**Chapter 16: Crimson Psalm  
💋 *"Say his name. Bleed his gospel."*  
🎵 Tracks:**

* ***The Host of Seraphim* — Dead Can Dance (Sacred Collapse)**
* ***Autumn Leaves* — Chet Baker (Memory Like Smoke)**
* ***Strange Fruit* — Billie Holiday (Corrupted Beauty, Unforgiven Blood)  
  💦 Fluids: Rain, Tears (emotional bleed)  
  🕯️ Ritual Tag: Sacred Parting / Final Covenant / Mourning Before the Murder**

The morning bled into Vivien Vale's bedroom like smoke. Gray light seeped through the cracked window, pulling the rain in with it—a steady hiss against the glass, like the city was trying to apologize too late.

Elena Cruz lay still in the bed.

The sheets were damp with sweat, tangled around bare legs and bruised hips. Vivien's body was a slow, steady weight against her side, one thigh thrown over her possessively.

The room smelled of sex, cigarettes, and the unspoken grief that had coiled around them the night before.

Cruz stared at the cracked ceiling.

In the peeling wallpaper and water stains, she could almost see the fire again. The motel. The bloodied mattress where Vivien had left a man's body cooling in a pool of semen and gasoline.

And she—good cop, loyal daughter, guilty Catholic—had kissed Vivien anyway.

Vivien stirred. She rolled onto her back, one arm stretching lazily over her head, exposing the pale, vulnerable line of her throat.

Her voice rasped into the stillness.

"Thinking about the fire already, Detective?"

Cruz said nothing.

Vivien smiled without opening her eyes.

"He deserved it. The fire. The blood. Some stains don't wash out."

Rain pattered harder against the window, filling the pause like a second heartbeat.

"Sometimes," Vivien murmured, "you have to burn it all down just to breathe again."

Cruz turned her head, studying the way morning light bruised itself across Vivien's bare skin. No apology there. No shame. Only a terrible, aching peace—the kind that comes after you stop pretending there's any other way.

"Did it help?" Cruz asked, voice raw.

Vivien opened her eyes then—glassy, fathomless.

"Not enough," she said.

Cruz lifted a hand, almost without meaning to. She brushed her thumb across Vivien's bottom lip, where the last ghost of last night's Crimson Psalm clung—a bruised halo, a wound without blood.

Vivien caught her hand gently. Turned it. Pressed a kiss into her palm.

Then she let go.

And Cruz stayed.

The rain hadn't let up when Cruz stepped outside.

The city pressed heavy against her, steaming and slick, gutters choking on runoff and last night's sins. Somewhere down the block, a siren wailed and cut out like a throat being slit. Neon flickered off puddles that slicked the cracked concrete, casting sickly halos around drowned cigarette butts and broken bottles.

The alley smelled of wet garbage, cheap whiskey, and something metallic underneath—like blood that had never quite been scrubbed away.

Cruz hunched deeper into her coat and moved quickly down the alley.

Gallagher waited near the mouth of it, propped against a rusted dumpster tagged with graffiti so old the letters bled together. Rain sheeted from the brim of his hat. His shoulders sagged like a man carrying a burden he had stopped pretending he could set down.

He had been tailing her all night. She saw it now—the slump of his spine, the weary way his eyes tracked her approach without conviction.

"Falco wanted you watched," Gallagher said without preamble, voice roughened by cold and regret. "Told me to keep you close. Keep you stupid."

Cruz said nothing. She just stared at him, rain running into her collar, the city's noises pulsing like a weak heartbeat around them.

Gallagher scratched at the side of his jaw, water dripping from his fingers. "I was good at it. For a while. Figured you'd trip yourself up without much help."

He shifted against the dumpster, the motion heavy, exhausted. A broken bottle crunched under his boot.

"But last night—" He shook his head. "Sitting there, watching you... made me think."

Another beat of rain-soaked silence. The wind rattled a dented fire escape above them, metal groaning like a tired lung.

"I been a coward a long time, kid," Gallagher said, voice low. "Thought survival meant loyalty. Thought if I just kept my head down, I could slide into retirement with a pension and a few regrets."

He huffed a bitter breath, steam clouding the air between them.

"But Falco... he doesn't let go. You work for him, you don't retire. You rot. You drown in it."

He fished into his coat, pulled out a brass key, dangling from a cracked motel tag that swung in the wet air like a condemned man's pendant.

"Back door," he muttered. "Maintenance entrance. Not his mansion—the real place. His private nest. You didn't hear it from me."

Cruz took the key without hesitation. Their fingers brushed—brief, cold, irrevocable.

Gallagher looked at her then—really looked—and the rain painted deep lines into his face, tracing every compromise he'd ever made.

"You're smarter than me," he said. "Don't let this city make you forget it."

She turned without a word.

He didn’t follow. He just stood there, watching the rain scrub the neon off the broken pavement, a man finally too tired to run from the truth.

Maybe he was tired of chasing ghosts too.

The rain had finally let up, but the city remained cold and heavy, the air thick with the scent of wet concrete and wilted cigarette smoke.

Cruz approached the church slowly, boots slapping through shallow puddles, her coat heavy on her shoulders. Vivien had told her where to meet—had whispered it the night before, her breath hot against Cruz's ear, a time and a place carved out between confessions and touches too desperate to name.

Iglesia del Silencio—once holy, now a mausoleum of broken glass and rotting wood—waited like a broken mouth ready to swallow prayers it no longer believed.

Cruz hesitated at the threshold.

The church smelled of mildew and ash. The wet stone walls wept silently. Glass crunched under her boots with every step. It felt wrong to breathe here, like every inhalation was a trespass.

She thought about how easy it would be to turn around. How the old Cruz—the good detective, the dutiful daughter—would have walked away.

But she wasn’t that woman anymore.

She stepped forward. Boots splashing through shallow puddles, scattering the broken colors into chaos.

Rain still dripped through the gaping wounds in the roof, pattering against the cracked marble altar and pooling across the ruined floor. The stained glass, shattered by time and storms, threw bruised light across the wet stone.

Vivien stood at the center of it all, a silhouette against the drowning light.

She wore black.

Not mourning black. War black.

The Crimson Psalm was perfect on her mouth, painted with slow, deliberate reverence. A wound kissed into shape.

A wet strand of hair clung to her cheek, trembling with each shallow breath she tried to hide.

Their eyes locked across the flooded nave.

Cruz felt the gravity of it—the inevitability—like a weight dragging her chest open.

She reached out first. She brushed the soaked strand of hair from Vivien's forehead, her fingers trembling not from fear—but from the terrible clarity of love.

Vivien caught her wrist. Held it. Not to stop her. To tether her.

"Don't stop me," Vivien said, her voice low, steady as the air between them.

Cruz tightened her grip against Vivien's jaw, grounding them both.

"I won't," she whispered.

Vivien leaned in, and they kissed—hard, wet, unholy. A kiss written not in forgiveness, but in war.

Cruz's mind fractured under the touch. Fragments blooming sharp behind her eyes: *I was already gone. I never had a choice.*

The ruined church around them seemed to hum, the echoes of old prayers swallowed by the rain-soaked silence.

When Vivien pulled back, she smiled—small, sharp, a wound shaped like a woman.

Cruz reached into her coat, pulling something from an inside pocket. She pressed the cold metal into Vivien's palm without speaking.

The key to Falco’s private nest.

Vivien closed her fingers around it slowly. The metal burned cold against her palm. Not just a key. A doorway into the filth Falco thought no one would ever reach. Their hands lingered, a tether stretched too tight.

"You could follow me," Vivien said, voice barely above a breath. Not a plea. Not quite.

Cruz’s throat worked, but no words came. The choice sat between them, sharp and terrible.

And Vivien—strong, defiant, aching Vivien—felt a crack splinter deep inside. A part of her wanted Cruz to say yes. Wanted to be selfish. Wanted to be saved.

But some prayers were already written in blood.

Vivien squeezed Cruz's hand—brief, fierce—and let go.

She smiled—small, sharp, a wound shaped like a woman.

Then she turned and walked into the storm.

Her trench coat flared behind her like a battle flag stitched in grief.

Her heels clicked against the flooded stone, slipping once before finding their rhythm. Somewhere high above, a broken pane of glass rattled against its frame—the dying breath of the church.

She was already gone. I just hadn't learned how to stay yet.

Cruz stayed standing in the ruin, heart hammering against the broken world, waiting for the city to bleed.

The rain had stopped, but the city was still weeping.

Vivien stepped from the crumbling chapel into the thick, cold air, her heels clicking against the drowned pavement, slipping once before she found her stride. The gutters overflowed, slick and stinking, steam curling up from the broken streets where the sun wouldn't come.

Neon buzzed weakly through the mist, the colors bleeding into the puddles—red, gold, a sickly green. Somewhere far off, a siren cut the air in half before dying away, swallowed whole by the wet concrete.

Vivien moved through it all like a prayer on fire.

The Crimson Psalm glowed fresh against her mouth, perfect despite the rain that had tried to drown it. Beneath her coat, the key Gallagher had passed burned cold against her skin, tucked close to her heart. Her fingers brushed the hidden knife once, a silent invocation.

She didn't rush. Didn't look back.

Behind her, the church sagged into the fog, and somewhere inside it, Cruz remained—a tether Vivien could still feel pulling at the hollow place behind her ribs.

She pressed forward.

Each step was a benediction. Each breath an act of war.

Somewhere beneath her heels, the city's pulse thudded slow and broken, a heart too tired to pray.

The city watched from broken windows and leaking rooftops. Held its breath. Waited.

Vivien Vale walked into the drowning streets, the Crimson Psalm singing silent on her mouth.

Tonight, the city would bleed with her.