



He loved her...to
the brink of madness

BORN,

DARKLY, MADLY DUET: BOOK ONE

DARKLY

FROM THE AUTHOR OF WITH VISIONS OF RED

TRISHA WOLFE

BORN, DARKLY

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Contents

Quote

Prologue

1. Animal
2. Blood
3. Visceral
4. Insight
5. Psychopathy
6. Lockdown
7. Entanglement
8. Gravity
9. Puzzle
10. Flight
11. Nexus
12. Tomb
13. Lay Bare
14. Departure
15. Prison
16. Perjury
17. Execution
18. Free Me
19. The Dare
20. Chemistry
21. Test
22. Grave
23. Master Our Passion
24. Cell

25. [Asylum](#)
26. [Till Death](#)
27. [Darkness](#)
28. [Trap](#)
29. [Deliverance](#)
30. [Burn](#)
31. [Thereafter](#)

[Broken Bonds Series](#)

[Also by Trisha Wolfe](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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“ What madness is it to be expecting evil before it comes.

~Lucius Annaeus Seneca

PROLOGUE

PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF

LONDON

Hands.
We don't consider them enough.

Taken for granted, our hands don't get the attention and recognition they deserve. Rather, we abuse them. Use them to abuse. Fondle our fat, loathing our bodies, especially women. We pluck and tug at our face, cursing the years. Never once acknowledging their beauty and strength—those precious instruments that enable us to do almost anything.

I notice mine now. Shaking and cold. The ugly beveled grooves from wrapping my fingers with string over the years. I use my thumb to smudge off the dirt that perspiration hasn't completely sweated away, revealing the faded black ink along the side of my palm.

My voice cracks on a laugh. I stare at the tattooed key on my flesh until my eyes blur. Sweat leaks into their corners, a biting sting like a needle piercing my vision clear.

Then I look up at all the dangling keys.

A canopy of gleaming silver and bronze and rusted metals held aloft by red string—a blanket woven of blood in the sky. The keys clang together, playing a dark, chiming melody that chills me to the bone.

He knows me.

In my vanity, I concealed the ugly and vile. And yet he saw.

In my profession, your past can be as damning as a wrong diagnosis.
Shame is the conception of most sins against ourselves.

A wail rips through the canopy, and I can feel the agony in the gutturalness of it. A scream wrenched from an abyss of never-ending pain. It forces my hand into the air.

I teeter on the rock, bare feet gripping the serrated edge of stone, as I reach for the first key.

Forgive me.

ANIMAL

LONDON

“Dr. Noble, can you tell us what the culprit was thinking when he did *this*?” The lawyer points to a projection screen along the courthouse wall. Magnified for the courtroom, the projected image displays the charred remains of a woman’s mutilated body.

I press my fingers into my kneecap behind the witness stand. My nails snag my sheer stockings, and I mentally curse, craving the feel of my string. Turning toward the screen, I open my mouth.

“Objection, Your Honor. The witness can’t know what the defendant was thinking.”

My gaze flicks to the judge. “Your rebuttal, Mr. Alister,” she prompts the defendant’s lawyer.

Armani suit as dark as his eyes, he smoothes his tie down along his dress shirt. “Dr. Noble is an expert witness, Your Honor. She was called in because she’s an *expert* in her field, which is insight into the minds of criminal individuals.”

“Disturbed individuals,” the prosecutor says loud enough for the court to hear.

“Don’t make me slam my gavel, Mr. Hatcher.” The judge raises her gavel in warning. “Objection overruled. Dr. Noble was asked to provide testimony

of her *professional* opinion of the defendant's state of mind. Since she's come all this way—" Judge Gellar grants me a telling smile, her dark features more youthful when not fixed in a scowl "—I'd like to hear her thoughts."

The prosecutor clears his throat before taking a seat. My nails sink into my kneecap as I again turn toward the screen. I'm a top psychologist in the field of criminal psychology—not a public speaker. No matter how many times I've taken the stand, it never gets easier. I loathe public speaking just as much now as I did in college.

"After examining the defendant, Charles Reker, I believe he displays classic signs of paranoid schizophrenia. In particular, he suffers from a specific delusion: Capgras delusion. Charles Reker, amid this delusion, believed his wife to be a clone—"

"Objection—"

"Sit down and shut up, Mr. Hatcher, or I will hold you in contempt."

The lawyer looks stricken. "On what grounds?" He quickly backpedals, "Your Honor."

Judge Gellar circles her gavel threateningly. "On the grounds that interruptions annoy me. Let the witness finish her testimony."

Pressing my palms onto the chair seat, I steady my voice. "In my professional *opinion*, the defendant believed his wife was replaced with a clone by the government as a means to spy on him. He believed that by torching the clone, he'd destroy the government's ability to control him."

Mr. Alister walks around the table and places a hand on his client's shoulder. "So you do not believe—in your professional opinion—that Charles intended to murder his wife of twenty-four years."

"No," I say, bolstering my voice an octave higher. "Charles was unable to distinguish reality from his delusion. His intent was to destroy a clone of his wife. *Not* his wife. He felt threatened in the midst of his delusional state."

"Thank you, Dr. Noble. No more questions."

A sinking feeling tugs at the back of my mind, but I suppress that

weakness. A brutal murder occurred, but the man sitting across from me at the defendant's table—now medicated under my care—is no longer capable of the brutality he exhibited when he violently killed his wife. His eyes reflect remorse. His disorder wouldn't allow guilt to show through; he's unable to fake it.

"Would you like to cross examine this witness, Mr. Hatcher?" the judge asks.

"Yes. Thank you, Your Honor." As the lawyer stands from behind the prosecution's table, I straighten my back.

The position threads every muscle along my spine with white-hot pain. I part my mouth to inhale a breath and then expel the ache, visualizing the pain as a physical object I can eject from my body.

Hatcher strides to the computer on the roll cart and adjusts the image. We're given a close-up of Margot Reker's mutilation. Members of the jury physically react, some averting their eyes.

"Dr. Noble," he begins with a vain toss of his head. I arch an eyebrow. "Since your expert opinion is so widely sought after, would you expound on why you believe Charles Reker sliced his wife up with a butcher knife after he set her on fire."

"Objection," the defense interjects. "Is there a question here, Your Honor? The witness has already provided testimony to her thoughts on the defendant's state of mind."

The judge looks at Hatcher expectantly.

"Dr. Noble provided the speculated reasoning as to the murder, but not the mutilation, Your Honor. In my opinion—"

"Careful, counselor," the judge warns.

"It's been stated the defendant killed his wife to eliminate the threat of government conspiracy," he revises. "However, I only aim to uncover why, then, the need for overkill."

Judge Gellar considers his rebuttal, then nods. "Proceed carefully, Mr.

Hatcher.”

He again focuses his piercing eyes on me. “Do I need to elaborate?”

Back pain is enough to bring the strongest person to their knees. Me? I get temperamental when in the middle of a flare-up. “I was able to follow, thank you. What you see on the screen does resemble overkill, that which can be construed as a crime of passion.”

“Exactly,” the lawyer says. “A crime of passion.” He turns and states this to the jury.

“However,” I continue, undeterred. “I analyzed Charles Reker for over a period of a month before I was able to clearly decipher the *why*. He was looking for proof.”

Hatcher tilts his head. “Proof?”

“Yes. He was searching for the computer chip that transmitted his information to the government. During his search, he was apprehended by the police.”

“His search?” He props one hand on his hip and marches to the screen. The lawyer has studied too many courtroom movies. “You’re telling me that this—” he points to the charred, flayed skin hanging from the victim’s bones “—was also a part of his delusion? That Charles Reker sliced and stabbed his wife more than thirty times all for a chip?”

“Yes.”

“Dr. Noble. I’m sorry, but to me, and probably to everyone else in the courtroom, this looks like the violent, destructive crime of an enraged man. A man furious with his cheating wife.” He nods to the jury. “As we proved beforehand.”

“Objection,” the defense says. “Counsel is testifying, Your Honor.”

“Sustained. Ask a question, Mr. Hatcher, or wrap it up.”

Incensed, the lawyer approaches the witness stand. “Did you, at all, factor Mrs. Reker’s affair into your evaluation? How such a painful betrayal from a wife of over twenty years could push an already unhinged man over the

edge?”

I stare into his eyes. “I did.”

His head jerks back, arms thrown wide. “Care to share, doctor?”

“Are you afraid of your wife, Mr. Hatcher?”

My challenging question knocks the smirk off his face. “Excuse me?”

“Your wife—” I nod to his hand that displays a gold wedding band “—are you fearful for your life when she discovers your affair with your paralegal?” I glance at the blonde seated at the prosecution’s table. “Because, according to your provoking argument of Mr. Reker, you should be downright terrified.”

A collective gasp rolls through the courtroom.

His lips curl in irritation, but he does a fantastic job at schooling the rest of his features. “Other than this being a blatant attempt to shift the focus of this trial, your assessment couldn’t be more off base, Dr. Noble. Which should prove psychology is hardly credible in a murder case.”

“When you first entered the courtroom,” I say, lifting my chin. “You guided your paralegal to the table by the small of her back.” He starts to interrupt, and I hold up a finger. “Which can be excused as simple old-school chivalry. Disturbing, but excusable. However, you don’t have to be a psychologist to detect your affair; anyone in this courtroom can spot the obvious signs. Your paralegal has a tan line where her wedding ring should be. You’ve been spinning your ring during the trial. Each time you spin it, you then check your phone. Which could be a nervous habit, but our subconscious gives away that which we most want to hide.”

The lawyer looks to the judge. “Your Honor, you can’t allow this—”

“You opened the door, Mr. Hatcher.” Judge Gellar lifts her shoulders in an unapologetic shrug.

“Also,” I continue. “The whole time you’ve been questioning me, your paralegal has been intermittently checking your phone herself.” He turns around to look. “I suspect that you’re both waiting for a reply from your wife.

A possible confirmation that you'll be able to spend a prolonged period of time together."

The blonde flinches when Hatcher's phone vibrates on the table.

Judge Gellar sighs. "Want to check your messages, Mr. Hatcher?"

He pivots to face the judge, his narrowed eyes sweeping me. "No, Your Honor. I don't care to play into courtroom theatrics." Then to me: "I fail to see how attempting to disgrace me proves your evaluation of Charles Reker was thorough, Dr. Noble."

I shift my position, alleviating the throbbing pressure at the base of my back. I'm officially tired of sitting here. "A crime of passion suggests an act of immediacy. Charles Reker, after careful analysis, proved to be aware of his wife's infidelity for over a year. Like you, Mr. Hatcher, Mrs. Reker was obvious in her attempts to hide the affair. So if you're suggesting that an affair alone is motive enough for murder...then I would be very wary of going through with your weekend plans."

At his intense silence, I add, "My findings and diagnosis are all documented in the files I sent to your paralegal." I nod to the mountain of files on the prosecution's desk. "If you'd been as invested in this case as you are with your extra curricular activities, you'd have read my reports, and not presented such a weak case for the prosecution."

A flash of anger stains his face, then he takes measured steps to his table. "I'm done, Your Honor. No more questions."

Judge Gellar shakes her head. "I agree there, Mr. Hatcher."

An hour after my testimony, the trial concludes, and the jury is sequestered for deliberation. High profile cases can't be kept out of the media, unfortunately. Judge Gellar is doing what she can to give Charles a fair trial.

I'm confident I was able to help the jury see past the grisliness of Charles's crime to the sick individual beneath. And, Mr. Hatcher won't ever call me to the stand in the future, I'm sure. Which I consider a double victory.

The crisp scent of spring greets me as I exit the courthouse. Maine is so fresh in the spring, as if everyone is given a clean slate. I inhale the jasmine in the air, letting it cleanse the trial from my system. I head down the steps, careful not to trigger another flare-up, and pain lances my arm.

It's acute and not the norm. As I spin around, cold liquid douses me—the shock of it stealing my breath. I drop my briefcase and wipe at my face, clearing away the thick substance.

My hands are covered in red.

“You got a murderer off!” a woman shouts. She throws a metal bucket at me, her aged features creased in anger. “That devil killed my sister. He burned her alive and hacked her up. Her blood is on your hands, you animal.”

My mouth pops open, and is immediately filled with the metallic taste of blood. I gag. I'm only given a moment to process what's taking place before she flees down the steps at the sound of sirens.

B L O O D

L O N D O N

Pig's blood. According to a pathologist friend who was gracious enough to test a sample at the station, Margo Reker's sister doused me in pig's blood. I suppose to her, I'm as bad as a cop. Because that's the only correlation I can conceive as to why she'd select the blood of a swine.

That, or she owns a pig farm...

Which isn't bringing any good conclusions to mind, so I'm going with the cop theory and easy access to a butcher's shop.

In the end, I didn't press charges. No reason for that family to suffer any more than they already have. And by foregoing the lengthy process to press charges, I was able to salvage my afternoon sessions.

Two hours of showering and then soaking, and showering some more, and I still feel as if there's a filmy layer of pig membranes coating my skin. No use trying to salvage my designer suit; it's trashed, right along with my dignity. And I really loved that suit, too.

Even ten years later, the thought of how much money I spent on the brand-name label, only to toss it out, drops heavy in my stomach like a lead weight. *Thud*. The sinking, ill feeling is a testament to our roots—the way we view ourselves so deeply ingrained that no amount of money can change self-image.

Although I do a fine job of dressing the part, when I look in the mirror, I still see that same poor, small-town girl. Her washed out skin, her sullen, sunken eyes, and badly bleached hair.

I toss my rich dark locks over my shoulder now as I pull open the door of my building. I've spent years helping others rise above, to embrace a future free of their past, so you'd think this knowledge would benefit me. Yet, I still struggle with my own personal psychologist to move beyond that deprived girl from Hallows, Mississippi.

And being doused in pig's blood sure as shit doesn't help me forget.

On the elevator ride up, I use the few seconds I have alone to pin my hair and pop a muscle relaxer. The repeated showering didn't help my flare-up. Hot water only serves to aggravate the inflammation. So much so that I turned the lever all the way to cold in a fit of anger.

It was a poor substitution for my morning routine of hot and cold therapy, which was already disrupted with the trial. What's a little pig's blood to top it all off? I'll make sure to have Lacy schedule an appointment with my chiropractor.

The elevator doors open to the sixth floor. My floor. Reclaimed hardwood meets each step, my nine-hundred dollar pumps clacking against the refinished surface. The walls of my practice are a soothing gray. Decorative art hangs strategically at eye level to keep my high-paying clients from staring at the shackled criminals in the waiting room.

I should've remodeled after I leased the floor, designed a separate waiting room—one where the ward could stow the eyesores—but doing so would've felt like acceptance, enabling me to continue in a direction I no longer wish to pursue.

I shrug off the morning as I approach the reception desk. "God, are you all right?" Lacy asks in way of greeting. Obviously, gossip has already spread. "It was on the news," she answers my unspoken question. "I'm so sorry, London. Why didn't you take the day off?"

A forced smile pulls my features tight. I admit an early morning blood bath is an extreme way to greet the day, even for me—but I’ve dealt with worse. I’ve been spat on, choked, have been practically defecated on...so at least this time I didn’t need a penicillin shot. Still, I should probably play the role of insulted physician for others’ sake.

“I’m fine, thanks. Nothing I can’t handle. You need to remind the warden not to bring up inmates until their appointment.”

Lacy is intelligent. Top of her class at Yale. I’m not reprimanding her; she’s used to my sharp moods. She fidgets with her cell phone, flipping away notifications. “Believe me,” she says, gaze cast down, “I’ve reminded him. I don’t want them here any longer than you do.”

Besides being smart, Lacy is also gorgeous. Long blond hair and busty. The inmates have no shame in ogling her. I roll my shoulders back and adjust my glasses. “I’ll handle it.”

Warden Marks is a tall, lanky man with pointy features. He reminds me of the scarecrows back home, and he gives off a similar creepy vibe as the straw-stuffed fiends of my past.

He’s seated in the cushioned chair next to my office door, his black dress shoe tapping. Two convicts in orange are seated on either side of him, three corrections officers standing guard. The inmates might not be as noticeable if the warden would allow them to wear a less distinctive color. Although, the handcuffed wrists chained to their ankles might be more telling than the tacky orange jumpsuits.

One more year.

My commitment to Cotsworth Correctional Facility will be fulfilled in a year’s time. Although my work with convicted murderers is what launched my career—the general public’s morbid fascination with serial killers a giant springboard—I’m moving away from that field of study. I owe Marks and others like him a debt of gratitude, as my research and methods are now taught at nearly every criminal justice academy nationwide, but I’m officially

through.

After seven years of intense study into the mind of the criminally insane, I have formed only one conclusion: serial offenders cannot be rehabilitated.

There is, of course, the rare subject that finds his way to God or another divine being and transcends beyond his compulsions. But without the chance to be monitored in a civilized setting without maximum security to make sure those compulsions stay checked, one can never prove effective rehabilitation.

Rather, my methods simply make life inside prison more bearable for the wardens and guards and doctors who deal with these offenders on a daily basis. No, I do not believe rehabilitation is achievable. Especially for the Bundys and Dahmers of the world.

They are governed by their Id—and the Id is the ultimate monster.

“Warden,” I say as I approach my office. “I shouldn’t have to remind you that inmates cannot use the waiting room.”

Warden Marks stands and pulls his suit jacket closed. “Hello, London. I was sorry to see the unfortunate happening at the courthouse on the news. I hope this won’t effect your sessions today, but I do understand if you need —”

I hold up a hand. “Where’s Riley?”

Irritated by my interruption, he purses his thin lips. “Riley has transferred out. He wasn’t making any progress in the program.”

I dig out the key from my purse and turn toward the warden. I could make an argument on Riley’s behalf, claim we’d eventually see a breakthrough, but this morning left me drained and lethargic. Riley is a prime example of failed rehabilitation.

Considering this, I glance between the two inmates seated in my waiting room. One is gawking openly at Lacy, drool streaming from his mouth. The other simply stares at the hardwood floor.

I feel a sardonic laugh bubble up. “No,” I say. “I’m absolutely not taking on two new patients.”

The officers move to escort the convicts out, but Warden Marks glares at them. “London,” he starts, my name an irritating plea in his nasally, reprimanding tone. “Funding requires that you meet your quota. Now that Riley is gone...” he trails off, leaving the rest unsaid.

I press my fingers to my forehead, annoyed with the mounting ache at my temples. My paying clients are enough to keep my practice more than profitable. If funding is pulled before the year is up, I’ll accept my reprimand. “One,” I state, holding up a finger to drive my seriousness through his thick skull. “I’ll take on one patient. We can discuss an alternative resource for the other. I can’t take on any more clients and be within regulations.” This is true.

With a defeated sigh, the warden nods to the officer nearest the drooling convict. “Bring Billings in.”

“Wait.” I do another quick sweep over the two men. “Not him. Him.” I point to the dark-haired man who hasn’t looked up once during our conversation.

Marks chuckles. “I assure you, if your workload is that hectic, you don’t want Sullivan here. He’s a lost cause. Only here as a last resort before he’s transferred to a maximum security penitentiary in New Castle.” His gaze hardens on the inmate. “He’s being tried for capital punishment. Lethal injection.”

I glare at him. “And yet you were so eager to waste my time.”

He shrugs. “I have my own pushy caseworkers to answer to.”

As the corrections officer begins to lead Sullivan toward the elevator, I look at Lacy and decide a hopeless case is better than her being uncomfortable for the next several months.

“I do like my challenges.” I turn to unlock the door. “When is the trial date?”

The warden clears his throat. “Three months from now. You’ll be required to speak on his behalf. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’m required to give my honest testimony. Which I always do,” I say as I step inside my office. “Bring him in. I’ll start the paperwork.”

I flip the light switch on, and the room is lit with the warm glow of track lighting. A diffuser in the corner emits the scent of sandalwood, a calming fragrance to enhance the saltwater fish tank along the narrow hallway that adjoins my therapy room. The whole room is styled in soothing, cool colors, but is otherwise devoid of details.

I find it’s best to keep convicts as calm as possible during sessions, and the blank space is intentional, designed not to trigger any unwanted memories or episodes. Also, my other clients appreciate the ambiance, as well.

After I tuck my purse away in my desk drawer and lock it, I lead the men into the therapy room and eye the rug beneath the contemporary leather chair. The officer knows the drill. He pushes the chair aside and pulls up the small area rug, revealing a bolted manacle in the floorboard.

The custom installation wasn’t cheap, and it came out of my own pocket, but the solution to conceal a floor restraint was more appealing than having a restraint bench in the middle of my room.

Once I have the forms completed, Marks signs his name, and the officer has my newest patient shackled to the floor. He’s only given enough slack to stand or be seated. No roaming during sessions.

As an extra precaution, all pens and sharp objects are locked inside my desk.

A prisoner once made it out with a pencil that he promptly lodged in an officer’s neck during an attempted escape. With violent offenders, no amount of vigilance can be enough.

The warden heads toward the office. “I feel the need to warn you that Sullivan is a level three inmate.” His brow furrows as he watches for my reaction. “I’ll be leaving Michaels with you.”

I scoot my chair up to the marked line four feet away from the shackled man in the room. “I appreciate the concern, and I am aware of the risk, but I

don't conduct sessions that way. Michaels can wait outside the office, as always." I meet his squinted gaze. "I'm sure if Sullivan was too much risk, we'd be conducting this session in a cell rather than here. Correct?"

And he knows for damn certain that's not happening. My first year out of college, I spent every weekday locked inside a cell with prisoners. I still have nightmares—the sound of a cell door clanging shut, the pound of feet and chains against concrete floors. The stench of urine and feces—sometimes being slung at me. The catcalls and riots.

Those iron bars that haunt me.

If the warden wants to continue my contract with the facility, then sessions will continue to be conducted under my terms.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, the warden leaves. The officer gives me a curt nod before he exits the therapy room. A few seconds later, the sound of my office door closing echoes around us. The hum of the fish tank fills the sudden, stark silence.

Without looking up, I open the file on my lap and scan the details. "Inmate number six-one-four. Grayson Pierce Sullivan. What do you like to go by?"

The silence stretches, forcing me to glance up. He's no longer staring at the floor; his eyes are trained on my face. In this lighting, I can't tell if they're blue or green, but his bright, steely irises are surrounded by a thick fringe of lashes. His short-cropped hair is the standard cut for all inmates, and provides a glimpse at several white scars along his scalp.

"I'll need to refer to you by something," I prompt.

The man in front of me doesn't respond. I use his lack of communication to quickly read over his file. I'm typically given a week to learn about my patients; I like to have a treatment plan in place before the introduction. But considering the circumstance, I'll have to assess him first.

Fine. I close the file and set it on the armrest. "We don't have to do introductions, but you should know my name is Dr. —"

“I know who you are.”

The deep bass of his voice hits my chest. He closes off again just as quickly, those unblinking eyes staring through me with uninhibited confidence. It’s been a long time since a patient unnerved me.

I clear my throat. “Then you’ve had the privilege of researching me before I could look into you. That puts me at a disadvantage, Grayson.”

I choose to call him by his first name, something other than what the warden and guards refer to him as. It’s not much of a reaction, but a muscle jumps along his jaw at my use of his given name.

“Your file says you’ve been convicted of five murders,” I continue, maintaining eye contact. “You’ve served a year of a life sentence.”

He doesn’t deny the murders. At least that’s a start. Half the convicts that make their way to my office are still pleading their cases. Researching the law and harassing lawyers.

“There were no bodies,” he says.

I nod. “So you are holding out hope for an appeal.” Which doesn’t much matter for Maine, since Delaware is the state he should be concerned about.

“Only stating the facts, Dr. Noble.”

My name rolls off his tongue in a smooth cadence, inflecting a slight accent. I’m trying to place it when what he said registers. Five murder convictions with no bodies. A recollection comes to mind, and I tilt my head. “Corpus delicti. Body of the crime.”

“That’s correct.”

“No victims found at the scenes, but there was enough blood and evidence to prove murders had occurred,” I say, recalling the details. “Then, during the investigation, videos were discovered. Footage of the murdered victims. The videos were leaked and went viral.”

That’s how one detective linked the evidence to the man who was eventually prosecuted. Video cameras, the older kind, have an identifying mark on the tape. It was traced to the person who purchased the camera.

“The Angel of Maine killings.”

His nostrils flare. “I thought monikers were frowned on.”

“They are. By law enforcement.” I cross my ankles, settling back into my chair. “I’m not law enforcement. I think a moniker or nickname gives the public a way to connect—for lack of a better word—with something they can’t understand, yet fascinates them.”

Grayson’s gaze narrows. He studies me just as intently as I study him. If it’s true, and the Angel of Maine really is the man sitting here now, then I have the chance to analyze one of the most confounding psychopathic minds.

His identity was hidden from the media during the trial. An attempt to keep the press from turning him into a vigilante. I tried unsuccessfully for months to get an interview.

A thrilled buzz spikes my blood. Heated and electrifying. It’s been an even longer time since a subject excited me.

I pull out my phone and text Lacy: *Cancel the rest of my appointments for today.*

“So tell me,” I officially begin our introduction, “why did you refuse to see me a year ago? And why are you here now?”

The stare off continues, but I don’t really need an answer. What Warden Marks revealed about his upcoming trial is enough for me to form an educated guess.

Grayson is about to be convicted in another state—one that has the death penalty.

He wants me to save his life.

VISCERAL

GRAYSON

London Noble has quirks. Likes and dislikes. Fears. All the little intricate details that make up her personality. I love dissecting her.

She wears glasses instead of contacts. She braids her long dark hair, twirling it into a bun, instead of cutting it short. She doesn't paint her nails. She always leaves one infuriating button undone on her blouse. She crosses her ankles instead of her legs. That is, until we talk about my deeds, then I watch her cross those long legs, thighs squeezed tight. She doesn't like noise. She enjoys complication. Her smiles are rare. Her approval even harder to earn. She suffers back pain due to some injury, but pretends it doesn't effect her. She's petite. Practically the size of a doll compared to my six feet. Yet she allows no one to look down to her. She's afraid of aging, becoming obsolete. But the single most interesting thing about my psychologist is this: I make her curious.

Not in a professional sense—though I'm sure that's how it started; a small flame sparked into existence—but the deep-seated, scary curious. The kind of curious that drives good girls bad.

I'd love to tangle her up in my web and feast.

"What do you see?"

Soft, thin fingers peek around the edge of a board. On the front, a black

and red ink blot splashes against white. *You*. “I see a butterfly.”

London lowers the board, her expression unreadable. At least, she strives for neutral. But I glimpse the irritation beneath her mask. She’s desperate to crack me. Wiggle inside my head and crawl around.

A week together, and she still doesn’t get it. There’s nothing to be found. I’m not here for myself, to resolve my psychotic tendencies. To be rehabilitated with the hopes of reentering society.

I’m here for her.

“You like games?” she asks, setting the stack of ink blots aside.

A smile curls my lips. I like playing games with *her*. “It depends on the game.”

“Do you see our time together as a game?”

Questions. Always tedious questions with her. She turns every reply into one. Refusing to let me inside her head. I adjust my feet, the rattle of my shackles loud in the still room. “This isn’t really our time, is it?”

Her soft brow creases. “You feel that I’m not committed to your treatment?”

“No,” I say, sitting forward, as much as my chains will allow. “I feel you’re very committed. Just to the wrong thing. Do you believe rehabilitation is possible?”

Her dark eyes blink behind her glasses. “I won’t lie to you, Grayson. I have my doubts. But we won’t know if it’s a possibility for you unless you take our time together seriously.”

Interesting. “I like when you answer my questions.”

She attempts to hide a smile. Crosses her legs. I inhale a deep breath, trying to taste her excitement. “My answers won’t help you.”

“How do you know?”

Her hands go to her lap. She keeps her gaze steady on me, but I see the anxious need to wrap her string around her finger. She hides it well—almost as well as she hides the tattoo on her hand—but I’ve caught her once. A black

thread she keeps tucked inside her pocket. The skin of her finger wears the groove marks from where she wraps it, tightening the thread over and over.

I wonder why she does it; where she picked up the compulsion.

“You said you have doubts,” I say, keeping the tables turned. “But what if it’s not doubt. What if you don’t want rehabilitation to work.”

Her mouth pops open. Before she can blurt a practiced retort, she checks herself. “Why would I not want it to work?”

I shrug as I ease back into the chair. “Because seeking the answer on how to fix the sick and deviant is boring. You’re really seeking to understand why you’re so drawn to it. Which is far more interesting.”

She lets a faint smile slip free. “That’s a logical leap. Of course I’m drawn to it, and fascinated with my study. Understanding your compulsion to punish and kill people—”

“I’ve never killed *people*.” None of them were human.

Her lips thin. “Why traps, Grayson?”

Her question tenses my shoulders. This isn’t what I want to talk about. “Why not traps? Aren’t we all victims of some sort of trap? A wife trapped in an unhappy marriage. A child trapped in a loveless family. A woman trapped in a profitless, unfulfilling career.” My gaze drops to her mouth. Those satin pink lips twitch.

“Those are theoretical. And they’re not life threatening.”

“They can be...”

“But your traps are designed to take lives, Grayson. Your victims forced to participate against their will.”

I release a lengthy breath. “It’s never against their will. Their choices led them there. They’re responsible and should be held accountable for their actions. I only provide a resolution. I offer them a final choice, a way to redeem themselves, which is more than any god would grant them.”

Her hand inches toward her pocket, but then she rests it on the armrest, instead. “Do you see yourself as a god? Granting your victims redemption?”

She can do better than this. She *is* better than this tired psychobabble. “No, I see myself as a hunter. They’re not victims; they’re predators stalking the woods in search of prey. If they fall into the hunter’s trap, then they were in a place they never should have been.”

She wets her lips. Her tongue peeks out to tease me. One of her sins: seduction.

“This room is designed like a trap,” I continue. “You lure the mentally ill in with promises of recovery and freedom. Maybe not physical freedom, but freedom from their demons. Once they’re shackled—” I tug at my restraint “—you feast on their horror stories in the name of psychology. You feed off them, sating your own twisted curiosities. And then you publish your papers on the poor damned souls that never had a chance. You reap glory off the murderers and from the victims themselves.”

Her sigh is heavy and breathy. It slides over my skin, making the distance between us unbearable. “Have you always been this judgmental?”

This line of questioning is getting us nowhere. “No, but I’ve always liked puzzles.”

“Puzzles,” she repeats. “Why is that?”

A memory from my childhood flickers across my vision, unbidden. I tamp it down. “I like the mechanics, the way each piece has a purpose, a place. The way it simply belongs.”

London uncrosses her legs and straightens her back, sitting taller in the chair. She’s so petite, she could curl up in it. “Where do you feel you belong, Grayson?”

Oh, if she only knew how loaded that question is. But it’s not my purpose for why I’m here; this isn’t about my story. This is about her. Where she fits into the puzzle. It’s time we start peeling back her layers.

I hold her gaze, unblinking. “With you, Dr. Noble. I belong right here with you.”

A tense battle of wills arcs between us, where neither one is willing to be

the first to look away.

If I come on too strong, if she becomes too aware, then she could request my transfer. I decide it's better not to chance it by provoking her and avert my eyes to the chain resting against my leg.

"I refused your interview a year ago," I say, finally giving her the answer to her question during our first session, "because I didn't trust you." I look up.

Her dark eyebrows arch. "And you trust me now?"

Dr. London Noble has a reputation of getting convicted murderers a lighter or reduced sentence. She humanizes monsters. She tames the untamable. She's the answer to every serial killer on death row—their angel of mercy.

But beneath that façade, a devil lurks.

It's taken me months to accept that she was put in my path for a reason. At first, I refused any connection to her. We couldn't be farther apart on the spectrum—and yet, her name kept coming to me, a chant my own damned soul recognized as kindred.

I lean forward, getting as close to her as my restraints allow. "I trust in the inevitable."

My response unnerves her. The delicate column of her throat jumps as she maintains an unaffected expression. "At some point, all your victims' fates were inevitable to you. Do you view me as a victim? Have I committed some sin that I'm unaware of?"

Her twisty words bring a real smile to my face. Is she aware? Or is the ruse a part of her seduction? I don't have the answer. Not yet. I need all the pieces of her puzzle first.

All I know for sure is that we have a story.

Ours is not a love story—we're too volatile, too explosive for monotony. No, our story comes with a warning.

Beware.

“You’re twisting things,” I say. “But you’re not wrong. All sinners are first victims. Everyone who lashes out to harm, has suffered harm themselves.” I run my hands over my thighs, staring at the gleaming metal of my cuffs. “It’s a simple yin yang; dark and light feeding each side and devouring. A snake eating it’s own tail. A vicious cycle.”

London doesn’t use a notepad to write down our sessions. She records them, watches them played back to her. She’s a watcher. A voyeur. She uses the here and now to process my words. Silence builds between us as she takes her time sorting my voiced thoughts.

“You feel you’re powerless against the cycle?”

My gaze snaps to hers. My hands itch to tear those glasses from her face so I can stare into her eyes unobstructed. “None of us are powerless. Choice is the most powerful thing in this world. Everyone has a choice.”

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, that small action igniting my skin. I curl my hands into fists as I await her next question.

“That’s a powerful statement in itself,” she says, surprising me. “Yet if you render your victims helpless, forced to make only the choices you provide them, then they’re not truly free to choose, are they?”

I unclench my hands. My fingers splay across my lap. I’ve wiggled an inch beneath her skin. I can see it in the way she touches her finger, anxious for her little string. “Much like our sessions,” I say.

Her eyebrows knit together. “How do you mean?”

I lift my arms and rattle the chains. “If we were on even ground, able to voice our thoughts truthfully, then my answers might be different.” I eye her closely. “And your questions, I bet, would be much different.”

She’s so still, if I blink, I could miss the slight tremor of her hands. I keep my gaze trained on her face. We are each other’s inevitability—a certainty that no amount of chains and bars and guards will prevent.

She breaks the connection first this time and looks at the wall clock. “That’s enough for today.”

Disappointment pulls at my shoulders. Where is the combative psychologist? Where is her determination to make me see the world her way? Doctor Noble is a narcissist. I've spent the past year studying her and devising my strategy for a woman I have yet to meet.

I release the mounting anger with a forceful exhale. Tomorrow.

We have an infinity of tomorrows.

INSIGHT

LONDON

A blank screen stares back at me, daring me to hit Play. I catch my reflection in the darkened widescreen and turn to the side, analyzing my legs, the way my knee-length skirt hugs my thighs. A thought flits through my mind—one second of curiosity over how Grayson perceives me—then it’s safely snuffed out as I face the TV and push the button to play the disc.

An image of a rusted metal room brightens to life. A low hum buzzes at my ears. I click the volume higher, then halt when someone enters the view. A tall man with a pot belly and disheveled gray suit.

His tie is tugged away from his neck, like he’s been pulling at it. His dirty blond hair a disarrayed mess, as if it’s suffered the same harsh treatment as his necktie. He’s harried as he searches the dimly lit room. His hands feel over the tarnished walls, seeking tirelessly as a string of hushed curses fall from his mouth.

Breath bated, I watch him cover every inch of the room, and when he falls to his knees, clawing at his hair, that’s when I see it. Descending from above, just peeking onto the screen, are cables. Thick black cables. At the end of each a manacle. One large harness rests amid the dangling shackles.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the string I keep at the ready. I tighten

the thread around my index finger as I watch. A garbled voice sounds out through the room.

“Brandon Harvey. You have a chance to free yourself from the prison in which you’ve created. You’re guilty of molesting children. Although you’ve beaten the system and you’re a free man in the eyes of the law, it’s now time to pay for your sins. The eyes of justice are not blind.”

“Fuck you!” the man shouts.

“Secure yourself into the harness. Then cuff your wrists and ankles into the shackles.”

The man flips off the room, and as he screams obscenities, a loud noise buzzes over the speaker system. One by one, panels along the walls flip over. The faces of children appear—*young* children—in a domino effect that covers the room.

Oh, God. I stumble backward, awkwardly finding my seat, my legs unable to hold my weight.

“The faces of your victims will be your reminder,” the voice says. “This is your only chance to redeem yourself. Choose. Redemption or death.”

I try to picture the man in my office from just hours ago as the concealed person behind the camera. The man I’ve been examining for the past week doesn’t appear to harbor sadistic tendencies, yet the proof before me is undeniable.

Grayson is a sadist.

What’s more, he’s an expert in deceit.

Before I become too involved, I reach for my journal and jot down my observations. A loud *clang* recaptures my attention and I’m forced to watch—I can’t look away from the screen.

The man in the suit does as instructed, cursing the whole time he shackles himself into the harness and cuffs. When he’s effectively restrained, the cables snap taut, lifting him off the ground. The hollow noise I heard before is revealed as the floor beneath him moves aside to expose an open panel. A

stool rises into the room from below.

It's not just a stool... I squint as I try to discern the pyramid-shaped seat, and all too soon, realization dawns. Some distant memory from history class resurfaces to give me the name of the torture device.

"A Judas Cradle," I breathe.

A mediaeval torture device that has no place in this scene erects below the struggling man, its pointed tip aimed directly between his spread legs. I know what's about to happen, but even as I realize this, I can't stop watching.

The string around my finger cuts off my circulation, the throb pulsing in sync to my increasing heart rate. As the cables descend, the man is stretched and lowered, his limbs pulled at every angle. His struggle is useless as he's slowly dropped onto the metal pyramid. His shouts turn into cries of pain as the pointed tip of the torture device makes contact with his rectum.

"Pass this test," the garbled voice says, "and you're free to go. You'll have suffered the same excruciating pain you forced on your victims. Like you, they were bound against their will, unable to fight. All you have to do is last twelve hours—one hour for each of your victims—to be redeemed."

My eyes close briefly. *Twelve hours*. I grab the CD case from the table and read over the label, noting the duration of the copied film. There's six hours of recorded footage.

"I can't take it!" the man shrieks. "Let me go! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

A rope drops from the ceiling, dangling close to the man's face. "You can stop the torture at any time," the voice announces. "But to end your immediate suffering, you have to be willing to end your life."

The humming grows louder, drowning out the screams. The cables rack his body as gravity takes hold, forcing him down onto the point. I'm transfixed by the scene. Wondering if Grayson watched the entirety of the torture.

Grayson is extremely intelligent. His file states *genius*. With an IQ of 152, he sees the world differently than the average person. He sees people

differently. He sees *me* differently.

I hold the remote outstretched, ready to fast-forward to the end, but I change my mind. To know my subject—to get inside their head and understand them, learn their motivations—I have to endure what they borne.

Majority of the time, I'm limited in how close I can get to a patient. Grayson recording his "sessions" with his victims presents a unique opportunity to peel back the layers and study his impulses. This is what I tell myself as I sit through hours of footage, unable to take my eyes off the tortured pedophile.

Beneath my professional curiosity, I am human, and I cringe at the revolting act—but I feel little remorse for this man when I glance at the faces of the children around the room. Do I think a lifetime in prison is a suitable punishment for his crime? I'm not sure that I do. At least on a personal level. Is Grayson justified in his method to punish where the law failed? Simply, that's a question for someone else. It doesn't pertain to his diagnosis.

And there's still the question of how Grayson knew of the man's guilt. Did he stalk him? Catch him in the act? Or is it an invented reality? One that consists of a delusional state in which he perceives those he deems guilty as just that, regardless of the facts.

I rub my forehead at the point of pressure and then make a note to research the victim. The bodies were never discovered. How did he dispose of them? Why? A counter forensic tactic to protect himself, or does he destroy the victim's remains to further insult them; preventing their loved ones from giving them a proper burial?

The length Grayson went to in order to study his victim, validate his purpose and devise an equally fitting punishment, then execute it...

Well, that takes conviction. Regardless of his mental state before, during, and after, Grayson's belief system will be our biggest challenge.

Going deeper still, why does he have this desire to punish so ruthlessly? What drives his purpose? Where does it stem from, and when did he first act

on the impulse?

An image of the scars crossing his scalp flits through my thoughts.

Torture. Self inflicted, or was he abused?

To learn the answers, I need access to vital information not provided in generic manila folders. His parents, his childhood environment, where he was raised—all these factors must come together to create a neat and acceptable profile for a psychopathy tailored to Grayson Pierce Sullivan.

Exploring from a professional distance, it's simple enough to chart his criminal profile. But what about the man?

The accent I hear on occasion that hints to an Irish heritage.

Those piercing ice-blue eyes that stare down to my marrow.

His masculine scent that pervades our sessions.

His voice—the way the raspy gutturalness makes my thighs squeeze together to offset the ache.

My subliminal reaction to his sex appeal is disturbing in its own right, and yet I still have to factor it into my observations. It's a part of his nature; charisma and determination work together to lure in his prey. He's a hunter. Like he admitted during our session.

And if I'm being honest, I've never been more fascinated by a patient. *Fascinated*. I could laugh. My attraction goes deeper than fascination...to some part of myself that yearns for his cruelty. He's free in a way that most people only dream—a dark and unforgiving dream where the rules don't apply.

I shake my head, realizing I've been rubbing at the side of my palm. A subconscious habit, and the reason why I took up my string therapy in the first place. I've worn the makeup off, the tattooed key now visible. Beneath the faded black ink, a deep scar mars my flesh.

Layers of my youth—the ways in which I've tried to conceal my pain over the years. Each one as telling as the crime.

I push the thought away along with my string and reclaim the remote.

Enough internal monologue for one day, I decide to skip ahead to the six-hour mark of the footage. Throughout the past four hours of grueling torture, Grayson has remained silent. He's not giving me anything. Where is he? What is he doing?

The man on screen is drenched in sweat. His suit has split down his legs, and the blood leaking from his rectum is evident as it coats the gray fabric and Judas Cradle. He must decide that he's suffered enough, or that he is deserving of death—or maybe he believes it's a bluff—because he reaches for the rope.

I cringe.

One forceful yank on the cord sets the cables free. The man's cry crackles through the speakers as the tip of the stool impales him. Another few seconds of torturous agony stretches out until I hear a sharp *snap*.

The man's head disconnects from his body.

I hit Rewind and then pause the image. I move closer, squinting at the screen. A cable makes contact with his neck, and as I click the footage ahead, I can clearly see where it cuts through, severing his head from his body.

"Christ."

I eject the disc and place it inside the case to be returned to the detective. I glance at the pile of cases on my desk, the recorded deaths of Grayson's victims that Detective Lux leant me—none too willingly—to help further my research.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I stuff the cases in my bag. A while ago, I chose not to bring my work home with me. To try to have a life outside of my career.

Half-attempted hobbies clutter my apartment, abandoned.

I sprinkle fish food into the tank, then lock up my office. On my walk home, the images on the disc play on a loop, my eyes unseeing as I follow the memorized path to my apartment.

If the prosecution has similar footage of the killings in New Castle, then

any testimony I may provide won't matter. After watching such a torturous and gruesome death—no matter the victim's crime—any jury would convict Grayson. His actions are premeditated.

He is a hopeless case.

PSYCHOPATHY

LONDON

I adjust the video recorder, centering the frame on Grayson's face. "Tell me what you're thinking."

When he says nothing, I turn around and move out of the view. "We're going to try something different," I say. "I'm not going to ask questions. I just want you to talk about whatever's on your mind."

He runs his palms over the top of his head. His hair has started to grow out. I put in an order to the corrections officers not to shave his head until he's released from therapy. I want to see if hiding his scars has any effect on his overall demeanor and reactions to me.

So far, he hasn't revealed the source of his scars, or whether or not they appear anywhere else on his body. Judging by the long-sleeved thermals he chooses to wear beneath his jumpsuit despite the unseasonably warm spring weather, I think it's a safe assumption that he's concealing more.

There are many ways to hide scars; both physical and emotional ones. The physical scars are easy enough to disguise. I know this from experience. I'm not as interested in those, but rather his emotional wounds—the ones that likely led to his disorder.

"Do I get my official diagnosis today, doc?" Grayson's accent is heavy this morning. He sounds weary.

After our first month, I bumped the sessions up to three times a week. The sooner I determine a treatment plan for Grayson, the sooner I can return to my other patients full time. I fear some may start to suffer from my neglect, but it's best to focus my undivided attention on Grayson rather than risk their mental health while being sidetracked.

With less than two months left until the trial, there's very little I can offer in way of a defense. I should end the sessions...but I'm greedy. A death row serial killer with media presence makes for an interesting case study, yes—but it's more than that.

He has answers.

Before the discovery of the videotapes, he was able to blend seamlessly into society. He held a steady job. Fostered romantic relationships. Though none were serious, the guise was that of a normal, functioning male adult. He fed his sadistic needs and compulsions without taking a life. Not by his own hands; he forced his victims to kill for him.

He has answers, and he's keeping them to himself.

I lace my arms across my chest. After a month of intensive interviews, I'm still reluctant to paste a label on him. "Would giving you a diagnosis make a difference during our sessions?"

He *tsks* with a shake of his head. "You asked a question."

I hold my stern expression in place. Lately, I've been enjoying my work too much. A sort of ease has settled between us, where this comfortable banter started to develop.

Grayson's charm is disarming. It's a part of his ruse. The mecca of his personality. But it's shallow; only the tip of the iceberg. I want to excavate below that surface. Even if I have to chisel away at the ice little by little.

"I won't ask another. You can go ahead and start wherever you'd like."

"What do you most want to know?"

A catch in my breath reveals how badly I want to ask him a particular question. His gaze drags over my body, slow and intense. If I hadn't been

studying him so closely, I might assume it's a sexual perusal—but this is how Grayson reads people. He gives them a smidgen of what they desire in order to analyze their tells.

He does this so intuitively, I'm in a constant state of awareness trying to control my micro expressions. It's like a ping pong match as I continually bounce his focus off of me and back onto him.

“How about you start with your career,” I suggest.

He looks disinterested in my choice of topic, but I only need him to relax into the conversation. This session's purpose is about recording his facial expressions. I want a base comparison for his comfort level and emotional cues. As we dive deeper into his psyche, I'll need to be able to read him as easily as he reads me.

His chains clatter against the hardwood floor as he eases into the chair. “I worked with my hands,” he states simply.

I have to restrain myself from asking him to elaborate on that point.

His lips quirk into a knowing grin. Grayson doesn't smile; he leers. I'm sure in the outside world where his charm is a weapon, his smile can melt the panties right off a woman. I've seen a dimple pop along his cheek on the occasions I catch him off guard, and I can imagine what a full, hundred-watt smile from Grayson looks like. I believe panty-melting is the term most women use.

His eyes travel over my body again and, this time, I feel their intrusion. I meticulously selected a tight pencil skirt that accentuates my curves. My blouse is unbuttoned down to the swell of my breasts. I stood at the door to my closet for a long time, thinking about which outfit would distract Grayson.

This is strictly a psychological tactic; to beguile him in the hopes that he'll reveal more during today's session. And yet, it doesn't stop the heat from gathering between my thighs as his gaze hungrily devours me.

He takes his time. When his gaze settles on my face, he says, “Welding.

Off the coast. Hyperbaric welding, or underwater welding, as it's more commonly known. I worked on ships and pipelines."

I know this much. All the easily attainable information I've imprinted into my mind. I wait for him to continue, but I'm getting impatient. Why does a man with an IQ of 152 choose to work with his hands?

He releases a heavy breath. "Yes, I liked it," he answers my unspoken question, and I allow a small smile to slip free.

I wait. Watch his tongue travel over his bottom lip. A grin hikes the corner of his mouth. "Look how tense you are," he says. "The need to ask your little questions tightening every muscle in your body. Especially those thighs." His gaze drops to my legs, and I slip behind my chair, removing my legs from his line of sight. "Go ahead. Ask."

"Why welding?"

"You mean, why didn't I go to college and pursue a career more befitting to my intelligence level?"

I lift my chin. "In fact, that's exactly what I mean. Didn't your parents encourage your education?" He's refused to discuss his parents with me so far. I won't stop pushing for the answers.

He rolls his shoulders. "My 'parents' encouraged me out as little as possible."

I crane an eyebrow, anticipating more on the subject, but he looks away. "The ocean is quiet," he says instead. "When you're down there, not even your thoughts are loud. It all just fades into the background of this tranquil, marine scenery."

I glance at the saltwater tank on impulse.

"I think you crave the same thing," he says, drawing my attention to him.

I don't confirm or deny his claim.

"Aren't you going to ask, doctor?"

I shake my head slowly. "This isn't about me. I'm not interested in what my thoughts are on the matter, only yours."

“But aren’t you dying to know what I think you crave?”

Yes. The answer burns through me, scorching the back of my throat as I hold it there.

He hikes his pants up his thighs as he sits forward. “I bet you keep that fish tank in here because you crave that same moment of solitude.”

A light laugh escapes. “So you’re the doctor now?”

His expression opens, stealing my breath. “I’d love to ask you questions. I’d like that game a lot.”

If this is what will let his guard fall—even for a fraction of a second so I can capture it—then I’ll play. “All right, I accept.” I move into my chair and cross my legs at the ankle. “No, Grayson. I don’t crave solitude, because I take my alone time every day.” I raise my eyebrows challengingly.

“It’s not the same,” he counters. “Being lonely and solitude are two different things.”

I force my lungs to expand past the tightness. “Is that how you see me? Lonely?”

He shakes his head. “I’m the doctor today. I’m asking the questions. Are you lonely?”

I swipe my tongue over my teeth in an attempt to hide my reactive frown. “At times, yes. Everyone feels lonely every once in a while. That’s human nature.”

He becomes engrossed in the game, in his performance. “You think you handle it better than most, though. Don’t you? Why? Because you’re a psychologist?”

I bite back a laugh. “No, because I don’t like—” I stop myself short.

His head tilts. “You don’t like what? Relationships? Too complicated? Too intimate?”

“I don’t particularly like people,” I confess.

The corner of his mouth kicks up. “A psychologist that doesn’t like people. How do you manage that?”

I huff out a breath. “I’m interested in the study of people, not in what they can do or be in relation to me,” I clarify. “That’s the difference between the average self-indulgent person and one who’s self-aware. As a psychologist who’s had the benefit of years of education into the mind, I understand people on a level that most don’t. As a whole, people are selfish and tiresome. I simply prefer to analyze them rather than pursue an intimate relationship.”

He laces his hands together on his lap, his gaze hard on me. “That’s either the most truthful response, or the most evasive. Which, either way, reveals your fear.”

A cold splash against the back of my neck freezes all movement. “My fear. Are you going to diagnose me, Dr. Sullivan?”

He sits back, breaking eye contact. “Haven’t you already diagnosed yourself by now?”

“That’s a logical assumption.” And a wrong one. I’ve never analyzed myself. Not even in college, when every psych student was dissecting their own brain. Back then, I had a theory that before one is able to diagnose another, one has to first exercise their mental demons.

A very difficult task. I soon realized it was easier to co-exist with my demons rather than expel them. Once I accepted that, it was easy enough to move ahead, to succeed even. And I succeeded. Right to the top of my class.

“A logical assumption,” Grayson repeats. “Is it a logical assumption, then, that you’re a pathological liar?”

He wants to bait me. Get a reaction. I straighten my back, trying to ignore the pain in my lumbar. Grayson’s eyebrows draw together. Not enough to denote concern, but just slightly to reveal he notices my discomfort.

“Do you feel I’ve lied to you?” I ask.

“No,” he says. “I don’t think you lie to your patients. I think you lie to yourself. Especially about your fears.”

I keep my tone low and unemotional. “That’s a severe assessment. Even

so, we all lie to ourselves to some extent. It's the way our mind protects us. If we realized just how insignificant we are, well—" I laugh "—then we might lose the will to live."

"Lose the will to live. That's interesting." He inches closer, staring at me as if he's puzzling me out. He likes puzzles.

I press back farther into the chair. Touch my forehead, willing the sudden ache away. "Have you given much thought to the outcome of the trial?" I hedge.

"What are you trying to protect yourself from?"

"What?"

"You said lying to yourself is a defense mechanism. I want to know what you're trying so hard to avoid. What do you need protection from?"

I grasp the arms of my chair and pull myself up to stand. "I'm not playing your head games, Grayson. Indulgent time is over."

"Who hurt you?" He rises from his seat so quickly, I react, retreating as his chains snap taut.

My gaze goes to my desk, to where the hidden panic button is positioned beneath its edge. Grayson tracks my line of sight, then he looks at me. "Go ahead. Press it," he dares.

I lift my chin, controlling my breathing. "If I do, then this will be our last session."

Dejection fills his eyes before he's able to mask his expression. I remind myself that it's not true emotion; he's a manipulator.

He proves this when he steps back and rubs his neck. "I would miss our time together, Dr. Noble. You are helping me."

Want to know when you're being lied to? Look for the manipulator's tell: a tug of the ear, a touch of the hair. Rubbing the neck. Only with Grayson, I'm undecided if he's lying about my helping him or whether he'll miss us—miss *me*.

"You want me to believe that you didn't just do that on purpose?"

He attempts a confused countenance, but he can't hold it for long. His smile stretches wide, that dimple carving his cheek. My legs quiver under his spell. "Maybe I want you to question which part of all this is true."

"Mission accomplished. If you purposely set out to manipulate these sessions, then I have to believe you wish to die. I ask you again, is this a game? Your last hurrah before your execution? Are you intentionally wasting my time because yours is up?"

His hands curl into fists. His physical restraint rattles the chains, his tensed muscles evident beneath his jumpsuit. I feel a tremor of anger rolling off him. It's the first real reaction I've witnessed; a true emotion.

I threaten him.

"You are not a game," he says through clenched teeth.

I suck in a fortifying breath. "I have deception training. You may be skilled in the art of deceit, but I'm skilled in detecting it, Grayson. I want the truth."

"Lying to you wouldn't benefit me. I want you to experience the truth."

The way he says this...the phrasing—*experience* the truth, rather than simply wanting me to know it—it's deliberate. My skin tingles.

"Did you enjoy making your victims suffer? Did you enjoy their torture, their deaths?" My words are just as selective. I need to understand if he's a sadist or if it's a facade. With his defenses lowered, I'll get a clear read.

"I did," he admits. "I enjoyed it. Not one bit of guilt."

I free a tense breath. "You can't feel guilt or regret if you derive pleasure from others' suffering and pain. So is it pleasurable? Are you aroused when your victims suffer? Do you achieve sexual gratification and release?"

His expression morphs into one of pure ecstasy as his eyes glaze over, like he's recalling his memories. And when he finds me past the haze, those vivid blue eyes zeroing in on me, I feel it in my core—his intensity a pulsing ache that forces my thighs together. "It's unfair that you know my secrets," he says, "and I don't have any of yours."

“Is that an admission?” I force the subject.

He nods once, a confirmation. “I was born this way. I’ve spent years trying to figure out the *why*. Then I got bored, and then I was tired. What matters now is how I choose to channel my...sadistic nature. If that’s what you want to label it.”

I lift my head, jaw set. “I do label it as that. You’re also delusional if you believe you’re channeling your sadism for the better. That you’re a hero, using your disorder to punish the guilty. That’s not how it works, Grayson. You do not get to be the judge, jury, and executioner.”

“And yet I am,” he says, sinking down into the chair. “It’s just a simple choice to accept who we are. You can relate. You channel your sickness through your patients.”

An arctic splash of fear snatches the air from my lungs.

“It’s why I’m here,” he continues. “Why you chose me over the drooler in the waiting room. You made a choice. One that benefits you. Just admit it. Admit that you were born as free as me so we can move past this meaninglessness and find out what we’re really capable of.”

I step back, putting more distance between us so I can take a breath not laced with his scent. “What do you want?” A simple question, but the answer will determine everything.

His steely gaze latches on to me. “I want to live. And I want you.”

Time suspends. It’s the honesty I read in his eyes that keeps me locked in this torturous moment. I’m aware that I’m becoming a part of his disorder; I’m the only outside source he has to form a connection—but I refuse to shut it down. I can use it. Ethical? No. Not at all. But there’s no one else like Grayson. I won’t get this opportunity again.

I toss my hair, clearing my vision of my bangs, and pull my glasses off. “In your circumstance, you can only have one pursuit. Since you value choices so much, I suggest you choose wisely.” I break the connection further by turning toward the writing desk and grabbing my notebook.

“Symphorophilia. Do you know this term?”

“Paraphilia is sexual deviation.” He smirks, his stare expectant. “I did my homework before our first meeting. Labeling me a deviant is nothing new.”

I cock an eyebrow. “But your particular deviation is,” I counter. “There’s no empirical research on the topic of symphorophilia.” Which is partly why I won’t stop the sessions. A documentation on a confirmed subject would be a first of its kind, and the only research to feature a serial killer. My other reasons are my own personal motivation.

“I can feel your excitement,” Grayson says, smile stretching. “Or is that arousal?” He sniffs the air, making me flush.

I lick my lips and flip my notebook open. “The broad definition is simple: you experience sexual gratification from staging disasters. That is too simple, however. Your particular psychopathy is sadistic symphorophilia. We’re going to delve deeper, discover why you turned to psychodrama theatrics instead of setting fires or staging traffic wrecks. And your victimology... Your victim selection process is key.”

Most psychopaths are relieved when they finally have an explanation, some measure of understanding as to why they are the way they are, even if they revolt against reform.

Not Grayson. The downturned edges of his mouth and drawn eyebrows denote his dissatisfaction.

“You don’t agree with my diagnosis?”

His even breaths are audible in the quiet space between us. “Every lock has a key.”

I frown. “It was figurative.”

His mouth presses into a firm line. Giving nothing away. I decide that’s acceptance enough, and end the session by crossing the room and opening the door to prompt the officer.

I hover by the hallway as Grayson is unshackled from the floor restraint and secured to be transferred back to Cotsworth. It’s a tedious and loud

process that grates my nerves every time the chains clatter and locks click.

When he's ready, the corrections officer escorts him forward to meet the other armed officers in the waiting room. As Grayson passes, his hand grazes mine. Just a light brush that could be perceived as an accident, but the directness of the touch, the point of contact, heats my skin. The stroke of his finger along the side of my palm is powerful enough to seize all my senses.

It was no accident.

I shut the door and cup my hand over the spot he touched.

LOCKDOWN

GRAYSON

P rison cell doors don't clang shut like in the movies. Upgraded facilities like Cotsworth use a thick pane of Plexiglas over the single barred door to keep level three inmates like me from having any outside contact.

I'm ordered to stand inside my white cell and face the cot. With my back to the officers, one of them unshackles my cuffs, then the cell door slides into place with a *beep* and hollow *click*. Once the door is locked and I'm sealed inside, I turn around.

Cotsworth did away with solitary confinement. It's now referred to as enhanced security confinement. I've had this six-by-eight room all to myself for the past year. My space is sparsely decorated with the only things I hold of value in this life.

I don't need many possessions. Too much tends to clutter a life, detract from what's essentially important.

Puzzle boxes are stacked on the one mounted plastic table. The most recent one completed, a scenic view of the Maine coastline. Sent to me by one of my fans. I have a number of those. Killer groupies is what the guards call them.

In the middle of my cell, a precast pull-up bar extends from the ceiling. Specially designed to prevent inmates from harming themselves. And along

the longest wall, two large posters: Kells Castle and a labyrinth. I got the labyrinth myself. The other was a gift from the groupies.

Lights blink out, and the dim overhead track illuminates the cell in an eerier orange glow. Downtime for an hour before the pitch-black. I pull off my jumpsuit, toss it in the corner, and push up my thermal sleeves. I lie back on my cot and stare at the swirls of orange along the ceiling.

Prison is all about schedule and order. Most inmates come from a place of chaos, making prison time a painful punishment. Strict rules don't affect me the same way; I grew up being told when to eat, when to sleep, when to shit. Being here is like being back home, and I'm biding my time just like I did there.

Nothing stays the same.

Change is the one constant you can depend on.

You either adapt or you don't. That choice is what sets inmates apart. Those who wait, and those who rebel. A smart man once told me the wait for something to happen can drive a sane man mad. And this place is full of madness.

Since I don't have to worry about going crazy, I'm waiting.

The guard passes my cell on his round, giving me thirty minutes to myself.

I spring off the cot. The labyrinth poster is easily removed to reveal the true treasure beneath.

The collection of images and articles I've amassed over the past nine months are arranged in a spiral collage on the wall, starting from when I first began my research, to her most recent trial. The newspaper clipping of her attack on the courthouse steps. The first day we met, and my confirmation that London needs me.

I run my finger along London's cheek, the image so lifelike I can recall the feel of her soft, warm skin. The flesh of her palm marred by a scar she tries to conceal, and the ink that peeks through at times to taunt me with its

secrets.

The outer ring goes back farther, sparse information sourced from the deepest waters of the Web. A girl with dyed blond hair. A decorated officer of the law. And the wreck that changed the outcome of the girl's life.

I pluck the most recent picture of London with her hair down from the wall and bring it closer, inspecting every gold fleck I can discern in her eyes. Before the blackness takes the meager light, I paste the image in the middle of my collage and back up a few paces until I'm under the pull-up bar.

I'm a man obsessed. I knew she would test me. When she first demanded an interview, I questioned her intent, her reasoning, as to why she wanted it so badly. The other bottom feeders gave up easily, but not her—she persisted. I didn't consider her endeavor desperate at the time, but it still made me curious. The more I looked into her, the more I saw her franticness, and then I scented it on her in her office.

I can smell her now, that sweet scent of lilacs mixed with her arousal.

Anyone that desperate for answers has demons to feed.

And oh, her demons are alive and kicking in our sessions. It's almost cruel to continue provoking her, but she needs to be broken from her trained thought pattern in order to accept the truth.

If I'm obsessed, then she's infatuated—an explosive combination.

I lower my boxers and kick them aside, then grab the bar above. I pull my body up, curling my arms until my chin taps the bar. I repeat my reps three at a time: up, up, up and hold. I stare at London, her bottomless brown eyes, curvy hourglass figure that she can't censor with her expensive suits. I see her crossing her legs right in front of me, applying pressure to the ache that pulses between those soft, inviting thighs.

With each chin-up, my dick gets harder. The tension in my muscles travels down my body until it reaches the tip of my cock, begging for release. A fiery burn sears every sinew beneath my flesh as I speed the reps. Adrenaline races through my bloodstream, quickening my pulse. I can almost

hear her...taste her...envisioning her struggling against the binds as her frantic voice calls my name...

A deep groan rumbles out as I complete another rep. I hold my body up, chin pressed hard against the cold bar as the release takes me. My cock throbs, my stomach flexed taut, as I thrust my hips forward to drive the freeing sensation down to my calves. The sound of my ejaculate hitting the cement mixes with my heavy breaths, heightening the orgasm, before I let go.

I drop to my knees, palms flat against the cool floor. She's already fading from my mind as I heave in breaths. I reach behind my head and pull my shirt off to cover my mess, eyes squeezed tight, then settle back onto my heels. I claw at my head.

Every scar on my body is aflame.

My flesh demands punishment, but I grasp onto the lingering wisps of London's face until the compulsion eases. Lightheaded and tingling, I savor this feeling before it's torn away. With her, I don't crave the abuse. I've enforced it for so long, it's damn near impossible to stop—but she's my answer. She's my salvation.

My blood runs hot. The frigid air touches my slick skin like a cruel caress, and I welcome it. I run my hands over the raised scars along my chest, feeling each life I witnessed being taken. Every one of them is carved into me, a brand that cements my fate, a penance I inflicted on myself for the pleasure I experienced during their suffering.

I'm not alone.

That initial realization was the first broken link in my chains.

I won't accept anything less than her; she's my other half.

I replace the poster, not bothering to dress. Before the light is gone, I bring her picture to the cot with me. I trace her features, memorizing them all over again.

The cell goes dark, and I slip the image under my pillow. I run my hands over my forearms, tracking ink that cannot completely disguise the scars. My

reminder that secrets can't stay buried.

London wants answers, I can give them to her. The only question is how far she's willing to go to get them.

ENTANGLEMENT

LONDON

Breaking glass. Twisting metal. Grinding against asphalt. The smell of leaking gas.

I relax my eyelids, trying not to force the memory. “It’s blackness after that,” I say, lacing my fingers together on my lap. “Can I open my eyes now?”

I hear Sadie draw in a deep breath. “Let’s try a little longer. Practice your breathing technique. Let the blackness settle over you.”

With a resigned nod, I fill my lungs. Hold my breath for five seconds, then expel the breath. I do this three times. Each intake sends a sharp pain into my lower back. My hands clench into fists as I release another lungful, freeing a curse.

I open my eyes. “The pain’s too much today.” I flex my fingers to work out the stress. “I’m sorry you came all this way.”

She tilts her head. “I’m not. No matter if we resolve anything in this session or not, I still get to visit my friend.” Her smile is warm yet practiced. This doesn’t bother me, because it doesn’t mean she feels the opposite of what she’s saying. Sadie isn’t able to experience feelings the way the average person does.

Back in college, we discovered early on that Sadie had sociopathic

tendencies, which resulted from a kidnapping she suffered as a young adult. She was tortured for days, and then she witnessed her abductor's death during her rescue. She's been able to channel this incident into a passionate career as a criminal behavioral analyst.

Only those closest to her know that her practiced mannerisms are a performance to fit in with society. It's also why I requested she be here today, to help me work through some residual complications from my own past that I was never able to confront. Or rather, refused to confront. Sadie's candor and insight might be uncomfortable for me, but she may also give me the push I need.

"You've gotten really good at that emotions thing," I say, smiling. "But you don't need the farce with me. You know this."

Her features relax into their natural state. "I do it so often now, I don't realize it. A reflex. Like I'm a real human being or something." She laughs.

I nearly reach out to her, but decide to pull my string from my pocket instead. Sadie is one of the only people I trust enough to let my guard down. "You're as real as they come."

Her expression shifts, more serious as she seizes a change in topic. "Your most recent patient," she says, "tell me about him."

I cock an eyebrow. "Nice pivot." She shrugs, unapologetic. "Well, since I can't discuss our sessions...what do you want to know?" I tighten the string around my finger.

"How you're handling it, and why suddenly after all these years you're thinking about the surgery."

"Cause and effect." I unwind the string. "It's that simple, isn't it?"

"It is."

I bury my thread in my pocket and cup my hands together, concealing the scar along my palm that's started to throb. "I'm experiencing countertransference," I admit.

Sadie doesn't react. Countertransference is a normal occurrence in our

field. “So this is the real reason for why I’m here.”

“I am considering the surgery...but I also need to know if I should discontinue this particular patient’s sessions.”

Sadie sits forward, and I notice for the first time that she’s wearing a V-neck, allowing me a glimpse of the scar along her collarbone. Something she’s hidden since the day we met. “Are you irritated during the sessions?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Is your back pain distracting? Could the pain be the outside source for projected emotions on your patient? Are you agitated? Anxious?”

Again, I shake my head. “I wish it was that simple. I’ve dealt with that before.” I pause, mentally arranging the words before I’m able to voice them. “I’m attracted to him.” But it’s more than that...

There’s no judgment in Sadie’s green eyes. “Is it purely physical?”

I lick my lips. “It’s physical...and emotional, in part. Grayson is intelligent. Self-aware. Intense.” I inhale deeply. “He might be the first patient I actually believe I can help rehabilitate.”

“And you want that for him.”

“Of course.” Thoughts on our last session spring up. “He’s a manipulator. And I know the danger with manipulators, but I witnessed a breakthrough during our last meeting. I just need to work through what I’m experiencing, because I’m afraid without me he’ll be sentenced to death.”

Sadie leans back. She’s seated in my chair. I’m the patient today. “You said afraid. Fear is a strong emotion. What else are you afraid of?”

I give my head a quick shake, a mock laugh held at the base of my throat. I know these tactics, I know the process, and yet it doesn’t make being in the hot seat any easier. “You want to know if there’s any correlation between my thoughts of surgery and my patient being on death row?”

She ticks her head to the side in a half shrug. “Is there?”

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth. “I don’t think there is. The reasons for why I’ve put the surgery off have nothing to do with how I’m

reacting to my patient.”

“London, we’ve never fully addressed your survivor’s guilt,” she says. “Are you taking any steps to finally confront it?”

“I’m considering the surgery, aren’t I?” I glance at the fish tank. “Sorry. I’m snappy today.”

“No, you’re right. It is a major step to finally confront the fact that you are not responsible for your father’s death.”

Like a slap to the face, her words smack hard and fast. My reflexive response is just as sharp. “I have never admitted that I blame myself—”

“You’ve refused surgery that will correct your L-five and L-three injuries since the accident,” she presses. “You live with the pain daily because you were driving the car that night. It doesn’t take a professional to see the guilt you suffer, that you force yourself to suffer, London. And now that a patient, who you believe can make progress for the better, is about to be sentenced to death, you want to suffer that guilt, also. You’re projecting your shame onto a patient who—if you don’t save—you will bear the guilt for his death. Do you want to risk your career because you refuse to deal with this guilt? Have you ever asked yourself why you feel this need to seek mercy for murderers in the first place?”

Brutal honesty. The reason why I allowed Sadie into my mind. I wipe the perspiration from my forehead. When I look at my hand, I glimpse the inked key beneath the layer of makeup. My temples pound in sync to my increasing heartbeat.

“I need a break.” I stand and head toward the mini-fridge to grab a bottle of water. I take a long pull before I bring a bottle back for Sadie.

She accepts and sets the water on the floor. “Too deep for a reentry session?”

I huff a laugh. Then more serious, I look into her supportive gaze. “I killed my father.”

I’ve never said those words out loud.

Sadie doesn't flinch. "The car wreck killed your father."

I nod, even though I know better. "I identify with him," I say. That I'm referring to Grayson is understood. "My patient is the Angel of Maine. He kills ruthlessly. Without mercy, though his moniker suggests otherwise. And there's not a bone in my body that can find fault with his logic. All his victims were deserving of punishment. And I identify with him, because I'm glad they're dead."

Silence falls between us, the quiet growing too loud until I can't stand staring at the floor any longer. I glance up. Sadie's expression still harbors no hint of judgment, and somehow, that makes this worse.

"I know." I clear my bangs from my vision. "I need to stop the sessions with him."

"No," she says, shocking me. "You need to delve deeper, trusting yourself to explore both transference and countertransference for you and your patient."

My brow furrows. "Psychoanalysis? I thought you agreed long ago I was not good with Freudian methods."

"You're terrible with them." Her smile is sincere. "But it would be a shame to allow a challenge to deter you from a great discovery just because of a little fear."

"Challenge myself," I repeat, hearing the fear distinctly in my voice. "Is that doctor's orders?"

Her dark eyebrows raise. "In fact, it is. You don't need me to tell you what to do, or give you permission. If your patient is sentenced to death, you have to accept it, and accept that it is not a reflection on you or your life. The danger isn't whether or not you're developing personal feelings for your patient. That can be remedied. A few sessions together and we'll resolve them and you'll go on with your career."

I hang on to her last words, waiting for the other shoe to drop. There's always a downside.

She leans in close. “The danger is in discovering the *why*. There are certain doors our minds close to protect us. Whether it’s blacked out memories or denial—” her gaze doesn’t waver “—we’ve chained those doors closed for a reason. Once you break the locks, there’s no going back. You may have to accept a new reality for yourself, and that can be dangerous.”

I knew in asking Sadie here I wouldn’t be able to continue to hide the truth. She’s mastered her abilities. “I’m scared that I’ve already begun the process.”

She reaches across to take my hand, and I let her. It’s the kind of comfort you offer someone when they’ve lost a loved one—the pure desolation of one’s soul. Although Sadie is here with me, I’m embarking on this journey alone.

I’m not afraid of what lies beyond the blackness. I know what’s there lurking, waiting. Threatening. I’m afraid that once I set the truth free, I’ll lose the last of my humanity.

“Tell me what happened before the wreck. Let me be your anchor.” Sadie’s hand closes over mine, holding on to me tighter.

Her question lashes out like a whip, cracking the seams of time, and the past bleeds into the present. First, a hazy red at the corners, then the blood covers my memories.

So much blood.

If Sadie knew the truth—if she knew the whole story—then her advice to pursue a deeper connection with my disturbed patient may be different. Beneath my professional obligations, a voice whispers from the dark recesses of my mind. A warning. To protect myself, I have to escape Grayson.

He’s a danger.

I swallow hard. Once I begin, I don’t stop until I have no breath left to tell another soul. “He wore a key around his neck...”

GRAVITY

LONDON

There are laws which can be broken, and then there are laws we must obey. How does one person decide the fate of another human being based on these laws?

With that question in mind, a sort of internal countdown has begun within me, a ticking hand on Grayson's trial clock. With less than a month to form my analysis, the problem of rules presents itself:

Which rules do we obey? Those of man, or those of the universe?

On a long enough timeline, the rules of man change, and they change quite often. What was once considered a sin punishable by death is now a simple social media update, an expression of sexual preference, politics, religious belief. A hundred years from now, sin in its current state might be a laughable pastime, the way we look back on our ancestors who once believed the world was flat. Or the way we resent the ignorance of the Salem Witch Trials.

Our justice system and our beliefs are a direct reflection of our politics, based on what we're willing to accept—what society as a whole *can* accept. But then there are rules to which we can't argue, like those governing our existence.

There's a natural phenomenon, a force, that attracts anything with mass

toward each other. The gravitational pull we take for granted every day is a law obeyed without question.

Gravity.

Two objects colliding together, unable to stop the crash from happening, because the rule is unbreakable.

Relatively, Grayson's actions, his sins, have created a black hole in the justice system. He's careening toward his fate at supersonic speed, and there's no outside force strong enough to stop it.

Not even me.

"London?"

Lacy's concerned voice jars me out of my thoughts, and I look up from my phone at my receptionist.

"Warden Marks is already en route from the facility," she says, sounding as tired as I feel. She lowers the desk phone to the cradle. "I'm sorry."

I drop my cell into my purse with a sigh. "You'll have to tell him in person, then. You can handle him." I give her a tight smile. "Just relay there's an emergency with a patient that I have to attend to."

I look away from her doubtful expression. I'm not the avoiding type. In spite of my breakthrough with Sadie, I feel continuing Grayson's sessions is the wrong course of action.

Sadie wants me to delve deeper. I don't want to drown.

And I'm drowning in him.

Until recently, I've been able to bury my past without any fear of it creeping into my professional life, and I know Grayson is the catalyst for why that's happening now. I don't want to confront my fears; I want them to go back to their dark corner and rot.

I can complete his analysis for trial by reviewing our recorded sessions. I'll prepare my conclusion, then I'll move on from this case and patient, locking it all away in that same dark corner of my mind where it belongs.

Once I've made a decision, I'm firm in my resolve.

“Is that all?” I ask her, turning to leave. I need to be out of here before they arrive.

She holds a finger up. “One more thing. A Detective Foster has left numerous messages. Do you want to return his call?”

I don’t recognize the name. “No. At least not now. If he calls again, tell him to contact me through email.” I receive many solicitations from investigators and law officials, and I simply can’t respond to them all.

“Will do,” Lacy says. “Try to enjoy your day off, London.”

“Thanks. I’ll be in touch.” I square my shoulders as I head toward the elevator, determination and conviction gaining momentum with each sure step in my new direction. I hit the Down button, a relieved feeling settling over me as the silver doors slide open.

My eyes meet his.

It’s only a second, a single lapse in time, but the moment our gaze connects, all resolve and surety slithers away like the spineless invertebrate I’ve become. I’m fleeing. I’m running. Grayson’s knowing blue eyes see right through me, calling me out.

Warden Marks is talking, but I hear nothing. My gaze is trapped by the man who refuses to let me go. As I become aware of my surroundings, I notice Grayson’s thermal is missing.

His arms are bare, displaying black and gray designs inking his skin. The tattoos are a shield. You have to look closer to see what’s beneath. The shiny scars the ink can’t completely conceal. I carry the same mask.

When gravity makes itself known, we’re powerless to stop the collision. Knowing you’re being drawn into a black hole does little to prevent the inevitable. Just like Grayson once said: we’re an inevitability.

“London, are you leaving?”

I blink, giving myself a few seconds to focus on the man to my left. I pivot to face Marks. “Not today.”

The confused draw of his eyebrows is his only response as I turn toward

my office. *Not today.* As if Grayson purposely intended to thwart my escape, he dropped the barrier to reel me back in.

I should heed the alarm going off in my head. But the simple truth is, I can't. He makes me reckless.

I disappear into my office bathroom while the corrections officers shackle Grayson in the middle of the therapy room. Standing at the sink, hands gripped to the pristine marble basin, I wait for the sounds of chains and locks to cease.

I give myself enough time to pull my guard into place, then I lift my chin as I enter the room and nod to the lingering officer. He exits. The hollow *click* of the office door latching closed tenses my back, the sound loud and final, as if I'm being sealed inside.

Foregoing the recorder, I walk to the edge of my desk and lean against the solid wood. A farther distance from him than when seated in my chair, and the strength I need to support my weight.

"No camera," Grayson comments.

He's not asking, but I can hear the question in his voice. I clear my throat. "When I conduct a psychoanalytical examination, I prefer not to record it. I find that when practicing free association, patients respond better when they're not being monitored as closely."

Grayson watches me intently, his gaze tracking my movements. He's waiting for my reaction to his exposed arms. I didn't give him enough of a response before, when I was too engrossed in my own emotional pull. I know he felt that connection, too.

I could wait for him to open up the discussion, to discover his reasoning as to why he chose today to reveal his scars to me, or I can start the session right in the middle of the deep end.

I'm drowning.

"Why the sudden shift in method?" he asks, forcing me to meet his cool gaze. "Was I not cooperating, doc?"

I wet my lips. Take a steadying breath. “Free association is just another tool we can use to uncover any repressed emotions or memories. Its purpose isn’t meant to treat, but rather to learn.”

His head tilts. “What’s left to learn? Unless this learning technique works both ways. There’s so much I’d love to learn about you, London. I want to learn how you feel beneath me. I want to learn how your hair feels tangled in my hand—”

“Stop.”

He does. He presses his shoulders against the chair, his arms on full display. I was wrong—and I’m rarely wrong—to think he hid his scars in shame. Grayson’s intelligence has always been my biggest obstacle. I was vain to believe I could simply outwit him. He’s offered me nothing of his past or himself.

He’s been the one gathering and collecting intel. On me.

That ends now.

“You’re going to learn about me during this session, also,” I say. “This method works both ways, between patient and psychologist.”

He sits forward. “We don’t need these evasive methods. Anything you want to know, just ask. I’ll tell you.”

“Fine.” I push off the desk and pull my seat up past the yellow line. “This takes trust, Grayson. Trust between patient and doctor, and I’m trusting you not to harm me with your actions or your words, and you can trust me not to do the same.”

He goes still, not a muscle twitch or facial tic to indicate that my proximity provokes him. But it’s in his stillness that I read his anxiety. Then there’s the slightest curl of his hand into a fist as he rests it on the chair.

“I can smell your body lotion,” he says. His eyes close as he inhales. “Lilacs.” A grin tips the corner of his mouth up. “I had one of my fans send me some fresh blooms to put in my cell.”

Ignoring the baiting comment, I remain calm. “You seem defensive

today.”

His smile drops. “That’s not a question.”

“We’re practicing free association. I’m able to voice my thoughts just as you are, without having to guard them.”

He glances at the camera again. “Are you worried about what you might reveal?”

I look down at my crossed ankles. “Actually, I am.” When I glance up, his demeanor is markedly different. More intense. More serious. As if he doesn’t feel the need to perform.

“We can start with a simple word association,” I begin. “I’ll say a word, and you’ll say the first thing that comes to mind. The point is not to take too long or to think about your response. Can I trust that you’ll do that?”

“You can trust that I’ll do anything you ask of me.”

I swallow forcefully, keeping my gaze fixed on him. Unaffected. “Let’s start simple. Animal.”

“Pig.”

“Salt.”

He peeks at the fish. “Tank.”

“Flowers.”

“Lilacs.”

“Finger.”

“String.”

“Back.”

“Pain.”

I pause. “You’re associating every word with me.”

He cranes an eyebrow. “Am I doing it wrong?”

“No. Not if it’s your natural response. Our goal is for you to transfer your emotions and desires onto me. It’s called transference. Unless you’re purposely selecting words to which you think make me uncomfortable...”

“You asked for honesty. Don’t doubt that I’m giving you anything less.”

I press my lips together. “Okay. Money.”

“Career.”

“Hunger.”

“Ravenous.”

I cross my legs, noting the way his gaze follows my action. “Wrong.”

“Right.”

“Death.”

“Penalty.”

“Love.”

“Sickness.”

“Woman.”

He pauses here. “You.”

“Sex.”

His nostrils flare. “Fuck.”

“Sin.”

“Salvation.”

“Happiness.”

He lunges forward. I don’t have time to react. I’m paralyzed, awaiting what happens next. He doesn’t touch me, but he’s close—close enough for me to smell his aftershave. “There’s no such thing,” he says. “Stop asking the questions of a psychologist and get your answers.”

I hold my place, not backing down. I’m trembling, but it’s not out of fear. Every molecule in my body is fighting to get closer.

Touch him.

I release the breath I’ve been holding, and Grayson’s sharp intake, as if he’s stealing it for himself, sparks a primal thrill within me.

“An answer for an answer,” I finally say.

This pulls a smile from him. “Okay.” He settles back into his chair without having touched me. I’m not sure if I’m relieved or disappointed. Both reactions are disconcerting.

I fold my hands together, gathering my bearings. “Where are you from?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Delaware.”

I arch an eyebrow.

His dimple makes an appearance. “Originally, Kells. Northern Ireland.”

“What brought you to the States?”

He shakes his head. “My turn. Where are you from?”

My shoulders deflate. He asks this like he already knows the answer. “Hollows, Mississippi.”

“That’s not a real place.”

“It’s as real as it gets,” I counter.

“Farming community?” he presses. “Or is it known for something... other.”

I dig my elbows into my thighs, grounding myself. “Tell me about the scars, Grayson.”

My question does what I want. His focus shifts from my past to his. “Which ones?”

On reflex, I glance at his arms.

His fingers trail over his inked forearm. He watches me, the way I follow his movement. “Some were a gift, and some were a punishment. My stepdad had a particular way of distinguishing both.”

This is the first time he’s made me aware of a stepparent. “Your stepfather was abusive, then.”

An amused smile lights his face. “You don’t like following your own rules.”

“Touché. Ask away.”

He bites down on his bottom lip as he thinks. My breathing becomes measured, too loud, too revealing. “The pain in your back. Tell me what happened.”

I flick my bangs from my forehead with a sharp head shake. Then I present the practiced answer I crafted years ago. “I was in a car wreck when I

was a teen. Fractured my back in several places. My lumbar suffered the most damage. I never fully recovered.”

Disappointment creases his eyes. “That’s not all.”

“That’s all, Grayson. That’s all there is.”

“Why do you cover up the tattoo on your hand? Tell me about it. Why you got it in the first—?”

“You’re out of line,” I interrupt. “My turn.”

“No. You didn’t give me an honest answer before. I want to know this.”

I suck in a quick breath. My agitation growing. “I got it when I was young—”

“Around the time of your accident?”

I hesitate. “Yes. And like any teen, I did so compulsively. I conceal it now out of professionalism.”

“Why not just get it removed, then?”

My heart beats erratically, the pulse at my temples firing a sharp web of pain through my head. I rub the back of my neck. “I don’t know why,” I say, having no other answer to offer him.

This seems to sate his curiosity for now. He doesn’t press.

“Are all your scars from your stepfather?” I ask. “What about your mother?”

“No. Not all of them.”

When I tap my fingers on the armrest, he sighs. It’s only fair that he divulge more if he expects more from me in return.

“My mother liked to watch. But we’re not talking about that. You’re not ready.”

“The very definition of my job is being prepared to talk you through this exact thing, Grayson.”

“But not today.” He touches an extensive scar along his forearm, a hard expression masking his face. “There are a number I’ve carved myself,” he confesses. “The pain I inflict on myself serves as punishment for when I

become aroused while watching their suffering.”

Their suffering. His victims. If there was ever any doubt as to whether or not my patient is a sadist, Grayson has just eliminated all uncertainty.

“You look...surprised.”

I open my mouth, but can’t summon the words to convey what I’m feeling. Revulsion. Fury. Sickened. These are acceptable responses, and yet I don’t feel any of them. Alarmed. Curious. Enthralled—the dark corner of my mind beckons me closer. I can feel the draw.

I touch my forehead, giving myself a moment to bury my head and disconnect from him. “Not surprised, just processing. I rarely encounter this level of candidness.” I look up at him. “And with no shame.”

The atmosphere thickens with his intense stare. “What am I supposed to feel ashamed of? I could be weak like Bundy or BTK, and inflict my sickness on the innocent. Instead, I’ve learned how to control my impulses and direct them toward the wicked. I’ve even learned how to manage my desires, choosing to self mutilate rather than losing myself in the liberation of taking from others. And let me tell you, Bundy and the lot of them suffered for that liberation. They feasted and then purged. Indulge and regret, over and over. Which is a far more vicious cycle than the one I’ve developed.”

I feel the force of his words, the lure reeling me in—and I’m powerless against it. I want more. I want to shut the blinds and block out the judgmental world and only exist in this one hour where shame doesn’t live.

When encountering the gravity of a black hole, a force so powerful not even light can escape its vortex, you don’t stand a chance against the darkness. Whatever light I’ve been able to muster in this dark world, he will surely devour if I continue on this collision course.

“So now, tell me,” he says, stretching his arms along the armrests, “how did you get your name? London is very unusual, especially for a small town in Mississippi.”

“I’m told my mother named me after...” I trail off. Smile. “She named

me after her favorite soap opera.”

His brow creases. “You’re *told*,” he repeats, stressing my blunder.

He doesn’t miss anything. Paying attention to every slip of the tongue and inflection. My turn to deflect. I glance at the clock.

“So we’re agreed,” he says, gaining my attention. “No discussion of mothers today, doc.”

I straighten my back. “That can be a topic for another day.” One that I won’t compound on, as I have no memory of mine. Just a few blurry pictures my father saved and her garden in the backyard. “Most of my patients spend years on that subject. We don’t have that much time.”

The mention of his dwindling time carves his features in hard angles. “What do we have time for, then?”

“Not much more today, I’m afraid.”

As I start to stand, he sits forward. “We’re a lot alike,” he says.

It’s time to end the session—it’s smart to stop it right now—but curiosity forces me to recline and stay. “How so?”

He glances at the camera. “We both like to record our sessions. I use it for reflection.”

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t compare the two, Grayson. It’s not the same.”

“But isn’t it? I’m curious. What do you use all those recordings for? Titillation?”

“We’re done.”

“Do you touch yourself while you watch them?”

I stand.

“Did you watch my videos?”

I push the frame of my glasses up, situating them. “Yes.”

“All of them?”

Shame squirms into our sacred space. Professionally speaking, one or two or even three recordings of Grayson’s torture sessions would’ve sufficed for

research into his diagnosis. But just like now, despite the warnings, the draw to experience...to *feel* this forbidden connection between us was too great.

“Yes,” I answer honestly. I’m a professional. And as a professional, I have every right to conduct extensive research into my patient.

But the dare in his eyes glints, a challenge to unmask those dark desires lurking beneath my surface. “Which one is your favorite?”

The rules of psychoanalysis are simple: there are no rules. In this safe haven, I can confess my excitement, my arousal at watching the woman be bound and racked until her limbs snapped. But I won’t admit that aloud. I refuse to give in to him.

“That’s our session for today,” I announce. I straighten my skirt as I start toward the hallway, forgetting my proximity to the inmate in my office.

Grayson hasn’t forgotten.

My march toward the other side of the room is thwarted as he grabs hold of my skirt. Every muscle in my body tenses, the hairs on my skin stand, all senses captured by him and his clutch on my skirt.

In an instant, I realize he purposely riled me for this exact outcome.

The rattling of chains heightens my anxiety, then I’m yanked backward. Forced to stand before him, I stare down at where he grips the hem of my skirt, bunching the fabric in a tight fist.

“Release me,” I demand, somehow controlling the tremor in my voice.

His gaze roves deliberately up my body to meet my eyes. “You want to touch my scars.”

The heat of his skin touches my bare thigh, his rough knuckles an abrasive and enticing friction. I swallow. “That would be inappropriate.”

“But you still want to.” He releases the fabric one finger at a time, until I’m free of him. But I’m not. The dare in his eyes still holds me captive. “I want you to.”

We should be like two similar poles of a magnet; we should repel each other. But our magnetic fields attract, snapping together forcefully.

As if he fears I'm a creature to be spooked, he gently rests his hands on my hips, and a shiver rocks me. "But if you do, I get to touch you," he challenges.

This is more than prohibited. It's dangerous.

I breathe in deeply, inhaling his masculine scent, torturing myself for what I'm about to do. In spite of my heart pounding in clear warning, I place my hand atop his. I let my palm travel over his rough fingers to his wrist, and on to his arm. Where the beveled scars wrap his flesh. Like wiry bands inserted beneath his skin, the scar tissue is smooth and cruel. Some more recent than others, and the thought of him inflicting the wounds while enraptured in erotic deviancy...

My breath catches as his fingers make contact with my inner thigh.

I shut my eyes against the onslaught of emotions—the illicit and erotic way he makes me feel as his coarse palm grazes up my thigh, my skirt bunching against his wrist.

"Look at me."

The demand races through my blood, scorching my veins. I open my eyes on impulse.

Grayson's electric blue gaze holds me imprisoned while his hand brands my skin. He inches upward, the abrasive pads of his fingers exploring, mapping me, as he gauges my response.

A whimper escapes, and I have to bite my lip to hold back another. A muscle jumps along his jaw, then he's roving higher, torturously slow. I tremble under his intimate touch. The stronger his touch becomes, the more I crave to dig my nails into his flesh. My fingers form claws on his arms.

As if he knows what I'm thinking, he licks his lips and says, "Do it."

The dare slithers over my body, the pulsing heat between my thighs inviting him to touch me, and as I surrender, his fingers skim the seam of my panties. A shock of awareness snatches my breath and I step back, breaking the connection.

I don't stop walking until I'm safely behind the yellow line. Grayson's heated stare tracks me, his chest moving up and down with his uneven breaths. His features strained as if he's feeling the same suffocating pain that burns my lungs. The room pulsates with each of his breaths, in harmony with the pounding of my heart.

I'm losing my mind.

Flustered, I turn my back to him and run my hands over my skirt as I rush to the office. Within minutes, the officers have Grayson shackled and transported. He didn't speak, didn't say a word. Giving no hint to the storm brewing between us.

I stand in the center of my office, feeling the weight of what transpired heavy and pressing. The wood floor shifts beneath my feet. Gravity only needs one slight push to send me spiraling down.

PUZZLE

GRAYSON

The buzz signals the cell door closing. I stand with my hands linked behind my back until the guards' footsteps retreat down the hall. Moving toward my cot, I inhale deeply, taking in the lingering scent of lilac. The flowers dried up. Dead petals frame my puzzles.

I'm patient, but even I have my breaking point.

A year in prison was easier than the torturous seconds spent touching her.

It's not time.

The lights dim, giving me my regulated privacy. I lift my tongue and dig out the object I lodged there in London's therapy room. Only two inches in size, the metal catch of her belt buckle wasn't easy to obtain, but it was an enjoyable challenge.

I smile as I wedge the silver prong beneath a flap of cardboard on my puzzle box. I'm running out of hiding places.

Soon.

I scrape aside puzzle pieces on the table and unfold the ancient article, smooth out the creases. I've read it many times already, but each time I do, I get another piece. Just like piecing together my puzzles, London has left little details, tiny clues, for me to uncover and fit together.

Hollows, Mississippi doesn't exist. But Sullivan's Hollow does, although

it's not printed on any proper map. I don't blame her or any of the residents within Mize for wanting to forget the past. New names and new histories. That's all that's needed to create a different identity.

How much does she remember? I wonder if she's completely rewritten it, her memories some distant nightmare she dreamed long ago.

Nine young women from the ages of sixteen to nineteen went missing over the course of twelve years. That might not seem like a lot, but to a small population like Mize, it's a terrifying thing. Most were chalked up to runaways, the article claims. The teens known to be promiscuous. And in a small town, judgment outweighs truth. It's easier to swallow. The article is full of suspicion and outdated thinking. They didn't even have a detective on the case.

But there's one significant piece that's niggled me for months. Not what's in the article, not what's mentioned...but what's omitted.

The date the disappearances suddenly stopped.

I tuck the article beneath my most recent puzzle. It's only half completed, but it's already revealing so much of the picture. I scrape a jagged piece off the table and twirl it around my fingers, envisioning the golden flecks in her eyes.

She's been living two lives for far too long. My objective is to tease them apart. Like the puzzle I stare at now, the woman I need hides in the details. She's buried beneath the lies.

Buried. I like that. And so I uncover the three-dimensional model on the table. I've been adding layers for months. It's a poor substitution for my welding tools and model kits at the house, but I almost appreciate the challenge to create out of practically nothing. Layered paper and formed cardboard. A makeshift trap construction that has yet to be realized.

Like a child playing with a dollhouse, the 3D model allows me to feed my obsession. I tear a corner from one of my puzzle boxes and fold the cardboard into a rectangle. It's not ideal, but the crude box will do. I slip the little box

onto the model with a smile.

It's only a matter of time until all the pieces align, and the picture is complete.

I recover the model and slide it under the table, then return to the jigsaw puzzle. A portrait of London I skillfully cut to seamlessly align on top of the puzzle. The piece finds its home, easily sliding into place to reveal those eyes that captivate me. I graze my knuckles over London's features, aroused by the tantalizing feel of the beveled edges of the linked puzzle pieces.

She's almost complete.

She's almost mine.

The lights go out, leaving me in my dark void to dream of her until morning.

FLIGHT

LONDON

Memories are deceptive.

The way the mind works when recalling the past distorts our reality. Our minds shape and mold a memory every time we look at it, changing subtle details, altering facts. No two people remember past events the same, whether they were both present at the moment or not.

Most people don't know this, and it can be a frightening realization when they discover the truth.

A married couple continuously arguing the same points, night after night, both adamantly swearing the other is wrong, that they are mistaken.

They're both right. Their memories are skewed to perceive the world around them in a way that structures and defines who they are and what they believe.

I wrote a paper on this once, back in my first year. Ripe right out of college, I was set on tackling the origins of a murderer's mind. Was it the nurture—the upbringing and experiences—that created a murderer, or was it how his mind perceived those first impressionable, crucial years that fashioned the killer.

Most would argue that they're one and the same. There's no difference between how we recall our past and our actual past—that the outcome, either

way, creates a monster.

This is chiefly true. It's difficult to separate any fact from fiction. So why bother debating theories and nitpicking the particulars?

I was young, and in my youth I bent to the psychology of the masses. I never again thought of my thesis, or how it may pertain to my patients. It was irrelevant for my area of study as I furthered my career with serial killers and their rehabilitation.

And in order to move forward, it was imperative that I stop recalling my own memories of the past. How many times had I gone over the details? How many times had my mind warped those events? Were my memories even real anymore, or just fragments of the truth tangled with my nightmares? Like an old cassette tape being recorded over and over, my memories now play back a garbled, distorted song.

I stuff my hands into my coat pockets and follow the winding trail through the lush garden of the aviary. The birds sing along to the tune in my head, their high-pitched shrieks punctuating the peaks of my anxiety.

I hoped the stroll through one of my favorite places would calm my worries, as I've used this escape a lot over the years to quiet my thoughts. But swooping birds overhead grow louder, as if they're aware of my secret, sharing it with one another in their twitter code.

I huff a soundless laugh at my paranoia. The birds don't care about me or what I've done. *I'm losing my mind.*

A chill touches my skin, and I release the clip, letting my hair drop and giving my tresses a shake to cover my neck. I've recalled the memory of my last session with Grayson too many times now, analyzing it, dissecting it, recollecting the details. The sensations and emotions he evoked. The yearning... And I'm scared that every time I remember, I'm altering what actually occurred.

Our minds are so powerful, constructing connections and feelings to a single occurrence, turning something considerably insignificant into a

meaningful moment. Full of passion and elation. When in truth, any colleague looking in would simply derive that countertransference is inhibiting my ability to assert my role as doctor over my patient.

I gave in to Grayson's wants, and you can never give your patient everything they want—regardless if those desires reflect your own. No, scratch that. *Especially* when their desires reflect your own.

It's more than dangerous; it's unethical.

But the feel of his rough hands on my skin... I shut my eyes, just for a second, allowing the memory to claim me once more before I bury it. I inhale a deep breath full of the cleansing power of the garden, and the evening sky darkens, thunder clouds looming.

The sound of birds has vanished. The sudden stillness of the aviary consumes my senses, and I notice that I'm not alone.

I turn around. "Are you following me, detective...?"

Wearing a black trench coat over a cheap suit, the slightly overweight man is easy to identify as a cop. Being raised by the town sheriff, I have experience in this. His smirk confirms my theory. "Foster. Detective Foster," he says. "I was just enjoying the scenery. Figured we could talk once we were alone."

I vaguely recall Lacy mentioning a detective by that name. I wrap my arms around my middle and glance behind him. The aviary will be closing soon. I start toward the exit. "You can say whatever you need to at my office. During business hours."

"I've tried, Dr. Noble. You're a difficult woman to get in touch with." As I try to pass, he thrusts a manila folder toward me. "You need to see this."

Regardless of my understanding of the mind's tricks, curiosity is still a powerful tool. This detective knows this, and he uses his skill set expertly. I take the folder.

"You're not the first shrink he's abused."

I squint at his word choice, then flip the folder open. When I look down,

my breath catches at the base of my throat. I school my features as I assess the image, not allowing the disgust to register on my face.

I flip to the next page and scan the victim's profile.

"Doctor Mary Jenkins."

I continue reading over the pages. Why does that name sound familiar?

"A neurologist at Hopkins. She was accused of unethical practices on her patients," he continues, filling in the blanks. "But never prosecuted."

My stomach pitches. Unethical practices is blanket terminology that doesn't convey the accused cruelties levied against her. The details come back to me of a Maryland neuroscientist who resurrected the barbaric practice of lobotomy.

The images of the deceased Dr. Jenkins capture the gruesomeness of the procedure. Puncture wounds dotting above her eyelids denote that she was a victim of her own morbid methods. Her dead eyes stare into the camera, blank and vacant. I wonder whether the pictures were taken peri- or postmortem, as they depict a casualty of lobotomy quite accurately.

Then a thought occurs. "Where did the images come from? Were they taken at the scene?"

Detective Foster's brow furrows. "I show you pictures of a tortured and murdered doctor and that's what you want to know?"

I close the folder. "I assume you've come a long way to show me these, so you've been anticipating my reaction. I'm sorry to disappoint you." As there were no lobotomy victims found in connection to Grayson in Maine, the detective has to be here on a mission from the prosecution in Delaware. "Otherwise, you'd have just simply emailed this to me." I hand him back the folder. "You're here to convince me not to take the stand in New Castle."

He squares his shoulders. "I've read up on you, Dr. Noble. I know how you work. I know that if you stand before that jury and spiel some psychobabble about Sullivan's abused childhood, then that monster could skate out of the death penalty."

I crane an eyebrow. The detective is well aware that witness tampering is a crime. But in my experience, officers of the law are typically the ones to break the rules most often.

“But to answer your question—” he digs out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket “—Sullivan didn’t always dispose of the bodies. This one was discovered at the scene. He’s perfecting his methods.”

I angle my head away as he blazes up and releases a smoky exhale. Fitting, that he’s for capital punishment and chooses a habit that gets him closer to his grave each puff. “I would say that he stopped perfecting his methods a year ago. That is, if the perpetrator was indeed caught.” I glance at the folder in his hand. “Do you have evidence tying him to the murder?”

Grayson has admitted the killings to me. I won’t go on trial declaring his innocence. I just enjoy watching the way the detective’s eye tics at the thought.

“You’re welcome to any and all evidence, Dr. Noble. I’ll have it forwarded to you.”

“Thank you.” I start to leave, feeling this is a proper place to end the discussion, but he snags the arm of my coat to halt me.

“It’s my hope that once you’ve reviewed the evidence, you’ll know the right thing to do.”

I pull away from him and cross my arms. “The right thing to do, detective, is my job. And no amount of coercion from you or any other police official from New Castle will deter me from that.”

He holds up his hands in defense. “No one’s threatening you, doctor. We’re all on the same side, aren’t we? The side that wants justice for the victims?” He tosses his cigarette down and stubs it out with the toe of his boot.

I huff an empty laugh. “Wanting justice for the victims doesn’t give us a license to kill, detective. Now please contact my office for any further inquiries.”

I leave then. He waits until I make it around the bend in the trail to call out. “He drove an icepick through her skull. But she didn’t die from that.”

My steps slow, but I don’t stop.

“She bled to death,” he shouts.

The exit is in sight. I push through the latticed door and hit the sidewalk, where I find a private alcove between buildings. I press my back to the brick and drag in a breath. An ache lodges in my head, pain radiating from the back of my neck.

I’m not easily shaken. I’ve dealt with far pushier police officials when combatting the prosecution on cases. I was caught off guard, I tell myself. Moments before his intrusion, I’d been feeling vulnerable.

Only I’m not so convincing. Dr. Jenkins and her icepick feel foreboding as I conjure the image from memory. Death due to brain injury is a slow and especially cruel way to die. You don’t essentially bleed to death—not like how Detective Foster portrayed. Rather, swelling inside the skull crushes the brain, severing the function of vital organs.

And yet, I can see the genius of her death, her demise designed to match her crime. There’s no doubt in my mind that Grayson devised a trap to murder the doctor, but it doesn’t frighten me. Not in the way the detective had hoped.

My connection to Grayson goes deeper than simple transference.

When I look into his eyes, I see myself. Not a reflection of the woman—but the hollow echo of my blood-stained soul.

If he’s evil, then am I in danger of falling for the devil, or am I the devil herself?

I snap my head back against the brick, just hard enough to knock the thought from my head. Then I start toward home.

I’m still in control of my mind and emotions, despite my fears. And I refuse to admit I’m falling for a patient. I refuse to fall for a killer.

NEXUS

LONDON

How many people can say they've looked into the eyes of a killer? For most, that is never a reality to contend with. It's a fiction experienced only through television, safely removed from any threat or corruption. For me, it's a daily challenge.

The first pair of eyes I remember looking into harbored the soul of a killer.

The eyes I stare into now—that I can clearly discern as the palest steel-blue—stare back into me. Grayson's knowing gaze reflects my truth, and every molecule of my body rebels in denial, wanting to defiantly snuff out that truth.

He doesn't know... He *can't* know. But paranoia is eating away my reasoning.

"The man who supports his madness with murder is a fanatic," Grayson says, disturbing my thoughts. "Would you consider yourself a fanatic, Dr. Noble? Or are you...passionate?"

I sit straighter, taking small, sharp breaths to ease the pressure in my back. Ever since my getaway from the detective yesterday evening, I've been in a full-scale flare-up.

I adjust my position again and say, "Voltaire."

Grayson's smile reaches those glacier eyes. "That's right."

"But you only partially quoted him. The first part states that an enthusiast takes ecstasies and visions, making dreams his reality. What do you think the difference is between an enthusiast and a fanatic? What do you think Voltaire was trying to say?"

"This isn't classic literature one-oh-one. I asked you a question."

My lips press together. I don't have to consider my answer for long. "I'm passionate about what I do."

He shakes his head. "That's a canned response."

"What is it that you want?"

His gaze snaps to my face, startling me with the intensity I see there.

"We're not yet ready for what I want," he says. "Let's start with what I don't. No practiced or rehearsed psycho-nonsense. Give me your honesty."

I release an extended breath, feeling the weariness of our sessions. The patient is supposed to be the one breaking, not the doctor. His walls stand just as erect as the day he entered my therapy room.

I pick his folder off the floor and set it on my lap. "You want direct conversation?"

"Yes."

"Because you have no inhibition in saying what you're thinking, you demand the same of me."

"Yes."

I look at him. "How freeing to have the power, the candidness, to just blurt whatever is on your mind and not give a damn how it's received. Tell me, Grayson. How does that feel?"

The corner of his mouth tips up. "Liberating."

I lick my lips. My mouth too dry to speak. I've allowed him to get under my skin, and he's enjoying my agitation.

"Is that considered crazy?" he asks. "Does it disturb the nice complacency of all those boring fucks we don't actually give a shit about?"

“The freedom to do and say what one wants has always disturbed others,” I admit, immediately following up. “It may be nonsensical to you, but it’s why society chooses to shield their innermost thoughts. An empathetic person doesn’t want to hurt anyone or make those around him uncomfortable. In order to...blend, for lack of a better word, we must...” I trail off, unable to complete my thought.

“We, doctor?” Grayson sits forward. “Tell me what we must do.”

I toss my bangs from my eyes and adjust my glasses. “Master our passions.”

His stare is invasive, that disarming gaze hardening as if he’s dissecting me. “Is that how you’ve done it?”

A splash of fear ices my body. “What?”

“Blended. Have you mastered your passions or are you just delusional?”

I slap the folder closed. “This session has officially gotten off track, and so it’s over.” I rise from my seat.

“But we only have one left after this.”

The hurt in his voice sounds so genuine it stops me. I turn toward him. “I have your evaluation completed already. You don’t require another session.” I yank the paperwork from the folder and flinch. “Damn. Paper cut.”

Red beads at the tip of my finger.

In the second it takes me to assess the wound, Grayson moves. He captures my hand and hauls me forward. His vise grip serves two purposes: preventing me from fleeing, and forcing blood to my hand.

He takes my finger into his mouth. A roar fills my ears, my heart thundering at the feel of him sucking the blood away. I feel it in the back of my knees, an electric current racing through my body and knocking my legs weak.

“Stop.” The word is barely audible, but it’s enough.

Grayson pulls back and releases my hand. He draws the chain off the floor, sliding it over his palm, then rubs a pattern over the lock. “I’m afraid

that when it comes to you, London, I'll never master that kind of control."

I step backward, separating us. "It doesn't matter. This is over, anyway."

Anger ignites his pale eyes. "Your lies don't work on me. You feel everything I do."

I shake my head and take another step away. "I don't. And you can't *feel*. You're not capable." Beneath the adrenaline spiking my bloodstream, I sense a distinct mock of hypocrisy.

My writing desk with the panic button is just feet behind me. The moment he stands, I sprint for it. I hear the clatter of chains and know I'm safe—that he can't reach me—only to be thrown against the edge of the desk as he grabs me from behind.

My back crushed to his chest, he seals a hand over my mouth. I reach for the button, but his other hand is there first. His grip wrenches my wrist back and then plants my palm on the wood, pinning me to the desk. My breaths sear my chest.

"We're not leaving here until you admit the truth one *fucking* time." His warm breath touches my neck. His mouth rests against my ear.

I blink hard as he lays a thin piece of metal on the desk. I recognize it as a silver catch from a belt buckle. I mentally curse myself. I was so enraptured in that moment he held me captive. His hand sliding up my thigh...his other hand anchored to my waist. He fucking used me. I was blind. Naive.

"You'd have never been so careless unless you wanted these chains off." He tightens his hold, letting me feel the chain still cuffed to his wrists. The cool metal of the links rub along my back. "Now tell the truth."

Then his hand is gone. I gasp in a breath, my nails claw at the desk. "I'll scream," I threaten.

He hauls the chain over my head and secures it around my neck, forcing my back harder against his chest. "And I'll crush your windpipe."

The links pinch my skin as he makes his point. But then just as suddenly, he loosens the chain, allowing me to take in an unobstructed breath. Only as

the fear of being strangled vanishes, a new one grips me. Grayson shoves my skirt up my legs.

“All your talk of control and morality...” He kicks my feet apart as his fingers splay along my thigh. “You’re a deviant, London. I know where you live—that dark corner where you hide.”

I whimper and shake my head against him. “You’re wrong, Grayson. You’ve built this up in your mind—”

“Stop.” He digs his hand into my hair and yanks. My hair comes loose, and he presses closer to inhale me. “I want you to prove how well you’ve mastered your passions.” His other hand inches higher. My belly trembles at the feel. “If you’re not turned on, I’ll cuff myself to the floor and never touch you again. But if you are...then you’re going to confess all those dirty sins to me.”

He tugs my leg over, spreading me wider, as he roams up my thigh. His body cages me in, the edge of the desk digging into my stomach, but the pain only serves to heighten the sensual sensation of every place he’s touching. An ache blooms deep in my core, the throb sending heat between my legs...and I know he can sense it. I clamp my eyes closed.

As he reaches the joint of my leg, I flinch. His finger traces along the seam of my underwear, a tantalizing threat, before he grasps me fully. I buck at the force, then he drags his fingers over me, the pressure erotic, evoking.

A low groan vibrates from deep within him. “I can feel you through the flimsy layer of cloth, London. You’re wet.”

His words ricochet through me, every point of impact detonating like a blast. Every stroke ignites my skin like a strike of a match, and I no longer have the power. Control slips through my fingers as easily as my hands splay over the desk, releasing my will.

“You’re aroused,” he says. “Just like when you watched my videos.” He grips my throat forcefully. “Admit it.”

A shaky breath slips free. “No.”

“Such a liar. You couldn’t take your eyes off the screen, could you? Tell me how turned on you got when you witnessed Giselle’s torture. Her limbs bound, her body stretched...until she confessed her sins.”

He’s never called his victims by name before. It feels too intimate, and that intimacy stirs a needy desire within me, awakening a hunger.

“Admit it,” he breathes into my ear. He tightens his hold around my throat, forcing my head against his shoulder. “Admit the truth, London.”

I struggle to hold on to my last bit of control, refusing to admit I’m anything like him, until he pushes his hand beneath my panties—touching me with no barrier. The chain drags across my breasts, stimulating every peak of my body. “I can’t,” I force out.

“Your body tells the truth, even if you won’t.”

He slips inside me then, his fingers sinking expertly, as if he’s spent the past three months memorizing me. I gasp and push back against him, unable to stop my body from responding. He reaches the ache deep within me, and all I can do is grasp for his neck and cling to him. Save myself from falling.

“I’m inside you now...” His teeth graze my shoulder. “Under your skin. I want to break you, so I can piece you back together.” His hand tightens, and the lack of oxygen makes my head swim, yet I’m hyperaware of every erogenous zone on my body—and I want him to master them all.

I don’t have to voice the truth; he’s right. My body betrays me with each moan and undulation as I seek release. And when he tears my blouse apart, I don’t stop him. I arch against his chest and press closer as he pushes my bra down to touch me—skin to skin.

We’re an entanglement of limbs and flesh, all searching to connect. I glimpse the ink on his arm, and this time, this close, I trace the design of puzzle pieces. A thrill arcs through me, sending a shiver racing over my skin.

“I’m the puzzle you’re piecing together,” I whisper.

He releases a growl. His fingers seek deeper, working me harder, his restraint unleashed. He pushes me down on the desk, my chest flattened

against the cool wooden surface. And as his fingers plunge deeper still, the stimulation to my nipples sends me over the edge.

I hear the tear of material, feel the pressure snap at my hip, as he shreds my panties. Then his hands are grasping me at my waist. He rolls me over, where there's no way to deny this is happening between us.

Our eyes meet.

He lowers himself over me. Brushes my hair from my eyes. The action so gentle it steals my breath. "You're my match."

I tremble at his words.

"Does that terrify you?" he asks.

"Yes."

A cruel smile slants his mouth. "But you still want this."

I swallow. "Yes."

All the permission he needs, he hauls my leg over his shoulder and takes me into his mouth. I arch off the desk, desire burning away all inhibitions. I crave to be just as free as him—and all else that doesn't matter falls away.

Grayson's touch...him tasting me, so wild and uninhibited...it's intoxicating. I've never been this exposed to anyone. God, the elation and pure, carnal pleasure is too much. It's all I can feel—all I want to *feel*.

It's bliss. And it's hell.

I was damned long before Grayson found me, and it was that dark note of my soul that called to him.

I'm burning.

I've set my whole world aflame to indulge this moment, and as he devours me, taking me within himself, consuming my willpower, I'd burn it all down for him—again and again.

He senses the second I let go and lifts up. "Look at me," he demands. He moves above me, his hand finding my neck and forcing my eyes on him. His fingers thrust inside me, his thumb pressed hard to my clit. "Say it. Say who you are. Admit your truth."

His fingers never stop stroking, caressing the ache heating my flesh, as his other hand closes around my throat. The erotic sensations swallow me. The pending orgasm pulls me under. I want to taste the freedom just once.

“Killer.”

Once the truth is bared, unadulterated pleasure sweeps through me. The fire sears my muscles and singes my bones, consuming me like a wildfire. I hear Grayson’s dark groan, then his mouth is on the juncture between my neck and shoulder. His teeth sink into my skin as I grind against his hand, riding the last euphoric wave.

As I return, our breathing is heavy and loud in the quiet room. My senses come back to me. Where we are, what we’ve done. It strikes hard and fast, like a collision as I crash back to reality.

Grayson strokes my neck, inspecting the marks he’s surely left behind. “I see you. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.” He kisses me, his lips soft and claiming, in complete contrast to the rawness we just experienced.

Raw. My skin and mind feel over sensitized. Scraped raw by his abrasive touch.

I allow our tongues to tangle, my palm pressed to his chest, counting his thunderous heartbeats. He tastes hypnotic. Like a drug. Like freedom. I feel his erection as he thrusts his hardness between my legs, igniting my arousal all over again... And I turn away, breaking the kiss.

I shove him back. Pushing my skirt down my legs, I say, “You have to go.”

I slide to the edge of the desk, but his hands pin either side of my thighs. “I know how scared you are,” he says. “That moment when you first say it out loud...there’s no going back, London. You’ve already kept it buried too long. Once it’s unleashed, you can’t lock the monster back up.”

Despite Sadie having warned of this very frightening inevitability, I stare into his eyes, defiant. “Watch me.”

I push him aside and hurry to the bathroom, grabbing my tattered

underwear on the way. I splash cool water on my face, avoiding the mirror. If I look, then I'll see those haunted memories, and I'm still too weak, too vulnerable in this state to face them.

When I'm composed, I fix my blouse and wander into the therapy room, where Grayson is shackled to the floor manacle once again. Everything feels so...undisturbed. As if the past half hour only existed in a fantasy.

He looks my way. "Same time tomorrow, then?"

A hollowness takes up residency where I was just so fulfilled, so assured. I leave the room to summon the officer.

T O M B

GRAYSON

Gen pop, otherwise known to the unaware public as general population, has its benefits in prison. It's less restricted, and therefore a con can acquire certain hard-to-get items if the price is right.

It's a bit trickier to take advantage of this currency when sanctioned in enhanced security confinement, but not impossible. It all boils down to supply and demand. In prison, things we take for granted in the outside world hold much more value on the inside. Out there, if you need a prescription, you go to the pharmacy. Here, you have to pay off the right guard.

With less than forty-eight hours until my transfer, time is my enemy. Locked in this cell is like being sealed inside a tomb. I'm already dead to the outside world.

And just as a dead man has no need for possessions, I've made arrangements. My cell is an empty, blank slate, ready for a new occupant. Everything has been thrown out in preparation for the transition to New Castle—all except for London's puzzle.

The photos, the research, the evidence of my obsession...all gone. It's locked inside me. Locked, locked. Only one other holds the key.

I stare down at the completed portrait of London, every curved jigsaw piece fitted together flawlessly, the seams of her face a delicate maze I've

mapped over and over.

I touch the beveled edges, recalling her taste, like sweet lilac. The feel of her in my hands. Her soft body molding to mine, coming undone under my touch. When the pieces snap together, it's an intoxicating satisfaction like nothing else in this world.

We're a perfect match.

Once you've sampled that perfection, that utterly seductive gratification, you cannot live without it. She's becoming a necessity, part of my addiction, and just as I can't quiet the compulsions, the absence of her stirs a restlessness, the fear of not having her a madness squirming inside my mind.

I pace my cell. A caged animal awaiting the gate to open.

We're being tested. She can't bottle what's been unleashed, and I can't return to the man I once was. That man only knew one way to survive: alone. Isolation is a survival instinct. But I no longer crave solitude to suffer my penance—I've found the one thing that can set me free, and I'll kill for it.

Footsteps near my cell. The heavy footfall of boots hitting cement spikes my adrenaline. I want this too badly.

"Delivery from gen pop," the guard says as he shoves a package into the slot. He holds it there on his side, his gaze narrowed on me. "This wasn't cheap, con."

I stand a distance away from the door. "I'll double the payment and wire it to your account."

He laughs. "Guess you're not going to spend it when you're dead." He sends the package through.

I grab the package and hold it behind my back. I can feel the contents.

"If you ask me...waste of money. Could've just got it from the infirmary." He continues to mumble to himself as he walks off.

As soon as the lights dim, I unwrap the paper bag packaging. A small baggie within holds three large, white pills. I read the imprint with a smile. Penicillin.

Bringing the meds along for the ride won't be easy. I open the empty puzzle box and peel back the cardboard along the side, then seal the pills inside. I dread knowing where I'll have to stow the pills when the time comes.

Before I lose the orange glow of the overhead lights, I yank off my thermal and kneel before a handheld mirror propped on the table. I angle my back to see the fresh ink between my shoulder blades.

The outline was the hardest part; making sure the curves align, that the lines are even. I dig out the ink and shiv from the hollow compartment at the base of my cot. Not an easy feat, keeping the guards ignorant of contraband. Only as long as my index finger, the splinter of a bench I picked up in the yard is used as the handle for the thin, sharp prongs I managed to wrangle from the kitchen. Another perk from my gen pop connection.

I use the needle-like points to shade in the black ink. Dip and puncture. Repeat. It's a tedious process, but the results are worth the effort. I envision her hand—the ink that she tries so hard to conceal—as I close in the negative space.

Then after tiresome repetition, the most vital element is layered within the shading. I can't bring the model with me, but I can take the measurements and specs. The formula. All the critical details needed to be planned ahead. Supplies. Check list of items. Plan of execution.

And the most fundamental of all: London.

Without her, this will fail.

My hand trembles, anticipation fueling my adrenaline.

London claims I'm incapable of feeling—that I'm a psychopath with no empathy.

I don't disagree with her assessment.

There are different types of psychopaths, however. And what she fails to acknowledge—like so many of her colleagues—is that a disempathetic type can and does exist.

I'm the proof.

“Constricted circle of empathy” is how it's defined, but easiest understood in comparison to a dead tree. Imagine if the tree had every limb severed. This tree has been in the dark all its life, slowly dying, decaying, until the sun shines down on it and a tiny sprig bursts free. The stem reaches for the light, growing toward the only sunshine its ever known.

One living limb on an otherwise dead tree.

London is the sunlight, and that new limb the feelings I'm only able to feel for her.

Love is difficult for my kind, but not impossible.

With every break of my skin, every stain that inks my flesh, I go against the grain of my nature to prove this to her. Like so many untraveled highways, the love and empathy road has been an infrequent path for the neurons in my mind. If you don't nurture a thing, it dies. I was born with the ability, like every other human is born with the ability to feel, empathize, love—only I was never required to exercise these emotions. They're weak and neglected.

Idle hands are the devil's playground...and all that entails.

I smile to myself.

Then there was her. Synapses fired, awakening a forgotten, dormant road. I've never felt any connection to a single person...

Until her.

I covet this rarity. Anxious to nurture this dark little seed she planted in my soul. My own design of love may be a twisted creature, but that creature is hungry and demands to be fed.

LAY BARE

LONDON

I've unpacked every skirt from my suitcase. A pile of black and gray slacks litter my bed as I try to unearth a wardrobe that won't tempt me, or Grayson, to think about today's session.

A mock laugh falls from my lips. I toss a pair of old slacks into the open luggage. *Session*. So that's what I'm calling it. Allowing a patient—a very sick patient—to maul me in my therapy room.

I zip the case closed with a curse.

I've been attracted to patients before. As I admitted to Sadie, I've dealt with transference plenty...but never at this level. Never with this much intensity and temptation. And I have never submitted to those temptations; never allowed to happen what transpired in my office today.

I close my eyes and fall to the bed. My skin still tingles, still feels heated from his touch. I was more than tempted to stay lost in that moment of ecstasy, to risk too much...and that's the danger. That's why I'm leaving early for New Castle. To put six-hundred miles between us and get this trial over with.

My cell vibrates on my nightstand.

I frown at the phone before I roll over and grab it. "Dr. London Noble."

"Yes, Dr. Noble. This is Attorney General Richard Shafer. Do you have a

moment to talk?”

I sit up. “I do, yes. How can I help you, Mr. Shafer?”

“I just wanted to extend the proverbial welcome mat, and make sure you received the material I had my office forward you.”

I clear my bangs from my eyes. “Thank you. I did, though I didn’t realize you’d be heading up the prosecution yourself.” My laptop rests at the foot of the bed. I pull it toward me and flip the screen open.

Honestly, between completing Grayson’s evaluation and our sessions, I have not looked at the evidence. Another psychologist would argue I’m subconsciously avoiding, unable to cope with the probable outcome, and that could be true.

As the Attorney General proceeds to elaborate on why he’s heading up this case personally, I look over the evidence. They have their own expert witness; a local therapist specializing in the criminally insane, who is testifying that Grayson will be a danger in prison. To himself, and to others.

I scoff.

“I’m sorry?” Mr. Shafer interjects.

“I appreciate your convictions in this case,” I recover, “but having expert testimony attest that Grayson Sullivan will be a dangerous incarceration? Mr. Shafer, with all due respect, he’s spent over a year in prison with no disciplinary write-ups. He’s been a model inmate.”

The lawyer clears his throat. “Yes, a model inmate...in solitary confinement. With no interaction with other prisoners. New Castle Penitentiary doesn’t have the funding that Maine has, I’m afraid, to provide Sullivan with the kind of monitoring he requires.” A beat. “You’re the chief psychologist in your field. Your opinion is testament in trial murder cases...”

My back tenses. Be wary of people who compliment too soon, before they even know you—they’re lowering your defenses in preparation for the strike.

“And it was you who proclaimed that one cannot prove rehabilitation

without first testing a subject in an unregulated environment.”

And there it is. He’s done his homework.

“So you can appreciate the state’s hesitancy here. Sullivan is simply too untested, too much of a risk.” He releases an audible breath. “And then there are the families, Dr. Noble.”

“What about them?”

“Did you know that the Supreme Court only just recently overturned the ruling to have capital punishment banished in Delaware? Primarily in anticipation of this case. That speaks volumes, doctor.”

“It speaks to fear and ignorance, Mr. Shafer. Sullivan is not, in my professional opinion, a threat to anyone on the inside. That structured environment lacks the chaos he desires to stabilize in the world.”

There’s a lengthy pause before he continues. “As a psychologist, I’m sure you understand the need for closure. These families deserve and need that closure.”

He’s set in his views. Nothing I say now or on the stand will change that. “I have the deepest sympathy for the families. I always strive to convey that during trials.”

“But this is your final stance.”

I square my shoulders. “It is. I would be doing a disservice to my profession, otherwise.”

“I understand. Well, thank you for your time, Dr. Noble. Safe travels.”

The line clicks dead, ending the call.

I set my phone aside and glance at the manila folder that holds Grayson’s evaluation.

Regardless of my personal feelings, professionally speaking, having a patient put on death row is a heavy burden for any doctor to bear. The weight of Grayson’s trial rests on my shoulders, his life hangs in the balance. This second attempt to sway me by the prosecution proves that.

With the Attorney General personally seeing that Grayson is put to death

for his crimes, the scales of justice won't tip favorably for him.

I open the folder and start my revision. My fear of loving a man capable of such atrocities can't stand in the way of what I inherently believe is right.

Soon, Grayson will be incarcerated far away from me. I'll never see nor speak to him again. What is there to fear?

The sounds of my nightmares come to life as I enter Cotsworth Correctional Facility. I stand before a barred door as a guard sweeps a handheld metal detector over my body.

"Clear."

He steps aside, and a loud buzz precedes the clang of the door mechanism unlocking. The door slides open, and I force my feet forward, propelling myself into the prison. I tuck my folder under my arm, thankful that this section of the facility isn't near the general population, where the catcalls used to welcome me.

I've requested a private session with my patient before his trial. The warden had no qualms in granting me that privileged access.

I'm led to another barred door, where a second guard swipes a keycard to gain entry. The door opens to reveal Grayson on the other side. My heart leaps to my throat, the whoosh that fills my ears momentarily disorienting.

I wasn't expecting him to be here already. I wanted more time to... prepare. I step inside the room and turn to the guard. "I won't be needing you. Thank you."

He gives me a disdainful look, then glares at Grayson. "I'm required to be within seven feet of him at all times. I'll be posted right outside this door." The guard adjusts his belt, making a production of arranging the Taser he has at the ready.

Once we're alone, the door closed, barring us together, I face my patient. Within the heavily guarded confines of this room, he's not mandated to be shackled to a restraint bench, but his ankles and wrists are cuffed and

chained. He's seated in the center, his hands hung between his legs. Watching me.

The space between us feels tenuous, the air too thin, the distance too easy to close.

"There are no cameras here," he says. "No one watching. If you thought that would keep you safe from me."

I lay the folder on the table, the only shield I have. "I know we're alone. I requested as much. But being here...I'm held more accountable for my actions."

He smiles. "Didn't take long for the guilt to set in. Huh, baby?"

I adjust my glasses, ignoring his baiting comment. "I've come to see you today, not as a doctor, not for our last session, but as a woman to tell you that this—whatever this is between us—is over. It got out of hand, and maybe that's my... No, I'm the professional. The fault lies only with me. I was unethical, and what happened yesterday...it was inappropriate."

His smile stretches, meeting his cool blue eyes. "Inappropriate? I hardly think that expresses it. It was fucking shattering. You want romance, go find yourself a nice little do-boy. But you don't want that—I tasted what you crave. I can feel it in you now. That dark obsession that twists you, makes you mine. "

I brace my hands on the edge of the table. Loving him will send me right over sanity's edge. I have to be free of this, of him.

"At the trial, I'm going to advocate for clemency, Grayson. Taking into account the abuse you likely suffered as a child, along with the conditions of your upbringing, you had an ideal—that is textbook—environment for the development of a psychotic disorder."

"Is that your professional or personal opinion?"

"Both. With the proper medication and counseling, you may be able to assimilate a normal life."

"A normal life...behind bars."

“Of course.”

“That’s downright sadistic. And you claim you’re nothing like me. Why don’t you neuter me in the process? That would be less cruel, and far less torturous.”

“I’m not sure what else you want from me. That’s all I have to offer in way of helping you.”

“I want *you*. You’re my doctor. So be my fucking doctor.”

“That’s not possible. I’m only here as a courtesy before trial. After my testimony, you’ll never see me again.”

He bounds to his feet. My reaction is delayed, recalling too late that he’s not completely restrained. I step backward as he moves toward me.

“Grayson, this is over.” I hold up my hands. The ankle shackles slow his advance, but don’t stop him.

“It’s never over.” He positions himself between the door and me. “For this to be over, one of us has to die.”

Fear snatches my breath. “Let me leave.”

“We both can’t carry your secret around, London. That is, unless we can work through it during our sessions.” He traces his knuckles down the curve of my breast.

“What are you talking about?” I have to angle my head back to meet his eyes. The closer he gets, the smaller I feel in comparison.

He cages me in against the wall. “It might be difficult for small towns to be open-minded enough, to be objectionable about one of their own. No one wants to think a killer hides among them.”

My back flattens against the brick as he towers over me.

“But you knew the truth, and you did what you’re so good at doing. You lied. You’ve been lying ever since. Even to yourself.”

I swallow. “I’m going to scream.”

“Go ahead,” he dares. “I’ll snag the first reporter interview I can to announce that your father was a monster that you put down.”

The air in the room is sucked out. The florescent lights flicker and buzz, my breaths too loud as I gasp past my constricted lungs.

He licks his lips, his body pressed close to mine. “The puzzle pieces were all there...they just needed to be linked together.”

“You’re mad. You’re delusional. You’ve built an alternate reality around me that is as far from the truth—”

His lips capture mine, silencing me. The kiss is hard and carnal and raw. I moan into him before I brace my palms high on his chest and push, breaking away.

“I wanted to taste the lie on your lips,” he says. “Tastes bitter. Nothing like that sweetness I experienced yesterday.” Then he backs farther away, allowing me to breathe and straighten my blouse.

He takes his seat again, his gaze never leaving my face. “All those missing girls. Did you see them? Witness their torture? How long were you a part of it before you decided to kill your father?”

The walls of the white room waver in the corner of my vision. Red seams the edges. I seal my eyes closed. The ink on my hand burns. I cup my palm, rub at the searing flesh. “Three months.”

A sense of relief crashes over me with the admission. The pressure in my head eases a fraction. I open my eyes. I expect to see the arrogance on Grayson’s face, having stripped me down to my black and tarred marrow, but he’s somber. Looking at me with a frightening wonder in his eyes.

“Lucky for you the coroner was a drunk. Couldn’t tell the difference between peri- and postmortem injuries. That car crash didn’t kill your father. He was already dead when you decided to take out a tree.”

I glance at the door, anxious. “Nothing you have is fact.”

“It doesn’t need to be. The speculation alone will be enough to destroy you.”

He’s right. An investigation into my father now, with advanced technology and police procedures, may prove that he was the Hollows

Reaper. A bogymen rumored to have stolen young girls in the middle of the night. What mothers told their daughters to keep them from roaming town.

“What did he do with the bodies?”

“What did you do with the bodies?” I counter.

A brutal smile slants his face. “I buried them, of course.”

My hands tremble. My family home is still in my name. I kept an abandoned house with a dead garden and barren cornfield. Rotting down to the foundation. I own the deed to a graveyard.

“You should tell the families where their loved ones are located, Grayson. The court would be more prone to clemency if you did.”

He cranes an eyebrow. “I will if you will.”

I push off the wall. Shove my hands in my hair. “This is crazy. I won’t be threatened.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving.”

“No. We’re not done.” His features harden. “Come here, London.”

All I have to do is bang on the door. I glance between Grayson and the door, and fear riots through me. How big of a disaster could Grayson create out of my life?

I walk toward him slowly. “Turning my life into a media circus would get you off, wouldn’t it?”

“It’s tempting—” he grabs my waist and hauls me to him “but I have bigger things in mind.”

“Let go—” I wriggle off his lap.

“I need to know how you felt,” he whispers. “In that moment. When you killed him...how did it feel? What did you use?”

Stunned, I stare down at him. “You’re a monster.”

“I’m your monster. Tell me, and you’ll own me. Completely.” He strokes the side of my hand. The rattle of his chains forces my eyes closed. Memories awakened. “You want to tell me.”

My body tense, he expertly guides the confession forth. My mind clicks off, like a switch he can toggle at will, and I allow him to pull me down against him. I straddle the man who threatens everything. My freedom. My morality. My sanity.

“A key,” I whisper with trembling lips. “He wore a key around his neck. To a dark basement cage where he kept them. I tore it free and drove it into his jugular.”

His fingers softly brush my hair from my eyes, remove my glasses. His gentle touch a stark contrast to the hardness I feel beneath me. He’s aroused.

“What did you feel?” he asks. His mouth hovers near mine, tasting my desperate breaths.

“I felt...free,” I admit. “Disembodied. Like I could do anything.”

“You can,” he coaxes. “It’s in your nature.”

A sharp pain thorns my chest. *No*. My internal alarm sounds, signaling my departure from reality. I attempt to stand, but he anchors strong hands to my thighs. The feel of him so hard, so wanting, pressed to my most intimate body part. Desire burns away any grasp I had on reason.

I shake my head. Force my glasses on. “We don’t get to do anything we want. There has to be boundaries, rules.”

He touches his forehead to mine. “We can make our own.”

My hands glide over his forearms. Tenderly feeling the scars he wears outside that match my inside. It’s intoxicating, the way he seduces my pain away, as if we really do command our own world.

No pain.

I’m here with him, and it would be so simple to fall all the way. Just let go. No hiding, no shame. He found me. He discovered my vile secret, and it excites him, what it could mean if I’d only release the string tethering me to a life so binding.

But that’s the trade. I risk losing what makes me human. Pain is human, and it means I still *feel*.

“No. I’m not damning myself again.” I break his hold and stand, backing up until my shoulders hit the wall.

“I’m not giving up,” he says, but he doesn’t pursue me. “We were designed for each other. Don’t you feel the pain when we’re apart? Don’t you want it to stop?”

I swallow. He’s too inside my head; I have to get away. “Guard.”

“You’re mine, London. We can dance this violent dance until we bleed each other dry, or we can surrender. Your choice. But I will have you.”

“That monster born of sin and death died in a car wreck. She’s gone.”

“Then it’s my mission to resurrect her.”

I pound on the door until it opens. I throw myself through the doorway, past the guard and his questions, and out into the open. The fresh air douses my heated skin, but the pain latches on to me, driving a searing iron into my back.

I scream.

DEPARTURE

GRAYSON

I only had theories. Wisps of the truth. Newspaper clippings and an old coroner report. But fearing a thing makes it come to a head much more quickly. Threatening her was all it took for London to be thrust back in time, to relive that one moment of ecstasy she allowed herself.

She's a born killer.

It's in our DNA. A genial road map of an exterminator.

Sounds like such an atrocity—to admit to being a killer. But we're all born with purpose. Some to be doctors and save, others to be lawyers and advocate. So what's wrong with our calling? The world is overpopulated and full of filth that needs picking off.

In this day and time, it's a calling only fit for the torrid pit of hell.

And yet it can be beautiful. An art form.

I rest my head against the seatback, imagining a younger, freer London driving a perfect replica of her tattoo through her father's neck. The strength it takes to do this—the sheer power, the lust for the kill. A thrill electrifies my blood.

The man who gave her the only life she's known, and she snuffed out his in an instant. Her hair wild, skin drenched with sweat, eyes gleaming. And then the serene look on her face that followed. The same one I glimpsed as

her body rolled with aftershocks of pleasure.

I want that back. I want to witness it over and over.

My pants tighten. I adjust myself, forcibly situating the aching member of my body that I refuse relief until my beautiful London submits.

“Half an hour till we land.” Officer Michaels glances over his shoulder. “When we reach the ground, just give me an excuse to put a bullet in your head.”

He says this lower, just so I can hear. His righteous anger brings a smile to my face. He was built for killing, too, but he’s denied himself that indulgence. Instead, choosing a profession that teases him, his trigger finger always at the ready.

What a painful existence.

I sit forward, and he noticeably tenses. “When the time comes, it won’t be you who gets that pleasure.”

His lip curls in revulsion. “Move back, con.”

I obey, turning my attention to the airplane window. Just above my head, a box of my meager belongings holds my ticket out of this life. No, Michaels won’t get his chance, because too many others are vying for their shot.

I lean close to the window to see the bend in the horizon. All that appears seamless and unending has a twist, and there is always an end.

New Castle welcomes me home.

“All rise. Court is now in session. The honorable Judge Arthur Lancaster is now presiding.”

A loud shuffle resounds through the courtroom. The pews packed full of the curious. The judge is a thin, aging man; his black robe swallows him. He orders the court to be seated, and I take a moment to glance around, seeking her eyes.

London’s not here.

My court-appointed lawyer nudges me to face forward. He delivered a

black suit and blue tie to my cell this morning. He requires my tattoos to be covered, my hair neatly trimmed. As if my *presentable* appearance holds any sway over the jury.

I can see it on their faces: disgust. This case would need to be heard halfway around the world in a remote location to find a jury that doesn't already know the grisly details.

"Don't make eye contact with them," my lawyer instructs. "Not yet. I'll advise."

Not a problem. There's only one gaze I need to look into. *She'll be here.* Her expert testimony won't be heard until later, but London is typically present for her patients during the trial. I'm not a typical patient, however. She's punishing me for my behavior—for knowing her sins.

She'll be here.

My hands fist beneath the table.

My lawyer looks at me. "I won't bring up the footage used in the previous trial unless we need to," he says. "That may or may not work in your favor. But just to be clear—" his eyes stare into mine "—there are no recordings of these victims, correct?"

None that were recovered by the police. "There are no recordings."

"Good." He straightens his tie and stands.

Only minutes into the trial, and the prosecution wastes no time getting to the shock and appall portion of this production. Enlarged images of victims are propped along a wall, displaying the crime scene photos. *Victims*, the prosecuting lawyer keeps stressing, beating it into the jurors' heads.

Referring to the victims as deviants would be too ironic.

But that's superfluous; they've already had their trial, and their consequence.

No one can take that away.

"Detective Foster, how was this new evidence discovered?" the lawyer asks the heavysset man on the stand.

The detective looks at the jury when he responds. “Technically, it was old evidence. We just had no basis for comparison. The defendant wasn’t in any database at the time.”

I admit, I was sloppy. My first attempt was delivered under anxious and taxing effort. I was near defeated by the time I gave in. Exhausted, tired of fighting the *need*. It was a compulsion that demanded to be answered—an action to be taken to make the desire end. I never imagined it would be so exhilarating, an addiction in the making, that I’d have to feed the craving again.

Once I killed the people who referred to themselves as my parents, I thought the dark thoughts would finally cease. I was their creation, and that part of me would die with them. Changing the scenery to an American backdrop in my tender youth didn’t stop the cravings, either. Nothing did.

I fought it for too many years. Weary and empty.

The first happened too fast. It wasn’t until my second that I became cautious. I had to be in order to continue on. I knew that my first endeavor would always haunt me, and here I am, being tried for the careless act.

But oh, the rush.

You can never replicate your first. Like two lovers in the throes of passion, clumsily feeling their way through that awkward first encounter, it’s still just as erotic, just as carnal.

“The perpetrator left a palm print on the murder weapon.” The detective points to the blown-up picture of a pulley shaft. The evidence couldn’t be more damning. I remember the night I rigged the contraption, my gloves getting caught in the axel.

“After so many years, a case goes cold,” the lawyer prompts. “What made you decide to run the search again on the palm print?”

“The MO. That is, the method and distinct pattern of the Angel of Maine killings were similar to the murders here in New Castle. It was worth a try, to see if there was a match.”

“And was there, detective? A match?”

“Yes.” He turns his attention to a diagram of the palm print in question. Numbered points of comparison prove that it is in fact a match to my print.

“No further questions, Your Honor.”

My lawyer rises from the table. “Detective, there’s no dispute to whether or not this print is a match to the defendant, and therefore he can be placed at the scene. However, do you have any other evidence?”

The detective frowns. “How do you mean?”

“I’m sorry. Let me be clear. Was there any other evidence uncovered at the scenes that can tie Mr. Sullivan to the crimes he’s being tried for here today? Or is this the only evidence to link him to all four homicides based on similarities of the murders?”

“This is the main evidence, that’s correct.”

“You mean to say, your only evidence,” my lawyer counters.

“Objection,” the Attorney General interjects.

“Sustained. The jury will disregard that statement.”

“I apologize, Your Honor. But, Detective Foster, I’m having a hard time understanding this logic, this process, if you will. Let’s walk the jury through it, shall we?”

The detective nods. “All right.”

I’m riveted watching Allen Young pace the courtroom. He’s a fresh trial lawyer that I believe the state thought would hang me. His theatrics are entertaining, but it’s his ability to gain the jury’s trust that’s fascinating. They like him, even if they despise me.

“Mr. Sullivan’s palm print was found on the pulley, but we already know that my client worked in the same fishing district as the victim. Is it possible that Mr. Sullivan used the pulley to load his diving equipment onto a boat at one time?”

“It’s possible, but not likely,” Detective Foster replies. “The charter boat Mr. Sullivan used for work has its own loading dock equipment.”

Young doesn't miss a beat. "But it is possible, considering the charter boat had numerous reports of faulty equipment at the time."

The detective furrows his brows. "A slight possibility."

"Thank you. Now let's discuss the differences among the cases. When you were first called to the scene, detective, did your initial report state that the victim's death was more than likely an accident? That it appeared the victim hung himself to the claim of faulty equipment?"

"I did make that statement, but I quickly amended it upon the discovery by the medical examiner."

"Right. The medical examiner reported contusions, that is bruises, around the victim's neck, which supports the cause of death due to asphyxiation. Like one would have when strangled by a rope."

"Yes, that's correct. But the examination also uncovered several repeated ligature contusions. As if the rope was tightened, loosened, and then tightened again. As if someone was torturing the victim prior to his death."

"Isn't it possible that this contusion pattern could've been caused by the victim fighting against the rope, trying to loosen it from around his neck?"

"Objection, Your Honor. The witness is not a medical doctor or expert."

"Sustained," the judge says. "I agree. Detective Foster isn't qualified to answer that question."

The detective looks annoyed at having his response suppressed.

Young quickly moves on. "But unlike the other crime scenes, where it was clear a heinous murder had been committed, this first scene—the scene providing your only supposed evidence—has a number of differences, is that correct? Such as the traps the perpetrator rigged to carry out the murders? The pulley was never confirmed as a trap, is this right?"

"That's not uncommon for a first homicide," the detective counters. "Repeat offenders get better, bolder, as their kill method advances. The difference between the first crime scene and the others is only that of an amateur versus a proficient."

My lawyer smiles. "In your opinion?"

"Yes. In my opinion, based on fifteen years of detective work."

"Was the wife of the victim ever questioned in connection to his death?"

"Of course. Everyone connected to the victim was questioned."

"But only after the second crime scene was discovered, and *after* the initial statement declaring the victim's death an accident had been retracted."

Detective Foster adjusts his posture. "That is correct."

"So to recap the facts, you have no inculpatory evidence tying the defendant to the other murders, and the very murder you can link him to, the method is arguably different than the other crimes. You, yourself, said it wasn't as methodical, and yet it was the only crime scene where any type of evidence was uncovered. That in itself is a deviation from the MO, wouldn't you agree, detective? That a methodical murderer would make such a blatant mistake? And yet you want to prosecute the defendant for all four murders and have him put to death by lethal injection?"

"Objection, Your Honor! Mr. Young is badgering the witness."

The detective flounders to answer, but Young speaks up before the ruling. "That's all right. Nothing further, Your Honor."

"I'm still giving my ruling to have that last statement stricken from the record, Mr. Young," the judge says.

I have a newfound respect for the state of Delaware. Allen Young almost has me doubting my own memories.

"And there's our reasonable doubt," the lawyer whispers to me as he slides into his seat.

Reasonable doubt. *For the other kills*. Not enough to keep me from serving that life sentence...but maybe enough to keep me off of death row.

There's a strange lightness to my head, a feeling almost like hope. It's as foreign as my newfound emotions for London.

"Now, if your psychologist will just work her magic, I'd say you have a good chance to plead for the mercy of the court."

“She will,” I assure him. He’s just as committed to this case for his own sake as mine. A case like this can make his career. And I’ve invested my time wisely in London. She’ll be here. I’ve made sure of that.

“Court is adjourned,” the judge announces. “We’ll resume at nine tomorrow morning.”

“You better make sure. Do whatever it takes to get her on that stand.” Young assembles his folders into his briefcase and departs, leaving the officers to shackle and escort me to the courthouse jail.

I glance around the room once more, noting London’s absence with a set jaw. She’ll be here. It’s not just my fate riding on her testimony.

Her life depends on it.

PRISON

LONDON

The first prison I ever saw was in the basement of my family home.

My father had turned the belly of our house into a hell. A cell where he kept the girls he'd stolen—where he tortured them. Until they were of no more use, then they'd stay down in that dungeon, starving in the pitch-black, until he ended their life.

He buried them under my mother's garden.

She was dead, he said to me when I asked him why...*how* he could do it. *A dead woman doesn't care and neither should we*, was his simple reply.

The first girl I found by accident. The anniversary of my mother's death meant sadness. I wanted to cheer up her neglected flowers. My father was outraged when I showed him the decayed body...that's how I knew. It wasn't the rational response a person—a *cop*—should have when one discovers a corpse in their backyard.

And then I remember the shiny glint of the key. That damn key that always hung around his neck. It all rushed together, a crash of elements around my life that I never looked at too closely, but that suddenly unmasked a very ugly, malevolent picture.

The basement.

My mind leapt from detail to detail, stringing together connections, and I

understood why I was banned from his private sanctuary. I suddenly knew what was down there.

For three months, I listened. In the still of the night I crept through the house, planted my ear to the floorboards, afraid to hear what my mind wouldn't allow me to believe.

The faintest cry tore up through the ground and gripped my soul.

There was another girl down there.

I close my eyes now, just for a moment to center myself. The air is stuffy and humid in this part of the courthouse as the officer leads me to the cells, to where Grayson is being kept under heavy guard and surveillance.

"Please check your purse and any personal belongings," the officer instructs, setting a plastic container near. "Then walk through."

I unload my items and then step through the metal detector. I'm cleared and instructed to follow a short hallway to the last cell on the right.

I walk the length of the hall toward Grayson the same way I walked down those steps all those years ago. My heart constricted. My pulse firing shots through my blood.

I'm not allowed access to him; can only talk to him through the bars. That same cold iron that filled my father's basement.

"You weren't there today."

I stuff my hands into my jacket pockets. "No." That's a lie. I stood outside the courtroom doors, my back pressed to the brick as I listened to the trial unfold. But Grayson already knows I'm a liar.

He stares at me from the other side of the cell, those watchful eyes sussing out the truth. "My lawyer thinks I can beat the capital punishment wrap."

I suck in a breath. "Are you truly afraid to die?"

The corner of his mouth kicks up. "Doesn't everybody fear death?"

"That's not an answer."

"I'm no longer on the clock, doc."

I stay silent and wait him out. There should be a pressing urgency to this discussion, as we're running out of time. But there's a strange calmness surrounding us.

"I don't fear death," he finally says. "Not in the way most people do. I was of the mindset that once they killed me, my life, my purpose...it would be done. Finished. There's nothing to fear in that. I almost welcomed it, the chance to rest the relentless compulsions." His gaze follows me, predatory and invasive. "And then there was you."

"I fail to see how I have anything at all to do with it."

He cocks his head. "You can't fear losing what you never knew existed. You changed everything, London. Now I can't simply cease—because I want you too badly. I want what we could mean together."

"That's delusional. Even if you live—"

"If?"

I swallow. "Grayson, we'll never be together. You're a serial killer behind bars. For *life*." The echo of my voice carries, reflecting the truth of that statement back to me. "Besides, as I've stated before, you're experiencing transference. Your feelings for me aren't real."

"Because I'm incapable of feeling."

"Yes. You're a manipulator. You manipulate emotions, and you're confusing the two."

He bounds off the cot. "Disempathetic," he pronounces slowly. "I've done my research. Why didn't you cite it in your evaluation? Why haven't you mentioned it once when it's fucking clear as crystal?"

I mock laugh. "Disempathetic type is a myth. It's the dream of wives and girlfriends of psychopaths everywhere—a way to cope. Convincing themselves that the men they love actually love them in return."

His face hardens. "Admit that it's possible for me."

"I will not ever."

His stare becomes calculated as he watches my features. Reading on my

face what I won't voice. "Then what about you, Dr. Noble? If you feel nothing for me, why are you here?"

"I don't know," I admit.

But then that's another lie.

His crooked smile reveals that wicked dimple in his cheek. "I do. You've come to find out if I'm going to tell the world your secret."

I wet my lips. "I'm tired of this dance, Grayson."

He moves closer, places his hands on the bars. "Tell me the truth of what happened, and no one will ever know."

I can feel his excitement. The way his pale gaze shines with anticipation. He's eager to witness me relive the past, to experience my kill through me.

"How did you find out?" he asks.

I press my hand to my forehead, squeeze my eyes closed, mentally willing the pain in my head away. "I'd be a fool to trust you."

"But that's part of therapy," he says. "Trust. Patient and doctor. Trusting each other."

A weak laugh falls from my lips. The details are insignificant. I recite them off like I'm reading from a grocery list. Removing any trace of emotion from my voice that he can glean pleasure from.

"I went into the basement and there was a girl," I say. "She was my age, too dehydrated to cry, trembling and covered in angry, red lashes, her skin blistered and bruised." I look up at him, embracing the memory. "She was beautiful."

"I tried to set her free," I whisper. "I knew it was the right thing to do. But I didn't have the key. I never thought of calling the police, or running to a neighbor..."

"Because your father was the sheriff," he provides.

"That, and I didn't want anyone to know. No one would've believed me, anyway. Probably." I shake my head. "I didn't really believe it until I saw her. By then, it was too late to go back."

I've inched closer to the bars, and Grayson's hand now covers mine. His finger stroking mine. His touch my anchor. "You knew you were going to kill him."

"Yes," I say. "I'd been fantasizing about it during those months. Obsessing about the different ways...how it would feel—" I cut myself off. "I didn't sneak down there. I knew he was aware, that he'd follow me to the basement. I brought him down there on purpose." I turn my head away.

Grayson reaches through the bars and forces my face toward his. "How did you plan to kill him, London?"

"I was going to throw him down the steps."

His finger trails my jaw. "But you failed the first time."

"He was bigger. Stronger. And I saw it in his eyes. That gleam. Like he'd been waiting for me."

Shame blankets me. I don't have to say it aloud; he doesn't make me. I was sixteen. The age of the girl in the cage. My father had been waiting for me.

"He strangled her," I power on. "He didn't kill her right away. He toyed with her. His eyes watched me while he choked her. My punishment for threatening him, I suppose. I would be next," I say, the cool room suddenly scented with the same dank smell of that basement. "I just knew. Somehow I understood. He was going to kill me. So I took his life instead."

His thumb traces the contour of my cheek before he touches the scar along my palm. "But not before he took something from you."

My humanity.

I glance at the scarred skin, stained with black ink and makeup. "He wanted me to be a part of it. I thought at the time he was trying to salvage..." I look up and curse. "I wanted to believe he loved me. In his own sick way, he wanted to make me a part of his secret so that we could share it. Or that I wouldn't be a threat to him. Reflection over the years has clarified the moment he put that knife in my hand and used me to end that girl's life.

Years of studying mental illness and disorders revealed that it excited him. That's all. Nothing more."

His gaze flicks over my face. "Were you excited?"

I bite my lip until the metallic tang of blood fills my mouth. "In that moment, experiencing the raw power of taking a life...yes. I wasn't just a voyeur," I admit. "I felt every stab of the blade. The way the knife sliced through flesh, the vibration when it hit bone. I was lost in the sensation before I willed myself back—ripping my hand free of his. The blade cut through my hand here." I turn my palm over, revealing the healed over scar.

"He let me kill him." I pull my hand back. "Maybe he was shattered that I refused him, or maybe in the end he was tired of his sickness...but I never should've been able to overpower him."

"But you did."

"He came after me. He'd left the knife behind. He had no weapon. I let him wrap his hands around my throat. Get close enough...before I grabbed the key and drove it into the one spot that would give me time. I went for the knife, but it wasn't needed. I'd torn through his jugular. He bled out quickly."

I glance at my hands, recalling the blood.

"Then you hid the kill."

I shake my head. "No. I didn't stage the accident to hide my crime. I had planned to die in that wreck. To end the deviant legacy, but when I awoke in the hospital, injured but alive, it was...a rebirth. A new life. A new chance." I look into his eyes. "I'm not that girl anymore. She died, Grayson. I killed her, too. And there's nothing you can say or do to bring her back. My own father failed, and so there's no hope for you. My will is stronger than my sickness."

He pulls away, breaking the connection. "Your pain didn't die with your father, and neither did your compulsion to kill. You've been able to channel that need through your patients, but it's getting harder, isn't it?"

I wipe at my face. "I've told you what you wanted to know. Now I need to know that it goes no further than here."

His smile long gone, he looks down and traces the design of a puzzle piece along his inner forearm. “You might be justified. You might even be considered a hero for what you did. But you still took the law into your own hands, which inherently in this justice system is wrong. You’re no better than any of the murderers you’ve treated. You’re a hypocrite and a narcissist. You loathe me, but you despise yourself more.”

“Swear it to me!” I shout.

His heated gaze flicks up. “I could never share you with another, London. I’m too selfish.”

Chin lifted, I straighten my jacket, smoothing my hands over the pleats. “Then this is goodbye, Grayson. I’ll see you in court tomorrow for the last time.”

I walk away from the cell and from him, leaving behind a piece of myself. He has my secret, that dark and frightening monster I keep hidden from not just the world but myself. Whether or not he’ll keep it, I can’t know. He suffers from sadistic symphorophilia, he’s a psychopath who loves to stage and watch disasters.

And destroying me? That would be the ultimate disaster for a sadist like Grayson.

PERJURY

LONDON

Nestled between a row of red oaks, one lone pine stands amid downtown New Castle's courthouse district. I sit on the courthouse steps, watching the pine's thin branches flutter in the light breeze.

It doesn't belong. Not sure how the tree got here, how it sprouted up in the middle of so much civilization, and it will most likely be cut down soon. Replaced with another red oak or birch to perfectly line the street.

But it's here.

I used to stare out the bay window of my house at the pines. We had tall, tightly packed skinny ones that would creak and bow in storms. And I would stare, just stare into the dense blankness of it all—the way the pines would sway back and forth, rocking themselves to some melody. As if they were self-soothing in the midst of all the violence.

That sight should've been a comfort. It shouldn't have frightened me.

But because there is comfort, there is turbulence. You fear it more acutely when the threat of it is pending, when it's near—the anticipation of our worst fears is more paralyzing than the impact.

There is no shelter from the storm.

I pick up my coffee cup and briefcase, and head into the courthouse, where I wait to be called. My suit feels warm on my skin from the sun, the

air-conditioned room causing me to shiver. I drain and toss my cup as the bailiff calls my name.

I sense his eyes on me the moment I enter the courtroom. I aim my gaze ahead as I follow the bailiff to the front. He holds the gate open for me, and I give a curt nod before I'm standing next to the judge.

"Raise your right hand."

I'm sworn in and take my seat at the stand. I've done this same action so many times it's habit. Formulaic. Yet everything about it this time is different. I can sense the judgment from the prosecution in a way I've never felt before. I'm tethered to the defendant, tied to him with a connection that screams to be severed.

The lights are amplified. The sounds too loud. The air too thick.

"Hello, Dr. Noble."

The defense attorney blocks my line of sight to Grayson before I'm tempted to look.

"How are you today?" he asks.

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Good. Glad to hear." After a brief rundown of my credentials, he asks, "Can you tell us how long you evaluated Mr. Sullivan?"

The lawyer is youthful and attractive. I notice the way the jury leans forward, attentive to him. His fresh face and amusing mannerisms are a welcome distraction to the heaviness of this trial.

"Nearly three months," I respond.

"And is this a sufficient amount of time to diagnose a patient?"

"Yes. Generally, I'm able to provide a full diagnosis and treatment plan for patients within a two-week period."

"Then why did Mr. Sullivan require a longer evaluation period?"

I straighten my back. "Midway through my initial evaluation, I noticed signs of severe delusion that I felt needed a closer assessment."

I'm going off script. Mr. Young stares at me curiously, then walks to the

defense table and grabs the folder that contains Grayson's evaluation.

"What is Mr. Sullivan's official diagnosis?" he asks.

"Mr. Sullivan exhibits antisocial personality disorder. He scored on the extreme high end of the spectrum for this personality disorder, which classifies him as a dangerous personality. He suffers from sadistic symphorophilia, which means he derives sexual gratification from staging and watching brutal disasters. As a sadist, Mr. Sullivan gleans pleasure from the suffering of others, and his particular psychopathy allows him to be a highly skilled manipulator."

The attorney blinks, looks at the prosecution, as if he's awaiting an objection. There will be no objection from that side of the courtroom during my testimony.

Mr. Young starts again, trying to find a thread of our original correspondence. "Dr. Noble, did you not verbally state that Mr. Sullivan is a model inmate. That despite his disorder, he was not a threat to anyone in prison, as it lacked the chaos to feed his particular psychopathy?"

I smile. He has a good memory, recalling what I relayed to him of my conversation with the Attorney General. "Yes, that's correct. I did say those words to the prosecution. But that was in the middle of my final evaluation. As I've stated, Mr. Sullivan is an expert manipulator, and thus more time is needed to effectively diagnose him and determine the level of danger he presents."

The lawyer flips through the evaluation I retyped only the night before. He was so confident in my verbal assessment that he never asked to receive the report prior to the trial.

"The treatment plan you originally thought best tailored for Mr. Sullivan was to be medicated under your care, to receive continued therapy sessions, and to slowly integrate him into general population where he can be a productive member of the correctional society." He glares at me, a threat in his eyes. "Do you still feel that Mr. Sullivan can benefit from this treatment?"

“Let me put it as simply as possible,” I say, bolstering myself. “Mr. Sullivan’s victims were, as he believed, guilty of crimes. Crimes he felt were deserving of extreme and disturbing vigilante justice. Does assimilating him into a population full of criminals sound like a good idea to you, Mr. Young?”

The shock on the lawyer’s face is only topped by the collective wave of agreement that rolls through the room.

“Order,” the judge demands.

I make eye contact with Grayson then. There’s no malice on his face, only the hint of a smirk. Those knowing eyes drill into me.

I roll my shoulders. “Furthermore, I discovered that Mr. Sullivan suffers an uncharacterized delusional disorder in connection to his psychopathy. He believes he has grandiose connections with his victims, which develops into a fixation on them where his delusion creates an alternate reality. In other words, the manipulation tactics he deploys on his victims serves to influence his own delusions, resulting in his belief of his own lies. This gives him the conviction to punish, maim, and kill without guilt or remorse.” I take a breath before I push through. I *have* to push through. “Anyone Grayson Sullivan comes into contact with is at risk for becoming a part of his delusions and thereby suffering either physical or mental harm. He is one of the most dangerous individuals I’ve come into contact with and feel I’m unable to continue his treatment. I do not feel rehabilitation is a prospect for Mr. Sullivan.”

Silence falls over the court, and Mr. Young clears his throat. “Thank you, Dr. Noble. Nothing more, Your Honor.”

After a charged moment, the judge looks to the Attorney General. “Would you like to cross examine, Mr. Shafer?”

The lawyer stands briefly. “No, Your Honor. The prosecution rests.”

“Please escort Dr. Noble off the stand,” the judge instructs the bailiff. “Court is adjourned for an hour recess, then we’ll hear closing arguments.”

I flinch at the commotion rising around the room as people stand. The finality of it rocks through me, and I grab the edge of the stand to help me rise. I pass Grayson on unsteady legs, the need to look into his eyes an unbearable, painful demand. The string tethering me to him snaps taut.

When I give in to the desire and our eyes meet, no words are needed. I see it there on his face, the understanding of what I've done. I've secured my lie by misdiagnosing a patient in open court. No one will hear or believe his claims about me.

I have sabotaged not only my career to do so, but any chance he had.

I've just sentenced Grayson to death.

My secret will die with him.

EXECUTION

GRAYSON

“All rise.”

I stand along with my lawyer and straighten my tie, giving it a tug to loosen it from around my constricted throat.

“At least there were no *videos* to defend this time around,” Young whispers my way. “Good luck.”

Luck isn’t on my side. London made sure of that. My lawyer has lost all of that enthusiastic hope he had early on at winning his shot. Her testimony shocked everyone here. Probably every professional in her field. The only person not surprised by her dramatic shift from savior to condemner is me.

I suppress a smile. I loved every second of watching her embrace her killer instinct.

As the jury enters, I look around the room instead of at them. I don’t need to see their hung heads and grave expressions. I knew the outcome of this trial before it started. I’m looking for London. She’s all that matters now.

She’s not here to witness her victory, however. I imagine she’s sitting alone in some hotel room, awaiting the verdict. Her guilt keeping her company. Funny thing about guilt; it’s a tricky emotion, often mistaken for shame.

London has nothing to feel ashamed about. Who wouldn’t defend their

life? I'm a threat she can't allow. I gave her no other choice.

"In the matter of Delaware verses Grayson Sullivan, for the charge of first-degree murder, how do you find the defendant?"

"Guilty, Your Honor."

This snags my attention and I look at the judge. His narrowed eyes are already on me. He runs down the list of charges, finalizing the jury's guilty verdict to all, then thanks the jury for their service and dismisses them.

"I have my own declarations to proclaim before your sentencing, Mr. Sullivan," the judge says. "If not for the painfully slow process of our justice system, I would personally see to it that your execution be swiftly delivered. The murders you've been found guilty of are a gross and heinous act of the worst kind. In my thirty years as a judge, I have never witnessed a more blatant disregard for human life. Do you have anything to proclaim to the court before you're sentenced?"

My lawyer taps my foot, giving me the cue to stand and deliver my practiced plea for clemency.

So I do. I stand and lift my chin. "I do, Your Honor. I proclaim that Hell is empty and all the devils are here." The courtroom erupts. The judge slams the gavel, trying to quiet the outburst. My lawyer hangs his head.

I smile. I've waited a lifetime to quote Shakespeare.

"Grayson Pierce Sullivan," the judge says over the commotion. "You're hereby found guilty and sentenced to no more than one-hundred years of imprisonment for each life you took. You're to be incarcerated in maximum security at the New Castle Correctional Facility, where you'll await to be executed by lethal injection until you're dead." He leans over the bench. "No god will have mercy on your soul."

"You're welcome," I say to him with a wink.

He glares at me, but not in confusion. Judge Lancaster has sentenced the majority of Delaware's capital punishment cases to death. Thirty years of killing with the law as his murder weapon. He's a killer that uses the law to

murder his victims, and he's enjoying every moment of this—one last hurrah before the state abolishes capital punishment for good.

"Remove this monster from my courtroom." He slams the gavel one last time, the final note in my life.

The handcuffs circle my wrists. My blood rushes past constricted arteries, the dizziness setting in. The lights flicker in my vision. My breath wheezes out, and I struggle to pull a full lungful of air past the knot in my throat. My lungs are burning.

Young notices first. "Sullivan, it's all right. We'll appeal. This isn't the end—" He's cut off when the seizure starts.

My jaw locks as the tremor takes hold of my muscles. I feel the frothy foam of vomit dribble down my chin.

"We need a doctor!" Young shouts.

The officer allows my body to drop to the floor. The cuffs bite into my skin as my body quakes. But before the world dims, there she is. Looking down at me. My angel of mercy to take away the pain.

London leans over me and presses her soft fingers to my neck. "He's going into shock. Anaphylaxis."

Her deep brown eyes are wide as she stares down. I try to count the specs of gold. They blur and dim until I lose sight of her all together. I'm able to mouth one word to her before the lights go out.

Killer.

FREE ME

LONDON

“Penicillin.” I look over Grayson’s chart. “Care to explain how Mr. Sullivan was given a medication that his file clearly states he’s allergic to?”

This question is directed to the corrections officer in charge of Grayson’s meals at the courthouse jail. I’ve asked this question of all the officers that have come into contact with him over the past forty-eight hours. I’m no detective and, officially, I’m no longer Grayson’s psychologist, but I demand an answer from someone.

The officer shakes his head. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I don’t know.”

I inhale a sharp breath. “Okay. Thank you.”

I head toward the hallway to slip the chart back into the ER room, and Detective Foster is there to head me off. “You’re not supposed to be here. I’ll take that.” He confiscates the chart.

“I was just leaving.” I attempt to do just that, but the bulky detective again steps into my path.

“Why *are* you here?”

I cross my arms. “One of my patients has been admitted to the hospital, detective. I’m here doing the same thing you are: trying to figure out how this happened, and more so, to determine how this affects my patient.”

He nods slowly. “You know, the visitor log at the jail only lists one

person. You. I find that very interesting.”

“Careful, detective. Someone might think you’re insinuating a respectable doctor poisoned her own patient.”

“I’m not insinuating anything. I’m very bluntly asking you if you gave Sullivan penicillin to delay his transfer.”

“Unbelievable,” I mutter under my breath. “Detective Foster, I take offense that I not only have to do the doctors’ job in this backward hospital, but now yours, too. How many people do you think want to see Grayson dead? Family of the victims, police officials...like yourself—”

“He was already being sentenced to death,” he interrupts.

“He wasn’t being sentenced yesterday,” I counter. “When the trial appeared to be going in his favor.” I raise my eyebrows.

He huffs a breath. “Don’t head back to Maine so quickly, doctor. I may need to question you again.”

I throw my hands up. “You’ve got it. Now, can I please see my patient?”

“Absolutely not. Sullivan is under strict guard. Officials and medical personnel only.”

He escorts me to the waiting room. I find the chair I’ve claimed as mine for the past eight hours. A strained tiredness presses behind my eyes, and I close them for a moment.

It took too long to transfer Grayson to an ambulance. The hospital only being five miles from the courthouse, it shouldn’t have exceeded fifteen minutes to get him into care. Those fifteen minutes cost Grayson his consciousness.

An anxious voice whispers from that dark corner of my mind, mocking me. *You wanted this.* I did—I wanted Grayson’s death. I wanted the threat eliminated. My perseverance is stronger than my feelings for him.

I blink the dryness from my eyes. I couldn’t will a tear forth if I tried.

Most psychologists are able to diagnose and treat their patients because they care. They have this well of empathy they pull from to give of

themselves and help those the world would otherwise shun.

I cannot relate.

I don't empathize with my patients; I commiserate with them.

Grayson and I share a connection...we're bound together by some dark force...and yet I know we're different. I'm better than him. I'm better because I'm stronger and I deserve to be the one to go on and to continue to help people. And for that to happen, he must be the one to fail.

So yes, I wanted his death. But not like this. I wanted the justice system to kill him. I wanted to be justified and free of blame. I hate feeling this hollow pang in my chest, and I want it to *stop*.

"Dr. Noble."

My eyes snap open. The ER doctor stands before me. "Yes?"

"Can I have a moment to talk with you?" he asks.

I grab my purse. "Of course, Dr. Roseland."

Grayson's medical file still has yet to be transferred. Had the staff wasted time with tests, I'm not sure Grayson would be alive. I threw my lofty title around to make sure Dr. Roseland knew what to test for immediately.

I'm led toward the emergency wing where Grayson is being monitored. "Don't worry. I've gotten you clearance." The doctor looks my way. "A doctor should be able to see her patient."

"Thank you."

"He's awake," he says. "I'm sure once I've cleared him for questioning, you won't have another chance to speak with him. He's been asking to see you since he woke up."

My brow furrows. "Dr. Roseland, you're taking a great chance by allowing me access. I don't think Detective Foster will appreciate your efforts."

He waves a hand dismissively. "Foster is a hot-head. You just let me worry about him."

I offer him a smile. Sounds like the ER doctor has regular dealings with

the detective. “Well, I appreciate this. Sullivan is a...unique patient.”

He nods. “I noticed that. His brain scans were impressive. It’s a shame that someone with so much potential resorted to... Well, it’s a shame.”

I lower my head as we pass the two officers guarding the hallway. “Do we know how he received the antibiotic?” I ask.

Once we reach the ER room, he pauses at the door and looks at me. “Yes. He administered the drug to himself.”

My heart knocks hard against my chest. The double *bah-dah-bump* steals the air from my lungs, and I’m able to gain an antiseptic-laced breath before the room door opens.

An officer stands guard outside the door, another inside the room stationed near Grayson. His ankles are cuffed to the gurney. A pair of handcuffs secures his left arm to the bedrail.

He’s awake. And watching me with hazy eyes as I enter.

“How medicated is he?” I ask Dr. Roseland.

The doctor stands in the doorway. “Very,” he says. “A few minutes longer, and Mr. Sullivan may not have made it. The EMT said you performed CPR until they were able to transport him.” He gives me a tight smile. “He has you to thank for his life.”

My eyes close briefly. The hollow pang burrows deeper.

“I’ll give you a moment,” the doctors says as he shuts the door.

I step forward, and the officer extends his hand. “You have to stay five feet away from him at all times.”

I set my purse down, giving myself something to do other than look at the man I betrayed.

“Thank you,” Grayson says, “for saving my life, doc.”

I suck in a breath and face him. “Did you attempt to take your own life?”

“Did it hurt you?”

“What?”

“Did saving my life hurt you?” He nods at me. “You’re back. You’re

limping.”

I hadn’t even noticed that I’d been coddling the pain. “No,” I answer. “I’m not hurt. Now tell me the truth. Did you—?”

“No, I didn’t try to take my own life.” His accent is thicker with the sedative.

I lift my chin. “The ER doctor said you dosed yourself with over a thousand milligrams of penicillin. One might consider that a suicide attempt. Especially when you’re well aware half that dosage is enough to kill you.”

He bats sleepy eyes and shrugs against the prop of pillows. “Maybe I did it just to see you one more time.”

I press my lips together. “Cut the shit, Grayson. You wanted to be the one to end your life. I understand that reasoning. If you were going to die, it was going to be on your own terms.” *Not mine*. “Am I correct?” I step closer.

“Sorry, doc. On this one, you couldn’t be more wrong.”

It happens fast. The guard reaches out to halt me. Grayson’s free hand grabs ahold of the guard’s wrist and yanks him over the gurney. He nails the guard in the back of the neck with his elbow. The gun appears in the commotion.

Grayson has the gun aimed at the officer’s temple. “Uncuff me,” he demands. But he’s not ordering the guard. He’s looking at me.

“No.”

His gaze hardens. “In five seconds, I’m going to pull the trigger. Do you want yet another life on your conscience?”

I wet my lips. Grayson has never directly killed a person. *That I know of*. My gut screams that he won’t do it now—that it goes against his compulsions, his beliefs...but then he’s never been in a position like this before.

I’ve taken his life, and he will make sure he has mine before it’s over.

I choose to save the man.

I unclip the keys from the officer’s belt and begin unshackling Grayson’s

ankles from the gurney. "Let him go."

Grayson waits until I've freed his wrist, then carefully stands, maneuvering the guard with him. The guard slings threats, attempting to alert the officer outside the room about the convict with the gun. Grayson clubs him over the back of the head. The cop doesn't go down with the first strike, or the second, and I have to look away as Grayson beats him until he finally drops to the floor.

"You're an animal," I say.

A smile kicks up the corner of his mouth. "Takes one to know one, baby."

The door of the ER room opens.

I'm spun around and pulled against Grayson's chest. I feel the press of the steel barrel under my chin. I'm shaking, but the gun forces my head high, and I refuse to let fear show on my face.

"Drop the weapon!" the officer shouts.

Grayson doesn't obey. He digs the barrel deeper, holding me in place. "I doubt I have more to lose than you, so don't be a hero for minimum wage, officer. I will kill this woman here, then I will fire off shots until the clip is empty, taking out as many people as possible before I go down." The cop holds his aim on Grayson. "Now, shut the door and lower your gun."

After a tense standoff, the officer closes the room door. He keeps his weapon trained on Grayson and me for another few seconds, then sets it on the floor.

"Slide it over," Grayson orders.

The cop does so reluctantly. "Backup will be here shortly," he tries to assure me.

Grayson nudges my back. "Strip the cop," he says. "Pants and shirt. Now."

I bite my lip as I lower myself toward the unconscious man, then slowly pull off his shoes. My gaze snags the gun on the floor, but Grayson confiscates it first. He uses the officer's handcuffs to lock him to the bedrail

before he knocks him over the head with the gun.

I curse, knowing that it's now—right now. I have to escape. He's completely unhinged.

I grunt as I tug the pants down the man's legs. "If you kill me, then you'll never truly have your revenge. You can't destroy a dead person."

Grayson grabs the nape of my neck and hauls me up, bringing me close. "I wish you would've talked this dirty during our sessions."

Anger spikes my blood, fueling a rush of adrenaline. I try to knee him, but he's there to block my attempt. He groans and grips my hair tighter. I spot a syringe on the tray and spring for it, ignoring the pain it costs me to break out of his grasp. I hear the tear of my hair giving way.

I have the needle in shaky hands, aimed at his neck. "I will shred your jugular before you squeeze that trigger, I swear to God."

He watches me intently, his teeth capture his lip to restrain a smile. "And I know just how good you are at that. I'm looking forward to more play time later," he says, then his hand covers mine, forcing my arm back until I drop the needle. "But right now, I just want you to *relax*."

I'm breathing hard. "Do it fast."

"All right." He grips my face and backs me against the wall. My heart lurches into my throat as his gaze darkens. Then his mouth closes over mine, the kiss stealing what's left of my breath. He pulls away with a gleam in his eyes. "But I'm not taking your life."

"What the fuck do you want, then?"

He finishes removing the officer's clothes and dresses hurriedly. He slides on the uniform pants and belt, then throws off the hospital gown before slipping a white T-shirt over his head. I spy the ink on his back and curse. I inch backward toward the door, but he notices my retreat.

I stop.

"You assume I want to kill you because of what you did to me," he says as he snatches the cop's radio and clips it to his belt. "But that's just your

guilt. You've trained yourself to feel it in order to blend." He spits the word at me. "Let go of it. It gets in your way. I would've done the same to you."

He grabs my purse and digs out my phone. He drops the phone and stomps on it, then places my bag over my shoulder. "Do you need your glasses to see?"

I squint. "I have an astigmatism. So, yes...and no."

He removes my glasses and places them in my bag. He then turns my back to his chest and presses the barrel of the gun to my head.

"Fuck. Grayson, what the hell do you want from me?"

"Be a good hostage and open the door."

Through the adrenaline, I make the connection. It slides together like a puzzle piece snapping in place. And I'm the piece of the puzzle that he's shaped to secure his freedom.

"You used me," I accuse.

"To be fair, we used each other."

I open the door.

THE DARE

GRAYSON

Thirty-two steps to the service elevator. On a floor plan, that distance feels short and easy. In real life with a hostage and screaming nurses and police aiming guns at your head, each step might as well be a mile.

“Neither one of us will make it out of this alive,” London says. “They will shoot through me to get to you, Grayson. You’re a convicted serial killer twice over. You’re not leaving this hospital.”

I breathe in her scent. The sweet note of lilac bolsters my courage and frees me of the sedative, urging my adrenaline to pump harder. “They’re not shooting a renowned doctor. The state doesn’t want that lawsuit.”

Her laugh is hollow. “So you did use me. This was the plan. Somehow you figured getting me here would be your best chance at escape.”

I pull her closer and we inch another step backward. “This is a conversation for later.”

“Sullivan.” Detective Foster aims his gun upward. “I’m putting my weapon down.” He holds one hand up and hunches to set his piece on the floor. He then orders the other officer to do the same. “We’re not doing this here, or anywhere else. If you release Dr. Noble, then we’ll all forget this happened. It’s not as if you can be prosecuted any more heavily than you already have been.”

I smirk. “That’s not a very good argument, detective.”

His brow furrows as he realizes my point. “But you don’t really want to hurt your doctor, do you? She’s been the only one in your corner.”

I gain another two steps toward the elevator. “Again, not a good counter strike. She fed me to the wolves. Or did you miss her fascinating testimony?”

“Sullivan, don’t—don’t take another step...,” he warns.

I hear the elevated pitch in his voice; he knows he’s lost this round. I tug London toward the wall, using it to shield our right so I can focus on the officers to our left in the adjacent hallway as we ease toward the elevator threshold.

“Push the button,” I tell her. She does, and when the doors slide open, I jerk her inside. “See you at the bottom,” I say to Foster before the doors close.

I hit the Lobby button, then count down the seconds. At ten, I push in the Stop button. The car jerks to a halt.

“What are you doing?”

“Trust me,” I say, and oh, the beautiful look of pure hatred on London’s face heats my blood. She’s breathtaking when she’s livid.

“We’re not a team,” she grates. “I diagnosed you as delusional in open court. God, I was right.”

“I know. It was brilliant, by the way.” I stuff the gun behind my back and lift a section of the car ceiling, sliding it back. “You should feel proud of that—the way you callously led the jury to kill without remorse. They have you to thank for not losing any sleep over it. Took less than two hours to convict me.”

I step onto the bar and hoist myself through the ceiling.

“I did not—”

“You did. You can stop lying.” I look down at her. “Give me your string.” I extend my hand. Her eyebrows push together in confusion. “Now, London. Give me the damn string in your pocket.”

She curses and digs out the black thread.

“All of it,” I demand. “I know you keep more.”

She hands up the roll of string. I unravel it and hand her one end. “Tie this around the red button.”

She does. “You said you don’t want to harm me. Are you letting me go?”

I show her the gun. “Don’t lose that sharp brain of yours just yet. Give me your hand.”

I pull her onto the top of the elevator, and we’re seconds from finding out if this plan will work. I guide her toward the ladder on the side of the shaft and then seal myself around her.

I pull the thread.

The elevator jolts and propels downward, continuing it’s journey to the lobby. “Climb,” I order.

We reach the roof of the hospital. Once I have London out of the shaft, I dispose of the gun. She anxiously stares at where I hid the weapon behind a skylight.

“I never liked them,” I say. “No art in shooting someone.”

Her feet move backward. “I’m leaving now, Grayson.”

I look up into the darkening sky. “What time is it?” When she doesn’t respond, I grab her arm and wrench off the thousand dollar watch she wears. I flip on the radio, gauging how close the search is to us. “You have less than one minute to make your choice,” I tell her. “In ten minutes, they’ll have downtown secured and blocked off. Then we have twenty minutes to make it out of the state. So you get one of those minutes. Decide.”

She pushes her hands through her hair. “You’re giving me a choice?”

“I give everyone a choice. You’ve been making choices since the first day we met.” I offer her my hand. “You can go back, try to insert yourself back into your life of lies, or you can come with me and find out how far the rabbit hole goes to get your answers.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t.”

I breathe hard. “You can. You can do anything you want, and I promise, I will let you go.”

She releases a manic laugh. “This is fucking crazy. You’re crazy!”

“Is that your professional opinion, doctor?”

Stare cast over the horizon, she shakes her head. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Even if it means discovering the truth?” I say, and her gaze nails me. “The absolute certainty of uncovering everything your father kept from you?”

It’s there in her pensive eyes, the longing, the desire to unmask that which terrifies her. Curiosity alone isn’t enough—to a narcissist like London, this is the promise of her story. *Her. her. her.* It feeds her vanity.

She secures her bag over her neck. “They’re going to put you to death. And I swear to God, Grayson...I will be there to watch.”

She takes my hand.

I close my fingers around her palm, feeling the beveled scar. “I hope you will be.”

But not before we end this.

I pull her behind me as I take off toward the edge of the building. Her pain will slow us down. I’ve thought about that, though, how to get us out of downtown the fastest, with the least amount of effort.

The sounds of helicopter blades chopping the air hovers near.

I let her go down the fire exit first. “Don’t look at the ground,” I instruct. She curses the whole way down the side of the building, but she makes it.

Police sirens bounce against the cement and brick, the hospital nearly barricaded. I grab her arm and lead her to the thick brush of trees and bushes where we halt before the freeway.

“We have a minute to make it to the bridge before the dogs pick up our trail.” I look down both lanes, gauging traffic. The darkness will give us some cover, but not for long.

“Why are you doing this...?” she asks aloud, but it’s not intentionally

directed at me.

I palm her face. “You know why—you know why you’re here. To demand the answers he kept from you.”

A tear slips free, and she blinks away the wetness. She’s not crying; her adrenaline is running high. Good. It will help cancel out her pain.

“We’re leaving, London. Now.”

The race to the bridge is our biggest challenge. We leave the sounds of the search behind as we cross the highway. Cars stop in the middle of the street, horns blare. Thirty seconds to go.

I pick up the pace once we’re on the median. Her gasps of pain sting my ears. I feel her pain for her, and I would take it if I could. The destination is in sight. Another five seconds and we’re here. “Stop.”

She doubles over to catch her breath. “We’re in the wide open!”

I look over the side of the bridge. “We’re going down.”

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head. “No. I’m not dying for you—”

I grab her around the waist and pull her back against me. She kicks and fights as I ease up against the cement railing. “You already made your choice.”

I take her with me over the edge.

The creek water hits us with an icy fist. A rock tears into my shoulder. I aimed for the deepest part of the Brandywine, but it’s still a shallow pool.

“Oh, my god!” She sputters and wipes at her face. “I hate you.”

I circle my arms around her and haul her close. “You act as if you’ve never swam in a creek, country girl.”

Her fists beat at my arms, splashing water. “This is madness—”

I turn her toward me, taking her face into my hands so I can stare into her brown eyes. “This is so much more than madness. This is what obsession does to a person.” I swallow hard. “Believe me, I have tried every way to get you out of my system, out of my head... I can’t. I’m only trying to make sense of the nonsense. We’re connected, and we belong together. I’m already

a dead man. So if I die in pursuit to obtain the unattainable...then that's a death I can honor."

She blinks through the droplets of water, her gaze flicking over my features. "You're doing this because you believe you can what...? Feel love?" She shakes her head against my grasp. "Jesus, Grayson. That's insane. And impossible. You're confused and sick."

"Then we'll be sick together."

I push off the floor of the creek to stand, bringing London with me. "Stay on the bank. Track through the water. Dogs can't scent us in the water."

She's managing, but I can sense her lethargy. She's fading fast. As soon as her adrenaline wears off, she'll be in too much agony to continue. I just have to get us outside of downtown. Then I can take over for her.

I smile to myself. Nurture is a strange thing.

My objective over the past year hasn't always been clear. The more I researched and learned about London, the more my goal has changed. But there has been one remainder that has consistently stayed the same.

Her.

She's the answer to my purpose.

With death row as my only certainty for the future, a short life sentence of penance isn't an option any longer. I've paid my dues to this world, a world that robbed me early on, that fashioned me into a killer and now wants to punish me for it. I owe it nothing.

But for her...I can be more. I can be whole. The completeness that we mean together is a satisfaction to the compulsions that has consumed me for months. Demanding to be obtained.

She is my salvation. And I am her long-awaited consequence.

CHEMISTRY

LONDON

Trekking through a muddy creek with a convicted killer on the run is not how I imagined my life would end. And it will end. Badly. There's no other logical outcome to this insanity. Detective Foster already has me pinned as Grayson's accomplice, and when he locates the gun that Grayson discarded, he'll deduce I helped him escape willingly.

I'll be prosecuted as aiding and abetting, if I don't end up dead.

I'm still trying to process what exactly snapped inside me the moment I put my hand in his.

I know he's a killer. I know he's a psychopath. I know that when his delusion is proven wrong, he'll become even more unhinged, and I'll most likely become his next victim.

And yet for one solitary moment, all warnings swept aside, and I wanted the clarity he's mastered. The power to be free without shame. In retrospect, that clarity is a probable detachment side effect of his inability to process emotions...and he no longer has anything to hold him back.

And I'm going to hell for envying him.

It's not out of a sworn doctor's oath that I'm here with my patient; I'm not here to save him. I didn't completely fabricate the truth on the witness stand when I condemned any likelihood that he could be rehabilitated. He's

dysfunctional on the most dangerous level.

I'm here for one simple reason: me. I'm selfish.

The draw I felt to Grayson during our first session has coaxed every choice I've made since. He's not wrong about that. I'm tethered so tightly to him, I can feel him in my veins. He's poison in my blood. I'm drunk on him.

I'm trapped within my own illusion of believing that I can resurrect my past and find some answer to free me of my father's legacy...and I've officially lost my mind.

"I can't do this," I say, my feet dragging. My heels long gone. "I can't keep going."

I'm not sure if I'm talking about my emotional state or the fiery hell of pain consuming my body. Both hold equal weight at the moment, and I drop to my knees.

Grayson kneels beside me and pulls my shoulder bag over my head. "You have meds in here?"

I nod. "But they won't help. I'm too far gone." The only thing to help the pain at this point would be to knock me unconscious. It would be a nice detachment from this reality, too.

I notice the blood staining his soaked shirt as he rummages through my purse until he finds painkillers. He thumbs out two and feeds them to me, forcing my mouth open. "Chew them," he orders.

I'm not cognizant enough to argue. I break each pill in half with my teeth and swallow the bitter chunks until the pills are dissolved. "You're hurt."

He doesn't acknowledge the wound on his shoulder. Instead, Grayson scoops me into his arms, carrying me against his chest like some hero.

A mock laugh tumbles out. "Most women end up with men like their fathers. I used to judge them pretty harshly. I guess I'm no different."

He doesn't remark as he wades through the shallow stream.

"Do you have any idea where you're going?" I demand.

"Yes," he finally says. "There."

I angle my neck to see a shopping complex abutting the creek. The shops are remodeled, multicolored townhomes. “I don’t think we’ll get the best customer service. I’m sure our faces are plastered all over the news by now.”

“We’re not shopping.” He treads up the bank and sets me down. “Stay here.”

As if I have a choice. Liquid fire threads every muscle. Nausea setting in.

Run. The thought assaults my head, and I’m seconds away from talking myself into it when I hear a car engine turn over. *He’s stealing a car.* Of course he is. It’s the only way we’re getting out of the state in his estimated timeframe.

I close my eyes and count to ten.

I block out the pain and my desire for Grayson, and try only to think of the aftermath. When we’re no longer running, what then? If I can’t walk away from him on a rooftop with the world poised to destroy us, how will I be strong enough to deny him...anything?

In every dysfunctional relationship, there is typically one codependent partner. I have to decide right now who is in control: me or him.

“Let’s go.”

Grayson’s strong arms surround me, then I’m again swept up and carried in a direction only he knows. The car door of an outdated Ford Taurus is ajar, the engine running. He places me in the passenger-seat and buckles me in.

The chilly night air blankets us in enough darkness to shroud our getaway, and I give in to the sparse comfort of it. We’re alone. I’m tired of fighting the inevitable.

I close my eyes.

An intense spike of pain rouses me awake.

I try to reach for my back, but my arm won’t move. Tingles bite into my hand and I groan. I peel my eyes open to see my wrists cuffed to the door handle. Panic splinters my head as I yank at the restraint.

I fear we've been caught, until I realize Grayson is driving. As the grogginess wears off, I take stock of my surroundings. It's night. Headlights illuminate the dirty windshield.

"Why am I handcuffed? Where did you get them?"

He keeps his gaze ahead. "We're almost there. And the cuffs came with my new ensemble." He's still dressed in the cop uniform.

I twist in the seat to face him. "That's not what I asked. Why am I restrained, and where is *there*?"

He reaches between the console and grabs a bottled water. "Drink this."

With a frustrated sigh, I jerk at the cuffs until my wrist bleeds.

"Finished?" he asks.

"Fuck you!" But suddenly thirst grips my throat. I tip the bottle with my mouth and guzzle. When I pull away, he sets the water in the cup holder. "You said you'd release me at any point."

"I never said that." He glances over. "I said I would release you. And I will. But we have a long way to go first."

"I'm not a hostage, Grayson."

"No, you're not a hostage. You're a hostile victim of your own prison. Once you're free of that, you can go. But not before you pass the test."

The way he says *test* ices my blood. "I won't run. I made a choice to be here."

"You will try to run, regardless of your choice. Everyone runs from their truth. I can't let that happen."

I settle back in the seat. I evaluate my state and situation. My skin is tacky and itchy with dried sweat. I'm barefoot, my legs and feet covered in dusty mud. My pain is present, but not overbearing. We're in a stolen car.

For all intents and purposes, I look and am behaving like a captive.

I'm a psychologist who needs to act like one and reason with her patient.

"How did you get the car?" I ask.

"Right place, right time," he says evasively. At my impatient glare, he

continues. “Newer models are designed to prevent theft. Just needed to find the right model to hotwire.”

For all I’ve learned of his psyche, I realize I know nothing of the man. “Is that a trade you picked up from your childhood? Your stepfather?”

He smiles. “Not every confined space belongs to you, London. You can stop trying to shrink me. You were never the one in control.”

Heat rises to my face. Acute anger that he may be right singes my nerves. “How long have you been plotting this?”

He grips the wheel with both hands. “At first, I accepted my time. I think you refer to it as the cool down period. But then you requested an interview.”

“So it’s my fault why we’re here?”

“No,” he says, his voice low and measured. “There’s no fault. That’s like trying to blame the sky for being blue. The color doesn’t exist; it’s a phenomena made up of layers of ozone and oxygen.

“We’re just layers of molecules, our brains hardwired to make up our personalities, our identity. It’s predestined. No amount of nurture or abuse could change either one of us.”

“That’s not fact, Grayson. That’s a longwinded debate that’s been argued for decades. That’s your opinion.”

“Is it?” He looks at me. “How many years and with how many subjects have you tried to rehabilitate?”

I hold his gaze, unable to answer.

“You chose me that day in the waiting room not because you believed that maybe, just maybe, I was the answer to your question of whether it was possible. You chose me because I was your proof that it’s not.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Yes, London. I couldn’t have planned every detail of this without your help. I’m good. Damn good and yes, intelligent—but this was a complex strategy over a long period of time that needed all the right pieces to fall into place. You enabled us.”

On some level, that's a likely probability. As a master manipulator, Grayson figured out my weaknesses and used them to achieve his desired outcome. And I'm the vain psychologist that tried to control a volatile relationship with my patient.

I failed.

"This isn't what I wanted."

"It's what you need," he says. "You've been screaming into the void, demanding your answer, and the void heard you. This is predestined."

"You are absolutely, fucking psychotic," I say.

We turn off from the highway. After a few miles, the car bumps along a dirt road, and my anxiety grows. I try to free myself of the handcuffs again, but too soon we're pulling into a darkened driveway.

He puts the car in Park. "We're here." He looks at me then.

I duck my head to see past the visor. Wooded scenery engulfs us. And in the middle of the dense trees, a large, contemporary style house graces the night skyline.

If he's brought me to a house, then no one knows it exists. Most of my patients had furtive locations. Second homes. Trailers. Storage units. It was their kill spot. Their secret place to take their victims.

Panic ices my veins. Real panic. As the reality of my situation sinks in.

Grayson has taken me to his kill spot.

What have I done.

My breathing labors as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a set of keys. "Remember during our session when I told you how much I enjoy puzzles. There's just something satisfying about putting the pieces together. I've been putting them together my whole life, searching for the one to end my suffering. You were a puzzle, London. And once the puzzle presented itself, I couldn't *not* put the pieces together. You created an unknown variable in my life that I had to decipher. You were the key."

"The key to what?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he moves in close to unlock the handcuffs.

"The key to what, Grayson? God, do you know how insane you sound? I never would've diagnosed you as delusional, but you're making me question my integrity as a psychologist."

He holds my wrists together. My skin stings, his tight grasp a pulsing pressure locked around my arms. He eats the distance between us, his face so close to mine I hold my breath.

"You forget I've tasted you," he says, his words a hot whisper against my lips. "I've been inside you. I've felt your desperation and your longing. The pain you carry isn't physical. You're dying for the punishment you never got, but know you deserve."

I blink hard. My heart constricts in my chest. "I want to leave. Now. Right now, Grayson. Let me go."

He rests his palm on my cheek. "God, you're beautiful." Then his lips taste mine. Slow and tentative at first, he kisses me deeply, and I welcome it. Our movements become frenzied as I put every emotion into the kiss, begging him. When he breaks away, I say again, "Please, release me."

He licks his lips as his gaze drags over my face. "Not happening, doc. You've been a very, very bad girl."

He pulls me across the console. My bare feet kick at the door as I struggle against him. My screams tear into the night.

As he hauls me out of the car, the only sound is my frantic pleas cracking against the pines.

T E S T

GRAYSON

It's the fear of the unknown that plagues most of us. Even London, with her knowledge and skills to defy the mind, is afflicted with the terror of not knowing what awaits her on the other side. Her body trembles in my arms. Her adrenaline careens through her system. My touch a malicious act instead of a comfort to her.

I run my finger through her hair, attempting to soothe her. She needs to be calm for this next part.

The earthy smell of the woods mixes with her faint scent of lilac, and it feels right. Like she belongs. Like she's *home*. "I have to chain you up now," I tell her.

She attempts to struggle, but her muscles are fatigued. Her energy all but gone. Her body starved and drained. This could be her breaking point, if she'd allow it.

She relaxes against me. "Grayson, please. I just want to go inside. I'm dehydrated and hungry. I'm dirty. I know this isn't what you want to do. You can fight the compulsion. You don't want to hurt me."

I press my lips to the top of her head. "This isn't just about your punishment." *It's also mine*. "Why do you think it is that the one person I develop these impossible feelings for happens to be a narcissistic sociopath?"

“Please,” she whispers.

I shake my head as I lift her off my chest. “We both have some things to figure out, London. Only one way to do that.”

Her wrists are grimy and bruised. Dark-red rings of dried blood mark her skin beneath the chains. I haul her toward a thin pine tree and link the chain around the trunk. Her whimpers are starting to agitate me.

“You’re not some weak, unfortunate victim. You know why you’re here.”

She releases a scream. It’s a cry of frustration, not fear. She wipes her matted bangs off her forehead with her shoulder. “When I get free...” she trails off, the threat evident in her callous tone.

I pick up the shovel and face her. “I’ll be waiting for you.” I push the shovel into the earth.

“I don’t have everything that I wanted here,” I tell her as I toss dirt on the pile. “I had to catalogue most things mentally. Some exceptions had to be made. But I built this beautiful, three-dimensional model for you. Your own puzzle. Your very own trap, London.” I glance at her. She’s shivering against the bark, knees pulled to her chest. “I can’t wait for you to experience it.”

“You can’t go through with this,” she says. “You’re doing it out of order. There’s no camera. I know who you are. Where’s the fear, Grayson? Where are the pictures of my victims?” Her voice rises in anger. “There are none. You can’t go through with this because it defies your beliefs and system.”

I pause to look into the night sky. “Like I said, some exceptions had to be made.” I toss another scoop, loving the feel of the wood splintering against my palms. “You have a long trail of victims, London. I’ll let you recall their faces on your own.”

“You sadistic fuck, there are no victims!”

By the time the hole is finished, the sun is starting to peek through the trees. The crickets have gone quiet. The woods are still and scented with the crisp note of morning. I toss the shovel down and haul the wooden crate into the fresh-dug earth. The shipping container will have to do. It’s not a coffin

in its own right, but it will suffice.

I nail together a few more planks on the sides to cover the gaps, then I climb out and kneel before London. She's taxed. Her clothes covered in filth, her skin rippled with shivers. Her head hangs down, and I brace my hands on either side of her face to lift her eyes to me.

"You can end our pain," I say. I rub my thumbs over her cheeks, clearing away the dried tear tracks. "Confess, London. Unburden yourself. Admit the truth of who you are and what you've done, and this all ends."

Her eyes focus on me. Then she spits in my face. "You're not my fucking priest."

"Fine." I unshackle her wrists and haul her to her feet. "See you in hell, baby."

Her shrieks increase as she gains a second wind. I drag her to the crate. "London Grace Noble, you're guilty of harboring a murderer. You desecrated your father's victims by burying the last girl and keeping the remains of all victims a secret. You hid behind the law, using it as a shield. As such, you're to receive the same fate as your father's victims."

"You bastard!" She yanks away from me. "You're a deluded hypocrite. You killed people and buried them. Just like he did."

"No. Those were not people; they were monsters. The girls that your father so arrogantly took from this world were innocents. Girls that hadn't lived long enough to wrong anyone. And you've kept them a dirty secret this whole time. For that alone, you've earned your punishment. You should be buried and forgotten about, just like they were."

I swoop down and capture her around the waist, throwing her over my shoulder. She beats her fists against my back as I jump down in the hole. Her petite body is easy enough to wrangle inside the box, and I slam the lid closed.

"Fuck you—" she shouts. "You tricked me. You lied to me. Let me out! Please. God, Grayson...don't do this."

My hands shake as I drive the first nail home, sealing her inside. “I’m not the liar, London. I told you that on day one. It’s time for you to meet and embrace your true self, the liar you’ve always been.”

The bangs turn into muffled thumps as I cover the crate with dirt. I fill the hole more than a quarter of the way. Enough weight to keep her sealed below. Her cries are buried, and when I toss the last shovel-full of earth over her grave, I lie down along the fresh dirt.

And wait.

GRAVE

LONDON

I've been buried alive.

Panic is a living being inside this tomb with me—the only thing telling me that I'm still alive in the pitch-black. I press my palms to the wood. My breaths bounce back at me from the lid, my chest on fire as the air is sucked away.

Splinters snag my skin. The pain sharpens my senses.

He can't let me die.

But I've watched the videos. I've witnessed the lengths Grayson has gone to in order to deliver his punishments.

Dread rises within me anew, and I bang against the wood, desperate to taste fresh air. "Help!"

A creek from the wood sends dirt into my mouth and eyes. I wipe at my face in a panic. My elbows knock the sides of the crate. I feel those sides closing in. The box is shrinking, swallowing me. *Shit*. I push harder against the lid, my forearms burning from the strain.

More dirt rains down. I taste the grit between my teeth and turn my head to spit. Between anxious breaths, I hear the sound of things crawling alongside the box. Moving through the loose dirt, trying to find a way in. Waiting for their food to rot.

Oh, God. I can't die like this.

The burden of an unfinished life is a dense weight bearing down on my chest. The painful compression heightens my anxiety until I'm hyperventilating.

Each rapid, labored breath is drawn with the knowledge that it could be my last. Every gasp is laced with less and less of the vital oxygen my lungs crave.

Calm down.

I chant this in my head as I hold a breath, forcing myself to relax—to still every muscle and organ clamoring for air.

Breathe.

I take in a shallow breath. Slow and steady, my lips trembling. Tears leak out the corners of my eyes, and my body tingles, adrenaline flooding my system. The lightheadedness transitions into a euphoric tranquility.

I linger this way for a while. Listening to my slow breaths. The blackness a thick and disembodied nightmare. Gauzy cotton webs my mind, detached. For what feels like hours, I alter between two stages. Panic and docile acceptance.

As my thoughts drift, all the things I've put off doing rush forward. Unfulfilled goals. Dreams. Happiness.

A weak laugh slips free. I coached my patients not to reach for something so flimsy and meaningless as happiness—it's an idea, not a goal. And yet here I am, staring death in the face, wishing I'd been a little more frivolous and *happy*.

But there was never any answer to that question, either. The one everyone asks themselves: *what will make me happy?* A husband? A child? I scoff at myself. I don't regret either, not really. I never could have shared myself or my time with something so demanding as motherhood.

Still, the fact that chance is being stolen away rocks through me, a vicious reminder that I chose Grayson. I chose this fate.

I draw in a breath to fill my lungs and blink against the darkness. Regret is a weakness. I can't afford to be weak.

Besides, there are more frightening realities to contend with than my shallow regrets.

The buried bodies in the backyard of the land in my name, that I always planned to move, to dispose of...and now that, too, is being decided for me. The girls will be found. Someone will purchase my family home and tear it down. Rebuild. They'll dig that dead garden up and my legacy will be remembered as a horror story, rather than the work I've devoted my short and vain life to.

With that realization comes a panic attack that consumes every sense. The blackness closes in, scrapes and sounds magnified, the feel of bugs crawling under my skin retches a fiery scream from my throat.

The calm waters of my acceptance rebels. A storm thunders through me as I crash against the boards. My arms flail, my feet thrash. My fingers claw at the wooden deathtrap, raking up splinters beneath my nails. I can almost scent the metallic tang of blood in the thin, musty air, and I become a rabid animal fighting for freedom.

Determined, I fight against my prison, and my foot kicks an object. It doesn't register right away, my panic too far gone, gripping my body and mind in a constricting vise. I turn onto my side and brace my shoulder against the lid, then I stop moving. I listen to the sound of my breathing, amplified in the confined space. *Think. Think. Think.*

I've analyzed Grayson for months. I've gotten inside his head. I understand him. I have an advantage over the rest of his victims. He has rules, and his disorder demands that he abide by them.

With three deep breaths, I quell the dread and slow my breathing. Reserve oxygen. Then I calmly use my foot to push the small object upward. Once it's near my knee, I reach down and grab it.

A phone.

Oh, my God. Relief pushes through my anxiety. I flip the device open, and the screen illuminates the inside of the box. I quickly use the light to look around, searching for a latch or loose nail or anything—a way *out*. “Dammit.”

I’m not clawing my way out of the earth. Even if I could, what then?

With shaky hands, I punch in 9-1-1 and hit Send.

Three long beeps answer me back.

“Shit—” The top of the screen flashes no service.

He’s toying with me. But no, it’s more than that. There has to be something...here. Grayson records his victims. He *watches* them. He gives them choices, dammit. Where are mine?

Static erupts from the device. Then: “You once said you disliked people because they’re selfish. I wonder if it’s more that their selfishness is a reflection of what you dislike in yourself.” Grayson’s voice fills the humid darkness. “Something you wish you could change but can’t. That’s a conundrum, an enigma. You’re full of these little puzzle pieces, London.”

I search the phone. It’s a radio phone with a button on the side. I depress the button. “The only thing I want to change is my view.” I swallow a weighty breath. “If you do this, Grayson...if you kill me, you won’t ever be satisfied. You know that it will torture you.”

A long pause follows, where I wait for his response. I squeeze my eyes closed. Grayson is too intelligent to be deceived so easily. He’s studied me these past few months just as I’ve studied him. He knows my tells, my lies. My *truth*. He wants me to play his game, but there’s some bigger part of him that wants me to win.

Where all his other victims failed, I have to succeed.

“You said you’d give me answers,” I try again. “I followed you here. I left everything behind to be with you. To get those answers. You can’t let me go without—”

“You wanted to see how far the rabbit hole went,” he says. “Did Alice

enjoy her Wonderland adventure? No, she was terrified. And to think, it was all in her mind. The most frightening things in this world usually are.”

“Grayson, please help me...”

“I don’t have your answers, London. Just like Alice, it’s all in your mind. I’m simply giving you the means, the tools, to unearth them.”

Unearth...

I repeat his words, looking for the clue—the piece of the puzzle Grayson is feeding me. Unearth...unearth...unearth.

Dig.

I hold down the button. “Dig,” I whisper.

He waits for me to make the connection.

A tear rolls across my face. Adrenaline courses thick and hot through my veins. “Dig them up.” I beat on the lid. “Dig them up!” He wants me to free the girls.

Silence stretches. The dank air sticks to my skin, snuffing out my life. The meager light of the phone fades. The faces of the victims taunt me, mocking me for becoming just like them.

Then I hear scratching. The faint sound grows louder, pulling at the seams of my sanity, until a hollow *thump* detonates.

The lid opens. Dirt falls on top of me, but there’s a hand to pull me out.

Grayson wipes the dirt from my face as I gasp in clean air, starving for oxygen. “You bastard,” I swear. My hand flies toward his face. He stops it from making contact.

His hand circles my wrist, holding my hand outstretched. “Save your energy. The first test is always the easiest.”

First test.

Dehydration and sleep deprivation finally take their toll. My weak body gives in and I fall.

MASTER OUR PASSION

LONDON

Light flickers against my eyelids. The cool press of a damp cloth against my face pulls me from the shadows.

My lids are heavy, like I've slept too long, suffering a morbid hangover. When I'm able to pry my eyes open, Grayson is close. I flinch away. In the dim lighting, I notice he's clean and shaven. The scent of fresh shampoo and soap pervades my senses, a welcoming comfort, before my internal alarm snaps me fully awake.

"Where am I?" I demand.

But one look around the bathroom clues me in. Lit candles illuminate the small room, making it feel cozy. Romantic, even. My stomach pitches.

"I'll power up the generator soon," Grayson answers my unspoken question about the candles.

My back is propped against the wall. Grayson holds a wet washcloth to my forehead. "I was going to let you sleep it off, but you were starting to stink."

I snatch the cloth from his hand. "That tends to happen when you've been *buried alive*," I snap.

He doesn't rattle. His mouth tips into that smug half-smile. "Towels are in the closet. Everything you need is already in the shower." He stands. "I'll

leave you alone.”

I watch him exit the room, shutting the wood panel door behind him. I toss the cloth and jump to my feet, and immediately sway. Using the wall to right myself, I creep toward the door and check the handle. Locked.

From the outside.

Christ. I’m in a house designed for captives.

I find a bottle of water on the counter and drink half of it down before rationalizing that it could be drugged. I wait to feel any disorienting effects. Once the fogginess starts to clear from my brain, I drink the rest and try to recall how I got here. Did we cross over a state line? Yes, Grayson said that was part of his plan—to get outside of Delaware in twenty minutes. But how long ago was that? How far did we drive?

A knock sounds at the door. “I laid clothes out for you in the guest room. You can discard of the ones you’re wearing.”

I brace my palms on the counter. I can’t make another mistake. I can’t underestimate him again. “And food?” I need energy.

“I’ll have something ready for you.”

I wait until his footsteps recede. Then I unbutton my grimy blouse and pull off my filthy slacks. All my clothes go into a wastebasket near the toilet. It takes too long for the water to heat. I dive into a cold shower, thankful to feel something clean against my skin.

Halfway through bathing, the water begins to warm, and I assume this is due to the generator Grayson mentioned. As I wash my hair, I filter every piece of data he gave me, processing his words, the scenery, my predicament. I need more information.

I need to suppress my fear and do what I’m trained to do: listen.

I shut the water off and step onto the chilly hardwood floor. Towel wrapped tightly around me, I look for clues. The whole bathroom is paneled in light and dark reclaimed wood. The shower and sink are white porcelain with contemporary fixtures. The candlelight reflects off a tall vanity mirror,

setting the space in an ambient glow that I'd otherwise appreciate if not for the fact that I'm trapped.

Under normal circumstances, I'd never condone using a patient's unhinged state to beguile them...but this is no normal circumstance. And my patient is a special brand of disturbed.

I have to stay sharp. I have to outwit him. With that in mind, when the bathroom door opens, I'm primed. Ready to take on Grayson with the only weapon I have.

I'm not prepared for the impact, however. Grayson stands in the doorway shirtless, unashamed. His tattoos and scars on full display. A gauze bandage wraps his shoulder, and a low-slung pair of jeans hangs on his hips, accentuating the toned body I've only felt before.

I tug my towel higher, wrap it tighter.

"Make sure those thighs are squeezed just as tight," he remarks.

I bristle, but I bite my tongue, forcing myself not to react.

He crosses his arms. "You're many things, London. Demure isn't one of them." His gaze travels over my body, and I feel the press of it as if he's physically touching my exposed skin.

I clear my throat. "I need clothes."

He pushes off the doorjamb and stalks forward. I back up, but he reaches me before I have a chance to retreat. We've only spent short lengths of time together where he wasn't shackled in a chair, and as he towers over me, I'm reminded of how much taller than me he is.

He brushes a finger across my shoulder, down my arm, leaving a trail of goose bumps in his wake. Then he grasps my wrist and brings it up to inspect. Deep-red bands wrap each of my wrists from where the cuffs bit in.

"Sit on the counter," he says.

I arch an eyebrow. "Clothes," I demand.

Without warning, he grips my waist and hoists me onto the counter. I dig my nails into his arm, but he easily pries me off, turning my hand over

between us. He uses the soft light of the candles to inspect my scrapes and bruises.

A charged current electrifies the air between us. His touch is too intimate, too familiar, my body on high alert, so aware of him and every caress of his sure fingers over my skin. I struggle to breathe.

He's silent as he reaches above my head to gather alcohol and gauze from behind the vanity. His cologne invades my space. It's a clean, nautical scent—and I imagine this is his scent; the way he always smelled before incarceration. The thought is tantalizing.

"First you hurt me, then you mend me," I say, shaking my head. "Your diagnosis is ever advancing, Grayson."

His fingers trace the sensitive skin beneath my scraped wrists. "Even a sadistic hunter prefers healthy prey."

I try to snatch my hand away, but his grip tightens. "Hold still."

I straighten my spine. "You're enjoying this. Getting off on my pain."

"Nothing has ever gotten me hotter." A devious smile twists his lips, annihilating what's left of my resistance.

My pulse speeds as I allow him to treat and bandage my wrists. I try to think, to process, but his bare chest is just inches from me, and all I can do is stare at his scars. One diagonal slash on top of another—eleven in all. He catches me staring. "They're self-inflicted," I say, and he glances down.

"Yes."

I recall during our sessions, the pieces he revealed of himself and his self imposed punishment. "Is that the number of lives you've taken?"

"Yes."

He's been convicted of nine murders. He brandishes two additional scars. I swallow an ache. "Am I going to become number twelve? Just another scar on your flesh?"

A muscle feathers along his locked jaw. "I won't let that happen."

He finishes wrapping my left wrist, and I pump my hand into a fist. "How

can you stop it from happening when you can't control your compulsions. That's why I'm here, isn't it? Because you obsessed over me—over some connection, our 'inevitability'. And then you fantasized about your escape until you made it happen."

He rests his hands on either side of my thighs, his face too close to mine. Shadows dance over his face. The flicker of candlelight casts his features in dark, predatory beauty. "There are too many contingencies to account for them all. I had to focus on the most likely ones, but we—you and I, London—we were always a contingency. What we're working through now is the variables to determine our exact outcome."

I hold his gaze. I find and wrap a stray thread from the towel around my finger. "A less intelligent person with your disorder would simply be insane. They'd have been locked up long ago with the rest of the criminally insane. But you...your IQ distorts the madness, Grayson. It may feel like brilliance, even mimic it, but it's still madness."

His head tilts slightly, bringing him even closer. "One man's madness is another's genius. Is that what you're saying?"

My shoulders tense, his nearness unnerving. "You buried me," I say, the accusation clear in my raspy voice. "Where is your genius in that?"

"Patience, love. You'll realize it soon enough." He lowers his head and inhales deeply, breathing in my skin. The pulse of his breaths against my shoulder vibrates along my body like a current, humming with a warning.

Grayson pulls away, putting a small space between us. Then, reaching for the white candle, he slowly swipes a finger through the flame. "Touching you is like daring the fire to burn me."

He taunts the fire, deliberately toying with the wick until the flame is almost snuffed out. Then he moves in. His hands slide along the counter, eating the distance separating us. His thumbs make contact—the slightest touch to my thighs, but I feel the impact rock through me.

"You've always been too tempting," he says. "Alluring, seductive..."

making me question myself. Seduction is one of your sins, did you know that? Are you aware of your power?”

I lick my lips, completely aware of the way he’s watching my mouth. This is a complicated matter, though; how far to push him without going too far, without pushing him over the edge. It could just as easily backfire.

I’m willing to take that risk.

“I’ve never felt weak until you happened,” he says, inching my towel up my thighs. “That can drive a man crazy. The want. The need. Craving what you know is bad for you.”

I stop resisting and let his hips push my knees apart. “I’m just as guilty,” I admit. “Of desiring that bad thing, of wanting you.”

His hand travels eagerly up my back, then he pushes his fingers into my damp hair. Restraint unleashed, he fists my hair and tugs, exposing my neck. I close my eyes against the feel of his mouth touching down, his lips and tongue coaxing me to give in as he kisses a blistering trail over the juncture of my neck and shoulder.

He pauses when he reaches my ear. “You are the bad thing.”

My eyes open. Arousal forgotten, I pull back and stare into his pale gaze. “I’m tired of this game, Grayson.”

“Then stop playing and show me *you*.” His hold in my hair tightens as he grips my upper thigh with his other, forcing me against him.

The abrasive rub of his jeans between my legs makes me gasp, and I thrust my hands out. I plant my palms on his chest, keeping a span of air between us. “Let me go—” His mouth captures mine in a ruthless kiss, swallowing my plea.

I push at his chest, hating that I notice the strain in his muscles, the way my body responds to the hardness pressing against my inner thigh. His fingers dig into the flesh of my backside, pulling me harder to him, my struggle only fueling the fire.

My nails find purchase in his skin, and I claw for freedom, the same way

I clawed the box. He absorbs the attack as if he's feeding on the pain. I locate the bandage on his shoulder and nail the wound with my fist. His guttural roar fills the cavern of my mouth before he breaks away, breaths heavy.

"I want out," I demand. "I want out of this sick game."

He takes my hand and flattens it to his chest, covering the scratches beading with red. "You're here—right here—because you chose to be. This is where you belong."

"I didn't choose to be your captive...your victim."

"What did you want to be, then? My love slave? My clandestine lover? Fucking like animals between inmate visitations?" His laugh is hollow. "I hardly think that would be good enough for the respectable Dr. Noble. Or maybe it's the other way around. You thought I'd be your dirty secret. Your pet. Take me out when you want to play, then lock me back up when you're through." He moves in closer, thrusting his erection hard against my seam. "Tell me. What did you think this was about?"

I hate him—I hate the way his words fracture my mind. The way his touch sears my flesh. I hate the way my body arches toward him against my will, the ache deep within my core a pulsing heat that demands to be sated.

"I hate you," I whisper.

"You hate everything but me."

"Stop fucking with my head—" My hands become fists that beat at his chest. Blind punches land anywhere I can strike.

Grayson groans and pulls me off the counter. His strong arms haul me forward, then I'm against the wall. My back makes contact as his body pins me, his hands trapping mine above my head. My lungs fight for oxygen.

"Is this your attempt at mastering your passions?" he says against my lips. "Let's see how mastered you are."

Keeping my wrists locked together, Grayson frees one of his hands. He slides it down my arm until he reaches the towel. With a quick tug, my only barrier from him drops to the floor.

I'm more than naked; I'm bared. Exposed. Vulnerable.

His skin touching mine, the heat of his body, our raw desire...it's real. And it's decimating. The air around us is charged with an alarming current that threatens to combust all the molecules in the room.

His knee wedges my legs apart, and my body doesn't fight. The ache intensifies at the feel of his hand finding me instantly. I quake under his touch and arch off the wall, my breasts seeking contact with his rough skin.

"Deny it," he whispers as he expertly slips his fingers between my thighs. "Utter one claim that this isn't what you want, and I'll stop."

But he knows the truth of me already. He can feel how wet I am as his fingers slide over my clit, hear my yearning in the breathless moans I try to hold back.

"Tell me you want this—say it. Tell me you want *us*."

I bite my lip, refusing to give in completely. "I can want physical satisfaction," I finally say when my body peaks. "That's not a shattering revelation. It means nothing."

The sound of his zipper lowering sends a thrill coursing through my veins. Want is a dangerous emotion. When it's strong enough, all other emotions fade into the background. I want Grayson, and my loathing isn't present enough to stop me.

His hand moves against my pelvis as he takes himself out. The silky smooth touch of his cock along my stomach speeds my pulse, my heart knocks painfully against my chest wall.

"You're so strong, London. So damn strong and stubborn." I can feel him stroking himself, and my eyes flutter closed. The ache builds into a sharp throb between my legs. "I love everything about you—even your sickness. It turns me on and drives me mad. The bad things you've done. I should despise what you are, but you caught me in your web, and I'm begging you to bleed me dry, that's how twisted you got me."

I gasp for air, my skin scorched everywhere he touches.

I open my eyes, and there in the vanity mirror I glimpse the tattoo between his shoulder blades. The inked keyhole is dark and fresh, hand drawn. Inside the shading are numbers and formulas—an equation I can't make out, but I know it's important. What does it mean?

“Look at me.”

I do. I stare right into him, taking in the heated look I see in his pale blues. How his arms flex with his sure movements as he continues to stroke himself. I can't fight the need any longer. “Fuck me.”

A smile notches the corner of his mouth up. The way his features shift, so subtle, so knowing, I shiver. He leans in, pushing his body fully against mine. “Say it again,” he whispers in my ear.

I swallow my erratic heartbeat. “Fuck me.”

He bites down on my shoulder, eliciting a cry from me, as he slips his cock between my slick lips—teasing, but not entering. He pulls back just as quickly and jerks his cock with fast and hard strokes. His movements painful to my neediest part. His groan travels the length of my body, then I feel warmth coating my stomach.

He releases me then. My arms fall to my sides, my muscles weak, my body yearning for fulfillment from denied gratification. My belly is cold from his semen, and I pant at the sight of his cock pulsing after release.

Grayson says nothing as he bends and picks up the towel. He tosses it at me.

I barely catch it and fumble to cover myself. Reality sinks in. “You used me.”

He pulls his jeans up and zips them before he steps close. “Now we're even.”

I push him away from me, my body a fit of pent-up frustration. “If we're keeping score, then you have another one coming. Six feet under.”

His lips graze my jaw, and I'm too depleted to push him away again. “I really do love you dirty mouth. But you should work a little harder on

mastering your passions.”

I watch him leave the room with a scowl. I clean myself off and blow one of the candles out, my shame too noticeable even in the dim light. I want to snuff out the world so I can hide in the shadows.

I’m only given a moment before I hear a rattling. My senses go on alert, and I scramble toward the door, but Grayson steps into my path. He grabs me around the waist and fastens the handcuffs to my bandaged wrists.

“No—”

The darkness is everywhere. Grayson’s house devoid of light. It follows me as he drags me to a black room.

CELL

GRAYSON

To break a person of their will, you have to break their hold on life itself. London knows this all too well. She employs this very tactic with her patients. Gradually stripping them of all hope.

Hope.

It's hope that gives a person the strength to fight, to persevere, to overcome. To *live*. Take their hope away, and you're left with a perfectly pliable, shell of a person to mold and shape. I don't have to agree with the psychology of it to appreciate the process, the structure. It's brilliant.

You could say it appeals to the welder in me, and the puzzler. I enjoy the building part more than the tearing down, and that's why London and I are a perfect match.

Together, we're complete. We're whole.

All these years, I've been missing an important aspect of the process. Torture isn't enough. Physical pain isn't enough. It's the psychological element—the total mental destruction—that breaks a person. Like a twig, when the mind is bent to the snapping point, the slightest outside pressure will break it clean through.

I admit this is a recent revelation. I'm prone to stick with what I know, the tried and true methods of my craft. In her presence, I'm lacking. But I

hope she'll come to appreciate my methods just as I admire hers.

I turn the key, locking the cell door, then pocket my key ring. London is curled into a ball in the middle of the room, looking beaten, defeated. But I know better. She's dressed in one of my T-shirts and a pair of my sweats. She's disheveled and beautiful.

I didn't build this dungeon for her—I built it with the idea that one day it would serve a purpose. Which proves how fortuitous we are. A twisted design by fate itself.

It's perfect.

"Did your father have a light?" I ask her. I relight the candle that went out during our struggle to put her in the cage.

"Did you make this cell for me?" she counters. "How long have you been planning to take me?"

I lower into a crouch and slide a plate of food under the bar. Spaghetti and two pain pills. "Take them sparingly." It's not the freshest meal, but not too much else can be kept for long without spoiling.

"Answer me."

"Believe it or not, London. Not everything is a conspiracy against you. That's the paranoia kicking in." I tap my temple. "I welded this jail because I'm a welder. It's what I do. I spent time here myself, staring at the bars, getting accustomed to them." I run my hand along the cold iron. "I spent a year incarcerated in solitary confinement. I can be a very patient man. I'll wait for you for as long as it takes."

She sits up, brushes her hair out of her face. "Can you at least tell me where we are."

"That's not what you're really asking. Our location serves you no purpose." I sit, making myself comfortable across from her. "You're asking how likely is the chance that the authorities will find you. This house isn't in my name. Technically, it doesn't belong to me or anyone that can be connected to me. It will be a while before you're found."

A spark of hope ignites in her dark eyes.

I've given her just enough to keep going. She'll need that tiny flicker of hope to survive her dungeon.

"I have to get rid of the car." I stand and brush down my jeans. It's liberating to be out of the orange jumpsuit. "I can't risk it being spotted. That would be irresponsible."

"Don't leave me."

Her voice is small and fragile. She looks almost helpless on the floor, surrounded by wrought-iron bars. She looks lost.

Another of her sins: deceit. She's mastered the art of duplicity. In order to fool others, she has to live the lies. As a narcissist, she even believes them. The structure of her world depends on her falsehoods. When London's truly at her breaking point, only then will the dam give, and the truth rush free.

I don't have an infinite amount of time with her, however. I'm not deluded enough to think that this won't fail absolutely. Her mind is her strongest attribute. And again, that's her specialty, not mine. She needs a push.

Bracing my hands on the bars, I say, "It's strange what impacts us. What defines us. People don't remember the good. They remember what guts them."

She gets to her knees. Keeping herself beneath me, giving me the assumption of power. She's an expert. I smile.

"I've been gutted, Grayson. My life is no fairytale. The punishment you're inflicting on me...I've already suffered. Any sins I may have committed throughout my life, I have paid for them already."

"Have you."

She squints at me. "You know I have."

I press my forehead to the bars. "Your patients suffered, too. Granted, they were sick individuals. Where we've been able to channel our sickness, control our compulsions and hide in plain sight, they're not as talented. They

lack impulse control. But that's where the good doctor comes in." I smile at her. "You are the best in your field."

She gets to her feet. "Go to hell."

I laugh. "Which one?"

A disgusted expression tugs her features into a scowl. "I strove to help my patients despite a world that would see them executed, exterminated. Like vermin." She clears her hair from her eyes. "As rehabilitation became more and more unlikely, I still fought for my patients."

"You have a bit of Florence Nightingale about you, don't you? You fall a little in love with all your patients—that give and take, sacrifice and consume, like a lovesick couple. Except for you, it's all about the take."

She regards me cautiously. "What are you talking about?"

"You're an artist, London. Your practice is like a dance. A bloody ballet where you warp and break the minds of your patients like a dancer's body. You devour their gifts, and when they're used up and broken, you discard them to the nearest insane asylum."

She stands still, her eyes gauging me. She's not the prey; she's the hunter. "You've fabricated a very rich story for me, Grayson. None of which is real."

I cock my head. "When did the headaches start?"

The confused draw of her eyebrows is her only response.

"I bet they've been happening more frequently lately. Becoming more painful, lasting longer."

"I've worked harder this year than at any other point in my career. Of course I'm going to suffer physically for that."

"You sure have been working hard. What about Thom Mercer?"

She shakes her head. "What about Thom?"

"Being inside prison, you meet a lot of unsavory types. A lot of whom were your patients. Thom was a very disturbed individual. The things he said..." I *tsk*. "If you hadn't already destroyed him, he may've ended up as one of mine."

“What the hell are you talking about? Thom Mercer was committed to Cotsworth’s psychiatric ward as a functionally medicated schizophrenic. He was one of my most acclaimed case studies.”

“Who hung himself with his bed sheet.”

Her face pales in shock. “Why are you doing this. Why are you lying?”

“Come on. Is lying a part of my disorder?”

She looks away, paces the cell. “No, but creating an elaborate disaster is. I won’t fall victim to this. I won’t become your next disaster.”

“Oh, London.” I love the way her name tastes; like fresh lilacs. “Why do you think I was so tempted from the start? You came to me as a beautiful disaster already.”

She rushes the cage. Like a wild animal, she grips the bars and throws her body into a violent fit to rattle her prison. I stand unmoved on the other side. The bars don’t give. “Fuck you. Fuck you—” She says it over and over, a breathy chant falling from her lips.

Breathing heavy, she sags against the iron, her grasp on the bars barely keeping her upright. I rest my hands over hers. “There’s only one way out,” I say. “You’re smart enough to figure out how.”

Her gaze latches on to me. “Did before—between us—mean anything to you?”

I press my mouth to her fingers, inhale her scent. “It meant everything.”

“Then you can’t do this, Grayson. You’re confused...you think this is love? Disempathetic types don’t torture their loved ones. You should be protecting me from your illness, not inflicting it on me.”

A laugh bursts free. “But that’s a myth, right?”

Her brows crease together. “And I’m a liar, right?”

I reach through the bars and grasp the back of her head, dragging her to me so I can taste her. I linger there, just feeling her breaths pulse against me, before I release her. “Because I do love you, I’ll give you what I’ve never given anyone before.” Her eyes widen as I back away from the cage. She

clings to her hope, waiting to hear the word *freedom*. But I can't grant her that. It's solely within her power to be set free.

"Here's your one hint, London," I say, and pick up the candle. "Think of this as your confessional. What Dr. Mary Jenkins was too proud, too vain to admit, you can divulge in secret. Only the cage to hear your whispers."

A hysterical laugh springs from her mouth. "And a camcorder, right?" Through with pacing, she settles next to her dish and stares at the food. "I'm not like Dr. Jenkins. I didn't lobotomize my patients."

"No, you didn't. That would've been too obvious. You're smarter than that. Better at impulse control. But yet, here you are, just like the others, caught in a web of your own design." I move toward the door. "Time to admit to your sins, London. You tortured your patients. You shredded their minds. You played God, trying to find a cure for yourself. Once you can admit that, then the cell door will open."

She looks up from the plate. "This is what you want me to confess?"

"Yes."

She lifts her hands in surrender. "Fine. I confess it. Now open the fucking door."

I pause in the doorway. "You know it's not that simple, love."

It's fleeting, but for a second, panic slips across her face. She's about to be abandoned. In a cage like her father kept his girls. She claws at her clothes, searching for a loose thread, her hair in tumbled disarray. Wild and frantic. "I want to see Thom Mercer's file," she says.

I rub the back of my neck. "That's a hard demand to meet out here—"

"I want to see it," she snaps.

I exhale heavily. "I'll make it happen." Then I turn to leave.

"No," she says, halting me just outside the door. "My father didn't allow light in his basement. He held them in the dark."

I keep her gaze. I promised to set her free, and I will. Set her free of the pain, and her crippling humanity. But first she has to face the dark. Even she

knows this.

From the very beginning, people have divided good and evil. Two beings fighting for dominance. I don't believe in divine beings. Life is simpler than that. We're our own gods and devils. Capable of the vilest evil and of the holiest righteousness. We make our own rules, and create our own heavens and hells.

We choose them every day.

I douse the flame and close the door, shutting out the light. Leaving London to war with her demons in her personal hell.

ASYLUM

LONDON

I once counseled a woman who was afraid to be alone. Her husband had left her for a younger woman, her daughter had fled home for college, and she found herself uneasy all the time. Unable to sleep, unable to cope. She suffered daily panic attacks.

The house is too quiet, too still, she said during one of our sessions. *I hate the silence.*

It was this patient in my early career that propelled me toward my passion and away from the bored housewives and midlife crises husbands. I remember how much I loathed her as I sat across from the hand-wringing woman. I couldn't sympathize with her; I had never hated the silence. Nor had I ever had that anxious need to be surrounded by people.

Solitude is a test, I told her.

Solitude reveals who we are. Isolation is not loneliness; it's the absence of noise and distraction. It forces you to acknowledge your worth. If you must surround yourself with people, you invite distractions from the one person deserving of your time: *you*.

Truthfully, I believed she was an empty, worthless woman who might as well be knitting doilies in front of daytime TV. She was wasting my valuable time with her pathetic existence, simply because she couldn't bear to be alone

with herself. She was selfish. She didn't like who she was, so she was going to subject me to her monotony, too.

That was my last session as a general psychologist.

Past sessions tend to creep up when the silence gets too loud. When I'm given too much time to think. Like now, the quiet is damn near tangible, the blackness muting the world.

Solitude is a test.

I've always savored my alone time, never fearing being truly isolated—but maybe I was too harsh on my patient. Maybe this is the kind of alone she felt. The absolute deprivation of all senses.

I would compare it in part to death, if I hadn't already experienced being buried alive.

I reach my hand outside the cage, toward a sliver of light bleeding through the blacked-out window. I have no concept of time, but it must be day. I've spent what feels like hours in this dark room, in the cage, huddled in a corner, trying to wait Grayson out. But time is relevant, right? For Grayson, maybe it's only been minutes.

He's testing me. This is a test that I can't fail.

That blade of daylight is just out of reach, but I still reach for it, imagining its warmth touching my fingers. It's a strange comfort.

I pull my hand back. Somewhere in this room is a camera. Grayson's watching me the same way he watched his victims before. If it was anyone else, I'd offer them money. I have plenty of money. I might even offer my body. I have very little shame or emotional connection to physical touch and sex. A breathy laugh escapes. Except when it comes to Grayson, apparently. I admit that much; being with him...that fire so tempting...I crave that bad thing. I hunger for him.

It's like a drug habit you can't shake. I tug his shirt up and inhale his scent on the fabric. It's like the craving between fixes. Your hands get shaky, skin clammy, awaiting the next taste. So, so bad for you—but absolutely

satisfying when you get that first hit.

I drop the shirt. Grayson can't be bought or bribed. He has his own cravings to feed, and I have to satisfy his deviant desires if I'm going to make it out of here alive. I have to find a way to give him what he wants without sacrificing too much.

The smell of the spaghetti gnaws at my stomach. I've tried to ignore it, even push it out of the cell. It could be laced with something. However, if taking the chance gets me one step closer out of this hellhole...

I bring the food closer and pick a pill off the plate. I break it in two and swallow half, then pocket the rest. I eat the noodles and tomato sauce with my hands instead of the fork, grinning as I'm reminded of when a woman doused me in pig's blood and called me an animal. I lick the plate just like the caged animal I've become.

Then I slide the dish toward the cell door. It hits the corner bar with a disruptive *clank*. "Satisfied now?" I ask. Too famished to care, I inhaled every noodle, disregarding the fact that it's probably drugged. Likely with a hallucinogen to enhance my *experience*. I laugh out loud at the thought. Grayson's traps are never so simple as to only lock one of his victims in a cell. I've watched hours of torture, the elaborate traps always having a gruesome twist. I suspect I'll start hallucinating soon, a frantic meltdown where this cage becomes my father's basement.

Because that's what he wants, right? Just like the grave, I'm to suffer as my father's victims suffered. I'm to be punished in the Hollows Reaper's place for his crimes.

Only as the seconds tick by, nothing happens. "I'm disappointed in you, Grayson. You missed a prime opportunity. This could've been your best trap yet."

But the thought sticks. My home basement manifests from my mind, as if I gave life to the memory by simply thinking it into existence. It wiggles around in my head, slithering from the dark corners. The seams of the cell

bend and warp. The shadows play tricks.

I squeeze my eyes closed against the darkness. Curse that meager ray of light. I wonder if Grayson allowed it in here on purpose to fuck with me.

Once the seed is planted, I can't uproot it. I pace the length of the cell. Back and forth. Trying to tear the thought out of my head, or tire myself out.

Maybe I never made it out of my father's basement. Maybe I've lived an entire lifetime inside a delusion, and in reality, he's had me trapped in that dank prison all this time.

"Fuck this." I crouch in the corner and wrap my arms around my legs. I can wait him out. He can't just keep me here. I have to eat. I have to use the bathroom. With a sudden flash of fear, I recall spotting something on the other side of the cell.

I crawl my way there, feeling my hands out before me, until I find it. I circle my hands around the rim. *A bucket.* "Oh, my God."

I bound to my feet and scream. I yell until my lungs catch fire and my stomach aches from overuse of muscles. I shout through the angry tears, and when my voice cracks and gives, I curse Grayson with heated whispers.

He has no answers.

The silence builds until my ears ring from the loss of sound.

I change positions. I pace. I do my routine exercise to alleviate the tenderness in my back. I try not to take the other half of the pill. I fail and take it anyway. Then I take the second one. I try to sleep, and I try to count. I sip at the one water bottle he left me. I hold my bladder, refusing to use the fucking bucket.

I do these things repeatedly. I change the order, doing them at random, trying to trigger something...a *change*.

How far is Grayson going to dispose of the car? An hour...a day...*days*? The silence grows thick and heavy, weighing on me in the dark. I'm becoming disoriented. My senses confused. With what's left of the light, I try to see my hands. A cold wetness covers them—that same sensation I felt that

day. I remember the thick red...how it coated my flesh, seeped into every crevice of my skin. Blood stains down to the bone.

Wiping my hands through my hair, I attempt to clean them. Get rid of the feeling. The image comes to me too clearly now. The girl in the mirror with blood-streaked hair and dirt-caked clothes. I throw the water bottle at the image, waiting to hear the glass shatter.

But the only sound to follow the thud of the bottle hitting the ground is the crash of thunder. I whip my head around. The light is gone.

“Damn this to hell.”

I jump and reach for the top bars. My fingers skim them, and I come down with a lancing pain to my back. Doubled over, I take in measured breaths, mentally steeling myself. Then I try again. With a groan, I grab hold of the bars. My arms burn, but I cling and start to swing my legs. Building momentum, I rock back and forth, talking myself into it, before I slam my bare feet into the cell door.

Pain webs through my body. I hit the floor, breath knocked from my lungs. Acute nausea grips me before I can cry out, and I hurl myself onto my side. I try for the bucket, but it's too far. I lose my stomach right here on the floor.

I wretch until my stomach is as empty as the room, and there's nothing left but bile. Flames lick my throat, and I mentally curse myself for throwing the water. When I roll onto my back, the pain is a living, breathing demon within me. It rages, working its way to my shoulder blades. My breath saws in and out. I blink back tears against the sudden flickering that covers my vision.

The flashes intensify, and I can't be sure if it's from the pain or the storm. A roll of thunder booms in time with each flip of the light. *Light and dark.* My heart picks up the beat, my blood pulsing painfully in rhythm, syncing with the flickering. Like an 8mm film reel, scratchy images bleed through the haze of pain. My mind is losing the battle.

Rain hammers our tin roof. The *plinks* come faster, harder, creating a sonogram of vibrations against my eyelids. I try to drift away, but the storm outside won't let me go. It reminds me that he'll be home soon.

The creek of pines whispers from my past. Voices float through the thin branches to taunt me. *You know.*

I shake my head against the floor. The motion tips my body over a cliff, and I'm spiraling down, nowhere to land, nothing to catch me. "*Stop.*"

The creek grows louder. It's no longer coming from the trees. I see his boots come down the steps, his weight bowing the boards. I hear the *clink* of the key entering the lock, then the squeak of the door opening.

She's panicking. Asking me what to do. *What are we going to do?*

I look to the girl beside me. "*Be good girls.*"

My eyes open with a start.

No. no, no, no.

I crawl away from the memory, toward that sliver of light. Where is it? God—where the fuck is it?

The fall jarred something inside me. One of the sealed doors came off the hinges.

I hear Sadie's voice: *once you break the locks, there's no going back.*

How far down does the rabbit hole go?

It's Grayson's voice guiding me toward that light now as my fingers claw the floor. Each push forward sends a fire-hot whip of pain across my spinal cord. I absorb the lashes, even welcome them, because the pain is real. I know it exists and why.

But the memories flooding my mind are streaming too fast. Overwhelming. My mind fractures, trying to separate truth from fiction.

He drugged me. Grayson had to have drugged me. I cling to that hope, desperate for the images assaulting my head to dissolve back into the abyss. But where there was once darkness, a light shines, illuminating those haunted corners.

I reach the bars and hold on tight as I tunnel down.

I'm not my father's daughter.

Not by blood. Not by a nameless, faceless woman who died after I was born. That's not her garden. That's not our *home*. I was born the day he stole me. Brought me into his world of locks and keys and bars. I was born into a dark world—after I was ripped from the light.

“He stole me.”

Even as I delve deeper, the psychologist in me denies it all. Repressed memories aren't credible. They're rarely ever accurate. They're the mind's way of reshelving memories, sorting too many moments that we're unable to catalogue. I want to continue to deny it, but it's as if a shroud has been lifted. Everything so clear, so vivid.

So real.

And I've never felt more alone.

You know.

I do know. I've always known about the girls, because I was once one of them. Until he pulled me from the cell and kept me for his own. He was a cop. He was the fucking sheriff. Of course, he was also my protector. I stayed in his asylum willingly, and left the other world behind, locking it away forever.

The man I killed was not my father. But the patients I tortured to understand who I am, what I am...suddenly, there are too many of them. The doors crack down the middle, light splintering through the shadows, and the overload flips the kill switch.

I shut down.

TILL DEATH

GRAYSON

Forty-six hours in the cage and London loses the fight.
The mind is a fucked up place.

I push Stop on the recorder, then log the time with my notes. The first half was spent cursing me, blaming me, listing the ways I should die—I enjoyed that part. She doesn't realize how talented she is—and waiting for the twist. I smile as I jot down her assumption on the drugs. Not a bad idea. Maybe next time.

Her last four hours... Those were her most trying. And the most revealing. Even a strong-willed woman like Dr. Noble can't keep the demons locked up forever. I watch her on the computer screen now, her arms cradling her body as she sleeps.

Denial is a strenuous mental exercise. You have to be completely, utterly delusional not to bend when faced with veracity in its barest form. Regardless of her behavior, London doesn't suffer from idiosyncratic beliefs. She's not delusional. Mastering the art of lying was a survival mechanism to protect herself, to enable her to pursue greatness in spite of the hurt, the harm, to others.

Just had to pull at her thread until the spool unraveled, revealing the truth. I'm pleased with the analogy as my hand flies over the journal page. I want to

remember our moment. It will be important later.

Can I claim I knew all the answers before I first entered her therapy room? No, not at all. Not like I typically do. Mounting extensive research on a subject before introductions. But with her—she was different, special. There was only a *feeling*.

Something I discredited as bullshit my whole life. I work with facts and evidence, not gut instinct or intuition. I trust what great minds before me have tested and studied and produced concrete proof of.

But like I said; she's different. I sensed that kindred connection to her, and it became a compulsion to tease our relationship apart, dissect it and layer the pieces together in a way I could analyze and understand.

I went against my nature by relying on instinct in this instance. Trusting this strange new sensation that warms my blood whenever I think of her. Love—if that's what it truly is—decided we were a match, and she's offered proof. Finally.

I flip the page, resting the ballpoint to the journal as I click back on the footage. Hair in beautiful disarray over her face, she whispers it over and over, rocking against the floor. "He's not my father."

I move closer to her image, an anxious thrill squirming inside me. This moment is too visceral to be an act. The admission too specific, explicit. It's her truth—and her truth matches my own. It's what called out to me, and why we belong together.

We are the stolen children raised by monsters.

And now she knows it, too.

"I want out." London's voice is barely audible. I turn up the volume. "Let me out of this fucking trap."

She's so close, but she doesn't understand it all fully yet. This isn't a trap. The burial, the cage...it's preparation *for* her trap. She can't go in until she's primed, her mind open and ready to accept our reality—to accept *us*.

She's so close.

I close out the footage and return to the live feed. I crick my neck, working out the kink, then stand and stretch. My body is just as taxed as London's. She hasn't gone through this alone. I've been with her. And when she enters the trap, I'll be with her still.

I glance out the window, excited for her to see our masterpiece.

Before her, countless hours have been spent in this room designing, crafting. Modeling. It's my home away from home, and when it's gone, I'll mourn—but I'll rebuild. Bigger, better, more intricate. With her.

I roll up my sleeves and reach behind my back, trace the tattooed equations between my shoulder blades. Then I pull out my plans, the ones I sketched from the engraved ink on my skin. The design of her trap began nine months ago in a six-by-eight cell. With a few custom tweaks modified for the upgraded specs, it's now nearly complete.

I put every last bit of myself into this. It's my heart and soul, if such a thing exists. I built it for her, out of some foreign emotion that consumed me, plagued me, until I was forced to relent. There's a fine line between passion and obsession—and I crossed that line the moment I saw her.

I haven't heeded my own warnings, though. Over the course of our entanglement, I've become dependent on her success. How much can the mind endure? Even when you know the disaster is coming, you can't look away. We're a little sick like that.

This trap will test us all.

I envisioned the moment at sunset. Something about the twilight suits the scene. With the dusting of stars scattering a pale sky, the chirr of crickets in the backdrop. Of course, we'll have our own orchestra of screams and pulleys, a soundtrack for the perfectly choreographed ballet. London's dance.

I hook the last key, give it a flick to watch it spin. Shiny silver glints in the setting sun.

When I'm satisfied that every detail is in place, I turn the laptop screen

toward me and enable the mic. "It's time to wake up, love."

London stirs, then her head snaps up and she looks around. "You twisted bastard. Let me out of here!"

Still so much fight in her. Good. Having her completely broken wouldn't work. "Are you ready?"

Her hand raises to flip me off. I suppose that's answer enough.

I'm like a kid in a candy store as I head toward her room. I twirl my key ring, my steps hurried, impatient. At least, I assume this is how a normal, healthy kid would feel awaiting his special treat. I have little to compare this feeling to, dread having been my prominent emotion during my youth.

I flip on the light. London's demeanor is unsettling as I near the cell. I can't keep the smile from curling my lips; I'm that eager. "It's only been a couple of days," I say, looking over her disheveled appearance. "You look like hell."

Her glare lacks that certain defiant spark I've come to adore. "I'm sick, Grayson. I need a doctor."

I unlock the cell door with a groan. I thought by now we'd be past the lies. "We've already established your sickness, baby. What you have... there's no cure." I brace my hand on the bar, blocking the opening. "I'm the closest thing to a doctor you're ever going to get."

She stands on shaky legs, her arms hugging her waist. "I have a fever, you asshole. I need a—"

"I have antibiotics." I step inside and hang the dress on a bar. London notices the black satin gown for the first time. "I have an assortment of medicine for any and all ailments. It's getting late. We need to get you cleaned up and dressed."

Her gaze doesn't stray from the dress. "What the hell is that."

"Your dinner gown. You are hungry, I assume."

She drops her hands into fists by her sides. "I'm not your fucking play thing."

“London, I’ve been exceedingly patient. Let’s go.”

She cranes an eyebrow. “Make me.”

I scrub a hand through my hair. Two days wasn’t enough. But we’re running short on time. For all intents and purposes, the dress isn’t a requirement for her trap. But she uses her expensive suits and pencil skirts to shield herself like armor. I want her out of her comfort zone.

Plus, I tried hard to pick the perfect attire for tonight. The black satin will cling to her curves, the purple slip beneath matches the tinted glass beading of the pearl shawl. Reminding me of her scent of lilac. My groin throbs in anticipation.

I yank the dress from the hanger and unzip the back. “Take off your clothes.”

She steps backward. “No.”

“Another two days in the cage, then?”

A laugh tumbles out. “You don’t have that much time.” She crosses her arms. “I might be feverish, but you forget that I’m still *your* doctor. I can see it in your jumpy muscles. Your anxious movements and hitched breathing. Whatever awaits me outside this cage is far worse than what I suffered inside it. And you know they’re looking for me. They’re getting close, aren’t they?”

Tossing the dress to the floor, I move in. “If you don’t undress, I’ll do it for you. And I’ll make sure to enjoy it.”

Her features steel. “You were kidnapped as a child,” she accuses, taking another step farther back. “That’s why you refused to talk about your parents during sessions.”

I stop in front of her. “Mind games are for later.” I lunge for her, giving her a second to react and turn before I wrap my arms around her waist.

She’s too weak to put up much of a struggle. I wrestle her to the floor and onto her back, pinning her wrists beneath my knees. “I was hoping we could work in some foreplay before dinner.” She wriggles beneath me as I grip the T-shirt and tear it down the middle.

“You’re sick—”

“We’ve already established that, too.” I ease up to get to her sweats.

Her hand slips away. Before I can recover it, she brandishes a fork. “You can dine with the devil, you evil bastard.”

The fork lodges in my stomach, plunged beneath my rib cage, the way she once stabbed another man who dared to lock her in a cage. I laugh at the irony as I clutch the utensil.

She uses her knees to shove me off, then crawls toward the door, getting to her feet when she clears the cell.

I roll over and brace myself. Gritting my teeth, I yank the fork free. My hand comes away with red, my shirt absorbing the blood. I palm the wound. It’s painful, but not fatal.

I’m following her trail through the hallway when I hear her scream. It doesn’t take long to locate her. She’s sprawled out on the floor, her foot hung on a tripwire.

I grab the back of her pants and lift her off the wire before I roll her over and straddle her legs. “I’m going to assume you meant to miss vital organs.”

She spits in my face, and I love the way the motion makes her tits bounce.

I run my tongue over my bottom lip, tasting her. Then closing my hands around her neck, I lean down. “Sweet dreams, London.” I squeeze.

Her gasps for air pulse against my fingers. Her nails claw at my hands. I watch her eyes bead with red as the vessels burst from the pressure. When her hands fall away, I strangle harder and press my lips to hers, tasting her shallow pleas before she fades.

DARKNESS

LONDON

Panic flares the moment consciousness snatches me back to the world. I don't open my eyes. I keep them sealed as I plead for that peaceful oblivion to return—that blissful nothingness. But just as he stole the world away, he forces me back, waving smelling salts under my nose.

I turn my head away, groggy. “Why can't I move?”

My voice is hoarse, my throat raw and neck tender. A wave of nausea rolls through my stomach. I can't move my head without pain shooting across my shoulders. “You choked me. Why didn't you just kill me?”

I hear a scraping sound, then as I dare to open my eyes, Grayson is seated beside me.

As my vision clears, so do the rest of my senses. We're under a veranda, the evening crisp with the taste of fresh mountain air. The glow of draped lights fills the space, keeping the darkness beyond my gaze. The scent of food hits me, making my mouth water and stomach pang with hunger. Then I notice the lack of feeling in my limbs, and fright startles me coherent.

“The string wasn't a part of the original design,” Grayson says, reaching for a tumbler of water. “But I couldn't resist the symbolism.”

I look down. I'm tied in thick black string. It crosses my body, cuts into my skin. I'm also wearing that damn dress.

“Restrained by your own devices,” he continues. “Your own self-induced limitations. How will you escape the binding restrictions you’ve imposed on your flesh?”

I blink at him, unimpressed.

He shrugs, then brings the glass to my lips. “Tough crowd. I thought the metaphor was fitting. That little string always wound so tightly around your fingers, cutting off blood flow, the way you cut yourself off from living. Then you enter the maze, following the cries, to find the final test.”

Maze? I hear it then—the sound that’s been in the background until he mentions it, bringing it forward. Screams carry from the dark, reaching my ears.

“Who is that? What have you done, Grayson?”

He makes me drink the water, and I struggle to force it past my constricted throat. But something else is...off.

I turn my head away in refusal, and notice my damp hair as it drags over my bare shoulders. “You drugged me,” I accuse.

“I didn’t want to, if that makes a difference.”

“It doesn’t. What did you use?” My head is fuzzy. I need to know if I’ll suffer any side effects. I need to think. To prepare.

“Chloroform.” He states it so casually, nonchalant. “You needed a bath, and as appealing as it sounds, wrestling you in the tub would’ve eaten away too much time.” Then he grasps my hand. “You’re scared.”

“I’m not scared of you.”

He encloses my hand in both of his. “You are frightened, London. Hands get cold when blood flows from the extremities. It’s a telling psychological response.” He releases me. “Let’s eat.”

He slides a plate closer, then cuts a piece of steak from a fillet. I try to crane my head toward the screams, but it’s painful, and the night masks the scenery past the veranda.

“I never asked, but I presumed you weren’t a vegetarian.”

Too starved to care, I lean forward and bite the meat off the fork.

He slices another piece free. “How much of your memory did you regain?” he asks, offering me the steak.

I take the food, chewing slowly. I don’t want to go back there. I’ve allowed my mind to slip once...I can’t afford to lose control again. “I remembered enough.”

“Do you remember how old you were when you were taken?” Grayson selects a steamed carrot this time. “I remember well. I was seven. Too old for that selective memory thing, where the mind represses bad things to protect itself.” He feeds me the carrot. “You must have been younger.”

“I don’t know,” I admit. I don’t even know if what I experienced in the cage was real or some drug-induced trip. “Why don’t you tell me? You seem to know everything about me already.”

“If I knew everything, we wouldn’t be here. And if we both knew all the answers, then we’d be far past this courting bullshit.”

I laugh. I can’t help it; I’ve gone completely mad. “Courting. I suppose this would be considered dating to a *psychopath*. A romantic dinner after a little strangulation foreplay.”

The screaming tapers off, barely audible now. He wipes a cloth napkin beneath my lips. “So you prefer something more mundane, like dinner and a movie. Where I bore you with my career achievements. And you force yourself to flatter me, stroke my ego, all the while I’m hoping you get liquored up enough for a quick, sloppy fuck by the end of the night.”

I glare at him.

His lips curve into a smile. “You do like your torture, don’t you.”

“You know what I like more? People who keep their word. You said once I confessed to the mistreatment and misconduct of my patients, then you’d release me.” I lift my chin. “I’m sure you have a recording of that stashed somewhere...so, the damage is done. My career is surely to be ruined. My files confiscated. Experts called in to reevaluate my patients and treatments.

You've won, Grayson. Another successful punishment dealt and suffered."

He pushes the plate away, and I mourn the loss of food. "I do have your recorded confessions, but they won't do any good. You were half delirious, clearly under duress amid your abduction at the hands of a madman." He stands and looks down at me. "That's not why you had to endure and pass the test."

Anxiety coils around my chest like a snake as he pushes the table back, creating a space for him to kneel in front of me. I glimpse the bloodstain on his shirt. Where I stabbed him. I eye the knife on the table.

I attempt to push away, but my legs are restrained just as tightly as my arms. My bare toes scrape the concrete.

He lays his hands on my thighs, stirring a visceral reaction. The contrast of the cool satin and his body heat ignites my skin. I want to flee and be closer to him all at once.

"Do you know who the girl was?" he asks. The feel of his touch steals the air from my lungs as his hands inch up, the silky dress whispering over my flesh. "The girl in the cage with you. Who was she?"

I breathe through the mounting pressure. "I can't be sure," I say. Her dirty face flashes before my eyes, unbidden. "But I think...I think I loved her."

Honesty is all we have left. Whatever Grayson has planned for me, my only recourse is the truth. He sees through my guise, the façade I display for the world, and he doesn't judge me the way it does. If anything, admitting the darkest, most disturbing facets of my psyche may buy me time.

And if I'm being completely honest with myself, I *want* to tell him. He was stolen—he has this whole experience and life as an abducted child, raised by the people who took him...and that's fascinating. But it's also sacred to who he is and the answers he harbors with that knowledge.

He glides his palms over my legs. I can feel the abrasive threat of his coarse touch beneath the flimsy material. I want it—and I loathe myself for wanting it. "Love," he repeats, like he's sounding it out, tasting it, the same

way I am in my head.

“She felt familiar,” I say. “Like family. Like a...”

“Sister.” He looks up at me.

As soon as I hear the word, recognition jars a memory. “Mia.” Little details, quick glimpses of our life, trickle into my mind. Her dirty blond hair tickling my face. Her smile. Her tears. Her laugh.

Then—

He took her from me. The current builds, a stream of memories flooding me. She was ripped through the bars, out of the basement, and away from me. I don’t need to recover all my memories to know the truth.

She’s buried with the others.

“London, breathe.” Grayson’s voice coaxes me away from the dark corner, and I gulp down a fiery breath.

“I don’t want to remember,” I confess. And I don’t. If he tortured her in front of me, if he killed her...my mind has protected me, sheltering me from an evil no child could process. Even now, the pain constricting my chest is so foreign, I’m unable to bear the crush. *I don’t want to feel.* “She can’t be my sister,” I whisper.

“There’s only one way to be sure.”

At that, my gaze lands on Grayson, trapped in his declaration. “Dig them up,” I say. Only this time when it leaves my mouth, the meaning is different, clear. DNA testing would prove if I had a sister. It would prove so much...

“You’ll never get answers from him,” Grayson says. “But if you pass your ultimate test, you will no longer need them.”

He buries his head in my lap, and the reflex to touch him strikes like a match. The yearning flares flinty and black between us. I steel my willpower, straining to hold on to some semblance of myself.

Think. The only question I would demand that my father answer is *why*.

But then, I know that, too, don’t I? I’ve studied and analyzed his disorder over the years. The girl, my sister, *Mia*—she was much older than me. She

was as old as the girls buried in our backyard. She was his target age, and me? I simply got in the way.

So the question then becomes: why did he keep me?

“He didn’t love me,” I reason aloud. “Not in the way a parent loves their child. He was grooming me. I was a project. And when I failed him, I was just another disobedient teen girl who needed punishment.”

Grayson grips my legs, grounding me. And I let him. “He was going to kill me,” I say, knowing it to be absolutely true now. My father—the only father I’ve known—was waiting for me to come of age.

“If you hadn’t killed him first.” He finds my gaze as he eases the dress above my knees. “The feeling, the emotion we call love is only a chemical in the brain. A chemical we never had access to, but does that mean we’re fiends?” He nuzzles my thighs, his lips dragging my dress higher. Heat singes my flesh. “Do we love each other, or are we merely crazy for each other? I know I’m crazy—maddeningly crazy for you. Obsession is a far more evocative emotion than love.”

The fervor of his touch rises, engulfing me in flames. The sensual feel of his palms on my thighs, skin to skin, stirs a carnal want within me that may just be akin to love. I want Grayson, in spite of—or maybe because of—the things he does to me that nobody else would dare.

“I wasn’t born this way.” I turn my head away, my fingers seeking desperately for the string.

“We weren’t born the day we took our first breath. We were born the moment we stole it.”

I close my eyes, feeling the raw and painful truth of his words. “We’re monsters.” I look at him then, breathless and torn. “And our love is this monstrous thing that will devour us.”

“It might, or it can take all the uncertainty and pain away,” he says. “This is right, London. We were born without remorse or guilt, because we’re designed to take life. The shame you feel, the guilt...it’s not real. You’ve

trained yourself to feel emotions that don't exist. Your mind has detached from certain areas of reality to shelter you from what you truly are."

"A killer," I whisper. An ache throbs at the base of my skull and I shut my eyes. "No. You're sick. I'm sick. We need help."

His deep laugh vibrates against my legs. "I am sick. I'm lovesick. But all love is a sickness. People do things to each other...couples employing deceptive tactics to try to change one another. Make them into a better version of themselves in the name of love. We're just more honest about it. We don't have to sugarcoat the process."

I shake my head. "I was fine before you happened to me."

He places a kiss on my thigh, then stands, looming over me. "You weren't fine, London. You were drowning."

I watch him walk to the end of the table, and I try again to free myself from the thick thread. I can't lose my grip on reality. I have to stay mentally strong, but I'm not sure of anything anymore—I'm not sure of myself.

Grayson returns with a folder. He drops it on the table, the contents spilling over the white tablecloth. "I couldn't access patient files. Not without giving us away. That's too dangerous." He tweaks a page from the pile. "But I was able to pull this off the Internet. I hope it will suffice."

He lays the page on my lap, the headline too bold to mistake.

"Convicted serial killer of three hangs himself in mental institution," he reads out loud. Another page is laid on top. "Arsonist murderer found dead in cell." Then another. "Suicide takes life of convicted rapist."

The pages continue to stack, each headline a weight, every name a face. It builds until the pain in my head screams, and I shout, "Enough—"

Knelt before me, Grayson reaches up and touches my hair. "I love it when you wear it down." He drapes the strands over my bare shoulders, situating the beaded shawl, his touch calming, gentle. I focus on grounding myself as a wave of nausea washes through me.

"I didn't kill them," I say, so low I can barely distinguish my own voice.

“No,” he says, removing the printed pages from my lap. “You didn’t kill them. You just gave them the means to kill themselves.”

The world tilts.

“Just like your most recent patient, or victim, Dale Riley.”

I blink hard, begging the world to right itself. “No. Riley transferred out of the program.”

A slanted smile steals across his face. “Is that what you call it? Transferring out. I like it. You’re exceptional, London. The way you’re able to not just lead a professional life, but thrive in it. Everyone around you, the whole world, invested in your lie. The truth is, Riley put a bullet through his head. Stole an officer’s gun and right here—” he angles two fingers under his chin “—pow.”

I turn my head, unable to look into his glacier eyes any longer.

“You see, London. Now that you’ve been shown the truth, you’ll never see the lie again. You’re liberated.”

“Liberated,” I repeat, trying to understand the meaning. The word sounds bizarre.

“No one understands you better than me. There’s no one who knows you more intimately, who will love you more passionately.” He strokes my face, then lays his hand over mine, caressing the tattooed scar along my palm. “We even mark ourselves the same. Our kills carved and inked on our flesh.”

I swallow. “I’ve only taken one life.”

His eyebrows hike. “You’ve taken six lives. Not with your own hands, you break their minds, plant a dark seed and help it grow, until your victims only have one choice.” He reaches for the knife. “We’re the same.”

My eyelids are too heavy to keep open. I let them drop as a swaying motion lulls me to some higher plane of consciousness. If I let him kill me, just end my life, I don’t have to face this truth again tomorrow. It can end here.

A sudden movement jars me back. I hear a loud tear, and my arm is freed

as the thread is stripped off. I open my eyes as Grayson then uses the knife to cut my other wrist free. He places the knife in my hand.

“You’ve been denying yourself the honesty of who you are,” he says. “And I’ve been weak. I have as much to answer for as you. My victims didn’t deserve the mercy I showed them, by even giving them a choice to redeem themselves. We were put here for a reason, designed for one purpose. Now that we’ve found each other, we don’t have to yield to their laws anymore.”

I stare up at him, a beautiful, dark god towering over his own insane creations. “You’re absolutely mad.”

His smile is shattering. “I can’t wait for you to join me.”

I grip the knife, adrenaline surging.

“But, I’m giving you a choice. After this, there are no more choices. This is the finality of us.”

I glance at the darkness, then at him. My chest tingles with anticipation. “What are my options?”

“A year ago, I was stalking a man before I was taken into custody. He was going to be my next victim. Now he’s yours. My gift to you.”

The screams have stopped, but with a shock of frightening awareness, I now know why they exist. “No. Grayson, please. You can’t do this to me.”

“I’ve done nothing to you but reveal the truth. But I am forcing you to finally choose, to stop the lies, London. I can’t tell you how badly I want you to do just that.”

“I won’t play this game.” I throw the knife down, emphasizing my point.

“So you’re going to go back to your world and...what? Confess your misconduct? Lose your license and possibly even serve prison time?”

No. I refuse to suffer the way the filth beneath me does. I shake the thought away.

“I didn’t think so.” He picks up the knife and places it in my grasp once again. “So choose. After everything we’ve uncovered, everything you now know. Do you think you’re above taking a life?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s find out.”

He turns toward the darkness. “You have until morning to decide. Free yourself of the string, run the maze, and make your choice. You can either set our victim free through rehabilitation, or you can end his life.”

Oh, God.

“Begin.”

T R A P

L O N D O N

What does it mean to be liberated?

During my career as a professional psychologist, I've counseled many patients, each one mentally shackled in one way or another, chained and bound by limitations. Even the most disturbed personalities who believed themselves to be free were governed by a crippling psychosis.

Take away our matter, and we exist only in thought.

We are all thoughts born of character. Each new moment, each new direction we take and journey we venture is first given birth by thought. This thought here, this is my transformation.

I'm being christened by darkness.

I've stared into the reflection of myself and glimpsed the unvarnished truth. Undistorted by the image our mind creates. When faced with that candidness, you can either accept or fracture.

No one can survive the absolute destruction of one's mind. We're not tempered glass, we're delicate shards, and I'm cracking.

Have I used my skills to warp the minds of six men? Have I been the murder weapon in their deaths? Or has Grayson shattered my mind?

Which reality is true?

My bare feet pound the earth as I race toward the edge of the woods.

Grayson's house stands tall and ominous against the night sky, its twinkling lights a refracted halo in the crisp air. I use the sparse light to guide me to the fence. I'm almost there.

Static erupts, crackling against the dark. "Touching the fence will end the game too soon, love. You don't want to do that."

I pant, my chest tight, as I stare up at the razor wire. I can hear the buzz of electricity humming along the woven metal fencing. *Bastard*. I look around, desperate for another escape.

"There's only one way out," Grayson's disembodied voice says. "And that's *in*."

The mouth of the garden maze lays before me, surrounded by high walls of vegetation.

"This is madness," I whisper to myself. "What if I refuse?" I shout. "What if I sit right here all night?"

The chirring of crickets is my only answer. "Shit." I bury my head in my hands, taking searing breaths, bone-weary. The ache in my back feels as if I've cracked in two—the lower half of my body a web of pain.

Atonement is another thought. It comes to me on a frantic note, a scream ringing out through the night. Somewhere amid the maze, a man awaits his fate. One of Grayson's victims. What has he done to be here? Is he worthy of saving?

Who has the right to make that choice?

I'm not a savior. I'm definitely not a hero. But I refuse to be this vile creature Grayson has painted me out to be. I'm not the bad thing—I can't be. My father's blood doesn't course through my veins.

I have a choice.

I drag the skirt of the dress up, freeing my ankles, and I sprint toward the opening of the maze. I took an oath as a doctor, and I can't let gravity pull me into the blackest hole...not yet.

Fire snakes a blistering trail through my lungs as I reach the latticed

opening, halting just within to grasp a breath. I find purchase on the wall of green, supporting my weight. Thorns press into my palm, and I pull away.

The screaming is louder here. My skin ripples with shivers. A glow dusts the night above the tall hedges, and I know that's my destination. I go in.

A cold sweat blankets my skin, my teeth chattering. The deeper I go, winding a path around walls of shadowy green, the colder the nighttime air gets. The temperature plunges as the night grows darker.

"Dammit," I curse as I hit a dead-end. I spin around, hands fisting my tangled hair. "Where am I going?"

The distorted hiss of the speaker system erupts, and I spin toward the sound.

"You're too impatient. Head east. You'll find your patient in the center."

"Fucking east," I breathe, my breath fogging. Which way is east? I chase the light instead, navigating the maze by shadows and instinct.

A tinkling sound disrupts the silence that's been my companion until now. A faint clang whispers in my ears. I follow the chime, dragging the hem of the dress behind me over the worn path. The hollow of the maze brightens as I turn a corner. Shock seizes my chest with a sharp spike.

No.

At first, I refuse to look—to *see*—so I stare at my hands. My thoughts lost in a void as I'm sucked down by the undertow.

Then I look up at the keys.

A canopy of gleaming silver and bronze and rusted metals held aloft by red string—a blanket woven of blood in the sky. The keys clang together, playing a dark, chiming melody that chills me to the bone.

My voice cracks on a laugh. I glance at the tattooed key on my flesh until my eyes blur. Sweat leaks into their corners, a biting sting like a needle piercing my vision clear.

He knows me.

In my vanity, I concealed the ugly and vile. And yet he saw.

In my profession, your past can be as damning as a wrong diagnosis. Shame is the conception of most sins against ourselves.

Twirling and twinkling like dancing stars in a black sky, the keys glimmer with the reflection of spotlights. Two lights shine on a glass container in the middle of the maze clearing. A tank filled to the brim with what looks like water. A half-naked man suspended above.

He screams as he fights his restraint. "Help me!"

I try to turn around, to go back, but Grayson's voice cuts through the night to stop me. "Below your patient is a deadly compound containing a heavy concentration of sulfuric acid. A lethal amount that can dissolve flesh and bone. To help him, London, you have to follow the rules. If you deem his life worthy of saving, that is."

"Fuck you!" I spin in circles, searching. I claw at the beads strung around my shoulders, tugging at them until the necklace breaks, spilling the glass orbs to the ground. "How do I save him?"

"There's a path you must follow. Stones guide the way. Stand on each and select a key. For every key you choose, your patient will either be lowered or lifted higher above." He pauses a beat. "There are two special keys I've selected for you. One will set the fiend free, the other is the kill switch."

How do I know which is which?

Breath searing my chest, I look at the container. A labyrinth of tubes wind and connect. Christ.

"Too many wrong choices and your patient will suffer a very close death to that of his victims. But, for every sincere confession you urge from him, redeeming his black soul, you'll move him farther above his fateful death."

I tear a hand through my hair. "What did he do?" I shout. "What is his disorder?"

"I'm innocent!" the man cries.

"Shut up!" I look to the keys. "Tell me, Grayson, or I won't know how to

help him.”

I wait, the cold air prickling my skin, before his voice returns. “Roger’s particular paraphilia is pedophilic disorder, though I’m sure you’ll unearth a multitude of others beneath his rotten flesh.”

I nod to myself. Although pedophilia isn’t my specialty, I’ve had two patients diagnosed as such. My stomach pitches. There are few paraphilias that sicken me as much. Grayson chose wisely. *I can’t do this.*

“At least seven children have suffered due to Roger’s illness,” Grayson says. “And four were murdered, taken from this world by Roger’s hands. Their remains dissolved and buried. He was brought up on charges for only one—his nephew—but the court failed to prosecute due to insufficient evidence.”

Legs weak and trembling, I step onto the first stone. “Why didn’t you just give the authorities the evidence?”

“Because this man had no mercy for his innocent victims, he deserves to be shown none.”

Right. I’m trying to reason with a psychopath. “I can’t do this. You know I can’t do this—”

“One last thing,” Grayson interrupts. “You should know that Roger’s most recent victim, a boy by the name of Michael, has not yet been recovered.”

I look up at the man dangling over the container of acid. *Oh, God.*

The speaker system clicks off with a screech as I balance on the rock, gaining equilibrium.

A wail rips through the canopy, and I can feel the agony in the gutturalness of it. A scream wrenched from an abyss of never-ending pain. It forces my hand into the air.

I teeter on the rock, bare feet gripping the serrated edge of stone, as I reach for the first key.

Forgive me.

The tips of my fingers graze the keys before I latch on to one. I close my eyes and yank down.

A grinding noise echoes through the clearing, and then Rodger's body jerks and drops. He cries out, a sloppy wail that rattles my teeth. "Stop—stop! Don't do it. You're going to kill me."

I breathe through the sickness coating my stomach. "If I don't try, he'll kill you regardless." I move to the next stone and stretch onto my toes, my hand wavering beneath the suspended keys. Flames lick my lower back. There's no logic to Grayson's game. One of the keys could free this man, or they could all doom him.

I grab ahold of a bronze skeleton key and pull.

Roger drops another inch.

Shit. Panicked, I forego the next stone and charge the tank. It's taller than me. Maybe six-feet high and looks like a vertical fish tank.

Christ. Grayson has taken every aspect of me to design my tests. Now he's turned something I used for tranquility into a deathtrap.

Ignoring the man's pleas, I inspect the rest. A mounted wooden beam holds Roger aloft, thick metal cables support his weight, his torso cradled by a leather harness. "It's a hangman's gallows." A simple structure, but built solid and sturdy. I walk the perimeter, studying Grayson's trap. Looking for a way to release Roger without dropping him straight into the vat of acid.

"Please, help me," he pleads.

Even if I was strong enough to shimmy the scaffold and pull him away from the tank, Grayson wouldn't allow it. As if he's reading my thoughts, a gear on the trap grinds, and Roger lowers closer to the surface.

"God—fuck—" He sobs, his flabby, milky body jiggling with his wretched cries.

"Christ. Shut up. Just shut up." I push my hair out of my face. "Why don't you walk me through this, Roger," I say, deciding to follow my path back to the third stone. "Tell me about yourself. You're here for a reason, just

as I am. We're in this together, okay?"

"Okay," he concedes.

As he talks about his job at a local supermarket as a meat packer, I count the stones ahead of me: three. I gauge how many more inches Roger has until his feet hit the sulfuric acid. Maybe five...I can't be sure.

There are more keys draped along the string canopy, outside my reach of the rocks. *Follow the rules.* But Grayson doesn't abide by rules. He breaks them. He defies society's laws. Everything with Grayson is a test.

I move off the rock and jump, waving a hand in the air.

"What are you doing?"

"Hush, Roger." I jump again and pull a key down with me.

A deep groan from the gears, then Roger descends. Even lower than the last time, he goes down, his toes skim the top. His shouts of fury ratchet my nerves, and I scream. Hands in my hair, I grip at the roots, tearing at the anxiety.

Chest heaving, I'm lost in a sea of keys, all shimmering with a mocking melody as they clang together above. There are too many.

I press a hand to my stomach, the black satin too binding, as I pull air into my tight lungs. *Do you think you're above taking a life?* Grayson's question haunts me. He chose this particular victim for a reason—why?

I step onto the stone, my bare feet blistered, stinging. "Tell me about your victims, Roger."

Past the shadows, I glimpse his stillness. Without my glasses, he's blurry from this distance, but I can read his demeanor, the way his rigid body planks. "Why? What do they matter?"

No denial. No remorse. *What do they matter.* If this man was seated in my therapy room, I'd log a note to explore the antisocial spectrum, to distinguish if there's a particular psychopathy. But we're not in my therapy room, and there's only time to acknowledge that there is one.

"I'm a psychologist," I say, taking a moment before I reach for the next

key. “I can help you. Well, in theory. Truthfully, I don’t really care whether you live or die. I just don’t want your death on my hands.”

There. Brutal honesty. Wherever Grayson is, I’m sure that devilish smile tilts his lips. “If it’s true, and you’ve committed the crimes levied against you...then that man over the speaker system won’t let you leave here alive. I’m not sure there’s anything I can do to save you.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he shouts down at me. “Jesus—you’re just as fucked up as him.”

I shrug. Maybe. Probably. But the adrenaline has run its course, and sheer exhaustion is wearing my patience. Before Grayson ever entered my office, I was decided. Rehabilitation was not possible for the truly sadistic.

If I was given an infinity of nights to transform this man, I would not succeed.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice whispers. I’ve been here before, standing at the precipice. The moment I realized it for the first time that I was fighting an impossible battle, waging a mental war with no end.

During this discovery, this acceptance, I broke a man’s mind. I turned his psychosis against him and urged it to devour him. To end him.

My chest catches fire, my breaths erratic. I drag in a lungful of cool air, dousing the burn. *Now that you’ve been shown the truth, you’ll never see the lie again. You’re liberated.*

Liberated. Free to speak and act without shame.

“I’m not ashamed for what I’ve done,” I say, steadying myself on the rock. “I’m ashamed that I hid it from myself.” A weakness I accepted the second I awoke in that hospital bed. A denial I fueled into a delusion because I couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—accept the truth.

I look at the suspended man. “Where is Michael, Roger?”

He twists, struggling with no hope. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I blow my bangs from my eyes, hands anchored to my hips, impatient.

“You’ve kidnapped a little boy. You have him hidden somewhere. If you want me to save you, you’re going to tell me where. Is Michael alive?”

My hand thrusts into the air. I flick the key teasingly.

He shouts, “Yes! All right. Yes. The boy is alive.”

I pull the key. Roger’s body is lofted higher. A sob of relief racks his body.

The realization that Grayson is playing according to his own rules hits me. He’s controlling the mechanism. The keys are tied to the strings, the strings attached to the contraption, and Grayson is working the controls. He’s in control.

We’re in control.

Roger’s life is dependent on Roger alone.

We give them the means to take their own life.

If I want to save this man, all I have to do is work his confessions free. There has to be a catch—Grayson has never given any of his victims a real chance. *He’s doing this for me.*

“Where is Michael?” I ask.

He doesn’t respond. Then, as I reach for a key, he says, “Wait. I’m not ready.”

“Neither were the children you stole and killed.” I grip and pull the key.

Roger drops. His toes hit the acid, and he cries out.

“Now, where is the boy being held?”

“Fuck—” He bends his knees, trying to hold his feet above the acid. “If I tell you that...then I’m going to prison. Do you know what they do to men like me in prison?”

“Do you fear that more than death?” I challenge. “If so, tell me. If death is your choice, I know the man doing this. He will grant you that freedom.”

“Freedom?” he spits the word at me. “You’re insane.”

“That’s the second time you’ve insulted my mental state.” I hop off the rock with little to no jarring impact to my back. I breathe in a cleansing

breath. “You’re making a poor case for yourself, Roger. And you only have hours to decide.”

Unable to hold his position, his body weary, he drops his legs. His ear-splitting scream echoes through the maze as his feet submerge. “God, please—I don’t want to die like this.”

I step onto a stone. “How did your victims die?”

His breath fogs the air around his head. “Go to hell.”

Been there. I stretch onto my toes and grasp a key. The cool metal feels satisfying against my heated skin.

“Wait,” he says again, straining to keep his grotesque, acid-eaten feet held over the tank. “I couldn’t help myself. It’s a sickness.”

“How?” I demand.

“Shit. All right. Fuck. Okay. I choked them.” He wriggles, trying to swing his body away from the container.

A cruel memory of my father’s hands around my neck assaults me. Disgust morphs into rage.

“Yeah. I choked them,” he repeats, easier this time, as if the admission feels good. In this way, Roger is also being liberated.

I close my hand around the key. Then pull. Again, Roger is lifted higher. He extends his legs, relieved.

I move to the last stone. I understand how this works, even if Roger hasn’t caught on yet. It doesn’t matter the number of keys dangling above my head; my selection of a key is my choice. Grayson knows me—he understands me, anticipates me.

One key will set the pedophile free. One key will end his life.

I study the keys. All the gleaming bronze, rusted metals, shiny silver. They’re beautiful. I never admitted it—not even back then—but when I inked a key over my scar, I was branding my kill. It was my trophy. I can admit this now.

The canopy of blood-red string and keys plays a dark melody that speaks

to my soul. No, I wasn't born this way. I was stolen, groomed, and born to another realm the average person only glimpses in nightmares. I never feared the monster, because the monster was already inside me.

"I want to know where the boy is," I stress to Roger.

Sweat pours from his matted, balding head. He's as pathetic here, now, as he is in his life. He shakes his head. "I can't."

"You can and you will." My hand wavers between two keys. The first is gold. Untarnished and new. The second is corroded. Its teeth gnarled, the silver worn and faded. It's a replica of the key I wear on my flesh.

Grayson chose it for me.

"What do you see when you think of Michael? What do you feel, Roger?" My hand stretches into the air.

Roger finds the strength to tear at the harness. His curses salt the night as he claws the leather. "He's special," he finally says. "I watched him the longest. God, he's beautiful. Baby blue eyes. His thin blond hair cut into a bowl. His skin is soft and delicate."

While he's been lost in his memories, his underwear displays the true lack of his remorse. An erection tints the dingy material. I advert my eyes in disgust.

I have to know, however, if this man is capable of change. I force my gaze back onto Roger. "Can you release him?" Not *will* he release the boy. But *can*. The two words are not interchangeable to a vile man like this.

His mouth twitches as he attempts to form the words. It's a telling micro expression. My sight is hindered, especially in the dark, and yet he's unable to mask his true feelings.

"Yes," he shouts. "Okay? I will release him. Let me go, and I'll take you to him."

Liar.

"But what about the others?" I insist. "All the future children you plan to harm. How can we trust that you're reformed, never to damage or kill another

child again?”

His laugh bounces over the clearing. “Are you serious?” He glares at me. “You’re a fucking therapist. You know how my illness works.” He releases a lengthy breath. “I’ll try, all right? I’ll get help. I’ll go to the meetings. I’ll put a goddamn chastity belt on my dick!” He fights the harness more. “Now get me the hell out of here, you fucking cunt.”

Yes, Roger has many more disorders to unearth. Woman-hating misogynist is on that list. There’s no reform in his future. If he’s set free, he may do time in prison. But he’ll be released eventually. Set loose to prey on innocent lives.

Our justice system fails when it comes to the predators of children. The very lives that need the most protection and shelter. Grayson was a victim to a monster just like Roger, and so were my sister and I. Now, there is no rehabilitation for any of us.

“What are you waiting for?” Roger yells. “Do it!”

One will free him. One is the kill switch.

I yank the rusted key.

Roger’s scream arcs over the maze before his body plunges feet-first into the tank of acid.

He sinks to the bottom of the container. The water bubbles and froths, bleeding pink at first, then a deep blood-red. Flesh bobs and hits the sides, then floats to the surface. I won’t look away—I can’t. I watch the gruesome death unfold.

Minutes pass, or maybe only seconds. The liquid thickens into a paste-like substance, too thick to discern Roger any longer.

My thoughts are a void. Hallowed out of me and splashed against the night. I only *am*—the purest sense of acceptance melds into the natural order. My existence in balance.

Then I feel arms surround my waist.

Grayson pulls me against his chest. I lean my head back, feeling his heart

race in time with mine. His solid form embraces me as he says, “Our first kill.”

DELIVERANCE

GRAYSON

A buzz fills the night air, a charged current caressing, embracing. I feel the electric pulse of it vibrating along London's skin.

Our first kill.

I'm drawn to her heat like a moth to the flame, like her body can ward off the demons of our past. She's my temple, and I want to kneel at her feet and worship.

"I'm on fire," she says. Adrenaline still courses her bloodstream, her flesh simmering beneath my arms. The tendons of my forearms tense as I ache to crush her body to mine.

She doesn't need to explain. I understand what she's feeling. I'm lit from the thrill of our kill—I can't stop touching her. Every texture between us a tantalizing, erotic pleasure.

"You're beautiful," I whisper in her ear. "So alive." I find the clasp of the dress and drag the zipper down her back. My fingers trail her skin, my whole being ablaze, desperate to touch her.

"I may have passed your test, but I failed mine." Her body goes rigid.

The boy. I can't help the smile that steals across my face. We're so close to being one. "Would knowing the boy was out of harm's way have changed the outcome for you? Would you have chosen differently?"

She turns in my arms, her eyes seeking the truth. “How?”

I push a loose wisp of hair behind her ear. “Trust, London. It’s what comes next. You have to trust me. Do you think I’d want you to suffer an innocent child’s death?”

She blinks up at me. “He was safe the whole time.”

I press my lips to her forehead, unable to deny myself the taste of her. “We’re not those monsters,” I say, my hands mapping a path across her back and waist, gripping the satin dress. “But we aren’t mundane, either. We’re ravenous, and we have to feed.”

She’s touching me, too—her hands tracing the ink and scars on my forearms, palms seeking friction along my chest, fingers entwining my hair and stroking the back of my neck. Every intimate quest to get closer sends an arousing shock to my flesh.

We’re uninhibited. Unleashed.

“It would’ve changed nothing,” she admits. “And now, I’ll never be sated. How will we ever stop? Filling the void is an endless cycle. We’ll always need more and more until it consumes us.”

I palm her face and stare into those dark eyes. The gold flecks sheen with the reflective sparkle of keys. “We never have to stop. Never. I no longer have my penance to bear, just as you no longer have to live a lie. Shame doesn’t exist between us. As for the maddening need...” I drag the dress down her body, letting it fall to the ground. “We’ll find a way to satisfy ourselves.”

Bathed in starlight, her body is achingly beautiful. A tantalizing tease finally within reach. I’m drunk on the sight of her. I lower my mouth to her shoulder, tasting the hint of lilac on her skin—my aphrodisiac, my drug. She’s my addiction.

Her breath hitches as I grasp her tiny waist in my hands. Then as she tilts her head back, surrendering to the spell, I drop kisses to her flesh. Greedily taking every bare inch of her for myself.

Her gaze slips to the trap, where our victim erodes into nothing. “It’s too much—keep touching me, Grayson. I’m burning up. I need more.”

“God, I love it when you talk dirty. Tell me all the bad things we’re going to do.” My knees hit the ground. I suck a trail over the soft skin of her pelvis, loving the way she grips my shoulders, her legs trembling from need.

“We can do anything,” she says, the throaty rasp of her voice tearing at my control.

I graze my fingers down her thighs, then bring one of her legs over my shoulder and bury my mouth against the tender flesh of her inner thigh. She jolts at the feel of my teeth, and I groan when her heat touches my face. Her hands sink into my hair as I kiss and bite my way up her thigh, her breathy, broken cries making my cock so hard it aches against my jeans.

I taste her then. I grasp her ass and force her sweet center to my mouth, my tongue slipping between her silky lips. She’s wet and hot and I can feel every constriction of her muscles as she grinds against my face.

“Grayson...” My name is a prayer on her lips. It makes me crazy. The need for her unbearable. My desire roams wild, tasting her until she’s throbbing against my tongue.

I pull away and push off the ground. I lift her into my arms, seating her right up against the achingly hard member of my body that yearns only for her.

“Take me,” she breathes over my mouth before she nips my bottom lip. I groan, thrusting a hand into her hair and pulling her down against me. “Fuck me until I’m begging you to stop...until we’re on the brink of death.”

“Shite.” I tremble as I lower her to the earth, every muscle and sinew strung tight in anticipation. “Christ, you’re so fucking perfect. I won’t ever hold back with you. That would be a sin.”

Her hands fight to remove my shirt, her nails digging into my skin. It’s agonizing and pleasurable and unadulterated. I hiss out a tense breath as her fingers hit the fresh wound on my stomach.

“Do it again,” I say.

She strokes the injury she inflicted with a sure hand, owning me. “Is this what love feels like?”

I crave her pain like my lungs crave oxygen. “This is what our love feels like.”

“Then make me a sinner, Grayson. I don’t want redemption. I want us.”

I kiss the cuts on her wrists. The marks I put there. It heightens the urge to mark her body even more, to make her mine in a way that she’s belonged to no one else. I rake my teeth over her shoulder, then sink into her neck, eliciting a soft, breathless cry.

We work my clothes off in a frenzy of stolen touches and heated avowals, impatient. Ravenous. The pain building to a staccato beat between us that pulses with insatiable need. To be closer. To be skin to skin. The hard slab of earth beneath us amplifies my awareness, the night clear and flawless. Nothing impure to hold us back.

I roll her on top of me, gazing up at her naked body, breasts bared to me with no trace of shame in her bottomless eyes. I flatten my hand along her stomach as she arches her back, working a string of expletives from me as she grinds her slick lips against the shaft of my cock.

“Fuck. You’re killing me.” I lift up to meet each of the sexy rolls of her hips.

She falls over me, her hair cascading down her shoulder and creating a curtain to shield us from the world. I let her cage me in, the undeniable power flowing from her limbs jacking my heart rate. She wears her sin beautifully.

“What if I could?” she whispers into the shell of my ear. Her teeth nick my flesh as she finds purchase on the ground to push back hard, decimating my restraint.

A growl works free, and I capture her wrist. I bring her hand to my throat and squeeze her fingers to my jugular. “If you’re going to tease, you better be willing to back it up.”

A deviant glint ignites her eyes. “You’re serious.”

“I’d suffer any torture willingly if it came at your hands. My sick matches your sick.” I move her fingers to my mouth and suck the pads, tasting her fevered arousal. “Touch yourself,” I command.

She does. Arcing back, she pushes those delicate fingers to her clit, rubbing and ratcheting her desire higher. I groan at the feel of her heated flesh sliding over me. Torture doesn’t begin to describe how punishing the feel of her is. Her mounting orgasm grabs hold, and her thighs grip me, her muscles clenching for release.

Wild and unfettered, with zero control tying me down, I rise up and hook an arm around her lower back. I anchor her to me, swallowing her gasp, as I sink into her. Our gazes connect. Every torturous second I hold still inside of her is an eternity.

Her nails slice into my back, and that simple action triggers her body to flex around me, detonating an explosive response. I slam into her. Gripping at the dirt behind me, I thrust into the perfect center of her, unrestrained. Her breathy cries fall close to my mouth. I taste her pleas, answering each one with another unguarded thrust.

The feel of being inside her annihilates every single belief I had before her.

This is heaven. The only heaven I care to witness.

She’s my truth now—the rules ours to make.

She peaks, I peak. Our bodies rise and lower in tandem, cresting higher, falling farther. The emotion thrumming our bodies almost unbearable. The desire to inflict and experience pain is damn near overwhelming. It’s too much. *Feeling* is too much. It’s maddening.

“Hurt me,” she pleads.

A violent shiver riots through me.

When pain is the only emotion you’ve ever known, it’s all you crave. It lets you know you’re alive.

My hands are touching, roving over every delicate region of her flesh. I scrape my fingers down her skin, marking her body with dirt from my hands. The abrasive grit of it rubs between us as we fuck. There's nothing tender in this moment as every ravenous desire demands to be sated. We're filthy. Fucking like two insatiable, wild animals that are starving for each other.

I bite down on the firm peak of her nipple, and she throws her head back, welcoming the sharp pain. Too many ways in which I can hurt her assaults my thoughts, tearing at my weakening control.

I cup her shoulders from behind, forcing her to arch and bare her tits to me. As I drive into her, the need to be deeper seizes my sanity. "It's not enough."

"Fucking make it enough, Grayson. Hurt me."

I growl and force her onto the ground, dragging her leg over my shoulder and slamming our hips together. Her fingers splay over the hard slab of muscles along my stomach as I rut into her. The need still demands more.

Her petite body fits seamlessly against me, begging me to manhandle her into any position I want. With a low growl, I flip her over and slip a hand beneath her pelvis, angling her beautiful ass up. Then I grab her wrists and anchor them to her back.

The position makes her vulnerable and bared, my cock throbbing as I ease up behind her, my heart thundering. I push inside her to the hilt. Her body bucks at the pressure, but then she's undulating those sexy hips, begging for more.

"Fucking hell," I breathe as I thrust deeper, forcing her wrists toward the middle of her slim back.

She releases a throaty curse, her core pulsing and tightening around me. I'm a starved animal with no remorse, my desire to fill her and take her all at once unfurling in the sweetest agony.

I fuck her violently. I fuck her brutally. Against the cold, unforgiving earth, under the open night sky, I make love the only way I know how to the

woman who's dominated my being since I first tasted her.

As the most shattering pleasure claims me, I'm lost. Her name a chant ripping free.

She comes shamelessly. She comes with abandon. She comes so hard she nearly pushes me out, but I crash back into her, breaking against her wave.

For a few tender seconds as London and I come down, ethereal bliss suspends the pain, and I fall against her, heaving strenuous breaths, sweeping my mouth over her so I can consume every bit of her and this moment.

Euphoria.

She frees herself of my weight and pushes me to the ground, where she curls on top of my body. "Peace," she whispers.

I wrap my arms around her. I've never felt peace before. I cradle her to me, allowing this foreign emotion to own me the same way she possesses me entirely. We lie like this beneath the canopy of red until her breathing evens out.

I don't want it to end.

But all too soon, the world and its constant constraint reminds me there's still work to be done. There's only one way for London to be completely free.

BURN

LONDON

A blazing heat like a furnace warms the side of my face. The startling contrast of hot and cool rips me out of a dreamless sleep, awareness hurtling me out of my calm and sated cocoon.

For once, my mind is blissfully quelled from all thoughts of the past and present. Then, reality bleeds in, drawing me into a new realm of anxiety.

A heated orange and red flickers against my eyelids. I reach for Grayson, and hear a rattling *clink* as my wrist is pinched and the cool kiss of metal drags across my arm. Eyes straining to open, an alarm sounds within me, my heart pounds in my ears as blood rushes my arteries.

I feel disconnected. Woozy. I blink a few times to clear my vision, and the sight hollows out my chest. Fire blazes high into the early morning sky. Flames seam the edges of deep-blue, blending into the mosaic of red and orange clouds, unable to separate the two entities.

“Grayson—” I say, panic lacing my voice. Then as I start to shout his name, the realization of where I am and what’s happening crashes into me.

I yank at the cuffs. A chain circles the scaffold, shackling me to the trap that Grayson and I used to kill a man. Beyond the maze, the house is engulfed in fire. The pop and snap of burning beams reaches my ears before the faint siren.

Frantic, I examine my body. I'm again wearing the black satin dress Grayson chose for me. An irrational thought circles my mind—that this must be another test. I glance up. One of the keys must set me free. Only the keys are gone.

My chest pangs with an empty, resonating ache.

Grayson told me he would let me go.

Oh, God. I didn't imagine it. I didn't invent what happened between us. No, my memories are firmly in place, undisturbed. Everything that transpired is still with me, a part of me—the world more transparent than ever.

Only Grayson is missing.

He let me go.

I tug at the handcuffs, desperate to flee and find him and...

What?

Run off into the sunset like some deranged Bonnie and Clyde? Running from the law, living on love and danger and...resentment. That's the whim of a little girl. Not the reality for a woman.

I sag against the scaffold. My bones weary, my muscles lethargic. Reality is a black hole.

I couldn't see past the immediate and instant gratification—but Grayson could.

Still, he didn't give me a choice. He decided for me.

The flash of police lights bounce against the pines. As the flames rise higher, smoke billowing into the callous morning, the shouts of firefighters and authorities clash. A moroseness settles in the pit of my stomach. Misery acute and damning.

Then voices drift toward the clearing.

"Dr. Noble?"

The dull talons of melancholy drag me under. I can't respond. I can't *breathe*.

"Dr. London Noble. I found her! Are you all right?"

My unseeing gaze snags on a significant detail. The dark suit before me brandishes an FBI pin clipped to the gray tie. “I’m Special Agent Nelson. You’re safe now.”

The agent lays a hand on my bare shoulder in a show of comfort. “Let’s get some help over here!” he shouts.

My body curls around the scaffold. Clinging to the solidness. Only moments before, I was free. Free in a way I never dared to imagine, with vibrant colors and textures. And in a blink, I’ve been thrust back into the dull and guilt-leaden world.

The pain tears a seam inside me, and an ache clogs my throat. I choke on the bile of bitterness. But I sniff hard, shoving the ache down. I have to.

I was a performer once. I can be again. At least now, I know the difference.

As the agent walks the perimeter of the tank, I erect my shield. He mutters a swear when he completes his round. “Holy mother of God.”

“Please, get these off me,” I manage to say.

Agent Nelson directs his attention on me. “Of course.” He slips on a pair of Latex gloves. While he’s working the cuff mechanism, more agents and police officials enter the clearing.

In a matter of seconds, uniforms and Tyvek-suited medical examiners have the clearing yellow-taped and marked off as a crime scene. Plastic sheets cover what was—just hours ago—my and Grayson’s sacred haven.

“I’m sorry to have to ask this, London.” The agent searches my gaze. He’s not sorry at all. “But I’m going to need you to undergo medical screening.”

Heat blazes my chest. “You mean a rape kit.”

“Yes.” With a resounding *click*, the cuffs release my wrists. He shakes out an evidence bag and slips them inside. The only hint to his remorse is the slight crease at the corners of his eyes. We’re both professionals. This is standard. “I’ll also need your statement shortly afterward.”

I rub my wrists, the beveled ridges of scrapes a painful reminder of what I've lost. Agent Nelson tries to help me stand, but I fend him off with an outstretched hand. "I'm all right," I assure. And I am. The pain that normally plagues me hasn't returned, vanishing the moment acceptance took root.

Later, I'll analyze this phenomena. But I can't think of it now.

"I'm ready," I announce.

The agent guides me out of the maze and toward an ambulance parked a distance away from the blaze. Chaos swamps the once peaceful woods as firefighters fight back the inferno before it spreads.

I face the fire, let the heat touch my skin. I feel it deep in my marrow, that electric pulse of chaos and disaster. Grayson's artwork framed within a pale canvas of sky. I watch the flames dance and tease higher, until the agent forces me away.

"Any evidence must be in there," one of the agents says as he passes, his gaze cast on the smoldering house. "We've recovered nothing so far."

Agent Nelson nods him on. "Keep searching."

I close my eyes. Just for a second to gather my bearings. I can't do this. Not without him. Grayson said I was the key—but he was the one to unlock me. Now we're both damned.

A medical personnel wraps a warm blanket around me, directing me farther away from the scene. Agent Nelson follows. "Dr. Noble, is he in there?" he asks.

My gaze flicks to the blackened, charred bones of the house. The fire still burns, brilliant orange and red and raging, licking the limbs of pines and sending embers into the dusky sky.

Grayson burned it all for me.

He set me free in more ways than one.

And in doing so, he destroyed my path to him. The answers to the man now ash.

Some things are meant to remain shrouded in mystery, I suppose. Where

you're not fed the answer. You have to search for it.

I wrench an answer for the agent from the dregs of my soul. "Yes," I say. "He's in there."

A gentle shake of the agent's head reveals his disbelief.

"How did you find me?" I ask.

He tears his attention from the fire and refocuses on me. "An anonymous call," he says simply.

A young EMT urges me to sit on the back of the ambulance. She asks me standard-issued questions about my wellbeing, then sets to work bandaging obvious cuts, being as careful as possible not to disturb any potential evidence.

It hits me then that the dress will be confiscated.

I sniff back my anger and look up at the agent. "There is no such thing as an anonymous call," I say, not attempting to hide the accusation in my tone.

His light brows create a furrow between his eyes. "No. There's not," he confesses. "The call led officials to an abducted boy that was being held in a warehouse. They then traced the call back to a wireless number in Grayson Sullivan's name. This address was listed on the account."

I turn my head to hide my outrage. Grayson knew it would only be a short matter of time before they discovered the location once they made the connection. It's so blatant it's almost stupid. Not the act of a highly intelligent man or criminal. Surely the FBI has to see that.

"The boy is all right?" I ask.

Nelson nods. "Yes. The parents are with him at the hospital."

I tug the blanket tighter around me. "The man who kidnapped him is in that rancid container."

"Jesus." The agent drives a hand through his shaggy hair. "Did you witness this?"

I consider the question. Grayson isn't inside the burning house. I know this just as the agent knows this fact.

The tests I endured and passed told me all the answers I ever sought. No more hiding. No more suppressing. No more lying. Grayson set fire to his life for me, so that I can start over. So that when I'm ready—truly ready—we can start over.

I trust him.

He found me by putting the puzzle pieces together. So that's how I'll find him. This agent and any official working the Sullivan manhunt are my new best friends.

"London?" the agent gains my notice, pressing the question.

I turn toward the fire. "Yes, I witnessed the murder. I have your answers."

After a charged minute, he asks in a more subdued tone, "Is there anyone I can call for you?"

Normally, that question would provoke me. A painful reminder of how alone I am. But being alone and lonely, as I once expressed to my patient, are two different things. I no longer choose to be alone, and the person I need is out there. Waiting for me.

I look at the FBI agent. "Yes. Call the press. I have an announcement to make."

Dig them up.

He's not my father.

Lessons that I must put into action, or else the rest of the answers will never be unlocked.

Now I know where I belong.

T H E R E A F T E R

G R A Y S O N

I f hell had a point of entry, it would be Mize, Mississippi.

I crank the AC and towel off the sweat from the back of my neck, disgusted with the heat. Then I turn up the volume so I can hear her voice over the blast of the vents. Twenty-four hours after her rescue, London is giving a press speech to the media.

My finger traces the delicate curve of her face, the flatscreen a poor substitution for her soft skin. I drop my hand. It curls into a fist on my thigh.

“Though this announcement weighs heavily on my heart, I cannot bear its burden for one more day,” London says into a microphone. The flash of cameras doesn’t faze her. She’s a born actress for this world.

I smirk as I settle on the sofa of my RV. To everyone else, Dr. Noble is a truly burdened soul. A survivor. A hero. To me, she’s a dark goddess that should be feared.

“During the long and trying hours of my captivity, I suffered a mental collapse. Breakdown—no longer recognized by my colleagues or me—is the only way I can describe what transpired.” She pauses to look at the floor. So demure. “Due to the duress, repressed memories have been recovered of the man who abducted me.”

A thrill buzzes through me. As the attack of the reporters rises, questions

shouted in unison, I leap off the couch, unable to contain my excitement.

Trust.

It's as new for me as it is for London.

With great difficulty, I leave the RV. Her voice lingers in the background, calling to me, but I pull away from it, knowing that it's only a matter of time until we're together now.

The dilapidated house sits on an acre of dead land. Corn husks litter the front yard. Cracked paint peels along the siding. A broken bay window hints to a moldy and rundown interior. The guts are here, the foundation, but all that was alive has faded.

London's childhood home.

I enter, the front door nearly falling off the rusted hinges. The floorboards creak beneath my boots. This was her beginning. Where her memories start.

I have to see the cage.

A padlocked door bars entry to the basement. It's the only door in the house that remains intact, as if she's returned periodically to make sure that no one can gain access. I wonder how many times a year she visits this basement, its truths haunting her, fearing discovery.

That fear no longer holds her captive.

I pick the lock easily enough, then pocket it, removing any evidence of her knowledge and involvement. When I pass into the dark and dank tomb, the sight of the bars ratchets my heart rate. It's beautiful. All gothic wrought iron and medieval. A black prison full of nightmares.

I spend time here, feeling her presence. Making sure there is nothing here to tie her to her father's crimes. Then I leave behind a clue only she will understand before I return to the RV.

The good authorities will be here soon. Digging and excavating. Unearthing the girls and London's dark secrets.

Now that she's free, I can be patient. I'm willing to be any and all that she needs. I've left her clues, pieces of my puzzle. My story will unravel the truth

for her.

She'll find me.

No, ours is not a love story. Ours comes with a warning.

And it's not over yet.

Of course, no one heeds warnings. If ours began with a *beware*, my story begins with a threat.

Do not enter.

I was spawned in hell itself.

London and Grayson's story will continue in *Born, Madly*, the second installment of the *Darkly, Madly Duet*, coming soon. Get a release notification sent right to your inbox by [signing up for Trisha Wolfe's newsletter](#).

Here's a special sneak peek at the cover to *Born, Madly*!



She loved him...
to the brink of death

BORN,
DARKLY, MADLY DUET: BOOK TWO
MADLY

FROM THE AUTHOR OF WITH VISIONS OF RED
TRISHA WOLFE



Sadie Bonds appeared in *Born, Darkly* as London's colleague and college friend. You can follow her dark and twisted journey on the hunt for a serial killer in the first Broken Bonds novel, *With Visions of Red*.

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I owe everything to God, thank you for *everything*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From an early age, Trisha Wolfe dreamed up fictional worlds and characters and was accused of talking to herself. Today, she lives in South Carolina with her family and writes full time, using her fictional worlds as an excuse to continue talking to herself. Get updates on future releases at <http://www.trishawolfe.com/>

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