny, caramel liquid.

Whiskey of some kind?

Nobody seems to be inside, though.

Why is there just a couch? No wall decor? A little kitchenette? If there's alcohol, there absolutely *needs* to be food.

In my periphery, I catch the sight of Noir's tail flitting in the air. She strolls in a skilled balance along the porch railing.

I look back at the bestial blaze. It's not trying to devour the land around it. The flames ripple in place, like they are chained to the underbrush.

A beautiful devastation acting as a barrier of some kind, maybe? To keep something out? Or maybe *in*? What if the owner of the dream is caught inside?

Noir sits on the corner of the railing and looks up, twisting her head in a predatorial, focused curiosity, expanding the slits of her pupils into large, round circles.

I take a few steps back and raise my head to gaze up at the roof.

If I were to look at the fire from a different angle, maybe I could see what's on the other side.

I drop my chin to acknowledge Noir, but she's gone.

My head jerks back toward the rooftop. Did she already go up without me?

A shudder slithers up my spine.

What the fuck is up there?

I let out a long breath, eyeing the tangled mess of ivy and coarse vines curling around a wooden trellis.

I guess up *is the only way to get answers.*

Real-world Tommy wouldn't stand a chance scaling up the walls of a house. I barely have the muscular stamina to take more than two flights of stairs at the office without crumbling to the floor, completely winded. Not only that, but catching the lofty view through the office windows already makes me want to puke.

However, Dream Tommy can easily climb up the ivy-braided wood without her limbs detonating in underused agony. My fear of heights is still present, but at least if I fall in this place, I won't die.

I clasp my hands together and stretch out my arms. My fingers pop, and I roll my neck from side to side.

Okay, it's fine.

You've fucking got this.

Without looking down, I scale the trellis, slowly making my way up the cottage. It takes me a few tries to web my fingers in between the jungle of briars to find my grip. I shove the toe of my boot through the slats to snap the vines.

A little bit at a time, I slowly ascend until I am eye-level with the rooftop.

I made it!

I avoid looking down and plant my trembling palms on the rough surface of the shingles.

Damn, I made it.

My stomach drops.

I crawl on my belly across the flat surface, the pang in my nervous system blasting throughout my limbs.

You are going to have to stand to see anything.

On shaky arms, I haul myself up onto my knees.

Don't look down, Tommy.

Clamping my breath in my diaphragm, I climb up to my feet like I'm a baby fawn learning to stand for the first time.

My pulse drums in my ears.

Okay, you did it.

See?

It's fine.

Like some kind of self-sabotaging reflex, I tilt forward a little to gauge the distance from the roof to the ground.

My chest goes light.

I stagger back a little, stiffening my knees to assure my balance that we are locked the fuck in.

I inhale a shaky breath of charred, piney air, cursing my phobia of heights.

Don't think about it.

I survey the rooftop. Half of it is shaded by the canopy of evergreens hovering over the cottage. I assume Noir lingers somewhere within the shadow.

Carefully, I angle my body to face the hellfire.

The hot breeze pushes through my hair as I strain my eyes to see through the brightness, tracking the silhouettes of the horizon for any movement, any outlines of someone trapped in its fury.

The mandarin veil is thick and impenetrable.

I see nothing beyond it.

What the hell?

Maybe there's a way around it to the other side?

I bend my knees, tempted to crawl to the ledge. The small movement causes my legs to wobble.

My breath catches, and I throw my arms out to keep steady.

"Noir!" I hiss quietly again, as if my voice will disrupt the disturbing atmosphere of this dreamland. "I need you!"

Seconds pass and she doesn't strut out of the shadows to my feet.

I grumble and take a baby step with a strict eye on the roof's edge as a focal point. An assurance it will not grow any further away from where I am.

Step, balance, step, balance.

Another step. Another wave of nausea. Another jump of my eyes from the trellis to the ground—

Something scuffs against the shingles.

It must be Noir.

As soon as I have the thought, my brain pedals back.

Noir's light on her paws and wouldn't make a sound.

My eyes fall to my feet.

The noise resembled the sole of a shoe.

My pulse flickers, recalling the vicious glint in Noir's eyes before she disappeared from the porch railing.

I whirl around.

The motion causes my ankle to roll, toppling my equilibrium.

A small scream chirps out of me, and I throw out my arm to grab a hold of something, *anything*.

My fingers twist into the material of a shirt, and a hand wraps around my forearm before I can fall off the rooftop.

Another arm straps my waist and lurches me forward. My curls spring into my face as my palm slaps against a solid, human chest.

Panting against the strum of my erratic heartbeat, I rush to process how I am not a broken mess on the ground. Pain is not zipping through my synapses. There is only a vibrant heat, seeping between the fabric of a shirt and my hand.

“You’re an old face.” His voice is deep, honeyed, and firm. “Want to tell me what you are doing inside my dream?”

I gape at my hand on his chest, over to his fingers curled around my arm, and up to the dark set of eyes staring down at me. Shadows from the bright glow of the flames lick across his face.

Impossible.

This man is looking *at* me.

He can *see* me.

Acknowledge me.

Inside of his dream.

I am never anything more than a specter, invisible through the eyes of the dreamscape’s owner.

This can’t be happening.

Not again.

Shit.

My fight-or-flight rears up through my shock, and I recoil from him, stumbling backward once more.

His eyes go round and he reaches for me again. “Wait!”

By some miracle, I stabilize my footing and sprint for the trellis. My limbs tremble like I’ve taken a hit of cocaine, but I don’t fucking stop.

I climb down the vine-snaked wood as quickly as my short legs can move.

When my feet meet the solid ground, I take off in a run. “Noir!”

Just as I call her name, I spot the black glint of her fur bouncing through the tall weeds ahead of me.

My breath goes shallow as I sprint, one foot after another, across the meadow, straight for the white oak window.

I was wrong.

This isn’t the man’s nightmare.

It’s mine.

The horrors of my past chase after me. I can feel their fingertips grazing my backside, closing in on me, pushing up out of the soil, clutching my ankles.

You thought you could escape it?

It’s happening again.

And for once, maybe I should’ve listened to my exhausting, delusional mother.

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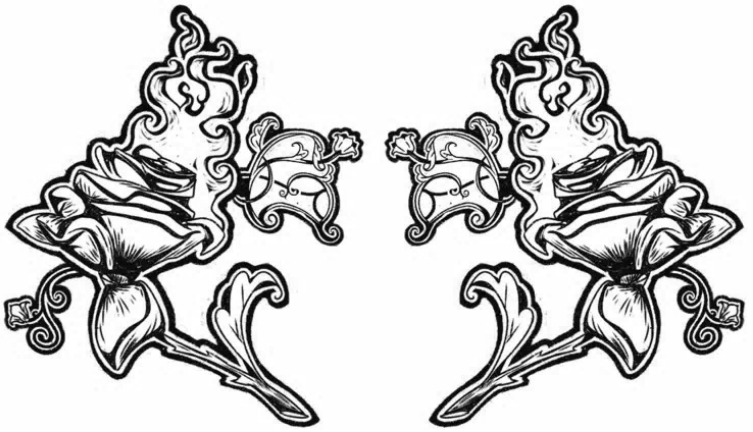
CHAPTER 3



COME BACK

THE LUCID DREAMER

I spend each of my nights lounged back on the rough exterior of the cottage rooftop, a structure I fabricated long ago just to have somewhere to sit and watch my dream drown in flames.

Hand under my head, I peer up at the smoke billowing into the night sky. It drifts and moves like eldritch limbs, curling and forming the thick, gray clouds above. I've grown numb to the crackling chorus in the background.

This conflagration appeared after the last time I saw her.

I've always had lucid dreams. Since I was young, they were my sanctuary. A place away from the horrors of my father's fists and my brother's constant pissing contests.

There was a time when I preferred my dreams over reality.

In them, I controlled the environment, the people, and the outcomes. If I had a shit day, I dreamed of a better one where things went my way. When Mattia made my life hell with his plotting and ruthless games, I dreamed of his disappearance. Or of him bleeding out on the table.

When I needed to feel love, I crafted a make-believe scenario where our mother was still alive and our father wasn't the savage that he's always been. Even Mattia was just a protective big brother. We were a normal, happy family.

This was the fantasy that Tommy walked in on the first time she trespassed in my dream.

I spotted her hugging the railing of the mezzanine above the dining room, poking her small head through the bars to watch us. A child, just like me—except she was not a fabrication of my imagination. In fact, I'd never seen her. And I weaved every aspect of my dream, down to the furniture and the trees outside.

She wasn't supposed to be there.

I think about her first appearance often when I'm lying on this rooftop.

The flames lick the black sky and devour everything. I feel it seeping into my veins, a malice intent on reminding me why this pyre still exists. The one thing that I cannot control. No matter how many times I've tried to extinguish the flames, they persist.

Because of her.

The single thing she left me with.

I spread my arms out wide over the shingles and close my eyes.

I no longer smell the fumes. My throat doesn't itch from them, and if I were to open my eyes and trudge closer, they wouldn't sting. I've sat with this monster for so long that I've grown used to its toxic presence.

For the first time in over a decade, I spoke to her. She was right in my fucking grasp. I could've ended this torture then. The thought didn't cross my mind, though. Nothing did.

I've only been a whisper in her life, and to have her staring at me, *acknowledging* me, curbed any appetite I had for her to end this hell inside my head.

"Fucking pathetic," I mumble to myself, throwing the crook of my elbow over my face.

The faint sound of a voice touches my ears.

I lift a little to investigate.

A figure appears at the top of the trellis, hunched over, making their way onto the roof.

My pulse fires at the sight.

What the fuck?

The person stands upright and brushes their hands together, letting out a relieved sound.

My eyes trace up the silhouette of her feminine physique as she peers fearlessly ahead into the fire. Shadows dim her profile, but I know it's her.

Against the blaze of the inferno, the shape of her untamed curls is unmistakable.

Blood rushes to my head.

Confusion swiftly falls over me.

Did I dream a version of her without realizing it?

Am I that desperate for her?

I yank my attention to the corner of the rooftop and manifest vines to climb up the shingles. The greenery is subtle, but its briars crawl to my shoe like little arms reaching across the surface. Proof that I'm still capable of lucid dreaming, which means she is real.

My heartbeat pounds in my skull.

By some fucking miracle, she's returned to me.

After all these years.

Was it because she saw me earlier?

I turn my head in a sharp motion back toward her.

At first, I can't make sense of it. She's here again, but we aren't kids. It's the version of her I talked to a few hours ago at the vending machine, not sixteen-year-old Tommy, latching onto my hand and leading me into her oasis.

Slowly, to avoid being heard, I climb up on my feet.

The next few seconds are a blur of her nearly tripping off the rooftop, my arm reaching for her, and this dark, twisted sense of irony pulsing hot in my throat as I ask her what the hell she's doing here.

And then she's running away from me.

Just like she did back then.



MY EYES POP open and I rip up from the mattress. Pulse ricocheting in my ears, I curl over and bury my hands in my hair, a thrill vibrating in my chest like I've swallowed a nest of bees.

Reality gradually settles me back into my bones—the musty odor of the motel room, the television light illuminating the room, the ashtray on my nightstand full of cigarette butts, and the chiaroscuro of Gabi's broad frame standing guard outside my window.

I brush the sheets off my leg, propping my arm up on my knee. My breath slows as I stare through the blue, flickering glow of the TV down at the cotton fabric.

Tommy and I were in close proximity at this motel, but the one night she stays in her childhood home is when she decides to find her way back to my dreamland.

I push my hair out of my face.

The truth is, I exist everywhere in her past. She cannot escape me.

I'll come back for you.

A vow that she finally decided to keep.

I run my palm over my face, peeking between the cracks of my fingers at the wall we had shared the night before.

A wicked grin slices across my lips. "About fucking time, Ella."

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PART II
KIT HARPER & FIORELLA

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CHAPTER 4



New Hire

THE TRESPASSER

THE DAY AFTER THE NIGHTMARE

I jam my knuckles into my brow bone, applying pressure against the dull splitting behind my eyeballs. The morning sun sneaks through the blinds and reflects a harsh light across the kitchen linoleum.

The house is quiet, something else that hasn't changed since I left. Though, this time of day, the aroma of coffee would waft from the kitchen, coaxing me to wake and stroll into the living room. I'd find Mom on the couch, watching the local news and sipping on her mug. Her form of morning greeting was usually some disapproving murmur about whatever the government officials of the town were up to.

Back then, I found her complaints annoying, but now, the memory forms a lump in my throat.

I draw in a deep breath through my nose and sit up in the chair. I dump my purse on the table—my makeup pouch, phone charger, a bottle of ibuprofen, mace, and my wallet.

My suitcase is already packed and by the door, so I settle for a natural look using my bare makeup essentials. I have little energy as is, and I'm not going to waste it reopening my bag and digging through it.

Letting out another long exhale, I unfold my compact mirror and analyze my appearance.

The bags under my eyes are a new look since I've always found joy in sleeping, a luxury that was impossible after my encounter with the lucid dreamer.

I lightly push on the puffy skin of my cheeks. My fingers tremble against my own face, a symptom of the anxiety still swirling around in my stomach. I haven't had espresso, and yet, it feels like I've injected several shots into my veins.

I bury my teeth into my bottom lip, staring into my own eyes.

The lucid dreamer's fervent gaze, his fiery glow, haunts my thoughts.

You're an old face.

His rough voice feels stuck underneath my skin, still buzzing.

Want to tell me what you are doing inside my dream?

Acid bubbles up into my esophagus.

It's him.

It has to be.

Lucid dreamers aren't rare, but they are complex. One is never the same as another, and I've encountered several in my lifetime. The extent of many only reached as far as controlling the narrative, setting, or actions of their dream. But none ever had the ability to recognize *my* meddling.

Except for one.

I bite down harder on my lip.

Kit.

It's been over a decade since I saw him, the only one ever who felt my presence in his dreams.

The first boy I ever loved.

I don't know how to feel.

Under the weight of my grief for Mom, a hope I smothered long ago flickers in my chest. The kind I desperately want to latch a hold of.

No matter how much I hyper-analyze the memory of the man's face for any familiarities, I'm not certain of anything. The shadows and the firelight made it difficult; that, and I was too busy running the hell away.

My mouth itches for a cigarette.

I staunch my relief. Until I know for sure, I refuse to get my hopes up. I'll check again tonight, more prepared this time.

I glance at the clock on my phone to see if I have time to sneak a smoke in.

Unfortunately, if I plan on making it to work on time, I don't. The drive back into South Haven takes about an hour and fifteen minutes, not including traffic.

I'll just light one on the way there.

I unzip my makeup pouch.

This is why she told you to stop entering dreamlands.

I speed through my foundation: dab, smooth, and examine for any discolored spots. I repeat this process, intentionally focusing on the fluidity of my wrist instead of the relentless nagging in my head.

It's become a habit to distance myself as far as possible from my mother's voice, but now she's dead, and doing so feels inherently wrong—disrespectful somehow. I can sense her phantom hovering over my shoulder, lecturing me the way she always did.

Stupid girl! When will you ever learn?

"I guess it's fitting to already disappoint you one week into the afterlife," I mutter to the empty air as I brush on my blush.

Through the living room, the faint sound of keys jingling catches my attention.

I pause and peer across the eerie space, my shoulders drooping and a tired breath leaving me.

The only other person with a key to the house is Lola. I shouldn't be surprised that she's here. After all, regardless if I was a bitch to her or not, she always keeps her word.

The door creaks open, and the screen slams shut behind the footfalls.

Lola emerges from around the corner of the entryway into the living room, dressed in a baggy sweatshirt and yoga pants. It's refreshing to see her not so put together for once.

I continue applying my makeup.

"You're going to work?" she asks.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see her folding the blanket I strung out on the couch, then gathering my empty glass of water and granola bar wrapper from the coffee table.

My mouth pinches, and I chuck the mascara back into my pouch.

Logan Willow was high-maintenance and expected a spotless house at all times. Another thing we don't—well, *didn't*—have in common. How

could I be so fucking different from the woman I came from?

And I don't know, maybe it's the reminder while watching Lola pick up after me, or how Logan is gone and Lola is still doing it, as if she isn't dead, that clenches the muscles in my neck.

"Not everyone can afford to take time off work." I'm well aware of the bite in my tone.

It doesn't affect Lola's light disposition as she washes the glass in the sink. "I think your boss will understand if you take another day. Your mom just died, and you have that appointment with the lawyer to go over the details in her will."

The thought of meeting with my mom's lawyer only makes my muscles strain more. Another task to complete, with another demand for effort and energy that I do not have.

"I used my bereavement time last week, and if I miss any more days, I'll fall behind." I apply my dark, vermillion lip stain using the small handheld mirror, attempting not to think too far into my day. When I do, a shortness of breath overtakes my lungs.

I'm already dreading it—the Sisyphean boulder that is my inbox, sifting through the sea of emails forwarded to me by none other than my shit boss who likes to teeter on the line of over-friendly and sexual harassment. Given how he's the head of the Human Resources department, he knows his odds of being reported to the higher-ups.

My stomach knots at the thought of dealing with him. The last few days have been a delightful vacation from his bullshit, even with the depressing circumstances.

Great, I prefer funerals and wakes over my own fucking boss.

When Lola doesn't respond right away, I glance at her backside. She's drying the glass at the kitchen sink, head lowered.

I continue on. "Besides, she probably included your name in the will too. More of a chance you're in there than me, if we're being real." I zip up my makeup pouch and stuff it back inside of my purse.

Just as I'm about to get up and say a quick goodbye, Lola comes around to sit at the table across from me, directing her furrowed brow and heavy frown my way.

Unlike the Willow women, Lola's dark hair is bone straight, ends grazing the tops of her shoulders. Her long legs make it impossible for her

to cross them under the table, so she settles for keeping her knees together, hiding both of her hands in her lap.

These are traits from my father's side of the family—all brunettes, all exceedingly tall. Two things that completely skipped over me in the womb. In appearance, I inherited most of my mom's, something that with age I've come to despise.

The one thing I did get from my dad, though, was his tan complexion. A glistening golden hue, as if I live somewhere with unlimited beach access, where I surf in my free time. It's one of the few qualities that Lola and I share, though my skin is traced with tattoos. As expected, hers has remained pure.

"Tommy, are you really okay?" Her big eyes flit all over my face, the pity overflowing in them. "Last night, you sounded—"

"Are *you*?" Blood rushes up my neck and warms the tips of my ears. "You live on the same block as Mom. You saw her every day. How are *you* grieving, Lola?" The pulsating in my temples drum harder. "We both have our own ways of coping. I hardly think drinking after my mother just died is a sin. Spare me the sermon for my well-being."

"I didn't mean it like that." Lola's eyes go wide, mortified by my accusation. "God, Tommy. You know I don't care if you drink or not. I'm just concerned. You went a long time without seeing Aunt Logan. I just know how hard all of this is for you."

The bitterness on my tongue collects like sea foam. I can't stop. I know Lola and her pastor husband aren't condemning me for getting drunk last night. I know Lola is only here to check on me. *I know* these things. And yet, I can't make myself care.

For the last five days, I've kept the conversation surface-level and light with Lola to avoid these feelings unearthing inside of me. And now, seconds before I head back into South Haven, she's here, wanting to chip away these walls I've been building between us for a decade.

I can't.

I shove the chair back to stand up and throw my purse over my shoulder. "You have no idea how I feel, Lola."

"We both lost her," she murmurs, her voice wobbling.

My vision tunnels and red orbs paint the vignette around it.

The tears flood her eyes, her lips trembling as she stares up at me. There's no malicious intent, just pain. She needs comforting, to let it all out.

And if I were a better person, I'd hug her and let her cry. Soothe her the way my mom did when Lola was seven and busted her knee, or when she got laid off from her job last year.

I want to, but the fact is that she received a comfort I never experienced from my own mother. It brands my chest, twisting and burning through the flesh, leaving an agony so unbearable that I want to dig in and rip it out with my own fingers.

"*No*," I seethe through my gritted teeth. The back of my throat shrinks, and my nose stings with the threat of my own tears. "Don't even compare what we are feeling as the same thing, Lola." I slap my hand on my chest. "I lost a mother who *hated* me. I will not grieve what I never had to begin with."

"Tommy, I—"

"Meet the lawyer yourself. I'm going back to the city."

And with that, I storm out of my childhood home, swearing to never step foot into this hellhole again.



WITH A GAS STATION coffee secured in hand and curls stuck in the corners of my mouth, I rush through the lobby of DVC Corporation, kindly ignoring the chatty security guard stationed behind the desk.

It's too early and my head is still pounding. I need at least another coffee or two to converse with extroverts and shake this hangover, preferably one that doesn't taste like cheap chocolate syrup.

I swipe my badge along the scanner and enter through the turnstile. The elevator quickly fills. Shoulders rest uncomfortably against mine. A melding of spicy colognes and overly sweet perfumes smother the air as the machine carries us up.

I get off on the twenty-third floor. The fluorescent lights and the smell of printer paper greet me.

I travel down an aisle of cubicles with an acquainted dread coiling my insides.

It's like walking into a white-walled prison, a chain heavy on my ankle, already knowing the next eight hours awaiting me at my desk.

By the end of the day, my brain will be numb, eyes bloodshot, and this headache pulsing behind my forehead will be a dull, relentless echo fed from the tension in my shoulders.

I glance around at the bustling workers bouncing from one side of the floor to the other, crunched over their own desks, fingers percussing on their keyboards. They work with a vigor and purpose that I can't relate to. This place, this job—for most, it is their whole life. To climb the corporate ladder, become someone important. Start a family, build a 401k.

I fucking hate it here.

"Welcome back, Ms. Willow." Mr. Thomas, my boss, approaches me from the other end of the hallway.

Based on the direction he comes from, he's on his morning route to survey the floor—or rather, to hunt for a busty woman caught alone in the break room, slip into interesting gossip, and continue to be the biggest waste of a six-figure-salaried space that a man can be.

I force a smile, because I am getting paid to be professional. "Mr. Thomas."

He stops when he makes it to me in the hallway, which means I have to do the same.

He leans into my space, his teakwood musk catching in the back of my throat. One of his hands comes up to my arm, and I bite the skin of my cheek to keep from cringing.

"I am sorry for your loss," he whispers, breathing his everything-bagel breath all over the side of my face. I eye what looks to be a sesame seed still caught in his beard.

"Thank you." I create a small wedge of space by stepping back on my heels, removing my arm from his sweaty palm. "I'll be in my office."

"I'll be sure to stop by later and catch you up on the transitions taking place. The merger is complete, and the new executive from V Group is already enforcing new changes."

I inhale a sharp breath through my nose, processing the information.

What little morale I had to take on the day vanishes, and it's not even hour two.

I'd forgotten about DVC being bought out by a parent company. I normally couldn't give less of a shit, but a paradigm shift this extreme will affect me and my daily routine.

Stress collects behind my eyeballs, drumming the migraine deeper into my skull. After so many days away on top of this stupid merger, my awaiting workload sits like an anvil on my chest.

The temptation to just say *fuck it* and go home and hide in my bed is already looking more promising.

“Yes sir.” I say and step around him, giving a quick nod in parting. “I’ll email you the times I have available today.”

He gives me a small wave before continuing his path.

I all but jog the rest of the way to my office and quickly unlock the door.

The lights flip on automatically. Bland beige walls envelop me.

I stop in front of the executive desk near the back wall and drop my purse on the sticky-note-covered surface.

Sighing, I place my acidic coffee on the crocheted cat coaster and twist open the blinds over the floor-to-ceiling window, inviting in the morning sunlight. The scenery of the skyscrapers built alongside DVC Corp blends into the horizon—a blockade of steel frames and glass walls.

The view of the dangerous height makes my chest go light, and I think of the rooftop of the cottage in last night’s burning dreamland.

I fidget with the hoops pierced in my nostril and zone out on the traffic zipping in and out of the spiraling asphalt below.

The scene is just another day, as if nothing has changed in the last hundred hours of my life. The world carries on, and I have to catch up with it.

During the entire drive back into the city, Lola’s conversation rang in my head. I got my phone out several times to call her and apologize. I knew she’d accept right away and then remind me about the lawyer, a confrontation that I didn’t want to deal with, so I switched my phone to silent instead, chain smoked, and sipped on the iced coffee that I got while gassing up.

Now, my stomach burns and I feel worse than I did earlier, obsessing over what happened with the damn lucid dreamer last night.

Blowing out a ragged breath, I plop down in my chair and power on my computer.

Every block on my calendar is color-coded, and the first reminder is for a meeting that starts in less than five minutes. A new hire meeting, one I am not prepared for in the slightest.

I prop my elbows up on my desk and throw my forehead into my hands, massaging my temples.

There is a special place in hell for those who designed new hire meetings, the fake politeness and extraneous talking. It makes me want to gag.

I glance at the time in the corner of my computer screen while taking another sip of the watered-down coffee. It hits my stomach, only adding to the fire.

I make a face and toss it into the trash can beside my desk.

After the meeting, I'll sneak downstairs to the company café.

A knock sounds on my door.

I roll my eyes, cursing the employee for arriving early as I rush to open up the documents attached in the email forwarded to me.

Lucas Mills.

I sit up in my chair, channeling Work Tommy, and rearrange my resting bitch face to my cheerfully trained expression. "Come in!"

The door opens and a man steps inside.

"Hi, I'm Tommy Willow." I clack away on my keyboard, filling out the necessary boxes on the new hire forms. "Go ahead and take a seat. I just need to finish filling out a few things on my end, and then I will walk you through how to log into your company portal."

"Sounds like some kind of mistake has been made." The sound of his voice travels through my ears, a timbre filling my blood with frost.

My fingers freeze over the keyboard.

I'm sure of it.

So fucking sure.

I've heard this man's voice before.

Last night, in fact.

My violent pulse ricochets in my skull, the caffeine from my shitty beverage only amplifying it, as I incline my head to acknowledge him.

He stands in front of the closed door, hands stowed away in the front pockets of his fitted suit. The lights gleam off his dark hair, perfectly parted down the middle and framing his face in floppy curtain bangs. The type of hair that lulls a person to run their fingers through it just to see if it's real.

I force my eyes onto his, merging with the same set that looked down at me in the burning dreamscape.

All the air in my lungs swiftly drains, and I have to assure myself that I'm not going to suffocate.

My epitaph cannot fucking read: *Tommy Willow, beloved HR Specialist*.

But he is here.

In the flesh.

Standing in my office.

And for a twisted second, my brain slurs and believes I'm back on that cottage rooftop—that I never left. Maybe I got stuck in some time loop and *thought* I escaped. The conversation with Lola never happened, and I'm not really at work but in some fucked up purgatory of my own making.

How strong was that vodka?

Every psychological horror movie I've ever seen flashes through my mind.

"Uh, um, I'm not sure what you, uh, mean…" My words get stuck in the back of my throat, attempting to push across the dryness of my tongue, but it's as if my brain can't compute the severity of my awful luck.

The lucid dreamer studies me for a beat, the corner of his mouth lifting like he's enjoying my dumbfounded reaction.

As quickly as the amusement flits over his face, it vanishes, and he steps toward my desk, his aura like a traveling storm.

My stomach twists.

He extends his tattooed hand. "I'm Nicola Valentine, the executive sent from V Group. I will be overseeing the company starting today."

Fuck me.

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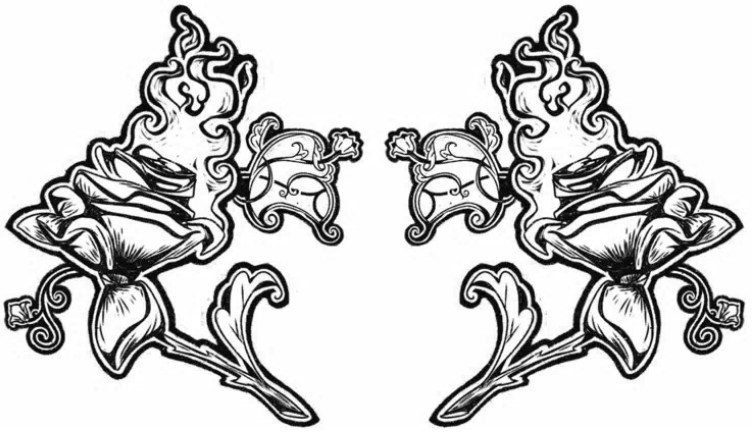
CHAPTER 5



MISS ME?

THE LUCID DREAMER

I resist placing the pad of my index finger under her chin to push her stained lips closed, for the sake of first impressions. Right now, I'm not sure if I want her to feel safe or a little afraid in my presence.

Regardless, her reaction is cute and the perk I needed to get through this day.

She drops her eyes to my outstretched hand and jolts up, ripping out of her chair to shake it. A small peek of black ink under the hem of her skirt teases me, making me want to unearth all her tattoos, run my fingers over them.

"I was told this would be a new hire meeting," she blurts out. "My mistake. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Valentine."

The formality of her tone and her strained smile grates my nerves. I much prefer the untamed version of her, spirited and volatile, like what I see outside the walls of this corporation—the Ella who was in my dream last night, prepared to journey into the hellfire.

She's unnerved by me. I can see it in her gaze, the panicked swirl of green and gold, and how she digs her teeth into her bottom lip. Do I remember her face? Do I not? Am I the boy from her childhood?

I've waited years to stand in front of her, and now that I am, I can barely contain the sinister excitement thrashing through my limbs.

I undo the button in the center of my suit jacket and take a seat in the chair across from her desk. “I am here to make sure all policies and procedures are up to date in the company. I figured I’d start with going over standard protocol for a new hire.”

She makes no move to sit and crosses her arms, a display of her stubbornness that both irks and arouses me all at once. “I’ve been on bereavement leave for the last few days. I hate to ask, but could we possibly reschedule? I am unprepared for this meeting.”

I reach into my pocket for the fruity sucker Gabi gave me earlier to curb my cravings.

“By all means, prepare.” With a flick of my chin, I gesture for her to do whatever she needs. “I don’t mind waiting.”

She glares at me.

I pop the sugary treat in my mouth.

The muscle in her jaw tics. “With all due respect, Mr. Valentine, wouldn’t Mr. Thomas be more helpful in this area? He’s the one who oversees the HR department.”

I see it then, a bit of the fire that I stare into most nights flaring in her gaze. She doesn’t want me here. Her curled fingers twitch at her sides, and she refuses to sit, her resolve like the way a horse digs its hooves into the ground, relentless and unyielding.

In truth, she did have a *new hire* meeting. A twenty-six-year-old intern currently sitting in Greyson Thomas’s office. And she’s right, I was supposed to meet with the head of the department, but I wanted to meet with her instead. And I get what I want.

I lounge back in the chair and spread my legs out, a silent reply to her that I’m just as stubborn. “I apologize for the misunderstanding, but my schedule is booked solid for the next few days. This is the only time I have to discuss this subject. If you are unprepared, do what you need and we can resume afterwards.”

She glances down at my mouth as I roll the stemmed candy around on my tongue and then back up to my eyes. “It would be unprofessional to prepare with you sitting there watching me.”

I can’t help the smirk crossing over my mouth. “Do I make you uncomfortable, Ms. Willow?”

Her gaze narrows on my curved lips, unamused. “Not at all.”

She lowers into her chair and fixes on her computer, clicking vigorously on her mouse. The printer behind her powers on and starts spitting out page after page in its tray.

I stare at her intently, cataloging everything subtle change about her since we were kids now that I'm this close again: the double hoop piercing in her nostril; the silhouette of freckles over the bridge of her nose beneath her makeup; the dangling silver lining her earlobes behind her fluffy, strawberry blonde curls; the round angle of her jawline; and how loosely her blouse fits around her breasts.

She's lost weight in the last week, and my mind immediately jumps to ways I can get her to eat more.

A company luncheon, maybe? I could cater her favorite curry?

Tommy's fingers echo loudly across the keyboard, and then she whirls around in her chair, enunciating her rigid body language.

She slides the pile of papers from the printer and straightens them into a neat stack. Her long fingernails are painted the shade of a ripe, squished blackberry.

She spins around to face me without looking up at my gaze.

"This is the policy and procedure handbook given to all of HR." As she speaks, she swipes through the pages, only pausing to staple the corners in specific intervals. "Tracy and her team handle the new hires. When she is on PTO, I usually take them for her. Today, she is out with her kid to get his wisdom teeth removed, which is why I am filling in."

The woman she meets on occasion for tacos and margaritas. The one co-worker she seems to be amicable with.

I stretch my arm along the back of the chair as I watch her lick her finger every few strokes of paper, combine them, and crunch the stapler with her soft palm. Every small movement is charged with a simmering rage that I want to spill out of her.

It's nice to see, despite the shit life has thrown at her, that she still wears her emotions exposed on her sleeve, unable to hide a damn thing.

"And what do *you* do most days?" I ask.

She continues to flip pages with her finger and staple them as quickly as she can. "A bit of everything."

"How often do your team leaders meet?"

She organizes the massive packet, straightening the edges once more before extending her arm across her desk with it in her grasp. "Every

Tuesday and Thursday morning. Fernando oversees training and development. Frankie is over job analysis, Mike is compensation and benefits, and Greyson, my boss, deals with employee relations."

I accept the papers and roll them up, using the tube to point at her. "And you do a *bit of everything*?"

She keeps her expression bland, her low-lidded gaze intentional, as if my question is exceedingly dumb and this conversation is a waste of her time. "I work under Mr. Thomas, so I go wherever I am needed, and do whatever nobody else has time for. What I do depends on his mood and workload that day."

"Why are *you* the only expert in more than one area?"

"I'm good at multitasking. Though, if you go meet with Mr. Thomas, he'd have a better answer for you, since he's the one who assigns my tasks." She smiles in the most artificial, sarcastic way possible, rivaling Caleb's famous shit-eating grin.

It's a bite at me for not listening to her earlier, but I don't miss how she refers to her boss with a clipped tension. I don't like it and make a mental note for Gabi to look into it. From what she's describing, it sounds like she is his dumping ground to do the work that he doesn't want to do, on top of the harassment allegations.

"I can tell working together is going to be an enlightening experience." I grin, flashing my teeth as I bite down on my candy. It shatters into pieces across my tongue.

"*Peachy* fun." She pulls back her forced smile, and it pries a breathy laugh out of me. "Do you have any other questions for me, Mr. Valentine?"

I glance at my watch, tracking the time until my next meeting with the Head of Consumer Operations. "Nope. I think that's it."

"Perfect." She pushes her chair out from her desk, prepared to rise and see me out of her office. "It was nice meeting you."

I sit up and wiggle the rolled-up packet in the air. "Thanks for this. I can't wait to read through it. If I have any questions or find any issues, I'll be sure to return swiftly."

I hear the *click* of her teeth inside her mouth. "My *email* is always open as well."

"I hate emailing. In-person is a little more my style." I give her a quick wink.

“Hm.” Pieces of her professional demeanor wear thin as she rolls her eyes to look at her computer screen. “Well, if that is all, I have my next meeting to prepare for.”

I stand and toss the stem of my sucker in the trash can beside her desk. “Your schedule sounds as busy as mine, Ms. Willow.”

She gives a strained laugh to pacify me as she moves around her desk. “That’s what I get for missing most of the week.” Before I can turn and reach for the door, she beats me to it with her fingers already wrapped around the handle, ushering me out. “Have a good day, sir.”

I make no move to exit, despite the crack she’s created in the doorway.

Instead, I slip into her space, enough to lower my voice and say, “It was nice seeing you again, Ms. Willow.”

Her breath hitches and she cuts her eyes up onto mine. “Excuse me?”

My pulse flutters in the base of my throat.

There she is.

I tilt my head, rubbing a hand over my chin. “Did I say something out of turn? You seem taken aback.”

Her chest rises and falls in a quicker rhythm, accentuating the shapely figure of her breasts underneath her black turtleneck, inches from grazing my stomach. My mind stretches far into the past and how she tasted on my tongue, pebbled and hard and deep in my mouth.

I wonder what sort of sounds she’d make for me now.

“We’ve never met, Mr. Valentine.” She says my name with finality, swinging the door wider.

I catch the wood with my palm, forcing it closed against her will.

She jerks backward with the movement, her stunned glower stabbing right through me. “What the hell is your deal?”

I use the door to support my weight as I lean down next to her ear, the fruity fragrance of her shampoo spinning my senses. “Tell Noir a pat on the head for me tonight.”

Her breath ceases.

The corners of my mouth pull up in a dark, satisfied smile. “Miss me, Ella?”

For the first time since I’ve known her, she’s speechless.

It’s always a privilege to be her first.

I angle my head to where my lips graze her curls. A desire rises sharply in me to smother my face into them, bury my mouth into her neck. It’s been

years since I've been within her proximity like this, and the innate need to mark the golden skin of her throat with my teeth takes me by surprise.

If I did so, I have no doubt she'd knee me in my groin, which is already growing tighter against my boxer briefs, and file sexual harassment charges. My father would applaud it and the board at V Group would write it off, but Tommy would probably open me up with a pair of scissors if I ever tried to speak to her again.

So for my own sake, I straighten up just enough to see the shock paling her face.

I've envisioned this moment more times than I can count, telling her how shitty the last thirteen years have been—imagining how much I'd revel in her stunned reaction, finally seeing the boy she once loved standing before her. Part of me believed that she'd recognize me, despite all the changes of my physicality. Maybe our souls would be kindred.

My interaction with her at the vending machine shattered that hope into smithereens.

It doesn't matter anyways.

Because she's here, gawking at me like I've risen from the dead, like I was never real to begin with.

And right now, all I want is for my face to haunt her, keep *her* up at night for a change.

I lift an arm to flick away the fluffy piece of hair sticking to her lips, but before I can make it there, she slaps my hand.

"Fuck off," she snarls, the life reviving in her expression. "Our business is finished, Mr. Valentine."

I rub my thumb over my smile, a weightlessness spreading throughout my chest. "I see you still have a mouth on you."

Her glare tightens around me. "I'll let you see yourself out."

Then she spins and rips the door open, storming out of her own office and leaving me behind, yet again.

Running away only provokes this carnal part of me to chase after her.

Like a fish with a hook in its cheek, I've got her, and, unlike last time, if she runs, there isn't anywhere in the world that I won't be able to find her.

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CHAPTER 6



JUST A FISH

THE TRESPASSER

I sit in my car for ten minutes, silent, before pulling out of the company garage.

After I left Nicola—*Kit*—in my office, I had a justified panic attack in a bathroom stall. The scene was me sitting on the toilet seat, breathing frantically into my palms in my best attempt to be quiet as my coworkers came and went in small, whispering groups. If they heard me, they pretended not to.

Once I was certain that I was alone, I scooped myself up and dabbled cold water on my cheeks to recollect my professional persona.

I purposely prolonged the journey back to my desk, fearful Nicola was still nearby. The plan backfired when I passed Mr. Thomas's office, who managed to catch sight of me and call me inside, adding more tasks to my never-ending to-do list.

Between his interruption and team meetings, merger updates, policy revisions, and answering the emails that piled up in my inbox while I was away, I barely had time to eat lunch.

I don't think I retained anything important, though. The interaction with Nicola played on loop in the back of my mind like a broken projector. It didn't help that his cologne still lingered in my office, a distraction of lotus, sea salt, and fresh citrus.

Miss me, Ella?

I massage my temples as I drive home.

The dull ache is relentless behind my eyes, an echo of pain I've ignored all day. The kind that zaps my ability to stress over Lola's relentless stream of texts, Kit's return, and the comical satire that is my life.

I roll my windows down and stare numbly at the road, operating on autopilot until I'm shutting off the car in the parking lot of my apartment complex.

I've got about four hours to cook dinner, shower, unpack, do a load of laundry, and get some form of personal decompression before bed. Responsibilities and self-care take precedence when all I want to do is fold myself in bed and hide away. I miss being a kid, watching old movies and staying up late with Dad, drinking hot cocoa without a care in the world. It seems like a lifetime ago.

I make no move to leave my car.

Instead, I peer out at the maple tree in the lawn, the streetlight's glow cast over its buttery, golden leaves. The autumn chill unfurls into the evening air, creeping through the window and biting at my fingers. I curl my hands in my lap under the layer of my skirt to warm them up.

This time last year, I was in my apartment, painting the bronze and dark brown branches of the tree. Half-empty tubes of acrylic paint were strewn over my table, white wine was within reaching distance, and music blasted in my ears. I was excited to replicate a beautiful thing.

Now, staring at that same tree, there is no elegance. My fingertips don't itch to bring it to life. A desolate, foreign feeling has replaced the urge, one that crystallized the moment Logan Willow took her last breath.

I breathe in and exhale deeply, dropping my head back onto the seat.

Fragments from last night play in my head—the intensity of the firelight, its gleam across Nicola's face, his grip around my arm to keep me from falling, and his gaze, a black chasm devouring me.

After all these years, he just reappears in my life, and I have no idea how to feel.

I didn't expect to react so callously, though. For years, I've dreamed of the day I'd meet him face to face again, and out of all the scenarios I envisioned, none of them were me telling him to *fuck off*.

I don't even know why I said it, just that he was staring down at me, all smug without any sign of genuineness. His ego crawled all over me.

Our last memory together has haunted me every day. When he called me *Ella*, beneath my shock from the revelation, I felt relief. An instant shot of happiness, releasing a decade-long tension from behind my sternum.

I wanted to hug him, because after everything, he was okay.

But then, a bitterness rose sharply in its place as I processed his face, all the new pieces of his identity I couldn't recognize moments prior, before he called me by that stupid name.

I'm furious at him, and I have no idea why.

My eyes jump back and forth between the weird stains scattered across the suede ceiling of my car. Another thing to clean, another task. To avoid it, I divert my attention below, tracing my fingers over the moth tattoo on my thigh.

Why now? After thirteen years, why did his window suddenly reappear when I had called for it so many times before in the past? And the odds of him waltzing into my office as the new executive from V Group? He didn't look the least bit surprised to see me.

The entire time he sat in my office, I scrutinized the hell out of his face, hunting for traces of the Kit I knew.

He was seventeen the last time I saw him—short hair, dark eyes, a lanky figure, and an awkward smile pulling up features he hadn't quite grown into yet. No inked skin, no gauged ears.

The man sitting before me today looked nothing like that boy.

Under his fitted suit and powerful disposition, I sensed something more like a devil—the way his eyes twisted with hunger onto me, and his dumb fucking smirk that wrapped tightly around his sucker.

The worst part is how infuriatingly attractive he was while doing it all. A small, nauseating detail that only further pissed me off. It was a reminder of how *this* is the way of the universe—carting some sexy man into my office who, less than twenty-four hours ago, caught me inside of his dream, and now claims to be the first boy I ever loved.

My chest burns like I ate a thick dollop of wasabi on an empty stomach.

I rub my knuckles into my sternum, swallowing the acid climbing up my esophagus.

New plan. I'm going to go inside, shower, and go to bed. Fuck everything else.

My phone vibrates in the cupholder.

I glance down at the name across the screen.

Lola.

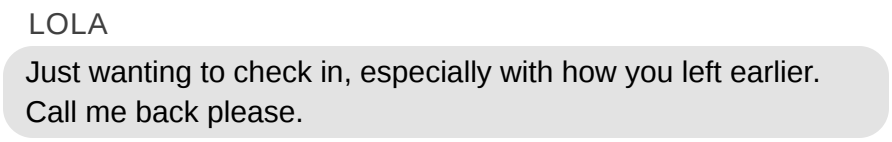
I roll my eyes.

I’m not in the mood to talk to her, so I ignore the call and slip out a cigarette from the pack jammed in the other cupholder.

It gives me the motivation to at least open my car door. The cool air invades the warmth around my legs. I rest my foot to keep the door propped and feel around my purse for my lighter.

The paper ignites and crackles behind the guard of my hands as I take a long drag, down to my lungs. The nicotine provides instant relief in my bloodstream, loosening the knotted muscles in my neck.

My phone buzzes.



I toss it in my purse and climb out of the car, starting across the concrete.

One puff of the cigarette and a few footfalls later, I step up onto the sidewalk.

The sound of a branch *snaps* from behind the bushes along the small, wooded area surrounding the complex.

I jerk my head in its direction, my body stiffening.

Fear burns in my throat as I scan the silhouettes of greenery under the large oaks for any movement.

The monsters, Tommy. You can’t let them find you.

My mom’s erratic warning fills my head.

I swallow, the nicotine thick on my tongue, as my gaze darts around the parking lot. I recognize all the vehicles, and I’m the only one out here. Aside from the constant South Haven static, there aren't any other odd noises.

She was crazy, Tommy.

My pulse thunders in my skull.

The monsters are just myths.

I force my shoulders to relax and continue up the sidewalk at a renewed pace. On my way up the staircase, I stamp my cigarette out on the railing and toss it in the trashcan stationed at the top.

No matter how much reassurance I give myself, I can't shake the urgency to run, to put distance between me and the *something* nipping at my heels. A make-believe being that I fabricated in my head when I was a child, terrified of my mom's ramblings. My kid brain made it out to be this spooky creature I read in a book once, the worst thing it could conjure up at the time.

I transition into a fast-paced stroll until I am entering the code on my keypad and safely on the other side of my door.

Pressing my weight against the solid structure, I inhale to calm my anxious heartbeat thumping against my ribcage.

They don't exist.

I drop my arm down at my side, letting my purse smack against the side of my leg.

Under the dim city lights sneaking through the windows, the view of my living room brings reassurance.

I am safe.

Everything is just as I left it five days ago—blankets unfolded and piled on the cushions of the couch, my tablet on the coffee table with a sketch pad open beside it, the birth of a new drawing across its page.

The night before I got the call of my mom's death, I'd explored a dreamscape filled with insects that appeared like flying flower petals. They had long snouts, each the body of a trumpet, and their wings were thin and glittering, translucent, like a church's stained glass.

Inspired, the next day, while I waited for the hours to pass until my date with some guy I matched with on an app, I decided to outline it.

I kick my boots off and drag my feet into the living room in front of the couch. The half-finished drawing stares up at me. Unimpressed and uninspired by it, I push the tablet away as I drop to the cushion of my couch.

I take another look around my apartment—over the dark television screen, the rows of books underneath, to the kitchen where I can see the bags of unopened popcorn on the counter and the bottle of wine sitting in the corner.

Looks like those things will be my dinner tonight.

I start toward the counter, flipping on lights as I pass the switches.

On my way, I pause in front of my fish tank against the wall between my living room and kitchen. A ten-gallon aquarium I got on a whim a few

years ago. My way of supplying a little bit of magic inside of my small, lonely home.

I bend to flip the aquarium light on.

Seconds pass and Opie, my betta fish, doesn't swim up to the glass to greet me.

My stomach twists.

"Opie?" I call softly.

The dread begins to crush down on me.

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip to control its trembling as I hunt for him in between plant leaves, red rocks, and moss.

He always swims to the glass and meets my face with a series of mouth movements. He's chatty that way, always with a lively spirit.

But now he floats motionless on the gravel beneath his favorite stone temple, his beautiful fins flowing in a dance around his corpse—black strands mixed with light pink and blue, rippling with the current's pulses.

I stare at his faded, lifeless eyes, the sight splintering my chest.

His white body is colorless and bloated, pruned the way someone's fingertips get when stuck in the summer pool for too long. It's unnatural to see his scales so waterlogged, so dull.

The ache crests over my heart.

"It's just a fish," I murmur to myself, preparing for the crash.

He's dead.

Tears sting behind my eyes.

I should be grateful considering he hid in his temple, almost as if to spare me from the gruesome image.

The sight of the aquarium blurs.

My water parameters were good. The automatic feeder was set while I was gone.

So then why?

My throat tightens.

Memories of his big eyes and even bigger personality fill my head—the way he looked at me from inside his favorite tunnel, how he would follow my finger to get his pellets, and the way he would watch me while I cooked in the kitchen, content and swimming in graceful strides.

Opie brought me so much joy through my day-to-day life.

From the first time I cupped him in my small hands, smiling at Kit over my shoulder, I vowed then to cherish him.

“It’s just a fish.”

The pounding in my head grows louder, boiling the hot blood in my face.

I grit my teeth as droplets roll down my cheeks.

Could I not have this one fucking thing?

Opie’s body comes into focus again.

And the waves collapse without mercy.

A cry scrapes out of me, and my shoulders cave inward. I slap my palm over my mouth, my knees giving way into a low crouch.

I curl into a ball, hugging my drenched face in the darkness of my lap.

The weight of Opie’s life forming like a seed in my grasp just to watch it wither away, it’s too much. He was a small token from my dreamland who helped me survive this shitty world.

His death is a reminder of how all things, even those that bring the most unadulterated joy, must come to an end. No matter how much I needed it, especially today.

Snot and spit drain in between my fingers. I choke on it all, grasping for breath and wincing from the sharp pang in my skull.

This isn’t just about Opie, though.

It’s all the bullshit I’ve had to face in the last five days. The ugliness in my life I’d always rather ignore—my contempt for reality and my complicated relationship with my mom and my traumatic past with Kit. Beneath my nine-to-five job, under the routine and structure I’ve built for myself in the city, desperately clinging to the faint dream of seeing one of my artworks in a gallery, I am still just as empty as I was the day I left Logan Willow, vowing to never be a nuisance again.

When did all of me start to drain away?

Kit.

I cry harder.

I’ll come back for you.

Then his window disappeared, and I never did.

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CHAPTER 7



LITTLE FLOWER

THE TRESPASSER

Against my will, I think of him often.

I was twelve years old, belly full of pot roast, the sleep heavy in my crusted eyes as the voices of my family members carried up the staircase. It was the anniversary of my dad's death, and each year, Mom cooked his favorite meal, leaving him a bowl at the table.

We ate and reminisced, and by the time night spilled in through the windows, the ache was too heavy in my chest to keep listening.

I retreated to my room and purged the sadness from my heart.

And then, I fell asleep, pretending he was there tucking me in, whispering: "Play hard in your dreams, Tommy. Tell me about them when you wake."

That night, I perused the Library of Reverie in search of something to fill the emptiness he left behind. There just happened to be a new window: one with a lightly colored oak frame, corners sharp, braided with thin branches. The intricate limbs held an array of warm, autumn leaves, reminding me of home. I didn't hesitate to crawl through it.

When I came out on the other side, my feet planted down on marbled flooring.

I started forward, enamored by the gleam of the jewels hanging above on the tall ceiling. I brushed my fingertips over the monochrome swirls

along the surface of the glossy walls.

As I neared the end of the hallway, small fragments of conversation danced up from beneath.

I kneeled and pressed my nose up against the railing of the balcony to peek below at a luxurious dining room. The table was long and narrow, decorated with tall, burning candles, wax dripping down their sides, and flowers—so many purple violets in vases made of thick, shimmering glass.

There were four chairs—a man and a woman each at the respective heads of the table, and two boys sitting across from one another. A massive chandelier hung over the space, its crystal body stocked with brilliant glass orbs.

The family chatted amongst themselves, giggling, pointing to one another, bright smiles lifting their cheeks.

From where I was crouched, the aroma of crispy meats and the tangy, herbed marinara saturated my mouth. In between the boys was a basket of crunchy, sliced bread, slick with some kind of oil.

One grabbed a slice and dipped it in his pasta. The woman at the head of the table sipped on her glass, half full of a viscous liquid I'd seen Mom drink many times on the weekends.

I was tempted to join them and make a plate for myself, but I decided against it, enjoying my view as a bystander in a supremely fancy house with this family. I'd just sat for hours with my own kin, but the mood was grim, and there hadn't been any laughing.

This, I kept thinking to myself. It's what I wished I could have.

The longing in my chest was suffocating.

Unable to bear it, I gripped the corner of the end table beside me to rise. The heel of my hand slipped on the edge and tugged the textured fabric running down the center of the table, knocking over the blown-glass figurine on top of it.

It shattered at my feet in fat, pointed shards.

I gasped, momentarily forgetting that inside a dreamscape, the jagged edges could not hurt me.

The family's voices went quiet.

I snapped my head back to them. Like mannequins, they were frozen in place mid-sentence, mid-bite—all but one of the boys.

He stood now, his mouth set in a tense line, glaring up at me.

My spine went rigid, and my heart thundered in my throat.

Can he really see me?

Fight-or-flight rushed through my nervous system, and my head went light.

What the hell do I do?

The boy shot off in a sudden motion.

I gasped again, staggering backward on my heels. My feet tangled and I lost my balance, clawing at the sleek walls to keep from falling.

His footfalls thundered up the stairs, fueling my urgency as I sprinted for where I'd crawled out of the floating window.

He was taller than I was, and much faster.

Just as I was about to round the corner, his fingers wrapped around my arm. "Wait!"

I snapped around and reached for the cumbersome, antique dinner bell atop the table in the middle of the hall. With a tight grip on its golden handle, I squeezed my eyes shut and swung it with as much force as I could muster.

The solid structure in my grasp transformed into something cushion-like, and when the impact of my hit landed, the force of the blunt object delivered an anticlimactic thud.

Stunned, I opened my eyes.

His dark hair was disheveled from the hard smack of the small pillow now in my hand.

I gaped between him and my now-harmless weapon. "What the…?"

The disapproving tension in the boy's eyes shifted as his cheeks rose with his chuckle.

"Ow. You sure got me." He rubbed his head.

"Explain yourself!" I held the pillow up in a threatening manner. It might've been soft, but I could smother him with it. "Where's the bell?"

I whirled around in search of it on the table full of other collectable knick-knacks, and on the floor around our feet. There was no trace of it.

My glare returned to him. "Well, I'm waiting!"

This time, he laughed, pointing to the cozy object still in my hand. "I can't believe you were going to knock me out with *that* thing!"

I blinked, completely unamused and so utterly perplexed. "Answer me!"

"You're bossy for someone who should be explaining *herself*. This is my dream, you know. I can create and control everything here." He

gestured to the space around us and then to me, lifting his eyebrows. “But I didn’t make you.”

I sank my teeth into my bottom lip to distract myself from the panic quivering my insides.

A lucid dreamer.

Mom warned me about them. If I were to ever encounter one, I was supposed to exit the dream as fast as possible, no matter their level of skill.

By the age of twelve, I’d encountered two who could influence the scenes around them, but neither were like him. The others couldn’t spot me inside of their handcrafted realms.

Running is what I should’ve done then. But the boy stared at me with a twinkle in his gaze, almost as if he found our encounter amusing. He seemed harmless, and I was desperate for anything to get my mind off Dad’s absence in my life.

Curiosity stoked a flame in my chest, calming the seize of my pulse.

What would it be like to have a friend?

In real life, I was alone. It was too hard to keep my ability a secret from others—especially Lola.

Because of it, I avoided growing close to people.

However, here with him, nothing could touch us. We were hidden away from our lives and the world.

There was no risk with a true stranger. I was safe.

I lowered the pillow and blurted out: “I can go into people’s dreams.”

A weight released from my shoulders, one I was unaware of until it was gone. It felt so nice to reveal this part of me to someone, anyone.

The boy nodded slowly, processing, and then gave a small shrug. “Cool. So what’s your name?”

I threw the pillow down at his feet and crossed my arms, swiveling my head to the side in a pretentious manner. “You’re crazy if you think I am telling you.”

The pillow fabricated back into the bell, and he picked it up and returned it to the empty space on the table beside us. “You literally just told me how you can enter people’s dreams. How the heck is that any more sensitive?”

“Well that’s different.” A blush warmed my cheeks, suddenly embarrassed. “We stay like spies in here. No real names.”

It was safer this way.

He huffed out a breath, rolling his eyes as he matched my stance and crossed his arms. “Okay, but I have to call you *something*. Unless you just want to be *the trespasser*?”

“What makes you think I will come back once I leave?” I raised my eyebrow at him.

“Do you have friends in other dreams?” His face went blank, already knowing the answer.

I crossed my arms. “Maybe.”

He sputtered out a small laugh. “Wow, you sure suck at lying.”

“So I get to name you, like a doll?”

He made a face. “I’m *not* your damn doll.”

“How do I know you’re a real person then?” I challenged, doubting my decision to share my secret with him. The shame of what my mom would say welled in my chest. “Nobody has ever seen me inside their dreams before.”

He sent me a flat look. “I am thirteen years old, in the seventh grade, and I hate peas with a passion that matches the sun.”

“Your hatred for peas doesn’t prove anything.” I flipped my hair over my shoulder, shifting my body away from him to appraise the shiny treasures decorating the table—brass figures shaped like fruit, blown-glass vases, bronze relics, and the stocky bell I nearly used to bash his skull in.

“Whatever,” he scoffed, pointing at himself. “I *am* real. As real as anyone, as real as *you*.”

Tremors ran up my spine, tingling in my fingertips.

You are real, I wanted to agree, happily. My first friend.

I bit my bottom lip, keeping my head momentarily turned away from him to hide my smile.

In this place, we could exist together; I could tell him everything I wanted, and Logan Willow would never know.

I rearranged my expression into something more casual before facing him.

“Kit Harper,” I said.

He shook his head slowly, slightly dumbfounded. “That’s so… specific.”

“Kit is the name of my favorite singer, and Harper is just a really good name. A little old-fashioned, but good, okay?”

“Creative.” He rolled his eyes again, the gesture provoking my irritation.

I jutted out my hip, holding two fingers up. “It’s either that or Callum Rose.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “Do you like roses or something?”

“Why?” I scrutinized him with a judgmental look. “Is the name *too girly* for you?”

“I don’t care about that.” His voice went small, and he scratched the back of his hair. “Just curious why Rose.”

The snarky flare in my tone died in the presence of his earnestness.

“They’re my favorite flower,” I told him. “The pink ones are the prettiest, though. I have them everywhere, in my own dreamland.”

He dropped his hand and a mischievous smirk curved across his mouth, clearing his bashful demeanor. “I must mean a lot to you, to name me after your favorite flower.”

I glowered at him. “If you keep on, I’ll call you Toad the Big Bastard.”

He chuckled, and I noticed the divot in his right cheek. “Kit Harper it is.”

I held my hands under my chin and batted my eyes in a melodramatic display. “And what about me?”

He studied my face for a short second, his cheeks turning the red hue of a ripe apple.

Quickly, he averted his attention to the decor on the table, fidgeting with the corner of the cloth.

“Fiorella,” he murmured.

I dropped my hands. “Frella?” I echoed.

“No,” he looked at me then. “*Fyoh—REHL—lah*.” He spoke slowly, enunciating each syllable with intentional precision.

I cocked my head, intrigued. “What does it mean?”

He grinned again as if it was a secret, then wiped his palm on his pants to remove the sweat before quickly shooting out his hand. “I’ll tell you another time, Ella.”

I thought it was cute considering we were in his dream and he was still nervous.

“You better. You know, *if* I decide to come back.” My own palm itched, so I massaged my thumb into it.

There was a nagging in the back of my mind that begged me to leave. It's what my mom would've expected me to do, but if I was being honest, it was the last thing *I* wanted.

I could be myself with him—no secrets.

I looked from the back of his hand to his face. The skin under the soft gleam of his eyes was wilted. A touch of sadness, the kind carried in the folded posture of his shoulders, in the subtle heaviness of his mouth, despite his smile.

I wanted to know more. I wanted to dive into his sorrow and see if it resonated with mine.

So, I took his hand and said, "Nice to meet you, Kit."

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CHAPTER 8



MEET ME IN MY DREAMS

THE TRESPASSER

Puffy-faced, I walk a block to the nearest convenience store for a pack of cigarettes.

Chain smoking on my balcony to deal with the grief was an unhealthy decision—especially when I needed to clean up Opie's corpse, his tank, and then get to all the other tasks on my adult to-do list. So when I ran out of cigarettes, I should've taken it as my sign to stop procrastinating, not walk through the night to supply my bad habit. But a riptide of *fuck it* is keeping me under.

I don't even have the energy to berate myself. Instead, I pacify it by taking in the calm streets. The white noise of the city hums around me, and the metallic lights reflect off the buildings and saturate the concrete in hues of blues and purples.

I rub my swollen eyes, to hell with smudging my eyeliner. The balmy sensation of my makeup is already an indication of how much of a mess I'm sure I look right now.

For some reason, I think about the time I failed a math test in the seventh grade, and how I came home and took out my disappointment on Mom. She tried to hand me a tangerine as an afternoon snack, and I snapped at her. Funnily enough, she was good at reading me and

immediately detected something was off, prodding until I blurted out in a sob-snot rant how I'd failed my test.

We stood in the middle of the living room, freshly peeled potatoes boiling on the stove, pork chops sizzling in the pan beside them, and she watched me cry into my hands.

When I was done, she moved around me, only to stop and pat me on the shoulder and say, "Always cry, Toms. You'll feel much better after."

Then, she told me to watch the food, slid out of the backdoor, and disappeared into her garden.

When she returned with an orange bundle of roots and leaves, I cleaned and peeled the freshly plucked carrots while she mashed the potatoes.

It was one of the few and fleeting moments of tenderness she gave me. I hold onto them like slivers of gold.

I think that's what makes my grief so difficult to process. There's anger in it, unable to understand why she pushed me away for refusing to live my life the way she insisted, but there is also love, the little glimpses of affection I was hesitant to accept but still starved for. To be human is to be messy, torn between love and hurt and everything in between.

Turns out, though, she was right. Sobbing on my kitchen floor did loosen the knots in my chest.

I draw in a breath through my nose, burying a hand in the pocket of my skirt. The chill nips at my arms, but I don't mind it. The physical sensation keeps me from stepping back into the spiraling storm of my mind or the paranoia I felt earlier walking from my car to my apartment, like I was being watched.

God, I really do sound like Logan.

My phone vibrates in my other hand.

An email lights up on my notification bar—a submission reply from Greyroot Gallery.

I pause in the middle of the sidewalk with my pulse fluttering in my throat.

Greyroot is local and one of my favorites. I go to every exhibit and have tried so hard to become acquainted with the curators in hopes they will give me a chance.

A few weeks ago, I submitted one of my paintings on a drunken whim for their portraits collection, something I rarely paint.

Choosing business for my major in college was to ensure I would land a job while nursing my art career. Working at DVC Corporation was only ever meant to be temporary.

As the years wane on, the reality of my dream drifts farther from me.

I could really use good news right now.

Palms sweating, I skim the email from the art gallery, already sensing the answer based on the short sentence, the stiff compliments. Ones that have words like *unique* and *engaging.*

And then I get to the inevitable gut-punch that feels like home.

However, unfortunately, I did not connect with your artistic style.

I release a dejected sigh, close my inbox, and lock my phone.

Of course.

Because that's the theme of this shitty week.

I look heavenward, the rejection sapping what little energy I have left.

People pass by from in front and behind me. A woman walks ahead, holding her daughter's hand. The little girl looks up at her, both giggling.

I glower at them, tears hot behind my eyeballs.

I want to fucking scream.

Up ahead, the bodega's neon sign flickers.

For the sake of being a regular and to avoid a scene, I endure what feels like a tight band around my ribcage and persist down the sidewalk, sidestepping the mother-daughter duo to remove them from my line of sight.

Eduardo, the older man who owns the shop, sits on his stool behind the counter, his glasses slipping down his nose as he reads the newspaper. As much as I've nagged him that papers will soon no longer be a thing, he still insists.

The bell jingles at the door's edge, and he looks up over the rim of his glasses. "It's past nine o'clock. No caffeine."

Rolling my eyes, I turn down the chip aisle, taking my usual route through the maze of the store for my essentials.

I snatch a bottle of cabernet sauvignon from the shelf, the unhealthiest chocolate bar I can find, and head back up to the front counter.

Eduardo sets down his sheet of crude mugshots and obituaries. His peppered hair is styled off to the side, and he's wearing his usual collared, short-sleeved shirt. Today, the pattern is alternating between muted yellow

and green stripes. Yesterday, it was a collage of tropical flowers, something Dad would wear.

His tan skin is leathered with wrinkles and yet, despite his age, he still gets up out of bed each morning, dresses professionally, and runs his bodega like he's the CEO of some major company.

I've been coming to his store since I moved to the city, and he is the one constant thing, so far, in my life.

I spill my goods down on the counter, clinking the glass bottle, and work my debit card out from behind my phone case. "Two packs."

He scans the wine and carefully places it in a paper sack. "We're out."

I jerk my head up and look past him to the wall of cigarettes on the shelves. There has to be twenty different brands, and the ones I typically get —El Olvido Black 100s—are gone.

More clusters of muscle clench in my already tense shoulders, but I'm not the least bit surprised.

What else do you have for me, Universe?

I rub my brow to combat the headache, grumbling. "Do you not have any in the back?"

He scans the candy bar and tosses it into a plastic sack with the bagged wine. "Nope. That gentleman"—he slightly nods his head sideways toward the window—"just bought the four packs I had left."

I glance over my shoulder to see Nicola outside on the sidewalk, the embossed black and gold outline of my cigarettes in his hand, flashing me an infuriating smirk and a small wave.

The muscles in my jaw flex.

Son of a bitch.

I release a sharp breath and point my wrath at Eduardo. "Who lets someone buy that many packs?"

He holds his blank stare on me. "*You* usually buy that many packs."

"When will more be in?"

"A few days." He taps the card machine. "There's a line."

I do a quick glance over my shoulder at the two individuals waiting behind me, and then to the card machine displaying the unusually low price.

The pressure in my chest swells and the energy it requires to breathe feels like too much.

Taking away my goddamn cigarettes is going to be the thing that causes me to spiral. Going somewhere else is an option, a task that would require

more effort than I'm willing to give at the moment.

I pop my lips and pick up one of the 24/7 energy shot drinks off the counter display, pretending to consider it as I say, "Well then, I guess I'll have to go to the bodega a few blocks down…"

The owner and Eduardo have been competing for years.

A long second passes, and I lift my gaze from the energy shot onto Eduardo.

He gives a lousy shrug, still wearing the unfazed expression that stays stamped on him. "Guess I'll stop stocking El Olvido Black 100s then."

I toss the energy shot back onto the little clear shelf and tap my card on the reader. "Whatever."

"You need to cut back anyways," he says, like some nagging parent—an endearing sentiment that I don't receive well. Not after the last five days, *particularly* today. His words ripple through my skin and shake loose the already unstable pieces of my mind. I thought Opie's death was my limit, but Kit is trying to send me to rock fucking bottom.

I snatch the plastic bag from him and storm out of the bodega, immediately finding my new boss, first love, and current least favorite person.

What the fuck is my life?

Nicola leans against the brick, a lone, unlit cigarette dangling between his lips. "Ms. Willow."

His dark hair and his black gauges blend into the obsidian night, and he still smells like the ocean wash of a beach vacation.

The audacity for him to act so cavalier and sly after he called me *Ella* in my office.

Punching him crosses my mind.

More because of how attractive he is while seemingly getting off on tormenting me. He's sexy, like one of those underwear models that I lag on when scrolling through clothing sales—as if I have any business shopping for a man with a thick bulge.

Under the material of his hoodie are broad shoulders hinting at a toned torso beneath. Symmetrical corners of what look to be some type of tattooed wings poke out above his stocky neckline. Paired with the slim joggers hugging his hips, my imagination runs wild with all sorts of lustful fantasies, and right now those involve some submission on his part to make up for this shit.

I bring my eyes back up to his face, which is a fucking sculpture: sharp contours, square chin, solid jaw, and floppy bangs spilling over his temples.

Though, under all his beauty, shadows hover beneath his eyes. A sign of stress, sleep deprivation?

Interesting.

I never knew Kit to have trouble sleeping. He always met me on time, every night.

"Mr. Valentine," I acknowledge in my work voice.

For whatever reason he is here, I don't allow myself to dwell in it. Not right now, when I'm holding myself together by the fucking seams.

I used to daydream how my reunion would go with him. I was mentally stable and so fucking happy to be in his presence. Maybe we'd pick up where we left off. I'd apologize for failing to find him. He would hug me, and all would be well.

Right now, though, I'm confused and disappointed by the way he's acting. Did he miss me the way I did him? Is there anything real behind this cunning, nonchalant act he's feeding me?

I don't do bullshit, and it feels like that's all he's interested in.

So with a polite dip of my chin, I slip around him and start down the sidewalk.

Two steps in and I hear the strike of a lighter. The hiss of metal igniting a whisper of flame.

Because I'm some kind of addict now, my pace slows just to catch a whiff of the slightly sweet, spice-infused smoke carrying in the autumn air.

My feet stop, and the tips of my fingers itch. My mouth goes fucking dry against the internal wailing for just one taste.

I picture the rest of my night without the distraction: lying awake in bed, drowning in my thoughts, this insufferable ache mining into the depths of my heart.

I turn around.

He has one hand in his pocket, the other gripping the cigarette between the pad of his thumb and his forefinger as he takes another long drag. The tendons flex on the back of his hand, bringing to life an inky snake head crowned by roses. Even his cuticles are damn near perfect. No build up, no torn skin around his clipped fingernails—

Do you need help?

The man at the vending machine.

Yeah. Lots of it.

The memory hitches my breath.

The morning of my mom's funeral comes rushing back to me, unable to sleep, my fingers trembling around the nicotine pacifier, desperate for caffeine to rid the pre-period cramps and mood swings. And then the motel's vending machine decided to test my limits on committing crime. But then a stranger appeared with a sucker in his mouth and the same tattoo on the back of his hand. I thought it was some divine miracle from the universe.

My heart accelerates.

Back in my office, his hair was styled and he wore a suit, but I can see it now.

It was him who broke into the vending machine and handed me brownies and gummy bears. I didn't question how he knew it was my favorite combination and just chalked it up to a fated kindness.

But now…

Is he following me?

I bite my lip, a chill spreading down my spine.

I've always had a weird sense of someone's eyes on me, which was only amplified earlier in the night.

I assumed it was anxiety, imagining the gaze of the so-called monsters my mother warned me about, hiding in the crevices of my apartment. All the suspicious little sounds, creaks on the floor, the crawling sensation on my back, hairs rising on my nape, even the silhouette of someone trailing behind me, only to stop and look and see no one. I guess it's a good thing I'm not going insane.

See, no such thing as monsters.

"You seem like you have something to say." He inclines his head to me as smoke trails from his nostrils.

Like an outline of shapes under a dusting of snow, I see traces of the boy I once knew: the solid, square shape of his chin, his perfectly arched, cupid's-bow, and his eyes, set under a pronounced brow bone, dark and solid, like I am staring into black tourmaline. I have no idea what is going on in his head, just how I never did with Kit. And maybe that's why I'm so fucking furious at him.

How long has he been watching me?

What does he want?

Is he taking his revenge on me for leaving him?

I never came back, and a decade of time weathered the space between us until we lost our way to one another.

I want to believe he still cares for me, but I don't know.

And the worst thing about all of this is how, even though it makes my skin crawl to imagine him stalking me, it also flares a thrill through my veins. A sensation I'd rather not dissect at the moment.

I take a bold step closer into his space, tired of his conceited act. "You bought all the packs." I glance down at the cigarette between his lips. "Give me one."

He swallows, the bulb in his throat rolling with the motion.

Heat flushes down the skin of my neck and into my chest, dripping low into my belly.

"Ah." He keeps it dangling in between his lips as they form another one of his heartbreaker smiles, compelling me to jab my finger in that stupid divot on his cheek. "Should've gotten here first then."

This version of him drips with both alluring charm and an enigmatic disposition, a dangerous combination that could tempt a fucking nun.

His gaze never leaves mine as tendrils of smoke curl from his nostrils once again. It stings my eyes, and I clench my jaw to keep from coughing because like hell am I going to move away.

"Take it," he says. "The cigarette." He tightens his lips around the butt and draws in another inhale. The paper burns at the tip. "You want it, then take it."

It's the timbre of his voice, low and daring and dangerous; the evocative glimmer in his stare; the cunning angle of his mouth, parting his lips just enough to hang onto the cigarette with his teeth, provoking me.

A deranged tremor quivers through my body.

Despite it, I hold onto my defiance.

"I want to be happy you're here," I say, "but you're being a prime-cut asshole. What is this? Punishment?"

I reach up and pluck the cigarette from his mouth.

Before I can wrap my lips around it, he catches me by the wrist.

My breath speeds up.

The muscles around his jaw tighten, the devious arrangement of his expression receding into a more somber one. "I guess you could say that, for when you broke your fucking promise."

I’ll come back for you.

It was the last thing I said to him.

A fresh wave of fury burns up my throat. “I tried to find you! I searched every night, terrified you were hurt or dead! I couldn’t stand the idea of you waiting for me!”

I attempt to rip my wrist out of his hold, but he tightens his grip, biting into my bone. “I searched for you, year after year, Fiorella. I didn’t stop until I found you. It sure as hell seems like you gave up a long time ago.”

The pressure that’s been bloating in my chest for the last few days bursts.

“What was the fucking point when there was nothing I could do?” My voice raises as the same helplessness I felt all those years ago quakes through me again. “It was easier to just forget about you! To forget how much I disappointed my mom and how much of a fuck-up I was! Still am, actually! God, I can’t fucking do this, Nicola. Just let me go and leave me the fuck alone!”

I’m breathing hard, my chest rising and falling in large, staggered gulps. My heartbeat reverberates in my skull. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the people entering and leaving the bodega, gawking at us as they walk.

Mortified for losing my composure, I bite my bottom lip to stop it from shaking.

Nicola’s darkened gaze flits to my exposed teeth and then back up to my eyes.

I try to focus on the tumultuous waves of oxygen entering my lungs, but the sensation of his fingers locked around my wrist distracts me. An urgency to flee bites at my heels.

“Let me go,” I repeat.

“So you can run away again?” Despite the pointed edge in his tone, his grip softens around my bone.

“I don’t have the energy to run away this time.” It’s partially true, given I barely have the vigor to do basic things, like my laundry. “It’s just all too much.” The emotions piled in my palms, spilling over my fingers. I can’t hold them all. I’m sick of trying to.

The collecting embers of the cigarette drop down the path of his forearm, and they remind me that it’s still between my index and middle finger.

He doesn’t move to brush the ashes off, and all I can focus on is the heat of his palm still wrapped around my wrist. The pads of his fingers imprint my skin.

I squirm a little, the intensity of his stare prickling my cheeks.

Tingles hum down my arm, warming my blood. His hand is bigger now, the skin decorated with ink that crawls over his knuckles. It used to be slender and smooth, with nimble fingertips and a palm roughened with calluses.

So much time has passed, and someone who I once knew better than myself, who still knows all my secrets, is nothing more than a stranger to me now.

It’s the weirdest feeling in the world. And his hand is a testament to how much we’ve changed.

We’re not kids anymore, hiding away in dreamlands.

Nicola’s other hand comes up to my mouth, his thumb lightly prying my lip out from underneath my teeth. “Feel better now?”

I straighten my head toward him, eye-level with the wings protruding across the front of his throat. “Don’t do that,” I warn. “Touch me like we’re not strangers.”

Nicola slowly uncurls his fingers from my wrist, stepping away a little. “Is that the lie you’re telling yourself?”

I purse my lips, hating how much he’s right.

“There’s a lot to fucking unpack here.” I gesture to the space between us.

He plucks the dying cigarette from my fingers before the remaining ashes can burn me. “Yeah, but we have time now.”

He takes a deep drag of it, angling his head to the side as he does so. Tucked underneath his ear is a Cupid tattoo, and I hate how the stupid little angel carved into the most painful part of his neck only makes him hotter.

He tosses the cigarette into the nearby trashcan.

I cross my arms as a shield, feeling far too exposed after my outburst. The plastic bag, resting in the crook of my elbow, ruffles and sways from the motion.

“Let’s start with why you’re following me then. Why you’ve *been* following me.”

The tautness of his broad shoulders relaxes, and he slips one of his hands into the front pocket of his joggers. “How about let’s start with

something smaller?”

I huff out a scoff, shaking my head. “You’re still the same, a closed book, never willing to just be honest.”

He ignores my jab and outstretches his hand between us. “My name is Nicola, but call me Nico.”

A gilded, old warmth surges in my chest, recalling the memory of our first introduction as kids. An instant weakness in my resolve. I want to be stubborn and difficult right now, anything but lenient.

I want an explanation as to how he found me and why he’s following me.

But goddammit, his hand waits for me, and if I shake it, I know I’ll slip right back into my old self, hopelessly in love and desperately stupid from just his smile alone.

“And I already told you my name at the office,” I say to him in a short tone, refusing his handshake.

He reaches up to tuck something behind my ear. “Might want to make that one last.”

Before I can reply, he sends me a wink and strolls around me.

The tip of my ear tingles from the graze of his finger.

I lift my hand to the soft cigarette, untangling it from my curls.

One.

This is what he’s leaving me with.

Such an asshole.

I look down at the cigarette.

Marks on the paper catch my eye, thin words written below one another:

Meet
me
in
my
dreams.

And just like that, fire and nostalgia saturate my chest, and I’m sixteen again, counting down the seconds until nightfall, eager to reunite with him

in our quiet, special place that only has room for the two of us.

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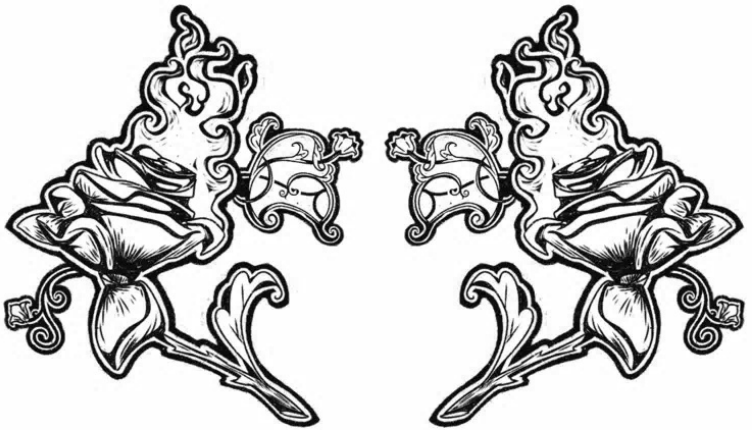
CHAPTER 9



OPIE

THE LUCID DREAMER

When we were kids, meeting in my dreams became our thing.

Dozing off to sleep quickly grew to be my favorite part of the day, and I'd rush through the sunlight hours to make it to nighttime.

At first, we stuck to my childhood home, exploring the twenty thousand square feet like it was our playground.

As the year went on, I challenged my ability to lucid dream and created new worlds for us to explore: a fairy-riddled forest, a Renaissance fair, an alt-rock music festival, a tour around Paris—all phases and obsessions that Tommy went through as she grew. I spent my spare time at school doing research for each one to piece together the details. It had to feel real.

I never wanted Tommy to get bored of me and stop appearing, something I casually brought up to her once.

We were hiking the grounds, collecting fallen autumn leaves off the vibrant earth. Tommy wanted me to fabricate woodland creatures out of them, bringing to life the crisp, dead nature.

We walked side by side while she hunted ahead for the prettiest, most unique ones. Our footfalls crunched over those she deemed unworthy in our path.

“I don’t know why you think I’m going to just abandon you,” she said, scanning the ground. “Oh! That one has yellow flecks.” She hopped forward and crouched, quickly plucking it up.

“Anyone can teach themselves how to lucid dream,” I replied as she twirled the hazel leaf in my face. “You’ll get bored eventually. And all I’m asking is that when you do, you tell me, so I’m not just sitting around waiting for you.”

I kept my voice nonchalant, as if the idea of her vanishing and never returning while I waited in the courtyard for the floating window didn’t already haunt me.

She gently tucked the leaf in her cross-over bag and then continued sweeping her gaze over the ground.

“If you were just some random lucid dreamer, you wouldn’t be able to see me,” she argued. “Have I got bored of you yet? No. So stop worrying.”

“Just promise me.” I hated the way my voice cracked, the way the words flew out all snappy and short.

So much so that Tommy stopped walking and shifted her attention onto me.

She stared at me, scouring my expression to make sense of my outburst.

A heat crept over my face.

I turned away from her and looked up to the tree branches ruffling in the breeze, all the flashes of brass and honey-brown drifting in the air.

“Something happened, didn’t it?” Her sage-green eyes continued their analysis on me. I wanted to say it, to tell her, but I didn’t know how. My silence only made her more curious. “Fine, I’ll bug it out of you. Tell me what’s going on, Kit. Oh *Kit*, please talk to me. Quit being stubborn, Kit.” She began to poke my dimple as she continued her taunting. “Kit Harper, please—”

“My mom went to run an errand one day and never came back,” I explained, running a hand through my hair. My fingers twisted in the back, and I pulled. “I waited for days before my father had the decency to tell me she’d died.”

Leaves sprinkled down around us, catching in Tommy’s fluffy braid. I flicked one away and brought my eyes back to her face. Her expression was soft, as if she understood without any further words.

“Regardless,” I said, “I just don’t like waiting, so please, if you ever get bored of me, tell me. Don’t just stop appearing.”

To my surprise, Tommy grabbed one of the leaves from her bag and tucked it behind my ear. “I know what it feels like when someone close to you just suddenly isn’t there anymore. My dad died when I was young too, so I get it. I would never do that to you. Besides, you’re my one and only friend, Kit Harper. Why would I ever leave you behind?”

Tears stung the back of my nose.

I cleared my throat, bringing my fingers up to the leaf stabbing the shell of my ear. “I don’t even know if I can create what you’re wanting me to. You’re the one with an ability. Maybe you can use it here in my dreamland too.”

She smiled and lightly nudged my arm before returning to her search. “You have an ability too, you know. You’re the most gifted lucid dreamer I’ve ever met.”

Thirteen-year-old me secretly took pride in the fact that she believed I was special. Like I had something that nobody else did, and that I could be of use to her in some way. Even if that just meant making her feel less alone.

It took me a few days of hard practice. Tommy placed the leaves in the form of a creature on the ground. Imagining the process was easy because of it. All I had to do was give them breath and movement.

When the pile took shape into a tangible little porcupine, Tommy squealed and threw her arms around me. A breeze of sugared strawberries swept up my nose, stirring my senses.

It was the first time she hugged me.

And after, it became a goal of mine to get her to do it again.

The woodland creatures, all crafted from red and orange and yellow autumn leaves, scurried around every year after. It was something for us to look forward to when summer dragged on.

By the time I turned fourteen, we ran out of ideas on how to mold my dreamland.

One day, we were sitting on the balcony of my bedroom—something that Tommy constantly teased me for.

The first time I brought her to my room, she bypassed everything, gawking at the double French doors. “Who has a *balcony* in their room?”

Tommy had her legs dangling through the bars off the ledge, peering out at the courtyard. It held the expensive marble fountain my father had

installed a year prior and the perfectly symmetrical shrubbery that lined the cobblestone.

Her black cat, Noir, lounged in a puddle beside her, grooming itself in long, lazy licks.

When I first met the feline, I quickly learned that when it hissed and batted at my hand with its claws, it was *not* open to anyone else's affection except for Tommy's.

I was at the table, part of an iron outdoor patio set imported from some foreign country that the interior decorator selected.

"We could do a circus," I suggested, waving out at all the space that was my backyard.

Tommy rested the side of her cheek on the railing. "We've done that already."

I crossed my ankles and slouched back in the chair. "I have no idea then."

My heartbeat accelerated with a white-hot fear that she'd crawl up, command Noir to follow her, and never return.

Tommy was a lifeline, something way too good to be true. My days with her were always like holding my breath, knowing it would all end eventually.

As the year progressed, though, Tommy was consistent. Not once had she ever disappeared on me.

She always comes back.

Noir yawned and rolled on her back, snuggling her head into the side of Tommy's thigh.

I glowered at the cat and its leisurely little life, envy burning in my stomach. It was stupid, but because of its docile attitude and aggressive greeting, I hated Noir.

Tommy whipped toward me, beaming. "I've got it!"

Her sudden motion startled me out of my ill-willed thoughts.

The cat continued laying belly-up beside her, eyes closed.

Before I could reply, Tommy was already up and tugging me through my bedroom, headed for the door.

Behind us, Noir slowly rose and stretched her front legs out, another yawn expanding from her mouth.

"What are we doing?" I asked, jogging behind her down the stairs.

“Just come on!” She was already a decent length ahead of me, her hair ruffling like a flag caught in wind, rounding the corners in an excited rush.

By the time I made it out the back door, my pace slowed to a walk.

Tommy was already in the pool of the colossal fountain, plopping down on the ledge.

The bright, midday sunlight shone down like a halo over the yard.

I squinted and held my hand up to block some of the rays. Tempted to manipulate the weather with my lucid dreaming, I decided against it. Approaching her under the radiant glow made all of this feel real, like we were at my home on summer vacation, killing time together.

She wore a tank top, an indication that wherever she was in the real world, it was summer, just like in mine. It was the first time I noticed her sun-kissed skin, the way it rolled over the cuts of her shoulder blades.

A heat crept up from my stomach and into my chest.

I came to stand behind her. “What are you doing?”

“You said your dad got this last week. It’s perfect!” She flicked water at me, smiling.

I brushed the wet speck on my shirt. “For what?”

The fountain was absurd and completely pointless. The only people in the house that spent any time in the courtyard were the workers employed for the landscaping.

“Conjure a fish.” She pointed to the glittering water. “A small one! Make it cute.”

“A fish?” I echoed. “Like a koi or a goldfish?”

“No, something smaller.” She snapped her fingers, mid-thought. “Like a betta. Those are pretty!”

“Okay, but why?”

Her smile and the freckles across her nose were hypnotic. “Just trust me. I want to try something.”

I let out a breath and closed my eyes.

My aquatic knowledge was slim, but I did remember one of the housemaids, Clara, telling me how she got a betta fish for her bedroom the other day. She showed me pictures. It was extravagant, with long, flowing fins and an assortment of white, red, orange, and blue—its pattern similar to a koi.

I crafted together a visual in my head, imagining its shades to be colorful and quirky as I recalled Tommy’s love for the arts.

Over the holidays, she'd gotten a paint kit and told me about all the paintings plastered on her bedroom walls. Pink and purple were her favorite colors to work with, along with black.

Tommy gasped. "Aw, it's so adorable!"

I opened my eyes to her cupping the fish in her hands under the water.

It was just as I created—small and colorful, dancing with life and lapping softly in Tommy's palms. Its fins bloomed around it as it swam.

"What's his name?" Tommy glanced up at me, smiling, and then back down at the fish. "It reminds me of candy because of its colors."

I thought of a lollipop, the ones I regularly sucked on when I felt anxious or worried.

Olly maybe?

But that didn't sound good.

"Opie?" I blurted.

She gave a squeal of approval. "That's perfect, Kit!"

I chuckled. The inside of my chest melted into sap as I watched her baby-talk the new fish.

I ran a hand through my hair, rolling my eyes to hide the blush kindling my cheeks. "So I made the fish, now what?"

She turned her head to me and smiled with all her teeth, a mischievous sort of smile that I felt flip around in my stomach.

"You're going to conjure me a jar now, and I am going to take Opie back into my dreamland," she said.

I blinked at her. "What?"

Clearly amused with my dumbfounded reaction, she smiled broader. "If I can manage to move Opie into my dreamland, then I don't see any reason why I can't bring you too."

I look back on this moment every day.

Back then, I wish that I would've told her no. Let me stay in my own home and suffer. Don't give me hope. Don't ruin a good thing just for me.

But I was so fucking stupid and selfish, unable to see past her bright grin and the fish in her hands and the urge to go anywhere she was.

I succumbed to the cruel belief that everything would work out.

This is where it began, where I was proven so fucking wrong.

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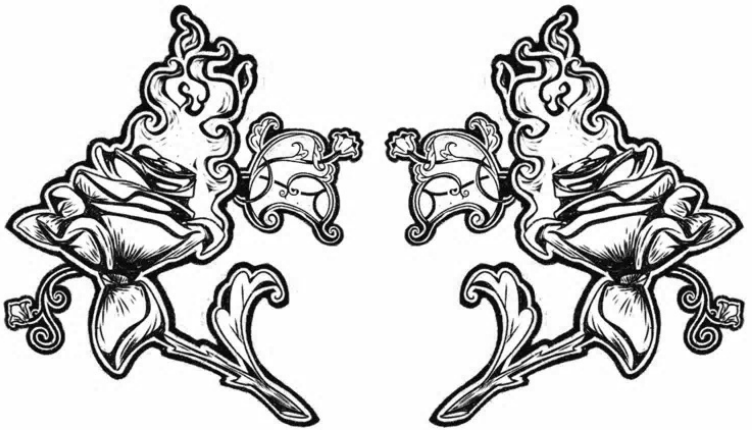
CHAPTER 10



BULLSHIT

THE LUCID DREAMER

She’s avoiding me.

It’s cute.

Throughout the morning meetings with directors and team leaders, I catch brief sightings of her through the glass walls of the cramped boardroom as she travels down the nearby hallway. Her head stays turned away, as if she’s intentionally trying to hide from me.

She must hear the whispers when I am out and about, because during those times, she remains in her office, the door closed.

Caleb wanders near DVC, tracking and observing those who surround it. When she leaves, he’s always on her tail.

During the workday, Gabi takes regular strolls around the office and updates me on whether she left for lunch or got take-out.

“It seems she hasn’t been eating much. Mr. Thomas has assigned her a multitude of tasks, so she stays mostly in her office,” Gabi tells me one day.

He sets a to-go cup on my desk, steam trailing out of the pre-cut hole in the lid.

I pause from the pile of emails in my inbox and grab the coffee. “Hold a company luncheon every Tuesday and Thursday. Cater in her favorite dishes from Bay Leaf and Astrelle’s.” I take a sip of the four-shot vanilla

latte, the espresso bitter and delicious on my tongue. “If she doesn’t come out to eat, have a plate brought to her.”

Gabi immediately gets to work on his tablet, the reflection of the screen flashing in the lens of his glasses.

Her silence continues for the rest of the week—and the week after.

That next Monday afternoon, I stroll back to my office, eager for a break from the swarms of people I’ve had to associate with since 8 a.m.

Even now, Tommy still takes me by surprise.

During our encounter at the bodega, I was convinced she was curious enough about me to return to my dreams. So much so that I went straight to the gym and worked out for an extra two hours on top of my usual load, just to wear myself out in hopes I could fall asleep easier. A nightly routine at this point.

It partially worked—with the assistance of a few more of her cigarettes.

Speaking of which…

I glance over my shoulder at Gabi. “Did you do what I asked, the cutoff?”

He scrolls through the tablet screen, reviewing my schedule. “All El Olvido Black 100s have been purchased within the South Haven city limits.”

I grin at his flat tone, clearly unamused with my antics.

When we were kids, I went through a practical joke phase—encasing plastic wrap over the top of Caleb’s toilet or dipping Gabi’s hand in warm water while he slept. Caleb participated in an all-out war with me. Gabi, on the other hand, gave me many heated lectures and a few fists to the face. He found my bullshit childish and immature, but I thought it kept life entertaining.

As I’ve become older, though, I’ve learned to channel that side of me with purpose.

“Extend the radius another ten miles *outside* of the city,” I tell him.

“And if she simply buys another brand?” Gabi counters.

“She won’t. She’s a creature of habit.”

If Tommy wants her precious smokes, she’ll have no choice but to come to me.

My office is the size of a penthouse living room—spacious and wide and completely unnecessary. Black leather furniture, identical to what sits in my father’s office, takes up one area. Another houses a long, narrow table

and a dozen office chairs that all point to the large projector screen at the end of the room, for the purpose of holding meetings in the comfort of my own space. I haven't used any of it, and I don't intend to.

I stand in front of the executive desk, a chunky, expensive, imported slab of wood, picking at the corner of the marble plaque with my name engraved on it.

I think about sending Gabi to package it up and mail it straight to Mattia's desk, but I'd miss the fury rippling across his face as he chucked it at the wall.

"What do you want for lunch?" Gabi asks.

I turn to him. "Not sure."

He peeks through the drawn blinds hiding the overcast sky and any chances of snipers targeting my head.

I've grown used to the constant unease that my life could end at any moment. Gabi and Caleb have not.

"I just got word from Caleb that she's on her way to the company café," Gabi informs me.

I lift my wrist to check the time on my watch. In an hour, I have a meeting across the city with a potential gunrunner looking to give us a generous deal on some high-caliber firepower.

"Have Caleb swing the car around and you two switch positions," I tell Gabi as I start toward the door.

He's smart and doesn't directly follow me. Instead, he'll take the stairs and make it to the café before I do. He'll linger discreetly out of sight somewhere in the lobby and observe his surroundings until I am ready to leave.

It feels odd, though, not having Gabi's constant presence loitering behind me as I stroll, like I've forgotten to put a jacket on.

Most of the employees in my path keep their heads down, quicken their pace to avoid being seen, or give a polite smile or nod or awkward wave. I have no idea how to decipher my reputation anymore, other than knowing I force people into their heads, anxious that their reaction is imperfect.

Up until this promotion, my day-to-day was in the den with the other members of the syndicate, ordering them to torture information out of a poor, captured soul—not off reciting this month's earnings. Back in the underground, I am feared and respected. Here, it's a different form of that, much tamer.

I step into the elevator. To my luck, it's empty and stops on the twenty-third floor.

The doors slide open and there she is, wild curls and all.

And beside her is Mr. Thomas, blabbering about HR ticket times.

She looks from him to the elevator, only to do a double take when she spots me.

I cut my eyes at Mr. Thomas's hand on her shoulder, my jaw flexing.

"Right, sir." She leans slightly sideways and wiggles her arm in a subtle manner to slip out from under his touch. "I'll take care of it. Give me until the end of the day."

His fingertips tighten around her skin, crumpling the sleeve of her shirt, unrelenting. He keeps speaking but it turns into white noise at the sight of his forceful touch on her.

I squeeze my hand into a fist inside of my pocket, reminding myself how unprofessional it would be to interfere by breaking his wrist.

The elevator doors begin to glide closed.

I stick my foot out, and the edges of the doors bounce off and retract.

"Mr. Thomas," I say, unable to fully strip the menacing edge from my tone. "It seems Ms. Willow has places to be, so maybe let her get on the elevator and resume your conversation when she returns, yeah?"

Mr. Thomas blinks at me, mouth opening and closing again. "Oh, uh, yes, right. My apologies. I missed you there." He laughs nervously, pointing at the elevator. "Didn't even see the doors open."

I continue to stare at him, unamused.

"I'll update you on that pressing matter later this afternoon." Tommy passes him another fake smile before stepping into the elevator.

Mr. Thomas straightens the lapels of his blazer, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. "I look forward to it."

I pass him a mocking, lazy salute as Tommy takes the space beside me. "See you in the next meeting."

The elevator doors slip closed, and I imagine all the creative ways I could remove that man's hand for touching what is mine.

Tommy keeps a suitable distance between us, arms crossed, refusing to acknowledge me. Her sugared strawberry fragrance fills the elevator as it descends slowly from floor to floor, the anticipation of each stop flickering my pulse. If others cram in this small space, it will give me an excuse to

push closer to her. However, if someone joins us, she will remain pouty and quiet and pretend like I don't exist.

And I don't want that.

So, I continue to watch her, knowing she can feel my eyes skim over her ruffled-sleeve blouse and down her dark skirt and thin tights, so thin that I can make out the tattoos above her knees: two moths, and beneath the left reads, *Asleep &*; the right, *Unafraid*.

It's fitting, given she always preferred her dreamland over reality. It was her way of hiding.

"Don't do that," she mutters.

I raise my eyebrows at her, bringing my attention back to the side of her face. "Help you out?"

"Yes," she gives me a sharp sidelong glance, "and don't look at me like that either."

I keep my hands in my pockets, disposition calm, despite the energy buzzing through my system. Her presence alone makes me feel like I downed another four espresso shots.

"Is there a particular reason?" I ask.

"Ironically, every store within two blocks is out of my cigarettes. I cheated on my bodega and they didn't even have what I needed." She keeps her gaze trained ahead, but the muscles in her shoulders are tense up to her ears.

It's an honor to be a source of her stress. It means I'm in her life, albeit not in the way I prefer, but anything is better than nothing.

"Hm." I give a small shrug and straighten my attention onto the shiny elevator doors. "Must be an error on the company's part."

She scoffs. "You're really good at it, you know."

"I'm good at many things, Ms. Willow," I reply smoothly. "You're going to have to be more specific."

"Bullshit," she spits out. "You're good at *bullshit*."

I chuckle, knowing Gabi would agree.

She unfolds her arms and whirls around in my direction, the sharp motion slinging the employee badge that always dangles around her neck on a lanyard. "We both know what this is really about."

She's closer now, aiming her swirling hazel eyes at me, exhaling a breeze of decadent vanilla that clouds all my senses at once. My eyes drop

to her silky, shiny lips, lathered in bronze gloss—the source of the scent—and all I want to do is lick it off like I'm some kind of addict.

"Stalk me, become my boss, take away all my cigarettes, torment me. You're a fucking child," she seethes, her coffee-coated breath washing across my face.

Like you have tormented me all this time, I almost say, but I suck air in between my teeth instead. "You saw my request on the cigarette I gave you?"

Her expression twists with more annoyance, and she shakes her head, a mixture of bitterness and being utterly baffled by my words. "So what's the deal? I meet you in your dreams and you give me another cigarette?"

I curve my mouth into a smirk and reach up to tuck one of her ringlets behind her ear, knowing the effect it will have on her. "Good girls get rewarded, Ms. Willow."

"Seriously. Stop fucking with me." She catches my wrist, digging her sharp, manicured nails into the base of my hand, but she doesn't push me away. "God, if you're mad at me, just say so."

I press my body against hers, nudging her back until she hits the wall. Her fingernails bite deeper into my flesh. Unwholesome images of them scraping down my skin fill my thoughts, seeping a dangerous heat down my middle.

I wedge my knees in between her legs, slightly parting them, and lean down until my lips graze the side of her hair. "I'm mad at you."

Her breath catches.

She doesn't push me away or squirm out from under me.

Interesting.

I pull away just enough to see her tan cheeks the shade of a ripe cherry.

It's so mundane, such a simple thing, for her to blush. But seeing it sends air into my starved lungs, as if I've been drowning this entire time. A glimpse of sunlight over my cold skin.

I feel the hunger crawl out of the hole I buried it in long ago. Behind it is the need to see her react again to me.

It seems, no matter the time that passes, my feelings for her live as the strongest part of me—and the weakest.

I intently study the conflicted droop of her brow, the soft glow of her gaze, and the pinching of her mouth.

Under this fluorescent lighting, I can make out the constellation of freckles crossing over the bridge of her nose, light and faded under the layer of her makeup. There's more now than when we were younger. Possibly because summer is over and she spent it outdoors more, walking at the park, drawing at the bank of her favorite lake.

The elevator door parts open, and a crowd enters, disrupting the moment.

She releases me, clears her throat, and turns away.

We both exit into an empty hallway that leads into the lobby, echoing with the lunch commotion.

Tommy doesn't take off, though.

She lingers at my side, looking up at me with a familiarity that thrums under my skin.

"What do you want from me?" she murmurs, defeated and lacking the hostility she wielded only moments ago.

Thirteen years since we held each other's eyes this way; thirteen years of changes and heartache and yet, beneath it all, connected in this moment, I feel like my seventeen-year-old self again, completely naked in front of her.

My eyes fall to her teeth buried in her bottom lip, and the urge to sink my own into her grows hot in my veins.

It's been too long since I've had a taste.

Without thinking, I lift my hand to her cheek.

To my surprise, she doesn't flinch or pull away.

"Nothing," I answer. "I don't want anything from you."

Her teeth scrape back, releasing her lip, littered with imprints and minor cuts from where she picks at the skin when she's anxious. "I see you still haven't broken your bad habit of lying."

"And I see you still haven't broken your bad habit of biting your lips." I rub my thumb over the bruised flesh, attuned to the fluttering pulse at the base of her throat.

Her breath accelerates, and her molten gaze drifts to my mouth, captivated by whatever traces of Kit that she sees. Or maybe, it's the way I am affecting her. The way only he ever could. No amount of *fuck boys* will erase the imprint I left, and that recognition swells pride in my chest. I've tormented her just as much as she has me through the years.

A torment far from over.

The clicking of heels echoes from around the corner.

I drop my hand as a group of women with their absurdly small coffee cups round into the hallway, their voices hushing as they spot us.

Tommy clears her throat and recoils, angling herself from me with one hand on her chest, the skin flushed rosy red all the way up her neck.

I casually slip my hand into my pocket and slant my body down next to hers, recalling the way she used to quiver when my lips graced her ear.

“I’ll see you around, Ella,” I whisper.

She shivers at my breath.

With a curve to my mouth, I slip around her, grazing my chest along the side of her arm as I saunter past the nosy women who slowly load into the elevator.

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CHAPTER 11



FOLLOW IN HER FOOTSTEPS

THE TRESPASSER

See you around, Ella.

Nico's stupid words outside of the elevator yesterday distract my thoughts.

I backspace the typos on my screen, releasing a tense exhale. The low music playing from my speakers does nothing to soothe the braided tension in my neck.

Fatigue tugs heavy in my limbs. To combat it, I take a few large sips of my iced shaken espresso.

The audacity for him to continue calling me *that* after everything.

It's infuriating.

He's infuriating.

I brush my fingernails along my leg tattoos.

That stupid divot on his cheek is infuriating. Every time he smirks, I want to poke it.

I grumble and flop back dramatically onto the headrest.

My throat aches, and my nostrils burn like I am breathing out tea-kettle steam. Symptoms that started out as just a mild scratch, providing little discomfort. As the day has lagged on, the itch has gotten worse, impending doom lingering closer.

I cannot afford to be sick.

My eyes jump to the corner of the screen where it reads the time and date.

Tues Oct 20

11:43 AM

It’s only Tuesday.

Jesus Christ.

Since yesterday, I have yet to run into Nico again. I managed to avoid him for two weeks after our encounter at the bodega, fearful of my lack of self-control around him. I’ve had too much emotional shit on me in the last month to trust myself to make healthy, non-erratic decisions.

I nibble at the skin of my lip. The physical movement expels some of my nervous, frustrated energy.

One moment trapped in an elevator with him completely proved my own stupidity.

After he strolled away, I stood in the hallway like an idiot, skin flushed, an insufferable heat dripping between my legs—unsettled by how much I wanted to storm after him and kiss him.

That’s the worst part about reuniting with someone that already has a piece of your heart.

We’re strangers but we’re not. I can’t forget what his touch is like, the familiar sense of his presence, or reject the way I feel when he looks at me with the same reserved warmth. I couldn't stop the flicker of lust even if I tried to.

The history between us could fill a fucking museum. I don’t even know how to begin digesting my feelings.

Clearly, he’s tormenting me for leaving him behind. That, and I’m actively going insane without cigarettes.

During the last couple weeks, I’ve scavenged every fucking store in the city to find El Olvido Black 100s to no avail. Desperation pushed me into buying another kind, to which I gagged the whole drive home while smoking. I need my routine, what I know. I also need an anchor right now, and the familiar burn and crunch of that paper could save me.

Every spare pack I kept stored away—in miscellaneous drawers in my house, the center console of my car, an emergency pouch in my purse, tucked in the back of one of my office drawers—I’ve torn into them all in a starved frenzy.

They’re gone, and now I’m going to have to go get nicotine patches or resort to vaping, two things that *do not* appeal to me.

My existing irritation with him only festers.

“Ms. Willow.” The sound of my name from Mr. Thomas’s mouth comes with a short-lived knock on my open door.

I straighten in my chair, quickly pausing my tunes by tapping on my space bar. “Yes?”

I give myself a mental pat on the back for making the one-syllable word come out more professional than dreadful. I am in no mood to entertain this man, though *man* gives him more credit than he deserves.

He slips into my office, shutting the door behind him. “Did you complete the spreadsheet that I forwarded you?”

A shudder rolls through my stomach.

My internal alarm blares as my eyes jump to the closed door and the fact that I am trapped between my desk and the wall with no escape. I’d have to plow through him to get to the door if he tries anything.

“This morning,” I say, measuring the distance from my hand, still on my knee, to the handle of my cabinet door in my desk—the seconds it would take me to rip it open, snatch my mace, and blast his sleazy ass with it.

Keeping my composure, I shift my attention back onto my screen with a nonchalant demeanor, continuing to work on my current report in hopes he will get the memo.

He saunters around my desk and places his grubby hand on my shoulder, bulldozing over my invisible boundary.

His long fingers all too casually rest inches above my breast. “What a good girl you are, Ms. Willow. Excellent work.”

My breakfast burrito churns in my stomach.

I shoot up from my chair, forcing him to take a few steps back. “Uh, excuse me.”

The sudden motion spins my head, but I fight through it as I maneuver around him to open the door.

The sight of the hallway floods in as I grip the handle, using it to regain my equilibrium. The pressure behind my eyes swells like a sponge into my sinus cavities.

I glance behind me at Mr. Thomas. “Bathroom break,” I say with a strained smile.

He nods, rubbing his hands together, reflecting the golden gleam of his wedding band. How fucking ironic. “I’ll swing by later then to check on the training schedule.”

“Great!” I press my tongue against the roof of my mouth, willing every ounce of self-control to keep my annoyance on a tight leash.

I exit my office and rush down the hallway.

As I walk, lethargy weighs down my limbs. My mouth is dry, like I’m parched, but water is the last thing I want right now.

I swallow and place my palm over my forehead, noting the sudden chill creeping down my arms. My skin feels clammy, a little hot.

Fuck.

Last night, in my dreamland, I was plunging into a cold river in the middle of a heavily planted forest. Noir hung her limbs off a branch, ample feet away from my splashing, and cleaned herself. Cicadas buzzed and the bright sunlight soaked into my pores. It’s somewhere I wish I could teleport to right now.

I enter the women’s bathroom.

Thankfully, it’s empty.

One look in the mirror—under the offensive fluorescent lights—at the dark circles around my eyes, the ashen hue of my olive complexion, and tears begin to sting in my nose.

I blink them away as quickly as they well up, knowing I will lose my shit if I smudge my mascara and have to field more pity condolences from coworkers I never speak with.

As if life hasn’t been cruel enough, it seems my immune system is giving out on me after all this goddamn stress.

Lovely.

After missing a week of work for Mom’s funeral, Mr. Thomas would no doubt gaslight me if I took PTO again for being sick. It’d be a mental battle to keep my professionalism in check—effort and restraint I simply don’t have much of at the moment.

I lightly wet a paper towel and dab it over my cheeks. My eyelids flutter closed. The surge of coolness delivers a temporary relief.

As the day progresses, my symptoms grow worse. I hide away in my office with the door closed during my lunch hour, lights off, head down on my desk.

I drift in and out of rest, but not deep enough to enter my dreamland.

The fire in my nostrils blazes down into my throat, and a few hours later, every inch of my body aches, including my fingertips.

I zone in and out, not really accomplishing much for the rest of the day.

Luckily, by some divine miracle, Mr. Thomas never returns, and I make it to five o'clock.

I trudge out of DVC, barely conscious of my surroundings, and berate myself for deciding to walk to work this morning. I was running well on time and believed the stroll would help alleviate stress.

What a magnificently stupid idea that was.

Operating on autopilot, I head in the direction of the bodega. The evening casts a bite in the air, the chill sneaking through the thin material of my tights.

I hug my arms into my torso and the security of my coat. At least I was smart enough to wear one this morning.

Streaks of gold sun slip in between the buildings and reflect in camera-like flashes off the passing vehicles. The bursts of light strike a violent pang through my skull, enhancing the migraine behind my eyes.

I focus on the pavement under my boots, relying on my periphery to travel in sync with the flow of pedestrians around me.

I concentrate on the rhythm of my feet, walking—dragging—one in front of another on my odyssey to the bodega.

You can do this, Tommy.

My legs beg me to stop, plop down on the sidewalk, and rest. But last week, I watched a two-year-old boy piss in this very spot, so I refrain and tap into my willpower to keep moving.

I grip the strap of my purse, the leather sticky and damp against my palm.

Vibrations from my phone ricochet up the strap and into my fingers.

I don't stop moving my feet as I dig into my purse for it.

Lola's name stretches across the screen.

I ignore the call and drop my phone back in my purse.

It's the fourth call since the weekend—plus there's the email from the lawyer's office still sitting in my inbox, also courtesy of Lola.

I do *not* have the energy to deal with her or another matriarchal fuckfest in my head.

I nearly rejoice when the bodega comes into view, its glass windows lined with orange tinsel and sugar skulls, but my arms don't have the

strength to lift over my head and celebrate.

With my wallet already prepared in hand, I open the door.

There's a line at the register. A teenage girl rings up the customers. She's the new hire that started a few weeks ago to take over the second shift. God, it takes her forever to ring anyone up, and she constantly chews bubble gum and smacks it with her mouth open, unaware the grating sound tests my patience every time I wait for her to scan my items. Like, please have some fucking self-awareness.

Whatever higher power is listening, give me the damn strength today. I don't need to end up in jail.

I slip through those in the line, heading straight toward the aisle of medication.

"Excuse me, ma'am," a rough voice calls from behind.

I whirl around in the middle of the chip aisle to a man in a suit. Tattoos spill out from his collar, all across his neck. He has a puffy, white scar etched across one side of his face, and he's holding a ten-dollar bill out to me.

"You dropped this," he says kindly. The silver glisten from a hoop piercing on his bottom lip catches my eye.

"Oh, I didn't realize I dropped any when I got my wallet out." I take the bill and give him the best smile I can muster in my current, energy-depleted state. "Thank you."

He grazes around and reaches behind me into one of the refrigerators. A cloud of spice and copper fills my nose.

"You look like you don't feel great." The stranger hands me a bottle of tea. "It has honey in it. It will help if you have a sore throat."

I hesitate, realizing my belief in random acts of kindness is dead.

He smiles a little, pulling the skin of his lip against his piercing. "I swear by these. Helped me get over the flu a month back."

I study his face for a beat. The thick scar runs through his eyebrow, over his eyelid, and down his cheek. There's a fleck of milky silver in his iris to match it.

"Sure, I'll try it." I accept the bottle, returning the polite smile. "Thanks for being so nice." I lift the bill up slightly, along with the tea.

He starts to back away, giving a small wave. "Get to feeling better."

And then he disappears around the corner.

The man’s generosity, which briefly revitalizes my sense of hope in the human race, distracts me from my muscle aches and chills long enough to grab medicine.

When I make it to the register, I include the tea with my purchase.

The store is a block from my apartment. A nice walk for me most days. Though, right now, it feels like a five-mile hike.

I calculate the distance and effort it will take to make it down the long stretch of sidewalk, up the stairs, unlock the door, and crash on the floor.

Thinking that far ahead makes the journey feel impossible, so I just cross my arms under my coat to hug my body heat close, keep my head down, and put one foot in front of the other once more.

The plastic bag knocks against my thighs as I walk, creating a rhythmic pulse with each footfall.

I turn off the busy sidewalk and onto the strip leading up to my apartment complex. It’s a path wedged in between the nearby tall buildings that separate me from the clamor of South Haven.

You’re almost there.

I pin my gaze straight ahead onto the wooden sign plastered above the brick gate, nibbling on my chapped, flaky lips. Another form of small pain to divert the pressure from building behind my eyeballs.

The wind picks up and slaps against my backside, throwing my hair over my shoulders and into my face. A sensation pricks at my back, raising the hairs on my arms.

I’m being followed again.

The jolt of fear in my system is met with relief as I remind myself it’s Nico. A bizarre feeling, considering he’s fucking *stalking* me. But at least I know he’s harmless, albeit annoying as shit.

A string of incoherent voices fills my ears.

My heart sinks.

Crowds of spectral whispers claw and buzz around me in a cacophony of chaos.

I stop, spinning around to investigate. The rushed motion scatters my sight into a whorling mess. The edges of the outdoor scene tunnel, and its center aggressively churns around a woman in a Victorian gown, her long blonde hair like wet string around her pale face.

She cocks her head in a deranged, glitchy motion.

Without taking a step, her form flickers and she's closer now, her face turning slowly at me, lips sewn together with briars. She extends one of her bony, brittle arms, the black tips of her fingers reaching for me.

My pulse thunders in my ears, and my fight-or-flight activates.

Monster.

The thought is like ice water in my veins as I stagger backward on my feet and break into a run.

The plastic bag and my purse both beat against my torso. I rip my head back and forth, watching the woman swallow the distance between us in flickering frames. The breath in my lungs burns like magma. Curls slap my face, sticking in my eyelashes and in the corners of my mouth.

I cut through the lawn to make a small leap for the sidewalk when something heavy slams into my backside, the impact buckling my knees.

I spill onto the ground, catching myself with my elbows against the soft terrain of the grass.

I wince. Pain spasms in my legs. The plastic bag and my purse lay underneath me.

A fluffy creature crowds my space, leaving strings of slobbery kisses all over the side of my face and in my hair.

"Winnie! Stop!" The owner, a middle-aged woman, fumbles to leash her dog and yank her off me. "Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry, ma'am! Are you okay? She got off her leash!"

She pulls the cream-colored retriever off to the side, its tail wagging in an aggressive tempo.

I gawk at the canine, winded, my heart thudding as I attempt to process what the fuck just happened.

"Do I need to call for someone?" The woman places a hand on the back of my shoulder. The weathered sound of her voice coaxes me to glance up at her silver hair pulled back in a bun.

I don't want to trouble her, so I shake my head, forcing myself to sit up to prove I'm fine. "It's okay. Really."

I reach my arm out and give a small pat on the dog's head.

The woman eyes me with worry, not completely convinced. "Alright, then have a good day."

She tugs on the dog's leash, turning to leave. "Come on, Winnie. Don't you run like that again!"

I watch them walk the opposite direction down the sidewalk, away from the apartment complex.

I need to get up, but my body shakes and I can't stop my teeth from chattering. An icy tremor spreads through my insides, though my skin still flares like there is hellfire trapped in my bloodstream.

It's okay.

I blame it on the fever.

Everything is fine.

There was no monster.

It was just the dog's owner.

She was just a person.

You are having a small psychotic break, and that's okay.

I reassure myself of this over and over again as I continue to my apartment.

I will not follow in her footsteps.

Logan Willow's paranoia drove her to insanity.

I will not become my mother.

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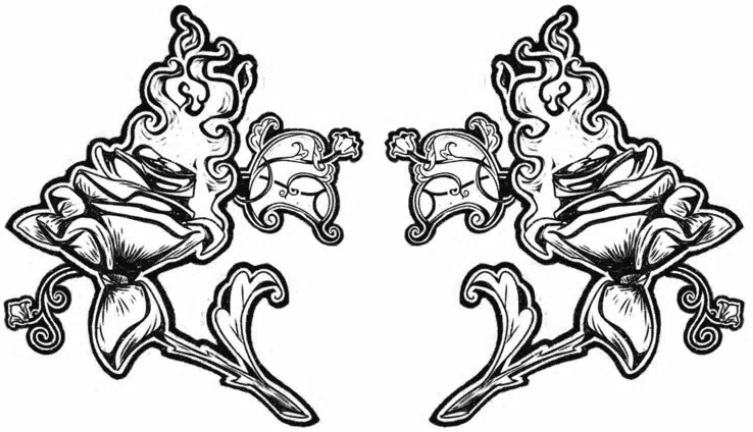
CHAPTER 12



BROTHERLY FUN

THE LUCID DREAMER

I step out of the vehicle under the obsidian sky, the frigid air dotted with salt.

Gabi waits for me at the nose of the car.

I saunter toward the edge of the road, overlooking the port of the city. The waves lap against the docks in foamy licks. It's quiet. Nothing but surrounding warehouses around us, all owned by a fishing company that V Group acquired nearly a decade ago.

Under the awning of each warehouse, I spot the silhouettes of my men and women, all stationed in the shadow of the lamplight.

Gabi's footsteps crunch under the gravel as he appears beside me. "Caleb is waiting."

I've been sitting in the backseat of the car, yet despite the lack of physical activity, my pulse throbs in my gums. I can feel the vigorous resonance of blood in my neck, beating into my vision.

I'm on edge, worried about Tommy, worried about the situation in that warehouse—how it feels like everything is rushing out ahead of me and I don't have enough hands to grasp it all before it slips through.

I need to calm down.

I fish a cigarette out of my pocket and hold it between my lips, tilting my head in Gabi's direction.

He sighs and strikes a flame on the lighter he always keeps in his coat for me, whether I've temporarily *quit* or not.

It's an attempted form of self-control on my part, having him be in charge of the silver box, and I can tell he'd love to accidentally drop it into the harbor.

I lean into the waltz of fire, inhaling the crisp, ember-hungry paper as smoke swells in the back of my throat.

For a few minutes, I take drags of my cigarette and enjoy the infinite view of the ocean tottering across the backdrop of darkness. The white glow of the artificial lights shimmers in the cresting waves as they gently fold and roll into the jagged rocks lining the bank.

I suck the rest of the cigarette down in a voracious breath and then head to the entrance of the warehouse. The end of my overcoat ripples behind my shins as I walk.

The guard opens the steel door for me.

I step through the threshold, greeted by a fusion of wet, sharp metal and gasoline. Rows of iron shelves stocked with crates of *fishing equipment* block my view, but I can hear the gurgling of what sounds like water, choking and coughing, and the pained groans of a man behind it all.

The inside of the room is crowded with members of the syndicate, individuals dressed in midnight-black suits and strapped with guns, deposited all throughout the maze of shelves in this large space.

Each one that I pass acknowledges me with a respectful nod of the head.

Gabi follows closely at my side.

Unlike his persona at DVC, my business-minded assistant always smiling during our long treks across the workplace, here he holds himself with a more daunting demeanor, eyeing each of the individuals we pass. He gives them a silent scrutiny, surveying their forms, their respect, and their chances of putting a bullet in the back of my head. The boots on the ground call him *the Enforcer*, though he hates any kind of embellishment.

I turn the corner to the opening in the center of the room, hidden by a square fortress of intentionally placed crates.

The violent stench of copper assaults my nostrils. It's all I see—blood on the stone floor, on Caleb's cheeks, the man's hands, the binds around his wrists. I'm surprised he has much left in him.

His face is covered by a piece of cloth, and Bre, a woman in Caleb's squad, douses gasoline over it. Her frame is petite, barely reaching five feet,

the same height as the man in the chair.

He screeches and coughs and fights against the straps tying down his limbs.

Caleb sits on a stool across from him, ankle propped up on his knee, watching the man with a malicious smirk that curls up one side of his mouth. His predatory gleam always drops my stomach.

Bre ceases on the jug, setting it back down on the drenched floor.

She looks between me and Caleb, the specks of blood bright on her ivory, freckled skin.

Caleb waves her away with a lazy flick of his fingers.

She obliges and steps back out of the circle.

I quickly scan the four individuals standing alongside the shelves, then I return to the man, wheezing and gagging on the toxic liquid.

Caleb rises from the stool, retracting a bit of his snake-like focus, and joins at Gabi's side.

I saunter over to the stool and take a seat.

"Let's see his face," I say.

Bre removes the fabric from the man's head.

My stomach flips at the gory sight.

His eyes are both swollen, his skin blotched in webs of red and blue under the muck and blood. Deep wounds are submerged into his head and jawline, as if Caleb carved into his flesh with a hunting knife.

He continues to wheeze for air in hoarse desperation, gasoline and spit foaming out of his mouth.

"I-I… told you every-th-thing—I kn-know! It w-was Mattia. He-he is the one who s-s-sent it—out!"

I reach into my pocket for the pack of cigarettes and slip another in between my teeth. "Sent what out?"

The man shakes in a coughing fit, gagging on the caustic sting of the fuel in his throat.

A flame appears over my shoulder. I angle my head until the tip of the cigarette is consumed by it.

The man's gravelly cough echoes loudly through the warehouse, gushing out a burst of clear, frothy liquid from his mouth that drips down his chin.

I take a large inhale, filling my lungs, praying this nicotine will be enough to hold me together.

“*Please*.” The man lowers his head in a broken sob. “I-I don’t w-want to die.”

Smoke trails from my nostrils as I stare blankly at him. “You beg for my sympathy when you were targeting what is mine and don’t even have the decency to ask for forgiveness.”

The image Caleb described revives in the front of my mind: Tommy on her way to the bodega, sick and unobservant of her surroundings, and this piece of shit in the alley by the entrance, waiting to snatch her up.

If Caleb hadn't intervened, god knows where she would’ve been taken at the hands of my brother.

“P-please!” He wails, hanging forward in the chair by his binds. “D-don’t—kill m-me! I’m s-s-s-sorry! I won’t ever go n-near—her again!”

I turn my head to Caleb, sick of waiting for an answer to my question.

Caleb’s eyes cut down onto me, jaw hardening. “A bounty,” he says.

The nausea in my stomach stirs.

I swallow it down, my mouth going dry. “How much?”

“For three million.”

My ears ring against the blood roaring into my skull.

“Th-there will be more! I can h-help you!” The man frantically goes on, and the sound of his rough, trembling voice seizes the muscles in my neck. “You need me—”

In one motion, I reach for the gun in my waistband, extend my arm, flip the safety, and pull the trigger, shutting him up mid-sentence.

Blood sprays across my cheeks in a warm smattering.

Small pieces of his flesh and hair pepper the ground behind him.

His body slumps into the macabre pond of crimson and refractive, rainbow gasoline.

More blood gushes from the wound in his forehead, dripping in long strings across his lap.

Silence holds in the warehouse, thick and intense.

Those circled around us from Caleb’s squad keep still, their expressions barren, numb to the onslaught.

My heart echoes rapidly in my chest. I can feel it in my fingertips, in my teeth, and I’m grateful that my own blood is still contained within me.

I click the safety and tuck the gun away.

Then, I rise and flick my cigarette in the puddle of gasoline that has surrounded the man.

Flames reach for the ceiling of the warehouse in a growing pyre and swallow him whole. Tangerine and bright blue, they ripple and dance in the same infuriating way that they do in my dreams.

“Collect his charred body and return it to Mattia,” I tell Caleb as I pass by.

Gabi sticks to my shadow as I stroll out of the warehouse, my hands balled into tight fists at my side.

My footfalls thud in a fast pace across the wooden dock and into the gravel.

I do a quick survey of my surroundings, ensuring I have some form of privacy to purge my rage.

I pace back and forth alongside the car, a hand sweeping through my hair, my fingers twisting and pulling it into a disheveled mess.

Gabi stays back, hands crossed in front of him. He remains silent, smart enough to know there’s not a damn thing he could say right now to ease my worry.

I expected Mattia to react in some theatrical way. He’s vindictive, and hates when he doesn’t get his way, but I didn’t anticipate him sabotaging my duties to *this* degree when they came from our father.

Mental warfare is a game taught to us by Levi, and it seems Mattia is only getting started with me.

I drag my hand down my face, a bitter laugh expunging quietly out of me.

Such a motherfucker.

I rip my phone from my pocket and dial a number that I rarely ever call.

Mattia answers on the fourth ring.

“Nicola, what a surprise,” he muses with a baiting hum to his tone.

“You’re fucking thirty-five.” I glower at the door of the car. “Act like it for once.”

“You seem agitated.” I can hear the snide delight in his voice. “It’s only a bounty. You can handle that, right? Just call it a little brotherly fun.”

A deranged cackle bursts out of me, and I push my fingers through my hair. “Oh Matty, do you honestly think I will let you lay a hand on her?”

“I always get what I want, baby brother. But you know that.”

Flashes of my traumatic childhood accompany his statement—spending days locked in a room, bloody and starving.

Another erratic laugh bubbles up my throat. I grip my hip and look down at my expensive, glistening shoe. My hair falls into my eyes as hot determination pools in my gut—a need to see my brother hurt for this.

"She's *mine*," I warn, my tone dark and ruinous.

"I've always taken what's yours, Nico." The danger in his voice crawls under my skin like a parasite. "What makes you think she's any different?"

My heart pumps faster, the surge blocking sound from my ears.

Before I can reply, the line ends.

I drop my hand to my side with the phone curled tightly in my palm. Tremors scatter down my arms.

I've battled Mattia all my life. He's a goddamn tick that comes back every time I think I've pried him off.

A long road of tragedy stretches out ahead of me. I can see it vividly—Tommy hidden from me in our underworld, violated and abused and trapped in Mattia's disgusting games.

A restlessness bounces through my synapses like I'm a pinball machine of nervous energy.

I won't let that happen.

I jolt and swing the car door open. "Let's go."

Gabi is already dipping into the driver's seat.

The tires skid on the gravel as he guns the gas out of the parking lot.

My hands shake around my phone. I pull up the surveillance cameras surrounding her apartment complex to assure myself she made it home. Some of Caleb's squad was left to keep watch, but my faith in their ability to survive Mattia's tricks are low.

I run the cameras to the time she would've been arriving.

My breath rushes out as I watch her sprint toward the staircase, terror wide on her face. Then a dog appears in the frame and pounces on her. She collapses on the lawn. A few seconds later, an older woman appears and pries the dog off. They leave and Tommy stays seated, panting, the horror still visible in her trembling arms.

I swipe my thumb to speed up the video, dread viscous in my chest. When she rises from the ground, I let it play at normal speed, watching her stagger up the staircase and enter her apartment.

I suck a sharp breath through my nostrils, the muscle in my jaw ticking as I fish out another cigarette.

"Eight minutes," Gabi announces in tense concentration.

I roll it around in my fingers, attempting to staunch my anxiety. The images won't stop—Tommy mutilated and lifeless on her living room floor, or caught in between Mattia's teeth, his hands on her, ripping under her skirt, impaling himself inside of her—

Stop.

I squeeze my palm into a fist, crumbling the cigarette.

"Seven minutes." Gabi's voice grounds me.

She's okay.

I need to pry this fear's grip from my throat.

I need to see her for myself.

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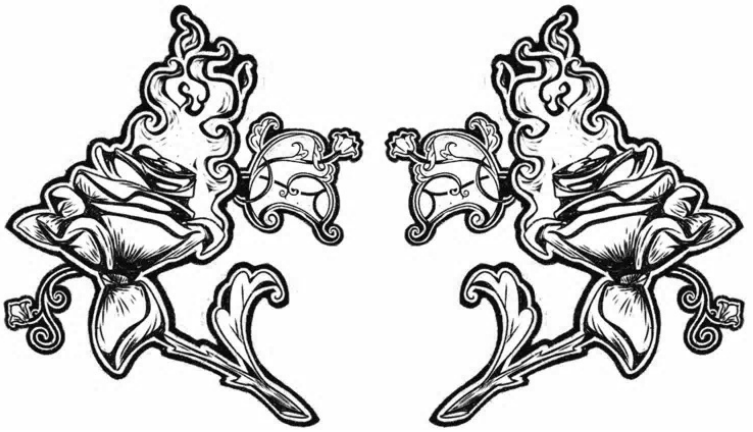
CHAPTER 13



END IN RUIN

THE LUCID DREAMER

Fiorella's Oasis.

It's what she called her dreamland the first time she took me to see it.

Opie's purpose was only meant to be a test, and back then, I hardly thought anything of it. The fish, technically, wasn't a living, breathing creature, just something I'd crafted using my ability in my *own* dream.

Thirteen-year-old Tommy gleamed with excitement the day she hugged the jar Opie swam around in, reappearing back into my dreamland after their quick adventure in between realms with Noir at her feet.

"He survived safe and sound." She held the jar up as proof, the fish swimming circles in it, and then snatched up my hand. "Now let's go."

"Where?" Despite my uncertainty, I let her drag me to the levitating window in the middle of my backyard, my chest tightening with unease. "What if it's too much for you and you get hurt?"

She looked over her shoulder at me. "I like it when you worry about me, Kit." Her curls, her *fucking curls*, sprang in all directions, those long, blonde strands caressing her face. In between the beautiful mess was her broad smile, so full of life and excitement that I couldn't think straight.

An inexplicable, torturous longing for her sank its roots inside of me.

I'd follow her anywhere.

The moment I crawled through the window, the atmosphere shifted into a stirring abyss.

My equilibrium flickered, and my stomach spun viciously.

“Wait!” I squawked, digging my heels into the solid, black nothingness of the ground.

Tommy swung around, still holding onto my fingers. “It’s okay! This is just the Library of Reverie. We have to travel through here to get to my dreamland.”

I shook my head, bile scaling up my throat. I slapped my hand over my mouth. “I’m going to be sick, Ella.”

She swooped in closer, placing one of her hands on my shoulder. Her candied strawberry fragrance snuck in between us and swam up my nose, soothing my nausea.

“What do you see?” she asked in a gentle tone, propping up my head with her finger under my chin. “Come on, focus on me.”

I held onto her engaged eyes, the color of honey drenched over an evergreen glade. “A blackness all around me. It isn’t ending.”

She made a *hmm* sound. “That’s weird.” She looked both ways and then back onto me. “We are in the middle of a hallway. Maybe you can’t see anything because you’re an intruder?”

“You’re the one who dragged me here.”

“Well yes, but *technically* you are one. Just think of it as a galaxy. We are traveling through the open atmosphere, to get to another planet.”

“The idea of floating in space is still terrifying!”

“Oh my gosh!” She grabbed my wrist and slapped my own palm over the top of my face. “Close your damn eyes then!”

I squeezed my eyes shut and dropped my hand, feeling too much like a child playing hide-and-seek.

The darkness mirrored my surroundings, but muting my sight did nothing to stop the roiling in my stomach. “Ella, I think I should just go back—”

My words were cut off by the softest touch of skin pressing against my mouth.

I gasped and went to stagger away, but her fingers twisted around the collar of my shirt and kept me in place.

I could taste her breath on my tongue, feel her curls brushing my collarbones. Tremors fluttered in my chest and burst, like I had swallowed

the sun and it radiated through me. The sensation melted in between the gaps in my ribs and welled behind my belly.

She pulled away and I held my mouth apart, transfixed by the tingling in my lips.

A long beat passed.

I didn't know what to say.

I daydreamed about kissing her all the time, but never acted, too fearful of scaring her away.

This was Tommy, though, always bold and fierce, never hesitating to take initiative.

"Focus on that," she murmured. The quietness in her tone quirked my lips, prideful to find her—for once—shy and flushed. I affected her the same way she did me, and the gentle timbre of her voice proved that.

The sloshing of water was followed by a hard jab into my sternum. "And hold onto Opie."

I brought my hand up, feeling for the rim of the glass. My fingertips dipped into the water. The fish nibbled on my skin, a light tickle that made me grin amidst the terror of the void.

Tommy giggled. "He thinks you're fish food. Did you not wash your hands after dinner?"

The sound of her laugh moved through me, swirling like little embers in my bloodstream.

"I can't create any of those pellets now that you've led me here." I did my best to sound vexed, pulling at that comfortable stitch between us. Bickering was something we always did well, and right now, I needed to ground myself from the thirst under my skin, eager to feel her lips against mine again.

Tommy lightly settled her grip on my elbow to usher me forward. "Don't worry. When we get to my oasis, Opie can have all the food he wants."

I let her blindly lead my path, keeping my arms wrapped around the fish's jar.

For a little over a year now, we'd left footprints all over my dreamland. A place of escape for me, never a paradise. Partially because when I thought about what my version of a paradise would be, I couldn't imagine it.

I could recognize it, though, the moment I stepped into hers.

The white noise in my ears silenced at the hum of wildlife—a choir of cicadas and birdsong. The dewy air was heavy, hanging onto my skin like mist. Tree bark and wet moss surrounded us.

I opened my eyes to a cavern of greenery.

We stood on a platform made of beige stones. A lamppost carved by birchwood lit up the shadowed area. I watched in fascination as tiny, pink, glowing insects fluttered around in the globe-like glass at its top, drawing silhouettes of their tiny bodies along the rock.

Tommy sprang her arms in a wide arc. “Welcome to Fiorella’s Oasis!”

I couldn’t take it all in.

It was impossible.

The cavern went on and on, above us, all around us—a lush, stone valley of earthy greens and hushed blues and rich teals. Its trenches were full of bushes and white flowers, their stems long and blossoms like small, brilliant orbs casting off more cosmic light. Warm, pink roses decorated the thicket of foliage, their velvet-like petals glittering under the luminescence.

Thick vines and overgrown floral canopies of deep, violet wisteria draped from the towering pillars. Moss crawled up the massive, oval stones.

We stood on a high boulder, embellished in a small grove of overgrown plants.

I glanced at the bench beside me, Noir lounged out on it, grooming herself, and then over at the weathered stone sign on my other side that read: *Crossroads.*

I didn’t understand why she had signs within her own nighttime residence, but I guess she found comfort in labeling things.

I could feel Tommy’s eyes on the side of my face, her grin burrowing into my cheek, clearly proud to see my dimwitted reaction.

For once, after our time together in my own dreamland, she was the one who had surprised me with a creation of her own.

Honestly, I felt stupid. Here I thought I was special, able to control the aspects and narratives of my dreams just to create mediocre playgrounds for us when she was capable of so much more. Her creativity knew no bounds, and I was in complete awe, while at the same time disappointed in myself.

She must’ve been so bored by what I had made.

The collision of her middle finger flicking against my temple startled me.

“Hey! Earth to Kit! What’s with the sappy ass frown?”

She didn’t wait for me to reply as she started down the stone steps.

“Ow.” I rubbed at the spot on my temple, rushing to follow her. “This is amazing, Ella.”

Turbulence swirled the contents in Opie’s jar against my torso. I slowed, letting the surface of the water settle back down.

“Seriously,” I continued. “Why would you ever leave?”

She gave me a pointed look, snatching Opie’s jar from me as we walked.

“Leaving is always the hardest part.” She hugged the container to her stomach, watching Opie’s long tailfins sway as he swam. “But as my mom always tells me, *none of this is real*.”

“Bullshit.” I ran my fingers over the sparkling, cotton candy-colored rose on the vines entangling the rock. “I can feel this flower, the solid ground under my feet. Everything about your oasis is real.”

“Thanks for that,” she said with a genuine drop to her voice. “This place is my escape from her, if I’m being truthful with myself.”

Tommy wasn’t afraid to speak her mind. Because of this, I knew about her strained relationship with her mom. Throughout the year, she gave sarcastic grumbles about the woman or would blatantly tell me how much they didn’t mesh, even as family.

“I understand,” I told her, slipping my hand inside of my pocket. “It’s the same with my dad.”

In my periphery, I could see her give me a sidelong glance. “Do you have a bad relationship with him?”

I peered at the end of the mountainous corridor we strolled through, the valley walls still spilling with even more rich vegetation. The verdant life was everywhere.

Her question prodded a nerve. It required an answer I didn’t know how to give. In the time we’d known each other, she was sensitive around the topic of my parents after learning how my father kept my mother’s death from me for days after it’d happened.

This was new of her to inquire, and I hadn’t prepared for it.

“If you’d even call it that,” I muttered. “We don’t get along either.”

“It’s the same with my mom. We just kind of coexist. She doesn’t like our gift.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. “*Our*?”

She cracked a devious grin my way, her eyes twinkling. “Ever wonder where my gift comes from?”

I stopped, and she paused along with me, giving me a head tilt that always lured me and tested my patience. “Well yeah, but I just figured you’d tell me whenever you were ready.”

“Such a gentleman,” she sighed melodramatically, reaching up and lightly flicking my bangs off my forehead.

I swayed, smoothing down my hair. “You’re such a brat.”

She laughed and continued walking. “My ability to enter dreamlands is passed down through the generations, to all of the women in my family.”

I watched the distance span between us, taken aback by the sharp strike of envy.

It was brief, but I hated its presence and how it triggered resentment to foam up my throat. Not toward Tommy, but toward my own situation, my own father, and the burden that would be passed down onto me.

Mattia and I only existed to carry on the Valentine name and the legacy our father had built. It was decided when we were children: Mattia would operate V Group as the CEO, and I would take over the syndicate.

The life was forced on me like a fucking scourge.

That was *my* generational gift.

“Are you coming?” Tommy stopped and rotated to me, her brow knitted together in concern as she stared at me.

I continued walking, folding away my own poignancy until I could slip it where no one could see. Here she was entrusting me with another one of her secrets. The last thing I wanted was to make her worry or doubt me.

Her arm brushed against mine as we strolled.

“Thanks for sharing that,” I told her. “I know you’ve never told anyone these secrets. I appreciate the trust, Ella. Honest.”

A beat of silence passed.

I peeked over at her flushed cheeks.

She snapped her head in the opposite direction. “Yeah, well government scientists haven’t come for me yet, so I figured you were trustworthy enough.”

I chuckled. “Government scientists?”

Unable to resist my mockery, she whirled her head around to me, her expression pinched. “Like you see in the movies. They want to dissect anything remotely different! MK Ultra shit, you know?”

The rushing roar of a waterfall drew closer, drowning out Tommy's words as we rounded the corner to a cliffside.

Beyond it were rolling hills of rapids lined with flora. Water sprayed the undergrowth and drenched the rocks, its mist sprinkling over my cheeks.

Silky, white birds hovered in the canopy of tree branches above, dropping down to the banks and skimming the cascades.

"Come on, we're almost there." Tommy waved for me to follow her down one of the paths off the side.

We took on the steep slope, sliding down it most of the way. I kept a close eye on her in front of me, prepared to catch her by the arm if she lost her balance.

At the bottom, we emerged to the edge of a mangrove, the trees so dense that they blocked out the sky. The rush of the waterfalls still echoed through the cushion like faint background noise.

It was quiet, peaceful. The surface of the nearby water was still and opalescent, a turquoise sheet of glass.

Those same snowy, slick-feathered birds from above wandered the bank, flying in and out of view from the thick branches.

Tommy kicked off her sandals and stepped into the shallow lagoon.

From this angle, his rainbow body looked too thin, too fragile for something to be alive and fending on its own. I should've made him bigger, more capable.

"Wait, Ella…" I took a step, eyeing the water once more and what lived within it. Figures swirled around Tommy's feet—shadows of much bigger fish. If she let Opie free just to witness him swallowed by something up the food chain, I'd be consoling her tears.

Tommy twisted to me, studying my expression.

"He will be safe," she assured me. "My oasis is peaceful. The creatures here obey that."

As if to prove her statement, she directed her attention to one of the curled branches at our side.

Noir lounged across it, her limbs lazily hanging off like a sloth.

I didn't even notice Noir following us.

As if she were waiting for my permission, Tommy stared at me.

I peeled out of my sneakers and rolled my pant legs up before wading into the ankle-deep water alongside her.

Various sizes of fish circled our feet—koi with long, angel-like wings and silver-blue goldfish with protruding, bubbled eyes and ivy for fins.

In between them, pinpricks formed, little droplets of pink and lavender and indigo.

I bent down to watch one of the grapefruit beads unfold into scales and fins, materializing another betta fish.

Fascinated, my eyes shot to the other teardrops evolving on their own.

“I’m not going to *not* give him friends,” Tommy said, crouching to submerge the jar.

Opie glided out without fear, greeted by the school of fish.

Tommy lifted, smiling in satisfied calmness. “See?”

I nodded, my heart warming as Opie explored further into the water until I was unable to track him.

“You’re amazing,” I murmured.

Tommy spun her head to me, her frizzy curls brushing the skin of her cheeks. “What?”

A hot glow expanded in my chest at the sight of her surprise.

Unlike her, I wasn’t direct. In fact, I had a hard time pushing out my feelings, my thoughts. I was learning, though. Little by little, she was teaching me. I wanted to be more like her.

But at that moment, more than anything, I wanted to make sure she knew just how incredible she was.

“This is all real, Ella.” I hung onto her gaze, hoping every word I said would brand somewhere inside of her, so she’d never forget them. “Fuck what your mom says.”

She pursed her smiling lips, tucking a curl behind her ear. “Um, well, thanks Kit. Nobody, besides my dad, has ever said anything like that.”

My heart thudded against my sternum, and that infectious warmth drowned it. Just like the vines in this place, my fondness for her coiled around its chambers, rooting until it couldn’t escape.

She bit at her bottom lip, averting her gaze to the water. It was a privilege to bring out this quiet, bashful side of her.

“You’re not a bad kisser, by the way.” I playfully nudged her with my elbow. “Anytime you want to try it again, I’m more than ready.”

Her expression arranged into a scowl, accompanied by a cherry tint to her cheeks. “I only kissed you to distract you. If you threw up, I would’ve too.”

I laughed under my breath, running a hand over my short hair just to watch her eyes jump from my fingers to my bicep.

Pleasure unfurled through me as her gaze collided with mine before quickly dropping to the empty jar, her cheeks burning brighter.

"*Right*." I made sure to elongate the syllable.

She sent me a deadly look, kicking her foot up to splash me.

The water slapped across my shirt, saturating it.

I cringed.

She cackled at my reaction.

"Okay," I said, nodding nonchalantly as water trickled from my hair and down the side of my face. "It's *your* turn."

I lunged for her.

She squealed and hopped away in the water.

I threw my arms around her waist and carried us deeper into the lagoon. She squirmed in my hold. I plunged us both under the water.

We emerged laughing, her drenched hair stuck to my skin. My fingers webbed in the heavy material of her shirt, her bare stomach grazing against my knuckles.

Soon, I would have to leave her. We would wake up from this place, and I would return to my underworld of violence where Mattia's knuckles left blotted blues and yellows on my face; a life of fighting rings and training for brutality; a path that led to my father's shadow, expected to one day send bullets through the brains of his enemies.

This was my gift, the curse inherited by the men in my family, and it would follow me until the day I died.

I was unfit to exist in a world like Tommy's.

The two of us were never meant to intertwine, and I would always be the inevitable stain to her radiance.

I knew even then, it could only end in ruin.

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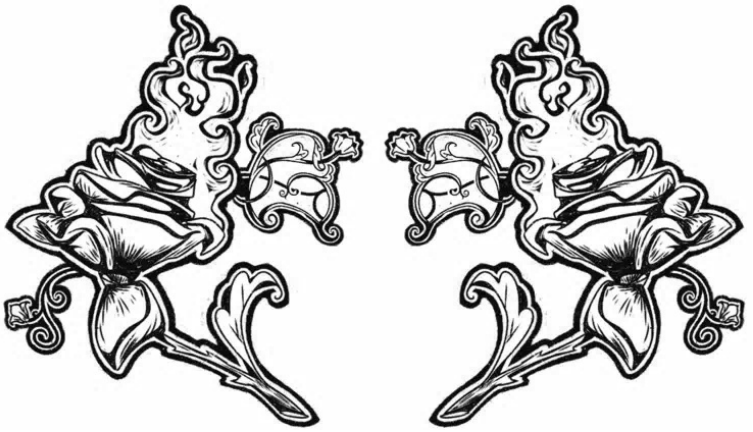
CHAPTER 14



FEVER

THE LUCID DREAMER

OPIE'S OASIS.

I glare at the small plaque on a stake driven into the sand of the aquarium, the green and lush aquatic ferns lapping around it. There are no signs of the fish. Judging from the hand-sized net off to the side of a small house plant, with fresh soil sprinkled over its surface, Opie's corpse had to be buried with its roots.

The ten-gallon tank sits on a small table up against the wall. Its wooden legs are painted in a honeydew coat with a pattern of sparkling fuchsia roses that snake up to the tabletop. Her favorite flowers. They were all over her oasis, a detail I could never forget.

Why did she take him out of the lagoon and bring him here?

I tried to find you! I searched every night!

She told me this outside of the bodega during our first interaction.

My jaw flexes, and I tug at the tie around my neck. The glass of water in my other hand sloshes a little over the edge. Beads drip down my knuckles and onto the wooden floor.

"Dammit, Ella," I mutter under my breath.

Did she actually bring the fish here because she *missed* me?

The muscles in my shoulders ache from the constant tension, and the twisting in my stomach hasn't let up, despite laying eyes on her.

I shift my weight onto one foot to angle my body toward her living room.

It’s whimsical and decorated exactly how I imagined it to be: a leopard print sofa, a pastel pink loveseat, lots of fluffy blankets, dark accents, and a glass coffee table. On its surface is a bouquet of wilted carnations, several dirty cups, a rolled-up bag of popcorn, a tablet, an electronic stylus, and other random Tommy items like lip balm and jewelry.

Swirls of pinks and blues and purples are painted across the ceiling, a cotton candy cloud dripping over the walls. No doubt something she saw in a dreamland.

I move through the room and into the small hallway, the walls covered in her artwork. There’s one of periwinkle clouds raining butterflies, another depicting the large pond from her oasis and all the fish it housed, and then of Noir in her jaguar form.

I roll my eyes. Still, after all these years, I hate the cat.

When I was fifteen, she transformed into the wild feline and chased me through a grove in Tommy’s dreamland. I nearly shit myself. Tommy laughed when Noir tackled me to the ground, pawing me as if I were dinner.

I return to Tommy’s bedroom and place the water on her bedside table. She doesn’t stir from her sleep at the sound of my presence or the ruffling of the paper bag as I unload the medication Gabi picked up for me.

I gently peel away the puffy duvet from her face to examine the scarlet hue of her cheeks. Despite the mountain of blankets she curled under, her teeth chatter, and her normally golden complexion is a few shades lighter than I’m comfortable with.

“Why didn’t you go to the doctor?” I grumble, placing my palm over her forehead.

I press the backs of my fingers to one cheek, then over to the other.

Her skin is burning up.

Worry flips in my stomach as I hyper-focus on the speed of her breath, watching her chest rise and fall in quick, rasping strides. I can’t tell if it's because she’s struggling in her dreamland, or if it’s from the fever.

Back when we were kids, she told me falling ill always turned her oasis into a turbulent nightmare.

I have to cool her body temperature down. It’s the only way to calm the storm in her dreamscape.

I pull the covers back, revealing the faded, oversized band t-shirt that meets the tops of her thighs. My eyes linger on her bare skin, warm and honeyed and coaxing my tongue for a taste.

I swallow and shift my gaze to the moth tattoos above her knees, and the droopy, different-colored socks hugging her ankles. It all feels personal, like the scope I've watched her through all these years has been zoomed in. I'm not just a shadow across the room anymore.

I guarantee if I glance in her sock drawer, none are even paired. The three different floral prints of her bed sheets were probably intentional. I can see her scrolling on the internet or spending at least an hour in the store debating her options. On her bedside table are melted candles and shea butter lotion—a nightly ritual after the sun has long set.

There are so many small aspects of her day-to-day life, and I'm starved to know more, despite the years I've had her in my sights.

Focus.

I slip my arm underneath her back and the other under the crook of her knees.

"You have no idea what you do to me," I mutter as I scoop her up.

Her head rolls back, draping her long hair over my arm.

I expected her to at least shift in my hold, show *some* signs of life. But she doesn't. Instead, she just hangs there, her limbs spilling and dangling freely, as if she's a vacant marionette.

What if she can't find her way out?

I quicken down the hallway into her bathroom.

What if she loses her way?

I kick open the shower curtain and flip the knob with my knee.

What if she never comes back to me?

Water sprays out into the tub.

I peel my shoes off and prop a foot up on the toilet seat to support her while shimmying out of my jacket. Once it puddles onto the floor, I climb inside the shower and slide down the wall into a sitting position.

What if she never wakes up?

The water sprays over my face, drenching her hair, saturating us both.

Despite the lukewarm downpour over her, her weight stays dead in between my legs. No movement, no signs of recovery.

Shit.

“Fiorella,” I say in a demanding voice, pushing the drenched curls from her shoulders. “I need you to wake up.” A stream cascades down the crevice of my nose and collects between my lips.

She remains limp against my chest.

The pace of my already unnerved pulse marches harder.

“Tommy.” I lift her chin with my fingers. Rivers run down her eyelids, her mouth. “You promised to come back.”

The weight of her head presses against my knuckles.

I spread my palm over her jaw and pull her forehead into my lips, sealing my eyes shut. Her skin is still warm.

On this side of the universe, waiting for her to emerge from a realm I spent most of my childhood inside of, I have no idea how to help her. There’s always a chance she’ll never revisit this world, never find her way home.

I feel as helpless as I was back then.

No.

A zealous flame floods my veins.

I sit up and grip her waist, hauling her up farther onto my chest to move her face out of the water.

As I do so, she stirs a little, her fingertips digging into the side of my ribs as she cages her arms around me.

My body stiffens and I raise my arms, unsure how to respond to her sudden affection.

She nuzzles her cheek into my chest. All the while, my heart rate revs and flutters like an engine on the night highway.

The feel of her body against my own, her warmth, her curls sticking to my wrist, her hands tucked under my shirt—fuck, I missed her.

She’s probably unaware of what she’s doing, but I really don’t care because she’s doing it anyway. Whether she realizes it or not, she’s clinging onto me, and suddenly, the last thirteen years of suffering down this tedious path to find her was worth it. Because no matter the time or distance between us, under the scars of our adulthood, we’re still Ella and Kit, lost together in this fucked up world.

I lower my arms around her frame and move my lips to the top of her hair. The water pelts the side of my face as I hold her as tightly as she can take.

If she remembers this in the morning, I hope she’ll forgive me.

~

I CALL MY FAMILY DOCTOR.

If Tommy were awake, if she knew that I was summoning help to her apartment, she'd mutter some sarcastic comment about my *rich boy privileges* and poke a justified amount of fun at me.

I relentlessly heard it when we were kids, exploring every inch of my father's mansion. I actually miss her mockery, her taunting voice. Her eyerolls and raised brows. I just miss her.

I leave my phone to air out on the bathroom vanity and dry myself off as best as I can with a towel. Once my clothes are no longer drip-all-over-the-floor drenched, I move onto Tommy, carrying her back to her bed.

I concentrate on the innocent days of our childhood as I peel off her wet t-shirt down to her black underwear.

My jaw clenches at the view of her cleavage, her flushed skin against the black cotton of her bra, and the glimpse of a tattoo poking out from underneath where her breasts meet. I catch my eyes before they have a chance to skim down her curves to the gem dangling from her belly button.

Heat ripples down my middle in a building tempest.

Fucking hell.

I snatch the velvet blue robe hanging from the back of the bathroom door and wrap her up in it.

She snuggles into the softness, turning her back to me. The robe slips off her waist and exposes the elastic hem of her underwear across her soft ass.

I swipe a hand through my hair, pressing my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

It's been over a decade since I saw her body this way. Back then, she was a young woman growing into her skin as it just started to take shape.

We're adults now, and it takes every ounce of self-control for me to keep my eyes away, eager to trace all of her filled-out curves with my tongue.

Blowing out a defeated breath, a knock sounds on the door just as my phone vibrates in my pocket.

I pull it out.

GABI

We tracked him the whole way. He’s clear.

I stalk through the house and open the door.

Dr. Jones stands at my height, draped in a trench coat, warming his hands with his breath. His duffle bag hangs from the crook of his elbow.

His expression flattens, the wrinkles on his eyelids sagging down into the corners. “Well, boy, are you going to invite me in?”

Nothing about the old man has changed.

I grip the side of the door, dropping my voice low. “If a word of this leaves your mouth—”

“My family will be slaughtered like pigs right in front of my eyes. Yes, I’m aware. I’ve been your physician since you left your mother’s womb. Now get out of the damn way, Nicola.” He pushes past me and heads straight for Tommy’s bedroom.

He sits on her bedside. His hands move quickly, placing a pulse ox on her finger, and aiming a thermometer shaped like a gun to her forehead.

My heart beats like timpani against my ribcage.

Minutes go by and he doesn’t say a word.

It’s just a cold.

We’re past the Stone Age.

She will be fine.

She will make it out of her oasis.

Noir probably helped her.

I’m sure she’s in some other dreamland or waiting in the Library of Reverie until she wakes up.

The machine lightly beeps, and the small screen on the backside flickers red.

103.2 degrees.

“Fucking hell,” I hiss, clenching my hands at my sides. “What do I need to do? The hospital is a few blocks away. I can take her and say that one of her neighbors—”

“Pull yourself together.” Without looking back at me, Dr. Jones quickly evicts a metal tray from his stocky duffle bag and places it on her nightstand.

“What can I do?” It comes out pained, a pathetic futility I want to purge away as soon as I say it.

He cleans her inner elbow with an alcohol pad.

“It’s refreshing,” he says. “Seeing you all bent out of shape.”

I glare at him. “Can it, old man, and tell me what the hell to do.”

The glint of the large needle between his fingers rolls my stomach.

In one skilled motion, he slips the sharp tip into one of her veins.

Tommy makes a small sound in her throat.

It pinches my chest.

Sweat cakes in my palms, and a chill pricks at my spine. Needles and the scent of disinfectant, they’ve never bothered me, but I find myself averting my gaze, unsure how to wade through this discomfort. I can’t stomach her suffering.

Dr. Jones continues to work, hooking up the IV to the tube.

“Interesting,” he muses. “I’ve pried bullets from your flesh, but you’re pale at the sight of a mere needle.”

As if to prove his statement, he glances at me over the framed glasses that sit low on his nose, traces of amusement cutting into his stoic expression.

I continue to glower at him.

“Will she be okay?” I ask, the stress pulsing in my temples.

He continues setting up the IV. “I cannot answer your question until I properly examine her. Something I *won’t* be able to do with you fluttering around like a moth in my goddamn ear.”

I surf a restless hand through my hair and grip a handful, squeezing at the roots, willing myself not to slice the corners of the old man’s smart mouth.

He points his stern face at me, waving me away. “Now be gone and let me do my work. It’s what you called me here to do.”

I drop my arm, blowing out a breath. “I need a fucking smoke.”

Spinning on my heel for Tommy’s balcony, I fish out a fresh El Olvido Black 100 from my pocket.

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CHAPTER 15



PHANTASMAGORIA

THE TRESPASSER

My eyes pop open.

Rain pelts over the tops of my shoulders, saturating my curls and my clothes. Shivers ripen over my skin from the chill.

The metal bench under my thighs begins to melt, like hardened sugar into sticky molasses, and before I give way to the fall, I push myself up onto my feet and stretch my arms out for balance.

My breath goes heavy against the spiraling view around me. Deep shades of blues and greens whirl and blur in the hungry vortex of the storm. The serene chirps of insects and birds morph into a screeching wind that slaps the rain around in vicious cuts, stinging my cheeks and eyes.

What the hell is going on?

I jerk my head up to the jagged piece of stone hanging on the birch lamppost: *Crossroads*.

The platform in the center of my dreamland.

In my oasis.

My pulse fires as it all comes back to me: feverish and struggling to make it home; the hallucination of the woman in the Victorian-style dress; the bounding dog and its owner.

The solid surface of the boulder beneath my feet softens into liquid and swallows my shins.

I scream and stagger backward, ripping my legs up and out of the muck.

Rumbles groan and tremor the valley. The greenery shudders under the hiss of the downpour.

I hop down the puddled mossy stones, panic hot in my veins as I witness the threads of my safety unstitch.

I'm sick.

And nothing is ever simple in my dreamland when I am sick.

The atmosphere around me becomes unsteady.

Some people get fever dreams or psychedelic experiences. I, however, am thrust into a turbulent land that is actively trying to kill me.

Noir's loud *meow* ricochets over the violent shrill of the wind.

I turn to the direction of her call as she jumps in a graceful stride from above. Mid-air, her legs elongate and her small body morphs into a black jaguar.

She lands at the entrance of the gorge, and I haul myself up on her muscular back.

We ascend the stone pathway to the entrance of the Library of Reverie. Streams of the rain rush down my face, dripping in my eyes, over my lips. I strain past the blur through the grove ahead—to a lavender, wood frame under an old oak, door wide open.

Noir pushes off her back legs and bounds forward in a high jump.

I tighten my grip in her slick fur and squeeze my eyes shut as she propels us through the air.

Her paws touch down, and the door slams behind us. It resounds in a thunderclap.

I startle, feeling the loud *slap* ripple up my spine and into my skull.

Behind it, though, the whistle of wind and roar of rain immediately dissipates.

I peel my eyes open.

Noir saunters at a slow pace down the hallway to the Library.

The sight of the familiar, chipped wallpaper and glimmering roses pinned over the bed of vines brings instant relief. Embedded in the flora are windowsills, none of which lure my attention right now.

I release the breath trapped in my diaphragm and relax my weight into Noir. My clothes weigh heavy on my skin, and my drenched hair clings to my neck and cheeks.

In any other circumstance, I'd conjure new, dry clothes. However, my body hangs on Noir, weary, the throes of my lethargy following me from my bed—at least that's where I hope I made it to before crashing into a fevered slumber.

"You did it," I whisper to her.

She responds with a soft growl.

I watch the tall grass and wildflowers ruffle in her footsteps, their ends brushing the belly of her velvety, onyx coat.

The sweet fragrance of honeysuckle wafts up my nose.

We approach the threshold of the Library, and she stops, as if to ask, *where to?*

I bite at my lip.

My oasis isn't safe at the moment.

None of the other dreamlands call to me.

Except for one.

My encounter with Nico in the elevator comes to mind.

What do you want from me?

Nothing.

He'd said it sincerely, as if he meant it, but his eyes bled with a pain I didn't understand. Just like when we were kids.

I didn't believe him back then, and I sure as hell didn't believe him in the elevator.

"Take me to his dreamland," I tell Noir.

The inferno.

It means something.

The night I ran into him on that cottage rooftop, he was up there watching it, almost as if he'd succumbed to it.

As a lucid dreamer, he should be able to extinguish it. So why hasn't he?

Unless he can't.

I need to figure out why.

Noir flexes in a light jump, and we soar like a falling star into the Library.

She travels smoothly on her feet, bouncing up the cotton-like landings one by one until we are at the top, diving straight through an open window into a plume of smoke.

Beyond it, fiery perdition swallows the land.

It’s just as it was the first night I stumbled into his dreamland.

Noir halts a little in her pacing, slowing her run to a trot.

I point straight to the inferno. “Keep going, Noir!”

She doesn’t hesitate as she strides into a full run again. The long tendrils of grass sting against my legs. My eyes well up from the harsh wind beating against my face. The radiant, blinding glow of the firestorm burns brighter. As we approach its line, the violent heat swelters and sticks to my skin.

The heavy air fills my lungs. Pressure gathers in my chest.

I have to do this.

“We’re going inside of it!” I instruct Noir.

She shifts her weight forward to gain more momentum.

I’m insane, and she’s even more so for following my orders, but I have a feeling that whatever the source of this hellfire is, it’s located at its heart.

I want to know why it’s here, why Nico hasn’t put it out. Compared to when we were children, this place is grim and desolate. It makes no sense.

I squeeze the sides of Noir’s ribcage with my thighs, preparing for the jump.

She hops up onto the boulder jutting out of the ground and leaps off it with intense velocity, plunging us straight into the flames.

I suck in a breath and squeeze my eyes shut. My whole body goes stiff.

Noir’s paws touch down gracefully on the terrain.

The roar and crack and dance of the fire silences immediately. It’s now just a hum in the distance, serene, like a trickling stream, or the way snow melts on soft, sunny days.

I open my eyes.

The fire is gone.

I search the space around us, climbing off Noir. “What the…?”

Noir swings her head to look back at me. A low grunt vibrates from her throat to get my attention.

I follow her golden gaze as she gestures to the spot in front of her.

I step around to see a bouquet of roses, their petals pink and glittered, slowly melting as a contained set of flames devour them.

Then, it hits me.

I snap my head back up, surveying the clearing of the forest. The distance is littered with smoke; a light wind ruffles the trees; the grass, outside of the inferno, is like straw, but inside where I stand, it’s vibrant and

fresh, like the color of saturated moss. Wildflowers dance amidst the swaying tendrils.

The open space swirls around me, caving in on my chest.

My breath goes shallow.

All this time.

When I reappeared in this place, he sat on the cottage roof, surrendering to this eternal burden inside of his dreamland.

What if he *couldn't* put it out?

I stare down at the burning pink roses.

The flames crackle and spit embers with wild abandon. I watch them float away and disappear in the grass.

It was me.

My stomach hardens, like I've swallowed wet cement.

I step up and kneel, dipping my fingers into the blaze.

And I see it: how it all ended for us, the fear in his gaze, the way his fingers dug into my wrist, grasping onto me as tightly as he could. The force expanding between us, we couldn't fight it.

I see him in my office the day of my new hire meeting, the blue shadows under his eyes.

All these years, this blight is what kept him from sleeping.

I did this.

A fire that perpetually burns.

Just like my love for him.

I'm so fucking stupid, so cruel.

I pick up the bouquet by the grouped stems.

Noir rubs the side of her face against my thigh. Her strength nudges me back a little on my heels.

She takes slow, deliberate steps, her shoulders rolling and tail flicking as she strolls ahead of me.

"Where are you going?" I call to her.

She doesn't look back before disappearing into the tall grass.

Something shuffles in the weeds behind me.

I spin around to a familiar being at my feet, the shape of a porcupine and made of autumn leaves.

I remember walking the forest around us, stuffing the prettiest ones I could find in my satchel, just to scatter them out across the yellowing grass for Kit to mold them, give them life.

He never got rid of the creatures, despite the fire. Almost as if he needed a reminder of me. A feeling I know all too well.

It was why I carried Opie from my dreamland and into my home.

A lump forms in my throat.

I crouch down and offer my hand to it.

The kind animal hesitantly stretches its neck, sniffing the back of my fingers.

It's why Noir walked away, so it would feel safer coming out.

"The fire is leaving," I assure it, smiling through my pathetic sorrow and shame. "I'm going to take it with me."

The creature's cold nose smudges my skin before slowly backing away and disappearing into the grass.

All is well now.

I sigh, letting my shoulders fall, and stare down at the tangerine and cerulean wisps convulsing around the flowers. They never seem to fully melt. They wilt and lose shape, just to reform and relent to the burning all over again.

Just like him.

God, it makes me sick.

All these years, he's suffered in his own dreamland because of me. His own oasis became a torture chamber—*because of me*. He has every right to continue his provocation.

And yet, he still regards me with clemency, his touch gentle, tender.

I don't want anything from you.

I believe him.

But just like when we were kids, I can see the shadow looming over him, weighing down his shoulders, leaving poison in its wake. The burden of it has only weathered him more over time. I see it in the dark circles bruising the skin under his eyes; the emptiness etched into his gaze; the vacancy I left in his chest.

Back then, I didn't push him to tell me about the monsters in *his* life. When I found out about them, it was too late.

This time will be different.

I rise and peer out at the settling smoke that perpetually drifts into the cushion of grass. The sunlight anchors back into the sky. Fat, white clouds blossom in the blue, and the autumnal creatures filter in from the forest.

When Nico goes to sleep tonight, I hope he feels some reprieve.

I glare at the burning roses.

The blaze will no longer haunt him. I will take it to my own oasis and let it ravage my own land. It's the least I can do after plaguing him with a decade of this burning purgatory.

He *will* sleep again.

No more wildfire dreaming.

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PART III
BLACK BRIARS AND A VIOLET FRAME

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CHAPTER 16



EXTRA SECRET GIFT

THE TRESPASSER

I was six years old the first time I pulled something out of my dream.

A fox made of ivy and foliage—the first creature I ever made in my oasis, and my first friend. I didn't want to part from it, so when it was time to wake up, I carried it over.

When I opened my eyes, it scurried off my mattress and hid under the bed.

Mom yelled at me. I sobbed, wiping my snot and tears, confused by her anger, and stunned by my own ability. Not once had she told me what we were capable of.

"You stupid girl! They will find us! The monsters will find us! You are never allowed to take anything out of your dream!"

After her lecture, she got down on her hands and knees and caught the fox by its tail. I watched in horror as she yanked it out with a bitter pull. It flailed in her grip, squealing.

Agony clenched in my chest and, suddenly, I regretted ever bringing it outside of my oasis.

In my dreamland, I could protect it. Here, in real life, I was useless when things went wrong.

"I'll go deal with it in the shed," she said, turning to leave my room. "No one can ever see this sin!"

I locked my fingers in her shirt, stretching the plaid sleeve, wailing, “Please Mom! No! I’ll put it back! I won’t ever do it again! Please!” My pulse thundered in my head, my panic white and hot and burning in my throat.

She knelt eye level with me, the creature still thrashing against her hold, its desperation grating my young, empathic heart.

“If you ever take something else out of your dreams, Tommy,” she spoke slowly through her teeth, “I will make you deal with it in *this* world. Taking it back to your dreamland will *not* be an option. Do you hear me?”

My lips trembled as I nodded. “I understand.”

She returned the fox to me, and I held it tightly until I fell asleep that night. Once back in my oasis, I let it roam, ensuring it never felt fear again.

I locked away the horrible memory but never forgot the terror blooming in my gut when Mom started out of my room with the creature, to *dispose* of it. It may have been made of leaves and vines, but it still held life within.

One day, I was fourteen and Nico was fifteen. We were in my oasis, lounging at the bank of the lagoon.

Noir kept herself high in the branches, far away from the water. Occasionally, I’d spot her long, black tail dangling and flicking amongst the leaves overhead, lazily chasing a *flowerfly* before laying back down.

Nico sat beside me on the tree root jutting out of the water, beads dripping down his bare chest from the ends of his dark hair.

I became comfortable with his exposed skin during our journeys traipsing the land of his dreamscape. We floated in his makeshift lazy rivers and dashed down tall, curvy slides into fancy pools.

However, as used to the glimpses of his bare skin that I was, the awareness between us had changed. I no longer disregarded him without a shirt the way I always had.

Instead, I peeked over at him more, noting the freckle on his collarbone, the dusting of hair over his chest, the trail over his bellybutton that disappeared into the waistband of his boxers.

The fantasy of tracing it with my finger was sadly interrupted by Nico pointing across the lagoon. “What is that?” he asked.

I turned to look, swirling a strawberry popsicle on my tongue. The ivy-furred fox stood on the bank, idly drinking from the waterhole.

“Leroy,” I said, swinging my legs back and forth. My toes grazed the surface of the lagoon. “I made him when I was six. There are a few more

around somewhere, but he was my first and has the darkest green leaves."

"He seems like he'd be a nicer pet than Noir," he grumbled under his breath, sending a short-lived glare to the branches above.

Nico hated her, though for what reason I had no idea. I always chalked it up to him not being a cat person.

I took a bite out of my popsicle with my front teeth. "I tried that once. He lived in my room for like half a day."

Nico gave me a double take. "How?"

"We can take things out of our dreams. Though I doubt my mom ever has before, in fear of getting struck by lightning or something." I rolled my eyes.

He blinked at me, mouth opening and closing.

"Wait." He held up his hand and shook his head. "Like you can bring things from *here*"—he waved around at the lagoon—"into the real world?"

"Call it my extra secret gift." I gave him a sly grin and pinched at his arm in a playful manner. "I love it when you're surprised. It's my favorite face you make."

He let out a skeptical laugh, peering out across the calm water. "Ella, you're truly amazing."

Warmth saturated my chest, despite the popsicle chilling my stomach.

I poked at the divot in his cheek. "I know."

"Okay, but why for less than a day?" A bit of his seriousness returned. "It had to be so cool."

I rested back on the heel of my hand and acted like I was handing my half-eaten popsicle to him before I pulled it back and devoured it all. We agreed to share earlier, but all bets were off with me and sweets back then.

"It's a rule set by my mom. I'm not allowed to bring things out of my dream. Creepy *monsters* hunt us down." I lifted both of my hands and said the word with air quotes. "Because of that, we can't leave behind any traces of our powers."

Nico held the popsicle stick, staring at me, the leftover dribbles of pink and red dripping over his knuckles. "What kind of monsters?"

"Dunno." I waved off his question, tired of this subject. I hated talking about my mother and all the things out of my control.

He narrowed his eyes. "How can you not know what is hunting you down? That seems intense as fuck."

Unable to take the second stream of melted strawberry syrup trickling down his fingers, I snatched the wooden stick away and tossed it toward the lagoon. It scattered into starlight before it reached the surface.

“Because my mom doesn’t tell me that shit. Like don’t you think I’ve asked her?” The koi created ripples under the surface. Quick sightings of the bettas flitting in and out of the shallow areas caught my eye. “My guess is that one of my ancestors created the monsters and accidentally brought them out of their dreamland.”

Nico didn’t reply right away.

I gave him a sidelong glance, meeting his pitiful frown.

“What’re you thinking?” I asked.

He dipped his sticky hands into the water, rinsing them. “How do *you* feel about all of this? It’s weird and vague and doesn’t make much sense.”

Nobody had ever asked me that before. Certainly not Mom.

I had strong feelings, obviously, regarding her stupid rule. There was so much beauty in my oasis. I understood that dreams and reality could never coalesce, but I could fill my daily life with small joys no one else ever had to know about.

I didn’t believe in the monsters, though. Not even for a second. Mom could never describe them, and she always evaded my questions when I asked about them. If anything, they were probably a bullshit story made up by an old geezer, all meant to frighten his daughter into submission.

“That doesn’t really matter, Kit,” I said, watching the fish dip in and out of sight under the water. “If I break her rule, she’ll punish me.”

He searched my face as I said it.

“What about you?” I asked, eager to shift the conversation onto him. “Do you have any demons in your life?”

It was my feeble attempt to pry at him. Some days, he seemed off. Not exactly present and in the moment with me. I knew of his tense family dynamic and the distant relationship with his father, but he rarely went into detail.

I desperately wanted to know what plagued *him* in his life. If we were only destined to meet in *this* place, between worlds, I wanted to at least feel like I was a part of him in some way, even if that meant just hearing him talk about his day.

I shouldn’t have been disappointed when he scooted closer and drew his arms around me, playfully nuzzling his nose into my cheek. “No monsters

will ever touch you, Ella. Not while I’m around.”

I giggled, squirming to get away before he could throw us both into the lagoon. His hold tightened around my waist. “Kit, I swear if you—”

His lips pressed against mine, stealing the breath from my lungs.

He swallowed it all, his tongue dancing with mine. Heat blossomed behind my navel. I couldn’t think straight. My blood ignited from his touch.

We melted into each other. His fingers spliced across the middle of my back. I arched against his chest, twisting my fingers in the back of his hair. The kiss transitioned from slow and experimental to chaotic and starved—lips smashing together, teeth grazing, tongues braiding, saliva dripping down my chin.

For a long time after that day, our adventures outside of the lagoon stilled. We’d retreat to the same tree and devour each other until we were forced to wake up.

I remember opening my eyes to the golden sunrise pouring through my bedroom window, giddy and beaming up at my ceiling fan.

With each breath, each kiss we shared, I was falling deeper, already plotting a way to bring us together outside of our dreamlands.

I didn’t know my power then, my limits, though I’d soon find out. She may have been cruel and cold, but my mother was right about a few things.

The fox would not be my last lesson.

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CHAPTER 17



COME BACK HOME

THE TRESPASSER

I open my eyes, the starry galaxy painted across my ceiling greeting me under the amber glow of my string lights.

My room.

I'm awake.

I take lethargic blinks, analyzing the relief in my raw throat. Aside from the pressure behind my eyes and the aching of my muscles, I have *some* kind of energy. It's enough for me to get up and take a shower, at least.

I lay my forearm across my face.

The gentle pull of skin and the pinch in the crook of my elbow takes me off guard.

I lift my arm above my eyes to see a cotton ball strapped under an adhesive bandage with a flowery print across the front.

What the hell?

Did I hurt myself when I fell earlier? I didn't think I did. Especially in such an awkward place on my arm—

I gasp and sit up, ripping off the bandage to find a small prick on my skin. The kind I walk out of the clinic with when I get my yearly bloodwork.

Medication boxes and beverages crowd my nightstand. A gun-shaped thermometer is beside it all—an object I know for a fact I do not own.

My pulse accelerates.

What the fuck?

Was I injected with something?

Nobody else knows the code to my door. Who would—

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip.

Nico.

Even if he wasn't actively stalking me, he'd be the only one who could figure out the code. He knew how much my dad meant to me.

Nico was in my fucking apartment. Something that should freak me out or fill me with dread. If I were smart, I'd call the cops. But shamefully, I don't feel any of that.

Toward him, at least.

No, I'm more afraid of what I saw on the sidewalk.

The creepy Victorian woman chasing after me.

I search through the shadows of my room, my senses sharp, on high alert.

What if she's here now, hiding somewhere in the darkness?

No, Tommy.

It was the fever.

I place my palm over my forehead, though it is absent of a concerning heat.

After leaving Nico's dreamland, I waited out the storm raging in my oasis by wandering the endless rows in the Library of Reverie. When I felt myself waking, I passed along the burning bouquet to Noir and instructed her to take it to one of the caves in my oasis, to keep the fire contained.

If Nico was here, is he the reason my fever is gone?

I throw my legs out of the blankets, dropping my feet onto the floor.

A jarring vibration rattles the boxes on the table, and I jolt, slapping my hand over my chest.

My phone.

The screen is lit.

Someone is calling.

My heart pounds against the palm of my hand.

I let out a sharp breath. "Jesus Christ."

The monsters don't exist, Tommy.

Don't let her pass her psychosis down to you.

I rise from the bed and answer the call. "Hello?"

“You sound awful,” Lola says. “Are you sick?”

I clear the phlegm from my throat. “Yeah. Just a stress cold.”

In the background, her keys jingle, like she’s picking them up. “I’ll come see you.”

“Really, Lola, I’m fine,” I assure her as I pace across my room. “I’ve already taken medication.”

“What about food?”

“Ordered take-out,” I lie.

I pause in the hallway. The mention of food has me pulling my screen from my cheek to glance at the time.

12:32 A.M.

I’ve been asleep for seven hours.

Lola lets out a long, berating exhale, the one thing she does to show her annoyance. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I tell her, flipping the light on in my living room.

“Okay, then just get some rest. We can talk later.”

“Just talk now.” The words leave my mouth absentmindedly, too occupied with shaking out the sofa’s blankets for any other suspicious items, hunting for proof of Nico’s break-in. It’s the last thing I should say, because I know what she’s going to bring up.

After a long beat, she murmurs, “You need to meet with the lawyer, Toms.”

The mention of it coils my chest.

I don’t want to deal with this right now, or ever really. But definitely not now.

“I’ll get to it, promise.” I spin slowly, sweeping my eyes around the room for anything out of place—any other objects that aren’t mine.

Nothing. Everything is just as I left it.

He had to have been here.

I know it.

“I can make an appointment. All you have to do is show up.” Lola’s tone is timid, speaking slowly and tenderly, like she’s trying not to spook a frightened animal. “Just give me some days and times that work best for you.”

Seven Fridays from now.

I sink my top teeth into my bottom lip to refrain from being sarcastic. “My schedule is packed. I’ll have to pull up my calendar.”

She gives another gruff breath, cracking in the speaker, but doesn't say anything.

I breeze past Opie's empty tank, my gaze avoiding its presence entirely, for the balcony. Nico smokes. Surely, he left traces—a cigarette butt, ashes over the patio table, *something*.

"You can't avoid this forever, Toms," Lola says quietly.

I halt, my grip hanging on the handle of the sliding glass door.

Her statement constricts my lungs.

The more I think about it, she's been overly persistent about me meeting with this lawyer to go over Mom's will. Why?

All that awaits me is an old man in a suit behind a desk telling me that my mom left me her house and all the shit inside of it, despite the hundreds of fights we had over my vow to never return to Brownwood. I should be impressed. Only Logan Willow could pull off a grade-A guilt trip from the grave like this.

It's going to take me months to go through and sell everything, then make the needed repairs to put it on the market. I don't want to deal with the mess, which is something I imagine Lola can sense. And I feel like I'm inconveniencing her somehow, as if I should be more of an adult. More like her.

"You want to buy the house," I say.

It makes the most sense. Lola is the type who usually gives me space. She might linger and check in on me, but she's never relentlessly hounded me like this.

"Tommy, well yes, but seriously, there's no rush. I assumed you were going to sell. If you decide not to, that's okay too," she stammers, the surprise in her voice evident. "Johnny and I want to start trying soon, and it's just always been a dream of mine to have a family in the house I grew up in."

I stare at the reflection of my hanging lights, how they scatter their warm, brassy hues across the Bohemian rug on my balcony. "Did Mom know?"

Another long pulse of silence.

And then: "No."

It's such a fucking Lola thing to say. Of course she kept her feelings to herself, never explicitly saying what she wanted. That would be selfish. Something *I* would do.

“Why? She would’ve just given it to you in the will. It would’ve saved us both a lot of fucking stress.” The ugly bite in my tone disgusts me. I want to be better and not just spew my venom out on Lola. She’s not the problem. She never was. It’s me and my dead mom and the festering distance that never seemed to stop growing between us.

“Because, Tommy.” She pauses, and I hear the wobble in her throat as she collects herself. “Aunt Logan always wanted you to come back home.”

The weight in my heart is too much to hold.

I let my hand slide off the handle and slowly make my way into the kitchen.

Mom knew I’d never return. After the incident, after all the things she said to me, the enmity built, little by little, until I moved out and cut ties with her. Everything aside from the DNA that connected me to her had been long burned.

Leaving me the house was just a cruel punishment. A way to force me to sift through her cowardly goddamn life, to hand over the keys to the daughter she wished she had.

All of my fight and pride drains away. Maybe it’s the cold medicine or the infection, but I don’t care anymore.

I reach for the bottle of merlot in my fridge—disregarding the shelves’ bare states and the random bag from Bay Leaf, I guess from the other day, which has probably now molded. The bottle is still half full, so I dump it into the biggest wine glass I own: a Halloween goblet I bought last year as a joke.

“I’ll make the appointment,” I murmur.

My thumb hits the end button before she has a chance to reply.

Then, I take the biggest gulp of wine, refusing to evaluate my decision to drink while on whatever medicine I was plied with.

The alcohol rushes down my throat. Liquid heat unfurls in my belly, lightening the weight of my sorrows.

I fidget with the hoops on my nostril. Lola and Johnny deserve the house. They are going to make great parents, and I need to be happy for them.

I am.

It’s in no way a reminder of the fact that I turn thirty soon; that I’m working a job I hate; that the love of my life reappeared from the void and is actively trying to make me mentally crack; that I may or may not have a

freaky monster haunting me; and, as the cherry on top, that I live in an apartment with an empty aquarium and no one to hold me as I crumble. No parents, no friends.

I down another mouthful of wine.

It's fucking fine.

The alcohol fills my empty stomach and mingles with the acid, a sweep of vertigo rushing quickly through my head. It's a sudden reminder that I didn't eat dinner, and how I have nothing in my fridge to satiate me. Groceries were unfortunately my task to do after work, and ordering take-out this late into the night is off the table.

I spin around to toss the bottle in the trash can.

A familiar, black-gold box sits on the counter.

El Olvido Black 100s.

My grip tightens around the neck of the merlot.

He was here.

I trash the empty bottle and pick up the pack. Judging from the bulk and weight, it's full.

I flip the top open to verify.

There is a rolled note stuffed along the top row of cigarette filters—written on the same small, floral stationary that I keep on my fridge to jot down my grocery list.

And in fine, printed ink, it reads:

Take-out is in the fridge.
Eat before you smoke, please.
And you know where to find me,
when you're ready.
- Kit

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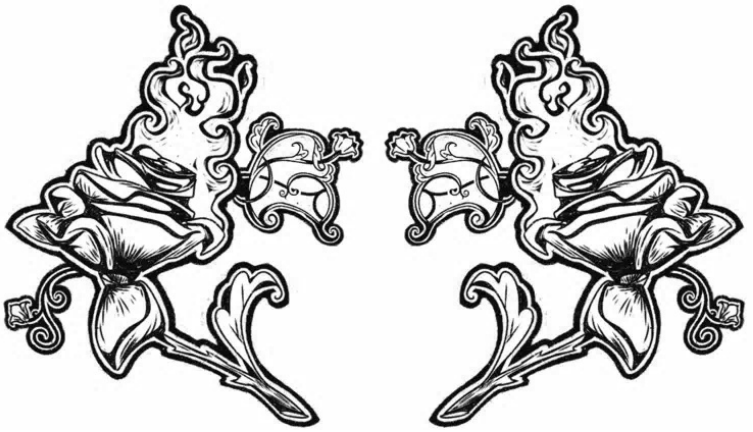
CHAPTER 18



THE TEST

THE LUCID DREAMER

Levi Valentine's mansion was erected in the center ring of his syndicate, and throughout the years he'd built himself a small community of structures around it—homes, training centers, businesses.

Entire generations of members dedicated their loyalties to him, and their children did the same. Most of the help were desperate citizens living off government checks, barely making ends meet. Levi and his men struck deals too impossible to turn down, not knowing the moment they entered the bold, iron gates of the property, they were never allowed to leave. This was the fate of both Gabi's and Caleb's parents. And the fate of my mother.

From an early age, my daily duty was to shadow my father, to stand in the corner and observe.

If I intervened, I met the back of my father's knuckles. If I spoke out of turn, the steel toe of his boot collided with my ribcage. And if he asked me a question that I didn't answer correctly, I was handed over to his right-hand, forced to defend myself until darkness kissed the edges of my vision.

I'd watched my father crush the bones of cheeks, brand the back of hands, pry out teeth, and carve lines through the throats of those unlucky enough to be his enemy. Those streams of blood would quickly flood the floor, and the copper stench would spread like poison through the room. I hated it all, but it was my rite of passage.

The first time I saw death, I hyperventilated.

He grabbed me by the collar and threw me into the puddle of scarlet at the corpse's feet. The man's body was still strapped to a chair, mutilated by my father's men—those who not only handled the carnage but took joy in it, relished in the vermillion.

My tongue graced the still-warm pool of fading life. The thick liquid gathered in my eyelashes. I gagged and fought to crawl up, only to meet a violent boot to my back, forcing me down.

My father's men cuffed me to the small rings of the floor, and I was forced to lay in the blood for days, until I was desensitized to the smell, the taste, the sight of it.

Retreating to my dreamland every night was the only escape I had from my macabre destiny as a Valentine.

The abyss inside me held hundreds of stars when I was with Tommy.

One day, I was sixteen, and after school I came home just to be escorted into the undercage where my father waited for me.

I stood at his side and watched as his men were commanded to sexually assault Caleb's mother, Mrs. Porter. A punishment for *revealing inside information to an outsider*. According to my father, she was the reason one of his recent drug mules was busted by the police. Three million dollars lost deserved three straight hours with the cabal, according to him.

The notion of her betrayal was ridiculous, given Mrs. Porter was kind and always stayed to herself. She'd lived on the property for sixteen years at that point, and not once had she stepped out of line. The accusation was made by Mattia, out to get Caleb for dominating the training center.

My body stiffened. A sickness purged up my throat. I swallowed and swallowed, to no avail. Sweat beaded across my brow, over my nape.

I could feel my father's eyes on me, see the curl of smoke trailing from his cigar. The men laughed and mocked her fear. My gut twisted.

The harsh stretch and rip of Mrs. Porter's clothes echoed in the grim silence of the room.

Her screams reverberated in my ears, each desperate cry a dagger cutting through my cartilage.

I knew it was a test. I was to stand there, apathetic, not so much as flinch, and watch her take her punishment.

I couldn't do it, though.

Before I could think about the consequences, I snatched the gun out of my waistband and shot one in the arm, the other right between his fucking legs.

They both dropped to the floor in shock and pain, never having imagined themselves vulnerable to an attack on their own turf.

I rushed over to Mrs. Porter, quickly surveying her for any signs of injury. Luckily, they had not succeeded in more than stripping her.

“Leave!” I yelled, my hands trembling as I ripped her up onto her feet and shoved her toward the door. While she had the opportunity, she needed to fucking run.

When I turned to meet my father’s rage—expecting his fist to snap my nose, or the barrel of his gun to smash my cheekbone—I was surprised to see him still seated, his head cocked and the cigar still between his fingers, a disturbing grin laced across his mouth.

“Interesting,” was all he said, in the most calm, reflective way.

That one word made me sick, filled my marrow with snow.

I was released without punishment.

That night, when I met Tommy in my dreamland, she quickly detected something was off.

“Rough day with my dad,” I told her.

We walked down the lush strip in between the cliffs in her oasis, headed for the lagoon. Noir lagged behind us, hopping along the top of the stone and ivy.

Tommy nibbled on her lip, the skin broken and littered with scabs. “What happened?” she asked.

I kept my hands in my pockets, peering down at the ground. Her painted, tangerine toenails moved in and out of my sight with each step.

“Just got into a fight,” I said.

Tommy nodded, making a *hmm* sound. Proof she didn’t buy my bullshit.

We strolled in a short bout of silence.

My father’s unsettling smile still burrowed in my skin, the devious gleam in his gaze despite me going against his orders. I could see his teeth so clearly under the hollow light, the stain of coffee still fresh on them. It made no sense. I expected absolution—being strapped into a chair and forced to watch another horrendous act of his, or worse, forced to take on the assault myself. His limits to virulence knew no bounds.

“What did you fight over?” Tommy asked, breaking through my anxious daze.

I shook my head, rubbing a hand over my jaw. “It was just a stupid fight.”

“It doesn’t seem stupid.” She angled her body toward me, her concerned gaze prodding into my cheek. “You look super down.”

“I’m fine, Ella. Really.” I assured her, forcing on a broken smile.

She frowned and continued looking straight ahead. Her curls were up off her nape, with little ringlets hugging her neck, and she wore a leopard-print blouse that I regularly gave her shit over.

“I’m here,” she murmured, nibbling at her lip until it bled. The cherry sight really did affect me less after my submersion in it, though it was her pain that made me want to collapse. “If you want to talk about it. Anything. Your life. Your dad. Mattia.”

Her reserved and timid approach were two things I knew would put distance between us, so I wrapped my arm around her neck, pulling her cheek into my kiss.

She giggled and playfully ruffled her nose into the divot of my cheek.

Her warmth, her smooth skin, the tickle of her hair in my face, her intoxicating fragrance of roasted cocoa beans and candied strawberries—I savored it all. It was the only reason I had to keep enduring the anguish outside.

As much as I wanted to open up, spill the horrors of my world, I couldn’t share the ugliness with her.

She deserved to see the world through her colorful lens, painting portraits, romanticizing the maple leaves during autumn, or every skyscraper that filled the city she dreamed of living in. Tommy deserved a college life fueled by caffeine and determination so she could become an artist and live in a studio apartment with Noir.

I didn’t want to be like her mother, preaching about the dark underbelly of the world, forcing her to be afraid.

Day after day, through all the pain, I’d meet Tommy in my dreamland, and she’d grab my hand every time and whisk me into her oasis.

We burrowed in the stone cottage that she referred to as her *hideaway*. Like most of her creations, it was draped in vines and sparkling, pink roses. Slow trickles of a brook curled around the foundation of the structure, a blue hue from the nearby lampposts reflecting off its lustrous surface.

It’s where we spent most nights through that season of our conjoined lives, lost in conversation, intensely analyzing board game rules, watching our favorite movies, conjuring snacks from around the world.

And when we weren’t talking, our lips found their way to each other’s, our movements fast and clumsy. My awkward hands caught in her hair, and her cold fingers bunched in my shirt.

Our kisses evolved into more: my fingers exploring the slickness between her thighs, her tongue running laps around my tip. These slow progressions, the way pleasure painted her face, the name she gave me slipping from her lips in raspy breaths, I memorized it all.

Tommy was always stunning, but in those moments, completely let go and shamelessly brazen, she was radiant.

I became addicted to the way she clung to me, the fact that *I* was the only one who drew out this side of her—how she passed me flirty looks in the lagoon, tugging at my clothes, just as hungry for me as I was for her; the way her legs wrapped around my waist, pulling me in; her moans when I thrust deep inside of her, targeting the spot that made her absolutely feral.

We both grew well versed in the language our bodies spoke to one another. Our intimacy, it fused her even deeper into my heart. My desire for her grew until it couldn’t be contained by my skin, like the buds of the briars that crawled over the nearby stone. It consumed me every day that I woke and was forced to live in a world where she did not exist.

Take me.

I wanted to say it to her so many times.

Bring me to wherever you are.

But I knew wherever I went, my father would follow. I remembered the test with Mrs. Porter. The cold syrup of blood that I called my home. I imagined every life I would have to strip away if anyone touched her, grabbed her by her dancing curls.

And so I shut my mouth, keeping her in the dark, where I alone belonged.

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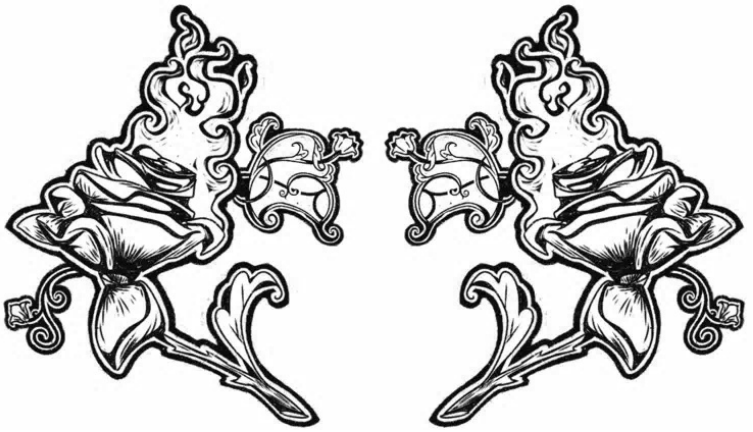
CHAPTER 19



BITE

THE LUCID DREAMER

The blinding, white sunlight pours in through the industrial windows of my oversized office.

Across from me, Mr. Thomas removes the gum from his mouth and goes for the trash can next to my desk. The wad sticks to his finger, and after three unsuccessful flings, he smears the goop on the edge of the black, plastic bag.

“It’s nice to finally meet with you just one on one,” he says.

Gabi quietly slips through my office door with a to-go coffee in hand.

Mr. Thomas does a comically exaggerated double take up at him. “I always see this guy hanging around you, but he never says anything. Did you come down from V Group as well?”

The slight jump at the corner of Gabi’s mouth indicates he’s a bit uncomfortable as he places my scalding cup next to the nightmarish stack of paperwork I’ve been assigned.

“Yes sir,” Gabi replies in a monotone, uninterested voice.

He spins around and takes a seat in the leather chair a few feet away from Mr. Thomas.

The old man props his weight on the arm of his own chair, directing all of his attention onto Gabi. “Are you married, boy?”

Gabi can’t even will himself to look at the insect as he continues to swipe and type on his tablet, scooting his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. “Any personal information that does not pertain to my immediate task list has no justification for being shared, Mr. Thomas, regardless of our standings at this company.”

I hide my grin by taking a sip of my vanilla latte.

Mr. Thomas laughs a little. “I’ll take that as a no. Women don’t like it when you have a stick up your ass.” He pulls his phone out of the inside of his jacket pocket. “I have a daughter in her second year of college, and I think you would be perfect for her. She needs to stay with our pedigree of people.”

Gabi cuts his eyes onto Mr. Thomas, the vein in his temple worming underneath his skin. “I’m not interested, *sir*,” he says slowly, with lethal finality.

Definitely his *drop it or I’ll strangle you* tone. He’s used it on Caleb many, many times. Though, the bastard enjoys pain and grins through it, only further pissing Gabi off.

“Here, let me show you.” Mr. Thomas waves his phone screen in Gabi’s face. “Isn’t she a sight? Looks just like my beautiful wife, who is a goddamn catch herself. No gag reflex.”

I take my opportunity to jump in and get to the point of this meeting before Mr. Thomas ends up as a cadaver on my floor.

“It’s funny you bring up your wife, Mr. Thomas,” I say, lounging back in my chair.

Mr. Thomas whirls around. “Excuse me?”

“I wonder how she’d feel watching you interact with your female colleagues in the workplace.”

Gabi rises from his chair and excuses himself silently from my office, his slicked blond waves staying in place as he walks.

Mr. Thomas puts his phone away, sweat sheening his mustache, and clears his throat. “Mr. Valentine, what is the purpose of today’s meeting?”

I stare at him through a low-lidded gaze, fully intending to make him as uncomfortable as his coworkers feel around *him*. “To address an ongoing issue that I’ve noticed. We can start with the activities you do on the days you *work overtime*, if you’d like?”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, his face now as pale as the foam that floats atop my latte. “I don’t know what you’ve heard or where you’re

getting your misinformation, but I assure you that I'm not breaking any company rules, if that's what you're implying."

I sit up in my chair and lean forward, sliding my elbows on my desk and locking my hands together. A way to restrain the dark tendencies that have been etched into my fingers. I could rip his throat out right now for laying his hands on Tommy, as if it were a carrot from the ground. But, it would piss Gabi off to clean up the mess, and I don't want to stain my favorite chair.

"Effective today, you are demoted and transferred over to the finance department," I tell him. "An executive from V Group will be stepping in to take over your position."

Mr. Thomas's eyes widen and he snaps up to his feet, his expression twisting in reckless anger. "You can't do this! Legally—"

"I can do whatever I want, Greyson. V Group owns this company. The board signs off on every decision." To punctuate my smugness, I lazily flick my fingers, gesturing to the space around us. "Every inch of this place belongs to me."

"I've worked at this company now for twenty damn years!" Globs of spit jump from his mouth and begin to paint the desk between us. "You have *no* proof of your accusations! I will fight this! You'll be hearing from my lawyer!"

Once he's finished yelling, he storms out of my office in a determined march.

I suspect he'll call the board, which I've already prepared for, so he really has no ground to stand on.

Come tomorrow, he will be on an entirely different floor in a whole new sector, far away from Tommy. She won't have to pick up his slack, follow his bullshit orders, or deal with his harassment ever again. He should be grateful for my restraint. I would have had him picked apart like Prometheus if she didn't have to see.

I slump back in my chair and take a few more much-needed sips of my espresso-laden drink. The bitter vanilla swims down my throat, releasing the caffeine into my bloodstream. It's my lifeline after another sleepless night.

I check my phone for an update.

GABI

She arrived safely to work today.

Relief breaks through some of the fog of my worry.

Caleb wasn't able to follow her from her apartment today. He caught wind of another scumbag on her tail, courtesy of Mattia and his goddamn bounty, forcing me to rely on a few members from Caleb's crew to take over watching her.

I trust them, but no matter how many times I assured myself that she made it to work—that I would've been informed if something happened to her—the absence of confirmation ate away at me.

Fucking hell, I'm about to start following her myself to shelter my own peace of mind.

Caleb hasn't texted me yet, which means he's probably dealing with the situation, sending off the freshly cold bodies.

I lock my phone, drop it onto my desk, and plop my head back.

A long exhalation leaves me as I search for the energy to work through my ever-expanding sea of tasks before my ten o'clock meeting.

A knock sounds on my door.

I assume it's Gabi, silently inquiring if Mr. Thomas is gone yet so he can continue his work.

"Come in," I call out.

The door swings open, and the first thing I see is her wild curls pulled back in a half-bun. A silky dress the shade of blush accentuates her curves as she strolls across my office. I can see the outline of her belly button piercing under the material. It evokes a heat that unfurls right behind my groin as I imagine flicking it with my tongue.

"Hey," she greets quietly—friendly, even—with her arms crossed over her lanyard. Her company badge dangles right below, over her diaphragm.

The uneasy pace of my heart slows.

She's safe, right here with me.

My eyes graze down her physique, over the black, oversized button-up tied around her hips to the exposed sliver of her skin right above her combat boots.

"Feeling better?" I keep my tone the same decibel as hers, careful not to express the excitement churning like a fucking water wheel in my stomach.

She’s here. She came to *me,* and she doesn’t seem pissed off? I expected her to storm in here and berate me for breaking into her apartment.

Instead, she pulls a pack of cigarettes from her dress pocket and tosses it on my desk.

I pick it up, noting that it feels significantly lighter. “I see you found your reward. I’m surprised there are any left.”

She watches me, her expression calm. It’s odd. I can’t get a good read on her.

“Why did you come to my apartment yesterday?” she asks, but I don’t detect any disapproval in her tone. Instead, it’s the opposite, almost as if she’s enticed by the idea of me lingering around in her space.

I stare at her intently, unsure how to unpack her curiosity.

Regardless, I anticipate a lecture and explain, “You were sick. My family doctor stopped by because your fever was so high and gave you an IV drip with medication. Your cheeks were burning up, El—” I catch myself and press my tongue to the roof of my mouth. “Ms. Willow. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

My mouth twitches for the cigarettes now in my proximity.

I settle for one of the hard candies I have in my pocket, slipping it out of the plastic and into my mouth. Gabi replaced my suckers with this new supply, arguing that a *lollipop stick* hanging between my lips made me look silly in the workplace.

The familiar strawberry flavor cuts down my craving.

“Thank you.”

I pause mid-reach to put the wrapper in the trash can beside my desk, the corners of my mouth jumping from the flood of warmth that seeps through my chest.

I drop the wrapper and sit back in my chair, running a hand through my hair, my cheeks kindling. “Oh, uh, you’re welcome.”

I’m not sure what else to say. Never in a million years did I think she would ever *thank* me for breaking in.

She shifts on her feet, slowly rotating to peer around my office. “Of course you have a *family doctor* that does house runs,” she says under her breath, flashing me an amused look. “Such a nepo baby thing to say.”

I grin, standing and moseying around my desk to lean on its front with my hands in my pockets. Any excuse to be closer to her. “I liked all the paintings. Really.”

She runs her fingertips over the surface of the conference table to my left, slowly circling it to create space between us. “Which one was your favorite?”

“Oh, definitely Noir.”

A laugh sneaks from her closed mouth.

She bites back her bottom lip, clicking her gaze up onto me from the other side of the table. “Noir ignores you. Always has.”

I roll my eyes. “The cat would eat me for a snack if you told her she could.”

Tommy’s smile grows wider, her teeth still digging into her soft skin.

She slowly grazes around the table and rests against one of the chairs, her finger lightly tracing her thigh as she speaks. “Thank you for the dinner. Bay Leaf is my favorite.”

I stare at her for a beat through a hooded gaze, the heat in my cheeks spreading down my neck and my arms. “I know.”

Standing across from me, she tilts her head in a flirty manner. “Because you stalk me?”

If I didn’t know any better, I’d think that a small part of her *likes* the idea of me watching over her.

I calculate the three steps separating us, the plum shade on her slightly parted lips against the contrast of her white, iridescent teeth.

My mouth dries even with the candy inside it, eager to clamp down on her flesh, to pull until she’s arched against me, her nails carving into my back.

Her eyes briefly flit down to my lips, thickening the density in my bloodstream. That singular motion transitions the space between us into a reckoning.

I take a daring half-step toward her, twisting my head. “And if I said that I do?”

She releases her lip from between her teeth, watching me closely.

I take another until I am hovering over her.

The light, liquid green of her eyes darkens. I can see the flecks of gold in her irises and the silver hoops lining her earlobes through the mess of her hair.

Her fruity, caramelized scent sweeps up my nostrils, and my thoughts slur, like I’ve downed a fifth of tequila.

Her breath speeds up in the rise and fall of her breasts, pulling taut against the thin, glimmering fabric of her dress.

I roll the candy around on my tongue, beckoning her eyes again.

“The fire,” she murmurs. “Why didn’t you tell me that I was the one who started it?”

Just like I suspected, she went into my dreamland while hers was falling apart during her sickness. I knew she wouldn’t be able to rest until she figured out the mystery of the inferno.

I spent my night in the gym—running miles, heavy lifting, doing everything I could to exhaust myself to try and sleep in hopes she would still be there waiting for me.

I bring my hand up to the side of her neck, sliding my fingers around her nape. “I didn’t want you to blame yourself.”

The sides of her mouth curl down into the start of a frown. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

I weave a grip of her long curls and tug, anchoring her head back to look up at me, and bring my lips closer to hers. “I don’t need you to be sorry, Tommy. I need you to kiss me.”

She’s a galaxy, and I want to explore it all.

Her cheeks flush, and she glances toward the door and then back to me, hesitant.

I chuckle, the low sound vibrating in my torso. “Scared we’re going to get caught, Willow?”

She clicks her eyes back to me, the aureate stars in her irises blazing, then grabs a hold of my tie, yanking me forward. “Just shut the fuck up already.”

Her mouth crashes onto mine, swallowing my breath.

My head spins. All the self-restraint I’ve practiced and applied with her goes up in flames and burns away like the roar of my dreamland, ricochetting me right into her.

I glide my tongue between her teeth, transferring my candy into her mouth.

She catches my lip in between her teeth and leaves scrapes down my flesh. Pain releases in my synapses, only fueling my desire. I feel it take shape and loom over me, like the smoke I know so well. The cloud warping over my head, it spells my doom.

Every nightmare, she was worth them all for this moment. I can’t get enough.

I press against her small frame. She staggers on her heels. I catch her by the backs of her thighs and haul her up onto the table.

She returns the candy into my mouth, twisting her tongue around mine. The strawberry flavor combined with her vanilla scented lip gloss sends a surge of heat down my chest and into my groin.

I tighten my knuckles in her hair, using the leverage to crane her neck back, breaking our kiss.

Our eyes lock, and I crush the hardened sugar in my molars.

My heartbeat resounds in my ears. I’m hyper-aware of her grip on my arms, holding herself up, the way my blood liquifies underneath it.

Never breaking her gaze, I bring my mouth to her jawline, taking my time to kiss down to her chin. My fingertips press into her nape, arching the shape of her throat so I can have my way with it.

She leans back on her elbows, opening her legs for me to fit in between, while giving one more glance toward the door.

“You sure? Once I get a taste of you again,” I kiss up the side of her neck to her earlobe, “I won’t be able to stop.”

She shivers. “You’re not the only one who missed this.”

I drag my palm up her smooth thigh, riding her dress up over the back of my wrist, and squeeze the soft, plump fruit of her ass. The feeling of her in my fingers quivers something low and sinister through my stomach.

She curves into me, pushing her breasts against my torso.

I hear her seductive plea and tug her straps down, curling my tongue around her pebbled nipple, flicking it and creating a suction of pleasure that always used to make her sing.

With my other hand, I push the center of her underwear aside and slip my finger into her warm, dripping flesh.

She sucks in a breath of pure ecstasy, clamping her teeth back down onto her bottom lip.

I fill her up and retract, massaging her swollen clit with my thumb.

She lifts her hips, chasing my movement.

Hungry pride swells in my chest to see her slowly unravel and let me take control.

“How long ago did you find me?” she asks, her breath growing quick and raspy.

With her breast in my other hand, I suck and twist with my tongue, leaving marks on the soft sphere of skin. “Years ago.”

“Why didn’t you—*ah*!” She digs her nails into the back of my shoulder as I push my finger to the knuckle inside of her. I still remember the perfect curve, how to map her body.

“What was that?” I tease, pulling out and slowly reentering, making sure she feels every inch this time.

Her eyelids flutter shut. “Why did you… Go so long without saying—anything to me?”

“Reasons,” I say before kissing the sensitive area of her neck, reveling in her accelerated pulse under my tongue.

I bite down on her skin, compelled to brand her with my mark, proof that I was here with her, of how fucking much she drives me insane.

She arches her head back further. The sound of her breathless whimper strains me against my boxer briefs.

I curl my arm around her waist, supporting her weight as I grind my length against her inner thigh. The friction zaps a tremor up my spine.

God, I want to flip her around and take her right on this table, but I know her. If I move too fast, she’ll run away from me again. She needs to feel some control over our speed, something I’ll grant her this time.

Whatever she gives me, I’ll consume it like the starved, voracious fiend I am. One bite is enough to last me another decade, as long as it’s her.

I slip another finger inside of her, thrusting it just as deep.

“Nico.” It slips out through her rapid breath. The sound hums through my skin and sparks a current of pleasure through my cock.

I clench the muscles in my abdomen to contain myself, licking the imprint of my teeth on her skin. “You say my name again, Fiorella, and I might fuck you right here.”

“*Stop—lying—to—me*,” she says, her oxygen coming in little, repetitive gasps.

I drive in and out of her even harder, nipping at her earlobe, tugging the dainty hoops. Her forehead comes down on my chest, and she clings to the backs of my arms, moving her hips in sync with my thrusts.

I curl my fingers a little more, hitting her right where she wants it—*needs* it.

She erupts in a rush of moans, throwing her head back. Her walls convulse and tighten around my fingers, and I imagine it were my dick

instead. The fantasy spikes a crescendo in my pulse, and I nearly come right there in my pants.

I slip my fingers out of her, but my arm remains around her back, supporting her languid weight as she attempts to catch her breath.

Her eyes are on me, mossy green, with a glossy after-orgasm high.

I bring my fingers to my mouth, still glistening and wet, and savor her beautiful flavor.

Her cheeks burn the color of the roses she loves so much.

I give her an insidious grin, enjoying the mix of embarrassment and desire blooming in her gaze from the sight. “I’ve waited years just for one more taste of you.”

At the mention of our past, the swirling, tender glimmer in her gaze hardens into marble.

She pushes off the desk and pulls up the straps of her dress.

I lower my hand, watching her readjust the flannel tied around her waist. Her silence stings in the air, and dark shame makes a home in my gut as I swim past my lust to recall her questions.

Just like when we were younger, her resolve is concrete. She has curiosities, and until I answer them, she will continue to push me away.

“I missed you, Kit. More than you’ll ever know.” She raises her head. The solemn tone of her voice, her frown, they pinch in my chest. “You’re the only one I’ve ever really loved. You know that. You’ve watched me all these years. You *should* know it, at least.”

I grind my jaw and turn my head away from her, rubbing the knots in my neck. Her walls are strong, but mine are unbreakable—and this has always been our downfall.

“I never approached you because you seemed happy,” I explain. “I didn’t want to risk ruining the life you built.”

She doesn’t respond for a long minute.

I look at her.

Her big, bold eyes remain on my face, searching every change in my expression.

I pride myself on wearing a bulletproof mask. In my line of work, it’s a requirement. However, with Tommy, the safeguard I’ve spent decades building simply gives way to her, and I feel the echoing absence of my words.

I fight against the innate force to keep myself closed off and lift my hand, reaching out for her.

She pushes past me, jabbing her shoulder into my arm. “Stop acting like some kind of selfless bastard.”

I spin around with an old, manic desperation to keep her here.

“Tommy,” I say.

She whips around, her face warped in anger. “*No!* You’re still lying to me. It’s *bullshit!* We promised to find each other in *this* world. And after the way we were separated, you expect me to believe that you found me and just decided not to come to me because you *didn’t want to ruin my life*?” Tears well in her eyes and drip down the crevice of her nose, between her lips.

The sight of her crying stabs through my heart. I’m such an asshole for triggering even a single one of those tears.

Calmly, I lift my hand to her cheek, using the back of my fingers to wipe away her sadness.

“What do you want from me?” I ask in a whisper. “Whatever you want, I’ll do it.”

She sniffles from my soft touch, her pinched expression wilting into melancholy. “I want you to be honest with me. What happened with your dad? Why are you here? Why are you following me?”

I purse my lips tightly, an attempt to keep the truths veiled.

Then I blow out a breath, wishing I could be a different man with a different life to display for her.

“My dad and I are fine,” I assure her. “I work with him and my brother. He promoted me after acquiring DVC.”

She studies me through her watery gaze, the disappointment pulling her mouth into a straight line.

If I tell her that I run a syndicate, that my shithead brother put a hit on her just to make me slip, it will only add more stress onto her. After the month she’s had, I’m terrified of what pieces of herself will remain intact.

Through the long stretch of my willful silence, Tommy shakes her head, releasing a pitiful, breathy scowl. “You haven’t changed. Not one fucking bit.”

She backs away from me, holding out her arm to keep the distance between us. I lose my breath a little from it, a reminder of the years I’ve been forced to watch her from the shadows, the alleyways.

She straightens her posture, regaining some of her fierceness as she raises her chin. “I won’t settle for secrets this time.”

“Just like what you saw all those years ago, my world is too much.” I push a stressed hand through my hair, flexing my jaw. My brow furrows as I drop my arm. “Can you please just trust me and—?”

“Sit back and do as I’m told?” Her harsh sarcasm ripples in my stomach. “I think it’s fair to say I did that last time, and it ended in a fucking disaster.”

“Because we thought we could go against the rules of your gift.”

She looks at me like I’m noxious. “*No*, because I didn’t know your history. I gave you everything, and you couldn’t even speak a word of what was really going on.” The memories of our past must play behind her eyes because they well up once again. “I was looking for the truth, and you kept on hiding.”

I give her a broken, defeated look. “Even if you knew about my shitty family earlier on, Tommy, you still would’ve tried to pull me out, save me from them.”

Her lips quiver at my mention of that day. “Probably so, but I wouldn’t have been separated from the boy I loved still feeling like he was a complete fucking stranger. All those years, you never really let me in. Not once.” Her voice hardens with unbridled gravitas. “This time will be different. I won’t wait for you, Nico.”

She utters the final syllable of my name—her tone like a guillotine—and storms away, the harsh slam of my office door reverberating through me.

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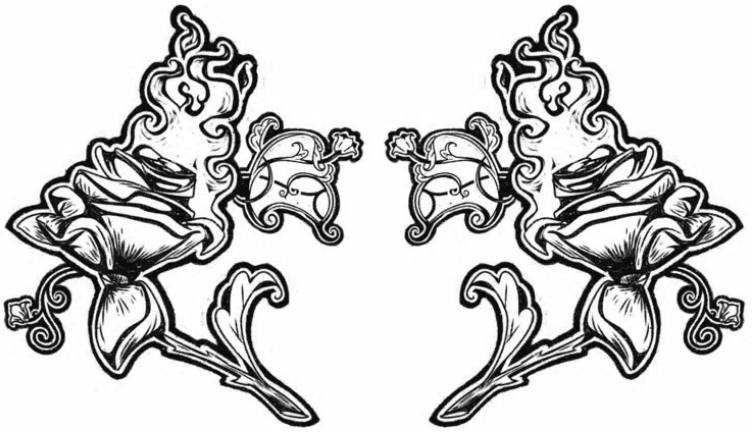
CHAPTER 20



REAL MEN

THE LUCID DREAMER

The first time I killed a man, I had to take pills to help me sleep.

Tommy waited on the balcony of my room, the place she always did, peering out into the courtyard.

In my dreamland, the property around my father's mansion was a dense forest with a skyline of trees. There were no structures, no help, no guards, none of it. I painted it as I'd always wanted it to be, a version only Tommy would know.

As if she could sense me, she spun around. "There you are." She beamed, strolling toward me.

She wore a slouchy sweater and baggy jeans, an indication that it was winter too, wherever she was. A detail my mind liked to snag a hold of and obsess over, somehow always convincing myself she was close to me in the real world. Maybe fate would let us cross paths, just once.

Four years had slipped by since she first appeared in my dream. She was sixteen by then, her curls cut shorter, skimming the tops of her shoulders, and they were saturated in caramel highlights, brighter than her sun-kissed complexion.

I wanted to smile back and assure her all was well.

I just had trouble falling asleep.

But I couldn't do it.

My lips were numb, and my hands still shook at my sides. Despite being asleep, I could feel the heat of my fever radiate in my blood and boil through my pores.

I curled my fingers into fists and managed a stiff nod and the remnants of a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Her gleam dulled a little, and she frowned, dipping her head to latch onto my gaze. “Is everything okay, Kit?”

I stared to the side at my bed, white-knuckling my resolve to keep my trauma from spilling out. Tears burned my nose with the incessant need to scream building behind the dam of my sternum.

My red bedsheets morphed and broke into hundreds of worms slithering over each other, pouring onto the floor.

I blinked.

What the fuck…?

A warm current seeped down my neck and over my chest.

I slapped my hand against my throat. The copper stench invaded my nostrils. I gagged and coughed, patting down my torso. It was dry.

Tommy rushed to my side and grabbed my arm. “Kit? Talk to me. Are you okay?”

I couldn’t control my rapid breath. It left and left until it felt like no oxygen remained.

My body folded forward, and I caught myself on my knees.

The memory was trapped in my head—the black-walled room his men escorted me to, the concrete floor under my feet and the two chairs in the center, my father waiting for me, his hands hidden in leather gloves, the smile on his face, and the silver glint of knives and metal tools used to peel and screw into flesh.

“The two men you shot to defend Mrs. Porter. They’re still alive.” He circled around me, slow and methodical, the way a vulture watches dying roadkill. “But you know that, because it was intentional.”

My pulse thundered painfully in my skull as I eyed the men stationed around the room. They were present to ensure my participation.

“Today, you become a real man,” he said with a touch of excitement in his regularly monotone voice.

His men dragged in two individuals, bound in rope.

The walls swirled and caved in all around me as I took in the sight of my best friend, struggling to fight himself free while they tied him to one of

the chairs.

“Finish the job and kill this man”—my father pointed to the one I’d shot in the shoulder, gagged and tied to the other chair beside Caleb—“or watch as your friend dies an excruciating, beautiful death.”

The blood drained from my face.

I couldn’t breathe.

“Kit!” Tommy’s voice grew distant and small, like she stood yards away, yelling at me from across a field.

It’s done.

Sticky, wet sap clotted in my chest.

No, it’s never done.

I coughed and spit, attempting to clear the blood from my airway.

“I-I can’t…” I slammed my palms over my ears to rid the screams trapped inside my head.

Caleb’s pained cry echoed in the hollow room as one of my father’s men dug their blade down his face, preparing to carve out his eye like a peach’s pit.

Caleb held up the best he could, gritting his teeth to smother his wails.

I couldn’t do it, though.

I couldn’t stand there while my best friend suffered.

So I—

My legs gave way.

Tommy caught me by my arm, collapsing beside me. “Kit!”

Her fingers threaded through mine. I tried to focus on that, on her touch, the ends of her hair brushing my forearm.

I was safe there, with her.

Safety is a falsehood.

I used her hold on my hand to haul her into my arms, squeezing her frame as tightly as I could. Her heart danced against my billowing chest.

It’s over.

I’m here.

With Ella now.

She hugged me back, resting her chin in the crook of my neck and shoulder.

“Kit, *are you okay*? I’m worried.”

“No,” I said.

You know what you did.

“Talk to me,” she pleaded. “What’s going on? Did something happen with your dad or Mattia? I know you don’t like to talk about them, but…”

Her voice was drowned by the ringing in my ears.

A glint of metal caught my eye, a blade poking out from the thicket of Tommy’s curls, its hilt secure in my grip.

I gasped and shoved Tommy away, fumbling to climb onto my feet.

No.

I threw down the blade, panic quivering my insides.

It melted away like smoke.

Tremors shuddered down my arms, rattling into my legs and threatening my balance. I reached for my dresser to keep from falling and snapped my gaze up to Tommy who stood in front of me, expression tense with worry, her mouth moving. A shrill scream, like metal on metal, overtook the inside of my skull. I couldn’t make out her words.

The safety of my room collapsed and began to spin like a vortex, hungry to devour us. I was losing control of my dreamland, of everything around me.

My palm burned, the gummy sensation of the knife’s hilt still branded on my skin, and the resistance it gave to the flesh as I gashed through the man’s throat.

Today you become a real man.

With my father beside me, grinning like the sadist he was, I stood, as numb as one could be, and watched as the light floated away in the man’s eyes, a crimson geyser blossoming down his torso.

The infinite burden of ending another’s existence cut cleanly into my soul; it was the beginning of the end of my innocence. The birth of a rot inside me.

Tommy’s soft fingers slowly wrapped around my wrists.

A tether.

Fat tears fell down my cheeks.

I killed him.

Rumbles shook the room, rattling the pictures on my walls. The frames on my desk fell and broke across the floor.

Tommy screamed and jumped at the sudden sound of shattering glass.

I flinched.

The walls of my bedroom began to melt like acid was being poured onto them, oozing down into the floor. Wind hissed and beat violently against us,

whipping Tommy’s hair in all directions and suctioning my clothes to my skin.

It was all coming down.

I was no longer in control.

My chest clenched.

Tommy was my first thought. She needed to leave before it got worse.

I latched onto her arm and threw her toward the door, the urgency and panic burning in my throat. “Go!” I demanded harshly.

She fumbled from my force, catching herself on the trim of the entryway.

“No!” She aimed her stubborn gaze at me, her mouth closed in a tight line.

The structure of my bedroom perished, and a vast blackness flickered around us.

“Real men do not hesitate to take what they want.”

Levi Valentine’s voice made my spine go rigid. It was loud, like we were trapped in a jar with the words. It wasn’t just in my head anymore, but seeping into the space around me. I tried to pull it back in, keep it from Tommy, but I was too weak.

My heart sank, and I ripped my head around, searching through the emptiness.

Gusts of angry wind continued to beat against us.

The chasm glitched and the memory took form as if we stood in that same goddamn room: the raw, metallic stench permeating my sinuses, the corpse of the man I’d just slaughtered slumped forward in his chair, my father lodging the tip of his boot into my ribcage, my face, my back, my legs.

He rammed his foot again and again, unleashing his pent-up rage for having a son so weak and caring. The antithesis of what he needed me to be.

Agony ripped up my torso and pulsed in my stomach, as if I was there, experiencing the trauma all over again. A violent crack reverberated through my skull, and a searing pain lanced behind my eyes.

It did not stop.

I learned to suffocate my tears.

But the sobs weren’t mine, they were Caleb’s, still strapped to his chair, one bloodied eye shut, a velvet-red incision carved down the right side of

his face.

I couldn’t look away, despite the panic whirring furiously in me to make it stop because Tommy was right there, witnessing a glimpse of this torture. I couldn’t let her see any of this. And yet, I couldn’t move.

It was one thing to live through this nightmare, but to see the gruesome image of it again, like a painting hung in my room—I never wanted to wake up again.

Tommy latched onto my hand, her touch breaking the fearful spell wrapped around my throat.

The memory expanded, as if it were being stretched apart, and then it *snapped* and fractured across the floor into more shards of thick glass.

She yanked on my arm, forcing me to follow her. The broken fragments of my sorrow crunched into powder under our feet.

I stared down, absently allowing her to drag me wherever she wanted.

Fuck, I was tired. I never wanted to prove Tommy right, that life was purely shit outside of dreamlands. Her philosophy was that this realm held more beauty than the world, that reality was hell in comparison.

“Kit!”

I looked up.

Crossroads.

We stood on the boulder overlooking the many pathways of her oasis. The green, bushy vegetation surrounded us. Her atmosphere was stable and calm, gently enveloping me like a hug from my mother.

Tommy stared at me with her pinched brow, her big eyes searching my face, worry flowing from them like the waterfall in the distance.

Her caring nature dug down inside of me and somehow broke through the heaviness I’d staunched. Nobody had ever seen me the way she did, and it destroyed the safeguard I’d built to keep my feelings contained.

A sob expanded in my throat and burst. I let my head fall, let my shoulders slouch, as I caved in on myself.

Tommy wrapped her arms around my neck, masking my face with her curls. I smothered my eyes and nose in them and held onto her, weeping.

“I can’t do this anymore, Ella. I’m so sorry you found out this way. I never meant to—” I hiccuped, spit and snot still caught in the back of my throat.

She held my cheek, pulling away to shake her head. “How long has he been abusing you?”

I blinked, my tears slowing as I processed what she saw from the memory and how she'd come to that conclusion.

Yes, my father abused me, but I was terrified that she had figured it out—what my life was, who I was destined to become. There was relief in the fact that she hadn't.

"All my life," I said.

"It ends today then." Tommy whipped around with my hand, tugging me down the stones and in the direction of the floating, lavender door. The one that I knew for a fact led out of her oasis.

There were two ways she could return to herself in the real world: through the exit in her oasis, and through the one in the Library of Reverie.

The portal from her oasis to the Library was behind us.

Which meant—

I ripped my hand out of hers. "Ella, wait!"

She glanced back over her shoulder at me, her feet still carrying us toward the door. "It will work. Just trust me!"

I dug my heels into the terrain, pulling at her grip to get her to slow down. "You've only ever taken things out of your dreamland that were created here."

She fought against my resistance, sinking her fingernails into the side of my hand. "And you'll be the first I haven't."

We stopped in front of the door, and she swung around to look at me, her gaze set with intensity. She wasn't going to back down.

"What about my body?" I challenged, my voice high and frantic. "I'm still sleeping."

"It will disappear when this version of you enters through the door."

"How do you know?" I was brutalized, but I didn't want to die either. I couldn't have anything happen to me.

"My grandma used to tell me stories."

The monsters.

An awful feeling sank into the cavity of my stomach.

I shook my head. "What if this is how the monsters were created? What if *I* turn into a monster?"

Tommy grabbed me by my cheeks and captured me in a quick kiss.

My yearning for her cracked down my chest, an eternal ache, despite her being right there with me, her lips on mine.

She lightly broke away and melted her forehead into my own. “Then I’ll gladly be haunted by you, Kit.”

Pushing off the ground, she reached for the handle. My fingertips fought to snatch a hold of her, stop her from what she was about to do. The gnawing in my gut was loud, festering down my arms, up my neck.

I watched as she opened the door, and an unknown, indigo-tinted room filled the rectangular frame. My breath caught. Through it, I could see Tommy, asleep, wrapped in muted, sage green bedding. It was her, the *real* her.

“Okay, give me your hand.” She braided her fingers through mine before I could move and gently led me closer. “Take a breath and just don’t let go.”

I did as she said as her foot slowly stepped over the threshold of the frame.

Her catatonic body on the bed began to shift. The transfer through the door, it was waking her up.

She looked back at me, smiling so fucking hopeful that I couldn’t help but feel it too. It would work. We would step through and be together. I could leave behind my fate as a Valentine and just be with her.

But dreams like that never happen for me.

The second I tried to pass the tip of my shoe through the door, an angry rumble quivered under me, trembling like a demon awakening underground.

A violent wind spun up and sucked me backward.

Dream Tommy whirled around, her fingers tightening around my hand.

She gritted her teeth and pulled, holding onto the frame of the door with her other. My body met magnetic resistance every time it hit the space between her oasis and the calm nocturne of her room.

“Kit, don’t let go!” The frenzied look in her eyes, the worry creasing her brow, I knew it then.

Her power wasn’t ready for this.

I turned my head to see the ivy and underbrush of her oasis wilting, and the ground between the gorges cracked into a wide crevasse. The cavern walls ached and began crumbling into the split.

Fear struck me then, wondering if what she was trying to do broke the laws of this place.

I had to let go of her, to ensure she would be okay.

I met her gaze, welling with tears, as she strained to hold onto me, fighting against the force sucking me back. Always so fucking stubborn. I loved her for it, but I couldn't be the thing that broke her.

The slap of her curls around her face, and the beads of rain leaking down her cheeks, I wanted to embrace her, siphon away her pain.

I gave her a soft, sad smile.

She choked on her sob, her fingernails burrowing into my wrist. "Don't you dare!"

A splinter of agony jabbed through my heart and tore through my lungs until it felt impossible to breathe.

"I have to, Ella."

She shook her head, her expression scrunching into a pitiful cry. "I will find you. Wherever you are, I'll come back for you."

I nodded, tears of my own flooding down my face. "I'm counting on it."

Before she could fight me, I used my feet to brace against the doorway and pulled my hand free.

The last thing I heard was a guttural, crestfallen cry—the name she'd given me, lost to the turmoil of her world—and then a fading silence as I was swallowed by the void opening beneath me.

My final memory of her oasis was of her beautiful, bubblegum roses catching fire, and I never let that image go.

It was all I had, of her, of us.



I WOKE IN A COLD SWEAT, the adrenaline electric in my veins, bolts of pain piercing through my muscles.

My eye, blackened and swollen, throbbed from the sudden rush of blood as I shot up. The blooms of blue sent a ripple up my chest, and the stitches over the knife wound on the side of my torso—courtesy of Mattia after my father's beating—tugged the skin around them.

I winced, gripping the injury, my breath wheezing as I fought to climb out of my bed.

I have to go back to her.

I have to make sure she made it through.

My equilibrium staggered, and I braced myself on the corner of my dresser.

The hard floor beneath my feet, the milky white glow of the light outside cast over my toes, the wintery, midnight air sliding through the crack of the open balcony doors, it all stunned my senses as my mind quickly deliberated on how *real* it felt.

I hobbled around Gabi and Caleb, both asleep and spilling out of their chairs at my bedside. Gabi still wore his glasses, and Caleb's face was freshly stitched, a white gauze covering half of it.

Panic pulsed through my palpitating heart.

This wasn't my dreamland.

I was awake.

"No," I whispered.

No, no, no, no, no.

I crawled back to my bed, frantically pleading with my body to fall back asleep.

Please still be there.

Please wait for me.

Hours passed. Monochromatic shades of an overcast, early morning sky filled my room. The grainy light grew brighter, taunting me.

I popped another sleeping pill, plucked from one of the assorted bottles on my nightstand, and hid under my blankets, keeping my eyes shut.

Eventually, the pill lulled me back.

Only, nothing was the same.

I didn't start in my room, or on my balcony, like I always did. My father's mansion was nowhere in sight. Just a grim, open field where all my head could conjure, like it was branded, was the pyre of her roses. Everywhere I looked, I saw them, and no matter how much I forced my dreams to alter, they only multiplied.

It was flame after flame after growing goddamn flame. And they didn't stop. I could make myself a chair to watch, something to drink, but I was a prisoner inside my own head.

Every night, I peered out at the meadow, its brittle, dull blades of grass trembling from the violent gust of the hot frenzy.

She'll come back.

I held onto hope for as long as I could that, one day, her stupid fucking window would reappear and she'd crawl out of it, grinning widely,

slamming into me with her arms locked around my neck.

Come back to me.

The longing in my chest swelled, like a wound never fully healed. It scabbed over and reformed time and time again. There was no sating, no dulling, no revising our tragic end.

I learned there were limitations with the inferno. If I tried to summon my father's mansion, it would swallow it. Any structures or shelter, they would be gone within seconds.

The only thing it allowed me to keep was the cottage. Maybe because it was born from her, mimicking the safe little hut in her oasis that we hid out in every night.

After a while, I stopped trying to put it out and succumbed to its power. The beast, hungry and hurting, was all I had left of her.

I peered up at the stars, fighting to keep them alive behind the smoke.

Little by little, day after day, as the years went on, the veil thickened and their shine grew to be barely visible, until they weren't there at all.

I felt like I deserved the fire. She got away, and she was better for it, I convinced myself. I let the ouroboros of violence and pain continue eating, without her, and without the hope she brought with her.



THE FIRST TIME I saw her in real life outside of my failed escape, she sat on a park bench with her cinnamon bagel and iced matcha, a tablet in her lap. Her wrist moved in lazy strokes as she drew on the screen. Time had filled in her features and gave a curve to her physique. The light shade of her curls was dyed strawberry blonde, and they were pulled back into a high ponytail.

She was jumping from job to job with the dream of becoming an artist, struggling to make ends meet, and the walls were closing in on her options.

I stood yards beside her, hands in my pockets, watching her teeth sink into her lip in concentration, the dip forming in the center of her eyebrows. A smudge of cream cheese had crusted on the corner of her mouth.

Every few minutes, she'd pause and take a sip of her beverage, her eyes never leaving the tablet's screen.

Some of the hostile yearning settled in me then.

It had been years since I last laid eyes on her, and here she was, sitting under a tree, its leaves buttery and brass, content in the crisp, autumn air with her art and her breakfast.

The Kit she once knew wanted to stroll up to her and take a seat on the bench, crack a smile, and say, “Long time, no see, Ella.”

Imagining the stunned reaction she’d have given was almost enough to convince me. But nearly a decade had gone by, and not once had she come back to find me in my dreams.

Would she have been happy to see me? Angry? Sad?

Dwelling in it was exhausting, and it seemed like I was a closed chapter of her life—history that she didn’t seem keen on revisiting. She’d built herself a little oasis in South Haven, ironically where I’d always been.

We used to come up with theories that we lived across the world from one another, when in reality, we’d always been less than two hours away.

The universe was a fucking asshole that way.

At the end of the day, I had a job to do, an empire to take over, and she had her own life. I told myself this time and time again.

Leave her alone.

You’re not a part of her anymore.

You never actually were.

I threaded finality into those thoughts, but I couldn’t ever fully let her go.

So I settled for being a specter, looking in, waiting for the day when I made something of myself, when the savages in my dark world would shake at the mention of my name.

This was the only way I could ever keep her safe.

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CHAPTER 21



PROVOKE

THE TRESPASSER

I won't wait for you.

I bury my face into my pillow and plop back on the couch. The way I said it was awful. Not at all what I meant. Nico probably took it as: *I'm done with you*. Something spilled in a moment of anger.

I'm done waiting for you to talk is what I should've said, because that's what I meant.

I groan, my face still shoved into the cushion.

But we'd just made out on his conference table, his fingers were inside of me, and he wasn't answering any of my questions. They were easy ones too, just scraping the surface of his steel bastion.

He never gives himself to me.

I drop the pillow and stroll to my kitchen for a drink.

Half of the naan from the Indian food he left in my fridge is still there.

My heart puddles, the warmth I feel toward him only irritating me even more. Things don't have to be so fucking complicated, but he's keeping them that way and I hate the messiness of it. Just *talk*.

I snatch a guava sparkling water from my fridge before closing the door. Cracking open the can, I spin and head back into the living room.

With the can to my lips, I raise my eyes and meet the reflection of a woman in my sliding glass door straight ahead—head tilted at a creepy

angle; stringy, blonde hair pouring down her shoulders; eyes bloodshot; face pale; and black briars swarming from her mouth, their thorns sewn into her skin.

I scream, nearly dropping my water. Blood thunders in my ears.

I blink, and she's gone.

It's just my own reflection staring back at me.

Fucking hell.

My breath is shallow.

It's not real.

I press a shaking hand against my sternum to ground myself.

You stay too fucking stressed.

"There's no such thing as monsters," I recite to myself as I march to the door, slide it open, and walk out onto my patio.

It's just my furniture, the empty pack of cigarettes I forgot to dispose of, and the sunset spilling rose gold and periwinkle over the horizon of the city.

Nothing else.

I stand there for a second, letting my heart rate die back down.

Then, I blow out a breath. The breeze flutters my curls over my face. I push them behind my ear and look up at the swirling, pastel clouds.

"I *won't* inherit your insanity," I say to my dead Mom, though the irony isn't lost on me.

The woman I keep seeing isn't tangible, just an error in my mental code. It was the fever, and now it's my delusion. The reflection was *me*.

That's it.

There is *no such thing* as these damn monsters.

I put the topic to rest inside of my head and return through the threshold to my place on the sofa.

The tempo of my circulatory system slowly returns to normal.

After a few more sips of my crispy, carbonated beverage, I set it aside on the table and stare at my phone, contemplating while chewing on my lip.

Nico is lying to me.

Just like he did back then.

Stalking me, keeping quiet, acting like an asshole at first, just to sneak into my apartment and make sure I'm not dying of a cold—and then demoting Mr. Thomas, information I found out through the gossip in the hallway as I left work. A part of me wants to believe he punished Mr. Thomas for simply being a terrible boss, but the other part of me, the one

who saw his face as he stood in the elevator, glaring at the sleaze bag's hand on me, knows better.

Nico does everything with intent, and right now, I'm fucking determined to figure out what that is.

There's only one way to get him to be honest with me—something I'm exceptional at.

It's time to piss him off.

Annoy him.

Make him crack, so his insides finally pour out.

It's petty and so fucking ridiculous. It's his kind of bullshit, and I despise it. But goddamn, I need to get under his skin and pry away the mask he hides behind if we are going to continue whatever stupid path we're taking.

So I grab my phone off the coffee table, open a dating app that I use regularly, and start swiping.



EVERY WEDNESDAY, my mom and Lola would attend evening church in Brownwood.

They'd go eat their ten-ninety-nine chicken fried steak and then sit in a pew for an hour and listen to Johnny speak his words of wisdom.

Meanwhile, one Wednesday a month out in South Haven, I'd sift through my matches on a dating app and pick the most promising option for no other reason than to get a free meal and a free cervix massage. No strings, no real connections, just an empty cycle that satisfied me well enough. I got *some* form of intimacy while maintaining the necessary emotional distance for the sake of my secret.

I told this to Lola once, mostly to keep her from asking about my dating life.

After finding out about my *slutty* habits, she'd call every Wednesday and invite me to church. I could always hear Mom in the background grumbling something inaudible, Lola shushing her, and then continuing her persuasive monologue on why I should go with them. She said I was putting myself in danger, in more ways than one.

I'd think about what would happen if I went with them just once. Would Mom be happy I showed? Would it have made a difference?

I think about her plea to get me into church while I stare up at a notorious nightclub, *Revelation*, admiring its broad pointed arches and stained-glass windows, the neon lights inside reflecting through them in bright beams. The building stands at the end of the entertainment district in South Haven, snug in a secluded dead end.

Some rich guy with too much time bought the church before it was torn down, and he flipped it into an exclusive, hole-in-the-wall club.

Mad respect for the idea, though Logan Willow is probably seizing in her casket right about now. Technically, I'm doing what she asked of me.

I tilt my head up at the black, opaque sky, blinded by the light pollution.

My streak of disappointment continues, mother dearest.

I let out a huff and grip my purse strap a little tighter. My nape tingles, and a knowing in my gut clenches, an intuitive sign.

He's here.

Or that creepy Victorian lady is the one following me.

I shudder a little at the frightening memory.

Nope, you're not even going to entertain that idea.

I can't believe I'm doing this. How long will it take Nico to intervene? Will he lecture me? Maybe punish me a little?

I grin to myself, not disliking the idea of that.

Okay, focus.

You can fool around with him after he answers your questions and quits being a fucking child.

I slip into the long line expanding down the sidewalk. Some of the ravers are dressed in Halloween costumes: a hot nurse, hot Dracula, and a hot zombie. The holiday is another week away, but all are classic choices—except for the guy who is in a giant burrito costume, taking up three spots by himself. The fake aluminum foil almost triggers a migraine.

Music pours out of the doors as the two security guards check IDs in tandem. I make it through, silently offended that the stocky man barely glanced at my license.

Inside the entrance is a small statue of Jesus on a platform, gazing heavenward in a pink neon crown, surrounded by purple and red glowing signs that read things like *SET ME FREE* and *FUCK ME DADDY*.

I scoff under my breath as I weave through the stream of people into the open space that used to be the nave of the church. I get poked by an onslaught of angel wings and magic wands on the way across the room.

What was once probably carpet lined with pews that reeked of old wood and the smell of my grandma's van is now shiny marble, speckled with bars and tables and lofts. The place has a pungent aroma of weed mixed with a sharp, herby air freshener to counteract the odor.

The middle of the floor is a crowd of bodies dancing under luminous, strobing lights, while the edges of the room are wrapped in a cloak of darkness and silhouettes.

I shimmy my way through to the closest bar, hunting through the dim atmosphere for the man I matched with on the app.

Matthew: a brunette, short hairstyle, has smooth, toned arms and a million-dollar smile, was a part of a fraternity, now works in finance, and loves to hike. Shouldn't be that hard to find, since he doesn't seem to really belong in this crowd of fishnets, electric tape, and exposed breasts. I'm sure he's the no-costume type, having *outgrew* Halloween years ago.

After a few minutes of searching the horizon of the room, I snipe the nearest empty stool and flag down the overworked bartender dressed as a prison inmate. If I'm going to survive the bass-laden blast of the speakers, I'm going to need tequila.

I shift to dig in my purse for my phone since I keep my debit card hidden in the case.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a dark-haired man in a suit sitting a few seats from me at the bar. I slightly lift my chin to get a better view of his lip piercing and the white, puffy scar carved down the side of his face. He wears a plastic set of devil horns on his head.

You dropped this.

The guy from the bodega who handed me my money.

Should I go over and thank him again?

He's probably here to have a good time, not remember aiding a pathetic bystander. Not only that, but he seems like a good person to help a stranger. If or when Nico shows, he could direct his jealousy onto this guy, something I don't want, so I stay put.

Bodega Guy downs the rest of his drink, stands, and slips into the amoebic crowd. I lose track of his outline within seconds.

"Ma'am!"

I snap my head back to the bartender who impatiently waits for me to hand over my debit card.

“Right! Sorry.” I give an apologetic smile, handing it over.

After a few minutes, he returns with it alongside my effervescent cocktail served in a copper mug—a tequila mule.

I prop my elbow on the surface of the bar, swirling the thin straw around in my glass. The carbonation bubbles and pops over the fresh lime slice. I take a drink, relishing in the sting of the citrusy liquor.

My muscles relax against my bones, dwindling the relentless loop of my anxiety the more sips I take.

As I do so, I glance around in search of Matthew *or* Nico.

Five more minutes goes by.

I nibble on my lip and get out my phone to make sure I have no unread messages from Matthew.

Nothing.

I send him a quick update on my location within the club.

Another four minutes.

The bartender restocks my drink, and I pass the time by scrolling through social media, watching timelapses of my favorite pixel artist.

After half an hour and several unread messages later, I come to the conclusion that Matthew is a dick and is standing me up. My plan has utterly failed.

It nips at me, knowing Nico is somewhere nearby watching, probably amused by my embarrassment. So I throw back the rest of my mule to soothe my damaged pride and abandon my stool to explore.

I cut around the dancing and dip into the nearest hallway. The harsh volume of the music quietens against the thick walls. Aside from a few bathroom travelers, the hallway is much less crowded than the main floor.

I wander, arms crossed, admiring the tall, vaulted ceiling, the columns of old stone.

A little way down, I stop in front of a massive, gleaming window made of multi-colored stained glass. My mom and Lola have muttered their teachings enough for me to recognize the art depicted on it: the final scene of Cain and Abel’s story—a set of brothers surrounded by tall, yellowing grass, one having just killed the other.

The scene fits the depravity of the club, but its refractive, artisan beauty is odd among the ugliness going on around me. Clearly, the owner of this

place wanted to preserve the religious, sinful aesthetics. Great marketing tactic.

“Admiring my lovely choice? I had it custom-made to fit the aura here.”

My stupor is broken by a man who slips beside me. Pieces of his styled black hair rest over his temples as he gazes up at the window. I analyze his lithe build, the luxurious jacket of his suit clasped around his slender waist.

At first, against my buzz and the lack of lighting, I think it’s Nico, but then my brain stutters and rejects that belief because his voice is completely different. Nico is also much more muscular—and visions of his bicep flexing as he fills me with his finger take over for a quick second.

I fidget with my nose rings, feeling the blood flush into my cheeks from the visual.

I don’t know this man at all, but I also don’t have an inherent need to ignore his existence either, so I go with it.

“Smooth,” I say with a playful smile. “You approach the girl and flex a little, subtly, but casually slipping in that you own this place.”

He chuckles, flashing a poetic smile, and takes a sip of his brown liquor. “You caught me red-handed.”

“The window itself is gorgeous, though.” I cross my arms. “The artistry.”

He gestures at it with his glass, the large sphere of ice clinking against its walls. “It was crafted in Italy. Chiara’s work. I met her when I lived over there. It’s where my mother is from.”

“Oh yeah, keep going.” I snort out a breathy laugh, raising my eyebrow. “You own a club and can fluently speak another language, correct?”

He grins wider, giving a lousy shrug. “I do what I can to impress.”

His smile pushes a divot into his cheek, and my gaze dances over the rest of his features: detailed angles, smooth finishes, and full lips with a swoon-worthy curve to them. He’s attractive and alluring, a dangerous combination. Just like Nico.

Great, you’re so obsessed that you’re seeing him in strangers now.

“It is a nice club,” I admit. “You know how to do smart business. Though your costume could use some work.”

He laughs a little, then glances around and back to me. “Are you waiting for someone?”

“Yeah, well, sort of. He’s supposed to meet me here. I just wanted to get away from the *acoustics*.” I wave my arm widely in the direction of the

dance floor.

“Ah.” He nods in understanding, shifting his body toward me. “Let me take you to a loft.” He points over his shoulder with his thumb. “It’s quieter. I’ll have the bouncers send the guy up when he gets here. What’s his name?”

“Matthew…” I purse my lips, the fucker’s last name drawing an absolute blank.

I hold up my finger. “One sec.” And then I grab my phone and search the mystery douche’s name on the app.

Mister Club Owner, who may now be his replacement, laughs a little as he waits.

“John,” I say, and then make a disgusted face.

“Matthew… John?” he utters with a full-body cringe. “What a shit name. Fits the biblical vibe, though. That’s probably *his* move here.”

I roll my eyes and let out a small groan, knowing he’s probably not wrong. “Whatever. He was hot in his profile pic, okay?”

“Come on,” he smiles, beckoning me to follow.

I trail him with a suitable length between us, my hand in my purse with my mace at the ready if things go south. I’ve had a bit to drink and can feel the alcohol swirling in my bloodstream.

He leads me up the staircase, its walls covered with magazine pages—photographs of models, articles, pop culture. Some are marked with lipstick, phone numbers written across the faded ink in marker. Purple and crimson lights line each step, blinking in rhythm with the music as it thrums through the marble and stone.

We make it to the top and enter a hazy, indigo-blue hallway filled with individual rooms.

As we pass by each lounge, I peek inside them.

Under the clouds of cigar smoke and bright neon are poles and women swinging on them atop platforms. A group of obviously important people sit around a table with cards and half-empty liquor bottles. Women dance seductively across men’s laps along the edges of another room. Can’t have too many vices, I guess.

We step through the last door at the end of the hallway, the lights above painting my skin scarlet. Chandeliers in various sizes dangle from the ceiling, the red hue shimmering off their individual gems which look dipped

in blood. Silks and fabrics drape the walls and create a lapping, hypnotic texture.

The man plops down on the banquette and crosses his ankle over his knee.

“Take a seat.” He points to the velvet cushion beside him and then gestures to one of the men nearby with a signal of his fingers. “Inform security out front that if a *Matthew John* enters, he’s to be escorted up here.”

The burly man nods and steps back into the edge of the room, relaying the information through the technology in his ear.

I sit off to the side of him, the soft material of the cushion pleasant against the backs of my thighs.

“Let me guess?” I ask. “This is *your* VIP lounge?”

Mister Club Owner outstretches one of his thick arms along the back of the banquette, sending me a smirk. “Of course.”

A young man with a round tray tucked under his arm appears. “Any refills, sir?”

“Bourbon, neat,” the man tells him in his gruff voice. “And a drink for…?” He looks at me, eyebrows raised.

“Ella,” I say, “but I’m good on the drink.”

I’m already feeling a little bubbly in my head from the three cocktails I had earlier.

The waiter leaves, and I expect the owner to as well. I thought he would just escort me into a room, say his goodbyes, and carry on with his night. Is he actually interested?

He cocks his head, studying me in the wave of our silence.

“Ella,” he muses. “It’s a nice name.”

“It’s not as extraordinary as *Matthew John*,” I tease.

Mister Club Owner reaches his hand over, holding it out.

“Anything can be extraordinary in this place, Ella.” His voice grows deeper as he holds my eyes.

I’m no stranger to cues. It’s how I operate in my dating life. After all, I’ve only ever satisfied the need to be close to someone through sex. This man is hooked. I can tell in his gaze, hooded and darkening with lust.

If Matthew isn’t going to show, then I will gladly use this stranger to my advantage to push Nico. I want to see him shatter, so we can get past this stupid phase. Before the night is over, I’m getting my answers.

So, I take the man’s hand and shake it.

“And you?” I ask in my best coy, flirtatious voice.

His thumb brushes over the tendons budding from my wrist. Under his touch, my skin itches, like I’m standing too close to a burner that’s still on.

He lifts the back of my fingers to his lips and says his name like it's a soft prayer. “Mattia.”

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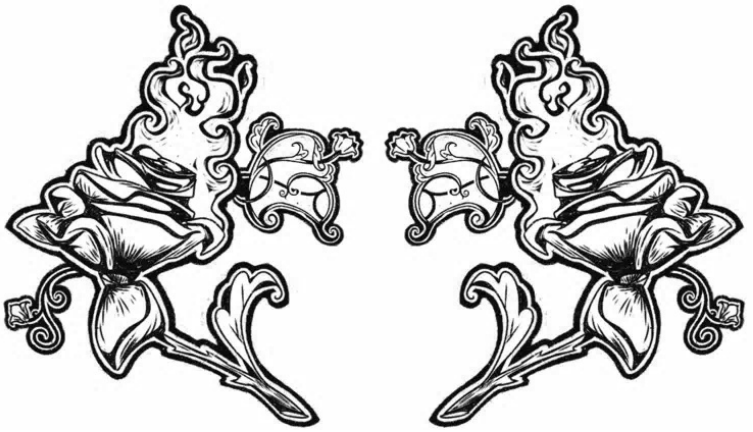
CHAPTER 22



VIOLA

THE LUCID DREAMER

The corpse of a man I do not recognize lays out on the gravel before me, spread under the streetlights in the parking lot of the warehouse.

Mid-thirties, dressed in a lime green collared shirt and chinos, with an average build, short brunette hair, and pinned on his collar is a single violet flower. An average, post-college frat guy who never got past his *glory days*, I'm sure.

I crouch to get a closer look, sucking on the end of my cigarette. The sea breeze ruffles through my hair, carrying the smoke with it.

Gabi hovers behind me, casting a shadow over the corpse's torso.

"He was delivered by your brother's men," Michael tells me, taking a step to hand Gabi the man's phone. "This was on him."

Gabi swipes and taps in an attempt to unlock it. Though, I know it's useless.

Olivia stands beside Michael, her black hair having grown out an inch since I last saw her. I bet she hasn't played any other poker games since the buzz cut.

"He was delivered an hour ago," she says.

"Did you examine the body to make sure there were no devices, wires, explosives?" I can hear the strain in Gabi's tone as his shoe scuffs a little on

the gravel, preparing to snatch me back in case the body is a ruse to end me for good. Typical Mattia bullshit.

"Yes," Olivia confirms.

I pluck the flower from the stranger's shirt, and then I rise, already turning away.

Viola.

Our mother's name.

"Find out identification on the man," I order Michael and Olivia, keeping my tone nonchalant. "And dispose of his body."

They both give a firm *yes sir* before I drift toward the edge of the parking lot, where the sea spray peppers the jagged, black rocks jutting out from the bank.

The muscles in my chest pull taut.

A dead body isn't abnormal, but it coming from my brother is unnerving. It's a message, waiting to be deciphered.

I inhale the rest of my cigarette and toss it out into the rolling waves. Gabi remains quiet at my side, but I can sense his anxiety, like a miasma rising from his skin and festering into mine.

I twirl the flower in front of my face. Mattia loves these stupid games. It gets him off.

A violet, our mother's favorite.

I clench my jaw.

The flowers we decorated her crypt with. A symbol of death—specifically a loved one's.

Something's off.

I spin to Gabi. "Where's Tommy right now?"

He blinks at me, stunned by the urgency in my tone. "Last Caleb said, she was heading out for the night."

Shit.

"We need to go to her now—"

My phone rings.

I rip my phone out of my jacket pocket.

It's Caleb, and my heart plummets into my stomach.

He never calls. Not unless it's serious.

"What's going on?" I answer, the words leaving my mouth in a hardened tone.

Gabi presses in against my side to hear the call.

“Revelation. Get here *now*.”

And then he hangs up.

My vision tunnels, and my legs move on their own, carrying me to the car. Epinephrine drops like a fucking bomb into my bloodstream.

I don’t wait for Gabi to open my door. He’s already in the driver’s seat. His mouth is moving, but I can’t hear a goddamn thing over the percussing in my ears.

I pull up my brother’s number and shove my phone to my ear.

“I see you got my present.” His indifference grates my nerves, and I curl my hand into a fist. “Matthew John. Thirty-two. Works in finance. Apparently, he matched with Tommy and was supposed to meet her tonight. Of course, he didn’t show, my doing, and now here she is, pathetic and with wounded pride, right in front of me—wrapped in a little purple dress, tipsy and admiring the art on my windows. I wonder how she’ll feel about it when I fuck her against the glass?”

A sickness stirs in my stomach. Mattia’s vengeance knows few limits.

I grind my molars, trying to scatter the dreadful image from my mind. “You won’t lay a goddamn hand on her or I’ll remove it from you myself.”

“What if she begs for it, though? I’d only be doing her a favor.” He sounds like he’s smiling as he spits the words at me.

The muscles in my neck go stiff. I squeeze the phone tighter in my grip, wishing I ended my brother years ago. “Mattia, if you so much as *breathe* on her, I will ensure you can never fuck *anything* again.”

“If you make it here in time, brother.” He gives a fake yawn. “And if you think Caleb will keep her safe until then, I’m afraid that I’ve already preoccupied your little right-hand bitch.”

I hang up, my knuckles turning pink and white from the tension, ready to dig a hole through my skin.

What the fuck was I thinking?

Of course Mattia would get to her. I shouldn’t have let her out of my fucking sight.

I hunch over on my knees, shoving my fingers through my hair. Glaring down at the floorboard, I want to peel my skin away and pry out the helplessness from within. It’s the same fucking feeling I felt the day we were separated.

I need us to get there, or I will have nothing left.

“Ten minutes,” Gabi announces, his voice terse as he weaves in and out of traffic.

That’s too long.

“Make it five,” I command.

The engine revs.

And the nightmarish scenarios continue to fill my head like a grainy film—Mattia forcing himself onto her, holding her down against her will, his men waiting for their turns.

The sickness shoots up my throat, and I heave up my lunch from earlier right into the floorboard. It’s too much, and my brother knows it. He’s making me reckless, but how the hell can I not be?

I cough, the bile stinging my nose.

Fuck.

My eyes water.

I lift my head to gauge where we are in the city.

The historic structures and blinding lights of downtown whizz by in an impressionistic blur.

We’re close. Gabi must be going three, four times the speed limit.

I grab my phone and pull up Caleb’s location.

All will be okay. We’re going to make it.

I can’t lose her again.

I *won’t.*

My hands instinctively check the bullet count in my magazines, knowing that Mattia’s church is about to experience its own form of communion.

Gabi glances at me in the rear-view mirror and gives a slight nod in silent understanding.

The words can’t escape my mouth quick enough: “No survivors.”

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CHAPTER 23



TEN SECONDS

THE TRESPASSER

The breath feels like it's been evicted from my chest.

Mattia.

Nico's brother.

When we were kids, Nico said nothing but harsh and horrible things about him. He hated Mattia, and sitting across from him, now knowing who he is, I don't believe for a second that his motives are anything short of malevolent.

I go to rip my hand from his hold, but he tightens his fingers around my wrist, locking me in place. Proof that my reservation isn't for nothing. I thank my instincts for not taking the drink he offered earlier.

A sinister smirk slices across his face, exposing his teeth. "Oh, you must know who I am. I can only imagine the lovely things my little brother has said about me."

"That you're a stain on this fucking earth," I spit out, tugging against his grip in frantic pulls.

He chuckles, his hot breath fanning against my cheek as he yanks me closer and nuzzles his nose into my hair, sucking the smell in. "Baby, I'm whatever you want me to be. You seem like the type who likes it rough anyways."

“Fucking creep, let go of me!” I shove him back by the shoulder with my other hand, ripping away from his vice-like grip.

He catches the elbow of my other arm, jerks me into him again, and nuzzles his nose against my temple, a harrowing laugh vibrating in his chest. “Let’s play a game, Ms. Willow. I’ll give you a ten-second head start. Get out, if you can. The loser gets hogtied in the basement.”

The depravity in his words crawls over my skin.

I shove my fist as hard as I can upwards, managing to land a soft blow to his chin. His teeth make a *click*.

He laughs, releasing me in a shove. I nearly tip over onto the ground as I scrape out of the banquette. Over my shoulder, I see him spread his legs wide, shoot his thumb sideways, and mouth the word *one* without sound before giving me an evil wink.

My heartbeat thunders against my sternum as I dash out of the room on legs that might as well be red, school-lunch gelatin.

Fear burns through my body like pictures to a lit flame. Nico’s plea during our fight in his office comes back to me: *Just like what you saw all those years ago, my world is too much. Can you please just trust me and—*

His pained expression, the war in his eyes, it drives my frustration because *he* couldn’t just show me this—I had to find out for myself.

The stairs are only a few lunges away when three men emerge up from them, their figures tall and muscular. The one in the front reaches for the ribbed black hilt sticking out from his waistband.

I have just enough time to cut off my scream and slam to a stop when someone wraps their arm around my waist and hauls me off my feet midair.

The guy sets me down in an oddly gentle dip and lifts a gun to the men, firing swiftly, deliberately, landing a metal kiss to each of their foreheads. The shots are silent, quick as a hitched breath.

I gasp, throwing my hands over my mouth, watching them crumble down onto the floor as if they’re made of papier-mâché.

Before I can process it, I’m being swept up once more and hauled through a different door, which the guy locks behind him with his free fingers.

I stumble on my feet, naturally resisting the man’s herculean strength, and catch my clumsy fall on the porcelain of a toilet seat.

The man firmly grabs my arm and yanks me back up.

Through the lavender glow, I make out his dark hair and toned build. He looks down at me, and his lip piercing glints in the neon lights above him.

"Just do as I say and you won't die," he mutters. "I'm not the one trying to hurt you."

Adrenaline sparks my trembling movements as I tear out of his hold. That's exactly what a predator would say, building false trust between us. He didn't even flinch when he took those lives in the hall.

I fumble for the pepper spray in my purse and swing it toward him. "Get away from me, bastard!"

He shoves me back against the wall with his forearm against my throat. I land with a *thud*, the impact knocking the breath from my lungs.

He pins my hand that's still desperately gripping the bottle above my head, and his other palm catches my chin between his thumb and index finger. "You're a real fucking piece of work. Had to enter the lion's den at feeding time just for you."

I spit on him.

His dark gaze twists with a bloodlust that instantly makes me regret my decision. "Do that again, and I'll cut your fucking tongue off."

His threat prickles gooseflesh on my nape, and since I have good sense, I give up the fight. Clearly, if he wanted me dead, I'd be a corpse already.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"An unfathomably underpaid employee." He rolls his eyes, one with an opaque, white speck in his iris. It matches the trajectory of the brutal scar down his face and glistens against the bright, unnatural ambiance. "Now, if you want to make it out of here alive, you'll do as I say."

I have no fucking idea what's going on, but something tells me that if I don't rely on him, I'll be Mattia's plaything tonight.

So I go with my gut and nod.

He slowly lowers his hand from my chin.

My chest rises and falls like the pistons of a steam engine against his forearm. "What the *fuck* is going on?"

"There are guys out there who are after you. I'll let Nico explain the rest." And then he steps away, turning his focus to the door. "Mattia is a businessman. Whoever he let inside of his club probably doesn't have guns. He wouldn't want to risk the reputation of this place and end up all over the news, which means they're going to have to strike close."

All of the information goes in my ears, but I'm having a hard time registering any of it. All aside from one thing.

"You work for Nico?"

He slips his gun out of the holster attached to the pants of his suit before looking back at me with raised eyebrows and an annoyed demeanor that any other time would piss me off. "Ding-ding-ding."

I glance down at the small, black piece of machinery in his grasp, and then back up to him and his less-than-formal attire—no tie, unfastened buttons, exposed chest and tattoos crawling up his neck, leather gloves, and a fat, expensive watch on his wrist.

My unease settles. I have no idea who he is, but the fact that he works for Nico cages my worry.

I rake a group of fingers into the front of my tangled curls, squeezing at the roots, and let out a sharp breath to prepare myself for whatever is waiting outside of this room.

Okay, it's fine.

You've got this.

"Nico has *a lot* of explaining to do." With quivering hands, I slip my pepper spray around my wrist, then push my wallet and phone into Bodega Guy's pockets. "You got a name?"

He watches me chuck my purse into the trash can as he says, "Caleb."

"Okay, Caleb." I straighten my shoulders and bend my knees, ready to haul ass out of this bathroom. "Let's go."

"Nico is on his way. Stay behind me. Don't run, and do as I say." He lets out an animated sigh. "If you die, the motherfucker will gut me, and I really like my ability to eat."

I can't help but huff out a laugh. "So the tongue threat was all talk."

The remnant of a smile shows up on his face before disappearing as quickly as it came.

He unlocks the door and rams it open with his foot, meeting the men in suits from Mattia's lounge, gathered and preparing an ambush.

Caleb clocks one with his elbow and simultaneously shoots another across his opposite side. I see the swift trail of the bullet as it lodges into the man's cheek and takes him down.

A metal blade swipes inches from my nose, refocusing me to the danger. I maneuver out from behind Caleb and press my finger down on the trigger to my pepper spray.

It flies out everywhere, showering the other three guys grouped in a tight cluster. They wail and slap at their faces. The potent, sharp odor hits the back of my throat, and I clench my airway to keep from coughing.

Caleb blinks at the scene for a split second before shoving me on my feet down the hallway, preparing to take advantage of their weakened states.

Unwilling to watch more bloodshed, I press down the hall, knowing Nico's bodyguard will be close behind.

The second I reach the stairs, I hear more voices bellowing up the corridor. My senses jolt, and I halt my steps. Getting trapped in a stairwell with a bunch of vile men is not on my bingo card tonight, so I duck into the nearest open door to hide—the lounge of card games and strippers I passed by earlier, now empty.

I drop to my knees and crawl behind the nearest leather settee, one that smells of sweat and expensive sandalwood cologne, and ready my mace.

My instincts are right, as another trio of headhunters enter the floor and spread out, searching for me. I feel an inkling better about my chances after witnessing the blood ridden exit wounds that Caleb left the last batch with.

Two of the men separate and slip through the frame I just did seconds prior.

Another hot burst of adrenaline shoots through my nervous system, and my fingers tremble against the bottle.

There's no running. Only one way in or out, and they're closer to it, so I gamble. I've always had shit luck, but it's better than going out with a whimper—or letting them get in stabbing distance.

Okay, okay.

You can do this.

Just act normal.

I stand, making sure to keep the pepper spray hidden behind me, and act irritated, as if I fell, unaware of the men.

"Damn shoes," I mutter to myself, before acknowledging their gazes.

They exchange predatory smiles and exchange nods as they simultaneously draw their blades.

"We could spit roast her first?" one mutters. "The reward didn't say the body couldn't be a little used."

"I wouldn't mind being tossed around a little bit," I say through a forced smile as I ignore my rapid pulse. "Who first?"

Like the stupid men they are, they fall for it. Their eyes follow the trail of my neck to my breasts as they take unhurried steps toward me. Their first fucking mistake, assuming I'm weak just because I'm alone.

I wait until they are both about a yard away and whip the pepper spray out, dousing a thick, violent stream across both their faces.

Their daggers drop and clank against the floor as they reel backward, giving me my only opportunity to sprint for the door.

One of them throws an arm out to grab me.

I curl my hand into a fist and punch him in the throat as I run past, but the other stumbles in front of the door, blocking my exit.

He lurches me by the wrist, ripping the mace from my grip, and throws me down at his feet.

"Oh, I'm going to make you hurt, girl." He aims a stomach-writhing smirk down at me, his eyes swollen and bloodshot and gleaming with a sick lust that I want to pry out of his skull.

Luckily for me, only minutes ago this was a room full of vices, and in my periphery, I spot a crystalline gleam on a nearby bar cart.

I shoot up and reach in desperation for a long, unopened bottle of vodka.

The man catches me by the hair and yanks me back just as my fingers lock around the neck of the bottle.

I whirl my arm back as hard as I can and batter the glass against his head.

Shards of crystal shatter on the ground. I expect him to stagger and go down like a crumbling building, but he only sways a little.

It doesn't work like the goddamn movies. Such bullshit.

"You little bitch!" His face churns with rage and he jerks me back by his fistful of my hair. Pain explodes through my scalp as he throws me against the wall. His massive form storms forward, preparing to slam up against me. He's taller than me, much stronger, and if he cages me in, I won't be able to escape.

Like hell this asshole is having his way with me.

I squeeze the neck of the jagged half-bottle in my palm, preparing to stab him in the gut, when the tip of a stiletto blade circles out from behind his head and slits a clean line across the center of his throat.

I see it happen in slow motion—the cease of the man's movement, his eyes going wide, the cascade of blood dripping from the thin line, and then

the choking of breath as he crashes down at my feet.

I look up to see Nico in front of me, covered in vermillion, his chest rising and falling in zealous palpitations, and his gorgeous features drawn with pure venom.

My eyes track the blood staining his usually perfect suit, the wool of his long coat, and the specks dripping and drying over his cheeks, in his hair.

Seeing him here, massacring the most vile creatures to ensure my safety, slicing down these men out of a pure, lucid love, I feel a stirring in myself.

This is what I want.

I'm scared out of my goddamn mind, but for the first time in my life, I want to be right here, in this world, with him.

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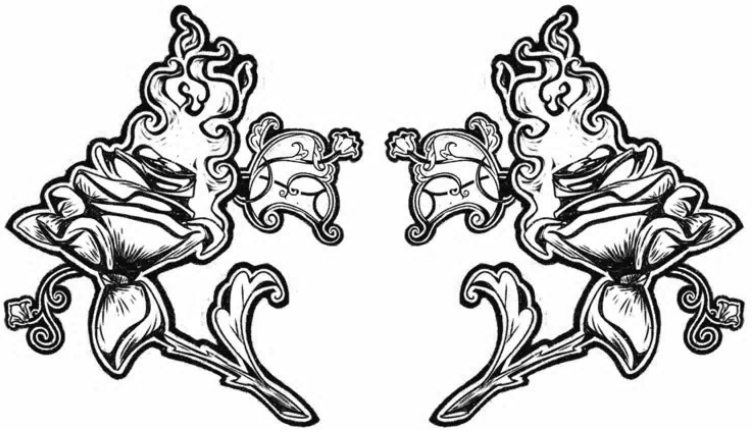
CHAPTER 24



MATTHEW JOHN

THE LUCID DREAMER

"Where the hell have you been?" She yells at me, still gripping the broken liquor bottle in a trembling grip, her chest caving in and out with rushed breaths.

"Are you fucking insane?" I give her an incredulous look as I slip a quick bullet into the other henchman's heart, because it sounds like she came to this club and got in this whirlpool of evil all to intentionally piss me off.

She watches his body fall and then points the spiked glass at me. "*You* were supposed to be following me! What's the point of a stalker if he doesn't trail you when you need him?"

I push my hand through my damp hair, holding it back, and then releasing it as I process the weird annoyance in her words. "Were you trying to provoke me with Matthew fucking John?"

She goes to continue her lecture, the start of a sentence firing out, but then her mouth falls shut.

"Wait." She shakes her head, the bottle in her grasp lowering. "You knew about him and sent *Caleb* instead?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose, feeling the gummy texture already caking onto my skin. The blood is everywhere, splattered across my face, my

hands, my suit. It's a sight that should make her uneasy or terrified, and yet, she's fucking berating me over not getting to her sooner. She's way too unbothered with the kind of danger she's in.

Maybe she's just as unhinged as I am.

I let out an exhausted sigh. "For the love of god, Fiorella, just stay off the dating apps from now on."

She drops her weapon and lets it break on the floor as she brings both hands up in a dramatic, defensive shrug. "How the fuck was I supposed to know a nice stranger would end up being intercepted by Mattia, who then tries to kill me?"

My face can't help but rearrange into a flat expression. "Watch true crime documentaries. They're informative."

She braces herself with the help of a nearby blackjack table for a second before whipping around, grumbling and glaring at the wall. Her equilibrium seems off; probably from the few drinks still in her system.

I give her a moment to collect herself, gripping my hips and surveying the aftermath of this room's ruination—the two limp bodies in bloating lakes of warm blood, remnants of white powder under the shattered bottles and glasses, amber liquid trickling off the edges of the tables in slow drips. The third body is resting against the wall one room over, never having even seen his killer.

By now, the club should be crawling with my members, running out any others trying to come for Tommy. Mattia will watch from above in his loft, enjoying the spectacle. Everything's a fucking wicked game to him.

It's what he wanted, to test the lengths I'd go.

I blow out a stale breath.

Fucking bastard.

After a long second of her rocking her weight back and forth on her heels, she faces me with her features pointed and sharp. "Why is he after me?"

"Because," I say in a hard tone, "I pissed him off."

"Why would he come for *me*?"

I send her an aggravated look. "Don't act stupid."

"No, I'm going to. Maybe you'll actually have to talk then." She sends a sarcastic grin back.

"Fine. You want me to say it?"

“I want you to say a lot of things.” Her tone has a small bite to it, though it’s not as malicious as I figured it would be after our last conversation.

My eyes lock with hers. “I want to *do* a lot of things in return.”

“Then why don’t you?” she challenges in that sassy tone that goes all over me. “The whole reason I went to this stupid club tonight was because I *knew* you were following me. I planned to flirt with and maybe even kiss Matthew John—”

My hands lift to my ears. “Stop saying his moronic fucking name!” I shout.

“Then stop hiding shit from me!” she shouts back.

“You make my heart fucking *skip*, Willow.” The words exit with a snarky lilt to them, meant to irk her. Though, it’s not entirely untrue, given the heart attack she’s triggered in me tonight.

“Fuck off!” she fires back, lips curling.

We could do this forever.

I clench my jaw, holding her stubborn stare.

Seconds pass.

She’s breathing hard, her tan cheeks still a rosy hue from her altercation with the men, though her mouth solidifies in a firm line.

Of all things, she’s *angry* when she should be panicked, disturbed.

Bodies of men are scattered through the current floor, souls I just ejected from their skin with my own hands, and she doesn’t seem to care. I expected her to hyperventilate, be afraid of me. It’s a lot, having a target on her back and a price on her head, running for her goddamn life, and to see this completely different side of me.

Or so I assumed.

Not once has she given the gun in my hand a second look.

I never considered that my way of life might satisfy her adventurous side—much like the version exploring through foreign dreamlands, beaming and hungry for something more.

I can see it in her gaze as she stares back at me now through her pinched expression, tracing the blood stains on my face without a sliver of fear. In fact, it’s the opposite. Under her rage is a dark swirl, a fervor.

My stomach coils and fills with liquid heat.

I take half a step closer until I am hovering over her.

She stands her ground and draws her head back to look up at me, exposing the smattered tears and cuts on her bottom lip that she's created with her teeth. Crusted, red dots decorate her cheeks, lost within the sea of her freckles.

My eyes float from her collarbones and the smooth surface of her sternum to the plump ridge of her breasts, the soft skin disappearing under the neckline of her dress. They swell under the material as she breathes in and out, pushing against my torso.

Tremors rush straight below my waist, and it takes every ounce of restraint I have not to pin her against the wall and devour her.

The first time I have her outside of our dreams will be somewhere I don't have to fear for her safety, and certainly nowhere near Mattia.

I bring my hooded eyes back up to hers with a wolfish gleam that should terrify her.

I'm obsessed and selfish and corrupt. All qualities I've never let her see in me until now. Like she said, no more hiding. She wants me to be honest, so if I'm pulling down the veil then no need to do it gently.

In a rough motion, I tangle my hand in her hair and rip her head back. Leaning over her, I graze the barrel of my gun over her cheek. "I am the leader of a syndicate, Tommy." I slide the tip of the cold steel down the column of her throat. "A seasoned killer."

She shivers, but doesn't move away.

"Mattia is after you because my father chose me for the promotion to oversee DVC, and Mattia is trying to punish me for his own insolence." Each word feels euphoric to finally purge. "He put a hit on you. Dead or alive. This is my world, Tommy. I'm not a good person. I'm not the Kit you knew."

She laughs a little under her breath, an unexpected sound that rattles through my weapon. "Good thing I know your name now, Nicola."

I cock my head a little, surprised by the tenacity still gathered in her voice.

"I know what you're trying to do." She cuts her gaze to my gun, her light eyelashes dusting over her cheeks. "You think *this*"—she curls her fingers around my wrist and guides the pistol down to her heart—"will scare me off. *You*." Her eyes click back up to mine, full of their usual Tommy fierceness. "I don't care about any of it, because I know you won't hurt me. I know *you*."

You don't, I want to say, but I can't.

Because out of everyone in the world, in my life, she is the one who understands me best. The parts of myself hidden beneath my bones and preserved from the world, she sees them.

I drop my arm to my side, keeping the gun in a proper grip just in case another threat enters the room.

"If you're going to run away, now's the time to do it, Tommy," I warn, my voice deep and gravelly in my throat. "Once we leave this place, I'll never let you go."

She settles her palm on my cheek and gives a wistful smile. "Even then, I don't think you would."

I push my thumb into the side of her neck where her pulse dances, proof that she's still here with me, unharmed. "You're right. After this, I might fucking tie you up, keep you in my sights at all times."

She studies me, reading the somberness on my face, a familiar furrow cutting over her brow. The same one I saw the day her oasis fell apart and swallowed me.

"I'm right here," she assures with a pathetic smile. "We don't have to escape anymore. This is real. I'm with you."

And just like that, we're Kit and Ella again, two individuals with a lifetime of history, a connection that runs so deep, I can feel it travel through my molecules and back into my soul.

My eyebrows pinch together, and an ache coils behind my diaphragm, so hard it hurts to breathe. A part of me wishes she were afraid, that this would've been too much for her.

The worst part of it all is that I knew she wouldn't be, and yet I still held back.

I lightly press my forehead against hers and close my eyes. "You're so fucking relentless, Tommy. You're like a goddamn mule."

"You should know that already." She props up on her tiptoes and kisses the dimple in my cheek. "Now take me home, Nico."

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CHAPTER 25



Home

THE TRESPASSER

A gale of harsh wind rips through my hair as we glide down the interstate under the indigo night sky. The sea of saturated red and white car lights rushes by in an obfuscated blur, with Caleb effortlessly weaving in and out of traffic.

A failsafe, Nico called it, in case the assholes skimming the club tried anything. He said it was better for me to escape quietly with Caleb, assuring me he'd be right behind us.

I relax against Caleb's back, the helmet heavy on my neck. I've never ridden a motorcycle, but it's nice—the openness of it, the slap of the breeze, the gravity suctioning us to these small wheels, the smooth vibration quivering through my skeleton, and the freedom of dabbling on that line of danger and ecstasy, knowing how close I am to the rough crunch of the pavement.

It's the same way I felt tonight. Running for my life in the nightclub was equally horrifying *and* exhilarating. It was a reminder of the blood still pulsing through my veins after the last few months of feeling like a revenant.

Though, the chokehold of fear suffocated my bizarre thrill the moment I entered that stupid poker-slash-stripper lounge and was trapped by those shit bags.

What Nico did to them should've thrown me into some kind of moral crisis, but it didn't. I was *glad* to see him react so viscerally from just the thought of them hurting me. He wrought violence with his hands, and then handled me so gently after.

I let out a breath, warming my cheeks in the helmet.

Maybe I'm just as insane as he is.

I got what I wanted tonight, though not in the way I'd hoped, and I definitely didn't unearth the information I expected to.

It makes sense why he never let me into his life back then. All along, Nico had his own curse to take over his family's underground business, and the fact he tried to shield me from it only makes me love him more.

The fact that Mattia is after me, though, only adds to my innate paranoia. I think I'd rather have the Victorian ghost lady than him, any day of the damn week.

Caleb veers off at an exit, his body weight tilting in sync with the bike.

I tighten my arms around his torso as the shift in pressure and direction flips my stomach like a fried egg.

For the rest of the ride, I focus on the whistle of the wind slipping through the creases of my helmet, how it feels tossing around the ends of my hair, and my bunched-up dress from the leg-wrap I have to do around Caleb.

I didn't really see this as the outcome when I got dressed for my date-slash-provocation, but I guess nothing is off the table dating Nico.

We go from the interstate through the crevices of the city and finally down a dirt road surrounded by thick trees, with nothing but the motorcycle headlight to guide our way.

Petrichor and moss and salt all lap in the breeze, replacing the smell of burger grease and oil. Wherever we are, I imagine it's close to the ocean.

We turn down a narrow driveway and, tucked in a small hollow surrounded by evergreens, is a one-story lake house. Through the rippling dark, I can't make out the design or what's beyond it, but I can hear the aggressive waves clashing against the bank.

Caleb parks the motorcycle in the driveway and kills the engine.

I unravel my arms from him and hop off, quickly smoothing down my dress before he can catch a glimpse of my ass.

He kicks the stand in place and lifts his leg in an arc over the bike.

I hand over the helmet. "This is Nico's house?"

I do a slow spin, surveying the small pots of chrysanthemums along the concrete, and the other motorcycle parked in front of the garage. Hobbies, I presume. Something he likes doing in the dead of night when he can't sleep, maybe? Though, the visual of him delicately planting flowers is cute as much as it is amusing, considering his occupation.

"Yeah." The word leaves Caleb's mouth as if there is something blocking his lips. I look back to find a cigarette dangling between his teeth as he tosses the pack at me. "Here."

My cigarettes.

Pure, divine happiness erupts from my synapses. "I don't even have the energy to be pissed at you for having these."

He cracks a small grin as he ignites his, the flame from his lighter casting an orange glow across his profile, dramatizing the off-white scar over his eye.

I pluck one out and step closer to the lit flame of his lighter. "How did you get that?" I ask.

His eyes flit up from the refractive heat and onto me, a prickly warning not to poke my nose into his business. "Long story. After tonight, let's just enjoy the silence. The tar spoiling our lungs."

There isn't enough energy to argue—all of it instead goes to appreciating the first puff after far, far too long. The nicotine hums in my bloodstream, like an old lover who just knows your body, knows how to make you unfurl.

I peer into the dense blackness. From the luminescence of the porch light, I can see the silhouettes of the pine trees reaching up toward the atmosphere, swallowing the space between us and the stars. So many of them dot the sky, hundreds of twinkling gemstones.

I raise my head to look at Nico's house. The location is secluded, tucked in a cove. It's somewhere he can rest without having to worry about his enemies finding him. If he's the boss of a criminal organization, I imagine he has tons—

"Hey."

I focus my attention back to Caleb, who watches me intently through a set of cold, empty eyes.

"Smoke your cigarette so we can go inside," he says, flicking away the ashes of his own from a few taps between the pad of his thumb and his forefinger.

He takes a long, purposeful drag, the paper quickly transitioning to embers across the long tube of tobacco, before releasing an exhalation through his nose, flooding the air between us with smoke.

I cross my arm over my torso and rest my elbow on my forearm, holding my cigarette in between my fingers. It burns and slowly crawls toward my hand as I gladly follow his instructions, grinning.

“You're a merciless killer, but you don’t smoke in the house?” I tease.

He pinches the end of his cigarette to put it out and stores it in the pocket of his jacket. “Come on.”

Who also doesn't litter either.

He doesn’t wait for me as he turns and heads down the sidewalk that runs alongside the house.

I inhale the rest of my cigarette while racing to catch up with him, taking in every single second of it blooming through my airways.

He unlocks the front door using the keypad and steps inside, flipping on the light.

I scramble to put out my butt on the side of the stone exterior, waving the final wisps of smoke away before stepping through the threshold.

He takes the filter from me and strolls farther into the house.

The walls are chestnut brown. Shelves hang symmetrically over the sofa beside an arched bay window, its cushioned seat full of fat blankets and soft pillows. Long, tropical houseplants droop over the sides of the shelves. Stacks of books and little trinkets sit alongside them.

His coffee table is light wood, the surface dusty, with a couple beer bottles still creating rings on it. I can see the edges of his granite kitchen counter from the doorway, half of a bronze espresso maker in view. It looks, well, normal. *Rich* normal, but still normal. I’m not sure what I imagined, but this isn’t it. It’s cozy, more inviting than I thought it would be.

All around the room is framed artwork, and at first glance, I almost miss it.

My breath catches.

I walk up to the painting of a woman, barefoot, traipsing a wispy field full of vibrant orange blossoms, their petals fluttering like wings and lapping in the air. *Flowerflies* are what I called them, when I stumbled upon them in another’s dreamland.

It’s *my* artwork. A piece I sold online before landing my job at DVC, determined to make a living off my artistry.

The one beside the TV is of the lagoon, full of teal and moody blues to capture the cavern light, my thick brush strokes mimicking the opalescent surface of the water. The loose vines hang from the thicket of branches above. Noir is hidden in the foliage, a long black tail caught mid-flick.

I smile softly, a tepid heat seeping down my chest and throughout my insides.

“Bathroom’s that way,” Caleb points to the hallway on our right. “Shower. Take-out is in the fridge. Nico will be here soon.”

I fidget with the hoops in my nostril. “And where will you be?”

“On the back porch.”

I tilt my head at him. “When Nico’s not the one following me, is it you?”

“It’s amazing how you haven’t figured it out.” He stalks closer, a cruel cut setting across his lips. Apparently, he has little tolerance for me at the moment. “I’ve been assigned to you for years. I watch your every move; where you go, and what you do. It’s impressive how oblivious you’ve been this whole time.”

His insult carves a fresh wound in my chest, and my expression tenses. “What makes you think I wasn’t ever suspicious?”

He scoffs out a quiet, malicious laugh, mocking me. “You have a funny way of investigating your suspicions then. Let’s just say it’s obvious you grew up in a small town.”

I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth, glowering at him. “Wow, I’m so glad I spit in your face earlier. You’re such a dick.”

He breezes around me, letting his shoulder drag against my arm. “Make my job a little easier and at least try to be more observant of your surroundings. And maybe lay off the apps that willingly put you in harm’s way.”

I want to blurt out that I *am* street smart, or at least I try to be. Though, sometimes I have a habit of lacking awareness, too afraid I’ll catch a glimpse of the demons my mother spent her entire lifetime warning me about.

Clearly, ignorance is what I do to avoid dealing with shit, which is my own red flag, but he doesn’t have to be so brazen about it.

“I don’t need you here, so you can just leave,” I snap in spite. Although I’m in way over my head and clearly do, I don’t want *his* protection at the very least.

He spins on his heel to glance back at me, a patronizing glimmer in his gaze as he snaps his fingers. “Oh right! You have your pepper spray. That definitely works well against firearms and trained guards.”

He punctuates his sarcastic comment with a shot from his finger pistol that makes me want to punch his head off his neck.

“You’re such a fucking bastard!” I yell, but he’s already strolling around the corner.

The click of a door down the hall confirms he’s gone, so I drop my face in my palms and let out a tired grumble.

If Nico is going to continue stalking me, I’ll request the other guy, the one who always shadows him around at the office. Gabrielle seems *way* more tolerable than perma-PMS Caleb.

My shoulders droop, the exhaustion starting to gather in my bones. I don’t think I’ve run that much or that fast in my entire life. The muscles in my legs wail, and the knots in my neck are like small pebbles under my skin.

What a fucking day.

The tips of my fingers instinctively rub at my temples to soothe the dull ache in my head. My mind feels waterlogged, the flood of today’s events sapping my vigor as I try to process it all.

I need to shower, to stand under scalding hot water until my skin is the color of a cherry tomato, where I can barely keep my eyes open.

I drop my hands and look out into the living room again, the sight of Nico’s space welling warmth in my chest.

It’s a reminder that good things did come out of this hectic day.

After trying out a few doorframes, I poke my head around the one holding a king-size bed, an oak desk matching the coffee table, and a massive, mounted TV. The closet holds a disturbing amount of black dress clothes, so this has to be Nico’s room.

It’s basic and lacks personality, unlike the rest of the house—which tells me how little time he spends in this room, in his bed, because of his insomnia. I thought removing the wildfire from his dreamscape would fix him, but I guess that would’ve been too easy. I’m determined, though, to see him sleep through the night.

At the very back of the closet, above his slightly unorganized piles of shoes, is a section of white button-downs. I grab one to change into after

my sauna of a shower, knowing it will end far below my waist to hide that I have no clean underwear to slip into.

After what feels like an eternity of fantasizing being in the real world with him, it's finally happening, and sixteen-year-old Tommy can barely contain her thrashing euphoria.

A desire births in me to be here with him, to forge a lifetime of memories in this space between the tall pines.

Ten steps into his home and it feels like more of one than I ever had.

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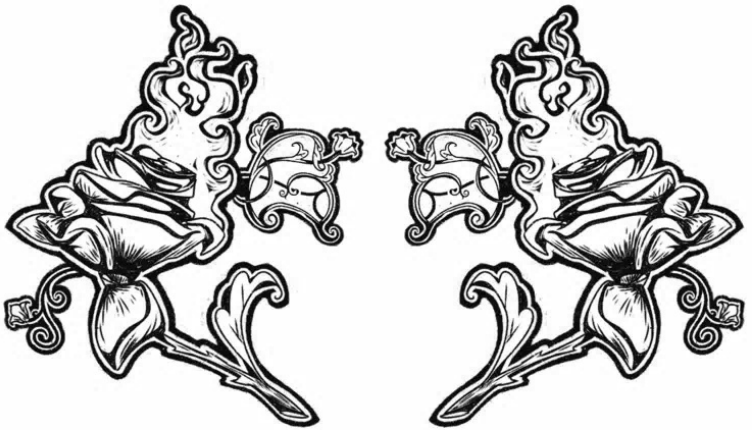
CHAPTER 26



A REAL OASIS

THE LUCID DREAMER

I loosen the tie around my neck when we hit the dirt road. The gravel crunches under the tires, a glorious sound indicating I'm close to home —outside of the city, away from the syndicate, and hidden from the prying eyes of my family.

This life has made me crave the feeling of plucking myself from the world.

It's even more alluring with the knowledge that she's inside of it, already asleep in my bed, according to Caleb. The thought has my stomach doing cartwheels, and my dick twitching inside of my pants.

"Any word from Mattia?" Gabi asks from the driver's seat. The cool blue glow of the dashboard lights reflects in his glasses, making it difficult to tell whether or not he's looking directly at me.

I surf a hand through my hair, matted with the crunch of dried blood, releasing a stale sigh. "You know he won't start more shit until I see him again."

After I escorted Tommy out of the club and sent her off with Caleb, I hung back in the secluded alley as my members brought each sorry soul who hunted her down in that place.

Lined up before me on their knees, wrists and ankles wrapped, I gave the command with the flick of my hand for each one of the bastards to get a

knife through the throat—before losing a few valuables first.

Once the fun part was finished, Gabi ordered a crew to clean up the mess, then we left.

Mattia plotted it all with ease: he sought out Matthew John the moment they arranged a date, slaughtered him, put out her location to all the vultures eager to collect his reward, sat back, and enjoyed the fucking show.

The anger burns up my throat all over again, just thinking about the horrors that *could've* happened to her tonight had Caleb not been there.

Though, according to him, she kicked ass and made his life easier with her mace, though he'd never admit that to her. He likes to stay brooding and overtly annoyed to everyone but me and Gabi.

I rub a hand over my mouth, grinning at the image of her bringing men almost twice her size down to their knees.

I also can't digest that after all these years, she knows—*really* knows. It feels good, like concrete blocks I didn't even realize I had strapped around me have been cut away.

Gabi pulls into the driveway and shuts off the vehicle.

We both get out, and as usual, he waits for me to walk ahead of him. Proper protocol and all that, the shit he started doing when I took over the syndicate. I never asked him to treat me like a boss, but he did it anyway.

A demonstration of how others should treat you was his reasoning. Though, I know it's because deep down he wants to ensure my safety.

While I gave up on resisting his efforts long ago, tonight I don't want him to be my right-hand man. He deserves a break, and I want some space with Tommy.

"Take the rest of the evening off," I say. "You and Caleb both."

"I'm sorry," he says with a sarcastic quip against his otherwise serious expression. "You'll have to explain to me what that is. A *night off?*" He tilts his head, dramatically raising his eyebrows, feigning confusion.

I roll my eyes, leaving him to go inside of the house first.

They'll stay close, despite my orders to go be humans unchained for a night. They always do. Like mice, they'll linger around the home, watching. I want more for them, but I'm always grateful our bond is so steadfast, so loyal.

I stroll through the back door and into the kitchen. Remnants of a take-out container line the counter, the smell of carnitas and lime lingering in the air. Beside the mess is a pack of El Olvido Black 100s.

Caleb is such a fucking sucker.

I continue through the living room and into my bedroom.

Streams of the porch light sneak through the curtain, giving me a full view of her body strewn across the deep-green covers of my bed.

My eyes trace over her glossy skin; over her hands curled under her chin; over the white material of one of my button-ups hugging her physique, the hem of it resting far below her knees. I can see thick shapes of ink peeking through the translucent cotton, her tattoos waiting to be appreciated.

The sight of her in my shirt births something sinister in my stomach.

I think about waking her with my teeth on her thighs, with low, sloppy kisses up to the fruit between her legs, thrusting my tongue in as far as it will go.

My length strains against my zipper.

I walk over to the side of the bed and gently push her curls from her face. They sprawl around her like a halo over my pillows, and I have to remind my brain this is real and not some illusion. I'm not going to wake up and be back here, alone again.

She is real, in *my* bed. A sentiment too good to be true. So much so that I'm afraid if I process it, the universe will snatch it away.

I leave her in her peaceful slumber to get myself cleaned up.

When I return, freshly showered, she is still in the same position.

I climb in bed beside her, and against my urge to pull her into me, I keep my hands to myself. She's had a lot of her boundaries tested tonight by salacious men. The last thing I want to do is intrude into her space.

So, I lie on my side, folding my arms over my bare chest, and watch her sleep, taking in every little detail—the amber shimmer of her eyelids, the short ringlets at her temples, her full lips slightly parted. I can smell my sea salt and orange peel body wash all over her skin, embedded in her hair.

This is my dream, I realize: her here with me in this world. Always has been, since the moment I caught her lurking inside of my dreamland.

Happiness bubbles up inside of me, cascading like the warm water of her lagoon. I let it saturate me until I drown in its bliss.

"I'm coming, Ella," I whisper. "Wait for me."

I listen to the soft, rhythmic sound of her breath, letting it lull my mind somewhere quieter.

In the solace, my body finally relaxes, and my mind gives way to the sleep I've always craved.



SHE'S WAITING FOR ME.

Across the clearing, I can see her jumping around on her feet, giggling down into the weeds. They ruffle around her, I assume from Noir.

Behind her is the floating windowsill, chipped and flaked old wood, eroded and singed.

The sight of it, after all these goddamn years, burns the back of my nose, and I have to blink through the moisture gathering in my eyes. I feel lighter, like I've shed off the last decade of rotted skin and finally arrived back home.

I stand on the porch of the cottage, taking in the empty, barren stretch of land surrounded by the pines. The cornflower blue sky is filled with fleece-like clouds passing over the sun in lethargic trails.

Everything is back as it should be. The fire is gone, and she is here.

I start through the waist-high weeds to her.

At the sound of my footsteps, she lifts her head, beaming with a wide smile, just like she always used to do.

The visual floods my chest in a syrupy warmth as I return her smile with one of my own.

I approach her with my hands in my pockets, eyeing the ground for Noir to pop out and lunge at me in her large, treacherous form.

Tommy glances back down at her feet, giggling again.

"If she comes at me—"

The cat springs up from the weeds, and I instinctively flinch.

Pulse hammering in my skull, I process her small paws on my shoulders, the curl of her tail around my nape, tickling my cheek.

Body stiff, I turn to look at Tommy as the cat nuzzles her head into the side of my neck. "What the fuck is this?"

"She apparently had a change of heart." Tommy bites her bottom lip back in an attempt to contain her amusement.

But I see it—recognize it—the same happiness I feel overflowing in her hazel gaze, her bunched cheeks forcing her to squint.

I hold out my hand. “Take me to your oasis?”

She accepts it without hesitation, tugging me toward the floating window.

Noir leaps off my shoulder and into the glittering mass swirling where the glass should be.

The routine returns to me like muscle memory: crawl into it and enter the hallway of the Library—still a vast atmosphere of haunting darkness that Tommy has to coax me through—and into her dreamland.

Her oasis is like a photograph, unchanged and captured in the same moment from over a decade prior. The thick tangles of ivy, the beautiful handwriting on the signage, the damp surface of the rocks, the floral, earthy aroma, the green and blue hue of the air above, it all hits me with a wave of nostalgia.

And melancholy, recalling my last memory of this place as it collapsed from my attempted escape. I’m relieved to see that it was able to recover its beauty after it crumbled.

“It’s still the same,” I murmur.

“Sounds like you missed it.” She shoots me a coy raise of her eyebrows, walking backward and beckoning me to follow. “Come on.”

We take the same path through the split in the cavern walls and up the rocky slopes. The silky, white birds perch atop the branches, some flying off as soon as they hear us.

The roar of the waterfall carries closer, accelerating the tempo of my heartbeat with each step, a physical declaration of how much Tommy was right.

She trots ahead of me with an eager hop to her step, as if this is my first time seeing it. I become captivated by the back of her curls bouncing, the way the silky dress she fabricated hugs her hips, shifting up and down across her ass with every footfall.

My brain finally comprehends it then—how we’re not sixteen and seventeen, connected by this place alone; we’re both real and adults and currently sleeping in my bed. We get to wake up together from this place, for the first time.

I pick up my stride to catch her hand, but she jumps off a rock and paces down the other side of the knoll.

I go to say her name, but the mangrove comes into view, its dense trees gorging into the edge of the lagoon like swollen fingers planting seeds into

soil.

My breath catches.

The surface of the water is calm and cut like turquoise marble, a tranquil glimmer reflecting the white, fluttering *flowerflies* as they skim over it. The heavenly, vibrant insects disappear in and out from the vegetation.

I survey the lagoon and all its subtle changes. The branches are fuller, cupping fat, tangerine and emerald blossoms that glow like little planets.

I catch a glimpse of colorful fins dashing just below the surface. It's a school of koi, judging by how big they are.

My attention leaps to the shallow end, and there they are, the bettas all swirling in a harmonious dance. I think of Opie and of the empty tank in Tommy's apartment.

My chest pinches.

"Why did you take Opie out of here?" I ask.

She kicks off her shoes and plants a seat on the trunk jutting out of the bank over the water. It's the place where we used to sit and talk and make out for hours.

I keep my hands in my pockets, watching her pull her hair up off her neck and push it all behind her shoulders. I get a peek of the smooth skin under her arms, the side of her breast exposed from the loose neckline of her dress.

She stares at the water, purposely avoiding me, as she explains, "Because I wanted a piece of us in the real world, even if we could never make that happen together."

I inhale a breath of the sweet citrusy fragrance emanating from the fruits nearby. "Have you taken anything else out?"

She cuts her gaze onto me, her expression icy. "You mean, have I created any monsters and brought them out to hunt your lying ass? Why no, I haven't."

I roll my eyes, her snarky words pricking at me. Clearly, it's still a sore subject. "That's not what I meant. What happened after you tried to take *me* out?"

I heard the stories of Logan Willow. She was strict and emotionally cruel to Tommy. Things ended in a disaster when she tried to rescue me from my destiny as a Valentine. Outside the bodega during our first

interaction, she mentioned that she tried to look for me. I can only imagine what her mother did to her as punishment.

She gives me a head tilt and glassy, vacant look, which are both things she does when she wants to change the subject. “I pushed myself too far when I tried to take you out.”

I clench my jaw, unsettled by her indirectness. She’s never anything but straightforward, always has been. “And?”

She gives a nonchalant shrug, averting her gaze onto the languid water. “I didn’t wake up for a while.”

My stomach twists.

Why didn’t I know that?

I know everything about her. At least, I tried to fill in the gaps once I found her.

“You wouldn’t have been able to do your freaky stalker shit and get information on it.” She dangles her legs over the surface of the lagoon, her eyes going unfocused, still avoiding my gaze. “I wasn’t ever taken to a hospital. My mom kept me at home. She knew it wasn’t anything doctors could help with anyways.”

“How long?” My voice is hard, stiff against the image of her lying asleep, lost in the ether.

She nibbles on her lip, shaking her head.

Let it go, I can hear the gesture say.

Something I never learned how to do.

I continue to peer at her for a long second, unrelenting.

She finally lifts her chin and gives me a sad smile. “I was in a coma, unable to find my way to the world outside. Luckily, my mom used her own ability, against every ounce of her conscience, and pulled me out. After that, we practically ignored each other’s existence.” She bows her head for a slow second, breathes in, then continues. “Her disappointment in me never recovered, having been forced to *sin* for my sake, and I was too afraid to ever try and take anything else out of my oasis for a long time. Until Opie. The first night in my apartment, it felt too lonely.”

My eyes fall shut.

While I waited night after night for her to come back to me, she floated around in a distant land, alone.

I hear Tommy get to her feet and move closer to me. I expect her hand to find mine, for her to murmur sweet words about how it’s over and she

came back. Something comforting to try and expel the ache constricting my heart.

But to my surprise, she throws her short arms around me and plunges us both into the lagoon.

Water drives up my nose and burns behind my eyes.

I choke and swim up to the surface, no longer feeling her body around me.

“What the hell?” I wipe the droplets from my eyelashes and shake the drenched hair from my face.

She laughs, the sound of the water parting in waves as she swims away from me. “You were being too serious!”

I can’t help but match her smile and kick my feet, further angering the once-calm water to chase after her.

Closing the distance between us, I manage to catch the edge of her dress and pull her to me.

She squeals through her giggles. My fingers settle on the bare skin of her hips under the floating, buoyant material as I squeeze her to me, fake biting her like a shark would to its prey.

After a bit of laughing and gliding together in the lagoon, silence settles once more between us.

She laps on her back, arms spread, peeking over her cheek, intently watching me. “What are you thinking?”

I push my wet hair back from my face, peering around at the bright green vines coiling up the trunks of the trees, the broad branches that umbrella the waterhole, and then back to her.

“I missed this place,” I tell her.

“Of course you did.” Her lips curve into a small smile. “What else?”

I grab her fingers and gently pull her toward me. “I want to make our own oasis, in the real world. This was what we needed, what I needed, when we were kids, but every second here just makes me want to return to you. The actual you.”

Her brow creases. “Like in your home?”

I press my body into hers, backing her into one of the tree’s thick roots. “Yes. That is exactly what I want.”

Her eyes lock into mine, softening as she lets my words rest in the warm, humid air. She brings a thumb up to my cheek, swiping over the

place my dimple hides. I soak in her touch, her affection, my desire for more consuming my breath.

And, in a slow motion, she uses her light grasp on my jaw to meet my height and fuse our lips together.

The sensation sparks like fireworks in my chest. I feel her everywhere, under my skin, in my blood.

I kiss her back, slipping my tongue inside her mouth, curling my hand around the base of her neck, slipping it into her hair, resting her mane of curls against my palm.

She pushes up on my shoulders and wraps her legs around me under the water. I twirl us around to support myself on the tree root.

My other hand works up from her hip bone, over the curve of her waist, to the underside of her breast. The smooth skin grazes my knuckles, and my pulse flickers with fire.

She slides her fingers between us, resting on the outline of my erect cock. I twitch against the damp material as she gives me a greedy squeeze. Tingles flutter behind my navel.

Against the dance of our bodies as we kiss again and again, she desperately pinches the zipper that holds me back.

Despite the haze filling my head, I jerk my hips back before she can wrap her small hands around me and break away from her, lips swollen, my longing for her boiling over in my bloodstream.

“Not here, Willow.” I drag my lips lazily up the side of her neck, behind her ear. “I want us to be awake, fully conscious, when I put my dick inside you again.” I nip at her earlobe.

She shivers, her cheeks flushing, and I know I’ve got her.

“Okay.” She pushes herself off my chest and drifts away, grinning with a confidence that makes me regret what I just said. “Let’s see who can wake up first then.”

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CHAPTER 27



NO MORE LIES

THE TRESPASSER

I open my eyes and I'm here in his room, the linen sheets cold against my back, a voracious heat already gathering between my legs.

Nico sleeps beside me with a respectable distance between us. I almost feel bad for waking him up when he looks so peaceful. Judging from the dark halos around his eyes, it's probably been days since he last slept because of his insomnia.

However, the hunger in me swells behind my navel, and I can't resist as I climb up and straddle his lap, grateful I came to bed without any panties on.

The bare skin of his abs against my exposed flesh sends a delicious shiver down toward my belly.

My fingers find their way to the buttons of the shirt I borrowed, slowly untangling it from my body in preparation. I want him to see me, all of me.

I toss it aside and push up on my knees to settle myself right on top of his hard length. Another ripple of desire echoes through me.

God, I want him.

I wait, watching his face as I rotate my hips, grinding myself against him.

He opens his eyes, the black dilation of his pupils taking over the dark brown of his irises.

“*I* win,” I hum, rocking back and forth to create friction against my clit.

The muscles in Nico’s jaw flicker under his skin, and he buries his fingertips into the sides of my ass, grabbing it like his prize. “Come here and get your reward then.”

I shimmy myself up on his stomach.

He smirks. “Higher, Ella.”

I drag myself slowly, agonizingly over his chest. “No more *Ella*. Call me by my real name.”

His patience snaps, and he lifts me and sets me down on his mouth, devouring the wetness between my legs.

A wave of pleasure spins my head, and I bite down on my bottom lip. Holding myself up on my knees, I grip the headboard and arch back.

He takes advantage of the angle and slips a finger inside of me while massaging my clit with his tongue.

With each sloppy caress, each deep thrust, I clutch the top of the headboard harder to support my trembling legs, gliding my hips to push his finger in all the way.

The muscles in my abdomen spasm, and an erotic moan sings low in my throat.

“Nico, I’m about to…” The ball of nerves behind my navel tenses, the cresting of my orgasm about to wash over me. I clench the insides of my thighs around his head, chasing the pleasure.

The muscles of his forearm bulge as he pumps in and out of me, faster and faster, sucking and swirling his tongue over my most delicate parts, all at a tempo that drives me over the edge.

On the precipice, about to implode with ecstasy, he pulls his finger out and lifts me up by my waist.

The climbing wave of my high flatlines, and frustration coils behind my stomach. “What—”

He spins me around, and my back hits the mattress, tossing my hair all around the pillow.

His firm body cages me down as he shackles my wrists over my head. “I’m never letting you out of my fucking sight again.”

The possessive, gravely pitch of his voice reverberates through my ribcage and ignites my core. I love seeing this side of him, dark and carnal, so desperate for me.

I squirm to pull my hands free to no avail, bucking my hips up to grind against his strained length. I want to push him over the edge, to see the most animalistic sides of him. All his twisted tendencies and violent edges, I want it all.

He leaves rough kisses down my jawline and over my throat. “You like it, don’t you? When I watch you…” He nips at the side of my neck, darkening the spot he marked me with in his office.

The painful sensation only heightens my arousal.

“I do,” I whisper, a confession more so to myself. God, I do. I want to be the center of his world.

“When I bite into you…” He drags his tongue over the bruise, skimming down my collarbone onto one of my breasts, and catches my nipple in between his teeth. A satisfying pain cries in my nerves, stoking the fever in my bloodstream.

“Don’t stop,” I whimper, the spark of pleasure overwhelming my senses. I arch my back, pushing my breast harder into his mouth.

“When I kill for you…” He lets go of my wrists and slips one of his hands in between us to free himself from his pants.

“Keep going.” My breath quickens with anticipation.

He adjusts his cock in between my wet slit, dripping for him, and teases me at my entrance. “When I fuck you…”

I clench my jaw, bucking my hips. “Just put it in already.”

“No.” He cups my cheek and brings his mouth over mine.

The kiss is slow, deliberate, trickling warmth through my chest and flooding my entire soul. It thrums in my blood, my gums, my temples, an agonizing yearning so profound I want to dissolve under his skin and live there forever.

He breaks away, and the ache for *more* is insatiable.

“You provoked me tonight.” He grazes down my torso, nibbling the side of my ribcage. “Went on a date with another guy.” He chomps his teeth down on the soft skin of my waist, just to run his tongue across my hip and tug on my belly button piercing. “Do you know how many years I had to watch you with your stupid dates?”

I shudder, fluttering my eyes open to look down at him. “None of them ever fucked me like you.”

He licks up my stomach, pausing at my diaphragm to suck on the skin of my sacred heart tattoo, leaving a welt. He moves back up to my breast,

biting at the plump skin.

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. Another strike of pleasure travels between my thighs.

When he's satisfied with the marks he's left, he raises onto his arms, bringing his face up to mine. "And none of them ever will."

He punctuates his promise by plunging into me with one thrust, filling me entirely.

I gasp, arching my breasts into his chest. "*Fuck*, Nico." I grip the backs of his shoulders, piercing my nails into his skin.

"You were a bad girl tonight, Ms. Willow." He pulls out and then drives himself in again, swirling his hips in a delicious motion that liquifies my insides. "And bad girls deserve to be punished."

My cheeks flush, and I wrap my legs around his waist, deepening his angle into me.

We fall into a sensual rhythm, slow and hard. I ride each thrust like my life would end if I stopped.

"No more lies," I say.

His dark eyes cut up to mine, pieces of disheveled hair fanning across his face. The shadow of lust and desire over his features is the hottest thing I've ever fucking seen. God, it nearly makes me orgasm at the sight alone.

He hooks his hips up, burying himself so deep and massaging his tip against the most sensitive flesh inside of me. I can't stop quivering against him. The ache clenching my core for *more* chips away at my patience.

"*No*. *More*. *Lies*," I grit out, pushing my head back into the pillow.

He rotates his pelvis again, swirling his cock inside of me in an agonizing circle.

I suck in air between my teeth, my mind hazy from the elation.

"You sure you can handle this side of me, Tommy?"

I twist my fingers through his hair and pull at the ends, knowing he'll get off on the pain. "I want all of you, or I want nothing at all."

He pulls out of me again, and I ground my jaw, sexually frustrated from his absence as he dips down low to my ear. "Then all of me is what you'll get. Just know that you can never run away. If you do, I *will* find you every time, and I'll fuck you all night, without mercy."

"If I stay, can I still get no mercy?" I say back.

Holding himself up on his palms, he glides his way inside once more. "Absolutely." The dark timbre of his voice vibrates through me.

Breathy moans spill from my lips.

He slams in and out of me in brutal thrusts. “Just like that, baby. You take it all so well.”

Waves build and then crash over me from his praise. An intense surge of pleasure explodes throughout my body as I writhe underneath him.

“That’s it, babe. Come for me.” He slows his speed to hard, languid strokes, drawing out the high of my orgasm as I clench around him.

Eyes closed, I go slack against the bed, my limbs trembling from the electricity in my veins.

“I missed you,” I murmur, relaxing against the mattress with a satiated breath.

Our oasis.

I smile.

I never want to leave.

“Oh Ms. Willow,” a profane chuckle rumbles from him, “we’re far from done.”

Before I can reply, he slips out of me and props up on his knees. His hands clutch around my hips, pressing dimples into them, and he quickly flips me over on my stomach.

My cheek buries into his pillow as he raises my ass up and pushes himself inside again. I continue to quiver around his cock, the rhythm of his thrusts transitioning faster, harder. My stomach tremors. Tingles flurry up my spine and into my head.

He holds me in place with his grip on my waist, keeping me stable as he pounds into me.

I brace myself against the headboard with weak arms. His depraved urgency makes my arousal even more feral, and the intense surges of pleasure roll my eyes back into their lids.

The desire behind my navel clenches, gathering the incessant need for release all over again. It’s maddening, the need for more and more, no matter how much he gives. I want it until I break.

“*Nico,*” I cry, pushing my ass against him. “Fuck me harder.”

“God, Tommy, you drive me fucking insane.” He frees a set of fingers from my hip, wrangles my hands from the top of the bed, and pins my wrists behind me, using the traction to ram harder inside me over and over until I feel his entire length pulse and release thick bursts of cum.

He shudders and rests against my backside as he continues unloading himself within me, his chest slick with sweat, my cheek buried into the pillow.

The sensation of him filling me up entirely drives me over the edge, and I tremble under him, the euphoria of my own orgasm rippling through my core once again.

“I love you,” he whispers, pulling himself out and letting my reward release onto the sheets. “You’re mine.” His fingers trace down the curve of my ass and into my flesh, still dripping with his cum. “This little cunt is *mine*.”

My insides spiral, already eager for another round. “Then give it what it wants.”

“You sure about that?” The low, sinister warning of his tone quivers through my stomach. “This is your one and only chance to tap out, Tommy.”

I want to draw out more of what I saw in him earlier tonight—completely unhinged, utterly untamed. “Fuck me until we both get our fill.”

I feel him lift off me. It prompts me to look at him over my shoulder.

He flashes me a wicked smirk before lowering his mouth to my ass cheek, biting down on the plump skin.

I jerk and stifle out a giggle. “That tickles.” I attempt to swat him away with what energy I have left.

He sucks and pops his lips against the plump skin, no doubt leaving a bruise that will remind me of this moment.

I plop my face back down on the pillow, giving into the post-orgasm bliss.

He shifts me on my side and lifts one of my legs from behind. With one jerk of his hip, he’s back inside of me, plowing deep, invoking another blinding build of pleasure I can’t get enough of.

His fingers sneak over my thigh and knead circles on my clit as he fucks me.

He goes and goes until he empties inside of me again.

His intensity never gives way. He pulls me up on his lap and sets me on top of his cock, bucking his hips in rough thrusts into me. I wrap my arms around his neck for support as he bites into my shoulder, my neck, my breasts.

He fills me up until I have no more room to give him, shuddering against my chest, just to flip me over on my stomach, mount me, and drive into me again and again.

My arousal climbs and descends in wavelengths of intoxicating pleasure. I gasp and tangle my fingers into the sweaty linen sheets, riding the high of my rapture.

I'm too exhausted to keep up with him. The muscles in my limbs flutter, unable to lift a finger, but I don't want him to stop. It turns me on even more, seeing this deviant, greedy side of him, all for me.

He goes on into the morning, taking turns on me with his fingers, his tongue, and his thick cock. I fade in and out, teetering on the edge of crossing over into the realm I've always preferred over the real one.

Only this time, I'm tethered to this moment with him. For the first time in my life, I'm content to stay in *this* world, content being awake.

I'll save my dreams. I refuse to run to them anymore.

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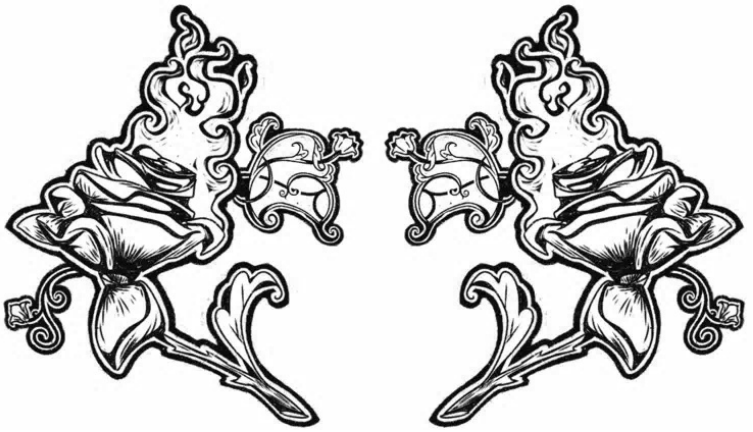
CHAPTER 28



THE CHAIRMAN CALLS

THE LUCID DREAMER

I don’t get a wink of fucking sleep, and for the first time in my life since the insomnia wrapped its talons around me, I’m okay with it. I feel more energized, more awake, than I have in years.

I lay propped up against the headboard, playing with a lone ringlet that keeps spilling over her forehead, curling and uncurling it around my index finger. She’s fast asleep, probably exploring some dreamland, or hanging in her oasis with Noir, recovering from her exhaustion.

My eyes drift over her breasts, over the purple welts scattered over her tan skin—the sensitive flesh of her neck, the top of her shoulder, the plumpness of her ass.

The intensity of my feelings took control, and my animalistic desire for her had its way. I fucked her again and again until her eyelids fluttered closed, sleep lulling her home.

I carried her into the bathroom and managed to make her piss to avoid a UTI from all my cum oozing out of her, and then cleaned her up with a warm cloth before returning her back to my sheets. Though, the sight of her dripping with my seed just made me want to go again.

I could’ve continued fucking her for hours on end, but after I lost count, I had to remind myself that we aren’t in one of our dreamlands. This is real

and she’s going to be sore from how rough I was with her, even if it was something she begged for more of.

She’s like a vice, and I can’t get enough, no matter how many times I have her. This need for more never diminishes. She’s right here with me, and the yearning in my chest still aches for her.

No matter where we are, the time that passes, I will never tire of her.

I want to sleep. It feels easier to do so, like I could slump down and wrap my arm around her and just fall soundlessly into it like I used to. But the muffled voices carry through the house from the patio, where I know Gabi and Caleb wait.

So, I climb out of bed as quietly as possible and make my way into the kitchen where I snipe one of Tommy’s cigarettes.

When I emerge onto the patio, Caleb is lounging in one of the chairs, head tipped back, a cigarette of his own in between his lips.

Gabi is in the other chair, suit jacket abandoned, and his usually slicked back hair is tousled from the harsh blast of the sea breeze. His hands are conjoined in his lap, and his eyes are shut behind his glasses. Though, I can tell by intuition that he hasn’t been asleep. Gabi, like me, has trouble resting. It’s why he’s able to keep up with me, why he’s the one that stays in my proximity.

I stroll up between them to the wooden railing. Gooseflesh ripens across my bare chest from the early autumn chill as it grazes over my skin like a new frost. The dark sky still houses hundreds of stars, which is my favorite part about living on the outskirts of the city.

I turn to Caleb, holding the cigarette between my teeth. “Give me your light.”

He rolls his eyes, keeping them on me as he reaches into his pocket and hands it over. “Have fun?”

“Must you be so goddamn nosey?” Gabi mutters without opening his lids.

I strike the flame and block the wind with my hand. “I’d rather not discuss how I like to fuck with *you* of all people.”

Caleb gives a breathy laugh, releasing smoke into the wind. His teeth shine in a mischievous grin. “I don’t think there’s a discussion to be had when the two of you can be heard from the goddamn trees.”

I take a long drag, and the rush of nicotine bubbles through my limbs and into my fingers, calming the anxiety in my gut.

Ever since I got the call from Caleb earlier and envisioned all sorts of horrifying scenarios I'd find Tommy in, I can't shake the worry feasting on my nerves.

"The charity event is tonight," Gabi reminds me, ruining the good vibes of the fall breeze. "The chairman is requiring you and Mattia's presence, and he wants to meet with you to check in on the progress of your promotion."

I suck my cigarette dry until there is nothing but the filter left. The smoke collects in my lungs as I try to siphon all the high I can before forcing myself back into this blight.

"I'm aware," I exhale, peering out at the silhouette of the waves crashing across the rocks.

Gabi finally opens his eyes and sits up in his chair, pinning me with his intense, inquisitive stare—eyebrows raised, all business.

"Are you prepared?" he asks, the judgement evident in his tone, as if he knows my answer.

Caleb scowls like a moody teenager losing their buzz. "Give it a rest. We're not in the office, man."

Gabi shoots him a pointed look. "You've never been in a goddamn office in your life."

Caleb lifts his head to regard him with a sharp glare. "No, I'm usually gouging eyes and cleaning up insides while you're playing fucking assistant with your stupid little tablet. *Oh no*, I forgot the company card info!"

I flick my ashes off the side of the railing, numb to their incessant bantering. "It's amazing how we're in our thirties and you both still argue like you did when we were children."

Gabi purses his lips into a tight line, swallowing whatever words he wanted to throw at Caleb.

It doesn't help that Caleb shoots him a wide, shit-eating grin, chuckling like he's high and watching TV. It all just baits Gabi even more, the unprofessionalism.

I have no interest in sitting outside, freezing my ass off, and listening to them bicker, so before they can continue, I say, "Tommy has a meeting with the lawyer to go over her mother's will today in Brownwood." I turn to Caleb. He snuffs out his cigarette in the crystal ashtray on the arm of the chair, the silver hoop in his lip glimmering under the soft glow of the porch light. "You'll drive her there. Before she wakes, go to her apartment and

pack her a bag. Until things are settled with Mattia, she'll stay here, and you will act as her watch."

His expression turns blank, matching more of his usual, apathetic demeanor, but I don't miss the flit of bloodlust in his gaze. "If she spits on me again, she won't have the ability to moan your name anymore."

I crack a proud smirk. "She spit on you?"

Even Gabi lets his lips form a smile.

Caleb sends him a deadly look before snapping his attention back onto me. "I'm tired of being a babysitter, Nico."

I roll my neck, the crunch of my bones echoing in my ears as it gives a temporary release to my knotted muscles. It's enough to keep my patience in check with Caleb.

"You'll keep yourself in line and restrain all your usual *tendencies* around her," I command. "Regardless if she pisses you off."

"Emotional regulation," Gabi hums on the other side of me. "You should try it."

Caleb's gaze rolls from me back to Gabi, glowering. "Says the one who has a mental breakdown if his shirt has a fucking coffee stain on it."

"I told you," Gabi snaps, defensively, "how you present yourself is how seriously others will take you!"

"Oh yes, the predator with a bullet between his eyes will be intensely judging your ability to keep a clean shirt."

Gabi straightens up in his chair, but before he can spout out more nonsense, I hold my hand up.

He clamps his mouth shut and falls back into the seat.

Still fucking children.

"You're with me at the charity event," I finish before tossing the butt of my cigarette into the ashtray.

"Of course I'm with you," Gabi mutters, spreading out his long legs and crossing his arms over his torso. "Who else is going to keep you in line when Mattia antagonizes you?"

It's an interaction I don't even want to waste the energy thinking about at the moment, so I push the thought away. That's Future Nico's problem.

"Make sure the shipment arriving tomorrow is also covered. Everything gets unloaded at the warehouse with no issues," I add in. "I trust the others, but our attention has been diverted since this promotion."

I can’t abandon my other syndicate duties, or my father will have yet another thing to pick me apart with.

“Already taken care of,” Gabi assures me.

I place my hands in the pockets of my sweatpants and start toward the door.

Caleb’s comment pricks at me, though. The impatience in his tone, tired of being tasked to watch Tommy all hours of the day when I can’t.

The group’s morale is running low, and I can feel it. Between taking out those with a target on Tommy, keeping her safe, dealing with Mattia’s bullshit, me taking on the executive position at the company, and keeping up with our usual underground duties, we’re stretched thin.

Regardless, I feel *good* about everything. Maybe it’s Tommy in my bed, or the fact that my father will finally acknowledge me at this charity event as one of his equals. After all, I’ve proven myself to him. At least, I’m about to.

All of our hard work is about to pay off. We just need to continue on a little longer.

So, before I step through the threshold, I pause and angle my head to where they both can hear me.

“We’ve come this far,” I say, referring to all the blood and abuse and savagery we lived through in the prison of my father’s property. “Fuck Mattia and his games. Just like we planned, we see this thing through to the end.”

A long, somber second passes.

And then:

“To the end,” Gabi says.

“To the end,” Caleb echoes.

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CHAPTER 29



THREE FEET DEEP

THE TRESPASSER

It was about a year ago when I got the call from Mom telling me of her disease. The doctors said it was dementia, but she swore up and down it was the curse.

I half-listened to her hysteric ramblings, interjecting to ask what the doctors said and if I needed to come home and take care of her. Lola, of course, stepped in, and as for the diagnosis, Mom refused medication and professional guidance, even their supplements.

“I see things, Tommy,” she told me, her voice quiet and somber, in a way that evicted my breath. “The monsters are getting close.”

At the time, I humored her notion and assured her everything would be fine. And then I ended the call, cried my eyes out, and drunkenly painted a portrait of myself as a little girl to give to her, in case she forgot who I was.

I don’t know why I think of this. Maybe because I’m so happy it hurts. Because I’m lying in Nico’s bed, wrapped in the sheets that smell like him —fresh citrus and a beachside mist.

A part of me feels like it’s shitty to be this happy so soon after my mom’s death. The other part is grasping at what it can, because it’s been so long since I felt this way, light in my chest, a smile woven into my lips.

Maybe it’s because today I have to return to my hometown, filled with a lifetime of memories that bruise my chest and make me think of her.

I let out a breath.

The meeting with the lawyer will go quick. Then, it's a matter of figuring out the logistics and giving the house over to Lola. At the end of the day, she deserves it, a place for her growing family to call home.

I stretch my achy muscles. It feels like I hit the fucking gym, which I haven't done since high school. Everything hurts, but in a good way.

A flash of Nico drilling me into his bed fills my mind, and I have to swat it away before I start wanting more.

I can also feel what might as well be a rat's nest clumping in the back of my hair. It's a small, insignificant detail in the grand scheme of things, but Nico waking beside me and witnessing all my *real* morning qualities is a blissful thought.

An amber glow pours in from the windows in between the layers of trees surrounding the house. I can hear the gentle wash of the bank through the cracked seam. The massive television that takes up most of Nico's back wall hums with an old, grainy rom-com from a few decades back. It's in a language I don't understand, but I can see from the intense expressions that we are in the third-act breakup.

When we were children, he told me Italian romcoms were his comfort movies. It was something he watched regularly with his mom as a little boy, a Sunday night ritual where she baked desserts and they snuggled in a mound of blankets on the couch.

I hold the small detail with gentle hands, excited to carry on her tradition.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand.

It's a text from a number I don't recognize.

UNKNOWN

Breakfast is in the fridge. I'm at work, and then I have V Group's charity event afterwards. I won't be gone long. Caleb will drive you to the appointment with your mother's lawyer. Please be safe. I love you, Tommy, and I had an amazing night with you.

My grin widens, and it feels like I'm a head-over-heels teenager again. After all this time that we've known one another, it's amusing that we *just now* exchanged numbers.

I miss you already. Keep me posted on the event. Try to sneak a nap in your office before you go. You hardly slept at all last night.

NICO

I can’t sleep without you. I’ll be fine. Eat the avocado toast I left for you before it turns that weird brown color and gets all mushy.

Still grinning like an absolute idiot, I swing my legs over the bed and shimmy the sheets fully around my torso before standing. Caleb is probably lingering around somewhere, so I refrain from walking out into the kitchen before getting dressed.

I slip into Nico’s conjoined bathroom.

My duffle bag sits on the vanity. I don’t question how it traveled from my apartment to here, and I immediately dispel the horrifying image of Caleb digging through my underwear drawer. Hopefully he didn’t grab one of my dating-app-night thongs. If he did, it will go down on the list of *things we never discuss with one another*.

I hop in the shower, relishing in all the purpled blotches that have blossomed in various places across my skin, then quickly get dressed and blow-dry my hair—surprised to see the device has a diffuser at the ready, an essential to those with curls.

When I’m finished, I start through his room, my destination being the breakfast already prepared for me.

In my next step, my bare feet submerge in water.

I gasp and look down at the puddle on the hardwood.

What the…?

Something flashes in the corner of the room.

The grotesque woman stands on the other side of the bed. She appears the same as she did in my last encounter with her—damp blonde hair; pale skin; red circles around her eyes; and thick, rotted briars clawing from her mouth and protruding into her cheeks.

My pulse thunders in my throat, and my spine goes rigid.

“End it.” Her voice is a distorted rumble, a low growl. I blink, and she clicks her head in a disturbing angle and then lunges at me. “Now!” Her scream rips through my ears, ricocheting in my bones.

I startle and slam my eyes shut, hitting my back on the doorframe of the bathroom.

Seconds go by and my brain processes that I'm unharmed.

I peek through the small sliver between my lids.

The room is empty, and the water at my feet is gone.

I slide down the wall until my ass meets the floor, still a little pained from the teeth marks, and sit there for a long minute, collecting my breath and allowing my heart rate to return to normal.

End it.

What the fuck?

End what?

The monsters, Tommy. Our family's greatest sin. You can't let them find you.

Dread squeezes in my chest as my mother's final words echo in my messy thoughts.

The joyous high from moments ago drains away instantaneously. In its place, fear ties itself around my neck like a goddamn noose.

The monsters are our greatest sin. Why? Are they cursed to roam this world? Is that what she meant? End the curse?

I press my clammy palm to my cheek to combat the sickness in my stomach.

"The monsters found me," I mutter, letting my head hang back against the wall to peer heavenward. "What now, Mom?"



I DISSOCIATE from the moment we enter Brownwood.

The lawyer's office smells like spearmint gum, and the receptionist is Ms. Fran, an older lady who used to be my high school history teacher.

I sit in silence and wait. She smiles and makes small talk about the *old days* when I was a teenager. I nod and give half-hearted replies, grateful when the lawyer steps out of his office and waves me in.

He's an older man with gray hair, the sides of it slicked back from his face. The strong fragrance of his spicy cologne fills the office, and it's all I can focus on as he goes over my mother's will.

As expected, she leaves me the house and everything inside of it.

By the end of the meeting, I'm tracing the moth tattoos on my thighs, anxious to escape his mustard walls and put the whole thing behind me.

I rise from my chair and turn to leave when he stops me.

“One more thing.” He slips a floral envelope out from his leather binder and hands it to me. Across the front is my name written in my mother’s elegant handwriting.

My throat clenches, and it takes a few seconds for the command to leave my brain to take it.

I clutch the old fold of paper, force a polite smile, and leave his office.

My hand shakes against my side. The letter feels like a brick against the pads of my fingers, heavy with her final words.

A sick hope sprouts in my gut that I will get some closure from this, that her last message will be a grand token of the motherly love I’ve always wanted from her. I can live the rest of my days with an *I love you, Tommy*, instead of a cryptic warning from a sick patient.

But the pessimistic, guarded part of me knows better, expecting it to be nothing but an ultimate expression of her disappointment.

I cut around the brick building where I know Caleb is parked, reach for the handle, and slam the car door shut behind me.

He glances back, peeking over his sunglasses at me and the letter crumpling in my grasp.

It stings my skin. I tuck it away in my purse, avoiding his inquisitive stare.

Without a word, he starts the car and takes me back where all this started.



CALEB STOPS at the street in front of my childhood home, nimbus clouds gathering above us.

It takes me a solid minute to conjure the mental energy to exit the vehicle, unlock the front door, and step inside.

He doesn’t follow me. Instead, he remains where he is, choosing to act as if I am not aware of his watchful eye. As if things are the way they were a few days ago. It’s fine; I prefer it this way. Caleb’s shit company anyways, always *I’ll cut your tongue off* or some other rudeness.

Not only that, but I need to read this fucking letter.

I throw my purse in the chair, wrap up in my mother's quilt, and settle onto the couch.

Five minutes goes by.

I stare at the family pictures on the wall—my dad's smiling face, my mom hugging his side, the school picture of me missing my front teeth.

The ache pries apart the middle of my chest.

I wring my hands, tangled in the blanket.

Okay, Tommy, now or never.

My stomach flutters with nerves that I have no idea how to deal with. It could be a whole page expressing her regrets and how much she loves me; or it could be more formal, instructing me on how to sort out all the details of her life that she left me with—donate the boxes in the garage to storage, give the dish set to Lola, pluck the ripe pumpkins off the vine and take them to town hall.

I inhale and blow out a sharp breath.

Just open the stupid letter.

Okay, I can do this.

My palms glisten with sweat as I break open the envelope and pull out the folded piece of stationary.

I breathe in one more time, stalling to mentally prepare myself, and then slowly unfold it.

My favorite chore.

Three feet deep.

-Mom

My brow creases, and I shake my head.

What the fuck?

I turn over the page to examine the back.

Nothing.

I reread the short sentences.

It has to be her garden. Maybe she's telling me to *plant* something? Her mind wasn't all there. Maybe she was confused?

But that wouldn’t make sense either. The biggest holes she ever dug for seeds were maybe three, four *inches*. Not that I cared, but her garden was one of the few topics she happily engaged in conversation with me over, or even let me be a part of.

I drop my hand into my lap, still holding the letter.

Beads of rain begin to softly pelt against the old roof of my childhood home.

I peer out the sliding glass back door into her garden. It’s something out of a storybook—perfectly sectioned plots, each with a hand-written sign labeling the fruit, vegetable, or herb in stunning calligraphy. A myriad of colors and greenery. Mom used to exit the house, her cheeks ripe from a smile, excited to work in the thick, wet soil.

Logan Willow’s back yard was where she spent most of her time, and just maybe, that’s the place where she hid all of her secrets.

My teeth grind from the stress, my molars aching in dull pain.

I jump off the couch and take the uneven stone pathway from the patio, the one my dad laid for her when they first bought this house.

Sprinkles of the autumn rainwater collect in my hair, trickling down my arms. I travel down the row of corn stalks and around the lush squash vines along the wooden fence line. The sludgy soil smears under the bottom of my feet. The overcast brings out the vibrant colors of her garden, reminding me of my oasis.

Against the side of her shed is a plethora of weathered, wooden boxes built on stands. Johnny, Lola’s husband, built them for her a few springs ago, since it became harder for her to squat and sit on the dirt.

Cherry-pink radish bulbs poke out from the dark soil in the back corner of the vegetation. Pools of precipitation drip off their large, sprouted leaves. They were her prized possessions, always adding them into our stews and stir fries, entering them into contests downtown.

This had to be what she meant.

My instincts scream for me to dig.

I feel like she’s close by, watching me as I gently tug on the base of the radishes. Their shoulders raise from the dirt after enough upward force.

Once I have them all collected in the nearby shed, I bury my fingers into the soil, caking it under my nails. The damp earth sticks to the tops of my bare toes.

Three feet.

There's no way I can tunnel down that far with my hands, so I grab a small shovel from her tool rack as if I'm a kid again.

After a grueling fight against the storm and my shrieking muscles from the night before, I hit something metallic, solid.

My heartbeat races as I yank out what looks like a steel time capsule, the kind we buried senior year way back when.

I gape at it, because I can't believe the message wasn't just another damn loose end.

The thundershower builds, washing the barrier of dirt off the top.

It feels like the stress of opening the letter all over again, but this time amplified tenfold.

Tracking dirt back into the otherwise perfect house, I set the container onto the carpet, cleaning it off with an old kitchen towel.

Will this *give me the finality I need?*

Beads of rainwater trickle from the ends of my hair and down my spine. I shiver, ignoring the discomfort of my saturated clothes and the frigid chill overtaking my wet skin.

With a creak of metal on metal, I open the lid to find a piece of cardstock, covered in Logan Willow's beautiful cursive.

I hold it close to my face, leaving damp fingerprints on the page as I read:

I wish it didn't have to come to this, Tommy.
Against everything I wanted for you, it's time
to test your gift.
Call for the window. Violet frame. Black briars.
It will come when you need it, and you do
now more than ever.
I love you, and I hope the Lord will keep
you safe without me.

-Mom

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CHAPTER 30



CURSE

THE TRESPASSER

The message leaves me spiraling with more goddamn questions than anything else. This warning feels different, though. Logan would never ask me to use the gift she spent her life despising and shunning, and a primal part of me trusts it, piercing any logical fallacies I want to find in her writing.

The box and the radishes and the mystery of it all has completely sapped me of my unadulterated bliss from last night—which is typical of anything related to my mother, but a bit of panic creeps in as well.

In my old bathroom cupboard, behind the ridiculous sea of toilet paper my mom hoarded, a few bottles of blue cold syrup still stand.

In my teenage years, before I could will myself to drift off easier, I'd sneak any kind of sleep aids I could find just to play in my oasis when I wanted.

After a few viscous, nostalgic gulps, I feel my equilibrium already beginning to unfurl.

I dry off from the rain, settle into the couch of my old living room, close my eyes, and give myself to the darkness as the sound of thunder pushes farther and farther away.

Like the intake of a breath, I slip into my other world.

I walk down the center aisle of the Library of Reverie, past the familiar multitude of windows, down to the end. Everything disappears in surreal brush strokes until it's just a wall, its surface whorling in a cosmic nebula.

I always assumed it was my limit, the edge of a place I was never meant to push against. At least, this is what my mother said. If I strayed too far away from the *safe spaces*, I would risk losing myself forever.

Fear is often what parents instill in their children to squash their curiosity. I should've known this was my mom's tactic as well.

I stick out my hand, dipping my fingertips into the tar-like substance. It doesn't resist, but it doesn't invite me in either. A simple vessel, uncaring in its purpose.

I exhale slowly and glance down at Noir. She sits at my feet, closely watching what I'm doing with that lazy, feline curiosity.

"Wherever I go, you go, right?" I ask her.

She responds by curling around my ankles.

Her company is all the comfort I need. Together—it's how we've done everything in this place.

I relax my shoulders and close my eyes, imagining the window from my mother's description in her letter. I've never asked the Library for anything, other than to return Nico's window, which it did, eventually.

"Violet frame. Black briars. Bring it to me." I command.

The air shifts and whispers across my cheeks, lightly pushing my hair back.

I open my eyes, greeted by a rectangular, old wood I've never seen before. The window looks ancient with its chipped exterior and dramatic pointed arch, as if it was designed centuries ago. It's just as Logan described, though a bit less colorful or lively than I imagined it to be.

As I climb through, Noir attempts to enter as well, but is greeted by a resistance similar to when I tried to pull Nico out of my dream. Luckily there is no angry destruction that hails down this time, but the idea of doing this alone shatters any confidence I had a couple seconds prior.

Her onyx figure seems to understand, and she rests on the sill in the Library, awaiting my return.

I nibble on my lip.

You don't need your emotional support cat.

I'm lying to myself and I know it, but whatever.

"I'll be back," I assure her.

She stares at me with a calmness I wish I felt.

I continue into the quiet umbra, devoid of any signs that show life. The ground laps at my feet, like I'm stepping in puddles, but my shoes stay dry.

I look around, the nerves under my skin buzzing like a livewire. It's a harsh kind of silence, the kind that thrums in my head, screaming for it to end. Any kind of voice or natural noise would make this much less harrowing.

I don't call out *hello* like they do in the movies, because like hell I'm painting a target on my back. It could piss off some eldritch entity who calls this place home.

So instead, I just slowly creep forward, peering out at the unending void and wondering why the fuck my dead mom thought *this* was the answer.

There has to be something here, but what if it won't reveal itself to me? That's how the Library worked when Nico entered it—a cavity of black vacancy for him, but the vivid hallway and unending starscape for me.

It all depends who is in control of the space, whose subconscious it has linked to, like how the windows connect to their dreamers.

I take another step.

"I'm a Willow," I assure whatever *it* is, quietly.

Then another.

"Show me your true form."

When the bottom of my foot touches down again, the ground ripples like rings across the surface of my lagoon, wrinkling the obsidian flatness. As it spreads to the horizon, the wash is followed by an unveiling of color and substance.

Tall pine trees and old oaks take root and soar up into the sky around me. Wispy, curled grass tickles around my legs. The atmosphere opens into a broad, untethered ashen sky. A dull, blue tint hovers over the land like an ethereal halo. The air is cooler now, and it smells of juniper and moss.

I lower my chin to see a woman standing across from me in the clearing.

Not a woman.

The monster.

I jolt and stagger back on my heels, my fight-or-flight ramping up as I ready myself to run.

My first instinct is to leave this place, get back to Noir, but my feet plant, yielding to her.

No more running.

I study her long, blonde locks, drenched and dripping beads of water at their ends; her complexion drained of pigment, emphasizing the hollow, red rings around her eyes; and the gown made of satin and ruffles, the corset underneath hugging her emaciated physique.

“What do you want?” I ask in a demanding tone. “Who are you?”

If this is where my mom wanted me, why is the creature here? Did *she* turn into this monster?

The woman watches me, silent.

I track her movement as she reaches for the briars protruding from her mouth.

In one harsh motion, she rips them free from her throat. The slick tear of her flesh reverberates in the space between us. I suck in a breath, my own throat tightening as blood pours down her chin and soaks the front of her already stained dress.

She throws the vine aside, and it curls and convulses like a snake in poison.

My body stays stiff as the thorny vine attempts to slither away of its own volition.

“I apologize for that,” she says, her voice feminine and silky smooth, oddly pleasing to the ear.

I cut my hard gaze onto her. “Why don’t you apologize for fucking haunting me?”

She clasps her hands in front of her torso, straightening her posture. The crimson stains around her mouth, the clotting across the cleavage of her breasts, the saturation over the light material of her dress—she ignores it all.

“You must be mistaken, young miss,” she says with poise and an antiquated lilt. I can tell by the way she speaks, how she holds herself, and her outfit, that she’s from a different era. “You are my kin, and I am no specter.”

“Kin?” I echo.

“I am Miss Anne Willow, six generations up the Willow family tree.”

I cross my arms, unsettled by her intense stare. “If you’re not haunting me, then what’s with all the freaky ass jump scares?”

She tilts her head a little to the side at my constant use of coarse language. “A premonition of what is to come if you do not listen.”

Chills rupture down the flesh of my arms. “What do you mean?”

“Allow me to recite my sorry tale.” As she completes her sentence, the gloomy forest around us begins to shift like we are in one of the countless dreamlands I’ve explored. The trees and the sky swirl into a smoky, dark haze.

The woman trots in a leisurely pace around me as she speaks. “When I was nineteen years of age, I found love with a man who I discovered through his dreams—a gentleman who could *see* me, when no one else was able. I told him everything I knew then about my gift, and he swore to never speak about it to a single soul.” Her mouth squeezes together in a bitter line. “A few fortnights later, we found one another in the world outside of sleep. Years went by, our admiration only blossoming, and we wed.”

As she narrates her past life, the black hue of the atmosphere fabricates into small flashes of color and shapes, mimicking her words: a perfect version of her currently worn dress; an archaic man gripping a floating, gloved hand; then them both together, riding a horse as she wraps her arms around his torso. The spectral images circle us, fading as quickly as they materialize.

A distant bubble of her tender laughter echoes in the scene, proof of her happiness.

I flinch at the sound, my skull throbbing. The parallels between her story and mine fill my stomach with a simmering nausea.

Anne locks her gaze with my own, stern and rigid. “We had little to our name, and our financial burden often gnawed at him. Because of this—my family having not built a dowry—we could not afford proper meals or basic necessities.”

The same two silhouettes from earlier reform on the floor beside us, eating what look like small tears of sourdough. They smear the pieces of bread across a set of small bowls, attempting to catch every last bit of the thick liquid inside.

“So when he proposed that I *forge* a fortune for us to live on, I did not hesitate, even for a moment. I created a sack of gold coins inside of my dreamland and brought it out for us to use.”

The clink of currency, followed by their cheerful bursts, permeates the space around us. The image of them in each other’s arms freezes, and they dissolve into gray wisps.

I bite at my lip, warring with myself to keep listening. I sense the direction she's going, and it feels like an oncoming train.

Logan's last request was for me to be here, though, so I keep my feet frozen in this wet void.

"As time kept on, our financial predicament improved, but his greed knew no bounds."

A high-pitched scream shoots through my ears. I wince. Behind Anne's real form, the man sits on a chair, his bulky set of hands tying knots into a large, frayed rope. Crude towels with dark blotches are scattered at his feet.

"Our marriage spoiled, and I tried to leave him for another who I found bliss with, but he held me against my will. I was poisoned, bound, and commanded to conjure whatever his heart desired with the use of my ability." Her eyes leave me for a split second, carrying the weight of her shame.

The man reappears to my left, walking down a set of stairs with a candelabra in hand. At the bottom lies the woman with a chained restraint around her neck, wailing, begging for release.

I can't tell if it's because of the relative thing, or the fact that she's an intrinsic part of this space, but the whips of her pain reverberate through me. The disgust, it's overwhelming. I want to peel out of my skin and float away; be anyone else but me right now.

Muffled cracks of bone settle in the bouts of silence between her words. "He held me on the promise that I could return to my current love once he was satiated. So I built a dynasty of wealth for him, for the generations that would be birthed after him."

The woman reappears, still bound and gagged, riding in a topless carriage. "But half a decade passed. He found a new spouse, filled his manor with heirs, and kept me imprisoned in the lowest level—threatening my life and the life of the man who waited for me if I did not fulfill his requests."

My hands curl into fists at my sides. "Why didn't you escape?" I seethe, horrified by her enslavement. "All those years of suffering and torture, you could've easily conjured *anything* from your dreamland to help you!"

The illusions around us dissipate.

"Do you think me a fool?" she snaps. "I tried time and time again, but he grew to anticipate my imagination and kept me weak with his forced

toxicants and bondage. He'd force briars down my throat, making each moment its own suffering."

A mass of black thorns erupts around us, forcing the two of us into a tight confinement. My body stiffens, and the need to hyperventilate squeezes my lungs.

"How would one break free from a cage if there is no exit in sight?" Her hand lowers to meet mine, and I let her gently hold my palm. "Love grants permission to see you, everything you are, your strengths, weaknesses, what you hold dear." A single, silent tear streams down her pallid face, seeping into the dried blood under her lips. Behind the moisture, her eyes solidify like stones. "He knew how to break me as easily as he knew how to love me."

My own tears sting in the back of my nose, her tale a visceral reminder of how dangerous love can be.

Anne hardens her jaw, releasing my hand to clutch her fingers in front of her torso. The wave of sorrow in her words washes on, keeping her caught in its eternal riptide. "This is precisely why I chose to die, for it was the only way to be truly free from him. Love would have to find me in the next life."

The inky water that we stand on foams and gurgles, as if it's matching the rage she harbors for the man, for herself. The water rises, gathering at our knees in violent washes.

"I summoned a deluge from my dreams and flooded his manor until all that remained were a scattering of wooden planks."

The murky sea around us bubbles up pieces of framework, of clothing, of bodies.

The blood drains from my face.

"What I thought would kill me ended up saving me, and I was able to escape. I never looked back, hoping the water washed away his rotten soul. I started a new life in a lone cottage, as far away as I could travel. My luck only lasted for so many moons though, before he found me once more, having been on horseback when I brought down his home. I was the source of his wealth, his lifestyle, and for that, he could never let me go."

The water stills again and is replaced by the resonance of beating footfalls and heavy, harsh breath. The sound of her escaping, running, never able to feel safe again.

“With the help of a few kind souls, I was able to stay out of his chains after that, but he passed down the hunt to those who he sired. And my daughter became their next plunder, as they understood the innate passage of our gift.”

“No,” I breathe out, shaking my head, already turning my body away from her. My heart palpitates, because I know what her next words are going to be. A merciless confession that I want no part of.

“Just as the Willow women have the ability to travel through dreams and pluck things from this world and bring them into the next—”

My hands come up to my ears. I don’t want to hear it.

“The Valentine men have the ability to see us on this side of the veil.”

It doesn’t matter, though, because I do anyway. Loud and clear, every fucking word.

A thrumming buzzes under my skin, like I’ve swallowed bees and they’re crawling through my veins. I’m shaking—my arms, my legs. I bring my curled hands to the sides of my head, blinking in wide, stunned strides down at the transfiguring floor.

“You seem to have found yourself in the same predicament as I once did,” she says, the pity thick in her throat.

Nico would never.

The Kit I know wouldn’t do that to me.

“No,” I say with finality this time, swinging back to glare at her. “He’s not the same.” My voice shakes in agony, in denial. “*We’re* not the same!”

I press my knuckles into my breastbone, the grinding sensation lessening the painful clench inside my chest.

“You must face the truth of your ancestors.”

“No, no, *no*!” I lift my hand to stop her, unable to control my body. My teeth chatter as if I’m buried in a torrent of snow. Every nerve under my flesh quivers, surging the hysteria through me.

The reality of her words is sharp in my stomach, like a curled blade cutting up into my diaphragm, making it impossible to breathe.

“He isn’t–” I shake my head, swaying a little. My eyes jump from her to the ground to my feet. Vertigo almost topples me. “I–he–I’ve known him since–he wouldn’t.”

He stayed.

It feels as if my heart stops.

The revelation is like the click of a deadbolt.

He stayed in the family business.

My chest goes light, wringing all the oxygen from my lungs. I push my palm against my clammy forehead to combat the tingling sensation in my face.

His father abused him all his life, his brother was hardly any different, and yet he remained alongside them.

Why?

I never asked.

Why did I never fucking ask?

I'm such a goddamn idiot.

My hands come up to my hair, and I hunch over, blinking the tears out of my eyes. Sobs do not push up my throat, my nose doesn't sniffle, and I don't feel the sadness snap like lightning in my chest.

Everything in me is cold, numb, but the tears continue in fat droplets, falling into the oblivion below.

The openness around us whorls and recolors into its original environment—a thicket of pines, a sky the color of bone. I pace in short steps back and forth in the grass, trying to register this insanity.

I briefly look up from my impending panic attack to make sure Anne hasn't disappeared, and that's when I see it.

Behind a cut of the tree line lies the same place I spent my teenage years exploring every inch of with Kit. The locus of his dreamland.

The Valentine mansion.

"Do not repeat my mistakes, young woman." Anne grabs both of my shoulders and settles me into a stable stance against the rush of gravity that wants me on the ground below. She cups my cheek and gives me a mournful smile, etched with her own lamentation. "Do not regret the love you shared with him, but do not let them take from us any longer. You deserve existence, *freedom*."

My mouth falls open, prepared to defend Nico, but the words fall flat. I can't.

He stayed, *willingly*, in that den of pain. He *still* answers to the father that once crushed him under his boots. My mom, she was here once, listening to this story, knowing what fate awaited me as her daughter. I can't ignore these things anymore.

Anne kisses my forehead in an anguished dip, her corset still cutting into her, and when she pulls away, she whispers, "Now, it's time to wake

up.”

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PART IV
HELLFIRE

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CHAPTER 31



GAMBIT

THE TRESPASSER

I shoot up, gasping for air like I'm emerging from a river's fatal pull.

My head feels like it's being sawed open, and I can feel the reverberations in my fingertips, my gums, my temples.

I rip off the couch and slap my quivering hand over my chest. The interaction with Anne, her story, the revelation of who Nico and his family are—all of it hits me like a goddamn meteor shower.

My body continues to shake. I can't stop. The terror tracing through me is too raw, too visceral. My brain flips through the years of my life, hunting for evidence that Anne is wrong.

I see my mother's face the day I woke up from my coma, her talking through her teeth, warning me to *never* see that boy again. I mistook it for strict, parental rage, for the paranoid warning of a woman losing pieces of her mind. Now, looking back, I can see the all-encompassing horror in her gaze.

I never questioned it. I never thought anything odd about Nico being able to see me. Instead, I took it as a gift from the universe, giving me a friend to sate my loneliness. And, as life progressed, even more than a friend.

I shift from foot to foot to expel some of my distress.

That night in front of the bodega comes back to mind, the anger warping over Nico's face as he confronted me.

I searched for you, year after year, Fiorella. I didn't stop until I found you. It sure as hell seems like you gave up a long time ago.

I was convinced he hated me, that he was intent on getting revenge for abandoning him. The hostility was present then, but I glossed over it, like I do everything else in my fucking life.

And that day in his office while we fooled around, when I pushed him to talk, he gave vague responses.

Why did you go so long without saying anything to me?

Reasons, he said, and then bit my neck and thrust his fingers inside of me, and I just let it go.

I'm so fucking stupid.

I failed to save him back then from his family. I left him behind and never looked back. He stood on the sideline of my life for years and watched me stray further and further away from him, from the memories of Kit.

I always imagined him to be watching out for me, his longing at the forefront of his heart, hesitant to reappear in my life and drag me back into his sinister underworld.

Now, I see a man darkened by the torment he's endured in his life, watching me from afar with resentment driving his soul.

Or maybe—

I bring an unstable hand to my forehead, my skin growing cold as I think about the possibility.

Maybe it was the plan all along.

From the moment I wandered into his dreamland as a child.

My imagination runs away from me, and I picture him, twelve years old, waking up and telling his father: *I found her*. And his father, grinning like the evil bastard he is, replying with: *Good, now make her fall in love with you.*

They probably plotted it all for decades.

My mouth goes dry, and I lose my breath. The sides of my throat clench. A shrill screeches in my ears, and everything else muffles into static. My hands fumble from my neck to my ribs, pinching the skin between them —cold and clammy and hot, all at the same time.

I hyperventilate, convinced my lungs are shriveling or that I'm going into cardiac arrest. It accelerates and thumps in my skull like someone striking blows with a hammer. Black spots blotch the edges of my vision. All drowsiness from the medicine has been expelled.

I slump down the front of the sofa and into the floor, curling my knees up to my chest, burying my head in the dark space between them.

Eliminating my vision helps. I draw in deep, full breaths down to the bottom of my lungs, and release in slow outtakes through my nose.

Within minutes, my panic attack begins to give way.

I stare into the nothingness.

Mom must've known everything. Why the hell did she never tell me? To *protect me* in her own selfish way?

And Nico, if he knows, if his intentions aren't malicious, why did *he* never tell me?

Because he's not who you think.

Don't be an idiot, Tommy.

Of course he's tricking you.

I don't know which of the two he is, and that terrifies me down to my marrow.

Was everything a fucking lie, half of my life as counterfeit?

Outside of the house, I hear a car door shut in the driveway.

Caleb.

I snatch my phone from the coffee table to check the time. It's been an hour. He's probably coming to check on me after giving me space to read the letter.

I crawl up and fumble to grab my purse and shoot out of the back door. The light rain patters down into my frizzy curls, through my clothes.

On my way across the damp yard, I rush to dial her number.

Lola answers on the first ring. "Tommy?"

"Get in your car and park behind the back gate. Stay there until I get in the car. Tell Johnny to come to the front door and distract the man who answers it. Do it now, please!"

I hang up and cut through Mom's garden, around the golden stalks of corn where I know Caleb won't see me. The tall, wooden privacy fence is a few feet larger than me, so it takes a running start for me to scale up it and throw myself over.

I land in an ungraceful thud on my hands and knees just as Lola's silver car pulls up on the street in front of me. For once in my life, I'm grateful how goddamn small this town is.

I crawl up and haul over the ditch and into the passenger's side.

"Drive," I demand, flailing to put my seatbelt on.

She continues down the block. "Toms, what's going on?"

As we pass by the side of the house, I see Caleb's black car in the driveway, and Johnny ringing the doorbell.

Caleb probably won't answer it, but Johnny's presence will prevent him from being able to haul ass to his car and chase me down.

"Who is that guy?" Lola flits her eyes from me to the road, her tone erratic. The high-pitched timbre of her voice overstimulates my already frazzled nerves. "Why is Johnny distracting him? Is he dangerous? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Lola!" I yell. "Stop asking so many fucking questions!"

"*Do not* scream at me right now!" she yells back, revving the engine as she pulls onto the two-lane highway.

I release a breath and lay slack in the seat, my fight to preserve any dignity in front of the woman Logan preferred slipping away.

A beat of silence passes.

She continues to give me impatient, concerned sidelong glances.

Without looking at her, I say, "Mom left me a letter."

A lump swells in my throat. I do my best to swallow it, but Lola looks at me with wide eyes and then back onto the road several times, as if the tears falling down my cheeks are some kind of rare cosmic showing.

"Tommy," she murmurs, frowning.

I shove the back of my hand over my mouth to muffle the sniffling, then turn my head toward the window, away from her.

I'm furious with my mother for dying, for never telling me the truth; I'm furious at Nico for coming back into my life, for never giving me a direct answer about his dad; I'm furious at how fucked in the head I feel right now, not sure whether to believe in him or if I'm just in denial.

If what Anne said is true, Nico found me, arranged all the pieces of my life to crumble, just to be the one to restore it all. I'd mistake his comfort and safety for love, destined to the same fate as her.

Fucking asshole.

“Tommy, tell me what you need from me,” Lola says. “Whatever you need, I’ll do it.”

I look at her. Just like when we were kids, she regards me with a patient, hopeful expression, the kind people wear when they try not to spook a stray cat when they’re setting out scraps.

All these years of my bitchy attitude and still she never relents. From the mushy sister TV shows she used to put on for us to watch, to the makeovers, bake-offs in the kitchen, late night video game binges. All Lola ever wanted from me was to lower my walls and let her in.

I’m tired of hiding myself from her.

Mom is gone and nobody is here to stop me.

“You should hate me for how I’ve treated you all these years,” I tell her, my voice quiet, small. It feels foreign to be vulnerable with her—with anyone other than Nico.

My stomach tightens.

Lola passes me a light-hearted smile, coming to a stop at a light. “I understood, Tommy. Aunt Logan treated you like dog shit most days.”

I blink some of my tears away, letting out a cracked chuckle. “You cursed.”

She rolls her eyes, carrying on with traffic. “I can be wild sometimes. Just ask Johnny.”

I snort out a full-fledged laugh this time. Snot bubbles out of my nose.

Lola lightly smacks my arm. “Okay, rude! And don’t sneeze that all over my car.”

“Sorry,” I say, matching her smile as I dig through the glove compartment for a take-out napkin.

I dry my tear-stained cheeks, watching the old buildings pass through my window, all of them decorated in oranges and reds. Damp bronze and brassy leaves cover the town square lawn.

By now, Caleb will have figured out that I’m not at the house. I only have a short window of time. We won’t make it to South Haven without him catching up. I love Lola, but she won’t drive ten over the speed limit.

I need to pivot. Nico will find me eventually, and when he does, I will be ready for a confrontation.

I suck in a breath and shift my body toward Lola. “I need your help.”

“Anything.” She nods once, detecting my solemn tone. A firm look of determination crosses over her soft features. “What do you need me to do?”

she asks in complete solidarity.

"Take me to the motel off seventy-one. If anyone asks, you never saw me. I promise when it's all done, I'll explain everything."

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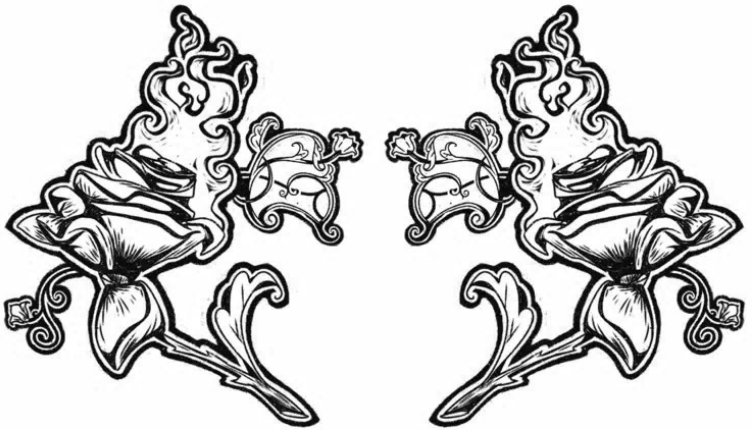
CHAPTER 32



TRIGGER

THE LUCID DREAMER

"Your father tells me you haven't married yet." The woman, whose name I've already forgotten, dangles her champagne flute between her manicured fingernails.

I glance at the time on my watch. It's only been two minutes.

Jesus Christ.

"I don't see how that's any of your business," I reply, cold and uninterested.

Under the elegant, cathedral ballroom ceiling are some of the wealthiest families in the city. Most of them run V Group's companies after we acquire them. That's the reason for this event in the first place. Every year, Mattia stands up on the stage and verbally jacks off everyone in the room, expressing sentimental words, as if V Group gives a single shit about them.

The woman stares at me through a low-lidded gaze framed by long, expensive lashes, inviting me in. She tucks a blonde strand of hair behind her ear, showcasing the diamonds on her fingers, in her lobes.

"Mine is constantly setting me up on blind dates with heirs to most of your companies," she continues in a smooth, silky tone, despite the fact that I didn't inquire and don't fucking care. "I have no interest, though, when I could just climb to the top myself."

I grind my jaw, eyeing the waiter traveling in my direction.

As he passes, I snipe one of the effervescing glasses from the tray and down it in one gulp. It bites at the back of my throat, and I make a pained face, letting the sting pass.

In the corner of my eye, I spot Gabi wading through the sea of suits and expensive gowns to my location.

It appears my father is ready to speak with me.

I hand off my empty champagne flute to the woman. “Best of luck with your search. I’m off the market, but my *brother* is available.”

Her mouth falls open, and a cunning satisfaction ripples through me before I walk away.

I follow Gabi out of the ballroom and through the extravagant, engraved halls. We head deeper into the heart of the venue where Father lingers, like a beast in the shadows, waiting for a chance to bite. Since Mattia took over the face of V Group, Levi rarely makes an appearance at these sorts of events.

He watches all through the eyes of his men stationed around in plain sight, always hiding nearby. His henchmen gauge the loyal businessmen brokering deals or sneak guests into a private lounge to participate in drug-fueled orgies—though my father charges them, of course. It’s a luxury to even be invited here.

We approach a set of white doors. Leaning up against them is none other than Mattia. He casually sips on his whiskey, his eyes tracking me over the glass.

I pause in my step.

Gabi stands close at my side, his shoulder intentionally brushing mine—a reminder to exercise restraint and *not* put a bullet between Mattia’s eyes, the ones that still glitter with mischief.

I fucking despise how alike we look: the same black hair, piercing eyes, and sleek bone structure. People used to call us twins when we were younger. Now, it’s only obvious we share a bit of DNA, and I couldn’t be happier with the distance I have created between us.

He greets me with a self-righteous smirk but doesn’t utter a single word as he rotates, twists open the doors, and strolls inside.

I inhale swiftly through my nose, wishing I had a goddamn cigarette.

Gabi moves ahead of me, stopping at the threshold to wait. A subtle cue to me that I can’t stand out here forever.

The room is full of antique furniture, the couches all leather with brass buttons. Cigar smoke wafts under the amber-tinted lights, dim and coaxing, meant to put you at ease. This is what Levi Valentine wants when you walk into this room, for you to put your guard down. It is easier to raze without resistance.

Father sits across the room in a hickory-brown club chair, his dark hair styled and peppered with flecks of gray. The center button of his suit jacket is undone, and his wrist dangles off the arm of the seat, lazily holding a cigar between his index and middle finger. It needs to be ashed, but he doesn't bother.

He acknowledges me with nothing more than an intimidating look, skillfully holding his face in a blank expression that would unnerve a fucking bear.

I stop at the edge of the center table, disregarding Mattia on my left who sits on the sofa. Gabi steps into the back of the room, near where the other guards tower around us.

Father takes a long drag of his cigar, unrushed. The embered finger of ash falls softly off the end and onto the rug below, but he just lets it burn. The shiny gold of his watch glimmers under the saffron lighting.

I wait.

It would be disrespectful for me to speak first. It's the one and only reason why Mattia is keeping his mouth shut at the moment.

Father lowers his cigar. A cloud of fresh smoke floats over his head and trails across the room.

He omits a thick cloud from his ringed mouth so that it passes right at face level across both me and my brother, making it difficult for us not to wipe our eyes.

Everything is a goddamn test of weakness with him.

"It's been two months," he says smoothly, without a hint of the disapproval he's intending.

I can feel his eyes burrowing into the skin of my face, observing it closely for any display of emotion. His words are hardly a question, but I know exactly what he wants from me.

An update.

"It takes time to do what you've asked of me. I can't command love." I keep my expression just as vacant, bored almost, as if nothing and nobody in this room means anything to me. It's easy in front of him.

“Mattia.” Father takes another steady inhale of his cigar. “Do you find it challenging to get a woman to fall at your feet?”

Mattia extends his arm along the back of the couch, slinking deeper into the cushion as he smirks. “Why no, Father, I don’t. In fact, it’s the easiest thing in the world.”

A stiffness grabs the muscles in my neck, but I keep my jaw loose. “When you’re waving rolls of bills at them, I imagine so.”

Mattia glowers over at me.

“The Valentine men have a reputation,” Father intervenes. “We are wealthy, powerful, and have a face that elicits a woman’s lust. I’m asking you, Nicola, have you used these things to your advantage?”

I stare for a beat at him, chewing on his words.

Women are objects to him, inferior in all ways. It’s why he never allowed them into the syndicate, why he fought me vehemently when I took over and overturned his dumbass rule. Women, in his eyes, are nothing more than dimwitted, frivolous playthings whose only purpose in life is to provide him a male heir.

These were the beliefs and morals he slid into our growing brains as children, and he had some excellent success with the man who sits to my left.

“Ms. Willow is right where I want her,” I assure him.

The corner of his mouth quirks. If I hadn’t been watching, I’d have missed it.

This pleases him.

Good.

He taps his cigar, and another collection of floating cinders slowly falls onto the floor. “You have two weeks to get her in willful confinement, or the promotion will be transferred to your brother.”

Mattia swirls his large sphere of ice against his glass to cover up his breathy, baiting laughter.

“Consider it done.” I incline my head, pinning Father with a lethal look of my own. One that he taught me to wear so well.

My cell phone buzzes ceaselessly in my pocket.

Father rubs his thumb over his chin, his cigar still pinched between his fingers, while his lips transform into a wicked smile that sinks my stomach.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to attend to.” I bow my head before turning and leaving.

I pull out my phone to see Caleb's name on the screen.

Gabi tails me, shutting the doors behind us.

Tremors of unrest race through my chest. "What now?" I answer the call, pacing down the hallway, already heading for the exit.

"Tommy snapped and snuck out of the house." The tense, unstable twinge of Caleb's voice strikes a fervor in my pulse. "I've lost sight of her."

My heart accelerates.

She *ran*, willingly? That doesn't add up. Not after last night.

I halt and push a hand through my hair. "What the fuck happened?"

Gabi continues ahead of me to go pull the car up front.

"Her mother gave her a letter," Caleb says.

Shit.

I drop my hand to my hip, and glare down at the red velvet lining the marble floor. "Fuck, okay. Pull footage from all surrounding security cameras near her house and find where she went. I'm headed that way now."



SHE RETURNS to the motel where she stayed during her mother's funeral.

I don't know what to expect when I find her—maybe slumped in the paper-thin sheets, clutching the letter, tears treading over her face. These are the last words her mother ever gave her, and the fact that I have no idea what she said or how Tommy's handling it coils my gut.

The moment Gabi pulls into the parking lot, I'm stepping out of the car and rushing down the sidewalk where Caleb waits in the shadows under the awning.

"Room 201." His demeanor is calm, in no way stressed, which tells me she's at least okay.

I breeze past him and to her door.

Caleb and Gabi float like phantoms behind me, their footfalls barely making the sound of a scuff on the pavement.

I burst through the door, surprised to find it unlocked, sweeping my eyes over the dusky silhouette of the bed, the dresser, and the wide-open bathroom door.

“Tommy?” I call out, searching the other side of the bed, inside the bathroom, the tub. There’s no fucking trace of her.

I whip back around to Caleb and Gabi who stand outside on the sidewalk, looking in.

“Where the fuck is she?” I snarl.

Caleb shakes his head, extending his arm toward the entryway. “I saw her with my own—”

A gun emerges from behind the dark shade of the door and into the streetlight pouring through the room.

She steps out, and my eyes trace over the body of the machinery, to her plum, painted fingernail resting on the trigger, up her fishnet sleeves to her hardened face, pinning me with a glare.

A sudden heaviness plummets in my chest.

At the sight of her aimed weapon, Caleb and Gabi both jump inside the room and rip their own guns out of their holsters, drawing them up at her.

“*Don’t!*” The command bursts from me in a stern, authoritative shout that I hope will cut through their blinding panic.

If she were anyone else, she’d already have two bullets through her skull.

With the gun in her grasp still high and pointed at me, she takes another step closer.

Gabi and Caleb follow her movement with the tips of their pistols.

“Nico,” Gabi warns.

“Don’t any of you fucking move or I’ll shoot.” She speaks her threat quietly, though her voice trembles.

My gaze doesn’t leave hers as I try to decipher the emotions flooding through it.

She must’ve figured it out.

I extend my arm, meeting her halfway. “Do you know how to use it?”

She doesn’t reply, but also doesn’t object as I slide my fingers over the back of her hand and position the barrel over my heart. “One shot here, and I’m gone.”

Pain flits over her face, and she buries her teeth into her bottom lip. Her hand shakes, but she stabilizes herself by pressing the barrel against my pec.

If this is how I die, I’ll gladly take it, so long as it’s done by her. My life belongs to her, anyways.

“Pull the trigger if you need to, Ella,” I murmur.

Moisture collects at the corners of her eyes, and her mouth pinches, anguish tracing across her face. “Do you even want to know why?”

“I know why.”

The tears drip down her cheeks and in between her quivering lips. “*You* are the monster.”

My eyes fall shut.

I clench my jaw, my nostrils flaring at the constriction. The web I’ve spent my lifetime casting has begun to unravel. How much longer can I go?

“Tommy—” I go to say, but she shakes her head.

“No! You lied. You fucking lied after we swore no more!” she shouts, the tip of the gun digging harder into my muscle.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Gabi’s arm stiffen, the tendon on the back of his hand flex, preparing to pull the trigger.

Caleb is no longer beside him. I catch a flash of his figure dipping around the edge of the door to maneuver behind Tommy.

I don’t want him to stop her. If Tommy wants me dead, then I’m dead. I won’t take away her will to make a choice. If she knows everything, then she deserves that much.

“I will not live my life afraid!” she continues, her expression contorting, full of torment. My heart pinches at the sight of it. “Hunted by your fucking family. I refuse to. That’s why you’re here, right? Why your father assigned you to DVC? You knew where I was, *who* I was.” Her shuddering returns. I feel it through the pistol she still presses against me. “All this time, from the moment I stepped inside of your dream, you only got close to me so you could use me the same way your ancestors used mine.”

She has every reason to feel this way, to believe I’d be as malicious and cruel as those who came before me. But if this is it, if she pulls the trigger, I need her to know the truth.

So I lean into the gun and settle my palm on the side of her neck. She grimaces a little to my touch. Her resistance pricks at my chest, burns in the back of my throat.

“From the moment you found me in my dreams…” I blink through the thick tears welling in my own eyes. A few escape down the crevice of my nose. At the sight of them, her rigid stance eases, but she keeps the weapon held against me. “All I’ve ever wanted is to be with you.”

Caleb hovers behind her, his cold eyes shining like a predator over her shoulder.

A sob escapes her, but she purses her lips, smothering it. “No more lies, Nico. I want to know *everything*. What happened after we were separated?”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know.” I curl my fingers around the top of her forearm and gently pull her toward me, away from Caleb before he can knock her unconscious.

She flicks her eyes from me to the side, probably noticing his threatening aura at her back. I expect her to flail, swing her gun around and accidentally pull the trigger.

But she doesn’t. Instead, she disregards him and clicks her attention back onto me. Proof that somewhere inside of her, despite her reservations, a portion of her trust in me still exists.

“*Everything*, Nico. I want to know it all. From you.” I can hear the exhaustion of her plea, the finality in it before she walks away from me for good.

“No more lies,” I promise her, with the scarred weight of my life in her delicate hands.

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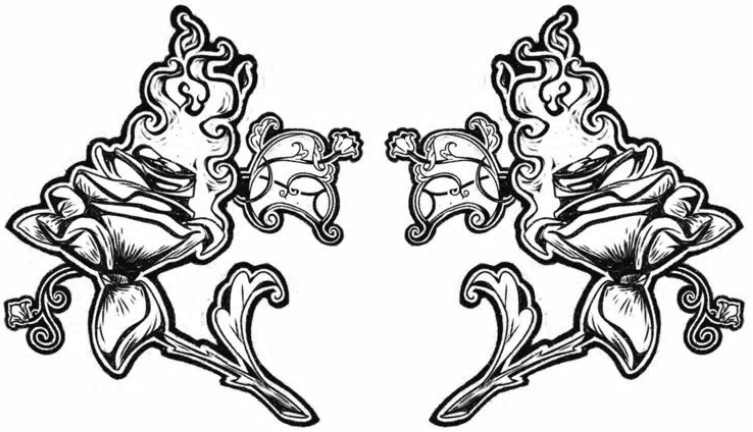
CHAPTER 33



COVET

THE LUCID DREAMER

"I was six years old the first time my grandfather told me the story of our family." I shed out of my jacket and hang it on the chair in front of the desk, slowly working my cufflinks off. The movement gives me some way to expel my nervous energy while I speak as Tommy stands a foot away from where I sit on the bed, her arms crossed. "This was our legacy: to find the Willow women and exploit their gift."

A bitter scoff evicts from her, and she turns her head away to grimace through the curtained window.

The gun is on the desk beside her, but she at least agreed to let go of it. A compromise for Gabi and Caleb to stay outside with the door closed, giving us some kind of privacy.

"The first night you stumbled into my dream, I never breathed a word of it to my father. But I knew you were his target." I stare at the side of her face in hopes she'll meet my eyes. She peels at the skin on her bottom lip, ripping it off with her teeth in an anxious tic. "He searched the world for you, and I did my best to veer his path away for as long as I could."

She whips her head back to me, throwing her hair over her face. In the midst of her wild curls, her eyes are sharp and hurt.

"I hid you and your mother," I continue, "the whole town of Brownwood, but then you left and were employed at DVC, and he found

you. I knew the day would come, which is why after we were separated, I stayed and worked up the ranks in the family business, earning his trust."

A skeptical, disapproving look brands her features, stunned and enraged by my confession.

She clenches her jaw, shakes her head, then adverts her gaze again before leaning against the shitty wooden furniture. They're all cues that she's about to explode, so I carry on, *needing* to get these words out.

"A few months ago, my father assigned me to get close to you, seduce you, do whatever was necessary to make you fall in love with me. This was the promotion Mattia and I fought over. I couldn't let him be the one to get it, so I did everything I could to prove to my father I was worthy."

She grumbles and kicks off the desk, her hands balling into fists and shooting up in the air as she paces the small space between the bed and the dresser.

I wince, watching her thresh in anger, doing her best not to interrupt each sentence as I say them. "Once I had your love, I was expected to sedate you and lock you away in some eternal prison where you would live out your days obeying my every wish, my every command, bringing whatever I desired from your dreamland. All to benefit my family's legacy."

"Why did you never tell me any of this?" She turns on me, voice raising. "I can't believe—No, I can because you never—Fucking hell, I'm so furious right now!"

"I know, and you have every right to be." I keep my tone soft, despite the emotions that have collected inside my chest.

"I had to find all this out through a weird encounter with a dead relative when you could've just told me from the start! If you would've—" Her fingers come up to her hair, squeezing at the roots. "I—you lied to me, just like her. All this time, I've been so fucking stupid! You could have told me the truth!"

The volume of her shouting grates through my skin. I let it travel through me, feeling the rise of my own defenses claw up my throat. She's hurt right now, overwhelmed, and trying to process it all.

"I did what I thought was best, Tommy. I wanted you to live a normal, happy life, without this constant anxiety—worrying about my goddamn father and the fucked-up fate the men in my family have placed on you. I knew I could keep you safe from it."

“And what about what I want? That’s your fucking problem, Nico!” She snaps forward, throwing her finger in my face, seething. “I *want* to be here with you, whatever fucking insanity that entails!”

The muscles strain in my shoulders, over my chest, and up my neck. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“But you never give me a fucking choice!” She bellows it even louder. “You do whatever you think is best!”

“That’s not—”

“You *never* let me in!”

“I didn’t want—”

“What torments you torments me, and you just shut me out every time—”

“*Do you think I wanted this for us?!*” I roar, ripping up from the bed.

Her reddening face contorts with more ire. “Then fucking tell me what you want!”

“I’m trying the best I can!”

She gives a slow, bitter shake to her head, searching my eyes. “How do you expect me to ever look at you the same after this? God, Nico, you’ve been lying to me since the day we met!”

My hand comes up to my hair. “Look at me the same?” I shift away, glaring at the wall. A humorless scoff huffs out of me, the potency of her words puncturing deep.

“You lied to me this whole time,” she repeats. “You could be lying to me right now just to deliver me on a fucking platter to your father.”

I shake my head, unable to shove down the emotions clawing their way up my throat. “*Goddammit*, Tommy, I don’t want to keep anything from you! I’m so fucking obsessed with you that it hurts!” My ribs feel tight, and a hollowness expands in my chest. “I want you in every part of my existence, but it’s a goddamn rot! I should’ve walked away from you so many times!”

The years of my life, all the heartache and pain and rage I’ve held onto, they burn in my blood and ripple across my skin in hot, acidic blotches.

She gapes at me, her mouth hanging open, and I think about how this is what she wanted—to see me crack and purge everything I’ve held back from her.

Her stunned reaction fuels me, and I shove myself into her space. The back of her waist hits the edge of the desk. “If I wanted to deliver you to my

fucking father, do you think I would've stayed for as long as I have?"

"I don't know what to believe!" she screams back at me.

"Fuck, Tommy, my family is heinous! I had to watch my mom wither away in that fucking house, abused and assaulted by her own husband!" Tears burn the back of my nose, but I keep yelling, expunging this shit from my chest. "I've seen things that I'd never want you to witness, to go through yourself! And I decided long ago that you wouldn't!" My voice cracks from the lump swelling in my throat.

"*You* decided." Her voice lowers, but she doesn't relent. "That's the problem, Nico."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for keeping this all from you." A sob quakes through my chest. "I was just trying to do whatever I could to keep you safe. If I messed up for even a second, it could have cost you your life, your autonomy."

I support myself on the edge of the desk with my hand and hang my head, the rain falling from my eyes before letting myself collapse onto the carpet below.

Her hands drop to both sides of my face and lightly guide the top of my head to rest against her diaphragm. The small act of comfort shatters the barrier keeping it all contained.

"Nico," she whispers.

"I love you more than I've ever loved anyone in my life, Tommy," I sniffle, looking up to her. "From the second you appeared in my dream when we were kids, I vowed to myself that they would never lay a hand on you."

Drops of her own tears fall against the crown of my head. I feel them run down the sides of my cheeks and under my jaw to my neck, mixing with mine in a fusion of sorrow.

She guides me back up off the floor with her hands and embraces my neck. The muffled sound of her crying squeaks in my ear as she buries her face in my chest.

I wrap my arms around her and hold her as tightly as I can without causing her pain. Tears and snot drain over my lips. The horrendous sound of my crying fills the quiet room. I let it all out, though. All the buried resentment and stress and goddamn anguish. Every bit of it that's collected inside of me. This moment with her, it's a panacea for the slow poison that was siphoning away my lifeblood.

“I’m sorry,” I say through a ragged breath. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“I know.” She pulls away and wipes my damp face with the end of her sleeve, the material catching over the stubble on my jawline. “I believe you.”

Pieces of me begin to settle. She can be livid, she can doubt me, but I need her to believe in me; to believe that every decision I made was to keep her free from my family.

Her eyes are glassy with tears, but she manages a sad, quivering smile, brushing her thumb over my dimple. “You have my love, so what happens now?”

I swallow the salt in my mouth, blinking the blur from my eyes.

The paradox I’ve wrestled with my whole life comes back again, and I have to let it end.

I’m so acquainted with the quicksand of this world I walk in. There is no hope at the end of this story for me, but there is for her. I didn’t fight tooth and nail my whole life for there not to be.

To put the legacy of the Valentines to an end, I have no choice but to go down with them, to end our name. For her freedom.

“The plan was always to bring him down. From the inside out. I know how to gut him, the legacy he’s built. By the end of tomorrow, it will all be over, and you won’t have to worry about becoming a slave for my family anymore.” I take a deep breath, and I do something I’ve never been able to before. “But for my plan to work, for me to settle the karma of the Valentine line, I won’t be with you at the end of it. My name is his, and you need to be free of us, no matter how much it kills me to see us dissolve—”

Before I can finish the sentence, she’s shaking her head, pushing away from me.

“No.” Her voice trembles. “Nico, *no*.” Her eyes focus on me, narrowed and serious. “We’ve waited fucking years to have this moment.”

Fresh tears burn behind my eyes. I don’t tell her that I agree with her. Speaking the words would be too painful.

“Tommy,” I say softly, “you deserve to live in a world where my family and the misery they’ve caused don’t exist.”

Her eyes sharpen over her quivering lips as she points a stern finger at me. “*No*. You are *not* him, or the ones that came before him! I told you, Nico. I believe you.”

I place my hands on her shoulders to ground her. “Just this once.” The somberness in my plea wells fresh pearls in her eyes. “I need you to blindly go with my plan, even though you have every right not to.”

A frown pulls at her mouth as she slips out from under my hands. She paces a small circle. Her gaze is everywhere, everywhere besides me. She brings her shaking hands up and then drops them.

“I—This is all too much.” Her breath is quick. She plants a hand over her chest to calm the erratic motion of it. “I’m still furious at you, but—I—you—if you do this, we’ll be—”

My heart aches at the sight of her breakdown, and I grab her by the wrist and pull her back into my arms, squeezing her tightly. Maybe, for once, I can give her the comfort I was never good at.

“It’s okay, Fiorella.” I weave my fingers through her curls and cup the back of her head, resting my chin on the top of her head. She hides her face against the cool material of my shirt. I can feel her unsettled heartbeat pounding against my ribcage. “Just focus on this moment. We have right now. Me and you, our oasis.”

She locks her small arms around me, hugging me as if I might float away right here and now.

A long second passes.

“I don’t accept it,” she says, full of resolve. “This will *not* be our last night.”

I want to tell her we had more time together than I ever imagined, more than I ever deserved. I always dreamed of a simple future with her, desperate and manic to get it, but nothing is simple when I live with this name branded on me. She’s not safe, never would be with me. Her life would always be used as leverage for my family’s enemies.

But I don’t say a word, because I know that’s not what she needs right now.

So I mutter, “Okay,” and let her have her way.

Whatever she needs to cope, tonight, I will grant that to her.

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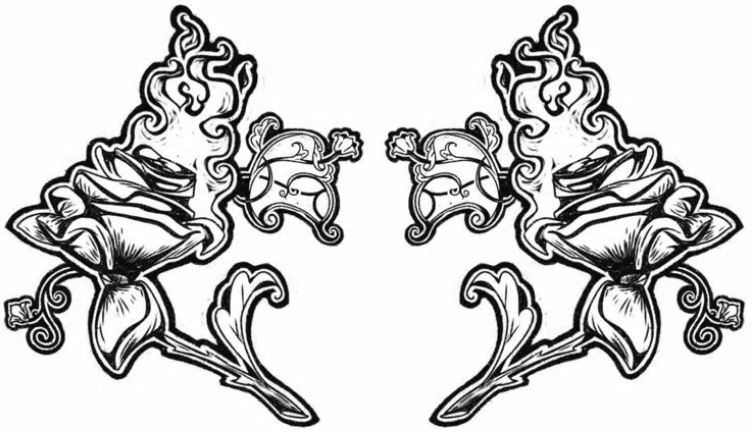
CHAPTER 34



PROMISE ME

THE LUCID DREAMER

I sit on the foot of the bed, my legs sprawled out just enough to keep my feet within inches of Tommy's. She stands with her arms crossed, propped against the desk, chewing on her lip and staring into space. It's been at least half an hour since our intense conversation, and since, we've sat and stewed in the quiet—mental fatigue pulling at both of us.

I don't try to break it. She seems lost in her head. After the strenuous day of emotional battery, she deserves whatever time is necessary to process everything.

Instead, I just wait patiently, watching her small, subtle movements.

I can hear the volume of a television several rooms down sneaking through the poorly crafted walls. Between the curtains, Gabi and Caleb's silhouettes hover outside the door. Their muffled conversation travels to the space between us, but I can't make any of it out.

Another set of minutes passes before Tommy finally lifts her eyes to me.

I dip my chin, hanging onto them. "What are you thinking?"

She releases her lip, letting out a long sigh. "Pizza sounds really fucking good right now."

I give a breathy laugh. "Want me to make it happen?"

“It’s okay.” The corners of her mouth pull down, and she averts her gaze to my loose collar.

Lightly pushing off the desk and coming to stand in between my legs, she asks, “Why a snake?”

Her fingertips come up to the base of my throat, tracing the rose tattooed on my skin, over to the head of the snake curled around my neck. They guide over to the other side, slipping under my collar and brushing over the tip of its tail.

I shiver under her touch. “To face my fear. It was something my father did to break me. He ordered Mattia to lock me inside of a shed with a nest of them. I couldn’t leave until I killed them all with only my hands.”

Her jaw clenches, and she pulls a breath in through her nose. “He’s such a piece of shit.”

“He is,” I agree, quietly.

She sucks in a breath through her nose and runs her fingertip up the side of my neck to the sensitive skin beneath my ear. “And this? Cupid—I’m assuming it has to do with your last name?”

I smile, sparing her the details of being in a drunken state, longing for a higher power to carry me to her. “I got it when I was seventeen,” I admit. “Hopelessly in love with a girl I didn’t think I’d ever find. I thought Cupid could help.”

She lets out a shaky exhale, a small smile curving at her lips. “That’s so cheesy.”

I laugh a little. “That was the point.”

A solemn weight pulls at her features, forming creases in her brow. “I wish you would’ve told me all the things you had to go through back then. It breaks my heart, Nico, that you endured all of that alone.”

I rise to my feet.

Towering over her, I grip her nape, propping her chin up with my thumb, and bring my lips close to hers. “Every night I spent with you in our dreamlands, that was all I needed, Tommy.”

“I’m still angry at you.” Her warm breath fans over my cheek, tracing arousal down my middle. “For lying.”

“Then take it out on me.”

Her mouth opens and I swallow her breath, pressing my lips into hers, letting our tongues dance. She inhales deeply, curving her body into mine, melting into the kiss.

We need this moment.

Her hands come up to my cheeks. Small currents hum in my chest and travel down into my stomach. My knees go fucking weak with an insatiable feeling for *more* pulling my abdomen taut.

I twirl my tongue over her bottom lip, tasting the copper from the gashes she made earlier.

As if she can read my disapproval, she sinks her teeth into mine, sucking and scraping back the skin.

I shudder, thrusting my tongue in deeper, kissing her like I'm starved and depraved—like I didn't just have her over and over again last night.

Her hands twist in my hair. Little sounds of pleasure catch in her throat and vibrate in my lips.

I haul her legs up around my waist and spin us around, lowering her onto the bed.

She breaks away, her gaze wild with a zealous lust, and fumbles to free me from my pants.

I rush to take off my dress shirt as she settles onto her knees and unstraps my belt, tossing it across the room.

She wraps her fingers around my cock, bringing her mouth to my tip.

"*Fuck*," I hiss, a euphoric high warping my perception.

Tommy massages her lips against the head of my dick, curling her fingers around its base to test how hard I am.

She drags the end of her tongue down the sensitive underside, then back up, again and again, before she takes all of me inside her mouth.

I feel myself hitting her soft flesh, but she manages to work me down entirely. The muscles in my groin clench from the instant pleasure, and the breath in my lungs goes shallow.

The sides of her throat hug tightly around me as she glides my cock in and out and in again without effort.

I groan, gripping the back of her hair as she swallows me down to the base of my length. "Fuck, Tommy, the fact that you're so good at this pisses me off."

A flash of her gargling those *fuckboys* grinds my nerves.

"I'm going to murder them all," I growl.

She removes me from her mouth at an agonizingly slow speed, lightly dragging her teeth along the top and lapping her tongue around my head.

I jerk back, inhaling sharply through my teeth. A short-lived pain quivers up my abdomen.

She giggles, a sensual purr that tingles up my cock and into my belly. “Bad boys deserve to be punished too.”

I look down at her through my heavy-lidded gaze. “Did you punish the others this way too?”

She smirks up at me, her lips shining with my pre-cum. “Only some. Not all. Depended on their skillset.” And then she opens wide and takes me in again, all the way down.

Heat surges in my blood stream as I thrust in and out of her silky throat. “You’re such a little fucking brat.”

Her smile wraps around my cock as she twirls her tongue around the tip like it’s her lollipop. “And you like it.” The erotic timbre of her tone nearly sends me over the edge.

I shudder, clenching the muscles behind my navel to keep from spilling in her mouth. I want to save it. I *need* to be inside of her.

“I could fuck your mouth all day, baby, but your little cunt is where I want to be right now.” I hook my thumb under her jaw and lean down, meeting her lips with mine.

I taste myself on her, and it fucking spins my head with a bizarre greed to mark her with my teeth and fill her up before watching it all drain out. It’s a reminder that no matter how far she tries to run away from me, nobody will ever be able to satisfy her the way I can.

She doesn’t relent and breaks away from my kiss instead, staying on her knees. “I’m in charge tonight.”

Instead of slowing down, she lathers my shaft with her tongue, licking down to my balls and back to my head. Her other hand comes up and works the base of my dick as she sucks on the end, putting me in an ecstasy I’ve never felt before.

“Fuck, baby, I’m about to—” The second the words slip out, she speeds her hand, slips me out of her throat, and points my length at her salivating, open mouth.

I come in agonizing pulses, shooting my wet, sticky release across her tongue as she keeps her eyes locked with mine. Too excited, a few strings make their way across her lips, her cheeks.

She lets me finish entirely, making sure she wrings out every ounce of her thick prize, and without breaking our conjoined stares, swallows my

seed in one ravenous gulp. Her lips part for me again, and she sticks out her clean, pink tongue, knowing what the sight will do to me.

My eyes darken as I swipe my thumb over the strands of cum on her face and paint her lips with them.

"Good boy." She nips at my knuckle, grinning. "*Now* you can have me."

She lays back on the bed, calling me to her with a curled finger.

I give a low, daring laugh, still lightheaded from my high.

"Oh Tommy," I warn in a gravelly rumble, devouring her with my hungry gaze. "You have five seconds to take off your dress."

She slowly discards the clothing as extra temptation, taking her time to unfasten her lacy bra and release her delicate breasts.

I climb beside her on the bed and slip her underwear down over her knees. I toss it aside and slide my hand between her thighs, massaging her delectable clit in lazy circles.

She arches back, locking a leg around my waist, the angle exposing the valley of her ribcage, the shapely curves of her breasts, her throat already decorated with blotches that I left on her last night. The purple and blue blossom up near her ear is more pronounced than the rest. My favorite spot, because it draws a reaction out of her to hear the sound of my raspy breath while I kiss and bite on her neck.

I devour it once again, leaving an imprint that I hope will last her a lifetime. Then, I move down, catching one of her hardened nipples in between my teeth.

She squirms, pressing into my hand with her soaking cunt.

"*More*," she spills in breathy intervals. "Keep going."

I move my thumb faster, leaving wet, brutal kisses down her neck. Her fingernails scrape down the backs of my shoulders, eliciting a pleasurable pain that only amplifies my arousal.

I grind my hard cock against her leg, clenching my jaw as I clasp onto my self-control for dear fucking life. She's an addiction that I crave more than nicotine. I'm still fuzzy in the head, and this carnal desire to be inside of her, wrecking her the way she does me, overwhelms my senses.

Her face begins to arrange in one of pleasure, right on the precipice of her release. I feel her body tense beneath me.

I remove my thumb from her clit and spread her legs even wider before positioning my waist between them, propping up on my hands for support.

“You ran away from me.” I rub the tip of my cock at her entrance, dripping and ready to be filled. “I told you what would happen if you ran, Tommy.” I position her hips upward. “Now *you’re* going to be a good girl and take it.”

“*Hard*.” She wraps her legs around my waist again. “Fuck me harder than you ever have before, Nico. I can take it.”

I raise off the bed, wrap both my hands behind her ass, pick her up, and place her on the carpet to get better traction. “You’re going to feel this in the morning, baby.”

In one thrust, I bury all the way inside of her.

She suctions around my dick, and a rush of intense pleasure surges up my spine.

She buries her teeth into her lip, clenching around me and using her hold to raise her hips even more, perfecting the angle of my penetration.

Her eyes roll back into their lids, and I shiver from the fucking rapture. It’s not enough. Not even in the slightest, so I hold onto the backs of her legs and skillfully trade places with her, keeping my cock buried inside as we make the transition.

She straddles me now, her beautiful, long curls flowing down and brushing over my flushed skin. I tuck some of them behind her ear to see her face. Her tan cheeks are bright red, and her hazel eyes are more emerald today, always a darker shade when she’s turned on.

“Go on, babe, ride it. You’re in charge, remember?” I bury my fingertips into the sides of her ass, holding her in place as I grind my pelvis higher, twisting my dick deep inside of her.

A steely, determined look sharpens in her eyes as she raises onto her knees, pulling herself partway off my cock, and then plunges straight down, swallowing it up in her sweet flesh. The sliver of light peeking in from the curtain glistens the cum still on her lips.

I meet each one of her thrusts. Her seductive, bleary-eyed gaze, her teeth pinching back her bottom lip, the way her breasts bounce and ripple as she rides me, the lewd, breathy cries spilling from her—it triggers that depraved, primal part of me to fucking consume her whole.

“Nico,” she whimpers. “I need it *harder*.”

A breathy laugh escapes me. “I thought you were in charge tonight.”

“Stop playing with me.”

I lift my hips, driving as deep as I can.

Her head rolls back.

“Let me hear you beg a little.” I hold her up by the ass, removing myself from her.

She returns her salacious gaze onto me, taking one of her breasts into her palm and kneading it. “Give it to me harder, Nico.” She splits apart her knees to fight my hold, lowering down on my cock in a slow, agonizing motion. “*Please.*”

Tingles scurry in my stomach, spasming through my abdomen.

“Such a good fucking girl.” I lift her off me and set her waist over my head, positioning her on all fours. The view of her delicious breasts drooping as her knees settle against the harsh carpet ignites a lust I can’t contain.

I use the bed as leverage to rise up and mount her before slipping back inside.

My hips churn into her, unyielding, as I gather her curls in my palm and pull, my other hand pressing against the wall for balance.

I plow hard and slow, hitting that spot that drives her insane, over and over, twisting and curling my dick inside of her.

Her body shudders, and her breath picks up. “Nico, *right there*—” And then she lets out a cry, writhing underneath me.

“*Don’t stop!*” Her walls convulse and grip my cock. “*Nico!*”

“God, baby, you take it so fucking good.” I straighten and grip her ass, enjoying the sight as I drive in and out of her, quickening my forceful thrusts. The top of her forehead grinds against the floor as she palpitates against me.

Her body goes limp, the backs of her shoulder blades cutting under her skin as she chases her breath.

I let her finish entirely before I feed both of my arms under her, pick her up, and collapse back onto the mattress with her in my grip.

I relax my chest against her, ravishing in the high of my own prior orgasm, in the feeling of her wrapped around me, *here* with me. Nothing else separates us.

I could stay in this shitty motel room for the rest of my life with her.

She wiggles around in my hold to face me, keeping my dick inside of her.

“I love you, Nico,” she murmurs, breathless, caressing the back of my hair with her long fingernails. “Thank you for enduring it all this time just

to keep me safe.”

An endless feeling floods my chest, drowning every part of me.

I lift up on my elbow and give her a soft kiss, hoping to take away all of the heartache I know she’s feeling after my confession.

“Choosing to protect your identity was a decision *I* made.” I fuse my forehead to hers, inhaling a deep breath of her fragrance—a fruity, warm vanilla with traces of my lotus candle, an amalgamation of her clothes and my house. “I don’t want you to feel burdened by it. Promise me.”

Her hand comes up to my cheek, and she kisses me once more, her oath lost to the silence of the room.

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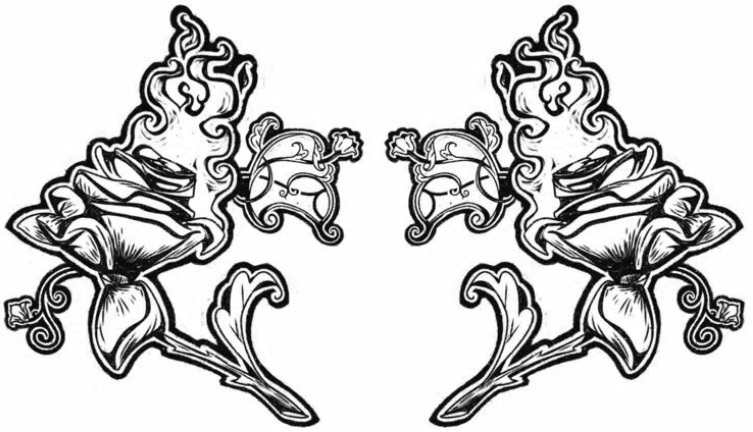
CHAPTER 35



LET ME KEEP YOU SAFE

THE LUCID DREAMER

I down the last of my coffee, the bitter espresso pricking my tastebuds and burning in my stomach. It’s strong, per my request as Caleb went on the normal morning coffee run.

Today, of all days, I need to be clear-headed. The sleep helped, but I’m skeptical how my body will operate with it, when it’s so used to going without.

Tommy slips an oversized flannel over her tank top. The rose gold sunrise filters through the motel room. Dust particles float in the air like specks of glitter, and streaks shine over the side of her face and into her hair. I admire the sun-kissed gloss of her complexion, the strawberry blonde of her messy, bunched curls.

Pain ripples through my chest.

I catch myself, halting in the moment, trying to collect as much of it as I can. I’m careful not to let my mind run too far ahead of me, envisioning a future where I don't exist to watch her, protect her. I’m not religious by any means, but I doubt I’m going wherever she is in the afterlife with all the atrocities I’ve committed. No god would want this shell of a man.

I clear my throat and toss my empty to-go cup in the trash can beside the desk, catching a glimpse of the gun she aimed at me still on the rough wood.

“Where did you get it?” I ask.

“Hm?” She looks up from her overnight bag, zipping it up.

I hold the gun up. “This. Did you always have one?”

She grins bashfully, biting at her long fingernail. “Not exactly. I sort of created it in my dreamland and brought it out.”

I gape at her, then the pistol, because it’s realistic as hell. I shouldn’t be surprised at how observant she is with things around her, given she’s an artist. Her eyes are always hunting for beautiful, intimate details.

My hands wrap around its frame, clicking on the safety as I stroll up to her.

I come up behind her and, with my free palm, guide her grip onto the gun over mine. “Like this.”

With my gentle pushes, I form her hands into a more stable stance, more accurate to aim. Pulling up the small, etched iron sights, I align them with a vase on the bedside table and then have her look down them, seeing how she can pick her targets.

“That one-handed, floppy grip isn’t going to do much once it starts kicking on you,” I say.

She rolls her eyes as I gently tuck the gun into the waistband of her jeans, hidden in the back shadow of her oversized shirt.

“It seemed pretty threatening against your heart.” She jumps a little in place, as if she remembered something important. “Wait, I didn’t put PTO in for today,” she blurts out, bringing her hand over her agape mouth. “What if they dock my pay?”

I can’t help but smile, wrapping my arm around her torso. “I’m your boss’s boss’s boss. Your pay *won’t* get docked. But if it makes you feel better, to pass the time, you can use the motel’s shitty internet to put in for it while you wait.”

“What’s the plan?” she asks, hugging her short arms around my waist.

“You’ll stay here with Caleb.” I kiss the tip of her nose. “I’ll take out my father, Mattia, and their men.” Over the sprinkle of freckles on her cheeks. “Once it’s done, Caleb will be notified.” Down her jawline. “The bounty will be lifted, and he’ll take you home.” Up her chin and to her lips. “And you will be free from this hell.”

She kisses me back, and then pulls away, searching my face with arcs of worry forming across her brow. “You won’t need him?”

“No,” I say, pulling her into a hug, an excuse to hide the tight line across my lips. A sickness churns in my gut. “I need him here with you.”

She nuzzles her face into my chest. “Nothing is going to happen to you. You can find a way to come home to me. *Please*.”

I bury my nose in her curls, inhaling her rich, sugary shampoo. “Something always happens with us, Tommy.” I let out a sigh, torpor pulling at my bones. “Just promise me you will stay put.”

“Is this how you felt waiting for me all those years in your dreamland?”

I don’t answer. Not because I don’t know what to say, but because my mouth goes dry and a pricking sensation jabs at my temples.

My jaw is sore from the relentless tension. Another start of a headache, I suppose. A migraine I can’t afford right now.

A long second passes, and I realize Tommy’s still holding onto me, quiet. Despite my lack of reply, she isn’t talking, looking up at me, nothing. It’s unusual and triggers my anxiety, but my heart doesn’t shoot off like normal. It feels slow, like I never woke up.

I go to pull away to look at her, but my gravity shifts, offsetting my equilibrium.

My pulse fires.

I sway a little, luckily still supported by her hold.

“What the…?” My own words reverberate in my head, and the room around us begins to drip across my vision. I blink hard but can’t focus on anything as I try to halt the vicious spinning.

“Tommy…” The muscles in my mouth, in my tongue, in my face, they slacken and I can’t get anything else out.

My limbs become heavy, like they’ve been tied with lead. I know this feeling. I’ve forced it on many adversaries in the depths of my cabal. It’s from the sedative we inject them with or crush into their drinks, taking their consciousness so they’re easier to strap into their cages or chairs for questioning.

She’s still silent, and for a split second, I think I’m in some kind of nightmare. None of this is real, she’s not here, and it’s just me trapped in the prison of my dreamland again—only this time, I know better. Something is wrong. Is it Mattia? Did he find us?

The prickling in my legs, the approaching numbness, I try to fight it off, push away from her. She has to go. It’s not safe here, especially if she has

been drugged too. How did I let this fucking happen? We're so goddamn close to the end.

Her arms tighten around me, and I'm too weak to escape.

"I'm sorry you suffered this long," she murmurs, tracing her eyes across my face, as if searching for something. Then, she unravels from me to lay my body across the bed.

The light gray popcorn ceiling of the motel swirls like a nebula as I fight to keep my eyelids open.

"It's time to rest now, Kit." She kisses my lips, but I can't feel a goddamn thing.

The gravity of this drug grows stronger, wearing down my resistance, but I can see the blur of her as she straightens up, a melancholy stamped across her beautiful face. "I'll take things over from here. This will be the last of your tragedy."

Hot, mind-numbing terror bursts through my brain as Caleb kicks open the door with an unconscious Gabi thrown over his shoulder.

He carefully lays him down beside me, acknowledges me with a pained, resistant look, and then exits the room.

"I love you," is the last thing I hear her say before my ability to fight any longer is stripped away, like a petal in the breeze.

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CHAPTER 36



KINGPIN

THE TRESPASSER

It was late last night, right after Nico fell asleep. I quietly slipped out of the bed, dressed in his wrinkled button-up to sneak outside for a smoke.

A little reprieve to digest our argument, the makeup sex, and where we currently stood after it all.

So much had happened in one fucking day—Mom's letter, the ancestral window, the revelation of Nico's family, the fact that he lied all these years to me. I didn't even know how to begin processing everything, and I didn't try. It was impossible, up against the gnawing in my gut over his supposed goodbye.

My plan to smoke and drown in my own anxiety was just another version of running away, something so disgustingly integral to me. I hated how natural it felt.

I stepped outside under the awning. Gabi was in the car, parked right in front of the door, asleep in the driver's seat, while Caleb leaned against the exterior, a cigarette dangling between his lips, his glare like a dagger to my throat.

If it weren't for Nico, I had no doubt he would've snapped my neck by now. I've made his job much harder than it needed to be.

Before he could say some cutting remark, I grabbed him by the hand and tugged him around the corner of the building, away from any chance

Nico or Gabi could eavesdrop.

Nico would not live a life of misery just to flatline when he finally got everything he wanted. He deserved more. A childhood, a normal sleep cycle. All the things I took for granted. There would be no sacrifice. He'd spent years ensuring my safety, so it was my turn to do the same.

I *refused* to let anything happen to him. So, against my pride and better judgement screaming at me not to trust someone like Caleb, I blurted out: "You know what Nico plans to do to take his father down. I *know* whatever it is, he won't survive it. He believes that's the only way I'll be free of his fucking family, right?"

He stared at me, not a hint of emotion displayed anywhere on his face. Embers continued to dissolve into the wind. "Sounds like you need to go talk this shit out with *him*, not me."

He went to slip around me, but I latched onto his arm. "Wait! I'm asking you to help me, Caleb. Let me take Nico's place. *I* can take down Levi and his men instead."

He gave me a disparaging once-over, unimpressed. "Why should I go against my damn boss's orders to help you, someone who couldn't even handle Mattia?"

"Because I don't want him to die." The thought squeezed my heart, pinching the back of my throat. "You already know his plan, right? To end his line in one fell swoop?"

Caleb grimaced, giving me the confirmation I didn't want. He stomped out his smoke against the concrete below.

My pulse seized, and I did my best to hold onto my breath before it escaped me, the hysteria overtaking my nervous system.

He's going to die.

Die.

Hell no.

"I won't let him do this for me. Help me." My lips trembled as I held Caleb's intense gaze, desperate, my only lifeline. "I'll be the one to end the motherfuckers. *Please*."

He let out a terse breath, turning away from me with a stressed hand in his hair. "You're such a pain in the ass." And then, he let his hand fall to his side, the warring and confliction evident in his eyes. "I disagreed with his suicide mission from the start. I don't want him to die either. You on the other hand, I could really care less about."

If I were in any other state, I'd have flipped him off, but his agreement to help unclenched the muscles in my gut.

At the end of the day, we both agreed on one thing: Nico had suffered enough.

Caleb and I came up with a plan and executed it without issue.

Now, here we are, the tires treading smoothly on the interstate, entering South Haven. Few words have been exchanged since we left Brownwood, other than my rational panicking over the drugs he fed Nico and Gabi, and the fact that I'm actually going through with this shit, walking right into a wolf den.

What my family has spent centuries actively avoiding is my destination.

I massage the bridge of my nose, feeling the start of a rupture through my temples.

The devastation on Nico's face haunts me. I push it away, but it returns, the betrayal, the hurt. The muscles in my chest tense.

I trace the words etched into my thighs, focusing on my breath, on the things in my control at the current moment.

It's the same feeling he must have had when he needed to lie for my safety.

By the end of the day, Nico will be okay—still alive. His disgusting father will be in a grave. This manhunt will be over.

And I will probably be gone with him.

That's what it took, for Anne at least—to be okay with dying. She accepted her fate and brought in a goddamn tsunami. Though luck was on her side, and she somehow escaped.

I doubt my fate will be as kind, after the last few months I've had.

In a perfect world, I kill Levi, walk out of his prison unscathed, and jump into Nico's arms. We live the rest of our days happy—no more bullshit—and all is well.

Unrealistic expectations don't stick, and I know that these are all just a child's dreams. It's like wanting to be an astronaut or a surgeon as a kid, not knowing what the world is really like.

Caleb cracks his window and lights up a cigarette with a skilled, one-handed motion, the other on the steering wheel.

"You getting nervous?" he asks, though I make no mistake to assume it's because he cares. He wants this to go well, for his and Nico's sake.

Smoke infiltrates the vehicle, coaxing my own addiction to light one up. I feel like I'm on death row, experiencing everything for the final time.

"I'm about to be handed to a vicious man who wants to enslave me," I reply, deadpan, and then snatch the cigarette from his lips. "Why no, I'm not fucking chill right now." I suck in a dramatic inhalation of the nicotine, hoping it will fix me.

Caleb lights up another in its place, disregarding my sarcasm. "I'll do my best to bring you back to him," he murmurs. "He'll string me up himself if I return empty-handed."

I look over at him, a little stunned by his sincerity.

"Thanks," I mumble.

A beat passes.

We both take drags against the pull of the tires under us.

I pick at the frayed hole on the thigh of my jeans. "Even if I don't, please take my body back to him. Just so he knows that I didn't abandon him."

In my periphery, Caleb tilts his head to me and then back to the road. "He knows," he says under his breath.

I meet the shiny reflection of his shades, hiding his eyes, and nod in a genuine manner.

Another wash of silence hangs in the air between us.

To pass the time, I gauge the dark sunglasses on his face, wondering why he's wearing them since it's overcast.

"The scar on your face," I say, "when you got the injury, was your eye harmed too?"

I expect him not to answer, but I guess we've bonded through our shared madness, because he says, "Yeah. I got lucky. They went easy on it when they tortured me, saving my eyeball for them to pry out with their knives. Nico killed them before they could, but they wounded it when slicing down my face. I can still see, but I have certain annoyances that I deal with from it."

"Like sensitivity to light?"

He gives a lazy, two-finger salute. "Yup."

The conversation goes stale, and I don't push it. Caleb isn't one for chit-chat. I'm just grateful he shared *something* about himself.

It makes me happy, aside from the horrendous torturing he endured, that Nico saved him. It amplifies my tenacity, squashing my doubts and fears

the closer we get to the Valentine prison.

I hold onto Nico and my love for him, bottle it up, and keep it in the center of my chest as a reminder of why I'm doing this.

It comes in handy when we turn off onto a road tunneled by trees. The further we drive, the more secluded the area becomes.

Caleb rolls the window up and tosses a pair of handcuffs in my lap. "Put your arms behind your back and let me lock those around your wrists. And I need the pistol."

I do as he says, making sure the safety's still on before I slide my steel creation across the console. He takes it, then clicks the metal of the binds into place before locking them with a small tool.

We went over the plan again the second we got in the vehicle. I have every angle of it memorized. He will be close by, monitoring everything behind the scenes. I just have to wait for Levi to take the bait.

No matter how many times I assure myself it will work, I still feel close to vomiting all over the slick surface of the dashboard.

Caleb reaches over and ruffles my hair with his hand, attempting to make it look like I put up a fight.

"Bite your lip hard," he orders. "Enough to make it bleed."

Without thinking too hard about his request, I do as he says, weirdly reminded of mine and Nico's hotel sex. A blush warms my cheeks. I miss him already.

My front teeth bite a chunk out of the plump flesh. Pain explodes up my face, and crimson seeps into my mouth.

I swallow it, trying not to gag from the sharp taste.

Caleb nods in approval. "Levi and his men are heartless. Expect every awful thing you could ever think of a man to do to you. Don't let your guard down, but don't be a brat either. They *will* punish anything not subservient. The sooner he locks you up in the undercage, the sooner we can end this shit."

In the distance ahead, the tall iron gates come into view. Behind them, I can see the outline of the mansion.

It feels like I've been here before, between Nico's dreamland and then Anne's painting of the past within her window. The scene is so familiar, yet so unsettling in person.

I shift around in my seat, sliding over the warm leather. My pulse picks up, entwining the nerves like roots in my stomach.

“You ready?” Caleb asks.

“No,” I answer honestly.

I draw in a heavy breath, hoping the oxygen will dissolve the anxious flutters in my bloodstream.

The iron gates grow larger as we approach. Several men are stationed in front of them—big and muscular, dressed in suits, all strapped with a myriad of weapons.

Time to act the part.

I shift into character—a girl in fight-or-flight, desperately switching my fear-stricken gaze from guy to guy. The more frightened I look, the less they will see me as a threat.

Caleb rolls his window down and his face is enough to permit us entrance.

The gates swing open, and we enter through, the smooth pavement transitioning into shined cobblestone.

What was once a monument to my adolescence, a playground for two stupid kids who didn’t know their fates, now becomes a mausoleum of regret. Regret that this is how things had to play out, that Nico couldn’t be here with me in what could be my final moments of sovereignty.

The mansion is bright gold and white with large, old columns. If I didn’t already know what was inside, I’d be starstruck by the beauty of its architecture. It’s just a façade, an illusion of purity.

Four men wait by the entrance, by the massive doors made of dark, polished wood. They stand perfectly still, though their eyes follow the front of our car as it slows to a halt in front of them. They’re as well-dressed as Caleb but with a more professional demeanor. Punishment for anything but perfection must have shaped them to be this way.

I continue to thrash, my cuffs cutting into my wrists. One of the men opens Caleb’s door with a bow, another coming to mine. Two wait to see if they’re needed to restrain me, which I’ll make sure they are.

I hear the click of my door and lunge my torso toward the sliver of open air, smashing the bulky man and pushing him back on his feet. My feet touch the cobblestone and I take off away from the mansion, wiggling against the hands that do their best to grasp me.

Caleb sprints around the car, just as planned, and slips himself between the underlings. I relax my muscles, preparing for—

“Down, bitch!” The words boom from Caleb’s lungs as he whirls his arm around, giving a hell of a convincing open-palm slap to my cheek.

To seem as believable as possible, I rocket myself across the stone below and cry out in pain.

His thick arms pull me up and over his shoulder, keeping me away from the door guards as best he can. “I’ve got her. Heading to the boss. She’ll lose teeth if she runs again.”

It’s hard to make out the upside-down foyer against the sting of my jaw and the bounce of my head against Caleb’s back.

It looks nothing like the place Nico and I used to play in—or not anymore, at least.

The walls are all scarlet red with extravagant staircases heading to the second and third story floors. Crystal chandeliers sparkle above us.

Maids pass in silence, their heads to the floor as they hurry across. One woman mops up a spill as if her life depends on it, which it probably does. A live ensemble roars with an upbeat jazz tune, the stand-up bass player rubbing his fingers numb.

The welcoming, spirited room quickly fades as Caleb heads down the halls filled with inhumanly expensive artwork and pottery on marble stands.

God, I wish I were here under different circumstances to appreciate them, but right now it’s all I can do not to pass out from the blooming welt on my face and the nauseating journey as a prisoner.

We finally approach what has to be Nico’s father’s room, judging by the ornate entrance and the number of henchmen standing watch.

The door swings open, and the room greets us with a menacing set of raven-colored walls, a beautiful overlay of velvet rugs, and a dark leather throne for the kingpin himself.

Bracing myself for the inevitable crash, I feel each of Caleb’s steps as he approaches the older man, who holds a small, steaming cup of black coffee.

There’s a quick tilt to my vision as I’m tossed right side up and onto the lush carpet at Levi’s feet.

With one foot, Caleb rolls me over on my stomach and presses his heavy boot into the space of my back above my cuffed hands, never tracing his gaze down to my bruised flesh. I cock my head at an uncomfortable angle to see Levi.

“I have to say, I was quite surprised to receive your call,” he says in a casual demeanor. “Care to explain why you brought her to me when I gave this job to my son?”

He looks *exactly* like Nico, only an older, more bitter version—tall, fit build, stocky shoulders, smooth, dark hair, and gorgeous facial features. I see traces of Mattia as well. An alluring caress to the eyes, lulling you in with a beauty only to be fucking devoured.

Caleb remains towering behind me, hands pinned behind his back in false respect, staring right through the old man without a flit of emotion. “As much as you want to have faith in your son, we both know Nicola was never going to bring her to you, so I did instead. He is my boss, and I wanted to protect him at all costs. She is yours, and in exchange, I ask that you absolve any punishment meant for him.”

Levi sets down his coffee, adjusting his cufflinks as Caleb finishes. A smile cuts across his face, exposing his bleach-white teeth. The sight crawls over my skin, seeing him feel any inkling of joy. “I’ve always valued your loyalty, Mr. Porter.”

“Thank you, sir. Anything for the Valentine legacy.” Caleb speaks in this honeyed, bullshit way I’ve never heard before from him, and it only amplifies the acid in my gut.

Finishing a quick bow, Caleb turns around and is guided out by a trio of men who are evidently below his rank.

The doors glide shut, and I have no choice but to accept my isolation.

Levi rises from the chair and saunters closer, gauging his prey. His eyes, refracting in the amber light, fall down to me like a guillotine. Pieces of peppered hair spill over his temples. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Willow.”

Years of Nico’s cries echo through my head. All I can imagine is the way I watched this man beat his own child in the nightmare that rattled Nico’s dreamland the day we were separated. “Can’t say the same, you fucking asshole.”

He chuckles, amazed at any kind of resistance, then licks his dry lips. “You have spirit. Lovely. It will make it that much more satisfying to watch as it breaks, bit by bit.”

“Go fuck yourself!” I snap, teeth bared, flailing against my restraints.

My tantrum comes to a quick end as he stamps on the nape of my neck, cutting off my oxygen. He buries my face into the rug, chafing my cheek.

After a few agonizing seconds, he relents before laughing into the quiet, spacious room.

I pant for breath, rolling over onto my side to better face him.

He crouches and snatches my chin in between his rough grip. “You’re lucky you have value, or I’d have taken out your knees already.”

I go to rip my face away, but his fingers constrict in my skin.

He yanks my head and bends down, forcing me to hold his frigid stare. “You are going to do as I say, or I will let every man I have on the clock right now have their way with you. One by one, for hours on end, until they’ve had their fill. I will keep you awake, force you to endure the pain until you’re begging for me to save you.”

Nausea brutally twists my stomach at the visual.

I cut my eyes to the guards blending into the corners of the room, taking in their curling lips, the spark of lust and zeal in their gazes.

A raw, primal fear slices in my chest, and all I can think about is what Nico said last night.

I’ve seen things that I’d never want you to witness, to go through yourself!

Nico was never a monster.

It’s Levi and the men who walk this earth, believing women are theirs to *have their way with*.

I swallow, pressing my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

“You will do what I say, when I say it,” he orders with a degrading edge to his tone. “Are we clear?”

I do my best to fight away furious tears, to not show weakness. “Yes.”

He squeezes my jawbone until pain shoots up into my temples.

A whimper escapes through my lips against my will.

“And where are your manners? You will address me as *sir* if you wish to keep your tongue.”

His request burns a fire in my throat as I grit my teeth. “Yes *sir*.”

An evil smirk sews into his mouth, and he lets out another menacing chuckle. “Oh, Ms. Willow, you’re going to love it here.” He releases my jaw and gives me a harsh shove before snapping his fingers.

The exit opens, and the jazz music can be faintly heard from the hall.

One of his men marches in and wraps their toned, hairy fingers around my neck. He heaves me to my feet, choking me in the process.

I try to gather any sense of balance I can. Levi towers above me, slipping his hands into the pockets of his expensive slacks.

With his eyes still on me, he cocks his head. “Take her to the undercage.”

At the command, three of his men move out of formation in unison, gathering around me.

Tremors threaten to shake my arms, but I hold myself together through sheer willpower, clenching the muscles in my legs—a distraction against my fraying nerves.

One of the shorter guards rips me by my bicep and throws me toward the open door. I almost stumble on my feet, still reeling from the trip through the mansion, but manage to catch myself on the door frame with my shoulder.

More men flank the hallway, their hungry stares assaulting me as I’m forced to walk between them.

At the end of the line, I pass Caleb, locking eyes with him.

His expression is set, just as apathetic as the others around us, blending in with amazing ease. But his gaze is sharp, alert, and full of the same rage I feel simmering under my skin.

You can do this.

The momentary connection, the reminder I’m not alone, relights the fire low in my belly.

It’s enough fuel for my anger to survive this confinement, enough to turn all these motherfuckers to ash.

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CHAPTER 37



OBEY

THE TRESPASSER

I am stripped down into my braless tank top and underwear, a precaution to keep me from smuggling anything in from my dreamland. The men take their time, pawing and pulling at my jeans, groping my skin. I spit and snap at them, which earns me a few knuckles to the cheeks.

I'm confined into a small room, the tile floor cold against my bare feet, and chained to the metal, twin-sized bed frame in the corner of the room.

I'm left alone for a good hour.

During my prison sentence, I scope out my surroundings. The low fluorescent lighting paints a gloomy tint over the room, sucking any joy out of the marrow of the walls. It's like I'm back at the hospital with Mom again.

In the corner is a toilet, beside it a sink, and on the other side is a small table and two chairs. They're barely enough to be called human essentials, but it seems that Levi expects me to make this my new home. Expects me to be grateful at all that I'm still breathing.

I sit on the mattress, and the paper-thin sheets scratch at my bare legs. My tattoos look saturated under the cool glow.

I bounce my knee in place, fighting to keep my anxious thoughts at bay. My mind keeps reaching ahead, imagining gruesome scenarios of these men forcing themselves onto me, of the same torture I watched Anne endure as

she told her tale—the bindings around her limbs, the lacerations across her skin.

That will not be you.

I assure myself of this over and over, staring through the small sliver of bulletproof glass in the door. The metal handle beckons me to pull at it, but I already tested the length of my iron leash, not even coming close.

The lower level of the mansion is one I know well. Although, back when Nico and I used to play tag down here, it was full of warmth and energy, not chains and agony. The halls were full of pink roses, and each room held some magical land with a different terrain—sandy slopes, evergreen mountains, blankets of snow.

What I would give to return to those small fragments of his imagination.

In reality, one wing of the lower level is crowded with servants that scurry from their one-room housing to tend the kitchens, the garden, and clean the wings of the mansion. They're all normal people who don't deserve to go down with the monstrosity of a man employing them.

The other wing—the undercage—is where I am, a line of identical, empty versions of this same room. It seems I'm their only prisoner right now, worthy of being held away in such an isolated space.

He put me here for a reason. I'm fucking honored.

It's obvious that my gift makes him uneasy. He no doubt heard of Anne and what she did to his kin, plus the palace that was demolished before this one was raised.

The lock on the other side of the metal door unlatches, and it creaks open.

Levi stands at the entrance, two of his men flanking his sides, but he doesn't step foot into the small room.

I tilt my head, confused by his distance.

His eyes skate down my tank top and over my panties, the untrimmed hair peeking out of them. My skin fucking shudders, and I have to suppress my disgust by grinding my teeth.

"I see you've already begun breaking in your new bed." He flicks his chin to the piece of shit mattress under me. "Good. It's time to put it to use."

I glower at him, feeling too much like an object under his stare to ever feel an inkling of comfort.

At my silence, he grins, the harsh line between his lips more degrading than the way he watches me. “I do love your obedience after our conversation. I’m glad that you now understand the repercussions, should you try to rebel against me. It only gets worse if you don’t obey.”

All I can think of is Nico, how he had to endure a lifetime of this vile man.

It makes me want to go back to last night and hug him a little while longer.

“Now, we will start with something small. A trial.” He turns his head and the man on his right slips a cigar in between his boss’s lips. “You are going to go inside of your dreamland, and when you return, I want you to supply me a copy of this 1924 triple eagle coin.” He rotates to the other man, greeted by a flame dancing on his lighter.

The end of his cigar crackles as he inhales a drag of it before tossing a large photograph into my new cell. It skids across the floor until it hits the leg of my bed, showing both faces, side by side, of an etched, aureate circle.

When he exhales, thick smoke wafts into the room, creating a thin veil between us. Through its haze, his low-lidded gaze still hangs on me.

“I do not levy punishment unless you give me a reason to, Ms. Willow. Do keep that in mind, my generosity.”

I don’t say a fucking word. Fury vibrates in me. I feel it clamoring my teeth together, beating my blood through my ears in quick thunderclaps.

He waits, carving another disgusting tilt to his lips. A test of my obedience.

My gaze stays on the two men beside him, their eyes assaulting my midriff, hoping I reap their *punishment*.

My heart speeds with a visceral fear, and I say, “Yes sir.”

Satisfied, his smile widens before he spins to leave.

One of the men follows him.

But the other steps inside, under the inhuman, white lights. From the hall, he drags with him a rolling IV, attached with opaque bags full of liquid.

My heart shoots up in my throat, and I crawl backward on the bed, the blades of my shoulders thudding hard against the stone wall.

He catches me by my ankle and yanks me forward, trapping my legs in between his knees.

No, no. Fuck no!

I ball my fingers and cock my elbow back. Just as I go to smash my knuckles into his temple, he catches my fist like a baseball. The glint of a syringe catches my eye.

I have just enough time to watch its pierced end break through the skin of my wrist while his other flexed arm holds me hostage, injecting a milky, white substance into my bloodstream.

The fast tempo of my heart slurs, and against every plea of my steadfast will, all of my muscles begin to give way, one by one, to the forced slumber.

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CHAPTER 38



REAL WOMEN

THE TRESPASSER

I move quickly in my oasis.

Noir must sense my urgency, the danger I'm in, because she stays close to my side as I work, pulling down the stardew of my world's sky and forming it into the bright, intricate coin Levi requested.

I trace the lines and cuts of the photograph with my eyes, ensuring it's as close to a replica as I can make it. In the picture, it seems heavy, so I give it more weight. Once I get it as close to exact as I can—enough to gamble my life on—I wrap my fingers around its ribbed edge.

The sedative in my system eventually wears out, and by the time I wake, Levi is on the other side of the door's threshold. Two more of his men are inside the room, one of which is Caleb.

I nearly smile in relief to see him, but catch myself, knowing it would ruin everything.

I lift from the bed, my head groggy and my thoughts swirled like cake batter from the drug. Extending my chained, non-IV arm as far as it will go, I open my fingers like a spring blossom. The prized currency glistens under the harsh light.

Caleb collects the boss's request and hands it over.

A mix of lust and fervor burns brightly in Levi's gaze as he inspects each side. "You truly are marvelous."

It’s an insult coming from him.

Since I prove myself, that I’m what the myths speak of, he pulls a list from his back pocket. The demands are written on thick paper, with big lines of red ink, along with corresponding, exhaustive photographs—close-ups of every part that could be questioned at auction.

1913 Bartleson Steele baseball card.

16th-century Sotao Imperial Vase.

Original Jack Warwick No. 7 (Red and Righteous).

I’m not sure why he doesn’t just make me bring back money or gold bars, but I guess the status and rarity gets him off—having all the world’s scarcest valuables.

I’m filled repeatedly with whatever is in the plastic sacs, in hour increments, testing the boundaries of my body and what won’t induce me into a permanent fucking coma.

Apparently, there is a doctor on standby, counseling them on how much to give me, where the blurred line is that threatens my health.

After the third treatment of the sedative, Levi informs me that, given in minor doses, it tranquilizes me for only a couple hours at a time. It’s a gruesome detail, but one that relieves me all the same.

It’s not been days. Nico is most likely still passed out on that motel bed, awaiting me in his dreamland.

I imagine him pacing, pulling at his hair, drowning in his helplessness—furious at me for doing something like this, and at Caleb for assisting.

I consider slipping away to him during one of my tasks for Levi, but decide against it, knowing the encounter would only make what I have to do that much harder.

So I refrain, and continue to work quickly.

After the fourth request, I wake up to a dry mouth, woozy and sluggish. I can barely lift my arm, let alone hand over the rusted, bronze trumpet to the man hovering over me.

Levi gives a belittling round of applause in the doorway, still too chickenshit to step inside. “Absolutely breathtaking. You get five minutes and then we go again.”

The metal door creaks closed.

I stare through the churning of my vision, trying to hold my focus on the light fixture, onto anything other than the listless beat of my heart.

Anne trickles back into my mind, and how she had to endure *years* of this mindless torture at the hands of the man she once loved. A sickness ruptures in my stomach.

I swallow through my cracked throat. Agony thrums in my brain. The physical torment festers and spreads with each breath. I feel it curling around my ribs like a miasma, burrowing deep, latching onto my flesh.

I tell myself the pain is nothing. I can handle it. No matter how hard it is to breathe, I am here and Nico is not and that's all I ever wanted—to untangle him from this web.

Five minutes pass, and the door opens again.

I muster the energy to roll my head in the direction of where Levi stands yet again.

One of his cronies tosses a pile of stapled papers onto my stomach.

I've worked at a corporation long enough to recognize the look of important documents, so I have a guess as to what he's going to ask for this time. The heart of why a corrupt billionaire asshole like him wants someone like me.

"Replicate this contract of dismissal, but ensure the signature at the bottom matches the references exactly, curve for delicate curve. It will be excellent leverage for the company president who has failed to show up for our merger meeting." There's a chipper note in his voice, as if he's having fun imagining this man suffer.

It reminds me of Mattia, the way he bared his teeth in that sadistic, predatory smile. It's hard to believe there's more than one of them, more of this plague.

Behind Levi, two others emerge from his backside and enter the room. They stand on either side in some kind of protocol, awaiting the man who controls the liquid narcotic to enter.

I can barely make out their faces, but I know one of them is Caleb by the subtle blurry differences of his outfit—no tie, loose collar, blazer sleeves rolled up to his upper forearms, a spider tattoo on the back of his hand. Glints of his piercings catch in the sterile luminescence as well.

He's still close. That's good. We may pull this off after all.

I have to end it. The legacy of savage men.

No more buying time.

One more dose of that medication might permanently maim me beyond repair. Or worse, lull me to the point where I am completely defenseless,

just a hole waiting to be violated.

I pull in a breath through my nose, the weight of the drug heavy on my chest. My lungs feel saturated with water.

"You spent…" The words slur out of my mouth, but I keep pushing. "Your whole life trying… to find me, and when you do… you… overuse me and ring me dry… and end up killing me." A weak, breathy laugh leaves me, barely audible. "Is this… how you killed… your wife?"

His tall figure snaps across the tile, and before I can register it, he's got his hands around my throat, pressing the back of my head into the thin pillow, his fingers tightening in a dangerous, animalistic grip.

The pressure behind my eyes swells. I choke and flail my limbs, trying to hit and kick him off me.

"You think you can speak to me with such disrespect and get away with it, you little bitch?" He shouts his words through gritted teeth, his spit splashing over my face.

Nobody in the room moves, including Caleb.

I remember what he told me: under no circumstances could he help me if I baited the old man.

This is my fault and I know it, and I'm probably going to die because of it. But I don't fucking regret it, because I had a hunch and it worked.

Levi is choking the life out of me, blackening my vision, getting me right on the cusp of death just to haul me back over and call it mercy. He's the one in control, not me.

But he's doing so *inside of the room*.

It gives me the confidence I need, the calmness to cling to, as my consciousness slowly fades.



UNSURE OF THE time I have remaining, I run down the Library of Reverie with Noir at my heels, headed for the ancestral window.

I need to see Anne again, to ask her how she did it without drowning the others in the manor that day. Levi deserves death, but not all the innocents in the mansion. The workers, Caleb, his family.

The aisle of windows blur in my periphery as I race past them. My breath is shallow, the dread nipping up my spine with each step.

At the end of the hall, in a space I come to like second nature, is my nocturnal home. The four edges are painted in four different pastel shades of purple, with blooms of glistening, bubblegum roses budding around the birch. My dreamland; my door.

I halt in front of it and kneel to Noir. “I need you to go into my oasis and get the burning bouquet. Meet me back at the entrance. Whatever you do, *don’t* set it down. Okay?”

She replies by stepping up on my knee and rubbing her head against my chin.

I kiss the top of her head, hoping she knows how much I fucking love her.

And then we break. She jumps into the portal to the Crossroads, her body transforming to enhance her speed.

I let out a breath, dropping my shoulders, and then I head for the precipice of the Library.

I run through the starry space, jumping from platform to platform until I find what I need. It’s still here, the gift from my ancestors—a rectangle of plum-colored wood, cracked but resilient, wrapped in ebony thorns.

My nerves flutter and twist in my stomach.

You can do this.

I crawl over the sill, and when I land, I break into a brutal sprint that would kill me on a normal day in the real world, weaving through the trees to the clearing ahead.

“Anne!” I shout.

I stop in the center, whirling around in search of her.

“Anne!”

The atmosphere is still cool, the sky still overcast and morose against the evergreen forest.

“Seriously? After all the vague hauntings, you’re going to abandon me now? *Goddammit*!” I scream up into the trees.

My echoes grow distant in the seemingly endless air, settling back to a quiet hum and the faint sound of my ricocheting pulse.

Without her, I have no idea what to do. I don’t want to die yet. There’s still so much I want to do with my art, with Nico and Noir. I want to build our life together. For fuck’s sake, we suffered enough. *He* suffered enough.

Hot tears gather in my eyes.

I can try and outsmart Levi. Bring a gun or a knife out of here and catch him off guard.

But I imagine how the scenario will play out. If Nico is a seasoned killer, then Levi is even more so. He'd never be so stupid as to let his guard down like that with me, and if I attempt to stab him and he overpowers me, my punishment will be worse than death.

Nausea bubbles in my stomach.

God, I can't do this.

A bolt of lightning cracks in my chest. Rage collects on my tongue, pushing the blood up my neck and into the tips of my ears.

"This is so *fucked up*!" I yell, my voice breaking in a sob. I throw my arms up, my fists clenched. "You can't do this! This is *your* fucking mess, Anne! I didn't choose to be born with all this goddamn baggage!"

My reverberating cry for help dies out and the stillness returns. It breaks me. Because this is it, and it was all for nothing. I tried to save Nico, save us, and in the end, his fucking father is going to win.

Why do evil men always win?

My knees collapse, hitting the ground, rocks and twigs biting through my jeans and into my skin. I wail into my hands, purging out all the emotions that have piled up since receiving my mom's letter.

What the fuck was I thinking, that I'd really make it out of this with my freedom?

If I ever do, I'm terrified of what I'll be left with. These men, Levi, it's only a matter of time until they peel away my skin.

The storm swells behind my sternum.

No.

Fuck no.

I did not come this far to fail not only myself, but the others who took his abuse. The abuse dealt by his father, his grandfather. Their wives and daughters who suffered their cruelty and believed it was love. Nico's innocent mother.

I have to end this.

"Anne!" I scream in a furious bellow. "Don't you fucking leave me alone to fix this! We've come this far! Show yourself and help me—"

A hand comes down on top of my hair.

"Get up, child."

I gasp and rip my head up to her standing behind me.

My ass hits the ground, and I catch myself upright with the heels of my hands.

She looks less ghastly, more normal, with a pink tint to her cheeks and her dry, blonde waves in a tightly woven updo. The material of *this* Anne's satin dress is dry and stitched up, with her corset snug against her waist.

Beside her is another woman who extends her arm to me. "Who said you are alone?"

This one looks similar to Anne, only she's shorter, with a brunette bob haircut and a dress glittering in a flurry of sequins.

My eyes jump from the soft skin of her palm to the third woman emerging from her side. "A Willow never does anything alone."

This one wears more modern pants, bright red lipstick, and shares my vibrant curls.

All three are young, connected in their resemblances even against the passage of fashion and time. The women who came before me: Anne, June, and Charlie Willow—grandmothers, mothers, daughters, granddaughters.

And then a familiar face kneels in front of me, cupping her small hands on my cheeks, her mouth curving into a mournful smile. "We are with you, Toms."

Mom.

My fight drains away, her presence giving me the comfort to fall apart.

I throw my arms around her neck. A sob scrapes out of my chest, and suddenly, it feels as if I am a child again, crying into her hair.

Mom squeezes me. "I'm so sorry for it all. I hope, now that everything is clear, you know I was trying to protect you. To let you experience a normal life. I was wrong, though." She matches my tears in her own tough, weathered way. "I was the scared one."

Validation, at least in some sense, is what I've always wanted from her. It doesn't excuse her actions, but it feels freeing to know she was another silent protector. First Nico, now her, and even those who came before her.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I sniffle. "I really thought you were batshit crazy."

She laughs a little, hugging my frame tighter. "Oh, my sweet girl. I never wanted any of this for you. I thought if we didn't look at the darkness, it would disappear. God knows we can't run from our demons, though."

Her tender words, her affection, they travel far inside of me, healing the little girl that craved to have them.

I’m still so angry and bitter toward her for how my life went; for how she withheld things from me; the cold shoulder and apathy she gave me most days.

But I also understand the burden placed upon her, that Logan only knew how to give me the affection she received from her own mother. Like a fucked up generational loop, it circled on and on and on.

The Willow history became our destined futures.

And it all ends with me.

I break away, glancing from her to the others, and then Anne. “I need you to tell me how you did it.”

Mom helps me up on my feet, but doesn’t let go of my hand.

Anne stares at me with a piercing gaze, her poised demeanor holding her shoulders stiff. Her bony fingers clasp in front of her gown. “I called on an inundation, and it cleansed the manor of its sin.”

“The Valentines lived, though, and even you were able to escape.”

Her brows lower in annoyance. “By sheer luck. Some members of the family were not there when I did so. My eternal regret, to have not been more careful.”

The reminder of my slipping time jumpstarts my adrenaline, my need for answers. “So there is no way to contain the catastrophe? I have no choice but to die along with the bastards, and bring down the innocents with me? The mothers and daughters just like us, all dealt a miserable, shitty hand?”

Anne licks her lips, draws in a breath. Whatever she wants to say, she doesn’t. The ache of silence spears right through any remaining hope that I have mustered in my head.

My heart descends, filling with a slow defeat.

“I’m not ready to die yet,” I whisper, the trepidation taking me over in waves. I feel it everywhere under my skin, eating at my blood, my bones. “How do I kill him without going down with him?”

“Tommy.” Charlie clutches my arm, her soft voice soothing my rising panic. Her eyes hold onto mine, as if she’s talking down a crying child. “There is a reason why the creatures in your dreamland live harmoniously. The things we mold in our realms, they abide by our will.”

I don’t have to think about what she says, because I know what she means. I remember vaguely explaining it to Nico once when we were kids, how Noir and the fish and the woodland creatures never harmed one

another. The moment I brought the burning bouquet from Nico's dreamland into mine, it settled into dim candlelight.

Whatever *I* manifested into existence, it bends to *my* will.

June taps her finger in the center of my chest. "Us Willows have a fierce spirit to be reckoned with, my darling girl. Now, it's time you use yours."

Mom pushes through June's arm to maneuver in front of me, the fear I know so well swelling in her eyes. "Tommy, listen to me. It takes a tremendous amount of power to bend the will of our creations outside this place. If you do this, you risk losing your way again. This time, nobody will be there to pull you out."

I step away from her, resolute. "You chose to be afraid your entire life. I love you, I do, but I will not follow in your footsteps." I look at the other women, finding my own features within them. "Or in any of your footsteps. This ends with me and Levi today. No more bullshit, no more pain. I will be the last woman to enter this place."

I hold my hand out, palm up, and close my eyes, feeling the acquainted pull of my consciousness warning me that my time here is coming to a close.

"Please, just give me your strength." I steel my voice with finality. "I need all the help I can get, right here, right now."

June lightly places her hand on top of mine. "I am here, love."

Then Charlie's, smiling warmly at me. "I'll be right by your side."

Mom's fingers close around my wrist, tears leaking down her cheeks. "I'm always with you, Toms."

Anne saunters closer and rests hers on my shoulder. "End this," she says.

Undo the final threads of their collective heartache and start anew.

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CHAPTER 39



PENANCE

THE TRESPASSER

"The undercage on the east side lower level is where they will lock you up. Levi won't want to take any risks, since your power is unpredictable to him. But, the room can't be opened from the inside, under any circumstance."

From the moment Caleb told me this, I knew what I had to do.

And like Nico, I refuse to let my ancestors' mistakes become my own. I promised him I would return, and I intend on seeing it through.

No more lies—a vow I brand to my fucking heart as I open my eyes to the pale, stone ceiling of my cell.

I feel the petals in my palm, a single rose hot with energy. Thin trickles of blood cake in the crevices between my fingers. The warm velvet of my power radiates.

But I can't have the bedsheets singeing or the plastic IV tube melting, so I do my best to silence the blossom. The fire, for now, is out. Though, I can feel its embers, giving a strange comfort in this otherwise harrowing room.

Contain it.

"Welcome back."

His voice penetrates my ears like a snake's sharp hiss.

I go to rise, but the tendons in my neck scream.

I wince, a small groan catching in my throat. My vocal cords scrape together like sandpaper, and I cough, inviting in a new kind of pain.

Fuck.

He got me good.

I drag my head over the pillow to look across the room, at the duo of men stationed at each of its corners, their tyrant at the entrance.

Levi takes up the entire frame of the doorway, his hands casually resting in his pockets. Across his shoulders, he strung his blazer, the sleeves dangling like pendulums. He is an exhibition of control and composition, as if he didn't just choke me out until I fainted. There isn't even the start of sweat across his forehead.

"You know…" My words have to be forced through my limp lips. "I'm only here… because you failed… as a father."

"The contract, Ms. Willow," he says in that belittling hum, "did you bring it?"

I press on, ensuring that, to him, I need the last of my defiance beat out of me. "Nicola is better, in every way. He—" A cough seizes my scratchy throat, and I wince from the pain, feeling as if my raw flesh is scraping against asphalt. "He will never… forgive you. And you're… no match at all."

His expression turns sour, and I see the hollowing of his cheeks as he grinds his jaw—something he and Nico have in common. His idyllic version of how this would play out is already beginning to fracture, and I can feel his impatience. Even a bit of desperation mixes in.

"Ms. Willow, this was honestly going so well. Yet you had to act like you have any sense of authority." He hands his jacket off to one of the men at his side and sighs. "You are property here. I tell you what to do, to say, and to think. And I do not have an equal in this fucking world. Now, the contract, where is it?"

Here we go. "It's pretty damn tough… to get you a contract… when I'm fighting for oxygen." *Make him unable to walk away*. "So have them give me another dose… and let me do my fucking work… *Sir*."

Levi raises his right hand, as if to pause the hallway guards as he takes his first step into the room again. "You had your chance. I warned you, and you did not listen." His fingers work their way to his black belt, beginning to unfasten it as he takes another step onto the tile. "And now, you will show penance with your screams. I want you awake for this, girl."

Levi takes one final step, meeting the center of the heavy, concrete tomb, ensuring his own ruin.

As his heavy boot clicks against the reflective floor, the door, finally, after hours of agony, slams shut.

Behind it, the outside guards shout over the muffled slice of bullets entering bone—Caleb shepherding these cruel men to hell, one by one.

The kingpin of this place whips around, finally showing a crack in his porcelain, placid mask. He goes to bellow out a harsh order, to command his two confused underlings to aid his escape, but words mean nothing anymore. The last thing his men will hear is the helpless scream of a weak, breakable man.

Before Levi can say his last goddamn goodbye, I lift my arm and let my fingers go numb, dropping the rose between us.

The stardust of the flower comes alive like a sparkler in its descent, and catches fire. The flames erupt. And they don't stop, building and building on each other until they lap the ceiling of the room.

As if this cell holds the spirit of every woman wronged from Levi's hands, they all ignite at once, growing until all I can see is the combustion consuming the bodies of him and his lackeys. Brilliant, almighty hellfire, returning these beasts to the goddamn ground.

Levi wails and thrashes, throwing himself at the door while his precious suit burns away. Then his coarse skin, his combed hair, his vile hands—all lost to the smoke.

For the first time in his life, Levi Valentine is the one begging, the one lathered in fear, eaten by embers.

His bubbling frame collapses against the door, the men beside him already purged of their spirits.

I smile and close my eyes, giving myself to the ravaging heat that licks up the bed and around my bruised legs. My mind slips away to the lull of my power being emptied entirely.

If Logan Willow is right, and there is a god, let these men never know.

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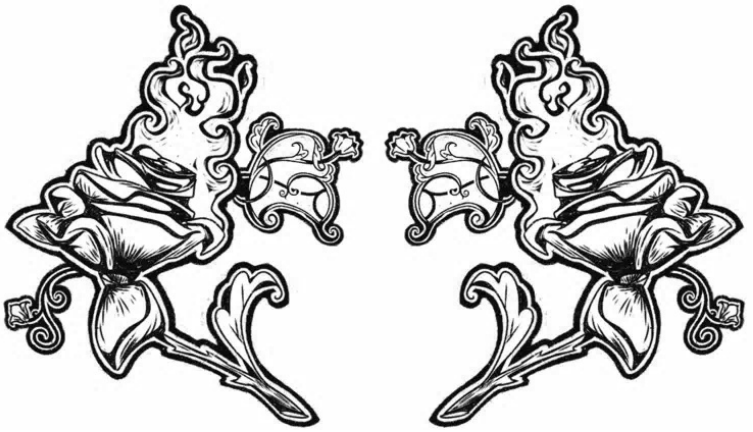
CHAPTER 40



THE END

THE LUCID DREAMER

My ears ring. They haven't stopped since I woke up in that shitty motel, wheezing through my hysteria as I shook Gabi awake, and commanded Caleb's crew, who stood outside the door, to drive us here.

I called her phone over and over, Caleb's too. Neither one of them answered. It was a poor attempt to satiate my unease—stuck in a vehicle, unable to do a goddamn thing. I'm forced to sit with the knowledge that she's in my father's mansion, receiving some kind of unthinkable persecution by him and his men.

I expunge the contents of my stomach several times until I'm dry heaving.

Gabi is a mess, hair disheveled, eyes wide and disoriented from the drug and the situation all together. He thrives on schedules, on knowing everything hours before it happens, and always being eight steps ahead.

Like me, this took him completely off guard.

I can't believe Caleb did this. I know his loyalty runs deep, but to choose my life over hers, when he knows how much she means to me. I will raze the grounds if I have to so she makes it back, even if he stands in my way.

When we enter through the gates, the front of the property is a clusterfuck of people. Guards gather in amassing circles, while workers evacuate out onto the lawn in confusion and fear.

The car barely parks before I rip open my door and dash out, my feet hitting the cobblestone and jarring the blended contents of my head.

I grimace, pushing myself toward the gilded, towering building.

Gabi catches up to me, latching onto my arm. “Nico, wait!”

I shove him off, my reflexes not quite recovered from the drug yet, and the motion sends me swaying.

I catch myself on the nose of a car. One of *my* cars. Fucking bastard.

Michael and Olivia speed around the sleek metal, splitting up to support both me and Gabi.

“What the hell happened?” I demand.

Michael frowns, exchanging a look with Olivia that fills my stomach with acid.

“You don’t look too good, boss. Maybe you should sit for a second?” Michael advises, attempting to lead me away from the mansion’s entrance.

I barrel out of his hold, dragging my feet to the stairs. The dense veil of smoke unfurls through the doorway and across the empty foyer, a solid plume that I can’t see through.

“Details, now!” Gabi orders Olivia behind me, knowing I won’t relent until I get information.

“Uh, from what we heard, a fire broke loose in the lower level. It was contained, but Caleb is overseeing the search to get a casualty count.”

My whole body snaps forward as if I’m a drunk marionette, the dread forcing my limbs to fight against the side effects of that goddamn coffee. The undercage is where Father would’ve taken her. And I know the fire is her doing, I was at its mercy for half my life, but *bodies present* means that hers could be one of them.

Gabi lurches me back and pins his strong arms around mine, fighting against me. “Nicola! You cannot go inside! Not until we know the fire is out!”

I go to bite his forearm before he adjusts his grip away from my mouth. “I have to find her. I have to make sure she is okay. Why would she do this? I–she–Father is still inside! I need to find her before he—”

“The Chairman is among one of the confirmed deceased,” Olivia quietly informs me.

My body slackens against Gabi. He hugs my hunched torso tighter, bracing me from hitting the ground.

The information doesn't stick, or I don't process it fully. This all feels too surreal, like I'm in a cruel nightmare, still running around the mansion in my head, trying to wake the fuck up from this endless stream of emotion.

If he's dead, then that means…

The fight in me resumes, and I jerk against Gabi when he doesn't expect it. One arm falls away, but he manages to catch my sleeve with his firm grip, yanking me back.

My eyes jump to the outline of someone emerging from the stairwell behind the wall of smoke. The silhouette of a man carrying someone in his arms.

The breath locks in my chest.

No.

Please no.

Caleb steps through the veil, soot and viscera smudged across his face like war paint.

And in his arms is Tommy, her frame dangling, unconscious. Her normally tan and freckled skin is ashen and sickly, with half of it exposed to the world, marked with bruises and blood.

The ringing in my ears takes over, muting every tire screech and wail and order from Gabi.

I can't move. The muscles in my body feel like they've been dipped in arctic water, forcing me still. My heart pounds and roars against the walls of its containment, trying desperately to keep me here in this moment.

Caleb kneels in front of me and gently places her onto the ground at my feet. My vision tunnels. The solemn, pained look he gives me, completely wordless, is the thing that throws me over the edge.

The will to press on, to continue this goddamned suffering, dies at the sight of her, and my entire figure shudders in endless swells, cycling between pain and numbness as I fall to my knees.

"Tommy. Tommy—you need to wake up." I lift her dead weight into my arms, catching her cheek in my palm as it rolls to me. Her matted hair spills over the knee I'm using to keep her propped up. "Baby, hey, please, okay?" I flatten my palm over her chest to assure myself of her beating heart. The vibrations are there, a soft, slurring cadence. "You—I—Hear my voice. Come back to me. You have to come back to me."

“Nico.” Caleb frowns, putting his hand on my forearm. “She—”

“*No!*” I snarl, recoiling from him. “You could’ve stopped her! Why the hell did you let her do this when you know what kind of fucking monster he is?”

Caleb takes my animosity head on with a grimace, turning away as if I slapped him. “She wanted to be the one to end Levi.”

I can hear what he doesn’t say: *She deserved to do this her own way*.

I look down at her sleeping face, imagining another decade in purgatory where this is all I have of her, letting each day wash on as I try and try to call her home.

A gut-wrenching wail pours out of me. I hug her to my chest, praying for the first time to whatever higher power will listen to give her back.

You know, I’ve waited for this fucking day my whole life. I thought I would feel relief, an instantaneous freedom the moment that my tether to him was broken. I swore I’d have some hallowed revelation when Levi Valentine no longer walked this earth.

And yet, all I feel is despair, pulling me further down than I thought I could go, because now that I am finally free of him, I no longer have her.

I’d give my father life again, a thousand times, if she returned with him.

“You promised me.” My voice cracks from the weight of my burden, the vacancy in her soul. “Come back to me, Fiorella.”

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CHAPTER 41



RETURN

THE TRESPASSER

Fiorella.

I looked it up once, long after I was separated from Nico. In the throes of my grief, it enraged me how I would never get to hear what the name he'd given me meant.

Little flower.

In the midst of his harsh, colorless world, I appeared, reviving a bit of life inside it.

The sentiment only made me miss him more.

I thought of him every time I saw a new blossom, whether I was dreaming or not.

And now, as a warm cloud cradles me, with a sweet, floral fragrance drifting in the air, I think of him again.

I float, my legs out, my arms spread, feeling the current twirl me in a slow, serene dance. Light flutters behind my eyelids. Birdsong and the ruffle of the breeze fuse into a springtime haven. Wherever I'm at, it's peaceful, the way home feels after a long vacation.

The mist kisses my cheeks, and the sensation tickles.

I giggle, wading my arm through the viscous haze enveloping me. The backs of my fingers graze something small, slimy. It flutters away in an instant, and I gasp, recoiling my hand.

My eyes pop open.

The mangrove's curled, lush branches arch over me.

No.

The lagoon.

I strain my muscles, kicking my legs in the water to shoot myself upright.

My breath billows in and out in an uneven cadence as I dart my gaze around, past the drooping vines to the massive trunk—its bark thick and gnarled, where Nico and I always used to nap—to the familiar bank, dusted in a thin layer of grass and wildflowers.

Sitting on the edge is Noir in her wildcat form, ears twitching, staring right at me with her big, frightening yellow eyes.

Pressure snaps in my chest and my breath rushes out.

I'm in my oasis.

I spring my arms out of the water, surveying them for blisters and burns. Levi and his men were melting. I didn't let my power relent until I saw the white of their bones. They have to be dead.

But what about me?

I distinctly remember the excruciating torment of the fire eating my flesh. But there's nothing, no wounds, no painful sensations in my body. No discomfort. Whatever happens to me in the real world doesn't always reflect in this place, though.

The fact that I'm here means I'm either asleep, unconscious, or lost to the ether, doomed to roam.

My pulse accelerates.

Nico.

I have to go to him.

He's waiting for me.

I can't abandon him again.

I kick my feet to swim to Noir and crawl out of the lagoon in a frantic, uneven stride.

The moment the water washes off me, a searing pain dissolves every cell of my body.

I whimper. It feels as if I've been dipped in acid, like every patch of my skin has been flayed from me. The burn curdles my stomach in nauseous contractions.

Noir curls her head against my side to support my weight. I brace myself on her thick neck and lower my cheek down onto her soft fur. Tears sting in my eyes, and I clamp my jaw, fighting against the boiling in my blood.

I wrap my arms around her, stretching my skin and amplifying the agony. I don't care, though. The pain is worth it as I nuzzle my face into her, amazed how she knew right where to take me, so I'd be protected from this torture.

"I love you, Noir. Thank you for being my best friend."

She starts to purr, the low-pitched buzz vibrating in my chest. The sensation is like a shot of whiskey, instantly soothing the feeling of steel wool grinding down my skin.

Noir bends down to let me climb atop her muscular body like a lifeline.

My muscles strain against her slow trot as she dances through the trees in the direction of the Crossroads. I listen to the wash of the waterfall fading in the distance; the foxes scurrying over the groundcover, startled by Noir's presence; and the flapping of the birds' wings over our heads.

I think about how six months ago, this place was my sanctuary. Somewhere I preferred over my reality. I used to lie in bed before drifting off, hoping to never wake up.

Now, here I am, desperate to make my way out to him—to *live*.

I'm so glad that I chose his window all those years ago, that he chased me up that stairwell before I could run away.

The wooden door comes into view ahead, painted the color of an orchid, partially cracked.

My soul begins to rest.

The burns are nothing anymore.

Noir comes to a stop, graceful on her paws, and bends her legs, making it easier for me to slide off.

I hug her again, planting a kiss on top of her head. "I'll be back."

She rubs her face into the side of my cheek.

Tears drip down the crevice of my nose. Salt burns my lips.

Lifting up, I hobble around her and catch the frame in a stumble.

I pull on the golden handle and open the door. A wide smile parts my mouth. The tears stream harder down my cheeks.

Nico's alive and holding me, the *real* me.

So much goddamn warmth and euphoria erupts in my chest, drowning the chambers of my heart.

I made it.

This love saturates me, and I think of Anne and June and Charlie and Logan and all the women before them and the ones that will come after me.

I will be their healing.

They can rest now.

And with that knowing, I step through the door, letting the smell of bitter smoke guide me home.

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PART V
FOREVER IN REVERIE

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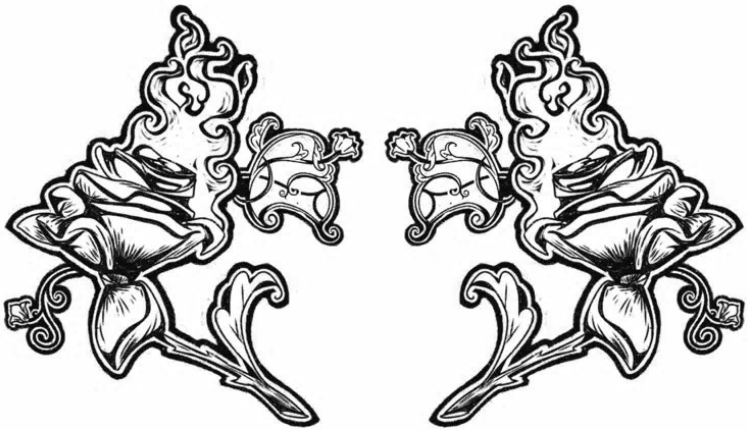
EPILOGUE



THE LUCID DREAMER

SIX MONTHS LATER

Fiorella's Oasis.

With one hand in the pocket of my slacks, the other around a cool glass of amber bourbon, I stare up at the title of the exhibition, beaming with so much fucking pride. After all her hard work, she finally did the damn thing.

The words are painted in her loopy, slightly smudged calligraphy over a bed of blossomed, sparkling pink roses. On the nearby walls around the sign is a collage of her artwork—pieces of strangers' dreamlands, Noir, and of us as kids. That last one's titled "Kit and Ella," and an *anonymous art critic* has already put in a generous offer for the original.

Completely silent other than a small *whoosh* of air, Caleb and Gabi settle on each side of me.

Caleb holds a plate of half-eaten carrot cake, a plastic fork sticking out of its plump curve like a flagpole. "Can you use your stalking powers for good and get me the info on this caterer? Shit rocks, man."

Caleb grips the fork like a caveman holding a stone tool, and Gabi reaches behind me and calmly swats the back of his bicep, breaking his attention from the off-white, cream cheese frosting.

“Manners,” Gabi mutters, as if he is scolding a seven-year-old child. “Don’t make it so miserably known that you don’t belong here.”

Repositioning his fork, Caleb takes another bite, sarcastically shooting his pinky up as he eats. “My apologies, dear Gabrielle. I will consume this delicacy with elegance.” He punctuates his mockery with a smile at Gabi, orange slivers and chewed nuts still in his teeth.

I ignore his smartass mouth and beckon them to follow me with a steady look before Gabi gets baited into making a scene and taking any attention away from Tommy.

We travel into a small sector of the gallery, a post-modern selection of single-colored sculptures that each represent the sins of our society.

Ensuring there are no visitors around, I speak to them in a deep, low timbre.

“The task we talked about. It’s time,” I say to Caleb. “It’s been six months, and his only known sighting has been up north near Belmont.”

Caleb told me everything, from the moment Tommy approached him outside the motel, all the way to exiting the prison walls of my father’s mansion that day. While Caleb finished his final act of playing loyal guard to Levi, he had a confrontation with Mattia, landing a stab wound to his gut before my big brother managed to escape.

Without our father in charge, Mattia knew he had little pull anymore. The workers and gunmen only respected him out of fear, and Tommy relieved them of that. So, he ran like the cowardly little asshole that he is.

Since the day of the fire, nobody has seen or heard from him.

Caleb swallows the rest of his cake in one greedy bite, wipes his messy mouth with his thumb, and nods. “About fucking time. I’m getting bored playing socialite with glasses over here.”

Gabi scoffs, eyeing him over his frames. “You have the attention span of a toddler. And how did you miss the frosting on your cheek?”

Caleb peers down at the reflective wooden floor, biting at the hoop in his lip. For the first time in his life, he doesn’t quip back, probably lost in thought about his new destination.

Gabi works the handkerchief out of his coat pocket and begrudgingly scrubs the speck from Caleb’s cheek. “There.”

Caleb rubs at the red blotch where Gabi applied a *little* too much pressure, twisting to throw away his empty plate in a nearby silver trash can.

I exchange a look with Gabi, questioning the brute’s strange pause. It’s like seeing a rare animal in the wild, having him disregard an opportunity to bicker.

Caleb remains quiet for a few breaths, and then he looks at me, a solemn shift to his demeanor. “Have you forgiven me yet?”

After everything, it took me a few weeks to be able to look at him, let alone talk to him. Tommy was insistent that I let my anger go, because he only went along with what she asked of him. Even Gabi pushed me to make amends, having the empathy of being drugged himself.

“I forgave you a long time ago,” I murmur, taking a drink to soothe the prick in my chest. The alcohol travels smoothly down my throat as I pretend to analyze the dick-shaped, sky-blue object labeled “Consumerism.” It infuriates me how long it took Tommy to get into this gallery, while shit like this has no issue. “But, you know I’m still hurt.”

“I get it,” he says. “I’ll take care of Mattia. Keep you both safe.”

No matter my immediate feelings, our bond goes too far back for me to think any differently of him. Caleb will always be the feisty kid I grew up with—more of a brother to me than my real one ever was.

My lungs pull in the clean, lemon-scented air. “Mattia is the one who orchestrated all the strings, who set up you and your mom back then. He’s the one who suggested my father use your torture to get to me.” I swivel to look at him, grabbing onto his dead eyes, nodding in understanding. “We’ve lived through hell and back, both of us. I know you want to make him pay, so I give you full permission. Just bring his body back to me.” I run a hand over my flexing jaw, lethality overtaking my tone. “I want him dead. *Then* we’re even.”

Caleb stares into my unwavering gaze for a beat, and then gives me a pat on the shoulder before spinning his broad frame for the exit. “Consider it done.”

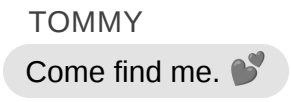
Gabi watches him depart with a buckled brow, hating to see any kind of cracks in our trio. “I’ll get him an hors d'oeuvre after I pull the car around. Cheer him back up.” He gives me a proper, absurd bow and then takes a step for the same exit.

I hold my hand up to stop him. “Don’t need the car. Just go be a normal member of society, please. You're off the clock.”

His attention remains on the exit of the gallery, and I’m unsure if he heard me.

My phone vibrates from the pocket inside my blazer.

I take it out and read the text.



I've been with her long enough to recognize her tone through texts now, and this one is sultry. My head echoes the seductive little purr she does that rushes blood straight to my dick and hardens it within seconds.

I slip my phone back. "Well, this is where I leave you. Enjoy your night, and don't follow me. For your sake."

Walking in front of Gabi, I shoot him a sly grin before breaking away from his path, heading back to the array of Tommy's amazing craft.

Between the ritzy suits and the glimmering dresses, Lola and her man awkwardly do slow, awkward circles through the exhibition, trailing a few feet behind Tommy.

I see the dance of her curls under the warm bulbs of light as she chats with her fans about the specific choices of color and of her influences.

She catches a glimpse of me through the crowd, and I can't help but just admire her, the woman she has made herself to be. This is her night, and I want to make her feel like the goddess she is.

Excusing herself from the passionate, inquisitive couple, she heads in my direction.

She passes my side without meeting my eyes, a cloud of her strawberry perfume drifting up my nose.

I shift a little to look back at her.

Her matte purple dress accentuates her curves as she walks. The hem sways, blessing me with the sexy view of her smooth legs.

She shoots me a coy grin over her shoulder.

Oh, she wants to play.

I smirk, downing the last of my drink and placing the glass on a traveling waiter's tray.

I try to act calm and posh as I follow her trail, when I want to take her right here—onlookers be damned.

We glide into a secluded section of the gallery.

I turn the corner, catching a glimpse of the entrance to another exhibition as its door swings shut.

Found you.

I stroll up to it, eyeing the plate with the artist's name and the details. It's a small, intimate room showcasing a constellation across the ceiling of intentionally crafted stars, meant to be appreciated with the overhead lights off.

Perfect. I'm loving art more by the second.

I turn the sign over on the entrance to TEMPORARILY CLOSED, step inside, and flip the latch locked behind me.

The lights strobe and flicker in pulses of indigo. A galaxy swirls above, sparkling jewels that rain down the sides of the wall and paint the cosmos over Tommy's curvy silhouette, in her eyes.

A hunger flares in my stomach, coiling and pulling my muscles taut.

I move slowly toward her, making sure she has enough time to catch glimpses of the desire darkening my gaze between the strobing lights.

She turns around, pretending to focus on the show around us.

I settle behind her, molding the front of my body into her backside. My strained cock rests on her ass.

She arches into it, grinding against me.

A heat simmers in my bloodstream as I push her curls from her shoulder and bring my lips to her ear. "You look stunning in that dress."

She inhales, rolling her head back on my chest. "How stunning?"

I lightly grip her waist and spin her to face me. "Let me show you."

Guiding her backward onto the nearest open wall, I dip to kiss her neck in a slow, sensual trail that only grows with intensity the harder she breathes.

I cradle the back of her head, using my hold to expose different angles of her throat, sucking and nipping at the sensitive skin. Her breasts swell with her breath, pressing her hard nipples against my torso, and it takes everything for me not to rip her dress and decorate them with my teeth.

Both of her hands sneak between us, her starved fingers working quickly to undo my belt buckle as I drag my tongue up her jawline.

"Not on the lips," she says through a hurried breath. "I can't have you ruining my makeup."

I work the sides of her dress up to her waist, careful to avoid ripping the hem. "Oh babe, I would never. You worked too hard."

She rips down my zipper and frees my hard cock from my pants before wrapping her arms around my neck. "I missed you. I'm sorry I've been so busy lately."

I haul her up by the backs of her thighs and secure her against the wall.

“I don’t care how busy you are, Tommy.” I slide my finger underneath her ass cheek to move aside her underwear. “You deserve all of this, babe. Soak it in.”

After a few strokes to make sure she’s wet enough, I fill her up in one brutal thrust.

Her breath catches in her throat as her eyes flutter.

“Did you… ah—” she sputters out as she digs her fingernails into my shoulders.

I smirk, the sounds of her whimpers only enhancing my starved desire to have her all fucking night. “What was that now?”

“Just fuck me already.” She holds on tighter around my neck, curving her back to hook her hips up. The angle shifts my dick deeper into her warm flesh.

Shivers tingle up my spine. I shudder, losing the will to make this last slowly and kindly for her. “You turn me into a fucking animal.”

I tighten my hold on her ass, using it to keep her in place as I plunge inside of her, hard and slow, just how she likes it.

She curls the ends of my hair in her fingers, her sultry cries accelerating. “Nico, I’m—I can’t be quiet—”

“Bite onto this.” I readjust her whole ass into one of my arms, using the wall as leverage, and push my tie in between her blue, stained lips.

She throws her head back against the painted wall, the muscles in her jaw quivering. Her teeth carve into the material as I hit that sacred spot inside of her, over and over.

“Come for me, baby,” I whisper, all gravelly in her ear.

Her moans vibrate through my chest, sending tremors into my stomach, as her entire body convulses around me.

The pleasure of her gripping my cock makes me lightheaded.

“That’s it. You take it like such a fucking good girl.” I pick up the tempo of my thrusts, pounding harder inside of her until I push myself to release.

“*Fuck*,” I hiss as my dick spills out her reward in exhausted surges. The muscles in my abdomen spasm from ecstasy.

I’m such an addict for her.

We both collapse into each other, our foreheads fused together, sharing winded draws of breath.

She smiles, spitting out my tie and letting out a satiated exhalation. Her fingers move to my jaw, her thumb rubbing circles on my cheek over my dimple.

“Did you see Fiorella’s Oasis?” she whispers.

“Of course.” I kiss the tip of her nose. “I saw it before anyone else ever did.”

“And?”

“Let’s just say our living room may have a new centerpiece.”

She laughs through her panting. “As long as you pay me for it.”

I swirl my hips, reminding her of my cock still inside her.

She bites down on her bottom lip, a dark, sensual heat filling her gaze again. “That payment will do,” she purrs, reigniting my arousal.

“I’ll give you whatever you want, Ella.” I nip at the side of her neck, coaxing another giggle from her. “I have your next installment right here.”

And I can tell by the way she kisses me that we’re not leaving this room for the rest of the night.



OUR REAL OASIS IS THIS:

A restful night’s sleep, Tommy and I playing with the creatures made of autumn leaves in my dreamland; fucking her against the trees of her lagoon; laying in the hut buried under the mangrove’s branches, the same one we use to hide ourselves in as kids, spread out on the floor, talking, laughing, eating all our favorite foods.

After our nocturnal fun, I open my eyes to Noir’s paw slapping at my cheek.

The morning light filters through the windows, a golden honey seeping into the air and reflecting in Noir’s yellow gaze, which points straight down at me.

She sits atop my chest, her tail flicking in curled arcs, proof of her mischievous mood.

Without looking, I know Tommy’s side is empty. I don’t sense her.

Music booms from the living room, confirming I’m right.

I narrow my eyes at the cat, debating how to remove her without risking damage to my jugular.

She cocks her head a little, and I tense, fearful she'll transform into some other form just to fuck with me.

But then the dreary fog of my brain lifts and I remember that I'm in the real world, and that she's in our seaside home, not a dreamland. In this place, she's a house cat. Nothing more.

It gives me the courage to swat her off me and climb out of bed to hunt for Tommy.

A sweet, doughy aroma fills the hallway. Her morning playlist, one I've heard countless times, is turned up through the surround sound speakers, rattling the artwork on our walls.

After brushing my teeth, I turn the corner to the kitchen and find her in one of my button-ups, the hem bouncing as she dances around, giving me a glimpse of her bare ass. Her hair is up in a messy bun, curls springing around her temples, over her nape.

Noir sits on the counter beside a steaming mug of coffee, idly licking her coat.

Tommy peeks inside the oven, releasing another cloud of blueberry and sugar into the air.

I cross my arms over my bare chest, watching her glide around the kitchen with familiarity. It never gets old, even though she moved in with me months ago.

"Think I can have my shirt back?" I smile at her as she turns around, catching her hips with my hands. "Just for a second…"

My fingers trace up the soft material to the top button, and I pry it apart, exposing a little more of her sheen skin.

She rests her hand on the kitchen island, regarding me with a sly gleam in her gaze. "Sure, if you think you can catch me!" Right as she finishes the sentence, she dollops my nose with a thick clotting of berries and vanilla before darting to the other side of the kitchen.

I catch her by the waist and pull her snugly to me, rubbing my batter-covered nose all over her cheeks.

And every laugh we share, each kiss under the overcast of her Crossroads, the squeals she gives when I sink my teeth into her shoulder, they're worth every merciless night I spent under my father's reign. She freed me, from my legacy, from my name.

And so I'll spend every moment, awake and asleep, thanking her, loving her, and giving her another reason to walk through that bright lavender

frame, back to me.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for picking up this book and sticking around until the end. This was my first time dabbling in a new genre, something equally exciting *and* nerve-wracking, but I had such a lovely time. Dark romance and fantasy are two of my favorite things, so I hope you enjoyed every gritty, gruesome, unhinged second of Tommy and Nico's story.

Their book is standalone, but I do plan to release a second novel set in the same world. Keep reading for an unedited preview of *LIMERENCE*, Caleb and Gabi's story! If you want to follow along for an early read, make sure to check out my Patreon.

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LIMERENCE

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CHAPTER 1

THREE MINUTES

THE ENFORCER

10:35 p.m.

The delivery is late.

Dom and his crew were supposed to dock at 10:30, and they're always on time. Was he intercepted? Killed in transit?

I stare at the hands ticking on my watch, as if they will miraculously move backward. A restlessness bites at my chest, clenching my lungs. It's been a shit week, and this really isn't helping.

"Gabi, you think something happened?" Olivia asks me, turning her head to scan the end of the pier, her shoulder-length, purple curls fluttering in the breeze.

Hoping the oxygen in my bloodstream will loosen the stress in my shoulders, I suck in a sharp breath through my nose as my hand instinctively plucks my phone from my pocket.

Michael, the nearly seven-foot behemoth beside her, keeps his posture strong, eyes trained on the shadows behind me, just like I taught him.

"Clearly," he replies for me. "Dom's never late."

The others in our small crew remain in position as well, observing our surroundings. Their fingers twitch at their sides, eager to reach for their guns.

We have cover from the warehouse windows, snipers in position if shit goes awry, but that doesn't bring me comfort right now.

Sweat lines the nosepiece of my glasses. With one finger, I push them back near my face and swipe through all of my notifications, searching for some explanatory text from Dom that I could've overlooked.

The sea gently laps against the dock we stand on. It's a small wooden piece of South Haven's port, and the warehouses around us all belong to V Group, our syndicate.

Once a month, I meet this integral delivery and check their inventory: supplies for V Group's illegal, underground gambling dens, nightclubs, and sport rings, high-end drugs, weaponry, and, of course, fishing equipment, to keep up the ruse of our warehouses. To the public eye, they belong to a *fishing company* owned by V Group. It's still supporting the local economy, I guess.

No update from Dom. Shit.

I roll my tongue over the front of my teeth, refreshing my inbox, double checking my texts, just in case. I'm ignoring the fact that there isn't a single goddamn update from Caleb, my childhood best friend.

Dom would've reached out if it were something small. Any change in schedule is protocol to report, and like me, Dom takes such things seriously. So whatever reason he's late, it's not fucking good.

"We can't just keep waiting for a ghost ship. Check the area," I command. "Send word back to the main warehouse. I want more bodies on the ground."

My crew draws out their weapons and scatters around the large industrial crates, away from the dock. The clicking of safeties makes a percussive rhythm in the night air.

One hand rubs my brow while the other dials Dom's number.

The phone rings and rings.

It's been weeks since Caleb set off to Belmont on Mattia's trail.

Six months ago, Levi Valentine, the chairman of V Group, went down in hellfire. Nico—his youngest son and my best friend-slash-boss—rose up as the Valentine heir and took over the company and its syndicate.

Nico's abhorrent older brother, Mattia, escaped before Caleb could fully end him, and a few weeks ago, Nico decided that it was time for Caleb to finish the job.

Last he said, Caleb had arrived in Belmont and was settling in. It's been over a week since I received a text or a call, though.

As kids, Mattia always had a score to settle with Caleb.

Despite his entire empire falling, I doubt Mattia will be easy to take down.

Caleb could be flatlined by now for all I know.

My stomach twists violently at the image.

No. They call him the Ripper *for a reason; he can hold his own*.

The call flips to Dom's voicemail.

I hang up and try again.

Dom always answers.

It goes to voicemail once more.

"Shit," I hiss, slipping my cell back into my pocket.

My nostrils flare.

Now isn't the time to be distracted. I can obsess over Caleb's whereabouts once I've secured the delivery.

Why can't shit just go according to plan?

Someone must've interfered.

A gunshot rings out to my left, followed by Olivia's scream. The small flash of light illuminates the sea spray in the air.

I drop to a knee, pressing my body against the thick metal of a crate for some semblance of protection.

Another bullet ricochets off the closest warehouse wall.

Fuck.

In one motion, I send a quick SOS text to Nico with one hand and rip out my heavy pistol with the other. The cold steel settles into my grip.

Hugging my shoulder against the edge of the crate as it drips with condensation, I peek around the corner. The swathes of murky darkness between the circles of lamplight don't show any obvious movement.

All clear.

I travel along the perimeter of the crate and along the nearest building—slow and calculated, my senses sharp.

I swivel my neck, shooting my eyes behind me every few seconds as I move, unable to hear footsteps over the slosh of waves.

Two reflective arcs shine on the side of the crate ahead. A pair of individuals, moving up toward me. I can't make out much, but I know by the color of their clothes, they aren't ours.

Pointing my sights to pierce the metal they hide behind, I pull back the weight of the trigger.

One. Two.

Three, four to be safe.

The groans resonate in the space between us, multiple timbres. Got them both.

As I inch up to ensure the completeness of their deaths, I come across the bulky body of Michael behind a dark green crate. His neck is carved clean open—a methodical, careful job.

Not even ten feet away from him lies Olivia, a hole burrowed into her skull from a bullet's perfect path.

Both were executed by a professional. I need backup, right fucking now.

I continue forward and around the corner, eyes sharp for any flicker of motion.

Chills spread through my marrow as I walk the narrow space between two crates.

The slight creak of wood resonates behind me.

I rush around on my feet to rear my arm up, the pad of my index finger pushing into the trigger, but I'm too slow.

A long, thin dagger plunges into my side.

Even under the smell of sea salt and blood, I can spot his cologne anywhere. It used to be so overwhelming, all black pepper and tobacco, but I got accustomed to it. Learned to long for it.

I clench my jaw, a groan clawing up my throat as a nauseating fire brands through my torso. My fingers wrap around his forearm, fighting against his strength to force the weapon from my flesh.

Caleb swivels his wrist to gnash the blade around inside of me.

I cry out, dropping my gun, and he kicks it away. It slides across the dock and splashes into the sea.

"Why?" I croak.

He curls his fingers around my nape and drags my ear to his lips, his body heat seeping through my clothes and into my skin.

"Because I know you will follow me," he whispers. "And I can't have that."

My heartbeat pounds painfully against my sternum, pulsing faster from the sharp object lodged in my guts.

I grab a fistful of his shirt, twisting my fingers into the material. "You—"

He yanks the blade out, slick and dripping with my blood.

I whimper through gritted teeth, releasing him as the mind-numbing waves of agony overtake my synapses.

Caleb slowly backs away, removing his grip from my neck. The severing of his fingers from me ignites a panic, swift and hot, in my chest.

I reach for him again, always a reflex. “Wait!”

My muscles spasm around the throbbing wound, and I flinch, clutching my stomach. Warm liquid oozes down my leg.

My weight on my knees suddenly feels like sand pressing down on my bones. They buckle and I hit the concrete below, slamming back into the door of a faded orange crate. The force sends a ripple of pain through my ribcage, and I can’t help but let out another cry.

He watches me, the halos of warm light casting a glow over his face, refracting the haunting, dark blue depths of his gaze. Not a glimpse of emotion crosses over his face as I crane my neck toward him.

Betrayal stings my insides, mixing with the adrenaline of survival.

I try to push myself up off the crate. Every ounce of muscle in my abdomen echoes a wail of pain through the rest of me.

“Caleb,” my voice cracks, “don’t you fucking do this.”

He kneels and grabs the collar of my suit, forcing me back down.

I grind my molars, eyeing the stiletto knife still secure in his other hand.

His plump lips and their glistening metal piercings hover above my face. “You were an idiot to ever love me, Gabs. Take this as your sign to move on. All I will ever do is hurt you.”

My chest hitches.

I grimace at his serrated words.

Heat wells up behind my nose.

Flashes of our childhood, our lives, ripple through my brain. My unrequited love, always keeping myself a safe proximity from him, never crossing that line. And to think, all this time, he knew how I felt.

The fight in my bones to smack the blade from his grasp, knock him unconscious, and wait for backup to drag us home, it all momentarily gives way to the ache in my heart.

He shoves me away like discarded goods, colliding my spine with the unforgiving metal exterior of the crate. The hit reverberates painfully through my damaged nerves.

I wince, curling my arm tighter over my stomach. My vision trembles and the world swirls around me.

My sight of him blurs, despite keeping my glasses intact, as he transitions into a tall silhouette, backing away into the thick shade of the dock.

He swings his head to the right, alerted by something—or someone—and then looks down at me.

I try to squint to see his expression, but he moves quickly, a flash of reflective movement that disappears around the crate.

I tell my arm to raise up, my feet to move, chase after him. Whatever happened, whatever drove him to this insanity, it's the beginning of a nightmare I fear we will never make it out of.

Shit.

I keep the heel of my hand pressed into the injury in an attempt to staunch the bleeding. I feel it all draining from my face, the lightheadedness swirling more aggressively behind my eyes, lulling me into that dark place. My breath is just as light, and the ringing in my ears has already started.

I'm losing too much blood, too fast.

God, I fucking hate him.

Or at least, I wish I did, because then, I might be foaming at the mouth with fury rather than drowning in this brokenness.

I roll my head to gaze up at the blinking specks of stardust and satellites in the night sky, their shapes fuzzy and bright. It's quiet. The air is heavy with the stench of copper, the souls of my crew untethering themselves from their skin.

Caleb's in trouble. He has to be. Something happened and he doesn't want me interfering, like I always manage to.

This is our dance, has been since we were kids. He acts recklessly, hurts me, and, like a fucking fool, I chase after him to make sure he doesn't get himself killed.

I know our cycle, and still all I can think is, *I hope he's okay,* as I bleed out on this stupid shipping crate. Because I know him, or at least I like to believe that I do. He wouldn't have acted so drastically without reason.

How can I not follow you?

Hot tears leak down the sides of my temples.

What is the point of my damned existence if I don't?

I raise my arm to bring my watch closer to my face. Despite the tragedy and smattering of blood, its hands still move.

10:38 p.m.

The span of three short minutes. That’s all it took for the bastard to change everything.

My arm flops back down, my energy sputtering out like a toppled electric pole.

I was desensitized to this life long ago, to the idea that I wake each morning and might not make it to sleep that night. I made peace with death, because this job is a constant tango with the damn grim reaper, one I eventually grew to enjoy.

However, I never made peace with *this*.

My breath goes shallow, and the darkness of the seaside port crests over the edges of my vision.

Wherever you are, I think through my fading consciousness, *I will find my way back.*

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Acknowledgments

IT’S DONE!!!!

Every time I make it here, I reflect on the journey in awe, unable to comprehend that when I started, this book did not exist, and now it does. That’s the beauty of art, slowly crafting something into existence without really understanding *how* you do it. The humanness of the process.

This book was a passion project inspired by my love for dreamy aesthetics, the dark underbelly of all things mafia, and my need to resonate with someone like Tommy—pissed off, tired of the bullshit in life, and desperate to carve her own path, rather than step into the same one of those who came before her. I hope that when you read her and Nico’s story, you come out on the other side a little healed and able to breathe again.

This book was a labor of hard work and so much love, but it took a village.

To all my beta readers and my street team: Jess, Melinda, Blakely, Cali, Nikki R., Ari, Cait, Jenny, Jennifer, Niki B., Kayla, Brenna, Crystal, Emily, Chris, Baylee, Claire, Samantha E., Stephanie, Sarah, Lacey, El, Evie, Samira, Tohfa, Prusilla, Deniece, Tori, Charla, and Samantha C. You’re the best hype squad a girl could ask for. I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH!

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To Mia, Sunday, and Aki, who are all under my desk at this moment, curled at my feet, waiting for me to finish writing this. And to Paris, who I carry with me every day.

To the rest of my family: Mom, Sis, Brandon, Leo, Ema, Wesley, and my grandparents. Thank you for all the love and excitement you give me and my career; for lifting me up when I think I've failed, and for supplying laughter during my lows. You all are my heart.

To Chase. Words feel inadequate to express my level of gratitude and affection for you, but I always try to give it a shot. After I finish writing this, you are going to grab us take-out, a celebratory bottle of wine, and we are going to curl up on the couch and watch a movie. All of which I cannot wait to do with you. This simple, small life we have, I treasure it every day. Thank you for giving me my *real oasis*. I couldn't do any of this without you.

And to the readers: for loving my books so loudly, shouting them to your friends, and all the things in between—thank you so much for letting me live my dream.

Until the next one. <3

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About the Author

Randi is a lover of evocative words. She aspires to create characters that live on with her readers. When she's not daydreaming about her next story, you can find her staying up too late immersed in a book or webtoon, sipping on matcha, rearranging her aquariums, or enjoying the company of her husband and their three dogs.

You can find early access to LIMERENCE, Caleb and Gabi's story, on her Patreon soon, as well as bonus content, access to prints, and signed copies! You can also find her on Substack and Instagram where you can stay up to date with her upcoming releases.

She would greatly appreciate it if you took the time to leave a rating or review on Amazon or Goodreads!



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