

MONTY JAY

WHAT IS LOVE
WITHOUT
OBSESSION?

HOLLOW BOYS BOOK THREE

THE
PIGGED

we crave



THE BLOOD WE CRAVE PT. 1

HOLLOW BOYS

BOOK THREE

MONTY JAY

OCEANOPDF.COM

The Blood We Crave
Monty Jay
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Cover Art by Opulent Designs
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BEFORE YOU READ

This is a dark romance, it does include content that some may find triggering.

Triggers include but are not limited to: Graphic Sexual Scenes, Graphic Violence, Serial Murder, Sexual Assault, Animal Cruelty, Human Trafficking, Child Abuse, mentions of suicide & Suicidal Ideations, Kidnapping, Sex Trafficking, Torture, Blood and Gore.

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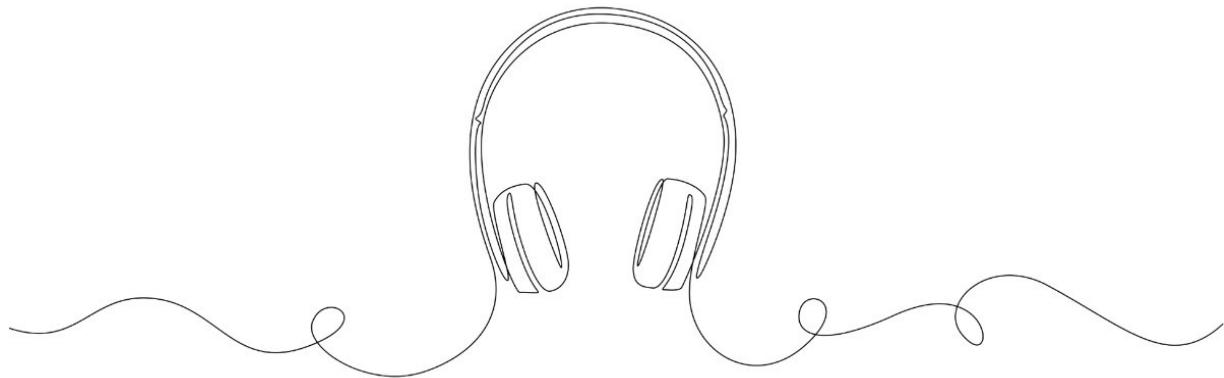
To everyone like me who watched Queen of the Damned and developed a blood kink, this one is for you.

And for the friends that never left my side through the struggles of this book—there were many—I owe you.

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“We are linked by blood, and blood is memory without language.”
Joyce Carol Oates

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Paper Love — Allie X
Teacher's Pet—Melanie Martinez
Serial Killer—Moncrieff, JUDGE
Let it Bleed—Unlike Pluto (feat. Cristina Gatti)
The Hearse—Matt Maeson
Once Upon a Dream—Lana Del Rey
A Girl Like You—Edwyn Collins
National Anthem—Lana Del Rey
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Kill of the Night—Gin Wigmore
See you Bleed—Ramsey
Tear You Apart—She Wants Revenge
Paparazzi—Kim Dracula



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PROLOGUE

Thirteen Years Ago...

“S carlett, wake up.”

The fog of sleep tries to clear my mind, but I fight it, despite my mother’s voice requesting the opposite. I snuggle deeper into her blankets, inhaling the scent of coffee and her bodywash, letting the comforting smell tug me back into my dreams.

I had been dreaming of a land made entirely of candy. It was a Willy Wonka masterpiece—grass made of licorice, gumdrop stools, houses built with boards of chocolate, and roads created from hardened sugar.

My stomach twisted with hunger, a familiar craving sweeping through me. I wanted to go back to my dream, where I could devour as many sweets as I liked without having to hear my mother’s constant warnings.

I know she’s right, that all the sugar will rot my teeth one day. She’s always right. However, I can’t bring myself to quit. Not when you love something the way I love candy.

I’m like that with a lot of things.

“Scarlett Lyra Abbott!” I could feel her cold fingers against my arm, chilling me to the bone. But it wasn’t just her touch that had goosebumps skittering across my skin. It was her tone of voice. She never used my full name like that. Not ever.

Urgency. Fear. Panic.

I opened my eyes, knowing somewhere in the pit of my stomach that something was wrong. This was not her stern, wake-up voice for when I

didn't feel like rolling out of bed for lessons, or the strict tone she used when I refused to brush my messy curls. This felt different.

My hand digs at my eye, wiping the sleep from my groggy mind as I sit up with a loud yawn. The sun still hasn't risen; the white beams of light from the moon spear through the bedroom window. It's far too early, even for my mother, who I hear walking around the house just before the sun makes an appearance regularly, feeding Swirl and Mocha, the two pythons that my mother had kept after receiving them in her lab from an animal rescue shelter. They were both too malnourished and abused to study, so she brought them home.

I, sadly, was not allowed to play with them, but sometimes when she wasn't looking, I ran my fingers along Swirl's scales, scratching the top of her diamond-shaped head. Swirl was much nicer than Mocha, who tried striking me the one and only time I'd dipped my finger in his cage.

"What's wrong, Mom?" I whisper, my small voice still muffled with sleep despite my open eyes.

"I think there is—"

Creak.

The words die on her lips as the weight of someone's footfalls presses into the floorboards of the hallway. The Victorian classic I've lived in my entire life has been here since the town was founded, and my mother only remodeled what was necessary. She enjoys preserving the history of the home. I, on the other hand, hate how the floors groan with every breeze and the water takes forever to heat up.

My eyebrows draw together as I look towards her bedroom door.
"Mom?"

The fear in my own voice frightens me, but not as much as the fear that radiates off my mother. Her hands wrap around my arms, tugging me off the bed with urgency. I think she might be taking me with her to see what's going on outside the room, but instead, she pulls me towards the closet.

"Scar, I need you to hide, okay?" Her green eyes mirror my own and try to remain calm, but I can see the nerves. "Stay inside the closet, and do not come out until I come to get you, alright? I'm just going to make sure everything is okay. It's probably just an animal that got inside."

I feel the material of her clothes touch my back as she pushes me farther into the dark space of the closet. My eyes start to burn with unshed tears, blurring my vision as I turn and stare up at my mom.

“But Mom, what about—”

“It’ll be okay, Scarlett. I promise. Just stay here. I’ll be back in a second.”

I can’t explain it. Wouldn’t know where to begin, but I could feel the lie. Even though she probably believed she would be back, that it was just a raccoon or opossum that had wandered in through the dog door, I don’t. Something feels wrong. Like I know she won’t be coming back to me, and no matter what I tell myself, that feeling won’t leave me.

My heart begins to ache, dull and persistent, like someone is beating down on the organ with a heavy mallet. She is all I have—it’s us against the world. And it’s that thought alone that has me clutching onto her hand, refusing to let her leave.

I know if I let her go, she won’t be coming back. Tears leak down my cheeks, the salty drops trickling into my mouth.

“Mom, I—” I croak, afraid of my voice, unsure of how to explain to her what I’m feeling. “I’m scared. Don’t—” I choke on the emotion in my throat. “Don’t leave me.”

Her gaze softens as her hand moves to rest on my cheek, holding me gently in her cold hands. I lean into the touch, chasing the comfort that comes from being near her. Chasing the comfort all little girls need from their mothers.

“Don’t be afraid, Scar. Everything will be fine,” she mutters, leaning down to place a kiss on my forehead, “I love you, sweet girl.”

I do not get a chance to tell her to stay. To try and describe what I’m feeling, what I’m actually afraid of. She retreats from the closet, shutting the door until it leaves only a small crack for me to gaze through.

I place my hand on my chest, rubbing my sternum, trying to release the pain that is throbbing there, but it does nothing for me. My small hands reach up, feeling the fabric of her clothes above me, and I desperately pull one of her sweaters from the hanger.

Wrapping myself around the soft, plush material like a blanket, I try to calm myself down. I press the sleeve into my nose, inhaling her familiar scent deeply, willing to try anything in order to distract from this feeling inside of me.

Through the slit in the door, I watch as she wraps a robe around her tall frame, tying the ribbon securely at her waist before she approaches the door. The moon reflects off the dark hardwood floors, following her like a

spotlight. I hold my breath as I prepare to see her disappear into the hallway, but she doesn't get a chance to even grab the knob.

The door is pushed open casually, like a soft gust of wind had bumped into it.

But it hadn't been the wind.

Or a nocturnal animal that had wandered into our home.

No, the cause of the creaky floorboards is entirely human. A tall, demanding presence that sucks up all the space in the doorway. The moonlight strikes the intruder's face, bouncing off his set jaw that seems to be made from stone. Maybe it's because I'm so tiny, but I could have sworn he had to duck in order to step farther into the bedroom.

The feeling in my gut hadn't been just a feeling at all. It had been him. I'd sensed it in my bones.

I feel his presence sweep across the room, seeping into the closet with me. An ominous, hazy mist gushes from his being. It pours out on the floor, soaking the room in fear.

Even though I'm young, a few short months from turning eight, I'm still an observant kid. So, I know that he is not here for anything remotely good. The word good tastes sour in my mouth as I gaze at him through the crack, as if it hates being in the same sentence as him.

There's nothing good about this person. Nothing at all.

"Wh-hat—" My mother's naturally strong voice seems muted, void of her normal authoritative charm.

The man lifts one darkened eyebrow, peering down at her with an impassive face. I've never seen someone with such blank features. He exudes such impartial feeling considering he has the audacity to stand there and stare at my mother as if he'd watched her pass in the grocery store instead of just broken into my home.

"What am I doing here?" he asks. "I thought it might be time to meet little Scarlett since we are getting serious. I mean, you know my secret now, don't you, Phoebe?"

Confusion drowns me, so many questions swirling around my mind, making me dizzy. I've never met this man, nor even seen his face. I mean, I'm homeschooled, so I spend a lot of my time here, but I do go out in town with Mom, and I've still never seen him. But he knows my name—he knows my mother.

“Scarlett isn’t here. Just like you shouldn’t be here, Henry. I have no idea what you’re talking about. Secret?” Her voice is steady as she takes a step back from him. “I told you the other day, this has run its course. We are just too different. Your family has expectations, and I don’t plan on being a part of those.”

Who is this man? Why didn’t she tell me about him? Does she work with him? Are they friends? I’d thought I’d met all her friends and coworkers. I thought I knew everything about my mother, but it would appear that she, too, has a secret..

The sound of him clicking his tongue makes a chill race down my spine. Little goosebumps run along my arms, and I curl deeper into the smell of the sweater wrapped tightly around me.

“You remember what I told you when I first met you, Phoebe?” he asks, walking closer towards her, crowding her space as if he belongs there. “That I hate liars. And you promised, with those big green eyes, that lying was the last thing you’d ever do to me.”

“I’m not—”

“You also know that I have friends. My family has friends. So, if you were to walk into a local police station and file a report about me, about something you saw me doing, I’d know about it. But you wouldn’t do that, would you, Phoebs?” The way his head tilts makes her flinch like he’s reading into every little movement she makes, every single breath she takes.

“I wouldn’t—”

“You wouldn’t have done that, right? You wouldn’t do that and then lie to me?”

Her back is to me, so I can’t see the look on her face, but I do see the way her shoulders tense up as she continues to step away from him.

“What did you expect me to do, Henry? After what I saw, what did you expect?” she whispers as he prowls forward, the same way Swirl and Mocha corner their live mice. At any moment, he could strike, and with each step closer, I feel my heart drop a little more.

“We can get you help, okay? You can turn yourself in, and we can get you help.”

He ignores her entirely, the words she mumbles going in one ear and swiftly out the other. There is a calmness in him, an unwavering sense of finality in his words. No need to yell or argue, just still, solid words.

“I trusted you, Phoebe. I became a better man for you. You told me there was nothing too dark for you to handle, and when I need you most, you turn on me? You run away?” One of his impossibly large hands snaps forward, lunging for her, and she isn’t quick enough to move out of striking distance.

I hear my mother gasp as she is yanked forward, landing hard in his arms. The brutal hold she’s locked in leaves her with nowhere to go. She is trapped, with no escape.

And I—

I am frozen in my own fear, too terrified to do anything other than watch.

“I trusted you, Phoebs. And now you have left me with no choice.” He brings his other hand up to her face, running one knuckle down her cheek. She fits comfortably with him, like this isn’t the first time they have held on to one another. He caresses her so gently, so calmly, that it should convey something sweet, like adoration. But it just feels gross and looks forced. “You’ve done this to me, to you, to us. I want you to know that I didn’t want to do this. You made me do this, love.”

My mother jerks from him, trying to wiggle out of his hold, but even from my space in the closet, I can see how much he outweighs her. How much stronger he is than her.

The way she looks so frail and weak in his arms. But that isn’t enough to stop the fight in her. No, not my mother. She is anything but weak.

“No, Henry,” she says with a tone that wobbles, but she manages to keep her head up. “You don’t need to do this. Just leave, and we can pretend this never happened.”

I see his face clearly, the way his eyebrows crouch into a deep V shape. “How could I ever forget this? How could I forget what we shared, Phoebe? How could I forget that we were, as you said, something consuming? You do remember saying that, don’t you? Or will you lie to me about that as well? You said that I consumed you. That my entire being enveloped your own, and it made you feel...safe. Do you still feel safe with me, my love?”

His words are trying to convey sadness, someone heartbroken and hurt. But his body, his tone, his eyes, they show nothing. Not even a hint of anything other than surface-level emotion. He is nothing but a void. A deep, dark, ominous void that is swallowing my mother up.

Leaning forward, he begins to whisper something in her ear that I can't hear, and when her body leans into his willingly, a stark white smile breaks across his face. A smile filled with nothing but sinister intentions.

Until my mother launches her knee into his gut, catching him off guard long enough for her to slip out of his grip. A cheer of silent encouragement surges through me as I watch her take off towards the bedroom door, trying to flee from his presence.

I think, for a split second, she has a chance. The feeling in my gut was wrong—she is going to be alright. Everything is going to be okay if she can just get far enough away to call for help or grab some sort of weapon.

But this is not like the fairy tales I read, the stories my mother tells me before bed. There is no happily ever after at the end of this once upon a time. This is an entirely different story, one shrouded in darkness and gloom. One where the handsome prince turns out to be the evil warlock, and the beautiful damsel in distress becomes prey.

The victim.

There is no frog that will be able to fix this, not even with the sweetest of kisses. No magical fairy godmother to save her. My entire future is being rewritten in front of my eyes. The beginning of my new story. One that will leave scars lingering on my soul, a brutal stain on my mind that can't be erased or struck out.

I can practically feel the pen moving along the paper of my life, erasing everything I'd known before and turning me into someone else entirely. Someone I did not know, could not recognize.

Henry, as my mother called him, recovers impossibly fast, whirling around with the first real emotion I've seen him show.

Anger.

It's all over his face and in the way his movements become charged. The way he snatches the back of her hair, winding his fingers into the soft dark strands before yanking her back to where she once was. Except this time, she is not standing on her feet; she is slung onto the floor.

The clatter of bones knocking into the wood makes my teeth throb, the stale taste of pennies flooding my throat, and I realize I've been biting down on my own tongue.

I suck my own blood into my throat, using it to quench my thirst, swallowing over and over again in order to remain quiet. So much blood that the taste loses its bitterness and turns sweet.

Like candy.

My mother is facing me now—well, facing the closet door mainly. The only person in the room who knows I'm here, that I'm hiding quietly inside. She scrambles to her knees, staring straight into the slot in the door, unknowingly making eye contact with me.

I've never seen her like this.

So afraid.

So broken.

She's always been the prime example of a strong, single mom. A full-time award-winning biologist who never let the fact she was a woman derail her success. She demands perfection from herself, and sometimes from me. But she always knows how to toe the line. To be caring, nurturing, and motherly, while also pushing me to be my best.

How am I ever going to know what the best version of myself looks like without her?

A sob tries to leave my mouth, but I shove it down painfully, covering my mouth with my small hands as tears continue to fall with no plan to stop. She sits there, staring at me until her lips begin to move, mouthing to me silently.

“I love you, Scar. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

She repeats it over and over again. A quiet promise. A reassurance. Hoping she can say it enough that I'll never forget what it feels like to be loved by her. Hoping she can say it enough times that it will last a lifetime. So that even though I'll be without her, I'll never be without her love.

I know she can't see me or hear me, even, but I reach my hand towards her. I wish I were bigger, I wish I were stronger and could swallow my fear in order to protect her, but I just can't move.

I just can't—

“I always liked how feisty you were, Phoebe,” he grunts. The hollow sounds of his shoes pounding on the floor makes me flinch. My blurry eyes catch the glint of something shiny in the moonlight, but before I can recognize what it is, it is far too late.

One large hand reaches forward, landing in her hair once again. Except this time, he doesn't throw her down. Henry picks her up and hauls her into his big chest. My mom falls against him with an resounding thud.

My hands scramble to cover my ears as she starts to scream. But the shrill echoes of her terror bleed through my small fingers. It rings in my

head, sinking into my veins, imprinting on my soul so that every time I close my eyes in the future, I know all I'll hear is my mother's screams. Her fear. Her sorrow.

I hadn't noticed that I'd shut my eyes, maybe because the darkness is calmer than what is happening in front of me. The unknown is safer.

Some piece of self-preservation inside of me knew I wouldn't survive watching what he's about to do. I'm already losing enough of myself in this moment; looking at the pure agony on her face would shatter me entirely. I'd never be able to leave this closet.

I sandwich my head between my hands to the point of pain. My ears throb from the pressure, and I can still hear her. I can hear him—his rhythmic bursts of breath escaping his lungs, the rustle of his body fighting hers. It doesn't matter how hard I try, I'm a prisoner to my mother's torture.

She'd unknowingly given me a front row seat to her life's finale.

I swear I can feel parts of me splintering off with every single scream. I was a fragile glass before, sitting atop a shelf, untouched and in pristine condition. Now, my shelf is threatening to fall beneath me, and every high-pitched cry cracks me, over and over. It's only seconds before I'm nothing but fractured glass along the floor.

Hours must pass, or maybe it's only a few lingering minutes. All I know is sweat has started to soak my pajamas, and I'm finally able to block out the noise. The sound of my own heart is so powerful that it hammers above the shouts.

I lessen the weight on my ears, my sensitive eardrums roaring and then picking up on the smallest of noises. They ache and I'm flinching, ready to recoil from another yell.

But nothing comes.

The screams have stopped, their power dwindled out completely. Not so much as a muffled groan or uncomfortable grunt. They stopped. Utterly nonexistent.

Silence like I've never known before hovers in the air so thick, so tangible, that I can feel its weight shoving down on my chest. My shoulders. My entire upper body. It's the silence that clings to tombstones and breathes alongside early fog on a warm morning.

It doesn't feel like the quiet I feel in the forest outside the house or the one I settle into when I'm feeding the snakes. No, that's a form of peace. I

feel nothing but serenity beneath the canopy of emerald-green pines. The woods are a silence filled with tiny rumbles that most never hear.

Not really.

I don't blame them—you don't notice until you really take a second to listen, almost placing your ear to the damp earth and waiting. The giggle of needles as the wind whispers secrets. Crickets and frogs echoing calls. Snapping twigs, birds shrieking. Even the tree trunks themselves seem to pulsate with vibrations.

This is not the silence in the woods.

This is absolute. All the sound has been sucked up, as if the noise had fallen into an empty black hole.

It is death.

I can't breathe. The sweltering heat that consumes me in this closet feels like an inferno. My throat clenches, desperate for air, for relief.

Please, please, please, I beg someone, anyone.

Bring the screaming back.

I know I'd asked within my own mind for it to stop just moments ago, but I didn't mean like this. No, never like this. Be careful what you wish for, right? Is this the universe showing me a lesson? Teaching me the hard way that wishes have consequences?

Please, someone, bring the screaming back.

I want to shout those very words at the top of my lungs. I want to unleash that prayer to the world—maybe if I'm loud enough, I'd rattle the powers that be, and they would grant me this favor.

But the more I think about it, the reality of my desperate plea, the quieter I become and the more hollow my chest feels.

If she isn't yelling, then she isn't fighting him.

Which means she's no longer breathing.

No longer alive.

I'm not wishing for screams. I'm wishing for my mother to return to the land of the living. And I know, the same way I knew when it was going to rain, her soul has left, leaving me only with her vacant body.

I was used to listening to the steady rise and fall of her chest—it was what lulled me into sleep almost every night, and now...now, there's nothing.

Just silence.

Emptiness.

I can physically feel in my gut the moment her heart stops. Maybe it's the bitter stillness in her body, or maybe...

It's because I feel something inside of me fracture.

Snapped clean in half. It's as if a light cuts off in my mind. A light that had always been there, guiding me through life. A switch that I'd never noticed, abruptly clicked off, and all I feel is...frigid disinterest.

I can't feel anything. I'm unexpectedly numb to my surroundings and I don't care what happens to me from this moment forward. If I never make it out of this closet, if no one ever finds me and I die wrapped in my mother's sweater, I wouldn't care. If that man—that monster, Henry—crawled towards me with his teeth bared and hands outstretched, I wouldn't move.

And it's because of that coldness that I open my eyes.

Her attacker is still perched atop her body. Her stiff body. Too stiff. His hair is disheveled, and there's something like relief sinking onto his shoulders.

Mom, I mouth, but not a peep leaves my lungs.

The grandfather clock in the foyer rings loud and solemnly. It shakes the quiet. It seems to snap the man out of his trance, as if the chime had pulled him from inside his own head, where he was enjoying the feeling of my mother's death beneath him.

My bottom lip trembles as he presses himself up from the floor. The squelch of liquid underneath him makes me queasy. Bile makes itself comfortable in my throat no matter how many times I try to force it down.

I haven't often thought about death or what taking someone's life would look like. Mostly due to the fact I was happy; my life was good. I had no reason to think about anything that dark, but the random thought crosses my mind that I have never pictured something so violent yet so calm.

A wide circle has begun to form around my mother's body, oily and dark. The moonlight reflects off the slick, showing the red hue that the night tried to hide. From my spot, I can see that there are multiple circles on her robe, each doused with blood. The knife in his hand was responsible for each wound on her soft body.

I look at him as he stands to his full height, graceful in the way he drags the blade of the knife against his clothes to clean off the blood. It's only now that I notice his leather-gloved hands and dark, crisp clothing. This was not something he'd done on a whim, and from the way he so easily steps past her dead body, I know this was not his first time.

No, he'd ended more lives than just my mother's. She was just another body he'd add to his growing list. An obstacle, from what I gathered from their conversation, that he plowed through.

When his feet hit the edge of the doorway, he's not met with an empty hallway. No, instead another figure appears in the space just outside the room.

"There you are," Henry says evenly, speaking for the first time since my mother took her last breath. "Did you find her?"

My heart stills.

Her.

Me. He means me.

He and his partner, who was tasked with handling me. They were looking for me. Had I slept in my own bedroom tonight, I would likely have met the same fate as my mother but at the hands of someone else. I still might. All I can see are the long legs of the accomplice; everything else is blocked by Henry's ungodly size.

But—

"No."

It's just one word, a singular response, but I can feel it all the way inside of my bones, like a gust of chilly wind pushed into this burning closet.

"The house is empty, save for some snakes in one of the spare bedrooms," says the voice. They are young; I can hear the youth in their voice no matter how much darkness tries to mask it.

"Stay here, son. I'm going to do a quick look around, and then we will be leaving. Don't touch anything—"

"Unless I have my gloves on," the unknown partner interrupts with an elegance that is far older than what he sounds like. "I remember your rules."

Son?

This man brought his child along with him to murder someone? What kind of parent does that? What kind of human being does that?

My brain is ready to spiral, prepared to run a mile with this new information and try to piece together what is happening right in front of my eyes, but my mental spasm doesn't have time to start because Henry moves into the night-coated hallway, leaving his son bare to me in the doorway.

Every microblade of hair on my neck stands up, alive and shaking with electricity that I can feel all the way to the soles of my feet. I feel like snow has reached inside my home. It's as if frost appears around his shoes with

every step he walks into the room. A personification of winter and the freezing cold. I'm submerged in the coolness he carries along his shoulders like a second skin.

There's a breath caught in my chest as I look at him.

A beautiful, lightless Jack Frost.

A boy, one I've never seen before. One that doesn't look much older than I am but seems far beyond his years. Like his soul has been here much longer than his youthful body. A pair of well-tailored jeans wrapped around his long legs, a bleak sweater covering his upper half.

He walks with his head up, a regal posture that makes it seem like he's floating across the floorboards. My fingers twitch when the moon spotlights his porcelain-white hair. He doesn't look real, and yet, he's the most tangible thing in this room.

There is no flaw in him.

No imperfection or blemish.

When he kneels down beside my mother—her corpse—that grim realization brings me back down to reality and away from my daydream. The fog of his hold begins to fade, and with it comes clarity.

This boy, Henry's son, is here to kill me.

That's the reason he came, isn't it? To help his father tie up loose strings, and I'm one of those, aren't I?

But as I look at him peering down at her, I can't bring myself to believe he's capable of that. Capable of what his father had done. I imagine for a moment him on top of me, slashing a knife across my skin over and over until I finally gave in to death. His neatly styled hair would shift out of place when he was finished, blood coating his immaculate frame.

I can't picture it.

Not when he's so...clean. Methodical. Groomed. He makes me feel dirty in comparison. Like he would cringe at the stale sweat that clings to my back or turn his nose up at my uncontrollable hair that had dried since my shower before bed.

Unlike his father, this boy looks at the damage on the floor. He looks at the body that's all I have left of my mother and just kneels slightly. I desperately want to know what he's thinking because one thing he does seem to have in common with his father is his ability to look emotionless.

Impassive. Cold. Void.

I want inside of his mind. What is he thinking? What is he feeling? Is he just as cruel as the man who'd given him life? Is this the future he wants for himself?

Something in me snaps when I see him reach into his pocket, pulling out an object that he starts to bring towards my mother's face. Is it not enough for her to be brutalized that she now has to experience torment after her death?

I'm no longer in fear of my life. I can't find it in me to care about what would happen when I left this closet and made my presence known.

My fingers wrap around one of my mother's heels, gripping it tightly in my hand, before I push the closet door open with my foot. When the door spans wide enough to expose his body to me fully, I do the only thing I can think of.

I throw the shoe directly at his head.

I wanted to hit the back of his skull, but the door opening must have caught his attention because he turns to face me just before the heel makes contact with his bottom lip with a dull thud.

Wasting no time, I scramble to my feet, tripping slightly over the clothes on the floor of the closet. My head is swimming, the room spinning with how fast I stood up, but I don't care.

I just want this nightmare to end.

One way or another.

"You aren't supposed to—"

"Don't touch her," I say, reaching down into the pit of my stomach and trying to pull as much strength as I can, but all that came out was a fragile whisper. My feet carry me shakily to her body. I doubt I would be able to do anything to fend either of them off, but maybe that's the point.

This isn't about protecting her after death.

Not really.

I knew coming out of that dark space while they were still here would mean my life would be ended. I wouldn't have to know what it'd be like to live a life without my mother in it. I would never need to worry about the uncertainty of life if they killed me.

This isn't about not wanting to live in a world without her.

"You made me bleed." His voice rolls across my skin like fire, and it burns. There is shock in his tone, as if the idea of someone hurting him is so peculiar.

“What did you—” I glance down at her face, pale, lifeless, and still just as beautiful. Except I can’t see her eyes. They’re covered with two matching coins, shielding me from the green irises I know so well—my eyes. “What did you do to her?”

“You made me bleed,” he repeats once again. Does he think he’s invincible? Had his father convinced him that they are divine in some way and only they are capable of killing others?

I look over at him where he sits on the ground a few feet away, holding his fingers out into the moonlight, staring hard at the blood that coats them. Blood leaks from his lip, dripping down his chin and sliding onto the fabric of his sweater.

“What did you do to her!” My voice is louder this time. I’m losing my patience and my ability to care about who hears me scream. Including his father.

It takes only a split second for him to react, and it’s not enough time for me to pull away. His hand reaches out and curls around my wrist, pulling me towards him on the floor. I shut my eyes, waiting for the pain of slamming into the floor to echo through my bones, but it doesn’t come.

What does happen is the feeling of his frigid arm wrapped around my back as he encases my body in his grasp. Gently, he lays me on the ground with his body resting partially on top of me and partially on the floor next to me, keeping his weight from crushing me.

My eyes widen as one of his hands presses over my mouth to keep me quiet. His smell attacks me from all directions. Dark, deep, woodsy. Just like the forest after it rains.

It soothes me somehow and reminds me of the tall trees and the happiness I felt inside the woods. My last sense of peace. Because this is it—this is the moment he came here for. To kill me. The pendulum of death swings closer and closer to me with every second we lie here.

Tears return, and I feel them skate down the side of my face. Although my mind had accepted this fate, the decision to not leave this room ever again, to die alongside my mother, my heart has not.

My heart refuses to accept this. It beats so hard in my chest I know the boy sent to kill me can feel it—he has to.

I tilt my head, looking over at my mother. Pain accelerates through my soul, and I feel like I’m experiencing every single stab wound as I lie here staring at her. Wishing she would turn her head and meet my eyes. Wishing

I could see her smile one more time or hear her say my name. My body shakes with the force of my tears, and I can hear my muffled cries.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

"Don't look at her."

I ignore him, which only makes him press his hand onto my mouth a little harder, trying to grab my attention.

"Don't look at her," he whispers again, his breath frosty against my warm skin. He's moved so close that I can feel every single exhale from his nose. "Look at me."

Look at him?

"Scarlett." My name slides out of his mouth like water. Fluid, smooth. "Look at me."

I feel this intangible string pull me. A string that he is holding and has somehow wrapped itself around my gut. It tugs, tugs, tugs, until I give in and pull my eyes away from her corpse.

Meeting his eyes is like diving through a sheet of pure ice. They are incredibly light, frozen Alaskan waters, blue. Looking at them feels like chewing on spearmint gum and taking a breath. It feels so cold that it knocks all the air out of your chest.

He doesn't shift his gaze from mine, not even for a second, not even when he pulls his hand from my mouth and I begin to speak.

"Are you going to kill me?" I say, the feeling of frostbite spreading across my lungs. "You are, aren't you? So why don't you just do it? Just get it over with, I mean—"

"They're coins." He interrupts my ramble before I can start, nodding his head in my mother's direction. "I put coins on her eyes. That's what I did to her."

"What—"

"You asked me what I did to her. I just told you."

I stare up at him with a blank expression, trying to understand what this has to do with him killing me. Why telling me this will do anything to stop the inevitable, but I can't help but ask.

"Why?" I breathe, feeling my heart slow and the weight on my chest release just enough to let me know that I'm not suffocating.

"They are—" He stumbles, and it looks so odd on him, like stumbling over his words aren't common. "The coins are payment used to ferry the

dead into the next life. It guarantees safe passage across the River Styx and ensures the soul makes it safely into the afterlife.”

There is a sense of warmth that permeates the cold he has wrapped me in. A little sliver of heat curls between us and causes my eyes to soften. My eyebrows dip together.

Why would he do something so...nice?

If his job when he got here was to follow in his monstrous father’s footsteps, why would he go out of his way to soothe the dead?

“I—”

The floorboards creak, and the sound of heavy footsteps ricochets off the hallway walls. Panic floods my system once again, and that piece of serenity that had briefly cascaded through me is now gone.

“Are you going to kill me?” I ask again with more urgency in my voice as his father approaches the bedroom. If I’m going to die, if one of them was going to kill me, I want it to be him.

This boy.

The unnamed boy that wished my mother a safe passage into whatever afterlife awaits us. I want him to be the one to take my final breath, however he sees fit. If anyone deserves to kill me tonight, it’s him.

He looks at me, his eyes swirling with an emotion I can’t decode. But it’s gone when the footsteps get closer.

“No.” He grimaces, and I can tell he doesn’t like that answer. Like he wants to say yes, like he wants to kill me. “But if you don’t get back in that closet, my father is going to.”

My head shakes violently. “I don’t want to go back in there. I don’t want to hide.”

His nostrils flare, and annoyance pours from him like water from a leaky faucet.

“It doesn’t matter what you—” he breathes down onto my face. “You have to hide. Go back into the closet. Be quiet, don’t make a sound, don’t breathe. Be a ghost. You don’t want to die, not like this.”

With ease, he pulls me off the ground with him as if I weigh nothing, steadying me before looking me in the eyes once more, making sure I’m meeting his gaze.

“Be a ghost, Scarlett. Don’t let him see you, ever.”

I can’t help the question that erupts from my mouth, the rush of emotions that attack me all at once.

“If I become a ghost, how will you see me?”

There’s something scary about him. Something untouched and unpredictable that feels dangerous. But looking at him, even in this horrible situation, watching as he hastily wipes the blood from his face, he makes me feel safe.

There’s more to him than just what I had perceived on the surface, something I briefly caught a glimpse of, and that peek feels like the only thing tethering me to life.

“I won’t.”

That’s all he says before grabbing my weapon of a shoe and pressing it into my arms before shoving me back, leading me towards the other side of the room where my hiding place is located.

Everything that happened tonight is spinning around in my thoughts. The crash of my adrenaline licks at my heels, and I know soon I’ll have to deal with the glaring breakdown that waits for me once I’m all alone.

Because that’s what I am.

I’m all alone now.

And for a moment, this boy made me feel not so lonely, even though I’ve lost the only person who’d ever loved me. Now, I’ll be losing him too, before I even get a chance to know him.

I am alone.

I go back into the closet, and I become a ghost.

And he...well, he kept his word.

He never saw me again.

THE PHANTOM

LYRA

“**L**yra, when you said it would be intricate, I didn’t think you meant this.”

My body flinches at the voice.

I’m used to being the one who blends into the shadows, sneaking up on people and spooking them. It’s rare that I find myself startled by someone’s presence.

But the select few that see me, I hold them close to me.

I set down the pair of tweezers I was wielding like a weapon, lift my glasses onto my head, and glance at the doorway of the classroom. It’s mid-August, so teachers have been on campus for a few weeks, and students have slowly filtered into their dorms.

During the summers, Hollow Heights is peaceful, with no hustle and shuffle of students. The old doors creak with the wind. You can hear the waves crashing into the cliffs just below the Kennedy District, and everything seems a little more haunting.

The winding stairways groan beneath your feet, and it’s impossible not to listen to it because of the vacant halls. Sitting in the library has been said to drive people crazy when it’s empty—the books start to whisper to one another, and voices that are anything but human fill the void.

That’s all a rumor, of course.

But I like it.

I enjoy being alone and practically having this place all to myself. Even though I could have gone without going through Dean Sinclair to secure a key to the lab. Being around him is what I imagine drowning yourself in toxic masculinity feels like. He always has a way of making you feel

beneath him, constantly making sure it's known he is the smartest in the room.

Besides the patriarchy, I love Hollow Heights when it embraces its spooky character.

"It took forever for me to get the Lunas in." I motion towards the pale green insect laid out on wax paper. "I would've finished it a week ago had they come in on time."

Conner Godfrey strolls through the doorway, sporting a denim button-down that is rolled to his elbows. His sandy-blond hair is swept out of his eyes and styled neatly. I've gotten accustomed to his handsome company since summer started, considering this is going to be his classroom for the coming semester.

Since Greg West, the previous organic chemistry teacher who was brutally murdered last year, was no longer available to teach, the university needed more than just a substitute to replace him. Mr. Godfrey, or rather Professor Godfrey, had been the school's guidance counselor, but with his various degrees, he'd volunteered to take Mr. West's place.

It came as a shock to everyone—well, mostly everyone—when investigators revealed that West's death was most likely due to his drug involvement.

They chalked it up to a deal gone wrong, an unhappy customer or a jilted distributor. And that was enough for the citizens of Ponderosa Springs. Everything but the truth is good for this place.

I'm not sure what aggravates me more about that.

The fact that these people are so dull they would eat whatever bullshit is fed to them or how people could see Greg West's body, see the proficient cuts, the meticulous disembodiment, and think for one second anyone other than an artist was responsible for his death.

That body had been drained of blood, bleached, and dissected so perfectly that there was no way a disgruntled buyer who did ecstasy was liable. They did not have the skill or the patience to do that.

Not like him.

"Patience is a virtue, Lyra. I think the wait was well worth it, was it not? I mean, look at those colors!" Conner's enthusiastic voice yanks me out of my head, away from where my thoughts wanted to drift, where they always drift.

I peer down at the antique glass dome, the lid set to the side, leaving it open. Six different moth species are scattered along the sides of a faux human skull I'd found at a taxidermy shop.

Atlas, Isabella tiger, black witch, garden tiger, rosy maple. A collection of my favorite moths are strategically laid across the top and sides of the skull. I'd saved the spot just above the eye sockets for the luna moth. I know the pale green anatomy would tie everything together.

I'd dispersed them, creating a swarm of stunning winged creatures that would be breathtaking once I placed the glass lid on top of the base and secured it close. A smile takes over my face as I think about the finished project.

Briar is going to love this. Oh, and Silas!

Maybe the facility will let me bring him some pictures the next time I visit. Most of the time when I drive up to Washington to see Silas, our visit consists of him trying to teach me how to play chess and me failing miserably. I try to fill the silence by talking too much, but I think he likes when I talk about my taxidermy.

His eyes kinda twitch at the sides, and sometimes, it looks like he might even smile, but that hasn't happened yet. So, I settle for silence, knowing my company is enough for him.

I wouldn't regard myself and Silas Hawthorne as close, not before everything that happened. He hadn't known I existed until last year, while I'd known just about everything there was to publicly know about him. But last year, we'd become acquaintances. The people we cherished were connected, so we were around each other by default.

But we're also two people intertwined through deadly secrets. Ones I know I'll have to carry with me far beyond the grave. He and his friends had briefly tormented me after I'd heard about all the things they'd done in the name of vengeance. I'd witnessed him kill someone.

He'd seen me kill someone.

Yet, it wasn't until they admitted him to the psychiatric ward that I would have called us friends.

"Is this the rosy maple you were talking about the other day?" Conner walks closer, and I can smell his teakwood cologne.

Something inside of my stomach warms when I realize he remembered our conversation. I admire the way his arms flex as he leans onto the

counter, looking closer at the different bugs but not touching them. He knows the rules—no touching.

I wonder why someone like him is still single. He's appealing, commercially successful, and kind. It always throws me for a loop when I look at his hand, seeing it void of a gold band.

"Yeah. Can you believe they are naturally this color? You'd think being bright yellow and pink would make them a target, but no! It's a form of camouflage. And they don't even have a mouth! They only eat as larvae, and when they get to this phase, their only focus is breeding. Isn't that insane?" Excitement pools in my stomach as I speak, looking over at him just in time to catch him staring at me, a smile on his lips.

A blush coats my cheeks, and I look away quickly.

"Sorry, that was a lot of unnecessary information." I choke out a nervous laugh.

"Don't do that," Conner says. "Don't apologize for being passionate about something."

My eyebrows furrow together as I risk a glance back, his chocolate-brown eyes drilling into mine. It almost makes me squirm in my seat, but I refrain, knowing that any form of eye contact makes me uneasy.

I don't like Professor Godfrey like that. There is only one person I want in a way that consumes my entire being. No one could ever take that spot. But it is nice knowing that someone like him enjoys listening to me rant and rave about bugs.

It's nice having a friend.

And that's what he has been to me this summer. Considering I'm the only one from the Loner Society that stayed in Ponderosa Springs, continued coming to Hollow Heights even though school was out.

But I understood that my friends needed out, even if it was for a few months. All of them were ready to leave this place and all its vicious memories, but they couldn't.

Not yet. Not when one of them is still here and unable to leave.

"The world is going to try and do that, Lyra. Make you feel bad for being emotional about the things you love, try and ridicule you over it, but don't let them. Don't let them ruin what you love," Conner continues, giving me a reassuring smile.

"That sounds like something my mother would've told me," I say without really thinking.

"She sounds like a smart woman. Now I know where you got it from."

"She was," I mutter, reveling in the pain that spreads across my chest when I allow myself to think of her.

Sensing the topic is a sore one for me, he quickly recovers, straightening his spine and rubbing his hands together.

"Well? Are you going to add the final piece? Or do I need to look away while you finish your work of genius?"

Grateful for the shift, I focus my attention on the brightly-colored moth on the table. It's not that I don't enjoy talking about my mom. It's just hard to remember her without thinking about that night. Without thinking about what came alive inside of me. What I became.

I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder pretty soon after her death, so it explained the constant nightmares, the flashbacks, and fear of the dark. I'd been through a traumatic event. It was normal for me to experience those things, to develop that mental struggle.

But there was one thing no one explained to me. One thing that no one knew, and if they did, they wouldn't understand.

No one could tell me why death lingered inside of me.

Slithering and flowing within the crevices of my skeleton, existing in my gut like an organ. A black liquid that had been injected deep into my veins refused to be flushed out. Everything I was before, every dream, it's a remote memory.

Now, I can't think of her, of that night, without being reminded of the morbid impulse it gave birth to. A compulsion that stings my tongue when it rises from my gut. It makes my mouth water, and my eyes burn.

I was able to swallow that urge for a long time. Tuck it away in my closet and hide it away. That was until a few months ago, when I'd taken a blade to someone's throat and felt blood on my hands for the first time since my mother's death.

I know what it feels like to kill someone now, and it scares me how easily I was able to do it. How easy it would be for me to do it again.

I was reborn into a new person when my mother was murdered. Scarlett died just as Phoebe did that night, and Lyra took her place. I became the bug queen, the odd one, the girl with a fascination with taxidermy, entomology, and the process of curating the dead.

I became a ghost.

Just like he asked me to.

My throat bobs as a familiar metallic taste swarms my tongue, but I quickly swallow it down, focusing on the task at hand.

Carefully, I begin to remove the small pins that hold the wax paper against the wings of the moth. I'd been kinda bummed out that I couldn't raise this one; it's always much more satisfying when I'm a part of the entire process. I enjoy watching them grow as much as this, observing their mannerisms, how they adapt, and eventually how they die.

It makes the pinning more interesting and more intimate. If I watch them grow up, live, exist, it's only right for me to take care of them after their inevitable deaths.

Once all the pins are out and I remove the paper, I use the tweezers to very gently lift the insect up and onto the center pole, placing the moth's thorax onto the front of the skull coated with superglue.

"Don't mess up." Conner snickers beside me, making me grin a bit while I hold it steady for a couple of seconds, just to make sure it's set.

When I'm sure it's set in place, I move back to look at the completed project.

"Do you think it's too much?" I ask, sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, questioning myself. "I probably should have just stuck to one kind of moth so the color scheme is similar, right? Maybe I can just redo—"

"Lyra," Conner warns. "Stop doubting yourself. This is fantastic. I'm tempted to buy it from you to decorate the mantle above my fireplace."

I look over at him, eyes bright with appreciation. I wish I were like Briar or Sage, girls who are confident in themselves with no need for reassurance or a friendly word here and there. However, I'd grown up in silence. Alone. A mist of a person who was rarely spoken to, let alone been complimented.

It's only human of me to want validation.

"Too bad it'll be decorating my apartment."

My gaze snaps to the doorway, seeing the one face I'd been waiting to see since she left at the end of the semester.

"Briar!" I say a little breathlessly, hopping out of my chair and speed walking in her direction. I don't think twice when I toss my arms around her shoulders and pull her into a hug.

"You know Sage and the boys hate Mr. Godfrey, right?" she whispers into the crook of my neck as she returns the hug.

I cringe, knowing that already.

“We can discuss that another time,” I mutter. “I thought you weren’t coming back until next week!” I playfully shove her, feigning anger at her surprise return.

“I was tired of hearing her bitch about missing you, so I brought her back early.”

Briar throws her middle finger up over her shoulder, directing it towards the large shadowy figure that is leaning against the doorframe. Alistair Caldwell’s presence is hard to detect, like a dark fog that you can’t see but can feel. But once you know he’s there, it’s impossible to ignore him.

I reach my arm over Briar’s shoulder, pushing my fist towards him. He lifts his knuckles and bumps them with mine, tossing his head up in greeting.

“How was Texas?” I ask him.

He scoffs. “Hot as fuck. This place still a shithole, bug queen?”

A nickname that had been used as an insult for the longest time had been turned into one of my favorite terms of endearment. I know he doesn’t mean it in a way to put me down; it’s his way of calling me a friend. Sorta, I guess. At the very least, he no longer wants my head on a stake.

The Hollow Boys don’t have friends other than each other. They are a four-piece puzzle. Where one is, the others surely follow. I’ve never seen a bond so thick. So solid.

For a long time, I was jealous. Now, I’ve just come to admire it.

“Depends on the day,” I answer with a little shrug.

I hadn’t ever admitted it out loud to Briar, to anyone, but I like Ponderosa Springs. Parts of it anyway. It was where my mother grew up.

I could do without the corruption, scandals, sex trafficking, and murder. But there are fragments of me that love this place, no matter how hard I try not to.

It’s different for them, though. I know that.

This town had done nothing but hurt them. Ruin them. Turn them into versions of themselves so dreadful I’m sure at some point they scared themselves. There was nothing left for my friends here, not when Ponderosa Springs had eaten it whole.

“I’ll leave you to talk, Lyra. I’m sure you all have a lot of catching up to do.” Conner walks to my side, giving a kind smile before pushing towards the door, waving slightly at my friends. “Miss Lowell, Mr. Caldwell.”

I watch his back fade away into the empty halls, waiting till he is out of earshot before returning my attention back to Briar.

“Are Sage and Rook back, too? How’s your mom? Oh my gosh, wait till you see the cabin I spent all summer decorating. I mean, I know you two have an apartment now, but you can still come over. We still need mandatory Loner Society meetings—”

“I missed you, too,” Briar laughs, cutting me off from my babbling and pulling me into another hug.

I did miss her. I missed her so much. I missed all of them.

My first real friend in years had spent the summer in Texas, visiting her family, showing Alistair where she’d grown up. Sage, a girl I’d seen go through hell and back, one I’d come to admire as a friend and a woman, had packed her bags for a road trip down the coast with Rook Van Doren, the Hollow Boy I get along with more than the rest because he always has snacks. There was also that time we set a legendary school tree on fire, but that’s a story for another time.

They’d all left me here, and I wanted to be upset about it—really, I did.

But I understood.

Briar, Alistair, Rook, and Sage needed a break from the carnage. The constant suffering and never-ending pain this place inflicted on them. Just for a few weeks, they needed to be normal, to enjoy life, and I couldn’t blame them for that even if I wanted to.

“Sage and Rook will be back tomorrow night. We’re meeting at Black Sands Cove.” Briar’s eyes sparkle with that familiar mischief that I’ve come to love and hate. It usually means whatever we’re doing is going to require us to do something physically demanding.

“The beach is closed at night,” I point out, hoping this little hiccup will be enough to derail whatever plan they’ve made.

“We know,” Alistair smirks behind her. “Rook will need to blow off some steam. Being back in Ponderosa Springs without Silas here is going to wreck his shit.”

My heart thrums. We’re not sure how long Silas will be getting help. Considering how bad the psychotic break was, doctors said anywhere from a few months to several years.

It breaks my heart, but it destroyed Rook. The two of them were close, so fucking close, and I know Rook blames himself for not realizing he was off his medication sooner.

We're not hanging out tomorrow night for us; we're doing it so we can be there for Rook. Secretly, I think they all need it. They all miss him.

"Reunited for the first time since Mayor Donahue's funeral. You think Sage is going to be okay?" I ask.

"I think," Briar starts, "Sage is handling her father's death just fine. She knows that accidents happen."

Accidents. Right.

Because setting a purposeful fire with her father and a federal agent inside her house was totally an accident. But, like I said, these are secrets that I'll carry to the grave. I have to if it means protecting my friends. It's not like I don't have secrets of my own that Sage and Briar are keeping for me. Keeping from their boyfriends. Everyone.

We protect each other and the secrets we carry along our shoulders. It's part of the deal when you join the Loner Society. You are allowed to be alone but never lonely.

"We figured we'd rekindle our friendship with a little game," Alistair says. "For old time's sake."

A game.

Always a game.

Usually illegal, and it never fails that I rip my lungs open, trying to keep up. I swallow my fear, not of playing but of knowing that my plan is about to begin, and I will have to face him in order to start it.

Not just hide in the shadows and watch him quietly. No, I will have to stand in front of him, use my words, and ask for what I want.

Months ago, he'd come seeking me out. A settled debt, he said. But I'm not finished with the Prince of Death. I've barely started. He'd denied me the first time I'd asked for a favor.

But I refuse to take no for an answer.

I love being his ghost. But now, I want him to see me.

It's not enough to haunt him. I need more from him.

"What's the game?"

Briar grins. It's wide, full of excitement, and it makes my stomach roll.

"Tag."

THE EXPOSITION

THATCHER

Every town has a ghost story.

One that is told at kids' sleepovers and nights spent circling around a crackling fire. A tale that has grown into almost an unbelievable lie over the years, but at its core, it carries some form of the truth.

My last name is that story.

The bump in the night. The boogeyman in the closet. The scratching noise in the wall.

My family had become a century-old myth meant to frighten the residents of Ponderosa Springs; a legend that was rumored to have started when the town was founded. The Piersons, being one of the founding families, had established a reputation of coldness and unreachable expectations. Others were so spooked that they only allowed us a piece of the town because of the sheer terror of what we would do to them if we did not receive our fair share.

There are many different origin stories. Some of the more far-fetched ones claimed we were vampires or some other form of inhuman, demonic creature that fed on pure souls. I can appreciate the creativity, especially considering the truth is far more boring.

My predecessors were secluded. They did not share with others unless absolutely necessary, and trust was not something they gave freely. They spoke swiftly and in small quantities.

This secretive behavior made others uncomfortable; more than that, it made them jealous. When weak-minded people are not given attention by those who are at the top, they will try to tear off the crown, chip away at the

throne by drawing baseless conclusions and spreading off-kilter rumors. Whatever they can do in order to knock someone down a few pegs.

Like dogs fighting for scraps of meat.

Unfortunately for those insecure folk, they only succeeded in lifting our legacy higher. All they accomplished was making people afraid of us, which worked in our favor.

People will serve the things they fear.

The town of Ponderosa Springs feared us more than anything else. So much so that the terror had continued years later. And for a while, all these horrid tales had only been fiction, gossip-riddled folklore created by bored town citizens.

Until one day, it wasn't.

Until one day, because of my father, my family proved every single terrifying narrative to be true.

Minus the vampires.

My head begins to lull back and forth as my long fingers stroke the ivory keys. Elegant music floats to my ears as I work the piano, tickling the instrument until it laughs out the melody I'm currently working on. While I believe he is overrated, Chopin was one of the first composers I learned to master on the bone-white Steinway & Sons grand piano, an early birthday present my grandmother had gifted me when I was young. Even then, I knew the addition of the cherry-red color on the lid, music desk, and prop stick was not a coincidence.

She knew my favorite color. She knew why I loved it so much.

Movement catches my attention for only a second, my eyes opening briefly as I glance towards the far-left side of the basement, my little chamber of immorality, and notice that my single-member audience has started to wake from his slumber.

I don't need to be over there to see the fright in his eyes. I'd imagine anyone would immediately start to panic when they woke up to find themselves unable to move, tethered to a freezing metal gurney wearing nothing but boxer briefs.

The temporary paralysis should continue working for at least another fifteen minutes, which will feel like years for my friend, Walter Hendricks. The K-hole he's currently found himself tripping inside of is not a pleasant one. I've never personally understood the need to chase artificial highs or

why people would be willing to take a veterinary drug just to experience dreamy hallucinations.

Deciding to let Walter continue panicking a little longer while the ketamine does its job, I bring my attention back to the piano. I'd continued the piece even as I'd looked away, but as my late music instructor would say, "If you're not consumed by the music you play, how do you expect anyone else to be?"

I can practically feel his cane swatting at my hands, the faint scars left behind evidence of his superior teaching. It had been years since my piano teacher had struck my knuckles, and yet I could still feel the blood that would leak from my skin onto the instrument.

Minus the brutal soreness, I enjoyed playing with the blood on my fingers. It made slipping across the keys more fluid. It felt right.

When I return my focus to my display, I notice the next few parts don't feel right. I look up at the sheet music displayed on the music rack, furrowing my eyebrows. Completely stopping, I remove the pencil from behind my ear and erase a few notes.

I look at the now blank lines and wiggle my fingers on the keys, asking myself, what did the music in my mind sound like when I'd taken Walter from just outside that bar?

The night had been warm on my skin, and I could smell the pungent odor of cigarettes wafting from the inside of the cheap bar. My heartbeat had been steady as I watched him exit from the back door, his black suit wrinkled from the day's wear and the cheap material it was made from.

I can spot a shoddy suit from a mile away, but I bet the people he surrounds himself with inside that shady bar think it's expensive. The thought makes me scoff.

West Trinity Falls wouldn't know a designer suit if it grew arms and smacked them in the face. God, just thinking of being in that town makes me feel dirty.

I don't always wait in the shadows when I do this. Sometimes, I'll walk inside wherever my target of the night is and I'll take a seat. Maybe at a table while observing them silently, or when I'm in the mood for it, I'll talk them right into my web.

However, this time, I had waited in the dark, in the gloom of that vile alley, waiting for the perfect moment. I want the music floating from the instrument to translate that. I want it to tell the story without words, a slow,

lyrical movement that contrasts the first form I'd created days earlier, a piece that allows me to show the beauty of my playing.

This form, Caccia, is the hunt. It needs to translate into a predator stalking its prey. An unknowing victim simply walks to their car with no sense of danger. The notes, in the beginning, start off slow, a gentle incline, and now I need it to be heavier.

I want the keys to sing the memory of my leather-gloved hand wrapping around him. I need to hear in the notes how he struggled against me just before I pierced his skin with the needle. How his body fell, weakened from the drug, and slugged into my arms. How easy it had been to snatch him up, how good it felt to be this talented at what I do.

I want to feel it.

I want to relive those moments every single time I select Walter's concerto from my collection. I'd let the fluid sounds bring me back to those moments so I could experience his torture all over again. I need to feel it slither through my corrupt veins.

Until I get it right, I will not move from this bench. I demand nothing short of perfection from myself. Frustration bites at me.

“Your father would already be done by now.”

Some voice that I despise speaks from inside of me, and I tighten my fist around the pencil, feeling the weak material bend in my grasp. My father, I want to say, could never do something this impressive. He killed women because he felt like it, took the slivers of their hair as tokens, and had no creative vision.

He was beneath me. A nobody in comparison to me.

I am an artist.

Everything he wished he could be but never had the skill to achieve.

I hear a grumble of despair, and it's enough to reel me back in from where my mind had traveled. Henry Pierson was the last thing I wanted to think about when I was in my basement.

Taking a much-needed deep breath, I inhale the smell of lye. The faint metallic smell soothes me. The boiling vat of liquid is tucked neatly in the corner near the bathroom, a conscious decision I'd made for easier cleanup.

I stare at the sheet in front of me. If I can't get this combination correct, I won't be able to move on to the final form, and that can't happen.

I refuse to leave a piece unfinished.

Not again.

Never again.

One incomplete work was enough. I had no desire to add any more.

I work in silence for several more seconds, neatly writing down the new notes I think will fit better and start playing from the beginning. I cascade through the bridge, a slow grin forming on my lips as I near the end of the song.

It's a spectrum of somber noise, round, dark, and rich. Earlier, it had been flat, but now, it's exactly where I need it to be. A living, breathing, wicked memory that I created.

Walter's murmurs of misery and confusion blend with the last few notes of the song. A chill rolls up the column of my spine, and suddenly, I'm starving. The air becomes steady, and the room falls into a deep silence.

I feel the thing inside of me crawl out from its cave, rancid and baring its teeth, ready to feast on the body I've secured for it. When the piano stops, when my fingers quit moving eloquently over the keys, that is when the show stops.

I no longer need to pretend that I am anything but this. I'm finally in harmony with myself and what I am. Although I never hide, even when I'm out in public, down here in this sinister haven I've built, I'm at peace.

With that hunger driving me, I stand from the bench, tilting my head to the left and then to the right, hearing a satisfying crack. My fingers inch towards the cuff of my Tom Ford button-down.

"Walter, I do believe your death will be my best work yet." I hum, taking my time to roll up both of my sleeves, exposing the violet-colored veins winding up my forearms.

The drugs I'd injected inside of his neck have started to wear off enough that his eyes are wide and alert, but he has yet to regain the full function of his limbs. The heels of my Italian leather shoes click across the red mosaic tiles on my floor, a pattern of glossy and matte finishes.

"Wh-hat..." he gurgles, trying to remind himself of how his vocal cords work. "Wh-ho—"

"I desperately wish you people would come up with more unique questions when you regain consciousness." I roll my eyes, working my way around the metal gurney that reflects the bright headlamp above us. "Why do you all feel the need to ask the same thing? Will it truly put you at ease if I tell you who I am? Or what you're doing here?"

I click my tongue, shaking my head as he continues to shake and wither in the binds. All of them, my victims, they are all the same, all of them weak and somehow convinced they will make it out of here alive.

“How about I tell you something else.” I carefully grab my rolling tray, one that has all my favorite toys splayed across it. “How about I tell you that it doesn’t matter who or what, you were always going to end up right here. At my mercy. Does that calm you at all?”

My fingertips graze the blades I’ve selected tonight. A well-trained and skilled hunter would appreciate my lineup. All the carbon knives are a dream for anyone looking to skin a deer or some other creature hunted for sport.

A tingle pools in my stomach, and if I could feel emotion, this would be the closest thing to joy, I believe. I wouldn’t exactly know because growing up as a ghost story meant a lonely existence.

I’d been born with death as a personal shadow.

Death, or at the very least, unmitigated evil, had infested my mother’s womb the night I was conceived. Something wicked and monstrous created me, infused my veins with apex predator instincts and a delicious appetite for blood.

I was born a psychopath.

Death manifested into one human.

The boogeyman beneath your bed. I am the one who makes you want to lock your doors at night and cling to your kids a little tighter.

It doesn’t matter to me much what psychologists or criminal investigators have to say on the matter. All the articles and dissertations read the same way. No one is born with psychopathy, they say. People are not genetically cursed in utero. It is something that is learned, that is absorbed and witnessed.

While I am always the first to agree with logical statements such as these, I am also living proof of the opposite. Therefore, they are wrong. Their theories are wrong.

However, I understand why they would reassure the population. It’s much less frightening to believe humans are born pure and innocent. That with love and affection, people will grow to be kind. Based on that theory, if all children were groomed with affection, we could end psychopaths and sociopaths altogether.

The truth is, I was made this way. Born with the perfect tools to make me into a killer, and that is far scarier. Knowing that there is no way to stop it, to stop us, those born with this urge pumping through our system. Knowing that no matter what you do or how much love you have to give, some people are just made to eradicate lives. Made to cut. To make others bleed.

How else do you explain my quietness as a child? My grandmother said the only time I'd ever cried out as an infant was the moment I came into the world, and once I was cleaned, swaddled, and handed to my mother, all sound ceased to exist. How else do you explain my lack of emotion, of feeling towards anyone, including myself? My loyalty is unmatched—I would do just about anything for the sake of the people I surround myself with, but that does not, and will never mean, I care for them.

It took my family a bit to catch on to that harsh reality, but after my grandfather's resigned reaction after he caught me in the backyard ripping the limbs off bugs, I knew they'd finally accepted me for what I was.

An abomination.

A monster.

A killer.

The thing my father had desperately hoped I would be. While his teaching and parental advice were morbid, he was the only person who understood what I was. Even if he was partially the reason I turned out this way.

By the time I reached middle school, I was no longer allowed to play with other children. Their parents complained that my presence disturbed their innocent little ones' minds.

I was bizarre. Foreign. Strange. An exceptional child with a dark imagination, teachers would say. There was not, and still isn't, a single person who wasn't creeped out by my presence, and honestly? I like it.

Thoroughly.

"Wha-at do you want?" His words tumble out, finally finding his footing, which always makes this much more interesting. It means his screams will be crystal clear. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Resorting to curse words." I suck my teeth, picking up one of the smaller knives, twirling it in between my fingers. "That's not the way you get on my good side."

Before I give Walter the attention he deserves, I grab my remote and click Play. Bach floats through the baseboard speakers, and everything begins to click into place. I try to imagine myself ten years down the road when I finish medical school. Ready to slice up someone for a completely different reason than I am now. Dressed in scrubs, with something classical playing in the operating room.

Would cutting with the intention of saving lives give me the same satisfaction as the one I'm about to make? Would slicing flesh for the purpose of medicine be enough to curb my insatiable habit?

Not one to be very optimistic, I doubt it. Highly.

I press the Start button on the recorder, laying it back on my tray and checking twice to make sure the red light is on in the upper-right corner. I've grown from my earlier mistakes when I was still trying to figure out what I liked. My routine. My process. After hitting the wrong button with one of my earlier victims, I now double-check, just in case.

What is a concerto without an orchestra?

A killer without his victims' screams?

Once the sound of Mozart's Lacrimosa begins, I peer down at the hunk of fat lying on the table. He is sweating. An unnatural amount, so much that I think he might have hyperhidrosis. I'm not a doctor yet, but I have killed six people up to this point, and none of them have perspired this much.

"Walter, what happened to that quarterback physique you love to remind people about? There isn't any possible way you'd be able to lead anyone for a short walk, let alone a state championship."

I take my time to look at his barely covered body. Brittle hair coats his chest and stomach, a large gut, and he has a deep red face that reminds me of a balloon ready to explode. He makes me sick. He's a waste of space, and to think he considered himself like me.

He could never be me. He could never do the things I do at the level I am capable of. The cops were weeks away from snatching him up and throwing away the key. It would take federal investigators a lifetime to even catch a whiff of me.

"How do you know me?" he puffs out from his dry mouth. "Do you want money? I can—"

"Please don't embarrass yourself. You couldn't afford to pay me off."

I spread my arms wide at the space around me, from the custom floors to the ridiculously priced statue in the corner. This basement, my slice of

harmony, costs more than most make in a lifetime. “Look around you—does it look like I need your money?”

My fingers grip the handle of the hunting knife, pointing the tip downward towards Walter’s face. I drag just the edge along the side of his cheek, the blade so sharp I can feel it cutting through his grainy beard hair.

“However, because I am not a complete monster, I will answer your first question.” The hair stands up on the back of my neck as I feel how easy it would be to gut him like a pig and watch the blood pour from his stomach. How very simple it is to end his life, just like that, with a flick of my wrist.

Power surges through my veins. Control and desire swirl together inside of me, creating the best natural high one can experience. There is no better feeling than this. Knowing that I am in full control of his fate, knowing he is at my mercy. That he is impotent and pathetic. Beneath me in every way. He will never be what I am.

“Shit—” he hisses. “Please, don’t do this. I have a daughter.”

The urge had threatened to pull me under, the overwhelming sensation of everything around me so intense I hadn’t noticed my blade had dug into his cheek just enough to draw blood.

“Jessica,” I say, taking a breath and pulling the edge from his face. “Right? She’ll be fifteen in December.”

His eyes flare, shining bright and ghastly with fear. It swallows his entire body, and it fills me with warmth. I want him to die afraid and shaking. Right before he draws his last breath, he will know what real death looks like. How true fear tastes on his tongue.

“Don’t you touch her,” he grates out, trying to move against the binds that are across his chest. He has no chance of getting out of them. I learned the art of knot tying when I was very young, one of the many lessons my father taught me that I had perfected for myself. Plus, his needle cocktail will keep him partially paralyzed until I’m finished.

My father was good at what he did.

I was the best.

“I would never. Teenagers, children in general, are targeted by a certain group of spineless people.” I smirk down at him. “Someone like you. Isn’t that right, Walter?”

I twirl the blade in between my fingers, focusing my attention on his hand. I lift the heavy limb, inspecting the lines and scars, my gloved fingers trying to find a starting point.

“What? What are you—”

“Do not waste my time,” I hiss, grinding my teeth as I bend one of his fingers in an impossible direction. “I hate liars, Walter. Try not to make this worse on yourself by aggravating me.”

He shouts in pain, but I ignore it, releasing my grip on the chubby digit before bringing the knife to the tip of his index finger.

“How do I know you?” I hum, feeling my toes curl as I dig the edge deep enough that it slips beneath all the layers of skin, and then I start to shave backward, slowly making sure the slicing is accurate. “I know you because you think you’re like me. Tell me, you love your daughter so much that you kill girls who look just like her? Is that how you show your love, Walter?”

I’m not sure he hears me, not over the blinding sound of his screams as searing pain radiates through his body. The hands are full of nerves, unfortunately for him, so he feels every single inch of the blade slipping through his flesh.

Blood pours from the wound like a fountain. Gushing and leaking onto the metallic table below, it makes visibility difficult, but I can feel the pull of his skin on the knife. I keep my hand steady, not a wobble or shake in sight as I bare his muscles and bones to the open air.

All those protected nerves attacked by the chill air down here must be miserable. I almost wish I could feel bad for him. Almost. The delicious screams of agony make my ears ring, vibrating the drums inside.

It’s better than Bach. Better than Mozart and Brahms.

This is my favorite form of music.

“Keep screaming,” I speak loudly. “You’re only doing it for my benefit. It’s only cheering me on, making me want to carve you deeper.”

I finish flaying his entire index finger, moving to the next, admiring the way his ligaments match the tile on my floor. Tightly wound cords of tough elastic tissue glisten underneath the harsh light above us.

This is much different than studying books and diagrams. Nothing compares to seeing the human anatomy with your own eyes. To feel sticky blood streaming across your hands and the smell of iron in the air. Knowing you are the wielder of pain and death.

I submerge myself into the process, in the beautiful gore and carnage. This is what I was made for. My nimble, long fingers were fabricated for inflicting torture. I was designed to kill.

I admire my work. His entire hand is completely skinned and raw, the skin flapped over and under his wrist. I chuckle thinking about how it reminds me of the banana I'd peeled this morning for breakfast. It always amazes me what the human body looks like in its natural state.

"Hey, none of that," I say, slapping the side of Walters's face to pull him back down to reality, his eyes fighting the urge to close. "I want you to stay awake. Talk to me. I asked you a question earlier—do you kill girls because of your love for your daughter? Or is it because you secretly have one of those disgusting fetishes for your own kin?"

Tears leak from the corners of his eyes, and his body shakes. Paleness has taken over his skin tone, and I know it's because he's going into shock. The blood loss is taking its toll. However, he should last till at least the shoulder before he bleeds out. Maybe if I'm lucky, he'll still be conscious when I start the other hand.

"I—" He chokes on a sob. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. I can't control it. I'm sorry."

I hate this part. It happens every single time.
The apologizing for their actions. The excuses.
I'm sick.
I need help.
I can't control it.

They all die atoning for their crimes, hoping that some god will forgive them in their final minutes so they don't spend eternity in some everlasting hell.

It's pathetic.

"You disgust me," I say absent-mindedly, digging a little too deep into his forearm with the blade. I swiftly swap the scalpel for a thicker knife, something hunters call a gut hook, a special type of blade in which the spine has a sharpened semicircle ground into it. I catch a piece of exposed skin, burrowing beneath the last layer right above the muscles, and begin to peel his flesh back from the bone.

Crimson clouds my vision.

"You should be sorry," I grind out, "not for what you've done but for calling yourself a killer. You are not a killer, Walter. Not a good one. Not even close. You're a coward with mommy issues."

Although my words become more vicious, my hand remains consistent. It would be easy to slice and dice him like he did to all those girls. That

would require zero skill and effort.

It takes years of discipline and practice to remain in control. To stay steady and refuse to let the bloodthirsty urge to end him take over. That takes mastery.

And I'd conquered the art of killing from a very young age. How could I not? When your father is a serial killer, one who is determined to never let his name die out, you become what you know.

Raised by a monster. Become a monster.

My father killed because he was angry at women. He had no impulse control. I kill other murderers, not because of some morality complex or that I feel the need to save people, not to make the world a better place.

No, I am not the morally-gray vigilante.

I kill other serial killers because I live for the thrill of outsmarting them. All of them. Of proving over and over again that I'm the best. No one is better at bringing death than I am.

My father wanted to own my legacy. Wanted to own the fact he'd created this thing inside of me. Because that's what Henry Pierson did—he owned people. And now that he is in prison, I'm his last hope of notoriety and fame.

But I refuse to allow someone who is not my equal to own anything of mine. Not anymore.

“But tonight,” I breathe, watching him hemorrhage before my very eyes. He won’t be in the land of the living for much longer. “Tonight, Walter, you get to be taken out by the best one. An excellent one. And that is a privilege that should bring you comfort.”

I reach the top of his arm, exposing his shoulder when I hear the rattle in his lungs. My movements pause as I meet his eyes, hovering over his face, making sure my face is the last thing he sees before he parts.

Like cold, swift night, death comes for him. The life drains from his eyes right in front of me, a little switch clicked off inside of him.

Just like that, my count goes from six to seven.

Ecstasy flows through my veins, a blissful concerto of emotion wafting over me. I had taken my father’s child-play nonsense and created something untouchable.

I had become an orchestrator of fear. A conductor of pain. I compose death.

Contrary to what people believe, the apple did fall very far from the wicked tree.

Because I never wanted to be my father. I never wanted to be like him.

I wanted to be better.

And I am.

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AN UNHEALTHY OBSESSION

LYRA

Everyone knows that flames lure moths.

Bright luminescent light bulbs on your porch or tall yellowish streetlamps on the highway. Hundreds of winged creatures will gather around gentle rays that emerge in the night.

The nocturnal insects have accumulated lore around them. They operate by transverse orientation, keeping a constant light source at a certain place in relation to their body in order to guide them on their journey. That light is normally the glimmer of the moon; the moon is their North Star. Their compass.

However, a more sinister reality is that moths are hypnotized by lights, following the glow to their death. Like a more melancholy version of Romeo and Juliet, the lure of the heart of a lamp to the moth is a fatal attraction. But no one talks about that.

Couples get compared to moths and flames all the time. Drawn to one another, magnetic. I bet if they knew the real reason, it wouldn't be as sweet. Not to normal people. Creatures who become entranced by bright lights get eaten by predators or overheat. They are not drawn by love or some deep-rooted appeal; they are pulled in by death.

Even though the moth consciously knows getting that close to the bright glow of light will kill them, they go anyway. They can't help themselves. They are addicted.

I think it makes it that much more romantic. They would risk dying just to get close. Just to bask in the light for a few seconds, even though their death waits just around the corner.

While most people are familiar with that aspect of a moth's behavior, something many don't know about lepidoptera is that certain species can't resist sweets.

They are suckers for fermented confectionaries. When I need to collect a few more specimens for an upcoming project, I will head outside with a jar of bananas mixed with molasses and stale beer. Then I'll pour some on a few different tree trunks and wait.

The number of winged beauties that come out for a taste is mesmerizing.

Maybe that's why moths are my favorite insect, why I appreciate them so much. We have two very important things in common.

Our love for sweets and our obsession with things that would kill us.

We have these addictive hearts.

That's what my mother used to call it.

When I love something, I love it with my entire being. The beating organ in my chest becomes this fiend for the things it likes. The things it needs. I don't feel mild, gentle emotions as others do.

My heart is a powerful thing, Mom once told me just before bed. Strong and with so much love that it could drown cities and empires. It does not know how to do anything other than bleed for the things I find joy in.

She finished by telling me that it was a dangerous thing to live with but also a gift. One that I should be careful with. Because few people will know what to do with a heart like mine.

I, of course, did not understand what could possibly be dangerous about caring the way I did.

Especially when the things I loved were things like candy, fairy tales, and storms. What harm could come from that kind of thing? A few cavities and wet hair in exchange for happiness seemed like a fine deal in my mind.

But now, it's five in the morning, and I'm thinking about how much of a chore having a heart like mine is. My sleepy limbs and tired eyes are not on board with what we are about to do. Even my brain is desperately trying to pull back on the leash wrapped around the instrument in my chest.

Three more hours of sleep, Lyra. Three more hours of sleep, then we can get up and eat those black cherry waffles you love so much at Tilly's, it's trying to bargain, convincing me to give up one addiction for another. But my brain is naïve and should know better. My ribs are not a strong enough cage to keep me from the one thing I want more than anything else.

I would never touch another cherry again, if only to stand close to him for an hour. There would be no more fairy tales before bed as long as I could breathe in his familiar scent instead.

There is nothing I love more than him. Nothing I am more addicted to. A lifetime's worth of all my favorite things would not equal one passing moment with him.

So yes, this fickle, obsessive heart forces me to get up before the sun, but it is all worth it.

To see him.

To feel his energy.

To be near him.

I hop down the deserted road on one leg, trying to pull my shoe back on properly, thankful there is no one driving past to watch me bumblefuck my way back into a steady jog. I'd stopped for just a second to catch my breath and check the damage to my right heel.

Everyone always talks about this marvelous runner's high, but no one ever mentions the blisters. So many fucking blisters. After applying another Band-Aid to the sore wound on the back of my foot and adjusting my shoe, I'm back on track.

Over the summer, I started going on morning jogs. I've never been a fan of running. I've always been terrible at it, and the days we were required to run the mile in high school gym class, I'd always feign ill or forged a note from my foster care family telling the school I had asthma.

Everyone always says the only way to get better at something is through repetition, so, although I loathe this feeling, that's what I'm attempting.

After what happened in the spring, I had grown tired of always being out of breath, always being behind, having to hide, being weak. Running from predators had never been a skill I needed to have until recently. As of late, I've worked muscles in my legs I didn't even know existed just to stay alive.

I also found that although it hurts every morning to get out of bed and my lungs always burn, my heavy footfalls against the ground drown the constant ebb of thoughts, aiding my restless mind that doesn't know how to quit.

I wish I could say these healthy, progressive reasons are why I started doing this. That I needed something to clear my mind or wanted my body to be better equipped to run from those with malicious intent.

But, unfortunately, I would be lying.

I glance down at my watch, the one I'd bought specifically for this, and see I'm a few minutes early, which is new for me. The touch screen around my wrist also tells me I'm approaching mile three, which is three miles I've added to my morning in order to park a safe distance away so that no one will see my car.

Cutting down off the side of the road so I can avoid the sometimes-crowded entrance, I dodge a few trees, slipping past neatly-trimmed bushes before emerging beside the track that winds through Ponderosa Springs Park Arboretum.

The botanical gardens are in full bloom, bursting with color along the edges of the man-made ponds that are strategically arranged around the 2.3-mile loop trail. Residents and visitors frequent this space during the summer mornings, meaning usually it's littered with people jogging, speed walking while gossiping, or children peering into the water, trying to spot as much wildlife as possible.

I can hear frogs croaking and the sweet sound of sparrows singing loudly through the wet fog. There are worse places to be, even if it's spent pumping my arms until they feel like Jell-O.

I casually make my way onto the paved trail, intermingling with early risers already there who, thankfully, didn't notice me appearing from the trees. But that isn't out of the norm. I think I'd be more shocked to find someone noticed me rather than the opposite.

Glancing down at my watch one last time, I count down from sixty in my head. Excitement buzzes in my stomach, so strong I'm afraid I might glow. I tug my beanie further down onto my head, the material straining to keep all my hair tucked inside.

It's easy to wear bland running attire, but keeping the mane of curls on my head hidden is a completely different obstacle. I need to blend in, merge into my surroundings, which has become sort of second nature for me at this point.

I've gotten so good at hiding that it's impossible for anyone to see me. A ghost hovering through spaces, moving through rooms with barely a second glance in my direction.

But that is going to change. I'll make sure of it. Today hadn't been a part of the plan, but I couldn't help myself. Even if he agrees to my terms, I

will still crave to see him when he thinks he is alone. I'll still want to be the little voyeur on the wall of his life.

Tonight will change everything for us. I can feel it. But right now, I'm still just his ghost and he the boy I love to haunt.

My feet bounce against the arched wooden bridge, the water below covered with a thin veil of mist. Just as I hit the Peak and my counting reaches sixteen, I feel him. If I walked into a pitch-black room with my ears plugged, I could still pick him out of a crowd of people.

The veil of darkness wraps around me like a second skin. It snuffs out all the light, shrouding me in an inky net. But it isn't intimidating. It's comforting, a blanket from death to keep out the freezing cold.

Goosebumps tickle my arms, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. The top of his icy-blond hair appears from the south entrance, a few feet away from me. I'm jealous of how effortless he makes running look. How fluidly he moves through the air, like slicing through still water, not creating a single ripple of disturbance.

I feel my heart try to leap from my chest, trembling and thrashing against my ribs to let it out, to let it go to him.

"Hi, hello, there you are! I've missed you. My love, my love, my love." She screams bloody murder for him.

And my brain doesn't have the guts to tell her he will never hear her wails. He will never accept the love she so freely gives him. His heart will never beat for us the way ours does for him.

Because he refuses to acknowledge he has one.

But that doesn't mean I'll give up. Not when I know the truth. That beneath the gloomy and macabre is a man who is capable of much more than even he believes.

He steers his body in front of the group I've immersed myself into, giving me a direct line of sight to his naked back. My pulse thrums deep in my belly as I watch layers of taut muscles jerk with every footfall, sharp dips and carved hollows sculpted from marble.

The need to touch him, to run my fingers along the edges of those lean tendons, is so overwhelming I stumble. Not enough for anyone to notice, but enough for me to remind myself I'm in public.

This is what I wake up for every single morning.
Him.

He is the reason it took me an extra ten minutes to get to class in high school because I purposely went the long way so I could walk past him. The reason I stood out in the freezing rain and got a cold, all because I wanted to follow him home in middle school. Why, more recently, I was almost arrested for trespassing on his family property and nearly broke my ankle running away from one of the gardening staff members.

The man I would quite literally do anything for.

My darkest obsession that my addictive heart refuses to quit.

This thing was never supposed to go on this long. But that's how every wicked habit starts, right? Some innocent idea that festers into an infatuation. It was my fault to believe my heart could give him up after giving her a taste of him.

As we all fall into a silent exercise, I admire not only his immaculate form but his dedication to routine. The strict timetable he follows is the same one he abides by every single day. And during the summer, when I'm not worried about studying or going to class, I follow it as well.

In theory, he is the easiest person in the world to stalk. He has been a creature of habit for as long as I have known him. Although his routine has adapted with his age, he still refuses to break form.

I, of course, allow time in my day for the other things I enjoy. I go to the library, bury my face in books, gather new insects, work on finishing the renovations to my cabin, binge-watch my favorite TV series.

I am a normal person who does ordinary things.

Which I think should be enough to balance out this one peculiar compulsion. But it doesn't. Not in the eyes of my friends or society.

I know it's wrong, that I'm doing something illegal and deranged. I'm aware of the fact something inside of me is so twisted up that my idea of love is stashing objects he leaves behind in a box in my closet. The internet has enough theories on why I do these things, but here's the thing...

I don't care.

I don't care about consequences or how it looks to those who can't comprehend what he means to me. What we are to one another. My morals do not need to be evaluated because the world sees what I do as something hostile or some sick form of ownership.

My entire life, people have treated me like I was this creature because I don't fit the standard of Ponderosa Springs hierarchy women. So, if I was already the town freak, I might as well embrace it.

What I feel for Thatcher Alexander Pierson isn't bad. It's lovely and unique, something invulnerable that regular people could never appreciate. The emotion he evokes inside of me is the only pure thing I have left.

The night his father, Henry, came into my home and shredded my entire world to pieces, he tainted all the good in me. He tore and tore every ounce of good from my soul with every stab into my mother's body.

Henry Pierson gave me both my worst nightmare and the sweetest gift.

The impulse to kill and a deep admiration for his son.

My thighs are cramping, a brutal reminder that I still have to walk three miles back to my car when this is finished. But I'm blissfully ignoring the pain, keeping my eyes focused in front of me.

Everything is going exactly as it typically does. He's running with his back to me, unaware of my existence, while I stare at every inch of defined skin on his body. Until something happens, something that has never happened before, and my heart skips a beat.

The shirt I'm assuming he planned to wear after running is rolled up and tucked neatly into the back of his shorts where it normally is. But just as he turns a corner on the trail, the black T-shirt slips from the band and falls onto the path, fluttering down onto the asphalt like leaves in the fall.

I dart my eyes around the space, wondering if anyone saw it happen, and when I'm sure all the runners near me are unaware, I make a split-second decision, one I barely think twice about.

I allow the group to pass me, slowing down to a stroll. Thatcher's body moves farther and farther from my view as I take a hurried look around before bending down on one knee.

To passersby, I'm simply tying my shoe. No one can see me scooping up the material on the ground with agile fingers, my palms buzzing at the soft shirt scraping against them.

With sore feet, I promptly shift towards an area swamped by trees off to the right of the path. It's private enough that no one would see me unless they came looking, and if Thatcher comes back, searching for his missing shirt, he'll never find me.

Branches crack beneath my feet and sweat trickles down my lower back as I advance farther into the woods, finally reaching a point that I feel is far enough from the public that I'm safe from prying eyes.

My back collapses against the trunk of a nearby tree. Bark digs into my skin, and I welcome the relief off my soles. The wobble in my knees tells

me I desperately need a break, anyway. The thick foliage in front of me shields anyone visiting the park from my view.

For the next several minutes, I level out my breathing, gently rubbing the fabric of his shirt between the pads of my fingers, letting it soothe me. I hardly notice when my eyes close at the comfort or when I gradually draw the material up towards my nose.

The fragrant scent of Thatcher's cologne curls around me as I hold my face against the black shirt, burying my nose into the cotton saturated in his aroma.

Acqua di Giò Absolu by Giorgio Armani.

He's worn the same cologne since he turned sixteen, and it has stuck inside my brain since I first smelled it. It's a little like citrus at first, the smell of freshly dried linen with a hint of lemon. But I can also smell the woods, an earthy sort of spice that reminds me of the forest just after it rains.

So clean yet with an edge that is so perfect for him.

My stomach twists, and a dull throb pulses between my thighs when I think about him getting ready this morning and slipping this shirt over his shoulders. I bet he meticulously thumbed through his drawer, picking this one out of hundreds.

And since he showers after his runs, the essence of him is mixed with sleep. The leftover smell that clings to his skin had rubbed off onto the shirt as he pulled it on.

Both of my hands ball up the material, penetrating my fingers into the softness, as I ponder how hard his body would feel beneath it. I usually do this with the few sweaters I've borrowed from his dorm closet without his knowledge. At night, when I'm curled in my bed and alone.

Knowing I'm outside where anyone can see me should cool off my desire, but it's only making it worse. All I can think about is, what if he knows I'm here?

Did he not feel the fabric slip from the band of his shorts? He didn't even turn around to glance, just kept moving. Did he know I was there, and he dropped it on purpose? Was this some kind of gift? Does he know what I do with his clothes in the shadows of my room?

I yank the shirt down my face, snagging my bottom lip in the process. My tongue swipes against the cloth, nipping at it delicately. I keep tugging it down, across my throat and chest, pushing into my skin hard.

I know Thatcher's touch would be vicious. Rough and pressured in all the right areas. Fingers curling into my skin and burying inside, bringing blood to the surface. Gods, to feel his lean body, solid and rigid, forced against my own, towering over me with wild lust in his icy blue eyes.

I feel like some animal, marking my body with his scent, hoping if I rub it against me hard enough, it will sink into my skin where it won't ever leave.

My right hand slides beneath the front of my elastic shorts while the other brings his shirt back to my face, keeping it against my face where I can inhale him. The pad of my fingers brush against my core, finding myself soaked and pulling a gasp from my lungs.

The shock that ripples through my stomach makes my toes curl. My body is on edge, desperate as it thinks about its favorite fantasy. Desire is an emotion I rarely feel, and when I do, it's always for him.

I crave him. Every part of him. Even the tortured parts of himself others run away from. I want to let his demons out of their shackles just so they can play with mine. To feel his body, to have his fingers be the ones rubbing fiercely at my clit, driving me towards a release.

The things I would let him do, the way I would let him treat my body—it tugs at the spring that is coiled in my belly. Flashes of red flick behind my eyes, images of him knelt at my feet while the tip of a blade slices into my inner thigh.

"Thatcher." I say his name like a prayer, imagining what his knife on my flesh would feel like.

I know the only reason he touches people is to cut. The blades are extensions of his hands. I would let him cut me, slice me up, and happily bleed out for him.

I can practically feel the stream of blood pouring down my leg and the heat of his mouth as he catches every single crimson drop leaking out of my wound, licking and cleaning the incision with his tongue, peering up at me with detached eyes. My orgasm takes over my body, yanking pleasure from my core with no warning and leaving me with one parting image.

Thatcher looking up at me with a grin tinted red with my blood, gripping my shaking thighs as I convulse from the shocks of my release. It rolls through my body and soothes my aching limbs.

My teeth sink into the material of his shirt, tasting the spicy cologne on my tongue. The backs of my thighs sting as I lift towards my hand, seeking

more pressure. More speed. More him. More everything.

Unsettled breaths stumble past my lips, and when my eyes pop open, my delusion is gone. And the adrenaline from my climax is fizzling out like a deflated balloon.

Everything leaves me. The images and the feeling I was chasing. It disappears, and I'm left mercilessly lonely again. The girl who floats through doors and hallways without a second glance.

The ghost.

The ghost who haunts the only person who ever saw her. The only one who made her feel not so alone.

The one she'd killed someone for.

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A DEAL WITH DEATH

THATCHER

Rule number twelve from Henry's Guide to Murder: Never be late. One second late is twenty minutes closer to getting caught.

I'd amended all his rules. All of them were fixed and alternated to fit my needs. I made them better. Fathers are supposed to set rules in the house: clean up your room, do the dishes for your mother, always wear a condom —basic standards for young men to follow.

The only regulation he'd ever taught me was how to end someone's existence efficiently, relentlessly pounding each rule into my brain as if I would ever forget what it looked like to cut someone up. It didn't matter how many there were or how ridiculous, I remembered them all.

But now, they aren't his to teach. They're mine to polish.

Rule number twelve from Thatcher's Guide to Murder: Never be late. Unless it's fashionable.

I couldn't change the unfortunate truth that my father was the foundation of all my twisted desires. There was a part of me that would always belong to him, the evil seed that had polluted any good my mother may have given me in the womb. And instead of trying to heal that wickedness, he'd nurtured it.

Cultivated it like one of his precious roses. Watering my curiosity about the human body, shining a light on all the immorality inside of my soul, and trimming any person out of my life who tried to get close.

He wanted me secluded.

Alone. Weak. A piece of untouched clay that he could mold.

He had to be the only resource in my life. I couldn't need anyone but him. This is why from the time I met the boys, I'd kept our closeness a

secret from my father. It wasn't until he was apprehended that they first came over to my grandparents' home.

Maybe that's why my loyalty is so intense, why it's so important to me. I'd hidden them from a monster, shielded them regardless of the consequences because I knew, even then, they were like me.

Sort of.

No one is like me.

But they each have this kernel of corruption, this darkness in them they can't manage, and I had been taught since childhood how to control mine. They need me to show them restraint, teach them how to harbor whatever vile hunger they have, hold it in until it's safe to release it.

The chaos that lives in each of us doesn't need to be reckless. I can show them how to contain it, exist with it, without letting it consume them whole.

I follow the chain-link fence along the forest line. The smell of salt burns my eyes, and I can feel the sand in my hair already. When I find the slit in the metal that I'm sure was Rook's doing, the one who refused to develop any form of self-control, I pull it back and slip through, careful not to snag my shirt.

The entrance of Black Sands Cove is protected by a pathetic excuse for a fence to keep people out during the hours it's closed, which had never stopped any of us, but it's been a while since I've been on the beach.

I'm used to looking down at this place from the Peak, not partaking in tourist activities like tanning and playing in the water. But it's been a while since I've seen them—it would have been rude not to show up.

Denying anyone of my presence should be a crime.

The knee-high grass is moments away from fading into sand, and a warm breeze runs across my exposed arms. I look down to see my skin slightly raised, the bumps beneath my blond hair noticeable even at night.

I stop walking, hearing the subtle sound of footsteps near me. At first, I think it's the group ahead of me, but I quickly realize that's incorrect.

The quick, hustled steps are coming from behind me. I know the feeling of being watched, how it pricks my skin and makes me crave a shower. I know what it feels like to have her eyes on me, and every time I encounter it, all I want to do is cleanse it from my body.

Her eyes contaminate me.

They make me just as filthy on the outside as I am internally, and that is not something I'm fond of.

It's cruel of me to let her keep doing this, to allow her to continue this sick obsession with me. What has it been—ten, eleven years since she's been my little shadow? Always prowling around in the dark, believing she is so unrecognizable that I don't know she's there.

I'll give her credit—there were a few times it took me a while to notice she was around. And she knew that.

She's odd, but she isn't stupid. She knows when I'm aware of her presence, when her wide eyes land on my body. When I'm walking to my car, sitting in class, or eating, she's always around somewhere. Watching. Stalking. Admiring.

However, I've never expressed my awareness. Never told her she isn't nearly as sneaky as she thinks, not until recently. I'd once told her she needed to be a ghost, to disappear. I didn't want to see her, feel her, or even hear her breath.

I don't need a reminder of my one and only failure in life. The only person I hadn't been able to kill. The incomplete piece of music is in my files. Blank sheets of paper sit inside her binder, but the older we get, the more she involves herself in my life, the closer I come to finishing what I had started all those nights ago.

"I can't tell if you're getting worse at this or if you've always been this blatantly obvious and I've just been too bored to notice."

Her footfalls stutter like she's tripped over the sound of my voice, and it makes me smirk. So reactive to me, that darling phantom of mine.

"I—" Her voice is caught by the wind, fading away.

"You?"

I turn around, finding her a few feet behind me, her unruly hair blowing across her face. She stands there silently, chewing the inside of her cheek as if she'll find the answer to my question there.

The pair of dark blue-and-green plaid pants matched with a black halter top makes me cringe. I'm fine with a black and navy moment, but make it work, for Christ's sake.

There isn't a single thing about her that makes sense to me. Well, one thing. The only thing we seem to have in common.

My father.

But other than our childhood, which is tangled together in a web of blood, she makes no sense whatsoever.

There are unsolvable physics equations that have more rationality than her. This dark academia clothing style she insists on, paired with a weird hobby of bug catching. There are people who would call themselves an enigma, but they would not hold a candle to Lyra Abbott.

Scarlett.

Scarlett was the girl before my father, and Lyra is what was left after he'd ripped her life to shreds.

"Do I make you so nervous you can't even speak?" I tilt my head. This is the behavior I'd come to expect from her, mousey and refusing to say more than a few quiet sentences towards me.

"Maybe if you didn't enjoy hearing yourself talk so much and gave me a moment, I'd actually be able to reply."

I don't miss the bite in her voice. For a moment, there is a flash of that girl who'd sliced a man's throat in front of me. Brash and fearless. Lyra had killed a man for me. To save me.

But I think that's a cover-up. One big excuse. She'd been waiting for a moment like that one. For an opportunity to release that creature that lives within her soul, a monster my father had created.

Lyra wanted to kill. Thirsted for it.

I just happened to be in the perfect position to give her a reason to act on it.

"Ah, there she is," I hum in approval, a grin on my lips. "The girl you love to hide from everyone. I knew I didn't imagine her."

She swallows roughly, making her throat constrict. "I don't hide anything from my friends."

Sliding my hands into my pockets, I close the short distance between the two of us, and the wind sends the smell of cherries straight to my nose.

It makes me nauseous. So sweet and sticky. A mess.

"Yeah? So you've told Briar and Sage about what you asked me? What you begged"—I breathe the word as I drop my head towards her face—"me to do?"

Wide, pure green eyes stare up at me, too big for her face and so distracting that I almost miss the way they flick to my lips. My jaw tenses, and my stomach tightens. If she tried to kiss me right now, I'd make her mouth bleed.

"I did not beg you," she whispers. "You're the one who came to me at the mausoleum. You sought me out, not the other way around, Thatcher."

"Let's not twist this, Lyra. I came to find you in order to settle a debt. I saved you once, and you returned that favor. I wanted to end this little habit you have of following me around," I sneer, not liking the way she said my name with so much disrespect. "I wouldn't have spoken to you if I knew you'd try to proposition me."

Her round face flushes pink, the same way it did when I'd revealed that I knew about her secret. That she enjoyed being a voyeur, stalking me. I thought it was because of our history, that she was somehow waiting to rescue me from harm the way I'd done for her. When I was weak and young, before I knew what I was. What I was capable of.

But she'd surprised me.

"Have you even considered what I asked?"

"No," I say sharply, leaving no room for question.

It's a lie.

I have thought about it, more than I wanted to. More than I should, and not because it's something I like thinking about. Her offer won't leave my mind, just sitting there pestering me, like an annoying fly.

Those jade-colored eyes flare with irritation, but instead of letting it out, she keeps it in, suppressing herself. Something she's probably spent her entire life doing, constantly swallowing the part of her that's all teeth and claws, afraid of what would happen if she allowed the darker parts of her out to play.

But that is not my issue, nor is it something I care about.

"I won't tell anyone if that's what you're concerned about." She tries to brush her curls behind her ears, but the unruly tendrils immediately fall back to the side of her face. "If you teach me, I promise I won't tell a soul. I'm good at keeping secrets, at being invisible."

"I have only not noticed you because I chose not to. I chose to ignore your presence. Not because you're good at creeping on me." Her chin wobbles at my tone, and it makes me press further, fueling me to slice her open. "You do not and have never existed to me."

To her credit, even though I know for a fact my words have landed a hard blow, she pushes forward, which both impresses and irritates me.

"I'm a quick learner. It would only be a few sessions, just a few tips. That's all I'm asking for. I just..." She twists her hands together. "I need

help dealing with...this thing.”

I scoff. “A few sessions? Do you think that’s all it takes to be what I am? It took years to perfect my craft. Years I will not waste on someone who can’t even accept what lives inside you. You can’t even admit it out loud, can you?”

Her head lifts, meeting my harsh gaze. There is so much going on inside those big eyes, so many feelings that I’ve thankfully never had to experience.

How many times has she looked into the mirror and flinched because she can see what her flesh hides from the world? How many times has she tried to rationalize that the night her mother was murdered didn’t infect her with something wicked?

“Admit what?” she says. “Tell me what I need to say so that you’ll teach me, Thatcher, and I’ll say it.”

Something boils in my gut. Something toxic and unclean. Hot, sticky, and dirty. Something that doesn’t belong in my system. It flashes white-hot in my veins, and it’s all because of her begging. Begging me. Pleading for me.

Fury unlike anything I’ve ever experienced seers my blood.

No. No. No.

You are in control of this situation. She is not allowed to affect you this way. People do not impact you, Thatcher Pierson.

I take a step away from her, then another, until I can no longer smell cherries. I glance down at my watch before giving her a bored stare.

“I will not teach you how to be a killer because you can’t accept you already are one. Sloppy, untrained, and impulsive, but one nonetheless. Now, for the last time, I’m finished with this conversation.” I turn around. “Indefinitely.”

Now I can continue my life the way it was before—ignoring her completely, forgetting I even knew her. She can continue her petty games if she likes, but I’m done giving her the attention she so desperately wants.

“You owe me this! Your father is the reason I’m”—she shouts at me, her voice louder than I’ve ever heard before. “—I’m all twisted up and sick inside. It’s his fault. You at least owe me this favor, Thatcher. Please, teach me how to live with this.”

The fundamental principles of my life are simple.

Routine. Control. Kill.

That is it. There is nothing else.

But with those four words, she has cracked one of those.

I owe her?

My control wavers, shakes beneath her words.

“I owe you?” I say calmly—too calmly. I rotate my body towards her once again, stepping through the weeds so that I’m in her personal space, so that cherries invade me once again.

I’m up on her so quickly that she stumbles back, and my hand snatches her arm. My pale fingers curl around her bicep, so pliable and weak in my grasp. I dig into her, making a small, incoherent whimper slip from her mouth.

I could do whatever I wanted to her right now. And she’d let me, wouldn’t she?

Touching people like this makes me sick. But touching her? It makes me want to peel my skin off and toss it in the washing machine. My eyes slit, glaring so hard that I see her body withdraw from it.

“I don’t owe you a fucking thing, Scarlett,” I sneer, practically spitting the words on her face. “You want to learn how to kill people so badly? Then you can schedule a visit at Rimond Penitentiary. He owes you, not me.

“You. Are. Not. My. Problem.” Each word makes my grip tighten on her arm, squeezing so hard I can feel her humerus bone. “Now, get out of my sight because I’m seconds away from snapping your neck.”

A gasp hits my ears, and I expect it to be because she is in pain. That she is in fear for her life or desperate to run away from me. Except she doesn’t try to wiggle out of my hold. No, she remains completely still.

Unaffected. Unafraid of me.

“You—” Her bottom lip trembles, “you don’t cuss. Ever.”

I grind my teeth together, and I swear if I crack a tooth because of Lyra Abbott, I will be pissed. That’s what she caught from that? Just that? What is wrong with—

My spine stiffens.

I don’t curse.

I don’t do this. I do not snap and lash out.

I’m calculated. I am in command.

I have dissected human bodies and listened to men beg for their lives. She will not be the reason I lose even an inch of my control. I refuse to let her.

My hand jerks back, deep red dots where my fingers just were are painted on her skin. I quickly wipe my hand on my shirt, like I could rid myself of the feeling of her by dusting it off.

I want away from her. I want her gone. Far, far away from me.

I want—

Without another word, I spin around, determined to put as much space between us as possible. She should never have opened her mouth to me. I should have never gone to find her.

Seconds. That's all it takes to snap everything back into place, to check myself.

I take a deep breath, straightening my watch and flicking off imaginary dust from my black shirt. The fact I'm participating in something that doesn't allow me to wear a suit is a tragedy.

As I swiftly move forward, I can start to make out the back of Alistair's dark hair a few yards away, a welcome distraction.

"What if I win tag tonight?" she says in a rush, her footsteps thudding in my ears as she chases after me. "If I win tonight, then you have to teach me how to kill people. How to live with what your father did."

For the love of—wait.

"What do I get if you don't?" I ask, slowing to a halt and keeping my eyes on the group up ahead.

Her breathing is erratic as she comes to a stop just behind me. "What?"

A feline smile curls on my face as I turn gently. "The more important question is, what do I get if you lose?"

Her eyebrows do that thing again, twitching and turning downwards as she looks at me.

"Oh, I thought it was obvious. I won't ask again, I'll leave you alone, I'll stop—" She pauses. "I'll leave you alone."

I lift an eyebrow, sucking my teeth as a sinister chuckle rumbles in my chest. "Still going to follow me around like my little pet, though?"

If she's intent on making herself known to me, then I'll deal with this the way it should've been handled in the first place.

The wind blows her hair in her face, the dark waves behind her crashing against the shore. At any second, it looks like the inky water might swallow her whole.

"I'm not a pet," she mutters, no weight behind her words. "You just fascinate me is all."

Liar. I can practically taste the lie on her lips.

“Welcome to the club. Everyone is fascinated by me.”

Her shoulders deflate, and I can see an argument on her tongue, but I quickly interject. Deciding to take a little pity on her, I play a bit. “I don’t want you to leave me alone, Lyra Abbott.”

My voice is smooth like the way I talk to those who believe they are above me. Those in power who I can manipulate for my own personal gain. One day, I’ll make a phenomenal politician.

I’m full of corrupt motives, and I’ve mastered the art of the chameleon. I can mimic just about any emotion. It will not be long before I have Congress eating out of the palm of my hand.

Becoming the man my father never could.

“What do you want?”

Hope flutters in her eyes, the moonlight catching her irises just right. Excitement pools in my stomach, knowing I’m going to suck all the life right out of those pretty jade eyes. Squash every single wicked dream she’s ever had about me, cripple that obsession of hers.

Because while her obsession with me may be strong, my taste for blood is vital.

“I want you dead.”

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IN THE WOODS SOMEWHERE

LYRA

Lightning splinters in the dark sky, the lilac bolt illuminating our outstretched hands, where a bargain lies along our fingertips. Wind howls between us, brushing my curls into my face, and a burst of saltwater fills my nose.

“I hope this deal is worth your life, pet.” I feel his hand slip from my grasp just as a wave of thunder roars beyond the clouds. The loud rumble seals our arrangement. Secures my fate. There is no backing away from this. Not now.

Thatcher sticks his hands inside his pockets before strolling away from me and towards our group of friends that stand waiting a little further down the beach. I take a moment to feel the weight of what I’ve just done.

There’s no way I would beat him. The mile trek through the high trees in order to reach Black Sands Cove was enough to have my lungs burning. outrunning him in tag would be impossible. Fog rolls through the forest behind me, meaning visibility during this game would be low. I’d be blind, out of shape, and running for my life. Literally.

I take a breath, heading down the soggy beach soaked with rainwater and high tide. I have no choice, not really. Living with homicidal urges that I have no clue how to stomach is worse than dying. This is my only chance at a normal life.

I need to win. I need him to teach me. To show me how he can endure what his father had created. Because my sanity is hanging by a slender thread that becomes more frayed every second.

Three months ago, when I’d killed that detective in Sage’s house in order to save Thatcher’s life, I woke something up. For years, I lived with

this sickness inside of my soul. Every time I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I could see it, curled in a dark corner, flashing its teeth every once in a while.

But now it's awake, hissing and hungry for food I don't know how to make.

I had enjoyed killing that man. The warmth of his blood cascading down my arm in crimson waves. Watching him writhe and choke on the floor just before he released his final breath.

It's not right for me to feel this way. I know that. It's wrong, immoral, and there's nothing okay about it. But I can't fucking help how I feel.

I would rip it out of me if I knew how, but I don't, and I don't know how to live with it.

Thatcher Alexander Pierson is my last hope or my death sentence.

It's always been that way for us. Never anything in between.

Black and white.

Yin and yang.

Dark and light.

Rest and movement.

Blurred lines. Bloody touches.

We're two souls with damned beginnings, created from the same wicked seed, never meant to be together, yet it's impossible to pull me away from him. Stalking him isn't enough to keep what's inside at bay anymore.

I need him to see me.

"You're the only one who wears a watch, Thatch. How the fuck are you still the only one of us who shows up late?" Rook Van Doren's explosive voice almost makes me smile. If circumstances weren't so grave, I might've laughed.

"I prefer to make an entrance," he replies smoothly. "Not to mention, I'm not the only one who couldn't make it on time."

Rook just smirks, walking towards his friend. "I missed you too, asshole."

Thatcher scoffs, letting Rook squeeze his shoulder in greeting. That's the closest thing to a hug anyone would be getting from Thatch, and everyone knows it. Alistair takes this time to move towards them as I step farther into the group, spotting the two people who mean more to me than anything.

"Does this count as a Loner Society meeting?" I smile happily.

Sage and Briar swarm me in a hug, limbs looped over limbs as we wrap each other in a much-needed embrace. The three of us had faced the unspeakable, haunted memories and desolate trauma that will stick in our souls till the grave.

We'd run from and towards trouble hand in hand, escaped deadly fates and gone toe-to-toe with the evil that lives within the town limits of Ponderosa Springs. What we had endured, what we shared, it forged a bond that would not bend.

It would not break over the pressure of time or distance. It's tungsten, coiled and wound so tightly that it will last a lifetime.

The Loner Society had been loosely inspired by Dead Poets Society, a book my mother read to me more times than I can remember and a film I knew by heart. While I'd never been a poet or a writer of any kind, I longed for a secret group of friends, ones that shared passions, dreams, and the mysteries of their lives they hid from the rest of the world. People you could be yourself around without fear of ridicule. Friends you would carry in your heart for years and years.

When I met Briar and Sage, I knew.

They, too, had experienced the hardships of life and existed just beyond the curtain of the world's standards. Those who wandered along the outskirts, with no place to call home or people to call their own.

Forgotten ones. Alone and desperately searching for acceptance.

It didn't matter that we were all drastically different in both personality and physical appearance. I mean, without our particular circumstances and the fate of how we met, we probably never would've spoken to one another.

Had Briar Lowell never said yes to her acceptance at Hollow Heights, I never would've crossed her path. She could've asked for a roommate change once she saw the dead bugs plaque on the wall and the state of my side of the dorm, but she hadn't. She saw something in me, just like I did her.

I saw the person I'd strived to be. Intelligent, strong-willed, and resilient. She hadn't let her upbringing taint the good in her. She'd used the skills they had taught her as a child to fight her way through life, and there's no one I respect more.

I know for a fact I'd never darkened Sage Donahue's doorstep in high school. A girl made of steel and flames, hardened from abuse and the queen

of masks. The mean cheerleader with superb and beautiful grace was only one of her façades created to protect the girl I know now.

Someone caring, passionate, and fiercely defensive of the people she loves. More than the sum of all the things people speak about her. More than what her father forced her to become. Sage is more.

“You should’ve just come with us,” Briar mumbles into my shoulder. “I told you to come. My mom was fucking bummed she didn’t get to meet you.”

“That was time for you and Alistair. I didn’t want to intrude.” I inhale their familiar scents, and if it weren’t for the dread of what was to come, I would have cried in happiness.

“He wouldn’t have cared!” She pulls back, staring hard at me. “He likes you, even though he doesn’t say it. You don’t get the I hate everyone look from him anymore, which is a win. Much more than this one can say.” She bumps Sage with her hip, grinning softly.

Sage groans, flipping her strawberry blonde hair over her shoulder. “He’s never gonna let it go. You’re the one who wanted to go that night!”

“Alistair will get over it. He’s just grumpy. Must not harm his baby and all that,” I joke, and it causes them both to laugh loudly.

Catching up with them was what made waiting worth it. They’d both offered to let me accompany them on their vacations, but I’d declined. Not because I didn’t want to go, but I knew they needed time.

Time to accept this new life. The consequences we may face and the future that may come.

We all did.

“How was the coast? You sick of Rook yet?” Briar asks, and Sage smiles, looking away.

I follow her eyes, seeing them stuck on the brunette a few feet away. His arms are hung loosely around both of his friends’ shoulders. Thatcher and Alistair look like they would rather be dead than touched, but they let him hang there.

A wide grin lights up his face as he laughs about something, causing both boys on either of him to either smirk or shake their head. I might not understand all the inner workings of their group, but I know Rook is the light.

The one who uses jokes to make light of his pain. Who laughs and brightens the room. He is the boys’ light, and he is Sage’s. The one that led

the way from the darkness she'd found herself in, and the love on her face for him makes my chest ache.

To love and be loved.

It's all anyone really wants.

Violently. Passionately. Wholly.

Well, mostly everyone.

My gaze flicks to Thatcher for only a moment before I return to my friends.

"I don't think it's possible to tire of him. I might want to kill him, but I'm not tired of him."

"I hear you talking about me, baby. Make sure you let them know about that new piercing you got in San Diego," Rook hollers, joy in his tone with a hint of lust.

Sage's eyes slit, her hand lifting to flip him off before she addresses us. "I take it back. I take everything I just said back."

We laugh, continuing to chat, when Thatcher's voice lifts an octave so we all can hear him, demanding attention.

"Why are you two so nosey? I told you I was busy. Not to mention, I wasn't the only one who was late. Why aren't you pestering dearest bug queen about why she was late?" He tosses his head towards me, pulling everyone's gaze in my direction.

I see the silent question on their faces, curiosity a quality we all share.

Where have you been?

Uncomfortable with this many eyes on me, I just give a small awkward wave. "Sorry, I was finishing up a project."

"With Conner Godfrey?" Alistair says with a raised eyebrow, daring me to lie to him about it. Every time I'm under his gaze, I feel like a student called to the principal's office.

"He's just a friend, a teacher," I say, looking warily at all the eyes pointed pinned on me. "He's been helping me this summer with my collection and species identification."

"Yeah, and when he isn't with you, he's busy helping Stephen Sinclair abduct and sell girls." Rook's jaw ticks, and I watch as Sage walks up and curls her arm around his, leaning closer to his body.

"We don't know that yet, Van Doren."

"Spare me. Who else could it be? He's basically wearing a sign that says, 'I'm doing sketchy shit.' That entire family is fucked. I guarantee they

are all involved.”

Alistair rolls his eyes but doesn’t exactly disagree when he says, “It’s not like we can show up unannounced and start asking those kinds of questions. We are beneath the police radar right now, but we aren’t untouchable, and going after the Sinclair family is asking for a prison sentence.”

“Nah, not untouchable. But we are unfuckwithable,” Rook says, his smirk wide.

“That is not a word,” Thatcher bites out with annoyance riddling his tone.

“Doesn’t make it any less true,” he replies with a shrug, barely affected by his friend’s attitude.

“I’ve not seen anything suspicious about him. He’s been, uh, nice to me. Kind.” I clear my throat. “If he was involved, don’t you think I would have already been taken by now? I mean, I’m a perfect target. I have no family that would come looking for me, a quiet loner. People wouldn’t notice me missing.”

The stark truth of that should bother me, knowing there would be no one searching for me if I didn’t turn up for class. I’m a ghost to this town and those who live in it. My presence would not be missed.

However, this was a fact I’d come to terms with long before I found out about the Halo, a sex-trafficking ring stationed right here in the heart of Ponderosa Springs. An organization that Sage’s father had gotten involved in that cost him his daughter’s life and Sage’s twin.

Something I don’t think any of us expected to uncover when this all started.

“Lyra—” Briar starts, but she is cut short.

“Correct. They wouldn’t notice you’d gone missing.” Thatcher cuts his eyes to me, bright blue eyes sparkling with bitterness. Gods, they’re so cold. One step in the wrong direction and I feel as if I’d fall into Alaskan waters.

“But your friends, who are sleeping with a Caldwell and a Van Doren, would notice. Which makes you the worst target. Whoever is running the Halo does not want sons of founding families as enemies. We have made that much clear, haven’t we?”

“But Conner—”

“Stop saying his name,” Thatcher bites out, his white teeth flashing in the moonlight, leaving no room for me to rebut. “He is not our ally. He is not your friend. Do not forget which side you are playing for, Lyra.”

Silence falls between everyone, heavy and thick, practically smothering me. I know he’s right. Being cordial with Conner Godfrey is the same thing as being nice to Stephen Sinclair, the dean of Hollow Heights. They have history, the two of them; they’re friends.

As much as I want to believe he isn’t involved, I learned quickly that in this part of Oregon, you trust no one. Every single person has some dirty secret they keep hidden.

“We are just trying to make sure you are safe. With what happened to Rosemary and all the other missing girls, we need to look out for each other,” Briar says warmly, reaching her arm out and grabbing my wrist to pull me into her body, away from Thatcher’s harsh stare and icy presence. She is constantly being a buffer between the two of us, unaware that I don’t want to be protected from him. I’m the one seeking him out.

I’d lied earlier to him when I said I kept nothing from my friends.

I’d kept him from all of them. From everyone.

Thatcher is my biggest secret.

When I was transferred to a foster home in Ponderosa Springs after spending two years out of state, I was in middle school. My first day of sixth grade was near the end of the school year.

I hadn’t forgotten him. His face had been in my dreams every night. The boy who had spared my life. I’d thought Thatcher was magnificent in the gloomy night, but nothing could fully prepare me for seeing him in the light of day in that school parking lot.

My plan was to get close enough to see if he’d say something to me, but true to his word, I was a ghost, one that he had created, and he never saw me. I floated around the same classrooms, hovered in the same lunchroom, and he didn’t give me so much as a second glance.

But then, something shifted. I became a ghost to everyone, invisible to those around me, but the only time I felt understood, accepted, was when I was around him. He was the only person in the world who knew my story, what I was, and the horrors I’d witnessed.

Even if he didn’t acknowledge I was there, there was a comfort in following him around. Knowing I wasn’t alone out there, knowing I wasn’t the only one living with a monster inside of me.

But then it gradually became less about getting his attention and more about being around him. Watching him. Even the most mundane tasks he did were so fascinating to me.

I kept myself close in school, but then I got bolder, lurking outside of school to see if he was different when he was alone and not surrounded by people. I got to know the boys through him because most of his free time was spent with at least one of them by his side.

At the Graveyard, I stood in the crowd of people, watching him support his friends in whatever blood sport they were taking part in that night. I'd watch him meet up with them at the Cliff, around town, and eventually, at his house.

Close wasn't close enough. No matter where I spied from or how private the area was, I just never felt close enough.

I tried to stop at one point, but I realized that the damage was done. My heart refused to let him go.

Now, here we stand, and he's a far cry from that boy who'd left coins on my mother's eyes. The boy who had saved me from his father's wrath.

What stands in front of me is the Angel of Death. A grim reaper made of shadows and elegance. A human man with hands made to strip life from others. The darkest of the darkest souls encased inside a winter incarnate corpse made from the purest marble, chiseled and etched to perfection, smooth porcelain skin that glares in the moonlight.

His black long-sleeve shirt is pushed up to his elbows, showing the deep blue veins that run across his forearms like tree roots. And for a moment, I wonder what color Thatcher bleeds. If I split his skin right now, would red ooze from the cut? Or would it be black? Gold?

"Speaking of the other girls," Sage chimes in, making me blink and tug my eyes off Thatcher's face, "we need to do something for them. We know about this organization. There are fifteen missing girls out there—that's just in and around Ponderosa Springs. Who knows how many more are out there? We can't just stay silent and let them die."

"Babe, we talked about this—"

"Do not babe me." She glares hard at Rook, pausing for a minute to share a private moment through their eyes. "My sister could have been one of them. She was one of them. I will not turn a blind eye like everyone else in this godforsaken town."

Without thinking twice, I reach my hand out and loop my fingers through Sage's, squeezing tight and letting her know that we have her back. Talking about Rosemary is a tough subject for everyone, especially her. I can't imagine what it would be like to live without your other half.

"Briar, Lyra, and I have been working on finding names over the summer. We can take what we have to the—"

"If the next words out of your mouth are 'the police,' then you are more stupid than I originally thought. And that's saying something." Thatcher laughs darkly. "Those girls are not our problem. We did not sign up to be vigilantes. The only reason any of us are standing here is because of Silas. We accomplished what he wanted. Now we wait until he is released, and then all of this disappears. It never happened. He is the only reason."

"Well, not all of us are heartless fucking psychopaths, Thatcher. I will not let innocent people die because you're a narcissist with daddy issues out the ass," Briar snaps, challenging him.

I can't say I'm surprised by the tension that is settling around us. We knew this was a possibility when we brought it up to them. I just wasn't aware we would do it on the first night we were all back together.

Their loyalty is to each other. To Silas.

Thatcher is right that the only reason they'd even gone poking around this mess was because of Silas and Rosemary. They did not sign up to save anyone. And it's moments like this that remind me of who we're dealing with.

Who we had tied our lives to.

The Hollow Boys had not got their reputation from being heroes who swooped in and saved the day. Alistair, Rook, Silas, and Thatcher are not good people. They do things to fit their agenda, to protect each other, and I respect that. But I also have to understand tigers do not change their stripes.

Just because two of the four had found some form of solace in the arms of my friends, it doesn't make them docile creatures. They will always be wolves that will go to any length to defend each other.

"We will talk about it." Alistair's steady and controlled voice tries to soothe the burn of tension.

"But—"

"Briar," Alistair breathes, looking down at my friend with eyes as black as coals. "Let us talk it over, okay? Just give me some time."

My friend turns her head defiantly, avoiding his gaze, but she's not the type to fight with him in public. The both of them are secretive in their relationship. It's theirs, always clung to the chest. Which is the complete opposite of Sage and Rook. They will air out dirty laundry in a grocery store if one of them is upset.

A small smile hits my mouth when he grabs her chin, jerking her back in place so she is looking at him once again.

"Please?" he asks, voice much lower.

Softness flutters over her face, and I watch Alistair's shoulders visibly relax. However, I'm still stuck on the fact Alistair Caldwell said the word please.

It's only silent for a moment before I'm reminded of why I'm here.

"I came here for a game," Thatcher says. "So, are we going to play? Or are you just wasting my time?"

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DEAD MAN'S END

LYRA

The rain is falling with a vengeance.

Heavy bullets of water blast against my skin as we walk towards the edge of the woods. I watch as Rook tosses the hood of his pullover up over his head, submerging himself into the darkness.

He looks over his shoulder at us, showing off the black-and-red striped drama mask that covers his face. When he catches me staring, he gives me a little wave, wiggling his fingers in a teasing way.

"I should've never bought him that," Sage mutters with a shake of her head. "We were in a vintage store in Hollywood. It wasn't that creepy in the daylight."

"Next time, refrain from buying any form of mask for any of them. I think they have enough," Briar adds, and I nod in agreement.

It doesn't matter that this is just a game. If the Hollow Boys have an opportunity to inflict panic, they would jump on the chance. It doesn't matter who we are to them. A part of them will always crave the power that comes from others' fear.

Even if it's from the ones they care for.

When we make it through the tree line, absorbed by the forest, I swallow tightly, trying to keep a smile on my face for my friends, who are laughing and making jokes.

For them, this is like walking into a haunted house, one where the actors can't touch you and everything is all in good fun. A little scare to get your blood pumping and heart racing.

A reuniting of friends. A way to drown out what this town has in store for us this year, honoring the one of us who couldn't be here and the girl

whose death had brought us all together.

I want to be excited, to enjoy this moment with the people who've been engraved into my life, who make me feel human instead of a ghost. But all I keep thinking about is that this might be the last time I see any of them.

Am I ready to face death?

I had done it before, walked away unscathed, but am I ready to do that again? Stare into the eyes of the reaper and accept the fate I'd escaped as a child?

“Tie your shoe.”

The chilly breeze of his voice tickles my ear, and I glance down to see that my laces are in fact untied.

“Surprised you’re helping me. Me tripping would put you at an advantage, don’t you think?” I look over my shoulder as Thatcher walks up to my side, walking in step with me.

A smirk adorns his lips, his mask resting on top of his head as he looks down at me. The wind blows violently, nearly knocking me over.

“I don’t want to win by default of your clumsiness.” He lifts his hand up, sliding the mask down and shielding his face before tilting his head lightly. “Good luck, pet. I’d start praying to whatever god you have that I don’t catch you.”

Fake blood pours from the black eye sockets of his stark white mask. The blank expression on the face hides all his features from me. He barely gives me time to reply before he is stalking forward, leaving me in the dust behind him and joining the other two boys in front of us. I duck down, tightening my laces to the point they might cut off circulation, hoping they stay tied through the entire game.

“Five minutes,” Alistair orders, turning to face us with his arms crossed in front of his chest. “That’s your head start.”

“That’s not enough time,” Sage argues, furrowing her eyebrows. “We should at least get ten, dude.”

Alistair slits his eyes, glaring at my friend with a look that sends a chill down my spine. But she holds her ground, keeping her head high and shoulders back, matching his stare.

It’s the only way to earn his respect. Have a backbone, and don’t back down. Don’t let him win.

“Four minutes and thirty-four seconds,” he grunts, and if it wasn’t for the skull face covering that hides the bottom half of his facial features, I’m

sure I'd see a smirk. "Tick-tock, dude. You're wasting time."

There's a brief pause where everything stops. It even feels like the rain halts just long enough for all of us to glance at one another, a silent agreement passing through in the wind.

I let my eyes drift to Thatcher, the tallest of the group of boys in front of me. I can't see them, but I know his eyes are glued to me. His prey hovering in front of him. I'm a piece of meat dangling on a claw, and he's the starved, caged animal waiting to be fed.

My heart drops to my stomach, and when I feel the rain on my skin once again, I run.

Win or die.

There is no other option.

Because if he catches me, there is nothing that will protect me from his wrath. Not even God himself could save me from Thatcher Pierson.

It doesn't take long for me to feel it.

The burn in my chest and the pressure in my ears. Even though I've been jogging every day, my breath control is still shit. But this is not my gentle, peaceful dawn routine, the one I spend staring at Thatcher's back muscles. There are no happily chirping birds or a comforting sunrise to soothe my sore limbs.

I suppose it's easier to run when it's for your life.

The tall trees seemed to squirm closer, overrunning me with their branches and sodden trunks. I inhale a ragged, wet breath that makes my lungs feel shaky. I can hear Sage and Briar close to me, breathing heavily as we try to put space between ourselves and the chasers.

Fog has settled in thick, and the deeper into the trees we travel, the more vague everything around me becomes. I can smell the rain in the air as I pump my arms, pushing me forward. A branch, or maybe a bush, nicks at my pants, cutting through the material and scratching my skin. A hiss of pain leaves my lips, but I don't worry about checking the damage. I'll deal with it later.

Time is obsolete. It's probably only been a few minutes, but my legs tell me it's been hours.

We have thirty minutes to stay out of their reach, all of our phones set with timers to alert us when the game ends. Winners stay dressed, and the loser takes a dip into the Pacific with no clothes.

We weave through the base of the trees, splitting the cloak of fog with our bodies, and run with no destination in mind. I try to listen for them, but all that fills my ears is the thudding of my heart and heavy breaths.

They're out there.

Lurking. Waiting.

Silent, calm, like still water.

"Should we—"

Sage's voice is cut off by a desolate scream that unloads panic straight into my stomach, a shriek full of surprise and fear, one that echoes through the branches.

"Briar," I whisper on a shaky breath.

I turn to my right sharply, my hair whipping across my face with the force of my movement. My friend dangles upside down, her dirty-blonde hair swaying in the darkness.

A rope is laced around her ankles, suspending her from a thick branch above. She doesn't look hurt, just spooked, but I think both Sage and I are in shock.

A snare trap?

The shock abates quickly when Briar yells again, sending us both into overdrive.

"I love you," Sage mutters, kneeling on the ground in front of Briar's swaying body and clamping a hand over her mouth, "but shut the fuck up. You're okay. We're going to get you down. Let's hope they didn't hear you."

With shaky hands, I start to work on the knot that is locked around her feet. The hefty rope rubs against my soft fingers, and I'm cursing myself for not having brought a knife.

We should've been more prepared. They apparently were. They would go this far. I just hadn't been expecting it. I was stupid to think they'd go easy on us.

"The knot is too tight. Do you have anything sharp?" I ask either of them. I can feel our lead dwindling with every second we stand stagnant.

"Shit no. I don't have my bag or—" Sage curses as I continue to tug at the rope, desperately looking for a loose edge or some way to get her down. "Wait, wait!"

I glance down, watching her dig her hand into the back pocket of her jeans. She lays the object flat on her hand, the metal glinting in the

moonlight. I've never been so happy to see a Zippo lighter in my life.

"Thank fuck for your boyfriend's smoking habit," I mutter as I take it from her while she holds Briar's shoulders up to prevent the blood from rushing to her head.

I flick the wheel once, twice, and nothing happens. The wind howls, and the sound of manic laughter catches the breeze. Panic settles into my bones.

They're closing in on our lead.

"Little thief, I can hear you breathing without me," Alistair shouts into the night, so far away but so close, his voice vibrates between the trees. It's impossible to tell where he's located.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

My hands began to shake as I try again, finally catching the flint and watching the flame sway in the night. Holding the fire to the rope, I look around me, seeing if they're close enough to see in the night.

But they are shadows.

The night itself blended into the wilderness.

It would be a disadvantage for anyone else, the pitch-black.

They thrive there. It's where they always seemed to belong.

"Look what we have here." The voice is followed by a wicked laugh that makes my stomach rattle.

Rook.

I glance at the rope, the light brown threads shaded, turned charcoal with the heat of the lighter. It's only a few more moments until it's weak enough to snap, but we're running out of time.

"What's the point of a goddamn head start if you guys set traps beforehand?" Sage yells, eyes burning with annoyance towards them.

"We never said we'd play fair," he answers, stepping from beyond the trees, headed in our direction.

I'm not sure they even know how to play fair or what that entails. All that matters is that they win, no matter the cost.

The harsh snap of rope echoes in the air, and Briar falls ungracefully onto the forest floor with a resounding thud. Panicked, she tries to shove the noose off her feet while Sage helps.

But Rook encroaches further, moving into our space, about to put this game to an end. Sage and Briar would go skinny-dipping while I meet the icy hands of death in a chilly embrace.

He can't catch all of us. I have the chance to run, to leave them behind, but I can't do it. Even with their stakes being so little and mine being so life-altering, I can't make myself leave.

My entire life, I've hidden or run from the things that have scared me, always blending into the background in order to avoid confrontation or attention. I made myself a ghost in order to survive, made myself weak.

I don't want that anymore.

I don't want to be the person who runs from her friends and leaves them in trouble. I want to be the friend who does something, and that's what I'm going to be.

With quick footsteps, I jog away from my friends, scanning the ground until I find a long piece of dry, rotted wood, a heavy fallen branch that will do the job I need.

Rook closes in on my friends, distracted by them just enough that I can walk up from the side. My hands are sweating as they curl around the long branch, feeling the wood dig into my palms.

My arms work before my brain can catch up. I swing my arms forward in the motion of a baseball bat, cracking the branch across Rook's back with a loud snap. The weak material breaks against his skin, dropping him to the ground with a groan.

"Run!" I scream, knowing it was enough to stun him but not enough to keep him down on the ground forever.

Briar and Sage scramble to their feet, scattering in different directions. I take off through the woods, leaving Rook mumbling on the ground. The last thing my ears can hear is a dark laugh.

There's no direction or plan. All I know is I need to put as much distance between myself and Thatcher as possible.

The problem?

I have no clue where he is. Knowing my luck, I'm probably headed straight for him.

Which is odd for me. I always know where he is. The shadow attached to the tip of his shoe, the ghost in his hallway. Where he is, I follow.

Wake up, run, shower, eat breakfast, which is always fruit and yogurt on Thursdays, and egg whites and toast every other day. His grandmother, May, goes to the farmer's market on Wednesday, and I think he secretly feels bad if he doesn't eat the fresh produce. Or maybe he just likes fruit.

I know his school schedule, thanks to an oblivious secretary in the front office of Hollow Heights. There are only a few places he goes that I can't seem to find him. The brief intervals when he disappears once every six months, sometimes for the entire day, other times only a few hours.

I could follow him wherever he travels to in his custom Lamborghini, but something about those rare trips he takes feels a little too private. The other boys, to my knowledge, don't even know about them.

Maybe a part of me knew where he was headed, what he was planning on doing, and that piece didn't want to disturb what he was planning. Or maybe I just wasn't ready to see him doing what Thatcher does best.

Hurting people.

"Darling phantom." Thatcher's voice slices through the fog. "Are you finished running from me?"

I'm not afraid of being caught by Rook Van Doren or Alistair Caldwell. Their reputation is a thing of nightmares, and it would be understandable if I was fearful for my life. They aren't the kind of people you want to involve yourself with.

But it's not them that makes my blood run cold and freezes the valves of my heart. They don't scare me, not like he does.

They are playing for bragging rights. This is supposed to be a fun night outing with friends. A way to commemorate all we've been through and us coming back together.

But I'm not playing for fun.

I hadn't made a deal with the Devil or the Vengeful One. I had bargained my life with death, the Pyscho, the Hollow Boy everyone is most uncomfortable around. The one who makes everyone's spine stiffen when he walks into the room. The one who makes you want to hide beneath your bed but you can't dare look away from.

My heart thumps in my chest as my legs slow for just a moment. I just need a second to catch my breath and figure out where I am. We'd darted from the beach and into the forest line, but I could still hear the crashing waves.

I place my hands on my knees, gobbling down air until my head spins. I flinch as the trees groan with the sway of the wind, my eyes snapping up to look around me.

My eyes try to survey my surroundings, but I'm too panicked to focus on anything for too long. I try my best to stay alert, but it seems my survival

instincts need work because every twig that snaps and creature that moves beyond the mist increases my fear. I can't contain the loud gasp that escapes when the sound of a crow howling rings through the night.

The forest works in Thatcher's favor, a puppet on his strings as it plays the role of his partner. Shadows dance, the moist ground beneath my feet feels like it wants to swallow me, and the rain comes down in heavy pelts that hurt when I run.

It whirls my mind, confuses me, creating an impossible trap to escape.

My body goes cold with dread as I turn to glance behind me. The fog seems to move around his body, parting from his frame to avoid touching him. He stalks through the trees at a leisurely pace, unafraid of me taking off again.

There's no rush in his step, just one controlled foot after the other as he moves in my direction. In a panic, I turn and sprint away. I can taste blood in my mouth from running so hard, sweat spilling down my back, and I topple over every single fallen branch. My personal purgatory is coming true, and he's barely trying.

The last trip over a limb is my final straw. I'm out of breath, facing him, exhausted from running.

When he tilts his gaze right at me, those glacial eyes send a prickling sensation all the way to the center of my stomach. Like ice daggers, they pierce my skin every single time he brings them my way. It's the kind of pain I can't run from, the kind of pain I want more of.

It doesn't happen often, but on the rare occasion Thatcher pays attention to me, I feel as if he's the only one in the world who actually sees me. His eyes make me alive, take me from being a ghost to a living, breathing human again.

I don't want to run from that feeling; I want to run towards it.

But not this time. I can't this time.

When his broad shoulders come closer into view, his mask is gone and the moonlight strikes the sharp hollows of his face, I shiver.

"I let you go once, Scarlett." His voice is steady, cutting through the shield of rain. "But not this time. This time, you're going to bleed for me."

Bleed for me.

It's a terrible, horrid thought that flashes in my mind—me laying out on his bed while he drags the tip of his favorite blade across my pale skin,

leaving a trail of my blood as he goes. I would lie still and be his virgin sacrifice.

How do I tell him I would bleed for him right now if he asked? That he doesn't have to kill me for it?

Lightning strikes as heat pours into my core, a desire so strong and so consuming I feel like I can't breathe. Sexual attraction, craving, it isn't something I've felt for anyone else. This sort of thirst can only be quenched by him.

I've never been touched by anyone because the only person I want isn't a person at all.

Every town has a scary story. A haunted house that eats souls. A vengeful ghost on the prowl. Ponderosa Springs has many.

But none as frightful as him.

He is a monster. The darkness that holds the moon. A fucking nightmare.

But he is mine.

"Teach me, and I'll bleed for you."

I say as I back away from his encroaching figure, step after step, giving no thought to anything on the path behind me.

"Making new bargains already? I've yet to catch you." His voice is playful, so cruelly playful. "But please, don't let me stop you from dropping to those knees of yours and begging me to let you live."

"If I do, will you agree to what I asked? Will you show me how you live with the urge to kill people? How to do it?"

All I need is for him to say yes. I need him to show me how to survive this.

"No." He laughs, and the sound shakes the ground beneath me as he slides his hands into his pockets. "But I think I'd like to see what those eyes of yours look like on the ground, pleading for mercy, just before I end your life."

A flash of a blade twinkles in the dark, the blunt end tucked neatly into Thatcher's large hand. The wind nearly knocks me forward as the trees lessen, opening up.

"Do you hate me that much that you'd rather kill me than help me?" The question comes from a deep sense of insecurity, one that always unearths when I'm around him.

“I don’t hate you, pet.” His voice is ice that slithers down my spine.
“That would require me to feel something for you.”

Disappointment settles into my bones. I’m not surprised by his statement. I’ve always known this. But it still stings just the same.

I’ve never seen Thatcher with a woman, but I know I’m not the type he would seek out for pleasure. Why would he? The girl who plays in the mud and collects bugs?

He has his pick. And I’m not one of them.

“I—”

The sound of waves slamming into rocks takes my voice, and I quickly glance behind me. I suddenly realize why Thatcher was in no hurry at all to catch me. In my terror-infused sprint, I’d wound up at the edge of one of the many cliffs that overlook Black Sands Cove.

The edge of the jagged drop-off gets closer with every step away from him. I can see the dark water beckoning me, calling for me.

“Dead Man’s End. You know what that means?”

I quickly avert my attention away from the depths below to stare back at Thatcher, who looks like a cat about to catch a mouse. He knows he has won. He knew from the moment this game started.

“We call this off?” I offer.

I’m running out of space, out of time. The drop is only getting closer, and I can feel it in my bones.

“Nowhere else to hide, pet.” He clicks his tongue, a smirk permanently situated on his lips, somehow both feline and predatory at the same time. He lifts his phone from his pocket, rocking it back and forth, showing me I still have two minutes left.

I almost had him. I almost won.

Just two more fucking minutes.

The back of my left shoe slips a bit, and I turn to glance down. I’ve reached the end of my rope, leaving only the seemingly bottomless pit below. The wind blows my hair into my face. Pieces of wet strands become trapped in my mouth as my heart races.

I am the girl captured in a venomous spider’s web. There’s nowhere to go.

Except down.

When I turn to face Thatcher again, he is only a few feet in front of me, full of himself and ready to collect his prize.

I shuffle both of my feet to the lip of the cliff, knowing the chances of me surviving are slim. But it's either this or let Thatcher win. If there's even a smidge of an opportunity for me to survive and win?

I'm going to take it.

"Thatcher." I say his name as a whisper, the wind catching it as rain continues to soak through my clothes.

"Your last words, darling phantom?"

I bite the inside of my cheek, smothering the fear inside of me with all the surrounding water. It's almost poetic that the past two times I've faced death have been while looking into Thatcher's eyes.

Something comforting washes over me, knowing the person I'm always watching will be here to see my final moments.

I outstretch my arms, feeling the wind and rain push me backward, nodding my head. But I see his eyes, how alert they are as they look at me, and I know he is sliding the puzzle pieces together.

"Before you start teaching me, there is something you should know." A smile of my own works its way onto my mouth.

I'm about to die, but I don't care.

I don't care.

"Lyra, don't you dare."

But it's too late.

"Don't underestimate the girl willing to do anything for what she wants."

I lean back into the empty air behind me, feeling my stomach drop as I descend towards the crashing waves below. My watery eyes make out Thatcher's form at the cliff's edge, peering down at me.

The rushing wind rings in my ears, and the fall feels much longer than I expected, until the feeling of water slamming against my back puts me out of my misery.

I win.

ALWAYS LOST IN THE COLD

THATCHER

“**B** ro, don’t fucking—”

The harsh whip of wind smacks against my face as I roll the window down. With zero regard for Rook’s protest, I shove my arm into the open air, holding the pack of cigarettes hostage in my grasp, threatening to send them into an asphalt grave.

Alistair’s arm snakes around the headrest, curling around my throat. I glance into the rearview mirror of my car, slitting my eyes at his predatory gaze.

“If you want to make it to Portland with your pretty face intact, I suggest you rethink what you’re about to do.”

My lips curve into a smile, and I feel my foot press into the gas a little harder when his arm tightens around my neck like a boa preparing its food. Looks like some things haven’t changed over the years. He is still just as fixated on the concept of controlling people, down to every single little breath they release.

And I’m the control freak.

“Aw, Ali,” I pout. “You think I’m pretty?”

His face twitches with a challenge as I wiggle the pack of cancer sticks outside the window.

“Is your ego feeling bruised, Thatch? Need me to kiss it better for you?”

I lift my eyebrow up, a short memory flashing in my blue eyes, and I know by the way his dark pupils dilate he knows what I’m thinking about without having to voice it.

For a moment, I allow myself the time to unlock a memory in my mind. I remember a fractured fifteen-year-old Alistair, who’d gotten so drunk after

a fight with his father that he'd cried for the first and only time on my bedroom floor.

Weakness is not something I tolerate from myself or the people I surround myself with. I'm not equipped with the knowledge of what to do when someone is so drunk they have no barricade. It was only his vulnerabilities and admission of one brutal truth: That he would rather die than exist as spare parts for his older brother.

I was so angry at him for allowing his family to snap him like this. We did not break. No matter how coiled or how bleak, we did not break.

That kiss I'd pressed to his tearstained lips was fueled with rage I hadn't felt in a long time. I wanted to pour it down his throat like molten silver until it filled all the cracks they'd created in him. I wanted him to get bitter, not sad or weak.

And his starved inner child, the boy in the corner of his mind who, like me, had never experienced an ounce of sentiment, devoured all of it. Teeth and claws pulled it from my mouth, gulping down my fury like oxygen and storing it somewhere in his body.

Malnourished hearts will feast on anything that resembles love. Even a cold, inexperienced first kiss from a boy who knew nothing of affection and kindness. He took it anyway.

"As much as I'd love to kiss you just to irritate your little toy, Alistair, I'm going to have to pass." I release the rectangle filled with nicotine and let them flutter in the wind, saying a brief prayer in hopes they get run over. "And I've already told you, no smoking in my car."

"Dude, come the fuck on!" Rook shouts.

"Fucking twat."

I simply roll my eyes as Alistair retreats, leaning against the back seat and crossing his arms in front of his chest like a spoiled brat. They will thank me one day when they don't have a machine breathing for them.

"We are twenty minutes from the facility. Unfortunately for me, you will survive."

Pressing my foot onto the gas pedal a little more, I look down at the speedometer, knowing the faster I push my car, the less time I have to hear them complaining.

"Careful, Thatcher. I'm not sure this car is street legal in the States. Wouldn't want to taint that flawless driving record of yours," Rook bites from the passenger seat.

My fingers run along the steering wheel of the car before I reach down to shift up a gear. The Aston Martin Victor is my favorite car from my small collection, one of the last gifts from my grandfather, who'd somehow always known what to get me. Down to every single heinous desire, he was there to supply me with what I needed.

By the time my father was arrested and thrown into prison, I was already so secluded from the rest of the world that I rarely communicated with anyone. Teachers complained that I disturbed the other children, and parents hugged their little ones a little tighter when I was around.

The news of what my father had done, what he was, spread like a blazing wildfire through Ponderosa Springs, torching any and all other gossip for the next five years. All anyone wanted to talk about was Henry Pierson, the Butcher of the Spring.

So maybe after my grandfather saw me in the backyard, ripping the limbs off bugs, he knew what he had to do. Shunning me would have only made it worse, so he accepted what my father had made me into.

He's made my favorite habit much easier for me, even from the grave.

I never know all the details. He was just as secretive as I am, but every six months, several files would arrive in the mail: different names, all men, and everyone suspected of murder in some capacity.

The perfect gift for a boy fighting the urge to kill. At seventeen, when I'd held the weight of a blade in my hand and ended my first life, it was the moment I stopped being my father's protégé, and I became something far worse.

A nightmare worse than Henry Pierson could have ever imagined.

"They'd have to catch me first." I smirk, tightening my grip on the wheel and passing two cars moving at a snail's pace, weaving in and out of traffic on the freeway smoothly.

The drive is comfortable physically, but the closer we get to the facility, the heavier the air feels in the car. The edge sharpens because we remember why we have to make this trip every week.

It isn't long before Rook's fingers fidget with his Zippo, constantly twirling it through the knuckles of his left hand while his right twitches light at his side. The metal snaps open and closed repeatedly.

Click

Click

Click

Clic—

“If you don’t want that to join your cigarettes on the asphalt, I suggest you knock it off,” I bite out, turning to look at him for a second. “If you have something you need to say, spit it out. Quit squirming.”

His response is a harsh glare, full of fire and burning anger. I know it’s not all directed towards me. Some of that hostility is what he feels for himself. Every time we visit, his subconscious tries to convince him once again that what happened to Silas is his fault.

Which is ridiculous, of course.

Silas Hawthorne is entirely his own man who makes decisions on his own. Stubborn and silent choices, but still, they are his. Rook knows this, and yet he still can’t accept he is faultless in this situation.

The guilt is eating him alive, and not even the love of Sage Donahue is enough to curb that. It will be years before he can look in the mirror and believe what we all have tried to explain to him.

“You think he’s okay in there?”

The question hangs in the air, dangling in the space, waiting for one of us to reach out and grab it. But I don’t think Alistair wants to answer because we know the truth.

“No,” I answer, refusing to lie. “I think he feels like a caged, rabid animal who is being taught how to roll over and sit on command.”

My gut heats and there’s an intense tug inside of me. I detest the idea of one of our own trapped inside a box. My heart may not care for the three men I’ve chosen to have in my life, but my loyalty to our bond does.

“I don’t—”

“But,” I interrupt, glaring at Alistair in the back seat, “he knows this is what he needs. Even if he doesn’t like it, even if we don’t like it, no one knows Silas’s mind better than him.”

I glimpse at Rook’s hand, watching the twitching slow down enough for me to know he isn’t going to try and blow this car up with himself inside of it. I know what he wants right now.

Punishment. Pain.

A way to release the guilt from his blood for even a moment, but he knows I refuse to hurt him for this, and more than that, he knows Sage would explode if he reverted to harm to deal with the loss of Silas.

I used to provide him with the pain he needed to survive whenever he needed it. But not now, and not for this.

“Yeah,” he breathes, looking out the window. “You’re right.”

A mist of silence falls inside the car as we end our trip and close in on our destination. When I pull into the parking lot of the multistory glass building, we all sit there for a moment longer than necessary.

“When Silas is ready,” Alistair says, reaching forward and placing a large hand on Rook’s shoulder, “we will rip the fucking doors off this place to get him out. You can burn it down for all I care. When he’s ready, we’ll be here.”

I don’t say it out loud, but deep inside of me, sparked and twisted, I feel sick as it whispers into my soul,

Always.

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A GAME OF CHESS

THATCHER

There's nothing I love more than the smell of bleach and antiseptic. It makes my mouth water as it reminds me of one of my favorite parts of my routine.

Cleaning up.

My father despised cleaning up after the messes he made. So, in order to teach me another one of his rules, and also avoid doing it himself, I was in charge of cleanup. When he'd let me inside the shed where he kept his victims hostage, it was always after he'd had his fill.

Their barren corpses were strung up from the rafters with massive chains that clicked together with the sway of the dead weight. Gaping slash marks were dispersed across their skin, still draining blood onto the ground.

I don't remember ever being shocked or afraid. Those moments of emotion, if I ever felt any, are blurry in my mind. However, I can recall every single bucket of watered-down blood I poured down the drain, the sound of the mop sloshing the thick red liquid across the floor. Every ounce of bleach and every pair of gloves I went through. I remember what was expected of me, but that's all.

I also know the only thing of importance I ever really paid attention to when it came to the bodies was how vastly different they were each time. There was never the same type of woman twice. Brown hair, blonde, red, black. Tall and short. They didn't have any physical similarities, but they did have one singularly common trait.

They all bled the same.

Crimson liquid that oozed onto the floor in drips and thick streams, always carrying the same aroma of rust.

For hours, he'd leave me in there while he toted their bodies into the greenhouse to prepare them for disposal, something I didn't witness for myself until I was the ripe age of seven. He'd been nice enough to spare me from the dismemberment aspect for a full year after my initiation into the new family business.

The smell of all the chemicals swishing around made me dizzy the first time. Possibly because of the strength of the scent or because the first time I'd taken hours to get every drop of evidence out of that room.

After a while, though, I learned to enjoy it.

Not the feeling of him waking me from slumber, always a quarter past three. Or his spent and scratchy voice telling me to get dressed before guiding me to my night-shift job that I was underpaid for.

The scent is what I came to like.

Bleach is not enough, he used to say. It kills DNA, but it won't remove the trace of blood beneath a forensic lens. So, I'd have to mop with bleach, then with lye, before taking a steam cleaner to the entire stainless steel room.

Now, as an adult with my own method of evidence removal, I find I quite enjoy the silence and peace that settles into my body. After weeks of hunting down targets and hours of torture, purging my space of their existence sends ripples of power through my veins.

A sublime ending to another perfect kill.

"I hate the smell of hospitals," Rook mutters next to me as he shuffles in his metal seat, struggling to sit still for longer than a few minutes.

I scoff at the private irony. "And I hate the smell of gasoline."

He turns to look at me, eyes a little wide and eyebrow lifted in question, "That's blasphemy, bro."

"Wasn't aware you were religious," I hum, glancing down at my watch more out of habit than anything. "You find God in between Sage's thighs recently?"

Flames and heat crackle inside his eyes at the sound of her name, and I have to hold myself back from gagging.

A devious smirk hits his lips as he clicks his tongue. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

I give him a blank look, one that suggests I'm not impressed by his sex life.

“No, actually, I wouldn’t,” I say before turning away from his eyes, not interested in continuing this conversation.

I never understood the carnal passion of sexual attraction. The way people throw themselves at one another, freely roaming strangers’ bodies in search of release. There’s never been a single person I’ve met that has made me seek their body the way I crave blood.

The shuffle of feet distracts me, I turn my gaze to the reason we came all this way. Seeing Silas’s face almost made listening to Alistair’s metal music worth it.

His body looks fuller, filling out his gray long-sleeve shirt like he spends all his free time in the gym. His light brown skin is full of color. Before he was admitted, his eyes sockets were nearly hollow from the weight he’d lost. But the person in front of me almost looks human.

If it weren’t for his eyes.

Those are still very much dead.

Looking into them reminds me of staring into a graveyard. Empty, decrepit, and full of mourning souls.

When he takes his seat across from us, I take a second to enjoy the silence he provides. It’s not an awkward one; it’s soothing. It’s Silas. When I’m arguing with one of the guys and Rook is being his obnoxiously loud self, I have come to miss the quiet he provides our group.

“You look surprisingly good,” I say candidly.

Rook’s head nearly snaps from his neck as he whirls to stare a hole into the side of my face.

“What?” I hold my hands out in defense, leaning back in my seat to rest one leg across my knee. “I’m just being honest.”

“Can you not be a fucking asshole for twenty seconds?”

“I feel good,” Silas tells us with a shocking lightness in his voice that hadn’t been there three weeks ago when I stopped by to visit him.

“So, they are treating you alright? No issues?” Rook pushes, his knee bouncing beneath the table so hard I’m afraid he might knock the entire thing over.

“I’m fine. The new meds make me a little nauseous in the mornings, but other than that, I’m okay,” Silas replies, looking him in the eyes for good measure. “Just like I said the last ten times you asked me.”

That pulls a chuckle from Alistair, who has remained quiet since we got inside. “It’s good to see you, man,” he says with a tight smile.

I sit motionless while they catch up, just hovering beside them as they talk and lightly joke about trivial things. Silas, like me, says little and shows even less. It's just like the way we were when we all drove to the Cliff in the evenings.

If I tried hard enough, I could almost convince myself all the tragedy that had wrecked its way through our lives wasn't real and we were seniors in high school all over again.

But life doesn't work that way. It always has a way of squirming up and reminding you it's filled with barbarous horror and misery.

"Did you change the flowers?" Silas asks, reaching up and grabbing the dark beanie from his head, exposing his high and tight buzz cut.

Rook nods, but I answer instead.

"I went with violets and tulips this time. If I were her, I would've gotten bored with peonies." I swipe a piece of dust away from my suit before looking back at him.

"You changed them?"

"I did," I say easily. "It was your one request while you were away, and these two were frolicking in different states, so I was the last line of defense against lazy cemetery workers."

He stares at me for a beat, then another, just looking at me with those eyes that see far more than I want. Far more than I allow.

"Thank you. I'm sure Rosemary would've loved tulips and violets."

Rosemary Donahue.

Her death had been the catalyst of our retribution on Ponderosa Springs. The town had this terror coming from the moment it exiled us into the shadows. But when Rose was murdered, we had no reason to withhold our chaos.

I don't believe anyone is truly innocent and undeserving of death. Everyone has evil secrets buried in their backyard or vicious lies under the floorboards of their closets.

But if there was anyone pure and honest in this devilish world, it was Rosemary—light, graceful, and she laughed. I remember the first time I heard it. A joke from Rook had pulled it from deep in her stomach. It wasn't even a noise that came from her mouth.

It was in her eyes; they kindled and twinkled. Wrinkles tinted the corners of her eyes, and it made her entire body shake with joy. The voice

almost scared me because I'd never seen someone filled with that emotion before.

Spotless happiness that wasn't tainted by the world.

The silence rang blistering cold when she died, and the world was a little bleaker without her laughter in it.

I don't like people, but if I was qualified to do that, I would've liked her. From the moment she came into our circle, there was not an iota of judgment. The fact we'd been publicly crucified and deemed beasts did not affect the way she cared for Silas. She refused to let the town and her presumptuous family sway her loyalty to us.

And there's nothing I respect in a person more than loyalty.

"Speaking of her." Alistair clears his throat. "There is something we all need to talk about."

I knew this conversation was a good portion of why we'd made the trip as a unit instead of separately like we normally do.

"What happened?"

I sigh, putting my hands behind my head. "Alistair and Rook's little toys have played detective. So, since the girls are in control of their groins, we are required to listen to what they say."

While I was able to tolerate the presence of Rosemary, I revolted against her twin, Sage. A sneaky, lying strawberry blonde who'd wedged herself beneath Rook's skin like a tick.

I doubt, highly, I could ever look at her without wanting to throttle her. I'd spent months of my life slicing into Rook's back because of her mistakes. And while he was willing to forgive her for the sake of love, she does not have that liberty with me. And she never will.

"Thatcher, I'm tired of talking with you about this." Alistair's jaw tightens, his knuckles flexing. "The next time you insult Briar, I won't give you a warning to watch your mouth."

My opinions on Briar Lowell have stayed the same since I met her. She is a thorn in my side, buried deep, and there is no getting her out until Alistair has his fill. I do, at the very least, respect her mentality and reasoning for hating me so much.

She's a handsy thief who'd stolen the edge from Alistair. A girl who, like us, has sharp teeth, ones she loves to snap at me when I get a little too close to her beloved Lyra.

Which leads me to believe Lyra hasn't told her dear friend about her favorite little hobby. I wonder if Briar's perspective of me would shift if she knew the truth. That Lyra was the one seeking me out, shoving her tiny button nose into my business.

I wonder if she would be less hostile if she knew I'd saved Lyra from a fate my father had warranted her. I'd granted her mercy in my inexperience, and how was I repaid? Having to deal with a constant cherry-scented shadow and her snippy best friend.

"What did they find out? Are they alright?" Silas asks, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"Names of more missing girls. They've been looking into all of them. Sage says there are at least fifteen in our area. They want to do something about it. They want to help," Rook says, filling him in on what the girls had already told us.

"And you guys think we should stay out of it?"

"I think we started this for Rosemary. Not for girls that aren't our problem," I snip.

"They may not be our problem, Thatcher, but my girlfriend is," Rook argues, looking to Silas. "And I have the feeling they are going to do something regardless of if we help or not. So, the way I see it, we find out who's running the show. Take down the organization from the inside 'cause we sure as fuck can't go to the police."

"Did you not hear a word Detective Breck said when he had a gun pressed to my skull?" I ask, leaning forward. "They were only the beginning. We have no idea who is involved, who is working for them. One slip-up and you'll be begging for mercy in prison."

"Never took you as the kind of man to be afraid of anything, Thatcher."

I tongue my cheek, trying not to think of Rook's head popping between my fingers as I lean towards him.

"I'm not going to prison over people who aren't my concern. Spend my life in a penitentiary for what? Trying to play the hero? Are you forgetting who I am? Who you are?" I hiss, my eyebrows slanted. "We are doing this for Silas. For Rosemary. That's it."

He meets my disapproval with rage, his impulsive behavior bubbling up, and my eyes dare him to take a swing at me. I don't fight because it's messy, and my suits are too expensive for a cheap swing. But right now, if

he laid a hand on me, I'd make sure he'd remember why he needs to watch his mouth with me.

"Thatcher is right, Rook." Alistair grabs his shoulder, the older brother none of us had, or particularly wanted, coming out. "This is about Si and Rosie. It's up to him."

Rook stares me down for another moment, just long enough for me to smirk and shoot him a sarcastic wink. But he decides against knocking his knuckles into my porcelain face, turning his attention back to Silas.

Am I fond of the idea of girls missing and being sold into sex slavery? No. It's disgusting and, if I'm honest, tacky.

Does that mean I want to risk our freedom for them? Also no.

I'd spent years of my life protecting the three of them without them so much as noticing, and I would not have it blow up in my face now.

"Thatch." Silas says my name steadily and waits for my eyes to meet his own before he says anything. "What if it was Rosemary?"

"Excuse me?"

"If it were Rosemary that was missing still, and she was alive, being sold into slavery, would you do it then? Would you risk it if I told you I want them all dead? Every last one of them that had a hand in Rosie's death, all the way to the top of the Halo. Would you do it?"

Silence thrums through the air for only a moment.

"Yes," I say through gritted teeth, "I wouldn't be happy about it. But if that's what you needed, I would do it."

Silas knows me, unfortunately. Knows things about me I didn't tell him or want him to know. But he is aware my loyalty to them is the most important thing to me. That I would do whatever they needed, whenever they needed it.

My only weakness.

It's them.

And I think a part of me hates them for that.

Rook scoffs, tossing his hands up in the air, ready to argue with me once again, but Silas's steady tone interrupts.

"Good. Because I want their heads on stakes." He looks at me a little longer before turning to Alistair. "Get with the girls, find out everything they know. And get closer to Easton and Stephen Sinclair."

"I fucking knew it!" Rook announces, causing workers to look at him with furrowed brows and shameful stares.

I give a reassuring smile to those who are still watching us warily, putting on my best politician mask and trying to convey with my face that we aren't doing anything too terrible.

When they all return to their task, I lift my hand and swat the back of Rook's head with a thump.

"Please, Van Doren, shout from the top of your lungs that we are planning mass murder. While you're at it, let them know you're an idiot."

He rubs the spot on his scalp, lifting his middle finger up to flip me off. "I knew it." His voice is much quieter this time.

"Why?" Alistair demands.

"Before everything went down with Frank, I was looking into Stephen's finances. He has quite a bit of money."

"That's a red flag? Should I be on this list of possible ringleaders?" I inquire, unashamed of my wealth.

"More money than he should have for a dean, even if it is a school like Hollow Heights. There are multiple offshore accounts I couldn't track, even after running it through my software," he explains.

"You hacked his bank account?" Alistair muses, a smile on his lips.

"And his search history, cell phone, emails. Oh, and his security cameras." The first facial expression other than his normal brooding scowl threatens to peek out, his lips barely twitching at the corners.

Silas is good at a lot of things, but he's great at hacking and holding a gun. Two vastly different hobbies, but he made them look so effortless you'd think they were the same thing.

"If you can convince my parents to let you into my room, I still have Easton linked to one of my monitors. He knows how to work with them." He nods his head towards Rook. "I'm not saying he's got anything to do with it, but it's better than nothing. It should get you started—Lyra?"

Lyra? Lyra Abbott?

Amusement fills me.

How bold of my shadow to show up here like this after her little cliff-diving stunt. I knew she'd seek me out eventually to discuss the bargain. The one where she'd cheated me.

The girl who had cheated death.

For the second time.

However, following me here while I'm with the boys? Is she that dedicated to the cause? Better yet, is she that dedicated to me? For the first

time, a question rocks its way into my brain regarding Lyra. Just how much had she seen over the years of her spying?

I swivel in my chair, looking towards the door, where Lyra stands damp from the rain, holding a broken umbrella and wearing chunky loafers. The tight brown turtleneck hugs the curves of her waist as it tucks into a corduroy skirt. It's the first outfit I've seen her in since that Halloween ball a year ago that highlights her figure instead of shielding it.

All amusement retires from my body and is replaced with irritation so severe my skin feels like it's on fire.

It's not because of the clothes or her worn-down shoes that still have mud on them.

No.

It's the smile on her face.

Wide, blinding, pristine, and intended for Silas Hawthorne. It takes up her entire face, lifting her entire body into a state of euphoria. Lyra radiates sunshine in the doorway, sunshine that peeks through a canopy of dark green pines and stabs the forest floor.

It's a smile that falls once she sets eyes on us.

Once she sees me.

The edges of her mouth turn down, hiding her white teeth, and I can physically feel the sun retreat inside of her chest, tucking away its light and warmth from me, which does something unexplainably twisted to me.

My nails press into the palm of my hand as my fist tightens in my lap.

"Oh, shit," she mutters, eyes discovering my own for a split second before moving back to Silas. "Sorry, I can just go. I didn't know they'd be here. I'll come back next week."

Next week?

A sharp twinge of pain bites into me as my grip turns my already pale knuckles stark white.

Silas shakes his head. "I didn't know it was Thursday already. You can stay. They won't be here much longer than we can play."

My control is an iron fortress, one that had been crafted and built over years. But now, it feels like a frayed piece of pathetic yarn as I stare at her. The words out of my mouth don't feel like my own.

"Play?" I say it like I'm spitting nails from my mouth. "Play what, exactly?"

With jittery hands, Lyra reaches into her oversized messenger bag, retrieving a box. She holds it out like a truce, as if whatever that box holds will somehow take away this searing feeling in my chest.

“Chess,” Silas answers. “I’ve been teaching Lyra since she insists on coming up here every week.”

Every week? Teaching?

The unmistakable feeling of liquid seeps into my hand, blood coating my palm as my nails burrow into my flesh.

“Lyra,” I say through clenched teeth. “A word?”

My chair scraping against the floor swallows her reply, if she even has one. I don’t wait for her to agree or accept my invitation. I’m closing in on her when she opens her mouth to respond, but I give her a curt shake of my head in warning.

One more word about her visits to Silas will send me over the edge. An edge I didn’t even know existed until her.

I hold the door to the lobby open, turning to watch her expectantly. She stares at me, rooted in place like her shoes are glued to the floor. If it didn’t require physical contact, I would rip her from the ground and haul her over my shoulder, but I do not want to touch her.

“Scarlett.” My tone is rough and low, only for her ears to hear.

This makes her move, finally.

Her small frame shuffles by me, and her scent mixed with something weirdly familiar wafts into my nose. Once she is inside the lobby and the door is shut behind me, I loop my thumbs in my pockets, remembering to keep my hands to myself.

“What are you doing here?” Her mouth drops open at my question, but I can see her reply in her eyes. “Pet, you better have a more clever answer than chess.”

Her brows furrow, like she’s unsure of why I’ve pulled her out here. Like she is blissfully unaware of what she’s done. What she has awoken inside of me.

“Then what would you like me to say, Thatcher? Because that is why I’m here. I wasn’t”—her arms wrap around herself, some form of defense mechanism as she lowers her tone—“following you, if that’s what you think. I didn’t even know you’d be here.”

I roll my tongue against my front teeth, shaking my head in mock understanding. “So, you’re here strictly for Silas?”

She nods quickly, not even letting me finish the question.

“Yes, we play chess on Thursdays. That’s the only reason, I swear.”

I glance down at my hand, opening it to find blood smeared against me, the cuts from my nails still flowing.

“You’re letting him teach you, huh?” I ask, feeling my jaw twitch as I rub my bloody forefinger and thumb together. “Are you learning things from Rook and Alistair as well?”

Looking up at her is a mistake because her eyes are looking at my hand, drawn to the cherry color in my palm, unable to look away and desperate to reach for it.

Blood hungry.

“I asked you a question,” I snarl. “Do you creep on them? Follow them around like some boy-obsessed little girl?”

“Wh-what?” she stutters, shaking her head, making all those wet curls bounce.

I’m ashamed of how easy it is for me to reach forward and snatch her throat between my fingers, jerking her close to me so that she can’t run from me. She can’t see anyone else huddled close to my chest. Can’t breathe in anyone else. No one else but me.

My thumb dips into the sides of her neck, feeling her pulse flutter in my hold. The slippery liquid in my palm coats her pasty skin, streaks of red tinting a winter bed of snow.

My mouth waters at the sight of her wearing my blood like a ruby necklace.

“Do you watch them?” I ask again.

Her little breaths brush against my face as tuck my chin so that she has to elevate her neck into my grip in order to look me in the eye.

“No, Thatcher.” She chokes on her words, my fingers forbidding her breath to come out of her own accord. “It’s just you. I’m your ghost. Only yours.”

Her words were supposed to be ice over my burning skin. But they aren’t. They’re an accelerant.

Watching her struggle in my hands, with my blood smeared along the fragile column of her throat and her telling me just how obsessed with me she is, only sends white-hot heat into my body.

In the past few months, she has done nothing but provoke and grate my nerves, clawed at the walls of my self-control with nails I didn’t even know

she had. I have no desire to be around her any more than was required.

When I look at her, I see my first and only mistake.

But right now, she looks like death's most desirable lover. The grim reaper himself would've crossed lands and oceans to touch her like this, to slather every single inch of her body in his blood so he could lick it clean.

A zap of shock flies down my spine.

"I don't want you to be anything to me," I say, wanting to retreat from her immediately.

I want a shower. I want clean of her. Right now.

This is the reason I stay away. Why I ignore the burn of her eyes on my skin and her presence in a room. Because for one split second, one single grain of hourglass sand, I'd been weak for this girl.

As an inept boy, I'd been weak for her, and I never want to experience that again. I had let her survive, forced her out of the way of my father instead of doing what I was tasked with.

She will not do this to me again.

I release her throat, allowing her to inhale deeply without restriction, and try to keep my eyes from the crimson handprint marked on her neck.

"But sadly, a deal is a deal." I take a step back from her, watching as her body sags visibly without my touch holding her up. "So, I have no choice but to be your teacher."

I will make it clear what this is and the boundaries I require for this to work.

"When do we start?" she whispers, looking like she wants to say more but is holding back in fear of me retracting my agreement.

"Next Thursday."

"But I—"

"But you? I'm doing you a favor here, pet. Don't make me change my mind," I warn, fully aware of what arrangement she has with Silas on that particular day.

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip. That snippy side of her wants to fight me on this so badly she can't stand it. I'm almost impressed that she holds back.

Almost.

"Fine. Anything else, your highness?" She plunges her hand into her bag, pulling out what looks to be a jacket or overcoat and using the sleeve to remove my stain from her delicate neck.

I drag my tongue across my bottom lip as a few tiny streaks remain, refusing to come off with just the harsh material of her jacket. I don't remember telling her she could do that

If she wants to do this, she will learn the way I did.

Through rules.

"Yes, actually." I peer down at my hand for a brief second before lifting my thumb to my lips, sucking it clean. The tangy flavor entices my taste buds as I swirl my tongue around before removing it.

Through my peripheral vision, I don't miss the way her eyes follow my every move. How they widen ever so slightly and her pink tongue darts across her bottom lip.

"There will be rules. If you do not follow every single one, no matter how insignificant, this deal is void. Is that clear?"

"You have a Thatcher's Guide to Murder?" she murmurs.

"It seems funny now, but I assure you, it isn't." My body retreats farther from hers, each graceful step backward putting a welcomed distance between the two of us. "Be at my home at six. I don't need to give you directions, right?"

Bright pink floods her cheeks, turning every inch of her face a dusty rose color as she looks down at the floor, clicking her heels together as she rocks back and forth.

"No, I know where it is."

"Thought so." I adjust my cufflinks. "Don't be late."

I don't want to admit it, but I think I'm going to enjoy putting Lyra Abbott in her place, straightening her out and cleaning her up. No more disorganized bags that look like a rat's nest when she is digging for a book she needs, no more messy fingers from all the mud she plays in hunting bugs.

It's she who came to me seeking my advice, so that is what she will get. Whether or not she likes it, well, that isn't my issue.

My hand grips the cool doorknob, ready to leave her in the lobby, and before I can think better of it, I speak again.

"Oh, and Lyra." I turn my head to the right, glancing over my shoulder at her stagnant frame that seems to perk up at the sound of my voice, like she's standing at attention.

"Yeah?"

“Do not ever wipe my blood off your body without my permission again.”

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THE FORGOTTEN PLACES

LYRA

Libraries are meant to be quiet.

The only sounds to fill the voids should be the scribble of pens against fresh paper or the rustle of turned, worn pages. The occasional squeak of chairs moving and hushed voices.

But the Caldwell Library during the fall semester is always obnoxiously loud. Students returning from break boast about trips to the Maldives and Spain, gathering in large groups, huddled over the long, rectangular mahogany tables, laughing freely.

The interior design of the building is stunning, with its gothic-style architecture, tall arches, vaulted ceiling, and incredible stained-glass windows that line the walls. It's a shame I've never been able to study here during the school year.

Getting anything done in that place besides eavesdropping was futile during my first semester. All the constant noise buzzing in my ears and endless distractions. There are too many students for the librarians to police into a more hushed tone, so now it's overruled with gossip and turned into a lounge for students who want to feel like they're studying but aren't actually doing anything but yapping their jaws.

But not all hope was lost.

It had only taken me a few trips and a little secret exploring to find my hideaway. I'm good at that—finding the places others overlook.

I gather the books I need for my genetics and genomics class, along with a few extras for an extra ecology course I'd picked up. Majoring in organismic and evolutionary biology had been my only choice, really, when selecting a graduate focus.

An entomology degree from Hollow Heights wasn't the most popular track, but it was mine and I enjoyed it. I'm not sure what I want to do. I've entertained the idea of becoming an ethologist, where I could study insects in their natural habitat for research, but my future always seems so hazy that planning that far ahead feels pointless.

I float through the tables of students unnoticed, another spirit inhabiting the shelves and nothing more. I carry myself all the way to the second level, glancing over the waist-high railing at all the people down below.

People-watching is my specialty.

Sometimes, when I'm bored, I'll look around at those around me, building these stories inside my mind about their lives, even though I already know basically everything about them already.

Yasmine Poverly, for example, daughter of not one but two art tycoons, who is said to have swirls like Picasso, is sitting a little too close to her best friend Felicity's long-term boyfriend, Jason Ellis.

Could it just be they are close after the years spent near one another? Sure. But it's much more fun to cook up something a little more dramatic. Like what if Yasmine and Jason are sleeping together but they can't say anything because Jason needs Felicity's father to give his recommendation at Johns Hopkins? Or worse, what if they've secretly been plotting to murder Felicity because she is actually a raging bitch to the both of them?

See? Much more interesting than them just being acquaintances.

I turn away, walking past the tall stacks of books, rows and rows of informational text, some of them older than I am. The smell of old leather and withered paper gets stronger the deeper I travel into the library.

A few sections ahead of me, there is a librarian shelving books, and she looks to be the same one from the last time I was here. I'm assuming she's tasked with making sure students don't drop their pants and attempt quick fucks in the darker portions of the building.

With practiced ease, I glide past a shelf, cherry-picking a few from my space in the aisle and letting them fall onto the floor with a loud thud. Just as the sound covers my footsteps, I shift between two of the shelves, allowing the dim lighting to conceal my body.

There are a few good things about being invisible, and this happens to be one of my favorites.

I hear her sigh, watching as she walks straight past me and gathers the books on the floor. With her back to me, I take the opportunity to slip

deeper into the section, passing row after row until I reach my destination.

Nestled between two mahogany shelves stands a black steel spiral staircase. The section of books itself is nothing of importance, old accounts of the founding of Ponderosa Springs and history regarding the renowned Hollow Heights University.

But the extra security isn't for the books themselves; it's for what lies atop the wrought iron stairs. The steel swirls and metal lattice conjoin to create a spiral of stairs leading to a portion of the Caldwell Library that no one is allowed to enter. It's one of two points of entry to the boarded-up tower that has been out of commission.

At one point, I'd read, they'd used it for astronomy and astrophysics students. Expensive telescopes were stationed at each of the four arched colonnades, where people could gaze at the stars from the tallest building on campus.

Most of the ghost stories that drift through the halls of this place are simply that—stories. Tall tales made up to add to the lore of the darkness that settles here, ways to scare the new students or creep out the locals.

But the Tower isn't just a story or a local myth.

It's real.

Stepping over the chain and sign that says DO NOT ENTER in bold print, I start to climb the narrow path, taking the steps two at a time, swirling around and around until I reach the top.

The click of heels against the floor rushes my movements, my hands pressing flat against the plywood that rests across the oval entrance. I shove it out of the way, quickly tossing my bag up and onto the level above before lifting myself up into the space.

Once I make it inside, I shove the wood back over the hole in the floor, successfully hiding myself from everyone below me. I hold my breath for a beat, making sure they did not see my shoes slipping up here, before I release an exhale.

When I stand up, wiping off the dust from my backside, I feel a gust of wind blow in from four boarded-up windows. The large vacant space is littered with cobwebs and boxes of books that are too damaged to sell or use.

There is a small desk tucked away in the corner, one that I'd cleaned off to use as my study table when I come up here. Just to the right of it is a tall door, one I've never seen inside of, but from the blueprints of the building,

I've determined there is a staircase that snakes around the outer level of the tower, taking you all the way to the entryway of the library. But it stays locked, and I've never had the guts to crack the dead bolt.

I walk to one side where a board is missing and peer out of the front of the building. From this angle, you can see the entire campus, even the ocean that is just beyond the cliff beside the Kennedy District.

When I stand here, looking out across the grounds, I think about what Tabitha Fléur must have felt like the night she fell—or, depending on what version you believe, was pushed.

In the winter of 1979, Tabitha, a bright sophomore student who was majoring in ethics, tumbled from the Caldwell tower like a bag of rocks, cracking her skull on the path below.

The force of her fall required maintenance to replace the entire fractured slab of cobblestone, and some say they heard the thud all over campus. There are a few who claim she was under brutal pressure from her parents, which caused her to take her own life.

If that were the case, I suppose she must have felt free standing at the open arch, looking down at the ground, seeking liberation from unreasonable expectations.

But the most common version, the one I believe, is she was pushed. They could never figure out who it might have been, but it was speculated to be her best friend—the one who conveniently took her valedictorian position.

Denise Bohart still lives in Ponderosa Springs to this day, married to Tabitha's ex-boyfriend and spending her days as a retired housewife. People whisper when they see her around, and she still has yet to speak about what happened.

For years students have claimed to hear her footsteps up here when they are beneath the level, or see her spirit floating through the rows of volumes. Every fallen book, misplaced item, or bump in the night is blamed on the ghost of the Caldwell tower.

Miss Tabitha Fléur.

I know there is a lot of treachery that surrounds this place, and the overall energy of Hollow Heights is eerie. I still just can't help but find it beautiful. All the crafted gothic architecture, stone gargoyles, marble fountains, and open space make for a breathtaking campus.

Maybe it's because I know what it's like for people to perceive me as creepy. And maybe because I'm waiting for the day people see me as beautiful instead of this twisted, spooky, bug girl.

Buzz. Buzz.

I pull my phone from my pocket, staring down at the text message from Sage that lets me know she and Briar are on their way. I send a quick reply before sliding it into my back pocket and depositing my books onto the desk.

If Tabitha's ghost is indeed haunting the tower, she's never bothered me before. Maybe because she realizes she's in good company with me. Although I'm living, I'm a ghost too, a person who appreciates the macabre spaces for what they are.

There is something incredibly alluring about forsaken spaces.

Cemeteries, the abandoned mausoleum behind the Rothchild District, and this dusty tower, they all play host to scary myths and misplaced fear, but underneath it all, they are all the same.

A home for the forgotten ones.

Those who have blended into oblivion and whose memory no longer exists unless to frighten people. They all feel like home to me rather than a place of mourning or sadness.

Because I'm one of the forgotten, too.

A rustle of material tickles my ears, and when I turn around, I see one of the white sheets that had been draped over a stray piece of furniture is now lying on the floor.

My eyebrows furrow, my brain already telling me it was simply the wind and nothing else. A loud groan trembles through the floors, the vibration of heavy footsteps coming from somewhere close by.

A lick of fear pools in my stomach, the subconscious part of me telling me it's something other than the age of the building and the powerful gusts of wind from outside.

I glance around the room, making sure I'm still the only person inside the tower. When I find it completely empty, I once again tell myself what every other person does. Your mind is playing silly tricks on you, Lyra. You're just giving in to the stories, too many scary movies before bed.

Another groan creaks into the space, but this time, it's much closer. I glance at the shut metal door across from me, staring at it until the noise

returns. It's the sound of someone's feet, taking their time as they work their way up ancient steps.

Every step is matched with an achy cry of aged material, sending echoes into the tower I'm currently standing in. The movies always tell you to avoid walking towards dreadful commotions, but human curiosity is a damned thing.

I walk towards the ominous metal door, the dark coloring patched with rust spots from age, and bolts decorate the edges. It's not exactly the kind of door that welcomes you to open it.

My body leans forward, palms lying flat against the cool steel. It's so cold I nearly hiss in shock. The icy feeling burns my skin. But I don't pull away; instead, I lean in farther.

Silence thrums in the air, so quiet it's almost loud. I can hear every single breath that pushes past my lips and feel the thump of every heartbeat. I press my ear to the door, listening for those heavy footsteps, but I hear nothing.

There is a thunderous crash behind me, making me retract from the door a little quicker than my legs expected. I feel myself slipping backwards, quickly trying to place my hands below me to break my fall.

When my butt slams into the floor, I cry out in pain. The soreness immediately throbs in my backside as I turn my head to look where the commotion came from. A sturdy breeze had knocked another one of the boarded panels loose, sending the sheet of wood onto the floor.

The wind howls and whips through the open cracks, whistling inside the small space I'd always found quite charming up to this point. A burning sensation tingles my body, and I glance down at my palms.

They had indeed saved me from breaking my tailbone but had suffered collateral damage in return. Nasty, jagged streaks slash across the soft flesh of my open hands.

I bite the inside of my cheek as I look at the pulled-back layers of skin —nothing too bad that I'll need medical attention, but I'm definitely going to need a buttload of Neosporin and some bandages.

“No more scary movies after mid—”

The stiff, bone-chilling whine of a door opening cuts me off.

The darkness and the unknown things that lurk there have never scared me. I've never been afraid of bumps in the night or half-opened closet doors because I'd been face-to-face with my worst nightmare and survived. I'd

seen the worst of humanity, what true evil looked like, and had walked out alive.

When I look into the mirror, the darkness everyone is terrified of stares right back at me. I have nothing to be afraid of when I am fear itself. Outside, I stayed the same girl, but the inside had turned into obscurity and death.

So, I'm not surprised by myself when I turn back to face the door with little regard to what could be standing in the open doorway. My imagination conjures up all the horror movie villains and ghouls I'd ever seen, preparing itself for whatever demon or slasher awaits me.

The door is open barely an inch, cracked enough that I notice it's ajar, but nothing beyond it makes a move to burst through. I sit there staring for a moment longer, patiently waiting for the inevitable jump scare, and when nothing comes out, I release a breath.

Could the wind have been strong enough to blow the weight of this door open? Even if it had been, how did it unlock? I had tugged and tugged on that handle when I first came up here. There was no way it was opened without the use of a key.

The logistics of how it stands there cracked open, spilling darkness, is only a brief thought. I stand up, dusting my pants off with the backs of my hands, careful not to rub my open wounds against the jeans.

There's only the wind for a beat more before a metallic tinkling echoes from behind the door. Its silvery harmony makes the hairs on my arms dance and my eyebrows lift.

It leaks from the exposed crevice, floating and tangling with the whistling of the wind. The music makes me think of the night I'd danced with Thatcher at the All Hallows Eve ball during our first semester.

The waltz had been stiff, one that we'd used as a distraction for Alistair and Briar to slip away undetected, he'd said once the last note was plucked. But even though we barely spoke, the feeling of spinning around on a waxed dance floor with him holding me had been a night I'd dreamed of for months.

This whimsical plucked melody does the opposite of its possible intended purpose. I'm not scared at all; I'm intrigued by whatever it is behind this door playing music that reminds me so much of how it felt to be held in Thatcher's arms.

How it felt to waltz with death.

And walk away unharmed.

When I pull the door open further, feeling it resist my force, I pull a little harder until it's open far enough that I can see inside. One single candle lies on the top of the first stair. I'd been right about the stone steps, identical to the material that makes up the walls around it.

The candle flickers, only reaching a short radius. I can barely see the second step down, and everything below it seems to just be obsidian darkness that swallows all the light.

Beside the golden candle holder that's now covered in white wax sits the source of the melody—a square-based music box. I squat down, picking it up as the tune finishes playing. The dark wooden base is decorated with delicate white swirls that wrap around the entire surface. Every detail looks hand-painted.

My fingers trace the top, where a small silver cage sits. The shiny bars encase a faux death's-head hawkmoth. It's the most common in pop culture, due to *The Silence of the Lambs*, and also for the notorious skull-shaped patterning on its thorax.

I turn the lever on the back, releasing it once the tension is tight enough, and I watch the moth inside the cage spin. It twirls in a circle, and for a second, I'm mesmerized by how beautiful it is.

Whether it was from Tabitha Flleur, who really did haunt the tower and had started to enjoy my company, or maybe someone more living, I don't really care. The gift is appreciated.

"Thank you," I whisper into the void, peering down into the lightless stairway with bated breath.

No voice returns the sentiment, but—

I can feel them.

The presence of someone skulking in the shadows just beyond the candle's reach.

"Lyra!"

My name is whispered yelled in a soft voice from the opening in the floor. I give one more glance to the dark before hurriedly sliding back into the room and shoving the door closed behind me.

I press my back against it, looking at the plywood on the floor moving before Briar's blonde hair pokes through. Her eyes search the room before finding me.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Briar mutters from the hole in the floor, looking up at me with furrowed eyebrows. “You alright?”

I rub my sternum with my fist, trying to pet my heart into a steady rhythm again. There has to be a rational explanation for the music box, but right now, all my brain can come up with is that it had been a gift from someone.

If they meant me harm, they had their chance.

“Yeah, think I’ve just been up here a little too long.”

I help Briar up and watch as Sage swiftly lifts herself up into the room, dusting off her polka-dotted jeans that look so good on her.

“You gotta get some sunlight, chick. All the darkness is going to swallow you up,” Sage adds, walking towards me with a stunning smile on her freckled face, using her hand to brush one of my curls back from my face.

“We could’ve had this meeting somewhere that didn’t require breaking and entering, ya know? My apartment, Sage’s place, your cabin,” Briar breathes, looking around at the dusty space. “I’m starting to think you don’t want us to see your little hideout.”

She’s talking about my mother’s cabin, or rather my cabin now.

I’d spent the past two summers redoing the interior, painting the exterior, and making the space livable. That place had been one of the many things I’d been left in her will, and it had been one of her favorite locations.

When I was released from the state at eighteen, my bank account had increased substantially. I knew my mother and I were well-off, but when I’d seen the number, my eyeballs nearly fell out of my skull. The insurance company told me it was from her policy, but even then, it felt like too much money.

It’s not that I don’t want the girls there—I do, more than they know. I’m just nervous about sharing this project I’d worked hard on, this space that my mother had loved, with other people.

I know they won’t judge me; they’re my friends, the only friends I’ve ever had, but my insecurity and history of being ridiculed make me apprehensive.

“I’m not keeping anything from you two,” I say softly. “I just think this place is much cooler.”

“Lyra, I love you,” Sage mutters as Briar drops her backpack onto the floor, “but this place creeps me the fuck out.”

“Most of the places I enjoy have that sort of effect on people.”

“That’s why we love you, though,” Briar says, winking at me from her squatted place on the floor. She’s digging for something, and when she finds it, she stands up and offers it to me.

I go to reach for it, but she pulls it back before I touch it.

“Alistair told me about the trip to see Silas.”

“Yeah?” I say, furrowing my brows. “They agreed to look into the other girls. We talked about this.”

“He told me about the entire trip, Lyra,” she emphasizes. Something cold crosses her eyes. “I thought we didn’t keep secrets from each other.”

“Nothing happened, B.” The lie on my tongue tastes bitter, so sour in my mouth I want to spit.

“So, he just pulled you away for a chat about homework?” She crosses her arm across her chest. “Listen, if he said something to you, you can tell me. I can—”

“I don’t need you to do anything,” I say, standing my ground. “I don’t need you to go tell Alistair. I’m completely capable of handling Thatcher Pierson on my own. What happened between our parents has nothing to do with us.”

It technically has everything to do with it, but I’m trying to make a point.

I know Briar sees Thatch as the enemy. That because of what his dad did, I’m suddenly a target. She’s being a good friend, watching out for me, but I know I’m capable of sticking up for myself.

I’m quiet, not weak.

“We know you are,” Sage interjects. “We just worry, Lyra. You have to be careful. I’m trying to respect the fascination you have with him, but I don’t want Thatcher throwing a hissy fit when he figures out you’ve been...” She struggles with the word. “You know, following him.”

“Stalking, you mean?” I give her the correct term, and she winces.

They said themselves they have no right to judge me and what I do. How I feel. But I know it’s difficult for them to grasp—it’s difficult for everyone to grasp. The connection we share is something private; only he and I can feel it. See it. Understand it.

That’s the way I like it.

The box of tokens I’d collected from Thatcher over the years had been my undoing. They know about my obsession with him, and I’d tried to

explain why I feel the need to be close to him, but it doesn't mean they like it.

"He is dangerous. Your fixation could just be a side effect of your PTSD, Lyra. Getting close to him scares me for you," Briar injects, not hiding her disapproval of him.

I flinch slightly at the sheer hypocritical nature of my friend. Briar Lowell is brave and the kind of friend you want by your side when you go into the worst storms. There is nothing I wouldn't do for her and she for me, but that? That is not her.

"Yeah? I remember hearing the same things about Alistair, B. Look how that worked out for you," I say. "You think he isn't dangerous? That he doesn't scare people?"

"Lyra—"

"But none of that matters, right? Because it's not what you see. The Alistair you love." I glance at Sage. "The Rook you understand. They are not the same people this town knows. They are the villains in every way to Ponderosa Springs, but not to you."

Sons of founding families damned from the very town their ancestors built. The Hollow Boys are the antiheroes who refuse redemption because they're comfortable in their corruption.

"Thatcher is the creature beneath everyone's bed. The evil beast in your closet waiting for you to fall asleep. Death personified. He is everyone's favorite scary tale. But he has never, not once, been the monster in my story."

No, he'd been the boy to save me once. A minor fact my friends do not know. It's something that might change their perspective on him, but I can't tell them. He wouldn't want me to.

That night is a secret between the two of us.

"I'm sorry," Briar says, reaching out for my hand and looping our pinky fingers together, giving me a tight squeeze. "I'm just on edge with all of this. I'm fucking worried. About everything. The boys, you guys. Just ignore me."

"You know I appreciate it, don't you? I would do the same for you if I thought you needed it. But I promise, I'm alright." We all share a look of truce, meaning they will leave it be until he does something they don't like. "Now, what's in the folder?"

"Alistair said they're going to do some checking in on Easton and Stephen, but I have another route I think we can look into." Briar places the folder in my hands, letting me thumb through it.

Sage cringes at the sound of Easton Sinclair's name, and I don't blame her. The dude is a sleazebag, and a part of me hopes he is involved so he is dealt with properly.

"Coraline Whittaker," Sage says as I look through images of Coraline and articles about her disappearance. "This is what I could find on her, but even with what little we have, she isn't like the other Halo girls."

I know Coraline.

Well, of her.

"Most of the girls who were taken were from West Trinity Falls. People who are from divorced homes or foster care. They are mostly labeled as runaways," I mutter, filling in what Sage is telling me. "Coraline was wealthy, decently popular, with two parents. Why take the risk of abducting a girl that people would search for?"

At Ponderosa Springs High, every group had a hierarchy. There wasn't just one group that was popular; it was all of them. Everyone was too wealthy not to be. Coraline's clique, for lack of a better word, was the goths.

Art nuts, music prodigies, poets. Artistic kids who rebelled by wearing a lot of eyeliner and the color black. So, while she'd been well-known by her friend group and liked by many, she was still a bit of a loner.

"That's what I said, so I did a little more digging, and I found this." Sage reaches into her back pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper.

"No fucking way," I breathe, pulling it apart to see it's a photograph.

It's a little grainy, but it's clear enough that I can make out all the faces.

Frank Donahue, Sage's father, smiling as he sits next to Greg West, Stephen Sinclair, James Whittaker, and lastly, Conner Godfrey. All posed in the parlor room of the Sinclair estate, holding drinks up in a toast.

They are all younger, of course, probably a few years older than us, but they all seem to be close friends or, at the very least, have something in common that makes them friendly.

"That's what I said. Is it just a coincidence that two of them are dead for being involved in the Halo? Could be. Is it possible all of them are a part of it? Absolutely," Briar says. "I think it's something we should look into."

The wheels in my head start to click, realizing what my part is in all of this.

“Greg and Frank are dead. The boys are handling Stephen. That leaves James and Conner.”

“Wouldn’t it be lovely if we had someone who already had a relationship with one of them,” Sage hums, looking at me with a knowing smirk.

“Better yet, a friendship with one of them,” Briar adds, eyes twinkling with mischief.

I glance back down at the picture, staring at the man all the way to the far right. Black, square glasses frame his handsome face. I don’t want him to be a part of this. Not because I care for him in that way, but because he seems like a kind person.

He’s nice to me. He is my friend, sorta.

Living here doesn’t allow you to give someone the benefit of the doubt. It’s guilty until proven innocent, not the other way around.

Which means I’ll have to keep Conner close.

“Keep your friends close,” I mutter, swiping my thumb across the picture.

“And your enemies dead.”

THE GARDEN ON THE HILL

LYRA

The house that haunts Pierson Point.

It's the story all little children are told in Ponderosa Springs.
A rite of passage.

If you grew up here, at least once in your life, you have stood in front of the wrought iron gates and crow statues that perch against the sides. It's usually a group of young kids who make the brave trip up the base of the hill just to stare at the house as a test of courage.

The estate that sits atop a knoll has a sweeping view of Ponderosa Springs and all who inhabit it. It watches ominously, monitoring misbehaving children. Legend says once it knows all the naughty things you've done, it lures you in, calling to you like a siren calls to a sailor, whispering a lullaby into your ear until you're pulled to the front gates and allowed to pass through.

But once you're inside, you never come back out.

That myth had only grown once Thatcher's father had been convicted of his crimes. Now, it's not just children who go missing once entering the infamous property.

Music plays low through my speakers as the gates creak open, letting me in. A fly caught in a trap, a willing bug buzzing into the spider's web. The lengthy driveway is lined with dark green western juniper and leafy maple trees that create a shady canopy across the paved road.

It hadn't taken much searching to find the history and layout of the fifty-seven-acre Gilded Age estate the Piersons have called home for decades. I'd looked into it shortly after taking my stalking habits outside of school.

I've followed Thatcher to a lot of different places, but inside his home was never one.

Not for lack of trying either. It's impossible to get into the house without triggering an alarm or being noticed by a groundskeeper. So, once Thatch enters the privacy of his home, his life becomes a silent mystery to me.

For short periods of time, I would peek in through the ground-floor windows, seeing him stalk through the kitchen and into various rooms, but I couldn't hear him. His grandmother, May, is rarely in the west wing of the home, so I never saw his interactions with her.

I imagine what he's like, maybe playing classical music over the speakers while he makes breakfast. Does he make his own bed? Bleach his own sheets? Are they even white? Does he color coordinate his closet?

So many unknowns about the specimen I've held so fondly in my heart, and it drives me mad. When I hyper-fixate on a new species of insect, I want to know everything about it. The way it moves, how it lives, what the inside looks like. I want to closely examine every movement and habit.

The glass windows put an entire world between the two of us. And the worst part is once he disappears into his basement, the spying stops completely. There are no windows in that area.

It's the one space I know he's unashamedly himself, all his guards down, existing in his natural habitat, and I'd never once even been able to see it. But that is changing today.

There's relief in knowing there's a possibility of learning things from Thatcher no one else could teach me, guiding me towards some form of release for these overwhelming, morbid fantasies I have.

But there's also excitement. I should be focused on what I'm going to learn, not consumed with the thought of being inside his home, where his smell is fresh and his movements are genuine.

Just me and him. No hiding.

My body taking up room in the private spaces he keeps to himself. It makes my fingers tingle.

When the trees part and the driveway ends, I'm met with a cobblestone motor court decorated with magnolia bushes bursting with vibrant color. The limestone chateau-style manor never fails to take my breath away with its delicate architecture and archways with decorative corbels and pillars.

Every detailed medallion and cornice are hand-carved, making the house fit those who dwell inside of it.

I park my older-model vehicle, feeling incredibly inadequate compared to the Cadillacs and other luxury cars that are nearby. Looking down at my phone, I see I'm several minutes early, and my options are limited to staying in my car or getting out. Considering I'm quite a curious individual, I go with the former.

My clunky yellow rain boots make a splat sound when they hit a puddle of water. My face is immediately greeted with the feeling of warm rain against my skin. I look up at the silver clouds, thick and angry.

Instead of walking inside the immense, stately home, I walk around the side of it, trying to count all the windows as I go. I get to thirty-one when I finally make it to the backyard.

I've only been able to see this place briefly for fear of being caught snooping, but now that I've been invited, I feel like I can really take it all in.

There's no pool or tennis courts, nothing that screams lavish or mass amounts of wealth.

Only flowers.

The luscious green yard seems to stretch for miles, and it looks like every square inch is smothered with roses. All the way to the tree line, red, pink, yellow, and white petals decorate the space.

Down the center stands sturdy columns that run vertically while a trellis lies across the top. Climbing roses snake around the pillars, crawling up until it creates a bed along the webbing of the lattice.

Tall white arches are wrapped delicately in their vines. There are marble statues dressed in only petals, rows of bright bushes overflowing with vibrant flowers. Near the back sits a fountain, and that too is adorned with the thorny plant.

The scent is so strong it makes me dizzy, and my eyes can't decide what to focus on first

My body moves willfully along the space. I move slowly, taking in the way vines and vines of roses are tethered up the sides of the house. Walking beneath the set of columns, I know this must have taken years to perfect.

I reach forward, grasping a petal between my thumb and forefinger, rubbing against the softness of the flower. The rain has stopped, my cardigan soaked, but I can't be bothered by that. My fingertips brush against a thorn, my flesh daring it to prick me.

“You won’t find Thatcher back here.” An elegant voice, smooth like honey, makes me turn around. “Practically avoids this portion of the house altogether.”

An older woman wearing a floppy white hat and gardening gloves stares at me while she adjusts the flowers in her basket. I’m tempted to believe the vampire rumor that swears the Pierson family is immortal when I look at her.

“I was—ugh, your flowers are beautiful,” I stutter, pointing at the flowers behind me. “Sorry, I’m Lyra. I’m a—”

I pause. What exactly am I to Thatcher? Student? Pupil? Definitely not a friend.

“Friend?” she offers, arching one dark eyebrow in my direction with this sort of knowing expression on her face. That makes me wonder just how much she knows about me.

“Yeah, you could say that,” I mutter, licking my suddenly dry bottom lip. “I’m sorry to disturb you. If you’ll just point me towards—”

“Nonsense.” She waves, cutting me off with a flick of her wrist. “It’s been years since another female has willingly come into this house. I’m tired of the testosterone.”

I don’t fight the goosebumps that walk along my skin, the meaning behind her words. Women haven’t been inside this house because they know the history. They know the fate women were forced to meet years ago.

“Are you Thatcher’s mother?”

Laughter, warm and youthful, echoes from her chest. A murder of crows croaks in the distance, soaring across the muted sky. She continues to laugh, a smile on her face.

“No, dear, I’m his grandmother. I’m not sure if you’re just trying to win me over or are nervous, but I’ll accept the compliment either way.”

I don’t think it’s a far stretch to guess she looks younger than her age. The lack of wrinkles and her hair tucked into a low bun are quite deceiving. I suppose the Piersons just age well, as they do most things.

Her warmth helps me relax a bit, knowing she was obviously aware of me showing up today. I feel my shoulders release the tension they’d worked up.

“Your home is beautiful,” I say idly, rubbing my finger across the roses once again. “Have you lived here your entire life?”

With graceful movement, she removes the hat from her head, placing it in the basket that dangles from her arms, and then slowly removes her gloves. The gleam from the hidden sun catches the weighty diamond ring on her finger as she gently massages her hands together.

“Mostly yes,” she breathes, looking around the spacious area as if daydreaming about memories that still live here. “I married Edmond, Thatcher’s grandfather, when I was twenty-one, although he’d reverently asked almost every day since we met at sixteen. But I was strong-willed, wanted to graduate college and make a name for myself. I refused to just be another Pierson wife perched on the ivory pedestal. We moved in once he took over his father’s company, a rite of passage of sorts. All Pierson men follow the same path. College, taking over the family business, moving into the estate. Edmond’s father and mother relocated to France for their retirement, leaving just us here until we had Henry.”

There is a deep sadness etched on the lines of her face, showing her age for the first time in the sorrow that lives inside her bones. I can’t imagine the difficulty of still loving the child you bore but regretting the man you’d created.

All the books and theories argue about nature versus nurture. If psychopathy is really something an individual is born with from birth or if outside influences affect your path to normalcy. For some reason, I can’t see this woman causing harm to Henry severe enough that it would turn him into what he became.

Monsters are created from other monsters, and if they aren’t, is the truth something far scarier?

Sometimes, the most frightening creatures aren’t formed at all. They are simply born that way. And no love or therapy will ever change what they are hardwired to do.

“You wear your thoughts on your face, little girl,” she croons. “You should be mindful of that if you want to continue being friends with my grandson.”

I blink idly, unsure of how to keep my face from showing the emotions that swim beneath.

“Edmond and I moved out once Henry took over, but we moved back in when Thatcher was eight to look after him. We didn’t like the idea of moving his foundation after Henry was arrested. Now the company is being

held down by longtime employees, patiently waiting for Thatcher to complete his schooling before he takes over.”

I couldn’t stop the question even if I tried.

“What was Thatcher like? After everything—” I wave my hand around, cringing at my bluntness. “—happened.”

“You mean after my only son was convicted of serial murder?” she says boldly. “You don’t have to tiptoe around me, girl. That town of busybodies does it enough.”

I nod. “I didn’t mean any offense.”

“I know that, dear.” She bends down towards one of the rosebushes, snipping one from the vine. “Thatcher never changed after Henry went away. Still the same intelligent and charismatic boy he’d always been. Still cold to affection and detested the idea of being touched. Doctors told us he was healthy and there were no signs of physical abuse. A therapist told us he might have PTSD, but Thatcher refused to communicate to anyone about his father. Still does. I wish I could say it was the aftermath that had changed him, but I think Henry did that long before he ever went away.”

My heart aches for the boy I’d met, for the young mind that was twisted and polluted with evil thoughts. Thatcher hadn’t just been broken. No, it was much worse.

Henry had molded him from birth, shaped and formed into a hellish piece of clay that was taught only death. I had only experienced one night of Henry’s nightmarish imprint. Years of conditioning turned Thatcher into the sculpted Prince of Blood.

And I, I was the one that had been broken. Shattered glass that was melted down and restored. We were two halves of the same whole, and I think my heart had known that from the moment he walked into my mother’s bedroom that night.

Who would Thatcher have been if he had been raised by May and Edmond from the start? What would he have become? Would my heart still call for him?

“Thatcher isn’t Henry,” I say absentmindedly, looking at the older woman who Briar said the boys were quite fond of.

“We knew that, Edmond and I. I believe even Thatcher knows that to be true, but it didn’t stop Edmond from doing everything in his power to protect him from the same fate Henry met.” She gives me a soft smile. “But

there are some things our parents shackle us with that are impossible to break free of.”

My alarm goes off in my pocket, vibrating my skin to let me know what time it is. Shit, Thatcher is going to think I’m late, and I doubt I can convince him I was having a chat with his grandmother in the garden.

“Do you mind if I head inside? I don’t want him in a pissy mood ‘cause he thinks I’m late for our...” I quickly try and scramble for a word. “Study session?”

It comes out more of a question than a statement, and suddenly, I feel very unprepared for what we are about to do. Can I keep quiet enough to get away with murder? If I’m stumbling over lies in front of an unsuspecting grandmother, how the hell do I plan to talk myself out of police integrations?

My palms begin to sweat, and uneasiness sweeps over me. Can I do this? Did I risk my life for something I’m not even capable of doing?

“Can I give you some advice, Lyra?” May tilts her head, eyeing me, effectively pulling me from my inner downward spiral.

“Yes.”

The wind blows roughly, bringing the heavy scent of roses closer to my nose. While she walks towards me, she runs her fingers along the stem of the rose, tracing along the thorns as she goes, the bright red flower twirling in her grasp.

“Thorns protect their weaker counterpart, nature’s way of reminding us that even the tamest of creatures have sharp teeth. That even when pushed, the most beautiful things in life can still cut you.” She holds the flower outward in my direction, beckoning me to take it.

“I love my grandson, very much, Miss Abbott. But Thatcher’s thorns are very sharp, and his father crushed anything soft about him a long time ago. Be careful how you handle him. He was made to make things bleed.”

Without pause, I take the flower from her hold, giving a gentle nod. A silent understanding passes through us as our fingers brush lightly. I’ve known Thatcher a long time, and I know what being around him means. The pain you’re subjecting yourself to.

But I have survived death. I’ve watched it. I’ve possessed its influence. And I know who Thatch is. Even if I hadn’t seen all of it, I know in my soul who he is.

Nothing about him could ever frighten me to the point of giving up on him.

I watch her retreat towards the house, leaving me to my own thoughts. For a moment, I stay in the garden, trying to regain the confidence I had before this conversation. There are a million questions I want to know the answers to, starting with how much does May know about Thatcher and what he does in the dark of the night?

I'm a ghost. No one will ever suspect me of anything, not with my ability to blend in. And with Thatcher's technique, I will release the chains attached to the urge I keep locked up and learn to live with it.

I have no other choice.

"What are you doing here?"

"You told me not to be late," I say, spinning on my heel to face him. "So, I showed up early. I was just looking around for a bit."

I know Thatcher's favorite color is red, but it does something to my insides every time he wears black. I try to hold in my gasp, keeping my lips sealed as I look him over.

His hair is parted to the side, pushed back out of his eyes, but a few stubborn strands dangle in front of his face. I like those pieces of hair the most. Reminds me he is, in fact, human.

The turtleneck and long overcoat make him look taller, more intimidating. He towers over me with a watchful gaze and rigid expression, lean legs wrapped in black slacks and paired with the same-colored dress shoes.

Black on black on black.

My stomach tightens as the bleak sun catches his eyes. Gods, maybe if he was a little less attractive, being around him wouldn't be this hard all the time. White, sweltering heat blazes my core, thinking about seeing him the other day.

I'd waited years to feel his touch on my skin like that.

His hand curled around my throat, brushing my pulse with his fingers, fully in control of my body with just his grip. The feeling of his slick blood marking my skin. I'd wanted him to cover me in it. Wiping it off had been an act of stubbornness, not because I wanted to.

I have little experience in the sex department, and I know that. But somehow, my body knows what it wants from Thatch. Knows that what it craves, only he can provide.

Marked. Bruised. Soaked. Taken.

"I don't recall telling you to be early either, or to sulk around the garden," he declares, reminding me that I'm not here to fantasize about what sex with him would be like. "When I tell you to do something, pet, I want it done perfectly. Don't be late, and don't be early. Be on time."

Trying to lighten the mood, soften this tension that is between us, I stand straight, mock saluting him. "Aye, aye, Captain."

The small smile I have falls immediately when I see his reaction. He just stares at me, unmoving, before shoving his hands into his pockets and turning around, leaving me to stand there like an idiot.

"I'm already regretting this," he grunts, walking away from me.

I sling my arm back to my side, my cheeks warm from embarrassment. I follow him, moving my short legs at a quick pace to keep up with his long strides.

"I thought we were starting today," I say to his back, trying to ignore the way his shoulders flex at my voice, how they stiffen and move beneath his jacket.

Fine, if he wants to be a jerk the entire time, then so be it.

They did not build Rome in a day, and Thatcher's icy walls won't fall in one either. His attitude does not affect our deal. Asshole or not, he's still holding up his end of the bargain.

I steel my spine, prepared for whatever is coming next. Whether he likes it or not, I'm going to get beneath his winter skin, until I'm burned so deep in the marrow of his bones he can't breathe without me.

Thatcher is teaching me how to kill, and I will be showing him he needs me just as much as I need him.

"We are." His tone is clipped, like he wants that to be the end of this conversation.

But if we plan to work together, he has to learn to talk to me a little more. Even if he doesn't like it.

"Then where are we going?" I ask.

He says nothing for a passing second, just keeps walking.

"The cemetery" is the only answer I get.

It's only then, as we leave the garden, headed towards the front of the house, that I realize...

I never told Thatcher's grandmother my last name.

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HOLD THIS SHOVEL

THATCHER

“W hat’s it like for you?”

The sound of gum snapping follows the question, the same noise that had been popping in my ear for the entire drive over here. Her inability to settle into silence will be my biggest challenge during the time we spend together.

I chance a look over my shoulder, seeing her lighthearted expression. The shovel resting on her shoulder sways as she follows my lead, looking through all the tombstones.

Little Miss Death and Decay pleasantly trots through tombstones as if they are a field of wildflowers. I suppose it is just further proof that Lyra Abbott is far from the conventional type.

They made some girls to frolic through flowers and others warm, sandy beaches.

But she was made to walk with the dead, to keep the rotting company.

“Is it like a weight off your shoulders? Do you feel relieved? Do you get sexual release from—”

“Do not finish that sentence,” I bite out, keeping my gaze forward and trying to ignore the way her closeness sets me on edge.

“If we are doing this, you’re going to have to treat me like an actual human being, ya know,” she says, walking faster so she is beside me, inclining her head to look at me. “Not a pet. If I ask a question, you can at least tell me you don’t feel comfortable giving an answer.”

I pause my stride, turning my head to peer down at her. So much shorter than me, at least by a foot. So tiny that I could crack her right in half with little effort. And yet she continues to probe me, unafraid of what might

happen to her when she pokes at the tender flesh that I don't allow anyone to see, tempting the button that will cause me to snap and tear her in two.

"That other side of you has sharp teeth, doesn't she?" I arch an eyebrow. "You better hope you can back up that bite, pet. I can think of fifty ways to get rid of your body."

Six months ago, she was a pest that I'd let fade into the background. A girl I'd shared one night with long ago, and that was it. But now, she'd killed someone in order to spare my life, had jumped from a cliff to warrant my guidance, and is now following me blindly through a cemetery for her first test of will.

My ghost had come to life, no longer content blending into the shadows of my life to watch me as she had so many times before.

She is present and alive.

And I want nothing more than to kill her all over again.

"There is no other side of me. You make it sound like I have multiple personalities. I'm just tired of you dismissing me like I'm a child and not answering my questions."

Her footsteps turn into stomps as we begin walking again, and a pout paints her lips.

I scoff at the audacity of demanding to be treated as an adult but continuing to act like a toddler. I might actually end my own life before this is all said and done.

The soppy ground squishes beneath my feet, filling the void of silence as I scan the markers. My family's cemetery isn't far from our estate, much smaller than most burial grounds, but it's a private spot away from prying eyes.

Which is exactly what I need for her very first lesson.

Silence.

When we reach the gate, I pull out a set of keys. Only those who hold the last name Pierson, and a select few groundskeepers, are allowed access. The tall black wrought iron gates square off about four acres of secluded land riddled with tombstones, memorials, and sculptures. One person, my grandfather, is laid to rest in a small mausoleum-like structure that my grandmother will join him in once her time comes.

I hold the gate open, listening to it whine against the hinges, letting her go through first because I am, at the very least, a gentleman. As she passes me, two things happen.

I feel time slow, just enough for me to notice, but it still slows for just a second. Enough time for the wind to catch her scent. Loose, silken brown hair is swept in the current. The smell of her blows up my nose, forcing me to inhale.

Sticky, sweet cherries.

The other thing I notice is her plump bottom lip is jutted out, pink, tulip-colored lips, warranting my attention. Her eyebrows are pulled together in a deep V. She is pouting, pulling a face like a spoiled little brat.

I decide to throw her a bone, if only to get that look off her face. It is aggravating me, and if she keeps doing it, I'm going to toss her into the lake that sits adjacent to the cemetery.

"Power," I say as I head towards the furthest end of the cemetery where I know the most empty space lies.

"What?"

"Now, why would I answer your questions if you can't even remember them yourself?" I prod but continue anyway. "When I kill someone, it feels like power. That's what it's like for me. What it gives me."

I have never, not once, talked to anyone about this. The boys drew their own conclusions about my private habits, but none of them had asked what happened in that basement. I keep that separate from them. A secret all my own.

Not even my father, who shared this trait with me, knew what I'm divulging to Lyra. All for what? For her to stop pouting?

"Power over what?" she asks, trying to take little pieces of me in hopes she'll be able to make a full image of who I am. "You're a man who will inherit a billion-dollar company. A legacy. Is that not enough power? You need more?"

Power from him.

That's my first thought.

I would give it all up, the legacy and the money, if it meant I could take the power back from the person who took all of mine from me. She has no idea what it is to be truly powerless to someone.

For someone to take and take and take until you are nothing, a blank canvas for them to work with. That's what my father did to me.

And every single slice, every tortured scream I rip from someone's lungs, is another piece of power I take back.

But I don't tell her these things. Because she doesn't need to know.

“You can never have enough power, especially not this kind. Material things and status are one thing, Lyra. But standing over a human, knowing you’re in control of life and death? That’s something entirely different. You own their fear. Their breath. Their soul. When you hear their screams of mercy, of pure agony, you’ll know exactly what I’m talking about.”

My fingers ache to run along the inside of someone’s chest cavity, to feel their heart pump in my palm as warm, slick blood flows through my hands. At that moment, when I play their ribs like piano keys, I’m in total power.

Knowing I have to wait another six months before I can do that again should bother me. It doesn’t. It gives me more time to think about the way I’ll kill him. Dismembering? Cracking his chest open? Splitting his gut open and giving him a little anatomy lesson as I pull organs from his body?

The options are infinitely horrific.

“Do you think power is what it will be like for me?”

We hadn’t gotten around to this portion of the conversation. Mostly because I tell myself I couldn’t care less why she wants this so badly. But I would be lying if I said I wasn’t a little curious.

My father had nurtured the psychopath in me. What may have laid a dormant seed of evil inside of me, had he left it be, was now a blooming, vicious flower. I was harvested and taught.

But my father had neglected what he’d left in the closet of Phoebe Abbott’s bedroom. Who knows what that night did to her? What has been festering inside of her all these years, untamed and undiagnosed?

“I’m not a specialist on the mind of serial murderers. If you want to know those answers, call a shrink.”

“I just thought—”

“You know what it feels like, Lyra. You know the feeling you’re chasing. How the hunger for it pumps in your veins.” I look over at her, and a memory I wish would leave floats in my brain. “The one you got the moment you stuck a knife into Detective Breck’s throat. I saw it in your eyes when his blood coated your fingers. Did that feel like power to you?”

I remind her once again that she’d already felt the rush of ending someone’s life. Just because she hadn’t planned it doesn’t mean she’s any less of a killer.

There’s been little in the past that sticks with me. I don’t keep much. I allow moments to slide through my memory like water because nothing

feels worth holding onto. Only a few stick.

But it's hard to forget what she looked like with that knife in her hand, a dead body at her feet and blood splattered across her face.

"What was it you said?" I continue. "Is it like a weight off your shoulders? Do you feel relieved? Are you my sexual sadist in training, Lyra?"

The corner of her lips lift, but the answer in her mind weighs down the smile she wants to give me. Like she is torn between embracing the darkness that lurks behind the curtain of her mind and knowing the way she feels is immoral.

I doubt she's even spoken this out loud before.

"When he was dead, I did feel a weight off my shoulders." She breathes deeply, chewing the inside of her cheek. "During, it was such a blur that all I recall is how hot the blood was. How thick it was."

Her throat strains as she swallows. "But before? That was what I remember most. How I felt watching him hold the gun to your head. It was a feeling I've had many times before. One that I only remember having after watching Henry kill my mother."

The pause that follows is long and heavy, just the sound of our wet footsteps as we travel farther towards the cemetery.

"Did you know I was in foster care?" she asks randomly, changing the subject.

"Yes? And do you know I had yogurt for breakfast? What does that have to do with this?"

This is not a therapy session or friends getting to know one another. I don't want to know about her or hear about the things she went through.

I will not be sharing with her how I know she grew up in the system or how I'm aware of the substantial amount of money sitting in her bank account that allows her to live more than comfortably on her own at this age.

There are some things people are better off being unaware of.

"The first time it happened was in one of the group homes," she whispers so sweetly that I can almost smell the cherries on her breath.

My hand tightens into a fist, my nails digging into my palms. I do not want to hear about this. I can't hear about this. But I also can't prevent my reaction to it.

I look down, staring hard at her.

“Did someone touch you while you were in there?”

My eyes dare her to lie or withhold information. I did not let her live just so another person could abuse her. Lyra might be a pest, a stubborn thorn burrowed into my skin, but she is mine.

Mine to deal with, mine to end.

No one else.

My six months between each victim rule seems to fade at the idea of boiling whoever had thought it was okay to touch something that is mine. Flashes of shredded body parts and melted flesh.

I’ll take my time with them. Make sure they feel every single cut.

“No, no.” She shakes her head aggressively. “Nothing like that.”

My leather-gloved hand curls around her weak bicep, my thumb pressing into her fragile skin. “Are you lying to me? I promise you, Lyra. The last thing you want to do is lie to me.”

Her bright eyes widen, flicking down to the place we are attached. That’s where they stay for a prolonged amount of time, just staring as my grip tightens around her arm, but she doesn’t even flinch. If anything, it feels like she is pushing into my hold.

“I’m not lying to you. Not to you, never you. I wouldn’t do that. I promise,” she swears, looking back up at me. “I was talking about the first time I ever got that feeling. It happened while I was living in a group home.”

She would lie.

But not to me? Never me?

It shouldn’t matter what her reply was. It shouldn’t affect me either way, but every single time she opens her mouth, it stirs something inside of me. I hate this feeling. I loathe being around her. All it does is put me in a sour mood.

Removing my hand from her, I keep walking. My silence must have been an encouragement for her to continue because she keeps speaking.

“I was eleven, and there was this older girl in my group home. Her name was Sonya, and gods, she was a bitter teenager, angry that the world had dealt her these shitty cards, and she took it out on the younger kids. One night, I came downstairs to get some water when I saw Sonya forcing this little boy to walk across broken glass from a bottle he’d dropped. And this thing—” She places her hand on her stomach as if it’s a real living organism inside of her. “—it shook. It rattled me. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was see

what her blood would look like spilling onto the floor. How it would feel to plunge a knife into her gut repeatedly.”

We get closer and closer to our destination, and I just listen. Instead of drowning her out like I do everyone else, I tune in to her. Because for the first time, I can relate to what she says.

“I thought it was just a protective instinct, you know? Something normal. I wanted to stop a bad person from doing a bad thing. People feel like that all the time, right? That’s what I told myself. Until it kept happening, until I—” She stops, like the truth on her tongue is choking her.

“Until you?” I push, making sure she finishes what she is about to say. Forcing her to own her thoughts.

A deep V creases between her brows, and out of all faces, that’s my least favorite of hers. As much as it pains me to say, even inside my head, Scarlett Lyra Abbott is beautiful.

Terrible dresser, nasty habits, and feral hair, but beautiful in all her obscurity.

I find classical music beautiful, foie gras striking, and the occasional scenery pleasing. But I do not find human beings attractive. They are bones, skin, and flesh. A pliable machine running on blood. I’m certainly fascinated by how much pain it can take but not pulled in by it.

Yet every moment I’m forced to see her face, I’m disgusted. Not due to how she looks but because I’m required to admit the truth of her proportionate features, and that, that makes me sick.

She’s so exquisite it makes me palpably ill.

“Until I started wanting people to hurt others. I’d hope they would do something bad, just to excuse the urge to harm them. I needed them to justify my need to see them bleed.”

I’m rarely rendered speechless. I seem to always have some quick quip or statement, but her talking about this has me grasping for words. She’s talking about something that I can almost taste. The intense metallic tang that surges up into your mouth when the appetite overtakes you. Every single base instinct is engulfed by the urge to kill. To cut. To hurt.

Never in my life have I spoken to anyone who has experienced it the way I do. Not my father or my grandparents. No one.

The guys, they know darkness. They know corruption and mayhem that are bred from neglect. How abuse can forge boys into soulless men. They know what it feels like to be cast out and damned for things you have no

control over—your birth order, a car accident, the crimes of a parent, or a mental illness.

But they don't know this.

The yearning that feels like it might consume you, body, mind, and soul, every second of the day. Something takes over like a virus, coating every molecule in your being, and doesn't leave until you've drained all the life from someone's body.

"Do you—" She bites the inside of her cheek, twirling the ring on her pointer finger, something I've noticed she does often. "Do you kill children or women?"

What does this question say about her? That she has never known the answer to this question and yet has still followed me around. My little shadow allowed herself to become this obsessed with me and still isn't sure if I harm those labeled innocent.

Would my answer change how she felt? Would that sparkle that lights her eyes every time she looks at me dwindle away? Or is her fixation strong enough to withstand something this harrowing?

Had Lyra done exactly as her mother had?

Fallen in love with a monster?

I think it's a trait all the Abbott women carry, a gene that Phoebe Abbott had passed down to her daughter that makes her attracted to men like me—soulless, emotionless, and every inch a psychopath who enjoys hurting others.

"No children. Preying on children is a cowardly thing to do. What does tricking the innocent mind prove? Nothing," I say simply, walking past the tombstones of my great-great-grandparents. "I usually hunt those who make kids their victims."

"And women?"

A cruel smile hitches on my face as I look over at her, watching the way she readjusts her grip on the shovel, reminding me of when I was just a small child doing this same thing once.

One lone, dark curl blows in front of her face, and only because my hands are wrapped in leather gloves do I reach out. My fingers tuck the frizzy hair behind her ear.

"There is only one woman I've ever wanted to kill, so terribly bad that I can almost taste how sweet her blood would be on my tongue. How pretty she would be, twisted up in anguish on my table."

Jade eyes search my face as I stroke the backs of my fingers against her cheek, a stark contrast between my black gloves and her pale skin. Her mouth opens slightly as she waits for my answer, hanging on my every word.

“And that’s you, pet.”

My hand lightly taps her cheek, dismissing her without a second thought, before I continue strolling through the cemetery. I don’t need to look in order to see I’ve left her speechless, mouth slightly open as she stares at the back of my head.

Lyra would die beautifully. It almost makes me jealous that Death himself would have time to take her before I did.

“Asshole,” she mutters softly, but I hear the smile in her voice.

Our walk ends when we get to the plot of land I’d been looking for. The large patch of grass is several inches away from any relative already buried here.

“Aren’t you going about this a little backward? I mean, shouldn’t digging a grave be the bottom of the how to get away with murder list? I need to learn how to kill someone before I even think about what to do with their body. What if I don’t even wanna bury them? There are other methods of disposal—pigs, dismemberment, acid—”

“Please stop talking.” I interrupt that disaster of a spiral before it spins any further. “I’ve told you this before. You already know how to kill someone, Lyra. I watched you.”

Something intense burns in my gut. Glimpses of Lyra covered in blood, clutching the knife in her right hand so tightly her knuckles were blinding white. The sparkle in her eyes as she peered down at the body that had lain dead between us. Once again, death had been the bridge that linked our souls. I’d started to wonder why it was always her at the other end.

“You sliced a man’s throat, right in front of me. You did that all on your own. Accept that you already are what you so desperately want to become, or it will drain you. Do you understand?”

“I know that. I just—”

“Say it,” I snap, my hands sliding into the pockets of my overcoat.

“I thought you wanted me to stop talking.”

I shake my head, clicking my tongue against the roof of my mouth. That mouth of hers that loves to make random appearances is going to be the death of her. Literally. It will be the reason I choke her to death.

“Now isn’t the time to be cute,” I warn. “Now, say it.”

A blush heats her face. “Say what?”

My mouth waters, a smirk tugging at my lips, the way she so blindly obeys me. My every command, every thought, every movement. She follows it so well every single time.

“Tell me you’re a killer.”

“Why?”

“Because if you can’t even say it, how do you plan on murdering someone? If you can’t even mutter the words, how will you get rid of a dead body? How will you be able to go through with it when they’re begging for their lives? When they tell you about their families and all the things they will leave behind when you kill them? Accept it, or this will be for nothing.”

Standing there in yellow rain boots, chewing on the inside of her cheek, she knows I’m right, so what is holding her back? What’s stopping her?

“Every day, I look in the mirror and see what I am, Thatcher. I see the thing—” She swallows, placing her hand on her chest. “—I have kept chained away, the thing that no one else has ever seen. I have hidden it, hidden myself my entire life in order to protect people from it. To protect whatever is left of Scarlett from it.”

She looks at me, eyes so green it’s impossible to do the color justice. Pure and luring, a whimsical forest pulling people inside, but I know once you allow yourself inside, there will be no getting out. It would be easy to get lost in a forest like that. In eyes like hers.

“I know that I’m a killer, that the craving that lives inside of me is one that is sated only by death. I know this, Thatch.”

“Then why are you holding back?”

Multiple questions pop into my brain, and I’m thankful my mouth went with that one. Because the others are thoughts I want gone. Immediately.

Is Lyra’s monster the same one that lives inside of me? Did my father create the same seed of evil in both of us? Are we truly more connected than I originally thought?

“I’m sure you don’t understand this concept because you are the Thatcher Pierson.” The air quotes around my name feel a bit unnecessary, but I do love a flair for the dramatics, so I let it slide without a snarky comment, allowing her to continue. “But I’m afraid. I fear what I will become when I let it out, when I allow myself to give in to the urge.”

I know somewhere there is a rule against what I'm about to say, but if there is one thing I'm not, it's a liar.

"You should be afraid, Lyra Abbott. What you live with should scare you—it should scare anyone who comes in contact with you," I say, pressing my foot on the open piece of grass. "Let it scare you, but never let it stop you."

I reach into my jacket pocket, feeling the weight of her stare on my face.

"Now, enough talking." If she keeps speaking, it'll be pitch-black outside before she even gets started.

A gust of wind breezes past, rattling the measuring tape in my hand as I pull it from my pocket. I remember when my father brought me out here. What he made me do to prove what I was, who I was, and the consequences of me not accepting those facts.

Lyra should be lucky I'm only honest.

"You're going to dig a hole six feet deep. Not an inch less or an inch more."

Her eyebrows furrow, the shake of her head coming before her words.
"What? Why?"

"Well, because you begged me with your sad little eyes to teach you. That's what I'm doing," I snap. I'm teaching you exactly what I learned. But I keep that to myself.

"I'm grateful, but I just don't understand—"

"I want you to dig a grave, Lyra. Your grave. Is that simple enough for your cloudy brain to understand, or should I spell it out for you?"

I'm not sure how it's possible for someone with a complexion like snow to turn any paler, but she does. The dusty pink rose that highlights her cheeks depletes. She takes a step back from me, and something primal in me clicks in my gut.

"Bailing out so quickly, pet? I expected you to last until disembowelment. How disappointing." I click my tongue with a shake of my head, stepping towards her, closing the gap that she is trying to put between us. "Diggig the hole you are going to spend the rest of eternity buried inside of if you tell anyone about this, that's too much for you? This is just an insurance policy. This is child's play."

Panic blossoms across her face, and I grin.

“That’s it, pet. Be frightened—I like you that way. Terrified to cross me, to lie, to mumble a single word about this to anyone.”

“I won’t say anything, Thatch. I-I wouldn’t put you at risk like that. If I did, it would get me in trouble, too. You don’t need to make me do this.” Her voice shakes and wobbles.

“That’s sweet. Really, it is. But I don’t trust you. I will not risk my freedom with only your word. I have a lot to lose in this deal we have, Lyra. Now, so will you.”

“Thatcher—”

“No one else can know about these things I do. What I show you. If anyone finds out, I will know it’s you. This is not a game. If you open that mouth of yours, I will remove each of those white teeth in your skull before I snap your pretty little neck and toss you into the hole you dug.” I don’t move my eyes from her face, needing her to know just how serious I am about this.

How very easy it would be for me to end her existence on this earth.

I grab the shovel from the ground, gripping the handle.

“This is ridiculous. I’ve never given you a reason not to trust me. Not once,” she argues, and her lack of compliance is starting to irritate me.

My jaw clenches. “My father took me here once, on my sixth birthday, and he made me dig a grave, just like you are, but we put my mother inside of it instead. I don’t remember complaining this much about it.”

Shock lights up her eyes, horror at what that must have done to a young child. And it makes me sick. I don’t need her sympathy or her concern. I don’t care about what happened in my past, or anything for that matter, so her wasted emotion on me is annoying.

“That was how I proved to him what I was. What I am. You’re going to dig this grave and earn the knowledge you’re demanding of me. If you don’t—” I pull out a blade from the other pocket, twirling it in my hand. “—we can end this deal now. It makes no difference to me.”

Her bottom lip wobbles, eyes glossed over with what looks like tears. I want so badly for it to be fear causing this, but I know it’s not.

She feels bad for me.

What a waste.

“Were you even big enough to use a shovel?”

“No.” I cringe, remembering all the dirt that I had to scrub out from beneath my fingers. How caked it was in my nails and how it covered my

skin. “He made me use my hands. Be glad I’m letting you use the shovel.”

I shove the object into her hands. “Now, do what you do best, Lyra. Play in the dirt. I won’t ask again.”

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RED ROSES, RED ROSES

LYRA

“S o, what is the most important question in organic chemistry?”

I stop rotating the ring on my pointer finger. The question hangs in the air, with awkward silence following. It’s a simple answer, one that most students should know if they’d pay attention during the lecture.

The sad thing is they do probably know the answer. They are just either hungover or too tired from working themselves back into a school schedule.

And no one likes a seven a.m. class.

No one, not even me, and I love class.

“How the fuck do we drop it?”

A chorus of snickers and giggles vibrates the room. It even makes a small smile tug at the corner of my lips as I look towards our professor at the front of the room, waiting for his rebuttal.

Conner laughs freely, unlike any other teacher here who would have instantly reprimanded the jokester who made that comment. He’s easily everyone’s favorite here, laid-back, and always ready to help in any way he can.

“Fortunately for you, Jacob, you probably won’t even use this after graduation. Just pass with a C, and ahead of you will be years of selling cars at your father’s dealership.”

The room erupts in laughter and whispers, ahs and ohs.

I can’t see it from my seat in the back, but I imagine Jacob’s face is the color of a fire hydrant, and I doubt he’ll be making any more snarky comments in class.

He isn’t lying. Jacob Nettle will inherit Nettle Auto once he graduates and become another cog in the Ponderosa Springs machine. I, unfortunately,

need this class for future endeavors; even if my mother's life insurance left a questionable amount of money behind, I still want a career.

That alone should be enough reason for me to be focusing on this class, but it isn't. Not this morning—this morning, I couldn't be bothered with anything other than him.

"Settle down, class. Settle down," he instructs with a mild sternness that makes students listen. "Does anyone else have an answer? What is the most important question in organic chemistry?"

Thatcher is all over my thoughts, running around the spaces of my mind, doing laps. He exists in every free space inside of me. All my brain can seem to think about is when our next lesson is, even if he'd been tiptoeing around the things I actually needed to learn.

Every time he messaged, I kept secretly hoping our meeting would be at his house. But he never failed to direct our lessons somewhere else, still not trusting me with the space that might make him even the slightest bit vulnerable.

My hands had been thankful for the lack of physical activity because of the blisters I'd acquired after handling a shovel for hours, but that had been a while ago.

The calluses and cracked palms had healed. I'm ready to get my hands dirty again—this time, less actual dirt. I'm tired of studying the endless books he'd laid out in front of me in our local library: anatomy of the human body, a textbook on serial murderers and their victims, even a mortician guide.

Then he'd give me a bullshit quiz. If I wanted to study murder, I would have majored in criminology. This was not what I had meant when I'd asked him for this, and he knows that. He knows that his constant teasing is only further irritating me, but if there's one thing I know more than anything, it's Thatcher's way or no way. He takes his time; he is patient. A diamond forming under slow pressure, something others would wait lifetimes for.

Even though I know he is stalling. I know he is. And every single time I try to call him out on it, he gives me the same passive answer.

"Students study, Lyra."

The only thing that seems to get me through the boring, quiet moments in that stuffy library is Thatcher in a pair of glasses. Thin, steel-gray frames that only intensify his harsh gaze, they seem to amplify the stark blue of his

eyes, so crystal clear and striking. It feels impossible not to wither in front of his gaze.

Yet I'd seen no one more attractive.

I spend more time analyzing him in the chair across from me than truly reading, openly gawking at his every movement, following the way his slender, steady fingers flip through his own book. Firm, yet so gentle with the old pages.

Even though he mostly overlooks me, I still enjoy being around him. I'd rather be ignored by him than noticed by anyone else.

"Anyone?" Godfrey probes again, retiring me from my daydream of Thatcher.

I look around the room, seeing no one else intent on giving an answer, so I decide to put us all out of our misery. I raise my hand, only to speed up the time we're trapped in our chairs.

Conner's eyes drift to my hand before slipping to my face, and a gentle smile warms his features as he lifts his finger, pointing to me in order to give me the floor to speak.

I open my mouth, but my voice isn't what spreads across the room. Instead, Mary Turgid's confident answer slips right out of her mouth.

"The most important question is, where are the electrons? Understanding electronegativities helps decide which portions of a molecule have relatively high electron density. And electronegativities of the atoms we will normally see in organic chemistry."

It's these grim moments when I think I might be worse than Thatcher. Murder is immoral. I know that, but even he has a code of conduct he follows: not to harm the innocent or helpless. I don't believe I have that.

I shouldn't want to harm girls my age, but I don't think it would matter who it was. If the alarm is triggered inside of me, my hunger wouldn't care who it dug its teeth in. All I can imagine is me grabbing a handful of that platinum-blonde hair and slamming her face into the desk until she is unrecognizable, face just as distorted and ugly as she is on the inside.

Not because she interrupted me—of course not that. If it was because of something so trivial, I would've snapped a long time ago. No, it's her small penance for what she did to my friend. This feeling of rusted nails stabbing my spine, of burnt rubber and old pennies that tastes bitter on my tongue. It's for revenge.

To wrap my hands around her throat and squeeze, count the clock until I hear the resounding snap of her neck. Listen to her scream, watch her struggle as she pays for betraying someone like Sage. For turning her back on her when she was supposed to be her closest friend. I want to make it hurt, avenge the pain she'd caused Sage.

Snap.

I glance down at the cracked pencil in my hand, split down the middle and cracked from the strength of my squeezing. A chill runs down my spine, fear licking my heels, fear of myself. When will I stop being afraid of this? Of what I am and what I feel?

"Correct, Miss Turgid," Conner says with a toothless smile, giving her a curt nod. "That's all for today. I'll see you all Monday, and please make sure you have the reading done before class."

When I stand, Mary is turned around to look up at me.

"Sorry about that. I didn't even realize you were in this class," she says with a bright smile that is anything but sweet. "It's like you don't even exist."

Giggles ripple across the two girls that are sitting next to her, and I simply shrug. There is nothing they can tell me I haven't already heard before. I'm one of the many ghosts of Ponderosa Springs. A lore, a scary story that haunts the halls and lives in attics. I know that. I accepted it a long time ago.

The girl with the morbid childhood who decided blending in was easier than standing out. I'm much better at being a ghost than a human.

"No biggie. You probably needed the praise from Professor Godfrey. God knows you don't get a lot of it from dating someone like Easton."

Her face crumples, mouth dropping open that I even responded. Which is warranted. Three years ago, I would've kept my mouth shut and left. She isn't used to me biting back.

It's a sharp dig, one she deserves for stabbing Sage in the back the first chance she got, and a lot nicer than what I really want to do to her. She should be thankful it's only a dig and not a sharp knife. Loyalty is scarce in this town. Everyone watches out for themselves, and they aren't afraid to step on the ones they love to reach the top.

Ponderosa Springs breeds selfish assholes.

That's what this school's crest should read.

Once I have my things, I'm ready to bolt from this class. I don't have any classes for the rest of the day, which means it's the perfect time to go pick up the first species for my new project.

I've been wanting to do a bee-themed dome for a long time, with preserved wildflowers and a few different species. I just need to see if I can work with something as tiny as a bee.

I'd inquired this summer with a local orchard about their population of mason bees. The metallic blue bee is native to Oregon and the fruit trees that populate the state. They would be perfect for a display, especially with that unique color.

Summer is over, fall is moving fast, and we are heading into the colder months; I know the bees will have nested, leaving the older ones that are reaching their expiration date hovering around. Hopefully, I can find a few already dead and in good condition so I don't have to play bee catcher.

"Lyra, hang back for a few minutes." Godfrey calls my name as I try to duck out of the classroom, halting my steps. The crowd of students filters past me as I turn around, clutching the handle of my bag.

"Getting extra credit, teacher's pet?" Mary whispers as she skims past me, hitting my shoulder as she does. "Make sure to really choke for that A."

Bitch.

I stare at her, knowing girls like her need to have the last word no matter what. It's easier to just let her go before I do something I'll regret. In public, anyway. Once everyone has disappeared, the last student leaving the door open on their way out, I turn so I'm facing Conner.

"Haven't seen much of you lately at the mausoleum. No more bug catching for you?" I chide with a smile, knowing he's been busy with classes but sort of missing the random afternoons when he'd join me in collecting insects. "How's teaching?"

He laughs, leaning against his desk with a sigh as his arms cross in front of his chest. "I find it's much more complex than consoling, way more time-consuming, and I suddenly have the desire to burn every tie I own."

I walk farther back into the room, matching his stance as I lean against one of the long tables in front of him.

"Why do you do that?" he asks, a deep V creasing his eyebrows while he loosens the knot at his throat.

"Do what?" I offer.

“Twirl that ring on your finger. You’re always fiddling with it. Especially during class when you are zoned out, not paying attention to my very detailed lecture. Is my teaching that horrible?” His voice is light with a joke that makes me smirk.

I look down at the silver metal looped around my pointer finger. The oval amber gem in the center that traps a small spider inside was my mother’s favorite piece of jewelry.

She never took it off. Not for a shower. Not for work. Not for bed.

Not even in death.

It had been my tiny hands that removed it from her on the second day just before emergency medical staff took her away. I’d lain on the floor beside her, nearly stuck to the floor because of the blood, until our cleaning lady showed up and all I did was twist the ring on her finger.

Spinning it had become a habit, one I’d subconsciously done since it became my own. I think Professor Godfrey is the first person to notice, or at least ask me about it.

“It was my mother’s. Guess it’s a comfort thing, something I do without thought.” I say with a shrug. “I used to watch her rotate it around for hours when I was a kid. You wouldn’t believe how jealous I was of this thing.”

I hold it out in front of me, wiggling my fingers. “For years, I begged to borrow it, but I’ve always been messy and unorganized. She was definitely afraid I’d lose it.”

“Or maybe she knew it wouldn’t fit you just yet.” His warm hand slides beneath my palm, cradling my fingers in his grip.

The action catches me by surprise but not discomfort, just the shock of being touched so abruptly. I look up at his creased forehead as he peers down, swiping his thumb across the ring.

“Fits you perfectly now,” he whispers lowly, a secret for only my ears to hear.

We are a respectful distance apart from each other, the length of his arm helping him reach me. Our hands are the only place of contact, and all I can think about is how little I feel about him.

I imagine it would be easy for any normal person to be attracted to someone conventional, someone like Conner Godfrey. For the longest time, all I wanted, all I craved, was to be normal. To feel what others felt, to have an average life. It’s all I dreamed of while I lay awake in those foster homes.

But I'm not. I have never been.
And someone like Conner...he doesn't make me feel.
Even now, knowing Thatch is nowhere close to me, I can feel him. His eyes. His energy in the room like the air, surrounding me.

Conner does not pluck the strings of my heart and play them as a melody he knows from memory. There is no immediate need to implode if I can't get close to him. My body does not soften and ignite the way it does for Thatcher Pierson.

Never for anyone else but him.

There is a long, bloodred string that is looped around one of my ribs. One that, if I followed, if I tugged, would lead straight to the Prince of Death himself. A thread I would follow over and over again, even if I knew it would lead me to a bitter end.

That's love, isn't it? Falling even though there is no one to catch you? No expectations. Just blind, whole-body, purifying love.

There was no darkness in him too much, no monster or harsh fantasy too scary that would keep me from loving him. Everything I know, everything he is, and everything he is to become, I would love all of it.

I would die for him.

I would kill for him.

I would bleed for him.

And that is a once-in-a-lifetime connection that is not easily matched by someone who is simply conventional.

"It's a beautiful piece, but I didn't keep you back to admire your jewelry, unfortunately." He taps the top of my hand, pulling away and rounding his desk to dig through the drawers.

"Your teaching isn't boring, by the way. I've just been tired," I mutter, blinking away the haze of my secret love.

"Yeah, yeah. I know a lie when I hear one, Miss Abbott." He smirks. "Still haven't been sleeping? Have you thought about going to the doctor for that? It could be insomnia, and they do prescribe medicine for that."

"Sleeping pills that make me sleep like the dead? No, thank you. I'd rather be deprived of a few hours of rest than wake up feeling like I got hit by a train."

"Stubborn, stubborn." He laughs, shaking his head as he retrieves a stack of papers and holds them out in my direction, beckoning me to take them. "Hopefully you won't be too hardheaded about this."

I roll my eyes but take them, assuming it's a part of class requirements, but when I look down at the boldly-printed black letters, I'm proven wrong. I trace my fingers along the stark white sheets.

"An internship? In New Hampshire?" I lift both of my eyebrows in shock.

He nods, folding his hands in front of his lap. "It's a forensic entomology program at Dartmouth. It has limited availability, but I thought it would be an exceptional opportunity for you."

"I-I—" I stifle myself, shaking my head, struck in awe by this act of kindness. "I don't know what to say. How did you find out about this? How did you get me an application?"

Maybe once when he'd asked me what I wanted for my future had I mentioned forensic entomology. It's a rare field, jobs are extremely competitive, and I never truly expected to have it as a career.

The study of insects during a criminal proceeding is often forgotten, even bypassed, but it can be an integral part of an investigation. From the time of death to where the crime took place, the live and dead creepy-crawlies found at a murder scene can tell you quite a bit.

It's a combination of the things I'm passionate about; there would never be a more perfect job for me.

Death and bugs.

"I went to graduate school there. I pulled a few strings with some friends I have back home. The position is yours next year if you'd like it." He winks. "Pending paperwork, of course."

I squeeze the papers in my fingers, knowing this is something incredible. My future lying in my hands, a job that I've wanted for years. All I want to do is tell my mom. To call her and hear her voice. The older I get, the more I grieve her.

I gather all these experiences, these moments that I'm desperate to share with her, and it keeps hurting the more I age. There is so much I want to tell her, so many things I've done and seen. It feels like a wound that deepens over time. The scar tissue has covered the outer layer, but the inside is still aching, still bleeding with all the pain of loss.

Could I leave the place that has her grave? The town where her memory haunts like a ghost?

Wait.

"Next year?"

He nods. “Yeah, is that a problem?”

My friends.

The Halo.

Thatcher.

Do they mean so little to me I nearly forgot all about them in light of my future?

Could I leave them, all of it, behind me in the rearview mirror like dust, as if these past years didn’t happen? Could I leave him across the map where my eyes would not reach him and my heart couldn’t feel him?

Even if I could, I’m not sure I want to. I don’t want to abandon the relationships I’ve built, even if we found it in madness and death. I’d like to believe what we share is a unique connection, one that doesn’t happen very often, and the thought of abandoning it makes me sick.

I clear my throat, shaking my head. “I mean, I still need to get a degree before I get a job, so what’s the point of an internship?”

“You could transfer. It’s not Hollow Heights, but Dartmouth isn’t for the weak either.” He smiles, proud of his alma mater.

Maybe I could just fill out the application now. It’s not until next year, which gives me time. I just need time to see where we are with the Halo. I can’t leave with all those missing girls.

It’s not my responsibility, but it feels like we’re their only hope, the only people looking for them, and if we just gave up, they’d die forgotten. Tormented, sold, and left for dead.

Which makes me remember that my task in this had been to look further into Conner Godfrey. Determine if he is a part of this or blissfully ignorant.

“Why did I think you were from here?” I say easily, feigning interest. “You know your way around this place too well to not be a local.”

The picture Sage had found definitely had him in it, and it had easily been from years ago.

“New Hampshire, born and raised. I visited Ponderosa Springs during most of my summers with Mr. Sinclair. My parents died when I was young, a lot like you, actually.” He smiles grimly at our orphaned past. “So, I spent my time here with the Sinclair family. It’s like my second home.”

I can’t imagine Stephen Sinclair being nice enough to have a civil conversation that isn’t laced with pompous brags, let alone being friendly.

“That’s right. Sage’s father mentioned you guys used to be friends when you were younger. What did you have in common with them? I mean, no

offense, but you seem much more..." I chew my bottom lip, struggling to find the word. "Honest?"

"Are you telling me my friends are liars?" He raises an eyebrow, watching me with questioning eyes, and I realize I might have said the wrong thing—triggered his alarms if he is a part of the Halo.

"Not really. You just come across as more genuine, is all. Can't really see you and Frank Donahue having much to chat about. Even when you were both in your hormonal twenties," I joke, trying to lighten the edge in the room.

"I'll take that as a compliment, Miss Abbott. But friends are friends for things far deeper than what they show on the surface. Trust me. We all just seemed to have the same mentality for the future."

It's cryptic and not nearly enough information to persecute him. If he isn't a part of this, he's in for a rude awakening when he finds out how shitty his friends are.

"It must've been hard on you then, on Mr. Sinclair too, losing Frank and Professor West. I'm sorry about that. You don't really talk about it often, but I am here if you need to chat." It feels wrong using his emotions against him like this. "Do you still talk to James Whittaker? How is he holding up with this?"

"Whittaker probably loves the fact they're both dead," he says harshly, and my fingers tighten around the paper. "How exactly do you know we were all friends—why the sudden interest?"

His tone is no longer funny and light.

Panic spreads throughout my chest like hot oil on a fire. I should have thought out my plan of questioning better. My answer has to be valid but not something that will be suspicious.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Sage," I blurt out. "She, uh—we were cleaning out what survived the fire, and there were some boxes of pictures in the attic. Mostly of her and Rosemary as babies, but there were a few of Frank back in the day. I just assumed... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit a nerve. I was—"

"It's fine, Lyra." He holds up his hand, releasing a breath. "Don't apologize. I know you are only being your curious self. I'm just wound a little tight lately, and James is a sore spot for just about anyone who comes into contact with him."

“He didn’t have the same mentality for the future?” I offer with a small smile, releasing a breath and letting my shoulders fall.

This gets him to laugh, just a little. “Exactly.”

I know if I keep poking, he’s going to grow even more suspicious, so I halt my digging for the time being, lifting the papers.

“Thank you for this. I’m not sure if I’ll accept. I don’t know if I can leave here—”

“Why?” he interrupts, standing up straight and watching me with such concern in his soft eyes that it’s hard to believe he’s capable of what the guys believe him to be.

“My friends—I have friends here, and I just...” I bite my bottom lip. “I don’t know if I can leave them yet.”

Conner nods, pursing his lips. “Friends with boyfriends who will lead their own lives far away from here one day? Would they stay for you?”

The question runs cold along my skin.

Would they?

“I would hate to see you end up another pebble in the cobblestone of this damn place. You deserve more than what this town can offer you. In this world, all you have is yourself. You are allowed to put yourself first, to be selfish—”

A scream, loud and piercing, interjects his speech and my train of thought questioning my friends’ loyalty. It’s pure fear, the echoes from the vocal chords of someone outside in the courtyard. The open windows in the classroom allow it to permeate along the first floor of the building, and I quickly hear noise gathering.

Anarchy. Panic. Fear.

“What the hell?” Godfrey says loudly, moving to the door with me quick on his heels.

We follow the massive swarm of students and faculty pooling out of the building and towards the commons in the center of the school grounds, a large circular building near the recently chopped oak tree that used to stand tall.

The leafy, historic tree was collateral damage during my freshman year. The tree I’d helped Rook set fire to to provide a distraction for Briar and Alistair, a memory that strikes like a match in the back of my mind.

But it is no longer the missing tree everyone is enthralled by.

Conner pushes his way through the chaos, me following the trail of space he makes until we are at the edge of the circle, exposed to the horror that is causing mass panic across the grounds.

I hear someone gasp, a cry of desperation from another, rumbling and whispers that grow louder the longer I stand here. My mouth is dry, and I can feel my heart cleaving against my chest.

At the base of the oak tree lies a human leg, expertly sliced at the joint and bleached pale white. There is a thin white ribbon tied in a bow at the knee and one singular red rose resting against it.

Alistair had warned us of this, told us that the town we had started to wreak havoc on would soon begin to retaliate. We may evade law enforcement, but we had dabbled into an organization that was tired of our meddling.

We'd killed one too many of them.

And all I can think is this was them taking their pound of flesh back.

"Is that...?" I whisper more to myself, but Conner replies.

"Yes."

Carved in brutal, scrawly script into the milky flesh of the calf is a message. Two words from a serial killer who'd come back to haunt his stomping grounds. A warning from the Butcher of the Spring.

I'm back.

The world begins to spin. In beautiful, disastrous color, it spins so fast that my eyes can't make out anything other than a blur of pigment. I feel my hand crash to my stomach, pressing into the flesh in an attempt to calm the raging war inside.

He's back.

That's not possible, is it?

Henry Pierson is locked inside a man-made rock, cemented behind bars until his body rots to maggot food. There is no way he can just escape a place like that. He can't be back.

It's not possible.

But this is his signature. The singular body part left out in the open spaces of Ponderosa Springs, tied with a ribbon and inscribed with a message. Gifts he left for the town to show just how much smarter he was than all of us. That he was able to steal our daughters, wives, and mothers without a trace.

It's not him. It's just a copycat. It's the logical answer, but my mind will not let me believe anything logical right now.

My soul feels detached from my body, leaving me numb and alone as I relive all the brutal memories of the night my mother was murdered.

The flashes of blood that leaked from her body, the dulled screams that broke through my small hands. He's back—is he coming for me now? The ghost that escaped his wrath?

I tumbled backward through the crowd of people still fixated on the detached limb, tripping over my shoe slightly and bumping into a few random bodies. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I can hear someone calling my name, but it's drowned out by the smell.

The one that refuses to leave my body, my nose, even after the countless showers. The stench of decomposing flesh, my mother's decaying body. It's all around me, dragging me further and further back to that night.

When I was little, alone with the dead and all the silence that came with it.

He's back. He's back and coming for me.

He—

“Stop.”

My back hits something cold. Cold enough to freeze my mind, my racing thoughts for just a moment, to smell something other than death.

Citrus and fresh sheets.

“Do not let them see you break, Scarlett.” His voice is steady, a rock against the crashing waves that threaten to take me under. “They do not get to see you break. Do you hear me?”

Icy hands curl around my upper arms, thumbs caressing my skin with gentle strokes. All of him overtakes me. He steps into me, the feeling of his chest chasing away all the memories.

Piece by piece, all that Thatcher is comforts my mind, pouring over the darkness like an urn of wintry light that illuminates me. Like frost covering the leaves of flowers. Protecting them. Shielding them.

Allowing me to breathe, to stop.

I anchor myself to that, the skin-to-skin contact he refuses to give others. My body hums at the places of raw connection, of his fingers tracing my bare arms. My head lulls back into his chest, resting there as I inhale the smell of him just beneath his jaw.

Where his cologne is the strongest, wafts and lingers.

“Get out of here. Be a ghost, Lyra, and go hide. Find the quiet,” he mutters into my ear, the stiffness of his tone leaving no room for argument. “You wait for me, and then you break. Only then.”

My nod feels more like a twitch, and my voice comes out strangled.

“If I become a ghost,” I choke, “how will you see me?”

A shaky breath comes from his throat, tickling the bottom of my ear. The haunting recollection of our first encounter sways between us, when we were little kids experiencing a vile evil that most can barely imagine.

Two children sewn together by the Fates’ bloody fingers. A story written in crimson and soaked in cruel endings. Had our parents felt this way? Did Henry Pierson soothe my mother’s soul before stealing it, the way Thatcher did mine?

While others around us are stalled in fear, we exist in the memory of our beginning and the start of our harrowing ending.

“Pet,” he purrs, “I have always seen you.”

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LEARN TO PLAY BY THE RULES

THATCHER

“Sir, I am sorry, but there hasn’t been an inmate escape since the 1970s. I can assure you everyone has been accounted for.”

My grasp on the phone stiffens, threatening to demolish it between my fingers.

“Put me through to the warden.”

The mob of people seems to detach from me, creating a route for me to stride through. Their fear rolls off them in waves, a pheromone only I can detect. The hysteria of finding a limb on campus lingers, building higher as the whispers grow louder.

The Butcher of the Spring has returned with a gift.

Or someone pretending to be him.

And everyone’s prime suspect is walking among them.

A few of them are bold enough to stare at me; others are too afraid of what would happen if they gawk a little too long. I can feel how stiff their spines are, hear the murmurs of theories.

They all think I’m responsible for this. As if my ego needed to be stroked so much, I’d resorted to this gaudy public display.

It doesn’t bother me, their rumor mill that would spin with my name as the primary source. Whatever resolution their narrow minds are drawing is the least of my concerns at the moment.

Let them fester, let their minds run around until the thought of my very name makes them quiver. I have no problem being their boogeyman.

“He isn’t accepting phone calls. Can I leave a message?”

God must be real. It’s the only way I can explain how lucky this twit on the other side of the phone is that I’m not standing in front of him.

"Yeah, tell him that Thatcher Pierson is calling regarding Henry Pierson, an inmate we pay a large amount of money to keep there," I reply swiftly, letting my feet carry me across campus with heavy steps.

"I-I—Mr. Pierson, I apologize. I had no idea—"

"Spare me," I snap. "If you want to keep your job, send me through to the warden. I won't ask again."

The line is mute for only a short time before another voice greets me on the opposite end.

"Mr. Pierson, what do I—"

"Where is my father?" I don't have time to rub elbows, a task I've prided myself on becoming an expert at faking.

I stride quickly past the school grounds and into the tree line behind the Rothchild District, where I know I'll find my darling phantom hiding away, locked in a decaying crypt. The only comfort someone so linked to death could find is among the silence that comes from where the dead rest.

I can hear the rustle of paper just before the warden of Rimond Penitentiary replies, "Where he has been for the past several years, sir? His private room in solitary. Why? Are you requesting us to move him?"

"Since when? When was the last time someone laid physical eyes on him?"

There is a tightness in my chest, an overwhelming sort of uncomfortable pain as my question swings in the air. Branches snap beneath the weight of my steps as I delve deeper into the forest behind Hollow Heights.

"We did cell checks about fifteen minutes ago, Mr. Pierson. Everyone, including your father, was cleared. Is there a problem?"

I know the probability of Henry escaping a maximum-security prison is slim, and I despise the reason I needed to call to check was because of Lyra.

"No, but I'd like you to post extra guards in solitary for the next few weeks. I want a list of all his visitors in the past two years, and call me if anyone requests a visit from this point forward," I tell him hastily before ending the call.

He may still be inside, but my father would never miss a chance to make a scene. We are, unfortunately, similar in that way.

This could easily be someone unrelated, using what the media published of his killings to spook the people of Ponderosa Springs, a copycat working for this outrageous Halo who is using my father's legend as a weapon against us.

But just in case Henry has rubbed his nose in my current business and found himself involved, I want to know.

I look down at my phone, and my thumb lingers over Alistair's name, ready to call him and jump down his throat, gripe about how I knew this would happen. How I warned them that if we poked into the missing girls and the Halo, they would retaliate.

And I'm the one who would get screwed.

I will be the first person the police will look at for this. I'm the obvious suspect, the angry son avenging his killer daddy. I swear, if that gets printed on a newspaper headline, I'll blow my brains out.

A groan erupts in my throat, thinking about having to deal with a police interrogation, which is inevitably coming. I need to call the guys. It should be my priority.

Except I set my sights on the decrepit building weathered by years of neglect and storms. My feet stop just outside the perimeter, where long ago a gate once stood.

Suddenly, calling anyone else, dealing with anything beyond this forest, doesn't seem so important.

They all can wait.

The chaos. The Halo. My father.

All of it stops existing for the next few hours.

For right now, it's just her.

The skeleton of a building used to be the mausoleum for the Harrison family, the original founder of Hollow Heights. Neglected and sordid, it's a creepy place of refuge, and I could never understand why this place speaks to her.

It's enveloped by tall grass and trees. Its Roman-style structure brings to mind a church, with the identical twin towers in the front, or what's left of them. One collapsed a long time ago, leaving one lone tower with a broken cross atop.

I walk up the short entryway steps, pressing the already cracked door fully open. My oxford shoes click against the damaged floors, the squeak of the door rustling, the birds hiding inside.

A shriek of crows echoes in the space, and I look above to watch a murder of them scatter out of the fractured dome roof. Only a few remain perched inside, pecking at breadcrumbs that are scattered along the floor.

I scoff.

Of course she would leave food for the birds.

“He’s back, isn’t he?”

Her voice is a quiet disturbance in the air, empty of its usual emotion, detached from the surrounding situation.

She sits tucked away in the empty granite window nook, arms wrapped around her legs, which are tightly nestled against her chest. Her head is facing the damaged stained-glass window, staring through fractures to the woods outside.

The sun radiates through what is left of the glass, striking her face in a kaleidoscope of color. Deep reds highlight the curves of her jaw, the slope of her nose brushed with vibrant blues.

She is ethereal, almost ghostly in this light.

A sight too powerful to be truly real, a brief figment of the imagination that you know will fade once you blink. For a heavy moment, I’m held in place, unable to do much other than stare.

I’ve never been affected by anyone like this. It’s as if I’m genuinely seeing her for the first time in our lives and recognizing just how hauntingly lovely she is.

Curls the color of silky raven feathers spill from her hair tie, dropping from the top of her head, and for the first time, I want to touch someone, to slip the hair between my fingers and feel if it’s as smooth as it looks.

Every curve, arch, and dip of her body is highlighted in this moment, the tight sweater accenting the slope of her breast and the softness of her stomach. Hunger pools in my gut at the dark green skirt wrapped around her thighs, the black pantyhose stretched across her pale legs, and I want to see just how silky her skin is beneath them.

Maybe it’s because my bare hands have touched her already, have curled around her arms in an effort of comfort. I know what her naked flesh feels like beneath my palm, and I want more.

To skin my teeth against it. To watch it turn pink. To make it bleed.

“He’s back, and he is coming for me,” she mutters, tilting her head in my direction and staring at me with those big green eyes, which sit vacant.

They are usually bouncing with energy, with feeling.

All I want to do is fill them back up. Pour all the emotions she normally overflows back into her body because she isn’t meant to look like this.

Empty and hollow.

Walls are built high in her mind, a defensive mechanism to hide from the things that scare her. She has probably had them her entire life. It wouldn't surprise me if that's what got her through the foster system.

But she's learned to hide so well behind them that she can't even find herself anymore. It's why she struggles to face what she is in the mirror.

"My father is still very much in prison, darling phantom." My voice is bitter as I step closer to her sitting frame. "Even if he wasn't, your fear of him is unnecessary."

Dead eyes roam my body before a scoff rocks her shoulders. "Says his son."

I don't want to question why it's only her that causes this eruption of energy inside of me. Why this molten, fiery feeling pumps through my veins at her reply. My eyebrows crease into a deep V.

"So, you're cursing me now? For the father I had no choice in being born to? I never thought you were like all of them, those sheep out there"—I toss my head towards the window—"who will eat whatever scraps of information are thrown their way, true or not?"

"Do not put words in my mouth, Thatcher." Her jaw tightens. This bitter, cold version of Little Miss Death unsettles me. And I'm never unsettled.

"You're his son. You have nothing to fear but an awkward reunion. I'm the girl who sent him to prison."

Her truth wafts between us. The consequences of what my father had done to her mother that night directly resulted in his arrest. After years of flying beneath the police radar, Scarlett Abbott was his undoing.

I had let her be his downfall.

She had survived him. Had seen everything he'd done to her mom. Had seen me. I'd never understood why Phoebe Abbott was the only woman my father hadn't dismembered. Henry had a particular routine, yet not in that moment.

He was arrested shortly after they'd found Phoebe Abbott inside the home. After Lyra had told the police everything. Everything except me, she'd never told them I was there.

"I am not afraid." She exhales. "I knew he would eventually come for me. I've been ready for a while."

Lie.

She is terrified of my father. I felt it in her shoulders moments ago, the way her body shook in my grasp and she disassociated from her body. A tactic the mind will force the body to do when re-experiencing severe trauma.

It's a common symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder.

And I watched her physically shut down after seeing that leg. Saw her mind shield itself the only way it knew how—disconnect and hide until all the monsters were gone, till the quiet she found inside that closet came back and she was able to come out. To no longer hide.

Several steps forward leave me directly beside her, my fingers reaching up to rub against the green silk ribbon in her hair. I feel her chest seize at my closeness, her hands balling into little fists at her side.

"That's why you sneak away to these dusty little spaces, isn't it? You don't have to hide from what scares you inside of them." I tilt my head, not sure why I asked out loud when I know the answer.

Warmth spreads across her face, pink burning her cheeks, and I can see the emotions twinkling back in her eyes. Raw, unfiltered emotion pouring out just for me. Because of me.

Something permanent sits in my chest, the decision that I think I'd do anything to prevent Lyra from going into that dark place inside of her head alone ever again.

"They are the forgotten places. I'm the forgotten one. These are the only spaces I feel like I belong."

My thumb drags along the seam of the fabric, catching one of her curls, and I feel just how smooth it is beneath my touch. So warm, so her.

"He is not coming for you, Lyra. Henry is still behind prison bars, and if he wasn't, I assure you, he would never get close to touching you." My fingers trail down from her hair to the curve of her neck. "Not a single graze on this pale skin."

A shiver that I feel in my hand runs through her body, her head tilting in order to give me access to her delicate throat, giving herself up to me so freely, with so little effort.

"How can you be so sure?"

"The only person who gets to make you bleed is me," I murmur. "Your suffering. Your fear. Your blood. It's all mine, pet."

My thumb creeps across the flutter of her pulse, feeling it spike at my touch. All of her is so reactive to me; down to the veins and arteries beneath

her flesh, they move for me. Her heart beats just for me.

“You want to build your walls, darling phantom? Shield yourself inside these haunted spaces? That’s fine,” I tell her with a nod, my thumb pressing into her neck deeply. “But you make sure I’m inside before you shut those doors. You can shut the entire world out. Not me. Never me.”

A shaky breath slips through her lips, her body leaning into my touch.

“Never you,” she whispers quietly. “Never, my angel.”

I snap an eyebrow up, peering down at her inquisitively. “That isn’t my name.”

“That’s what you are inside of my head.”

An angel. Is she joking?

Her body rotates casually until her front is facing me, her feet dangling over the edge of the marble seat. Her knees are inches away from my own, my hand still resting against her throat.

I watch her finger hesitantly reach forward, skimming the fabric of my tan suit jacket. It runs up and down so nonchalantly it doesn’t even seem like she is moving.

“Angel of death,” she mutters. “The divine being believed to comfort souls and accompany them into another dimension.”

I’d hoped somewhere along the way she would have let it slip from her mind what I’d done for her mother. But apparently, unlike me, Lyra remembers everything from her childhood. Especially that night.

The coins to pay the ferryman.

A Pierson family tradition that I’d been told about since I was young, one of the only memories I could recollect. All of those holding my last name who died were buried with coins over their eyes so that our wealth would not go unnoticed in whatever afterlife we were sent to.

I’d thrown snuck coins into my own mother’s grave just before helping my father bury her. A woman I could barely remember. I wasn’t sure if she had been neglectful or loving, what her voice sounded like or the clothes she wore.

Maybe it had been what was left of my conscience, wanting to do a good deed for Phoebe Abbott. But whatever it had been, my father had crushed it long ago. The desire to help anyone else across the River Styx had left me, only returning when I met the boys.

“I’m no angel, pet. You’d be naïve to think that.” I use my grip on her throat to lift her head up so her eyes can meet my own.

She sits there, looking at me with those eyes, and I know it doesn't matter what I tell her; she will believe what she wants. Her mind is her own creature, one that has begun to intrigue me.

"Then why did you come find me?"

The answer she is looking for isn't the one she will be getting.
Even if it's the truth.

Because the reason I'd been in the courtyard to begin with had been due to rage. I'd planned on ripping her from the crowd of people and dragging her by her hair to somewhere private, where I could teach her some manners. To remind her of how this deal between us worked.

"To show you your next lesson." The corners of my mouth tilt upward into a smirk. I take another step into her body, forcing her legs to spread in order to make room for me.

I want my body to reject the feeling of her warm thighs touching mine, to feel repulsed by the contact, but the only disgust I have is from the feeling it gives me. The way my gut tightens and my cock hardens behind my slacks.

I'm repulsed by my reaction to laying my hands on her. Not because of her.

My free hand reaches into my pocket. "I'm your teacher, am I not, pet?"

Her throat bobs as she looks at the switchblade between us. My fingers press the button along the side to expose the spear-shaped knife. It slices through the dimly lit room, the tip grazing the front of her sweater.

All of that burning I'd shoved down earlier due to the distraction of that hacked limb is resurfacing. The urge to watch her beg for forgiveness, to hear that cherry-flavored mouth atone for what she'd done.

"Thatcher—"

"Answer my question," I bite out, dragging the weapon up and snagging some of the fabric on the way. The sweater slices open, exposing the stark white material of her bra.

A groan rumbles in my throat, having my knife this close to her skin, knowing if I pressed just a little, a stream of crimson would leak down the valley of her perky breasts.

I circle the sharp edge around the front of her bra, pressing just enough so she'll feel the sensation on her nipples, swirling the handle in my palm and watching her head toss back in pleasure.

My cock twitches, seeking more of the warmth that radiates between her milky thighs. I press further into her body, a whimper slipping from her mouth as my hardened length connects to her center. There is a glaze over her eyes, one that makes her look sort of dreamy. Like she isn't sure this is real, only a dream that will be gone once she wakes up.

I'm not quite sure this is real either.

It feels too normal, too good to be something that exists in reality.

Lyra's legs wind around my waist, urging me closer, desperate to have me when she should fight to get far, far away from me. If she knew how I want her, the things I want to put her body through, she wouldn't be so needy for me.

Yet, here she is.

"Yes, you're my teacher," she whimpers, her small hands tightening in my jacket.

I nod, taking my bottom lip between my teeth, letting the blade move higher until it's touching her throat. The sharpness dances along her delicate skin but not with enough pressure to split her open.

Not yet.

"Then why the fuck is Conner Godfrey touching what belongs to me?"

The haze of lust fogging her eyes wavers.

"Wh-hat?" she stutters out, taking a second to figure out what I'm talking about. "Wait, you were watching me in class?"

I drag my left hand behind her neck, lacing my fingers into her wild curls. My grip is painfully tight, making a long whine pull from her throat. I use my hold as leverage, tilting her head back further, forcing her throat towards the tip of the knife.

"Thatch," she hisses when it bites into her skin.

"There I was, walking to my next class," I interrupt her, watching the first drop of blood pour from the small slit I'd created on her neck. A long stream of red trickles down the column of her throat. "When I walk past an open classroom door and catch Conner Godfrey drooling over your hand."

My hips jerk forward, my cock grinding against her core. Through all our clothes, I can still feel how soaked she is, leaking wetness from between her thighs, her body dripping from my touch.

"Tell me, what made you think other men could touch you?" I lean down so that my mouth is hovering just above her nose. "What made you think anyone but me could touch you?"

Using the blunt edge of the knife, I gather the blood on her throat across the metal, bringing it farther up her neck until it reaches her chin, careful not to cut her further, smearing a path of red on my way.

“He was looking at my ring. That was all.” Her voice wobbles, but her hips push towards me, rolling timidly against my crotch, seeking friction to aid her desire.

“You think I care what he was looking at?” I bite out.

The fury from watching Conner Godfrey rub his grimy hands across her own fuels my every action. I’m blind to everything but proving my point. My control snaps clean in two when it comes to Lyra Abbott, a shattered break with no hopes of mending.

I loathe it.

How wild she makes me. How out of my mind her every move makes me. She’s tainted me in ways my father would never.

I am a man of order, routine, and strict cleanliness.

And she is my filthy little pet.

Yet the only dirty I ever want to be is hers.

“It’s not like that. He’s only a friend.” She swallows as I rest the top half of the blade on her lips. The dark red liquid coats her cherry-flavored mouth, making her look just as sweet as I know she tastes.

“You’re correct, pet,” I say coldly, tracing the shape of her lips with the blood-soaked dagger and painting her red, covering her in my favorite color. “He is not me. He will never be me.”

She opens without my command, allowing the knife to drop into her mouth. My cock strains in my pants, ravenous for more of her when I see that pink tongue curl around the steel.

I let her play.

Allow her to swirl her tongue around the metal and gently suck off her own mess until she’s cleaned it off. The aroma of cherries and tangy blood fills my nose, and it makes me greedy.

I remove it from her mouth just in time for her to speak again.

“But,” she chokes out, rolling her tongue across to catch the drips along her lip, “what if he can teach me things you can’t?”

Is this how she plans to get what she wants from me? By pushing me far past my breaking point, into territory no one should be?

“Oh? Tell me, what does he know that I don’t?”

One of her hands falls to my lower stomach, pressing into the hard muscle beneath my shirt. The feeling of her nails trying to dig into my skin sends a hard shiver down my spine.

“What if he can teach me what a man’s touch feels like,” she mutters. “How to make myself feel good at night when I’m all alone in bed and my hand slips between my thighs.”

A heavy breath rattles through my nose, and my jaw tightens to steel. I lift my head towards the ceiling, my neck muscles straining. I need to gather control, just an ounce to keep me from snapping.

But all I see behind my eyelids is Lyra splayed out across Godfrey’s desk while he devours her in the way only I can, his mouth marking her up, hands groping at whatever they can find.

I saw the way he was looking at her.

A man lost in the desert, and she was a rushing river, just waiting for him to dive in. She may not believe it, but he wants her.

I’m hanging on a fine thread, one that is about to split and send me tearing through campus until I have my hands inside Conner Godfrey’s chest cavity, ripping out his ribs one by one.

“You can’t teach me that,” she tells me, a hint of mock innocence in her tone.

When I let her words soak into my mind, really seep inside, something clicks into place for me.

What if he can teach me what a man’s touch feels like.

An ominous chuckle rumbles in my chest, vibrating her tiny hands still pressed into my stomach. I click my tongue as a wicked smile pulls on my lips.

“My, my, Lyra,” I chide. “I always assumed, but now I know for certain. What a delightful discovery.”

I angle my head back down so that I’m staring into her confused eyes.

“My darling phantom is a virgin.” With ease, I flip the knife in my hand so the blade is resting in my palm. “Futile attempts at making me jealous wasn’t necessary. You could’ve just begged.”

“What—”

“You could have got down on your knees and asked nicely to bleed on my cock. Stuck that bottom lip out and pouted until I broke through those tight walls. But you didn’t.”

I shove the black handle into her mouth, forcing it down her throat. My hold constricts on the knife, feeling the edge slice into my palm much deeper than the knick on her throat.

Her eyes widen, and a guttural moan vibrates her throat as my blood gushes from the wound. It pours across her mouth, a warm stream cascading down her throat. I grunt as it drips between her supple breasts, and just like I thought, it's a damning sight.

All this bright red liquid marking up her milky skin. My blood crawls across her body until it coats every square, visible inch. I want her to drown in it, suffocate on me.

"You're mine," I growl against her ear, letting her hot mouth choke around my blade. "My student. My fucking pet. I will bend, break, and play with you as I see fit. Until you're nothing if I want. You wanted this, begged me for it, so you will abide by my rules. Do you understand?"

I feel her nod aggressively, barely letting me finish speaking before she is agreeing.

"Say it."

I remove the knife from her throat in order for her to speak and drag it to another hole entirely. A metallic scent rings between us, overtaking my senses as my blood drenches my hand.

The pain is secondary. I'd learned a long time ago how to shut things like this out, to kill it before it even has a chance to hurt.

"I'm yours," she mumbles, leaning her back against the glass for support while her hips arch towards me. "Only yours. Always yours, Thatcher."

Erotic isn't a word that covers what she looks like right now.

Legs spread wide, I rip the black pantyhose at the center, exposing her white underwear that has a dark spot in the front from how soaked she is. Sweater ripped open, and my blood painted across her body.

Death's wet dream. A sickening desire I'd refused to notice. My bloody, cherry-flavored little killer. She would bring the reaper of souls himself to his knees. Angels would raise hell and condemn heaven for a peek.

Men would slaughter themselves for her if they got a chance to see her this way.

I have never faltered. Not a single time in my horrid life. I have stood for years unfazed by the beauty of women and men alike.

But this day, this moment.

My legs shake, and my knees are fucking weak.

The handle falls down her stomach, following the lines of her body until I have it centered between her thighs. Her shaky hands tug her skirt farther up her waist, exposing her bottom half to me.

“You want someone to make you come, pet? Is that what you wanted? Is that why you were challenging me? You need someone to show you how to make this pathetic little cunt come?”

Using the blade, I shove her panties to the side, leaving a red stain on them as I do. My throbbing hand is still pouring blood when I press the end of the handle between her slick folds.

The ache in my groin is almost unbearable. My cock enjoys the sight of her soaked and bloody a little too much. That untouched, glistening pussy beckons to me, praying to me like I’m her god, wanting no one but me to be the one she bleeds on.

“I can do better than that, Lyra. I can make her scream. I can make her cry.”

I circle her sensitive bundle of nerves, pressing just hard enough on it to give her a little bite of pain with her pleasure. My body folds over the top of hers, my spare hand landing just beside her head, holding me just above her so that I can look between us and watch the knife that is digging into my flesh slide through her juices.

Lyra’s head falls backward, her cunt pulsating against the slick black handle. But I want more of the sweet, pathetic moans filling this rotting building, to wake the dead with her screams for more.

“Thatcher.” She let out a furrowed whine before continuing. “You—you’re bleeding. So much.”

I bury my nose into the apex of her throat and shoulder as she pumps her hips in jerky thrusts, meeting the pressure of the blade. She grinds herself against it while my hand bleeds freely into her core.

My blood makes it easier to slip through her folds repeatedly.

As I drag the tip of my nose along the column of her throat, the smell of cherries blinds me. I can’t keep my tongue from flicking across the cut I’d made earlier. Her taste, sweet and metallic, pulls a guttural moan from deep inside me.

“For you. I’m bleeding for you.” My teeth tease her neck, nipping at the sensitive spots there. “I’m bleeding for this pitiful pussy that is crying for me. Do you hear her, pet?”

All she can manage is a shaky nod, her mind so blitzed with pleasure that I don't think she even understood my question—barely heard my words as she loses herself in me.

I've never been this intimate with someone before. Never felt this liquid heat between a woman's thighs that leaks from her in waves. I've never been the cause of anyone's ecstasy, only ever the reason for their misery.

Everything about this should be incorrect. The improper form of how to treat a woman when she craves release. Yet, somehow I know that's wrong.

Maybe because I know the human body. I know what it looks like bowed in pain, twisted in agony, how it reacts to the slightest of touches, where to slice to cause little or severe damage.

More than that, I know Lyra Abbott.

As much as I don't want to, as much as I want her flushed from my mind, I know her.

And this is exactly how she wants to be touched. This little killer doesn't want soft kisses and sweet nothings whispered into her ear.

No, she wants to be craved.

For someone to ache for her in the depths of their being, to be driven mad by the desire to breathe the same air as she does, have every single molecule of their being consumed with only her.

She does not want love.

She needs her obsession to be fed, an unhinged addiction that seeks no cure. Devotion that the gods would kill for. There is no soft, flowery poetry that could explain what it is she needs.

It requires dark, obsidian words written in blood at altars and prayed upon until your knees are bruised.

And right now, I'm eager to feed that obsession inside her, to show her just how overwhelming being fixated on someone like me is.

Her whimpers sing in my ear, the sound of a lewd song only she is capable of. Heavy pants crash from her lips as her fingers wind into my jacket, tugging me closer into her.

She is so close to tipping into that pool of ecstasy all of us chase. I can feel it in the way she trembles. I increase my pace, rubbing the handle with more direct pressure on her clit, making sure my hand is covering the entire blade.

"You better ask me for permission to come, Scarlett." I sink my teeth into her collarbone in warning.

“Fuck,” she cries, throwing her hips up with no restraint. “Please, Thatcher. Please let me come. I need to come.”

Power floods my veins, searing hot with a chilled burn to match, ice injected straight into my system. It’s like a high I’ve never experienced. This sort of power is dominating, knowing I’m the only one capable of giving her blissful release, that if I stopped, all of that would fall away. She would whine and plead as her orgasm slipped away.

I am the master and she the pretty puppet on my strings.

“You poor, poor thing,” I purr. “You need to come? Well, go on, then, pet. Come for me.”

It takes all of ten seconds before her hips buck up one last time and her throat opens to scream, a shriek of pleasure that sends the rest of those crows flying for the roof. Her body tightens against me, locking up as the waves of bliss wash across her over and over again.

I feel every shiver and aftershock, the ones that make her body twitch and heart beat erratically. My hand drops the knife to the ground, and it clatters against the floor.

My head lifts from her neck, pulling her scent with me on a deep inhale. I make eye contact with her hazy eyes as my bloodstained hand cups her delicate cheek.

“Blood and pleasure look divine on you, darling phantom,” I whisper as I drape two of my fingers towards her already red mouth, slipping them inside and pressing against her warm lips.

Her tongue automatically swirls around me, sucking and mewling at the sinister combination that coats my skin—her sticky, sweet juices and the vile crimson liquid that pumps inside my veins.

The deep slash across my palm still leaks but has clotted enough that I can see the harsh tissue wound. It’ll take several stitches, but it’s the least of my concerns.

“Don’t let me see you with him again, yeah?” I say, allowing her to taste herself for a moment longer before pulling away.

A mixture of a cough and whimper croaks from her throat, her eyebrows furrowed, and I can tell by the look in her eyes she is about to argue with me.

I lift my pointer finger in front of her face, wiggling it back and forth. Her mouth snaps shut before she even has the chance to speak.

With ease, I trail my touch to her exposed chest, tracing the letters of my name in the blood pooled atop her pale skin. Over and over, I write my name across her body just above her breasts.

“You can’t—”

“I can and I will,” I warn, leaning dangerously close to her messy face with a voice as cold as winter night. “If Conner Godfrey comes near you again, I will feed him his own fucking hands.”

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BETWEEN THE KEYS

THATCHER

My hands are red.
Throbbing, pruned, and scalding.

My entire body is a fleshy pink and aches as I drag the scratchy material of my loofah across my skin. Except it's only a dull ache, one I can place in the back of my mind while I continue to scrub.

Clean.

I just want to be clean.

But it doesn't matter how much soap I cover myself in or how long I stand here, I still feel dirty. This microscopic residue of Lyra will not come off my skin.

I needed to clear up any evidence of what I'd done. What we had done. If I could just scrub hard enough, use enough chemicals, I could erase the taste of her on my tongue, eliminate my blood from the scene of the crime, polish myself until it feels as if nothing had happened between the two of us.

I've always been exceptionally good at that, cleaning up messes with such dedication no one would detect any form of foul play. Now, I can barely get off the smell of cherries, and I'm starting to believe I've lost my touch.

The loofah falls from my hands as I rest my palms against the cool gray stone of the shower. The stitches laced inside of my skin rub against the wall, and the water pours between my shoulder blades as I shut my eyes.

I should see nothing but pitch-black desolation behind my shut lids, void of image and consciousness, yet my mind is relentless in projecting her face and only her face.

Nausea rolls through my stomach, disgusted with myself for what I'd done. For touching her. For allowing myself to lose my self-control.

How could I have been so soft? So weak for someone?

I'd demanded her not to break in front of all those undeserving eyes, yet there I was, breaking apart in that mausoleum. The restraint I'd crafted had exploded in a matter of seconds at the sound of her empty voice.

I'm sickened by myself.

I am not these things, these feeble and tender things she made me. I'd been born with no weakness or emotion—that was what was preached from birth to sentencing. A cold-blooded killer was what I was to become, and any hint of feeling is a virus that needs to be extracted.

Lyra is a plague.

A disastrous affliction.

I'd known that being near her would do this—cause her infection to spread throughout my body before I even had a chance to recognize it was affecting me. She is a beacon of emotion and feeling, always pulling it out of people, involving all the wrong things for someone like me.

Killing her would be easier than living with this.

These visions of her. The tightness in my groin when her name floats across my mind. The physical pinch of pain that radiates in my chest when I remember what she sounded like moaning my name.

I want to hear them again. To taste the cherries on her tongue. To feel my skin against hers because, for the first time, my body didn't revolt against it.

Since I can recall, my mind has been a weapon. Always sharp, ready to rip the world in two. It had been ground and beaten into something lethal to use against just about everyone.

Yet, it had been quiet between her thighs. Completely empty of turmoil and thought in her arms. The only other place of solace that feels the same is at the piano.

The keys help me get lost.

She makes me want.

Want things I have no right to. Things I'm not qualified to handle.

And it's dangerous for people like me to want. To crave. To consume.

"To need people is to fail, Alexander. To want is for the weak. Are you weak, my boy?"

My hands tear through my hair, pushing through the white strands and pulling. Water cascades across me in constant drips as I bend over and open my lungs.

“Fuck!” I roar, the loudest my voice has ever rung in my ears.

I scream as the steam floats around me, scream until I feel my chest rattle in discomfort and the stone walls shake.

My mind wants to kill anything regarding Lyra, to slaughter all the thoughts that spiral around her and pull her apart until nothing remains.

But my body wants to keep her.

My flesh is weak, overpowering hormones trying to take over all the years of discipline I’d mastered. One quirky, bug-loving girl is enough to demolish everything I’d built.

Lyra. Lyra. Lyra. Lyra.

I scrawl her name along the walls of my mind while trying desperately to scrub it clean after every line. Once again, I scream, this feeling too much for me to take.

There’s a reason why I’d stayed away. Why I’d ignored her in the first place, had avoided being in the same space as her.

I know what she is to me.

Lyra. Lyra. Lyra. Lyra.

I can feel my voice starting to give. I’d given too much time for her to fester inside of me. And I was allowing it to continue, allowing it to overrun everything.

What would your father think if he saw this, Thatcher? Do you think your father would have done something this dramatic? Would he have even cared?

He easily slept with women. Took them out on dates, walked them to the door and kissed them goodnight without a second thought, able to come home and cut up her friend if he wanted to.

He’d even fooled Lyra’s mother.

And yet, here I am, losing my mind in the shower after one stupid moment that should have never happened.

He is better than you are.

I let my mind emotionally abuse me back into control, berate myself until I feel restraint flow back into my body, and I pluck her out. When my voice gives out, I take another prolonged moment before forcing the switch in my mind to click back into place.

“One,” I croak, inhaling deeply through my nose, and my head feels light before I exhale. My fingers twist into my hair a little tighter than necessary before releasing it.

“Two.”

Another breath as I tilt my head, hearing the bones crack.

“Three.”

Last one.

When my eyes reopen, I feel the familiar numbness sweep over my shoulders. The indifference settles deep into my bones, allowing me to reach forward and click the button for the rain shower to cease its flow from the ceiling.

The warm bathmat meets my feet as I step out. Reaching for a towel to loop around my waist, I push myself back into autopilot, back into my strict routine where wandering thoughts do not belong.

I take my time as I cleanse my face, patting my skin dry before applying a toner evenly across my cheekbones. By the time I get to the moisturizing, everything feels normal again.

As normal as my life can be.

Meeting my gaze in the mirror, I stare at the reflection of the monster my father created. One that I’d crafted into something far more than even his wildest dreams but still his little Frankenstein.

“You have no emotion. You are unfeeling and just. If you feel, you kill it. You will be perfect, Alexander. You must.”

I wish the narrator in my mind would download an unfamiliar voice, one that doesn’t sound exactly like my father. Or maybe it’s a repressed memory resurfacing to remind me of what my role in life is.

Either way, I’ll be shoving my breakdown to the back of my mind and pretending it never happened. Because, for all intents and purposes, it didn’t. The next time I have to deal with Lyra, I’ll be telling her this agreement is over.

I don’t care if she begs and offers me her heart on a silver platter to eat.

I am done. With the teaching, her obsession with me, all of it.

She will go back to being irrelevant to my life, and I will continue to erase her bit by bit until it’s as if she never made it out of that closet in the first place.

I’m pulling the dark green cashmere sweater over my head when I hear a gentle knock at the door. My eyebrow lifts in silent question. None of the

boys would knock, and the staff know not to bother me in my room, no matter the issue.

Which leaves one other person that could be waiting on the opposite side of my door.

“Come in,” I call, watching the handle turn and my grandmother’s heeled feet walk through the door.

The large, pale-colored skirt and white button-down have been a staple in her wardrobe for as long as I can remember. She’s a woman who has everyone at her disposal yet insists on doing everything herself. It used to drive my grandfather insane.

“May,” I say, walking to my drawer and opening the top to pull out a pair of tan socks, “to what do I owe the pleasure?”

There is a deep sense of respect that I carry for my grandmother, one that has nothing to do with familial love or blood-bound loyalty but an appreciation for all she came from and what she has weathered in her life. Although she was wealthy for most of her adulthood, it was not without struggle, and I have watched her handle it for years with the grace others would kill for.

Few people can say they’ve lost their children to prison because of psychopathy, and that’s the reason she had to raise her only grandchild as her own, only to lose her husband shortly after.

Yet, here she stands with her spine straight and, more often than not, a smile on her aging face.

I think she might be the only person who never had a predisposition about me. Those who had once only seen me as a removed child had quickly changed their view after my father was arrested.

I’d become Ponderosa Springs’s next serial killer. A ticking time bomb of destruction.

Even though he’d deny it, my grandfather saw me differently, too. In his defense, he had to in order to keep me from making the same mistakes as my father. If he was going to help me, he needed to see me for what I was.

A cocktail of homicidal tendencies at a young age paired with childhood trauma.

Not her though—she’d always just seen me as Thatcher. Her grandson, who needed to be alone more often than other children, played the piano, and had a keen eye.

May treated me like she would've any other grandchild. I often forgot to tell her how much I appreciated that, but I tried my best in the little ways I knew how.

"You used to call me Baba when you were little. Did you know that?" she asks as she walks farther into my room with several letters in her hands.

My eyebrows furrow, scoffing at the idea of me having a nickname for my grandmother. I'd never been an affectionate or loving child.

"Can't say I do," I reply, walking to sit on my bed to pull my socks onto my feet. "You sure you don't have another grandchild you're thinking about?"

"Your mother used to call me Babushka after you were born. It's Russian for grandmother. I think it helped her miss home less." She thumbs through the stack of mail, "You obviously couldn't pronounce that at your age, so you stuck with Baba."

It could've been entirely possible, but my mind won't let me travel that far back in my memories. Everything before her death had a thick fog covering it, a haze that made it hard to remember much of anything other than what I'd been told.

"Are you visiting me to request I call you Baba again? Unfortunately, May, I think you may have traveled from your wing of the house to be disappointed," I say with a light tone, enough to let her know I'm joking but that I also won't ever be calling her that again.

She rolls her eyes at me, but there is a gentle smile painting her lips. She drops the mail beside me, and I glance over at the small stack of letters. When I lean up, I find her standing in front of me.

"I came to drop off your mail." She hums, looking at it. "He wrote."

I know who he is already. I'd been expecting it, and I don't need to hear her say it to know it's from my father.

I sigh. "He always does."

Every one I get, I read through briefly, scanning the neat handwriting that details his day-to-day life inside solitary confinement. The unanswered questions he always asks, constantly wondering what I am doing and where I am.

Once I'm finished, I crumple it up and toss it into the trash. Every single one.

I know the only reason he does it is out of hope. That one day I will reply and come crawling back for his praise. He wants me to engage with

him so that he can see what his legacy has done. For me to fuel his already enormous ego by showing him I have continued killing in his name.

The only reason I keep reading is the power trip I get from them, knowing I'm the one in control, his connection to the outside world. He desperately needs me to feed his need to kill, and I never give it to him.

I'm the one in charge now. I have the power, and I'll die before giving it back.

"You're not him. You know that, don't you?" The feeling of her fingers brushing my wet hair out of my face makes me cringe.

It's not a malicious touch, just a grandmother showing affection for her grandson, and because of the respect I have for her, I let her do it without complaint.

Even though I hate it.

With ease, she places two fingers beneath my chin, lifting my face so that I'm looking at her.

"Don't you?"

I believe in eye contact. It's a nonverbal social cue that projects confidence, high self-esteem, and assertiveness. It can intimidate people into submission if done correctly. The subtle art of showing people you are secure in yourself and do not fear what they might see when they look into your eyes.

I don't believe in eye contact with May.

There is this constant sadness inside them, a constant sheet of tears over her eyes from the misery she lives with. I don't want to make that worse by letting her see what I have become.

What I let my father make me into.

It would only break what's left of her heart. To look at me and see the son she lost. To know that despite her love, the homemade muffins, and summer trips, there was nothing she could've done to change me.

Henry had done too much damage. I'd seen too much and accepted my fate a long time ago.

I almost felt guilty for being this way, if only because of May.

Almost.

"I'm aware," I say, clearing my throat and turning my hand from her touch so that her fingers slip from my chin.

"Sometimes I don't think you are."

A defeated breath falls from her lips as she steps back from me, giving me space but not leaving the room just yet. She lingers, walking towards the standard black piano placed near the corner of my room.

Striking one key, I can hear how long it's been since I've played on that piano. More often than not, I'm using the one in the basement. I stand and walk over to the instrument, taking a seat on the bench.

She stands at the opposite end, looking over at me across the slick black surface. Her features reflect on the glossy lid as I glance down at the keys, my fingers brushing across the tops of them with a featherlight touch.

I take my time rolling up my sleeves to my elbows as I look up at her.

"Any requests?" I ask, a lighthearted smirk on my lips.

She is a sucker for my playing. It doesn't matter how upset or angry she is, she loves to hear me play. And when I know I can't give her the words she needs or the comfort she deserves, I give her what I can.

"Play me something that tells me how you've been, Alexander."

How I've been?

How have I been?

Recently? Or in the past few years? Because there is a range of expression for what's happened to me as of late. But there's only one overwhelming word that comes to me.

As I peer down at the stitched gash across my palm, horizontal in the middle of my skin, the memory of where it came from is quick to present itself.

Tormented. Plagued and put in a place of excruciating agony every time I am in her space. Somehow, I know exactly the piece of music that projects that sort of tortured anguish.

Taking a moment to settle on the piano bench, I make myself comfortable before I play. I allow myself to experience the same torture I felt in the shower, only this time, I have somewhere to put it. The opening of movement two in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 is haunting.

My fingers begin to dance across the keys, a gothic waltz for the opening piano solo. It is perhaps the rawest expression of longing and grief ever transformed into sound. I can feel the subtle ache in the tune, as if the black and white keys have begun to sigh, their echoes sobbing as the piano sings with a solemn voice.

In my subconscious, I can hear the faint whisper of her name in my ear, urging me to pour every tortuous emotion I've felt for her into the song.

The noise is a creative representation of how twisted everything inside of me feels.

As the song progresses, my shoulders bear the weight of the isolation it evokes, swaying back and forth in a fluid motion as I imagine the orchestra joining in to weave the beauty of pain and melancholic desire.

Lyra, Lyra, Lyra, Lyra.

Her name hums in sync with each downward stroke. Behind my shut eyes and furrowed brow, I can see her. Last year's All Hallows Eve ball, dressed in that crimson ball gown that flattered every curve she owns. In my mind, she spins, twirling and twirling to my music while she is wrapped in the arms of a man in black, who cradles her fragile body. His black hood only allows me to see flashes of his ghastly skin.

He carries her, leading their dance with poise, and she follows, elegantly floating with every note. She is waltzing with death, a divinity who is so grateful that his sickly flesh can hold a human without causing harm.

Centuries of searching the world for the person who could withstand the fatality of his hand, only to find it in her. The girl the world has forgotten. But not him, the reaper of souls and killer of spirits.

She would never be forgotten by him.

I move faster, watching her steps quicken in my mind. Although the three families of instruments are not physically playing, I can still hear them supporting each other, following along with the sweeping gesture of the keys.

Producing the perfect danse macabre.

The whine of a violin and bellow of a trumpet, each one, brass and string alike, coming together to mourn. To feel pain and show what that sounds like for each of them.

Lyra, Lyra, Lyra, Lyra.

I hear it one last time as I finish the section, completing the piece and the dance all at once. My eyes reopen, reminding me I am indeed in my bedroom with my grandmother still standing across from me in awe.

A comfortable silence remains until May speaks again.

"Every time I hear you play, I think about how much joy it would've brought to your mother."

I remove my fingers from the instrument, tightening my jaw as I shake my head. With ease, I stand up, moving back towards my bed to go through my mail in order to escape this conversation.

"I know you don't remember her much, but your mother loved you very much. You were the only reason she didn't leave and return to Russia," she continues as I walk towards the bed.

"For that, I apologize," I say sharply over my shoulder. "She might still be alive had she left."

I rest on the edge of the bed, scooping up the mail just in time for her to point an accusatory finger in my direction. Suddenly, I feel like I'm a child again. Rarely was I reprimanded, but occasionally, she would pull out that finger and wield it as some sort of magic wand to keep me in place.

"Don't do that," she scolds me. "The last thing she would have done is blame you for her death. Her staying was a decision she made with love in her heart for you. Don't make it anything else but that, Alexander."

I pick through the letters, tossing my father's to the back of the pile. Medical school letter, trust inquiry, credit card application—ah, there it is. My fingers pull at the manila envelope addressed to my grandfather from a private detective service in Washington.

As I toss the rest of the junk beside me, something catches my eye. It slides from the pile, a square envelope that is solid black. My eyebrows furrow as I pick it up, rotating it to see my name in scrawling white letters.

No address or sender, just my name.

I furrow my eyebrows, pulling at the lip of the envelope. "Can we talk about this another time? I have something I need to do."

When I pull the white sheet of paper from inside, there is a simple note written across it in awful penmanship.

Ponderosa Springs only has room for so much evil. If you don't leave now, you'll never get out alive. Leave before it gets worse.

-X

What the hell is this? Pretty Little Liars? Have we really resorted to anonymous threats now? Alistair is going to love this, just as much as Rook is going to enjoy lighting it on fire.

I scoff, just before I hear the clicks of heels across the floorboard. I look up to see May resting by the door, ready to leave.

"You know I don't enjoy talking about them. Can you please stop hurting your own feelings by bringing them up?"

The harshness in my tone is more than I intended; the words, however, are true. But I still regret speaking them to her when I know she has no ill intent.

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Yes, you did. Don’t apologize on account of me. You’re man enough to say them. At least own up to it.”

A smirk hits my lips, knowing my witty tongue came from the woman standing in front of me.

“We—”

“Do you know why you love the piano so much?” May interrupts me, her arms crossed in front of her chest. I don’t have to look to know she is giving me the Do not talk back to me, boy eyes right now.

“Because it requires structure and talent, both of which I am supremely gifted with,” I say with a little snark. “That’s verbatim from my music teacher, if you forgot.”

May gives me a tired grin. She knows I give the same reaction every time she tries to wiggle in conversation about either of my parents.

One is a stain that I’d like to forget, and the other is a stranger.

Neither have a hold over me anymore.

“Besides your charming overconfidence,” she chides. “Talia used to keep classical music on in your home. It would ring through the halls day and night. She’d been a ballerina when she was younger. You were only two when she sat you down on the bench to play.”

The smirk that I once wore is gone as a sharp tightness wraps around my gut. A coldness I’ve never known before settles into my shoulders as I try to shuffle through my mind to find the truth in that, but I come up empty.

“Whether you don’t like to admit it or don’t remember, it doesn’t matter,” she says. “You have her to thank for your talent and desire to play. Every day, I watch you become more and more like her. I’d like to think she would love the man you have become, Alexander.”

“Somehow, I think that’s a lie, May,” I say, knowing no mother could love a son who’d done what I have. What I crave to do.

“I still love your father,” she says. “We love our children despite the bad. Every day, I mourn the loss of my little boy. It pains me to know what he’s done, but I still love him.”

The click of my door closing echoes inside my chest, once again absorbed by the silence, leaving me to ponder if playing the piano was simply my mind chasing the mother I never knew and had helped bury.

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ALL THESE WICKED GAMES

LYRA

“So, besides him having bad blood with James, we have nothing else tying Conner to the Halo or the murders?” Briar asks me.

Frustration is evident in her usually calm voice. I tuck the phone between my ear and shoulder as I peer through the open, tiled space, checking beneath each of the eight stalls to make sure I’m the only person occupying the upperclassman shower house.

I nod, even though she can’t see it. “I told you guys everything he told me. I didn’t have time to ask him anything else. Someone depositing a limb in the courtyard like a psychotic Easter Bunny rudely interrupted me. It couldn’t have been Conner anyway—he was with me the entire time before the leg showed up.”

When I’m sure that it’s only me hidden away inside here, I deposit my bag onto the sleek white counter, careful not to let it slip inside one of the many sinks. With maximum effort, I toe my yellow rain boots off, pieces of mud knocking off them and onto the floor as I do.

“Sage says that Rook thinks it’s Easton. Won’t entertain a thought of anyone else.”

I huff out a laugh, “Rook blames him for fucking climate change.”

If it was possible, he’d blame Easton Sinclair for every bad thing on the planet. It’s not like I blame him; Stephen’s son had never been a nice guy. A toxic, manipulative golden boy with a misogynistic streak a mile wide.

He’d not only put Sage through living hell, but he’d harassed Briar early on, and gods knows he’s been battling his ego against every single one of the boys since he could fucking talk. So like his father in the way they have to make sure everyone is aware that they have the biggest dick in the room,

completely unaware that we all know they bust too quickly and couldn't find the clit with a compass.

"Let's be honest," I continue. "Rook's just looking for an excuse to burn the other side of Easton's face off. He has no actual proof other than that. You heard about the other body they found yesterday. Do we really think the guy who almost threw up during a frog dissection our sophomore year of high school could murder someone?"

After struggling with trying to wiggle out of my pants for far too long, a light bulb finally clicks on inside of my brain. I slide the phone onto the counter, pressing the speaker button so that I can undress without having to be an acrobat.

"As much as I hate that fucking prick, I don't think he has the guts to leave a woman's torso on the front steps of city hall, even if he's doing his daddy's bidding."

Two body parts from two separate people, within a week. It makes my stomach twist, knowing whoever is doing this has a mission, one that I can't shake is tied to us.

"Haley Townson." I say her name softly, a whisper of remembrance, "She was graduating valedictorian this year. That's whose torso it was. This killer, he doesn't care about being discreet or hiding. He wants us to know him."

It would've been much easier for this unknown threat to go after someone with less popularity, a woman or girl who would draw less attention to their actions, but they are purposely going after targets with status.

They want to be caught. They want us to know we are the final target of these killings. If the bodies weren't enough, the latest message scrawled across Hayley's belly was.

I'll only stop if you do.

Stop looking into things. Stop killing people on their payroll.

It's a pendulum swinging lower and lower by the section. Either let it slice into you or give in. Either way, people are going to die, whether by the hand of a copycat murderer or sold into sex slavery.

Neither sits well with me, and it feels like this constant weight of picking the lesser evil.

I'm pulling my shirt off my head, leaving me in nothing but a bra and underwear, when Briar catches me off guard with her next question.

“You don’t think it’s Thatcher? Copying his dad’s technique? It would make the most sense—”

“No, it wouldn’t,” I interrupt, my eyebrows furrowed, watching my face fall in the wall-length mirror in front of me. “You can think what you want about him, but the last thing he would do is put the boys at risk. You have to know that. Regardless of who his father was, he would not do that to them. Leaving random body parts around would do nothing but bring unwanted attention. So, no, I don’t think it’s Thatch. You shouldn’t either.”

He’s also too precise and too talented to sling his work out in public, but I can’t say that. I promised him I wouldn’t say anything about what he told me or showed me. I’d given him my word, and his extracurricular activities aren’t my secrets to share.

“I’m just trying to explore all our options, Lyra,” Briar argues. “The people I love are knee-deep in shit. Thatcher knows his father’s routine, how he did things. He’s the only person.”

“Yeah, and so does everyone else across the States. The investigation was on national news outlets, blogs, and gods knows what else,” I retort, annoyance clear in my voice.

“I don’t want to argue about him with you.” She sighs, and I know she’s running a hand through her hair. “I’m just trying to protect you. I just...I hope whatever it is you see in him doesn’t get you hurt at the end of this.”

Me too, I want to say.

Just not in the way she thinks.

I’m not afraid of him killing me. I know he won’t. If he wanted to, he would’ve already done it by now.

But he has all the power in the world to break me. To take my bleeding heart and crush it between his lengthy fingers. Even though right now he doesn’t deserve my loyalty, considering he hasn’t spoken to me in days. It’s been nothing but read receipts and radio silence since the mausoleum.

I still felt pulled to the parts of him I’d seen that day in my macabre hideaway. The pieces of him I’d collected over the years that no one else ever witnessed. I was clinging to those, and the hope that they saw something in me, too.

“I get it. I do, but the people you love trust Thatcher. He wouldn’t do this. He isn’t his father,” I say despite myself, wishing he would believe those words as much as I did. “I’m getting a shower before leaving campus, I’ll text you when I’m home.”

There is a beat of silence, like she wants to say something else but doesn't.

"Just, be safe." She breathes.

"Wait, wait!" I say just before she hangs up, "Are we going to the night circus tomorrow?"

Her laughter rings in my ears. "Maybe, I've got a huge Calc exam coming up and I need to study."

"It's Halloween, Briar. Which means candy and costumes. You can't put the numbers away for one night?"

"I'll think about it," she hums with a smile in her voice. "I love you, Lyra. I'll see you in the morning."

She hangs up before I can return the sentiment. I want to be frustrated at her for painting Thatcher as the villain. Truly I do, but I also can't blame her. Not when I know where she is coming from, not when I understand all she wants is to keep the ones she loves safe.

The silence of the Rothchild District community showers embraces me. It's rare for anyone to use them. The space was reserved for upperclassman only, which meant most of those eligible to live here could also live off campus. Considering everyone here blew their nose in hundred-dollar bills, it was uncommon for them to remain in a dorm.

Which meant the tiled house was always open. Always empty. And ideal for when I didn't want to drive home from school covered in leaves and mud. Today had been perfect, minus my freezing fingers that were covered with dirt.

I'd gotten to harvest today. Spent the entirety of my time foraging through the woods surrounding campus in search of silky nests woven between trees and certain plants.

Spider season had arrived with the turn of the fall leaves.

While butterflies, moths and beetles had been a species I'd loved since I was young, my curiosity with the eight-legged creature everyone is so fearful of had only developed recently.

They were one of the only insects I'd yet to make a display with. While I'd always admired their creative web spins and behavior, it wasn't until I binged a documentary on Australia's spider season that my curiosity launched into a full-fledged obsession.

The idea of creating a flat display, inside a rectangular frame with an artificial web spun along the inside, creating the perfect background for a

slew of spider species. It would look incredible hanging above my fireplace mantle.

It had come to me so quickly that I'd barely gotten time to write it down before researching which species I'd be placing inside. Any of the local spiders I can collect, I prefer to do so on my own. It feels more intimate than ordering all the specimens. Plus, I get to go digging through the forest, which, in my mind, is always a bonus.

Luckily, I'd been able to collect a few different egg sacks, so hopefully I'll be able to hatch them properly so that I can follow their life span before using them in one of my taxidermy displays. I'd already set up the tank and incubation. All I needed to do was keep a close eye on the enclosure for a few weeks.

Once I finish rinsing the dirt from my boots, I step into the shower. Pulling the thin black curtain to provide me privacy for both my thoughts and body. The steady stream of hot water soothing the chill in my bones.

Excitement thrums through me for the first time in a week. My passion for insects has always been this quiet light that hibernates within me. Glowing when I need joy or warmth. A flame throughout all my dim moments.

I can remember the first time a foster care guardian had asked me why bugs? when she'd found a box of grasshoppers stuffed beneath my bed. Why didn't I choose a hobby that was more normal, like Barbie dolls or books?

I didn't have an answer besides they were cool and I liked the way their little legs felt on my palm. But now that I've grown this love, and this craft, my answer is a little more concrete.

It is simple. Every spider, moth, and beetle has a category. They all have a part to play in building the bigger picture. All of them are predictable in their own ways, working together to provide larger systems with ease. They do so much yet go unnoticed and ridiculed because of their features.

From biological control to reducing the population of pests that threaten crops to medicinal treatments that require the sting of the bee to provide relief for those with chronic illness. They creep and slither across the earth, pollinating, recycling, always quietly doing their job.

They are these abnormal and contextually-dark enigmas. Ones that I have always found myself drawn to, even as a little girl. They are the only

thread I have tethering me to the girl I was before my mother died. My only connection to Scarlett.

My fingers scrub through my scalp working in the product, while I let the warm water rush the stress away from my thoughts. Trying to let go of the weight of Conner's offer that has been heavy on my mind.

I know I shouldn't trust him because of who he has aligned himself with. But he'd given me the opportunity to nurture the little light inside of me, to continue it for a career. One that I know would make me happy.

An opportunity that meant leaving everything I'd forged here behind. My friends. My life. My mother's memory.

It would be a fresh start without my True Crime Network past making a constant appearance. A new life where I could be anyone I wanted to be. But, also, a clean slate without the people who'd seen me literally at my worst.

I'd be leaving them and all these troubled memories we'd created behind. Briar and Sage, the Loner's Society. It would all remain in Ponderosa Springs where nothing but evil resides.

An entire map away from Thatcher.

No more early morning jogs with him setting the pace, no more sneaking into his dorm to steal sweaters or bodywash. I would be completely and utterly alone, without my obsession to keep me company.

My heart revolted against that thought. Threatened to nearly stop beating, but that soft glow of light inside of me hummed with happiness.

The sound of the heavy door creaking open interrupts the steady thrum of silence, making me jump. My thoughts drifting away and bring me back to reality. Footsteps clicking against the floor seconds later and I silently hope no one says anything to me about the pile of dirty clothes at the sink.

But, thankfully, whoever else has joined me just turns on the shower in front of me without a peep. I continue to wash the grime of the day off my body and rinsing my hair of the conditioner when I hear a stream of water start in the stall behind me.

I'd only heard one set of footsteps walk in. So, it made no sense for them to have both showers running. But just as I am about to question the odd motive, another turns on. Then another, and another. Until all eight of the single stalls are running in tandem.

My chest tightens just as the lights go out. Fear bubbles in my stomach and all I can seem to think about is that I'm going to die as a cliché.

Stranded, naked, and wet, in a shower, like every horror movie I've ever seen.

The dark takes over my vision, barely allowing me to see my hand in front of my face. I quickly jerk the towel I'd brought in down, clicking the water off and curling it around my body.

"Hello?" I call out, my other senses heightened by the lack of light. My ears strain to hear any slight movement, but silence is the only reply.

I tell myself it's just someone playing a stupid prank. Try to repeat that over and over, in order to convince myself of that truth, but with women's body parts appearing out of thin air, it's hard to think of anything other than that.

My fingers tighten into a ball, curling into the fabric of the towel as I pull back the curtain slightly, peeking my head through. I'm met with my darkness and the keen awareness that someone is here with me.

Watching.

Chills tickle my arms, making the hair stand straight up. My throat tightens a bit, as I feel the presence of someone who isn't supposed to be in here. I silently pray it's a ghost. Which is a new low for even me to sink to.

If I could just get to my phone, I could call someone for help. I'd left it laying out on the counter just a few feet away from the shower, I could reach it in time. Couldn't I?

There was only one way to find out.

I take two slow breaths, just to steady my wobbly confidence before I dart out of the shower. My wet feet smack against the titled floor and I hope to the gods I don't slip and crack my head open because of a ghost. Or worse, I make a serial killer's job that much easier.

The sprint to the sinks feels so much longer than it'd been moments ago, and without the use of my eyes I hurl myself forward, using my body to determine my location.

My stomach collides with the marble, knocking the breath out of me. I try to suck in air as I use one of my hands to swipe across the cool surface in search of my phone.

Just as my fingers discover the familiar device, I feel the looming energy of someone standing behind me. With little options, I spin around with my phone facing outward so the bright glow will show my tormenter's face.

At the very least, I can see who will take me to meet my maker.

“Rule number three,” he mutters. “Always have your guard up. How do you expect to sneak up on a target when the target may already be sneaking up on you?”

Thatcher’s face is illuminated by my screen, his angular jaw filled with tension as his eyes peer down at me. In this light they are so dark, almost black, and filled with something I’ve never seen in them before.

I clutch the towel to myself, shaking. “You couldn’t have thought about giving me a lesson without the heart attack? Or are those things tethered?”

“You smell like me.”

He ignores me, as if I wasn’t talking. As if this revelation is more important than him submerging me into pitch darkness and scaring the shit out of me.

“Why do you smell like me?” he asks, demanding an answer.

A week ago, I’d seen what he’d looked like with lust painting his face, how unnerved and all-consuming he becomes when he allows the desire to take over. I’d thought seeing Thatcher out of control would scare me. But it had the opposite effect entirely.

Even now, as handsome as he is, it was nothing compared to how breathtaking he had been the other day. Panting above me, lost in the chaos that tugged us together and refused to let go. Pieces of his hair had fallen in front of his face, his shirt disheveled and eyes the wildest shade of blue I’d ever seen.

He was a mess.

Thatcher Pierson had been a mess, just for me.

And he’d never been more beautiful.

Now, standing here. He was the Thatch I knew. The passive man, with a rigid spine, staring at me with an unreadable gaze. Both versions of him made me weak.

Maybe it’s because I’m angry at him for ignoring me, or that I just don’t care if he knows, but with my head high, I tell him, “I stole your bodywash from your dorm bathroom.”

The muscle in his jaw ticks, his brows slanting, “Why?”

My arms cocoon around myself, keeping the light directed between us. Trying to shield the vulnerable parts of myself from him, even though he’d already seen the worst of them.

“I like the way you smell,” I say, chewing the inside of my cheek. “I like the way you smell on me.”

Something rushes across his face and I know it's the memory of his body between my thighs. When his smell was smothering my own. I know he remembers it, how it felt, how he felt.

Heat sparks between us, his breath fanning across my face, and I realize how badly I've missed him the week we've been apart. I'd been so angry, still am, and had forced myself not to follow him around.

Denying myself my favorite addiction.

"My sweaters, too?" He pushes, a realization clicking in his mind as he lifts one of his fingers to flick away a stray piece of my wet hair. I give him a slow nod as my cheeks warm. Thinking of all the clothing articles I've stolen from him in the past.

"Hollow Heights really needs to work on their dorm locks. I like the cashmere ones." I mutter, a soft smile on my lips.

It's only a prolonged second, just a singular moment where he lets something other than void expression cover his face. Where we exist between the shadows of our past and the dawning of our future.

Except life has a funny way of reminding me that I can't live here forever. No matter how badly I want to, something will always pull us in separate directions. He will always keep himself at arm's length. Just out of my reach.

"No more," he says, allowing his face to morph into that blank sheet of emptiness I've come to know so well. A pit of nothing. "This is done, pet. You're done. The following me around, our lessons. All of that is over."

I can feel my heart plummet.

This is what he does, he cuts. He slices up the people who try to get too close so they will step away. Anytime someone tries to sink below the surface, he swiftly guts them with an expert hand.

Thatcher is not a solid wall that you just break down with force or crumble over time.

He is a fortress of thorns. Splintered wood and shards of glass. All fragments of what his father left behind. Deadly weapons to keep him protected from feeling. From emotion. From being human.

"Bullshit." I say with a harsh bite, "That's fucking bullshit. You're only backing out of this because you felt something for me."

Except I was not everyone. I was not someone who would easily shy from his challenge. I would not let the knives of his fear of me keep me out. Not when a little blood had never scared me.

He scoffs, as if they're the most unreasonable words anyone has ever spoken. Taking steps away from me to flick on the switch, burning my eyes with the abrupt light.

"Don't flatter yourself. What happened between us was a mistake. Do not let that hopeless heart inside of your chest think otherwise."

The coldness in his tone makes me shiver.

My throat narrows a bit. The tangled fairy tale I'd spent building the past few days was not disintegrating. Evaporating into a nightmare I wanted to wake up from.

A fucking mistake?

"You're a fucking coward. My hopeless heart wasn't the only thing at fault, your hands were between my thighs, you stubborn prick." I hiss.

I'm not sure who I'm more frustrated with. Him for so easily brushing off what happened between us, for being able to look at me and not remember how desperate his hands were on my body, how lewd his words were in my ear. That he can stand there with no remorse on his porcelain face for ripping away something that felt this good just because he can.

Or myself.

For thinking I could get this close to him unscathed.

"Nothing but a fucking coward," I say, letting my anger aid my aching heart at his blatant rejection.

Refusing to look away from his eyes, even though all I want to do is sink into myself and disappear from the world. To evaporate from his line of sight and never reappear. But that would be giving him exactly what he wants.

It would be giving up on him.

Thatcher may be a lot of horrible things, to me and other people. He may want to hurt me with his words right now and I may be so angry at him that I'm ten seconds from clawing his eyes out, but he doesn't deserve to be given up on.

The world had already done that.

The way his head snaps towards me looks painful, his upper lip curling. "Watch your mouth, pet."

"I heard worse come out of your lips a week ago. When my pussy was covered in your blood. You do not get to patronize me," I fire back.

Frustration builds and he takes a large hand, running it down his face, like he's two seconds from ripping the world apart with his teeth. It's

probably the most emotion he's felt in his life and watching him navigate it is painful.

"Let it die!" He yells, a piece of hair falling down in his face. "All of it. The night your mother was killed. The mausoleum and every second that has to do with me. Do you get that? I want you dead to me, Lyra."

We had been alive in that crypt. Our bodies thriving within each other. His brutal silver tongue would not change that. It would not change the way I felt, no matter how much it hurt.

But right now, I want him to ache. It's wrong to seek revenge, to wound him just because he doesn't understand his feelings. But I can't help it.

I want him to hurt the way I am, so that when he walks away, I'm not the only one with a gashed wound.

If I bleed, he's going to bleed with me.

"So, it's over, the deal, all of it?" The steam from the shower billowing in front of my face, the towel still wrapped around my body keeping me warm.

"Yes," he says, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows roughly.

I scoop my clean clothes out of my bag, tucking them into my chest with a little more attitude than necessity.

"Great," I sneer, turning my back to him as I stride towards the dressing rooms. "I'll tell Conner you said hello."

I have no desire to see his reaction or continue this conversation further when he will only continue to break what little connection we have built. All I want is to get dressed and let him wither in jealousy at the idea of Conner Godfrey being my shoulder to cry on.

Let him think the worst.

Except I don't get very far, Thatch's fingers snatch my elbow, squeezing tightly with all the words he refuses to say out loud. The pain makes me face him; eyebrows furrowed in annoyance as I do.

A storm of violence thunders on his shoulders, a sort of dark look that promises nothing but misery and pain. One I imagine he has when he's looking into the eyes of someone he is about to slice up or grind into tiny pieces.

His free hand jerks on my towel, inexpedient and I don't have time to stop it from sliding off my body. My nipples harden when the cool air traces the sensitive flesh, my mind hating him, but my body thriving beneath his gaze.

“Do not play games with me, Lyra Abbott.” He says in a voice like nightshade. Cloaked in darkness and immoral intentions.

A warning.

His eyes trace the lines of my exposed body, caressing them without even lifting a hand, and my stomach burns with hunger. An involuntary twitch of my thighs is all it takes for a smirk to tilt on his mouth.

Like he’s won something.

“How pathetic,” he hums. “Your pussy aches for my hatred more than it will ever crave another man’s love. Isn’t that sad, darling phantom?”

One of his fingers reaches for my collarbone and it takes all my physical strength to grab it before he makes contact with my skin. I hold my head up high, even though my spine feels as if it might crack.

“You can’t be the man who touches me and the one who causes me suffering,” I say with impressive steadiness. “You can be one or the other, Thatcher. But you can’t be both.”

The calm confidence he had moments ago falters. He jerks his hand from my grip, sliding it into the pocket of his dark slacks. We stand there, two halves of the same whole with nothing but silence between us.

I would battle heaven and hell for him. The world’s most addictive creature. My angel of death and not so secret obsession. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for the tormented man in front of me.

And while it may shatter my addictive heart that only seeks his love, I refuse to allow him to treat me badly just because he is hurting. His indifference and snark are one thing, but bitter attacks due to his inexperience with feelings will not be at the cost of me.

I won’t do that.

“Thatcher, we said grab her, not keep her locked in here.” A voice from the door says.

I clutch my clothes to my bare chest, just as Thatcher steps directly in front of me, placing both hands on either side of my body to lay flat against the wall. Shielding me from Rook who is talking from the door.

His smell mingles with the steam, strong and thick. Covering me in nothing but him. I look up at him through my lashes, barely listening to his friend as he peers down at me with quiet curiosity.

“You owe me nothing, Lyra,” he says, the look of genuine pleading etched on his face. “But I need you to tell them no. When they ask you for this favor, regardless of how you feel about me, I need you to say no.”

My eyebrows furrow together, “What do—”

“Bug Girl!” Rook shouts, “We need to talk. I’m sure Thatcher wasn’t nice in asking about it, but if it helps, I’ll say please!”

“She’ll be out in a minute, you impatient child,” he says over his shoulder, waiting for the sound of the door to shut closed before moving away from me.

“Say no,” Thatcher says one last time, before disappearing from view and leaving me to put on my clothes.

I take my time with getting dressed, making sure my emotions are completely in check before I go out there and talk to people who have no idea what just occurred in this community shower.

To stand in front of his friends and act as if Thatcher Pierson isn’t the man my heart refuses to quit on. The man all my dreams centered around, who my body craves, and my mind loathes.

No, I can’t show any of that.

So, I take my time, until I can school my features into the picture of unknowing and apathy.

I gather my things and push the door open, the cool autumn air chilling my damp hair immediately. My fingers sink into the pockets of my cardigan, the smell of smoke tickling my nose.

Alistair is leaning against the side of the building, cigarette pinched between his thumb and pointer finger as he passes it off to Rook. The burning cherry pouring gray smoke into the air.

They both look at me as I come outside, while Thatcher would rather look anywhere else but in my direction.

“Who died?” I say with a joking tone, my palms sweating slightly with nerves, because they very well might tell me that another body has shown up.

Except it’s odd for the three of them to seek me out without the other girls present. It means whatever they need is from me and me only.

“No one,” Alistair grunts, his voice low and clipped, “yet.”

I rock back and forth on my heels, chewing the inside of my cheek. “What do you guys need from me? Did something happen to Briar or Sage?”

“No,” Rook says quickly. “They are fine, and you can tell them about this conversation when we are done, but we wanted to ask you alone so that

the decision is yours and only yours. We know how protective our girls can get when it comes to you, Lyra.”

“This is ridiculous—”

“We voted, Thatcher. You lost. It’s no longer up to you,” Rook interrupts with an intense tone, one I’ve rarely heard from him. “It’s up to Lyra.”

Thatch tightens his jaw, staring at Rook with a harsh glare. “It’s a reckless idea, one that shouldn’t have been brought to vote.”

“Reckless ‘cause it was mine?” Rook bites, “or because you didn’t come up with it first? Don’t worry, fragile one, you can have all the credit if it means you’ll pull that stick out from your ass.”

Friend against friend.

Whatever this plan is, it’s brought two inseparable people toe-to-toe. Literally. Thatcher’s black dress shoes touch the tips of Rook’s Vans, the four-inch difference in height giving Thatch the advantage as he stares down at what could only be described as a living flame.

“There are easier ways to die, Van Doren.” Thatcher sneers, his teeth shining in the moonlight as he grins, “But if you want to play, we can play.”

This is two seconds shy of being a brutal brawl that I have no desire to watch. Knowing both of their rage directed at one another would make for an equally bloody fight.

Rook takes a draw of his cigarette, blowing the smoke directly into his friend’s face with a smirk of his own. “Try me.”

I take a step towards them, placing a hand on Rook’s shoulder as I gaze towards his friend who looks intent on bringing a little blood into their verbal argument.

“Calm down,” I say lightly. “Just tell me what you need from me. I don’t mind helping.”

Thatcher’s gaze shoots straight to my hand, resting on another man’s shoulder.

“They want you to get close to Easton,” he bites, never taking his eyes off my fingers. “Lead you to him, like a sheep to slaughter. Bait.”

My eyebrows furrow and I glance at Alistair for confirmation pulling my hand back into my pockets.

“He’s dramatic,” Alistair says, with a sigh. “We just need you to close enough to watch him. Every time we try to get close, he notices us. We need

someone quiet who can watch his movements, listen in on conversations that are private. That's all."

Pride.

It surges through me in waves. No one has ever needed me before, not like this. And although they were scouting me out for my invisibility, it still felt nice to be needed.

Even though it was dangerous, I wanted to be a part of this. To help those missing girls and my friends. Up to this point, I'd felt helpless, but this was my chance. To help them gather information, to maybe figure out who is running the Halo so we can end this for good.

What didn't make sense, though, was why was Thatch so against it.

"We won't let anything happen to you, contrary to what he thinks," Alistair says, tossing his head towards Thatch with a grunt. "It's completely up to you."

They need a ghost. Someone who is invisible, who can listen to the whispers that bounce off the walls during secret discussions. A person who blends in to the point of camouflage.

And that's me.

I look at Thatcher, thinking about what he asked of me in the shower, weighing my options of going against him and helping the people I care about. His eyes silently beg me to refuse, walk away and pretend they never asked me.

So, I look away from him.

"When should I start?"

BITTER IS THE WAR OF BROTHERS

THATCHER

Rule number twenty-two: Prepare for the consequences of your own actions.

It was one of the more difficult lessons to learn as a child. To revolt against your natural instincts and accept that your normal was not the same as anyone else's.

There had been this cat that somehow managed to sneak its way onto the estate. It was mewling and digging around in the garden when I'd found it covered in dirt with its fur matted.

I only remember because when I'd scooped it up, it hadn't even tried to hiss or scratch at me. Just curled into my chest and began a steady purr. I knew my father had a very strict no pets rule, but something about this cat called to my seven-year-old self.

The black coat, with the tips of its ears colored orange. It had been so trusting, so unafraid of me even though I could've had the worst intentions. I'm not sure why I kept it. Looking back, it would've been better off starving to death.

It had been easy at first. I let her roam around one of the caretaker cottages on the property and every day I would sneak food and water out. The cooks knew before my father, considering for an entire month I requested nothing but tuna sandwiches for lunch.

After my lessons, both educational and with my father, I would go to the cottage and read while it played at my feet or took naps in my lap. The only ray of light I can recall from that time.

I spent evenings listening, watching, and cleaning up murders. Scrubbing blood from floors while dead women hung in the background,

cleaning saws while my father took care of the body parts strewn across the table. But, for a few moments, I could just live in silence with another living creature. Surely, I was allowed to have this one small piece of joy, right? This secret, tiny, good thing.

I'd never been so brutally wrong.

It was late when Henry Pierson burst into my bedroom, the moon was high and the sun was far, far away from my home. No light, no good could come close to the doors of that manor.

He'd tossed the growing kitten on my comforter, its little whimper pulling me from my slumber. I'd pulled it into my arms as he stared down at me with empty eyes.

“You know the rules, Alexander.”

Something inside of me shut down that night. Whatever was left of my human soul disappeared. It was that moment, in the darkness of my room when he handed me a blade, that any good that may have existed within me was snuffed out.

“You’re named after a great king. I expect you to be great. Perfection has no room for kindness, for feeling,” he says, laying the knife into my small hands. “Caring about people, things, it makes no sense. Why care for something, anything, if it is just going to die? There is no point. Love is pointless, it does not live in you, Alexander.”

The last thing I can recall from that night, is his words in my ears just before I looked into the eyes of that small cat, the one who had trusted with me soft eyes until the very end. Everything went fuzzy the moment my hand curled around the blade.

But I know what I did. What I became.

There had not been a tear shed, not a disagreement on my tongue. Just unyielding dedication to be what he wanted. Desperation to accept the pure evil that coursed through my veins.

I knew what would happen if he found that thing. I knew what he would make me do to it. That was my consequence for a reckless action.

Just as my ghost running into the arms of Conner Godfrey is my consequence for the things I said to her. Yet these repercussions tasted bitter on my tongue.

I hadn’t expected her to be so...intense.

Apparently, I’d forgotten that Lyra Abbott was forged from crimson nights and sharp objects.

Beneath the girl she portrays to the world is a wielder of honed blades and rotten intentions. A viper with a nasty bite. A trauma soldier who still leaked pain and tasted of agony. She is the combination of life and death. The keeper of the reaper. A lovely grim death. A beautiful corpse.

And now, she is his.

No longer belonging to my cruel, cold fingers, instead she will find solace in Conner's cheap loafers and nauseating cologne. Maybe I was touting myself a little, but I could not keep myself from asking if he would become her new obsession.

Would he feed the addiction in her as I had? Would he be better?

"No costume? It's unlike you to not make a show, especially on Halloween."

I glance over my shoulder, a flash of leather in my doorway. "Black is the appropriate color to wear to funerals, isn't it?"

He snorts, not appreciating my humor.

Halloween night, the perfect opportunity for Ponderosa Springs to rake in money for a charity that most likely doesn't exist. Last year had been a fair. The year before a petting zoo. The board never missed a chance to suck people dry and use the funds for useless town maintenance or were straight up pocketing it.

It was a never-ending pit that town citizens were more than happy to toss their money into.

The Nightmare Circus.

A combination of swirlly red tents and All Hallows Eve. Where the dead are allowed to walk the human lands once again in order to revisit those pasts and seek vengeance on the ones who wronged their living souls.

I'd never gone trick or treating, but I'd come to enjoy Halloween. A night where everyone became spooky monsters and horrid villains. And I no longer required a mask. I could walk as the killer of killers and call it a costume. Free to remove the flesh I wore every day and expose what is decaying beneath.

"Nothing is going to happen to her tonight," he says as he twirls his fingers inside a cup of pens at my desk. "She's going to trail him at the charity circus and meet us in the parking lot at nine when they close. Lyra knows the rules, knows not to go anywhere without telling us. We will be there the entire time. It's going to be fine."

My molars grind together as I nod my head in dull agreement, keeping my mouth shut as I walk towards my mirror to fix my collar. I didn't plan on arguing this point with him again, not when I knew what would happen if something did, in fact, happen to her.

"This isn't even about Lyra."

I tilt my head in his direction, looking at Alistair for the first time since he arrived. His dark eyes are watching me like a hawk, as if he's capable of seeing past the mirage I present to him. Out of all the guys, he might be the closest.

"Pray tell, you all-knowing god, what is it about then?" I ask dryly.

He easily slides into my desk chair, leaning back with his hands resting behind his head. I'd met no one who could scowl quite like Alistair Caldwell. Even as a child, he'd had a permanent look of anger stamped on his face.

Even when he wasn't necessarily irritated, he always looked that way.

"You're upset that I didn't vote with you," he says with a sureness that makes a bitter laugh slip from my lips. "Laugh all you want, but this is the first time I've split our votes. We have always voted together, the one-time I don't, you're pissy about it."

Tension sizzles in the room between us, one wrong word or move and a savage verbal argument will erupt between the two of us. It's unfortunate that he's my opposite, so strongly bonded when we agree, but feral enemies when we clash.

He was correct about one thing. This had been the only time in the history of our democracy-style plans that we voted on contrasting sides. Did it annoy me? Sure it did. Following Rook's lead has never ended well. Alistair knows that, or at least I thought he did. Everything he does is without thought and impulsive. Quick to jump on an idea that sounds good in theory but has a damning consequence.

"I'm so bored with your constant I'm-the-leader bit." I say, "We are not children. This isn't the school playground and I'm moping because you didn't pick me. Your life might be a lot easier if you stopped believing the world revolved around you, Ali."

His jaw ticks, my words dancing dangerously on that big red button inside of him. I swear, he's too easy. Always has been. He may not know me, but I know him.

Better than almost anyone.

Alistair and I met first. It had been just me and him until we helped Rook set off firecrackers at a country club where Silas stood watch.

But before that, it was us.

My grandfather wanted to host a luncheon for Ponderosa Springs royalty, considering he was on the board at Hollow Heights. This was not out of character. I think it was his way of introducing my father to the people he was supposed to work in tandem with once he fully took over the Pierson Fortune business and inherited his portion of this rotten town.

He'd wanted my father to rub elbows with the right people. Make a list of those who couldn't be trusted, that sort of thing.

I'd been almost six, tossing rocks into the large water fountain in the entrance of our property's driveway. It wasn't out of the ordinary for my home to be filled with children and adults, mingling. It also wasn't out of the norm for me to find any other place to be but inside with all that noise.

My grandfather said I would play the part of a wealthy grandson perfectly. I'd show off my talent on the piano, let my father guide me around, introducing me to powerful names and influencers alike.

I could only stand that for about an hour before I disappeared. Before human interaction became too much and I craved the comfort of silence.

Standing outside my home, I watched Alistair and his family arrive. I saw how his mother and father got out of the car with his older brother, Dorian, close by their sides.

Content to leave a youthful lanky boy behind them to catch up. His head down, suit disheveled, and eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. Like he knew his place was five steps behind theirs. Always in the gloom of their shadows. Of Dorian's shadow.

A sad reality for someone so young.

I knew what that felt like. Understood what it was to be ashamed of your existence. It was as if there was something different in our blood, pumping through him, pumping through me, through all of us boys.

This wickedness that bonded our trauma. Wrapped us in all we hated, all we ran from, and turned us into what we were today. We each became the things we feared the most.

No, we became worse.

I'd always thought Alistair and I were the closest, yet today, we couldn't feel further apart.

"Lyra will be—"

“Lyra,” I bite out, interrupting him with a harsh scowl, hating the way he says her name, rushed without a passing thought, “is expendable to you. A piece of dust in your world. You and Rook are content with something happening to her because she means nothing to you.”

He stands from my chair, quick to make his presence known as he steps into my personal space. I was on a roll with pissing off what remaining friends I have. First Rook puffing his chest like the big bad wolf he is, now Alistair?

How exciting.

“You’re full of shit, Thatcher,” he says. “You know I wouldn’t put her at risk.”

He says it like it’s his job to look out for her. As if he is the almighty responsible one in charge of each of us. I wonder what he would do if he knew I allow him to be in charge?

That I let him think he’s in control because I know he’ll disintegrate if he’s not. That he has never, not once, been in charge of what I do or who I am.

“Yeah?” I furrow my eyebrows, my eyes slitting as I lean close to his face, my mouth a breath away from his nose. “Then why didn’t you offer Briar? Why not Sage?”

Lyra and I may be complicated, we may very well be done with whatever was transpiring, but she did not need to be put in harm’s way, especially not for the sake of me and the boys.

The thought of Easton Sinclair laying a single filthy hand on her made something volatile rupture in me. I didn’t want her near him, not even breathing the same air as that inadequately-dressed daddy’s boy.

Tonight she’d be wandering around the circus following his every move, listening for information we may need. She’d have to watch the way he moves all night, tune in to his voice, monitor each footstep. A job I knew she was capable of, but I didn’t want her doing.

Not with Easton.

Alistair’s eyebrows twitch, pulling inward. “Are you telling me you care about her?”

“Just an observation, Caldwell.”

He shakes his head, sneering, “So, let’s get something straight, Thatcher. You’re telling me that Lyra Abbott means to you what Briar does to me, or are you just being petty?”

My mouth moves before I can think better of it. Before I get ahold of my control and reel in the part of me that wants to disengage anyone who has a passing thought about my darling phantom.

I dig my finger into his chest. “You have no idea what she is to me,” I say with a vicious snarl.

Luckily, that’s all I get out before I remind myself that trying to explain it to him would be pointless. He could never understand what she means to me. What her soul is to the world.

What he feels for Briar is a kernel, a speck, compared to what I share with Lyra Abbott. The power she could have over me is something no one has ever come close to.

It’s why it’s so imperative that she stays far, far away from me.

He flinches at my words, something I can’t read lives inside of his eyes and I’ve never despised him as much as I do right now. Like he can see into me without me saying anything.

As if Lyra is the one secret, the one part of my conscience I can’t hide from anyone. She lives on the surface, refusing to be tucked away.

“Nothing will happen to her. I promise you,” he says, his voice losing its edge.

“Keep your promises for someone who needs them,” I say, staring at him for a moment longer before pulling away.

I walk to the bed, scooping up my jacket, sliding the material over my arms and giving myself a once-over in the mirror before heading towards the door to begin this disaster of a night.

With ease, I slip a hand into my pocket, running my fingers along the cool metal inside. The engravings that live on both sides of the coin dig into the pads of my fingers. The same type of coin I once put over Phoebe Abbott’s eyes.

“You better hope you’re right, Alistair. If anything happens to her,” I grip it in my palm, pulling it out and flipping it absentmindedly over my shoulder towards him, “Not even our friendship can protect you from me.”

I leave him there with the sound of Charon’s obol ringing in the air. Fare for the ferry.

CRIMSON HAZE

THATCHER

One of two things were true.

Lyra was late, or she was dead.

Dead because I'm wearing a seventeen-thousand-dollar Rolex that is more likely to be stolen than wrong with the time. So, that meant Lyra was already twenty minutes late.

They told me she would be fine. That this plan would not fail. She would gather intel and meet us scratch-free. Yet, I'd only seen her once in the chaos of circus-themed costumes and juggling acrobats. When she was tucked away behind a food stand while Easton preened to a group of acolytes who looked extremely unimpressed by whatever he was saying.

But that had been it. A whisper of her curls, a glimpse of her dark sweater. All the texts I'd sent had been left unread. I'd been thoroughly ignored all day, and now she was late.

"Checking your watch won't change anything," Rook mutters across from me where he leans against his bike. "Give her a minute, Thatcher. Maybe she thought we said nine-thirty."

My arms stay crossed in front of my chest, my back resting against the driver's side of my door. I can feel how deadly my glare is as soon as it lands on him. Lyra wouldn't mix up times, she wouldn't do that. We agreed on nine, campus parking lot B. If everything was fine, she would be here.

"You told Sage about your plan?" I ask with a tilt of my head. "Does she know you set her friend to play spy on her vindictive ex-fiancé?"

The color drains from his face. Whatever smart remark waiting on his tongue dies. It's replaced with a vicious rage. At just the thought of putting his precious little Sage in danger or anywhere close to Easton Sinclair.

“You shut your fucking snobbish mouth or I’ll make you swallow your teeth, Pierson.” He pushes off the bike, standing straight. “We agreed to tell them after tonight. It’s a test run. There is no need to freak Sage out over something that might not even work.”

Alistair puts a reassuring hand on Rook’s shoulder, trying to keep him levelheaded so that we don’t have a brawl in the middle of the campus parking lot, but I couldn’t care less.

It might actually be a pleasant distraction from my wandering mind. One that can’t seem to let go of the idea that Lyra is in trouble, and we are standing her doing nothing.

“Go on,” I nod towards Alistair. “Release your dog from its chain. I have a rabies shot.”

“Get fucked, asshole,” Rook grumbles.

My fingers tap our message thread, pulling up Lyra’s contact and calling her. Just like it did for the first three times, it only rings until it reaches the sound of her voicemail. Glancing down at my watch as I listen to her voice.

“Hey! This is Lyra, sorry I missed your call. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you.”

She must have made that when she was in a good mood. Her voice has a lightness to it that only comes out when she’s surrounded by the people she cares about or talking about her passions.

My gut tightens and a feeling of knowing settles inside. A sensation that tells me that this brief experiment has cost Lyra her life, or, at the very least, one of her limbs.

“I never agreed to those terms. You and Alistair did. Assuring yourself that lying to your doting girlfriends was the best way to keep them safe,” I say with a flick of my wrist and a patronizing voice, dripping with disdain and sarcasm.

“Thatcher, I swear—”

The sound of tires rubbing against the pavement catches our attention elsewhere. I’m hoping to see Lyra’s older-model vehicle. But, unfortunately for literally everyone, it’s not.

Easton Sinclair’s freshly wrapped McLaren pulls into the parking lot. Pulling into the spot just next to mine. I look over my shoulder as he slides out of the driver’s seat, no bimbo girlfriend or meathead friends at his back. Just him.

“Late night, Sinclair?” I ask over my shoulder.

He lifts his gaze to mine, a streak of white-hot fear blazing across his face. It's not often that I'm the one in his business, approaching him, having my sights on him as a target. But he quickly remembers the role he plays, the macho man, and easily schools his features.

Stephen, his father, would be so proud.

No matter how many skin grafts his plastic surgeon did, Easton still wore a brutal scar on the left side of his face. It had been mutilated, healed with time, but the skin discolorations and lines of tissue covered from his jaw to upper cheek.

It was gory, but there was no one who deserved to wear it more.

“Been a while, boys.” Easton looks over my shoulder, eyes slitting when he sees Rook behind me. “How’s Sage, Van Doren? Does she still taste as good as I remember?”

I feel the steam that pours from Rook’s shoulders. It’s a bold move from Easton, considering my pyromaniac friend has been chomping at the bit for a chance to roast him on a spit.

Sage will always remain a sore sport between the two of them. Whether it’s the ownership Easton feels for the strawberry blonde, or some form of love, it will be a long time before he lets go of her. It’ll be an even longer time before Rook ever lets her go.

“I’m not sure. Do you still remember what the exhaust of my bike tastes like? Or do you need a reminder?” Rook tosses his head towards the bike, beckoning for trouble.

Easton runs his fingers along the side of his scar. “Lay a finger on me and I’ll make sure Sage is the one to pay for it.”

“It’s a dangerous place to be making threats right now, East.” Alistair steps next to me, his shoulder grazing mine. “No daddy or friends to protect you. How will they know anything happened to you if they can’t find your body?”

I scoff, “If there’s one to find.”

“At least I don’t have to worry about you leaving my body parts out in public, Thatcher. We all know you’re just like your daddy. Only the weak, innocent women get you off when you’re hacking them up.”

It was no secret that I was a suspect. That the town had deemed me guilty before I could even plead innocent.

“You sure you’re not the one slinging body parts around like cash in a club, East? Must not be easy finding your mother screwing Alistair’s dad,

what were you five, six? When you saw Wayne Caldwell putting it down on mommy dearest?" Rook taunts. "Letting out some of those pent-up issues on girls around town?"

Easton's jaw ticks, another very tender place for our longtime enemy. I wasn't sure if it was a gift from the divine when we found out about their parents' affair, but I loved seeing that twisted look of misery on Easton's face any time we brought it up.

"Wouldn't you know if it was me? Who knows how long you've had your little pet trailing me." He sneers.

My spine stills.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Are you just playing stupid? Or is this your normal setting?" he asks with a roll of his eyes. "It was clever, ya know? I had this nagging feeling I was being followed, but every time I turned around, nothing was there. Not until right before I left the circus tonight."

I look at Rook, then over at Alistair, this feeling of sheer adrenaline pumping through my veins. This had been a mistake. I hate this punk, but he was smart, and we knew that. Having him followed was a mistake.

And now Lyra is out there somewhere paying for it.

There is a split second where I try to reign in my self-control. Where I attempt to bite down on my tongue and remain the aloof one. The one who never really gives Easton the attention he seeks, but I can't.

I fractured my control when I landed between Lyra Abbott's thighs. I had little restraint when it came to anything that had to do with that little bug queen..

Sweat slicks my palms, I have never felt so hot. My body overflowing with wrath. Violence humming inside of my chest. This need to destroy everything and anything in my path. It's never happened like this.

The urge to kill.

Never so quickly, so powerfully, that I doubt anything could stop me from shredding the world apart with my teeth. Eating it alive. So volatile that no one—man, woman, child, friend, or stranger—was safe.

I take two steps before I'm looking down my nose at Easton, my voice an animalistic growl.

"Where is she."

"Who?" he asks with a cocky lifted brow.

My hands reach forward, snatching the front of his jacket. I twist my hands into the material, lifting him from the ground a few inches, my body shaking.

“What the hell—”

The breath shoots from his lungs as I slam him into the asphalt beneath us with as much force as I can gather. His back smacks with a bang, a groan rippling from his lips as I stand over him.

“Where the fuck is she.”

I’m not asking questions or begging for an answer.

I would kill him, and I would make it hurt. Sit him down in front of his mother and remove each of his ribs one by one. Pull his goddamn spine from his throat and choke him with it.

“You’ve got ten seconds, Sinclair,” I reach into my pocket and click the button on my switchblade, waving it in front of his face, “before I leave you in pieces.”

“I—” he chokes on the air, “don’t know.”

My mind had never been able to wrap around the sort of territorial claim my friends had over Briar and Sage. Never understood what it was they possessed that caused the guys to turn into animals ready to snap at the first person who breathed their name.

It had been cheesy and repulsive to me.

But right now I understood, and the idea of burning off Easton’s face made sense. All of it made sense.

The feeling of protecting what belonged to you. What you would kill to defend. For the first time, I felt that.

I sneer. “Five seconds.”

He jerks beneath my hold. “I swear to fucking God! I don’t know. She left when I did, and I didn’t see her again. I swear to God, man, I don’t know where she is.”

The panic in his voice is the sound of piano keys in the morning.

Refreshing.

The knife flips across my fingers, just before I aim the blade towards the center of his Adam’s apple. Alistair grabs my shoulder, his voice like thunder in my ear. A shattering sound that breaks across my anger like a whip.

“Thatch.” The tip of my knife dips into his flesh. “I just got her phone location from Briar, she’s still inside the circus.”

The grip of his hand tightens. It digs into my flesh like an anchor, his mouth near my ear. “He isn’t worth it. Not yet.”

My hand shakes with the need to gut Easton like a fish. Leave him lying in this parking lot. But the need to lay eyes on Lyra is stronger. It’s all that my brain can seem to care about.

I lean my body towards Easton, my mouth spewing spit across his face and my knife pressed into his throat just enough to cut him. “You better pray to whatever god you believe in, maggot. He saved you tonight.”

With the same motion as throwing out trash, I sling Easton back onto the ground, leaving him panting and in the process of curling into a ball when I stand to my full height.

Alistair shows me his phone, the little blue dot tells me where Lyra’s location is. I straighten, pulling at the lapels on my jacket, before moving towards my car.

“Ouch,” Rook coos, tapping Easton on the chest. Needing to add insult to injury. “I’d hate to be you right now, my guy.”

They each pull themselves inside my car.

“What’s the plan?” Alistair asks beside me, Rook scooting towards the middle as he listens in. My hands flex around the wheel, the engine humming to life as I turn the key.

It’s not the apology the world would want from them, but it’s the one I need. The one that says they are willing to follow me into whatever depths in order to mend what they thought was a good idea.

I’m angry they didn’t listen. That they put Lyra at risk.

But how can I blame them when I can’t even explain to myself what she means to me? What she is?

So right now, I don’t need an apology.

I need their unending loyalty. Their anger. That dark, twisted thing that lives in each of them to come out and play with my own.

“Find her.”

NIGHTMARE CIRCUS

LYRA

The circus ring was vacant.

All the chairs that ringed the outside of the circular stage were bare. The sand inside the pit of the ring was soft beneath my uncovered feet, rubbing against my soles.

Blood pooled on my lip, clotted from the deep split in the center of my mouth. I could feel the dried liquid sticking to my chin, the dripping had stopped several minutes ago.

My cheeks were flush, burning hot as sweat gathered on my forehead, only heating further with the blinding spotlight that was trained on my face.

I could barely make out the first row of seats just beyond the lifted barrier. The one where audience members cheered on a ringmaster walking a tightrope or an acrobat flying gracefully in the air.

Tonight, with no one in sight to applaud, I am the act. A private showing of my torment. Slowly tortured all to prove a point, to send a message.

I hiss, feeling it sizzle through my barred teeth as I turn my head away from Player One, as I'm calling him. His slimy fingers press into my ribs, the oncoming bruise thumping in pain. I can feel him dig into my skin, ticking the bone and pushing further.

"This is just the preview, girl," he says in my ear. "If you keep digging, you'll be in your own grave. You think they won't come back for you? To finish what we started?"

My teeth sink into my tongue, biting back a scream of agony as the cool tip of a knife slices into me, ripping through flesh, opening another wound on my body.

I hate myself for the whimper that escapes, the proof of their torture affecting me. Briar wouldn't have let them see her shed a tear and Sage would have died before showing weakness.

"It's okay to cry. Go ahead and cry," Player Two, the one wearing a white mask, urges. Walking towards me, placing his hand on the top of my head, petting my hair with gentle strokes.

"I want your friends to see your tears. Bloody, bruised, and barely alive. Maybe then they'll learn to keep out of business that doesn't involve them."

I fight the urge to let tears fall, refusing to give them the pleasure of breaking me. Even though the pain is unbearable, every breath a chore. My face tender from the earlier hits, torso leaking blood from the several minor open wounds.

It wasn't enough to kill me. Like they said, they didn't want to kill me. They wanted me to live so that they could prove a point. Wanted me to crawl back to them mutilated, in hopes my injuries would scare us all into silence.

But they did not know the boys. What they were capable of when scorned. What their wrath could do in times of sorrow.

"They'll kill you," I whisper, sucking in a breath. "When they find you, they will gut you like fish. You don't stand a fucking chance."

A hash slapping sound echoes in the circus tent. My head spinning from the force of the hit across my left cheek. Whimsical music whirls in my head, floating from the speakers.

I tongue my cheek, swallowing the burn. Checking to make sure my all my teeth are still intact.

His fingers grab my jaw, jerking me to face him. The ropes wound around my upper body tighten as I try to fight against them. I feel so helpless, and the only person I can blame is myself.

If I would've just followed the rules. Stayed at the circus, instead of following Easton to his home. I should have just done what the guys asked, but I couldn't.

I couldn't meet them and bear the weight of their stares as I told them I had learned nothing of importance while trailing Easton Sinclair. Not his father, not the Halo, not so much as a fucking speeding ticket.

I failed them. Their disappointment would've hurt far worse than any beating these two could deliver.

“You fucked with the wrong people. This was too powerful for those rich punks you call friends. They should’ve let that girl’s death go. Now you’re the one paying for their mistakes, all because of their bruised pride.”

Player One lazily draws the knife up my body in a teasing way. A predator playing with its food, dragging out the catch. When he reaches the joint between my shoulder and neck, he rips my sweater to expose my skin.

I try to block him out. Shut out the pain and think of anything else. My breaths are shaky as I delve into how I got here in the first place, distracting myself the best I can.

The details are fuzzy, frayed around the edges of my memory, but I remember following Easton from the circus, even though I promised I wouldn’t. I needed to get something on him. I couldn’t let everyone down by turning up empty-handed.

Excruciating pain zaps into my shoulder, blood wetting my skin, but I keep my eyes forward and my mind busy. They are not worth my fear or my suffering. They will not win.

I followed Easton all the way to the Sinclair residence. Slipped inside his house when I saw he’d left the front door unlocked. I can recall every inch of their home. What I found on Stephen’s desk, the padlocked door in his office, and approximately how long I had to hide in a storage closet until Easton and his mother finished arguing over dinner.

I can trace every footprint out of his house and to my car, can remember pulling into the parking lot of the school, planning to wait there until it was time to meet the guys.

The last thing my brain can recollect is my door being jerked open and an aggressive hand curling around my upper arm. After that, it’s all blank. My memory runs out of tape and the screen fades to white noise.

Fingers run along the fresh wound on my shoulder, and I look over to see Player Two slipping his fingers into his mouth. Licking my blood from his skin.

“You taste so sweet, almost too sweet to waste.”

Bile lodges in my throat, watching him suck on the two digits coated in my blood.

“Fuck,” spitting it onto the black cloth of the fabric shielding his face, “you.”

Saliva and blood splatters across the mask causing a nasty growl to come from his lips as he presses his covered face against my own. His nails

penetrate my scalp, tearing at my hair. The smell of decay on his hot breath makes my stomach revolt.

“That can be arranged, little girl.”

If they thought for one second I would go down easy, they were mistaken. I may be tethered to this chair, beaten and bleeding, but I refuse to go quietly. When they leave my body for the bugs to feast upon, my mark would remain on their skin.

They would remember me, the way I fought, and I would not die forgotten.

With all the force I have left inside of my bound body, I jerk my head back and launch it forward, crashing my forehead into what I am hoping is his nose. My skull throbs in protest of the collision, but his groan of discomfort is enough to make it worth it.

“You cunt!” He screeches, wrenching his mask off in order to hold his split nose. His face isn’t familiar to me, but I try to take a mental picture of every detail.

The way his greasy blond hair swoops in front of his ratty eyes. The mole that lives on his cheek, and the scar that curls around his upper lip. I mark every feature in my mind, keeping it there just in case I make it out of this.

“We aren’t supposed to take the masks off,” Player Two urges, looking over at me. “We weren’t—”

“It doesn’t matter.” His partner removes the face covering completely, tossing it on the ground. “It doesn’t matter if she sees us now. She won’t live to talk about what we look like.”

My gut churns. Terror swells inside of my chest like a wave, crashing over my entire body. Their large hands grab me on either side, plucking me from the chair with ease.

I kick my feet in the sand, tossing up the grainy bits. My lungs belt out scream after scream as they drag me backward. Tears streak down my face as I feel metal scratching my back.

My head turns, searching for something to tell me where I’m headed. I catch a glimpse at what looks like a set of stairs. Black grate steps, leading to a small platform. My body bumps against each incline, aching with every impact.

When they reach the top, my weight is slung onto the platform. It does not take me long to understand what their plan is. Remembering when they

first woke me up, what remained from tonight's event.

A prompt still stranded in the ring, altered to create the perfect torture device. A cylindrical tank that had been used as a magic act earlier. Escape the unescapable. A tank filled to the brim with water, while they chained a performer to the bottom. Escape and you're a modern Houdini. Don't and you drown.

But it wasn't water inside of it. Well, not all water. It's thicker and scarlet. It sloshed around in the tank, at least twelve feet deep, wobbling with my anxious moments on the platform.

"Pig's blood, mixed with a little water." Player One says snidely. "We were going to give you your very own Carrie moment. Dunk your head under a few times, get your adrenaline pumping. But you've been difficult, little girl."

My heart thrums in my ears, when they threw me inside this, there would be no hope for me. I would sink to the bottom and never reemerge.

That would be it.

"Killing me won't stop them," I press my arms against the ropes, trying to find a weak spot in the knots, but I'm having no luck. "It'll only make it worse. Your boss knows what they did with Rosemary Donahue. They won't stop."

"My boss..." he preens, "doesn't care. I don't think there is anything he'd want more than to slaughter one son from each founding family. Make this town reap what it has sown. You're just the warning of what's coming, Lyra."

"You won't make it out alive," I choke.

"A reckoning is coming, little girl. For you now, and all those little friends of yours later. I just hope I get to be the one to rip Pierson apart."

I'd decided from the moment they'd kidnapped me, those in charge of the Halo hired these men. We were running out of time, and they were coming for our silence.

Even if they had to kill us to retrieve it.

We'd gone a step too far, learning too much. Killing a teacher and teaching assistant to uncover the drugs they are using to sedate the girls they kidnap. Burning the mayor alive for selling Rosemary, butchering two corrupt detectives involved in the ring.

We'd gone too far.

At the sound of Thatcher's name, my heart surges. A sob choking me, the urge to beg. To plead for mercy and pray they stay far, far away. But not from me.

Never from me.

From him.

"Go on, beg me." Player Two snickers. "Beg me to spare your life and I might just keep you alive long enough to watch how well you take my cock."

My body flinches at his crude words. One singular tear falling from my eye at the choices I have left. Behave, beg, bend for this disgusting excuse of a man to lay his filthy hands on my body, or remain where I am, letting them push me into a vat of animal blood where I'll sink and drown.

Two options, that was what my life had boiled down to.

Two shitty fucking options.

My life had come down to the total of this. Everything I'd ever done would be overlooked and I would become a gory newspaper headline of a girl who was killed at the Nightmare Circus.

Another ghost story to haunt the streets of Ponderosa Springs.

With the last bit of my dwindling hope, I reach into myself. Willing my voice to ricochet off the fabric of this tent, willing my body to call out for help.

To scream for the only name that existed in my brain right now. The one I felt could save me from this damned ending. My last chance, the boy who'd frozen the horror with his wintery steps the last time death floated above me.

My angel.

"Thatcher!"

It was a banshee shriek into the void. Praying by some act of divine fate, he was nearby. That he'd come looking for me, noticed me missing. That somehow he'd hear my voice over the whirling circus music, over the howling wind.

I just needed him to come for me. To save me this one last time, because I wasn't ready to die. Not like this—not before I graduated, or watched my friends walk down the aisle. I wanted to develop a career, to grow up, I wanted to live.

I didn't want to die before I—

"Thatcher, please," I shout, blood spilling out of my mouth. "Thatcher!"

“What a beautiful corpse you’ll be,” one of them mumble before the force of someone’s boot slams into my side.

It sends me tumbling into the tank, the blood mixture welcoming me with its sticky arms and metallic perfume. Pulling me beneath the surface to a watery death.

The world became a magnificent shade of red as I sunk to the bottom of the tank. Crushed roses that leaked through my shut eyes and tasted of sweet pennies. My senses spun in brilliant hues of the familiar color. Cherry, garnet, vermillion, and ruby.

It was everywhere. Soaked through the strands of my hair, stuffed inside of my grappling lungs, and wedged within the walls of my throat. It was consuming me, eating me alive, swallowing me fucking whole.

My chest burns, desperate for air. Hopelessly trying to tear through the rough binds that circled around me, but without oxygen in my lungs, my limbs are weak. The tank is deep, too deep, and I don’t have enough energy to keep myself afloat without my legs. My head is dizzy, the burn in my lungs turning into one of comfort. As if my body knows what is going to happen in a few brief moments.

I feel arms curled around my waist, reminding me of the night I danced with Thatcher a year ago at the All Hallows Eve ball. What he’d done as a distraction for our friends had been a memory engraved deeply into my mind.

Meeting Briar for the first time. How innocent her eyes had been. Burning down a tree with Rook and catching Alistair in my shower after he’d stayed in our dorm. Seeing Sage sitting in the dining hall after she’d come back.

Memories I kept safely tucked inside played on a reel. Flash after flash. A playback of my life’s best moments, one final comfort movie before I was welcomed into the afterlife.

My subconscious seemed to fade towards the light, a bright, stark light and the taste of air making me choke. All the watered-down blood wedged in my mouth pours out as I gasp.

“Grab her.”

Hands touch me, coiling around the rope still wound around my body. My brain tries to decide if I’ve entered immortality, or if my call had been answered and I was still alive.

I try to blink past the streaks of red, clinging to my senses, trying to clear the fog of crimson that blinds me.

“What the fuck do you think I’m doing? Playing checkers?”

“You’re useless.”

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll drop her and you can both drown, jackass.”

“Just—” A pause, “Just help her.”

I can feel my chest heaving up and down, gobbling down oxygen as quickly as possible. The pain remains, and it’s this that tells me I am still alive. That somehow, I’d made it out of that liquid grave.

Voices hum around me, the feeling of cool metal resting against my back. The ropes loosen, my arms able to move freely.

“Lyra, Lyra, Lyra...”

The touch of a familiar person leans over my prone body, shoving my wet hair away from my face, wiping as much of the red liquid from my eyes, my cheeks, my mouth, as my name is chanted. When my brain receives the air it was neglected of, the rest of my senses trickle back.

I can make out the smell of something fresh. My skin feels his cool hands, and my eyes make out the details of his face. His silver hair stained red, dripping maroon. Blue eyes so starkly clear, I could almost see my reflection inside of them.

“Thatcher,” I breathe, a prayer on my lips. “Thatcher.”

With a wobbly hand I lift my fingers, tracing the line across his eyebrows, the deep V creasing his forehead. I can feel him. He is real. I’m not sure I’m really thinking, or maybe it’s because this still feels like a dream.

I sink my fingers into the wet strands of his hair, drawing his head down.

A dream in which he came for me, he heard my plea, and he came for me. The villain who’d given up his plan of revenge in order to save the girl

“Lyra.”

My lips touch his in a quiet collision. The very first snowflake of winter grazing my mouth. A falling star slipping across the sky in stealthy wonder. The whisper of his last exhale rattling between my teeth, filling my empty lungs. The breath of life from the angel of death. His lips were firm against my own, a gift from the gods.

There are no fireworks. It isn’t a kiss overwhelmed with hunger or washed in passion. Just our lips rest against the other’s, a brief rest in a

moment of chaos. Our mouths, speaking without words.

“Hello, you are safe here. You are safe with me.”

He is the first to pull away, just enough to create a thin veil of space between our lips. I blink several times, watching his passive face stare down at me.

“I didn’t,” my voice is hoarse, “I didn’t want to die without kissing you first. It felt too cruel to die before I knew what it was like.”

Thatcher drags his thumb across my swollen mouth, softly massaging the feeling of his kiss into my skin. Pressing the taste of him into me. The edges of his mouth twitching.

“My darling phantom,” he whispers. “You’re not dying, not until I’m done with you.”

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BLOOD BATH

THATCHER

This was not my normal routine.

I had not spent months tracking, hunting, and gathering intel on this victim. Not able to spare the time to create the beginning and middle of his concerto. I hadn't written notes, erased, and composed gruesome music to set my stage. Simply fast-forwarding the end with no thought of what his death would sound like paired with my piano.

Normally, being out of a pattern would throw me off. Not being in my space, with all my weapons and disposal supplies. No classical music playing in the background.

This was not how I killed people. My destruction of the human body was an art. One that I often took my time with, spent months planning, crafting the perfect piece of music for each section of the kill.

This moment, this was how I made a man pay for touching what belongs to me.

I looked ahead, seeing a man tethered to a circular board. A thick, black belt stretched across his waist, both hands clasped above his head, and feet secured in cuffs. The wisps of red stars painted on the board appear and disappear behind his limbs.

I'm sure they had used this prop as a part of a knife-throwing act. Where a confident man stood in front of a crowd and blindly threw weapons at a half-naked woman. Barely missing her skin by mere inches and leaving the crowd exhilarated.

Except I was running the show now. The circus ring was my arena of death and I didn't plan on missing.

“What are you going to do?” my target urges. “Man, please, what is he going to do? Is he going to fucking kill me?”

Alistair remains silent, only looking at him from his chair that he’d pulled from the audience. A cigarette burning on his lips, a haze of smoke floating in front of his passive face.

It had been him who’d caught one culprit before he could scramble away. Drug him back to the ring and waited for my instruction. Knowing better than to lay a finger on my prey. He knew this kill was mine and mine alone.

I wanted every drop of his pain, his fear, his life. My stomach growled, hungry for the power that came from the final pump of someone’s heart.

My body shifts, peering down at the open knife roll exposed in a chair, individual blades tucked into separate pockets neatly. My fingers graze the sharp tips, the craving for revenge leaving me famished, savage.

Carefully, my hands roll up each of the sleeves of my drenched dress shirt, exposing my pale, veiny arms beneath, rivulets of the bloody mixture trickling down from the compressed cuffs. The air is cool against my neck, anticipation raising my temperature.

The sound of the tent opening averts my attention. Lyra charges inside, her bruised lip catching the spotlight. The lip I had felt against mine several moments ago. Her mouth tasted of brutality and fear. Quite the opposite of the cherry flavor I’d anticipated.

After pulling her from that bloody tank, I got a real taste of anger. I’d seen it in others, witnessed what it could do, but I’d never felt it for myself. Not like this.

My fury was this quiet, seething predator. As if I could feel the emotion coursing through my veins like sandpaper. Rough against my skin and coiling my spine.

This was my first kill that was rooted in emotion. Driven by her.

Lyra was my beacon of emotion. All these feelings I’d never once experienced were happening to me because of her.

Being close to her was making me more and more human.

My fingers flex when Rook walks in behind her, his hand curling around Lyra’s arm, tugging backward, his voice loud enough for me to hear.

“Lyra, we need to get you to the hospital. You don’t want to see this. You don’t want to see him like this.”

“I’m not leaving,” she argues, flinching from his grasp, determined to keep moving farther inside the tent and closer to me.

“Please—”

“Lyra.” I call her name, interrupting my friend. Her soft eyes turn to me, like my voice is the only sound she hears. I crook a finger, teasing in a come-hither motion. “Come.”

Rook removes his hand, shaking his head with a huff as she moves in my direction. I don’t miss the way she limps a bit, still holding her head high, refusing to show her pain.

She wants to prove they did not break her. That they could never break her. Something swells inside of me, and I think it might be pride. Loyalty not only to me, but to herself.

When she is close enough, I reach forward, grasping her chin in my fingers. I tilt her head from side to side, noting every scratch, every slight inconsistency, every bruise.

She should leave, go get checked out not just physically but mentally. What she experienced would hit her hard once the adrenaline faded out. The trauma response to curl within herself would come back with a vengeance and a person can only handle so much before they disappear and never return.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she nods, “and I want to watch. I know you said we were done, but I need to watch. I need to learn, Thatcher, before this thing eats me alive.”

“You didn’t let them see you break,” I mutter, rubbing my thumb across her skin.

I feel her body settle into my touch, melting into my hand. “You told me not to.”

“You did so good, darling phantom,” I whisper, lifting her head up so she’s looking at me. “Do you want your reward? Would you like me to be your teacher tonight?”

Her jade eyes widen, interest piqued and possibly shocked that I’m agreeing so easily.

“No more textbooks?”

A smirk pulls at my mouth as I shake my head. “No textbooks. Just you being a dedicated little student. I would take a few notes, there might be a quiz.”

This secret little arrangement between the two of us is my greatest struggle and hardest thing to release. It's hard to admit it out loud, but I enjoy Lyra's watching. The stalking through the shadows with her eyes focused solely on me. I'm the center of her world, and she is my little voyeur.

Relief settles in her shoulders.

"Thank you," she mutters, just before turning and walking towards a seat in the front row. I look over at Rook, tossing my head towards her, wanting him to stay close in case anything is to happen.

I allow my thoughts to linger on her. On the image of her porcelain, flawless face bloody and bruised, tainted in a way it should have never been. All my anger is singular. It's focused, trained towards one person and only one.

"My father gifted me a set of throwing knives when I was kid," I say, lifting a stainless-steel spear point blade. "A way to practice wielding a blade with efficiency. I guess it became a hobby of mine, one I'm quite good at now."

My long, careful fingers slip one blade from its pouch, twirling it in my hand. The matte black finish is forged from the night. Designed for stealth and made for swift, silent deaths. Their dark color is twin against my leather gloves, my palm weighing the dagger with a quiet stillness that sets an eerie energy into the air.

I knew what I was going to do tonight, had mapped out every second of the torture the moment I'd stepped inside of this tent. Yet, I felt as if I was taking a stroll through the neighborhood.

Not thrumming with emotion or panic.

Just death.

"What the fuck, dude," the man attached to the wooden board mumbles. "I was just doing my job. We weren't really gonna kill her. Just scare her a little, ya know? That was it, I swear!"

"What's your name?" I ask curtly, ignoring his words. Not interested in what he has to say.

He groans, grinding his teeth as tears stream from his eyes. Overtaken by so much fear, I'm sure he can barely breathe. It's suffocating him, weighing down on his lungs like a boulder. I wonder if he's thinking of his last moments the way I am. If he is prepared to meet his maker.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! This is so fucked. It wasn’t supposed to go down like this!”

Normally I’d play a little longer, drag out the first cut. Edge myself with the first stroke of power that surges through me when I slice open someone’s skin.

But I wasn’t in the mood to toy with my food tonight.

Like lightning slicing through the air, the black dagger whirls like a bolt. Striking the target with a thunderous thud, only to be followed by a screech from the depths of this man’s gut.

It tickles my ears. Warms something inside of me the same way playing a variation from Horowitz might.

Blood slides from the center of his palm. The spear punctured through his exposed hand, pinning it effectively to the board beneath. The first stab in my human pin board.

“Michael! Michael!” He screams, skin pale as he looks over at his skewered hand. “My name is Michael!”

As I scoop another blade between my fingers, I nod. I twirl the metal, rotating it across my knuckles. This is supposed to be for Lyra. My reason in killing this man is here.

Yet, I can’t help but feel elated at the sight of him withering in pain. Squirming against his restraints, desperate for my mercy. Does that truly make me the morally-gray hero everyone raves about? Right the wrongs that society would never? Or is this just an excuse to tap into the side of me that is hungry for the kill?

My eyes flick towards the audience, scanning the empty seats until my gaze connects with hers. She is a nightmare version of herself. Swallowed by cuts, bruises and blood that is not her own. Those wild curls are frizzed, and her clothes are soaked.

But I don’t see any of that. Not really.

I just see her.

Scarlett.

The little girl who’d thrown a shoe at me on our first encounter. One who was so afraid, but also so brave. That night, I’d seen nothing like her.

Someone so brash and bold. Flying from the closet with her inky black hair swirling and eyes filled with determination. She’d been so different from my sterilized life, so chaotic.

In that room that smelt of death, she felt like the last living thing. This beautiful, messy thing that I couldn't kill. And the fact that this scum of a man thought he could enraged me.

"Michael," I hum, looking away and back towards my target. "It means, he who is like God."

I am the ringmaster. The controller of the show, making him dance and squirm for my pleasure. It's more than the physical violence, it's the mental game that feeds my ego.

This had been what Lyra was waiting to learn. She'd been patient, jumping through all my hoops so she could witness this moment. To teach her how to screw with someone's mind, how to break their spirit before ever touching them.

How to master the calm, be the picture of a killer.

"Do you believe you are like God, Michael? That divine blood runs through your veins and you have the power to decide the fate of life and death?"

"Don't kill me, please. I can't die. I'm not ready." He pants. "This wasn't even my idea. I was just hired and needed the extra cash. I didn't have a part in this."

"But you did," I correct, "have a part in this. You kidnapped an innocent girl and decided your ego was more important than her life, did you not?"

"That wasn't me! It was Colin! He wanted to kill her, not me. I just wanted to do the job." He swallows, eyes widening. "If you let me down, I'll take you to him. I can find out where he lives!"

The weight of the blade sits balanced on my palm. "Who hired you?"

A whiny moan comes from his throat. "Shit. Shit, I can't tell you. I can take you to Colin, but I can't tell you that. They'll kill me. Rip me to pieces, man. I can't."

I almost laugh that he thinks what they have in store for him is worse than my plans. Another black dart whizzes through the air, silent as a bird's feather, landing through the middle of Michael's pelvis. Slicing through flesh, tearing into his skin.

Based on the gut-wrenching howl, it's safe to say I hit my intended target.

"Impressive aim, considering how small it is." Alistair speaks from his seat, taking another puff of his cigarette.

The blade is pinned between his thighs, pierced straight through what I'm hoping is his dick and balls. Tears stream down his face, his whole body shaking. The handle wobbles with every ragged breath he takes.

It'll be a slow, painful way to die.

Unless those knives are removed, it will prevent him from bleeding out. They will plug the holes and keep him breathing until I am finished. He has no option but to hang there suffering.

"I wouldn't expect you to know this, because you don't know me, Michael," I say, scooping up another knife without looking. "But I don't believe I'm like God, either."

I flip it in my hand before rearing my arm behind my head and throwing it forward. I move smoothly, barely a sound coming from my movements as it slips from my grip and pegs the center of Michael's left hand.

Briefly I can hear bone crunching, before another slew of curse words leaves his mouth. I take my time, walking closer to the circular board and the man dangling from it.

Each footstep lethal and sure.

My gloved hand clutches Michael's jaw, my voice deadly still. Calm as liquid night.

"I am worse than any god, you know. There is no mercy granted here or miracles given. I am the patron saint of your death. You die when I want you to."

Michael sobs, big heaving cries from a man who had earlier threatened to take Lyra's life. The power he'd thought he had over her shifts. He is now a tiny, inconvenient bug beneath my shoe.

"Who hired you?" I ask again, feeling the wave of euphoria crashing over me as he cries, snot dripping from his nose, and face flushed from screaming. "It's in your best interest to tell me, Michael. I can make this last all night."

I've broken him. Shattered every piece of masculinity he has ever had. Tore down his barricades, until all that is left is a sad man desperate for his life.

"Stephen Sinclair." He cries through gritted teeth. "Stephen Sinclair hired us!"

There is no surprise on my face. We all knew the dean of Hollow Heights was woven into the Halo somehow. Known he was a snake long before Rosemary turned up dead.

“Why.” I demand.

“I don’t know. All he talked to us about was the job. Grab her and throw her around a little.” He coughs. “When I asked why, all he said was, ‘So when she goes crawling back to her degenerate friends, they will know what is at risk. What I’m capable of taking from them.’”

My hand grabs the handle of the knife lodged between his legs, jerking it harshly to the left. Inciting another cry for help from his mouth.

“What else do you know?”

Michael tilts his head towards the ceiling, eyes squeezed shut. Trying to picture a different reality, desperately hoping to wake up from this nightmare.

“It wasn’t supposed to be Lyra,” he croaks. “We were told to grab Sage Donahue, but we—I—”

“But you?” I apply more pressure to the knife, cutting the words from his throat.

“Some blond kid came in and told him no. Had a nasty scar on his face, demanded Stephen to pick Lyra Abbott instead. Said she was the weakest of the group and would break easier.”

I can feel Rook’s rage towards Easton Sinclair mingling with my own. Knowing earlier I’d been seconds from snapping his neck and should have, according to this information.

“Are you sure there wasn’t anything else?”

“I’m sure!” he screams. “That’s it! That’s all I know, swear to fucking God.”

I nod, knowing this is all the information he is going to be able to give me. There aren’t many men who would lie while a blade was shoved into their cock, and he wasn’t one of them.

The color in his face does not exist. He is pale, ghastly, and quickly losing blood. I’m finished with him. He has served his purpose for our agenda, and now I’m free to end him.

I reach up, grasping the handle of the knife inside of his hand and remove it swiftly. Blood leaks from the wound and coats my glove. I’m seconds from wedging this weapon into his windpipe when I hear Lyra’s voice.

“Wait.”

I turn my head, looking at her standing in front of the barrier, walking towards me like I’m the moon and she’s stuck in my gravitational pull.

Drawn to me as if magnetized, with no choice but to seek me out.

Alistair and Rook are staring, observing this interaction with silent eyes. Two people caught between orbiting planets that have no clue how to be in each other's galaxy.

"I want to do it," she mutters.

My eyebrows pull together, staring at her sharply, expectantly.

"Do what? Use your words, pet."

A steady breath skates past her lips, her chin tilted up, and spine stiffening. "I want to be the one to kill him."

Lyra is no longer the broken, mousy girl she shows to the world. She is a force, one woven together by the urge to kill and secret beauty. This dark, wicked woman who wants revenge.

A companion of the reaper, his lover and second hand.

She comes closer, her breath fanning across the planes of my face. Hunger for something entirely different pools in my stomach. Desire, white-hot and blinding, sears me.

I'd never seen anyone more beautiful. Never been this attracted to another person before. So taken by her, that I'm not even the slightest bit disappointed in the fact I won't be taking this fool's life.

I lay my palm out, the blade hers to do as she pleases. I feel her fingers curl around the handle, taking it from me. With ease I step aside, holding my arm out, motioning her towards Michael.

I lean forward, my mouth grazing the bottom of her ear, "Make me proud, darling phantom."

She nods, unaffected by my breath against her skin. I watch her step towards the board, the queen of death claiming her crown of bones and teeth.

It's twisted and immoral, but I can feel my pants tighten. My cock swelling as she holds the knife in her hand, dragging the tip against his chest, drawing a harmless line to his throat.

"Look at me," she says, staring up at him, but clearly the one in control. "I want you to look at me."

When he doesn't follow her instructions, she uses her other hand to grab the knife between his thighs, still plunged into his flesh. He groans as she twists, repeating herself once more before he finally opens his eyes.

My mouth waters seeing her accept the secret part of her she seems so afraid of. Owning every ounce of hunger she carries within herself. When

she removes the weapon completely from his groin, he chokes.

Gurgling around a scream of agony, as blood soaks the front of his jeans.

“Do I look broken to you?” she speaks, a confidence I’ve never seen before shining through.

“Please, I am sorry. God, have mercy on me,” he whimpers, pupils blown to the size of saucers. A plea of mercy in his gaze, and maybe the Lyra everyone knew would have given it to him, if the creature inside of her was not so famished.

There is a flash of pause. Only his gasps, and whines of discomfort. I watch Lyra rotate both blades in her hands, squeezing the handle into her tiny fists.

“Your god may grant you forgiveness,” she whispers, as Michael lifts his head to meet her eyes, “but you are a fool to expect the same sympathy from me.”

It’s a quick movement, so sudden I think I may have missed the impact. One second his eyes are open and the next there are twin blades logged deep inside of his sockets.

The sharp ends pierce through the squishy material of his eyeballs. The squelch of shredded tissue and the sight of projecting blood is his demise. His mouth lay open, choked words tumbling out.

She uncurls her hands, rearing back with her palms facing towards the hilts, and slams both into the end of the knives, sending the weapon farther into his skull. I can hear the crunching of human bone beneath the weight of the blade as she silences the man who’d tried to take her life.

There is so much force behind it that his head is pinned to the wooden board behind him. Blood oozes in streaks, painting messy lines down his cheeks.

Power. Relief. Pride.

It swells in the air as Michael’s corpse remains tethered, mouth ajar in a silent scream. A demonic version of Leonardo da Vinci’s art piece on the human body.

A crucifix of revenge.

I feel my friend’s presence before I see him, his voice shaky in my ear.

“She is fucking scary, dude.”

“No,” my lips twitch at the corners, just enough for me to notice. “She is exceptional.”

My devoted student.
My little pet.

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THE PIANO MAN

LYRA

“Yes, I’m fine,” I mutter, my eyes closed as I press my head into the window. “I promise, they are mostly superficial cuts. No stitches needed.”

It didn’t mean they hurt any less, but I didn’t think my already hysterical friends needed to know that.

“I’m going to kill him!” Sage screams somewhere in the background, her voice shrieking. “They are going to have bigger problems than this godforsaken Halo, you know that? He better have a good excuse for lying or I’m ripping his dick off.”

My chest aches, knowing I’d lied to them, too. It aches for Rook, remembering the way his burning irises melted into my own when he took me outside of the tent. A sadness had settled, one I’d never seen on him before.

The way he’d tried to wrap me in his jean jacket and begged me to let him take me to the hospital. Had apologized repeatedly for letting this happen.

What happened tonight was not his fault, and I’d told him that. Yet I knew how Rook handled guilt. How he shouldered the responsibility of letting his friends down more than anyone else. How it ate at him, how hard Sage worked to get him to understand that not every bad thing resulted from his actions.

Silas had been in the hospital for five months now, and he still couldn’t let go of that guilt. As if he somehow could’ve prevented Silas from stopping his meds.

"I told them to keep it from you two. I didn't want you worrying about me. You can be angry at me. Give me a day to recuperate, then you can be mad at me. They were just keeping their word; you can't be upset at that."

They'd already been filled in with the need-to-know details. How what happened was because I'd followed Easton home and informing no one. That the situation had been handled, and there was a man currently impaled on a wooden board in the center of a family circus tent.

The rest...

The rest may come later, or maybe it just won't come out at all. Somehow, I knew the latter wasn't an option. That I'd have to explain what I'd done. But right now, I didn't have the energy or the desire to talk about it.

"You're so stubborn, we could've been there for you," Briar whispers. "But I love you. Are you sure you don't want us to come over? We can bring snacks and scary movies? Help you get cleaned up?"

"I just wanna be alone tonight," I say, as I flick my eyes to the person in the driver seat. "The bed is calling my name. You guys can come over tomorrow and yell at me, yeah?"

Both of them huff in disappointment but agree. Ordering me to call them as soon as I'm awake or they'll be beating down my door. I let the silence absorb me, the expensive leather warm against my tender back. Even though I'm covered in blood, I could go to sleep wrapped in this soothing scent.

I feel safe here.

"They are going to know it was us who left Michael's body there, you know?" I say softly, hoping the conversation will keep me awake, at least long enough for a shower. "What do I say if the police show up asking questions?"

Thatcher's hand tightens around the steering wheel for a split second before releasing, keeping his eyes on the road. Remnants of red still stuck to his pale skin and hair, the both of us covered in blood.

The stain of tonight weighing heavy, that thread connecting us growing a little stronger. Even if he was unaware of it. My lips still hummed, buzzed with the electric tingle of his lips.

"They won't," Thatcher says calmly, turning the wheel and pulling into the gates of his driveway. "Stephen will hear of it. Call off the dogs before they have time to sniff. It'll be swept under the rug. This town won't even

hear a whisper about it. But the message to the Sinclairs will be more than obvious. If they want to play, we will play.”

I nod, chewing the inside of my cheek as I try to pull my body up. Searing pain spreads across my abdomen, and I hiss softly, my hands reach for the wounds on my stomach.

“I’ll bandage those inside,” he says, still not looking at me, content with keeping his eyes forward.

When he told me I was coming with him, I thought he wanted to give me a ride to my home. I hadn’t realized that wasn’t the case until we were deep into town, headed towards his residence.

“Is your grandmother—I mean, is she—” A blush heats my cheeks. “Is she okay with me being here?”

It feels naïve to ask something like that, this trivial thing in the face of everything we are going through. But May Pierson is a lovely woman, and I would hate to disrespect her, even if I desperately need a shower.

“The west wing of the house is mine. She rarely visits it. She won’t even know you’re here.”

The car pulls into the front of the house, coming to a gradual stop before he places it into park.

“Does she—” I swallow, glancing at him. “Does she know who I am?”

He knows what I mean. I’m not asking if she knows if we are friends. I’m asking if she knows who I am to their family. The girl who sent Henry Pierson, her son, to jail and lived to tell the story of my mother’s death.

“Yes.”

I don’t have time to react or ask further questions because his slender legs are climbing out of the vehicle. I think I might prefer the Thatcher who is snarky, sarcastic, and always interrupting me to this dry, straight to the point version.

His stillness is throwing me off.

Exhaustion suffocates me, my bones aching as I reach for the door handle, barely able to push it open. My adrenaline had crashed hard, leaving me weak.

The drive of the hungry, the urge that fueled my strength had gone away. Retreated, tucked away inside of that dark cave in my soul where it slept full and sated. It had left me to deal with the aftermath alone. Feeling empty and lost.

That's the issue with this thing. Once everything steadies, the anger and need to do harm fades to black, the emotional pain still lives. It still breathes and exists inside of me like a perpetual open wound. Always bleeding.

Killing him had fed the urge to kill.

It did not heal the wound.

It did not take away the memory of their hands on me or the sound of their voices in my ear. It did not erase the burning in my chest from the lack of oxygen. My revenge had been enough to curb the craving for violence and broken bones.

But it would never chase out the fear of watching my mother die or somehow avenge her life. I'd done it because they deserved to pay for what they did, but it didn't change anything.

Could never change anything.

My knees wobble, standing on my own for only a second, before Thatcher's slender arm snakes around my waist, his other cupping my legs and sweeping me up from the ground.

In one elegant movement, I'm scooped up into his arms. The chill of his body icing out the thoughts that seem to eat me alive when I'm all but deserted in my mind.

In his arms, I am not alone.

I stare at the side of his face, his jaw set as he says nothing. Just carries me in his arms as if I weigh nothing, as if this is just a normal thing we do every single day.

"Stop looking at me like that."

I fight a smile, casting my gaze down. "Okay."

The walk to the far left side of the house is quiet, my ear resting against his chest, counting the beats of his heart. It's a perfect rhythm, just the right amount of pressure, steady and a healthy tempo. The sound soothed my own.

I have very few healthy emotional memories.

Like when people smell a familiar scent. Or suddenly remember an embarrassing high school incident and you feel that shame all over again. Or maybe the rush of winning a game you played. It is more powerful than just a memory that you just recall. Those triggers give you the ability to relive those occasions once again.

But mine are different. All my triggers are connected to memories that leave me scared and angry.

One smell or sight, and I'm right back to experiencing the worst night of my life. I'm no longer in class or reading a book in my home, I'm in the closet, watching my mother die again.

I know vaguely that I'm in class, that people could be staring, but Henry is kneeling over my mother's body, killing her and I can't do anything about it. I can't breathe or calm down. While the world moves around me. I am trapped in a snow globe, re-experiencing my trauma.

The only thing that has pulled me back, the only person who has cracked that snow globe, is Thatcher.

It's not anything he does physically, but every single time he comes into those visions, everything feels better. When he steps into my mother's bedroom, I forget everything else and I cling to him, let his memory make me feel safe, comfort me until I'm back to reality.

To everyone else, he is their worst nightmare.

But he has always woken me up from mine.

When we enter the side of his house, it's mostly dark. I can barely make out the kitchen and the expensive couches in the living room. We climb a set of steps, followed by more walking. Everything is mostly a blur as he continues down a lengthy hallway.

The door to his bedroom opens with ease, his body turning sideways so that I don't bang my head against the frame. Thatcher's room is everything I expected it to be, but not at all at the same time.

My eager eyes take in every visible inch of the space. The impossibly high ceilings, eggshell-colored walls, and marble floors. His bed sits low to the ground, the white comforter looks freshly steamed and the pillows are organized perfectly. A sleek grand piano is tucked in the corner, and he has a desk against one of the walls.

It's all very modern and clean. Exactly like I thought it would be, but it doesn't seem lived in. There are no papers on his desk or shoes on the floor. No form of personalization or care, leaving it all very desolate.

I am so exhausted that I can barely appreciate being in his space. Finally within the walls of his home, where he dwells in private. Where everything smells like him.

He carries me easily to the bathroom, setting me down on my own two feet in front of the sink before walking towards the shower, hitting a button

that makes water fall down from the ceiling from multiple different spouts. The gray-tiled stand-up shower probably costs more money than my entire house.

“Shower,” he mutters. “I’m going to use the spare. Just wait in my room until I come back with bandages. I’m assuming my bodywash and hair products work fine for you, or do I need to grab something else?”

I know my face is red and I’m secretly hoping the blood covers the sight of my embarrassment. I should’ve never told him about the bodywash. He’s never going to forget it.

“Yeah, it’s fine.” I clear my throat. “You didn’t, I mean, you don’t have to do this. You could’ve just taken me home. Contrary to what you believe, I can take care of myself.”

“I’m aware.”

I watch him walk to the door, pausing with his hand on the knob, his back stiff. I say nothing, just stand still and wait. Wait for whatever it is he has to say.

“I heard you.” He wavers. “When you screamed, I heard you.”

The sound of the door clicking follows. I glued my eyes to where he once stood, digesting his words. Somehow, my desperate plea for help had been answered. He’d heard me.

It took me a while to make my way to the shower, stuck on some version of autopilot when I finally stepped beneath the stream of water. I took my time, lathering myself in his bodywash, rubbing the silky shampoo in my curls.

I must have lost track of time inside the steam, because by the time the water ran clear, letting me know that I’d successfully washed all the blood down the drain, the faint sound of music was drifting from outside. Piano keys humming in the distance.

Curiosity and excitement coils in my stomach. I click the shower off, wrapping a warm towel around my body, only then realizing I don’t have a change of clothes.

I chew the inside of my cheek, considering my options. Deciding that Thatcher has already seen me naked before, this isn’t any different. Even though this situation feels so much more... intimate. Soft. Quiet.

Everything that we are not.

My body throbs as I crack the door, steam bursting out into the bedroom. The music is much louder now, melodies floating from the keys.

The bed is empty, a pile of clothes folded neatly atop them.

But Thatcher sits tucked in the corner, facing me as he plays the instrument in front of him like they are one and the same. One fluid piece. I can't tell where he ends, and the key begins.

I could only imagine how many hours he'd sat in this room, in front of this very piano, practicing, perfecting each little movement of his fingers.

His body sways and gives with every single note. Eyes closed as his wet hair falls in front of his face, so uncharacteristically disheveled that it nearly takes my breath away. The black-collared shirt he is wearing isn't buttoned, leaving his chest exposed.

The muscles in his stomach flexing as his fingers delicately fly across the black and white keys, blending them together so that you have no choice but to exist in his version of gray.

I'd heard nothing more beautiful, seen anyone more talented.

For the first time, I'm not asking myself what is inside Thatcher's mind or curious about what he is thinking. For the first time, I just...know.

Like the lyrics are telling me everything I need to hear. As if he is speaking through the chords and notes. Drawing me in so I know exactly what he is feeling.

I can feel it in my bones. The pain that lives inside of him, the sorrow that exists deep in the marrow of his bones that no one else can see. It's right there in front of my eyes, tickling my ears.

I've been watching him forever, but I think this is what seeing him really feels like.

The grief and sadness thrumming straight through the thread that binds my soul to his. Gods, my poor heart, she is crying for him. Weeping as he plays note after note of somber music.

It's the purest form of music.

True communication, like I've never experienced before.

When the song tumbles to a graceful end, only his breathing fills the room. His eyes remaining closed for only a second more, before he opens them to look straight at me.

I've gotten caught staring, my mouth speaking before I can do anything about it. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"I knew you were there already," he interrupts, standing from the bench. "No need to apologize for snooping when I was aware of my audience."

“Thatcher, I knew you played, but,” my eyebrows furrow together, “that was incredible. Could-tour-the-world-playing-for-people incredible. Bring-the-world-to-tears in—”

“The world doesn’t need another musician.”

I step from behind the bathroom door, greeted by the cold temperature of his room. Fuck, I’m in a towel.

“Then how about just one of you? Don’t you think the world needs that?”

The look he gives me is dry, like there is nothing going on behind his eyes. Telling me his answer before he even speaks a word.

“I think you know the answer to that, Lyra.” His graceful legs carry him to the bed, scooping up the pile of clothes. “Are you going to get dressed? Or do you prefer a towel?”

Everything he says makes me squirm. Turns the tops of my cheeks red, like my body has no clue what to do when he speaks except flood with embarrassment and arousal.

It’s eternally frustrating.

My damp feet squeak across the shiny marble floors, the only noise between the two of us as I make my way in his direction. I can’t prevent my eyes from taking him in now that he’s standing.

It’s so difficult being in the same room with someone who is so... flawless. Even when he is so unfixed. Hair still a little wet, pieces falling in his eyes. Eyes like the coolest Alaskan waters, somehow I know they are rare. His dress shirt exposes the smooth lines and ridges of his toned stomach, with every breath the flex, hardening beneath my gaze. Those little valleys on either side of his hips that trail dangerously into the waist band of his pants—

Wait.

“Is that a tattoo?” I ask, my eyes squinting, forgetting about the clothes in his hands, standing almost an arm’s length away. “You have a tattoo?”

“Yes.” He clears his throat. “I’m above the legal age to have a tattoo, the guys are covered in them.”

“Yeah, but it’s you. Mr. Do Not Touch Me. Must be clean all the time, wears gloves to murder people. You don’t do tattoos.”

The circular ink hides just along his upper rib cage. A detailed design of a coin. Charon’s obol, the same piece of currency he’d once left on my mother’s eyes. The same one Silas has on his wrist.

“You got it done with the guys? You all have one?”

Another piece of his puzzle, closer and closer to the man no one can figure out. But just as he always does when one gets too close, he cuts. A viper striking.

One step forward and ten steps back. Always.

“Do you want the clothes or not?” His voice is harsh, not unlike his normal tone, but the coldest he has been since he found me tonight.

I remove my eyes from the tattoo, lifting my gaze to his. My hands reach for the items in his hands. I feel the fabric between my fingers smiling quietly.

The soft, plush material beneath my touch is hard to mistake.
Cashmere.

But he quickly pulls it back from my grasp. “I need to bandage your wounds first.”

I nod. “Okay.”

“Sit.”

I sit.

“Lean back.”

I lean back.

“I’m not a dog,” I bite out, even though I did what he asked.

“You’re not?” he purrs, the edges of his lips tugging up. “Could’ve fooled me.”

A strangled laugh comes from the back of my throat, pain tingling my side from what I assume is a fractured rib. “Did you just make a joke?”

“If that will make you feel better about what I said, then sure. I made a joke.”

The smile on my face is hard to remove because he’s smirking, and not in a wicked way. In this funny, happy sorta way.

“Drop the towel.” He orders, kneeling on the ground in front of me.

“What? Why?”

My heart rate suddenly spiking and thighs locking together. The sight of him on the ground, kneeling, doesn’t seem right. Me, Lyra Abbott making Thatcher Pierson get on his knees, just doesn’t add up in my mind.

“I need to see if you’re still bleeding and if any of your wounds need cleaning. I can’t do that over the towel.” He says it so clinically, like he’s a doctor and I’m a patient in need of care. As if he is clueless about what happens to my body when he is close, let alone close while I’m naked.

“Why can’t I just—I don’t think it’s—”

“Let me see what they did to you, pet.” The rumble at the back of his throat makes me jump. “Show me so that when I track down the one who got away, I’ll make him pay for laying a finger on you. Show me, so that I can make this better.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, dragging the towel. The cold air biting at my nipples, my face turning red as they harden. I let it fall until just above my waist, baring my upper half to him entirely.

“All the way,” he orders.

I bite the inside of my cheek, whispering, “They didn’t touch me down there.”

Thankfully, he doesn’t push that issue.

My eyes spare a look down at my abdomen, wincing at the sight. Several open cuts that are still leaking blood, some deeper than others. They run along my sides, across my belly, one that looks deep enough to scar is torn across my hip bone. My eyebrows furrow in disgust at the nasty, reddish purple bruises that freshly adorn my rib cage.

It looks awful. I look awful. What they did to me was awful.

Tears sting my eyes, forcing me to look away towards the wall so that I don’t have to witness Thatcher’s reaction. The last thing I need is for him to look at me with disgust in his eyes. Repulsed by the sight of me.

I feel his fingers against my skin, cold and making me jump a little. The pad of his pointer finger skates across my hip bone, drawing a line up my ribs and across my stomach. Just soft touches.

At first I thought it might be medicine or him cleaning the wounds, but as I chance a look down, it’s just his hand. And he’s staring at me with lightness in his eyes. A face filled with light.

The kindest I’ve ever seen him. Soft and eyes swimming with something...something. He looks like a child who just discovered the secrets of the universe.

“You have freckles here.”

My breath is caught in my throat, unsure of how to respond or even operate my lungs. His fingers just keep tracing the light brown spots littered across my skin. Compulsively, like he can’t help himself.

One of the deeper cuts bleeds freely, streaming down my stomach towards the center of my belly. Landing right in the path of Thatcher’s moving hands , but he doesn’t let that stop him.

No, he smears the red liquid across his finger like a paintbrush and my body a canvas. I can't believe my eyes, looking at him like this on his knees. Etched, detailed, and sculpted from stone, a god amongst mortals.

The pain reduces, trickling down from my mind as lust boils in my stomach. Rising from the temperature of my body, making my thighs tighten and my core ache.

Touching Thatcher isn't like coming in contact with anyone else. It doesn't feel the same. It's more than just superficial, I feel it in my bones. The depths of my soul purrs at the feeling of his skin on mine, coaxes me into a state of bliss.

Nothing my imagination dreamed up could have done this justice.

The way time seems to pause as he leans farther towards my torso, forcing my legs open in order to make space for his broad shoulders. The sharp chill of skin touching such an intimate part of makes me shiver. It cools the heat, making everything feel that much more real.

"You're so cold," I gasp, the towel sunk between my legs hiding my delicate center from his view.

"Some would argue you're too warm," he whispers. His mouth hovers right over the middle of my stomach, less than an inch from the red streaks that paint my skin. "But that's the point, isn't it? You're too warm and I'm too cold."

We are the light and the darkness, creating the gray matter that hangs in the balance. We are good and evil, proof that it all lives within each of our souls regardless of life's interference.

I've always known what I was to Thatcher, what he was to me. This moment made me feel like he was a little closer to seeing it too.

"I'm your rose," I mumble, sucking in a sharp breath when his cool lips touch me. The wet feeling of his tongue swirling against me, licking up the blood he'd coated there. "You're my thorns."

I look down at his white hair, watching him shake his head.

"No," he mutters, every movement of his lips I feel deep in my center. "You're my ghost, Lyra Abbott. Mine and only mine. You watch me, you exist for me."

Blissful agony spreads throughout my bones, so overwhelming that I don't even notice his sneaky fingers pulling the towel. It's only when the cool air of his room brushes against my slicked folds I notice I'm bared naked in front of him.

Completely exposed. Vulnerable. This is my weakest moment, and he is right here to see all of it. All my sharp edges melted away the moment those knives dove into Michael's brain. In front of Thatcher, I'm nothing but a hollowed, fractured girl desperate to feel loved. To feel wanted.

"What does that make you?" I ask on a gasp, glancing down just in time to watch his head move farther south, his mouth stained red. I have a shiver of déjà vu, remembering having this exact fantasy months ago.

"I'm the man you haunt." His bottom lip drags past my belly button, my stomach quivering. "Your scent, your smile, your touch. You have haunted me every single day since the moment I looked at you."

He bowed his head, placing a tender kiss on my inner thigh, his hands gripping the backs of my legs, stroking them with gentle swoops as if he was afraid I'd split beneath his touch.

My heart soared with my body. Every fiber of my being was burning beneath his icy touch. The tightness that overtook my chest and core were almost unbearable. I felt as if I could explode, and he'd barely done anything.

The sadistic hands of a killer tapped the top of my knees. Demanding entrance. Hands that had tormented without mercy and granted death without compassion. My thighs parted further, giving him unfettered access.

Blood-stained and vicious. It could only be these hands I craved.

"Sweet, so very sweet for me, pet," he hums.

My erratic breathing pumps my chest up and down in a rapid pace. I fiercely want his mouth on my pussy. Aching for him in a way that can only be described as feverish.

"Thatcher," I whimper. "Please, I need..."

Fuck, what did I need?

"You need?"

My eyes meet his, the piercing fixed stare he gives me.

"Everything. Anything. Just...please."

The first swipe of his tongue against my folds drags a moan from deep inside of me. Bolts of lightning buzz across my lower half, and nothing has ever made me feel more alive or closer to death. He licks up and down, dragging through my folds, tasting me with a guttural groan that vibrates my core.

"Am I the reason your desperate cunt tastes so addictively good? She wants to be sweet for me, doesn't she?"

My eyes roll back as I nod, ass arching off the bed to chase the friction of his wet mouth. When his tongue swirls around my clit, pulling the sensitive bundle of nerves into his mouth, I jerk into him.

Thatcher's body is cold, but his mouth is hot. Pouring liquid heat straight into my pussy, filling my insides with a fire unlike anything I've ever experienced.

He takes his time, savoring every inch, discovering every spot that makes me weak. My teeth sink into my bottom lip as he begins to pay special attention to my clit.

Swirling his warm tongue in tight circles, rapid motions that wind the coil in my gut tighter. Impossibly tight. One of his hands swipes across my belly, my stare flicking down to see him covering two fingers in the blood that drips from my cuts before they disappear between my thighs, beneath his mouth.

"Oh my—" I suck in a shaky breath, his digit pressing against my entrance teasing me for only a second before sinking into my tight walls.

Something inside of me twists, this idea that he's taking this awful thing that was done to me and using it to make me come. Rewriting what this evening means to me. So that later, when I think back to what happened tonight or I look at the scars on my stomach, I don't remember those horrid men.

I'll remember Thatcher on his knees in front of me, his mouth devouring me and fingers exploring my body.

Blood is our life force. It is the color of passion, of lust, of our hearts. It's what makes us human, what attaches the two of us in every single way you can connect to another person. The most intimate form of connection is sharing this liquid that determines life and death.

That's what being with him is like, teetering on the edge of life and death continually. I want to do both with him, die and live. Exist and rot. All that falls in between.

I stare down, watching as he slides another finger inside of me, my arousal mixing with the blood on his hand. An erotic, soul-shattering sight. My whimpers slip from my lips with no restraint, not caring that I'm pushing my hips into his hand because I'm so needy.

I'll be needy. I'll be desperate. I'll be these things and more to have him.

He never removes his eyes from me, not even as my hands slam into the comforter digging into the mattress as that coil inside me threatens to break.

“My poor, little pet,” he purrs. “You want to come, don’t you? You want to pour all those sweet juices on my tongue, huh?”

“Yes, yes,” I cry, his fingers pumping leisurely inside of me at a steady pace, so slowly that it’s just enough to keep me on the threshold of a euphoric climax. Too much and not enough. And he knows it.

“Come on, darling phantom, work a little harder for it. Show me how badly you want it, earn it.”

Another flick of his tongue against my clit with the command. I whined in frustration, my hands pressing into the bed, lifting my ass from it in order to gain some leverage so that I could rock myself against his strong fingers. Thrusting forward, watching them disappear inside of me repeatedly.

Thatcher’s pupils dilated, as if he knew the filthy thoughts that were on my mind.

I was so very close, sweat trickling down my back and beading on my chest as I fucked his hand. My work must have earned me a reward because he pressed his tongue against my center, flicking the bud with urgency, giving me just the right amount of pressure to send me soaring.

Liquid ecstasy poured across my body like a waterfall. The band deep in my stomach snapping in half as I crashed through my orgasm. The scream that ripped out of me was a beaten, mangled thing. My back bowed, legs quaking as I came all over his hand.

“That’s it,” he praises, lapping up the sticky liquid between my thighs. “That’s it, my bloody girl.”

Every flick of his tongue sent an electric bolt through me, all my senses heightened as he licked me through my high. A groan rumbles in his chest, continuing even when the waves of pleasure ebbed, coaxes my pussy into a trembling mess.

My chest is heaving, erratic, as I try to catch a breath, try to give my body a break, but I’m still shaking when he pulls away. The heat of his mouth leaving the apex of my thighs.

When my eyes open, fluttering in this state of bliss, I find him looking down at his lap. My brows tugging together in concern as I lean forward. My limbs feel impossibly heavy, exhaustion and pain slamming back into me with vengeance.

“Thatch,” I murmur, looking down at his lap and finding a dark spot on the center of his jeans, my jaw going slack. “Is that—Did you?”

“It would appear,” he says, clearing his throat, but the haze of lust still heavy on his tongue, “my cock enjoys the way you taste as well, pet.”

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BLOOD IN THE WATER

THATCHER

“E njoy.”

The sound of a tray slamming onto the table in front of me gives off the impression the person leaving it would rather us die than enjoy. I flick my gaze to the server, who walks from our table.

“I wonder if they rock, paper, scissors, shoot for who has to wait on us.”

The entire staff, along with the customers, inside Tilly’s Diner don’t try to hide their stares or concern about our presence. It wouldn’t shock me to find out the cook put rat poison inside the food my friends ordered.

Their visible fear and buried envy are no longer a surprise. When I was younger, I questioned why everyone always stared, why they walked on the opposite side of the street or whispered amongst themselves.

It did not take me much time to figure out that I was both everything they wished to be and what they lived to tear down. Even if my father’s reputation hadn’t followed me like a plague, I would still be everyone’s favorite topic.

We all would.

“Must have been her turn to pull the short straw,” Briar quips from across the booth, leaning further into Alistair’s arm that is slung protectively over her shoulder.

“Is getting dick from Ponderosa Springs’s most notorious asshat worth the shit service?” Rook mutters, reaching down from his place behind me to pluck a basket of fries into his hands.

He is sitting atop the booth, tucked against the wall behind Sage, who rolls her eyes at his vulgar question but does nothing to correct him.

Briar doesn't miss a beat, only shrugs and replies, "Wouldn't that mean I was screwing you?"

A loud cough erupts from Alistair's mouth, his girlfriend's rebuttal choking him on a mixture of shock and laughter. A smirk tugs at my lips. I may not like Briar, but I enjoy anyone calling Rook out for his stupidity.

Rook juts out his bottom lip in a fake pout, leaning down to bury his head in Sage's strawberry blonde locks.

"Babe, you just gonna let her talk to me like that?"

"You asked for it," she says, smiling as she runs a hand through his messy hair.

A bell rings, the door to Tilly's swinging open. I remove my attention from the couples fest I've subjected myself to, to see a pair of muddy yellow rain boots.

I can hear the wet steps from our table, the face of our new guest hidden by a ratty, navy green coat. Except the curls bursting from the edges give her away.

Lyra glides through the aisle, her fingers wrapped around the strap of her crossbody bag. She doesn't speak, brings zero attention to herself, and the patrons barely acknowledge her arrival.

They give her a quick glance before returning to their stale food and redundant conversations. She isn't of interest to them.

But she is all I can see. All I am intrigued by in the neon-lit diner.

It's starkly different from their reaction to me. They do not stop to gawk and whisper. She simply blends into her environment with little effort and goes undetected.

However, when a select few people notice my gaze is away from my already outcast group, she warrants recognition. They take a moment, a second glance, a third, until they are blatantly staring at the woman who has my attention.

I can see it in her shoulders, the way they tense. She knows they are watching her now. A feeling I'm sure she isn't used to or comfortable with. Lyra shrinks into her hood, trying desperately to fade back into the shadows, but it's too late.

All of them are asking the same vain question.

Who is she?

A violent thought enters my brain.

Would it be possible to make it around every table, plucking eyeballs and feeding them to the vultures with enough time to evade the police?

When she reaches the table, the girls greet her with warm remarks. She tugs the hood from her head, the split in her lip still visible, and there is an ugly bruise still decorating her cheek. Its edges have turned yellow, but the center still lingers purple.

“Hi,” she breathes, grabbing the back of a chair from an empty table. “Sorry, I was in the library and lost track of time. Did I—”

“You can’t use that chair.”

Silence so thick you could slice it settles around the restaurant. I remove my eyes from Lyra, cutting a cold glaze towards a server, different from the young female who had delivered our food but still reeking of distaste for our presence.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware it was reserved,” Lyra apologizes swiftly, her face red with embarrassment, visibly shrinking for a man wearing something off the rack.

A man clearly beneath her in means, yet she bends for him like a sad, little piece of taffy, and that fresh taste of anger is quick to fill my throat.

“It’s not, sweetheart,” he sneers, “but this is a restaurant, and it’s needed for paying customers, make sense?”

With shyness and obedience, a bit too fluid for my liking, she pushes the chair back to its place. But my hand snatches the back of it, curling around the cool metal and holding it there.

The only person she should ever bow to is me. My little pet needs a lesson in owning who she is, and quickly, because I refuse to witness her bend to any man but me.

“Are we not paying customers?” I say firmly, my tone steady as I stare up at the man sporting a manager tag.

His eyes widen slightly, shocked by my interruption. I’m sure he was expecting to deal with the explosive personality of Rook or even a harsh glare from Alistair, one of my companions known for confrontation.

But I can see he was not expecting to deal with me.

We all know this isn’t about seating. It has everything to do with measly townsfolk trying to take a stand against the big bad wolves that prowl around doing as they please.

“Of course.” He clears his throat. “But we get a little busier during this time. Someone could need—”

“Does anyone else need this chair?” I ask loudly, my voice echoing in the diner’s stillness. No one moves, not even a single gasp. Just steady quiet.

When I look back at the manager—Josh, as his tag reads—his face is the color of a fire hydrant, his fists balled at his sides.

“It’s company policy,” he insists, putting up much more fight than I expected. “She can’t have that seat.”

I nod, a smile lifting at the corners of my lips. I release the chair, pushing myself to a standing position before stepping out of the booth. I take my time to button the front of my suit before I encroach into Josh’s space.

My frame dominates his.

Not just in height either.

“Tell me no again,” I bait him.

“I—” he stutters, barely able to look me in the eyes, frantically searching around him for someone to aid him but finding no one willing to keep him out of my path.

“If she wants every chair in this trash diner, she will have it,” I say. “If I want to buy every square inch of land this dump sits on, I will. Just to let my friend burn you alive inside of it.”

Josh’s face becomes a sickly green color, and if he even thinks about throwing up on me, I will remove his spine and use it as a scarf.

My hand regrips the chair, spinning it around so it is open for Lyra to sit on. The metal scrapes across the cheap floor as I lean my face an inch closer to the man who has my full attention.

“Make sense?” I edge.

He swallows, carefully debating his next words before saying, “Yes, sir. I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

That should be enough. If I were someone else, I would have let him go, pride bruised, and tail tucked between his legs.

Except I’m a sadistic man, and breaking men who think they own the world is my favorite pastime. I live for it.

“It’s not me you owe an apology to,” I correct, looking over at Lyra, who is staring at me with a blank expression on her face. I flick my eyes to the seat, motioning for her to take it.

She chews the inside of her cheek, silently obeying me. I step behind her and the chair, pushing it into the table where she had originally intended

it to be.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, for the confusion. It was my mistake." He lets lose a breath. "Will there be anything else?"

"We are—"

"Cherry Coke. Do you think you can manage that without any confusion?" I interrupt Lyra once again, watching Josh nod his head and practically run in the opposite direction of our table.

"Was that necessary?" Lyra whispers, her face still red with embarrassment.

I look at her. "Stop bowing down to people beneath you and I'll stop. Remember your place, pet."

A question lingers in her eyes, but she keeps quiet, settling into her chair. Awkward silence lingers around the table, everyone too shocked to speak, but I've never explained my actions to anyone before, and I won't start now.

A fry sails across the air, thumping against Lyra's chest. "Seems the bug queen has crawled her way into Thatcher's icy heart, too."

Lyra smiles gently while I throw my middle finger up to Rook. Her knee knocks against my own. A light pink color rises to her cheeks, memories from the last time we were together probably replaying in her mind. Suddenly, I'm starved. Famished, and not for trash food here at Tilly's.

She clears her throat, looking around the building quickly before speaking. "Any word?"

"On what, exactly? We are knee-deep in shit, and it just keeps getting deeper by the second. Gotta be more specific," Rook hums.

He's not wrong. Quite on the mark this time. Right now, we are staring at a dead end, sitting like ducks, waiting for trouble to come to us with no way to stop it.

"The circus. Have the police released a statement or asked questions?"

"Nothing has come across my father's desk. I went by the station yesterday and didn't hear or see anyone chatting about a man being impaled on a board."

Regardless of Rook's turbulent relationship with his father, Theodore Van Doren is in the perfect position to provide us with information regarding the legal status of all things criminal in Ponderosa Springs.

His father being the district attorney not only gives Rook access (without his permission) to confidential files, but his office is smack-dab in the middle of the police station.

All it takes is one brief visit, and we can figure out just about anything.

“That’s the least of my concern,” Alistair speaks up from the corner. “That was an eye for an eye. Stephen knows the score. If anyone came for us, he knows we’d throw him under the bus. He wouldn’t risk it.”

Lyra’s shoulders relax a bit at the reassurance that she won’t be thrown into the back of a police car.

“Every day I wake up feels another day closer to prison,” Briar mutters, running a hand down her face in frustration. “I still don’t understand why we can’t go to someone outside the Ponderosa Springs food chain and share the information we already have. Let professionals handle it.”

Alistair’s hand tightens around her shoulder as if silently letting her know he’d rather die than have her go to jail. This will never touch her or Sage. They wouldn’t let it, even if it meant rotting for the rest of their lives.

“All of our proof is tied to something that could bring us down with it,” Sage says slowly. “We have nothing solid to stand on without incriminating ourselves, plus I don’t trust anyone. Not even the feds. We saw how that worked out last time.”

“Then—”

“Then what?” I interrupt the blonde across from me. “We tell them about where those missing federal agents are? That the reason we know about this sex ring is because we went on a murder spree to find it? That’s your big plan?”

I watch her fist tighten into a ball, her lips in a thin line, and she glares at me.

“You’re a real asshole, Pierson. At least I’m trying to help. Must be real fun to only care about yourself.”

“It is,” I quip, only pissing her off further.

Arguing with her statement is pointless. Briar doesn’t know me, and even if she did, she wouldn’t understand me. We are two opposites with contrasting views around every turn.

There is no middle ground for the two of us. And there never will be.

Briar opens her mouth to say something I’m sure is full of curse words and distaste for my actions, but Lyra is quick to interrupt.

“Stephen is going to run for mayor,” she blurts out, effectively stopping her best friend from speaking.

“What?”

“I saw the campaign information on his desk. He plans on announcing it soon, some type of launch party he’s getting together.”

“How’d you get into his office?” Sage asks. “The Sinclairs have fucking crazy security protocols.”

She shrugs. “I’d spent all day following Easton. The entire day, I trailed him, listening to pointless fucking conversations. So, I followed him to his house, and the idiot didn’t lock the door behind him. I saw an opportunity, and I took it.”

While she continues sharing the details of her Nancy Drew moment that almost got her killed, our waitress drops by for long enough to slide a glass of soda onto the table towards me.

Thoughtlessly, I tear open a straw, dropping it into the carbonated liquid before pushing the drink towards Lyra silently.

“Is that all you found?” Alistair asks.

For her sake, I hope it’s more than that. If she put herself on death’s doorstep to only find out about Stephen running for mayor, I’ll make her wish she were dead.

“Godfrey is on his payroll. I saw some invoices still pulled up on his computer. There wasn’t a description of the work he is doing, but it’s...” she swallows a drink, “a lot of fucking money.”

“Woah,” Rook breathes, throwing his arms behind his head and kicking his feet out. “I’m impressed. Stephen actually pays for the whores who suck his cock. Who knew?”

My ego can’t help but want to say something along the lines of “I told you so.” In fact, we all told her that Conner Godfrey was not the man she thought him to be.

Yet, it wouldn’t be Lyra Abbott if she wasn’t hell-bent on always seeing the good in everyone. Even if there was little good to be found, she would snuff it out and cling to it.

It’s who she is. Who she has always been.

“I also found a door. It was hidden behind a bookshelf and secured with a padlock. It could be standard practice to hide your tax information that securely, but I felt it was worth mentioning.”

“Probably where he keeps all his skin suits—”

“How exactly did you find this door?” I ask, talking over Briar.

A passive look settles onto her face as she looks at me. “Through hard detective work and raw intelligence.”

She chews the inside of her cheek, looking away from me before muttering, “I tripped on the rug and hit a statue on his desk. That’s what moved the shelf.”

The group of people around us laugh, and I can feel that same sound tickling my throat as I hum, “That sounds more accurate.”

She mumbles something to herself, probably cursing me as she digs into her bag, retrieving her phone. I watch her put in her passcode, something about it familiar, and then she pulls up an image, sliding it across the table for everyone to look at.

“There was this, too. I think it’s a schedule. Certain dates when Stephen meets someone at Term thirteen? But I wasn’t sure what it meant. I thought maybe one of you did.”

“Terminal thirteen,” I say. “It’s a shipping port twenty miles from Ponderosa Springs. What better way to send off kidnapped girls than in a cargo container?”

It’s the only deep-water port close by and responsible for helping move goods through Portland’s marine terminals. And, apparently, aid in the illegal transportation of human beings.

These dots we’d placed in our mind, we’re trying to connect, desperately looking for a way to make sense of everything that had happened and all we’ve seen in the past two years.

“Is it that easy to sell and trade people?” Briar asks, eyebrows furrowing together.

Her confusion, as annoying as it is, is valid. She grew up in a small town in Texas, dirt-poor. Something like this is only on the television for her.

“If you have the right amount of money,” Rook replies. “You can do anything easily with money.”

“I’m surprised. I didn’t think the Sinclairs had two brain cells to rub together, let alone were smart enough to run an entire sex trafficking ring,” Sage says, a coldness in her voice as she speaks about the people who had almost become her family.

“It’s still not enough to prove anything,” Alistair points out. “Rook, have you gotten access to Silas’s computer? Able to see anything on the

security cameras at the Sinclair estate?”

“Besides Easton in his boxers?” Rook cringes. “No, there are no cameras in the office or the billiard. Literally fucking anywhere someone might hide something is blacked out. Godfrey is over a lot, but nothing suspicious.”

When we had started this quest for revenge in the name of Rosemary, I never wanted to get in this deep. I’d theorized that someone in Ponderosa Springs that we had wronged went after the only weakness we had as retaliation.

We would find them, kill them, and that would be the end. We would go our separate ways, leave this rotting town in the rearview mirror. It was never supposed to go this far, run this deep.

I’m not the hero that takes down a sex ring. None of us are. But my loyalty to Silas won’t let me abandon him. No matter how far the lies go, I’ll be in it until he’s had enough.

I owe that to him. To Rosemary.

“Dead end,” Briar sighs. “All we keep finding are fucking dead ends.”

She runs a hand through her hair, leaning further into Alistair’s arms, seeking comfort in a hand I’d seen rip people apart. A man who believed he was nothing but a spare is the only thing holding her together.

“So, we wait. I mean, that’s all we can do, right?”

“Wait for what? The Halo to make good on their promise to Thatcher?” the blonde bites with more venom than I think she wanted to. “For them to finish what they started with you, Lyra? Or do they come after Alistair? Or Sage?”

Fear.

It pours off Briar in waves. She may not admit it out loud, but it’s in her eyes. It lives there, festering and boiling out of her throat.

“Little thief—”

“No, Alistair. Don’t do that—don’t little thief me,” she bites, eyes shimmering with unshed tears, looking at him with a fierce gaze. “I will not lose you. I will not lose any of you. Do you understand?”

She’s afraid, not for herself but for Alistair. For the people she cares about. Fearful of surrendering him to the cruel realities of this town. That small sliver of respect I have for her vibrates in my chest. An understanding between us that if the world came crashing down, she would sacrifice anything to protect him, just as he would for her.

Alistair, with hands capable of inflicting immense pain, swipes a tear gently off her cheek with his thumb, leaning forward so that his mouth is buried in her hair just beside her ear, whispering something only they can hear.

Emotions are running at an all-time high right now, and I have no desire to see it delve any further. I press my hands onto the table, getting ready to stand up when Lyra addresses me.

“You got a threat? When? What kind?”

“It’s nothing—”

“He got a letter, something about evil and warning him to leave or he wouldn’t make it out alive. Real Pretty Little Liars bullshit,” Rook butts in, always quick to insert himself into situations he doesn’t belong in.

“Mind your business,” I snap at him.

“Why didn’t you say anything to me?” Lyra insists.

I can see the hurt in her eyes, the glaze across them, from my spot next to her. I don’t need her worry or concern. She can’t protect me because I’m not a victim.

Outside our private lessons, we aren’t supposed to be in contact. None of the surrounding people know of what we do behind closed doors, and she’s three seconds from showing all her cards to these people.

“This conversation is over.”

I stand to my full height, slipping out of the booth, when her soft interjection floats to my ears.

“But—”

I cut my gaze down at her, giving a curt shake of my head. Like someone silently punishing a child, keeping her from uttering another word.

It is not her job to look at me with glassy, pity-filled eyes. I am not some tragedy or person for her to care about losing. That isn’t what I am to her, and yet it’s written all over her face.

She could stare at the back of my head with those eyes filled with worry for all I care. I’d spent my childhood learning how to care for myself, how to mentally defend against my emotions, and how to physically protect myself from harm.

But for some reason, that makes no sense biologically or chemically, it’s harder to stop myself from doing things I know I’ll regret later when she’s around. Like laying my palm on her head, petting her hair, and telling her with my mouth on her body that she had no reason to worry for me.

Touch is my biggest pet peeve, my mortal enemy for as long as I can remember. Yet, with Lyra, my skin burns for her contact. My sharp edges crave the gentle softness only she has.

My chest does this god-awful spasm, locking up and tightening. I need out of this diner and far away from her. I need space from her dirty rain boots and familiar smell.

Distance, so I can remind myself that I do not need Lyra to care about me. It's easier to suspend her memory, the effect she seems to have on me, when I'm isolated, far away from her physical form.

I turn my back to her, tossing my hand over my head in a careless goodbye that doesn't require a response. I'm not paying attention, which is normally fine. I always have a clear path because it's out of the ordinary for people to be in my way. They make it a point to flee whenever I'm around.

Except I feel my chest collide with another person, my face feigning indifference and eyes hardening as I look down. It's probably wrong of me to assume everyone is below me, which is why I constantly cast my gaze lower. But I'm rarely wrong in my suspicion.

Witty, cat-shaped eyes look up at me, unfamiliar and overconfident.

“Spatial awareness. Could use some work, yeah?”

I carelessly sweep my gaze across this unwelcome newcomer: Canadian based on her accent, female, and staring up at me as if I'm a fly caught in her unsuspecting web.

“I could recommend the same for you, with the addition of some manners,” I say coolly.

“You’re absolutely right. I apologize.” She grins, full of herself or sheer overconfidence. “Odette Marshall, and this is my partner, Gerrick Knight. We’re from a special task force in Virginia and were called in to consult on the recent murders.” She extends her hand for me to shake it. “Didn’t want to forget my manners again.”

I only stare down at it with no intention of returning the gesture. I look over at her male counterpart. Muscles on muscles with veins threatening to explode. High-and-tight haircut, standing with a cool expression and arms braced behind his back.

“It’s only polite manners to shake someone’s hand when you’re pleased to make their acquaintance,” I hum, shoving my hands into my pocket. “The effort is noted, though.”

Odette Marshall, to her credit, continues to smile at me, even as her left eye twitches with annoyance. No one enjoys being undermined, especially when they think they are in charge.

I'm surprised by their presence, more disappointed it had taken them this long to make the trip.

"Do you also plan to withhold evidence and take bribes?" I click my tongue, looking at both of them for the answer. "I wasn't sure if it was a skill they taught all members of the FBI or just your coworkers."

There had been global coverage regarding Cain McKay and Finn Breck's indiscretions while swearing to protect and serve. Unfortunately, none of the information that had been leaked could tie them to the Halo, but it was enough to discredit their images.

As if it matters now—they're both dead. One is documented, and the other is supposedly still on the run. They'll never find Cain's body. I made sure of that after Rook was finished with him.

"Rest assured, Thatcher, we are just two detectives looking for answers with nothing but good intentions," she hums. "It is Thatcher, right?"

The confidence she has is because she thinks she's above me. That she somehow has the upper hand because she'd read my file, asked a few questions, and gathered intel on me. All of us, if I had to suspect.

Except there is no upper hand with me. You are at my side or beneath my shoe.

"Is there something I can do for you, Detective? Or are you and your Marine just making the rounds?" I ask, already bored with this interaction.

If Gerrick is surprised by my assumption of his military service, he doesn't show it, only continues to watch in silence as his partner takes the lead.

"Yes, actually, there is." She folds her hands in front of her. "We wanted to see if you could answer a few questions for us. You're a local, after all, and from what we have gathered, quite intelligent. You could be a great help in giving us some direction on this case."

I hold in my scoff. This is the route they want to take with me? Really?

"Detective," I muse, a smile on my lips, "I'm charmed, but please refrain from trying to stroke my ego. You're not very good at it. But if you want direction..."

I reach into my pocket, sliding my wallet out and plucking a white card from one slot. I turn it over, offering it to her with two fingers.

“You can type this into your GPS and it will send you straight to my lawyer. I’m sure he’ll be more than willing to answer any of your questions in regard to me.”

“Oh, come on, you need a chaperone? Not capable of answering without supervision?”

It’s the first words Gerrick has spoken, his voice exactly as I expected. Deep and rough around the edges. I raise my eyebrow at his statement, my grin widening.

“Am I capable of answering your questions? Absolutely.” I hum, nodding my head softly. “Will I? Not likely.”

He grunts, crossing his arms in front of his chest. I avert my eyes back to Odette, still standing smug regardless of my compliance.

“Very interesting, the differences in those two words,” she hums. “We’ll make sure to tell your lawyer hello, and while I’m at it...”

She reaches into her pocket, retrieving a pale card of her own and looking up to meet my gaze. We stand there staring at one another, a sense of knowing passing between the two of us. I know her game, and she’s aware of mine.

Although my semiannual bloodshed is not on her radar, those dead girls with missing limbs are. She wants a killer in custody, and I’m her prime target.

I assume she is going to hand it to me, but she steps to the side, aiming her gaze at the people tucked in the booth behind me. They had silently watched our interaction but are now actively a part of the conversation.

“I’m interested in speaking to all of you, actually.”

Impressive how she hit a wall in trying to intimidate me and quickly readjusted, working her attention towards those she feels I care for. To her credit, she’d done her research, probably knows how intertwined all of us are.

On paper, she probably thought she had all my weak spots tucked in her pocket. But I’m impervious to her mediocre game of chess. I even have a Rook for her Knight, and if he keeps staring at me, I’ll let my game piece set him on fire.

Odette stares kindly in Lyra’s direction, her small body swiveled around in the chair. With a gentle movement, the detective reaches her hand forward, offering the pale card.

It's pure instinct. I barely notice the movement myself. My hand curls around the metal of Lyra's chair, my arm blocking her body from the offered card.

But I regret it the moment I see the detective's eyes sharpen, a knowing grin tugging on the edge of her lips. She quickly changes directions. Instead of handing it to only Lyra, she slips the paper onto the table.

"Call me if you hear anything useful." She pulls away, straightening her jacket. "Thatcher, I'll be seeing you."

It's several moments later before I make it out to my car, finally able to leave after making sure everyone, mostly the girls, knows not to speak to anyone without a lawyer present.

My mistake of showing the detective that I, unfortunately, have a weakness makes my palms itch. A weakness that I can no longer deny. One that would never be on paper but had bloomed inside of me like a vicious ivy.

Lyra and Lyra only. My instinctual need to shield her had opened a doorway with enough room for Odette to use her against me. My jaw aches with tension after clenching my teeth together for too long.

I sling my car door open, sinking into the leather seat and pressing my palms into my eyes as I lean back on the headrest. My head thrums with regret.

How had I let her get this close? How could I have been so weak?

Those questions feel so trivial now that I've allowed myself to be in this position. I am here and need to find a way out of this web Lyra has woven me into. I've let her haunt me far longer than I should have.

It's time for an exorcism.

I can't trust myself around her because she's so overwhelming. All I can seem to think about is her when she is in my vicinity. Not my safety or the secrets that could send me to prison.

Just her.

This is a game of survival, and if something makes you weak, you cut it off. And that's exactly what I need to do to Lyra. Cleave her off me, removed with a swift, clean slice. It will only put both of us in danger if we continue. Her life and my freedom are at risk.

This is my only choice.

As if to solidify my decision to amputate her from my life, when I open my eyes, in my passenger seat lies a present that hadn't been there when I'd

arrived earlier.

A severed human hand rest on the brown leather, a neat bow tied around one finger, a fresh rose resting alongside it, and a note just off to the side that reads in stark letters:

I warned you.

OceanofPDF.com

SPIDER BITES

LYRA

I can't find him.

It's been nearly two weeks since I last saw him, last spoke to him. All my calls were left unanswered, text messages delivered without a single reply.

There hadn't been a whisper of him on campus or anywhere in Ponderosa Springs for weeks.

Not at the coffee shop on Fifth, where he pays five dollars for an Americano every Tuesday and Thursday when he has an eight a.m. class. The gallery his family owns that he goes to on Saturday mornings was void of his presence.

He hadn't been jogging, not on his regular path or any path, as far as I knew. I'd woken up every day with the hope he would be there, but I always left with sore feet and a solemn heart.

When I'd asked Alistair where he'd gone, his reply was devoid of answers or hints. He simply looked at me and said, "We don't ask questions, Lyra. He tells us what he wants. We know what he needs. We don't question why."

That wasn't enough for me. That's bullshit in my eyes. If that's the relationship he carries with the guys, fine. But that won't work with me. It's not the connection we have.

I get the courage to darken his doorstep when week three rolls around. I'm greeted only by workers and his grandmother, who kindly lets me know he's okay. All he'd told her was he was going away for a few weeks—a vacation, he'd called it.

She assumes he's at one of their other houses, possibly the one in British Columbia, the one he'd loved as a child. Or the one in Vermont. It had been his mother's favorite.

Talking to her is only a short balm to my burning heart. A little dose of him to make breathing a little easier. But it's not enough.

I'm so disturbingly lonely. The library tower isn't comforting; the mausoleum is grim without him there. And I can't even bring myself to work with or look for insects. There's an emptiness inside of me that hasn't ached in years, a hollow well with no end, just an eternal pit with no bottom in sight.

So, when May Pierson tells me goodbye at her front door, I quickly find a way inside once again. This time, without her knowledge. I'm quiet, trying to remember the steps to his bedroom.

It takes me longer than I'd like to admit finding it, but once I do, I allow myself to succumb to what lived inside his room. The little pieces of him I could grab. Crumbs of him that were left lingering, crumbs that before might have suppressed my fixation, sated my obsession until the next time I'm able to watch him from a distance or steal a sweater.

But even this isn't enough anymore. Nothing could ever be enough after everything we'd exchanged. I now know what it feels like to be held by a man only death could touch. Felt his fingers along my skin, between my thighs. Know what his blood tastes like on my tongue.

However, that doesn't stop me from being greedy.

I press my nose against every article of clothing hanging in his closet, chasing his smell. Run my fingers along his cufflinks and ties. Trace the black and white keys that his hands touched so often.

I slip one of his black cardigans over my shoulders, planning to take it with me. My hands run across the small desk tucked into the corner, touching all his notes, tracing the distinct swishes and swoops in his dignified handwriting.

There is a lot you can tell from a person's handwriting.

For example, Thatcher's wide spacing between words tells me he loathes being crowded and enjoys being alone. The narrow e loops expose how unattached he is to people's emotions. And the deliberate slashed dot over his i? Well, that tells me two things.

How little patience he has for others' inadequacies.

And how much he loves to cut things.

My body melts into his sheets. I lie in his bed and think about how this is the longest I've been without seeing him. Watching him. Existing in the same spaces as him.

Since I came back to Ponderosa Springs after my mother's death, he'd been there nearly every day, even if just a brief glimpse of his tall frame. I hadn't been without his presence in years.

I want to be fucking angry at him. He knows what this is for me. That my obsession needs to be fed. Sometimes, I think he enjoyed being the man I watched religiously, and now, he's left.

Taken it away. Ripped my secret, lovely fascination from my hands. My heart is in turmoil but could never be truly upset with him. Not in the way he deserves.

Thatcher had a routine, a set system that he followed critically, down to every little detail. If that was disrupted, it would cause chaos for him.

I don't think he understood he was mine. He was my routine. My fucking system. And now, I'm in chaos without him.

I let myself wallow for thirty minutes more before finally getting the energy to leave. Going home is the last thing I want to do, and even though I love Sage and Briar, I don't want to see them.

I'm in my car driving when I realize what day it is. Thursday is chess with Silas, and I haven't been in a while. It's the perfect way to entertain myself, to be around someone who might understand.

The drive is long, quiet. I don't bother with the radio, just sit in silence and listen to the hum of my older-model vehicle until I finally pull into the parking lot of Portland's best psychiatric hospital.

Silas is reading *The Art of the Attack* when I find him. The matching white shirt and pants fit snug against his large frame. He's much broader than Thatcher, I always feel small when I'm in his space.

It doesn't take us long to settle into a game, the checkered board situated between us as we take turns moving pieces around. I'm half-heartedly playing but still appreciate the distraction.

"Check," he says lowly. "You might be the worst student ever."

"Maybe you're a shit teacher," I say, a smile tugging at my lips at the joke. Silas is great at chess, and if I'm honest, I've learned a lot about the game from him.

He tilts his head, lifting an eyebrow, which is the closest I've ever got to a smile or any genuine emotion from him since I started visiting. I don't

remember ever seeing him smile, not even in the halls with Rosemary.

You could always see it in his eyes, though.

His love lived there in those deep brown irises.

And now, well...

Now, she's dead, and so are his eyes.

"Sorry, I'm not really paying attention." I breathe out heavily. "I'm feeling a little..."

"In your head?" he finishes for me, and I nod with a grim smile.

"Know any good ways to fix that?"

"You think if I did, I'd be in here?"

I laugh, even though it's not exactly funny, but I enjoy his dry humor. It's a pleasant change of pace.

"Fair point." I chew the inside of my cheek, the question I've been wanting to ask since I arrived weighing heavy on my tongue.

It's selfish of me to ask. To travel all the way up here, just to make him feel like I'm using him for information. But he feels like my last hope.

"Can I ask you a question, Silas?"

"Sure." He leans back in the chair, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Don't be offended if I don't answer."

Now or never, right?

"Do you—" I swallow. "Do you know where Thatcher is? Or where he might go if he needs to get away from Ponderosa Springs?"

Silas's face doesn't move. It gives no indication of a response; he just sits there and stares at me. It's so difficult to read him, similar to Thatcher but also different.

Thatcher is hard to read because he doesn't feel the same way others do, so he doesn't have the same reactions you'd think to look for. Silas though, he feels—he just hides it. A blank wall that doesn't let anything in, and nothing comes out.

So, I just sit there, studying his prominent brow, the slope of his strong nose, the dark freckles on his light brown skin. Unmoving and unyielding. And I think, maybe the reason he doesn't speak often is because he's trying to read me, too.

"No."

One syllable. One singular word. The only answer I'm going to get from him regarding his friend.

I nod, looking down at the chessboard. My chest throbs, hope dying inside of me, knowing I'll just have to wait until Thatcher comes back from wherever he is.

If he comes back.

"Why do you want to know?" Silas's voice is even, genuinely curious.

"Because I—"

The words die on my lips. What would I even say?

Because I'm his stalker and can't find him?

Because I'm obsessed with your best friend and have been since we were kids?

Because I love him?

They are all responses, but none of them are good enough to speak out loud. Every one of them feels so trivial. I don't think there are actual words out there that could explain the craving in my soul for Thatcher.

"Just because."

I pick up my knight, moving it forward, avoiding Silas's earlier checkmate by blocking his queen. Content with continuing our game and sitting in silence like we normally do.

"Lyra," Silas says, his voice making me look up from the board, "why are you doing this to yourself?"

He doesn't need to say anything else. I know what he is asking. Why am I at the mercy of a man who, time and time again, has proven just how incapable he is of feeling?

It's the question on everyone's mind. What they whisper among one another. The one they think about but never ask me, and if they do, I usually never give a response. Except I'm exhausted with people who measure what I feel for Thatcher on their scale of love's expectations.

"Loving him isn't about getting anything in return," I say with a hardened stare. "My love for Thatcher is not selfish. It does not require reciprocation or celebration. It's honest. It can exist on its own without notice."

I am a ghost who haunts a man. A ghost who doesn't need him to make me human. It is enough for him to see me, for me to inhabit the empty attics of his mind and barren hallways of his heart.

Loving him without favor is enough.

It is my obsession that needs attention, that needs feeding.

“I thought you, of all people, would understand what that is like,” I finish because if we are going to put my dirty laundry on the table, might as well throw his in the mix.

My admission doesn’t surprise him, or maybe it does. He doesn’t show it either way, only stares at me with empty eyes.

We sit here.

Two people woven in webs of pain at the hands of the world’s most lethal spider.

Love.

I may not have been there when he was with Rosemary, didn’t know him well, or see him in the aftermath of her death like Rook did, but there’s a deep sense of understanding that flows between the two of us. A river connected to the same pool of turmoil. Maybe there always had been from the first day I showed up here to visit.

Something in me knew he would understand, without explanation. If the rest of the world didn’t, he would. Silas makes other people uncomfortable because he refuses to hide the pain in his eyes, the sorrow that lives in them.

I think he knew I wasn’t afraid of it—it’s why he gave me the opportunity of friendship. Silas leans forward, picking up his bishop and taking one of my pieces, adding it to the growing pile of black on the side of the board.

“What a pair we make,” he mutters. “We love people who will never love us back.”

I let out a breathy laugh, shaking my head. “Rosemary loved you. You know that.”

“Not anymore,” he says, his jaw tightening at the admission.

My eyebrows furrow, and on instinct, my hand moves forward, resting on top of his across the board.

“That love still exists, Silas.” My words carry a sense of urgency. “It doesn’t just disappear. It has to go somewhere. It is still real.”

He stares hard at my hand, allowing a beat of silence to pass between us before looking up again.

“I can’t find it anymore.”

There is no response for me. Nothing I tell him will aid in easing the pain he carries. So, I tighten my grip, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. Hoping it can say the things I can’t.

We linger there for a moment longer before I pull back, staring down at the chess game with zero clue of how to progress forward without losing immediately.

“Lyra.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I wave him off. “I’m trying to think about whether I should attack or defend—”

“Rook has my phone.”

I raise my eyes to his gaze, lifting an eyebrow. “When you get it back, there will be a slew of dick pics. You know that, right?”

He scoffs, kinda like a laugh.

When he opens his mouth again, he says something I’m not expecting. A helpful hand, just like I’d given him. It makes me wish I could do more for him.

“I have tracking devices on all the guys’ cars.” He sighs. “If you can get ahold of my phone, it will show you where they all are.”

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ORIGIN STORY

LYRA

My mother's home is a tomb.

A shell of what had once been a breathtaking Victorian-inspired manor, now engorged with ivy, smothered by overgrown weeds, and in desperate need of repair.

It's a corpse.

A beautiful, rotten, decaying corpse. The remains of my childhood linger, and if I tried hard enough, I could recall some of those memories: smuggling ladybugs in from the garden, breaking my arm trying to climb the tree in the front yard, trying to convince my mother to let me sleep on the front porch when it rained.

But as I walk through the desolate halls, the wood groaning beneath my shoes, I can't help but feel like a stranger inside. As if all the good, all the happiness, was sucked dry the second Henry Pierson killed Phoebe Abbott.

It never resold. Remained empty for good reason. Who wants to move into a house where a murder occurred?

It's now just a house. Four walls that caged a gruesome headline story. A roof that sheltered trauma and despair. It's no longer home, no longer a place of solace or joyful remembrance.

I had stared at Silas's phone for what felt like hours, thinking this couldn't be right. There was no way Thatcher's location was correct. But when I'd hesitantly approached my old home, I saw his car parked in the driveway.

It hadn't been a figment of my imagination. He's here. For how long? I'm not sure, but he is inside now. The place our story began. When he was an unfamiliar Jack Frost and I was a lonely little girl.

The strings of our fate are rooted here. They thrum and breathe—it's the only reasoning behind my footsteps carrying me to my mother's bedroom.

When I find the courage to open the door, that's where I find him, leaning against the wall, staring out of the balcony windows into the meek backyard.

His suit is pristine. The dark blue fabric doesn't have a single wrinkle. Everything about him feels too clean in this room. A dazzling glass ice sculpture laid out among the filth of history.

For a moment, I wish I would have dropped to my knees and prayed to a god I didn't believe in for him to not be so...

Beautiful.

Maybe then it would be easier to detach myself from him. If I somehow could remove the rose-tinted glasses, see him the way everyone else does.

Calculating. Toxic. Unfeeling monster.

If the craving for death that prowled beneath the surface was reflected on his outer image, would it have made a difference?

I tell myself yes.

But I know that's not true.

Regardless of how he appears to the human eye, I would always see his soul. Would see his version of cold as Hawaii's first snow. Something of wonder and beauty.

"Why are you here, Lyra?"

I don't bother asking how he knew it was me. I just step farther into a room I hadn't seen since a dead body occupied it. It's empty. Furniture gone, paint chipped, completely vacant.

A cold wind blows in from the window, making me pull the sleeves of Thatcher's black cardigan over my hands, curling my arms safely around myself as I stare at the back of his head.

"You disappeared after I found out you were getting death threats," I say. I felt that answer was obvious. "You just vanished. Not a fucking word to me."

He meets me with silence, continuing to stare out the window, an unmoving statue. I chew the inside of my cheek, squeezing my arm for comfort.

"And because—" I swallow. "Because lately, you're the only place I don't feel alone."

I shouldn't be hurt by him still not replying. But I can't blame him. Expressing emotions and vulnerability has never really been his forte. It's not his fault that I fell in love with someone so cold.

Or maybe it is.

"Why are you here?" I ask, turning the tables.

He's the one inhabiting my old home, standing in this room like it's a completely normal part of his day-to-day. As if this isn't the space where our mother and father once stood together in a final parting.

This question makes him move. He slowly pulls away from the window, turning his body so that he is facing me. His back still rests against the wall, hands tucked into his pockets.

He looks like Thatcher, with all his normal features, but I can see the hint of purple beneath his eyes. Dark circles from stress or lack of sleep, maybe both.

"I thought it was the one place you wouldn't come."

I can't help the way my eyebrows tug together, the way I scoff out a laugh and shake my head. I take several steps forward, standing in the center of the room.

"You don't get it, do you?" I say with something like frustration sitting on my tongue. "There is no place where you are that I wouldn't go."

After all these years, he still can't see past his own blinders to see that I would do anything, go anywhere, for him. There is no other option for me. The string that attaches us refuses to let me go. My heart would revolt if I left him.

He is not my love.

He is my obsession. As in a person who continually preoccupies and intrudes on my mind. A sickness, a drug that I refuse to quit or seek help for. I don't want to live a life he isn't in.

That is a fate crueler than any death.

To exist in a world he no longer breathes in.

"And you know what that makes you?" he says, cocking his head to the side with an icy stare. "Not a hopeless romantic or even pathetic. It makes you dangerous. Reckless. You'll follow me anywhere. What about to the grave, pet? Because if you keep this up, that's where you will be."

A tightness expands in my chest.

"Are you saying you think the Halo will make good on their threats?"

“I’m telling you that the closer you try to get to me is another step towards an early funeral.”

I shake my head. “I don’t care. I won’t—”

“You are naïve, Lyra Abbott,” he interrupts, pushing off the wall so that he is standing tall. “A naïve, sick girl that formed this idea in her head when she was a child that I was an angel.”

My mouth opens to interject, but he pushes forward. Each word is cruel, his tongue slashing into my sensitive flesh, cutting me open and making me bleed all the ways I’ll never be able to love him.

“All you are to me is an inconvenient blip in my childhood. A target that I should have killed, like my father ordered. A mistake that I should’ve never touched.” Thatcher runs his hand across his jaw. “It’s time to wake up. Come back to life. You are not my ghost, and I am done being your obsession.”

All the points on my body that have felt his hands throb in pain. At being called a mistake. Salty, fresh tears hit my upper lip. I can taste their desperation, their pain.

“I accept that you are cold,” I breathe, visible puffs expelled from my lips. “Filled to the brim with ice. Sometimes it physically hurts to stand too close to you.”

I take a step towards him. Another. Then another.

“I accept you feel nothing. That long ago, someone ripped the softness from you with their teeth, and now you are nothing but sharp edges.” My words choke me, a sob forming around the words.

But I keep moving forward on unsteady legs until I am standing right in front of him, his body a mere inch away from my own, my head inclined so that I can look him in the eyes.

“I even accept that you are cruel. So fucking cruel, Thatcher Pierson. There is nothing about you I wouldn’t accept. I will meet your cold with my warmth. I will let your sharp edges do their worst because I was made to bleed for you.”

My knuckles are white, balled at my side. His blue eyes are a shimmering, frozen lake, only reflecting my emotion in their mirror.

But his gaze—always so blank, serious, and intense—it softens slightly. I only recognize it because I know his face so well and because even if he doesn’t notice it, he looks at me differently than he does anyone else.

“But I refuse that,” I croak, giving a curt shake of my head. “You can’t make me accept something I know isn’t true. You don’t understand what I will become without you.”

“If this is about you learning to control your urges, you will—”

“No!” I shout, and to his credit, he doesn’t even flinch, just closes his mouth as I press my pointer finger into his chest. “If something happens to you, I will not weep at your grave and beg for someone to bring you back.”

How do you explain to someone who knows nothing of love that they are the reason you breathe? That without them, you would have died a long time ago, that they are the only reason you want to exist so that you can be seen by them?

“I won’t seek vengeance.” My voice cracks. “I will wage a war with no end.”

I will not leave him. He will not push me away. Not when I can protect him. The Halo will not take him from me. There is no one who can take him from me.

“If you die, it won’t just ruin me, Thatcher. It will be the reason behind the slaughter of this entire town.” I grind my teeth, knowing my grief at losing him would leave no one safe. “Do not shove me away, then allow yourself to be killed and blame me for what kind of monster is born in my mourning.”

THATCHER

I prided myself my entire life on being honest. It had been the only real factor distinguishing me from my father. He hid what he was from the world, pretended to be a man when he was a monster.

But I promised myself I would be different. I would be better.

So, I refused to lie. Even if it hurt, even if the truth stung and it was bitter. I allowed the world to fear me, to let them see me for exactly what I was. That way, no one could ever say they were surprised by my behavior.

I wouldn’t be the serial killer on the news where the neighbors talked about how they had no clue. How they never would have guessed I could dismantle human bodies and dissolve them in acid.

No, they would know. They have always known what I am, what lives among them.

“Do you think I care what you become?”

Lyra’s tears are leaking in heavy streaks down her face, large drops pouring out. She shows all she is feeling on the surface, wearing that fragile, ridiculous heart on her sleeve for anyone to see.

“I—”

“I think you have mistaken me for someone else. For someone who is capable of giving a fuck. So, allow me to make this clear. I don’t want there to be any confusion moving forward.”

I lift one of my knuckles to her face, brushing the tears away from her skin, the gentle touch the direct opposite of my brutal words.

“I don’t care about you, Lyra Abbott.”

Lie.

Lie.

Lie.

Dirty. Filthy. Disgusting lie.

There is something inside of me, a buried truth, one I will deny until my very last breath, that she has always been the only woman, the only person, I have ever cared for.

The kid I couldn’t kill. The little girl that got an entire tray of food dumped on her head in fifth grade by Scottie Camball, so I pushed him down a flight of stairs. The woman I let watch me, haunt me, because I enjoy the way her eyes feel on my body.

My one weak spot. The first person to ever make me bleed.

And I have hated her for it every single day.

Hated how she makes morbid desires for things look like passionate beauty.

“But you—”

“Did you think you could change me?” I ask, pressing a tear into her cheek before grabbing one of her curls and tugging harmlessly on it. “Did you think you could weasel your way inside and filthy me up, turn me into the man who loves? Don’t tell me you’re that pathetic, darling phantom.”

I enjoy diminishing the lights from people’s eyes, removing any source of life inside their pupils until they fog up and glass over. I love that part.

But this feels nothing like that.

The luster inside her jade irises flutters out, a crushed firefly beneath my shoe. The constant emotion that swims within the depths when she stares at me, so overwhelming I can see it from across the courtyard when she tries to blend into the crowd...

It's gone.

Empty.

But I need it killed.

My body leans towards her, reaching forward and flicking one of her curls out of the way with my thumb. I feel my mind take a mental picture of this look on her pale face.

"We are nothing but a generational curse. The ninth symphony, doomed to end before we even start," I mutter. "Your mother fell in love with a killer, and look where she wound up. Look what my father did to her. Think about what I can do to you."

Phoebe Abbott had fallen in the worst way for Henry—into a dead end with no escape. The man of her dreams had created her worst nightmare. And we had slipped into the same wheel.

She blinks up at me, her left hand reaching into my jacket pocket. The warmth of her fingers seeps through the material.

"That was our destiny, right, Thatcher? I fall in love with you, and you kill me. Just like our parents, yeah?"

My pocketknife gleams when she removes it, holding it flat on her palm and offering it to me.

I nod curtly, removing my hands from her hair.

"Then kill me."

Lyra's words slice through the air. She stares up with a mask of impassive emotion, unmoving and without fear. Either she's ready to die or believes I won't hurt her.

"Stop," I order, knowing what she is trying to do.

"If you're like your father and I'm my mother, then this should be easy. Kill me," she urges, flicking the knife open and shoving it towards me, desperate for me to take it from her.

Every muscle in my body tightens, something inside of me boiling. That new emotion, rage, crashes over me like a red wave. The longer she stands there, pushing the knife into my hands, the darker the color becomes.

I step closer to her. "I won't tell you again."

“Do it!” she yells. “If it’s so easy, if what you say is true, then do it! Just go ahead and end it.”

My hand is shaking with fury when I jerk the knife from her hand. My fingers sink into the back of her hair, tugging her body into my own.

With commanding steps, I walk us backwards, forcing her body back until we wind up across the room, tucked into the darkness of the closet and her back slammed into the wall.

The blade feels warm in my hand, the metal pressed sideways against her delicate throat. I keep my hold on the back of her head, forcing her neck into the knife.

“Kill me, Thatcher. Show me exactly who you are.”

Her breath comes out in quick gasps, but she keeps her head up, giving me access, practically begging for me to cut her open, to leave her lying with nothing but a ruby necklace, streaks of blood pouring down, draining her dry.

I grind my teeth, desperate to end this. But my hand won’t let me. My mind refuses.

“No.” I shake my head, trying to swallow, but my throat tightens.

“Do it! Kill me!” Her voice shakes in my ears, ringing clear, demanding me to do something I’ve thought about for years. But just like the first time, I don’t.

“I can’t!” I pull her hair, forcing her to look directly up at me. “God, I want to slice you up, pet. Into pieces, slaughter everything you are so I never have to experience this horrendous thrumming in my gut every time I see you. I want to kill you and your memory, but I can’t fucking do it!”

My chest heaves, breaths coming out in spurts like I’ve run for miles on end. The stark truth wavers between us, my incapability landing in front of me.

That I am weak regarding her. The one thing I was made to do, and I can’t do it. All because of her.

My eyes meet hers, hunger drowning inside of them, but always, there is a sense of winning shimmering there, too.

“I see you. The only one who knows you,” she breathes. “And I know you’re a liar. This is our destiny.”

It’s the last she says before I feel her hands grab the back of my neck with one hand and the front of my jacket with the other, and she slams our mouths into one another.

And I let her. I let her because there is a part of me that knows she's right. That she has always been right. Even while I denied myself of her, refused to acknowledge her existence out of fear of this exact moment.

Pure, addictive intimacy that only blooms in her wake. Of course, she could grow inside of me, blossom like a winter rose through the freezing cold and unforgiving ice.

Living things do not survive in me. I'd been built to destroy them early on, but she, Miss Death and Decay, she thrived in all the places others feared.

Thrived.

Teeth and tongue as we battle each other. She hums against me, forcing me to swallow her pleasure, pouring all that malice and the words we won't say into the other's throat. I drag the knife from her neck down the front of her body.

Her teeth sink into my bottom lip, biting hard enough that I taste something familiar and metallic on my tongue. A groan rumbles in my throat as she sucks on the flesh, drawing my blood into her own mouth.

Painting her insides with me.

We are a web of tangled limbs and bruising touches. She tears my jacket from my shoulders, ripping at the fabric, yearning to touch me, to be beneath my skin.

Surface isn't enough for her. She wants below everything I've built on the outside. Under my flesh, within the walls of my head. Nothing I give her will ever be enough.

Several moments of suspended time, with my hands in her hair, tugging at the wild curls. My fingers pull apart the seams of her clothing. The warmth of her mouth sears into mine, cherries drowning my senses.

I push myself farther against her small frame, grunting into her mouth as I feel her exposed nipples poke into my chest. Desire coats every instinct, my control a passing thought. All I can think about is touching her.

My entire life, I have wanted to be clean. Painstakingly clean.

And all I want, all I crave, is for her to make me dirty. Bare the inside of her soul to me so that I can rip it to pieces if I want. Know every inch of her, dip my hands into her and be covered in everything that is Lyra Abbott.

It's morbid intimacy. Possibly the only kind I'm capable of, almost sick in its nature. I think of how I ache to be inside of her. I want my cock

shoved between her thighs while my blood drowns her throat, and our bodies try to forge into one.

My hand gropes her breast, twisting the sensitive bud between my fingers, making her cry out as she bows her back. I trail my tongue across her neck, exploring all the places that make her tighten.

The knife in my left-hand twitches, begging for her. With lazy movement, I drag the tip down her naked upper body, watching goosebumps prickle until I've reached the apex of her thighs.

Her hands tug at the bottom of her skirt, pulling it up to her waist, showing me the pair of lavender panties beneath. My cock strains against my pants, pulsing at the thought of red streaming down her milky thighs.

I turn my hand, pressing the blade into her leg and sliding it gradually so she can feel the bite of metal. She secures her nails to my shoulders, burrowing into the muscle.

Her brows scrunch up, a beautiful look of anguish resting in the lines of her face. I attempt to ease up, but she holds me in place, shaking her head in a panic.

“Wait,” she pants. “I can take it. Keep going.”

A smile forms on my lips as I lean forward, pressing a kiss to the fluttering pulse in her throat. I can feel the warm liquid on the side of my hand.

She is so very good, willing to take every cut.

“You bleed so pretty for me, pet.”

And I mean every word.

I mean it so much that I don't question the way my legs give out and I let myself fall to my knees so I can watch as the knife sinks into the softness of her.

Using my free hand, I hook the back of her knee, lifting it up in the air and widening the gap between her thighs. My fingers dig into her, hoping to leave bruises from my touch, imprinted there for years after I'm gone.

“Do you see what the sight of you bleeding does to me, darling? What it makes me want to do?”

My eyes focus on the next cut, just below the first horizontal wound. Blood seeps from the cut, and for once, I don't deny myself of her. I place my mouth on her reddened skin.

“Thatcher...” She moans at the contact.

Whines, whimpers, and sighs are expelled from her lungs. All the while, my tongue laps up the blood pouring from her leg. I drink her down, feeling the tangy flavor drip down the back of my throat, filling me with her.

I know now that no matter where I go or what happens, she is always in me. Existing inside the spaces no other human has dared to go. Within the spaces of my ribs, flowing through the veins surrounding my heart.

When her hands descend to my chest, her palms pushing me back towards the cold floor, it's partially because of the haze of her scent that makes me so compliant. It's all I can blame it on as I let her crawl up my waist.

The knife clatters against the hardwood floors, ringing in my ears. My palms rest behind me, keeping me upright as she settles into my lap. Her mouth moves along the ridges of my throat, nipping at the skin.

She's feral in her movements, frantic in her need to feel me. My eyes are glassy with lust as I stare up at her, at her long, bouncing curls that stop just above her pale breasts.

Miles of smooth skin and warmth perched on my waist. Nimble, animalistic fingers pull at my belt, unlatching it from its notch and working on my button and zipper.

My cock strains, throbbing as my chest heaves. No one has been this close. Gotten this far. I've never wanted it this badly, never needed to feel it this much.

She's turned me into a ferocious animal, reverted to base male instinct, driven only by the thought of those delicate fingers wrapped around my shaft and the sight of her cunt dripping from my come.

Sex has always been this elusive concept that everyone raved about and acted like hormonal rabbits for. There had been nothing appealing to me about having anyone that close to my body.

I loose a groan as her warm fingers rub against the base of my cock, gently curling around and pumping me in her hand. Electric shocks hum along the back of my spine, my mind dizzy.

I'd been touch-deprived my entire life, both because of my own actions and my father's parenting. I'd gone so long without it, my body didn't know how famished I was until Lyra started touching me.

Robbed of contact, of the bond you create through physical touch. Drained of oxytocin the entirety of my life, so long I doubt I'd ever been held as an infant.

But now, I am a starved man.

I'd gotten a taste, and suddenly, my body remembered just how deprived it was.

Something wet runs along the head of my cock. When I glance down, I find Lyra's hand coated in a red liquid that she'd swiped from her thigh. With slow, nervous strokes, she paints me.

Up and down my shaft, the slippery feel of blood makes it easier for her to move faster. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, watching her mark me.

I snatch an arm around her waist, keeping one behind me flat on the floor to keep me balanced as I lift my hips just a smidge so that her hand has no choice but to move and my cock is tucked against her panties.

"Pet," I hum, brushing my lips across hers, "let me see your cunt. Show me how wet that sad little pussy is. Show me so I can make her cry for me."

Dark, wicked lust swims in her eyes, so far gone in this moment that I know she would bow and bend to my every command. Power like I've never felt before surges in my veins, knowing all of her is mine to control.

Lyra's fingers pull the material of her underwear to the side, putting her pink cunt on display for only me to see. My cock leaks as I press myself against her, the liquid heat pouring out from between her legs consuming me.

I use the hold on her waist to rock her hips in tune with mine. My shaft slips through her folds with ease, a mixture of blood and her lust aiding me.

Everything about her seems so small in my arms, knowing if I impaled her cunt on my length, it might split her in two. That my hands can bruise her with little effort. And she would take every single bit of it.

A whimper slips from her mouth, her hips grinding against me in messy strokes.

"More, Thatcher. I want more. I want all of you."

My cock twitches, on board with the idea of burying itself inside of her walls and never coming back out. But my self-control, it's still there, clinging to the last shreds of sanity.

She can never let me go if I do this. She will be in danger for as long as I'm a target, and she won't care.

If I do this, she'll be mine. Only mine. Regardless of my ability to care or love, she will never belong to another man or woman. I will own her, mind, body, and soul.

And I can't do that to her.

I can't do that to myself.

But God, I want to. I need to. Need nothing more.

My hand holds her tight against me as I shift our position, laying her on the floor so that my body rests overtop of her. My wide frame forces her thighs open, and I use my hand to guide my cock back between the slippery warmth of her pussy.

"Don't be a greedy whore, Scarlett." I rock my hips, rubbing the head of my cock against her swollen clit. "Be a good girl. Be so very good for me and come. Can you manage that, pet?"

Calling her by her first name feels like my right. The only person in the world aware of it and allowed to use it when I choose. It's ours and only ours.

She lifts off the ground to move with me, chasing that blinding orgasm that sits just beyond reach. My jaw is tight, knowing if I move just an inch south, I can feel all of her, raw and unprotected.

I squeeze her soft waist, harder than necessary, desperate to hold on to my will. For once, do something good. Force myself not to ruin her or myself.

"Fuck," I hiss. She feels too good, is too tempting.

"Thatch, I'm gonna come," she gasps, hooking her hands around my waist and urging me closer. "Please, please, please..."

I keep the same pace, stroking her clit repeatedly. But every single time I pull back, I feel her hips lift higher, making it harder to avoid that tight hole I'm on the edge of destroying.

"Lyra, don't," I warn, my teeth grinding together as my body, awake and alive for the first time, begs me to give in. "We can't."

She presses her hands into my lower back, grabbing at my waist and pulling me forward. It's a pathetic fight I give her, battling my own instincts. My own urges.

"Please, Thatcher. I'm so close," she pleads, the moan in her throat enough to drop kings to their knees.

My balls tighten, my orgasm close as we continue to move against one another. I make the mistake of looking down at the place where our bodies meet, and a deep rumble rattles my chest.

Once again, when I retract my hips just before I send them forward to rut against her, her body arches up. This time, I feel the tip of my cock catch her opening.

The veins in my neck throb. My hold on her waist is brutal.

“Lyra, baby, don’t make me—”

But it’s too late.

Lyra comes with a scream, a tortured sound of riveting pleasure and anguish. The entire length of my shaft lies inside of her, delving into her walls the moment she falls over the edge and into a blissful climax, every inch enveloped by her wet heat.

“Goddamnit,” I moan, burying my head into her shoulder, my cock pulsing as her walls clamp down around me in the aftershock of her orgasm. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

I inhale her, the dip between her neck and shoulder. She smells like cherries and the nighttime air. Refreshing, soothing, and everything I love about the darkness.

We are a blend of black and white, gray matter connected by the catastrophic pull neither of us bothers to deny in this closet. I had made my way inside of her head long ago, and now I’m deep in her body.

There is no getting me out now, and she had done that all to herself.

“Tell me it’s a mistake later,” she mutters, grabbing my neck. “For now, feel me bleed on your cock. I was made to bleed for you.”

I lift up slightly, peering down at her face, our bodies connected in a way they’ve never been before. With each other or anyone else.

Lyra brings her blood-soaked hand to my face, smearing it across my lips, her eyes wide and full of shimmering emotion. I swipe my tongue across her thumb before merging our mouths back together.

An intoxicating bloodstained kiss. A happily ever after’s worst nightmare. The grim reality of our bond. That we have always been silent nights and crimson origins.

Her obsessed, unhinged infatuation with me has taken over every logical portion of her brain. And I give in. I feed her fixation. Because there is nothing I’d rather see more than Lyra desperate for me, aching for only me.

My hips pull back all the way, and I can see the panic in her eyes, thinking I’m going to stop this, end it right here. But I am quick to halt her worry.

“This is mine now, Scarlett.” I slide every inch back into her. “Only mine. Do you understand? This greedy, whiny cunt is mine to fill and fuck as I please, yeah?”

Her eyebrows furrow together, a hiss of pain on her mouth. My size spreads her open, molding her walls to accommodate my cock, mending her body so that she is made for me.

“Tell me you understand what you’ve done,” I groan, plunging into her again, harder. I take one of her nipples into my mouth and bite. “This body is mine. These perky nipples, those lips, the whole of you is mine. Nothing belongs to you anymore.”

My climax is close, a combination of how obscenely tight she feels and never having been this intimate before. I find myself thankful she came before this started.

“It’s—” The breath is knocked out of her as I push into her again, faster and with more strength. “It’s always been yours.”

My mouth hovers over hers, breathing in her gasps of discomfort and swallowing them, using them to rock myself harder into her body, listening to her sloppy cunt take all of me.

I place my thumb against her clit, drawing slow circles to soothe the pain she must be feeling.

“I’m going to ruin you,” I demand. “Go on, look. Watch how pretty your virgin pussy bleeds for me.”

I lean back on my knees, continuing to shove myself in and out of her walls, watching her breasts bounce with every single hard thrust, the lewd, filthy sight of my cock slicked with her juices and remnants of blood.

Her lower half is stained with red, imprints of touches and drips of maroon. It’s the most painfully erotic sight I’ve ever beheld. Tiny gasps of pleasure release from her mouth as she watches. Every single time, her pussy draws me back inside.

I wrap both of my hands around her waist, jerking her into me, forcing her to take every depraved inch. I want her to drown in me. In my come, in my blood.

“Thatch.”

That’s the last piece. My name on her tongue sends me tumbling into an orgasm. I can feel my cock twitch inside her wet walls, marking her pussy with endless spurts of my hot come.

I keep pushing into her, rocking my hips, fucking my come into her so that not only her mind knows, but her soul is fully aware of who owns her.

My mouth drops to her forehead, still inside of her, as I press a cold kiss to her sweaty brow. “Death will have to wait for you. You’re mine now.”

“He can’t have either of us,” she mumbles, sated in my arms.

Lyra belongs to me. She is my sickening desire, filled with morbid, grim hope and everything I should have avoided. But she belongs to no one else in this life.

Her hand comes to my face, and I feel the cool pressure of the ring she never goes without against my heated skin. It’s so domestic. I think I hate how natural it feels. How natural she always feels.

Like blood flowing through my veins, air cycling through my lungs, neurons firing in my brain.

If the Halo comes for me, like they promised, I’ll take it as a compliment.

But her?

If they figure out what she is to me. If they come for her?

I’ll paint the town red.

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ONCE UPON A DECEMBER

LYRA

The first snowfall of the season is late compared to years past.

But it came at the perfect time.

On the first morning of December, heavy snowflakes fall from the sky, gathering along sidewalks, covering trees, turning Ponderosa Springs into a winter wonderland.

“Woah, where are you headed so fast?”

I slow my speed-walk to a stroll, peering over my shoulder and seeing Conner Godfrey jogging towards me through the snow in the school parking lot.

His scarf flutters in the wind, and the tip of his nose is a shade past fire hydrant. I give him a tense smile. While we had found nothing extremely incriminating against him, he’s still involved with the dean.

They’re best friends, and although I don’t want to believe he’s harboring the ability to sell human beings, it’s highly unlikely he doesn’t know what his best friend since college is up to.

“I have—” I fumble for the words, “—a tutoring lesson, and I’m already late.”

Tutoring in the art of murder, but tutoring, nonetheless.

This is Thatcher’s and my first session since what happened in my old house. I’m not ashamed of the hope in my chest. I allow it to glitter inside of me like a star renewed.

Even though I knew how quick Thatcher was to pull away from me, our relationship shifted that night. It changed, altered into something more twisted. New.

I'd seen him without his guard, made it through the rows of shrapnel, bloody and bruised, but he'd taken me anyway. Damaged soul and all, he took every piece of me and merged it with his own.

The scars on my thighs tingle at the memory, that frantic need to be close to him burning in my stomach, closer than anyone else has ever been or ever will be.

"You? What could you possibly need help with?" He laughs, friendly and so unsuspecting. I keep trying to see if anything changes in his gaze or mannerisms, but he's just Conner.

"Just some extra-credit stuff, nothing too important."

"I haven't seen you around the labs lately. Has the cold weather stopped your genius?"

No, trying to bring down a sex ring while learning how to kill people has taken up most of my time as of late. Fear for my friends has crushed my creativity and urge to scavenge for bugs. I'm constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I love the cold weather, actually. I've just been busy with school, trying to maintain my grades. Typical college student bullshit," I hum.

Conner nods, giving me a soft smile. "Well, I just wanted to tell you that the director of the internship is eager for you application, and to check in, make sure you're being safe out here."

Of course he did.

Although it had been weeks since another body part was found, the campus is still on high alert, constantly making sure girls walk to class in groups, never being alone after dark, and all the girls who stayed on campus had a mandatory curfew.

"I'm being careful, I promise," I assure him, hitching my bag farther up my shoulder. "I do have to get going, though. I'll see you around, Professor Godfrey."

I turn to take the last few steps to my car, but he gently grabs ahold of my jacket, keeping me in place.

"Listen," he murmurs, his voice almost nervous. "I know it's not my place, and I'm sure I'm crossing a line, but I would never forgive myself if I didn't say anything."

My body angles towards him once again, eyebrows pulled tight as I wait for him to continue.

"I know you have good reasoning behind the friends you choose," he starts, "but I just want you to be smart about your future. To be safe."

"Being friends with Briar and Sage isn't safe?"

"Being friends with Thatcher Pierson isn't safe." Conner's gaze is fixed on mine. "There have been whispers about his potential involvement in the recent murders. I just don't want anything to happen to you, Lyra."

Venom boils beneath my skin. I feel that urge inside of me yawning awake as protectiveness lures it from its slumber. My jaw tightens as I jerk my coat from his grasp.

I couldn't care less if he was being nice or not.

"You're right. It isn't your place," I say curtly.

My anger isn't just directed at Conner; it's at this entire town, scrawling the word "villain" across Thatcher's forehead before he was even a teenager.

They all wanted a monster to fear, to point fingers at and spread vicious lies about, so they created one in him. They helped Henry Pierson mold him into the unfeeling man he is now.

"Lyra, I wasn't—"

I raise my hand to him. "Don't. I understand your concern, but my friends are none of your business."

He calls my name twice before the sound of my car pulling out of the parking lot drowns him out. My fingers tighten around the steering wheel, soft music on the radio failing to help me forget that entire conversation.

I want to make this entire town pay for what they did to him. I want to make his father pay for making his son into a killing machine who is so twisted on the inside he can barely stand to touch other people.

Thoughts of how I would torture Henry Pierson consumed me the entire drive, the short distance to Thatcher's home eaten up by how I would bleed him out, suffocate him gradually, maybe even dabble in dismemberment.

He deserves to die twice.

Once for my mother. And the other for Thatcher.

If I could kill him and bring him back just to kill him again, I swear I would.

The long driveway to the House that Haunts Pierson Point is decorated by the elements. The dark green western juniper trees, now coated with snow, create a canopy of beauty above me.

Fall is now a memory as winter leaves its mark. There's always been something so beautiful about the cold. How it freezes moments in time and traps our seconds in snow globes.

Even as a child, I loved the warm fires that healed my cold fingers. The urge to stay outside in the snow for hours on end just to feel the fresh air on my skin.

When I reached the peak of the driveway, revealing the front of the house, all the joy sparked inside of me fizzles out and is replaced with panicked confusion.

All it takes is one second, just one long second, to turn joy into unbridled fear. One moment, your life is on a steady course, routine and comfortable, and in the blink of an eye, it all changes.

Everything you know, everything you believe in, shifts.

Red and blue lights twinkle in front of the house, the hope of them being early Christmas decorations quickly forgotten. Police cars are packed into the front, surrounding the fountain and cobblestone drive.

One singular ambulance is nestled closer to the door. My chest tightens as I take it all in, seeing Alistair and Rook's cars parked alongside Thatcher's.

Suddenly, the cold is not beautiful. It burns my skin as I step outside of my vehicle. The harsh wind slaps against my sensitive skin. My hands shake at my sides, the snow crunching beneath my boots.

My world seems to move in slow motion. Even though I feel like I'm sprinting, I know I'm only taking narrow steps. I will my knees not to give out, to keep standing, to continue moving forward.

Two officers walk past me, seeing me moments after I spot them. Their hard stares do nothing to stop my slow walk until they turn and approach with their hands held out.

"Ma'am, you can't be here," one of them tells me. "It's best if you wait in your car."

My eyebrows pull together. Why would I need to wait in my car? What happened? What is going on?

Questions without answers spin around a merry-go-round that I can't stop. The static of a radio crackles in my ears before a patchy voice echoes in the winter air.

"DOA." Static pause. "No sign of forced entry."

The ground crumbles beneath my feet. The entire world cracks and shatters beneath me. There is nothing to hold on to. I'm simply spinning with no hope of stopping.

I'd heard once that the pain of loss comes as a witness, to bear testimony, to the realness of love.

This was not how I wanted my love to be proven. In the havoc of death. In the mourning of a soul. I wanted my love to breathe and exist, to be felt for eons. But as I stand there, that hope falls away, crumbled to ashes and scattering in the wind.

The police are talking to me, but I can't hear them. I am numb. The crushing loneliness has taken me over, body and soul. I don't even feel like myself, as if my soul had detached from my body and was watching from above.

Tears slick my cheeks, and agony ripples across my chest. Footsteps emerge from the front door, familiar combat boots coming into view.

Alistair Caldwell's hair is tousled, as if he'd run his hands through it too many times. His face is pale, and eyes rimmed with an angry red color.

I can feel myself cracking as I try to open my lungs, to call for him. Beg him to explain what's happening, for him to tell me everything is fine.

That Thatcher is fine.

I mean, he has to be, right?

Death wouldn't be that cruel, would it?

No, no, never death. It is merciful, kind, with icy hands and a mournful smile.

Life would be that cruel. It would break you with unforgiving fingers and leave you alone to repair in the darkness.

"You've stepped on my foot twice."

My face flames red as I beg the floor to swallow me whole. Thatcher's hand on my waist tightens a bit, blue eyes unwavering in their passive nature.

This was a giant mistake. All of this was. Getting involved with the Hollow Boys. Letting myself get this close to Thatcher, and God knows what Alistair is doing with Briar.

But being here feels nice. I feel seen, and I'm not alone because he is here. The last time we were this close to one another was the night my mother died, and we were kids.

This is different.

“I told you I wasn’t a good dancer.” I sigh, blowing a piece of hair out of my face.

My dress rustles against the floor as he pushes me outward, gripping my hand in his own as he spins me in time with the piano. The room swirls, vibrant, warm hues mingling together.

When he pulls me back into him, my palms rest against his suit-clad chest. We are so close; I had never been this close before, simply his shadow from a distance, but never this close.

“This isn’t a dance,” he declares, his breath fanning across my face, the scent of mint attacking my senses.

I can feel my heart pounding inside my chest, thumping loudly, dancing around, excited. I’d been watching him for so long, but it’s incredible the details I missed from a distance.

I can see every mark, every slope, every inch of what makes up his handsome face. I make sure to commit every last one to memory, unsure of when I’d ever be this close again.

“What is it, then?” I breathe, looking up at him with curious eyes.

“This is a distraction,” he mutters, leaning towards my ear. “You should be careful with how close you get to me, Lyra. There is a fine line between me and death. One is merciful, and the other is me.”

The memory of our first dance all those months ago came back in a vengeful flashback. A hollow sensation spreads across my chest, submerging me in emptiness.

Rook is next to appear outside, his hood pulled over his head, but I can see the tint of red on his cheeks. The sadness washes over him like a wave he hadn’t prepared for.

I will myself to take another step forward, feeling arms pull me back. Strength from deep within wills me past them, trudging forward through the snow. I just keep moving, telling myself if I can make it to the door, the next person outside will be Thatcher.

Thatcher in a pressed suit, in one piece, breathing. It will be Thatcher—it has to be him. I won’t accept any other option other than him.

Through the doorway, another set of feet appears. But it isn’t a waxed pair of loafers or oxfords. It’s heavy boots. My lightless Jack Frost, who glows in the winter months, isn’t the one through the door.

It’s men in uniforms guiding a gurney. They roll it down the steps, towards the open ambulance. A body covered in a stark white sheet lies

prone atop the gurney. Patches of maroon stain the fabric, the color so blinding in the snow-covered outdoors.

In the distance, I can hear my sobs. I think I might even be screaming. Because in my blurry vision, I see Alistair and Rook rushing towards me, and everyone is looking at me.

Everyone can see me.

But not him.

He can't, he can't, he can't—

My hands snap to my ears. Suddenly, everything is too loud. It all feels too heavy as I crash to the frozen ground. I want to go back, back to the closet. I want to be anywhere but in the reality of this moment.

My addictive heart that thrums for the things it loves. For the hope of him. That shouts and jumps when he is near. I feel her scream one last time. Just one long, guttural wail before she breaks.

Oh, she breaks. Shatters. Explodes into fragments so tiny there is nothing left. Just one big gaping hole plunged into my chest cavity where she used to live.

Everything goes dark; there is no light. My mind fades into nothing, and my body follows suit. I silently pray it's me falling into the afterlife.

But morning comes, and it's not good or bright.

It's only the start of the longest and darkest night to ever exist.

TO BE CONTINUED....

THE BLOOD WE CRAVE PT 2

Will obsession be enough?

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THANK YOU!

Thank you so much for reading **The Blood we Crave!**
Want more of Thatcher and Lyra? Click [here](#) to sign up for my newsletter to get access to my top secret bonus room!

[The Lies we Steal \(Book One\)](#) Tropes

- Bully Romance
- Revenge Plot
- Touch Her you Die
- Murder Mystery
- Enemies to Lovers
- New Girl x Rich Local Boy
- Dark Academia

[The Truths we Burn \(Book Two\)](#) Tropes

- Second Chance Romance
- Revenge Plot
- Murder Mystery

- Touch Her you Die
- Enemies to lovers back to enemies...
- Mean Girl x Bad Boy
- Rivals Ex-Girlfriend
- Dark Academia

The Blood we Crave Duet (Books Three and Four)

Tropes

- MMC Serial Killer x FMC Stalker
- Forced Proximity
- Revenge Plot
- Murder Mystery
- Touch Her/Touch Him you Die
- Opposites Attract
- Blood/Knife kink
- Dark Academia

The Oath we Give (Book Five)

Tropes

- Marriage of Convenience
- Forced Proximity
- Revenge Plot
- He Falls First
- Touch her and you die
- Opposites Attract
- Murder Mystery
- Revenge Plot

Come hang out with me in my [**reader group**](#) to stay up to date with all things Monty Jay.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fuck, man. This book.

When I started The Hollow Boys series, I knew Thatcher and Lyra's plot. I knew he was a serial killer's son, and she stalked him. What I did not plan for was how they overtook my entire life. This year, it's been hard for me. But this book? This was me *bleeding* onto the page, cut open and letting all the emotions out. I felt every single word. My entire mind was on only these two characters. They are, to date, the most difficult couple I've written, but I've never been prouder. I love this book even though the entire time I said I hated it. It was all a lie.

There are so many people I have to thank for this book. It's hard to figure out where to start.

Fletcher, your patience with my work schedule is incredible. I am so very lucky to be the Nesta to your Cassian. Thank you for always reaching out your hand.

My fellow Sisters in Christ, don't get me started. The way our lives are interwoven, and I genuinely feel I couldn't go a day without speaking to you. I appreciate the constant advice, the laughs, the support. Here is to years of tipsy typing and overall friendship. Also, I tried for #pantygate but it ended up being #shirtgate.

Tril, I love you. Thank you for never letting me give up.

Saffron! Saf, Saf, Saf! You are one of my dearest friends and I'm always so excited to send you my books when they are finished. Thank you for all the advice, it means so much.

To my incredible Alphas! Kandace and Shaunna, you two got me through this. Thank you for being down to facetime at random hours and keeping me from going insane.

Everyone who put this together, cover designers, formatters, editors. I would be lost without you.

The fantastic four, you didn't think I'd leave you out, did you? I will never truly be able to express my gratitude to each of you. How do you thank people for pulling you out of the dark and pushing you through? Is there a thank you card for that? I'll try to find one. Andy, for keeping me grounded and never letting me forget that I need to laugh. Hannah, for never, not one single time, making me feel bad for my passion, only encouraging it and helping it grow. And Jess, thank you for advocating for me when I couldn't do it myself. For helping me put myself first. You all deserve the world. I love you.

And you, darling reader. Always you. Thank you for your patience, for loving these characters, and pushing me to be better. I know right about now you're on the verge of possibly unaliving me, but I promise you, this journey? It's so worth it. Come on, take my hand, we are going further into the dark...

About Monty Jay

Monty Jay is a dark romance author with titles published in multiple countries. Their books are for hopeless romantics with wicked hearts looking for their next morally grey hero. They call the Appalachian mountains home, along with their two furry friends, Poe and Maeve. When they aren't writing you can find them reading anything Stephen King, in a tattoo chair or binging a new true crime documentary.

For more information and ways to contact them, click here

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