



Make Me Wild

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

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MAKE ME WILD

RICH DEMONS OF DARKWOOD BOOK 3

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CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)
[Join Our Readers' Group](#)
[Make Me Wild](#)
[Make Me Wild Soundtrack](#)
[Rich Demons of Darkwood Series](#)
[Prologue](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)

[Make Me Burn](#)

[The Delilah Recipe](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Forbidden Honor](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Books by C.R. Jane](#)

[Books By May Dawson](#)

[About C.R. Jane](#)

[About May Dawson](#)

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Proof: Jasmine Jordan

DEDICATION

To all the girls who like a little wild with their happily ever after.

JOIN OUR READERS' GROUP

Stay up to date with C.R. Jane by joining her Facebook readers' group, C.R.'s Fated Realm. Ask questions, get first looks at new books/series, and have fun with other book lovers!

[Join C.R. Jane's Group](#)

Join May Dawson's Wild Angels to chat directly with May and other readers about her books, enter giveaways, and generally just have fun!

[Join May's Group](#)

MAKE ME WILD



Stellan's always been a pretty horrible ex-boyfriend, but he takes it to a new level when he kidnaps me.

I wake up in a trunk, determined to make him pay.

But Stellan needs answers about his sister's disappearance.
And I need them too.

So even if he does deserve to die for what he's done to me, we form a tentative alliance.

We go back to where it all began, Stellan's childhood home. The Demon's house, next door, watches over our search.

It's not only the house that seems to loom over us.

Ghosts from my past know everything that happened to Sophia...

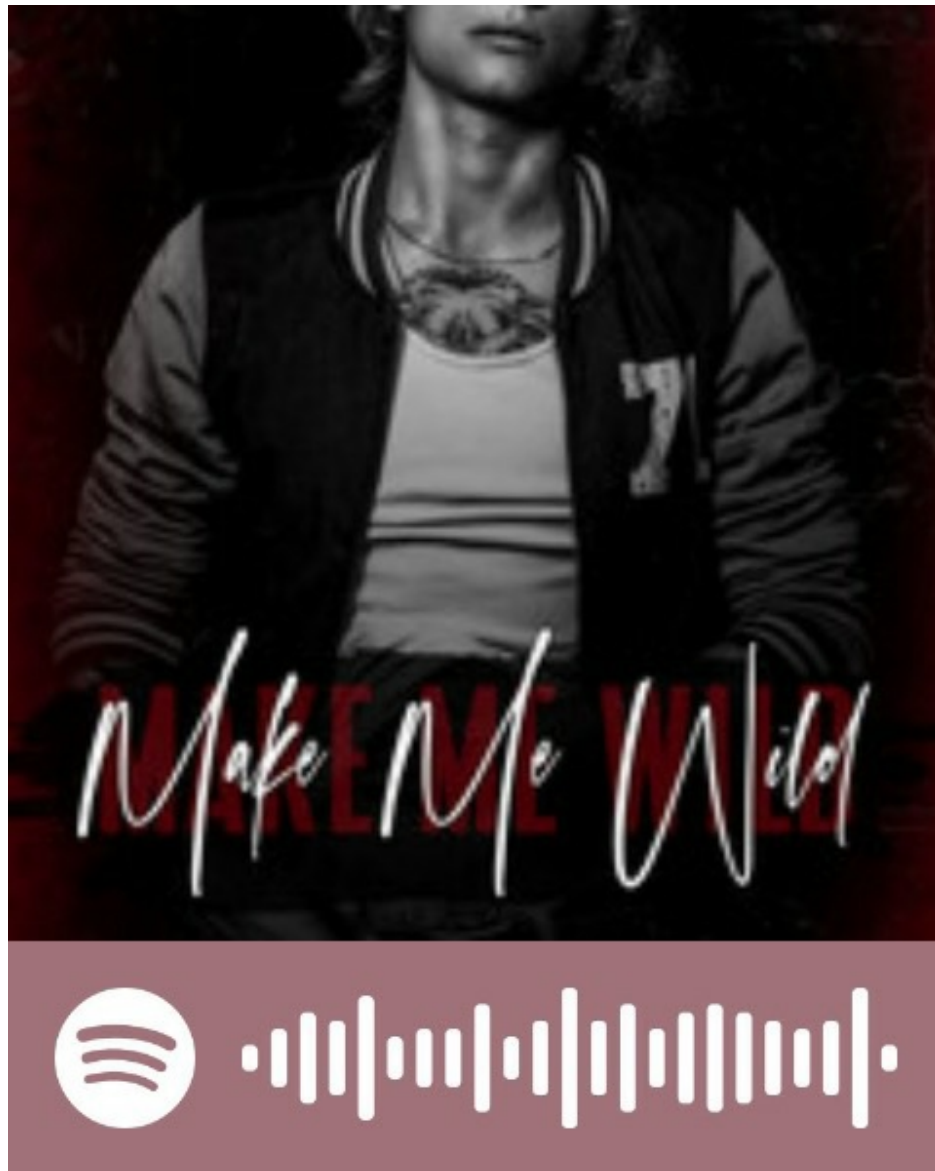
And they want to see me embrace my father's legacy. Or die. They aren't too picky.

My other a**holes aren't too happy with Stellan's disappearing act, but

they'll go along with helping...for now.

Can Stellan and I find what happened to Sophia, despite the hate and lust that pulses between us?

Or will my father's old friends leave us buried alongside Sophia?



Mansion

NF

Cover Me Up

Morgan Wallen

Dandelions-slowed + reverb

Ruth B., slater

Something to Someone

Dermot Kennedy

10 Things I Hate About You

Leah Kate

Psychofreak (feat. WILLOW)

Camila Cabello

Savage

Megan Thee Stallion

Crossfire

Stephen

no tears left to cry

Ariana Grande

like that

Bea Miller

Maniac

Conan Gray

Malibu

Miley Cyrus

This Love (Taylor's Version)

Taylor Swift

You broke me first

Tate McRae

Overpass Graffiti

Ed Sheeran

Hate Me

Blue October

Get the SPOTIFY playlist [HERE](#)

RICH DEMONS OF DARKWOOD SERIES

FROM C.R. JANE AND MAY DAWSON

Make Me Lie
Make Me Beg
Make Me Wild
Make Me Burn

This is a college bully reverse harem series which means the main character will end up with multiple love interests. It may have triggers for some as this is a dark romance with scenes of intense bullying, murder and mayhem, and sexual scenes.

PROLOGUE

DELILAH



AGE SIXTEEN

Sophia was complaining about our math class as we walked out together. With an exuberant sweep of her arm, she imitated our math teacher in a high falsetto. “You don’t appreciate now how much you’ll always need algebra! It’s not meaningless!” In her own voice, she said, “That’s exactly what you’d say if it were going to be meaningless for ninety percent of us.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see the math teacher staring after Sophia stonily.

I ducked my head in embarrassment but couldn’t hide a grin. Sophia moved through the world noisily, bold and unafraid. She felt like my exact opposite. I hid in the shadows...except for when I was with her.

Sophia heaved a sigh and linked her arm with mine. I froze a little as I always did, but a lot of the girls were physically affectionate with each other, so it wasn’t entirely weird. It just felt weird for me.

“Of course, you’re brilliant at math just like everything else,” Sophia went on. “I don’t know why a smart girl like you would even look twice at an idiot.”

“What idiot am I looking at?” I demanded.

Sophia shot me a mock-severe glare. “My idiot *brother*? You’re much too good for him, you know.”

I laughed, but that was a lie. Half the school was in love with Stellan.

“I don’t think he likes me,” I said, thinking of that kiss we’d shared in the rain. And thinking of how he ignored me in the halls of our school. He could have almost any girl and probably most of the boys, too. He was a star soccer player, but that wasn’t really what made Stellan so magnetic. He was charming and funny and, unexpectedly given his popularity, kind and easygoing.

Sophia huffed and rolled her eyes. “I wish he didn’t. Maybe you’d look around for someone who isn’t an idiot instead of falling for him like every girl in school.”

“Thanks for always being my hype team, sis,” Stellan drawled as he walked up alongside us. His hands were jammed in his pockets, and he shot me a bright smile.

Sophia's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed. For a second, she looked at him as if she hated him—it was the briefest flash across her face—and then she smiled. “Well, she's my best friend. I like her better than I like you.”

“You're never going to get over that time I locked you in your closet when you were eleven, are you?”

“Nope.”

“She was awful when she was eleven,” Stellan confided to me. “Sophia, tell her what you did to me first.”

Sophia rolled her eyes. “I know how desperately you want to talk about yourself.”

“She found the dirty story I'd written about my crush and carried it off to our sweet little Southern Baptist grandma.” Stellan shook his head, then teased. “I'm just saying, I might be an idiot, but my sister has a mean streak. You should consider being my best friend instead.”

I laughed because I didn't know what to say as Stellan laced his fingers through mine and tugged me away from Sophia. I thought he was just pulling me away from her to be playful, but then he kept holding my hand.

“She's mine now,” Stellan told Sophia. Sophia frowned at him and dove for my other hand. “My new bestie.”

Stellan swung my hand as if we were in some rom-com strolling through the fair, and everyone in the halls looked at us. Undisguised jealousy was written across the faces of other girls as we passed by. Everyone would hear about this. Stellan had to know that, right?

He was probably just messing with Sophia and me. I shouldn't take this too seriously. It didn't mean anything.

“Will you come to my game on Saturday?” Stellan asked. “Given how my sister's been running me down, you could come see what I'm halfway decent at. And then we could get dinner.”

“You're just going to ask my best friend out on a date in front of me?” Sophia wrinkled her nose at him. “Gross, Stellan.”

He shrugged.

They were both still holding my hands, and I cast a glance between the two of them.

“Are you okay with it, Sophia?” I asked. I didn't want to lose my friendship with her.

“God, if I'd known I'd need her permission to date, I would've been nicer

to her,” Stellan muttered.

Sophia grinned. “Of course, Delilah. You’re too cool for him, but you’ll realize that.”

Stellan stuck his tongue out at her. It felt as if the two of them were fighting over me and that made me nervous, because I loved them both.

But something light and reckless and happy rose in my chest. It felt like spring as we walked outside, even though a dusting of snow still covered the grass.

And then I saw my father’s car parked across the street, and my happiness curdled in my chest.

I pulled my hands away from both of theirs quickly, as if I’d been burned.

“Are you all right?” Sophia asked, and I didn’t have to look at her to know she was frowning, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from my father’s car.

“I’m fine,” I said, with a smile. I had learned to lie so well that I must have sounded convincing, even though my heart was hammering. My friends both relaxed. “My dad’s just here to pick me up, and I am so not ready to explain to him that everyone is in love with his baby girl.”

I said the words facetiously, but Sophia grabbed my sleeve and pulled me toward her, planting a goofy kiss on my cheek. I laughed at her, but that was only on the surface. Worms of anxiety squirmed through my gut. My mind spun with my next move even though I was on autopilot for the rest of the world.

“How could we help falling for you?” Sophia demanded, releasing me.

“Saturday?” Stellan asked.

“I guess.” I smiled at him over my shoulder, then ran down the steps to my father’s car. My heart was pounding. He was here for a reason.

It was time to move.

Which also meant it was time to kill the man he’d been torturing in our basement.

The driver’s side door opened, and Dad rose from the driver’s seat. “Hi, honey.”

“Hi, Dad.”

He didn’t say a word about my friends or even glance their way, and I dared to hope maybe he didn’t know about them. But I knew better.

The Demon didn’t miss much. That was how he’d eluded capture all these years.

When we got back to the house, there was an eerie sound. I paused in the doorway, listening, wondering if the man from the basement had escaped.

But then a stranger walked toward us from the back of the house and the Demon smiled, his hand resting on my shoulder to keep me from attacking him.

The stranger was young and dark-haired with heavy features, and he looked at me with intense eyes. "It's so nice to meet you, Delilah."

"Bentley is going to help us clean up the house," my father said. "Make sure we're ready to move. No loose ends."

So this was one of my father's apprentices. My stomach froze. I worried one day my father would kill me and leave me behind, buried in the basement of one of our houses, because he'd found someone he liked better. I wasn't sure being the Demon's flesh-and-blood would save me if he ever grew weary of my hesitation to shed blood.

"Thank you," I managed. "I'm going to drop my stuff off upstairs."

In my room, I slung my backpack to the floor. Loose ends? From here, I could see out my window to Stellan and Sophia's house. Were *they* loose ends? Because I'd gotten close to them, because sometimes I'd fantasized about telling Sophia, about having someone help me?

There was a flicker of movement in the trees outside. I moved quickly to the window, trying to see what it was, but it was gone.

I leaned my head against the cool glass.

If I were ever going to be free, if I were ever going to have a home and friends and real love, I'd have to kill the Demon.

CHAPTER 1

AURORA



Bang! My eyes flew open as I smashed my head against something, only to see total darkness surrounding me. Suffocating me.

What the fuck?

Terror threaded through me, both from the darkness and not knowing where I was—but I forced it down, taking slow, deep breaths until my pulse didn't feel like it was going to race away anymore.

I was in a car. The low hum that threaded through my insides and the bumps that sent me careening against the walls every so often confirmed that.

"I'm going to find out the truth no matter what, Delilah...and you're going to help." The words screeched through my mind...along with what happened. Finding Stellan in my room. The picture with the Demon looking out from the window behind us. Stellan's face as he stuck me with a fucking needle.

I was going to kill him.

What the fuck was he doing?

I mean, I'd obviously known that Stellan and I had issues...but drugging me and locking me in a fucking trunk...

That was something I would do, not sweet Stellan. Cain lying paralyzed on the floor filled my head, and even in my current circumstances, a smile spread across my lips. Definitely something I would do.

My smile dropped when the car hit a pothole and my head smashed against the top of the trunk.

"Fuck!" I hissed as I rubbed the sore spot that was only going to make the headache I had, worse.

"Stellan, I'm going to fucking murder you!" I screamed, not sure if he

could hear me, but willing to give it a try anyway. It better be Stellan up there. Ice clawed at my veins thinking about the possibility that I was trapped in a car with someone else—that Stellan had given me to someone.

I rolled to the side, seeing if I could hear the radio or someone talking. But all I could hear was the road, the occasional rock scraping across the bottom of the car. I sighed and laid back. My hands were free. That was a good sign, right? If he'd given me to someone, surely they would have tied my hands.

I mean, Stellan should have known to restrain me. Because as soon as he opened this trunk, I was going to knock him the fuck out.

My teeth ground against each other when the next hole the car hit sent my face smashing against the trunk roof. Pain ricocheted through my nose. I gingerly felt around it, breathing a sigh of relief when everything felt intact. I really would have to kill him if he'd broken my pretty nose. I'd paid a lot for it.

I tensed when the car began to slow down, and rolled as it turned left, unable to find anything to hold onto in time. Were we about to stop? Would he let me out?

Would he let me out? I hummed to myself. If he didn't let me out, I was going to let myself out. Obviously.

But it would be better for him if he did it himself.

The car stopped and everything went quiet for a long moment.

Come on, asshole, I muttered, my head still aching. I heard the car door open and then slam shut and I waited a minute, expecting the trunk to be popped any second now.

Nothing.

When another minute passed and I still wasn't being let out, I got tired of waiting.

Cursing how dark it was, I rolled towards the trunk latch and began to feel around blindly for the little trunk release lever that all cars had nowadays. People didn't really think about it since they didn't find themselves locked in trunks on many occasions, but the Demon had been all about preparation. I'd been locked in many a trunk growing up until it was second nature escaping them. I'm not sure that he was envisioning that I'd be trapped in a trunk by my ex-boyfriend, but his lessons were applicable nonetheless.

I did a corny fist pump when I finally found the latch and pulled on it

hard until the hatch finally popped, letting in a burst of clean, cool air. I took some deep breaths, realizing how much fuel exhaust had been in the trunk with me.

Just another reason that Stellan needed to pay. Or at least be maimed and tortured a bit.

It was dark outside. Which meant hours had passed since Stellan had drugged me. Perfect. With all the kidnapping I'd been experiencing lately, there were a lot of chunks of my life being lost.

Unacceptable.

I pushed the trunk lid open a little wider and peeked through, trying to get a better look at my surroundings. Gas pump, bright lights. A store. We were at a gas station, but we were the only car in the parking lot from what I could see.

I slid out of the trunk, the world spinning around me a bit with the aftereffects of the drug affecting my equilibrium...and maybe the car fumes too. I bent over and took a few more deep breaths, working to clear my head.

Once I felt like I wasn't going to either fall or throw up if I took a step, I straightened and studied my surroundings a bit more. Beyond the yellow light cast on the ancient-looking gas pumps, there was nothing but darkness and pines. We were definitely at a gas station, and we were definitely out in the middle of nowhere. Where was he taking me?

Cold anger slid through my veins once again and I shook my head, a thousand possibilities of how to punish Stellan filling my head. Peeking into the front seat, a glimmer of metal caught my attention. A long serrated knife had been thrown onto the floor of the car haphazardly.

And what did he think he was going to do with that?

I headed towards the store entrance, patting my pocket and grinning when I felt my own small pocket knife bulging out slightly from the back of my pants. The other blade was still in the cutout inside the top of my pants as well.

Fun.

It had to be Stellan who'd been driving the car; he was always underestimating me.

Of course he hadn't checked my pockets, because he never in a million years would have thought I would escape from the trunk, or perhaps even wake up at all. I highly doubted Stellan had done any studies on the proper ratio of drug to body mass to keep someone asleep. It had taken a month

under the Demon's tutelage to start to get that right. I was probably lucky he hadn't accidentally killed me by injecting me with too much.

The car was parked on the side of the gas station, so I paused when I got to the corner and peered inside the giant windows of the store. They were desperately in need of a good wash—dirt, handprints, and who knows what else smeared all across them. A flash of movement caught my eye, and I spotted Stellan disappearing down a hallway, probably to use the bathroom. There was a bored-looking store clerk fiddling around on his phone at the check-out counter, but I didn't see anyone else inside.

Perfect.

I walked inside and the clerk didn't even glance up as the bell above the door rang. Walking left down an aisle, I ducked so that I could see Stellan through the cracks of the food racks when he came back up the hallway. If I didn't move, I highly doubted he would notice me in time to do anything about it.

The store clerk sneezed, and I watched in disgust as he used his shirt to wipe his nose, his hairy, paunch of a stomach bared for all the world to see.

Or I guess just me to see since no one else was in here.

Lucky me.

I grabbed a Snickers off the rack in front of me and carefully undid it, taking a big bite of the delicious bar as I kept an eye on the clerk and the hallway. Wouldn't want to add "hangry" to my already ragey mind.

I was debating going down the hallway to perhaps drown him in the toilet when he appeared in the entryway and headed towards one of the drink coolers.

It was annoying how attractive I still found him. He didn't seem fazed at all about the fact he was keeping someone locked in his trunk. I couldn't see a bead of sweat on his forehead, and his hair was still perfectly in place, so he hadn't been running his hands through it like he did when he was agitated or nervous.

Fucker.

I began to move down the aisle while he perused which Monster energy drink he was going to pick. And right as he opened the door to the fridge and leaned in to grab a drink—my favorite flavor, by the way—I popped up behind him and slid my knife to his throat. He flinched and I smirked as his eyes widened in the reflection of the metal in the cooler. Just for fun, I dug my blade into his skin until a drop of blood pebbled into view and slid down

his skin.

I resisted the inane urge I had to lick it off, because that would be psychotic...right?

“Hello, asshole,” I purred pleasantly. “Surprised to see me?”

Stellan began to turn his head and I dug my other knife into his back. He immediately stilled.

“Good to see you’re awake,” he murmured casually. I resisted the urge to sever his spinal cord at his blasé tone.

“I’m picturing it right now, you know.”

“What?”

“Your blood smeared all over the glass. Right now I’m thinking I wouldn’t miss you that much.”

His tongue peeked out from his full lips, and he slid it along his bottom lip. “You’d have to kill the clerk too. Might be a bit messy.”

I huffed out a soft laugh and leaned closer to him. “I’m finding I like messy, Stellan.”

“You’re not going to stab me, Del—Aurora,” he murmured, glancing to the side of him towards the counter on the other side of the room where the clerk was still painfully unaware of what was happening in the store.

“I really think I could right now. Especially if you keep calling me that name. I wonder what part of your brain I have to rip out to get it out of your system. That knife in the car, were you planning to use it on me?” I pressed my blade into his neck once more and another drop of blood slid down his skin.

A streak of light reflected off the glass.

That was annoying. Another car had just pulled into the parking lot. I needed to take this somewhere more private.

Stellan’s silence was deafening, the answer to my question clear enough.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. We’re going to walk back towards the bathrooms, and you’re not going to cause any problems. Understand?”

His face hardened. “Fine,” he said through gritted teeth.

I lifted the knife off his throat, moving the blade to his back so we could walk at least a little less suspiciously past the clerk.

I needn’t have bothered though...the guy still didn’t look up, even as a trucker-looking guy with a lip full of tobacco came into the store.

This would be a great place to rob if I ever needed money.

We made it to the hallway and just for fun, I slid one of the blades up his

spine, making slices in his shirt.

“Women’s room,” I murmured in a sing-song voice when he paused in front of the men’s bathroom. He sighed and shook his head, but listened to my directions, and in just a moment we were enclosed in the single-stall bathroom.

I allowed him to step away from the knives and turn to face me.

“This would be where you start groveling.”

He snorted. “I would if I was sorry at all.”

I waved one of the knives at him. “You stuffed me in a fucking trunk! You drugged me!”

“Like you’re one to talk about drugging someone,” he sneered, my earlier thoughts thrown back at me.

“I’ve done fucking nothing to you. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You’re going to help me find out what happened to her!” he snarled.

His words saturated the room, cloying and ugly, until the air tasted gross as I breathed.

“Why are we having this conversation? Isn’t it getting old to you yet? I didn’t have anything to do with it!”

I lunged at him, my chest heaving as I held the blade against his heart. He could have tried to push me away, but he just stood there, his breaths echoing mine in ferocity.

We glared at each other, my hand unsteady as I gripped the knife. I’d loved this boy, this beautifully infuriating fuckboy for so many years. But right now, what I was feeling felt a lot like hate.

“Do it,” he whispered. “Just get it over with. I won’t stop you. Ever since the moment you stepped back into my life...it’s been nothing but hurt. And I can’t stand any more hurt than the pain I already feel missing Sophia. You’re like a sliver wedged under my skin, a bullet they can’t get out. You’re pain, Aurora. Poisonous pain that’s infected every part of me.”

A flicker of hurt rushed my insides, but I pushed it away. “Stop complimenting me, asshole,” I said softly back to him.

His eyes flickered with something that looked a lot like hunger, and then...

Stellan pressed against me so the blade actually went into his skin, and his mouth slammed against mine. His hand went to my throat, squeezing gently as the knife clattered to the ground when I dropped it. My arms wrapped around him, pulling at his hair as I bit savagely down on his lip,

tasting his blood as I tore into his skin.

“Fuck,” he growled, his grip tightening around my throat.

He abruptly ripped away and turned me until we were standing in front of the mirror, staring at each other in the dirty reflection. We were...a mess. His blood was smeared on my face and the front of my shirt. His hair was all over the place, red smeared all over him. His jaw was clenched, his nostrils flaring as his gaze stayed locked on mine.

“I hate you,” he murmured as his hand continued to grip my throat.

“The feeling’s obviously mutual.” Even as the words left my mouth, I was rocking back into him like an animal in heat, his hard cock pushing against my ass. We both moaned at the sensation and Stellan’s other hand slid in front of me and gripped my dripping core, his fingers expertly rubbing against my clit through my pants and sending heat sparking up my spine.

“Fuck.” His voice was rough and labored as he ripped his hand up to the button of my jeans and tore them open. The hand around my throat let go and slid to one of my breasts. He began to knead it roughly, plucking and pulling at my nipple until a sob slipped past my lips. I rubbed against him again and he chuckled darkly as his fingers slid past my underwear and through my soaked folds.

“Knew you would be wet for me,” he growled as he bit into the side of my neck. It was like he’d pressed some kind of button on me because my whole body had melted against him. I was liquid in his hands. I mewled and writhed against him once again. “You want my cock. Say it,” he ordered as he slipped two fingers into me, immediately finding the perfect spot to send me spiraling.

I don’t know how, but I came instantly.

“Good girl,” he murmured.

I snarled, my breath coming out in loud gasps that filled the room.

“Open your eyes,” he ordered.

“No thanks. Would ruin the vibe I’ve got going if I have to look at your face,” I snarled. His fingers curled inside of me, hitting that spot once again that threatened to set my soul on fire.

“Open. Your. Eyes.”

I obeyed this time, unable to miss how magnificent he looked behind me with his cheeks flushed and his pupils blown out in arousal.

“I want your shirt off,” I gasped as an orgasm began to build again.

He smirked like the cocky bastard he was and abruptly pulled out his

fingers, licking each one as I watched as if in a trance. Then he whipped off his shirt and threw it haphazardly on the cracked sink in front of us.

"How's this?" he purred, and I whimpered as I pushed my hips back once again, completely losing all my badassery in the heat of the moment.

All I wanted was to be fucked. By him.

And yes, I was fully aware of how unhealthy that was.

Stellan ripped down my jeans and panties until they were hanging taut around my knees. I tried to kick them lower but his hands gripped my hips, halting any movement. "I want your legs just like this," he said gruffly, and who was I to argue with him?

A bead of sweat slid down my forehead as I watched his hand move across my stomach and my breasts, his arm shifting and flexing as he moved. He reached a hand in between us to free his cock and my whole body tensed in preparation for what was coming.

He didn't ask if I was ready, and he didn't need to. I could feel my arousal dripping down my leg. I was definitely wet enough for what he had planned. Stellan gripped my hair in his fist and pushed me slightly forward before he thrust violently through my folds, bottoming out so deep inside of me that I could feel him pressing against my womb.

I trembled all over and moaned as he drew back slowly, leaving in just the thick head of his cock, before driving back inside of me.

"This is what you wanted, wasn't it? This is what you needed," he rasped in a tight voice as he began to slam into me, over and over again, stretching me so wide it felt like I was going to split in two.

"You love my cock, don't you? And. I. Love. This. Pussy." He pushed me forward even more until I was leaning over the sink.

His eyes locked with mine in the mirror as he fucked me harder, each long stroke sending tremors shooting across my skin.

I was a mindless animal as I pushed back against him at the same pace, chasing the release building inside of me. Something sparked in his gaze as we watched each other, both practically feral in our movements.

When I'd first met him, I never in a million years would have seen us here, and now that we were, I didn't see us anywhere else.

His hips slapped against my ass, his heavy sack bouncing against my clit with every hard thrust. I moaned again, not even caring anymore if the store clerk heard and came back here to investigate. I don't think I'd even miss a beat if the door suddenly slammed open and he was standing there.

"I hate you, but I fucking love your cock."

He barked out a harsh laugh as his grip tightened on my hair and on my hip as he battered into me.

"Squeeze my fucking cock," he ordered, and as if he held my pleasure on a string, I was falling, ecstasy tearing through me as my orgasm hit.

"Fucking perfect," he said, before he pinched my clit, hard. My answering scream only seemed to spur him on further. We were a wet and sloppy mess. The insides of my thighs were slick with our essence. He leaned over me and bit into my neck savagely again, and my breath hitched.

The pain only made everything feel even better.

"My little psychopath," he purred, before his rhythm began to falter as he came with a growl.

He thrust a few more times before coming to a stop, the silence of the room almost deafening without the echo of our skin slapping together. We stared at each other in the mirror, twin glares written on our faces.

Evidently hate fucking was my thing now.

I waited for the disgust to come, something to tell me how wrong this was.

I could see it in Stellan's gaze as he came down from the high, that he wasn't sure how we'd gotten here.

I bit my lip to hold in a moan as he finally slid out of me. I went to move to grab a tissue, but then he was there, a paper towel in his hand that he slid between my folds.

The act felt too intimate for what we'd just done, and I pushed him away before hastily pulling up my underwear and jeans.

No one knew better how to fuck with my head than Stellan.

But this time, I was pretty sure I'd done it to myself.

CHAPTER 2

CAIN



I knocked on Aurora's door, which wasn't exactly my usual M.O. She'd been through a lot lately though. Aurora was tougher than any other girl I'd ever met. Hell, she was tougher than any of the men I knew too. But everyone has their breaking point.

And if Aurora had reached hers, I wanted to be there for her. As much as I was capable. If she was struggling, maybe I should tag in Remington. I'd prefer to kill someone for her rather than hold her while she sobbed.

When she didn't answer, though, my usual impatience kicked in. "Aurora, it's me."

She didn't answer. If she were inside, she knew better than to think I'd tolerate being ignored. I turned the knob, already putting my shoulder into the door, expecting resistance. To my surprise, the door opened immediately. I frowned. I didn't entirely like that, although any of the men around here should know just how dangerous it would be to mess with Aurora. I would never tolerate anyone hurting her. Well, anyone but me.

Instead, I walked into her room to find that she was gone. I moved swiftly to the attached bathroom, already feeling my skin prickle from the sense of emptiness. She wasn't in the bathroom, which was dry. No sign of anyone taking a shower recently. I turned back to the room, where the sheets were still undisturbed. But a few things had been knocked off her desk onto the floor in the otherwise tidy room. Signs of a struggle.

My sudden sense of rage flowed like ice through my veins. Had Aurora run from me? Or worse, right after we'd gotten her back, had someone dared to steal her from me? To hurt her? We needed to find her. Now.

A new thought prickled in my mind though. I headed toward the stairs

that lead down to the garage. Remington was in the hallway too, and he stilled at my face, whatever smartass remark he'd been about to say dying on his lips.

"Aurora's not in her room. I need that big, ridiculous brain of yours." I clapped his shoulder, pushing him ahead of me toward the stairs.

"She's probably with Pax or Stellan. Not an emergency."

"Unless it is. I think there might have been a struggle in her room."

No matter how much Remington might bitch about it, at least he was already moving, following me as I headed toward the stairs to the garage.

"We could start by looking in the house for her," Remington said reasonably, sounding confused as to why our first stop was the stairs down to the garage.

But nothing about Aurora made me feel reasonable.

"Sure. But if someone took her, that's the biggest emergency. It'd be hard to get out of here walking out the door. Maybe someone took one of the cars. I don't really trust our brothers right now."

I didn't trust anyone but Pax, Stellan, and Remington to have my back.

Remington was already pulling his phone out of his pocket and tapping on it. "I'm pulling up the video feeds from the past few hours now."

The two of us reached the basement garage.

"What cars are gone?" I demanded.

Remington looked up from his phone with the dazed look he sometimes had on his face when he had just been thinking hard and working on some hacking. "Couple of boots. And... Stellan's."

He must have seen my face harden, because he said quickly, "That doesn't necessarily mean anything. Maybe he took Aurora on a date."

"Maybe." I felt stupid that I'd worried about her if that were the case. But given everything that had happened, Stellan should know better than to take her out of the house without talking to us first.

Given what I did, and who my father was, there were people out there who might try to hurt Aurora to punish me. I didn't like the idea of her being outside of my protection. Not for a single minute.

"Find Aurora."

"You don't need to be so bossy," Remington said lightly. "I'm already on it."

The two of us ran back up the stairs. I walked into the hallway and saw Reynolds, who was not my favorite boot, to say the least. He was the kind of

man who always has good ideas for what other people should do, but rarely has the balls to do them himself. But Stellan had liked him. Probably for a reason. Like Reynolds was easy for him to use.

I slammed Reynolds into the wall. It wasn't as satisfying as I would have hoped, given how much it was not Stellan.

"Do you know where Aurora is?" I demanded.

"No," he squeaked out. "I haven't seen her."

He said the words both carefully and wild-eyed, like someone trying to avoid outright lying

"Oh, all right then," I said pleasantly enough and took a step back. The step back was just so that I had enough reach for it to hurt when I hit him. My weight shifted forward, his eyes widening in shock before my fist slammed him across the face.

He fell back into the drywall and his eyes fluttered back in his head.

"Christ, Cain." Remington looked mildly annoyed as he stared down at the man.

Pax stepped down to the hall, a curious look across his face. "Why, Cain? As always, just why?"

"I didn't mean to knock him out."

Remington shook his head. "Well, he's not going to answer any questions for a while. That went well."

I'd caught Reynold's shoulders, pinning him against the wall as his eyes rolled back in his head. But now I released him and he crumpled across the floor, landing on the toes of my shoes. I took a step back.

"Stellan took her." I was having a hard time explaining why, but I felt it in my bones. And I trusted my instincts. "He's always been a miserable dickhead when it came to her."

"To be fair, we've all been miserable dickheads." Remington didn't seem to be taking this too seriously, and it made me want to punch him. He might take that seriously.

"You are not helping right now," I told him.

Remington spread his arms and shrugged. "Aren't I?" He wagged his cell phone at me. "I'm zeroing in on Aurora's location."

The man on the floor's eyes fluttered open. I crouched to talk to him.

"Maybe you should let me do that." Remington crouched too. "He's supposed to be someone important. His father's got a decent chance of being president one day."

“No one's important to me unless I choose for them to be important to me.” I'd chosen my friends. Including Stellan, even though he was an asshole sometimes. And now, I knew that I couldn't deny that I chose Aurora, too. She was mine. And anyone who hurt her was going to pay.

Reynold's eyes opened. Fear flashed across his face at the sight of me invading his personal space.

“Tell me everything you know about Aurora.”

From the look on his face, he was warring internally with serious questions of survival. I hit him again. No need for internal debate. His greatest danger was within two feet and the next five minutes.

He groaned and cradled his jaw.

“Stellan asked me for some drugs,” he admitted.

“Oh really? What kind of drugs?” The same kind of drugs Aurora had used on me? When I remembered that terrifying crazy bitch straddling me to tattoo my abs, I got unreasonably hard.

“Dark X. It knocks people out.”

“Why would you have a drug like that?” And why the fuck hadn't Stellan told me if he knew.

Reynold flushed. “It was just for fun.” There was no hiding the whining note in his voice as if he knew he was in trouble. “Stellan took everything I had.”

I didn't like anything going on in my house that I hadn't sanctioned myself.

“You'd better hope to fuck I get her back.” I resisted the temptation to hit him again, but just barely. If he was already concussed, a second blow might do long-term damage. Couldn't give the future president's son brain damage... unless Aurora got hurt. Then all bets were off.

I rose to my feet, catching a glimpse of the look Pax and Remington exchanged. I knew I wasn't exactly acting like normal.

“I'm pretty sure Stellan drugged Aurora and took her with him to get revenge for his sister.”

Pax said, “I don't think Aurora had anything to do with that. That girl is trouble. But she's not a murderer.”

“Not without good cause,” I said. “I'll be surprised if we find Stellan's head still attached to his body when we catch up to them. I'm not sure if we're rescuing her or rescuing him.”

At least I hoped that was the case. I liked to think of Aurora as being

tough enough to survive in our brutal world. I wanted to protect her but I didn't want to have to. I wanted someone I didn't have to feel guilty for dragging into my dirty corner in the universe, for making her as filthy as I already was.

Aurora seemed like the queen who could stand beside me and rule the fucking underworld.

Remington looked up from his cell. "Aurora seems to have stopped. Off highway 18. She's about an hour from here."

"Let's track down our wayward friends," I said lightly.

"Want me to drive?" Remington asked with a cheeky grin. "Since you don't have a car?"

Maybe I should let Aurora murder all of them, actually. And then that crazy girl and I could ride off into the sunset without anyone left to annoy me.

But first, I had to get my twisted queen back by my side.

CHAPTER 3

AURORA



Stellan and I walked into the yellow circle of light surrounding the gas station pumps. Beyond that, the night seemed to press in.

“This time,” I told Stellan as we walked toward the car, “I’m riding up front.”

“You’re going to go with me voluntarily.” He cast me a look over the top of the car.

I rested my arms on the roof over the passenger seat, giving him a look right back. “Like I always would have if you weren’t a fucking idiot. All you had to do was ask.”

He scoffed. “How can I ever really trust you?”

He got into the driver’s seat before I could answer. Ass.

I yanked open my own door and slid in next to him. “That’s a great question. It’s one I’ve been mulling over myself. Because the thing is, Stellan, I don’t know if I can ever trust you. You kidnapped me.”

“For Sophia.”

“Sophia would think you’re a moron.”

He looked at me as if I’d just slapped him, but it was true.

I didn’t want to leave Stellan, Cain, Pax, and Remington behind. I felt alive when I was with them. Irritated, angry, sick of their shit—absolutely. But alive too. They turned the world technicolor, and I was someone new when I was with them. Delilah was dead. And in her place was a wild girl who tattooed Cain, who saved Remington, who played with the monsters and could best them.

I didn’t want to walk away from them, even though I should’ve *run*.

But I couldn’t do this bullshit anymore. It was exhausting

“I want to find out what happened to Sophia as much as you did. But once we find out, I think we have to go our separate ways.”

“Once we find out? You say it like it’s going to be easy.” He flashed me a look I couldn’t quite read, and wasn’t sure I wanted to.

It made me want to scratch his eyes out. With the serrated knife. “You know, you put me through hell on top of the hell I already went through losing Sophia. So once we’re done with this, we’re done with each other. You have to promise to help me get away from the others. Deal?”

“Deal,” he agreed, although he looked troubled.

“What is it?” I demanded.

“I don’t know that Cain would be willing to let go of you. I’m not sure he’s...” he paused, searching for the words. “I’m not sure he’s able.”

Obviously, Cain’s obsession with me burned bright as my obsession with him. Maybe his obsession with me burned a little brighter because the truth was, I was drawn to each of these damaged, intense men. I couldn’t imagine having just one of them.

But they weren’t exactly good for me.

“That’s why it’d be an escape.” I couldn’t stand to see Stellan anymore. What was between us was raw in a way my relationship would never be with any other man. I was drawn to him, but it also hurt. I used to think that Stellan was a bruise I couldn’t stop pressing. Now I realized he was a whole goddamn stab wound.

“Cain won’t like the idea of you out there on your own. And neither do I.”

“You don’t get to feel protective after you shot me with illicit drugs. I’m not doing this,” I said. I looked at him over the hood of the car. “Are you driving or do you want me to drive?”

He tossed the keys in his hand like he had every intention of driving, but asked, “Do you know the way home?”

“I’ve never had a home, Stellan, but I can find my way back to your old house. Get into the car.”

“I’ll drive.” He flashed me a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, as if he didn’t trust me not to do something crazy, like stop suddenly and send him flying out the window or bash his side of the car into a jersey barrier. It was like he knew me.

We were a dozen more miles down the road when he cursed as if he’d forgotten something back at the society house. His soul, probably.

“What's wrong?” I asked. “Besides your head.”

“Tracking device.” He'd gone slightly pale, but he drummed his fingers against the steering wheel, lost in thought and trying to problem solve. He'd been a musician in high school, playing the guitars and drumming, as well as playing soccer. I used to think there was nothing Stellan couldn't do.

“Remington will use his tracker to find you.”

“I would assume they could just show up at your old house.”

His lips twisted. “Those guys and I've been through several circles of hell together. But we don't exactly get personal. We've never been to my mom's house for Thanksgiving. I'm sure they'll figure it out eventually. But that will take time.”

I nodded. “Pull over.”

“What is it?”

“I'll take the tracker out.”

“Aurora, it's embedded in your body.”

“I am aware. If you're concerned about it, you probably should have mentioned that when Remington chipped me like a fucking dog after biting me. You all are depraved by the way.”

“And you fit right in,” Stellan said.

He pulled off the highway onto a quiet country road, then pulled into a copse of trees that hit us from the road. When he cut the engine and the headlights died, it felt like the trees around us might be haunted.

I opened the door and stepped out. “I don't want to get any more blood on your upholstery.”

I needed to know what had happened to Sophia. I needed it as badly as Stellan did, although unlike him, it hadn't turned me crazy.

Cain would drag us back to the house. Stellan had lost his damn mind, but I didn't doubt he had a reason for running from his friends.

I ran my fingertips over my throat, looking for the healed-over bite mark. It was still slightly tender and throbbing, as if the foreign material inside hurt. What a sick fucker Remington was—devious and possessive and dangerous. He might be able to keep up with me.

I probed my skin, but I couldn't feel the chip yet. Ugh. That was going to make this difficult—I didn't like the idea of poking inside the bleeding wound for the chip. But I'd do it. For Sophia.

I flipped open my knife and pressed the point against my skin, choosing carefully to find the right spot.

“Aurora.” Stellan took a sudden step forward. “You don't have to do this.”

He wrapped his hand around my wrist to pull the knife away from my skin. The blade hovered between us as his gaze met mine, his voice hard and confident. “I’ll explain it to them. I’ll deal with Cain. I wasn't thinking.”

Something inside me melted, just a little. Could he really have used that knife on me when he couldn’t stand to see me cut myself for good reason?

His voice softened. “I was just so sick about Sophia. I can't stand not knowing where she is, how she died. She could be anywhere. My little sister doesn't deserve that. She deserves to be at rest.”

Stellan also deserved peace. Maybe he didn’t deserve me, but he deserved peace about Sophia’s death. And so did I.

“We'll put her to rest,” I promised. We'd figure out what happened and for us to do that, I had to do this. I abruptly pulled my hand away from his, digging the knife tip into my skin. It throbbed as if the steel was hot, burning into my skin.

Stellan’s gaze was still on mine. “You’re the toughest woman I’ve ever met.”

If I had been alone, I probably would have bit my lower lip so hard I drew blood. I might even have shed some tears. But having Stellan in front of me with his watchful gaze gave me both a sense of strength and need. I wanted to prove his every worst thought about me wrong. I cared about Sophia. I was capable of that. And I was tough as fuck and capable of this.

“I'm in this with you,” I promised, my gaze meeting his. “We’ll run from Cain together, and we’ll find Sophia together.”

Blood trickled down my shoulder and into my camisole, soaking it to my breasts. And Stellan—Stellan who used to be the All-American boy next door and had been turned into something else—his gaze dropped hungrily to my cleavage despite the blood.

“I'll do whatever it takes to bring Sophia peace,” I spoke into the heaviness between us. “To free us from the past.”

“And I'll make sure you're free from anyone who wants to keep you hostage in the future,” he promised. “Including Cain.”

I pressed my fingers into the wound, seeking something that was hard and metallic, that didn't belong.

“Let me help. It's the least I can do.”

I let my bloody fingers drop to my sides. Agony pressed through my head

which felt suddenly light and my knees went weak but I knew how to deal with pain. I knew how to survive. I let my gaze go soft and unfocused, staring over his shoulder as he searched carefully for the chip.

His other hand dropped to my waist, steadying me, his gaze intent on the wound now. This moment wasn't nearly as fun as the one we shared earlier, but there was still something powerful about it.

The throbbing intensified to a wicked burn, and I breathed through the pain, letting my mind float away from my body.

"There." He sounded as triumphant as anyone could be coated in blood, raising the tick-sized tracker into my line of vision. My blood was soaked into his nail beds. "All right. What should we do with it now?"

"We need to find a car going in the opposite direction." It was time to send the others on a wild goose chase.

"Always clever," Stellan said with a smile that reminded me of when we were young and his compliments set a glow in my chest. He pulled off his t-shirt and pressed it against the wound, holding pressure there.

Then he leaned forward and kissed me, his bloody hand wrapping the back of my neck, and even though I knew he was making a mess of my hair and my clothes, I couldn't help kissing him back.

This time, this kiss felt like a promise.

We stopped at a gas station along the highway and dropped the tracker into the well below the windshield wipers on a random Acura. I hoped they had a good adventure.

Then Stellan and I got into the car and drove away. Night was deep, but dawn was only a few hours away.

Stellan and I had a long way to go to reach our own sunrise, though.

CHAPTER 4

PAX



As we chased Stellan and Aurora, the atmosphere in the car was intense. Back in the house, I'd stopped the two psychos before they could rush off, egging each other on to violence and foolishness. Somehow, even though I was the professional bruiser, when it came to Aurora, I might be the cool head.

"I'll drive." I'd cut in, because Cain and Remington needed me, not that they ever acknowledged that, even to themselves. "Remington will cause a roll-over trying to track Aurora with one hand."

Remington had looked mock-offended. "I have a lot of experience thinking about Aurora one-handed."

But neither of them argued with me. Because we were in a hurry. Because Cain always liked my back-up when he wanted to give someone a beat-down, and right now, Stellan had hit the top of his list. And because the four of us were all in it together when it came to Aurora, drawn to her even though she was sweet-scented poison.

Now the three of us were in my truck. Cain's anger hung in the air, simmering dangerously even though I knew it wasn't directed at either of us. He thought he was so untouchable, and yet Aurora drove him to all-new levels of insanity. As much as he loved thinking of himself as the cruelest and most dangerous man of his generation of gangsters, he still had some fragment of a heart left... and Aurora had walked off with it tucked into her pocket and a smile on her face.

Remington frowned down at his screen. "Well, it looks like they made a U-turn. What are you up to, Stellan?"

"He could've realized we'd be tracking him. But there's nothing he can

do about that, unless..." Cain's hands tightened into fists.

"He's not going to hurt Aurora. He's not an idiot. Not about that anyway." Remington rattled off new directions for me, then scrolled his phone. "I'm going to check in on his cell phone. I installed all the security shit on all of your phones like you asked, Cain... so now I'm the only one who can eavesdrop on you."

"What the fuck?" Cain demanded, but Remington just grinned at him.

"I never bother, Cain. You're not very interesting."

Remington knew damn well how many conversations Cain had that would incriminate him with a life sentence in prison. Cain shook his head, his jaw tense. He trusted Remington completely. If Remy were anyone else, Cain would've hurt someone for threatening his privacy.

"And dropping in... now." Remington raised his phone, but the only noise was a loud rush of white noise.

Remington's face went from cocky to concerned instantly. He began to tap frantically on his phone again.

"What is it?"

"It shouldn't sound like this if his phone is in the car."

In the distance, over the white noise, there was a faint tinny sound of someone asking for thirty dollars in gas.

"Fucker," Remington said, sounding appreciative. "I thought he was too addicted to his phone to just leave it somewhere. And if he'd turned it off, I would've noticed."

"He has to know we're tracking him by Aurora's chip." Cain clapped my shoulder. "We've got to intercept them before he gets desperate."

I was already speeding, but I crossed into reckless territory, weaving adeptly through the traffic on the highway. Everyone else slowed as a storm blew in, and I cursed in exasperation.

Heavy rain washed across the windshield, turning it white. The car went quiet and tense except for the sound of the rain beating against the roof of my truck.

"What do you think Aurora's condition is?" Cain asked into the silence. "Stellan, for all his faults, never used those drugs on a girl before. Unlike that bitch Reynolds. So he doesn't have any practice getting it right."

"Don't torture yourself thinking about it," Remington said.

"I'm not. I'm going to torture Stellan."

"You're going to love him again next week once you've sufficiently

terrorized him and—" Remington suddenly broke off, not even interested in his own prattle when his tech had distracted him.

"What?" I demanded.

"They just got off the highway. It's weird but..." Remington trailed off and directed me. We left the highway and entered quiet country roads heading through farmland, passing wet, grouchy cows and broken-down farmhouses.

"Where do you think he's taking her?" I asked. "I didn't think he grew up in the country."

Remington scoffed. "Did you ever ask?"

"No." Now that Stellan's past and Aurora's future seemed tied together, it occurred to me that I could've been a better friend and taken some interest in his life.

"Maybe there are places he and his sister visited that we don't have the first fucking clue about." Cain said the same thing I was thinking. "Or maybe he's taking Aurora from us for another reason. Going to sell her or something."

"He wouldn't do that," Remington said.

I glanced at him, wondering if Remington knew the first thing about hate, how it was like its own animal that stole your humanity.

Because I thought Stellan might be capable of anything.

"Getting close," Remy said, holding up the phone with the blinking tracker on screen. "There it is."

He pointed in front of us to a flash of brake lights just before the car half a mile ahead of us took a sharp turn. Cain let out a growl low in the back of his throat, a feral sound I didn't think he even realized he'd made.

Aurora was so close. As soon as I eased around the sharp corner, my foot dug deep into the accelerator, punching it to get closer to her. Now. Then I realized what I was doing.

We followed the car in front of us down a long, winding country road until it turned into a farmhouse. I drove past the house. Cain watched the car with furious eyes, but he didn't complain.

As I brought the truck to a halt down the road, Cain was already throwing his door open and jumping out.

"Calm down," I told him, not that he was listening, as I threw the car into park. "Remy, don't let him take a gun in there."

"Don't let Cain act like a psycho?"

“He’ll regret it if he kills Stellan.”

“I won’t,” Cain whipped back over his shoulder.

“Won’t regret it or won’t kill Stellan?” Remington asked.

But I didn’t question which way he’d meant that. I knew Cain too well.

I cursed and ran after him. Remington trudged through the mud ahead of me, his shoulders hunched against the dismal weather.

The farmhouse came into view. The car was empty now.

“How do you want to do this?” I demanded, and finally, Cain stopped. Thank fuck. He was relentless when he wanted something, and he *needed* Aurora. I hadn’t thought he would.

“I’ll go in the front.” He seemed to be back to his usual icy composure. “Make sure Stellan doesn’t go anywhere.”

“I’ll take the back,” Remington said, and mouthed at me, “Watch him.”

Remington knew I was the only one who could take Cain down. I was pretty sure Cain knew it too.

Cain kicked the front door in and went in like an extra-deranged version of the Kool-Aid man.

An overweight man on the couch jumped up, already screaming, “What the fuck?”

He wasn’t Aurora, and Cain just straight-armed him back into the couch where the man collapsed as Cain bulled his way through the rest of the rooms. A strange scent like burnt plastic and cleaning products hung in the air, coating every surface in the house.

Meth. I knew that smell from when I was a kid.

“Where the hell are they?” Cain roared.

I moved through the house, quickly checking each room. In one bedroom, a woman was lying across the sheets, her head lolling, and my heart leapt at the sight of her before I registered dark hair and empty, glazed eyes.

“They’re not here,” I called, already knowing the truth as I checked the last room.

The next room stank of dirty diapers left for a long time and piss-soaked carpet. Two toddlers, barely more than babies, were lying together on a stained mattress without sheets. They were so thin I could see every rib, and then I realized the scabs on their skin were from bugs. The TV in the corner of the room droned on.

I’d seen this shit when I was a kid. But I hadn’t been able to do anything about it.

I went back downstairs, where Remington perched on the very edge of a kitchen chair as if he didn't want to sully himself by making full contact with any part of this house, back to work on his phone.

I checked the fridge for food. Nothing but condiments and a half-used package of glossy, rancid lunch meat. There was almost nothing to eat in the house.

"They're not here," Cain said impatiently as he walked into the room. "We need to move on."

"Cain, can you do me a favor?"

He eyed me as if he wanted to say no, when he was heated looking for Aurora, but he asked, "What?"

"Can you persuade the locals not to sell drugs to those two scumbags in there anymore?"

He sighed and raked his hand through his hair. "You know someone's always going to be willing, Pax, and then we'll have to hurt someone... why not just turn the kids into CPS?"

"We have to do that too."

Cain grumbled under his breath. "Fine. I'll go terrorize them."

Cain walked back in to have a conversation with the meth heads in the next room. I hated knowing there was nothing I could do to truly fix things for these kids. Some kids just get dealt a bad hand when it comes to their parents. Only their parents could fix that.

But I could try to persuade them they should.

The mom barrelled past me on her way upstairs, and I found her on her knees, hugging her kiddos. She was freaking out, rambling about how she didn't want to lose them.

"Well, I guess that's up to you," I said. "As soon as we leave, the police are going to show up, and you might want to start cleaning up. For your kids."

She was crying when we walked downstairs and out the front door. Remington stood in the driveway, which was made of just as many dandelions as gravel, carefully searching along the well under the windshield wipers.

He cursed as he straightened. He held up a GPS chip. I held my hand out for it, and he dropped it into my palm, where I confirmed what I'd thought: it was covered in dried blood. Fuck. Aurora's blood.

She was tough and she certainly never shied away from causing

bloodshed, but the thought of Stellan making her bleed....

“Somehow, Stellan got the tracker out of her,” I said grimly. “He sent us in the wrong direction.”

“I’m going to murder him,” Cain growled, and this time, even Remington wouldn’t try to stop him.

“I guess I’m stuck with the two of you. You need someone to be the cooler head. See what Stellan has to say for himself first.”

“Yeah, you’re real cool,” Cain retorted. “That’s why you beat people half to death for sport. No deep rage there.”

“I do it for the money,” I corrected. I locked eyes with him. “And I do it for you.”

If I had a rage problem, I probably would’ve loosed it on the meth head that reminded me of more than one home I’d stayed in after my mother was murdered. Cain was only controlled because he didn’t give a damn about anything, which made him analytical. I was controlled because I gave a damn about *everything*.

“I’ll find them,” Remy promised. Unspoken was that there was nowhere else for us to go until he did. We’d hit a dead end.

“I know you will,” Cain said. He radiated quiet rage but he seemed confident in Remy anyway, as always.

I never would’ve admitted it, but as we drove back to the house, the shit we’d just seen reminded me of the hole in my soul that I’d felt since I was a kid. No family left alive that loved me. No one that mattered.

And then I’d met Cain, his father had taken me in, and I’d been immersed in a world of privilege and bloodshed and darkness ever since. My truck, MMA fighting, the adoration of the public, and the worship from girls in private, all of that had seemed to fill the void. At least if I didn’t look too hard.

But somehow Aurora had revealed how empty my soul still was.

And now I couldn’t get myself to forget it again like I had for years.

CHAPTER 5

AURORA



Ghosts. These streets were full of them. Every corner we passed was a memory, a moment in time where I'd been happy. This place had been the first time in my life where I'd felt a little bit free.

And then it had become a nightmare.

The sun was shining. The front lawns in the houses were still perfectly manicured and green. There were children playing in the parks we passed, their loud shrieks flooding my open window.

It all looked perfect.

It used to feel perfect.

But not anymore.

"It feels weird, doesn't it?" Stellan murmured, his eyes darting about our surroundings like he expected Sophia to appear on the sidewalk.

"Don't you go home during breaks?" I asked, a pang shooting through me as we passed an ice cream shop that Sophia and I had gone to every chance we could.

"Not often." He paused, the crooning voice of Dermot Kennedy filling the car. "My parents divorced about a year after Sophia disappeared. Which apparently is pretty common when you lose a child. But after Dad left, my mom...she just kind of faded away. She still sleeps in Sophia's bed, even now. Like she expects Sophia to just pop in through her bedroom window any minute now." He huffed out a sigh and leaned back in his seat. "It stopped feeling like home the second we realized she was gone. There's no real reason to go back now."

"Except for this."

He glanced at me, his gaze darting over my features in that way he did

sometimes, like he was trying to find Delilah in Aurora's face. "Except for this," he repeated.

A bead of sweat trickled down my spine as we turned into our old neighborhood. Stellan was saying something about people who'd moved across the street from where we'd lived, but his words were muffled...hard to understand.

Because I could see Sophia's ghost all over this place...but I could also see the Demon's.

My heart battered against my chest as we finally turned onto our street.

Our street. The words felt wrong in my head.

The first thing I noticed was that Stellan's house wasn't looking so good. Unlike the houses around us, the grass on the lawn was long, weeds sprouting up all over the place—a buffet of dandelions for all the wishes that would never come true.

"Fuck," he muttered. "I've been paying for a lawn service, but she must have fired them. Again. Fucking bastards have just been taking the money every month."

He pulled into the driveway and I purposely kept my eyes away from the house next door. I'd address that particular bogeyman tomorrow. Even without looking over at the house, I could feel it.

There was an imprint on that place, an evil energy that was tangible. I held in my shiver, feeling like the Demon's eyes were on me and he'd be able to see if I showed a drop of fear.

It took me a second to realize Stellan had turned the car off and we were just sitting there, both of us staring off into space.

"Shall we?" I asked, dreading going inside but wanting a wall between myself and the house next door.

Stellan shook his head like he was coming out of a trance. He went to open his door and then paused. "Just be prepared. She's not going to be the same woman as back then."

I frowned. I hadn't really thought through coming face to face with his mom. This wasn't going to go well.

Stellan slipped out of the car, and after taking a deep breath, I got out too. As we walked the sidewalk leading up to the front door, it was like eyes were slicing into the back of my head. I couldn't help it then, I looked back, half expecting the Demon to be peering through the window at me, that manic smile on his face that haunted my dreams.

But there was nothing, no specters grinning out at me, just dark, still, drape-covered windows. Somehow, I still felt those eyes.

“Aurora?” Stellan asked, peering back at me from the entry to his house. I gave him a grim, fake smile and hustled up the steps towards him. He unlocked the door and then slowly opened it.

“Is she out running errands?” I murmured, noting how dark it was inside. And stale.

The air was musty like nothing living had been here for months.

“No,” he answered grimly, but he didn’t offer anything else.

I’d tried to imagine what it would be like, to come in here again. But I hadn’t realized how much it would hurt.

The second I walked in, I was assaulted by memories of Sophia. I’d heard her laugh in my head. Seeing it frozen in time like it had been the last time I saw her...it was torture.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, and instead of heading down the hallway to the master bedroom, he strode down the hallway which led to his room...and Sophia’s.

He disappeared from sight, and a second later, I heard the soft muttering of voices. I shifted uncomfortably. She must have been in Sophia’s room.

A minute later, Stellan reappeared, a tic in his cheek and weighted frustration in his gaze. I opened my mouth to ask how she was, but then I closed it without a word.

It was obvious how she was. Years later and she was still sleeping in her daughter’s bed. Everything was definitely not alright.

We walked into the living room, everything the same as it was back then. All I could see were hours spent over board games, cutting out pictures of cute outfits from magazines, stalking people on Facebook. The air felt suffocating, so thick and cloying that I began to feel light-headed.

“Breathe,” I heard Stellan say sharply. I opened my eyes and found myself bent over, my hand on my knees, my breath coming out in gasps.

He looked pale, a bit glassy-eyed, but at least he was still standing.

“Sorry,” I muttered, and he led me into the kitchen, his hand pressed against my lower back. I braced against the countertop while he got me some water. I couldn’t stop seeing memories of baking cookies, of helping Sophia with the dishes while we sang along to Taylor Swift, of stolen glances at Stellan. “This is fucking me up,” I admitted as I grabbed the water from his hand and gulped it down, the taste of it rancid against my tongue even though

he'd just grabbed it from the fridge.

"You can see why I don't come back very often."

I nodded, taking one last sip before I set the glass down on the counter.

"What exactly was your plan once you got here and let me out of your trunk?"

His nose wrinkled. The move sent flutters through my stomach...just like it used to.

"Her journals," he answered.

My eyes widened. Her journals. Of course.

It was funny how habits could be ingrained. Even after all these years, the thought of looking through her journals felt taboo. My mind flashed to the journal I'd found in Stellan's room at school.

"You had one of her journals in your room," I commented, not ashamed at all I'd been snooping around in his room.

He turned away from me and opened the fridge, staring aimlessly into it without answering.

"Was there anything in it?" I pressed. His shoulders tensed, and I saw his knuckles grow white with how hard he was gripping the refrigerator door handle.

"Nothing helpful," he finally said.

Well, that wasn't suspicious at all.

"Let's order something to eat and start looking through them," I finally said.

Just then, I heard shuffling coming from the hallway. I peeked my head around the corner and gasped when I locked eyes with Stellan's mom.

She was... almost unrecognizable. Her once pristine blonde hair that she had kept up religiously with appointments with her hairdresser every six weeks to dye her roots, was now almost completely gray. Mrs. Bishop had been the emblem of a perfect housewife when I'd known her. I had never seen her in anything but a perfectly pressed outfit.

Right now she was dressed in a pair of sweats and a baggy T-shirt covered in stains, like she'd been wearing the same outfit for days...if not weeks. We were staring at each other, but there was no hint that she recognized me. A flicker of embarrassment sparked in her gaze before her eyes slipped from mine and she continued forward, walking past me into the kitchen.

"Are you hungry?" Stellan asked in a soft voice. "We were just about to

order dinner."

"Not hungry, sweetheart," she said in a rough voice, like she hadn't used it in forever.

"We can get whatever you want," Stellan said cajolingly.

"I said I'm not hungry," she snapped.

Stellan gritted his teeth but nodded.

She sighed and pushed a hand through her hair agitatedly. Up close, I could see that it wasn't just gray, it was also greasy, badly in need of a wash.

My heart clenched and guilt flashed through me. I told myself it wasn't my fault that Sophia had disappeared, but sometimes it was hard to believe that, and seeing Stellan and his mom's pain like this, it was hard to think positively.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I'm sorry."

Without saying anything else, she trudged out of the room, her hands empty.

"I better get her some water. Who knows when the last time she drank something was." He filled a large cup and then followed after her.

I found myself drawn to the gallery wall on the far side of the living room, covered in pictures of Sophia and Stellan's past. Unlike the rest of the room which was covered in a thick sheet of dust, the frames and pictures on this wall were pristine.

My heart clenched when I got to the next row of pictures down and saw one with Sophia and I. We'd been jumping on the trampoline in the backyard and it had started pouring. We'd been holding hands as we ran across the yard in the rain, twin grins on our faces, our hair and clothes drenched.

I traced Sophia's face with my fingertip.

"I ordered Alonzo's," Stellan said as he came back into the room what seemed like forever later. I was still standing in front of the pictures, lost in memories.

A smile slipped across my lips. Alonzo's. It had been my favorite pizza place. Sophia hated it, but Stellan used to order it anyway any time I was over because he knew I loved it.

I bit my lip, a flicker of shyness shooting through me. That's all I'd been in this house, shy and in love with a boy I thought I'd never get.

This place was bringing everything back.

I fucking hated it.

Schooling my face, I watched in satisfaction as Stellan's face dropped.

I just needed to remember that he'd drugged me and stuffed me in a trunk. That would help me keep up my defenses.

Because if there was anything I knew, it was that Stellan Bishop was only capable of breaking my heart. He'd shown me that since the moment I'd come back in his life.

An hour later, we were sitting on his floor, our backs leaning against his bed as we stared at the stack of journals in front of us, empty pizza boxes thrown haphazardly to the side.

It hadn't tasted nearly as good as I'd remembered.

"Alright, let's get started," Stellan said, grabbing the two journals on the top of the stack and tossing me one.

My hands shook a little as I stared down at it, various emotions tearing through me. I wanted answers, but at the same time...I was afraid of answers.

I opened up the page.

I love Delilah.

The first sentence on the page and it felt a bit like I'd been ripped open. My breath hitched.

"What?" Stellan asked, anxiously.

"Nothing," I answered quickly, clearing my throat and staring back at the page.

She looks at him, like I'm desperate for her to look at me. And I'm afraid that lately...he's looking back at her the exact same way.

I would do anything for her.

Anything.

My mind was spinning as I struggled to understand what I'd been reading. Sophia had...been in love with me?

We had a thousand memories together, but looking through each one, I struggled to see it. She'd always been the best friend anyone could ask for. The most devoted, kind, loving friend.

Guilt flashed through me. How had I missed it?

I skimmed the next few pages, not seeing anything else about me besides funny things that had happened in school.

The rest of the journal passed in a similar vein, and I carefully set it down

and took another one, dread pooling in my stomach with anticipation of what else I was going to find.

Hours passed as I discovered my best friend all over again. I'd thought I'd known her back then, I'd thought she'd been an open book.

But I guess I hadn't been an open book, so why should I have expected the same from her?

One thing was for sure. I hadn't deserved her. The kind of friend she was, how much she'd cared about me—there wasn't another person on the planet who had ever felt that way about me. Tears were caught in the back of my throat the entire time I read.

I could feel Stellan's gaze on me from time to time, but I didn't acknowledge him. This moment felt too intimate to share with him. It felt like a moment just between Sophia and me.

I'd started to think we weren't going to find anything when I picked up a journal and immediately realized the dates in the entries were of the last two weeks before the Demon had moved us away and Sophia had been taken.

Stellan kissed her last night. They'd been arguing about something and then, all of a sudden, he pulled her into his arms and he did what I've dreamed about doing almost every second since I've met her.

It was a strange thing, how you could want to die, but also be so happy for someone. She tries not to talk about it, she tries to pretend like he's just another boy, but I know she's crazy about him. And my brother, he's the best person I know. So while I was crying watching him get what I wanted so badly, I was also happy for her.

Because that's all I want, is for her to be happy. And I guess at least if they ended up together, it would ensure that I had her in my life forever. And that's better than nothing, right? The chance to have your soulmate around for good.

I'm going to try and be supportive of her...of them.

But I don't think I can hold my secret in forever.

I just want to be able to tell her I love her. Just once. Even if I never can again.

Even if it breaks my heart.

I dropped the book and then my face was in my hands, giant sobs wracking through my body.

"Hey, Aurora. Baby. What did you find?" Stellan asked anxiously, his hand rubbing against my back soothingly.

“I didn’t deserve her,” I sniffed. “She was perfect.”

There was a long pause.

“I think she thought you were perfect too,” he said.

I hated how we talked about her in the past tense now. As if we had come to the conclusion for good that she was really gone, that when we did find her at the end of this search, it was going to be for a goodbye. Instead of a hello.

What he’d said struck me then.

“You knew she was in love with me,” I whispered, meeting his gaze. His guilty-looking gaze.

He bit his lip and looked away from me. “Not then I didn’t.” Stellan sighed. “To be honest, though, I don’t know if I could have stayed away from you even if I had known.” He moved his hand away from me and picked at some lint on the carpet.

“When did you find out?”

“That journal you found in my room. Trust me, reading my sister’s sexual fantasies about the girl I’ve fucked wasn’t my idea of a good time.”

It was stupid. But something burned inside of me at him calling me “the girl he’d fucked.” I’d given the asshole my virginity. The least he could do was call me the love of his life or something.

I was fully aware I sounded like a psycho. Especially because I hated Stellan.

At least at the moment.

“You’re mad,” he announced, a small smirk on his lips. Mind you, there were still tears falling down my cheeks, so I wasn’t in the mood to be fucked with.

“Stellan, if you don’t shut up, I’m going to stab you in the dick,” I told him seriously, picking up the journal again to keep reading.

His smirk fell and he stared at me, openmouthed.

I lifted an eyebrow, daring him to say something. He shifted, casually covering his nuts just in case I followed through with my threat.

Rolling my eyes, I wiped my face and went back to reading.

And immediately wished I hadn’t.

This whole time I’d been telling the guys I had nothing to do with Sophia’s disappearance. And that I didn’t know if the Demon had anything to do with her disappearance.

Finding out that Sophia had seen the Demon hit me...was making me doubt that.

Some of Stellan's friends were over today, being assholes like usual, and I heard them teasing him about his crush on Delilah. And the fucker denied liking her. When I'd just seen him kissing her.

What an asshole.

If I was with Delilah, I'd never hide her. I'd want the whole world to know I was the luckiest girl in the world to have someone like her love me.

Stellan doesn't deserve her.

I wasn't feeling brave enough to tell her how I felt, but I'd wanted to see her. So even though it was nine pm and her scary ass dad wouldn't let her stay out that late, I thought I could at least knock on her window or something.

I snuck in between our houses and went up to her window, only to see her dad standing with his back to the window in her room.

"What the fuck do you think you were doing today?" he asked in a calm voice that was fucking terrifying.

I'd been with Delilah all day. I couldn't think of anything we'd done besides our usual bullshit. Certainly nothing that would have gotten her in trouble. Or else I never would have allowed it.

I didn't want anything to prevent me from seeing her.

Delilah's face was perfectly blank as he spoke, with no sign of life in her beautiful eyes. She looked dead inside right then, and I shivered as I looked at her. Delilah was reserved, but there was always a spark in her gaze with me. Right then, there'd been nothing.

All of a sudden, her dad reached back and then slapped her in the face. Hard. The force of it sent her flying back towards the wall. The crash reverberated through the glass I was looking through.

I squeaked, and he started to turn towards the window, like he'd heard the sound. I'd thrown myself into the bushes, my breath coming out in gasps. I waited in those bushes for what seemed like forever, until I finally got the courage to peek over the windowsill and see if they were still in there.

The room had been empty.

Mom had asked me why I was covered in dirt and how it had gone.

And I was too stunned and in shock to have a good answer for her.

How am I going to talk to Delilah about what I saw tonight?

My heart was thumping as I read through her entry. Because I could remember that night. At first, the Demon hadn't hurt me. He'd been trying to lure me to his side. But as I'd gotten older, and I'd started to push back with

his requests—beatings had definitely been involved.

I quickly turned the page, shivering when I realized I'd found it, the entry from right before she'd disappeared.

"Stellan," I whispered in a choked voice. "This is it."

He dropped the journal he'd been reading and scooted closer to me. I ignored the way the warmth of his body made me feel.

Dear Diary, Tonight I'm going to tell Delilah how I feel...and then I'm going to save her.

Stellan was gripping the journal so tightly that I was afraid it was going to fall apart in his hands. There wasn't much else to read in the entry. Only that she was going to sneak me out of the house and call the police...and then confess her undying love to me.

But obviously, none of that had happened.

So what *had* happened?

Sophia

"Hey," I said with a smile, throwing my arms around Delilah in the hallway at school. I snuck a deep inhale of her intoxicating scent and then quickly pulled away so she didn't think I was a creeper. There were big circles under her eyes, and she didn't look like she'd slept at all.

He'd done it again last night. I'd snuck over to try and talk to her, and I'd seen the belt wrapped around his hand. The way he'd made her push her shirt up and then whipped her with it until there were welts and bruises and cuts all over her skin.

I'd just stood there in the window, a worthless idiot, feeling more helpless than I ever could have imagined. What was I going to do?

"Everything okay?" I asked, taking her hand. That was safe, right? Friends touched each other. And I'd always been touchy-feely to begin with.

"Just didn't sleep well," she lied, and my insides clenched, wondering what I could do to get her to tell me what was going on with her dad. She started walking toward Calculus, and I followed behind her like a lost puppy.

Stellan passed us just then across the hall, surrounded by his usual posse of worshipful sheep, and Delilah stumbled as she watched him pass by. The fucker locked eyes with her for a second before quickly looking away, and I

could see how her whole demeanor dropped when he didn't even say hi.

"My brother's an idiot," I said, locking eyes with her and giving her a reassuring smile.

She wrinkled her nose in that cute way of hers. "Yeah, he is."

Was it just me? Was there something else in her gaze when she looked at me? Or was that just wishful thinking since I'd just seen her pining over my brother?

We walked into class and I silently cheered when I saw we had a sub. That meant we'd be able to talk all class without getting in trouble.

I glared at a guy who was staring a little too hard at Delilah, and he quickly looked away as we sat down at desks nearby.

Delilah winced as she sat down, gingerly leaning back into the seat.

Just tell me.

She noticed me watching her and quickly schooled her face, erasing the grimace she'd just been sporting.

"So what did you do last night?" I asked innocently, not really expecting her to blurt out in class what had really happened, but definitely grasping at strings to try and get her to hint at anything.

"Same old, same old." She doodled on her paper as the sub announced that we'd be watching a movie for class today.

The rest of the students cheered, but Delilah didn't even smile. The lights dimmed and I reached into my backpack and pulled out a Starbucks banana bread loaf that I'd picked up for her that morning on the way to school.

For the first time today, she grinned, and butterflies exploded in my stomach. I had to yank my face away before I started drooling or giggling uncontrollably.

She took a bite, continuing to draw on her paper while the movie started.

I leaned over to look at what she was drawing and cringed when I saw the scary-looking skull she'd doodled.

Just then, the kid behind her knocked his legs against the back of her seat and a gasp of pain flew out of her as the metal seat banged against her injured back.

"Are you trying to die today?" I hissed at the guy, as he shrunk back in his seat and mouthed sorry to me. People at the school didn't mess with me. Not with golden god Stellan as my brother. Stellan had no problem putting people in their place if they stepped out of line when it came to me. Begrudgingly, I admitted to myself that he'd started to do it for Delilah too.

Delilah scooted out from her chair. "Bathroom break," she whispered before walking towards the front of the room.

I only admired her ass for one second. Because I wasn't a perv. Or at least that's what I was telling myself.

She said something to the sub and then left the room.

When fifteen minutes had passed and she still hadn't returned, I decided to go check on her.

I walked into the bathroom, immediately hearing her falling apart in one of the stalls.

"Delilah," I called out softly, knocking on the door. Her cries abruptly cut off.

A second later, the stall door opened and she was there, with red-rimmed eyes and a tear-stained face.

"What's wrong?" I asked, keeping my arms plastered against my sides. All I wanted to do was hug her, but I knew she wouldn't appreciate that right now.

She hesitated for a long moment. "We're moving again," she finally said. My insides froze at her words.

"What?" I whispered.

"Yeah. My dad told me last night." She rubbed her hands down her face. "I don't want to move again." Another sob ripped out of her.

My head was spinning, and I was beginning to feel lightheaded.

"When did he say it was happening?" I asked, my voice coming out strange to my own ears as panic threaded through me.

"After school on Friday."

"What? But that's tomorrow," I gasped, sure I wasn't hearing right. Who just decided to move and then left the next day? A psychopath I was pretty sure. "What about the house? You're going to move before you sell it?"

She shrugged, another tear sliding down her beautiful face.

There was no way I could lose her. I couldn't. Who would protect her once he took her away? I thought I could have a few days to try and come up with a plan to help her, but I...I would have to do something tonight. We'd have to run away, find someone who would believe us and protect her.

I'd already thought about telling my parents and then decided against it. I'd seen the evil in his face. There was something wrong with Delilah's father. Something more than just the fact he was a child abuser. There was a layer of evil in his eyes and if my parents didn't believe me and they didn't

call the police? Or heaven forbid they mention it to him for some reason and then he comes after my parents?

I just needed to handle it myself. I'd get her out of her house. We'd tell the police. And if they didn't believe me, we'd just go live on the other side of the country where he couldn't find us. I had money saved up from working the last few summers, enough to get us somewhere until we could find jobs—and finish high school. But GEDs were basically the same thing as high school diplomas, right?

Fuck. This was going to be complicated.

She looked at me through tear-glazed eyes, and I had the insane urge to kiss her. "It's going to be okay. We'll figure something out," I reassured her, but she shook her head before I'd even finished my sentence.

"There's nothing to figure out," she whispered, before walking out of the bathroom without another word.

I stood in the kitchen, watching my mother hum as she finished drying some dishes that I'd just washed from dinner. I'd been so focused on planning what I was going to do to save Delilah that I hadn't really thought about what it would be like to leave my family.

"I love you," I blurted out. She looked up from the plate she was holding and flashed me a gorgeous smile. I tried to memorize it so I could look back on it later, hold onto the warmth I always felt when I saw it until I could contact her again.

"I love you too, sweetheart," she said, reaching over and stroking my hair gently. The words were there, the urge to tell her the whole plan and have her just take the burden from me.

But staring at her then...I couldn't do that to her. I loved her too much. Maybe people would think I was being unreasonable for trying to handle this at my age alone...but everything inside me was telling me that Delilah's dad was not someone you messed with.

After kissing her goodnight, I pretended to go back to my room for a few hours, and then sneaked out, and circled back to the sliding glass door so I could slip outside. I had bags stuffed with essentials under the back porch to come back and grab after I got Delilah, and as I walked quietly between the

houses towards her window, I just hoped I'd thought of everything.

But when I made it to her room...she wasn't there. Her bed was still perfectly made and her bedroom door was open, a dim thread of light peeking in from the hallway beyond her door.

Fuck. It was late. I'd even waited until after my dad had come to check on me before he went to bed. Where was she?

I leaned in closer to the window so I could see more details inside her room, but a rustling from the nearby bushes caught my attention. I froze, my eyes darting around me. There weren't lights in between the houses, and everything was dark around me.

Something moved in the bushes again, and my insides trembled. "Hello," I whispered, hating that I felt like one of those stupid girls in a scary movie. But fuck, it felt like I was in one.

Where was Aurora?

Rocks skittered in the darkness and I began to back away from the sound, keeping my gaze on the bush where the sound seemed to be coming from. A low, deep laugh sent shivers sparking across my skin and I turned to run. And then...

CHAPTER 6

PAX



He thought Aurora was hurt somewhere—and worse, that Stellan had been the one to hurt her—obviously filled Cain with rage. It was palpable, an icy tension around him, like being trapped in close quarters with a lion. As soon as I parked the truck and we walked back to the house, Cain bounded out, and everyone who crossed his path immediately thought better of it and scattered. No one radiated fury like Cain.

“I never thought I’d see it,” Remington muttered to me as we walked upstairs, “but I think he likes her even better than he liked the McLaren.”

“He’s always been protective of his toys.”

“I think this goes deeper than that,” Remington grinned, although it wasn’t as bright as his usual smile. “I think our boy’s fallen in love.”

As much as Remington might make fun of Cain—usually when he knew Cain was at least half a mile out of earshot—I thought they both were losing their damn heads. Remy’s intense concentration as he tried to hack his way to Aurora’s location didn’t fit his usual cool detachment.

I racked out in my bed for a few hours since we’d driven around all night, chasing ghosts. My nap wasn’t restful though. In my dreams, my mother’s face was shattered all over again as she reached for me. “Rey,” she whispered, the nickname she’d used for me as a child. *King*.

But then my dream shifted, and it was Aurora’s grasping fingers reaching for me, her gaze filled with pain and pleading.

When I woke up, the sheets were damp with sweat and tangled around my legs. I peeled them off me and went to take a shower. But I couldn’t stop thinking of Aurora. I tried to think about another girl, about porn, about anything, but I couldn’t stop imagining her. I could jerk my big dick off in

the shower all I wanted, but I couldn't get another girl to stay in my brain for two seconds, and every time I thought about Aurora, I thought about how maybe she was hurt, and my dick went limp.

"Fucking great. Now I've got Stellan problems," I muttered to myself. He hadn't been able to get hard for anyone but Aurora since she walked back into our lives.

Not that it was going to matter because there was a real possibility Cain would cut off his dick when he caught him.

By the time I got out, Cain was banging on my door. "Hey. I need you."

Never a moment of fucking peace with these clowns.

I headed down to the den where Cain did business. Remy looked grouchy to have been roused from his room with all his computers, and he had his legs flung over one arm of the chair, working on his laptop. There were bags under his eyes and his hair was tousled—a little less artfully than usual.

"You look like shit," I told him.

He didn't take his eyes off the screen. "We don't all take naps like fucking preschoolers."

"Preschoolers are smarter than you. You need a nap. And a juice box. You'll be in a better mood."

"Can you two act like you aren't fucking weirdos for five minutes?" Cain demanded as he walked in. "My dad's coming over, wants to talk about a situation."

"Great." A *situation* was almost always an assignment for us to fix something or hurt someone.

"Because we have time for that," Remy muttered.

"Pax and I will take care of it while you keep trying to prove you're smarter than Stellan," Cain said, and Remy's head lifted, his gaze leaving the screen. Shots fired. Remy was not going to take that challenge well.

Cain went out to meet his dad and talk to him without us. I sank into the chair across from Remington, still bone-tired. Shitty sleep feels worse than no sleep.

"You know what's funny?" Remington said. "I'm trying to track down all the locations that might be important to Stellan. And it occurred to me that if we were all halfway normal and functional people, we might just know where he lived, what mattered to him, without me having to hack into his accounts and search news articles about his sister and try to break into the police database."

“Yeah? Well, we’ve never been those kinds of friends.”

“Maybe we haven’t been much of friends at all.”

I scoffed, thinking that was stupid. “Don’t get soft on me.”

Of course, Remy wasn’t the only thing going soft around here.

And I was pretty sure if I just got a look at Aurora, alive and unharmed, wearing that smile that was real and alive in a way that no one else seemed to be... I’d be back to normal.

So maybe Remy had a point.

“How’s your mom doing?” I asked.

Remy looked at me over his laptop screen, as if he realized exactly what I was doing, and I instantly regretted any attempt to be nice.

“She’s all right,” he said. “My aunt always wanted to help her and the kids. Mom’s in rehab, and whether it’ll take is... well, I’m not exactly filled with sunny optimism. But the kids are enrolled in school and therapy, and maybe they’ll turn out... better.” He shrugged.

As much as I might insult him, I thought Remy had turned out pretty good, given the rich asshole stock he came from. But I could see where he would want better for his younger siblings.

Cain walked in. “There’s been some fallout from my club takeover.”

“I’m shocked,” Remy said. “Absolutely shocked.”

Cain ignored Remy’s sarcasm. “A few of the guys from the club roughed up some of the girls last night. One of them was private property—this tech mogul’s side piece. So he’s pissed. Dad wants us to go deal with the guys.”

“I’m going to just pretend your father is calling us out as white knights because of his deep respect for women,” Remington said.

Cain scoffed. “You don’t know my dad. He adores my mom.”

That was true. I’d spent my teenage years in Cain’s house. His family was weird, of course. All rich people are weird; their differences are in the particulars of that weirdness.

It had been easy for me to be Cain’s roommate because his parents let him live in the three-bedroom guest house on the other side of their pool. Because a pool house was a totally normal thirteenth birthday gift, right?

But we’d spent plenty of time over in Cain’s parents’ house, eating his mother’s cooking. Cain’s father was a hard man. I’d seen him kill people without a second thought. He took no joy in torture but didn’t mind it either. Like Cain, it seemed sometimes as if there was nothing behind those cool eyes and handsome features. No soul. But his eyes flickered to life when

Cain's mom walked into the room, and he turned into someone else.

Outsiders thought Cain must've had a twisted childhood to turn him into the handsome monster.

But he had the happiest childhood of any of us.

That didn't change the fact his father was a pain in the ass, though.

"Dad needs this taken care of, and Remy hasn't found Stellan yet for us anyway," Cain said. "Come on."

It made sense Cain did what his father asked, since after all, the family business would be Cain's one day. But sometimes I wasn't sure why I always followed Cain in some new circle of Hell. And yet... I nodded a goodbye to Remington—not that he noticed—and went with Cain.

When we were in my truck, Cain said, "Something's been bothering me."

"No shit."

"Not Aurora."

I doubted that.

"When I talked to my father... he didn't seem very interested in Aurora."

I dared a glance away from the road, because it wasn't like Cain and his father had a lot of deep talks growing up. They'd bonded over weapons and intimidation and a love of Cain's mom's lasagna, but that had been about it. "And?"

"I told him I was trying to find her. He knows she's my..." His jaw set as if he couldn't bring himself to say the word *weakness*. "Interest. She's not like the other girls that were...replaceable. But he didn't seem curious."

"Like he..."

"Like he already knows about her," Cain confirmed. "I don't fucking like it. I don't want him anywhere near her."

It would certainly be in her best interest if we kept her far away from Cain's family and their business. Probably for the best if we kept her away from *us*, too. But we weren't exactly unselfish.

Cain gave me directions and explained the details of club life. We arrived at the house where the girls who needed a place to stay when they weren't at the club lived. Most of them were addicts and the house gave them someplace safe. But it never sat quite right with me. Weren't there plenty of girls that would love to be spanked and spoiled by rich men? Business was always going to be sordid, but there were levels.

We talked to the girls and reviewed the video footage. These men had just taken what they wanted from the girls without worrying about words like

consent or sanity or wound care.

"I'll take care of you," Cain promised. "which means I'll take care of them."

It was unexpected, and on the way out, he asked me, "What the fuck are you looking at me like that for?"

"I just didn't expect you to care."

"Of course I care. They're valued employees." He said the words drily, as if he'd been debating between calling them valued employees and valuable merchandise, but hey, at least he'd made the right choice. "And I want them to be loyal to me."

"I should've known. You've always got some ulterior motive."

"Sure," Cain agreed. "Now shut the fuck up. You're boring me."

Cain could never talk about his feelings for more than a sentence without resorting to profanity and irritation. It was part of why we got along.

"You recognized their names?" I asked in the car. Cain's memory for names and faces was legendary. It was too bad for a lot of people who would've happily paid for Cain to forget them.

He nodded. "A couple of my father's men. Real low-level thugs. He's not attached to them."

"Too bad for them. Do you have any ideas where to find them?"

"Yeah," he scoffed. "I'm calling them to get their asses over here. If I have to look for them, I'm going to be in a foul mood, and I don't think they want that."

He drove us back to the club, and on the way, he called one of the men to tell him that he wanted them to meet him there.

When they walked into the lobby, the men had busted knuckles and bad attitudes.

Cain turned a little chillier, even by Cain's standards.

"Yeah, things got a little wild last night," one of them said. "But that's what those bitches were for. They were for using."

"One of those girls wasn't," Cain said pleasantly. "She belonged to someone important."

"Oh yeah, who? We'll leave her alone next time." He snickered. "As long as it wasn't the cute blond. Between Dem and me, we ripped her vag into her asshole when we were pounding her. Grossest thing I ever saw. Anyway, I guess it's too late."

I saw red. Cain cast a warning glance at me.

“So anyway, who did she belong to?” one of the others asked, with a nervous look at Cain.

“Who did she belong to?” I demanded. “How about herself?”

The guy who’d just been bragging about the blond must’ve sensed danger, because he jumped up as if he were going to make a run for the door. I slammed into him, driving him to the ground before I even realized what I was doing. I punched him over and over.

The other two dogpiled me. In the distance, I heard Cain swear as punches landed on my chest and abs. I threw one of them off, and then felt the edge of a knife jab against my side.

Then it was gone, lifted off me, and Cain threw the guy across the room. He raised his gun and squeezed off three quick shots, two body, one head. The other guy who had dogpiled me tried to run, and Cain shot him twice in the back.

I would’ve thought it was overkill, but now I realized the guy under me was dead.

Cain stared at me over the bodies. “Did you just become a fucking feminist? *She belonged to herself*. What’s wrong with you? Did you pack a copy of *The Feminine Mystique* today instead of your nine mil?”

“They were assholes. It’s no loss.”

Cain raked his hand through his hair, looking perturbed. Then he sighed and shrugged. “I mean. Fine. But you’re not usually the one who kills people so lightly.”

I shrugged. Cain gave me a cutting look as if he saw right through me.

“Don’t know why the fuck you’ve been talking to me about keeping a cool head,” Cain said. “You’re coming pretty unhinged thinking about that girl, aren’t you?”

“Haven’t you ever thought Aurora deserves more than us and the nasty life that we can give her?”

“No.” Cain scoffed. “Because I deserve her.”

It would be nice to have his unshakable faith that he was worthy. Because as I wiped my bloody knuckles clean, I thought Aurora deserved better than us.

CHAPTER 7

AURORA



My dreams that night were all nightmares.

I woke up to find Stellan sitting on the floor next to my bed. His head was bowed as if he were sleeping, his elbows braced on his knees, his legs folded up in front of him. He was a tall, intimidating man with an athletic frame, but right now, I could see much of the boy he'd been when he was lanky and broad-shouldered and the star soccer player. My heart lurched in a familiar way before I woke up enough to hate him.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

His eyes met mine, his handsome face pensive. "You were screaming in your sleep."

God, that was embarrassing. But I said flatly, "I don't remember any of my dreams."

"Maybe that's for the best."

"Maybe. But maybe I would remember something that would help us find Sophia."

Stellan looked torn, as if he didn't want me to be miserable but he could accept my misery if that was the price for finding what he needed.

I wasn't telling him the whole truth. My dreams the night before were all shadows, and I wasn't sure if they were real or my fevered imagination. I knew I'd seen Sophia in my dreams last night. And I'd seen the Demon, too.

But you don't owe the whole truth to anyone who has ever locked you in a car trunk.

"You need a break," Stellan said. "And the truth is, I need one too. Let's both take showers and get out of here. Go get some food."

"I'm not hungry." I couldn't imagine eating right now. Not when I had

spent so long soaked in the memories of Sophia and the guilt for how we never said goodbye. The Demon had said it was time to leave, and I thought I was protecting my friends by going. But I hadn't been protecting my friends at all.

What if I had killed the Demon and buried him in the woods? I hadn't been ready then to hurt my own father, even though he had hurt me.

I wish I'd clung to the first good thing I had found- my relationship with Stellan and Sophia-so tightly that I would kill anyone who tried to take it from me. I lost them both. And I'd lost the last good part of Delilah.

"Do it anyway," Stellan said. "You've got to keep your strength up. We both do. Trying to find out what happened to Sophia is going to be hard on us."

I scoffed. "You say that like you don't think I'm the one responsible for her murder."

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to. You drugged me and brought me here because you think I know something."

The look on his face was unrepentant and unashamed. "Yes, I do. But I watched you cry about Sophia all day yesterday. I don't think you have any memories of hurting her."

I rose to my feet, fixing my camisole strap. I felt naked in front of Stellan, even though I was still wearing my top and bra and underwear. I hadn't been able to bring myself to take some of Sophia's clothes out of the drawer. I didn't even want to open it. The way her room was like a shrine felt deeply wrong and unsettling.

"Do you think I lost my memories? You don't believe I didn't hurt her? What the hell are you accusing me of, Stellan?"

He raised his hands. "I'm not accusing you of anything."

"For a second, I thought you were in here when I woke up because you were worried about me. But were you just listening to what I was talking about in my dreams? Listening to my screams to see if there was anything useful when I talked in my sleep?"

"Why can't it be both?" Stellan demanded.

I slapped him across the face. Stellan's eyes flashed at me dangerously. An electric buzz ignited across my skin. Would he hit me back? Was the Stellan I used to love completely dead?

My voice came out soft, almost a whisper, but harsh anyway. "Your sister

would be ashamed of you.”

His jaw worked once. He rubbed two fingers over his reddened cheek. “Yes, I am sure she would be.”

The admission shocked me.

He shrugged. “I’m not the same person that I was when she knew me. Before she died. I’m a different person now.”

“A worse person. A terrible person.”

“Yes, I think that goes without saying.” His tone was casual. “You can take a shower first. I’ll go out and get you some clothes.”

I stiffened. He must have realized already that I couldn’t bring myself to wear any of Sophia’s clothes, and he hadn’t exactly packed me a bag. He was a pretty inconsiderate kidnapper.

But it was thoughtful of him to go out to get me clothes. So thoughtful that it made me uncertain. I stayed paused at the end of the bed as he walked out, his spreading shoulders filling the doorway.

Over his shoulder, he threw, “There’s coffee in the kitchen.”

By the time I padded downstairs, his car was gone from the driveway. I got the milk out of the fridge, remembering how magical making coffee in the quiet of the house had seemed during sleepovers. I’d usually wake up before anyone else and come into this room, with the view of the living room and beyond that the doors to the green backyard with the trampoline. This house had felt cozy, safe.

Well, most of the time. I’d always wake hours before Sophia—I was too restless to sleep in—then read in the living room and drink my coffee. But every once in a while, the silence would last too long, and I’d become convinced the Demon had snuck in. I’d get up with my stomach twisted with tension and go to check on Sophia, pushing the door open, sure that I’d find her in blood-soaked sheets.

I should have killed the Demon. The regret that I hadn’t felt unbearable.

Did I have to go see him face to face? To ask him about Sophia? I wouldn’t have hesitated, but he’d never tell me a damn thing that I could believe. He’d take any chance to hurt me, and losing Sophia... That would never stop hurting.

The thought made me suddenly nauseous. Seeing him once since the courtroom was enough. Too much.

I hopped in a long, hot shower, but it didn’t make me feel clean.

When I was about to get out, Stellan’s voice called from around the

corner, "Hey, it's me. Just dropping your clothes off."

"Stay out of the bathroom," I said, but I was still speaking as he rounded the corner.

I could never stand to close a shower curtain. It made me feel unsafe, not being able to see what was on the other side when I was naked.

Stellan stopped dead when he saw me, his fingers uncurling from around the bag, which fell to the floor. His jaw dropped open. The raw longing on his face when he looked at me sparked a surge of power in my chest.

"It's nothing you haven't seen before," I reminded him.

"True." He was back to cool and unimpressed, leaning against the door, his muscular arms crossing his chest. But I'd seen the way he'd looked at me the moment before, as if he would devour me. "But you look different."

"Just used to seeing me covered in blood?"

"Or in Cain's lap." There was the faintest note of jealousy, then it was gone, and I thought I might've imagined it. "But I never see you like this."

"Wet?"

"Vulnerable." He opened the cabinet in the corner and pulled out a towel. I rolled my eyes and turned off the water, but when I stepped out of the tub, he wrapped the towel around me. The movement brought us intimately close together.

"You like vulnerable?" I asked skeptically. "That's not creepy at all."

He huffed a faint laugh, never the slightest bit shaken when I was barbed. "I like all your sides, Delilah."

"That's a fucking lie." I was instantly furious, and I shoved him against the wall. "And I'm not Delilah."

"Bullshit," he said. He let me shove him against the wall, but even when my hands were pressing him against the wall, he looked down at me as if he were in control. "You can't just divide yourself into two people. One before, and one after."

He wasn't talking about *me* anymore, or at least he wasn't just talking about me.

"Then you show me how it's done," I said. "Be someone besides the asshole you've become. Show me that you're still the one I used to..."

I stumbled over the word.

"Love?" he asked me, the word itself a taunt.

"Sophia was right. You never deserved me." I shoved off him, intending to walk away.

“Never,” he agreed.

Then he grabbed the back of my neck and spun me to face him.

His lips came down on mine, and my fingers grabbed his shoulders—to push him away, and then I stayed instead.

His tongue lapped against my lips, rough and devouring, and I opened to him. I considered biting down on his tongue as it invaded my mouth, even as my hips rocked forward against his. My need met the rough jeans covering his thighs, and his hands slid up my hips, gliding in the moisture from the shower. His hands felt hot as brands against my skin, as if he were fevered.

He lifted me easily onto the sink. I teetered on the countertop, the edge biting into my ass. I twined my legs around his waist, drawing him close to me. He buried his face in my shoulder, his lips caressing, sucking, biting. Raw urgency built between my thighs.

He raised his head and pressed a tender kiss to the corner of my mouth. His eyes had softened, and he looked at me with what seemed like genuine warmth and affection. It made me feel weak for him, and I couldn’t stand that. Besides, Stellan’s eyes were a lie. His lips were a lie. The truth was a car trunk and a knife’s blade. I could never forget he was a threat to me.

I pushed him away. “I don’t want your kisses. I just want your dick.”

Just because we couldn’t trust each other didn’t mean we couldn’t use each other.

He took a step back, my legs falling around his hips, and disappointment rocked through my body. Had I hurt his feelings too much for sex?

He slowly pulled his t-shirt over his head, revealing every hard-angled ab, the powerful planes of his chest, his broad shoulders. He unclipped his holster from the small of his back and laid it carefully on the counter. My gaze flickered to the discarded weapon. He’d caught me without my knives.

Then his hands went to his belt, unbuckling it and easing his jeans down, revealing his taut lower abs and the first inch of his shaved package.

He could’ve just freed his cock, but he knew I liked seeing every bit of him. He was gorgeous. Too bad all that sexy was wrapped around all his crazy.

And maybe he knew I wanted him to be as vulnerable as I was.

“I don’t think you’re ready for my dick,” he said, grabbing my thighs and spreading them without preamble.

He knelt, then leaned forward and licked my pussy, his tongue gliding through my folds. I rocked back on my ass so he could manhandle my thighs.

He touched me as if I belonged to him—at least for the moment—exposing me and eating me out with passion. Every lap of his tongue felt a fresh surge of desire through my thighs.

I groaned, my fingers gliding through his hair. I was on the verge of cumming, my thighs beginning to shake, when he straightened. Without preamble, he flicked the tip of his cock against my wet core, then pushed inside. He slammed into me over and over, hard, rolling his hips at the end in a way that sent a warm surge to my very center. He fucked me mercilessly, hard and relentless, and it would've hurt except for the way he hit my g-spot, sending sparks flying around my vision.

I moaned, and his body responded, moving faster. He stared into my face with those eyes I couldn't read, as if he would destroy me—I didn't doubt that—and I would've closed my eyes, except I didn't dare trust him. So the two of us stared into each other's eyes as he hit my core, as my legs shook, as I squeezed his cock in the throes of my orgasm. He spurted inside me, filling me. For a second, he looked... happy. Satisfied.

Then he abruptly pulled away, dropping my legs. I barely managed to catch myself, rocking on the edge of the counter.

"You don't want to kiss me?" he demanded. His face seemed to war with itself, then he abruptly grabbed my chin. He tilted my face up to his, and his lips pressed mine in a hot, conquering kiss.

He kissed me like he needed me, his lips filled with need. And I couldn't resist kissing him back.

I was breathless when he released me, his expression more satisfied than ever. "Bullshit."

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, my lips still tingling from the power of that kiss. My mouth felt as tender as my pussy.

"Why do you kiss me like that when you hate me?" I demanded.

"You hate me more," Stellan said. "And you still kiss me."

"I have every reason to hate you," I called after him as he walked away.

But I wasn't sure the two of us ever told the truth to each other.

CHAPTER 8

THE SUITOR



I stood at the back of the house, looking up at the bathroom window's golden glow. The neighborhood was quiet in the morning; except for the two houses side-by-side, the trees around the big old homes provided an abundance of privacy. Next door's driveway wrapped around the house to the garage, which had been very useful, once upon a time, when bodies needed to be removed from the house.

Only ghosts had lived in both these houses for a while. The ghost of a girl, and the ghost of a mother.

Then Delilah moved across the room, and I gasped. She was still so beautiful. So mine. Her long hair was a shimmering platinum blond now instead of the glossy brunette that had suited her far better. Her breasts were large and pert, with pink nipples. She'd filled out from her teenage years. I'd liked her better a little thinner, a little smaller. I'd have to see that she ate less. But still... she was beautiful, and I stroked my hand over my cock. As if the memories from these houses weren't enough to make me hard already. All the pain and screaming.

She frowned, speaking to someone, and my hand stilled. She was talking to someone while she was naked like that, the slut?

Then he stepped into view. Perfect, even features and a pretty boy haircut. My guts tightened as he held a towel out to her, and she let him wrap it around her. Such a slut.

Once I got her into a cage where she belonged, I'd starve her back to the way I liked her. That would only be the beginning of my punishments.

I watched in fury as he picked her up, blocking her from my view, as he stripped his own clothes off. His broad shoulders and rippling back muscles

were all I could see now, that and her fingernails pressing into his shoulders, her legs wrapping his waist. I stood in the silence, far away from the sounds and screams they were obviously sharing, and felt my dick shrivel.

I'd have to kill someone soon.

She was making me do it.

Until I could get my hands on her, my almost perfect girl. My fixable girl.

And someday, my bride.

CHAPTER 9

AURORA



It took me a few minutes to realize Stellan was driving toward Maisy's Diner, which was across from the high school. We'd piled in there for French fries after school and chocolate chip pancakes late nights after studying or school dances. It was open 24/7 so it was definitely open now, but the memory of how disappointing that pizza had been stuck with me. I didn't want to lose the memories of the most delicious cheese fries and the fluffiest pancakes I'd ever had—and I didn't want to relive the memory of Sophia laughing across the table at me.

"Can we go somewhere else?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure. Where did you want to go?"

"I don't know. Just not there. I can't take any more nostalgia." Everything from the time I'd shared with Sophia seems cast in a slightly different hue now that I knew how much she cared about me that whole time. I felt sick with guilt. How had I been so blind?

"All right, well, I think this place is open." He did a quick turn to the right and I jounced against my seat belt.

"See, you're not any better a driver than you were in high school."

"You didn't criticize my driving when you were locked in the trunk," Stellan observed.

"Too soon," I said dourly.

But Stellan gave me a cheeky grin that was just as heart-melting as when we were kids. It made me soften, which tempted me to slap him. I couldn't keep giving in to him.

A hostess came over and led us through the tables; there was a bar at the center where a couple of people were already sitting—or still sitting from the

night before.

We took seats in the dimly lit restaurant which seemed like it couldn't decide if it wanted to be a bar or a diner. Multiple TVs hung around the room playing recaps of the weekend's sports. I found myself trying to figure out what day it was. Time didn't seem to matter when I was with these men, as if we'd entered our own private universe. It wasn't as if any of us prioritized going to class.

I sighed at the thought that my dreams were going up in smoke, one after the other. I wasn't exactly having a normal college experience. It was hard for me to imagine surviving the next four years, let alone walking across a stage in a cap and gown.

I handled the sticky laminated menu gingerly, trying not to think about how many people had touched this before with their unwashed hands. I could be pretty laid back about blood. But something about the germs of hundreds made me uncomfortable.

Just then, the waitress sashayed over, her long blond hair swinging around her shoulders.

She let out a dramatic gasp. "Stellan, is that you?"

She sounded so flirtatious. I had the feeling she'd known it was Stellan long before she came over. That gasp was not Oscar-worthy.

"Hi," Stellan said with that big, confident, charming smile that never seem to be directed my way and also seemed fake as fuck. I was pretty sure he had no idea who she was.

"It's good seeing you again!" She leaned over, touching his arm; her shirt seemed a little insubstantial for food service, given her boobs spilled toward Stellan.

He pulled back slightly, and I hid my smile as he said, "It's good seeing you too."

"We've missed you around here."

Stellan was tired of women falling over themselves for his attention. It didn't exactly win his heart.

I tried to place her face as she raked her yellow hair back with long fingernails, her smile fixed on Stellan. He tried to order a Denver omelet and a black coffee, but she kept interrupting him for small talk.

Stellan made eye contact with me. "What would you like?"

She didn't look my way, and her tone changed as she asked, "What do you want?"

Subtle. Stellan rolled his eyes, looking anything but charmed.

“The breakfast platter with French toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon.”

She heaved a sigh as she wrote it down, as if it was a burden. I knew customer service positions sucked, but she seemed to be taking my desire for French toast a little too personally.

I didn't remember her face, but I remembered her bitchy sigh. Roxy. We'd taken gym class together, and since we'd moved so much, I'd never played volleyball before. Sophia, Roxy, and I were all on the same team, and Roxy had sighed every time I missed the ball. She'd acted as if the concept of whacking a ball with your forearms so hard it stings was supposed to be innate.

Roxy had always had a huge thing for Stellan and hey, it wasn't as if I could blame anyone for that. But she'd also been “a wannabe mean girl” as Sophia had described her.

As soon as she walked away, I asked, “Do you actually remember who she is?”

“No.” He flashed me a grin that was sharper, wickeder, and even more gorgeous than the one he'd given her. “You're the only girl who left much of an impression on me.”

“And how lucky I am to have your attention,” I deadpanned. I'd like to see Roxy find her way out of Stellan's trunk.

He clucked disapprovingly. “You were so sweet and reserved and mysterious in high school. Now you're all attitude.”

“Now I wear my crazy on the outside,” I said. “Instead of keeping it all on the inside where all it did was punish me.”

He suddenly adjusted himself as if he were remembering my promises to detach his dick if he continued to be, well, a dick. Maybe a dickectomy would balance his attitude out.

Our waitress might have been annoying, but the food she brought to our table smelled delicious.

“I guess you don't worry about your weight.” Roxy plunked the maple syrup to the side of my plate.

I shrugged without looking up as I poured syrup over my breakfast. Her judgment wasn't nearly as important to me as maple syrup.

I didn't really think I was very likely to live past twenty-two. Might as well enjoy some bacon along the way. Live fast, eat grease, die young. Something like that.

Someone changed one of the TVs from sports recaps to the news. At first, it was all about how the economy looked, all gloom and doom.

"I guess for most people, serial killers are the least of our country's problems," Stellan muttered.

But then gradually, I was jolted out of my maple syrup as I heard the words *the Demon*.

My gaze snapped around to the TV. My father's face was on the screen and breakfast pressed against the back of my throat like it might exit. But it was just a TV, he wasn't here. I didn't need to have a panic attack.

I told my brain sternly to knock the panic off, but for some reason, that wasn't a deeply calming thought.

"Aurora," Stellan said softly. "You all right?"

I swallowed the panic that tightened my throat, although I had to try twice, then smiled at him. "Super." I drained half my glass of water. Stellan was still watching me as if he were worried.

Roxy sashayed back up to our table. She didn't make eye contact with me, but that was nothing new.

"Stellan, there's a phone call for you in the back."

He eyed her skeptically then looked at me, concern that this was a trap written all over his face.

Roxy looked annoyed. "It's your mom."

"There's no way she would know that I'm here," he said.

She shrugged, trying to look nonchalant and failing. "There are only so many restaurants in town that are open for breakfast. And this is the best." She flashed that too-bright smile at Stellan. "Best customer service around too."

She was trying to separate Stellan and me for a reason. But was it just because she obviously wanted to jam her tongue down his throat and try to convince him to carry her out of here?

Stellan leaned back in his seat, putting his arm over the back of the booth. It was obvious he wasn't going to move anywhere.

She deflated. "Fine. I just wanted to ask you in private if you knew who she was."

She gestured at me.

Stellan looked confused. "Why wouldn't I know who she is?" He looked at me as if the two of us were in on a joke together. "We came in together, right? Or did I dream that?"

“You and me together? Sounds like a dream,” I said just as breezily. His gaze was fixed on me, ignoring her, and I could feel her tension crackling. My smile deepened slightly, feeling genuine, when Stellan’s bright smile seemed to radiate between us. He was making a show of only having eyes for me.

“That’s Delilah!” she said in exasperation. “The daughter of the Demon. She changed her face, but she’s the same girl from high school.”

Stellan rubbed his forehead as if he were exhausted by his hometown already, but his smile didn’t dim. “I see.”

“I didn’t know who you were until you came on the news,” she said without looking at me. “Stellan. Are you safe? Is she a threat to you?”

A few men at the bar stood up and they formed a circle around our table threateningly. They were all old and punchy, and I was sure Stellan’s reflexes and mine were quite a bit sharper.

One of them was carrying openly though, carrying a revolver in his belt when he came to get coffee and biscuits and sausage gravy, and I was willing to bet the others were too. I did not have time today to deal with Meal Team Six

“Everything is fine,” Stellan said. He didn’t seem rattled at all. He seemed mildly annoyed. “I don’t need anyone looking out for me. I’ve got Delilah here.” He swept his hand toward me. “She’ll keep me out of trouble.”

“He doesn’t sound right,” Roxy said to the men desperately. They seemed like they might just feel drunk and heroic enough to be dangerous. “She’s doing something to him.”

“She’s no threat,” Stellan said, slightly more sharply. “And she would never hurt me.”

Those were all lies, but I wasn’t going to argue with him under the circumstances at the moment.

Stellan pulled out his wallet and dropped two twenties on the table. “That should more than cover breakfast. It’s time we got out of here.”

“Oh, she’s not going anywhere,” one of the men said. “Not until we’re sure she’s no threat.”

Stellan looked bored. He leaned back in his booth again. “I hope we’re not going to make this tiresome.”

“She was a bitch in high school, but I never realized how fucking awful she was,” Roxy said.

Stellan rose abruptly, and Meal Team Six took a step back despite

themselves.

I silently prayed that Stellan wouldn't escalate the situation. He was probably armed too; the guys almost always seemed to be when they left the Sphinx. But I didn't think a shoot-out in the bar and grill was going to make it any easier to uncover the mysteries of Sophia's secrets.

"Be careful, Stellan," I reminded him. "We don't want to end up on the news ourselves."

Cain and the others would be here before we knew it if there was the slightest hint of us in the news or the police blotter. I was kind of surprised they weren't here already. It was a matter of time.

Unless they didn't think it was worth coming for us. I would have thought that maybe they were in on it with Stellan except for his obvious concern about what would happen when they caught up to us.

"You think you can treat her like shit because she's the Demon's daughter," Stellan said quietly. "You just want someone to vent your rage and misery. You'd never think about what it might have been like to be her."

He glanced around at them, looking persuasive as a hotshot trial lawyer as he adjusted his jacket. I didn't think any of them noticed how he unzipped it, as if he were getting easier access to his gun. "She was just a child living with a serial killer, with a monster, who forced her to see unspeakable things. If you'd lived through that same situation, you would have been broken beyond repair. And yet Aurora is the nicest, kindest person I know."

I stared at him in shock. But Stellan was still talking. "But you're all monsters, even though you don't have any reason to be."

Stellan offered me his hand. I slid out of the booth and he pulled me behind him, his broad shoulders blocking me from these people who were way too belligerent for such an early hour in the morning. I breathed in Stellan's aftershave, always crisp and delicious, and for a second, all I could see was his powerful back under his black jacket. He seemed...protective.

He took a step forward and one of the men moved out of his way. Once we reached the doorway, he opened the door for me, still keeping an eye on the men as if they might come after us.

Then we were out in the parking lot, the sun shining on our faces.

"Let's go find Sophia. No more bullshit." Stellan was still holding my hand as we walked toward the car.

I pulled away, my mind racing.

I hadn't been that surprised to see him with a needle in his hand. But

Stellan defending me, protecting me?
That was shocking.

CHAPTER 10

STELLAN



Aurora's white-blond hair reflected the sunshine, giving her a glow as if she were an angel. She was still striking, but I missed something about the way she was beautiful when we were kids, with her dark hair and striking violet-blue eyes and her pensive sweetness.

Back then, I hadn't known how strong she really was. I hadn't known what was going on in her life. And the person that I was now didn't have a lot of empathy. If I was going to feel sorry for anyone, it was my sister.

But sometimes I saw the girl that Aurora used to be. And those times I caught flickers of the boy I used to be too. When I was still capable of giving a damn about anyone else, when I wasn't jaded.

If Sophia could see us now... I wasn't sure if she'd love either of us the way she once had.

"That was unexpected." Aurora threw me a look over the top of the car that I couldn't quite read.

"We'd better get going. I don't want to deal with any more of your fans."

"I wasn't talking about them being jerks." She swung an arm toward the restaurant. "I'm not surprised by that. I assume most people are jerks. I was surprised by you, not being a jerk."

"Let's not talk about it," I said.

"Worried I'm going to start to like you?" she teased with a magnetic smile slipping across her red lips.

She ducked into the passenger side then, so she couldn't see my face. That was a relief.

She was right that I'd been a jerk. And she'd been nothing but kind to everyone she ran across, at least, until they gave her a good reason for

violence. She deserved better than the way she was treated by the world. And the worst part was, I'd been part of that world. I didn't think she'd hurt Sophia, at least not on purpose. Maybe the Demon had caught Sophia the night that she went to try to rescue Aurora. Maybe the fact that Aurora and Sophia had known each other had caused Sophia's death at the hands of a serial killer. When I pictured it, grief stabbed my chest.

But I wasn't going to blame Aurora for what the Demon had done. She was still strong and caring and good despite being surrounded by a world that wasn't any of those things. But everyone had to have their breaking point. I didn't want to be Aurora's.

I climbed into the driver's seat. She was so much better than I was, better than anyone. And I wanted to protect that flame of decency.

Of course, memories were buried in her head that would lead us to Sophia's path. We could find out once and for all if my sister was killed by the Demon. And if we were lucky, maybe we would be able to find her.

I used to hope I'd find my sister alive. Slowly, we'd started to just hope for a body.

Once, I'd woken up in the middle of the night and gone to make tea for my mother. She'd been up all night, keening the way she did. At night she could never bear not knowing where Sophia was. She was always afraid that she was cold and hurt and lonely and desperate somewhere. She stayed up all night like she was keeping a vigil. She'd clung to my shirt and told me, "I don't want tea. I just want my little girl home. Why can't you do that for me, Stellan?"

I cleared my throat. That memory always felt raw, those words ringing in my head all these years.

"Are you all right?" Aurora asked gently.

"I should be asking you that. You're the one they attacked."

"They didn't hurt me." She shook her head. She was still looking at me in a way I couldn't make sense of, as if she were curious. "Words aren't going to hurt me. I'm tough."

"No, you're not tough," I disagreed. "Most people would be tough after what you've been through, but you're just...strong."

She was incredible.

"I don't feel that way," she said with an embarrassed smile.

"Well, I'm sorry you've ever had to be strong because of me," I said gruffly.

She was still watching me as if she wasn't sure what to make of me. Then she took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

“If we don't find anything based on the journals, Stellan... if we don't find anything in the Demon's house...”

My heart twisted. I didn't think I could stand living like this much longer, and I didn't think my mom could, either. “Yeah?”

She inhaled again, as if she were steeling herself. “I think I need to go talk to the Demon.”

CHAPTER 11

AURORA



"Let's get ice cream," Stellan said suddenly.

I looked at him, confused at his response to what I'd just said. "Did you hear what I said?"

"That's our Hail Mary play. I don't want you visiting the Demon unless we have no other choice."

I chewed my lip. I didn't want to see the Demon unless it was our last choice either.

"Didn't we just get done eating?" I finally said, Stellan's changing personality giving me whiplash, as usual.

"Would you usually not finish breakfast?" he asked.

My stomach grumbled at his question. Those fuckers had interrupted our breakfast. And why shouldn't I have ice cream right now? In the past week alone, I'd been kidnapped multiple times and almost raped. That had to give you some kind of license to live outside the rules.

Although, who was I kidding? When had I ever lived by the rules?

"Why do I get the feeling that you're trying to stall?" I asked, biting my lip as I looked out the window. It was weird. Breakfast, now ice cream. Sex in the bathroom. Where was the urgency?

It was almost like he'd given up hope before we even really got started.

He hesitated a moment, and then finally shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I am. Now that we're here, it's almost like I can feel what we're going to find. I'm scared to get to the end," he said softly.

I wanted to tell him not to think like that. I wanted to be the voice of optimism that this time this sort of story would end happily. The girl gets found after years alive and unharmed, or at least not harmed enough that

therapy can't help.

Maybe we both thought that that was just wishful thinking.

"Ice cream it is."

Stellan surprised me when he didn't go to the shop we always used to go to. Instead, he headed across town next to the main park.

"When did this place open?" I asked, studying the sign suspiciously, because ice cream was life and I wasn't big on trying unproven places.

Stellan snickered. "It's good," he promised, before hopping out of the car. When he came around to my side and acted like he was going to open up my door for me, I was sure that an alien had inhabited his body.

Despite the heart-to-heart we'd just had, Stellan and Aurora weren't just going to be awesome after one conversation. What was that saying? "Rome wasn't built in a day." In this case, it was more like Rome hadn't been destroyed in a day, and it wasn't going to be rebuilt in one.

Okay, I was definitely rambling to myself. I crossed my arms in front of me just in case he got some idea to try and hold my hand again. Although I really wanted him to hold my hand.

We walked inside, the cool air of the shop rushing over me. A happy-looking woman with snow-white hair was standing beside a long display case holding an assortment of ice cream options. Her face lit up even more when she saw us.

I wondered what it would feel like, for someone to describe your face as happy looking, to wear a smile that looked untouched by the world.

"Stellan," she said vibrantly, "I didn't know you were in town. And look at your pretty girlfriend," she cooed.

I opened my mouth to set her straight, because one thing we were not, was a couple, but Stellan shocked the hell out of me once again today by throwing his arm around my waist as he led me towards the counter.

"Olga, it was a last-minute trip. This is Aurora," he said, his voice filled with... affection?

She said something, but my eyes were locked on his. We were staring at each other again, and hell only knew what happened when we got lost in each other like this. He leaned forward, his eyes focused on my lips, and I bounced towards the counter. Sure, hate sex was one thing, but this, whatever it was, it was too much.

"Everything looks so good," I said, fake excitement threaded through my voice.

She was looking at me like I was a little strange, but that was okay. I was strange.

"They have one that tastes just like that Girl Scout cookie you love," he said, pointing towards a container labeled 'Samoa Dream.'

It did look yummy.

"I'll get a scoop of that," I said—

"Make that two scoops of that," Stellan interjected. I gave him a mock glare.

Olga giggled, sounding much younger than her appearance suggested. Just then, a handsome, wrinkled man stepped out from the back. His snow-white hair matched hers perfectly.

He walked over to her and kissed her softly on the cheek, and I watched in awe at the look they gave each other. Stellan's fingers brushed against mine, and when I looked at him, I knew it was all over my face. My yearning.

I'd wanted this so fucking bad when we were younger. For Stellan to be my boyfriend, for him to take me out for ice cream. I wanted the love story I was seeing in front of me. How had I gotten so far away from it?

Even though the answer was imprinted in my skull, I still couldn't get rid of the yearning.

The man smiled at us before shuffling into the back room without a word. Evidently, he didn't recognize Stellan like his wife did. Olga hummed to herself as she scooped our cones. Stellan had ordered mint chocolate, but as soon as Olga gave me my cone, he leaned over and took a giant bite out of mine—to my horror. After ringing us out, she came around the counter and gave Stellan a hug.

"Don't be a stranger, boy." She turned towards me. "Keep him in line," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

I smiled weakly and nodded. I didn't think stabbing him in the dick was what she had in mind when saying that.

Stellan winked at her, and this time, he did grab my hand as he led me out of the shop.

"What's the story behind that?" I asked as we walked down the sidewalk, nodding my head at the shop we'd just left behind.

Stellan smiled fondly as he licked at his ice cream cone, way too sensually in my opinion. Like, I knew he was good with his tongue. He didn't need to try and convince me.

"I found this place after Sophia disappeared. One day I was just walking

around town aimlessly, trying to avoid all the spots that reminded me of her, and this place had just opened up. I don't even know why I went in. I definitely wasn't in the mood for ice cream. But when I walked in, Olga started chattering away at me. Telling me her and her husband's life story. Obviously, she could tell that I was upset, but she just kept talking and gave me a sample of every flavor they had in stock. And a couple days later, I found myself back. I'd visit at least once a week until I left for school."

My heart was melting at the story, and I didn't know what to say, so instead, I just squeezed his hand, just once, to let him know that I understood.

"Let's go sit by the fountain in the park," he offered, and I nodded, lost in thought, trying to imagine what Stellan had been like in those months after Sophia disappeared.

The little town had tried to reach for the stars with this park. It was modeled like Central Park in New York, with large trees everywhere, and a pathway that wound its way around a small lake. It had always been one of my favorite places, and I couldn't help but smile and breathe deeply as we walked our way down the winding path.

We'd gotten about half a mile in when I heard the low hum of voices, like a large crowd was gathered just up ahead. Stellan and I exchanged questioning glances, but we kept on walking.

I regretted that a minute later, when we turned a corner and there they were. At least fifteen of my father's most faithful fan club. How were they everywhere?

"We've gotta get the fuck out of here," I whispered to Stellan as I began to back away slowly.

But of course, because nothing ever went my way, one of them happened to turn and spot us. I watched as her eyes widened as she recognized me. Obviously, at this point, my new face had been plastered everywhere online, so it was likely as recognizable as my old one had been.

"Delilah!" she screeched, catching the attention of the crowd around her. They all turned, almost as one, quite the creepy sight.

I wasn't sure whether to take off sprinting or wave and try to play nice and just pray that they weren't at their extreme level of craziness today. She hustled towards me, and I ripped my hand away from Stellan's, one of my hands drifting to my pocket where my knife was. I needed to be prepared just in case she launched herself at me.

"You visited your father recently! Is he going to get out soon? Did he tell

you of his plans? Are you ready to take over?" The questions launched from her mouth, making me feel woozy and a bit sick inside. Looks like another meal today was going to be ruined. And also, how did these people literally find out everything that had to do with my father? I couldn't imagine what kind of job it was for you to stake out a prison every day just in case a visitor stopped by. It's not like I had announced to their little group where I was going that day.

"My father was doing well, but I don't think he'll be getting out anytime soon," I responded politely.

I jumped when she suddenly threw herself to the ground, thrashing and pulling at the thick grass like she was having some type of seizure, her wails filling the air around her.

"Okay. We're getting the fuck out of here," Stellan murmured, trying to reach for my hand again. I was frozen, watching in fascination as the woman fell apart in front of me. What on earth did she think my father had done to get this level of obsession and devotion?

"Did he give you a message for us? Did he ask you to continue his work?" a man called out from nearby.

Fuck. This guy had crept way too close when I was paying attention to the circus act in front of me, standing just a few feet away now, his gaze manic and crazed.

"I —" my words got stuck in my throat when his gaze flicked towards Stellan, ice-cold rage crossing his face.

"You!" he seethed. "You defiled her."

Stellan and I looked at each other, both of us wondering what the hell he was talking about—and which bathroom he was referencing. Since that seemed to be a thing with us as of late. There were options to choose from.

"You turned the Demon's daughter into a whore," he called out, taking a threatening step toward us.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, my stomach clenching in horror.

"You've been spreading your legs, betraying your legacy. The Demon devoted his life to maintaining your purity, and you've thrown it all away. We saw you!."

"Devoted his life to maintaining my purity?" I repeated incredulously. What the hell was he talking about? The Demon had been a controlling bastard, especially when it came to my virginity, but that was a whole new level of daddy issues.

I felt a little numb about the prospect of there being a sex tape out there of me. Not that I judged anyone who went that route, but it had never been a kink I'd been interested in exploring.

It especially hadn't been my thing to have this group of lunatics watch.

"I need to get a copy of that tape," Stellan muttered next to me. "Cain's going to kill me." I resisted the urge to elbow him, just in case that was taken as the call for violence by the group.

"We're just gonna leave now. But I'll give my father your best regards. He's assured me he's forgiven me for my sins," I said piously, not that I knew what that sounded like. But I'd just given it my best effort.

"You should come with us, so we can cleanse you," the crazy man said, taking another step toward us.

I held my hands up in front of me beseechingly, trying to mentally calculate how good our odds were against this many of them. And winning a fight with them was bound to get police attention. That was all I needed, for "The Demon's Daughter" to be in a headline with his cult.

"No cleansing necessary," I said. The Demon always had a way with his followers. They hung on his every word, treating it like fact and not demented opinion. He had always been so fucking persuasive.

It was a gift he had not passed on as evidenced by the fact that I'd just been recently stuffed in a trunk because I couldn't convince Stellan I hadn't helped murder his sister, and the man in front of us that had just taken another step toward us. The crowd began shouting things at us then.

"Whore!"

"Tell us his plan!"

"Slut!"

"Traitor!"

Their screams filled the air. We were losing control quickly—or at least things were getting out of hand, since I didn't think we'd ever had control in the first place. My ice cream fell to the ground as the man pulled a pencil-thin knife from his belt loop. I cringed when I immediately recognized it as a ritual knife. They would all have something similar; it was what they used to sacrifice their blood for their rituals. Obviously you couldn't pay homage to a serial killer named "the Demon" without such bloodletting.

Regardless, the presence of fifteen of those knives was going to make things much more complicated. My pocket knife wasn't going to do much against them.

So much for laying low.

Just then, Stellan's hand slipped under his jacket and he pulled out a gun, casually holding it in his hands like he was showing it to the crowd instead of threatening them with it.

I froze, sure that one of the psychos would be pulling out a gun any second now too.

Surprisingly though, no one reached for one. Instead, they stared at Stellan bitterly, with faces promising retribution.

Stellan grabbed my arm and started to back away, making sure we were still facing them the entire time.

"You guys can just go about your ritual, or whatever other freaky fucking thing you were just doing. I'll continue... Cleansing the Demon's daughter."

There was no missing the smirk on his face as he said that. I was sure the whole group was well aware that his version of "cleansing" was very different from theirs.

We kept backing away until we were around the corner, and they were out of sight.

"Run," Stellan commanded, yanking me forward as we sprinted down the pathway, both of us checking behind us every couple of seconds for signs that they had followed.

But surprisingly, there was no hint of them. No sound of footsteps racing towards us, and the din of their voices eventually faded until it was just the sound of birds chirping and leaves wrestling the wind that we could hear.

"I'm beginning to feel like I'm not welcome in this town," I said mockingly.

Stellan and I stared at each other, our breaths coming out in gasps over the adrenaline of the moment.

And then for some reason, we both began laughing, uncontrollably.

The stress from the last few days had finally made us crack until we were both hunched over, our hands on our knees as tears streamed from our eyes with the force of our laughter.

Stellan straightened and used the bottom of his shirt to wipe at the moisture on his cheeks, the move revealing his perfect set of bronzed abs. "You know, my life has been really fucking weird since you came into it," he commented.

I pretended to be miffed by his statement. "You mean you don't usually have run-ins with crazy cult members obsessed with serial killers?" I mused.

He rolled his eyes, his features growing serious. I braced for the impact.

"I'm ready to go to his house."

The smirk I'd been wearing immediately disappeared. How the hell my life could go from brunch, to ice cream, to a run-in with a cult...to exploring a serial killer's lair was anyone's guess.

But Sophia deserved my best effort, and going into the hellscape that made up a Demon property was definitely part of that effort.

We jogged the rest of the way to the car, continuing to look behind us. But there was no sign of them. Stellan called and left an anonymous tip on the police hotline, alerting them of the gathering since no doubt there was freaky fuckery involved. And there were way too many children playing in that park for a cult to be gathered.

The mood grew darker the closer we got to the house. I was gripping the sides of my seat, trying to coach myself into accepting what I was going to do.

Out of the darkness, and into the light. To all that is good, and all that is bright, I recited in my head, over and over again, hoping that it would somehow give me enough bravery for what I was about to do.

I kept thinking that, as more and more shit happened to me, my ability to be ruined by the Demon would eventually diminish.

But somehow, I hadn't seen any signs of it fading.

Stellan parked in his driveway, and we both sat in the car, just staring at the house next door.

It was still daytime, but somehow the sky felt darker, the whip in the wind more menacing as it rocked against the trees.

"Our love story was in her journals," he said softly, and my breath caught at the emotion in his voice.

"Yeah, it was, wasn't it," I replied. I picked at a thread coming loose in my jeans.

"And so was hers."

His gaze was caught on the Demon's house. "I was thinking as I read her entries that the best way to honor Sophia's memory would have been to protect you. And instead, all I've done is hurt you."

My hands were trembling as I reached up to push a stray piece of hair out of my face. How did he always know exactly what to say to make me want to cry?

"Yeah, that is all you've done," I finally answered. It started to rain then,

the windshield growing blurry with the sheets of water falling on the glass.

Staring out my window, unable to look at him, I knew it was time to stop delaying. Just then, I noticed a faded green Jeep parked on the opposite side of Stellan's house. It looked so familiar.

"Delilah, come on," Sophia said exasperatedly as she waited for me to decide what candy I was going to buy to bring into the theater.

"This is a really important decision," I said seriously.

Sophia snorted, but then her glance got caught on something behind me. When I turned to look at what she was seeing, she grabbed my arm to halt my movement.

"That guy has been staring at you for the last ten minutes," she said, concerned.

"Is he cute?" I joked, but her hold on my arm tightened.

"He's giving off major creep vibes, Delilah."

I frowned, a flicker of unease lighting up in my chest. Was it one of the Demon's fan club? They'd been hanging around town lately, because even though they didn't know what my father looked like, the rumor on the Internet was that the Demon was somewhere around the area.

Pretending to be staring up at the list of movies, I glanced over to where Sophia was still glaring, and sure enough, there was a strange man leaning against the wall, staring at his phone.

Or at least pretending to be staring at his phone. His gaze kept flicking over to us...to me.

But I couldn't place him.

The Demon had shown me the major players of the three main cults who tracked his movements closely, but he hadn't been on any of those lists.

"Let's just get our food and go into the movie. I'm sure it's nothing. Some people are just weird like that," I told her reassuringly.

Even though I was very much aware of how often the weird person giving off creep vibes was in fact, a creep.

I picked some peanut butter M&M's even though I wasn't feeling in the mood, and then we went into the comedy that I chose. Sophia was more into horror films herself, but since my life was a horror film, I'd made it clear very early on in our friendship that I would only watch movies that were funny or romantic. And luckily, she'd been understanding about that. As we settled down in our seats, I noted that the guy had followed us in, and had chosen a seat in the row to the right of us. I tried to keep my mind off him as the movie

came on, but I kept feeling his eyes boring into the side of my head.

He got up to leave with about five minutes left in the movie, and I breathed a sigh of relief. The man wasn't anywhere in the lobby as we were walking out of the theater, and I was just about to push it out of my head as a weird but harmless coincidence when I saw him sitting in a faded green Jeep, parked right outside the entrance.

And he was staring right at me.

Sophia didn't notice; she was chattering away about the movie and how much she loved it. I linked an arm through hers and her words cut off, a pleased expression of surprise on her face since I wasn't usually one to initiate physical contact. I urged her through the parking lot, pretending nothing was wrong, but when I looked behind me... he was still parked.

And he was still watching.

"Aurora?" Stellan pressed. And I blinked, forcing myself out of the walk down memory lane I'd just happened upon. There was no way that was the same Jeep.

Although, how many faded green Jeeps would be around this town?

But all these years later?

I let out a shaky breath, feeling as if I was being hunted by all my ghosts.

We got out of the car, immediately getting soaked from the rain still crashing down from the sky. Stellan and I jogged over to the house, ducking under the front porch and wiping off our wet faces.

His front door opened. "Stellan?"

"Mom?" He and I traded a quick glance, then he ran to her.

I trudged through the rain, feeling oddly defeated as we returned to his old house. It took strength to walk back toward the Demon's house; I just wanted to face the house of nightmares and be done.

"He came back." She clutched at his arms, her eyes wide with panic. "The one who took Sophia."

CHAPTER 12

AURORA



“What happened?” Stellan demanded, his voice tight.

“He was here in the house! He left us a message!”

He moved his mother aside, already drawing his gun, and said to me over his shoulder, “Protect her. Please.”

Stellan looked at me as if he needed me, as if he trusted me, and he didn’t fucking deserve me but I nodded anyway. This was Sophia’s mom, too. I’d look after her for Sophia’s sake.

Stellan disappeared inside and searched through the house. He returned with a grim look on his face. “You’d better see this.”

“Be careful,” she begged, grabbing him again. “Stellan, if anything happened to you... I wouldn’t survive it. I can’t take any more. You’re all I have left.”

Her face crumpled. Stellan’s posture was rigid, ready for a fight, and it took effort for him to stop and wrap his arms around her. But he did, hugging her despite the gun still clutched in his hand.

“It’s going to be all right, Mama. Nothing’s going to happen to me,” he promised her. “I’ve got to tell you something.”

I was itching to know what had happened, but Stellan got her a glass of water and she sat down on the porch swing, her hands shaking. The rain streamed from the gutters, the constant pounding on the porch roof droning and monotonous.

I sat down next to her and picked at a streak of hot pink nail polish with my thumbnail, then stilled. I remembered sitting on the swing with Sophia on a warm summer day when we’d just met and I’d spilled the nail polish. I’d been nervous, afraid her mom would be mad. Sophia had looked at me like I

was crazy. Then her mom had parked the van in the driveway and walked up carrying a bag of groceries, and Sophia had run to hug her and tell her she'd dropped nail polish on the wood swing. Her mother had sighed dramatically and said, "You don't deserve popsicles," and then handed her the box of Klondike bars anyway. Eating our melting ice cream on the swing on a sunny day, I'd felt a rare sense of peace.

Stellan said gently, "Nothing is going to happen to me, because I've got backup. I've got a fantastic team behind me, including my partner here. Because we're federal agents. We're investigating what happened to Sophia."

I schooled my face, even though I was pretty sure Stellan had just lost his mind.

"You are?" she asked, as if she wanted to believe.

He nodded. "We're getting close, and that's why the kidnapper left that message. I need you to go stay with Aunt Julie, all right? Just until we find Sophia. So I know you're safe, and the team and I can focus on Sophia."

Her eyes flooded with tears. "My boy. You'll bring her home, won't you?"

"I'll bring her home," he promised, and then she hugged him again. His eyes misted over as he held her tightly, patting his back, and something inside me melted.

Stellan got her to leave almost right away. He was all confidence and reassurance, tall and sure of himself, until her car had turned out of sight beyond the trees that lined the street.

Then his shoulders sagged, just slightly. "Come on."

I followed him through the house into the bathroom. A message was painted in what looked like blood across the white wall, and an instant chill settled into my stomach.

"Can you read it?" Stellan frowned at the words. "The blood ran everywhere... and he ran out of room to write. I don't think the killer ever did this before."

"Very junior varsity," I agreed, as if I weren't terrified. "Let me translate from the original psycho."

Cleans yourself before your wedding day

Cleans or die

"What's up with them and their obsession with *cleansing*?"

"Maybe you shouldn't have brought up *cleansing* with them like it obviously involved shoving your tongue down my throat." But bantering with

Stellan was making me feel steadier despite the evidence the cult had been in the house where I was staying. I shuddered. I wouldn't sleep here again.

"This is where it would be nice to actually have a forensics team," I said. "I'd like to know whose blood that is."

"Unfortunately, we don't," Stellan said. He took careful photos of the mirror, then searched under the sink for Windex and sprayed it clean. "Like it never happened."

"But it did," I said. I chewed my lower lip. "They were here for me, Stellan. They know where we are."

"Let's figure out how to end this," he said. "Then you never have to come home to this town again."

He held out his hand to me, and I took it. The two of us walked across to the Demon's house, although I couldn't shake the feeling we were being watched now that I knew we'd been found by the cult.

"Now, how are we going to get in?" he asked. "You don't by chance have a key with you, do you?"

I rolled my eyes. "Maybe I would if you'd given me a little more heads up than the trunk of your car," I snarked at him.

He looked like a kicked puppy, but I ignored it.

"We used to keep a key under one of these bricks," I mused, crouching down and beginning to pull at the bricks in the wall.

"The Demon had a hide-a-key?" Stellan sounded disbelieving.

The Demon sometimes had guests he wanted to allow into the house... terrible guests. "Yeah, I know. But everything looked normal in the house. He even said I could have friends over... Not that I ever would have."

The fourth one was the charm, and with a little tugging I pulled off the brick face, revealing a small hollow where a spare house key still sat. Dread flinched through me as I grabbed it, replacing the brick before standing up.

I realized I was standing in the bushes outside my house where Sophia might've stood, because from here I could see partially into my old window. The thought made me shiver with sudden cold as if a ghost had just walked through me.

"Ready?" I asked, a hint of a quiver in my voice. Although I didn't know why I was asking him if he was ready; he wouldn't have any bad memories of this house. I never would have wanted them to come in.

Because there was a good chance that they never would've made it out.

Stellan and I walked into the living room. The house was empty. The

Demon always had all of our furniture disposed of when we moved, getting rid of any possible evidence. For a second, I couldn't remember what the house had looked like when it was furnished.

And then I remembered, coming in the front door with my backpack over my shoulder. I'd heard Sophia's voice right behind me, high and laughing, and I had spun around, panic welling in my chest.

She had been standing in the doorway, trying to follow me in. "I just wanted to see where the mysterious Delilah lived."

It had been weird that I never invited her over even though I practically lived at her house. Now I could imagine the scene clearly. Sophia with a big, mischievous, innocent smile on her face and no idea how much danger she was in. The living room with its bland tan sectional and coffee table. The art on the walls that my father had picked up at a garage sale, including photos of some random woman that wasn't my mother. Everything was staged to look normal.

And then the Demon had been in the opposite doorway. He was still drying his hands with a towel. I was pretty sure he'd just come from the basement. "Delilah, why don't you introduce me to your friend?" he'd asked with his most charming smile.

That was before Sophia had known anything about what he really was, going off her journal entries.

"Are you alright?" Stellan asked.

"Super," I managed. "Just taking a little walk down memory lane. It's... a good thing. Maybe it will jog some memory that we need."

I couldn't be sure how much I had forgotten. Because my whole life had been one trauma after another, and they all blurred together. I knew Sophia had left the house that day, alive and well after making small talk with the Demon. My father had warned me I needed to be careful, but he hadn't been angry then. He worried sometimes that I lacked his charisma. He didn't want me to get close to anyone, but he wanted me to be popular. I always worried that if I became too popular, he'd start using me to draw girls into his web. He usually said it was important to hunt far from where we lived but I didn't trust he'd remain dedicated to that philosophy.

I walked through the house to the kitchen, which looked the same way it always had, and into the dining room where we'd sometimes dined with those who were about to be dead. The dining table was long gone, but I remembered sitting down with spaghetti Bolognese and a nice green salad

and a man whose screams would stay with me for a long time.

“Do you want to go upstairs or down?” Stellan asked me, breaking open my reveries.

“We might as well go downstairs. It’s not going to get any easier.”

He hesitated, as if he wanted to tell me it was all right, we could just leave. But we couldn’t. We’d come this far and we needed to find answers. So he just rested his hand on my shoulder, as if to say he’d be with me the whole way.

And I shrugged his hand off.

Because he couldn’t be with me where I was going. No one would ever understand the dark memories that plagued me.

CHAPTER 13

AURORA



The door to the basement stood in the hall. It had once been locked too, with a keypad lock, but that had been busted open by the police. Now the door stood slightly ajar. I still couldn't shake the feeling it might lock behind us and trap us down there forever, leaving us to die in the dark.

And I couldn't quite shake the feeling that Stellan might be turning tender now to make sure I didn't run, that I felt safe before he murdered me. After all, he'd thought I might have helped the Demon kill Sophia. He might still believe that, and he'd just lied and pretended he didn't. And even if he knew I hadn't hurt Sophia... he knew I was the reason she was dead. She'd come here to help me, and she'd never returned home.

I flicked on the lights, revealing the bare wooden stairs and a glimpse of gray concrete at the bottom. I started down the stairs with a creeping feeling traveling up my spine. My fingers wrapped the banister tightly, afraid Stellan might shove me from behind at any moment.

But I reached the hard tile floor. Stellan stopped next to me.

The basement had been methodically stripped of any reminder of what happened here. My father's apprentice and I had worked long hours making sure no trace of blood and misery remained, and my back had ached and my hands had bled from the bleach.

"It's so empty." Stellan didn't sound surprised.

My gaze rose to his sharply, and he stuck his hands in his pockets, looking abashed.

"I used to sneak into the house," he admitted. "I was so convinced that you and the Demon had done something to Sophia. It just made no sense... The way she was gone and so were you on the same night. For a while, when

I read the journals, I hoped maybe you'd run away together instead of her being dead. But I realize how stupid that is. Land of wishful thinking."

He sounded bitter at himself.

"You used to sneak in here?"

He nodded. "I figured that Sophia died here. It was the closest I could get to her... My mother's always said, she'll start to heal when she has a grave she can go to. But I think that might always feel empty. I feel like... I feel her ghost here."

He managed the faintest smile. "If her ghost is here, I bet she's happy to see you."

I'd been suspicious by nature because of my entire life, and so while part of my heart twisted with sympathy for Stellan, the other part—the part that imagined how he had paced these rooms imagining his sister's death—I just thought, maybe he planned to take his revenge for Sophia here. He could leave my ghost here with hers... forever. If someone had killed one of the people I loved, that's the kind of way I'd want to kill them. It seemed like maybe it would bring some closure, although I started to think that closure was a lie.

I shifted, feeling for my knife, although Stellan was carrying his gun. I'd have to get lucky to bring him down before he killed me.

"Are you all right?" Stellan asked, then frowned at himself. "I guess that's a stupid question. Who could be all right down here?"

There used to be an operating table in the middle of the room. The basement was soundproofed. But while my father had often played down here, this hadn't been where he kept his victims.

"This isn't all of it." My voice came out a whisper. I didn't want to go further down into the basement with a man who might try to kill me. "My father installed a sub-basement. I don't think the police ever found it."

He hadn't bothered to clean that up. He liked to leave something behind in every house. He liked the idea of families going on with their lives, never knowing they were decorating their Christmas trees or eating cereal above a torture chamber.

Stellan swallowed.

"I never went back in there that night," I said. "I helped him... clean up this floor. I went out to..."

Stellan's gaze sharpened at the implication. He prompted me, "What did you do that night, Aurora?"

I shook my head.

“Tell me.” His voice was sharp as a whip crack.

“I dumped the body,” I said. “It was a man. A man he’d been holding here. My father said it was my fault because...because I got so close to you, because we had to move so soon. But he would’ve killed him anyway, eventually.”

“Of course he would have,” Stellan said. “That man was dead when he entered the doors. That’s not your fault.”

I stared at him, wondering if he was just saying what I wanted to hear. Did Stellan really believe that? Because I’d told myself that a hundred times, but I didn’t believe it.

“And maybe,” he said, swallowing, “my sister was dead from the time she left my house that night to go save you.”

His voice twisted bitterly on the words *save you*.

My eyes suddenly felt hot, and I turned away from him. I wanted desperately to go back in time, to slip out to see Sophia before she could come to see me. As my vision blurred, I moved toward the secret door, my movements quick and resolute, my posture perfect so Stellan wouldn’t see how much he devastated me, so easily.

I’d rather take the risk he knifed me in the back than have him see me cry right now.

I opened the secret panel that led down to the sub-basement. After we moved in, my father had spent days pretending to go to work for the benefit of the neighbors, only to instead come down and destroy the original basement floor, to dig down and create a new sub-basement.

The opening yawned at my feet, dark and terrifying. He’d locked me down here sometimes. When he’d had a victim, they would beg me for help, and I’d ignore them because if I showed any sign of mercy, or even acknowledged they were human, the Demon would make me torture them myself. And when they finally died, I couldn’t even feel relief for their release from pain.

Because I was always afraid I’d be next.

I pinched my hand between my thumb and finger, the sharpness of the pain reminding me I was still alive, and tried to stay grounded in my body. Even if—just like when I used to disassociate when I was a kid—I didn’t want to be here anymore.

“Aurora?” Stellan asked, his voice seeming to come from a long way

away. I couldn't tell if he sounded concerned or if he was just prompting me to get on with it.

I checked that I had my knife and started down into the hole. I kept expecting the sound of the door slamming above me, but instead, I heard the soft shuffle of Stellan's feet.

"Wait, Aurora, the flashlight," he said. "Aren't there any lights down here?"

I shook my head. "He liked it better this way... the only time there was any light for his... guests... was when he came down carrying one. Or when I did."

The last few words, I said in a whisper.

I'd come down to feed them every day. They'd begged me for help.

As if by muscle memory, I moved to the table in the dark, found the matches still left behind, found the lamp and lit it. Stellan looked like a ghost for a second before his handsome features resolved into familiarity for me. Beyond the golden glow of the lamp was the familiar cage, the vertical board where my father had strapped his victims, the pegboard of neatly-arranged torture devices. My father knew how to make it so people took a long time to die.

My vision faded dark around the corners, the beginning of a panic attack coming on so fast I couldn't fight it.

"Is there anything out of place here? Anything new?" Stellan asked, moving around the room to examine it.

I tried to focus, but I couldn't draw a breath. I couldn't stay standing, and I hit my knees on the concrete.

"Aurora?" he asked, and then he was kneeling in front of me. "Hey."

Then he must have realized what was happening, because his voice turned gentle. "Stay with me. Out of the darkness..."

My gaze snapped to his. "How do you know..."

"You whisper it to yourself sometimes. I was listening. I pay attention to you, you know." Even in the dim light, I could see the wistful way his lips twisted.

"I feel so guilty," I admitted, knowing it was foolish, knowing I should keep my darkest thoughts to myself so Stellan wouldn't leave me down here. If the Demon could go back in time, I knew he'd lock me down here and leave me to scream and starve and suffer. Stellan could exact the Demon's punishment for his sister's life and no one would ever know. "I should have

killed him. I should've protected... everyone."

Stellan gazed into my eyes, and my breath hung in my chest.

"If it was your fault that one man died," he said quietly, "it was my fault too. The Demon wanted to move you because I fell in love with you. He was the monster, but...we were both the reason he wanted to move. I would never have left you alone. You don't have to carry those deaths alone, Aurora."

His lips tilted up in an attempt at a smile that didn't quite manage. "You don't have to carry any of those deaths."

"Don't I?" I asked. "I cleaned up his tools. I buried bodies. I..." I trailed off, looking away. "I hurt people to save myself. And I thought they were going to die anyway, but I... I should have been braver. I should have been better."

My eyes blurred with tears, so I couldn't see Stellan's face. I could feel him watching me, and I was sure he was judging me.

Then suddenly, he gathered my hands in his. "Aurora. Whatever you did... you're the only one who can forgive yourself. But if you need help trying to put things to rights, if Sophia isn't the only one whose body you need to find, I'm here. I'll help you."

His lips brushed my forehead. "I need forgiveness too. I let my grief turn me into an asshole instead of using it to turn into a better person... someone who was worthy of Sophia's memory. I betrayed her."

His voice was full of sorrow.

I shook my head, blinking away tears. Now I could see Stellan clearly. His face was pensive and sad but his eyes were clear, the same bright blue as the ocean. He was always handsome, but this version of Stellan filled my heart with a longing ache.

"You don't know everything I did," I said. "It's one thing to say I had to, but if you see every video, if you knew how weak I am..."

He shook his head. "I was weak too, Aurora. I don't deserve to judge you. And if you can find those videos, if you want me to watch them, I will." A muscle twitched in his cheek, as if he dreaded the thought. "And then I'll still be there by your side. We might both hate ourselves...but we can find a way to live with ourselves. And with each other."

I stared up at him, wanting to believe him, but not quite daring to do so. Stellan's gaze on mine was warm even in this hell hole.

For a second, I teetered at the edge of a frail hope.

And then I heard the start of the chanting.

CHAPTER 14

AURORA



“We have to get out of here!” The thought of being trapped down here by the cult terrified me. Cain and the others would eventually track us down—but they would never find us if we were buried alive. I scrambled for the stairs. I wanted Stellan right behind me, but he paused to grab the lantern, then raced behind me.

We emerged into the light of the basement just as the chanting grew louder and the first feet came into view on the stairs. Stellan kicked the panel back into place, hiding the subfloor from view, just before the first cult member emerged.

I breathed a sigh of relief because the sub-basement was closed.

Then it was on to the next disaster, because these people had seemed very interested in killing us already today.

“What do you want?” I demanded as the first cultist emerged.

He was an older man, someone’s grandpa most likely, his eyes shining with manic glee.

“We want you to take your place, of course, Delilah,” he said. “Prove to us that you’re truly your father’s daughter and not just some common whore who was never worthy of his name.”

“You people really need to learn a bit about sex positivity,” I muttered.

Five more cultists streamed down the stairs. But what made my heart stop was the sound of struggling on the stairs. Of a gagged scream. Of panic.

The last two cultists were wrestling a woman down the stairs. Her hands were bound, and her mouth gagged. Her hair was wild around her face, some strands stuck to her skin with tears and mucus. Her eyes were desperate.

“It’s going to be alright,” Stellan promised her, and I shot him a dark

look, because we might very well need to act as if we were willing to kill her. But then I saw how he was focused on her, the pain on his face—as if he was imagining Sophia on the stairs—and I softened.

How many rounds did he have in his gun? Given that he carried concealed, he might have just eight rounds in his magazine.

“I hope you’re better at shooting than you are at locking people in trunks,” I muttered.

The gun was already in his hand, hidden behind his back. “Too soon,” he repeated my words back to me, offering me a cocky smile that made my heart flip-flop.

Well, my heart was well and truly out of control. But I’d always loved him.

And also, I was a broken person.

The sight of Stellan ready to do violence—to save someone from turning into another of my father’s victims—turned me on a little.

“What do you want from me?” I demanded.

“We want you to kill her. Show us how it’s done,” one of them said. “Or have you completely abandoned your father’s ways?”

They looked at me as if they were eager to hurt me if that would make my father happy. They’d do anything for him. Follow me. Flay me. It could go either way. Bile rose in the back of my mouth. I was so disgusted by people who worshiped my father.

But I made myself smile.

“I’m down a table and some tools,” I drolled. “But I guess I can get creative.”

She let out a scream, as much as she could, and I gestured for them to give her to me.

One of them pushed her toward me.

I grabbed her and spun around, shielding her.

Stellan raised his gun and pointed it at the deranged grandpa, squeezing off two quick rounds. They each hit him in the center of mass, the sound so loud it made my ears pop. *No, Stellan, you don’t have enough rounds for two in the body, one in the head*, I thought desperately, suddenly willing to bet that was how he’d drilled at the gun range. Sure enough, he was moving on autopilot, already sighting in on the next cult member.

They were screaming, charging for the stairs or charging toward us, either way. For people who wanted to be hardened killers, they didn’t have a lot of

chill. It was embarrassing, really. “My father would despise you,” I said. “He probably already does.”

I shoved the bound girl toward the ground where she would be safer from the gunfire. Then I turned back to see another body slump to the ground. My ears buzzed, my hearing damaged from the gunfire in such close quarters. It made everything feel surreal as another cultist charged at me, their knife raised.

Stellan fired twice, and the man stopped, a look of horror spreading across his face at the same time as blood spread across his shirt. Then the man fell to his knees in front of me.

Two men leaped on Stellan at once, struggling to get control of his gun hand. The gun went off. Five shots. But Stellan tossed the gun toward me without hesitating, then set to work slamming one of them into the wall while the other tried to stab him from behind. I didn’t dare shoot at him when he was so close to Stellan, the three of them moving quickly, spinning in circles and trying to gain control. There was no clear angle to fire. I was just as likely to kill Stellan as to kill one of them.

The last two knife-carrying crazies ran toward me. At the same time, Stellan threw one of the men off him, and he slammed onto his back, his knife still gripped in his hand. Without hesitating, I shot him. He let out a scream, and I realized with disappointment I’d only hit his shoulder.

Two dead, one wounded, three still fully in play.

And one of them was almost on top of me. She looked like a middle-management type with her dark bob, but she wore the white robes and a crazed expression on her face. The cultists were convinced that only by coming close to death could they truly experience life.

She slashed me, managing to cut my outstretched forearm before I was able to bring the sights to her. I squeezed the trigger and she fell back, her chest exploding. Gore splattered over me at such close quarters.

“I hope that’s the epiphany you were hoping for,” Itaunted, and she lurched toward me and I fired again. She fell back and stopped moving.

Seven shots, right? Had I counted right? I wasn’t sure if Stellan had fired more rounds when I looked away, focused on the victim.

“Traitor,” the cult member near me accused. She slashed at me, and I pulled the trigger and... nothing. I’d miscounted. I’d lost track of a round.

Now the gun was nothing but a fancy club.

I threw it at her and went to pull my knife.

But while I was still getting it out of my pocket, she fell onto Stellan's back. She and the last man drove Stellan into the wall, trying to stab him. He held the man's wrist with the blade away from him and delivered a few sharp, punishing punches to the man's side. Pulling the knife free, I then grabbed her and threw her off Stellan, before moving to stab her.

Stellan finally put down the man who had attacked him, punching him over and over, the sounds increasingly wet as Stellan lost himself to his rage.

The woman slashed back at me, the two of us circling each other, stepping carefully over the bodies, trying to find an angle.

The wounded man stabbed my leg. I let out a gasp of pain as the knife pierced through my calf, and I stumbled.

The woman lunged at me and shoved me into the wall. She raised the knife to drive it home.

Stellan was there, grabbing her wrist, yanking her away from me. He slammed her into the wall, his hand wrapping her throat.

She stabbed him, driving the knife into his abs. He winced and his fingers tightened on her throat. He dragged the blade out of his stomach and drove it into hers instead. She let out a gasp, then went limp.

He let her fall.

I dared to exhale. We'd killed five. Now to finish the wounded one.

I turned to find him as movement caught my attention.

The wounded man had crawled to the woman with the bound hands—and drove the knife into her side. The woman screamed and so did I.

Her blood spilled across the slick basement floor.

I ran to her, trying to find something to staunch her bleeding until we could get emergency help. She was dying, though. Fast.

"It's going to be alright," I lied. I pressed the wound, trying to keep her from losing any more blood. Over my shoulder, I called, "Stellan? You okay?"

"Never better," he said through gritted teeth. "I really, really hate your father's friends."

"Same."

Footsteps on the stairs. *Fuck.*

"And now there are about to be more of them."

The crazies had reinforcements.

CHAPTER 15

REMINGTON



I stepped off the stairs and into a circle of hell.

Stellan staggered between me and Aurora, his arm clutched over the bleeding wound in his side and a bloody knife gripped in his other hand. He looked resolute and dangerous in the second before he recognized me.

Seven bodies littered the floor. Blood was everywhere, splattered on the walls and in puddles underfoot. My heart froze. Aurora...

And then I saw her among the chaos, kneeling, trying frantically to revive the seventh body.

Cain bulled past me. He'd been trying to get down here first, but I'd slipped past him.

"Aurora," he snapped, sounding furious.

The next moment, he pulled her up from the floor and wrapped her in his arms. "Are you all right?"

He sounded nothing but pissed. This was probably the closest Cain could come to caring. It was cute, really.

"We've got to help her," she said desperately.

Cain leaned down over the body and pressed his fingers to her throat. "She's already gone."

"No," Aurora managed, looking heartbroken. "They were going to make her into another victim like all my father's... I wanted to save her... to save someone for once..."

"Aurora," Stellan reached for her, but I grabbed his shoulder and reeled him back.

"I think you're in trouble," I said mildly. "And I'm not sure if she wants you to touch her."

Stellan tried to shake me off, but he'd clearly lost a lot of blood.

"It's a good thing she's dead," Cain told Aurora harshly. "You don't need to be tied to this mess. We'll get it cleaned up and you can walk away like nothing ever happened."

Aurora stared at him. "You're a..."

"Psychopath who doesn't give a shit about anyone but you? And..." Cain cast a quick glance around at the rest of us. "Maybe them. Maybe."

"I know you love me, Cain. Your act doesn't convince me," I teased. All I wanted to do was wrap my arms around Aurora and carry her out of this mess. Her eyes were still wide and she was soaked with blood. Anger tightened my stomach at the thought any of it could be hers.

"You've been stabbed," Pax said to Stellan. "Are you alright? You dying?"

Stellan shook his head. "No, not dying. I'll be fine."

"Glad to hear it," Pax said pleasantly, then punched Stellan across the face.

Stellan flew back, and it was only because I already had my hand on his shoulder that I was able to break his fall. I slowed his plummet toward the ground before he hit the cement on his shoulders.

Stellan lay there and groaned.

"Jesus Christ, Pax, not pulling your punches today, are you?" I asked.

Pax stood over Stellan, looking furious. "What the fuck did you do to Aurora?"

"This reckoning can wait until later," I interrupted. God, these bastards needed me. "I need to call a clean-up crew in and...are we killing Stellan?"

My voice sounded conversational. Stellan sat up on the floor, groaning, and put his hand to his jaw. His face paled slightly at the threat.

"No," Aurora exclaimed, sounding exasperated. "Stop it. No more hitting him."

"I don't need to hit him to kill him," Cain said. "I can be creative."

"No!" Aurora shook her finger in his face as if he were a naughty puppy. "No hurting Stellan."

Cain gave her a doubtful look as if he couldn't make any promises.

"Well, in that case," I said, "we need to call in a surgeon to clean up that wound." Aurora took a step, awkwardly, and I realized she was limping. "And Aurora's."

Cain's gaze snapped to her.

“I’ll survive,” she said, raising both her hands. “No need to go nuclear.”

“Pax, you call in the surgeon,” I said, because my two friends were both idiots who wanted to vent their anger and protectiveness. I’d be the one who swept in...and got to touch her. “Make sure Stellan gets all healed up.”

I swept Aurora off her feet and into my arms. She let out a gasp of surprise, but her arms circled my neck, and I felt a surge of joy. Her weight against my chest felt like all was right with the world again.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” I told her.

“You’re just leaving us to deal with this?” Pax asked.

“Someone has to look after Aurora and you all seemed more interested in mayhem,” I said easily. “Get the story from Stellan so we can make sure the threat’s dealt with.”

I carried Aurora upstairs. She started shaking in my arms, and from the look on her face, she felt embarrassed.

“Adrenaline letdown,” I said. “Happens to me too. No shame.”

She let her head fall onto my shoulder. “All I feel in this house is shame.”

“Then let me make you feel something else.”

She raised a blood-crusted eyebrow. “Remington...”

But she let me carry her next door into Stellan’s house, moving through the backyards because I didn’t want to risk anyone seeing her like this. I already knew the house was empty; we’d gone there first, trying to track Stellan and Aurora. We hadn’t heard the gunshots or the screams; the house was too well sound-proofed. The thought that Aurora could be in trouble and I might not know was a grating one, and anger closed around me again like a fist. I grounded myself, looking into those violet-blue eyes.

I started the tub running, then set her on the edge of the sink and knelt to examine the stab wound.

“We can’t do this here,” she said. “I don’t want to leave evidence in Stellan’s house...”

“We’re good at clean-up work,” I promised her. “Don’t miss the chance to watch Pax on his hands and knees scrubbing, all right? It’s a rare glimpse of a domestic side that I think you need to see.”

She finally gave in and smiled.

“It’s a shallow cut, although I’m sure it hurts like a bitch,” I said, holding her slender calf in my hands to examine the wound. “We’ll get you stitches to be sure. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She looked up at me with those luminous eyes as I undressed her, and I

was reminded all over again that I would do anything for her. I loved when she looked at me like that.

“You know, it’s pretty rude to save yourself when we were trying to ride in like white knights to save the day,” I said.

“Sorry.” She couldn’t resist a smile that slowly stole over those kissable pink lips. “But you don’t seem like the white knight types.”

“Dark knights, then. But yours,” I promised her, and as I leaned forward, she wrapped her arms around my neck.

No matter how dark and stained we were, I felt like a hero when she wrapped her arms around me.

I lifted her into the warm bath and washed her, caressing each limb until the water was pink and she was clean, then drained the tub and began to refill it. This time, I washed her more slowly, watching her eyes grow heavy-lidded as if she trusted me.

I wanted to know everything that happened while we were apart, but for now, this moment felt like the only thing that mattered.

My hand slid between her thighs, the washcloth tracing over her folds, and her hips lifted subtly toward me. I abandoned the washcloth, working my hand between her thighs until her hips rocked out of the water.

She was so gorgeous, with her long white-blond hair flowing around her shoulders, her skin shiny from the water, her perfect breasts with her nipples tight and sharp. She was perfect. She was more than we deserved.

But as Cain had said, we would take her anyway.

I worked my hand against her, driving my fingers inside her soft, wet heat. She squirmed against the edge of the tub, her fingers tangling in her hair. Her hips rocked frantically against my hand and then she subsided with a moan, collapsing into the water. My cock was so hard it hurt, but that didn’t matter. She was too hurt and exhausted to fuck right now. And...pleasing her made me happy.

“I’ll be right back with some clothes,” I told her.

Her eyes snapped open. “No, I can’t wear anything of hers...”

I was confused for a second. Then I explained, “Pax packed your own clothes. He was sure we would find you.”

“Oh.” She looked as perplexed as I had just felt. “That’s sweet.”

“Yeah, well, don’t tell him.”

My cell phone chimed impatiently. Over and over. It was Cain’s special signal that I’d programmed in to represent him, and in my head, I thought it

sounded like a two-syllable chime. Ass hole.

Where are you? The surgeon is here.

I helped Aurora dress and then, before she could fight me, I swept her into my arms.

“Let’s get you all fixed up,” I said, pressing a kiss to her forehead as I carried her back through the house. “You’re going to need your strength to deal with Cain’s all-new levels of crazy.”

“Oh?” she asked, her brows rising.

“Well, he’s never been in love before,” I said, just before we stepped into the house. She made a shocked sound, but the others were waiting inside and so she didn’t get a chance to retort. I just smiled at her wickedly, and she smiled back slowly.

Cain paced as the surgeon tended her wound. Stellan sat in the corner and groaned, and no one felt sorry for him. I was pretty sure it was only Aurora’s presence that kept Pax from hitting him again.

Then, when Cain had supervised the start of the cleanup crew, and the bodies had been dragged out, we headed back to the hotel. I was probably the only one excited about what would come next. Stellan looked full of dread, even more so than he had about getting stitches without a local anesthetic. Aurora’s chin rose determinedly, as if she were going to make sure Stellan was safe.

Pax and Cain looked psychotic, as usual. But what was unusual was their protectiveness.

She was upending our whole world, and I was living for it. And not just—although partially—because I lived for drama.

The world in general—and the Sphinx in particular—was better with Aurora in it, and she belonged with us.

CHAPTER 16

CAIN



I kept a firm grip on the back of Aurora's neck as we marched into the lobby of the hotel where we'd booked a few rooms for the night. I wasn't about to stay in Stellan's house, trying to sleep on the couch or huddled in a twin-size bed. Not to mention the fact the place felt like it was haunted.

No, thank you.

Remington had already arranged for us to be checked in, so we bypassed the front desk, the hotel employee sending fuck me eyes after us as we headed towards the elevator.

Pathetic sheep yearning after wolves.

Paxton had a firm grip on Stellan's shirt, a gun hidden in his coat pointed directly at his spinal cord just in case Stellan got a wild hair and decided to try and leave.

Probably unnecessary since I was pretty sure his balls had become surgically attached to wherever Aurora happened to be. But it was still fun to keep him guessing.

Remington was whistling annoyingly, his gaze locked on the back of Aurora, yearning pathetically after her.

He was letting me take the lead though, which was smart.

We got into the elevator, and Aurora growled the second the door was closed.

"I'm not a dog, Cain," Aurora snapped, trying to pull her neck out of my grip. I just chuckled and squeezed tighter, not admitting to myself how much trouble I was having with the concept of doing something like letting her go.

"I know you're not a dog, little devil. But I'm not too pleased with the fact that you didn't kill Stellan—or at least maim him—to get back to me."

She bit her lip and I nuzzled into her hair, ignoring the incredulous look Pax was giving me as he watched me fawn over my girl.

“We had a mission,” she finally said stubbornly, and I sighed, annoyed that she wasn’t getting it.

Her only mission was to be with me. When was she going to learn that?

The elevator door opened and Pax frog marched Stellan down the hallway to one of our rooms.

“You’ve given up on the idea of killing him, right?” Aurora asked hesitantly.

“Mmmh. Still debating.” I stroked her shoulder, my fingers getting caught on a bandage there.

“Never mind. He’s definitely going to die,” I growled, letting her go and stalking after him.

“No. Cain. I did that,” she called out frantically.

I skidded to a halt and turned and frowned at her. “You tore out your tracker? Why the fuck would you do that.”

She waved her hands in the air in front of her, flustered. I sighed and grabbed her arm, pulling her through the doorway and into the room that Paxton had just unlocked.

Aurora yawned nonchalantly as she slid past me, jumping on the bed and spreading her limbs like some sort of sexy-looking starfish.

Not that I usually found starfish sexy.

Paxton threw Stellan to the ground and he growled and stood up. “Fuck you, Paxton.”

Pax just smiled at him as I clicked my tongue.

“The three of you are exhausting,” sighed Remington as he closed the room door behind us and locked it.

“Don’t worry, Remington. The fun’s about to start—stop looking at her,” I snapped at Stellan, who was staring at Aurora a bit obsessively.

Being obsessed with Aurora was my thing.

Aurora was tracking me with her gaze, not willing to take her eyes off the biggest predator in the room.

Smart girl.

“Now, Aurora, I’m not happy that you took out the tracker specifically meant to keep you safe,” I said, leaning over her on the bed.

That fire that I loved so much sprang to life in her gaze.

“You mean the tracker that you put in me without my consent?” she asked

sarcastically. I grabbed her chin, squeezing her cheeks.

"Is that how you talk to me?"

She just glared at me, her breath coming out in gasps, and a faint flush to her cheeks. That was one of the things I loved about Aurora--she was just as fucked up as I was. She got off on the crazy.

I let go of her face and she dropped back to the bed. Then I slowly turned around to face Stellan.

"I've decided not to kill you," I said calmly, a glimmer of satisfaction flickering in my chest at the look of relief on his face. "But I am going to punish you," I continued.

"Okay, what's it gonna be? Drain my bank accounts? Make me in charge of the pledges? Do your homework for the rest of the year? Chop off my balls?"

I chuckled, enjoying how his skin paled at the sound.

"Maybe all of that will come, but I had something more...immediate in mind."

"Are you going to cut off one of his fingers? Make him bathe in bleach? Tear off his fingernails one by one?" Remington drawled. "Because if that's what's happening right now, I'm going to order a pizza and take a nap. This whole saving the damsel in distress and her loser boyfriend has tuckered me out," he drawled, giving Aurora an annoying wink.

Pax scoffed next to him, looking a little worried that I was going to do some of those things.

Maybe with anyone else I would have, and it was going to take a while before Stellan made it back into my so-called circle of trust, but Aurora would be really upset if I decided to kill him off. And maybe I'd miss him a bit too. So I had something else in mind, something a bit more *fun* than bloodshed.

Something that was really going to drive him crazy.

"Tie him to a chair," I ordered sternly.

Stellan's eyes widened, but he didn't try to move as Pax grabbed him and shoved him over to the antique wooden chair that I'd pulled out when we first came into the room. A minute later, Stellan was tied to the chair, his arms pulled behind him awkwardly, and his legs secured to the chair legs.

"Cain," Aurora chided, but I ignored her, for now.

I slowly walked towards Stellan. He was furious, but I could see the guilt in his gaze. Stellan wanted to be punished for what he'd done. He wanted me

to do something to make him look better in Aurora's eyes.

Stupid fucker.

But he definitely wasn't going to want this.

I crouched down in front of him and gave him the deadly smile that I'd perfected, guaranteed to put fear in the hearts of...well, everyone.

"Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to fuck Aurora in front of you. And you're going to watch. And at the end, you're going to clean her up."

"Get fucked, Cain," he said through gritted teeth.

"I intend to," I chuckled, knowing that he wasn't fully comprehending what I'd just told him was going to take place.

Remington and Pax were restless against the wall. "Going to stay and watch?" I taunted.

Pax just huffed out an annoyed grunt but made no move to leave...while Remington looked jealous.

"I'm going to go order that pizza now," he said. "Don't do anything to my girl," he warned before shooting Aurora a yearning look and leaving the room.

Aurora keened softly, and I turned to her. Her eyes were blown out, and she was rubbing her thighs together as she lay there. Evidently, she liked my plan. A lot.

I ambled towards her. "Say you're sorry," I ordered, as my palm caressed her mound over her jeans. "Tell me."

"I'm sorry," she said through trembling lips. "You should punish me," she taunted, the words coming out breathlessly.

"Fuck, little devil," I groaned, faintly aware of Pax settling himself into one of the armchairs, and Stellan's furious gaze boring holes into the back of my head.

"You want me to punish you?"

"I want it to hurt."

"Hmm. I don't know that you're in a position to be requesting things, love. You're going to have to beg a little better than that."

"Please," she rasped. "I fucking need it." She gripped my arms, pulling me towards her until I was bracing myself on top of her. I pulled out a knife from my pocket and flicked it open, trailing it down the front of her shirt until I got to the top of her jeans.

"Aurora, you don't have to do this," said Stellan angrily. A flicker of unease lit up her gaze, but I watched as she pushed it away, determined for

Stellan not to have a say in what was about to occur.

"Stellan, if you talk again, I'm going to cut out your fucking tongue," I threw over my shoulder, not taking my gaze away from Aurora's perfect face. Stellan grunted in answer, but he didn't say anything else.

He knew I wasn't kidding.

Don't fucking move," I growled, watching in satisfaction as her whole body melted against the bed and she just stared up at me submissively. I took the knife and cut the button off the front of her pants, before I sliced down the front of her shirt, revealing her perfect fucking tits encased like a present in a black lace bra.

"Naughty Aurora," I chided softly. "Wearing this when I wasn't around."

Aurora

I didn't recognize myself. Not here lying on the bed, my breath coming out in gasps as I stared up at Cain's beautiful face.

Maybe we'd always been moving towards this moment, when I needed the pain perhaps more than the pleasure. And if that was so, would I ever be able to walk away from them when this was what I needed?

"What did I say about moving?" he growled, and I realized that I was thrashing against the bed, begging for him to touch me.

Now that I was bared to him, he took his time sliding his fingers down my skin.

"Remember that you asked for this," he murmured silkily, and I shivered as the command in his voice had me softening, wanting to offer myself to him. He began to force his fingers inside of me, and I moaned as I was stretched open. I was already swollen, from how turned on I was just being in this situation.

And all the while, I felt the heavy, hot gazes of Stellan and Paxton on my skin.

"I want to hear everything," Cain ordered as he pushed another finger in.

A hitched sob slid from my throat. He had four fingers inside of me now. And it burned, tingles cascading all over my skin.

"You were made for me. You love me hurting you just as much as I love hurting you."

I squeezed my eyes closed, not wanting to face the truth. We did belong together like this. Because it wasn't a want anymore. I craved the pain. The darkness inside of me was fully in control, and I was ready for anything that Cain was willing to offer.

"More," I begged.

He'd shifted so he was straddling my legs, his free hand on my hip, holding me down so I couldn't move.

"Were you trying to get my attention? Is that why you left me?"

My eyes flew open at his questions. "I didn't exactly ask to be stuffed in a trunk," I complained in a gasp.

I heard Stellan huff, and my gaze darted over to him, even as Cain continued to move his fingers in and out of me.

Stellan's gaze was wild. I could see the war on his face; he was turned on seeing me like this, but at the same time, he hated it.

Maybe this was the perfect punishment for him.

I cried out as Cain finally inserted his thumb, and then his whole hand was inside of me, pain searing through me, the stress and anxiety of the last few days fading away until all I could think about was just this moment.

"Never again," he growled. "You're never going to leave me again. I don't care what it takes. I don't care who it is. You kill any motherfucker that dares to keep you from me." His hand stilled. "Do you understand?"

It was hard to form words. All of my attention was caught by the intense pressure at my core.

He forced his fingers further in and I cried out again.

I heard Stellan's "fuck," and the rattle of the chair, but I lost the ability to move along with talking, so I couldn't see what he was doing.

"Aurora," Cain said calmly. "Do. You. Understand?"

"Yes," I finally gasped, the words bubbling out of me.

"Now do you need something?" he asked, almost sweetly.

"To come," I begged.

"You're not coming with anything but my cock." He pulled his fingers out, and before I could even take a breath, his huge, pierced dick was plunging inside of me, feeling even bigger than his fist had.

"Fucking hell," I heard Paxton mutter as we began to move together frantically. There was this crazed energy between us. We were desperate for each other. I wanted everything he could give me.

"Yes," I screamed, my head arching from the bed as I tried to move

harder against him.

"You know who owns you, don't you, little devil?" His voice was primal and ragged, his dark energy almost suffocating.

"Hurt me. Do it, Cain."

One of his hands moved to my throat as he angled his hips, pushing into me so hard and so far that I could swear he was hitting my cervix. His hand began to tighten around my throat, and colorful sparks filled my vision as my oxygen dwindled.

Pleasure like I'd never experienced before was coursing through me. Every hard and painful thrust added more.

"Is this what you want? You want to make sure you can feel me everywhere?" he breathed as his hand tightened. Darkness was beginning to cloud my vision. His face was surrounded by it. Cain's lips crashed against me, his tongue licking into my mouth. He was feeding me his breaths.

Just when I was about to pass out, his hands darted between us, frantically circling my clit until I exploded, the most intense pleasure of my life shattering me into oblivion.

His hand released its hold around my neck as tears began to fall down my face. I was feeling too much. It was like this with all of them. I didn't know if I was obsessed or I was addicted...all I knew was that I didn't want to stop.

Cain's thrusts began to shorten as he chased his release. Paxton groaned, his pained voice joining the erotic soundtrack filling the room as our hips slapped together wet and noisily.

Cain gripped my chin, making sure that I was watching him as he came, and then somehow, I followed after him once again. He moved in and out of me a few more times and then gasped, falling on top of me.

I was trembling all over, but Cain didn't try to soothe me. Instead, he pulled out of me and grabbed a knife from his discarded pants before walking over to where Stellan was bound.

"Ready for your punishment?" he purred. I shifted on the bed, wild emotions still pulsing through me.

"And what's that?" growled Stellan. "I'm not sucking your dick if that's what you're about to suggest."

Cain threw his head back and laughed wickedly, his hard dick bobbing as his whole body shook. "You'd suck my dick if I asked, Stellan." He scraped the knife across Stellan's neck. "No doubt about that. You'd do anything to keep Aurora."

“Aurora’s mine,” Stellan growled. I noted that his pants were wet around his crotch where he’d come from the show we’d just put on. He must have hated that.

“No,” Cain answered calmly. “Aurora’s mine. But if you’re good, you can have her too.” Abruptly, he sliced at the ropes binding Stellan so he was free. “Now go clean her up like a good boy.”

“Clean her up?” Stellan asked, confused. I glanced over at Paxton only to see he already had a tissue and was wiping the cum off his abs, his beautiful dick still out of his pants. A rush of heat flashed through me just thinking of him jacking off while watching me.

I wished that I’d been paying attention enough to see it.

“That’s easy enough,” said Stellan, taking a step forward to get to the bathroom, presumably to get a washcloth.

Cain’s hand shot out and grabbed his shoulder. “Not like that. You’re going to clean her up a bit more personally.”

Fuck.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me, Cain.”

Cain laughed again and dragged him towards the bed.

“Not happening.”

Cain swiftly moved his knife so it was stretched across Stellan’s throat, pushing in so far to the skin that beads of crimson blood began to slide down his skin...a mimicry of a move I’d done to that same throat just a few days before. “I will kill you,” Cain murmured calmly.

And there was no doubt in my mind that he meant it too.

“Cain,” Paxton chided. Cain didn’t even grace him with a look.

“What will it be, Stellan? Me slicing your throat right now and throwing you in the woods somewhere in an unmarked grave...or...”

They stared at each other, a tic in Stellan’s cheek, heat coursing through his gaze.

He shook Cain off, letting the blade drag through his skin a bit more in the process, and stalked towards me.

Cain had cum...a lot, and it was dripping out of me.

Stellan slid determinedly up onto the bed and then gripped my thighs tightly as he forced them open.

“Make it good for her,” Cain ordered.

Stellan’s gaze pierced into me and then he lowered his head between my legs. After a moment’s hesitation, he began to lap and suck at my clit, and the

heat that had never fully subsided began to grow once more. Something about this turned me on so hard. I loved the image of Stellan between my legs as his fingers joined his mouth in his efforts. He licked and sucked until another absolutely devastating orgasm tore through me. And then he kept on going as he ate at me hungrily. Only when I'd come once more and my sobs were echoing around the room did he stop, pulling his head from between my legs, his mouth glistening with a mix of Cain's and my juices.

"Lick your fingers," Cain ordered, stroking his cock lazily as he watched us with satisfaction.

Stellan glared at him before sucking on his wet fingers.

"Satisfied?" he finally said.

"Almost," Cain replied, and then he lunged towards him and stabbed him in the shoulder.

"Fuck," Stellan roared as Paxton jumped from his seat.

"Get him stitched up," Cain tossed out as he scooped me up from the bed and threw me over his shoulder as he strode towards the bathroom.

"You're crazy," I gasped, watching as Stellan wrenched the knife out of his shoulder with gritted teeth, blood flowing down his chest.

"You love it," Cain said confidently.

And as we went into the bathroom, where Cain would take me once more against the shower wall...

I was afraid that he was right.

CHAPTER 17

AURORA



"Master," he rasped respectfully in that cold way of his as he knelt at the Demon's feet. The guy was an idiot—willingly walking into my father's web. How could you have respect for someone like this? He would've done anything my father had asked. He was a worm, albeit a scary worm, and I was pretty sure that after the Demon decided he wasn't useful anymore, he would be joining the worms in the ground.

"Did you find someone?" the Demon asked, like the guy wasn't on the floor right now, kneeling before him...practically licking his shoes.

"I think so," he responded cautiously, shooting me a glance with his watery blue eyes.

"You think so?" the Demon repeated as he bent over and grabbed the guy around the neck, hauling him to his feet. Bentley didn't seem scared; he looked like he was getting off on the mere fact that the Demon was touching him and paying him so much attention.

I shook my head in disgust.

"He was on the sex offender list. And then I caught him staring at kids at the park for several days in a row. I followed him home and he was looking at...porn on the computer," Bentley explained. That seemed to satisfy my father that he had another victim—not that we didn't already have one in the basement.

She'd been forced to eat with us last night. A local teacher, who the Demon said had been taking advantage of the students.

If you asked me, Bentley was most likely to have the perfect rap sheet for the Demon's next kill. I would've suggested it if the Demon hadn't been so mad at me about last night. I'd refused to force our guests to eat her fingers

with her potatoes.

So the Demon had to do it himself.

"Delilah, you and Bentley go play with our guest downstairs," he ordered smoothly.

My stomach dropped. I did not want to be alone with this guy. He stared at me almost as worshipfully as he did the Demon. And I wasn't ready to become a skin suit, not after I'd lasted this long with my father.

The Demon was still holding Bentley by the throat, but now Bentley's cool mask had slipped at the idea of spending time with me.

"I have a calculus test tomorrow," I interjected in a measured voice. "The teacher just sprung it on us. I'm worried I might fail." It was only a half-lie; I'd known about the test for a week, but it was the only thing I possessed in my arsenal to stave off an evening with Bentley. Something I'd like about as much as I'd liked torturing someone.

Which meant not at all.

The Demon assessed me, trying to see through the mask he'd taught me to wear, to see if I was just making up an excuse.

"Very well," he finally relented, releasing Bentley and walking towards the basement stairs. "I'll show Bentley the proper way to use pliers." I made sure to keep my face blank, even though relief was bleating through me. Bentley shot me a longing stare that made revulsion spike down my spine, but he followed after the Demon.

My breath came out in a gasp when I heard the basement door open—I'd be spared just one night.

The one thing I needed, though, was for Bentley to stop being such a good psychopath, because every day I was becoming more and more replaceable to the Demon.

It would be extremely disappointing if Bentley was the cause of my doom.

My eyes shot open with a gasp, the dream sticking with me, scratching against my skin. I hadn't thought about my father's apprentice in a very long time. This town was bringing up too many memories.

I could hear the soft breathing of Cain next to me, and I carefully slid out of bed to wash my face and try to recover from the dream.

"What did you dream about?" Pax's voice questioned roughly in the darkness. I jumped, searching the shadows, only to finally see his huge form in one of the large armchairs against the wall.

I hesitated for a moment, my ever present walls standing at attention.

"The usual," I finally whispered. I took a step toward him. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

He laughed softly, the sound somehow painful and raw. "I haven't been sleeping much," he murmured, and I could hear the missing part of the sentence: *since you left*.

"My father had an apprentice, towards the end. I was terrified that he was going to replace me because I began to push back with what the Demon wanted me to do. That's what my dream was tonight."

I didn't usually share any details when we had these nighttime interactions, so I could tell from the silence that I'd caught him off guard.

Without waiting for him to say something, I turned and strode into the bathroom, closing the door softly behind me so I was able to have a moment alone.

I stared at my shadow-ridden face, hating that it would never be possible to get rid of the haunted emptiness in my gaze. Turning on the faucet, I splashed cold water on my face, trying to wash off the layer of dread I always had after a nightmare. And that hadn't even been a bad one.

Sighing, I switched off the light, opened the door, and walked back into the dark bedroom. Paxton was still just sitting in that chair. Shaking my head, I walked over to him and grabbed his hand. His eyes flickered with surprise as he stared up at me, twin candlelights shining in the darkness of the room.

"What are you doing?" he asked gruffly.

"About to get some sleep."

After what seemed like forever, he let me pull him to his feet and drag him towards the bed, his hand warm and rough in mine. I slid under the sheets, pulling them aside so Paxton could climb in behind me. Cain was somehow still sleeping, his soft breaths surrounding me as he nuzzled up behind my other side.

It still was weird to me that Cain...was a cuddler.

Paxton and I lay there, just staring at each other.

"Do you think they'll ever go away?" I whispered to him.

He reached out and trailed a finger down the side of my cheek, stroking my skin gently like I was made of porcelain and could shatter into a thousand pieces.

"They go away with you," he finally admitted to my astonishment.

Something warm burst in my chest. Different from the dark and needy emotion Cain had brought to life earlier. Without second-guessing myself, I

leaned forward and pressed my lips against his. After a pause where he didn't respond, I pulled away, or tried to, but then his hands were cradling my face, holding my lips softly against his. The kiss was so tender, I felt dazed.

I drowned in his supple kiss, as his tongue slipped in, giving me long, deep licks that went straight to my core.

One of his hands slid from my face, over my breast and my stomach, until he got to my underwear. His fingers brushed softly over my clit, the fabric wet already from the way his lips were artfully tearing me apart.

"Perfect," he murmured, as his fingers slipped under my panty line, rubbing through my soaked folds.

He caught my bleating whimper with his decadent kiss. I was sore; Cain had made sure of that. But I was unable to resist Paxton's soft touch. I started to move against him, riding his fingers as they continued to stroke my skin.

Pax finally took pity on me, two fingers sliding inside of me, immediately finding the perfect spot. I closed my eyes, feeling like the fingers weren't even necessary—I could come just from the way he was kissing me.

And I did cum, moments later, gasping into his mouth as pleasure tore through me. He gave me another slow, panty-melting kiss before removing his fingers and licking them.

I reached between us to return the favor, but he caught my hand. "Not tonight," he murmured, his voice thick with arousal.

"Why?" I almost whined, because taking care of him sounded like a good distraction from the dark thoughts coursing through me.

"Go to sleep, baby," he whispered, brushing a kiss against my forehead. And I fucking melted. Paxton calling me "baby" was next level, get pregnant shit.

And strangely...I did fall asleep.

And like usual when I was in Pax's arms, I didn't dream at all.

CHAPTER 18

REMINGTON



In the morning, Cain walked into the living room of our suite, looking disgruntled.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Need your morning frappuccino with extra whip to wipe the frown off your face?”

Cain ignored me pointedly, which was fifty percent of our interactions. He didn’t appreciate my sense of humor. He was probably jealous. Psychopaths are no fun at parties. But then he explained, “Pax is still cuddled up with Aurora.”

“Taking your place?” I asked sympathetically. “Well, if it makes you feel better, Stellan didn’t have the best night’s sleep. I guess those stitches still hurt.”

Cain grunted. “Are there any more of those cult members left that attacked Aurora? Or were all of them in the basement?”

“You want me to see if I can find a membership roll? I can’t imagine serial killer cults keep...” I trailed off, my fingers already dancing over the keyboard and my brain taken up by the task.

As I worked, Cain went on, “If there’s anyone else left who is a threat to her, this is a good time to exterminate them. And we should plant evidence, make it look as if they were responsible for the Senator’s murder. That will take the heat off Aurora.”

“Trying to make it so our sweet girl can run from us? That’s new.”

He shook his head. “She won’t run.”

I whistled. “I’ve never seen you like this before. In love.”

Cain gave me a dark glare. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Mark my words, you’ll be telling that girl, *I love you, shmoopums*, by

the end of the month.”

“I should’ve stabbed you too,” Cain muttered, looking as if he were reliving the moment he stabbed Stellan, but imagining my face.

“Well, well, well. Don’t pretend you don’t love me too, Cain. It turns out our idiot cult members have a message server. It seems we have a few die-hard members who couldn’t sneak away to terrorize Aurora the other day. And they’re all terrified at the moment—as well they should be—and are getting together in person to plan later today.”

“Great,” Cain said. “Get me all the info. Pax and I will go take care of them.”

“Why don’t you and I go?” I didn’t bother glancing up from the laptop, but I could feel Cain’s reluctance radiating from his big frame.

“Why?”

“We hardly ever get quality time together anymore.”

He grunted and started for the bedroom, doubtless to tear Pax out of the bed by his ankles.

“She’s mine too, you know,” I said. “I’ll do anything to protect her.”

He stopped, his back still to me. “Did you tell her you love her?”

“Christ, no. What the fuck do you think I am?”

Cain turned around, looking as if he doubted all his life choices. “Fine. But you have to promise to talk...less.”

“I cannot make that promise.”

There were three other cult members that had come to town, but they hadn’t been in the basement—as far as I could tell—judging from the frantic communication between them after their friends disappeared. They were all meeting to discuss recent events in person at a church on the outskirts of town.

“Criminal geniuses, they are not,” I quipped.

The two of us armed up. I checked on Stellan, who was still sleeping—I’d taken pity on him and given him some of the drug he’d given Aurora. Turnabout’s fair play. He’d been in so much pain, and at least he was sleeping now.

But I had to shake him awake. He started up. “Sophia?” The word tumbled from his lips as he looked at me wild-eyed.

It took me a second to remember that was the name of his sister, and then I felt like an asshole. “Not yet.”

Cain was going to want to head back to campus. Pax and I had soccer

games, Cain had football, we all had to run the Sphinx... and Cain had his internship in crime to continue, from the sex club to his father's business. But Stellan was going to want to stay here and finish what he'd started. I didn't feel optimistic about the odds we'd track down the end of this cold case. But I knew what Aurora would choose.

"Look at these people." I turned my laptop around to face him, and he swiped his hand through his hair, trying to focus on the screen when he still looked groggy. "Were they there in the park? We didn't find their bodies in the basement."

He stared at their faces, then looked up at me. "What are you up to?"

"I'm trying to make sure Cain and I are protecting Aurora and not just committing the murder of some deeply unwise souls."

He scoffed. "You're more careful than Cain would be. He'd say it's worth it."

"I'm not a cold-blooded murderer." It was true. I didn't want to kill anyone—I was capable of doing whatever had to be done, but it would never be... nothing to me. Not like it was for Cain.

"They were there." He sounded sure of himself, then winced as he moved his arm. "I won't forget those faces."

I shrugged. "After today, you might as well."

Then Cain and I headed out, leaving Pax and Aurora snuggling. It hardly seemed fair.

Cain and I drove to the location on the outskirts of town where the cult was meeting. On our way, we plotted how we could implicate them in my father's murder.

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," I muttered, thinking about my father's death and about how much sooner I should've had him killed. He should never have had the chance to kidnap Aurora and *touch* her... the thought of his disgusting hands on her body made me instantly furious.

"He's dead now," Cain said. "No need to worry about him."

Cain would make a terrible therapist. Since he had the emotional range of a wasp, he assumed the rest of us were the same way.

I pulled my wallet out and withdrew the photo tucked inside of my little

siblings. My father's handwriting was on the back, his lean cursive in Latin. *Dignus esse.*

Be worthy.

It had been a warning for me. If I wasn't worthy, my siblings would be punished for my failures. But anyone who wasn't an evil lunatic would assume my father had carried the photo to motivate him to be a good father and man. It would seem as if these cult members had stolen it from my father before they tortured him.

"They'll believe this is his," I said, wiping the prints off it. "A souvenir."

"They do seem like amateurs. So we make it look like two of them killed the other, and hopefully the cops will jump on the idea they were the ones behind your father's murder. They'll surely want to close that case."

We reached the abandoned old church where they were planning to meet. The once-white building's paint was peeling and the yard was overgrown, green and wild. But three cars were parked in the lot behind the church, where grass peeked out from between old gravel.

"I love churches," Cain said, and I wasn't quite sure what to make of that statement.

The two of us snuck to check the doors of the church. They'd locked themselves in, but I was carrying my lockpicking kit, and I made short work of the lock.

Then we walked into the lobby that smelled of wood rot; through the open doors, I caught a glimpse of boarded-up stained glass windows. There were voices coming from the basement; twin stairs to either side of the lobby led down. Cain gestured for me to take one side and he took the other.

Two men and a woman stood in the church basement, arguing.

"Damien and I found the woman walking home," she said. "I stopped and offered to give her a ride while he hid in the trunk. There was nothing suspicious about her, I swear to God."

"But then you didn't go with him to the Demon's temple."

"I had to get to work!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose, wondering how it was possible people like this could be gainfully employed.

"What happened to them?" The man twisted his hands, casting a nervous glance around, and I moved back behind the doorway. "Who's there?"

"Stop panicking," the other man said. "There's no one there. We just have to keep moving. We have to prepare for the Demon's return. The Daughter

has turned herself into our enemy. But we can't stop."

I frowned at that thought—was this wishful thinking, or was there a plan to help the Demon escape? But I didn't have time to discuss it.

"If you assholes want someone to worship so much, why don't you make me your god?" Cain demanded as he strode into the room. For a second, I could just imagine him slipping into the role of cult leader. Honestly, it would pretty much be a lateral move from the head of the Sphinx.

They gasped and scattered, one of them pulling a knife out. But Cain already had his gun in his hand and so did I, so I liked our chances.

"Oh, right," Cain continued. "Because I don't want you. You're weak and pathetic, just like your master, the Demon. He couldn't take anyone in a fair fight."

"Don't you dare speak of him," the man gasped.

"I'm going to give you a chance to get out of here," Cain said pleasantly. He raised his gun and shot the woman in the head. Her brain matter and blood sprayed across the cracked wall, and she crumpled to the ground. "Well, just the two of you."

Given that she'd convinced a woman it was safe to get in the car with her, I didn't feel bad for her.

"What do you want from us?" the man demanded.

"You two fight each other. I'll let whichever one of you survives go free." Cain smiled, the expression chilling on his handsome face. "Or you can meet the same fate she did. It's all the same to me."

"This is insane," the one man babbled.

The other man was already pulling his knife.

The babbler stilled, his eyes widening.

"We can see which of you is the Demon's true apprentice," Cain taunted with a laugh.

The babbler rushed to grab his own knife. He was pulling it loose as his former friend struck out desperately, slashing at him. He danced back, too late, his arm was bleeding heavily. He let out short, gasping breaths of pain as he circled his opponent.

Cain's lip was curled in disgust, and he looked bored. "This is definitely not worthy of one of Pax's matches."

The babbler managed to knock the other down and drove his knife into his wrist, pinning him to the floor. The man screamed and yanked his arm free, shattering his wrist in the process. I winced—although not quite

sympathetically. The two of them scrabbled desperately across the floor, stabbing each other, their blood running across the old hardwood floors.

I was worried Cain's boredom would turn murderous before I could get answers.

"When you said the Demon was going to be free soon," I demanded, grinding the toe of my shoe against his shattered wrist. "What exactly did you mean?"

"I'll never betray the master," he said.

"We'll see." I turned to the other cult member. He was bleeding heavily, and he was probably going to die too... soon. But maybe he could be useful in the meantime. "Show us what you do to your victims."

Soon, the first man was screaming. But all he could tell us was that the Demon had promised he'd be free soon, and he didn't know any details. I believed him.

So we let the other man kill him, and then Cain flipped him over and stabbed him, making it look as if the two had killed each other.

The man looked at him with betrayal written across his face, as blood began to pour from his mouth.

"Well," Cain said. "I never promised I'd be a *just* god."

He let the man's corpse fall to the floor.

CHAPTER 19

AURORA



When we woke up, Paxton kissed me good morning, then disappeared in search of coffee and sweets. He already knew I liked to start the day with a good sugar high.

I brushed my teeth in the adjoining bathroom, then padded out into the suite's living room. Stellan lay on the couch, looking paler than usual. He was shirtless, and there were bloody bandages covering his tanned shoulder, where Cain had stabbed him.

I pulled a face at the sight as I sat down next to him. "I'm sorry about that."

He scoffed. "Please. Cain will be Cain... I knew what was going to happen when I carried you off."

"But it was worth it to you."

"I'll do anything to find my sister. To bring my mom..." He trailed off, then said, "Well, I don't know that she'll ever have peace. But at least she needs the chance to say goodbye."

"We won't give up," I promised him, resting my hand lightly on his knee.

He gave me a long look that I couldn't quite read. "Cain will want to go home."

"Well, luckily for you, I don't have a home. And I don't care what Cain wants."

"Oh?"

My hand was still on his knee, and I didn't quite know what to do with myself. Stellan threw me for a loop like no one else.

"I need to go see the Demon today," I murmured. "I want to ask him if he knows anything about Sophia."

He looked skeptical. “Do you think he’ll tell you the truth?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I spent a lot of time with him. I...know him. I think it’ll be useful, or I wouldn’t put myself through visiting him.”

He nodded. “I don’t want you to have to see the Demon.”

“Believe me, I don’t want to go either.”

The hotel door opened, and Pax walked in—carrying coffees for all of us and a white paper bag. He set the coffees on the table in front of the couch, then I pounced on the paper bag. Pax gave me an indulgent smile.

“Donuts!” They were yeasty and light and still warm. “At least there can be some joy in my life before I face the Demon.”

Pax frowned. “The Demon?”

“I need to see him.” I tore a glazed donut in half, then sank into the couch to enjoy the fluffy texture.

“Well, I hate that. But we’ll go with you,” Pax said.

“You can drive me,” I agreed. “But the Demon isn’t allowed any visitors who aren’t on his authorized list, and that’s only family. They won’t want any of his depraved followers getting an audience.”

“We are your family,” Pax stated, and my heart melted with those unexpectedly cheesy words before he added, “As far as the prison database is concerned, Remington fixed it.”

“You knew that I went to see my dad?” I asked.

He nodded as he took a seat next to me, picking up his own coffee. “We always know where you are,” he replied mildly. He didn’t seem at all concerned at how psychopathic he sounded.

“You lost me once,” I reminded, poking him with one bare foot.

Stellan glanced away, looking abashed. Pax caught my foot with one hand, preventing me from poking him again. “You’re right, we need to keep you closer from now on. On a leash, maybe.”

“Don’t give Cain any ideas,” Stellan warned.

To my surprise, Pax caught my other ankle too and lifted my feet onto his lap, where he began to massage them absently. I finished my first donut and picked up my coffee, determined to enjoy this rare, beautiful moment before I dove back into my father’s hell.

I’d gotten the dangerous men of the Sphinx under my spell, enough for foot rubs and kink.

We had to go through a long process to get into the supermax where my father was being kept. I bit my lip and closed my eyes through the pat-down. I hated for strangers to touch me. Then Pax settled his hand on my shoulder, and it felt like he was grounding me, just like in bed together when it was easier to sleep if he was near me.

My sense of dread grew with every minute as we moved deeper and deeper into the supermax to the visitors' area.

"Please stay back," I told them when we arrived at the bank of visitor spaces, with plexiglass between us and the prisoners. "I don't want him to know anything about you."

"Being all protective?" Stellan murmured, his brows rising. "I didn't think I deserved that."

"It's Pax I want to protect," I said. Then I aimed a cheeky grin his way. "After all, Pax is the delicate one."

Pax just rolled his eyes. "Go, before I take up Cain's hobby of spanking your ass."

That sounded great to me, and I felt lighter, happier, after bantering with the two of them.

Then I turned to see my father shuffling into the prisoners' side, his posture erect and proud as anyone can be with their wrists and ankles chained. They clearly saw my father as a threat, even now. My stomach twisted and sank as his gaze met mine. I moved quickly to the seats, but I had no doubt those bright, intelligent blue eyes had recorded my men. I knew he knew something about them already, but I didn't want him to have any extra windows into my life.

Instead, I took a seat in the blue plastic chair and flashed a smile his way. "Hello, Dad."

"I'm so pleased you came to see me early, Aurora. I've been looking forward to our next visit."

He'd love to hear about how his followers had terrorized me, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. Especially when I was sure the prison was recording our conversation. I didn't need anything tying me to the pile of bodies.

"Did you miss me?" he prompted.

I swallowed and realized I was taking too long to answer, despite my best attempt to be breezy. "I came to ask you a question."

He leaned back in his chair, trying to cross his legs only to realize he

couldn't with his chained ankles. "All right. What is it?"

"Did you kill my friend, Sophia?"

"Sophia." He frowned as if he were trying to remember her. "The cute little blond one with no sense of boundaries?"

"Yes."

He shook his head. "No. I never hurt her."

He must have seen the skeptical look on my face, because he added, "Have I ever lied to you?"

"You've hurt me over and over."

"For your own good, Delilah. It hurt me more than it hurt you. I love and cherish you so much. I had to try to make you strong enough to face this dark world. To make you an instrument of justice instead of yet another victim."

His words made my heart hammer in my chest. He was so damned arrogant, so convinced he was right even as he flayed people alive.

"You told me we were only hurting evil people."

"They were all evil people. I didn't lie to you."

"Not everyone we took was a... child predator."

He inclined his head. "But they *were* all evil. In their own ways."

His twisted mind was so difficult to parse. Almost everyone had fallen short in his mind and therefore deserved to be punished...to be cleansed.

"Was Sophia evil?"

His forehead scrunched up and he pursed his lips. "She was a distraction from your work. I was glad at first when it seemed as if you were learning how to be popular, how to act with people. You were suddenly at the top of your high school's hierarchy. And then I realized it was just... luck. Not skill. You weren't being purposeful."

"You mean I wasn't manipulating people? I just actually, genuinely, had friends? How awful." I let out a short, sharp laugh.

He shook his head. "You're meant for so much more, Aurora. You're brilliant, resilient, strong. I don't see why you have to make yourself so common."

His gaze flickered to where Stellan and Pax waited for me. "For instance, are you making yourself a common whore for those men?"

"No. If you never lie to me," I said. "Then tell me about my mother."

I wasn't sure where that had just come from, but I always wondered about her. Some part of me, deep inside, would always be that little girl swimming in her sweatshirt, sitting on the bench outside the gas station and waiting for

her to come back.

“Ah, your mother,” he said, then smiled at me wickedly. “Well, you see, my dear, she was my biggest fan. My most faithful servant.”

I stared at him in shock, my stomach curdling.

Maybe this time, he was lying.

I had a thousand more questions to ask, but the guard stepped forward then, signaling that our time was over.

My father pressed his hand against the glass. “I do love you, Aurora. In my own way. I still do... and we’ll be together again soon.”

My blood turned to ice, barely flowing through my veins.

He always sounded so confident. But what if he really had a plan to escape this time?

“Sure you will, old man,” the guard said, grabbing his shoulder.

I stood there rooted to the ground, frozen.

Stellan and Pax were at my side in an instant, as if they’d read my body language.

“Are you worthy of her?” my father demanded.

“Worthier than you ever were,” Stellan spat at him.

My father’s eyes narrowed in on him, then relaxed, recognition coming over his face. “Ah, Stellan. I’m sorry I can’t shed any light on where your sister’s decaying corpse is. Someone else must have killed that little lesbian whore.”

Stellan’s every muscle tightened, but he didn’t move. The guards dragged my father away.

“Stellan, are you all right?” I asked, touching his shoulder, even though *I* was not alright. Seeing my father had left me feeling shaken.

Stellan slid his arm around my waist, holding me up, as if he realized that, even though the movement was mechanical, distant. He seemed lost in thought.

“How did he know that my sister loved you?” he asked.

And the bottom fell out from beneath my feet all over again.

My father had gotten close to Sophia. But how? And what had happened afterward?

“I need to talk to him!” I called after the guards, but none of them were listening.

My father just looked at me over his shoulder and threw me a wink.

CHAPTER 20

PAXTON



She was trembling silently next to me in the passenger seat, her face like stone as she stared out the window stubbornly.

I recognized what she was doing; she was trying to stay strong. Like the Demon had probably ingrained in her while growing up. Hell, we'd reinforced that too, trying to prey on any weakness we'd seen.

I hated that.

I'd been taught to stay strong at all costs too, even when there was so much in my life I wanted to fall apart at.

"Head back to the house. Maybe we've missed something," muttered Stellan, lost in thought, obviously missing the way Aurora was falling apart.

Asshole.

I abruptly turned right, heading towards an overlook I'd been to in the past about twenty minutes away.

Aurora turned and glanced at me questioningly, her face pale, and her eyes just cold...and empty.

"Just taking a detour, princess."

"Well, at least I'm not in a trunk for this one," she quipped half-heartedly, and I glared at Stellan in the rearview mirror.

He at least looked guilty. "How long do you think it will take you to let that go?" he asked.

She scoffed but didn't say anything back. And that worried me even more about how she was doing. Aurora wasn't one to not have the last word.

Hopefully, my plan would *relax* her...

Stellan didn't press about where we were going or why, he just sulked in the back, so the ride was blissfully quiet until we got there.

I pulled down the stretch of dirt road that led to the overlook. "Please tell me I'm not about to die," she drawled. "I'd hate to have my life end with the Demon as my last memory."

"I think we can do better than that," I murmured as we parked and I hopped out of the car. She paused for a second while I waited impatiently, and then she finally got out of the car. Her eyes widened when she took a few steps forward and saw the view I'd taken us to.

There was a cliff a few feet away, and beyond that, a meadow dotted with colorful trees showcasing all of fall's glory. During the summer, the meadow was covered in wildflowers.

I'd never taken anyone here. And I could have done without Stellan's presence, but it felt right to be here with her.

It was terrifying how right everything felt with her lately.

Aurora

I stared out at the awe-inspiring sight in front of me. Sometimes I forgot that beauty existed in the world. It was easy to think that it had ceased to exist, or that it didn't exist for me. But here, with this in front of me, I was being reminded.

"It's beautiful," I murmured to him as I felt his presence behind me, the warmth of his body enveloping me as he pulled me into his arms.

"You're beautiful," he responded, and I glanced up at him, prepared to tease him for being so corny...or check on his health since he'd been far too sweet today. But my words got caught in my throat when I saw how he was looking at me.

Like...I was important.

Like...I was everything.

"I didn't just bring you up here for the view," he whispered softly in my ear as his hand trailed from my neck, down the side of my arm.

I was faintly aware of the car door opening and the sound of footsteps approaching as Stellan walked towards us...but my attention was focused on the stroke of Paxton's hand.

His hand traveled down my hip and then slid across my waist and down my leg before dipping under my dress.

"What are you doing?" I gasped, my voice coming out annoyingly high-pitched.

"Distracting you. Getting you out of your head," he murmured as he started to softly brush against my clit through my underwear in maddeningly slow strokes.

I moaned, and my head fell back on his shoulder as my eyes slipped closed.

"What a view," laughed Stellan from next to me, and my eyes flew open, expecting him to be staring out at the gorgeous valley, but of course the dirty boy was looking at me.

Paxton finally slipped under my underwear, dipping through my folds before he thrust two fingers inside of me. I arched against him, widening my legs so he had more room...to do whatever he wanted with me.

"Fucking gorgeous," Paxton purred in my ear as Stellan stepped in front of me, blocking my view of the valley.

I didn't mind. The sight of his perfect face was just as good. His cheeks were flushed and his pupils were already blown out...just from watching me. He still looked conflicted, which was par for the course for Stellan, but just like last night...he couldn't help but be turned on.

I felt powerful in that moment, having both of them wrapped up in me.

Paxton pulled his fingers out and I whimpered as he began to just rub around the rim of my entrance.

"You like this, princess? You like knowing that you can own us whenever you want to? That we fucking dream of being inside you?" His fingers slipped in again, and despite the chill in the air, a bead of sweat trailed down my spine as my orgasm began to build.

Stellan decided to join the party then as he pulled down the front of my dress to pluck and tease at my nipples through my lace bra, leaning forward and suddenly biting down on my lip. I tasted the sharp metallic tang of blood in my mouth, my insides heating even more when he pulled away and I saw my blood on his lip.

Like I'd said before, I was fucked up.

Paxton must have sensed that my attention wasn't on him, because he slipped another finger in, the stretch taking my breath away...just as it had last night.

"I think I'm craving something sweet," mused Stellan with a grin, sinking into the dirt in front of me. Evidently, this was becoming some sort of

competition between them. And...I.Was.Here.For.It.

He began to inch up my dress even more as Paxton's fingers slid out of me and went to my breasts, taking over kneading and massaging them. Stellan pulled one of my legs up and threw it over his shoulder. And then his mouth was covering my sex. He began to suck and lick, separating my folds with his fucking perfect tongue as he thrust his fingers into me. I gripped his hair, driving my core against him. If he was going to try and ruin my life at every turn, he could at least give me the best fucking head of my life.

His hands squeezed my ass so I was straddling his face. Paxton's hot breath was against my ear, his fingers doing something to my nipples that were driving me towards orgasm just as much as Stellan's delicious tongue.

"Hottest fucking thing I've ever seen, watching you like this, princess."

"You got a thing for Stellan between my legs?" I asked breathlessly.

"I've got a thing for anything that makes you cum, sweetheart. Watching you let go, those soft breaths...fuck. Ride his face. Use him. Cum for us."

Stellan's tongue licked deep inside of me, and that, combined with the feel of his stubble and Paxton's hands and voice...

I fell over the cliff, an orgasm so fucking strong soaring through me that I swore my heart stopped beating for a moment as the world went white around me.

I came back to focus riding Stellan's face, sounds coming out of my mouth that I'd never experienced before.

Stellan didn't seem to mind, though; he just kept going, licking and sucking as tremors continued to rip through my body. His fingers and tongue worked together, fucking me in the perfect rhythm—Paxton pressed a hot finger against my asshole suddenly and I yelped. The objection quickly dissolved into a moan as he caressed the hot bundle of nerves.

"You both are going to kill me," I breathed.

"I can't wait to take your ass," Paxton said with a smirk, using his other hand to grab my hair and pull my head back, his lips beginning to lick and suck at my mouth in a mimicry of what Stellan was still doing to my pussy.

Another orgasm burst through my core, and Paxton sealed his lips against mine, taking my scream.

He held me up as Stellan moved his face out from between my legs, a wide smile on his lips that took my breath away even more on account of the fact that I rarely ever saw it. I was a bit surprised that he was still breathing since I had to have been suffocating him with my thighs. "So fucking sweet,"

he said roughly.

“Got any more for us?” Paxton growled, his face now against my neck, his words brushing against my skin.

Stellan stood up eagerly, beginning to undo his belt.

Paxton yanked me backward. “You’re not getting this perfect pussy until you learn not to be such a selfish prick, Stellan.”

Stellan’s hands stilled and his smile dropped. “What the fuck?”

I didn’t bother telling Paxton that Stellan had me a lot on our little trip. easing and torturing Stellan right now sounded like a great idea.

“Get inside of me,” I ordered Paxton, ignoring the look of betrayal on Stellan's face.

Paxton was evidently good at directions because he spun me around and then grabbed the back of my thighs, picking me up as he strode over to the car and laid me down on the hood. He began to play with my clit as his other hand fumbled for his zipper.

I licked my lips as he freed his perfect cock, drops of precum already glistening on his red and swollen tip.

“Stellan, come play with my breasts while Paxton fucks me,” I ordered. Stellan growled, but he practically ran over, immediately starting to fondle and lick and suck at my nipples.

“Yes,” I purred as Paxton began to push inside of me, a needy hunger building again as he stretched me. “Fuck. I feel so full.”

“You’d be fuller if you let me join,” complained Stellan.

“Get back to work, fucker,” said Paxton as he slowly moved in and out of me, his fingers rubbing on my clit as he worked his way further in with every move of his hips. I tried to get him to go faster, to push all the way in, but his other hand tightened on my hip, holding me still.

Stellan chose that moment to bite down on my nipple. I moaned and Stellan laughed darkly against my skin. “Knew you’d like that.”

Paxton slammed into me all the way, bringing my attention back to him as I lost my breath at the full length of him.

“So fucking tight,” Paxton groaned as he pulled out and then rammed in somehow even deeper. “Love that you take fucking all of me.”

He was fucking into me so hard that it hurt. My back kept slamming against the car, and Stellan was having trouble keeping up.

“So. Fucking. Tight,” Paxton growled. “Going to fuck you every day.”

Stellan huffed, giving up on my breasts and sealing his lips on mine. Our

tongues battled together as Paxton pounded into me.

“You’re soaking my balls, princess. I’m tempted to see how much wetter you would get if I let Stellan join in.”

Stellan pulled away from my lips, looking at me hopefully.

“Not happening, dickhead,” Paxton said with a laugh that dripped into a groan as my insides began to flutter, gripping his dick even harder as another orgasm hit.

“It’s okay, babe. We know how good I make you cum,” Stellan growled as he began to kiss me desperately again. It was hard to do simply because my body felt like a fucking live wire, but I did grab his dick through his pants and began to jack him off through his clothing.

“Come again, princess,” Paxton ordered, ignoring Stellan.

“I can’t,” I gasped. I was shaking all over, sweat dripping down my skin.

“Do it. Now.” My body listened to Paxton because another burst of searing pleasure surged through me just as Paxton’s rhythm faltered and I felt him come hard and hot inside of me, filling me up with pulse after pulse of cum until it was dripping down my legs.

Stellan groaned, ripping himself away from me and pulling his dick out of his pants. He jerked himself off, hard, as Paxton’s movements stilled.

It only took a minute and then Stellan was cumming all over my chest, his gaze glued to my breasts as he covered them in sticky, white ropes.

There was a stillness after we’d all finished, our heavy breathing mixing in with the sound of crickets starting to play their song as night began to fall.

“Well,” I finally said, still finding it hard to form words. “Just so we’re clear, I’m down for this sort of distraction whenever you guys want.” I hissed as Paxton pulled out of me, my insides feeling sore after the pounding I’d just taken. “As long as you clean me up afterwards,” I finished, looking down and seeing my messy chest and thighs.

“Sure thing, princess,” Paxton replied with a wink, leaning over and brushing his lips against mine. “Whatever you want.”

Whatever I want.

I liked the sound of that.

If only that was the case with all aspects of my life.

CHAPTER 21

AURORA



When we got back to the hotel, Remington was lounging on the couch looking freshly showered and irritated, and the sound of the shower in the next room was still going.

“Where the hell were you?” Remington demanded. “Can’t you people leave a note?”

Pax regarded him skeptically. “As if you didn’t know. As if you weren’t tracking us.”

“I track you because I love you,” Remington said lightly.

I’d never heard him use the word love before, even as a joke, so it sounded odd on his lips.

Remington turned to me. “Are you all right?”

I nodded. “Just had to see if the Demon knew anything.”

“Do you believe him?” Stellan demanded. “He knew something about Sophia.”

I nodded. “He’s always made this big deal about how he doesn’t lie to me... but I don’t believe him.”

And I didn’t want to believe him about my mother, either. I felt a prickle of nervous doubt, though.

Remington hugged me tightly. “Listen, we took care of them. No more stalkers.”

“What do you mean, you took care of them?”

“I was with Cain,” he said wryly. “Does that tell you what I mean when I say we took care of someone?”

Maybe it was a sign that the Demon had made me almost as evil as he was himself in the process of trying to survive, but I couldn’t summon any

regret at the thought of Cain killing the rest of the cult members. But I stared at him, chewing my lip, barely daring to believe it.

“Stellan identified some cult members that weren’t there in the basement,” Remington went on. “They’re all gone, Aurora. They’re never going to bother you again.”

I let out a shaky breath. It was too much to hope for. “Did you see a green Jeep?”

“A green Jeep?” He frowned. “No. Is there someone I need to kill who drives a green Jeep?”

“Maybe just to be on the safe side,” I said, then let out a shaky laugh. “No, it’s fine. I’ve just been remembering this man who was obsessed with me. One of my father’s admirers and apprentices. I was worried he would replace me... but he seemed more interested in marrying me.”

Remington’s face went tight with fury, some combination of protectiveness and possessiveness, perhaps. “Did he hurt you?”

I shook my head. “Just another one of my father’s creeps. It’s fine.”

Remington nodded. “I hope this brings you a little peace, Aurora. We made it look as if they were the ones that killed my father. That way, hopefully, people won’t keep looking at you for it.”

I felt oddly touched by that. “Does that mean you’re not planning to use the Internet to terrorize me and keep me under control anymore?” Remington gave me a smile that had an edge to it. “I saw you with Cain, Aurora. I don’t think we need the Internet to keep you under control.”

I couldn’t help but blush. That was embarrassing. And he wasn’t wrong. Not that I would ever let Cain truly control me, but I certainly enjoyed our games.

“You’re beautiful when you blush,” he commented. “But you know you have nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed of with us. We’re all far worse monsters than you.”

“Remington, what if I tell you I’m not convinced you’re monsters anymore at all?”

His brows tilted upward. “Then I’d tell *you* that you’re losing your mind. Although I guess after everything you’ve been through, maybe you’re entitled.”

“Can I borrow one of your laptops?” I asked while he was feeling sympathetic.

“Why?” he questioned.

At the same time, Pax whistled. “That’s a big ask. I touched one of his computers once and he tried to break my jaw.”

Remington rolled his eyes. “All right, drama queen, save the theatrics for the soccer field.”

“I want to email an old friend,” I answered. “One of the few people I keep in touch with. She’ll be worried about me.”

I could’ve sworn they all visibly relaxed when I identified her as a woman.

“All right,” Remington said, and Pax’s eyes widened in surprise. He passed me one of his laptops—reluctantly. “Web browser only. Don’t poke around my files.”

“Believe me, I don’t want to,” I promised him. “I’ve seen enough horrors in my life.”

Remington rifled my hair affectionately, and I wasn’t sure what to make of that. I carried the laptop to the bedroom for a little privacy and contacted my hacker friend.

She popped up right away with a message back. *It’s been a while. What do you need?*

I can’t just check in with an old friend?

Sure. I tried cauliflower pizza recently and it was a disgrace. I also bought new pants. The way the old ones fit is the motive for the cauliflower. Oh, and I threw out all my old, mismatched socks and bought all new ones in a radical act of self-love. That’s everything new. Now, what do you need?

I laughed out loud. Sometimes I thought she was my favorite person, even though we’d never met in real life.

I know this is going to sound crazy and impossible... I was wondering if there was any way to track down if the Demon has any digital files? Photographs, journals, web browser records... I’d take anything.

Videos?

That lone word was a stab to my heart. Yes, *I’d take those.*

After the one that had surfaced, I’d never seen any others, but I knew they were lurking out there.

I’ll do what I can.

I can tell you the names he traveled under while I knew him.

By the time I disconnected with her, I felt a little better.

The Demon was wicked as ever, but he was in prison.

His followers were dead.

And I wasn't entirely alone in the world.

CHAPTER 22

AURORA



Remington ordered food in. The five of us sat around the coffee table in the living room of the suite. The world might be a dark place, but lo mein was still delicious. And the sight of Cain eating noodles with chopsticks was unexpectedly amusing.

“We need to head back,” Cain announced.

I shook my head. “You can do what you want, but I’m not leaving.”

He tossed a fortune cookie my way. “Spoiler alert: your fortune reads, *You’re about to get your ass spanked.*”

“Please,” I shot back. “But we’re staying until we find Sophia.”

“You know she’s dead,” Cain said with his usual tact. “What does it matter?”

I shot a quick glance at Stellan’s face, remembering his mother’s grief, his promises. “It matters to me.”

“So we wrap things up ASAP and then we head home,” Pax said, ignoring the hard way Cain glared at him.

Cain was quickly being outvoted, and I was sure he did not appreciate that.

“I agree,” Remington added.

Stellan didn’t say a word—I was sure he knew he didn’t get a vote at the moment—but his eyes lit up with hope. I reached out and brushed his fingers with my own. I might not forgive him yet, but just as he felt he needed to live up to Sophia’s memory now, I felt the same way. I needed to look out for her idiot brother, and I needed to help her mother.

I let out a deep breath. “I think we need to go back to the house.”

“There’s nothing there,” Stellan disagreed. “The basement’s been

cleaned.”

“It’s just a feeling I have. We didn’t finish before we were interrupted.”

A self-satisfied glimmer came into Cain’s eyes. “They’ll never bother you again.”

I wish I believed it was that easy. My father had many admirers.

The five of us went together back to Stellan’s house. We pulled into the driveway. I gazed across the overgrown yard to the house where I’d spent a few years.

It was a little easier to go in when I had all four of them with me. But as we started across the grass, Stellan frowned and suddenly knelt.

“What is it?” Remington asked.

“I don’t know. I just thought I saw something shiny...” Stellan trailed off, still parting the thick grass with his hands.

I knelt next to him, and together the two of us searched through the grass. After a moment, the others began to do the same.

“It’s just trash,” Stellan said in disappointment, sitting back on his heels. He had a scrap of tin foil in his hands.

“Well, I found something,” Remington announced. He was still trying to unearth something from the dirt. I leaned over his shoulder and saw a scrap of chain, half-buried in the sand.

My heart stopped. I remembered Sophia playing with her bracelet over and over again. She was always tugging at it. It was her favorite way of fidgeting when she had to attempt to sit still.

Remington passed it to Stellan, and Stellan chipped away at the dirt on the charms with his thumb. His face had gone pale. He glanced from the spot in the bushes behind my old house where Sophia must have stood, to the spot at his feet where the bracelet had been found.

“Aurora, do you think there’s any chance the Demon would have taken her somewhere else? Because he knew you’d see her if he brought her into the house?”

“It’s possible,” I admitted, trying to be logical. “But I don’t think it’s very likely. He would have wanted me to see what happened to Sophia. And he never went anywhere else to torture anyone. He liked to take his time. He liked to have his equipment. The only time he took a victim out of the house was when he disposed of the body. Once they entered those doors... They were there to stay. Until he was done torturing them.”

Cain looked thoughtful. Pax and Remington looked slightly sickened.

“What if Sophia was taken by one of the cult members?” Stellan asked. “And we killed them... we’ll never get to ask them any questions. We’ll never get to ask them where they buried my sister.”

“We don’t know yet.” I could feel the guys watching me, as if they were curious about how I reacted to Stellan.

“Don’t lose hope, Stellan.”

He nodded, but he didn’t seem very hopeful. “She would have wanted you to have this.”

Because it obviously meant so much to him, I held out my wrist for him to fasten the dirt-crusted bracelet. I had the feeling the guys were all watching me curiously, trying to understand how I reacted to Stellan. I was sure they would forgive him eventually for running off with me anyway. Or, if my men were not very capable of forgiving, at least they would put it in the past. Their friendship was deeper and more intense than anyone would expect from this group of motley monsters. But I had the feeling it mattered to them if I forgave Stellan.

“Come on, let’s go into the house. There’s no point in standing out here in the sunshine.” And in fact, it felt like the sky darkened with every step we took toward that cursed house.

However, in the end, we found nothing inside but more bad memories. I couldn’t have told them what I was searching for. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were missing something.

We hadn’t had another message from the stalker who had written that note in blood in Stellan’s bathroom. So hopefully Cain was right and they’d killed everyone who worshiped my father to the point of bloodshed. But I couldn’t shake my worries.

Remington glanced at his cell phone. “You’ve got a message, Aurora.”

“How do you know, stalker?”

He grinned at me. “Admit it. You’re impressed by me.”

“And you’re impressed by me,” I shot back.

“I’ve never tried to hide that.”

Cain rolled his eyes. “You just can’t stop flattering the little devil, can you?”

“We all have our own relationship with her,” Remington threw back. “You act like a possessive psychopath, and for some weird reason, that turns her on. Pax is all angsty, and they can angst together. Stellan taps into the sweet girl she really is underneath her general stabiness. A complicated little

monster like Aurora needs all of us.”

Remington was joking around, but he was also speaking the truth. My relationship with each of these guys was so different, and as I looked at Stellan, still wearing the dirt on his hands from his sister’s bracelet, I thought that they each completed a part of me in their own strange way. Cain’s rage felt like a mirror of my own at times. He let me be my savage self. I could be unbridled and unashamed with him. And I could be sad with Pax, but that was only part of it; the two of us comforted and soothed each other. And I could be nostalgic and tender with Stellan. Maybe... maybe I could hang onto the best parts of Delilah after all.

And Remington... Remington just felt like home. Even though I always said I didn’t have one. I rested my hand on his shoulder and leaned up on my tippy toes to brush my lips against his cheek.

Remington hugged me around the waist, tugging my body hard against his. He gave Cain a self-satisfied smile and Cain rolled his eyes.

Then I stole the cell phone out of his hands. “Show me how to get to these messages.”

I couldn’t stand to be in the house any longer. I went outside to the porch and sat on the steps, although I could feel them close behind, giving me privacy, but not too much, because they wanted to stay close and protect me. I was grateful for that. As much as I wanted to believe that the cult was really gone, we couldn’t be stupid. And I couldn’t shake the nagging sense that the Demon was up to something. He always was.

Remington helped me pull up the message from my hacker friend, then retreated.

I was able to find some videos. They were in a Google account he once used. He must have sent them to someone. I’m trying to track them all down. I’ll make sure that they disappear, and we’re the only ones who have them.

I responded, thank you. When are they from?

You don’t want to watch them.

No, I don’t want to. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t have to.

I asked her, do any of them match up with the date February 27th, 2019?

What happened then?

It’s when I moved.

My father was... erratic. By his standards. He’d always been measured and controlled in his own blood-thirsty way. I’m trying to figure out what he was up to.

I can tell you what he was up to most of that night.

I'd stayed up that night, almost all night long, scrubbing the house to get rid of any signs of evidence.

Send me the video

Aurora...

Send it to me

She did, and I opened it with shaking hands, terrified of what I would find.

But I didn't see Sophia. It was my father torturing the man from the basement, his dinner guest. I looked at the timestamp, then fast-forwarded. It was the same time Sophia would have come over to my house. As I jumped ahead in the video, making sure he never left the basement, it was obvious the Demon was busy until early in the morning. I remembered that night, and how late it was when he had finally turned the body over to me to leave and bury. That time frame when I had left the house had seemed as if it might be the window where he had killed Sophia. But the timeline just didn't make sense. From her diary, she hadn't waited that long to come to see me.

"Aurora? What is it?" Stellan asked from behind me.

He came and sat on the porch steps beside me. Together, we walked through what we remembered of the timeline in Sophia's diary, making sure that we were both on the same page, and examining the timestamps.

Stellan buried his face in his hands. "So the Demon didn't do it. It was one of his followers. And we'll never get the chance to interrogate them."

At first, I thought he was crying, but then I realized how hard his fingertips were pressing into the sides of his face. He was on the verge of drawing his own blood. And then I realized he was just devastated, and filled with rage that he had no way of venting. He was so angry at himself.

"We didn't have a choice, Stellan. We had to kill them or they would have killed us."

"I know," he said, his voice choked.

I knew that feeling, of trying to be logical and yet being ragged with emotion at the same time that no logic could cure.

Then I heard feet on the steps and Pax went down the stairs on the other side of me, before turning to face Stellan. Stellan got up and began to pace.

"Next time, don't try to do shit on your own," Pax said to his back. "You obviously aren't capable."

I stared at Pax, horrified. He wasn't exactly the softest person, but he was

probably the nicest out of the four. Why the hell would he attack Stellan now at such a vulnerable moment?

“Shut up,” Stellan told him.

Pax let out a laugh. “Why? Are you going to make me? You can’t even protect Aurora. You aren’t worthy of her. What are you gonna do? Kick my ass?”

“Pax!” I said in horror. “Stop it!”

I started to rise to my feet, but Remington suddenly sat down beside me, his hand settling on my shoulder. His gaze met mine, and he gave a quick shake of his head.

Sometimes I didn’t understand these men and what happened between them.

Then Stellan threw himself at Pax. Stellan got in a good punch that snapped Pax’s head back. Pax paid him back with a brutal punch. The two of them tumbled to the ground, wrestling for supremacy.

I tried to fight Remington off, but once I launched myself off the step, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me into his lap. Cain sat beside him, his fingers tangling in my hair as he dragged my head back into his lap. “Enough,” Cain ordered me, turning my head.

And then I realized they were both sitting on the ground, and Pax was hugging Stellan. “It’s alright. It’s alright. We’ll find her.”

He’d given Stellan the chance to vent his rage, and said the words out loud that Stellan must be thinking—giving him a chance to reject them.

“Something is bothering me,” Remington stated, as if there was nothing noteworthy about the brutal and affectionate scene that had just unfolded in front of us. Or the way he and Cain had teamed up to dominate me; Cain still had his fingers in my hair, my head in his lap as he absently brushed his fingers through my strands, possessive and stern all at once. The two of them together turned me on and made it hard to focus on what Remington was saying.

He went on, “How did your hacker friend get those videos so quickly?”

“She’s good.”

Remington looked doubtful. “She’d have to be a lot better than me.”

“We already know that.” After all, she’d been able to mess up his grades. Remington was able to set them to rights, but not fast enough to stop the fallout.

He shook his head. “Something isn’t right here,” he insisted. “Trust me,

Aurora, I think your hacker friend knows more than she should about the Demon.”

That was a chilling thought, since she had all the video evidence of what the Demon had done...and I knew I was in some of those videos.

“We need to figure out who she is,” Remington said.

“Don’t worry, little devil,” Cain soothed. “We’ve got you.”

CHAPTER 23

AURORA



It was time for us to go. Maybe it was time for us to leave these houses behind forever. There was nothing else for us to find here.

But then, I saw some dandelions, gone to seed, bobbing their fluffy white heads at the edge of the curb. It was late in the season for there to still be dandelions. And even though I knew it was stupid, part of me couldn't help but think it was a last message from Sophia. She was saying goodbye.

We used to make wishes all the time. It had been childish, but it had been kind of her thing. On the late summer day when I'd first met her, she'd picked two dandelions and handed one to me.

"I never make wishes," I'd said. I'd given up on wishing, hoping, dreaming a long time before. All I did was plot and plan.

"Don't be stupid," she'd said firmly. "When you wish on a dandelion, it always comes true."

"No, it doesn't."

"Eventually," she'd promised, so insistently that I'd taken the flower and blown the fluff ball to make her happy. When I opened my eyes, she'd still been watching me carefully. "What did you wish for?"

"Can't tell."

"You didn't really wish for anything."

But she'd never stopped handing me those dandelions, and in time, as my friendship with Sophia and Stellan warmed my heart, I'd started making wishes.

I wanted to make a wish. A last wish for her.

The guys were already getting into the car. I paused, then said, "I'll be right back. There's just... One more thing I have to do."

I slammed the car door on their objections.

I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to make a wish in order to find Sophia. As silly as it might be. The world was a weird and dark place, and I might as well give in to my whims when they were harmless.

I went over to the edge of the road and picked two dandelions, one for each of us. I could feel the guys watching me from here, keeping an eye on me, trying to make sure I was safe.

I pretended to be Sophia. The two of us used to make wishes for each other; we thought altruistic wishes had to be more powerful. So I pretended to be her. "I hope you have a happy life, Delilah. I hope the darkest days are behind you and love and light is in your future. Even if you choose love and light with idiots."

I could hear those words in her voice so clearly, even though she'd never said them. It was such a Sophia thing to say. I closed my eyes and blew the fluff, imagining that I was her for a moment, picturing that she was still on this earth the way she should be.

Then I lifted the other dandelion to my lips. "I hope you come home, Sophia. And I hope wherever you are, even if you already left this earth, I hope you know how very loved you are. Stellan and I are both a mess, but we're a mess in part because we both adore you. And you're worth it. I'm glad you were my friend. And I'll miss you for the rest of my life."

I blew out the puff of dandelion, convinced that if she were just a body to find, her body would come home to us.

Then I heard a warning shout from the guys. My eyes flew open, just in time to see a van barreling down the street right for me.

The guys were running toward me, and I started to sprint toward them. But I was too late. The door of the van slammed open. I had my back to the vehicle, racing away, as suddenly something dark flew over my head. I choked as it tightened around my neck. And I was dragged backward. I fought with everything I had, feeling myself slam into the edge of the van's door. I threw myself toward the street, kicking and flailing. I heard someone curse, and I almost escaped them. Then they got lucky and reeled me back, and I felt myself slam into the floor of the car.

The vehicle lurched, the engine revved. In the distance, I could hear the guys shouting.

But the car was hurtling off with me inside it.

CHAPTER 24

STELLAN



As the van drove off with Aurora inside it, I leaped onto the back. I desperately scrambled for any handhold on the smooth white panel. There was a handle for the hatch, and I managed to get my fingers around that, clinging to it one-handed with my feet on the bumper. It wasn't very stable, and I desperately grabbed for the roof of the van with my other hand, trying to mold myself to the back.

My stab wounds screamed with every move. As the car frantically wove back and forth across the street, trying to shake me off, my grip loosened a little bit every time, and my arm wasn't as strong as it would've been if I hadn't been stabbed through the shoulder muscle. I gritted my teeth, desperate to cling to the back.

"Aurora," I shouted. The driver obviously knew I was here, so there was no point in trying to be stealthy anymore. "Hang in there. We are going to get you free!"

I could already feel my grip slipping. I tried more desperately over and over to get a better hold.

The driver yanked the wheel sharply to the right and then to the left. I tried to hang on, but he finally managed to throw me.

I slammed into the concrete and rolled over and over. As I finally came to a stop, I was already jumping to my feet. I raced after the van. I was limping, my knee badly hurt and the stab wounds screaming with pain. But nothing could stop me from trying to reach Aurora.

A car suddenly came to a stop beside me. Someone threw open the back door. It was Cain. "Get in."

I threw myself into the car and reached to slam the door shut, but we were

already rocketing off and momentum slammed the door.

“You slowed them down a little,” Pax said from behind the wheel. “You might have given us a chance to catch up to them.”

“At the cost of your face,” Cain commented. He cast a glance over it, and for the first time, I realized how much my face burned. There must be bits of cement embedded in my skin. “You’ll no longer be putting up much of a contest for which one of us is prettier.”

I knew Cain could joke—or at least what passed for jokes for Cain—at any time, but I couldn’t think about anything but Aurora. I sat on the edge of my seat, as our car chased theirs.

“When we get that girl back, she’s definitely getting a new GPS tracker,” Remington growled.

“This is all my fault,” I admitted. I couldn’t stop thinking that I was going to lose her just like I lost Sophia. I hadn’t been worthy of my sister, and I hadn’t protected her well enough. Now I hadn’t protected Aurora either.

“Fucking snap out of it,” Cain said. “You fell off the car because you aren’t a goddamn character out of Die Hard. We’re going to get her back, you didn’t fail her. This isn’t karma for being an asshole. Obviously, you are an asshole, but that doesn’t mean the universe is out to get you. The universe doesn’t give a shit about any of us. No, this is personal.”

It might have been the longest monologue I’d ever heard from Cain.

He was watching the road ahead of us with bright intense eyes, smoldering with wicked intent, and his hands were tightened into fists in his lap. “Someone is obsessed with her, besides us, and we’re going to show them they made a mistake. She’s ours.”

Remington, who was on his phone as always, said, “Police scanners know there’s a car chase. We’ve got about two minutes. We’ve gotta look out for cops.”

“They’re in a van,” Pax cut in. “We’ll catch them.”

The van ahead of us drove through a red light. We followed them through it.

Just then, a police car slammed into the side of our car. It knocked us into a 360-degree loop, and as buildings and cars flashed by us, I caught a glimpse of the tail lights of the van in the distance.

No.

We were losing her.

By the time Cain and Remington finished with the cops, they were

apologizing profusely. We got back into our damaged car, but it wouldn't drive. While Cain called for a car delivery—asap— Pax slammed his hands into the steering wheel.

“How the hell do we get her back?”

CHAPTER 25

AURORA



At least I hadn't been drugged. You knew your life was fucked up when you had thoughts like that. But I appreciated the fact that I wouldn't be suffering from a massive migraine while also trying to stay alive.

Whoever had taken me hadn't said a word on the drive, but they'd played fucking classical music...just like the Demon had liked.

That didn't bode well for me.

I hadn't bothered trying to engage in conversation for most of the drive. There were two people working together because a second after I'd been thrown into the van and we'd started to drive away, a pair of cold and clammy hands had yanked my hands together and hog-tied them before doing the same thing to my feet.

I'd attempted to scream my bloody brains out, but then the bag had been tightened around my neck and it had gotten really hard to breathe. After that, I'd just concentrated on not passing out.

The car ride seemed to last forever, the sound of that music threatening to drive me crazy before the end of it. Finally, we'd stopped, the music abruptly cutting off, much to my relief. I'd heard the sound of the driver's door opening and shutting. A moment later, the van door was opened.

"What is this place?" an unfamiliar voice asked from right next to me.

I shrieked when a gun went off, blasting my eardrums and echoing around the van's interior.

The man next to me grunted. "Why?" he said in a gurgled voice. I couldn't see him, but I could just picture blood trickling out of his mouth. His hand hit me...and then he felt still.

Humming started then, a sound that was guaranteed to take a starring role

in my nightmares. The other person scooped me up in his arms bridal style, that dreadful humming inches from my ear.

I began to thrash around, just to get away from the sound, and he grunted as I elbowed him in the chest.

“Naughty, naughty,” a male voice whispered.

Had I heard that voice before? It sounded so fucking familiar.

He walked a few feet before he stopped and I heard the beep of a keypad, before what I assumed was a door opened up in front of us and I felt a gasp of air against my hands.

The door was slammed behind us and then we moved forward a few more feet before we began to descend. Fuck...he was going down a long flight of stairs.

By the musty smell in the air, I guessed we were going somewhere underground. Which was not my ideal place to be.

If I ever got out of this ridiculous situation and got the chance to live, I was going to make sure that any future dwelling I inhabited was going to be basement free. That would be my number one requirement for a house. Nothing could be underground.

Maybe a treehouse, I mused...obviously losing my mind.

We stopped again, and there was the sound of another keypad, and another door opening—and then I was seated on something soft and cushiony.

Everything was silent, except for his breathing. That was a bit unnerving.

Out of the darkness and into the light... I chanted silently, trying to keep my mind sharp for whatever hellscape I was about to encounter.

Who was I kidding? Was it even possible not to totally lose my shit right now...especially as some sort of weird chorus music began to play.

Wait...the song was a...wedding march?

My insides tensed even more as dread spiked through my veins.

It was becoming more and more clear who was going to be on the other side of this bag on my head, and I was just praying that I was wrong. Because yes, I was a tough badass.

But my father’s apprentice...he was a thousand times more fucked up than me. And that was hard to beat.

The humming began again, and an unbidden tear streaked down my face...

I heard his footsteps near me and then suddenly the bag was ripped off

my head, and before I even could comprehend who was standing there, a warm, slimy, rough tongue licked the moisture off my face.

"Fuck," I screeched, not enjoying that at all.

"Language," the voice snarled, and I blinked as my captor removed his tongue and stepped away from me, revealing...Bentley.

He was dressed in an ill-fitting tuxedo, worn in some spots like he'd taken it from a corpse in some grave. I shivered at the thought because, knowing Bentley, that probably wasn't too far off the mark.

I had to admit as I stared into his cold, evil eyes...the universe fucking hated me.

"Sorry you've had to wait so long. Things had to be put into place until everything was perfect. For my perfect bride," he said smoothly, looking genuinely sorry he hadn't been able to kidnap me earlier.

Wait a minute...perfect bride?

Horror blossomed even further in my chest as I glanced around the room and realized what was happening.

Bentley had organized the saddest-looking wedding ceremony I'd ever seen.

"You're admiring the decorations. I worked very hard on them," he said excitedly, or as excitedly as one could speak when you didn't have a soul.

I took in even more details, keeping one eye on Bentley the whole time as I did so. There were wilted flowers propped up in spray-painted black vases all over the room. The air was ripe with decay. Pepto Bismol-colored tulle had been thrown everywhere, like a party store had thrown up all over the place.

And there was the cake. That was...interesting. He'd taken what was clearly grocery store sheet cakes, and cut them in half, stacking them on top of each other until the end result was this eight-layer monstrosity that was on the verge of tipping over. The bride and groom perched on top looked like they'd been crafted with papier-mâché, and the groom was several inches shorter than the bride since he'd begun to sink into the cake frosting.

It was almost impressive how pathetic my wedding was going to be.

There were no windows in the room, making the whole thing just that much creepier. The carpet was a 50s orange color that clashed violently with the pink theme he had going.

Was this really happening?

My eyes caught on an especially interesting tulle creation that hung on

the wall opposite where I was sitting. I realized it was supposed to be an arch. There was a table underneath the arch holding a Bible... and a knife.

"Look behind you, sweetheart," he said as he eagerly licked his lips. "Sweetheart, little lamb..." he mused before shaking his head. "I'll continue to work on it." He gave me a broad smile, or at least as close to a smile as a crazy like him could give. It looked all wrong on his face, since there wasn't anything in his eyes to match the smile and it stretched his lips weirdly far across his skin.

"I'm good, thanks," I responded coldly, and his smile dropped.

"You wouldn't want to show ungratefulness for how hard I've worked for us," he breathed intensely. I gulped and shot a glance behind me, immediately wishing I hadn't. Behind me, there was a bed that had been draped in red sheets with white carnations thrown all over it. There was also a stack of sex toys, because nothing said wedding except for a bunch of dildos and butt plugs. I squinted at them, grimacing when I realized they didn't look all that clean.

Fuck no.

"Well?" he asked expectantly.

"It looks great. Who's it for?" I quipped.

He chuckled, shaking his head fondly as if I was an errant child.

"I know that it's taken far too long, but I'm hoping you can forgive me since you can see how special I wanted today to be. Just like we always talked about."

"Talked about?" I pressed, wondering just how far his delusion went.

He patted my leg. "I remember everything you ever said, about how you wanted it to be just us—well, and your dad." He frowned as he remembered that piece wasn't possible.

Not that I had ever mentioned wanting a wedding with him or my father.

"I even got you chocolate fudge cake, because I know that was your favorite. I took you to that one bakery on our first date, and you had me buy the whole cake." He shook his head and then tapped me underneath my chin. "But we won't be eating cake anymore until we lose some weight, will we?"

I stared at him blankly, truly shocked. I mean, of course I'd been shocked with the whole kidnapping thing and him being behind it. But imagining a whole life? I'd known he was demented, a psychopath like my father, but I'd never seen this level of crazy during that time.

Also, had he just called me fat and told me I needed to lose weight?

Because that was rude.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, making me jump. “You haven’t seen your dress yet!”

He ran over to a door on the other side of the room, revealing a mostly empty closet with the exception of some photographs stapled to its back wall and a long black dress bag. I couldn’t make out what the pictures were of, and I was grateful for that.

I’m sure I didn’t want to see them.

Bentley carefully pulled the dress bag out of the closet and walked over to the bed and laid it down. “I can’t wait to see you in this,” he cooed, beginning to unzip it.

The first thing I noticed was that it was really poofy. There were yards and yards of fabric around the skirt. I was going to resemble a heavily frosted white cupcake. The second thing I noticed was that it had been made for a person half my size. He was really going to be disappointed if he tried to force me to fit into that. Maybe I would have fit when the Demon was taking me through food rationing, but the current me, who actually had meals, was never going to be able to zip that thing up.

“I’m going to help you get ready. I think that will be more intimate, don’t you?” he asked absentmindedly, his fingers stroking the bedazzlements on the skirt of the dress reverently.

Okay, I just needed to play along until I could get a hold of that knife. Or at least until I figured out a way to overpower him. Bentley was highly trained, my father had made sure of that, so he wasn’t going to fall for the tricks that stupid people usually did.

“Delilah,” he snapped, a threat woven into his voice.

“Just busy admiring it,” I quickly responded, trying my best to keep any latent sarcasm out of my tone.

He seemed pleased by that, so I must have been a better actress than I thought.

“Is there a bathroom I can change in?” I asked lightly, really not wanting to get undressed in front of this bonehead.

Bentley eyed me hungrily.

“I want it to be a surprise and all of that,” I quickly added, not liking the way he was practically foaming at the mouth as he eyed my body.

“I don’t quite trust you yet, Delilah,” he responded, looking genuinely sad about that. “I think that those assholes worked really hard to make you forget

me. I'm going to be patient with you. That's what a perfect husband would do."

His emphasis on "perfect" was really creeping me out.

"Fair enough," I said with a plastered smile. "Let's do this."

"I'm going to untie you so you can put on the dress. But I'm going to have a gun on you the whole time, so please don't try anything. I really don't want any blood on the dress," he warned.

Right. Would definitely be a shame to ruin such a hideous dress.

He cut the ties on my wrists and ankles and I sighed in relief as feeling started to return to my hands and feet. That had been fucking uncomfortable.

I shifted nervously before just going for it; I began to take off the dress I'd been wearing. At least I had on a bra and underwear. That would have been really bad.

"So what have you been up to all these years?" I asked, trying to ignore the dirty feeling of his gaze caressing my skin.

He was seated on the bed at this point, a gun pointed at me, absolutely enthralled by the view.

Dirty perv.

"Well, there was a lot to take care of after the *unfortunate* situation with the Master," he answered. Bentley abruptly growled. "Who did you wear those for? Was it them?"

His glare was on my lacy underthings...which had definitely not been worn for his viewing pleasure.

He flew off the bed, his face twisted in murderous rage as he reared back and pistol-whipped me in the face with his gun, knocking me to the floor. "Whore, you're a whore. You let them touch you. I saw it." He sobbed and lunged at me again before abruptly freezing and moving back to the bed.

There was a long silence after that. My cheek was throbbing, and the room was spinning a bit as I struggled to get my bearings. Fuck. That hurt. Somehow he hadn't broken the skin, but I could already feel the bruise forming as my cheek throbbed and burned from the hit.

"I shouldn't lose my temper," he suddenly said in an extremely calm voice, one completely at odds with the rage fest he'd just leveled on me. Was he serious? "It makes me very unhappy that you didn't wait for me to get you. That you allowed them to sully your body. I watched you with that... that dyke's brother. The way you let him touch you...." His whole body shuddered as he fisted his hands and brought them in front of his face.

Bentley took several deep breaths before finally lowering his hands.

My breath was coming out in gasps--not from fear, although there was plenty of that--but in rage, that he'd dared to strike me.

My father would have killed him.

Weird thing to think about, but as much as I knew he was devoted to my dad, he was breaking an awful lot of the Demon's rules at the moment.

"I'm trying to work through some things, darling. I know you understand. Please continue trying on the dress."

I struggled to my feet, the dread in my gut growing as it sunk in just how dangerous Bentley was when he was this...unhinged.

What was I going to do?

"It's all been very unfortunate," I murmured shakily, not having to fake that part at all. "But it was the plan."

He glanced at me suspiciously. "Plan? I've spoken to the Demon many times since he's been...in that place." The word "place" rolled off his tongue in disgust. "And he's never hinted at anything."

"Well, he couldn't tell you, not when all of his communication was being monitored. But it was all necessary in order to prepare for the cleansing," I insisted. "When he gets out, it will all make sense. As his heir, I've been hard at work carrying out our plan in his absence. "

Nothing I was saying made sense in my head, but I was hoping keywords like "cleansing" and "gets out"...and "heir" were at least distracting him a little bit. The Demon's merry band of crazies really liked words like that.

Bentley frowned as he thought over my words. I grabbed the dress from the bed, hoping that would distract him a bit.

It weighed what felt like a million pounds. Where had he found this thing?

"I really want to believe you. The idea that you, my perfect girl, could fall so off the course the Demon has set for us. I've been preparing how to help you get back on the path, but I've still always hoped..."

I didn't like the sound of whatever "help" he'd had in mind. I definitely didn't want to see that plan.

I stepped into the dress, cringing when it got stuck on my thighs.

His nostrils flared in dismay when he saw. "It doesn't fit. How did you let yourself get like this?"

I had to bite my tongue. What a fucker. Judging by the look in his gaze though, I really needed to find a way to fit in this dress.

I crossed my legs in front of me, trying to inch the fabric up over my thighs. Inch by inch I dragged it, sweating from the effort and how much fucking fabric was on the thing. I heard a stitch pop when I was pulling it up over my ass, but I didn't give up. Where was a tub of butter when you needed it? That would have been helpful in getting this thing up.

I sucked in my stomach as much as I could, and somehow, I got the dress up.

It was a miracle.

Bentley got up off the bed, eyeing me admiringly as he walked to my back and began to work on the zipper. It was all I could do not to scream, or throw up, at the feel of his fingers brushing against my skin as he tugged.

Thank God the zipper didn't go all the way down my back, or it never would have worked. I was definitely shouting *Hosanna* when he managed to get the zipper up.

"Beautiful," he purred, leaning forward and...sniffing me? I stood perfectly still, my heart racing as I waited for what he was going to do next.

Finally, he stepped away and did a slow walk around me.

Something hit me then. Dyke. Is that what he'd said? Dyke's brother? He'd been talking about Stellan. Which meant...

Ice flushed through me. Sophia. He was talking about Sophia.

"Should we catch up a bit before the ceremony?" I asked, hoping I sounded at least a little bit flirty.

"Catch up?"

He didn't seem to be falling for the terrible flirting. Come on, Aurora. Do better.

"It's just... It's been so long." I sniffed, trying to summon any semblance of tears. "It almost feels like you're a stranger now."

Bentley frowned, his eyes tracking my face.

I reached out and touched his chest softly, ignoring the revulsion crawling at my veins. "It's been lonely without someone who understands. You're the only one who could."

His eyes glimmered at that comment. "I do understand you. That's why we're perfect, Delilah. I'm the only one."

Enough with the perfect already.

He was still gripping the gun so I slowly reached for his other hand, taking his cold, clammy skin in mine and leading him...away from the bed, to where a small table and chairs were situated in the corner.

Bentley was staring at where our hands were joined, confused, like he wasn't sure how this was happening.

Join the club, buddy. I wasn't sure how this was happening either.

We sat down in the chairs, and I continued to hold onto his hand over the table since he really seemed to like that.

"Things got so complicated when we left that house like that. It's when everything started, you know?" I said.

He nodded like he understood exactly what I was saying.

I hesitated and began to stroke his hand with my thumb. Bentley was practically vibrating with delight at my touch. I decided just to go for it.

"I never got to thank you, you know. For getting rid of that problem."

Please say you don't know what I'm talking about, I pleaded silently, even as I leaned closer to him.

"Problem?" he asked, his voice a bit breathless as he tracked my movements, his blank gaze darting to my mouth as his tongue trailed across his lower lip.

Funny how that could look so sexy when Cain or Remington did it, and so...gross with Bentley.

"That girl. The one that was in love with me."

My heartbeat was hammering in my ears and my head felt lightheaded.

"You did take care of her, didn't you?" My own voice was breathy now, courtesy of how the way too small dress was cutting off my oxygen. Any minute now, it was going to split open and ruin how this was going.

He grinned then, in that way that the Demon did. When he was especially proud of a kill.

And my heart broke. It shattered and shifted and changed. Because I knew what he was about to say.

"Of course I got rid of that...slut. She was obsessed with you." His smile changed to a grimace of disgust. "I caught her outside your window, spying on you. She wanted you. I couldn't let that happen."

A sob was caught in my throat. I wanted to scream, to fall to the ground...to reach out and choke him and rejoice as the light left his eyes.

"How did you do it?" I asked. And it was like another person was speaking, someone who was dead inside, someone who was completely unfeeling, who was talking about a stranger's death and not the best friend I'd ever known in my life.

He moaned, biting his bottom lip like he was about to cum just from the

thought of it.

“I grabbed that bitch from your window, broke her neck and strangled her, and then I threw her under her own porch. The ground was frozen, if you remember. I couldn’t bury her or do what I wanted. But it was actually kind of perfect. To think of her family looking for her all these years, and then she was there all along. As soon as it began to get warm, I actually buried her under there. Didn’t want the smell to get noticeable.” He snorted. “I’ve watched her house every time I’ve been in town, and her mother still thinks the lesbian is going to come home.” His hand shook in mine as he laughed coldly at the thought of Sophia’s mother suffering while her daughter was buried feet away from her.

I was finding it hard to think at the moment, to remember what my plan had been to get out of here. I’d spent months trying to prepare myself for this moment—when it was confirmed that I was never going to see my beautiful, vivacious friend again. But I hadn’t really comprehended what it would feel like to know for sure.

There was a ringing in my ears as waves of grief flowed through me.

“Delilah?” His voice cut in, and I tried to force a smile, something to hide the heartbreak living in every cell of my body.

“You must really care about me. To always be watching out for me.”

Bentley looked very satisfied at my comment, squeezing my hand. “You have no idea how much I care,” he murmured, before straightening in his seat. “Oh, I have a wedding present for you.”

He squeezed my hand once more before letting go and hopping up from his seat to stride across the room. I took the time to look frantically for anything close by I could use as a weapon since he’d definitely notice if I lunged for that knife under the arch monstrosity.

A seam popped in my dress and I winced, my attention flicking back to Bentley as he opened up a drawer, creepily humming again as he did so.

I was tempted, at that moment, to just give up. Maybe I should piss him off and let him kill me. As much as the logical part of me tried to say I wasn’t responsible for what he’d done to Sophia, every other part of me believed I was.

After all the sins I’d committed in my life, there was none quite so heavy as Sophia’s death. Had he done it quick so she only had to be afraid for seconds? Had she struggled? Was she all the way dead when he’d pulled her under the porch? Or had she just laid there, alone and cold in the dark,

waiting for the end to come?

I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry.

Apologies crashed through my brain, drowning everything around me so I was only faintly aware that he was coming back towards me, carrying something.

Bentley dropped a box on the table, and my gaze flicked to it as he opened the lid with a flourish.

I was so twisted with guilt that it barely registered that there was a man's hand inside the box. And when I did take a closer look at it, it only took a moment to realize that it was Carrie's hand, the corpse I was supposed to dig up for the Sphinx. Because of course it was.

Laughter erupted from my mouth, so loud and uncontrolled that tears fell down my cheeks. Some for me, but mostly for Sophia, but all tangled and at odds with the crazy giggles falling from my mouth.

He frowned as we locked eyes, and then he slammed his hand down on the table.

"I think we've had enough catching up," he murmured, sliding the lid back on the box. "I think it's time we start the ceremony. You seem a bit... out of sorts."

The suspicion was back in his voice, but honestly, it was hard to care right then. And as he pulled me up from the chair and my zipper popped open in multiple places...I was thinking maybe everything was turning out exactly how it was supposed to.

Because there was no way that I was going to walk out of this ceremony alive.

I was going to get everything I finally deserved.

CHAPTER 26

AURORA



“I want you to walk towards me, Delilah. Meet me at the altar as a symbol that you’re offering yourself to me,” he demanded.

Nope. Didn’t like his use of that word. “Offering” myself to psychopaths seemed to be my thing, though, throughout my life. So maybe this was fitting.

“Although I wish the Master was here so we could do this properly.”

“I’m sure he wishes that he was here too. Should we wait until he gets out so that he can walk me down the aisle?” I tried to not sound too hopeful, but my nails were digging into my skin with how hard I was clenching my hands. Just wishing for something to turn in my favor.

Even if I didn’t deserve it.

His lips pursed, his eyes squinting as he thought about it. Hard by the look of it.

Bentley began to shake his head, his overlong hair flopping into his eyes, and my insides dropped. Besides the gross suit he was wearing, most people would have found Bentley attractive. Not attractive enough to catch overt attention, but enough for people to have a pleasing feeling when he was around, to immediately trust him. It was part of the reason the Demon had allowed him to apprentice--he thought his outer package and his sick inner package were an ideal combination. I think the Demon had ingrained in me the ability to sense evil, though. I think maybe that was my superpower now. You could line up a set of normal-looking people and I’d somehow be able to sense which of them were cracked inside.

“I think it’s much better that we do this today. Your father would want me to start the process of *cleansing* you,” he said, bringing me back into the

room. “By the time he gets out, there will be no trace of those disgusting, overwrought frat boys in your head. I know you wouldn’t want any distractions from the plan you and the Master put together.” There was a challenge in his voice, the distrust still there. Yep, he hadn’t bought what I’d said earlier about the Demon’s arrest being planned.

It was worth a try, I guess.

The creepy wedding music had long since stopped, so he went to the dilapidated music player and started it up again. “Go over to that wall,” he ordered, since I hadn’t yet moved from my original spot.

A wave of hopelessness crashed over me. Over and over. I felt like I was drowning in my pain.

Their faces flashed in my head. Cain, Paxton, Remington...and Stellan. Were they looking for me? Would they be able to figure out where I was?

I had suspicions the more that I looked at my surroundings. It had taken me a second to remember, because I’d only been inside once. But he’d had a burial ground, not far from the college actually. There’d been a small fisherman’s cottage on the property that was hidden in the trees right beyond the lake. Anyone on the water would have had to look hard to be able to see any sign of it.

It was the thick woods that surrounded the property he’d like, though. There was an algae that had grown on the ground, sheltered by the trees and given ideal conditions to grow. It had been perfect for decomposition, he’d told me. He’d bury the bodies in the ground and they’d disappear at a much higher rate thanks to the algae.

I had only seen into the front room, and it had been more...updated than this basement was, by about thirty years. But there was a smell caused by the algae. I could remember it now. A dank, musty smell of decay that had cloaked the air. And I realized now, after however long I’d been down here, that I was getting that same smell stuck in my nostrils. Of that algae.

Had Bentley taken me there?

As I walked over to the wall where he wanted me to start, my insides were trembling just thinking about this place. His more personal kills had been buried here. I might not have seen him bury them here, but I remembered him telling me that he liked to keep them close to his “favorite place”. And I remembered most of those kills. Those were primarily the ones that starred in my nightmares, the ghosts that haunted me when I closed my eyes. He’d been...brutal in those killings. He’d desecrated their bodies until

they were unrecognizable.

“Delilah!” Bentley roared sharply, his face a mottled red color at my obvious distraction. “If I didn’t know better, I would think you’re not as happy about this as I am...since you can’t seem to keep focus on the vows we’re about to take for one fucking second.”

His gaze had that crazy look he’d had when he struck me. I needed to fix this...fast.

“We’re at the cottage, aren’t we? I was just thinking about it, how thoughtful you are to want to be at my father’s favorite place for our ceremony.”

Evidently, that was the right thing to say because the crazy dimmed and pleasure replaced the rage in his features.

“Yes, I was hoping you would notice that.” He took a deep breath in, I’m sure inhaling the stench of decay. “This place is sacred. Can’t you feel it? The perfect place for us to begin our eternities together.”

“I can feel it,” I answered truthfully. It did feel like a sacred place...for the Devil.

“I’ve been mostly staying here since everything happened.” He grinned... and it was terrifying. “Sometimes I feel like I can hear their screams at night. It’s absolutely exhilarating.”

How did people like this happen? I knew very little about the Demon’s background. I only suspected that his parents had abused him since, at least in the beginning, his primary target was sex predators. But I knew nothing about Bentley’s background.

Had he been born like this? Or had he been made?

And what was the answer to that question for me?

I don’t think I wanted to know.

“Perfect,” I answered when I realized he was waiting for a response. “I couldn’t have picked a more perfect place.”

His eyes glimmered at my use of his favorite word, and I made a mental note to add that to “cleansing” and all the other words I kept in the Demon database in my head.

“Are you ready, my *perfect* bride?” he purred, his cheeks flushed in anticipation.

“Yes,” I murmured, as my back hit the wall where he’d wanted me to start.

Bentley restarted the music and it began to swell around us.

I inhaled the smell of...death.

And I walked towards my future. Because there was no way that my white knights—or dark knights, I should say—were ever going to find me.

Remington

It had taken me far too long to hack into Aurora's computer that was still at the Sphinx. Whoever had helped her with the firewalls and protections was good. Her hacker friend, I was guessing, since Aurora had mentioned her helping with computer stuff. I was just hoping when I messaged her from Aurora's account that she would actually respond. She had to know places where Aurora could have been taken. There was no doubt in any of our minds that the guys had been Demon followers. We were just hoping they were close Demon followers and would have wanted to stay close to his property for whatever demented shit they had planned.

And everything in me was saying this hacker person knew far more about the Demon than she'd been playing off to Aurora.

"What the fuck is taking so long?" Stellan snapped, wearing holes in the carpet as he walked back and forth across the room. Cain and Paxton were out driving the area on the off chance that he'd taken her nearby and they spotted the van anywhere. We all knew that they wouldn't find anything.

But I guess they wanted to feel useful.

I loved being the useful one for Aurora. I think that earned me extra, exclusive time with her after we got her back.

And we were going to get her back.

We were also going to follow up on that leash idea, because a tracker was never going to be good enough, and I was never going to let her out of my sight again.

She could bitch and complain all she wanted.

"Shut the fuck up, Stellan," I muttered as I worked to get through yet another wall in Aurora's computer that was preventing me from being able to get into the account. On a normal computer, it would have taken me less than five minutes to be able to control their whole interface. It had been hours so far trying to get into Aurora's, and I was about to lose my mind.

And stab Stellan.

Although maybe we'd learned our lesson about the whole stabbing Stellan thing. Who knows how long he would have been able to hold on if Cain hadn't mutilated his shoulder.

Not that Cain was probably thinking about that at all.

Asshole.

When I realized I didn't hear Stellan's feet dragging through the carpet, I glanced back, only to see Stellan on the floor with his face in his hands.

Such a melodramatic bastard.

"Stellan, we're going to get her back," I said, feeling exhausted all of a sudden. I'd been riding adrenaline since the moment she'd been grabbed. But now that the hours were stretching on, and this was taking so fucking long, a bone-deep weariness had begun to spread through my veins.

"She hasn't forgiven me, Remi. I've been such a bastard. I think I'll literally die if something happened to her."

"Newsflash, Stellan. A million things have already happened to her. Maybe those should have brought about this midlife crisis you're having."

His eyes were red-rimmed as he dragged his fingers down his face and looked at me pathetically. He was hurting. Badly. A flicker of jealousy came to life in my chest, because despite everything, she was definitely still in love with him. They had something special between them, a shared history that I'd never be able to replicate. Even after months of him being the world's biggest asshole, she loved him.

"Yes!" I practically screamed as the program I'd been trying to use finished loading and I made it through the final firewall. Stellan sprang off the ground and was at my shoulder in a second, peering over my shoulder at Aurora's desktop. I immediately went to her server and started the process of logging in to the dark web messenger I knew she used.

"Fuck."

"What?"

"Just hating at the moment how fucking smart our girl is. It would be much easier to save Lady Love if she could have used fewer encrypted passwords. Whatever happened to saving your passwords in your Google keychain," I complained, shaking my head as I started yet another program. "You guys are lucky to have me."

"Wow. I'm impressed," I muttered.

"Impressed at what?" Stellan asked, frowning as he stared at the code on the screen that would look like nothing but gibberish to an ignorant heathen

like himself.

“About how fucking smart I am. I’m the only one who deserves Aurora.” I announced it with a flourish as the chat screen finally pulled up.

I quickly found their private messaging window, scrolling through it. “Ok, whoever this is sucks and will need to be punished at a later date after they help us. This is how Aurora changed my grades and stole my money!”

“You were saying how you were so deserving of Aurora?” he taunted, and I stuck my tongue at him as I typed out, *Nena, I need your help*, into the messenger screen.

“Obviously none of us deserve her, Stellan. Seriously, you would think you knew my humor by now.”

Aurora? popped up on the screen.

It’s her boyfriend. The one you helped destroy my grades and take my money...

There was a long pause, and Stellan and I were both on the edge of our seats waiting for her to answer. If she answered at all.

Five fucking minutes passed before more words appeared on the screen. And we were only down one lamp in the room, so I would say that showed we had a great deal of patience.

How did you get into this chat...Where’s Aurora? She didn’t say you were her boyfriend.

She’s in trouble. We think someone connected with the Demon took her.

I sent a screenshot of the creepy blood message she’d been left.

How do I know it’s you? She never said she trusted you.

I sighed in frustration and grabbed the side of Stellan’s face. “Smile,” I said as I snapped a picture of our faces.

I sent the picture along with some I’d taken with Aurora lately where she’d actually looked happy and not like she wanted to kill me. When she still didn’t respond, I began to get annoyed.

Look. If you care about Aurora at all, you’ll help us. I don’t have time to send you over a blood sample of who I am. I love Aurora. I can’t stand the thought of her being hurt and alone. Please help us.

I could feel Stellan’s gaze sending laser beams into the side of my head.

“You love her?”

“Yes, Stellan,” I drawled. “I love her. It’s pretty fucking obvious.” I shot him a side glance as I waited for the hacker person to respond. “And I’m going to tell her as soon as we get her back. Just in case that wasn’t clear.”

There was caution in my voice. I know I didn't have to tell him. But out of the four of us, Stellan was the one who had the most trouble with the idea of sharing Aurora. Although why he would think he could handle the job of taking care of Aurora by himself, wasn't clear. We were failing miserably with all four of us trying to do it.

Are you going to help, or not? Because if not, let me know so I can stop wasting my time.

"I thought you were trying to make her like you?" Stellan asked, an eyebrow raised at my impatient words.

"I don't care if she fucking likes me or not. She just needs to answer."

Paxton and Cain chose that moment to walk through the door, a quick glance at their dejected and frustrated faces telling me they'd had no success.

Well, that and the fact that Aurora was not in fact with them.

I have a list of some of his properties, Nena abruptly responded. If that was even her name. Nena the hacker. Sounded fake to me.

He could have told his followers about some of them. But...

But what?

But there's one that he only would have told his closest followers. It was his favorite place.

I resisted the urge to ask her how he knew that. But as soon as I got Aurora back, I would be doing everything I could to make sure she stayed away from this person.

"Is she saying anything?" Cain growled, looking over my other shoulder. It felt like I'd sprouted two extra heads with Cain and Stellan so close to me.

It's not that far from your campus.

Can you send us a list, and I guess we'll just start going through them?

My foot was tapping impatiently against the chair leg. Every second felt like an hour.

A second later, a list of addresses popped up, most of them hours and hours away.

"Those two are fairly close by," Stellan said, pointing at the screen. I swatted his hand away...fingerprints on my screen was not my happy place.

The two I've starred have still been using electricity and gas. There's been people living there.

Oh, well, that was at least promising. You were promised a crazy if they were choosing to stay at a Demon property. I can't imagine they made very charming Airbnbs.

Please keep me updated, Nena wrote, before abruptly logging off the chat.

“Okay, I guess we’ll search those two places. And fucking hope that he wasn’t feeling up for a hugely long drive when he grabbed her.”

I shut my computer, tucking it under my arm as we all headed towards the door.

It would take us at least three hours between both of those places, and if we had to go to the others...it could be days.

Definitely doing a leash as soon as I saw her. And a million tracking chips.

I’d stopped praying a long time ago. But as we walked out to the car, the silence between us all overbearing and stifling, I found myself reaching out to the big guy. I figured that with how gross the Demon and his cronies were, even with my debauchery, I was firmly a middle-of-the-road sinner. Might help to get my prayer in the queue.

We’re coming, baby. Hold on.

CHAPTER 27

AURORA



Honestly, if I thought about things I couldn't have predicted, walking across eighties-style orange carpet in my father's graveyard abode...in a ripped, too-small wedding dress was not one of them.

Bentley was perched under the arch, a demented smile stretched ear to ear. It kind of reminded me of the Joker smile, honestly. It was so...big...and wrong. I was expecting at any moment to hear him offer to put a smile on my face with that dagger that was still on that table.

I was really not looking forward to what part of the ceremony that was for.

Considering I just had to walk across the living room, my journey down the aisle lasted forever.

And yet not nearly long enough.

Because somehow, here I was, standing across from him, getting smacked in the side of the face from the tulle getting blown by the air conditioning vent...about to become a wife.

Or at least a fake wife.

"Do you think you'll get married?" Sophia asked as we laid out on her trampoline and watched a storm blow in.

My gaze automatically flicked over to my house, expecting the Demon to be standing right there and ready to haul me off just at the mention of the word "married."

"I try not to think that far in advance," I murmured when I was assured he wasn't there. He was supposed to be gone all day today procuring another...guest.

I was hoping it took several days.

“Oh, come on, you have to have thought of it at least once.”

I frowned as I tried to think if I had. I really couldn't think of a time when I allowed myself to have a happy thought like that.

Although I guess there were a lot of people that didn't necessarily consider marriage to be a happy thought.

I snorted and then heard Sophia giggling.

“What?” I asked, unable to stop myself from laughing with her.

“You're doing that thing again.” Her nose was wrinkled up like it always did when she found something funny, and I flicked it with my finger.

“What thing?”

“When you get lost having whole conversations in your head.”

I laughed. “I guess I was doing that.”

When you didn't have anyone to talk to except a psychopath, it tended to happen a lot.

“Alright, since you apparently have never dreamed of a wedding, I'll tell you all about mine.”

“Who's the lucky guy going to be?” I said, raising my eyebrows exaggeratedly.

Something flickered in her gaze, a shadow. Oh crap, was she crushing on someone she hadn't told me about? Had he done something? I would stab him for her. I was pretty sure she knew that.

“Oh, look at that cloud,” she said abruptly, pointing to a dark one that was about to be right on top of us.

I was about to call her out on changing the subject, just in case there was someone that I needed to stab when—

Rain had begun to splash down on us. We shrieked and grabbed hands, jumping off the trampoline and running through the rain towards the house.

And her mother had been there with a wide smile, snapping a picture as we ran.

A throat cleared, and I came back to the present only to inhale sharply in surprise when I saw Bentley was now wearing a long dark robe over his suit...like one a pastor of a church would wear.

And so started what was undoubtedly the weirdest moment of my life.

Bentley picked up the bible that had been lying on the table and gave an oddly benevolent-looking smile to the empty room. “Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today...” he began, looking at the wall in front of him like there was an audience of people there. He droned on and on while I just

stared at him in shocked awe that someone could be so fucking...crazy.

I mean, Cain looked like the most well-adjusted person on the planet now that this was happening.

“Will you please repeat this vow to Delilah, saying after me: I, Bentley, take you Delilah, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, I promise to love and cherish you.”

I watched incredulously as he set down the bible and then shrugged off the robe and set it carefully down on the table.

Bentley then grabbed my hands and stared into my eyes. And said, “I do.” He placed a slimy kiss on my hand and then released them and put the robe back on.

Holy shit. It was about to be my turn.

“Will you please repeat this vow to Bentley, saying after me: I, Delilah, take you Bentley, to be my husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, I promise to love and cherish and obey you.”

Yuck, of course he would add in that “obey you” part.

A second later, Bentley had the robe off and was waiting expectantly for me to speak as he held tightly onto my hands.

I couldn’t help it...my gaze flicked to the knife on the table.

His grip tightened and I quickly looked back at his face, noting the darkness spreading in his gaze. He reached down and grabbed it, tucking it into his belt loop. I could see that he was trying to resist the urge to use it on me.

That was stupid, Aurora.

“I, Delilah, take you Bentley, to be my husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, I promise to love and cherish and obey you,” I rushed out, my tongue tripping on the words “obey you”, but what else could he expect?

Bentley beamed, the darkness receding, and he took a step towards me before shaking his head. “Has to be perfect,” he muttered before he let go of my hands and once again put the robe back on.

He went into another speech, reciting the wedding vows from memory—the bible was evidently just a prop to add to his character. And then it was time to exchange the rings. He grabbed a box out of his pocket and I almost threw up when he opened it up and revealed a small diamond ring. I didn’t

feel sick because of the diamond—it was definitely because of the piece of skin stuck to it. If I'd had any doubts about where he'd gotten the suit...and the ring...they were gone now.

“Do you like it, darling?” he asked, holding out the ring box in offering.

“It's—beautiful,” I choked out. I was not putting that on. Nope, I drew the line there.

I was prepared to try and knee him in the balls, but then an image of Stellan's back porch flashed through my mind. In the image, a flash of Sophia's hair was sticking out from the ground.

This was what I deserved.

Bentley eagerly grabbed the ring, frowning when he noticed the skin... “Fuck,” he murmured, his cheeks flushing as he ripped the skin off and then rubbed the ring against his coat.

Funny that was what embarrassed him, amidst all of that.

The groom in the cake chose that moment to sink all the way down...and then...the cake fell over. The warmth of the room was too much for the precariously constructed monstrosity.

“No!” Bentley screeched as he threw the ring down on the table and went to grab at the cake like he could put the frosting back together.

A buzzing sound started right then, and I frowned as I tried to figure out the source.

“You've got to be kidding me,” he growled as he turned, frosting all over his fingers, and reached into his pocket...smearing the icing everywhere. He pulled out a phone and frowned as he stared at the screen. His look of annoyance flashed into...rage.

He pocketed the phone and wiped off the frosting on the front of his jacket. “Change of plans, Delilah. I've decided on a different wedding locale.” He strode over to me and grabbed my arm in a tight grip. “Let's go.”

He began to drag me towards the door, my interest spiked. What had he seen on his phone?

We got up the stairs, the dark smell of the algae growing stronger.

Everything was familiar up here, like taking a step back in time.

Before I could venture too far up memory lane, he was dragging me towards the door, checking his phone as we walked.

“Fuck!” We came to a halt as I heard the sound of car doors closing outside.

Hope flickered to life in my chest. Was that...them?

Bentley began to drag me towards the back door that led to the deck that peeked out to the lake. Right then, the door crashed open with a BANG. Paxton was there, shock and relief flicking across his face. His teeth tangled up in a snarl when he saw Bentley's grip on my arm.

Well, if this wasn't the moment I'd been waiting for. I elbowed Bentley as hard as I could, wrenching my other arm from his as I stomped on his foot at the same time. Cain, Stellan, and Remington had just burst through the door after Paxton, Cain's gun raised and pointing at Bentley.

I took a step forward, but Bentley caught me by the hair, yanking me back to his chest as he used me as a shield against the threat of them all.

Cain laughed cruelly, the sound sending chills cascading across my skin. He was so fucking sexy.

"Give us back our girl, and maybe I won't cut off your dick *before* I kill you," Cain said pleasantly.

"Your girl?" Bentley seethed as the knife he'd put in his belt earlier stretched across my neck. His grip on my hair tightened, and I huffed as pain shot through me. He was going to fucking scalp me. "Delilah, darling. We really have to talk about your choice of company." Bentley licked the side of my face with his slimy, warm tongue—my least favorite combination, by the way—and I cringed as the knife dug into my skin at the same time.

Paxton was moving around the perimeter of the room, but Bentley saw him, moving us backwards until his back was against the back door.

"Delilah, I'll get us a better cake next time," he murmured against my skin as he let my hair go, and I heard the sound of the door opening behind him.

He was not taking me out of this house. No fucking way.

I slammed my elbow back, but right as I connected with his chest, a shocking, sharp pain ripped through my chest.

He released me, and I was faintly aware of the guys shouting and of the door slamming closed behind me, but it felt like I was trapped in an echo chamber, everything sounding too loud and echoing.

I glanced down where the pain was pulsing and saw the fucker had stabbed me in the fucking chest.

I began to fall, but I was caught in Paxton's strong arms.

"Princess," he breathed, brushing a kiss against my forehead. Cain was there then, standing right in front of me, his fingertips dancing across my face.

“Little Devil, we really need to find a new way for you to get an adrenaline rush. Might I suggest a St. Andrew’s cross?”

I tried to open my mouth to respond, and Remington and Stellan appeared right behind Cain, twin worried looks on their pretty faces.

Ice was spreading through my veins...and I was feeling so heavy all of a sudden...

Then everything faded away.

CHAPTER 28

CAIN



Aurora wove in and out of consciousness as I settled into the backseat of the car with her. Her head lolled against my shoulder.

“Get her to my father’s house,” I told Remington. “I’ll have the physician meet us there.”

We couldn’t exactly go to the emergency room. I didn’t trust anyone with Aurora. The Demon’s daughter. So many people saw her as the enemy—what if the police saw her as the enemy instead of the victim?

She murmured something. She pushed against my arm, fighting to sit up, and she winced as if the movement hurt.

“Shut up, save your strength,” I told her.

She whispered something. I hoped like fuck she wasn’t trying to say sweet last words to me. “What?”

She tried again, her voice ragged. “Fucking asshole.”

I laughed. “That’s my girl. I’ll spank your ass for it later, of course.”

But blood was pumping steadily out of the wound, and there might not be a later.

“He’s the one who took Sophia,” she managed.

“He’ll be dead soon,” I promised. “Like anyone else who tries to fuck with my girl.”

I dared a glance at Stellan beside me, who seemed too intent on Aurora to take that as a threat.

He reached out and took her hand. She squeezed his fingers, and she blinked heavily, her gaze finding his. “He said he buried Sophia....”

Every word seemed to take her enormous effort. Then she started to cough, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

Stellan's posture had gone rigid, every bit of him intent on Aurora. He wanted to know so badly.

"It's okay," he said. "It's okay. Don't try to talk if it hurts."

She swallowed heavily, coughed again.

"He buried her under your porch," she managed in a rush. "At least you can know that. Your mom can know where she's sleeping now. You can bury her properly."

"Aurora, don't talk like that," Stellan said. He leaned over her, his face crumpling as he leaned over her. He blinked hard, trying to hold back tears, shame coloring his cheeks when the rest of us were so close. "Don't leave me too. I need you, Aurora. Delilah. Please."

"It's all right," she whispered. "Whatever happens..."

"No, no," Stellan said.

I wasn't sure I'd ever believe Stellan deserved her. But looking at his face, there was no doubt he loved her.

And yet he'd kidnapped her. What a fucking psycho.

Devastation darkened his gaze as she lapsed into unconsciousness. He lowered his head, trying to hide the tears that had come to his eyes.

"I swear she was just hanging on to tell us," Pax said quietly, as if he were driving the knife home through Stellan's soul. Or maybe he was just that amazed by Aurora. She was incredible. Strong and sweet; I hadn't thought anyone could be both at once like she was.

"No, she's hanging on because she's fucking mine and she's not allowed to run away," I growled. She might be unconscious, but I bet she could hear me. Hopefully she'd fucking listen for once.

Aurora was the most amazing woman I'd ever met, but she certainly didn't have great listening skills.

Remington pulled the car into the driveway of my parent's rambling Tudor mansion. Pax bounded out of the car and opened my door, and I climbed out, carrying Aurora. The physician was just arriving, his familiar dark SUV pulling in behind us.

I nestled her head against my shoulder to make sure she wouldn't get hurt, and I ran for the basement of our house and the operating room inside it.

In case of emergency—or mob war—my father had a small clinic installed in our basement. I carried her through the house toward the basement stairs. My mother cried out in alarm when she saw me, then realized it wasn't one of my friends that I was carrying. She frowned. "A

woman, Cain?”

“I do like them, Mom,” I pointed out before I jogged down the stairs.

“You’ve just never brought a woman home before, and the first time you do, she’s bleeding.” Her voice faded behind me.

I lay Aurora on the table. Her clothes were completely saturated with blood, and the sight made my heart twist. I loved seeing my Aurora dressed in blood—the blood of her enemies. I loved the way she’d introduced me to how much the curve of a knife’s blade against my skin turned me on. She was all danger.

But this was the wrong kind of blood. Her eyelashes fluttered, and I demanded, “Aurora.” I wanted to see her eyes open, see her grounded in the here and now.

But her eyes didn’t open. The fluttering stopped.

The surgeon rushed in, and I quickly explained the situation. The other guys piled in, obviously all worried as hell about her.

They could be in their feelings. I’d rather help save her life. I let the care I felt for her pop like a bubble, seeing her as nothing but a body. If we lost her, there’d be time for feelings later.

For now, I demanded, “What do you need?”

The physician said, “She’s going into hypovolemic shock. Get her IV started with universal blood. Then give her a shot of norepinephrine. I’m going to remove the knife.”

We’d left it in, knowing it was dangerous to remove a knife without knowing what it was embedded in. I’d hated looking at the fucking thing.

He reached for the scissors to cut off her blood-soaked shirt, but it already had a hole and I ripped it open, baring her chest. I’d apologize later. Then I moved to start the IV.

“We’ve got an entry wound along the mid-left sternal border,” the doc went on. He was pressing around the knife, fresh blood bubbling up around it. Pax looked away, his face pale as if he couldn’t stand to see Aurora like this, naked and wounded and vulnerable.

“You can leave,” I told them. They weren’t being useful anyway.

Remington scoffed. “There’s no way I’m leaving her side.”

Pax agreed with him, and Stellan shook his head, rejecting my suggestion they get out of the operating room.

“You sure you don’t want to go dig up Sophia right now?” I asked harshly, knowing I was being a dick, but I was just so pissed. If he hadn’t run

off with Aurora, we wouldn't be so close to losing her now.

"No," Stellan met my gaze evenly. "I'm going to do that with Aurora."

After that, I ignored them and focused on doing whatever I could to help the doc with Aurora. It wasn't until later that I felt the adrenaline let-down coursing through my legs, when the last of Aurora's stitches were being carefully looped through her skin by the physician. I watched him closely, making sure he left my girl as unscarred as possible.

Then I said to the guys, "We can all stay here until she's ready to go back to the Sphinx." I knew she was safe here, and I had a lot of shit I wanted to sort out.

Aurora woke a few times during the night. Each time, the rest of us woke up from where we'd slept scattered through the guest suite. It was a relief to see her breathing and alive and awake, even if she was sleepy and grouchy and blinking each time.

In the morning, she woke up for real.

"Finally," I told her. I lay on the bed beside her, although I didn't touch her; I was worried the wound would hurt her if I pulled her head onto my shoulder like I wanted to.

I tried to convince her to stay in bed, but she heard my mother's voice in the hallway and kept trying to hobble out to be polite.

"You're just curious." I placed my hand gently on her unwounded shoulder to keep her from rising. I had to reject my first impulse to grab her throat and push her down into the pillows and remind her who was in charge here. She was still fragile. "You want to know where someone like me comes from, I know."

Her expression changed, her eyes growing darker.

"They can just come in here," Remington said. "You don't need to get up."

"They?" Aurora echoed, sudden concern across her face.

"Don't worry about meeting my parents." We'd washed and dressed her and changed the sheets, knowing she wouldn't want to sleep in blood. "They wouldn't like any girl anyway."

My father appreciated that I didn't have many distractions. Academics,

sports, and the Sphinx had kept me too busy for a serious relationship with any girl. He wanted me to focus on masquerading as a successful and honest businessman while taking over the family business in the shadows.

And I was pretty sure my mom just worried she'd lose me, her one and only partner for watching K-drama. I'd do anything to make my mom happy...as long as it was only once a month.

My joke did not make Aurora smile. She seemed on edge, in a different way than usual, her eyes gliding around the room.

When my mother and father stepped into the room, she smiled at my mother. Her gaze slid to my father and then away, and I realized with a jolt that she was afraid of him. Why? Because he was a mobster?

Maybe she wasn't going to be my underworld queen after all. She'd seen a lot of darkness. I guessed I could understand if she didn't want anymore. But the thought still made my hands close into fists.

"Aurora, I'm so glad you're doing better," my mother said warmly. "I want to know everything about you."

"Sweetheart, the girl just had a near-death experience. Don't smother her," Dad reproved, but there was a gleam in his eyes. He adored my mother, and he wrapped his arm around her waist as they stood at Aurora's side.

I introduced them. Then, as my mother started to chatter to Aurora who smiled, warming to her—everyone warmed to my mom—Dad tugged me to one side.

"Do you need any help fixing... this?" he asked me, gesturing at Aurora.

"I've got it under control," I promised.

"Good job, then." My father clapped my shoulder. He looked at me as if he had a question on his lips, as if he wanted to know how serious I was about this girl, but it seemed to die in his mouth. He just clapped my shoulder again and smiled.

He must be able to see from my face how I felt about her.

Just like I could always see how he loved Mom from the way he looked at her.

The similarity hit me hard.

"All right, she actually needs to get some rest. You can let her sleep before you try to make her watch your K-drama," Dad teased Mom, his gaze affectionate.

Aurora smiled, just faintly. "It was nice... meeting you both."

When they'd left and the guys gave us a minute, I asked, "Well, how bad

was that?”

Some crazy part of me gave a shit. If my parents and Aurora hated each other, I'd still choose her. I'd find a way to keep those two halves of my life separate. But I wanted Aurora every minute, close enough to know she was safe, to kiss, to share those quick glances where I knew what she was thinking. And to bend her over every available object to fuck too, of course. I wanted her so badly all the time that I was hard even now, when I'd never start anything because she was too weak. And when I could hear my mother in the hall talking about making lasagna for lunch.

“It was fine,” she said carefully. “Your mom and dad tease each other a lot. I didn't expect them to be so... happy.”

I nodded. “I've never seen anyone in love like they're in love.”

Her lips curled in a smile. “That's nice. I'm glad you grew up with that.”

She sounded warm and sweet. She might've had the shittiest of childhoods, but she was glad whenever anyone else had happiness. She was too fucking good for my world, but I was going to keep her in mine anyway.

I didn't like talking about my feelings, but I had a feeling I was going to have to get over that...at least a little... to keep Aurora.

I raked my hand through my hair, feeling stupid, before I confessed, “I never thought I'd find anything like that myself.”

She stared at me in surprise, her lips parting.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Don't say you love me quite yet, Cain.” Her voice came out light, and I stared at her. It sounded like a joke.

“Why?” My voice came out harsher than I intended.

“Well.” She hesitated. “Your father ordered my kidnapping.”

CHAPTER 29

AURORA



It made sense that it was a gloomy, cold day when we went back to Stellan's house. The sky seemed to be agreeing with us that there was nothing to be happy about. I was glad that the earth seemed to be mourning with me.

After the little bombshell I'd given Cain, he'd gone quiet with a fury that was truly terrifying to behold. Cain was scariest when he was quiet, and you knew whatever he did to address that anger was going to be bad.

If it were one of the other guys, they would have probably marched down the hall to have a knock-down-drag-out fight, but Cain didn't do much without thinking it over. We'd left a few hours after that bombshell though, when Cain was sure I wasn't going to pass out and need the surgeon again. He wouldn't let me in the same room with either of his parents and he didn't say goodbye.

Remington had put in a tip to the local police force of where Sophia's body might be, thinking it would be better for someone in a more official capacity to uncover her body so everyone could properly mourn her, not just us.

We arrived just as the police squad showed up at the house. Stellan's mother was standing on the front porch, her hands wrapped around her body as she rocked herself back and forth, back and forth.

When the car door opened and she saw it was Stellan, she lurched forward, running towards him through the damp grass, barefoot. She threw herself into his arms, and he caught her with a low grunt, holding her tight and murmuring soothing words into her ear. They both sank to the grass, and my heart clenched watching Stellan's face twist up in misery as well, tears

streaming down his face.

Would she be alright? Would his mom somehow be able to move on once she knew where her daughter was?

Or was that just wishful thinking?

Would any of the ones who loved Sophia ever be able to move on?

I wasn't sure.

I stayed by the car as one of the officers came and said something to Stellan and his mother while other officers began to walk around the back of the house carrying shovels and equipment bags.

"I have to see this," I murmured to Remington, who was wrapped around me, his head laying on my shoulder. He'd been exceptionally touchy-feely since they'd found me, and I wasn't mad about it at all.

"Okay, baby," he answered, pulling his head away and taking my hand as we began to walk around the side of the house to where the police had just disappeared. I could feel the dark specter of the Demon's house watching over us, but I ignored it.

He'd already won. Or at least that's what it felt like, even if he hadn't been the one to kill her. It was because of him...because of me, she was dead. But I'm sure when he heard the news, he'd be delighted.

The police were in the process of ripping apart the side of the deck when we got back there. One of them walked towards us, I'm sure to tell us we had to leave, but then Stellan and his mother were rounding the corner—his mother a mess—and the police officer went back to watching the others work. I guess they thought Sophia's family should be able to see this.

Thank goodness he hadn't said anything. That probably would have gotten messy judging by the way Remington was poised next to me, his arm around my waist, like he was prepared to launch into battle for me at a moment's notice.

The last of the fencing on the side of the deck ripped away, and two of the officers got on their knees, shining a flashlight into the darkness. One of them crawled a few feet in. He looked like he was brushing something on the ground and then—

"Something's buried under here," he called out.

Stellan's mother sank to her knees, and Stellan didn't try to keep her up this time. One of the other officers eyed her uneasily, but then he turned back to the task at hand.

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and there was Paxton and

Cain, leaning against the side wall, their eyes not on the deck...but on me.

It was tragically funny, but there was still part of me that was hoping Bentley had been lying. Or that this was some sort of misunderstanding, and it was actually some other girl he'd buried under there.

Not that I wanted another girl to be dead. But I'd gladly trade almost any news other than the one I knew I was about to get.

Small shovels were handed to the officers who were underneath the deck while others went to work ripping up the top part of the deck.

A few minutes passed, and you could see the officers moving dirt around.

"It's a body," someone confirmed somberly.

I was aware that Stellan's mom was screaming hysterically, but it was faint, like a story that wasn't happening to me. My attention was focused on the darkness, waiting to get a glimpse, to know for sure. The other officers were hard at work, still tearing planks of wood off. Cain and Paxton joined in, and a few minutes later we were all able to look beneath the deck.

All we could see was a skeletal finger, poking out from where they'd pushed dirt off, but with every scoop of dirt, more of the body was uncovered.

I knew as soon as the rest of the arm was revealed, it was her. The friendship bracelet I'd given her for her birthday one year was wrapped around the bone, the colors still somehow bright amid the ruin.

I waited though, watching as they revealed the scraps of the vintage Rolling Stones t-shirt she'd found at a thrift shop, and the necklace that her father had given her. There was still plenty of flesh left, and when they revealed her face, I felt like I'd been stabbed in the heart a thousand times over.

"My baby, my baby," Stellan's mom was screaming as she rushed to get below the deck and grab her daughter. It took both Stellan and Remington to hold her back, and soon, medics were called in to give her something to calm down. Stellan's dad came running up half an hour after her body had been uncovered. He fell to his knees, great wracking sobs coming out of a man I only remembered being happy.

Everything was chaotic and heartbreaking. Screams and tears, the sound of sirens in the air as more and more officers arrived.

And I stood there, frozen in place, staring at her body, wondering why it couldn't have been me instead.

The days between finding her body and the funeral were hazy and fractured. Stellan's mom had to be sedated the whole week, and his dad couldn't do anything but look at pictures and cry, so it was up to us to plan something.

We spent hours on her obituary, trying to put into words the magic of Sophia. Magic that the world would forget in the next news cycle. We went through pictures, trying to decide which ones to blow up. Stellan and I picked out her fucking coffin. I was still healing, so at least the pain medicine I was on was able to numb the pain at least a little bit. I felt hollow, broken, destroyed.

Stellan walked around, angry at the world, snapping at everyone around him as he tried to find an outlet for the pain. He'd trashed the living room that first night, breaking all the pictures I'd admired, tearing the pillows apart, shattering the coffee table and the TV. No one tried to stop him. Stellan could destroy everything if he wanted; he deserved that after the hell he'd been through. After he'd lost basically his entire family because he had the bad fortune of being my next-door neighbor. I circled him warily, only speaking to him when absolutely necessary. I was afraid that any more interaction with me would just make everything worse.

Paxton slept with me every night. The nightmares were back, worse than ever. Real memories mixed with new ones. The sight of her body, her mother's shriek of sorrow, the cockroaches that had been eating her insides. He'd hold me tight and tell me things would get better. But his words didn't bring the comfort that they usually did.

I knew they were all worried about me; I'd walk into a room and their whispers would fade away as they hastily tried to cover up the fact that they were talking about me. I didn't really care, though. Nothing seemed that important.

There was no viewing...obviously, since the body was in no condition. So we'd planned a "night of memories" in the high school gymnasium the night before the funeral, where all of her friends and family were invited to talk about all the good stories of Sophia. I found myself laughing for the first time as people talked about pranks she pulled, one-liners they still remembered years later. They talked about how kind she was, how she stood up for people, how they could still hear her laugh in their heads.

As the hours ticked by, I knew I needed to say something, but it was hard

to summon the right words.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Remington whispered as Stellan stood up to talk. I just laid my head on his shoulder and squeezed his hand, trying to get my thoughts together.

Stellan’s eyes were red as he stood there, but otherwise, he looked calm and in control. Everyone stared at him like they always had when he’d lived in this town—like he was everything. His reputation in this place would only grow after all of this, I was sure.

“I just wanted to thank everyone for coming tonight. I’m sure Sophia would be extremely happy about being the center of attention since she wasn’t one to ever shy away from the spotlight.” There were a bunch of smiles amongst the crowd, including mine. Sophia had been a star, a bright shining star in any crowd she found herself. We’d orbited around her presence.

My smile fell, though, when I thought about all the past tense words we would use for the rest of our lives when we talked about her. All of the remember whens.

My body shook as a sob ripped through me, and it was everything I could do to hold in the sound of it.

“This wasn’t how I wanted her story to end,” Stellan continued. “I was hoping until the very end that I’d be able to give her a hug, tell her how proud I was to be her brother. To hear her complain about how long I took to style my hair.”

More laughter filled the crowd at that one.

“I was trying to think what story to tell of her, and like most of you, it’s hard to pick just one. But what I ended up deciding, was that I wanted you guys to remember how well she loved. My little sister gave her whole heart to the people she chose to love, and it was one of the most precious gifts I’ve ever received. I remember when I was being an idiot about a girl I was desperately in love with. And she came into my room and she told me, “Stellan, you only get one chance to find your soul mate. Don’t fuck it up.”

Stellan’s gaze was locked on mine as he spoke, and I hated it.

“She was so fucking wise beyond her years.” He pushed some hair out of his face. “I don’t really know where I’m going with all of this, but I guess what I’m trying to say is, we were lucky to know her. She was as good as you can find. I’ve spent all these years missing her, and I know it’s never going to stop. I’m always going to feel like part of me’s gone.” He took a deep,

shuddering breath. “Thank you,” he murmured, before striding back into the crowd.

I should probably go next, right? Even though no one in this crowd knew who I was, what with the new face and all. I went back and forth as a few more people went. And every time I tried to move and stand up, it was like my legs had turned into lead. When there was only a few minutes left, I finally forced myself to my feet and walked through the crowd. I grabbed the mic and walked out in front.

And then I just stood there. People eyed me expectantly, trying to place who I was.

And I still just stood there.

I tried to speak, and it was like my voice had disappeared. Gone was the badass Demon’s daughter, and in its place was a broken child of a girl.

I stood there, sweat beginning to form on my brow, my head beginning to go fuzzy.

Paxton was all of a sudden there, taking the mic from my hand and leading me away from the questioning crowd. He pulled me through the gym double doors, out into the chill night air.

“Breathe, Aurora,” he commanded as I fell forward, sinking to the cold concrete as I gasped for breath.

“I—I don’t know what’s happening to me,” I said through chattering teeth.

He crouched down in front of me and grabbed onto my hands. “It’s called grief, princess. You spent all this time not really grieving. And now you are.”

I picked up my head and looked at him with watery eyes. “Tell me it’s going to get better. Tell me it’s not going to hurt like this forever. I knew she was gone. I knew it. It shouldn’t feel like this after years of knowing it.”

“It’s going to hurt for a long time. And then one day, you’ll wake up, and it will hurt a little less. And then a little less the next day. Until eventually, you can feel where there’s a part of you that’s missing, but you realize that you can finally breathe without the ache.”

Paxton was speaking from experience, I knew that. But the part that he wasn’t saying was that the missing part of you, it warped you. Like when he’d pushed me against that wall after his fight and told me I could never hurt him. I was already so warped, I couldn’t picture what the “after” me was going to look like.

“Breathe with me, princess,” he murmured, taking my hand and putting it

against his chest so I could feel it rise and fall. His heart battered against my hand, but his breath was steady...unhurried. I began to inhale and exhale when he did until I didn't feel like I was about to pass out anymore.

"Thank you," I whispered, as I stared into his gorgeous amber eyes, wondering when he'd turned into someone my heart couldn't afford to lose.

He opened his mouth like he was going to say something, and then he closed it and smiled instead. We both rose to our feet, and he put an arm around my waist as we headed towards the car.

And I still had the funeral tomorrow...

It was done.

The funeral was over, the crowd had left, and now it was just the five of us standing watch as the cemetery worker began to lower her coffin into the ground.

It was amazing, but Stellan's mother looked a little better today. She'd cried the whole time obviously, but there had been more color to her cheeks, more steel in her gaze. Like she'd perhaps decided she'd rather live than fade away. Stellan's dad had left the second the funeral was over, never saying a word, just staring at her coffin, pale-faced and sick-looking.

"Goodbye, Sophia," I whispered. "Someday I hope you can forgive me, because I'm never going to be able to forgive myself."

My hair fluttered in the breeze at my words, and I closed my eyes, trying to picture her in my head. How long would it take until I couldn't remember the sound of her voice? Or how her hug had felt?

What would I do then?

"She would want us to live, you know. For her. As best we could," Stellan murmured as he came up next to me.

I hummed non-committedly.

"She'd want me to stop wasting time and get my head out of my ass."

I smiled at that, throwing one last white rose onto the coffin as it lowered all the way to the bottom of the grave.

"She would have said it just like that, too."

He chuckled at that, and then reached over to grab my hand.

"I don't want to waste any more time, Aurora," he murmured.

I shook my head, pulling my hand away from his even though my whole soul was screaming at me to throw myself at him. I knew what this was, though. He was feeling guilty. He was feeling like he needed to live for Sophia, and have me when she couldn't.

I wasn't going to let him do that

"Stellan, don't waste your time by trying to live her dream," I told him, staring at the ground and hugging myself against the cold breeze blowing past.

"Aurora—it's not."

"Now we can both truly say goodbye," I said sadly, finally looking him in the face for the first time today.

I brushed a kiss against his cheek, and then I walked away.

CHAPTER 30

AURORA



The next day, it felt odd being at the Sphinx, back to normal classes. Not that anything was very normal about our lives, and the admiring glances the guys received. One of them was always with me on campus, and I would've protested their protectiveness, but the company was nice.

Also, it was interesting to watch Cain sit at the same table as Jenna, who never stopped talking the whole time. Cain looked slightly bemused.

That night, Remington insisted we dress up for dinner. I wore a long purple gown that had appeared in my closet and silver high heels. Pax was waiting for me outside my room, in suit-and-tie; he looked rakish and charming leaning against the wall.

"I wish they'd stop trying to cheer me up," I told him.

"Humor them, it makes them feel better." He crooked his arm at me, and I slipped my fingers over his corded forearm.

Together, the two of us swept downstairs and entered the small, private dining room.

"I have gifts to celebrate Aurora's homecoming," Remington announced as we all gathered around the table. Stellan, Cain, and Pax were taking their seats, but Cain paused and started to rise.

"Sit down, asshole," Remington ordered, and I laughed. Remington grinned at me, although Cain didn't look terribly amused.

"I bought Aurora a GPS tracker or two." I handed her the jewelry box with a flourish. "Since you're being all weird about me chipping you."

"I'm not an errant poodle, Remington."

"No, you find yourself in trouble far more often."

I opened the jewelry box to find several sparkling necklaces, earrings, and rings. No one would ever guess there was a chip inside each one.

“Always,” Remington said firmly, as if he could already guess I might be inclined to take them off from time to time. A girl needs her privacy.

Especially when her lovers are so exceptionally stalkerish.

I stuck my tongue out at him. “Possibly.”

I was still shaken and sad from finding Sophia, but it was obvious Remington was trying to make me feel better, and I wanted to show him I appreciated the effort. Then Stellan raised his gaze to mine and smiled, his lips curling up at the edges, and I paused. That smile still made my insides flip-flop just like it had when I was still a teenager, when I was Delilah.

He looked into my eyes across the table as if he were trying to memorize my face.

Cain cleared his throat. “Have I mentioned lately that the two of you annoy the fuck out of me?”

“Oh, you love us both,” I said lightly, plopping myself down into Cain’s lap. His arm tightened around my waist automatically. I handed him one of the shiny necklaces. “Make yourself useful.”

His fingers swept over the skin at the back of my neck, sending the same electric chill down my spine that he had when he arrived to save me. The metal was cool against my throat as he latched it.

“Perfect,” Remington said, “because I have a gift for Cain I know he’ll be excited to use.”

Cain sighed under his breath as Remington put a brightly wrapped present on the table and shoved it across the smooth wood toward him.

“Be nice,” I teased Cain. It wasn’t as if we all expected him to be anything other than...Cain.

He unwrapped the gift and lifted out a black leather collar, with silver studs, and a leash. Cain let out a surprised laugh that shook his chest.

“What the fuck, Remington,” I said, because it wasn’t as if the Sphinx had a pet. I knew who Cain would try to collar.

“Be nice,” Cain chided, shifting slightly so my legs straddled his one thigh. His hand dropped lazily between my thighs, teasing me through the material of my dress and panties. “I think Remington was very thoughtful.”

“You would.”

“I happen to have my own gift for Aurora,” Cain said. He reluctantly lifted his big hand from between my thighs and gripped my hips, lifting me

gently off his lap. Pax was there instantly, resting his hand on my lower back and watching me carefully to make sure I wasn't hurt.

I get stabbed in the almost-heart one time, and these guys become gentlemen. It was amazing.

We took the elevator down to the basement. "Tell me this gift isn't in the tunnels under the Sphinx," I said.

Remington looked slightly guilty, but only slightly. I had a feeling he'd inject a chip under my skin again given half a chance.

"Nope," Cain said as the doors opened into the garage. "You'd be wrong."

In front of us was a Porsche SUV.

Cain dangled the keys in front of me. "Try not to light any more of my cars on fire, Aurora."

I stared at the car. "I have a car already, though."

"It's ugly. Also, it was repossessed after we stole all your money." Remington didn't look up from typing on his phone. "I forgot to mention it."

"Did you have anything to do with this repossession, Remington?" I demanded. I'd been a little busy. I hadn't gone to look at my car since it had been disabled, but I'd assumed it was still safely parked in good old Student Lot D.

I should have known.

Remington tried to look innocent and failed. Innocent was not his strong suit.

I sighed. "Fuck faces."

"*Generous* fuck faces," Cain corrected.

I took the keys. "Thanks."

"That's it?"

"You're the reason I don't have my other, perfectly nice car anymore," I reminded him. "You can't buy me with expensive things, Cain. That's never going to impress me."

I leaned up and brushed a kiss over his cheek. Then I turned and headed back into the elevator, leaving Cain looking a little shocked.

"Too bad, the money was the big thing you had to offer," Remington mocked Cain.

"I'm pretty sure his dick is the big thing he has to offer," I sang as the doors started to close, and then Remington dove through the doors. I caught a glimpse of Cain smiling after us.

Remington had just rushed through, but he straightened his lapels, looking unruffled, and pressed the button for the top floor of the Sphinx. "I have another present for you."

"I see."

His lips curled at the corners. "It's better than Cain's."

"We'll see," I teased back, then said, "I don't have anything for you. You guys are making me a little uncomfortable."

"The only gift I need is your smile," he said, which made me laugh, and he grinned back at me.

Remington was *fun*. I needed that. I needed *him*.

The elevator doors slid open, and we stepped out into the small, glass room that opened onto the rooftop garden. I'd never been up here, but it was as spectacular as one would expect from the Sphinx. There was a smaller pool—of course, how ridiculous to think they only had an indoor pool; what were we, peasants?—and a hot tub large enough for all kinds of secret society debauchery. Steel bar-height tables were dotted around the perfectly groomed concrete and gravel rooftop, broken by expanses of green lawn and large black square planters holding blooming green plants.

"It's so pretty," I said softly.

Remington took my hand. Together, the two of us sat at the edge of the pool. I hiked up my skirt and we let our feet dangle in.

"I realized something when we were afraid we'd lose you," Remington said.

"You left your cell phone charger in my room?"

"I'm going to pretend you aren't being irreverent as a defense mechanism so I can actually get through, because I fucking hate talking about my feelings."

"We don't have to," I said, resting my hand on his knee. "Remi, I get it. You don't have to say anything. I wouldn't let a lunatic force you into marriage under a tacky tulle arch either." I shuddered dramatically.

"I can't imagine losing you, Aurora." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a long box.

"What now?" I asked, but I tore off the wrapping paper. I knew he wouldn't let me avoid it.

I opened the lid to find a long, dangerous-looking knife in a sheath.

"It's a KA-bar, like the Marines use," he said. "It was my great-grandfather's in World War Two. He was my hero. But I had the sheath made

just for you... to make it easier to conceal under your clothes. You should be able to wear it if you wear a long jacket without anyone seeing it. You seem to prefer knives to guns, so..."

"Well, maybe not anymore," I quipped, but I was genuinely touched. It was such a cool knife... and it meant something that it came from his grandfather. I brushed my lips against his cheek. "Thank you, Remington."

He smiled back at me. "I want to protect you from anything else that ever comes your way but... I know you can protect yourself pretty damn well, too. Even from us. I love that about you."

I grinned back at him.

Then he added, carefully, "I love *you*."

The words seemed to hang in the air between us, and he watched my face.

Something warm and bright broke loose in my chest. No one had said those words to me since my mother kissed my forehead outside that gas station before she left.

"I love you too," I said. It felt wild and reckless to say.

He kissed me, almost tentatively, as if he wasn't sure how to touch me tenderly. As if the weight of that confession had made him lose his usual certainty.

I pressed back against him, kissing him harder. My hand settled on his thigh, my fingers stroking over his hard length where it pressed against his trousers. He was so hard for me.

His tongue licked against my lips, forcing my mouth open. I straddled his lap, my hem hanging into the pool and making my dress heavy, but I needed to be closer to him. I looked into his handsome face, his eyes bright and his smile wicked. Remington, just the way I loved him.

The elevator doors pinged open behind us, breaking the moment.

Stellan stepped out. He froze when he saw us. "Never mind. It'll keep."

He turned around and headed for the elevator. Remington looked at my face, and I wasn't sure what he saw there, but he cursed under his breath as if he'd just made a decision that he didn't entirely like.

Then he called over his shoulder, "Stellan!"

Stellan paused. "What?"

"This is a private party, but you can come in if you pay the admission fee."

Stellan came over, looking curious. "Which is?"

"I just told Aurora I love her." Remington almost tripped over the

unfamiliar words, but he managed. “I saw the way you looked at her in the car on the way to Cain’s. Like you would die if she did.”

His words hit me hard, and I looked up at Stellan, wondering if that were true. Stellan’s face had gone tight.

Remington finished, “So just fucking tell her.”

“So romantic, Remington,” Stellan said drily.

I thought he was going to be an ass again—Stellan, always so hot and cold—and then he kicked off his shoes and joined us at the edge of the pool.

He looked at me seriously. “Aurora, if I tell you I love you...after everything I’ve done...can you really believe it?” He looked so weary.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Convince me.”

My voice came out sharp, and I wasn’t sorry.

“I’ll be back,” Remington said, getting up. He snatched the KA-bar from the side of the pool and gave me a mock-severe look. “And I’m taking this with me.”

Stellan watched him go, then turned to me. The moments seemed to stretch out between us for several heartbeats.

He cleared his throat. “I’m so sorry I hurt you, Aurora. My sister would be ashamed...” He trailed off, then shook his head. “She would be, but what matters now is... I’m ashamed. You deserved so much better from me.”

“I do,” I agreed. “Not drugging, kidnapping, or planning to use a knife on me. That’s a pretty low bar for a boyfriend, Stellan.”

He nodded. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, and I wish I had seen that back in high school.”

The part of me deep inside that would forever be an uncertain sixteen-year-old girl squeezed. I could just imagine what it would have been like if Stellan had just...been mine. I’d spent so much time longing for him. Then he finally grabbed my hand in that hallway...and the next day I was gone. I’d never made it to his game.

“It kills me to think that if I had been more honest with you all...if I had been braver... then you might have known that I was on your side.” He swallowed hard, staring out beyond me at the night sky. “You might have come to me and we could have stood up against the Demon together.”

“And then maybe Sophia would still be alive,” I filled in.

His gaze snapped to mine, his eyes shining with unshed tears. The sight shocked me.

So did his words as he said forcefully, “No, it’s not just about that. Yes, I

wish I could go back in time and save my sister. But...I also wish for your sake I could just go back in time and be a better man.”

He blew out a long, shaky breath. “I wish I could go back just a week and be a better man.”

His eyes were filled with tears.

Look at that, the bastard was really sorry.

“I lost my mind to my grief, but that doesn't justify anything that happened. I promise you, Aurora, I will never hurt you like that again.”

He'd blinked them away, but tears glittered on his long, dark lashes. He wiped his face impatiently with his sleeve, the movement quick and boyish. God, we both missed her so much. And we both regretted the past so much.

“You know...” I found myself stumbling over my words like he had, feeling as if every honest word had to be forced out of my throat. “When that psycho tried to force me to marry him...and I thought I was going to die... all I kept thinking was that I deserved it. In a way. Because...I'm the reason Sophia got killed.”

The words hung between us. I studied his face, wondering if he could ever forgive me for being that reason. Because if I'd never come to their town, Sophia would never have been standing outside my window that night. She would never have been killed.

Stellan had called me poison, and it was bullshit, and at the same time, my existence had poisoned his life.

Stellan's face was etched with pain. “No. Aurora, promise me you won't think that. Even if you're done with me... You don't deserve to go through life feeling that way. You were the best thing in Sophia's life for the little bit of time we had together. And... you were the best thing in mine.”

I studied his face, trying to tell if he really meant it or not.

“I wish we'd stopped the Demon together, and I wish I'd killed the man who hurt Sophia and then you,” he said. “But I don't regret *you*, Aurora. I don't regret knowing you.”

His words were crisp and certain.

My heart tilted in my chest, but I schooled my face.

“Are you still going to help me escape?” I asked. “If I'm done with you?”

I threw those words back at him, curious how he would respond.

He looked as if he wanted to beg me to stay, but then he swallowed the words and nodded. “I promised. And I'm always going to keep my promises to you from now on.”

I was tempted to make him go through with it, just to test him. “Cain would kill you.”

He pulled a face. “I feel like I came pretty close to death already, after he caught up to us. And unlike you, when I had my near-death experience....I deserved it.”

I reached up and brushed away one of the teardrops that clung to his lashes. “I miss her too. So much. I can’t blame you for going crazy with grief.”

“I should have been the one that you could talk to,” Stellan said. “For us to remember her together.”

“From now on,” I said, my voice coming out thick.

Stellan’s face brightened. I realized I had started crying too, my tears matching his. The two of us shared a kiss that was salty and bitter. It was a tentative kiss. It didn’t have the fire of our previous angry couplings... but it had warmth and passion of its own.

When he pulled away, he said, “I love you, you know. It’s okay if you’re not ready to say it back to me yet. But I hope I’ll prove it to you in time and you’ll come to really believe it.”

I smiled and kissed him back. He was right, I wasn’t quite ready to say it. But when I looked at the way he gazed at me, the worshipfulness in his eyes behind the sheen of tears, I believed he meant it.

And I believed I was going to forgive him.

CHAPTER 31

AURORA



Stellan kissed me deep and slow. His tongue moved against mine and my arms wrapped around him, fisting at his hair as I gave him everything.

We were both breathless as he briefly pulled away, slipped off the edge of the pool and stepped between my thighs, nudging my knees apart so he could stand between them. His fingertips rested lightly on my jaw as he brushed his mouth against my lower lip, then kissed the corner tenderly.

His white shirt was soaked to his body now, revealing the hard lines of his chest and shoulders. I ran my hands over the cloth clinging over his chest, then began to unbutton it.

His hands glided up and down my thighs through the sopping dress. His touch raised goosebumps on my skin.

He kissed one side of my jaw, nibbled on my ear, and murmured, “Aurora...” into my ear. He nuzzled my throat, then came up on the other side and kissed the erogenous zone just behind my ear. My toes curled. “Delilah...” he murmured.

I'd threatened to kill him if he used that name again. My eyes flew open. And then I looked at the way he was looking at me, his gaze soft, his expression tender. For him, I'd always be both Delilah and Aurora. The sweet, reserved girl I'd once been, and the brasher, more dangerous version of myself now.

And that wasn't a bad thing. Deep down inside, I'd always be both girls. Maybe Stellan was the only one who knew that side of me. And maybe... I didn't want to entirely lose the girl that Sophia had fallen in love with, and Stellan had too.

Because they'd both been special—and Stellan still was—and the girl

they'd loved was probably special, too.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his, and his mouth twitched in the faintest smile against my lips. Some of the tension fled from his broad shoulders.

I pulled away long enough to murmur, "You were a little worried I was going to stab you, weren't you?"

"Well, it does seem to be a temptation people experience."

I grinned at him for a second before he caught my chin with his two fingers and leaned in to kiss me.

Another long, slow kiss, and then I said, "We'd better call in Remington. You know he's dying."

"One can hope." But he raised his voice and called to Remington.

Remington strolled back into the area, his hands shoved in his pockets. "You both survived."

"It was touch and go for a while there," Stellan admitted. "Admit it, Remy. You wanted us to have this conversation at the pool so she'd have a chance to drown me if she didn't like what I said."

Remington grinned and jumped into the pool. The wave splashed over us both. He reached out his arms to me. I slid off the side of the pool and found myself pinned in between them. The night air was cool, especially when we were dressed in our clothes that were soaking wet now, but their hands tracing over my body lit fire everywhere they touched. I began again to unbutton Stellan's shirt.

Remington pressed behind me, my body held between their two hard, muscular forms. Remington's lips dropped to trace the back of my neck, and then his fingers skimmed down my spine, unzipping my dress. They slid it off my shoulders, and after I stepped out of it, it floated across the tranquil surface of the water.

Stellan was in front of me, so when I had peeled his wet shirt off, I reached for his belt and began to unbuckle it. All the while, we traded kisses, while Remington's cock rubbed up behind me, his hands worshipful all over my body.

Then Stellan spun me around to face Remington before I could do more than pull him free of his trousers. His cock slid between my thighs as he pushed me closer towards Remington. "Undress him too."

He said it as if he'd enjoyed the experience of having me undress him, and he wanted the same for his best friend.

I loosened Remington's tie, then draped it around my own shoulders. Remington's mischievous eyes sparkled down at me. He let me undress him, obviously enjoying every bit of contact as I unbuttoned his shirt, as I pulled his shirttails out of his trousers, as I pushed the shirt off his shoulders and enjoyed the sight of him shirtless under the moonlight. Then I reached into his trousers and drew out his long, thick cock.

Just like Stellan, he stepped out of his trousers, and now I was the only one left wearing any underwear. But Stellan was already working them down my thighs, and my body tensed in the best of ways as his fingertips brushed over my mound in the process.

Then all of us had shed our clothes, and I was pressed between the two of them as they paid slow homage to my body, kissing and sucking and biting. I remembered how good Stellan was at teasing my nipples, and I twisted again to face Stellan. I leaned my shoulders against Remington's chest as I arched my back and pushed my breasts up toward Stellan. His eyes lit with excitement, and he wrapped his hands around my hips to hold me steady as his mouth caressed my nipples. He sucked on one and then the other, biting just hard enough to make my toes clench against the smooth bottom of the pool.

"Love these fucking tits," Stellan groaned as his cheeks hollowed, and he sucked a nipple hard and deep into his mouth.

Meanwhile, Remington was working his fingers steadily against my clit. They brought me close to the edge, just with his teasing touch and Stellan's warm mouth.

I was just starting to moan when he abruptly pulled away. Even from the corner of my vision as he kissed my shoulder, I could see that wicked, sharp smile that I loved so much.

"Not too early," he chided. He rose out of the pool, then stood at the side and offered me his hand. "Should we move to the hot tub?"

My nipples were sharp as blades from my arousal and from the cool breeze that drifted around my body without the two of them. The hot tub sounded amazing. I took his hand and let him help me out of the pool, and both men slid their arms behind my back as we walked across to the hot tub together.

Stellan took a seat on the bench in the hot tub, and I climbed into his lap, straddling him. The tip of his cock rubbed against my clit, which was already so sensitive from Remington. I sucked in a breath and bit my lower lip.

Stellan ran his thumb across my lower lip. His eyes smoldered up at me. "You're so beautiful."

I had a moment where the past tried to rear its head.

"Even as Aurora?"

They both paused.

"You've always been gorgeous, baby. Delilah...Aurora...they're both my favorite," he murmured, leaning forward and scattering kisses across my face as his cock continued to torture my clit in a slow, tortuous rhythm. He dropped kisses down my neck and across my shoulder, licking along my pulse before he made his way back up to my ear. Stellan growled softly. "They're both fucking amazing."

Before I could think any harder, Remington pressed behind me. I was amazed at how comfortable they were with each other; their legs were touching with just me between them.

Stellan rubbed the tip of his cock against my clit faster. I tilted my head back and moaned, but when my back arched, Remington brushed his thumb over my asshole. He kissed my shoulder as he softly applied more pressure. A moment later, I was whimpering as he grabbed my cheeks and spread them apart, rubbing his thumb against that sensitive spot with ever-increasing urgency. My core squeezed in response, feeling empty and aching.

Then Stellan grabbed my hips and drew me down toward his cock. In the water, his tip slid against my folds but didn't go in. Remington reached around and grabbed Stellan's cock, lining it up so that Stellan could draw me down. Stellan filled me abruptly, an answer to that ache that made me cry out in pleasure. The urgency between us hurt, but in the best of ways.

Then I was rising up on my knees, riding Stellan's cock.

"Fuck, yes. Look at you ride my cock," he growled. "You're a fucking goddess."

Remington continued to play with me, and I broke my cadence with Stellan for a second just to shove my ass back into Remington's hips, seeking more of him.

"I'm not sure you're ready for me," Remington murmured, the heat in his voice telling me how ready *he* was. He reached between my legs to tease my clit. As he worked his fingers in tiny circles that made me clench around Stellan's cock, I thought I was going to die if they made me wait any longer.

"I promise I am," I said breathlessly.

His tip teased against me once again, and then I felt him slowly, steadily,

press inside me. I paused, Stellan's cock deep inside me—Stellan had gone still too. They gave me time to just feel the two of them filling me up, the intense sensation. The sensation of their cocks pressed together through the thin wall between my channels was almost too much pleasure at once.

Then when I was ready, I began to move, and they moved with me. Stellan's lips parted.

Remington moaned behind me. "Aurora, your ass is so perfect...on the inside just like on the outside."

I would have snorted at his comment, but it felt too fucking good.

The three of us moved together until I shattered. Our moans and cries echoing in the night air as the steam from the hot tub surrounded us. I felt them come too, the moment that we all fell over the edge together and their cocks twitched inside me, their bodies tensing, groans reverberating through all three of us.

Then we were still; for a second, all of us stayed where we were, these men still buried deep inside me, and twined around me together.

Slowly, they withdrew. I wasn't sure what to expect, but Stellan drew me onto his lap, and Remington slid beside him, close enough that I propped my thighs across his lap, so the three of us were all intimately close. I felt relaxed in a bone-deep way that I could never remember feeling.

I rested my head on Stellan's shoulder. Remington's hands drifted up and down my calves.

"So good, baby," Remington whispered as he brushed his lips across my shoulder. "I love you."

I sighed into the feeling of that. Having someone love me.

Having two people love me.

"I think we should dry you off and carry you up to bed," he continued. "You still need your rest."

He pressed his lips across my forehead.

"I'm fine," I promised him. "I'm healing nicely."

Remington lifted me in his arms and carried me across the pool to the stairs. He scoffed. "That's not what you're going to need your rest to recover from."

I let out a laugh, which seemed to echo through the clear, bright night air.

CHAPTER 32

AURORA



Beep, Beep, Beep. I frowned as I came slowly to consciousness, wondering who the fuck had decided to set an alarm this morning.

And why they'd picked such an annoying one.

My eyes flickered open as I stretched my arms above my head, realizing I was alone in bed. Stellan and Remington had better be getting me breakfast in bed. I was ridiculously sore from our extracurricular activities the night before.

The sheets were cold next to me, meaning they'd been gone for a while. I'd been wrapped around them tightly last thing I remembered, but yet here I was, alone.

Beep, Beep, Beep. The alarm continued and I reached for my phone to turn the fucking thing off, but when I picked it up, I realized that my alarm wasn't on, and the sound most definitely hadn't been coming from over there in the first place.

I sat up to see where the sound was coming from, and then I froze, white-hot panic flashing through me.

Because there was someone sitting at the end of my bed.

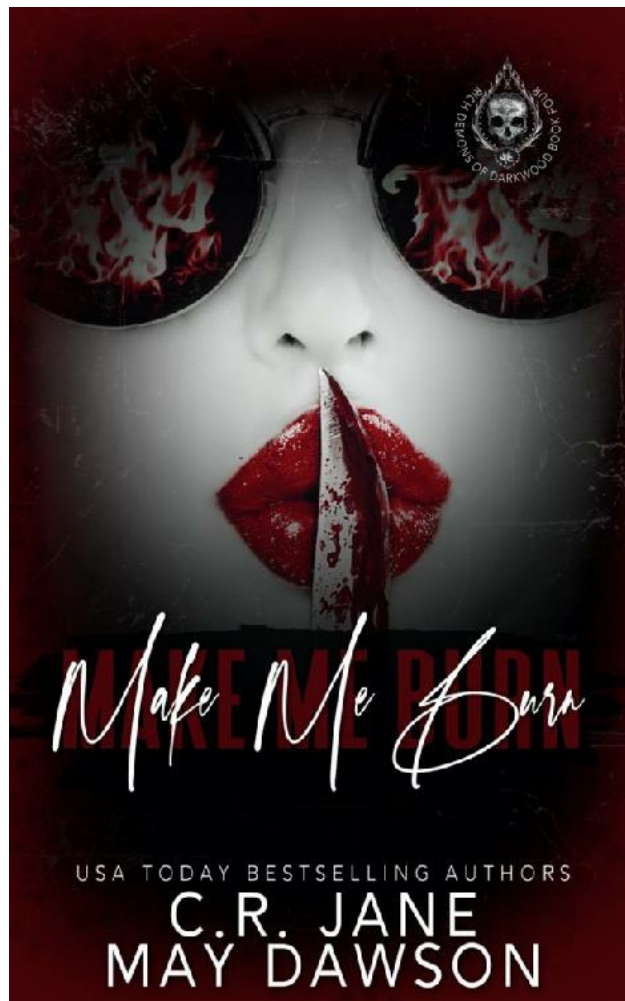
Not just someone...

Him.

"Hello, Delilah," the Demon murmured with a smile full of promises.

Continue the Rich Demons of Darkwood series in [Make Me Burn](#)

MAKE ME BURN



Get Make Me Burn [here](#).

THE DELILAH RECIPE



The Delilah

1/4 cup Pomegranate juice

1 1/2 ounces bourbon

1/2 ounce raspberry liquor

and juice from 1/2 lemon

Make Me Lie

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I take special joy in imagining your faces after a cliffhanger.

I'm just saying.

So know that you are making me very happy even when you want to scream at me.

This book was emotional, we know that. But we'd like to think it was worth it.

And just wait until you see what we have next.

Paxton's book is next...

A huge thanks to our betas on this one: Summer, Nicole, Jennifer, and Caitlin. Thank you for stepping in when we were stressed, and the deadline was looming, and just in general being amazing.

Another thank you to Jasmine, our proofreader, for always being so amazing and willing to help out.

Thank you to Victoria for these amazing covers...it's like Christmas every time you message me with your designs!

And last but not least...thank you to you, our readers. We couldn't do what we loved without you.

XOXO,

C.R. & May

**Keep reading for a preview of other works by C.R. Jane and May
Dawson...**

RUINING DAHLIA



I was sold to my enemies. And not just my enemies. I was sold to monsters.

I should know all about how to survive monsters though, I come from a family of them. We aren't Butchers in name only, after all. I'm shipped away to New York City to the powerful head of the Costa Nostra, the Rossi Family.

My first meeting with them is bloody and wild, just like they are. Lucian, Raphael, and Gabriel Rossi...they own me now. And they won't let me forget it.

A dahlia has always bloomed best in the light, but they're determined to keep me in the dark.

The thing they don't realize is that I'm more than what I seem. It's a race to the ending, me against them.

They want to ruin me. And I'm afraid I just might like it.

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Cover by Maria Spade

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Proof: Jasmine Jordan

CHAPTER 1



DAHLIA

I t was dark.

Isn't that how all these tales go?

Maybe everything had always been dark for me though, since the moment I took my first breath as a baby. Always somber. Always sad.

An ache inside of me that the doctors and the medicine could never fix.

I laid in bed that night, listening to the sounds of the party that my parents were throwing to celebrate some deal that The Firm had managed to enter into.

There was a nightlight across the room, its light a beacon that I would stare at every night until finally I drifted off to sleep.

I had always been scared of the dark. Which was a strange thing in itself since I just confessed to living in it.

But ever since I could remember, I'd needed a light on.

At first, I'd been allowed to have the closet light on, but then my father had insisted that "no child of his was going to be afraid of the dark," and from that moment on, it wasn't allowed. He'd gone so far as to unscrew my lightbulb at night so I could "get over my fears." It was only my continual screaming at night that got him to allow me a small nightlight. When I was away at school, I always kept the light on in my room, but here I was, back home on holiday, the nightlight my only saving grace.

A small creak sounded in the room. I flinched at the noise, my eyes desperately searching the darkness to see what monster was waiting in the dark corners of my room. I watched in terror as the door to my closet inched open, the sound of its creaking scraping down my spine, and a massive form stepped out from its depths.

I opened my mouth to scream, just praying that the music wasn't too loud and that someone would be able to hear me before it was too late.

"It's just me, pet," my uncle's voice whispered in the darkness.

I trembled beneath my blankets, sliding farther away from him until I hit the wall, because I knew even at eight there was no good reason for my uncle to be hiding in my closet.

His footsteps were soft as he ambled towards me, his features becoming

clear as he walked into the nightlight's purvey.

"Please get out," I hoarsely begged, not sure what to do. My Uncle Robert was my father's right hand. A skilled killer whose name was synonymous with The Firm.

My father would never believe me over him.

"Don't be afraid, Dahlia," he whispered as he reached my bed.

I whimpered and pulled the covers up closer to my chin.

I cried when he slid into the bed with me, his hands traveling over my skin.

I shattered into a million pieces when he first stroked his finger across my knickers. The darkness that lived inside me spread through my veins, until any light that had been trying to survive was extinguished, leaving me an empty husk.

But I didn't cry after that.

Or the time after that.

Or the time after that.

I didn't cry ever again.

Twelve Years Later

"Bollocks," I murmured as a busy passerby shoulder-swiped me as they walked past, the white chocolate mocha in my hand going flying all over the pristine white blouse that I'd mistakenly chosen for this flight. For some inane reason, I'd thought that getting all dressed up before my eight-hour flight made sense.

Not that the man waiting for me at the end of the flight would care if I was dressed up or not. He probably wouldn't care if I showed up in a paper bag...or if I showed up at all.

Butterflies swarmed inside me just thinking of what lay ahead. I'd stopped in the middle of the walkway to assess the damage, so it wasn't a surprise when someone knocked into me again, spilling the rest of my drink.

"Fuck," I griped as I finally did the sensible thing and scurried out of the way of the thousands of people milling around in the Heathrow airport today. I'd never been in a public airport before. I'd always been on a private plane courtesy of the wealth of my father, Trevor Butcher. But he was gone now,

and my brother...along with my new fiancé had apparently thought that commercial was the way to go.

For a moment, I imagined melding into the crowd and setting off for some exotic locale to be lost in. I imagined golden beaches, and drinks with the little umbrellas in them...or maybe an idyllic lake setting where I'd spend my days on a dock, watching wisteria grow over my bare feet, writing the next great novel which would never see the light of day.

I would have thought them all foolish to send me on my own. A girl even an ounce braver than me would be running for the hills, desperate not to marry a perfect stranger. After all, they didn't know the nightmares that waited for me here in England were far worse than anything I could comprehend waiting for me in New York. They didn't know how close I'd been to trying to get away...permanently.

Or maybe they did. My stomach clenched at the thought. Maybe they saw the ruin in me. Either way, my warped, damaged self somehow held some loyalty to "The Firm"...so here I was, the obedient daughter to the very end.

I shook my head, trying to push away the memories and images that seemed to be permanently etched into my mind.

That was all behind me now. This was my fresh start. I threw my now empty cup away and looked around to see if there were any airport shops I could get a new shirt from, since my bags and belongings were all either checked already or shipped to New York ahead of me. I wandered through the airport, glancing at the stores, searching for anything that might sell clothing, until I stopped and turned around, not wanting to get too far from my gate.

See...the perpetual good girl to a fault.

I weighed my options as I spotted a shirt sporting the Union Jack in one of the gift shops. Which was worse, meeting my future husband with a brown stain that resembled shit all over my shirt...or wearing that?

Union Jack it was.

My hand reached for the shirt at the same time another hand did, and our skin brushed against each other, until I yanked my hand away like I'd been burned.

I turned my head to apologize, but my words got lost at the blond Adonis standing next to me.

Everyone was looking at him. It was impossible not to. He was beautiful. Like Chris Hemsworth and Henry Cavill had merged into one being and then

been touched by Midas.

And that description wasn't an exaggeration.

It was his eyes that caught me first. They were the color of a thousand dancing waves, the exact color of pictures I'd seen showing the Caribbean. Or maybe not the Caribbean. They seemed to change the longer I stared. Maybe they were more like the hot blue flicker of a flame, burning my insides until a warm, achy feeling overtook me. Something I'd never experienced before, not even with Leo.

The color was startling against his golden features. Golden skin. Golden hair that reminded me of a field of golden wheat in the peak of the summer, right before fall hit and it was ready to harvest. His aristocratic nose would have had Prince William weeping with envy. And those lips...I knew a thousand women who would give their left ovaries...or both ovaries...to get a pair.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" I asked, realizing that the beautiful stranger had just spoken.

He looked at me, amused and unimpressed at the same time.

I blushed furiously under his gaze, feeling like an errant school girl who'd never seen a man before.

I quickly yanked my gaze back to the offensive-looking shirt in front of me, wondering idly why this perfect creature would be wanting anything to do with this shirt.

"I was saying we seem to have the same taste in horrible clothing," he said with a practiced grin that melted my insides. His accent was American, and the timber of his voice was like honey, like he'd been biologically made to attract a mate in any way possible.

I could only imagine his scent. I resisted the urge to lean forward and try and capture it.

That would be too much, right?

He looked amused again and I belatedly gestured to my ruined shirt, only then realizing that not only was it stained... It was also see-through. When I quickly crossed my arms in front of my chest to try to hide the fact that my nipples were standing at attention, I almost missed the flash of heat in his gaze, followed by a surprised expression that looked out of place on his face. I'm sure a guy like him had seen a million boobs.

And with that thought, I turned my attention back to the shirt, dismissing whatever errant thoughts I'd had about him.

But a piece of me wondered...could a man like him make me feel?

"I'm sorry if I offended you. I'm sure the shirt would look amazing on you," he said quickly, blinding me with another perfect grin.

"I know why I'm buying this blight of patriotism, but why are you?" I asked, examining the expensive-looking black dress shirt and slacks he was sporting, the dark color making his golden appearance even more noticeable.

He brushed his hand through his hair, almost sheepishly. "It's a thing I do. Well, a thing I collect," he explained. "I try to get a trashy t-shirt from every country I visit."

"How many do you have?" I asked, giggling at the thought of this veritable god having a closet somewhere stuffed with corny t-shirts. I tried picturing him in one, but my mind couldn't quite wrap around the thought.

He chuckled, probably at the look on my face. The sound reverberated right through me, stoking the flames inside that I was trying desperately to suppress. I didn't want to jump the man after all, and I was really close to that.

"Fifty-three?" he mused, stroking his lips with his thumb as he thought about it...I found myself strangely jealous of that thumb. "Well, I guess fifty-four as soon as this piece of art is paid for."

"Well, your reason for buying this shirt is far better than my clumsiness."

I rifled through the shirts, looking for my size. Once I found it, I turned around and almost dropped it when I found him staring at me intensely, all the earlier lightheartedness completely gone. He was studying me closely... clinically, like he was tearing off the layers of my skin to see what was inside.

I hoped he didn't venture too far down, he would only be disappointed when he got to my insides and found there was nothing but empty space.

What did it say about me that this small glimpse of the darker side of him only made me more attracted?

"Well," I began awkwardly. "Enjoy your shirt," I finished lamely, wanting to slap myself in the face for not being able to come up with something wittier.

"I hope you can find another coffee before your flight," he said charmingly as he reached past me and began to look through the shirts.

I was far more reluctant to leave his side than I would've liked as I headed towards the cashier stand to pay for my shirt. The bored-looking clerk quickly rang up my purchase, snapping her gum loudly as she did so. I forced

myself not to wince. I'd always hated the sound of chewing. Chewing gum. Chewing food. It all drove me mad. Just another one of the little idiosyncrasies that set me apart from the rest of society.

I grabbed the shirt, not bothering to have her bag it since I would just be putting it on, and strode towards the exit, furtively looking around to see if I could get one more glimpse of him. He was still by the shirts, and he didn't turn around when I strode past him.

That was really okay, though; the backside of him was almost as good as the front.

As soon as I stepped out of the store, it all came rushing back. Where I was going. The fact that technically I was an engaged woman... It would take a minute to get used to that. I waited for the rush of guilt to hit me, since I'd spent the last two weeks after finding out about this whole arranged marriage trying to wrap my mind around the idea of becoming a stranger's wife.

Nope. Nothing. Not a flicker of guilt that I was just lusting crazily over a stranger.

My mum would be so disappointed, God bless her distracted, oblivious soul.

Rosemary Butcher was a lot of things, but oblivious was probably the most apt description for her. Oblivious to my father's sins, oblivious to my brothers following in his footsteps, oblivious to her daughter's pain.

I stepped into the bathroom stall, thinking of how excited she'd been for me as we said our farewells. She'd thought that this was the most amazing thing that could have happened to me. It would've been amazing if she was actually right.

But Rosemary Butcher was never right.

About anything.

I shook my head and pulled off my blouse, trying to push away the memory of that last hug she'd given me before she'd "spotted out for tea." It was amazing how someone could love you so much, and at the same time, not see you at all.

I should've just stuffed my shirt in my bag. I'm sure someone could have gotten the stain out, but instead, I impulsively threw it into a trashcan in the stall. I tore off the tag to the Union Jack shirt and slipped it on, immediately realizing that I'd somehow managed to get a size too small. I blamed it on being distracted and cringed as I pictured showing up to New York in a skin-tight t-shirt sporting the Union Jack flag.

Deciding I didn't have a choice but to buy another size, I peered into the trashcan to see if I could grab my blouse so I could take this one off and exchange it.

Of course, I muttered to myself, when I saw that I'd managed to throw the blouse right into an open diaper filled with poop.

I guess I was about to be the proud owner of *two* Union Jack shirts. Maybe there were better ones in there that I could find.

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FORBIDDEN HONOR

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CHAPTER 1

HONOR

In my world, dragon shifters rule. Dragon shifters are always Royals. They're always male. And they're always assholes.

I have to obey if I want to survive.

But I don't have to like it, and I don't have to like *them*.

It was lunch time, and I was thinking about just how much I disdained the royals as I watched them from the balcony of Prince Jaik's room. I'd been cleaning his room when the noon bell tolled, and I hadn't hesitated to dump his dirty laundry in a pile by the door and head outside.

Red strands lashed my face until I raked them back into a ponytail, tying them with a leather thong from around my wrist. I needed that breeze after being up-close-and personal with the prince's laundry.

Prince Jaik was sword-fighting with one of the young dukes, Arren. Arren moved impossibly fast for a man so tall and muscled, his dark hair pulled taut from his chiseled features. Jaik's gorgeous cheekbones, wavy dark hair and tall posture in his dark uniform made him look impeccable.

But I knew better. The man's armpits stunk like any other's when he was done with a day of training.

That was what he—and the other dragon royals—were up to at the moment. The rest of the shifters at the academy had already melted away to lunch, but the five of them continued to banter and fight. Their swords rang against each other's, their muscles rippling and flexing under tanned skin. They seemed to coordinate without ever saying a word, two of them attacking the other three, moving in fluid tandem.

They should stay shirtless like that forever.

And not just because it was easier on the laundry.

"Honor." My friend, Calla, leaned across the opposite balcony, waving to catch my attention. "How did I know you'd be watching them?"

"I wish we could train too," I said, before she could accuse me of having too much fun watching them.

I could enjoy the sight of the pretty men even if I didn't have any respect for them. Not that they needed my respect; they had the adoration of an entire nation, because they stood between us and the Scourge.

“I know, I know. Come over here, I’ve got cake.”

I threw my sandwich back into my bag and tossed it over my shoulder, just as Calla hurriedly said, “Use the *door*, Honor. The hallway is your friend.”

I grinned back at her as I backed up and ran toward the balcony ledge. Calla backed up, shaking her head, until her back pressed the stone exterior of the building.

I jumped, got my balance on the edge of the railing, and leapt easily from one side to the other. In a second, I was beside Calla.

She sighed. “You scare me.”

“You’re still afraid of heights.”

She leaned over the railing, taking in the training yard far, far below. She was silhouetted against the shimmering lake and the blue outline of the mountains in the distance. “You don’t have to be afraid of heights to know that jumping balconies is a bad idea if you want to live until our first Shifting Moon.”

She was excited for our first shifting. I imagined that would be nice.

“Mm,” I said. “Maybe I don’t want to live long enough to find out my soul-creature is a field mouse.”

“What’s wrong with being a field mouse?” She raised both eyebrows at me, reminding me—too late—that Calla was from a proud family of chipmunks. Perhaps field mice and chipmunks were cousins in her eyes.

“Nothing,” I said, too late to be convincing.

“You want to be something fierce.” She put her hands up beside her face and imitated claws. It was adorable. It was charming. It was not remotely fierce.

“Hey, when you’re an orphan, the first shifting moon is an exciting gamble.” Although our soul-creatures were supposed to be manifestations of who we truly were, most times, they ran in families. Only males shifted into dragons, the highest of creatures, but their royal sisters tended to shift into lions or wolves.

And servants like Calla and me tended to be smaller, meeker, and far more edible.

“It’s an exciting gamble for everyone,” Calla reminded me. “Greta Sandstone discovered her real father was a hawk.”

I groaned. “What a terrible day.”

Calla had squawked and run away from the temple as if her true soul

creature were an angry chicken.

One of the Royals whirled, throwing his sword—and a long, horned head and a powerful tail whipped out of his body as he grew long and scaled. The next second, his transformation was complete and he was an enormous dragon. He let out a long, blast of fire at the other royals, who threw up magical shields to block the attack and jumped over his wicked tail.

Their power was incredible, I had to admit. The Scourge had recently surged right outside the gates of the city. The royals had stopped them as the rest of the city cowered in their houses.

Calla propped her chin on her hand, forgetting to eat as she gazed at the royals. “You know, Lara got her hands on this *amazing* story being passed around about the dragon royals.”

“A true story?”

“No, it’s a fantasy. A romance. One of Lara’s cousins wrote it.”

I groaned. “Look at those men down there. They might be the heroes of the kingdom, but they are wildly arrogant. They’re probably terrible in bed.”

Calla looked considering. “They’re really good with those swords.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve fallen victim to their fan club, too.” I had regrets about being so condescending about the Royals’ fan-fiction now, because part of me was a little curious. Did they always have tails? Some Fae did, although our race of shifters looked more mortal than the Fae in the storybooks I’d read.

Ever since the Scourge began, our island had been sealed away from the rest of the Fae world. Storybooks were the only glimpse I’d had of the bigger world beyond.

“Come on,” Calla swept her arm toward the door. “We should get out of here. We’re not supposed to linger in their rooms once we’re done.”

The military students training here were apparently too precious to wash their own laundry or scrub the hallway floors. Worst of all, though, were the royals, who were too important to even clean their own rooms.

“But I like the view,” I pouted, then added, “of the mountains.”

I glanced down at the empty yard only to realize the royals had left the yard as we were chatting, and sudden disappointment dropped like a stone.

“Mm-hmm.” Calla gave me a knowing smile.

Maybe every girl in RyLOW secretly dreamed of winning the heart of a dragon prince.

Maybe that was even true for me, even if I also fantasized about kicking

their asses.

They were a pretty fine-looking group of men.

A voice in the hall called for Calla, summoning her out of the room, and Calla scrambled toward it. I grabbed half her handful of cake before she could go.

“You’re going to get in trouble,” she hissed at me.

“Is that a promise? Because I’m so very bored,” I answered, even though the truth was, I needed the money. Which meant I needed the job.

But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t defy the head housekeeper behind her back. I was an *uppity orphan*—as she’d informed me. Now I had a reputation to live up to.

“I’m going to work right through my lunch break because I’m such a diligent employee,” I added, and even though Calla’s back was to me as she bustled through the room toward the door, I could feel the eye-rolling vibe.

Carrying my cake in one hand, I leapt onto the balcony, then across. I strolled into the prince’s room, scattering crumbs as I ate my cake. I still had to mop the floors anyway.

Then the connecting door to the bath swung open.

Prince Jaik stepped out, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. Beads of water trickled from his spreading shoulders down the most beautiful set of abs I’d ever seen.

He stopped dead, staring at me, now wearing both a towel *and* a frown.

“Hi, just finishing up tidying your room,” I said, flinging my arm to encompass the room—and flinging crumbs along with it.

A bit of frosting landed on the prince’s cheek. Pink frosting. It complemented his dark hair and furious amber eyes quite nicely.

“What are you doing in here?” he demanded. “Haven’t I requested my privacy?”

I was momentarily flummoxed. “Did you think the towels picked themselves up by magic? That the dirty clothes turned sentient at night and walked themselves to and from the laundry?”

“Oh, you’re a smartass, aren’t you?” He leaned in the doorway. “I’m sure the head housekeeper would love that.”

“And I’m sure no one loves a tattle tale.” I tapped my cheekbone with two fingers. “You’ve got a little something right there.”

He swiped and his fingers came away covered in pink frosting. “You’re not a very good housekeeper, are you?”

Funny, I'd heard some variation on that—usually with a lot more swearing—several times from the Head Housekeeper since taking this job. “Maybe I’m meant for something more.”

“Mm. What’s your name?”

Giving him my name seemed like a very bad idea. “Aren’t you supposed to be in class? I can take care of the floors while you’re off. It’s no trouble.”

His eyes blazed. “I don’t need you to tell me where I’m supposed to be.”

Oh god. Even those abs wouldn’t make up for his anger problems. Why are the beautiful men so often such bitches?

The bit of cake still in my hand was becoming a sticky distraction, and I didn’t know how else to get rid of it, so I stuck it in my mouth. I backed away from him, still chewing.

“What is wrong with you?” he demanded.

I had an awesome snarky response for that, but the words came out a bit jumbled and with a spray of crumbs.

“I’m sorry, what did you try to say to me?” He took a step forward to match each step I took backward, as if we were dancing.

I’ve never liked dancing.

I swallowed just as I stepped out onto the balcony. “Honestly, you’d think with all that power you wield, all the reverence you get from the common people, you wouldn’t be so *touchy*. How do you get your feelings hurt so easily?”

He took the next step forward a bit faster, and I turned and leapt onto the railing, then over to the next balcony.

We rotated who cleaned the princes’ rooms. I wouldn’t come up in the rotation for a week or two, and hopefully I’d embarrassed him enough that he wouldn’t *tattle* to the Head.

But probably, I was going to end up fired in the next hour.

I stopped and turned toward him. His eyes still blazed with anger, but he leaned against the railing opposite me.

“You’re awfully sure-footed for a servant.”

“And you’re awfully tender-feeling for a king,” I shot back.

I stuck my tongue out at him and sauntered into his friend’s room.

The second I was out of his sight, I ran through the room and careened out into the hallway.

But the prince didn’t chase me.

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Kingdom of Wolves Co-write with Mila Young

[Wild Moon](#)

[Wild Heart](#)

[Wild Girl](#)

[Wild Love](#)

[Wild Soul](#)

[Wild Kiss](#)

Stupid Boys Series Co-write with Rebecca Royce

[Stupid Boys](#)

[Dumb Girl](#)

[Crazy Love](#)

Breathe Me Duet Co-write with Ivy Fox (complete)

[Breathe Me](#)

[Breathe You](#)

[Breathe Me Duet](#)

Rich Demons of Darkwood Series Co-write with May Dawson

[Make Me Lie](#)

[Make Me Beg](#)

[Make Me Wild](#)

[Make Me Burn](#)

BOOKS BY MAY DAWSON

[May Dawson's Website](#)

The Lost Fae Series

[Wandering Queen](#)

Fallen Queen

Rebel Queen

Lost Queen

Their Shifter Princess Series

Their Shifter Princess

Their Shifter Princess 2: Pack War

Their Shifter Princess 3: Coven's Revenge

Their Shifter Academy Series

A Prequel Novella

[Unwanted](#)

[Unclaimed](#)

[Undone](#)

[Unforgivable](#)

[Unstoppable](#)

The Wild Angels & Hunters Series:

[Wild Angels](#)

[Fierce Angels](#)

[Dirty Angels](#)

[Chosen Angels](#)

Academy of the Supernatural

[Her Kind of Magic](#)

[His Dangerous Ways](#)

[Their Dark Imaginings](#)

Ashley Landon, Bad Medium

Dead Girls Club

The True and the Crown Series

[One Kind of Wicked](#)

[Two Kinds of Damned](#)

[Three Kinds of Lost](#)

[Four Kinds of Cursed](#)

[Five Kinds of Love](#)

Rich Demons of Darkwood Series Co-write with C.R. Jane

[Make Me Lie](#)

[Make Me Beg](#)

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ABOUT C.R. JANE

A Texas girl living in Utah now, I'm a wife, mother, lawyer, and now author. My stories have been floating around in my head for years, and it has been a relief to finally get them down on paper. I'm a huge Dallas Cowboys fan and I primarily listen to Taylor Swift and hip hop...don't lie and say you don't too.

My love of reading started probably when I was three and it only made sense that I would start to create my own worlds since I was always getting lost in others'.

I like heroines who have to grow in order to become badasses, happy endings, and swoon-worthy, devoted, (and hot) male characters. If this sounds like you, I'm pretty sure we'll be friends.

I'm so glad to have you on my team...check out the links below for ways to hang out with me and more of my books you can read!

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ABOUT MAY DAWSON

May Dawson lives in Virginia with her husband and two red-headed wild babies. Before her second career as an author, she spent eight years in the Marine Corps and visited forty-two countries and all seven continents (including a research station in the Antarctic). You can always find her on Facebook in [May Dawson's Wild Angels](#) or on the internet at MayDawson.com