

Broken Bonds, Book One



WITH
VISIONS
OF RED

TRISHA WOLFE

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About the Author

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WITH VISIONS OF RED

BROKEN BONDS SERIES

A Dark Romantic Thriller

By

Trisha Wolfe



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Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. When you gaze long enough into the abyss, the abyss gazes back into you.

~Friedrich Nietzsche

PROLOGUE

TEN YEARS AGO

The stench of rotting meat permeates the cool, dank air of the basement. A rotating air purifier in the corner does nothing for the smell, only blasts my sweat-slicked skin with a chilly, stale breeze, causing gooseflesh to rise along my exposed skin.

My pink tank top clings to my body, saturated with old and new sweat, dirt and filth. My legs remain bare—my boy-shorts the only guard against the elements...and him.

I nudge the plate of uneaten food aside with my knee, my shackles rattling from above. The chains tighten, and I wince at the sharp, pinching pain. A whimper escapes my mouth.

My arms stopped aching hours ago—my muscles numb. If I stand, the feeling will come alive with unbearable agony. My calves still burn from the stretching. I no longer feel my toes, either. I wriggle them, trying to force circulation into my feet and legs, the cold cement floor fighting back against my attempt.

Three days. Five. A week? With no windows, no light from outside, there's no way to be sure. Time doesn't pass down here; it stalled and the world quit spinning the moment he touched me. Invaded me. And I stopped existing.

I've tried to measure my time trapped in this dungeon by his comings and

goings—but they’re too sporadic. Sometimes I’m left alone for so long, I fear he’s forgotten about me. Then I’m sickened by the realization that I actually fear he won’t return.

Twisted.

At first, I screamed. I screamed for hours until my throat burned and my voice gave. He never covered my mouth. So the only thing I know for sure is that I’m somewhere far enough away where he doesn’t worry about me being heard. No. He likes my screams. That’s the first thing I learned. Then I learned to hold them in. Not to encourage him.

My body ices over with dread as my gaze swings to the cross.

I made the mistake of demanding to know what it was used for...having spent hours staring at it, fearing it...and then he *showed* me.

Not today. Please, not today. A hot tear trickles down my cheek, and I wipe the side of my face against my arm. He can’t see me broken. Because when he knows I’m broken—when he’s mastered me—I’ll be of no more use.

I pull at my memories, try to find a sanctuary.

So stupid. So, so stupid. My lips tremble as I recount my actions that brought me here. That dumb fight with Brandon, the one where I slammed his car door and stormed off—I can hardly remember why I was so angry.

He was texting some other girl. That was it. Then it blew up from there. Accusations and claims that I’m crazy. Girls are always the crazy ones. We never actually see what’s right before our eyes.

Furious, I walked off on my own, desperate to be away from him and empowered by the right to be a strong, independent woman who didn’t need her cheating boyfriend to drive her home. Damn if I wouldn’t walk myself right there. Then—

The night swallowed me.

And I’ve been engulfed, surrounded by its darkness ever since. I now know what evil lurks where even the light is afraid to shine.

A *thump* from above hitches my breathing.

Oh, God. I want the fear back. I wish my limbs would quake—that my body would shrivel up and my mind would space. I’ve moved past that fight or flight adrenaline rush, though. I’ve moved on to acceptance. And I want his touch to kill me.

I just want this to end.

As his footsteps travel down the steps, echoing against the cement walls, I decide I’m broken. Just let him see me break. That’s all he wants, then the torment will end.

And when I meet his intense gray eyes—no mask to protect his features—I know. This *is* my end. He’s no longer concerned about my escape, or someone finding me. I’ll never be able to utter his likeness to a soul.

His tall, muscular form moves to the wall behind me and he cranks a lever. My chains jerk taut, and I’m forced to my feet. My arms and body stretch thin, fire-hot needles attacking my arms and calves, my toes just scraping the floor. I shut my eyes against the pain and bite down on my lip to stifle the scream slithering up my throat.

He hates this. He’ll punish me. He wants to see my fear through the windows of my soul. Smell my sweaty skin. Taste my terror. If I anger him enough, maybe he’ll make it quick.

The feel of his calloused fingers gliding along my skin knots my stomach. “You’re being a bad girl again, I see.” They trail down, down my arms. Down my ribs, and further to my waist. The chains jangle at my uncontrollable tremble. “My dirty girl.” His guttural voice surrounds me, blanketing my body with malicious intent, and my vision tunnels until I detach, removed far away from myself.

But he doesn’t allow me to stay there. He always brings me back.

The second his fingers dip beneath the front of my underwear, I seize with awareness. I’m present. I *feel*. Shocked into alertness, I fight back. Writhing against his iron-fisted hold, I force my legs closed. The same dance

every time.

I never win.

He bites my earlobe and his feet move between mine, kicking them apart, before he wraps one large leg around my thigh to lock me in place. The struggle only urges him on—I have to stop fighting. And when I do, accepting my punishment, praying he’s quick...my fucking treacherous body deceives me.

I feel myself slick against his rough fingers. I cringe and squeeze my eyes closed tighter.

“Yes,” he says against my ear. “There’s my fucking dirty girl. You can’t hide from me.” He pinches me hard, wrenching a cry from my mouth, and then his hand is gone.

He backs away just enough to grip the hem of my tank top, then I hear the loud tear of material, fibers ripping, shredding the seams of my sanity. The cool air assaults my skin. My whole body shivers, fright enveloping me. A cold, hard object lightly grazes my bare back.

I shudder slightly, attempting to keep from flinching. I know what that object is; his favorite. He’s wasting no time getting to his good part. I keep my eyes sealed shut. Do not react.

I sense his presence before me, moving in, as he drags the cane along my stomach. “Look at me, Sadie.”

My eyes fly open. He’s never used my name before. Never wanted me to feel like a person. I’m his pet. His possession. At this point, I almost inherently believe that.

His face is not how I pictured it behind his mask. He’s younger than my parents; thirtyish, maybe. Dark strands of hair layer a handsome face. It’s all wrong. He should be vile. Inhuman. Not blessed with... I almost think *beauty*. But I cannot even utter that word in my head without the nauseous tumble pulling me under.

I never want to hear that word again.

He leans down, cane pressed against my belly. His hot breath sears my shoulder. “You’re not like the others,” he whispers. “They didn’t enjoy their punishment.”

My jaw tightens, my neck quivers, making my head shake from the restraint. Fear evaporates, and anger bursts forth. “You’re sick. I’m nothing like you.”

My head is yanked back as he digs his fingers into my hair and grips at my scalp. His gray eyes widen. Face right before mine. “Remember, Sadie. Every time you suck a dick, every time you fucking come, see *these* eyes watching you. I know where you live.” His tongue snakes out to lick my chin. “Now, let’s have some fun before we’re interrupted.”

The confusion at his words pushes my eyebrows together, but I’m not lost for long. In the moment he raises the cane to strike, a *bang* reverberates through the room, followed by stomps against the ceiling. My captor releases my hair. Fury ignites his eyes, his silver irises aglow with rage.

He pushes me away from him and snaps the cane apart, revealing a blade lodged at the head. I swing back into his arms as the footfalls grow louder. He moves behind me and clutches me against his chest, the blade pressed to my throat.

“God, what I could’ve done with you, accomplished, if I’d had more time. Never forget your lessons.” The blade drags along my collarbone, a searing fire splitting my skin and bone, and a shrill scream scrapes my throat as it claws free. “You were truly special, my filthy Sadie.”

Blackness threatens the corners of my vision. I’m detaching again... fading. My defense against the pain and terror. But my tormentor won’t let me fall. He keeps ahold of me; taking me with him.

“Drop your weapon!” Shouts. Clicks. Then a thunderous *boom* bursts my eardrums.

Damp warmth sprays over me. Covers me, drenching me in blood.

Silence hums. I close my eyes. A blink that lasts an eternity. And when I

finally open my eyes, the world is red.

SCENE ONE

SADIE

*B*lood calls to me.

There's a story in every drop. A song in the spray pattern. A flickering movie reel projecting images in slow motion—life—as it oozes its last drip. If you look beyond the violence, past the gruesome, a kind of poetry unfolds. Its rhyme and rhythm is what reaches out to me, and its what I use to find you.

“Bonds.” The gruff voice gains my attention, breaking my connection to the killer. I look up from the bloody crime scene to see Detective Quinn. He nods toward a shuttered bank of windows. “Might have a print.”

Unlikely, but I step around the dead woman and blood-soaked carpet, my clompy sneakers wrapped in shoe covers, to meet him. I don't like being disturbed when I'm putting myself in the scene, and he knows it. “You do your job, Quinn, and let me do mine,” I say, nodding back toward the victim. “Why else did you call me here?”

His dark eyebrows furrow, weathered eyes crease at their corners, hinting to the many years he's spent investigating scenes just like this. “I didn't.” Turning toward the shades, he places a yellow marker next to a smudge. “An hour ago, I told Wexler this was a domestic. The boyfriend called it in and

then did a disappearing act. But Boss Man insisted I bring you in. Cover all the bases.” Looking at me, he frowns. “So here you are. Just thought steering you in the right direction would help speed this up. But do your thing, psycho analyst, so that I can get on with making my case.”

I catch the tip of my tongue between my teeth to keep from lashing out a snide retort, and instead give him a tight smile. Stuffing my hands into my jean jacket pockets, I turn and stare at the scene once again. I stopped taking offense to how the detectives—the *real* case solvers—view behavioral analysts. Or profilers, though that term is likely to garner even more mockery. It doesn’t bother me because, as much as Quinn has given me a hard time over the years, he depends on my insight. And he knows it.

Just won’t ever admit to it. Not in front of his uniforms.

And because I can easily sum up his hesitancy and anger to macho male aggression and being the product of a single parent who put too much pressure on him...I give him some slack. There are other factors, too, in why he’s such a dick, but his profile is actually pretty boring.

Right. Boring. Nothing like the passionate scene here displayed in red and domination. Which has me seriously doubting Quinn’s judgment call on the boyfriend.

I take a couple of deep breaths, then move through the bedroom, letting my gaze roam and snag on the details. I try to block out the unis marking evidence and snapping pictures. Push everyone and everything out of the room except the victim and her attacker.

Blood is pooled around the vic’s head and torso. The fatal wound a deep laceration to her throat. Inadvertently, my hand goes to my own chest, my fingers applying a slight pressure to my collarbone.

She’s been positioned on her stomach. Dress rucked up past her hips. Ankles bound together with rope, knees spread, placing her in a prime, demeaning position for the offender. One can only assume she was raped until the M.E. examines her fully, but everything about the way the

perpetrator posed her indicates that this was a sex crime.

No gun. At least, the perpetrator didn't use one to end her life. No bullet holes or neighbors complaining about noise. But the uniforms haven't completely canvassed the apartment complex yet. Murder weapon could be from her own kitchen. Although, with how meticulously staged this scene is, I doubt it. I'm almost certain he brought his own rape kit. Still, we need to discover if anything's missing or out of place.

No discernable stab wounds. No angry, sloppy slashes or strikes signifying she knew the offender personally. And no castoff bloodstains from the weapon indicates he killed her slowly, precisely. He wasn't enraged; he took his time.

And he knew how to kill. Her carotid is perfectly severed. The arterial spray reached the ceiling—and no transfer stains, no castoff, suggests he wasn't surprised by the amount of blood. Rather, I presume he enjoyed it, and he worked to get this desired effect.

The torture he inflicted—battered face and body; hours of restraint; burns to the thighs—signifies measured and controlled. Intended to heighten her suffering, not kill her quickly.

The possibility of this being a revenge-motivated kill decreases by the second.

She's wearing an evening gown. Black. Elegant. Yet no makeup. The perpetrator could've interrupted her while she was getting ready for a Friday night out, but being a woman myself, I have to make an assumption on this one. Makeup first, then hair. Dress last. And her hair, though having been handled roughly during the attack, doesn't look like it was styled recently.

No jewelry, either.

I walk toward the open closet and peer inside. Then back around the room. No shoes have been removed. No heels kicked off anywhere. She wasn't planning a night out. I head toward the corner of her room where a robe has been discarded. After slipping on gloves, I adjust my holstered SIG

and kneel down to lift the seam of the garment. A T-shirt and underwear lay beneath.

My eyes flick back to the closet, and I note the gap in the row, where clothes hangers have been pushed aside.

Standing, I shake my head. What method of coercion did the assailant use to force her into changing into a dress? What's more, *why*?

"We got the boyfriend," one of the uniforms announces. "They're taking him to the station."

Quinn nods to the cop and looks over at me. "I'm going in to question him. You want to watch?" He pushes his gray coat sleeves back as he starts to remove his gloves.

I look at the shuttered windows again, to where Quinn found his first clue. Maybe mine, too. "The perpetrator most likely did close the blinds. Although I seriously doubt you'll find his print, he wanted some privacy. He needed enough time to play out his fantasy. And somehow, he knew he had that time." Could've been opportunity, or he may have been stalking her, or maybe he *did* know her. I tilt my head, imagining myself laying in wait. Watching her. There were no signs of forced entry. "Find out about the boyfriend's porn collection."

Quinn scoffs. "Real original," he mumbles. "Bondage, I assume?"

Exhaling heavily, I clarify, "Find out if he's prone to voyeurism. If he likes to watch or be watched, Quinn." I nod to the blinds. "There's more to a killer's porn than bondage." I glare at him, keeping my own suspicions about *his* porn collection to myself.

As he wraps up his instructions with CSU, I move toward the vic. It's not my job to put myself in her place; I'm here to identify with her killer. Get inside his head and break him down. That's the only thing I can do to help her now.

I reach for her fisted hand tucked closely to her chin along the white carpet. It's next to her lips, as if she's stifling her last scream. Ligation marks

wrap her wrist in red, puffy welts. But unlike her ankles, the binding device has been removed. Time of death was determined to be just a couple of hours ago. No rigor, and her skin is dry.

How many hours did he play? How long did he torture her? The dress, with all my speculations, doesn't really point to a clear time of entry. I look over her exposed skin, studying the shades of bruising, trying to determine a better timeline based on the facts.

I uncurl her fingers.

Red stains their tips. My forehead scrunches as I move in closer. A flutter hits my chest, stealing my breath. Puncture wounds dot her fingertips just beneath her nails. One nail has been torn off, and the nail bed is ripped from an object being inserted.

Recognition smacks me hard and fast. But I push past the similarity, noting the high unlikeliness of a connection. During my training, I spent far too many years investigating my own obsessions.

I look up at Quinn as he's leaving the room. "Better yet, Quinn," I say, nodding to her hand. "Try to get a warrant for his computer to access all his porno while you're at it."

"That's going to be a bitch to get," he says on an exhale. "Unless you got something solid to tie this to the boyfriend." Quinn adjusts his blue tie before running a hand through his close-cropped, salt and pepper hair. "Defensive wounds?"

Shaking my head, I say, "No. Whoever our UNSUB is, he likes his torture techniques."

I see it as soon as frustration crosses his face; this case just got a whole lot more complicated.

"I'M ASSUMING THE NEEDLE JOB ON THE VIC'S NAILS WASN'T TO TREAT SMASHED

fingers,” Quinn says. He props his shoulder against the doorjamb of my small office, his leanly muscled arms defined well against his standard white button-up.

Shrugging, I say, “He could’ve first wounded her hands, then treated them. Maybe a nurse or even a doctor playing out a husband-wife fantasy.” I reconsider. “Could even be a doctor-patient fantasy.”

Quinn groans. “See, that’s why this shit will never be a science, Bonds. You just jump around, grabbing at randomness, hoping to nail down a perp.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Really? Did you just say perp and make a pun on the nails?” I refuse to take his bait. When I first met Detective Quinn on assignment two years ago, it was my first high-profile case. We did this song and dance then; I know his opinion on criminal profiling. And I also know that it was the combined effort of both the Arlington County PD and the Virginia State General Investigation Section that brought in the offender.

This man is very territorial, though. He won’t acknowledge outside help, but at least he isn’t so stubborn that he down right refuses to take it.

Then there’s also the thing where he doesn’t trust my reasons for requesting a transfer to ACPD—not when I was in line to be promoted within the Fairfax field office to the BCI (Bureau of Criminal Investigations).

I see it in his eyes, even now; he thinks I fucked up somehow. That I was demoted and my blunder buried by bureaucratic bullshit. But I’m not so special that I’d warrant that kind of elite treatment. I have no friends in high enough places to pull something like that off. But from Quinn’s perspective, why else would a person in my field willingly stray from the path that leads to the FBI?

But those reasons border on my personal life...and they’re none of his damn business.

His hazel eyes narrow. “I saw your face when you noticed the fingers. You know something. Something that’s not head shrinking or total bullshit guesswork.” He steps into my office and sits down in the chair across from

my piled-high desk. Loosening his cross-shoulder gun harness, he says, “Spit it out.”

“I’m offended you think your time is more valuable than mine.” Just because I’m used to the scorn of the department, doesn’t mean I’m a pushover. Sighing, I settle into my chair, deciding I’m too drained to battle this argument. Again.

One thing about Quinn: he keeps my guard up. I never have time to relax into my job. As if that would even be possible. But it’s now been seven months with the ACPD, and it’s like I just started yesterday.

“It might be going way out on a limb,” I begin. “And I’d rather wait to hear back from the M.E. first. See what object was used. Needle, syringe, nail, some other kind of tool.”

Pressing his lips together tightly, Quinn adopts an impatient countenance.

“You’re cranky, you know that?” I glare at him. “Maybe you need more fiber in your diet.” *Or your ass needs to get laid.* But I also keep that to myself. I need to take it easy on the guy; his wife did just leave him a few months back. Just one of the many *perks* of our job: romantic relationships rarely make it.

“Yeah? Well you need to start dressing like the job you want, instead of the one you have.” He makes a face. “Wait. You actually *do* need to start dressing for the damn job you have. I’m sick of having to convince officers at my crime scenes that you’re not some teenager.” He looks over my baggy jean jacket and even baggier jeans. The frumpy, untucked T-shirt I’ve had since college.

“My choice of style really can’t bother you,” I say. But in truth, I know it does. Quinn is a neat freak. And what’s more, he’s all about order. On the job and off.

“Lack of style, you mean. Just saying, Bonds.” He shrugs. “You’re never going to get the Bureau to look your way dressing like some rookie.”

I roll my eyes. “Can we chill on the clichés for today?”

But his eyes nail me with a serious, insightful glare. “The quicker you apply, the faster I get you and your analytic bullshit out of my department. And I know you want to. Who goes into your field and doesn’t want the FBI? So what’s the hold-up?”

And...here we go again. A slight pressure builds between my eyes. I press the tips of my fingers against the ache. “I’d miss this too much. It’s so gratifying working with detectives who not only put my work into question, but my wardrobe, too.” I mock smile. “Now. Get off the FBI trip,” I tell him. And he really should, because I’ve been over it for a while.

“All right,” he says. “Just remember, you’re already twenty-six, and you’re not getting any younger.”

Thanks. “I’ll keep that in mind.” Moistening my lips, I shift forward and move this convo back on topic. “Medieval torture,” I say, and he tilts his head. “I’m not saying it is...but you asked. They used to insert needles, sometimes heated, under the nail beds. Sometimes it was punishment for sloppy needlework, other times a way to extract information from the person. An admittance to a crime. And sometimes it was just to be cruel.”

His tongue pokes at his cheek as he considers this. “Guess I’ll go brush up on my medieval history.” He goes to stand, but pauses. “You’re thinking the boyfriend has a history of violence. That this isn’t his first victim.”

“You don’t want to hear what I think.” Averting my gaze, I look down at my paperwork. “It’s all just conjecture, anyway, until I get some facts. Like whether she was sexually assaulted.”

“Humor me,” he says.

Huffing, I glance up at him. We’ve done this so many times before. “I’m thinking that this is premeditated murder. The work of a sadist. And I’m thinking that the boyfriend might be innocent. At least, of this.”

“You haven’t even seen this guy.” Quinn grits his teeth, immediately wincing. And I roll my eyes. “Pure scum. He’s been in and out of the system since nineteen. And I can say with almost certainty that he probably has a

juvi record, too.”

“That might be,” I say, standing to see him out. I’m weary and want to get back to my own work so I can get out of here. “But your UNSUB probably wouldn’t have a record. He’d be too careful, leery of leaving a trail. The crime scene stated caution. Regardless of how practiced the scene looked, it might have been his first acted out fantasy. He probably would’ve been planning it for months, maybe even years.”

“The same woman?”

I shake my head. “No. His victim probably wasn’t chosen randomly, but he’s had her role in mind for a long time.”

“Let me guess,” Quinn says, making his way to the door. “He matches a certain profile.”

Internally groaning, I say, “Yes. The perpetrator’s actions highly suggest a distinct profile. Though there may be some slight variations, as there are always variables that differ from person to person—”

“Killer,” he corrects.

“—he’d still be inline with the profile.” I nod toward the door. “If the boyfriend snapped and decided to play out his fantasy with the girlfriend, there’s always that. But I really believe the perpetrator was calm, collected though aroused, while he took his time torturing the victim.”

Quinn nods before leaving. He plays the tough, grumpy cop well, but there’s a good guy buried under that stiff exterior who wants to catch all the bad guys. And he’ll probably never admit to needing my advice, but I wouldn’t still be in this department if he didn’t.

That, right there, says more than he’ll ever voice.

“And go see a damn dentist,” I tell him as I usher him out of my office. “You’re driving me crazy worrying that tooth.”

He grunts. “No time for a root canal.”

“Right. Big baby.”

He waves me off as he leaves, and I shake my head. He’s seen more pain

and suffering than the average person, been up against some of the most vicious criminals, and the dentist scares the man.

I walk back to my desk and open the crime scene file. Standing over it, I stare down at the quickly processed photos. I roll my shoulders, then release the hairband holding back my tightly bound, dark layers.

Studying the photo of the victim's hands, I run my fingers through my tangled tresses and massage my scalp. I imagine the killer snatching the victim's hair, dragging her over the bed, threatening her until she removed her robe and underwear.

His hands shaking—adrenaline pumping—as he searched her wardrobe until he found the dress he first saw her in. The one that drew his attention to her; the fantasy he'd been visualizing, rehearsing over and over, that didn't have a face until that moment.

Something about that dress drew him in—it's his selection process, why he chose her, and possibly even a clue to his past victims. As practiced as the scene was, this might've been his first kill—but there's likely a trail of crimes he's left in his wake. And if this was his first, any mistakes he made he'll quickly correct. He'll become even more difficult to catch.

I jot down a list of most notable aspects of the crime scene to run through ViCAP—the choice of the victim's home for the attack and the dress could link this to other unsolved cases.

I sigh, knowing that I'm already building a profile that won't align with the boyfriend. I don't even have to sit in on the questioning. This wasn't a crime of passion, or a revenge killing. This was too calculated. Planned. Carefully executed. A fantasy realized.

Clearing my dry throat, I flip through the photos, imprinting them in my mind. Seeking anything that stands out. I reach into my pocket and take out my packet of gum. I stopped smoking a few years back, but the gum habit stuck. I crave the idea of smoking. Having something to do while I'm working, looking through crime scene images. It always helped me not get

pulled in too closely—a smoky barrier between the killer and me—while I delved into his world.

Staring at the photo of the victim with her legs spread, ankles bound, I envision the perpetrator kneeling behind her—degrading her. This position humiliated her, and he was her god. Towering over her, he was all-powerful, and that power intoxicated him. But he didn't allow the adrenaline rush to overtake him.

He was calm, methodical, in control. Only his victim's suffering is what he desired. He's nothing like the weak woman below him. The slut. The whore. She deserves to be stripped bare, her flesh on display for him. She gives it up so easily, why not take what she's offering?

Before I'm completely consumed by his world, I quickly break away and put in a call to the M.E., asking to be updated as soon as possible on her findings. Then I sit and open a new grid worksheet, and start clicking away at the keys, filling in the fields. Quinn will use what little I can devise from the scene to question the boyfriend further, or he can run it through the shredder. Either wouldn't surprise me.

The perpetrator is above average intelligence. Mid twenties to mid thirties. And like Quinn scoffed at, he probably has an extensive porn collection centering on bondage and demeaning women. The fact that the UNSUB knew he had time to commit his crime in her home, with no interruption, means he was most likely watching her for a while. It could also mean someone who knew her personally—like the boyfriend. But I build on the facts, not the suspect.

I grab the photo of the victim and hold it up, studying it once more. My vision flickers, and the room fades away, replaced by nearly bare white walls. My senses prickle. My skin heats. I can feel the rope tied around my ankles. The coarse threads rubbing against my skin. Smell his sweat; his excitement.

His fingers dig into flesh as he takes his hard-won prize...

My face flushes, and I drop the photo. Dammit. Envisioning this scene

from the victim's perspective is too dangerous. I know this. Shutting my computer off, I swear under my breath. It's been too long since my last trip. Since I first glimpsed the victim, I knew this case would get to me. I need to go. Tonight.

Before I leave my office, I stand paused near the door, my gaze searching the bookcase in the corner. I march over and snatch a book on medieval serial killers from the shelf. Then I stuff it into my bag as I exit.

Quinn totally called me out. He knows me a little too well. There is more to this kind of specific torture the victim endured—the method the perpetrator used to damage her fingers. But my thoughts aren't going to be voiced or recorded in that profile until I know more.

It could be a sick coincidence. Or maybe the perpetrator stumbled over the torture technique during his online searches. It might have intrigued him. Excited him. For a sadist, inserting needles under the nails is a vicious deed.

But it's also very precise to the torture techniques favored by one of the most infamous serial killers of the millennia. A killer I've spent countless hours studying, analyzing, speculating. A woman who's as loathed as she is fascinating.

The Blood Countess.

On my mission to understand, to compartmentalize, how a human can commit such acts of violence, I came across Elizabeth Bathory, a Hungarian Countess from the sixteenth century. I wanted to understand what kind of energy, hatred, *fear* was needed to torture and kill over two hundred young girls.

She became my rule, the bar by which I measure—she is the ultimate testament in human cruelty. What we are capable of, and by some degree, what I might even be capable of.

It's just human nature and a touch of psychology, really. I once thought if I could unravel the mystery around her, I could understand what happened to me. *Why* it happened. And how someone could fall so far into the darkness

they only existed to inflict another living being with their maliciousness.

Bathory is my ultimate intrigue as a profiler. Not only that, but as a victim myself.

The fact that our newest perpetrator emulated her technique is interesting—but that's as far as I can allow my brain to process it. A strange, yet intriguing coincidence.

Besides, other than the fact that Quinn will laugh me out of the building for trying to link a current killer to the sixteenth century, I have more immediate needs to remedy.

Arlington is a fairly quiet city. Low crime rate. One of the reasons it was my top choice for transfer out of the field office that kept me moving and dissecting crime scenes across Virginia. Now, the carnage has followed me to my own backyard.

I haven't had a case like this in a while...and I'm going to need my head clear and my conscience subdued in order to work it.

FIRST CONTACT

COLTON

I watch her.

Since her first visit to The Lair months ago, I've been watching. Just watching. And she watches, too. I assumed she was a voyeur. Only here to feed some curiosity, or feast on the sight of flesh and violence. But the longer I watch, the more I see it in her jade eyes; she's hungry.

How she even got through the front door, I don't know. Julian must have been feeling charitable that night. Maybe thinking the same as me—that she was just wanting to settle some curiosity. But here she is again. It's her MO.

I round the bar, tapping Onyx on the shoulder to let her know I'm taking off. Then I duck under the bar top, the beat of the house music thumping in sync to my ramped heart rate.

She hasn't been back for a while. Maybe two weeks. And I'm like a hunter stalking my prey, needing to get a long, lustful gaze at my conquest. Although, truth be told, I have no intention of making a move on her. She's too perfect. I just want to marvel. To watch as she watches...taking in her labored breaths. Her fingers clamped tightly around her flute of champagne.

I lean my shoulder against the wall and fold my arms over my chest and black T-shirt, letting my gaze travel over the room until it locks on to her.

This is just one room in the club. The voyeur. Set up with a stage and plenty of space for the audience to roam and play while each scene is enacted for the members' enjoyment.

I've wondered before if she ever visits the other rooms. If she ever visits mine...if she plays...but I'm trusting my instincts on this one. That, and the fact that Julian has confirmed he's never set her up with a Dom or Domme. Okay, fine. I've asked about her. Even against my better judgment and Julian's unwelcome probing into my life.

All my thoughts cease as the scene on stage begins. The music dies down, and in the sudden, stark silence, a low and melodic beat starts. The dungeon master walks a blindfolded woman onto the stage and commences strapping her to a St. Andrew's cross. It's a classic scene, one that the sub requests each week. She likes to be flogged while a Dom frees her from her daily monotony as a CEO of some company. Then she prefers her master to go down on her as she climaxes.

But it's the first time *she's* been witness to it. And I move a bit closer, needing a clear view of her face as she watches. My breath moves past my lips, slow and measured, as I spy her vivid eyes trained on the scene. Her lips parted, black dress clinging to the curves of her slim body.

Her chest rises with her sudden and deep inhale. The V of her dress teasing me; the creamy skin of her chest hidden beneath a scarf, the round swells of her breasts just below, inviting. From the corner of my vision, I see the flogger make contact across the sub's tits, and my pants tighten painfully as my target's hand goes to her chest. She caresses her smooth skin beneath that infuriating scarf as if she's been struck.

I slide my tongue over my lips as she crosses her legs. I imagine her thighs pressing together tightly, putting needed pressure against her clit, her panties wet. Fuck. I reach down and adjust myself. This is getting ridiculous, how much I crave this stranger. But she's not like the others.

So many tempting beauties occupy this scene, and though I've played

with my fair share, and it was satisfying on a carnal level—I've never been entranced the way I am when I watch her.

What would it feel like to tie her down, discover what she desires? For her to let me in and reveal her darkest fantasies? Extract her fears and inflict them on her, making her tremble, scream, *ache*. Then fall to my knees and gratify her as I worship my goddess.

The muffled cry from on stage cracks into my musings with the strike of the flogger, and I'm awoken from my trance, only to fall into my own form of torment. I watch as my goddess becomes bold as the other members play around her. She snakes her hand up her parted thighs...under the hem of her dress. Her eyes shut against the scene as she touches herself.

Fucking hell. I'm going to come undone. Yes, beauty. Rub that slick, swollen clit. I reach down and run my palm over the rock-hard bulge pressing against my jeans. I feel the connection to her as she pushes her hem up enough for me to witness her sliding her underwear aside, then I envision her trembling finger sliding into her warm flesh. Her eyes are clamped closed against the darkness, her breasts straining against the taut fabric, her nipples peaked.

I want to be there with her. Right there, when she comes. I'm tempted to yank my cock out this instant and beat the fucker off.

But my hand stills, my breathing catches in my throat, as a guy moves in front of my line of vision. Dammit. I'm already stepping closer to get around him when my feet stop. He lays his hand on her shoulder, then bends over to whisper in her ear.

My hands curl into fists.

If she welcomes his advance, I'm going to lose my shit. I won't be able to stand here and watch someone else give her what I know she needs. Fuck him. He hasn't watched her for months; he hasn't logged away countless hours discovering what she yearns for.

And he sure as shit doesn't know that she doesn't want to be touched. But

I do—and I'm two seconds away from breaking his hand.

But I keep watching, regardless. If she's ready to play, finally, I'll make sure she's safe...

She's shaking her head, trying to get away from him. She's rattled. He's not what she wants. She's here to watch, not play. She's not ready.

Relieved, I slowly back away. I'm pissed hot that he interrupted our moment, but there will be another. There's always another. She's getting bolder. And so am I. Only when I glimpse the distress on her face, her panic mounting, I immediately stop.

The guy touches her again, this time on her waist. He's leaning over her, trying to persuade her to join him. He grips her around one thin wrist and forcefully pulls her against him.

That's breaking the rules, fucker.

I'm storming toward him before Onyx can alert the bouncer.

His hand slides around her stomach as she pushes away from him, fear marring her gorgeous face.

"She said no," I blurt. Towering over the guy, I bring all of my six-foot self forward, a dominant shadow cast over him. I haven't touched him. Yet. But my fists are locked, every muscle corded tight.

The guy—who's wearing a dark gray business suit—straightens his back to bring himself fully before me. "She wants it. She's just shy." He glances down at her. "Needs a little persuading."

Hot breaths saw in and out of my nose. "The lady wants to watch. No means *no*, asshole. In any establishment, but especially here." Hiking my thumb over my shoulder, I say, "I think you've played enough for tonight."

His eyes narrow, but he shrugs, deciding it's not worth the consequences if he wants to take this matter further. He gives me a once over, sizing me up, before he walks around and leaves.

Releasing a strained breath, I let the adrenaline ebb. Gain my composure before I look down at her. When I finally do, my muscles go lax. She's

mortified. I can see it painted clearly all over her beautiful face, splashed with red, even in the darkness.

I kneel down, my whole body strung tight with the need to touch her. I've anticipated this moment—when we'd first look at one another; when I'd hear her voice—but I hate that it's like this. With fear in her deep green eyes. At least, fear that I didn't put there.

“He's a douchebag. But are you okay?” I ask.

Her burgundy layers fall to conceal her face, and I want so badly to push them aside. It's a wig—I realized this before now. I've imagined what her real hair looks like; dark, to match her eyebrows. Soft, silky, long. I want to strip her of the fakeness and curl my fingers around a thick hank of her real hair. Pull her head back; look down into her eyes. I push the enticing thought away.

She nods a couple times, her movements jerky. “I'm fine. Just embarrassed, I guess.” Lifting her chin, she fixes her penetrating gaze on me. All logic flees my brain. “But what did I expect? I mean, look at where I am. I overreacted, that's all.”

Blinking hard, I break the hold she has over me, searching for the right words. I need to please her in this moment. But I'm already so lost to her. “You should expect members to behave appropriately. At the very least. You're not doing anything wrong by being here, watching. That's what this room is all about. He knows the rules.” I nod my head toward the black wall, where submissives are lined up in knelt positions. “You're not on your knees. You're not asking to be dominated. There's always a bad apple, and it just looks like one found you.”

Long eyelashes frame widening eyes. She's staring right into the depths of me. “Don't blame the victim,” she says, her voice throaty. “I know that by heart. You'd think I'd believe it by now.”

I feel my brows furrow slightly. It's as if she's talking more to herself than me, but I tuck this interesting morsel of information away. “That's right.

Now,” I say, moving a fraction closer. “I’m technically off work. So I’d like to help you get back to enjoying yourself.”

The thin column of her throat bobs on a swallow. “I’m not into…”

“Shh,” I say. “I won’t lay a hand on you. I won’t touch you. And I can leave…if that makes you more comfortable.” I pause, praying that my goddess doesn’t send me away. When she doesn’t speak up immediately, I push on. “I only want to see that look in your eyes, that passion on your face—the one you wore just moments before that rude interruption.”

I watch as her breathing quickens. The tremble of her red, red lips. “No touching?” she questions.

My pulse speeds. “Only if you ask. *Always*, only if you ask.”

She continues to stare at me in guarded fascination, the seconds suspending us in our own sphere of heat and caution. And when she gives a sure nod, I’m lit with fire.

As she swivels on the stool to face the stage, I peer down at her. Amazed at this stunning creature I’ve somehow discovered. I pull another stool up close behind her, take my seat. Her shoulders tense as my thighs and body cage her in from behind. I can feel her body heat radiating off her, caressing me, beckoning me. Her fragrance of sweet-scented shampoo and body lotion fills my senses, tantalizing.

Slowly, carefully, I lower my head next to hers. As close to her as I can get without touching. With difficulty, I aim my attention toward the stage. The Dom is placing nipple clamps on the sub, her high-pitched moans piercing the charged air between us.

“Do you know why he connects the chain to her mouth gag?” My words slip past my lips in a whispered plea.

She remains silent, her gaze steady on the scene. A slight shake of her head invites me to continue, and my dick swells.

“It heightens her desire. Her awareness.” I breathe her in, a glutton, needing to satisfy my senses. “It also heightens her suffering, increasing his

pleasure.” As the flogger makes contact against the sub’s stomach, she jerks her head, pulling the chain taut. “He’s punishing her for moving, but that sharp spike of pain gives her so much pleasure...that she can’t help but be disobedient. She needs the punishment almost as much as she needs the release—the gratification.”

My gaze flicks lower as my goddess clamps her thighs together. I bite down on my bottom lip, inducing a slight pain to keep my emotions in check, my head clear. The need to slip my arms around her and hike up that damn dress...spread those legs wide...is almost unbearable. I grip my jeans near my knees, clenching the rough material, to keep my hands from roaming.

This—it’s not nearly enough. But as the wisps of her hair caress my cheek, hinting at her trembling body, I revel in this profound moment my goddess is gifting me. To indulge in her—to enter into her sanctity. She’s my temple and I’m her slave, willing to kneel before her on command.

And as she tentatively runs a finger along her thigh, drawing up the hem of her dress, sliding her hand between her thighs...God. The anguish is pure hell. A torment so divine I nearly come loose at the threads.

I will beg for more.

I’m not ashamed to own it—to confess what I’ve been craving for months.

“Can you feel what she feels?” I ask, my voice husky with restrained want.

I watch her tongue slip out to wet her lips as she gazes at the scene, and I grit my teeth. The sub—now sated from her penance—throws her head back in bliss. The Dom hikes one of her legs over his shoulder as he kneels before her, devouring her. Taking her into his mouth with unguarded vigor.

“She’s stripped raw, laid bare...” I whisper. “She’s utterly vulnerable to him. Having submitted her whole being over to him, she’s now free to indulge in the ecstasy that comes from that liberating release of control.”

She shudders next to me, and my eyes follow the trail of her hand

upward. Farther and farther—so painstakingly slow—until she’s there. Her head lolls to the side, her eyes close, and we’re lost together as she caresses herself through the thin barrier of her black underwear.

“I wish I could have that...” she admits, so low. And my whole body is piqued, awaiting her next admission.

“What do you need?” I ask, my fingers curled so tightly around my jeans they ache, could shred the fuckers. My dick is so hard I swear it’s going to rip straight through my jeans.

“To be free,” she whispers.

I squeeze my eyes closed against the severe quake that her softly spoken words elicit. “Slide your panties aside.”

I’m just in control enough to open my eyes and witness her obeying my order. A primal need to throw her down and ravish her—right here; right now—barrels through me.

“Push inside. Deep. Until it aches.” God, but she does. Holy hell she spreads those sweet thighs and sinks her finger inside until I hear her desperate moan. “Fucking move your hips. Go deeper...”

A shrill moan resounds around us, and the spell is broken. Her eyes fly open and she stares at the stage, to where the sub is coming with a fierce and quivering pleasure as she pulls at her restraints.

“Relax,” I say, restraining from touching her. “Let me be the one to take you there. Just like that. Let me...”

She sits forward. Pushes her dress back down her legs. “Shit. I need to go.”

“Wait.” I almost reach out for her, but I stop mid-air. My hand balling into a tight fist. “Don’t run. This is what comes next. Let yourself experience it.”

She shakes her head, shame creasing the tight corners of her eyes. “It always pulls me under,” she says. At my confused expression, she clarifies, “The darkness. It’s always there...with the cries. I don’t deserve the freedom

you're offering. That's not why I'm here."

Then she's gone before I can demand to know more, my beautiful goddess vanishing as quickly as she appeared. And, oh—I'm so tempted to give chase and beg her to welcome me into her darkness.

I close my eyes, slip my hand into my pocket, and caress the rough cord to drive away the coldness encasing me in my own dark, hollow space.

She will understand that there's no reason to hide from me, no reason to be ashamed—I appreciate her fear more than any other soul. Soothed, I open my eyes. I won't be able to wait until she appears next in my world before I see her again.

The desire to follow her thrums through me with vicious abandon.

LOVERS' WALTZ

SADIE

The camphor ointment under my nose does little to mask the smell of burning flesh. I've gotten used to the awful scents of the M.E.'s lab over the years, but Avery was just in the middle of cauterizing a body when I entered through the double doors.

That's a tasty smell no one can get used to.

"Piper McKenna," Avery says, securing her hairband tighter around her thick blond ponytail as she delves into the facts about the victim. "Twenty-six. Healthy and in excellent shape, except for some unsightly mucus on the lungs, denoting she was a recovering smoker. But otherwise, no real vices."

I twist my lips, trying to keep from scratching at the itch on my nose. "Sexual assault?"

She lifts a shoulder. "I know it's not what you want to hear, but I can't confirm. She did have sex prior to her death, only it could've been consensual...or forced."

"You're right, that's not what I want to hear." I sigh. I spent most of Sunday researching the victim so that I'd have a head start when I heard from Avery—but I'm still waiting for something to connect.

The vic kept to herself. She was new to the city. No family in the area.

She once went out with a couple of co-workers from her place of employment—a local gym—to catch a movie, and she'd recently started dating the guy who called in her murder. The reason he was there Saturday morning, according to Quinn's interview, was that they'd had plans to work out together.

She could've been sleeping with him...or not. Based on her rigorous schedule and almost OCD-like qualities, she didn't leave much room for a social life. Her daily routine was mapped out like clockwork. Like my life, really.

I suppress the desire to think about *him*. Burying myself in work yesterday didn't help. Nor did the trip to The Lair help to sate my thirst—but hearing his voice, his tempting words... A pang hits my chest and hitches my breathing. I push the unwanted thoughts deeper, past my subconscious where they belong.

"Nothing more specific?" I ask, hoping the M.E. can help me link the pieces.

"Sorry. I can only say for sure that there was no sexual trauma."

"So what's our proof that she had sex, then?"

Avery holds my gaze. "Trace evidence. He used a condom. Which means no seminal fluids for a DNA test, obviously. But like I said, no trauma means the sex could've been consensual prior to the attack." She pulls the white sheet back to reveal the victim's torso. "Cause of death was exsanguination due to a deep laceration to her neck. The carotid artery, more precisely."

I nod. "Blood loss. Any idea as to what kind of weapon that was used?"

At this, Avery presses her pink lips into a hard line. Using a gloved hand, she points along the victim's neck. "A very large knife," she states. I raise my eyebrows, prompting her on. "At first, I was leaning toward some kind of hunting knife as opposed to an ordinary straight blade."

"But now...?"

"Now, I'm not confident in that theory. See here"—she applies light

pressure to the neck, opening up the clean wound. “Most hunting knives have a serrated edge that would have torn the skin. Though one would be sharp enough and have no problem cutting this deeply, this is too clean a laceration. The blade that was used was blunt and almost...waved. The pattern has a curvature to it...it’s odd, I know. And the perpetrator would’ve had to use a lot of force to cut this deeply.” She frowns. “A thick, blunt blade that hit bone.”

Not a difficult feat for someone with enough sadistic rage, though. I tap out a note on my tablet. “Strength was definitely needed, then. So the UNSUB was most likely a man.” I glance up. “Just to confirm.”

Her deep brown gaze holds mine a moment before she says, “Between you and me, this is the first time I’ve seen any kind of weapon like this. But yes, I’d say your UNSUB is most likely male.”

The fact that the best M.E. I know—a woman who’s seen everything—is shocked by this kill doesn’t bode well for us. But maybe it’s a lead for our victim. If the perpetrator used a rare weapon, maybe he’s used it or one like it before. It could show up on another radar out there. I make a quick note on my tablet before Avery continues.

“I’ll work up the best sketch I can for the weapon based on the pattern.”

Nodding, I say, “Thanks. That will help.”

She offers a slight smile and continues. “Ligature marks around the ankles and wrists confirm she was bound for hours.” She holds the victim’s arm above the steel table and points out the darkened skin. “The different variations in bruising suggest she was conscious and struggled for some time before her death. And her tox screen was clear. No alcohol or drugs used to sedate her.”

I bend over and peer closer at her hands. “Any chance she got a piece of him during her fight?” My gaze flicks up to catch the shake of Avery’s head.

“Unfortunately, no. There are no defensive wounds. I’ll leave the detecting to you and Quinn, but my guess is that she was apprehended and

bound before she even had a chance to fight him.”

More proof of how planned out this attack was. “That’s my theory, too.”

She nods. “All right, then. So I know you’re dying to ask about what was used under the nails.”

Straightening my back, I give her a faint smile. “Surprised it wasn’t my first question?”

“Absolutely. Your patience with this one is remarkable.” Using an instrument to hold the victim’s arm aloft, Avery angles the above light over the hand. “Unlike the murder weapon, this torture method was a little more straight forward. A needle.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I stare at her, waiting for more. “Just any needle? Like a syringe? But why? I thought the tox showed there was nothing in her system?” The look she gives me states she knows I’m fishing. When I first saw the marks, my initial suspicion wasn’t a syringe. But I’m trying to keep my mind open to other possibilities.

“Not a syringe. A needle like a sewing needle.” She raises her eyebrows.

Tilting my head, I say, “So where’s the thread?”

Her smile reveals her youth. “I like the way your brain works. Cause and effect.” She reaches under the table and pulls out a tub. “I already sent a sample off to forensics, but thought you’d like to get a look for yourself.”

“You know me too well.”

She laughs lightly. “It’s more I know Detective Quinn, and how territorial he is over his crime scenes.” She smirks knowingly at me. And this is true. I wanted to study the rope closer yesterday, but Quinn wasn’t having it until everything was processed.

“Woven cotton. Twisted design, and about six millimeters thick,” Avery declares as she stretches out the rope that was used to bind the victim’s ankles. “Not many offenders’ first choice in restraints.”

My brow creases. “No, it’s not. There are much better, stronger choices. And you’d think he’d want to restrain his victim with the strongest material

possible.”

“Is that part of the profile?” Avery cocks her head.

“More like common sense.” As I reach for the rope, she lays it across my hand. “It looks...soft.” I rub my latex-covered thumb over the natural white fibers. “The profile is building toward the UNSUB being a sadist, so this doesn’t really line up.”

Avery sighs as she looks down at the victim. “I’m inclined to agree with your theory there.” She leans back against the opposite table and looks at me. “Maybe the assailant’s rope choice was a matter of convenience, because he sure wasn’t concerned about her level of comfort.”

I shake my head. “Everything at the crime scene implied meticulously planned. Staged. This rope is based on his personal preference. The question is, why? What’s so significant about this particular rope?”

“Maybe forensics will help with that,” she says. “I had it sent out for more than just trace evidence. Look closely, Sadie,” she encourages. “Note how the threads of the rope are subtly different. Some tighter, some looser. Not exactly perfect.”

As I turn the rope over in my hand, I see what she means. “And the ivory color is stained with dark pigments.”

“It’s only a guess, but I’d say it’s hand-woven. Not manufactured.”

My insides bubble up with excitement, and I look at her with widening eyes. “If that’s true, we may be able to track down where the rope came from.” She gives me a bright smile. “Avery, you’re a genius.”

She lifts a shoulder on a half shrug. “I do what I can, but I’ll take it. But,” she adds, tone serious again. “Don’t get your hopes up for trace like skin cells. I found powdered residue on the rope.”

The UNSUB used gloves. “A forensic counter measure,” I say, and her lips thin into a tight frown. “If he’s that careful, then it’s unlikely he’d forget to wear gloves while handling the rope at any other point.”

“Exactly.” She pulls the sheet over the victim. “But sometimes origin can

be more helpful than DNA.”

Running the cord through my hand, I gaze down at the intricate design of the rope. The perpetrator’s methodology is starting to reveal itself, one link at a time.

“KNOCKING ON DOORS IS THE UNIS’ JOB, BONDS.” QUINN GROANS AS HE DRIVES HIS fingers through his graying, disheveled hair. It’s almost always in a perpetual state of disarray. The gray suits him, though; it’s distinguished versus dated.

“Their report says that two neighbors weren’t home when they canvassed the area yesterday,” I say, flipping my notebook closed. I raise my hand to knock again, and hear footsteps from within the apartment. I lower my hand. “Besides, it’s a good idea for us to get our own profile of the vic to build on.”

“Because Old Lady Time was so helpful there,” he mutters under his breath.

I cough to disguise my laugh. Misses Lewis—the first neighbor we spoke to—was an irritable older woman who spent the whole twenty minutes telling Quinn all about how lazy the department is, and how in her day, murders like this never would’ve happened. It’s all because of that violent cable TV, she swore.

“You have something better to do?” I ask Quinn, knowing the answer. We’re both at a standstill in our investigation until we hear back from forensics.

“Apparently not.” His hazel eyes slit to a glare before the door swings open. “Hello, I’m Detective Quinn with the ACPD,” he says, flashing the man his badge. “Can we have a moment of your time?”

I smirk, but school my expression as I turn to face the victim’s neighbor filling the doorway. I know Quinn would rather be anywhere else than here with me, working on the victim’s profile.

“Uh...sure,” the guy says, taking a glance over his shoulder. “Come on in.”

As he opens the door wide, I follow Quinn into the entryway, which is identical in design to the victim’s apartment. Taking a quick look around, I note it’s the same floor plan.

“My roommate’s resting in his room. Works the night shift.” The guy, who’s around six-foot tall with light blond hair and a lean build, crosses his arms over his chest. Obviously not letting us fully enter into his home. “This about what happened to Piper?”

“Exactly,” Quinn says. “Did you know her well?” He breaks out his little flip notepad, going old-school detective mode. When the guy—Jefferson—shakes his head and claims they were just friendly neighbors, Quinn presses on. “Were you home Friday night?”

As Quinn runs through his base line of questioning, I take in the living room around Jefferson’s tall frame. Extravagant artwork with dark splashes of color—reds, purples, shades of black—line the walls. Black leather furniture crowds the small living space. It’s clean, tidy. And though it states manly decor, it also says a lot more about the men who live here.

“Is it at all possible for us to speak with your roommate?” I ask when there’s a lull in the questioning.

As if he was awaiting our invitation, a back bedroom door creaks open. “I guess you can,” Jefferson says, turning his attention to the tall figure emerging from the hallway. “Colt, these detectives want to ask you about the other night. It’s about what happened to Piper.”

His words trail off, becoming a distant noise as a loud *whoosh* fills my ears. My breath catches in my throat, my heartbeat pulses in my veins, blood careening painfully against my arteries. The room feels as if it’s folding in around me. The moment our eyes connect, I’m caught. My immediate reaction is to leave, run. Get out right now.

But his stone-blue gaze ensnares me. No escape.

My skin flushes with heat, and I lick my lips, my voice lost. The bartender from The Lair. The one who's been watching me in the voyeur room. Who pours my pink champagne, who knows my secret. The one who thinks he's spying on me...while I've been slyly surveying him from the corner of my vision.

In the light of day, he should look wrong. Not nearly as sexy and tantalizing as he appears shrouded by the dim lighting of the club. With sex and leather as a backdrop, it's easy to be attracted to someone—simple to foster a fantasy. Only he's every bit as tempting now. With his fitted gray thermal outlining the leanly chiseled definition of his body...and a shock of straight black hair falling haphazardly over one of his eyes, tempting me to brush it aside, so there's no obstruction as I gaze into his pale blue irises.

God, but I haven't been tempted in a long damn time.

A slow smile twists his lips. And in that split second where he could out me in front of Quinn, as his eyes subtly shift to acknowledge the detective beside me, I watch a decision being made. Then he fixes me with another purposeful, intent stare-off.

“Detectives,” the bartender says, nodding his head once in greeting. “I don't know how much help I'll be, since I was at work that night. But my time is yours.” He says this last part directly to me, and I note the hint of a double meaning.

Letting my breath vacate my tight lungs in a relieved exhale, I glance down at my notebook. My hand trembles as I poise my pen over a line on the page.

“Why don't you question the roommate while I finish up here,” Quinn says, drawing my divided attention to him. I don't miss the slight questioning tone in his voice; he's a good detective. He's picked up on my unease. “We'll wrap up quicker that way.”

“All right,” I say, and suck in a deep, steady breath. I widen my eyes at the guy from the club, silently asking how he'd like this to proceed. He

might be on my turf now, but I need to give him the lead so I can figure out his angle.

My two lives do not intersect into one another. Ever. Mentally, I'm very efficient at keeping them separated, and one does not affect the other. I remind myself of this as he gestures to the kitchen area and I follow him toward a marble-top island.

"Your name." He demands this as though I've kept this piece of information from him on purpose. Maybe I have. Had he asked me Saturday night, or any other night I've seen him at the club, I would've lied. Given him a fake.

But now that my two worlds have collided at a blinding speed, I don't have that opportunity. "Bonds." He arches one dark eyebrow, and I add, "Sadie."

He licks his lips, like he's preparing to taste my name, then, "Sadie." It rolls off his tongue like a whispered prayer. The desire to close my eyes and be lost in that sound alarms me, and I press my palms to the counter to ground myself.

It's the same reaction I had as his words caressed me at the club, the same draw to his deep timbre—inviting, arousing, *tempting*. But I can't... I'm not that person right now.

"You're a detective," he says, surprise edging into his tone. "I never would've guessed that. Though I did take a stab at your real hair color—and that, I'm pleased to say, I got right." He winks, sending a jolt to my chest. "I like your natural color more."

"Behavioral analyst, actually." I match his cocky smile with one of my own, choosing to ignore his remark about my hair. "But it's along the same field of work. Sort of."

His eyebrows draw together, like he's working something out. "A profiler?"

Damn television. "Yes. But don't worry," I say, lowering my voice

conspiratorially. “Long as you tell the truth, you’re safe.”

“I have no reason to lie. Nothing to hide.” There’s a hint of accusation there.

I note that, then try to push us both past this awkward encounter. “Your full name?” I ask, forcing my gaze to my notebook. I reach for my pen.

His hand snakes the pen off the counter first. “Colton Reed.” He studies the object for a second before he holds the pen out between us. I grasp it hesitantly, anticipating the touch of his fingers on mine. I hold my breath, waiting for their feel...but he releases the pen without making a connection. “I gave you my word, Sadie. I won’t touch you until you ask.”

My eyes stay locked on his disarming gaze while I lower the pen to the page. My stomach clenches, and I’m not sure if its nerves or what, but an ache thrums through me. Hot and vicious. Igniting my skin with awareness.

Breaking eye contact, I look down at the clean page and write his name. “You said you were at work the night of your neighbor’s attack. Can you confirm where that is?”

I can feel his smile charging the air between us. “You know where. And yes, that’s a confirmation.”

Right. “On that night you were bartending?”

“No.”

I look up to catch the serious pull at his features. “Can you elaborate?”

He pushes his sleeves up, exposing one well-defined forearm at a time, then rests his elbows on the counter. Lowering himself right before me, so close I could lean in and feel his breath on my skin, he says, “I’d rather show you.”

I force a smile. “I’m sorry, Colton. I don’t have time for games. This is a very serious investigation—”

“And I’m taking it seriously. I’m trying to tell you that bartending is only something I do as a favor to the owner until he finds a proper replacement. That if you ever explored a bit beyond your comfort zone, you’d already

know the answer to your question.”

This, right here, is why I don’t mix business with pleasure. The line blurs, and I can’t focus on my job when that happens. I sigh and push away from the counter. “As long as this checks out, I think I have everything I need from you.”

Colton tilts his head. “As far as *this* is concerned, you do. I wasn’t home to hear any noises. I only spoke to Piper in greeting while checking the mail or in passing. I have nothing to offer you that will help with your case. For that, I’m sorry. But”—he reaches across the island and pulls my notebook toward him. And I’m so stunned by his willing admission, his knowledge of my job, that I don’t stop him—“as for having everything you need from me? You couldn’t be more wrong.”

I can only watch—frozen—as he plucks the pen from my hand without touching me and scrawls something along the side of the page. “You know absolutely nothing about me,” I say, hearing the tremble in my voice and hating it. “Just because I frequent a less than socially acceptable establishment doesn’t mean you can play games with me.”

He slides the notebook toward me and looks up. Straightening to his full height, he walks around the island, coming to stand before me. His flinty eyes slowly drag down my body, taking me in, mentally peeling away the layers of my clothing to leave me bare and vulnerable.

“I wonder which is closer to the real you, Sadie? The little, tight dresses you wear so sexy, or this baggy outfit meant to hide behind. Two very different looks, two very different intentions...but both offer some form of control and power for you.”

What the hell. Is this guy really trying to profile *me*? I’m the master of mind games—but if he wants to play, I can give him the room to hang himself. “Very insightful. You don’t want me to analyze you, do you?”

His knowing smile tilts his lips into a crooked grin. “Well, first you have to gather the facts.” He glances back at the notebook on the counter. “And if

you're up for that, then I'm all over giving you what you need.”

Head games. I might be damn good at them, but that doesn't mean I like them. And I sure don't like losing my footing in a case. I watch him slip out of the kitchen and back into the living area, where Quinn and Colton's roommate appear to have completed their interview.

I pick up my notebook, but before I close it, curiosity demands I first glance down: *Meet me tonight. The rope room. Wear red.* Then below the note, his number.

Shit. My stomach knots, a deep need tightening my muscles. Shaking the feeling off, I pull out my packet of gum and stuff a piece into my mouth, my teeth grinding the mint flavor out before I've even left the apartment.

FLAME

UNSUB

Obsession.

It starts with a spark. A flicker. At the strike of a match. Lying dormant in most of us, obsession feasts on the fumes, breathes in the smoky scent, curling around and in on itself. Building.

We pet it, nurse it into existence. It is ours. All ours. A coveted perfection.

And when it refuses to be ignored, it rages. It roars to life. A blazing inferno. Consuming.

We are but pawns to its deceptive power. Though we attempt to guide it, caress it tenderly into a loving beauty, it cannot be controlled. It's a haunted, vengeful lover. Like a wildfire devouring life in its path, we can only follow its carnal trail.

Slaves.

Obsession rules us. Our master.

And we submit.

Obsession can be our paramount joy; sweet, sweet love. It can also be our utter hatred. An ecstasy of sorrow.

Our pain becomes like a festering scab, and though it hurts to

continuously scrape it open, the compulsion to do so is overwhelming. One second of pleasure when we tear the wound wide and then our guilt eats us alive.

But, oh—for that brief moment the relief is divine.

“No! No! *Please*—” Her bare feet kick out at me as she writhes, twisting and struggling against the rope binds.

Building...building...like the peak of a volcano, the pressure cooks. With her every scream, a gratifying shiver slithers up my back. It's so close to that seductive pull you feel right before you climax. When your gut tightens. Your jaw clenches.

The wider her eyes become the closer I get, the more fear shines in the whites. Glossy like glass, shimmery with tears. I tilt the candle, and wax drizzles over her thigh, eliciting an orgasmic cry. It barrels through my senses until I'm helpless, and I drive the fire into her flesh.

Her back arches off the table. Her muscles lock tight. A piercing scream hangs in the air around her, suspended by the agony of unbearable pain.

Suffering.

It's an aphrodisiac. My eyes roll into the back of my head as I reach out and touch her trembling body.

I am but a slave to obsession. Owning that is freedom, and soon my love will know that freedom, too.

But first... I slide my zipper down. Her whimpers and pleas for mercy only heighten my desire. In order to gain control over the beast, I must possess her. Overpower her. Control demands it of me.

As her sobs fill the air, my thrusts decimate her fragility.

Shoved in her mouth the clue goes. My hand clamps over her thin lips to force her mouth shut. There's always sadness at the end. Not remorse; rather a farewell to a beloved toy.

Shiny metal slices into creamy, soft skin as I drag my blade across her neck. A wet gurgle escapes her mouth, eyes wide with horror. The acceptance

of the inevitable.

Without obsession, we may be free. Peace could have a chance. But what would life be without obsession? Hollow vessels, bored and impotent.

Death. It is obsession's ultimate price.

A small tribute to pay to our beast.

UNBIND ME

SADIE

Disguise. It only works to conceal you for so long, and it's impossible to keep hiding from yourself when you've been made. So why bother with the wig now, when one of the members of The Lair knows exactly who I am?

Because it's more than for protection; a disguise is a defense, a shield. Much in the same way a cop feels his authority when he flashes his badge. It offers no more cover than his weapon, but the power behind the shield infuses him with courage.

And I wrap myself in courage, my camouflage, each night that I embark on this dark underworld. Or maybe that's a lie...maybe I am hiding. I'm honest enough with myself to admit the possibility.

So why the red? Why give in to Colton's whims and slip on this dress? I guess I'll find out the answer to that as soon as I discover his elusive job. That's why I'm here. To get the answers.

The bouncer nods to me and unclips a link from the rope, moving it aside so I can step into the unknown. The rope room. I've passed by it many times, but never entered. Only brave enough to go where I know I won't be touched.

This room is darker than the voyeur. Dim purple and blue lighting streams down the walls, illuminating mounted brackets and hooks. Along one

wall, different lengths of rope coil and stretch, enticing members to select their preference. All colors, materials, widths and sizes. It's a playroom for erotic rope fetish.

Bondage.

My chest constricts, and I'm suddenly in a black, chilly basement. No windows. No way out. I'm turning and leaving before the smells can pull me under...but a man steps in front of my path.

"Miss B?" His deep voice is questioning, but he says this in a way that lets me know I'm exactly who he's seeking. B, an initial, but not my full name. Colton was conscientious enough not to reveal my full identity, but he wasn't going to allow me to use a pseudonym, either.

Once I nod my head to the tall man, he turns and leads me toward a partially enclosed corner table. Sheer black curtains run the length from ceiling to floor, and they're held aside by thick bands of rope. Neutral in color, the ropes decorate everything, falling from the ceiling, running along the seams of the black cushions. They're the focal point.

As soon as I'm seated, a drink—pink champagne—is set before me by the waitress.

Anger bubbles up in my chest, lava-hot. This was my reprieve. My secret. The place where I could disappear and allow the haunted demon inside me to roam. Taste a little freedom before I buried her again in the daylight.

Now that one shelter has been stripped away.

The loud industrial music fades out, and a low hum fills the silence, vibrating the air. As the slow, melodic tune builds, the crowded room parts, creating a ring. I wrap my fingers around the flute stem and grip. Anticipation mixes with anxiety as a beam of light blinks on, illuminating a single rope descending from above. Slowly, it lowers toward the center of the divided crowd. A single, silver ring dangles from its length.

Two figures emerge from the other side of the room. A robed woman. And Colton. He guides her toward the open area, his hand at the small of her

back. I'm acutely aware of the jealousy festering at that simple touch. Craving the feel of his skin against mine...but that's all it is. A carnal desire. I know all too well that desire can't withstand the fear.

As soon as contact is made, my body tenses and panic flares. Primal instinct switches on like the flip of a button.

So I sit and watch. Able to harness some sort of surrogate connection through voyeurism. I didn't start out this way...I was made. Fashioned into an untouchable creature out of horror and pain.

My thoughts abruptly cut off when Colton's stony blue gaze captures mine. Dressed in all black—from the V-neck shirt molding perfectly to his leanly muscled arms, to the black denim hugging his long legs—he stands behind the robed woman, his hands hovering over her shoulders, but his eyes touching mine.

As the beat increases, my heart rate ramps, and so do his movements. Purposely running his hands along her arms, he reaches the neck of the robe and begins to peel it away from her body, revealing her beautiful, naked figure.

And as he reaches above her head to grasp the silver ring, he loops a long length of rope through, then brings the rope before her to capture her around the chest. She remains silent and still as he repeats this act, twining the rope around her, above and below her breasts. The rope skillfully sliding through his hands to bind her.

My breath hitches in my throat. My eyes tear...but I don't look away. His fingers expertly loop and tie until the woman is wearing a harness of rope. Her breasts peek between the tightly wound bands, her arms trapped behind her back.

All the while, as Colton is threading this elaborate binding, his eyes keep mine. As if he's testing each knot against my reflexes. Reading me, studying me. I'm more than vulnerable; I'm exposed. With every twist of the rope, his proficient hands tear away a painstakingly constructed piece of my armor.

It's like he knows my fears and wants to exploit them for all to witness. Shame suddenly fills me, and I go to stand, but Colton makes a similar move. He steps to the side, as if he's going to pursue me if I bolt.

Fine. This is his production. Resigned, I sit back down. So he's watched me, analyzed me. So he's figured out my defect. That's not a very difficult thing to do in my case. It doesn't give him the right to lord it over me.

I take a sip of champagne and press my back into the cushion, forcing my muscles to relax. It's difficult enough having to battle these confusing, erotic impulses while staring at crime scene photos...this was the one place I felt safe. Hidden. Where I could free those demons that I keep buried so far down. Now, Colton's gone and shone a light on them, and he's feeding off my pain.

But even as I'm thinking this, building a case against him, breaking him down and stripping him bare to reveal his malevolent intentions, a small voice inside my head starts to sing. A tiny clarity that whispers truth.

As he runs the rope over the model's skin, causing her to quiver with need, this whisper grows into a chorus. His gaze penetrates me, his voice a light brush against my ear. *I won't touch you.*

The promise rushes through me with a spike of adrenaline, and then I'm fixated on his movements, intently watching as he crosses more rope around the woman's torso. Then drops to his knees, where he begins winding a long thread around one thigh, then the next. Standing, he pulls the ropes taut, and the woman is suspended in the air, her back arched, hair falling around her bowed head.

With fluid movements mimicking a dance, Colton runs his hand along the span of air just beneath her stomach, all the way to her foot—where he catches her ankle with a loop and brings it up toward her wrists. He ties the length of rope off to the silver ring, and she becomes a work of art.

An extension of his mind, of himself.

I realize the bond of trust created and tethered between them. I yearn for

it. And as he tugs on the rope, molding and shaping her, she starts to spin. There is no audience, no sound. But I feel the collective awe rising above the room as the woman spirals into her own world of pleasure—her subspace.

Passion—laced as tightly as the rope binding the model—coils inside me. It's an overwhelming rush of emotion that snaps each thread of rope—one by one—until my insides burst free, and I feel a tear fall from my eye.

She's so beautiful, in all her freedom, and somewhere deep within me longs desperately to feel that. And when my eyes meet Colton's again, I can't hide. He sees it.

He sees me.

WANT

COLTON

Slow applause fills the rope room as I untie the last knot binding Katrina's wrists. She's a wonderful, trusting model who I've performed with many times. Since Julian asked me to start showcasing Shibari sessions twice a week as one of the club's main features, I've only worked with three models; but that's all it is. Work.

Regardless of my love of bondage and ropework, I'm able to separate work from play quite easily. And separating play from need... Well, that's why I've asked Sadie here.

I slip Katrina's robe over her shoulders. She wraps her arms around her waist, and a slight tremble ripples over her body. She turns and meets my eyes, hers still lit with emotion, before she's enveloped by the arms of her Dom.

He's here to offer her the aftercare she needs after such an emotionally charged experience, and I'm gifted with their trust. I nod to him as he takes her toward a back room.

Then all my attention is aimed toward the private seating area in the corner. To the place where most of my devotion has been focused since I first stepped onto the floor. I find and lock on to Sadie's jade gaze. Like being

drawn by the force of a magnet, she's my counter—powerful attraction; no way to stop the science of it.

As I move toward her, I twine a thin link of rope around my hand, subconsciously toying, a part of me. When I'm right before her, she holds my stare, evoking a strong bravado. But within seconds she wilts against the black cushions, using the small table between us as some kind of barrier.

"So you showed me," she says, her voice airy, but I can see the emotion swimming in the depth of her green eyes. She was affected.

Slipping onto the bench seat, I push myself along the cushions until I'm as close to her as I assume she'll allow. Her body reacts, tensing. "Just what you inquired about," I say. "But that's not what I truly wanted to show you."

"I asked about your job, and I see now." She swallows. "It's intense, Colton. I understand why it would be difficult to explain outside of the club." She takes a sip of champagne, then leaves her hand resting on the table near the stem.

Unlinking the rope, I lay it on the table and cautiously slide the tip close to her hand. "That's one part, but it's not the whole reason why you're here. I will never ask, Sadie." I look up to meet her hesitant gaze. "You don't have to offer any explanation. I've been a part of the scene long enough that I recognize turmoil—true suffering—when I see it. And I just want to show you the way past it. To help you free yourself of the dungeon you've isolated ___"

"Stop." Her head lowers as she sucks in a sharp breath. "You know nothing of dungeons." The lights dim further, the beat of seductive music filling the gulf between us.

She allows the darkness to hide her features as she sinks into the seat. With deft movements, I expertly work the length of rope closer to her hand... and graze the tip along her silky skin. She flinches, but doesn't remove her hand from the table.

I continue to run the rope along the top of her hand, toward her forearm,

over the sexy projection of her wrist. “I don’t have to speak, either,” I tell her, allowing the rope to be my hands. I can touch her in a way that won’t set off her inner alarm.

If she’ll let me.

I know something dark is haunting her. I saw it long before now; when she gazed at the stage in the voyeur room. The wanting, the yearning...but also the *fear*. It’s what first drew me to her. Some horror lurks deep within my goddess, and I need so badly to bring that to the surface. To show her she’s in control of it—that she’s its master.

But like the fiend that I am, I also want to gaze into that abyss. Watch it swallow her; the consumption. To look into the darkness and discover why... because understanding that will answer so many questions.

“Please,” she says, barely audible over the low music. “Colton. I know what you’re trying to do. And it’s not that I don’t—” She breaks off, seemingly searching for words. “You’re so aware, attuned. To me.” She looks up then, ensnaring me with her eyes. “If I lose what fragile grip I have, I’ll fall. I’ve worked so hard to just be where I am now.”

“And where is that?” I ask, needing her to drop her walls and let me in. If just a fraction. “What are you so frightened will happen if you let go. You clearly crave this, Sadie.” I loop the rope around her wrist, leaving a loose knot that she can easily slip out of, but pulling it tight enough that she feels the rough fibers graze her skin. “Are you scared of being judged? Scared that it will effect your work?”

Surprisingly, she laughs. That melodic sound washes over me, sending a shiver down my spine. She looks at her bound wrist, at the gooseflesh rising along her skin. “If only it was that simple.” Twisting her arm, she gives the rope a tug, testing the restraint. I watch as slight distress worries the smooth skin between her eyebrows—and it hits me, spiking my chest with sharp pain.

“Someone hurt you.” It rushes out, no filter. With her, I’m unable to hold

back.

Her gaze snaps to mine. And the truth is there in the dilation of her pupils. The shimmer of her wide eyes.

“You’d make a good profiler,” she says, ripping the cord from her wrist. She balls the rope in her palm. “But maybe you should leave that to me, and get back to *your* job.”

I can’t help it; a quick smile tilts my lips. “I could do both, if that’s what I wanted. I don’t limit myself. But what’s interesting is how you stress *my* job—with such scorn.”

“Stop trying to analyze me,” she snaps.

“Easy,” I say, pulling on the end of the rope, slowly uncoiling it from her tight grasp. “I know you’re not really being judgmental. You feel trapped. You want to hate what I am, ultimately what you are...but you don’t. Not really. You’re just torn.” Unwinding the thread of rope, I begin to wrap it around my fingers, watching her gaze follow my movements. “Whoever hurt you, they must have hurt you bad. And now you’re confused. This”—I tighten the band of rope around my hand until my skin puckers from the restraint—“is all about give and take. And what happened to you, I’m assuming, wasn’t a choice. They took. And took.”

Her bottom lip trembles, and I’m desperate to capture it with my mouth. Feel her fear against me and breathe it in, taste her. But it’s too soon. She’s on the edge.

“Now you’re here, trying to unravel the mystery,” I continue. “Wanting to understand if it’s because of what happened to you that you crave the pain, or if it was there all along, but has now become warped. Misshapen.” Her breath stutters past her lips on a gasp. “If it’s distorted *you*.”

She pushes her wig out of her eyes, and God, do I want to strip her of that false identity. Reveal her beauty to her. “I’m a monster,” she says.

Her admission startles me for a second, but I refuse to let her believe this. “No,” I say, testing the space between us, moving an inch closer. Her eyes

reach mine. “No, you’re a goddess.”

With her gaze steady on mine, her body still, waiting, anticipating, I lean in and carefully raise my index finger with the cord of rope wrapping it toward her. I brush my finger across her mouth, gently drag the rope over her lips.

I observe how she tries to control her breathing, forcefully restraining her trembling body to keep still. But she’s buzzing—her whole being humming so audibly it charges the air between us with a spark.

Roaming the rope along her jawline, I caress her the only way she’ll permit, and revel in the trance descending over us as she closes her eyes, trusting me.

“You just need to experience this on your own terms,” I whisper, guiding the rope lower, to her neck. “With someone who’s going to offer as much as they ask for in return. I’ll go slow. I’ll test, and I’ll gauge, and I’ll never push you past your comfort zone. But I do want to help you loosen your bonds, Sadie.” Her eyes open at this. “To show you the other side, and to free you of the dungeon where you’re lost. Pain doesn’t have to mean suffering. Between us, it can be the ultimate pleasure and freedom.”

“I can’t,” she admits, and I stop my progression right above her collarbone. She pulls away so that my hand stays suspended between us. “That divider is the only thing saving me from truly becoming a monster. If you take that away, if I accept that it’s okay, then I might be lost forever.”

“I don’t understand.” I try again to reach for her, but she slips farther out of reach, putting a painful distance between us.

As she stands, she looks down at me. “My dungeon master opened my eyes long ago, Colton. I am who I am.”

“That’s not true. You had something taken, stripped away. That’s not how it’s supposed to work. It’s all about trust.” I hold her gaze, imploring her to trust me now. “Just give me one chance to prove that to you.”

And in this second, with her glassy eyes swallowing me, I feel her giving

in. Hearing my words, and accepting us as inevitable. This *has* to happen. She didn't find me by accident, and I didn't just stumble upon my goddess.

An infuriating beep breaks the moment, and I lose her as she glances down at her bag. She pulls out her phone and taps the screen.

“Something important?”

Her features shift from the sultry, wanting woman to the cool and in control profiler I met in my apartment. “I have to go.” She turns to leave, but pauses and looks back at me. “Why red, Colton?”

A small smile twitches at my lips. Standing, I bring myself close to her and push her fake hair away from her face, loving how her sudden breath drags over her lips at the almost contact. “Because you're my vision.”

And she is. I've marveled at her, studied her, imagining how I would bind and shape her. What patterns I'd create, how I could fashion this lovely, wounded creature into a masterpiece.

But she leaves without gifting me a response. Maybe I gave away too much. Maybe she saw the truth in my eyes just then. Maybe she now knows.

She will be mine.

B E C O M I N G

S A D I E

The remembered bite of blade carving skin and bone has been a constant ache beneath my breastbone—but it's a distant ache. Removed. Now, there is a clipped beat to my heart. The staccato pulse chases the hollowness in my chest, cutting anew, parting sharp pain in its wake.

Colton's words ripped the scab away...and now I'm forced to see the wound that never scarred over.

You're a lucky girl, Sadie. He missed.

No, my captor didn't miss. He hit his target dead on. He wasn't attempting to take my life, but he made sure I died that day. That his torment would ensue long past my physical suffering. That I would never forget.

And I haven't. I never left that basement.

I even found a way to be ultimately okay with that—until Colton. How did he find me? Was he looking? Am I that transparent?

This is too dangerous.

I should listen to that voice, the one screaming inside my head to keep him away. Whatever he can offer me, whatever freedom, isn't worth the price both of us will pay. As much as he sees me...I'm not glass. He can't see everything.

I slam my foot down on the brake and curse. Putting my car in reverse, I back up and then park beside Quinn's unmarked Crown Vic. I push my car door open and wince as my stilettos crunch gravel beneath their soles. Glancing down at my red dress and cringing at the clashing shoulder holster, I bite my lip. But it's too late to wish I'd changed now.

Quinn is never going to stop giving me shit about this dress.

Regardless of my discomfort, this is not about me. When I got the message that another murder had been reported a few blocks from The Lair, I had to come right away. So I tug off the burgundy wig and stuff it into my bag as I round the stream of yellow tape toward the front porch of the small house.

Already, I've left behind the twisted and confused girl at the club, and am now in full investigative mode. The only setback, my annoyingly slow pace due to the tight skirt of the dress and high heels.

"Jesus—"

My attention snaps up at Quinn's voice. Damn.

Standing near two uniforms, his black trench coat setting him apart from the blue pressed shirts circling him, a slack-jawed Quinn stares down at me. He blinks hard once, breaking his intense scrutiny, then motions his unis to head inside the house.

Their eyes stay trained on me even as they disappear through the front door.

Checking my scarf and securing it tighter, I release a heavy breath and take the first step. "Don't even, Quinn," I say, eyes aimed on the cement porch. "Let's just get to work. Fill me in on what you know."

I peek up to see him raise his eyebrows. "You show up to my crime scene dressed like..." His eyes languidly trace my form, then roam up, meeting my gaze searchingly. "You look good, Bonds. Shocking, but good."

I don't know how to take him—sincerity coming from Quinn throws me off balance. "Don't get used to it. It was just one of those nights, all right?"

He holds up his hands. “You don’t owe me an explanation. No judgment here.”

His words stop me from entering the house, and I turn toward him, my face scrunched in question. He’s the second man to point out that I have no reason to be judged. Shaking it off with a jerk of my head, I motion toward the cracked front door.

“Who called it in?” I ask.

Visibly putting himself back in the scene, the hard detective switches on with a roll of his shoulders. “A friend, or rather a co-worker. When the victim didn’t show up for work today, and didn’t reply to texts or calls later, she came by to check on her.” Quinn pushes the door open and guides me inside, his hand at the small of my back. “After banging on the door repeatedly, she found it unlocked and came in to find this.”

Ignoring his alpha-male manners, I step away from his touch, and into a grisly crime scene that steals my breath. Red covers the floor. The walls. The chandelier. Suddenly I’m very aware of just how inappropriate my outfit is. Just how much I stand out against the numbers of blue and black, and the violent blood splatters.

Sensing my unease, Quinn yanks off his coat and offers it to me. I nod, allowing him to drape it over my shoulders. “Has the M.E. determined the TOD yet?” Feeling slightly less on display, I slink over to where a box of shoe covers has been placed along the floor and slip them over my heels.

Quinn does the same. “Avery thinks the vic was killed sometime this morning. But the scene suggests the perpetrator spent a good amount of time with her first.”

Despite my best effort to focus on the facts in their own element, my mind is already linking this case to the previous. Both women apparently lived alone and were attacked in their own homes. Both were tortured throughout the night and killed in the early morning hours.

But there are glaring differences setting this crime apart from the other.

The living room is wrecked. As if the victim put up a fierce struggle, or the assailant was enraged. Probably both. Broken glass litters the hardwood floor, blood coats the gleaming slivers. It's probably too much to hope that it's the perpetrator's blood—most likely he attacked the victim with the glass object.

Which denotes impulse. Very different from the meticulously planned attack on the previous victim, where she was subdued without a fight.

“No forced entry?” I look over at Quinn, already suspecting the answer. There was no damage to the door.

He shakes his head. “No sign of that yet. No broken windows. Everything is all locked up. There's also no murder weapon or prints...but I'm hoping, with the apparent struggle, we get some of the perpetrator's DNA.”

When I reach the victim herself, I can only stare. Whether in wonder, awe, or mortification...it's all the same. Naked and mutilated, she's been posed on the floor as if she's sleeping. Hands curled toward her mouth, hair fanning out around her head. Eyes closed. To the untrained eye, the pose looks like a sign of remorse—but he didn't cover her; he left her nude and degraded. It feels more like mockery than regret.

Her body is covered with burns, stab wounds, and contusions. Ligation marks wrap her wrists, and her ankles are still bound. That's the only thing similar to the previous vic—everything else screams sadistic rage.

Kneeling down, I pull out a pair of gloves I knew I'd find in Quinn's coat pocket and slide them on. A hardened, waxy residue covers her thigh. Inspecting closer, I recognize the substance: red candle wax. It's mixed in with the blood. Her whole body shows evidence of wax and fire burns...deep lacerations...numerous stab wounds. All over her chest, stomach, and thighs. And once the M.E. cleans the body, I'm sure she'll find the color of bruising consistent with hours of torture.

My curiosity to peek at her hands tears through me, but I decide to wait for Avery's examination.

“He did a number on her,” Quinn says, his voice raspy. “I know what you’re thinking. That the perp from the other case is looking good for this one, too.”

“And the boyfriend?” I ask, tilting my head back to see Quinn’s face.

He puffs out a heavy breath. “He was released from custody, but I had a team trailing him. I’ll need a more precise timeline here...but the boyfriend is looking clear of this.”

“Of this,” I repeat, my gaze swimming over the victim’s mutilated body.

“Yeah,” he says, lowering himself down beside me. “Unless he can be in two places at once, he didn’t do this. But you were already convinced he wasn’t our guy before, Bonds. So what are you saying? This is the same offender, no doubt. Look at her. Some sadistic shit is out there, stalking and preying on these women.”

What am I saying? I really don’t know. “I never said that the boyfriend wasn’t guilty. I haven’t even completed the profile. I haven’t had time to piece everything together, and now this.” I shake my head. “I don’t know, but...it’s the deviation in MO that suggests this is a different offender. Massive overkill. Not at all like the first vic.”

“From what I can see, no defensive wounds, either,” he adds. “This one could’ve been drugged. And I’ll wait for the M.E.’s report, but I’m going to assume she was sexually assaulted.”

Quinn and I rarely agree—rarely bounce theories off each other so in sync. It says a lot about these cases that we’re working together instead of against each other.

“The attack denotes sadistic rage and disorganized behavior. But despite all the disarray and blood, the crime scene still states methodical, technique—he took his time torturing the vic. He brought and used his own weapon.” I look up and glance around. “I don’t see any red candles, and the rope on her ankles looks similar to the rope we recovered from the first vic...so he brought his own torture kit.”

Quinn stares at the scene, too. “Looks like a blitz attack to me. Perp knocks on the door, and for whatever reason—she knows him; he looks harmless—she opens it. He pushes his way inside and clubs her over the head with the vase on the entryway table.”

“Maybe. That’s likely,” I say, envisioning his scenario as he walks us through it. “But then we have to wonder, if it *is* the same offender, why he didn’t blitz the first victim—which style fits his true MO? He plans the attacks ahead of time, but the first time he subdued the vic without a struggle. The apartment was in order; he wasn’t enraged. He was patient and precise. The first vic was also dressed, whereas this one didn’t get his royal treatment.”

“And this vic doesn’t match the victimology so far,” Quinn adds. “First vic had brown hair, she has blond.” He nods down at the body. “Body type is different, too. Petite verses tall and curvy.”

“It’s possible he doesn’t have a type...just needs a surrogate to complete his fantasy.” Standing, I pull Quinn’s coat tighter around my waist. “Where’s the bedroom? Have the unis processed it yet?”

“They’re working their way to it.” Quinn points me in the right direction, and we walk together down a hallway. “That’s another thing: two different locations for the kill. I thought sadists kept to their rituals?”

As we enter the bedroom, the sight knocks the air from my lungs. A red dress is laid out across the foot of the bed.

Quinn stalks toward it and peers down, then over at me. “Damn. Starting to look like the same MO. I’m thinking something upset his plans, and he didn’t get to dress her. Maybe she fought back, was more than he bargained on, and that’s what set him off. Decided to kill her without the dress being part of his ritual.” He looks at me with a grim frown.

“I think you’re right,” I say, and his eyebrows hike toward his hairline. “Something going wrong during his ritual would explain the rage. The heightened level of torture and the overkill. He was angry.”

As I continue to look around the small bedroom, seeking signs of a struggle, I patiently wait for Quinn to comment on the fact that I'm agreeing with his theory. His silence draws my attention.

He studies me for a long second, glances down at the dress, then walks toward me. "Take off the coat."

My head jerks back. "What?"

Not wasting any time to clarify, Quinn stands before me and grasps the lapels of the coat, then pushes it open. He slides it off my shoulders gently, but still, the feel of his rough palms grazing my skin stirs a delicate ripple of anxiety within me.

I try to step away, but he says, "Just stand still for a minute." He drops his coat to the floor as he moves behind me. "Take off your holster and place your wrists together in front of you. Like you're bound. Keep your ankles close together."

He wants to reenact the scene. My chest tightens painfully, and I shake my head. "We don't have any facts to go on—"

"Just...trust me," he says, his body way too close, his heat pressing hard against me. Resigned, I slip off my SIG shoulder holster and set it down. "This is where it must have gone wrong for the UNSUB. The first vic was killed in her bedroom. The dress is spread out here... You're the profiler. Get inside his head and find out what set him off. Why he couldn't complete his ritual."

As much as I hate this idea, he has a point. In order to understand the perpetrator, we have to understand his ritual. "Okay," I say, keeping my voice steady. "Assuming he didn't drug her, he needed to subdue her early on. We'll go with your vase theory. He knocks her hard enough to take control, then he ties her up and forces her into the bedroom."

"He carried her." Quinn doesn't wait for an assent from me; he swoops down and scoops me into his arms. He first traces our steps back to the doorway, then reenacts taking me as far as the foot of the bed, where he

places me on my feet.

Wrapping his arms around me from behind, he says, “Now struggle. Fight back. This vic obviously wasn’t as easy going as the first. She didn’t buy into his coercion.”

Panic slithers over me, but I clamp my eyes shut, jaw tight, regulating my breathing. Everything inside me wants to wilt, disappear. Quinn’s touch is scalding against my flesh.

“Sadie?” His voice is laced with concern, and that pulls me out of the darkness.

I take in a deep breath. Open my eyes. “He’d have a weapon,” I say. “Something big and scary. I’m still waiting on a sketch from Avery, but if it’s the same guy, I’m thinking his weapon is part of his ritual.”

“Right.” Quinn angles one arm out and brings his hand to my neck. A wave of fear crashes over me, but I keep reminding myself this is the job. I’m not there—I’m not *his* anymore. And then I’m not acting; I’m wriggling and twisting, trying to break free of his hold.

“There’s no blood in this room,” Quinn grunts out around my struggle. “So the vic somehow knocked the weapon from his hand.”

I take the lead and mimic throwing my head back, connecting my crown to his chin. “But she’s taller than me. And depending on his size, she may have struck his head. Then—” I jam my elbow into his ribs, and Quinn’s hand drops from my throat.

“Good,” he says. “Now I’m furious. What’s my next move?”

A narcissistic sadist being stripped of his power... “He has to gain control over her. Take his power back. Relieved of his weapon, he’d use psychological torture. He needs her to suffer...” My throat thickens, cutting off my words. Dread claws at my reasoning. “He needs to humiliate her... take her off guard.”

I can feel Quinn’s hesitation in his stiff posture, the tension straining his muscles. Then, with too much caution the UNSUB would never possess,

Quinn wraps his arm tighter around my neck and flattens his other hand against my stomach.

“He would only sexually degrade her after he felt weak,” Quinn says, his voice low and testing. Sliding his palm slowly downward, his fingers splay over my hip, then begin to inch the tight material of my dress up.

The shock of cold air hitting my skin sends a buzz to my head, the room bleeding away at the corners. As his hand roams lower, inching my thighs apart, my breathing intensifies. I can feel his own labored breaths against my neck, his thick want along the crease of my backside.

And when his skin connects with mine—palm to thigh; flesh to flesh—warmth pools liquid-hot between my legs. His coarse fingertips skim the seam of my underwear, and a fierce ache blooms deep in my core.

He releases a strangled groan, and with noticeable effort, forces his hand lower to grasp my leg. “She had bruises on her knees.” The sound of his rough voice scrapes over me, the restraint in it tangible. It pulls me out of the swirling haze sucking me under.

My chest rising with my quick intake of air, I nod once. “Buckle my knees,” I order.

He does, pressing his knees into the backs of mine, and guides me to the hardwood floor. His arm leaves my neck and he sinks his fingers into my hair, loosely gripping at my scalp. “Go with my movements,” he instructs. And I can tell he’s trying hard not to hurt me...but I’m so lost in the moment, so torn, all I want is for him to yank my head back and dig his teeth into my flesh.

But I follow him. As he pushes my head down, I understand what he’s envisioning. The first crime scene—the vic’s position. My forehead rests easily on the floor, and I turn my head sideways. That’s when I see it.

“Quinn, don’t move.” I yank my arm free from his grasp and reach under the bed.

My wriggling to reach farther pushes my ass up against Quinn’s crotch,

and he sucks in a sharp breath through his teeth. “Fuck...Bonds, take it easy on a man.”

Only I'm no longer paying attention to him. The shiny, silver object captures my full attention. My gloved hand stops an inch from the needle, and I say, “Get CSU in here to process this.” I pull my hand back, shakily exhaling.

“Wait—what is it?”

“A needle.”

He wouldn't make a mistake. Even with a vic who enraged him—even after his fantasy and ritual were ruined. He wouldn't make this kind of mistake.

The UNSUB wanted us to find it.

Bringing myself back up into a knelt position, I press my hand to the floor and shake my head. “I need to work on the profile. We need to get it out there to the uniforms so we can find this guy, Quinn. He's escalating too quickly.”

“All right. But give me a minute.” He blows out a heavy breath, and that's when I notice he's still pressed too closely against me—his hand resting along my thigh.

“God, you're such a man,” I say, trying to break some of the tension gathering around us.

He chuckles. “Hey. You wore that damn dress to my crime scene.” He slips his finger beneath the seam of my skirt and gives it a tug. The material smacks my skin. “It's pretty damn sexy, Bonds. You really can't blame a guy.”

“Oh? So you're blaming me?” I'm trying to keep the banter going, needing to distance myself from the intensity of his body so near mine. I'm already starting to quake with fear and a confusing mix of need. Desire and the demand to flee battling in sync.

“You know better than that,” he says, his hand lightly wandering over my thigh, toying with the dress. “I know better than that. It's my damn job. But,

where were you tonight? Who gets the privilege of seeing you wearing this? And why does this dress—?”

His playful movements halt with his words. My body stills. “What is it?”

“I’m good now. Stand up.” He gets to his feet, then reaches down to grasp my hand, pulling me up beside him. His gaze travels inquisitively over me, his hand reaching out to touch the red material along my hip. “I mean, all women’s clothing kind of looks the same to guys...but, Bonds. Your dress looks a hell of a lot like the one on the bed.”

I turn to face the dress, looking it over closely for the first time. Similar shade of red. Same simple, elegant design. Not an exact match, but close enough to squeeze the last bit of air from my lungs.

“A coincidence,” I say, but my words sound false even to my own ears.

Quinn bends over to pick his coat up off the floor, then moves to stand beside me. “Didn’t you once tell me you didn’t believe in coincidences?”

Hell.

Quinn’s cell phone rings, breaking the awkward moment further. As he talks quickly with the person on the other end, my mind races, trying to make sense out of something that has no meaning. At least, not to me.

“Avery needs us with the vic,” he says. I look at him and nod. “She’s found something she says we need to see.”

I sigh. “All right.” Taking off for the living room, I leave behind the chill that settled over me in the bedroom, and the confusion that Quinn’s touch upset within me.

Answers are what we need to move this case forward and to get an accurate profile. I have more questions than answers. I need some answers.

But I know one thing: what happened in that bedroom...the UNSUB isn’t the only one escalating. I’m on edge. And as much as I fear the unknown, fear *myself*...Colton Reed may be my own, personal answer.

HUSH - HUSH

UNSUB

All great love stories have an element of fear.

Fear of change. Fear of forgetting. Fear of loss.

Our fear just reaches astounding heights—because we're above the rest. We're extraordinary. Unique.

And all great loves take work. Hard work. The right preparation, conviction, and the determination to triumph over all obstacles.

I know she appreciates that—appreciates the sweat, blood (oh, the lovely blood), and tears I've put into her gifts. With every token she presents to me, I'm encouraged that much more to gift the perfect offering to her.

Only that fucking cunt wouldn't do as told. She nearly ruined it. Still, my offering to my love was exquisite. She'll appreciate the extra work and all that divine red.

Mmm. Her scent envelops me now. She wears it just for me. Leaves it lingering in our special places. The touch of her hand to her neck, when her breath is stolen. Then the discrete placement of her palm to the cloth napkin. Leaving me a secret token.

Secrets.

It's what fuels the fire of forbidden love.

And our secrets are holy. She tells me hers in riddles. Wanting me to
piece together the puzzle and set her free. Only then will we truly be together.
Black and earth, decomposing, twining.

No barriers in the forever.

Soon.

W R E C K M E

S A D I E

“*Y*ou need to see this.” Avery stands over the body. She tweaks open a plastic bag and digs out a new pair of tweezers.

“Tell me you found some trace evidence for us,” Quinn says.

I position myself closer as Avery lowers herself to kneel over the victim. “I haven’t found any yet,” she says, bracing her hand on the vic’s jaw. “But there’s always the hope that he made a mistake.” Forcing the vic’s mouth open, she inserts the tweezers and pulls out a brownish, blackish material.

I lean in closer. “What is that?”

Avery shrugs a shoulder. “Not sure. But whatever it is, the assailant put it there on purpose.” Her gaze lifts to meet mine. “A message, maybe.”

A quick shiver races up my back. “He left behind one of his tools, too,” I say, nodding toward the back bedroom. “How quickly can you get that to forensics?”

She drops the dark clue into an open evidence bag. “How about right now. Your wish is my command.”

“Thanks, Avery,” I say, getting to my feet. “Anything else of note? Her fingers?”

Her features pull together, conveying worry. “Not the fingers, no. They’re

undamaged. Probably the only place on her body that wasn't touched."

Quinn speaks up. "His MO is all over the place." He sighs. "Does this mean she was in fact sexually assaulted?"

Avery nods. "With this one, I can clearly discern sexual trauma. I'll have a more thorough look and give you my full evaluation tomorrow. But"—she glances between me and Quinn—"I can tell you right now, if you're wondering, that this is the same offender. The lacerations on her body were cut with an identical blade. The pattern matches."

Quinn groans. "Fuck. One more body and we'll have a serial killer on our hands."

I stay quiet, allowing this revelation to sink in. I was already close to believing this was the same killer. Unlike Quinn, I don't need the required number of bodies to claim this as a serial—I already know, whoever the killer is, isn't going to stop.

It's just a matter of time before the next body turns up.

"At the rate he's escalating," I say, pulling off my gloves and stuffing them in Quinn's coat pocket, "that won't take long."

I need his profile. I need it now.

Which means I have to get my head clear, and stop obsessing over my own issues.

TWELVE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING MIDNIGHT, AND I FIND MYSELF PARKED IN FRONT of The Lair.

My hands grip the steering wheel as the engine idles, waiting for me to make a decision.

I tried to go home. I even circled my neighborhood—twice—talking myself into pulling into my complex, just to see how my nerves fared. But I'm too high-strung. Needing some kind of...release.

And the only thing I can envision, see clearly, is Colton and those ropes. Not the killer I should be hunting. The sadist I should be compiling a profile of. The psychopath I should be relating to instead of fearing—who's probably stalking the streets right now for his next victim.

All these thoughts swell into an overwhelming surge of anxiety, coating my chest with a prickly sensation that claws at me from the inside. A nagging cloud of doubt smothering me, tickling my ear, whispering that I'm too close to this to think logically.

Blinded by bias.

I push my car door open and slam it closed behind me, flinching at the loud bang that echoes mockingly in the still night air.

Low and steady thumps of bass bleed out of the three-story building. The heavy bass-filled music beckons each of my steps closer to The Lair. I don't bother with my wig; Colton has already seen the real me. And the patrons here at this hour have as much to hide from me as I do from them.

I'm not even sure Colton is still here...but my body won't let me rest until I've at least tried to see him. My brain won't stop churning the past and present, over and over, grinding my two lives into an unrecognizable, distorted collage.

If I can just grasp one second of peace, where my mind stops—just shuts off—that's all I need. One break from reality. One escape.

And then he's there, offering me just that.

I've wandered into the rope room, somehow not really seeing anything or anyone until the moment I'm standing right before Colton. Everything around me comes into focus. Sight. Sound. And scent.

I need touch.

Sitting at the table where I left him earlier this evening, his wide, blue gaze hard on me, it's as if he's trying to keep as still as possible. Like the next move is mine.

"I want it," I say. "Now."

He's pushing off the seat and moving toward me as soon as the last, desperate word leaves my mouth. A fleeting sense of panic races through me as he stalks closer. He stops before me, his body crowding the small span of air keeping us separated. My feet feel too heavy to pick up, to step away. To flee.

That heaviness travels slowly over the rest of me, until it reaches my eyelids, and I close my eyes. Giving myself over to him.

"Look at me." His husky words are laced with restraint and lust.

I force my eyes open and stare into his. *Don't blink*. My breath staggers past my lips, uneven.

"I won't regret anything." He raises his hand out to the side, palm open, a waiting invitation for me to accept. "And if we do this, neither will you."

The conviction of his promise whirls around me in a haze of apprehension. The offer to the next step, my own discovery, resting in his outstretched hand. Not a handshake among business partners; an agreement between lovers. One touch to seal the deal.

I slip my hand into his.

And watch as his eyes squeeze closed, his face contorting as if he's in pain—but that's not quite it. It's more...pure. Relief. He yearns for me as badly as I crave him.

His fingers fasten around my hand, anchoring me to him, a short, revealing moment where I can almost turn back, before he's marching through the room, pulling me behind him. The strength of his grip and his urgent steps force all doubt from my mind. And when we stop before a door, I'm filled with need. The anticipation drowning out any alarm.

He keeps ahold of my hand as he reaches into his pocket with the other and brings out a set of keys. I stay quiet as he unlocks the door, not asking why there are locked rooms in the club. Why he has the keys. Who uses the rooms...

I follow him inside.

The air vacates my lungs in a chest-crushing exhale.

Gleaming silver fetish toys line the wall. Clamps. Chains. Leather. A red cane is prized and center. Ropes of all shades, widths, sizes coil against the black, dangle from above. At the far end, a St. Andrew's cross.

A torture chamber.

Colton must sense my unease, because his hand tightens around mine as he leads me deeper into the room. "This is my personal...space." He turns to face me, his mouth a hard line, eyebrows furrowed. "I'm more of a collector than a Dom, Sadie. My passion is bondage, ropework in particular. So don't let the decoration intimidate you. Or scare you."

Intimidate? No...that's the wrong word. Scare? Not powerful enough to express the sickening fear invading my soul. This is a dungeon—too similar to the one where I was sealed away in for days...lost. Helpless. Stripped of my self.

And though it's frustrating to be so confused, so torn over the lure I feel toward bondage, there is no mistake that I will never be a victim again.

I control this. I *have* to.

"Sadie," Colton says, his voice raw, aching.

I suck in a steadying breath and look up to meet his intense gaze. "A monster shouldn't fear her element," I say. "I'm just so fucked up."

He moves so quickly, my breath catches, my body frozen. His hand releases me only to grasp my face, his palm firm against my cheek, thumb braced over my chin. "What happened tonight?" His icy gaze traces the contours of my face, analyzing my tells. "What's the trigger that pushed you here, into my arms, Sadie?"

Holding his stare, I give nothing away. I'm trained to know how to control my features, but my head is screaming just to let go. "Nothing," I say. "It's just time that I—"

"Bullshit," he bites out, and I flinch against his hold.

Licking my lips, I savor the coarse feel of his palm on my skin. "The

crime scene,” I start. “It should disgust me. Cord banding the victim’s wrists...ankles. Limbs stretched and aching...the tightening of the binding until your will evaporates. The feel of hands touching, taking...pressure—” I break off and attempt to look away, but Colton holds me firmly in place. “I should hate it. Loathe it. But I don’t. I desire it so deeply...it hurts. And I like the pain.”

A low growl rumbles from deep within Colton’s chest. His hand clamps harder to my face as he moves in closer, no more separation between us. “There’s nothing wrong with you, goddess. Just the absolute tragedy that I didn’t make you mine first.”

Then I’m free of his touch before his words can sear me, and his hands are latched around my wrists, guiding them above my head.

“We’re not doing a Shibari session tonight.” At my confused expression, he says, “You’re too piqued...bound too tightly already. Trust me. Right now, you simply need release.”

Sliding his rope-calloused palms down my arms, stirring a familiar but restricted heat deep inside me, he whispers, “Keep your arms raised,” then he snakes an arm around my back and hoists me against his hard chest.

My whole body stiffens, every muscle rigid. But I keep my hands lifted, trying to relax against him. Trying to do just as he said; trust him. “This much contact was not part of our...agreement,” I say, noting the tremble in my voice.

“We have yet to discuss the terms.” As he walks us to the middle of the room, my feet drag over the cold tile floor, my shoes lost. He lifts me higher and places me on a bench. The leather cushion slicks against my heated skin.

“And those are?”

His eyes meet mine. “I help free you, and you allow me to worship you.”

My heart batters my chest. “I’m not the goddess you think I am.”

A slanted smile tilts the corner of his mouth up. “I’m about to prove differently. Now, don’t lower your arms,” he instructs. Then he grasps my

wrists and brings them to his mouth, tenderly placing a kiss to each before dragging his hands down my arms, ribs, waist, shooting a thrumming need right to my core. When he reaches my hips, his teeth sink into his bottom lip. He grips the material of my red dress and yanks it up past my thighs.

I hold back a gasp as his palms slip between my thighs and push them apart.

His blue irises lit with hunger, he runs the pad of his finger over the thin satin of my underwear. A harsh exhale bursts from between his lips as his fingers expertly slide the fabric aside, his skin grazing mine, before he pulls them down my legs.

“The second you get this wet....” he says, his voice dark, “you find me. Wherever you are, it doesn’t matter. Do not wait. There’s no reason why you should ever want for release, Sadie.” He reaches up to take hold of my scarf, but I pull back.

“You can have me laying here completely bare, Colton... All but that. The scarf stays.”

With an evident mask of frustration worrying his face, he says, “We hide nothing from each other. This won’t work if we don’t have complete openness and trust. That’s a requirement.”

When I don’t pull away this time as he touches the black scarf, he begins to slowly unravel it from around my neck. Before he has me exposed, I say, “No knives. No sharp objects. One of my rules.”

He nods, then pulls the scarf, revealing the ugly scar marring my collarbone.

My arms tremble, the need to lower them and cover myself almost unbearable. But I keep them raised, my eyes averted, as he tentatively traces the rough pads of his fingers across the white scar.

“No sharp objects,” he repeats as a reassurance. Then he threads the scarf around his fingers once before he brings it up to bind my wrists. “You’ll need one thing of yours touching you, centering you. We’ll move slowly, always.

But right now, I just need you to come for me.”

He doesn't give me time to respond, though. His words bind me tighter than the scarf wrapping my wrists. He reaches farther above us and tugs down a suspended rope. Like the one I saw in the rope room, this too has a silver ring where he threads the scarf through, then ties it off.

“This,” he says, pushing away and taking out a length of rope from his pocket. “Is as much for me as it is for you. I want you to tell me what you feel as the rope touches your skin.”

Kneeling before me, he cups my calf and slides his hand down until he reaches my ankle, where he begins to wrap the thin rope—once, twice, three times. As he performs this action, my body tenses. But the tightening pulling at my every muscle, the ache pulsing through me, overwhelms the anxiety.

“It tickles,” I say, and he looks up, his eyes lit with surprise. “Tighter. It needs to be tighter.”

And he doesn't deny me. His fingers curl around the ends of the rope and he pulls; the bands tighten with a pleasurable rub of friction against my heated skin. “It feels...coarse but soft. Like a hard, demanding kiss meant to chase away the darkness.”

At this, he groans and yanks the rope taut, stretching my leg outward. A small sound escapes my mouth, and I watch as he ties my ankle down to an extension of the bench. With noticeably less patience, he does the same to my other leg, leaving me open to him. Exposed and in total submission.

Bringing himself up to stand, he towers over me, his breaths expanding his chest against the black fabric of his shirt. Staring down at me, he says, “Tell me to taste you.”

My heart stutters. “I thought I didn't have to ask...”

“Not ask. Order.” He leans down, folding his body over mine like a shield. “Here, with me, you are in control. This is your power.” He lifts one hand to grasp the knot between my wrists. “I want to touch you... everywhere. Taste you all over. Devour you and consume you. And trust that

this is merely a weak form of expression compared to what I'm feeling." His eyes shut briefly. When he opens them again, I witness the restrained hunger in their depths. "But I'll only ever do as you ask. This is the trust between us. When you say stop, I'll stop. When you demand more, I'll exert myself until you're satisfied." His face is so close to mine, I just have to inch forward... one little inch...to taste him. "Now, those are the clear safe words between us. So tell me to taste you, and not to stop until you're coming in my mouth."

I part my lips, my breath unsteady as it seeks to touch what's just out of reach. Everything he said...it's what I want. Control. Absolute power in this completely fucked up web corroding my life. But everything, *everything* we desire comes with a price.

What will this trade cost me?

Before the horror of my past can reach up and snatch my courage away, I say, "Taste me, Colton. And don't stop."

Without hesitation, he does. When his mouth presses against me, eliciting a soft moan, my eyes close. And I'm lost. Fallen down the rabbit hole.

ALL OF HER

COLTON

I have never been a greedy, impatient man. The years it's taken to study the art of Shibari, the dedication, I have conditioned myself to not only understand patience, but to respect it.

Sadie strips me of all benevolence.

I'm insatiable.

A pure glutton as I run my palms over her thighs, savoring the quiver my touch provokes across her velvety skin. I'm just sampling right now, curling my tongue along her slick lips, teasing my teeth over her lovely clit. When I first glimpsed her sweet, pink pussy, it was all I could do not to fall to my knees and devour her whole.

Restraint. It's not just a bondage term; it's a religion.

And I've suddenly become a devoted practitioner.

I want to tease the experience out with her as much as I want to fulfill her. Every time her hips buck off the bench, it sends a pulse to my cock. He's the greedy fucker. And as her thigh muscles flex, her legs straining, ankles puckering against the ropes, I can't hold back any longer.

Sinking my tongue deep into her pussy, I taste her fully. Her sweetness consumes me, overpowering my senses, and her soft, soft skin—so wet—

slides against my tongue, warm and beckoning.

Her breathy moans have me gripping either corner of the bench, my fingers damn near tearing through the leather. How long has it been since she's allowed herself this release? I'm scared to know; the temptation to tie her down and ravish her might break me.

But she's almost there now. She's wound so tightly, all her muscles corded with the near release, that I have to grind my knees into the floor to ground me. The pain bursts through the lust-filled haze clouding my thoughts, and I focus solely on her. Each stroke of my tongue purposeful, each suck choreographed in sync with the arching of her back.

The rope hook near the top of the ceiling squeaks, and I glance up to catch her arms straining against the scarf. I latch onto her ass and scoot her forward, driving my tongue deeper. She cries out and sinks her mouth against her arm.

I want to tell her to let go—stop denying herself what her body needs. But I don't want to lose our rhythm. This intense moment binding her to me. Instead, like the greedy fuck that I am for her, I decide I have to share—just a small piece of her—with the part of me that's clawing like a wild animal to take every last bit of her.

Rearing back just enough so I don't lose connection, I place one finger at her soaked entrance. Then I slide my finger inside, deep. Her ass comes off the bench, and I clamp my other hand tighter to her, holding her still. I want her to take it. Inserting another finger, I go deeper still, stroking her swollen flesh over and over until her walls clamp down around me.

As she fights her climax, wriggling her hips and refusing to make a sound, I slip my zipper down and let my hard, aching dick free. This won't do. Not at all. It's not nearly enough.

Quickly switching hands, I try not to miss a beat as I sink my fingers inside her and then wrap my cock with my other hand. Her wetness slides over my sensitive skin, and I groan against her as I stroke her come along my

shaft, all the way to the head.

Fucking hell. I've watched her for what feels like forever—have imagined what she'd feel like. I've craved just a second where I could taste my goddess, but all that imagery was wasted. Just wasted. She's beyond my fantasy.

And so I know—hell, do I know—that when I finally get to take her over the edge, I'll be lost to her.

“Oh, God...Colton. I can't...”

Her pleading breaks through my thoughts, and I pull away only long enough to find her eyes. Pushing my fingers hard against her swollen mound, I say, “Don't think. Don't fight. Just close your eyes and fuck my mouth.” Then I drop my head back between her thighs and nip her clit before my mouth surrounds her.

Hips bucking, she releases a strangled cry that pulses through me. I press deeper into her, my tongue caressing her clit as my other hand pumps my cock. And when she tenses—all sound muted until that single second when she shatters around me—I break free. I unleash a harsh groan as I spill my come to the floor, cock pulsing against her sweet wetness that still coats my hand, and we release together.

I stay where I am, just touching her, head resting against her pelvis, as I savor the aftershocks rolling off her to me. Her pants slow, and I look up into her face.

Her skin glows with a beautiful sheen of sweat. Features twisted, she looks pained, but I know that's not true. I won't let her feel guilty. That was our deal; no regret.

Standing slowly, I rise before her, still holding myself. Her gaze travels down.

“I'm still hard for you,” I say, running my palm along my shaft. “That's what you do to me.”

I watch the slender column of her neck bob on a hard swallow. She clears

her throat and says, “Can I taste you?”

And those words...coming from that mouth...send me right over the fucking edge. I grip the head of my cock and squeeze, biting out a curse as I throb from the inside out. I imagine grabbing my pocketknife and slitting her dress down the middle. Tearing it from her body. Strapping her to the St. Andrew’s cross in the corner and hearing the sounds I know she’s capable of making—

But I push that craving down into my gut. Shut it off. She’s not there yet. And she may never be. Whoever gave her that scar on her collarbone stole something sacred from her.

It’s going to take more than a hot face-fuck to crumble her walls. And I may be greedy, I may be a glutton, but I’m still patient.

I want it all.

Exercising that patience now, I step closer to her as I swipe the tip of my finger over the head of my cock. Then bracing one hand beside her on the bench, I lower myself, bringing my finger close to her mouth.

Her eyes drag over my face, flicking down to my slick finger. She parts her lips, and I rub the pad over her bottom lip. Her tongue snakes out to taste me, and a sharp hiss slips past my gritted teeth.

She sucks my finger into her mouth, sampling the taste of us combined, and I’m envious. I want so badly to pull my finger away and steal a kiss; taste us on her lips. Only I’m torn over her reaction to such a bold move and missing the feel of her sultry tongue sliding over my finger.

I decide I’ve been enough of a masochist for one night—there’s only so much torture I can bear—and slowly draw my finger away. I take one quick taste for myself, popping my finger into my mouth, and then say, “Now that you’re sated, we can start our sessions.”

Her eyebrows rise. “Tonight?”

I smile. “As much as I want to bind you right now...come back tomorrow. Rest first. Make sure you soak your muscles so you’re nice and

limber, then come back to me.”

The corner of her mouth kicks up. “I thought I was the one giving the orders?”

Oh, how I want to punish that smart mouth. Nip those soft lips and bite that tongue. Pressing my forehead against hers, needing to inhale the sweetness of her, I whisper, “When you finally understand everything, you’ll know just how much power you truly have over me.”

With that, I straighten and begin to untie her scarf.

One admission is enough for tonight.

TRACERS

SADIE

The reality of my predicament doesn't fully sink in until I'm seated behind my desk, the printed profile of the UNSUB spread out before me.

Colton Reed, a bondage rigger from a BDSM club, went down on me last night. In his room of torture devices and ropes. With my scar—that I show no one—on full display.

You're being a bad girl again, I see. My dirty girl.

I shake the vile voice from my head and gather together the scattered sheets on my desk.

I'm embarrassed to admit, even to myself, how long it's been since I've been with a man. I should feel ashamed of that, more so, than the fact that I was with Colton. Being with a man is normal. At my age, hell, it's expected. And last night, we didn't do anything—really—that verged on kink. It was vanilla compared to most scenes I've witnessed in the club.

Even so, Colton's touch thoroughly shattered me—I can't deny that. I can still feel his rough palms on my skin...his soft lips tenderly caressing, tasting...his taut muscles, hard and flexed, pressed against my thighs.

And what's more, I'm hungry to feel him all over again.

It's just the time between that's shocking; I understand this. I haven't

thought of Isaiah in years. Only it's impossible not to rewind to my last physical relationship—in my junior year of college—and compare. And cringe.

Has it really been that long?

Isaiah was the closest thing to love and understanding I've ever known, and not even he could beat back the darkness forever. In the end, it broke us. The fights, the accusations, the mistrust...the jealousy. And so much anger. I can still picture his face, striking even with its furious, hard lines, right before mine—his hot breath searing my cheeks as he shouted and I tried to turn away from him...

I always made him so angry.

It didn't help that I was a psych major. Who psychoanalyzed him, over and over, no matter how hard he tried to convince me I was worthy of love.

It just never made sense to me back then.

It still doesn't.

So it's completely understandable that when Colton came along, offering validation for why I am the way that I am, it was an offer too tempting to resist.

And maybe I have to accept my shame as payment for my atonement.

Atonement.

That word sounds as foreign as it feels.

Would Colton be able to justify the full truth of me? If he knew everything? It's unfair, really. Openness and trust; his words, his rules....now ours. Those things are as far out of reach to me as atonement.

A knock sounds at my office door, and I startle out of my dark musings. "It's open."

Quinn walks in with a serious, prepped look on his face. "You got the profile ready?"

Shit. Is it already time for the task force meeting? The morning just slipped away, and I'm hardly prepared to deliver a completed profile on the

offender. Which is completely out of character for me. Last night was supposed to help me get back on my game, not turn my whole world inside out.

“You’re jumping the gun a little on this serial killer task force, aren’t you?” I say, reorganizing the sheets and placing them in an open file. “You’re still a body short.”

Every uniform and detective was on edge this morning as we waited for the call to come in. The one that would report the third victim. That call hasn’t come—yet. But Quinn still feels confident in calling the murders a serial, and is pushing the request through for the task force.

The call may not come today...but that doesn’t mean there’s not a body out there somewhere. At the rate the UNSUB is devolving, there could even be two.

“You want to hash it out real quick?” Quinn says, taking a seat in his usual spot. “We have about twenty-five minutes. Let’s go over what we know.”

With a long exhale, I pull up a doc I saved from my recent search and then turn the screen toward Quinn. “I’ve compiled a list of unsolved rapes and/or murders from the past three years encompassing the statewide area. There are three that stand out. Aside from the attacks occurring in each victim’s home, they were also posed. Not in the exact same position as our vics, but the use of both knife-like weapons to kill and fire to torture links them closely together.”

Quinn props his hands on his thighs and leans forward to read the screen. “Was there any DNA discovered on the bodies or at the crime scenes?”

I shake my head. “No. If the perpetrator who committed these crimes is the same UNSUB we’re dealing with, he’s at least always been consistent about that.”

A frown twists Quinn’s mouth. “Even if there was DNA, like you said, he’s meticulous enough not to leave a trail. His DNA probably wouldn’t be in

any database, anyway.”

Surprised, I crane an eyebrow, but let the almost compliment slide untouched. “If this is our guy, his MO has changed some since these past killings. And I’m not sure we have enough to build a sure victimology off of, but there’s one thing for sure: sadists only stop when caught. With the speed at which he’s devolving, he could make a mistake.”

“I’m not sitting back and waiting for him to fuck up while bodies pile up.” Peeking down at his phone, Quinn quickly jumps ahead. “Twenty minutes.” He looks up at me. “Let’s flip the MO. Could we be looking for a team of killers?”

I still feel the same as I did last night at the crime scene; like this is one methodical killer—someone who is too selfish, too vain to share his spotlight. But...I can try to roll with a new take. Just to see if we can unearth a new theory. “Let’s say there are two. Two offenders would explain the two slightly different MOs. In this case, it would need to be a master and servant. One would be completely dominant in this relationship. And one, probably the servant, could be the devolving partner, the one becoming unhinged.”

“Why would the submissive be more likely to lose it?”

“It’s psychology,” I answer. “He’s the pleaser. He has to appease his master in order to feel self-worth. It’s his place. If something’s happened in their partnership to displease the other, then one would be trying to gain that approval back.” I shrug. “When a person is faced with losing what they value the most, they can go to desperate measures to keep it. In desperation, mistakes are made.”

Quinn’s gaze settles on the porcelain ballerina figurine on my desk, his expression blank, as if he’s far away in thought. Then, “Folie a deux,” he says. “Madness shared by two.”

“A psychotic delusion shared by two, to be exact.” I sit back and cross my arms. “Wow. I’m impressed, detective. Where did you pull that psychology term from?”

He looks up at me and smirks. “I know things.”

“Apparently.” And it’s so unlike Quinn to fall back on psychology that I realize just how desperate this case is making him. “It refers to an established, shared bond between two people that brings out the monster in them,” I say, elaborating on the dynamic. “Which is exactly what we’d be dealing with *if* there are in fact two killers. But we’re reaching, Quinn. There’s nothing at either scene to suggest there’s more than one UNSUB other than the slightly altered MO.”

He spears his fingers through his hair and sighs. “Let’s hear your profile first, then we’ll head to the M.E.’s. Maybe Avery’s had enough time to find something new.”

As he stands, he looks me over noticeably.

“What?”

He shakes his head. “It’s a shame you’re not still wearing that dress, Bonds.”

Rolling my eyes, I shut down my computer. “Let it go, detective.”

“Just saying. You’d have the full attention of the task force.”

“That borders on sexual harassment, Quinn. And my profile speaks for itself.”

He shrugs. “Maybe so, but there’d be no backlash on the profile if it was delivered by Agent Bonds in a red dress.”

I stand and pull my jean jacket straight. “Then do your job.” I eye him. “Keep your unis in check during the meeting.”

He scowls. “Just you leave them to me. I think you’ll be surprised to find we’re already on the same page. I have specific jobs mapped out for the team—just getting the forensic reports back soon would help. It’s always a damn waiting game.”

Nodding, I gather up my files and add, “I know, but we also need to look more closely at the victimology, find out why these women were targeted. If their paths ever crossed. During the meeting, we can put the techs on

crosschecking their credit cards. See where they bought their coffee. What restaurants they liked. Clothes shops, etcetera.”

Heading for the door, Quinn adjusts his tie. “Gathering a task force on a *presumed* serial killer could end my career.” His eyes lock on to mine. “That is, if we don’t catch him.”

I hold Quinn’s gaze a moment longer, understanding exactly what he’s voicing. “You could also be shutting down a serial killer before he has the chance to kill again,” I say. “I think you’re making the right call. If you care for my opinion.”

He’s the first to break eye contact as he moves to open the door. “Let’s catch him, then.”

WITH THE TASK FORCE UNDERWAY, GUIDED BY MY PROFILE OF THE UNSUB, QUINN and I keep to our own course and head to the Medical Examiner’s office.

I gave the most accurate profile possible based on the facts of our case. During the meeting, when the detectives usually mock and denounce my theories, there was silence. Quinn kept his word and backed up the profile, which I believe was the game changer. But I can’t ignore the nagging feeling that something’s...off. That I made an oversight. Not with the profile directly, but somewhere within the context.

It could be that the acceptance of the profile caught me off guard, or that this case being upgraded to a serial killer has everyone on edge. The atmosphere in the task force meeting hummed with high tension. Maybe it’s just getting to me, too.

And then there’s the missing link; the signature. What every serial killer case needs to be official. With only two bodies, both that were killed just similarly enough, I wasn’t able to produce a clear signature for the UNSUB.

As Avery opens the wall locker and pulls out the slab with the most

recent victim, I reach down and rub the tender skin of my ankle, feeling the embedded rope marks left on my skin from Colton. My chest stirs with heat. Just the subtle reminder—the feel, the tenderness—is enough to make me crave him.

I drop my foot and right myself when Avery flips open her file to gather her notes.

“Someone was in his heyday,” Avery says, her gaze dropping to the covered victim as she peels back the white sheet. The body of the mutilated woman, now cleaned, is nearly more gruesome than when her wounds were hidden by blood. “I know you’re working quickly to catch this guy, so I’ll keep this short and direct. You can listen to the full examination if you want all the details.”

She runs through the most evident torture the victim suffered, which is an extreme reproduction of the first vic. Then concludes with, “Postmortem stab wounds cover her body. From chest to thighs.”

“That signifies sexual homicide,” Quinn prompts.

Avery nods. “She was raped. But this... Well, it’s extreme overkill.”

“I noticed that,” I say.

“Which is markedly different than the first victim,” Avery adds. “He tortured her. Pure and simple. Tortured her before he killed her, and he didn’t stop even after she was dead.”

The connection hits me hard and fast; the one thing I couldn’t nail down for the profile.

Whirling toward Quinn, I say, “Torture could be our UNSUB's signature. I mean, the methodology is usually unique. An offender whose preference is fire doesn’t typically use a knife, and vice versa.”

He huffs out a hard breath. “So we’re back to the prospect of more than one killer?”

“Not really....look.” I press my gum into my cheek, ready to dive into my explanation. “Usually torture falls into two categories: sadistic and

functional. We can cross out functional, because we're fairly certain our UNSUB isn't trying to extract information. Though he could be punishing." My chest tightens as the memory of a cane connecting to my back steals the air from my lungs.

"Bonds." Quinn's voice pulls me back. "You're doing that thing you do again. Time. We don't have a lot of it."

Nodding, I brush my bangs away from my eyes. "Right. Okay. It's more likely that we're dealing with a sadist who uses torture to sate an emotional need. Sadists are sexually deviant, and even though there's no proof the first vic was raped, sex is irrelevant. He's satisfying his urges through torture. Or he was..."

"Not in the mood for a longwinded hash out, Bonds." Quinn stuffs his hands in his pants' pockets, impatient. I don't fault the guy. I've already given the profile, and now I may have to expand on it.

"Torture might not be enough to satisfy his sadistic needs anymore," I continue, working out the methodology in my head as I go. "He now needs to sexually torment his victims, too."

"Either way," Avery cuts into my theory, "the UNSUB is a sure psychopath. I was on the fence with the first victim, but this one is proof of what's going on in his head."

"Agreed. He's one twisted fuck," Quinn adds. "And because it's easier for a sadistic killer to torture someone they don't know personally, chances are we won't find an outright common denominator between the victims." He glances my way. "We should check in with the task force and see what they've dug up around the profile so far."

I nod. "And maybe recheck ViCAP—go back at least five years outside the statewide area. This level of sadistic torture might show up somewhere else." My thoughts intersect as I look down at the victim. "Most sadists restrain their captives on their own turf, so why would he take the risk at his victims' houses? We need to cross-reference that, too."

Quinn groans, his frustration mounting. “If we go nationwide, we’ll bury the task force. We’re already short on time. Not to mention resources.”

He’s right. But if we can find one significant clue, one important fact to ground our search, then it would be worth the extra effort.

Avery waves a hand through the air between us. “Hey, I know I’m no detective, and you’re probably already a step ahead of me—but don’t you want to know about the second message?”

A prickling sensation sweeps over me, and I narrow my eyes in her direction. At my confused look, she continues, “I’m assuming, of course, that you found a message at the first crime scene.”

“Avery, don’t assume. What are you talking about?” Quinn pulls his hands from his pockets and moves closer to the slab.

Grabbing one of the evidence bags from the table, Avery holds it up before us. Inside is a small section of what she found in the vic’s mouth. “I sent most of it to forensics, but I first took a closer look. When I opened up the particles, I found words—too small to the naked eye—printed and layered within the oakum.”

My thoughts grind to a halt. “Wait. Oakum?”

“Words?” Quinn says, almost in unison.

Avery’s gaze flicks between us. “Before you two went all Sherlock and Watson, I was trying to get to this. It read: Her walls talk.”

“Her walls talk,” Quinn repeats, as if he’s tasting the words on his tongue, trying to connect each one to the case. But it’s a far-off echo hitting my ears too slowly. My brain is already thumbing through literature, texts surfacing, blurring and tracing across my vision. Then, a portrait comes into focus as the pieces connect at an alarming speed.

My throat thickens as a surge of nausea coats my stomach. I realize I’ve swallowed my gum a second too late—but what does that matter? The answer is here. Right here. And I’m so stupid for doubting my first hunch.

“We need to go to the first crime scene,” I say, my feet already in motion

and leading me toward the door.

“Jesus, Bonds...” Quinn catches up to me quickly. “What the hell? Are you going to let me in? We weren’t done back there—”

“I know...or at least think I know...where that first message is.” I don’t look over at him. I don’t want to see the doubt I know is on his face.

But he surprises me when he says, “Should I alert the task force of anything yet?”

My pace slows some as I glance his way. “No. Not yet. I need to make sure first.”

He nods. “Okay then.” He digs out his car keys as we exit the building. “I’ll drive. You talk. And don’t leave out any details.”

Fair enough. “Did you ever get around to brushing up on your medieval history?” I ask, and he sends me an annoyed glare. “Our UNSUB might be a copycat.”

MASTERPIECE

UNSUB

*I*n the daylight, everything is pure, rich. It sparkles with a brilliant clarity, and it cannot be hidden. Such deeds should not only be committed at night. They lose some of their beauty if not greeted by light.

I almost laugh; I made a rhyme. Fitting, since I've been reciting poetry to my newest pets. *She Walks in Beauty*. Lord Byron, one of the greatest poets of the Victorian era—of the millennia, really—and neither can appreciate the poem's stanzas.

I suppose, honestly, it's not so much their inability to grasp it, rather than my inability to describe something so...ineffable. That which cannot be named. Something so exquisite, so delicate in its brilliance, that it's impossible to explain. It just has to be *felt*.

Sometimes these things are so beautiful they make you ache. To feel pain is the only measurable way to experience an ineffable beauty.

I've tried to gift my love poetry. I've left her little verses. But I feel I've failed to get her attention. I don't want to admit that I've failed her—that would be impossible. We're the only two people on the planet who completely understand each other. The depth that we share. No, I haven't failed her. I just need something grander that in some way measures up to her

standards.

She'll appreciate my latest gift. It's a sentiment right out of the history books for which she adores. And when that moment strikes—when all ends meet, and she realizes the brilliance of us...

Oh, how I yearn to see her face. Place my hand to her chest and feel that one, momentary second of awe that makes her heart skip a beat.

We're unique. See, she's the only one that truly understands the significance of that. I searched for so long...hunted for so many years...just to make sense of the *why*.

Why the flame is just as intoxicating as the razor's edge. Why the shrill cry wrenched from the slice of the blade gives equal satisfaction as the shriek from searing flesh.

It should be wrong. I've read all the material, sat through countless lectures. The brain doesn't work this way, so I've been instructed. Preference is as much an art form as the stroke of a brush.

Just to test my theory—because I love to test—I guide the tip of the blade close to my newest pet's throat. Her body trembles and her sobs grow chokingly thick. Clear liquid trails her pink cheeks, and as I nip her skin, she releases a wail that sends an electric current through my veins.

I revel in the delicious shivers skittering over my skin. It's a shame there's no one else around to hear her beautiful cries—but that's how it has to be. People off living their lives, unaware of the masterpiece being created right next door to their living space.

So busy...everyone's so busy today. Not a soul near enough to hear the pleas.

And that's how I find them. The ones who gallivant at night, seeking acceptance. Those who work hard to maintain a normal, functioning life so artificially balanced it's robotic during the light of day. The lonely ones who no one misses right away. I have journals full of such souls; their schedules. When they leave, when they come back. Where they go. No pets. That's

important. Can't have irritating yapping interrupting my delicate work.

And I love to watch. As they stir their coffee; this one here, she prefers light cream, no sugar. No siblings. No calls from Mom and Dad, who live in Wyoming, so her last letter from Mom was stamped. Oh, all the hard, hard work that goes into detailing a life. But all those wonderful details make up a roadmap that leads to this long-awaited moment.

Where they experience their fate. What all the other, lame nonsense was just leading up to. I'm giving them a gift, really. Now Lucy doesn't have to complain to the other waitresses at the diner about how "if she could just find the right man, then she'd stop sleeping around with all those losers..."

See? How horrible her life was before I knocked at her door. And I could see it in her eyes—that clear second of realization; sun illuminating her hair like a halo—that she knew: salvation.

Her salvation from the mundane had finally come.

She's free from all the toil, the heartache, the struggle. Free.

She no longer has to suffer her monotonous routine.

She was so tired, anyway. So, so tired.

Just enough spunk left over to offer me her sweet cries.

And how I relish them. Her present to me.

But her ultimate gift? Being a part of my grand masterpiece. My offering to my love. Dear Lucy just doesn't quite possess the fortitude to appreciate how special she is.

I get chills just thinking about it.

Lucy can't possibly comprehend our connection, my love. When I was lost, you showed me the way. You opened my eyes to who I truly am. You gave me my signature.

A man cannot lack his signature—it's damn near the most important aspect.

For that, I'm eternally indebted to you.

I start slowly, nicking, slicing. Watching red bead against milky flesh.

The gorgeous red—our favorite color. The metallic tang scents the air, and I inhale deeply, impatient for the moment when I'm able to bathe *you* in blood.

FINDING BLOOD

SADIE

“ESU dusted every inch of this apartment,” Quinn says. “Just tell me what you’re looking for.”

The unseen beam from the ultraviolet light scans the wall as I move through the room. “I’ll know it when I see it,” I tell him. I snagged the equipment from Barry—a nice tech who was kind enough to meet us halfway here and “lend” me a few supplies.

Quinn is not impressed with my methods, however. If I wasn’t in such a rush, I might offer him a psych evaluation on his overly anal, control freak issues. Some rules are just made to be broken, as cliché as that is. But it’s true. As Quinn pointed out, we’re pressed for time, and we don’t have enough resources to call in another sweep.

So far, we’ve checked every wall in the master bedroom, spare bedroom, hallway, and we’re now scouring the living room. I thought for sure we’d find something in the victim’s bedroom; that’s where the UNSUB focused his attention.

But...nothing.

“Dammit,” I breathe out, and drag my arm across my forehead.

Moving close to my side, Quinn extends his hand to accept the light. I lay

it in his open palm. “Let me in, Bonds,” he says, his deep voice conveying a heavier meaning.

With a full inhale, I nod. “Okay.” I face him and look up into his hazel eyes. “Her walls talk. I know it can have any number of meanings for our UNSUB...or maybe it’s just meant to throw us off. But I don’t think so. Everything he’s done so far...it looks chaotic, but it’s a calculated chaos.”

Quinn holds up a hand. “You don’t have to convince me. Just say it.”

Licking my lips, I prepare myself. I’m not sure I want to voice this aloud. “I think our UNSUB is copycatting a medieval serial killer. The Blood Countess.”

And there it is; the second the words are unleashed, doubt rushes in. I feel it in my bones, see it on Quinn’s hard face. It’s too...reaching. Hopeful is the wrong word, but I can’t claim another.

I’ve spent so many hours researching Elizabeth Bathory, I’m damn near an expert. But that’s just it; I’m too close. Of course I would connect all the pieces and link them together in this fashion. My vision is skewed. I need an outside opinion, and Quinn is as outside as it gets.

“Explain,” he says simply.

And I do. Starting with my initial hunch right here at the first crime scene, I take him through each torture technique—needles under the nails; candles to burn flesh; sharp objects to draw blood—that Bathory and her accomplices enjoyed inflicting on their victims. The way the methodology ties to Bathory’s own, strange signature: torture. With all my study, the only thing I could genuinely understand about the infamous lady was her non-preference.

She was accused of torturing young girls in a variety of ways...so that there’s no one clear method to claim as her signature. It was in that moment, agonizing over the details, that I realized all sadists—no matter their perfected signature; however vain—spoke their specialized method of evoking suffering through torture.

Such a simple concept. Such a profound revelation.

“What else,” Quinn says, gaze steady on the wall as he hunts. “What else about these cases can be linked back to this woman, other than a few similarities.”

To myself, I shrug. “The tarred oakum, for one. It’s how Bathory concealed the bodies, and I’ve only ever read that specific detail in translated documents of her trial. The UNSUB had to do a lot of research to unearth it. I can’t overlook how explicitly connected it is to Bathory.”

Quinn nods. “Okay. That’s unusual, but lot’s of contractors still use oakum to seal...”—he waves his hand, as if trying to grasp the thought from the air—“pipes and stuff. What if the UNSUB is a plumber? It’s a possibility. You said you’ve studied this Bathory intensively. Your mind wants to make the connection—”

I shake my head. “That’s what I thought at first. Believe me, Quinn. I’ve considered that. I don’t make these kind of leaps, you know this.” I meet and hold his gaze, imploring. “There’s also the message itself. After Bathory was prosecuted and found guilty...which is a whole other story,” I add. “I have my own theories about how her case was handled, but we’ll stick to the historical facts to make our case. Anyway, she was sentenced to be walled up in a room of her own home. It was documented that she spent the last two years of her life in there, writing on walls. When she ran out of parchment, she wrote her thoughts, ramblings, whatever on the walls of her cell. And it’s just too close...the message, the method of torture—burns, contusions, the rope—” I break off as my mind continues to connect evidence.

“What?” Quinn says, pocketing the light.

I take out my phone and pull up Avery’s personal contact number, click it. She answers right away. “This better be an invitation to get a drink,” she says.

“When we catch this guy, I’ll buy every round,” I say.

Her short sigh catches at the end. “I’m taking you up on that. All right,

what do you need?”

Glancing at Quinn, I nod once. Then, “I know we’ve asked you to all but give up sleep, but have you had any time to check-up on the rope origin?” I bite my lip. “You said you thought it was handmade, Avery. Can you confirm that yet?”

“I do have other cases, Sadie, and this UNSUB isn’t really giving us enough time between victims.” I hear the ruffling of papers on her end. “But I really like you. Don’t tell Quinn. He’s not my favorite.” I smirk at that. “All right. Give me twenty minutes and I’ll get you an update. Oh, and I just completed that work-up sketch on the murder weapon. I’ll snap a pic and shoot it over to you now.”

“You’re the best, Avery.”

“I know. I know. Just catch this guy and lighten my workload, would you?”

After the call ends, Avery’s sketch pops up on my screen. I tap it to enlarge the image, then send it to my email. “I need to grab my tablet so we can enlarge it...but, Quinn. I think we’re finally moving in the right direction.”

I hold up my phone so he can see the image.

“You’re fucking with me.” Driving a hand through his hair, he says, “A sword? Really? How the hell does a person walk around carrying a sword and not stand out in this city?”

Flipping the screen around, I study the sketch. “Not just any sword, a flamberg.”

“Which is significant how?”

“Its pique of popularity was during the middle ages. Around the same time of Bathory.” I shrug.

“Of course,” Quinn says.

“Only,” I say, squinting at the screen. “The proportions are off. I mean, I know Avery’s thorough in her work, but a flamberg is a huge sword. Heavy,

tall...and like you said, would be exceedingly difficult to sneak around town and into a victim's home without their notice. Unless he stashed it there. But Avery's drawing depicts it as half the actual size. I've never seen this sword designed like this."

Quinn walks my way, stopping a couple feet before me. "But you've seen it nonetheless."

I look up. "Not in person. In drawings, and paintings. Internet images during research. It's possible someone could've had one specially made—"

Quinn's already ahead of me, though. He flips his phone out and is scrolling through webpages before I can finish my thought. "Three custom weaponry shops in downtown alone." He glances at me. "We can start there."

"All right."

As I begin to pack up the supplies, I can't shake the feeling that this new search will produce little, also. I know we have to follow each lead; that's the job. But this is too simple for our UNSUB. Too...naïve. All this planning... all this meticulous staging...just to be caught by one thoughtless lapse?

I halt putting away the reagents, my hand clasping a bottle of luminol held aloft.

He *wants* us to find his message.

We didn't discover it the first time, and that's probably why he made the second one so obvious. So the inane detectives couldn't miss it. Part of his demonstrated frustration at the second crime scene could've been his anger toward us not seeing his whole design.

But it's the glaringly obvious omission that is bothering me the most. If this UNSUB is in fact copycatting Bathory, where's the blood?

The infamous lady, the first documented woman serial killer, was made immortal by the blood she spilled. Countless legends have been created around her trail of gore; the vampire, for one. It's her legacy. Her ultimate signature; stained in red.

While I've been lost in thought, my feet have tracked back to the master

bedroom. I stand in the middle of the room, close my eyes. Unlike my first walkthrough, where I focused on the pool stain around the victim, I concentrate on what I *can't* see.

The negative space.

I'm a creator. An artist. Every slice of my blade and singe of my flame purposeful in its placement. I leave nothing to fate; I control all elements. You see what I want you to see. And I've worked hard to design this stage for you.

Inhaling a deep, slow breath, I taste the air. The muted *whoosh* of sounds bleed into my ears. Feel the fibers of the dress...soft, tantalizing. It's time.

I run my sword across her throat and hold her close as she gasps for air. I open my eyes to watch her fall to the floor and bleed out—but I'm far from through. Her silence is just one aspect; the kill.

The other game pieces need to be linked to complete the puzzle.

There is no other above me... I am her god, standing over her, judging her. This is my game board, and all others are my pawns as I stare down on them...

I look up.

There.

“Quinn!”

His footsteps echo from down the hallway. “What is it?” He peeks his head into the room. “We got to move if we're going to hit all three shops before tonight.”

My face still tilted toward the ceiling, I say, “He knew what he was doing when he severed her carotid artery in this exact spot. He wanted the spray to dust the ceiling. Not splash it...just a hint in the right direction.”

“CSU covered it. It's in the report.”

I circle the pool stain until I'm standing directly under the inlaid light. “Yeah, I read it. And I didn't think anything of the lighting then, but we're going to have to peel back the layers.” I look around. “Get me something to

stand on.”

Quinn huffs a clipped laugh. “Like a ladder? Bonds, you’re too short.” I send him a glare. “Just a fact, not an insult.”

“Fine,” I say, looking around for tall furniture and finding nothing. I point at him. “Boost me on your shoulders.”

In retrospect, this wasn’t the best idea. “Hold me steady,” I say through gritted teeth as I try to keep balance. “For a big guy, you have some bony shoulders, you know that?”

He grunts. Holding a spray bottle of luminol in one hand, I push my other gloved palm against the plastic light fixture. It gives with a *pop* and falls open, just missing my head. “Okay. Move me closer.”

It looks clean. Too clean for a place which rarely gets attention. No creepy crawlies or dust. I mist the plastic with the reagent and drop my hand down. Quinn places the light in my hand. When I shine the UV light over the plastic, I curse.

“Is that a good shit or bad?”

But I don’t have time to answer as Quinn’s phone rings. He says, “stay still,” and grasps me at the waist to hoist me down. My gaze stays with the illuminated words as Quinn answers the call.

“On my way.” He releases a long exhale as he clicks the phone off.

“Another body?” I ask, my eyes tracing the glowing, bloody letters the UNSUB took great care to hide—maybe too well. But we were meant to find them. *I* was meant to find them. It’s what he wanted.

“Two,” Quinn finally says.

My head snaps around. Light angled on his face, as if it will help me read him better.

Looking up, Quinn echoes my sentiment as he reads the message. “Snap a pic of our new evidence for the task force, we need to go. Now.”

I do just that, my stomach knotted as I send the image to my tablet. I’m not sure what I’m feeling. Dread. Excitement. Anger...

I'm definitely feeling anger. And that's wrong; this cannot become personal. But I have a sickening feeling this UNSUB wants it to be personal. Not the way some past serial killers toyed with police officials—inserting themselves into the investigation. Leaving special clues for detectives working their cases. No, this one has a very specific target.

Me.

Only I can't confirm this...it's just a message. To anyone else it wouldn't mean anything. Just the random meaninglessness left behind from a disturbed mind.

She walks in beauty, like the night

Written in blood, and then wiped clean. Blood. It's always blood.

THE HEART

COLTON

*T*wist and loop. Twist and loop. My fingers delicately twine the jute fibers, deftly working them to lock together. I caress the light strands, nurture them, putting myself into each tightly woven loop.

I have many ropes. All sizes, colors, widths. And I take great care of my collection. But none of them feel right for tonight. For Sadie...for this long-awaited moment...I have to create the perfect tool.

My chest stirs with warmth as I imagine the light brown rope against her pearly skin, the complexion, the contrast. Dark and bright. I almost feel drunk; the excitement coursing through me with a steady flow of adrenaline. I'm like a kid about to play with his favorite toy. A toy that's been kept from him for too long.

Creating another painstaking loop, I twist the fibers slowly, relishing the imprint the bands will leave behind on her soft skin. Intoxicating.

"Making something special for tonight?"

Julian's deep timbre pulls me out of my trance, and I glance up to find him leaning against the corner of the bar top, hands sunk into his black suit pockets.

Since he opened his own club, I haven't seen him in a pair of jeans. He's

all business now. I guess I shouldn't judge; I've buried myself in my work, too.

Unhooking the lead thread from the bar where I have my station set up, I begin to wind the rope. "Just needed some new material."

He glances around the empty club before his gaze settles back on me. "They do have these things called stores. I know you're all about the ritual"—his voice lowers—"but it wouldn't hurt to take a shortcut every once in a while."

"And see, that's what you don't get, Julian." I stuff the newly braided rope into my pack along with the rest of my supplies. Then rising from the stool, I look Julian in his clear blue eyes and say, "The ritual is everything."

His gaze turns hard, serious. He straightens, and the banter leaves his voice. "I do get some things."

"And what's that?" Apprehension dampers my mood. For months, ever since I took Julian up on his offer to work at his club, I've felt like I've been treading water. Edging the thin line drawn between us—the one that keeps us hospitable toward each other. It's a very thin line.

"I get that this is the longest you've stayed in one place. At least since—"

"Don't." That single, deadly spoken word halts him.

His strained exhale is the only sound amid us.

Gaze still on mine, he says, "I thought that after all these years, I'd finally get my brother back. That if I just stayed quiet, let you deal with everything on your own terms, you'd eventually recover. But—" He shakes his head, breaks eye contact to stare at the floor. "She ruined you."

Anger brims fire-hot in my chest. "I told you never to mention her again."

"Colt, listen."

But I'm already turning away and heading out of the rope room. A hand on my shoulder stops my steps, and I pivot, face contorted, beckoning all control.

Julian removes his hand and takes a step back. "I don't want to push you

away again.”

“Then don’t,” I snap.

He crosses his arms; defensive. Good. As long as I keep him rebounding, he’ll back off. “Fine. I won’t. We don’t ever have to have that conversation. Just do your Shibari. Entertain. Get your kicks...whatever it is that you get out of performing. But be careful.” He presses his lips together, features stern. “I’ve seen what happens when you get too...involved, Colt. The obsession takes you to a dark place. I don’t want you to get lost there again.”

I can’t help it—coming from him? This bullshit?—I laugh.

Then I walk away.

“Just know that I loved her, too.”

His words stop my retreat. But when I don’t react; all stoic control over my emotions, he says, “Just wanted to voice that. To finally have my say.”

Jesus. I really don’t need this shit right now. I drive a hand through my hair, attempting to wipe his admission from my head. Finally, I turn and face my brother.

“Love? Is that what you call it?” I ask, my voice thick with disdain. “You have the worst possible way of showing it, then.” As he opens his mouth to say something more, I hold up a hand. I’ve heard enough. “All right, Julian. What I get out of it—is that what you’re trying to figure out? Why I’m not like you. Sitting in an office, locked away, just on the edge of the scene.” I step closer, stare him in the eyes. “Control. I make sure that my world never spins out of control again. Say it’s obsession. Say whatever you want, but at least I was man enough to stay until the end. I had to face what you were too much of a coward to deal with. I looked it in the eyes...all that darkness... and I stayed. And hell, I’m sure it left an imprint. The price I now pay for having something so beautiful, however fleeting. So, I’ll do whatever the hell I want now. I’ve earned it.”

He shakes his head. “I won’t deny you that. I was a coward.”

Arms crossed, back and shoulders tense, I wait for the rest of his speech.

Wait to see if he's going to take this all the way. Damn, and we really were doing so well. Where the hell did this even come from?

"Look," he says, and my defenses climb. Here it comes. "You've found a way to put everything in place. Nice and neat. You're a pro at compartmentalizing. But I've been paying attention," he says, gaze narrowing. "I don't want Marni to shadow the rest of your life."

I huff a soundless laugh. *Asshole.*

"I'm serious. You deserve something good. This scene is fun...it's a lifestyle, yes, but it's not meant to replace real relationships. I'm doing it because—"

"Because it now pays the bills," I clip.

He shrugs, his expression neutral. "Yeah. And because she loved it. It got me through the worst of it, afterward, but I don't use it to lose myself. Not anymore. I'm getting out."

Tension thrums in the air between us, and I push back against its walls. So this is what spurred this conversation. He always has an agenda. "And the club?"

His shoulders lift again. "I wanted to hand the reins over to my little brother. But not if that means watching him degrade into himself." He searches my face. "I like the idea of you sticking around the city. Being here...with me. But we have to come to an understanding."

My lips stretch into a smile that verges on a sneer. "An ultimatum, you mean."

"Call it what you want. The only thing I ask is that you keep your 'personal' life out of the club."

And understanding flits through me, transparent. I uncross my arms and straighten my back. "You were watching me last night."

Shame flushes his face. "My name will remain on the lease, Colt. Everything will still tie back to me..." He trails off. "If you want to have your personal 'sessions'—" He makes air quotes again, and my chest flames

with heat.

“Stop doing that. Just say what you mean, Julian.”

He releases a heavy breath. “I can’t have accusations flung at the club if you go off the rails again. Okay?”

Sonofabitch. “You know what? Fuck you.”

“Hell, real mature, Colt.” He shakes his head, looks down at the tiled floor.

“You had no right to eavesdrop on me. What I do on my own time—personal or otherwise; in the club or outside of it—is none of your business.” I glare at him, trying to catch his eyes. “Hand the club over to someone else.”

He looks up then. “There’s no one else I trust.”

“Bullshit.” I take a step back, thoroughly over this conversation. “This is just your way to keep tabs on me. Keep things running the way you want, without having to actually do the dirty work.” I bark a laugh. “But I’m not your bitch boy—and you don’t run me.”

“That’s not it at all. Listen, I always get a little harassment from the cops,” he says, finally meeting my gaze again. “I’m used to it, but I can’t let it get out of hand. I have to have someone running the show who knows how to keep things...neutral.”

I wonder what he’d say if I told him that the woman I took to the back room last night was not only a cop, but a profiler. That whatever he’s so worried about keeping concealed, she’s probably already uncovered.

Only I know that’s not true. I might be a lot of things—things that don’t get me any slack from my brother—but a liar isn’t one of them. Sadie came here for herself, not her department. At least, that’s the truth I knew up until this moment. I never once questioned if she had an ulterior motive. Why would I, when she’s damn perfect for me.

Now Julian’s planted a seed of doubt, and I hate that. I can already feel it festering.

But—no. I refuse to let my brother infect my head. I’ve watched her long

enough; I've tasted her. Her scent still clings to me. I've looked into those bottomless jewel-green eyes and I've seen the beauty among the abyss.

I find Julian's gaze. "Why are you getting out?"

His fight to remain composed under my scrutiny is evident. "I'm marrying Bethany."

Fucking hell.

"Congrats." The word tastes bitter on my tongue. Then I tell him, "I'll think about it," before he can say anything further to disgust me.

Content with my answer for now, Julian nods a couple of times and says, "Thanks." Then he leaves me alone with my spiraling thoughts.

Reaching into my pocket, I touch the rope I always keep there. My connection. My center. I need Sadie here, now. I can't wait until tonight.

ECHO

SADIE

There's a moment right before a storm. When the sky blackens, ink-swollen clouds claw the sky, and electricity charges the air. You feel it building, an anxious clutching of your chest that you can't quite comprehend, but you know lightning is about to strike.

You're connected to the elements. Your bones, flesh, your blood. Your soul. It's all linked and communicating with something greater than you... and if you could just reach out and grasp the fading wisps, you could finally make that connection.

You'd be a part of something more powerful than yourself, and you wouldn't feel so alone or lost.

I'm standing on the edge of that storm now.

It takes all shapes and sizes, can strike at any moment. Most of the time, we're not ready. I'm not ready now. But the eye of the storm is hovering, taunting. A false calm luring me into believing we're close, and that once we connect this last, final piece, we'll find our killer.

Only I've been in the center of a great storm before. I know the lie it feeds you right before the sky tears, and you're swallowed.

There's always more to come.

“CSU is waiting for us to make the first sweep,” Quinn says as he pulls the car along a sidewalk. “The unis have already secured the scene, and Wexler said to take only my best in.” He glances over at me as he removes the keys. “You ready?”

I should appreciate the compliment. He considers me one of his best. We’re going into the third crime scene and God only knows what the UNSUB has left for us this time. But my mind is still churning the discovery from moments ago. I’m mentally grasping for that wisp as it floats just out of reach, trying to latch on before I’m plunged under the monsoon.

“Ready,” I say, beckoning fortitude as I push open the door. I glance at the sky, noting again the looming darkness. “Let’s get in before the rain catches us.”

A crowd has gathered on the sidewalk, phones snapping pics, people craning their necks to get a glimpse around uniforms barring the entrance to the apartment building.

This means the UNSUB—who’s just graduated to serial killer status—is now making the news. I’m sure Quinn hoped we could keep this under wraps, at least for the next week. But once the press gets a whiff of a serial killer case, it’s game over. Someone made a buck leaking it to a reporter, and now we’re looking at constant press interference throughout the rest of the investigation.

We push through the throng, and Quinn gives his officers a couple of directions before a small group of us head toward the unit marked off with yellow crime scene tape.

“You need to suit up,” one of the uniforms says, and I look over at him. He’s covered head-to-toe in a white Tyvek coverall. The kind CSU wears—the kind we have to wear when the scene requires it.

Quinn and I are quick as we pull on the suits, and once we finally make our way into the apartment, I’ve adopted a numbness from practiced behavior over the years. I’m prepared...and then I’m not.

“Mother of God,” Quinn whispers. And I can just picture him crossing his chest like he’s saying a prayer, though I have no idea if he’s Catholic. He doesn’t actually do this, of course, but the action is so fitting for what we’re seeing that I wish he would. Someone needs to say a prayer.

The metallic taste hits my senses first. A bitter aftertaste that resonates in the back of my throat. The air crackles with a suffocating, dark energy.

Red paints the walls. Impact splatters. Cast-off stains. High velocity, low velocity. I could spend a week alone analyzing every drop and spray pattern. My eyes take in each spine and satellite stemming from the larger bloodstains. From the arterial spray—the UNSUB’s one signature slash across the neck—to the blunt force splatters that indicate how badly the victim was beaten before the real torture even began.

My mind drifts, and I’m sixteen. Standing in front of a mirror at the hospital. Examining the spray pattern that sheets my skin. Studying the different shades of red. Darker burgundies contrasting against my light skin; lighter pinks flecked across my cheeks. I could not love nor hate the blood; it became a part of me that day.

“Bonds.” Quinn’s voice reaches into the dark recesses of my mind, and I’m again at the crime scene, uniforms capturing the scene in pristine condition before it’s torn apart to uncover the story.

My gaze is steadily locked on the body. Quinn is already there; his first priority.

I carefully maneuver through the room, trying to disturb as little as possible, my plastic suit whispering in the still air, as I sidestep broken picture frames and blood pools, until I’m by his side and staring up at the suspended corpse.

The body has been hung from the ceiling by three lengths of rope. One band circles her shoulders, the next around her upper thighs, the third across her chest. And all I can think is: this is a new pose.

When Avery arrives and begins her examination, I won’t need to inquire.

I won't need to ask about what was done to her. My eyes snag and hold exactly what Quinn is staring at. What he's trying so hard not to turn away from.

"This countess," he says, obvious revulsion in his voice. "Was she known for this?"

"Yes," I say simply.

"Hell," he breathes out.

And there's no better descriptor to capture this scene. Hell. This is hell.

I've never worked a case that involved mutilated genitalia. And I don't want to ask Quinn if he has. Past experience won't matter, regardless. The MO of the sadist who could go to this extreme would be a very different profile than the one I've already compiled for this case. He's a copycat. Torture is his signature. And it's not even his own.

We remain quiet as we inspect her battered and disfigured private parts. Besides the numerous contusions and cuts, and seared flesh covering her body, the mutilation of her lower region makes her nearly unidentifiable as a woman. Right now, I'm thankful for the blood that obscures most of her injuries.

"Back here," someone shouts from the side bedroom.

Without words, Quinn and I both head toward the master bathroom that has garnered new attention.

"No one drain that tub," Quinn instructs. "I want it skimmed out first. Look for anything hidden beneath the surface and around the vic."

Bathed in blood. Poetic. The second victim is something right out of a Bathory legend. A fictional work that depicts the Countess as a creature of the night who exsanguinates women to bathe in their blood.

I'm lost in the meaning, confused as to why a purest—as the UNSUB has been so far—would lower his standards to hearsay and fictions...until my eyes discern the brutality masked under all the swirling red decoration.

A single, jagged slash across the second victim's collarbone.

He sacrificed his kill method to send a message. The recipient: me.

The air becomes thick, my lungs struggle to accept a full breath. The bathroom is so small...too many bodies pressing against me. This whole apartment is like a tomb; taking on the shape and surroundings of a lightless, dank basement.

“Where are you going?”

But I can't answer Quinn right now. I'm making my way back through the press of uniforms and through the living room, and then out through the front door, where I finally drag in an unobstructed breath.

No one knows about me. What happened all those years ago. My scar. That's personal, and that's *mine*. He's been inside my house. He's watched me. He knows secret details I've scribbled in my journal. The one place where I share my history.

The poem. What it means to me...the pain. The terror. The shame. The unbearable verses recited to me over and over, my captor making me feel each line. Fashioning and molding me into the perfect, virtuous woman through his special brand of torture. I was a dirty girl, one he desired to transform into a delicate beauty that was above reproach.

I know every stanza by heart. And back at the first scene, when I read those words, the old wound tore wide. And I'm bleeding...

“Sadie...” My name, softly spoken by Quinn, snaps me out of my panic. “You can't have a meltdown here,” he says, gripping my elbow. He guides me down the pathway, away from the apartment building. “Too many people. I'm sure some of them reporters.”

I notice Quinn removing his coverall, and I decide to do the same. I slip out of the plastic, forcing it down my body with shaky hands, and kick out of the suit.

As I crumple the plastic into a tight ball, what Quinn said finally registers. “Wait.” I stuff the balled suit under my arm and turn to face the crowd.

“We can catch Avery later. Let's go get some food in you. We're going to

have a long night—”

“No, Quinn. He’s here.” Swinging my gaze around to Quinn, I widen my eyes, discreetly nodding to the gathered bodies. “The profile suggests he’ll insert himself into the investigation.” *And my life.* “This was his big masterwork. The crime scene that would undoubtedly link everything together.” I scan over the crowd, seeking each individual face. “I’m sure he wouldn’t be able to keep away.”

From my peripheral, I see Quinn take out his phone and put it to his ear. “Make sure you get shots of the crowd. I want every gawker at this crime scene photographed.” I give him a raised eyebrow as he lowers his phone. “Well, we can’t go up to each one and ask if they’re the killer, can we?”

I press my lips together, conceding. “No...yeah, you’re right.” But I *have* to recognize him. Maybe. I’m so careful about who I allow to get close. My world consists of a handful of people.

Except at the club.

The place where I go to unleash the side I keep hidden *from* those people.

He could be a member. He could’ve followed me home one night. Waited until the right moment to break in and pry into my life. But the question remains: *why?*

“It doesn’t match the profile,” I say to myself. But Quinn picks up on it.

“What doesn’t?”

Damn.

Facing Quinn, I prepare to deprive him of the truth. For the first time in our working relationship—that has had its almost good moments, and its difficult ones—I cannot give him the unvarnished truth.

I have to withhold evidence—or at the very least, my suspicions.

Without knowing how this is linked to me, or why, I have to keep my guard up. And the truth is, I’m afraid. Though I don’t want to admit it, there’s the possibility that my mind is selectively piecing together this terrible reality with my past. After the abduction, there was a time when I seriously doubted

my sanity—but that was a long time ago.

I've overcome so much, and I do not want to degrade back into that doubt. But that's exactly what the UNSUB is making me do; doubt myself.

Until I discover just what it has to do with me, Quinn has to remain in the dark. He may pull me off the case, otherwise. And if the UNSUB's game does revolve around me, that will only anger him. I'll play his game—for now. I have to, to see what the rules are. Then I'll turn them around on him.

“There may be a subtle difference forming from the initial profile,” I say, working out the weak details as they form in my mind. Quinn cocks his head. “We're still dealing with a copycat, but I was off on his reasoning. He's not just emulating Bathory, he doesn't just admire her...he believes they share a special bond. A romantic relationship...” Quinn's features shift, his face contorting in confusion, and I know I'm losing him. “Erotomania,” I blurt.

He shakes his head. “Really? You're going there? With a delusional UNSUB who believes that a dead woman—for over four hundred years—is in love with him?”

Yeah. Hearing it out loud doesn't seal the deal for me, either. But it's all I have to work with. And I have to keep my conjectures close without giving anything personal away. I nod assuredly. “It might not be romantic at all, actually. He could think that he's one of Bathory's accomplices. That he's carrying out her work in tribute. But yes, ultimately, he would believe that the Countess has true affection for him. Whether he thinks her to be dead or alive, that's irrelevant. In his delusion, he could've created a conspiracy around the vampire legend. He may think she's come back from the dead...” I trail off at Quinn's grimace. “Look, his reasoning isn't as important as the clear fact that he's striving to impress someone. He probably believes that she's been sending him secret messages, telling him how to fulfill her will.”

“Jesus,” Quinn says. He groans and turns to unlock his Crown Vic. He opens the door and lays his neatly folded coverall on the floorboard. “Can we just go get some food?” he asks, spinning to face me, his arm braced on the

hood of the car. “I can’t deal with this on an empty stomach.”

So I guess he doesn’t want to hear the part where I profile the UNSUB’s next move.

At least Quinn’s looking where I want him to, and not in the one place where the answers lie. The perpetrator very well could suffer from erotomanic delusions, only it may not be the deceased Countess he’s trying to impress.

There are now too many variables I have to consider before I come to a firm conclusion—but I need a safe place to sort through them. Quinn reads me too well, and I’m shaken. I admit it. I’m the one who analyzes the killers...not the other way around. And this UNSUB is most definitely invading my head.

As I reach for the car door handle, I hear my name being called. I turn to see Avery flagging us down. We meet her away from the crowd. “What do you have?” Quinn asks.

“Hell, good to see you too, Quinn,” she remarks.

Despite my unease, I smile. I hope she has something solid; some evidence that will lead us in the right direction. I’m through being a chess piece maneuvered around a board. I want to make the next move.

She looks at me. “Got that update on the rope,” she says, and I actually hold my breath. “First of all, it’s made entirely of jute fibers. Secondly, it is handmade. But it’s the third variable that’s the kicker. The origin.” She pauses for dramatic effect. “Vienna.”

My breath expels.

Quinn looks between us, hands fisted on his waist. “Am I missing something?”

Yes, Quinn. With this case, you’re definitely missing it all. But I don’t clue him in. Instead, I focus on what I can reveal. I shift the rumpled suit under my arm and reach into my bag. Pulling out my tablet, I select the most recent eBook on my virtual shelf, then hand him the device.

“The section is already highlighted,” I tell him.

He reads aloud. “She tortured them by binding their arms with Viennese cord.”

Avery’s head jerks back, her shock evident. “Then you already have a suspect.”

Handing me back the tablet, Quinn scoffs. “Yeah we do. If you count four hundred year-old dead countesses.”

Avery looks to me for clarity, but then she holds up her hand. “You know what, not my field. You guys handle the perps.” She digs out a folder from her satchel and hands it to Quinn. To me, she says, “I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of doing a bit of my own investigating. I was curious about why someone would select a specific rope from a specific country; like Vienna. It just seemed too particular.”

As Quinn flips the file open, his eyes scanning the document inside, he says, “Where did you find this?”

She beams. “The Internet. Simple search pulled it right up. Pretty strange, don’t you think? I’m not sure if it has anything to do with your case, but it seemed worth mentioning.”

Curious, I move closer to Quinn’s side and take a look at the page. “Viennese Rope Gala,” I say, and look up at her.

“It’s an annual bondage and rope fetish event. I checked it out; it’s pretty intense. For the rope enthusiast in us all.”

But her words are starting to fade as I’m drawn within myself, my mind linking aspects together. *Bondage. Rope. Suspension.* An image of the vic inside, hung from the ceiling, merges with memories of last night at the club. I hear Quinn’s voice, but can’t discern his words.

“Shibari,” Avery says, bringing me out of my musings, and suddenly a vise-like grip squeezes my chest as the puzzle piece rattling around my brain slides home. “It’s the main attraction, why the hardcore bondage patrons attend the event. It appears there’s a whole subculture within the bondage

world centering around it.” She shrugs. “Anyway, I just thought it was interesting. It may not tie back to your UNSUB at all.”

“No, this is good, Avery,” Quinn says as he closes the file. “Some good detective work.”

She laughs. “I’ll tell the Internet you said so.” Her gaze sweeps over me, her pretty features drawing together. “Sadie, are you all right?”

I’m calling attention to myself. *Don’t*. I school my face into what I feel is a neutral, calm expression, even though my heart is battering my chest. Stomach acid is rising to my throat. I can only focus on my breathing; in, out. Even breaths. In, out.

“I’m fine,” I say, nodding. “I’ll look more into this. Thanks, Avery.” I start to walk away, but Quinn catches my arm.

“Where are you going? The car’s that way.” He motions in the opposite direction.

Avery saves me the interrogation by cutting in. “I hear I have a lot of work waiting for me.” She gestures toward the apartment building. “I’ll get back to you on my findings as soon as possible.”

Quinn offers her a faint smile and his thanks, then his attention is back on me. Moody hazel eyes assessing me closely. I just can’t do this right now—I can’t *be* here.

“I think we should split up,” I say. His forehead creases as he continues to stare down at me, expression wary. “We’ll cover more area if you check out the weaponry shops, and I follow this new lead.”

He crosses his arms. “I wouldn’t exactly call this a lead, Bonds. What are you going to do? Track down a list of all the attendees of that rope event and interrogate them?”

No. Just one.

“It may turn out to be nothing.” I hold his unyielding gaze, infusing myself with strength I don’t feel. My legs ache, like they’re going to buckle under the pressure bearing down on me. “But we can’t afford to overlook

anything. The UNSUB is devolving, Quinn. Two more bodies. We don't have time to even argue this point."

He sighs a heavy grunt that comes out sounding as exasperated as he appears. He looks past me, at the gathering storm clouds in the distance. "Yeah, okay. You're right." He glances at me then. "I'll touch base with the task force. Get updates and head to the first shop. You keep me abreast on anything you uncover. Even if you think it's not worthwhile, I want to know."

"I will," I say. He continues to stare at me, as if there's more he wants to add, his eyes probing like he can suss out the many thoughts jumbling my brain. Quinn hates being out of the loop. But this is one knotted loop I have to unravel on my own.

"You need a ride back to the station?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"No time. You go ahead; I can get my car. My apartment is close to here." And so is Colton's.

Finally, he releases me from his penetrating gaze. "Forward me that sketch," he says as he turns and walks toward his car.

Once I'm free of Quinn's hovering presence, I dip between the adjacent complex, my route already mapped out. I stuff the suit in my bag, check my holster and secure my SIG, unclipping the leather clasp. Then I head straight for the man who may have the answers. Whose sudden appearance in my life may not have been chance.

My gut knots just thinking about last night...

A flash streaks the dark sky, followed by a loud *crack* and a long rumble of thunder. The oncoming storm steals my thoughts for the moment, and I wrap my arms around myself as the first raindrops begin to fall.

I can't think about last night. Not now. I'm a professional. Right this second, I'm Agent Bonds—not the woman who craves the touch of a possible serial killer.

S U S P E N D

S A D I E

*B*efore I came to work as a profiler, before I was an agent for the State—I was a cop. A Trooper just starting out, but one who swore an oath.

I believe, in our profession, we can lose sight of that oath.

I've been guilty of doing just that over the years; I'm not an innocent. We sometimes bend the law to meet our needs—whether or not it's in the interest of justice, we decide we're the final say in how that justice is delivered.

It's a very gray area. And I live in that gray area, but I believe I do try my best to always uphold my Oath of Honor.

I'm thinking about this now, as I approach Colton's apartment—number 518—soaking wet, my drenched clothes cold and clinging, because I feel my oath is about to be tested. Mostly the part where I swore I'd always have the courage to hold myself accountable for my actions.

Will today be that day? Truthfully, if it is, it's been a long time coming.

When the aftermath of what happens here is investigated by Quinn's team, will Quinn blame himself? Scold himself for not following that hunch deep in the pit of his gut that something was amiss?

All those answers ride on this moment.

I stop in front of the apartment door, sweep my matted bangs aside and

roll my shoulders back. Suck in a full breath. Instead of knocking, I pull out my phone and send Colton a text. It will be traceable. I suppose I'm making the decision right now to keep my oath...even if once I enter, I fail.

I may not have the strength to face my demons, but I'll answer for them.

Colton's hands on me...his touch. Caressing my body. His lips roaming, tasting. His husky voice vibrating against my skin as he seduces me.

I clear my head of the unsolicited images as I hear footsteps from inside the apartment. For one, quick second, I expect the roommate to answer the door, before I process the fact that I just sent a text to Colton. Then, the door opens and his ice-blue eyes greet me.

His mouth tips up into a sexy, knowing grin. Arm braced high on the doorjamb, he blocks the entryway, his gaze devouring me. "Agent Bonds," he acknowledges my soggy, dressed down appearance. "I have to admit, when I said find me when you're wet, I didn't mean from the rain. Though this works for me, too."

A vicious shiver races along my skin, and I try to ignore the pounding of my heart. The erratic beats drown out my hurried breaths. I'm focusing too hard on controlling them, my will tested as my whole body aches to be lost to him.

"Mr. Reed," I formally address him. "This isn't a social call. I have a few more questions I need to ask. Can I come in?"

And like that, his open expression shifts, closing off. But nearly as quickly, he forces his features playful. He's controlling this game.

Nodding his head toward the living area, he opens the door wide, allowing me to enter. I rest my hand over my SIG just beneath my jean jacket as I step across the threshold.

"Is your roommate—Jefferson—home?" I ask, my gaze sweeping the tidy, quiet apartment.

Colton walks to the leather loveseat and makes himself comfortable for the interrogation. "Not today," he says, and pats the space beside him. "I'd

offer you a towel...but you're too damn sexy all wet."

I stay rooted to my spot. "I prefer to stand. Thank you."

Obvious annoyance tints his face at my refusal to participate in the banter. "What's this about, Sadie? Why the cop-like approach. Is it because it's the daytime? Because we're not in the club?" His arctic gaze travels over my body very evidently. "Is it the clothes that make the girl? Crime fighter by day, sultry sex kitten by night. Because really, both do a damn fine job of turning me on."

I can feel myself losing my footing. If I drag this out, I'll only give him the upper hand. He knows exactly how to wear me down, and if I let him, he'll win. But only if I let him. The problem is: I'm unsure whether or not I want him to, as twisted as that is.

Peeling off my jean jacket, I expose my weapon. Assuring he sees it before I toss the soaked garment to the floor and pull my shirt down over my belt holster.

"That the best intimidation tactic you got? Am I supposed to be coerced by the gun or the wet T-shirt." He smiles. "Want to see my tactic?"

I back up a step as he makes a move to stand—but he stops, releasing an abrupt laugh. Shaking his head, he says, "Let's just get this part over with. I know you have a job to do. So do it." He runs a hand through his disheveled black hair, relaxing back into his seat. "I'm getting anxious to move on to more...interesting things."

For all my training, all those years invested in detecting human behavior, when it comes to Colton, I find myself unwilling to employ mind games. Simple psychological variables: personality traits; psychopathologies and behavioral patterns. Age, race, childhood—comparisons to the profile. They all muddle my thoughts as I analyze the man before me.

I could go at this with the best interrogation strategies I have in my arsenal...but I'm already biased. It's now personal. Rip the Band-Aid off. Everything out in the open. Because if he is the UNSUB, he's already

mastered the art of performance.

One last deep breath, then, “Why the Blood Countess?” I hold his intense stare, don’t blink. Neither does he. “Was your choice to emulate Bathory primarily based on me, or was she already a part of the scheme, and I just happened to fulfill an important role?”

His eyebrows knit together tightly. “I have no fucking idea what you’re asking me.”

All right. Now I at least know his angle; he’s not giving anything away. Wants to continue to play the game.

Slowly, I move closer to him, stopping before the coffee table in the center of the room. A solid object between us. “I could spend a few hours digging for the answer, but I’m wet and tired. Just tell me, Colton. Have you ever attended the Rope Gala in Vienna?”

His eyes beam, lips twisting into a suggestive smirk. “I’m impressed. You’ve been doing your homework.” He stands and pushes his hands into his pockets. “Of course I’ve gone. It’s the top underground Shibari themed event for over the past two years. Anyone who takes Shibari as a serious art form attends.” He cocks his head. “But something tells me you already knew this. So what are you really asking?”

The moment of truth. I’ve gotten the answer I came here for—the one that was supposed to set me free. Reveal exactly who Colton Reed is, and why he fused himself into my life.

Only it’s not enough. It’s circumstantial. I could break down all the evidence, analyze every piece of the puzzle through a psychological microscope and link it back to him, but I know it will never hold up. It’s just us—Colton and me—who are teetering on this weak fact...and all I truly have is suspicion.

Even Quinn pointed out how weak the lead was, but I had to follow my instinct. It was instinct, wasn’t it? Suddenly, as I stand here damp and vulnerable before Colton, I question how much of it was my own fear.

Do I want him to be the UNSUB? Do I *need* him to be?

“On your last trip, did you bring any special rope back with you?” I ask.

“No.” His face dims as he takes one, then two steps closer. “I shipped it to myself. But just the threads. I make my own rope.”

My lips part, next question poised on my lips, but he rushes me before they’re set free. His arms circle me and he clasps my arms behind my back, his face inches from mine.

My lungs struggle to accept air as his body presses hard against mine. My cold, wet shirt stings my skin. “You’re working that serial killer case,” he says evenly, almost an accusation.

Words fail, but I manage to nod my head once.

The twist of his lips is the only indication I may have a chance to gain control. But then with swift reflexes, he secures both my wrists with a thin rope. Panic flares.

“I saw it on the news today,” he says as he continues to twine the rope around my wrists. A clipped grunt slips past his lips as he yanks the knot tight. “Piper was a victim, and I heard there are more.”

“There are. Four,” I say, my voice raw.

He keeps his arms banded around me, his muscles strained as he holds me against him even though I’m not trying to escape. “I’ve been doing some thinking today about why you first came to the club; whether it was really for you, or your job. I admit, I had a moment of doubt about us. But then I realized there’s no way this can be connected.” He smiles down at me. “You’ve been showing up at the club for over three months—way before the first body was ever found.”

He had doubts about us. About me. That revelation slays me.

“Only now,” he says, bringing his face closer still, his low words whispering his minty breath across my lips. “I assume something you discovered brought you to my door. And how convenient for you.”

I absolutely do not want to give in to him, but I need to keep him talking.

“Why is that convenient for me?”

Holding the rope between my wrists firmly with one hand, he uses the other to relinquish me of my belt holster and gun. It falls to the floor, and he kicks it aside.

“Because,” he says, hot breath drawing me in, “you need a way out. A scapegoat. And if I’m a bad man, that’s the perfect excuse. Last night terrified you, and tonight would’ve been your undoing. You fear the loss of control, Sadie. But you can’t look at it like that.” His face is so close to mine, his body heat pressing so hard against me. “It’s not loss; it’s a power exchange. And I’m not stripping you of yours, I’m empowering you with mine.”

Confusion twists hot and vicious within me, taunting me. I shake my head. “That’s not why I’m here, Colton. The evidence leads to—”

“What evidence?” He slips his free hand between my thighs, drawing a gasp from my mouth. His skilled fingers caress me purposely, tenderly. And I want to close my eyes, just let go... But he keeps me grounded with his voice. “Rope? You found some rope? Vienna is well-known for rope-making, Sadie. Do you think I’m the only ropework enthusiast who knows this? Their industry specialized in it for hundreds of years. Hell, even I did my research. I only use the best.”

Trying to avert my gaze away from him, I stare at a painting hung along the wall. The reds splashed across the canvas. The shades sending a thrill coursing through my body and mingling with his touch. He’s feeding me what I want to hear; that’s what the terrified side of me screams. But the other half—the rational part—wants to accept the logic. It wasn’t really a lead; Quinn said so.

And I’ve done the research, too. Viennese rope was used ages ago by Bathory herself because, as Colton stated, it was the city’s commodity, and one of the Countess’s mansions was located in Vienna. It’s as simple as that—a convenience.

I'm looking in the wrong place. And now I'm trapped.

Colton watches this internal struggle play across my face. His eyes brighten. "There you are, goddess. Come back to me."

Again, I shake my head, over and over. And I feel a hot tear slip from my eye.

He rests his forehead against mine, stopping my movement, and releases a heavy exhale. "I am flattered, though. The fact that you presumed I was meticulous enough to be your killer—that's a surreal kind of compliment coming from Agent Bonds. But still"—he pulls away and looks into my eyes—"you came alone. I don't know if that excites me or angers me. What if I had been him, Sadie? I mean, what the hell? Do you have a death wish?"

I gulp down my fear. "I don't." I haven't fought all these years just to be taken down by one vain psychopath.

He eyes me questioningly. "If I was your Dom, I'd punish you for that. Putting yourself in danger. But I'm not, and it's not my place to issue penance." He sighs. "Unfortunately."

A dark shiver wracks my body, but it's not at all unwanted. Rather, the thought of Colton inflicting pain—delivering punishment—consumes all my senses. Heat blooms in my core, sinking me further into the unknown of my psyche.

He notes the change; the loosening of my muscles, the heaviness of my eyelids. My body giving itself over to him, fully. A low growl erupts from his mouth as his eyes ignite with need.

Then his hand is in my hair and gripping, pulling my head back to where I can only see him. His other arm anchors around my waist as he lifts me off my feet and sinks his teeth into my neck. I gasp air into my lungs at the same time I try to release a scream, the sound coming out strained. He backs me against the wall, my bound hands making rough contact.

"Colton..." I get out past his merciless assault on my body. "I can't...I'm still on the clock."

He breaks away and catches my gaze, his chest heaving, fisted hand still entangled in my hair. “Then this is the last place you should’ve come, goddess.”

That’s all the words between us. In a heated frenzy, I’m away from the wall and in Colton’s arms. My being rages, demanding to be set free, but it’s a losing battle. He’s won.

I’m placed on my feet for just a moment, long enough for him to drop to his knees and undo my jeans. He yanks them down with unguarded intensity, the wetness from the rain making them tug roughly against my skin. His hands slide up the length of my leg, coasting surely and greedily to reach my inner thigh.

I stare down at him as his fingers tenderly test and explore, the rough pads sampling me through the thin barrier of fabric. My head tips back, and I’m torn—fear trickling through me like a stream flowing over a jagged-edged waterfall, warring with the desire craving his touch.

I sense him rise before me, then he’s a breath away. The rope around my wrists loosens and my arms fall free. My muscles twitch, aching from my fight against the restraint.

“Look at me,” he says, his voice a guttural plea. And I do. I open my eyes and take in the exquisite man that will be my ultimate undoing. “You have the power to stop this at any time. It’s all yours.”

Then, with delicate grace, he brings my hands between us and slowly winds the rope around my wrists. My body trembles, the word *stop* dancing on my tongue...but it’s just a thought. I don’t voice it as he continues to hold my gaze, unwavering, and raises my bound wrists to link them around his neck.

“Say it.” His eyes close, the moment stretching out as he waits for my assent.

I know exactly what he desires to hear, and with all I have left, the fragile will that I can still claim as my own, I say, “I’m yours.”

His eyes snap open and he lowers himself to take me in his arms. He carries me this way—his arms secured to me, mine to him—to a back bedroom.

I keep my eyes locked on him, but in my peripheral I note the bare walls, neutral in color. The bed, covered by a simple black comforter. No TV. The only electronic sits in the corner: a large stereo.

Once he releases me to stand, he walks to his closet where he pulls out a gray canvas bag. Apprehension claws at me so fiercely I almost lose balance, the room swaying, but I focus on Colton—trust him. If I'm here, if I've given myself to him, I have to follow the rules.

Even if they go against everything I've been taught—every barrier I've erected to protect myself. I won't know if I can be freed unless I give him that trust.

“I made this for tonight.” He turns and holds up a coiled rope. “I've never done a session in my home before...” He smiles, looking almost sheepish. It's too endearing for this unsure moment between us. “But I do practice my technique here.”

Unwinding the rope, he lets the thick bands fall to uncoil on the floor, then he reaches up and threads one end through a silver ring above his head. I look up for the first time and see a large bamboo log hung from the ceiling.

I watch, hypnotized, as Colton prepares the scene. And when he's pleased with his work, he walks toward me. “You have to give me permission to bend a rule.”

My lips quiver. “Which one?”

“Your only. I'm going to remove your clothes with a sharp object. I will not touch your skin. I will not inflict pain upon you by this method.”

Flashes of my nightmares come alive, tangible and growing thick in the slight span of air between us.

“The only way to face your demon is to free it, Sadie.”

And I know this is true—but it's the one thing I fear the most: unleashing

the monster within. I've strove to keep that demon bound and fed, sated just enough to live a normal life. Who will I be once she's finally free...

With strength I barely possess, I nod my head. And with trust I've never been able to gift anyone, I close my eyes. Only the sound of a blade clicking open and the tear of fabric rings in the static air as Colton cuts away my shirt and bra.

Then his hands are on my waist, and I can not only hear but feel his shallow breaths. His fingers splay against my skin a moment before they descend lower, dipping between the material of my underwear and my hip, and then tugging them down.

Cool air licks my exposed skin, and finally, I open my eyes.

Colton's gaze travels from my legs to my face, slowly and deliberately taking in every inch of me. "Beautiful," he says.

My insides jolt. "Please, don't use that word."

He moves closer. Palming my cheek, he angles my face toward his and his pale blue irises ensnare me. "I'm going to make you feel that word for what it truly is; *yours*. It won't belong to anyone else after this. You *are* beautiful, goddess."

I wet my lips. An urgent need to press them against his rises up inside me with a sudden, insatiable hunger. But he moves out of reach before I can make the attempt. And I'm thankful; I'm not ready. I can't lose my whole self to this man—not when I have nothing yet to offer in return.

A serious demeanor falls over Colton as he instructs me where to stand, how to position my hands. This is erotic rope play, yes, but it also goes so much deeper for him. As he maneuvers my ankles apart and begins to wrap them with the rope, he talks me through each tie-off. Coaxing the fear out of me, feeding on it, but also infusing me with a new form of strength.

The combination of terror and power heightens all my senses, making me acutely aware of every smell; the musty scent of rope. Taste; the salty tang of my sweat. Sound; Colton's deep and even breaths. Sight; my skin bunched

against the constriction of the binds. Touch; the abrasive rub of fibers against my skin—all of it is too much, overwhelming. It brings on a dizzy spell, and I have to lean against him until he says, “Stand on your own, Sadie.”

I do as directed, my legs unsteady as they just keep me from hitting the floor. And then the rope around my wrists tightens further, my ankles scream as the bands sink deep. My stomach muscles fight against the sudden assault. It’s a moment of pure pain that racks my body, stretching and lengthening me, and then blissfully...I’m weightless.

The creak of the rope twisting and gathering around my body as I’m suspended sends an electric pulse through me. A cry nearly wrenches from my mouth, but I bite down on my lip, stifling it.

“Don’t filter yourself,” he says, and I feel his reassuring touch against my back. “This is your space now. Submit to it. Allow the ropes to comfort you.”

I clamp my eyelids closed, refusing to see my position; the way my legs are spread wide, making me vulnerable. The way I’m bound, imprisoned. My lungs tighten painfully, cutting off my ability to breathe. I’m plunged right into the black pit of my fear...*his* voice snaking up and slithering against the walls of my mind.

Dirty girl.

His sweaty palms probe me...pain ripples through my breast as he pinches my nipple. Twists, eliciting a shrill scream...the wetness...forcing my body to betray me. Because I am. I am filthy.

“Sadie.” Colton’s voice cracks the vision. The walls bleed. “Please, baby. Stay here with me—fight. Find your subspace.”

I shake my head, unable to open my eyes. “I can’t...I can’t.” The pathetic mantra echoes in my head as my memories become palpable, and I feel the warm spray of blood wash my skin. I gasp in a jagged breath.

Rough palms bracket my face, and my eyes blink open. Staring into the depths of his vivid blue eyes, I focus on their clarity. “It’s all I ever see, Colton. How I view my world—with visions of red. The blood pulls me

under...”

His thumb swipes under my eye, clearing away the gathered moisture, before he pulls away, leaving me reeling.

The ropes tighten even more, and I’m shifted upright, my arms bound to my chest, my wrapped thigh angled close to my body, fingers clawing the air. My whole world shifts as I’m suspended higher.

My head falls back. Light encases me—a blinding purity that forces air into my lungs and a searing energy fires through every limb and bone, awakening me. A lucid transcendence that leaves no room for fear. Or shame.

Cradled within the twisted threads, I fall deep within myself. A lightness encompassing me as the rope hugs my body—soothing. A tender embrace. The pain no longer breaks me; I no longer crave the cruel bite to sate the darkness—I’m cocooned by a lover’s kiss.

“Beautiful,” I hear Colton appraise. “With your permission, goddess.”

I glance over to see him kneeling below me, a flogger laid across his lap. A manic vibe steals over me, and I hear myself say, “Yes.”

Rising to his knees, he places one hand to my ankle and affectionately kisses the abused flesh above the binding. Then getting to his feet, he removes his shirt, exposing perfect flesh. Hard muscles line his stomach and trail down into a taut V just above his jeans. His arms flex as he works his way over the length of my body, the leather tails silky soft against my skin and drawing a throaty moan from my mouth.

“Suede,” he says, running the tails across my breasts; my nipples peaking from between my bound arms pebble at the arousing feel. “A low intensity sting, and hardly any thud, but we’re starting slow.” With a quick snap of his wrist, the black leather tails make contact with my skin.

I hiss out a breath, but it’s more due to the act, the sound of the *swish*, than the light pain.

His smile lights his face, and I lick my lips in anticipation of his touch. He trails the leather tips along my stomach, and I close my eyes, abandoning

all reservation.

When he reaches my pelvis, he rests the mop there for one brief second and places his lips to the sensitive area just above my core. I tense, the muscles deep within me contracting at the erotic sensation. And when he drops the tails between my thighs, caressing my heated, slick lips with the smooth suede, my hips move of their own accord, causing the rope to creak against the bamboo.

Suddenly the flogger is gone, leaving me keening and throbbing, then with a severe *thwack*, it makes direct contact with my clit. My teeth pin my bottom lip as an intense pleasure radiates from my core and shoots throughout my body.

He continues to torture me in this fashion—giving and depriving of gratification—until my arousal is piqued, and I'm pleading for release. I've become dependent on the restraints, needing their assurance as I'm brought to the brink, only to descend into the violent ache all over.

But as Colton's rhythm increases, each sting coming harder, and faster, his own harsh moans mingling with mine, he doesn't withhold—he knows exactly what I need, when I need it, and he lashes my clit until my entire body is centered on that one, intense sensation, and my body reacts, pulling every muscle tight, giving over to the orgasm.

The flogger is replaced by the feel of Colton's fingers greedily seeking their rightful place inside me, his thumb pressed hard to my clit as I come. His hand clasps the back of my neck, bringing me forward, and his lips crash against mine.

I'm captive to the sensations swimming over me, through me, demanding to be felt—and I'm captive to him. Every atom of my body entwines and connects at the place where our lips meet, caress. As his tongue darts out and slips past my lips to touch mine, I strain against the ropes, yearning for him to claim me completely.

As the aftershocks pulse pleurably, rolling within me and along my

skin, Colton releases me. Euphoria claims what's left of me as my binds are removed and I fall into his strong arms.

A sheet covers me, cool and soothing against my sensitized flesh. We're laying in his bed, his arms still holding me, comforting and giving solace, as my mind slips into the realm of sleep. But before I'm fully under, I feel something coarse wrap my wrist...a kiss to my mouth...then I'm free of all nightmares as I drift.

UNKNOWN SUBJECT

SADIE

Cravings don't ever truly disappear. Right now, as I stare out over the little lagoon of Colton's apartment complex, perched on the balcony, his giant T-shirt shrouding me from the elements, I could kill for a cigarette.

I look down at my phone again: four missed calls from Quinn, and one missed call from Avery.

I can't hide forever—but now that everything feels shifted, surreal, I'm not sure what happens next. I have to confess what I know to Quinn, because I can't work this case alone. And I'm not sure that I want to. Suddenly I fear something I've never had reason to fear before: loss.

I have things in my life—*people*—who I fear losing if I can't get in front of this.

But timing is everything.

The UNSUB has a plan. I'm a part of that plan. My timing needs to align with his, and I can't make a mistake. He's successfully affected me. If that was his ultimate goal, then he's already a step ahead. Only I've studied and analyzed his kind for years; there's a greater scheme here than just distressing the profiler on his case.

He wants something from me—an acknowledgement, a contribution,

maybe even *me*—and he won't stop until he's attained his desire.

The night wind lifts the hem of my shirt, sending a cool, rain-damp breeze along the inflamed areas of my flesh. I hold the sides down as it howls into the night, and feel the abrasive rub of threads against my tender wrist.

I lift my hands and finger the thin link of rope, the one Colton tied there right before sleep took me. I'm not sure why he gave it to me, or what it represents; maybe a token of his affection, or a sort of branding, a claim. Either way, the message is clear: I'm his.

A small smile tilts my lips as I push the pale rope along my wrist, finding myself not at all uncomfortable with that realization.

A *beep* interrupts my thoughts and I sigh, accepting the fact that it's time to return to my world. I bring my phone up to respond to the text...and my heart stutters.

Unknown: Fitting, isn't it? That technology should label my "name" so appropriately. Unknown Subject, or UNSUB...as you prefer to call me. But I know that's only because you can't let them become aware of us, our little secret. It won't be long now, Sadie. Soon, you won't have to hide who you are, just as I won't have to lie about who I am. We'll be together. And we'll be unstoppable. Soon.

I read the message again, my hands trembling, thumbs shaky as they hover over the brightly lit screen. Before I can act or react, another text appears.

Unknown: White has never been my favorite color on you.

An eerie shiver slithers over my skin, and my head snaps up. *He can see me... He's watching right now.* I glance around the complex, seeking a face—and a moment of doubt erodes the sturdy concrete beneath my bare feet.

Backing away from the railing, I keep my gaze aimed out over the lagoon, then quickly turn and slide the glass door open. I grab my gun from the holster lying on the floor and head to Colton's room.

Door open, my back pressed to the wood, I peer around the corner.

Colton's shirtless backside faces me as he lies in bed, covers kicked down around his feet. A breath expels from my burning lungs. I lower the gun, then set it on the floor near the wall altogether.

My eyes scan the room, making sure it's clear, that we're still alone, then I push the door fully open and walk in. His shallow breaths are the only sound stirring the air as I carefully sit on the edge of the bed.

I reach out to run my fingers along what caught my attention before...but I stop my hand mid-air. Instead, my eyes trace the black ink swirling his back. Intricate designs depicting a Japanese-style dragon that curls down the stretch of his spine. It's beautiful and tortured at the same time.

My job consists of knowing and anticipating those around me, yet in my personal life, I know very little about the man I just bared my soul to. I could spend tonight analyzing just that, or investigating his past...or I could get dressed and return to work. Where a blank profile grid awaits a new entry on the UNSUB.

As I stand, I allow my gaze to take in Colton a moment longer, then I put my head back in the game. There's a message on my phone that needs to be traced. I walk toward my discarded jeans on the floor. Kneeling to pick them up, I spot Colton's cell phone on the nightstand table near him plugged into its charger.

My breath halts, chest thumping as my heart picks up pace. I glance over at Colton, then again at the phone. I move forward, my feet leading me to that device of their own accord. I stare down at it, heartbeat pulsing in my throat. And for one, fleeting second, I'm tempted to look—to break the delicate trust we've just established. But at what cost?

The truth always reveals itself in time. And my truth—my own personal form of reality, no matter how skewed—is that right now, I need Colton Reed to *not* be my enemy. There may come a day when that's not so, when we truly discover each other and come up wanting. But for this moment, I need him to remain worthy. I *need* him.

Simply, I've tasted enough evil in my short existence to be sated for a lifetime.

I turn away, and a warm hand wraps my wrist. I startle and try to pull free, but Colton tugs me down onto the bed. His arm anchors around my back as he brings my hand up, placing a soft kiss to my inner wrist, just below the link of rope.

His eyes study the features of my face intently. "Come back to me soon," he says, then releases me from his hold.

As I place my palm to his chest, I note the accelerated pace of his heart, and I gulp down a breath. "I won't be long," I say, and push myself up to stand.

Stepping into the hallway, I close the door, grab my SIG, and then slip on my jeans, tucking Colton's shirt into the waistband. His masculine scent presses against me as I clip my holster and rush out into the clear night.

It's always clear after the storm.

"Quinn," I say into my phone before he can get a word in. "I need you to get the task force techs to run a trace."

His heavy sigh travels over the connection. "On who? And where the hell have you been?"

"Me," I say, ignoring the irritation in his voice. "Get a trace on my phone." I glance behind me, wondering if he's following me now. "The UNSUB made contact."

"Bonds," Quinn says, a note of anger—that I long ago recognized with Quinn denotes fear—rumbles in his thick tone. "Get your ass to the station now."

After I end the call, I yank my bag strap higher on my shoulder and walk with sure, determined steps. For the first time since I moved to this city, I feel like I know my place.

I requested the transfer and accepted a demoted position for reasons I've been trying to avoid, hopeful that the new location and practically

nonexistent murder rate would be enough. That it would give me time to figure out the next part. To decide if the path I was on was truly the right course.

Well, we're rarely given what we ask for.

I decide that, no, the UNSUB is not watching me; he's out there hunting. He just wanted to impart the fact that he *knows*. He wants me to understand that he's aware of all my secrets.

And that's okay. Hunt tonight.

Because come light, it's my turn to hunt you.

WHEN YOU DIG DEEP INTO THE BOWELS OF EVIL, YOU CANNOT HOPE TO REEMERGE unscathed, unaffected, unchanged—but rather you know without doubt that your character is as fragile and susceptible to fate as the changing tide is to the sea. It's very little to do with choice.

And everything to do with risk. ~Sadie Bonds

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I owe everything to God, thank you for *everything*.

SAMPLE CHAPTER: THE DARKEST PART

WASTELAND

Sam

There's a universal truth. One that I never questioned. One that, when planning out the rest of my life, I felt confident was solid. This truth was my rock, my constant. And all the other bullshit didn't matter.

Tyler Marks loved me.

He would always be there. By my side. The one beautiful certainty in my bleak existence.

My forever.

But then a cruel and bitter reality stole everything.

Only, I refused to accept it. When you're so sure of something, when you trust in it, believe in it with your whole being, nothing can change it. Not even death.

And this alternate reality? The one where I sleep until three in the afternoon, don't shower for days, forget to eat...garnering strange, pitying looks from my parents and friends when I'm caught talking to myself...? It's just a temporary limbo I've stumbled into.

Everything is hazy and faded gray around the edges like a dream. Or a

nightmare. One that I will wake up from and Tyler will be there, his strong arms holding me. Comforting me. And the world will make sense again.

It *has* to.

With a half-hearted sigh, I sink farther into the too-soft chair, trying to become invisible—like the love of my life standing off to the right in my peripheral.

“Sam won’t begin to get better unless she starts taking her medication,” Dr. Hartman states seriously, her perfect manicured fingernails visible as she laces her fingers together on top of her lap. She tucks in her chin, her dark eyes looking up to pin my mother with a severe glare. “If you’re not helping her, you’re enabling her. Sam needs to be on her meds.”

My mother swats a stray hair from her vision and then crosses her arms over her chest defensively. “I’m not enabling her,” she says, and glances at me quickly. “She’s nineteen...almost twenty. I can’t force-feed her pills as if she’s a child. Don’t you think I want her to take them? But it’s her choice.”

Sure. My choice. As if I’d choose any of this. As if I’d choose to be sitting here right now, being talked about like I’m not even in the room. Technically, I *am* an adult and didn’t have to consent to “treatment.” And I really shouldn’t have allowed my mother to talk me into letting her come to this session. But no one really has control over any of their choices in life. They just find some measure of control in choosing from options after the fact.

Like the options I have now: take antipsychotic pills to treat a condition I don’t have, or continue to argue with my family and doctor, digging myself deeper into this limbo wasteland.

I couldn’t bear the worried looks anymore, though. The whispering when I walked into a room. My father nervous to even be around me, up and leaving for pretend business meetings because he can’t deal.

After my mother made the initial appointment to talk to a psychiatrist (behind my back), I was then strong-armed into “giving it a shot.” For *them*, I

did, and was diagnosed with (let me make sure I get this right) major depression with psychotic features. That's a mouthful.

I smooth my hair back toward the rubber band, feeling three-day old grease and tangles. I probably should've showered and actually dressed today—then maybe Dr. Hartman wouldn't be *as* concerned.

Nope. That's not true. I doubt my lack of hygiene fazes her. The fact that I'm seeing and talking to my dead boyfriend is why I'm here. I should've never let my parents know. I should have kept it to myself.

But when you're fearful of even leaving the house, stuck inside watching reruns of *Ghost Whisperer*, it's hard to keep something like that hidden. And, maybe I *did* think I was going a bit crazy. And maybe I wanted someone to tell me that I wasn't. That's not what happened, though. Now, I'm trapped in this situation with no way out.

I need an out.

"Dr. Hartman," I say, and both my mother's and my shrink's gazes snap to me. "I'll take my medication."

My mother's perfectly groomed eyebrows shoot up. "Really, Sam?"

I nod. "I don't want to be sick anymore." *I don't want to be here anymore.* "I promise. I'll really try this time." I smile for good measure. It feels odd, foreign. Not sure when's the last time I did so genuinely. I see Tyler flinch in the corner, and my stomach sinks. My fake smile falls.

Dr. Hartman watches me intently, her expression skeptical, but she decides to take my offer. "That's wonderful, Sam. And you'll see, in time, these visions will cease. You'll be able to return to your life again."

I didn't take her for a liar. A wound-too-tight-control-freak-who-needs-to-get-laid maybe, but not a liar. Her words cause my fingers to curl into a tight ball, my unclipped nails digging into my palm.

Return to my life...

I glimpse Tyler out of the corner of my vision, his dirty blond hair beautifully disheveled, like always. His chocolate brown eyes brilliant despite

his faded appearance. And his full, downturned lips, the knowing look on his face that screams there is no return.

This is my reality now.

He's my only reality.

I died with him that day.

Five Months Earlier

“How about Wichita?” Tyler suggests as his index finger traces the map spread out on the bed before us.

I wrinkle my nose. “Wichita? What the hell's in Wichita?” I study its location on the map. “Oh, no. Kansas? Wouldn't they try to burn me at the stake or something?” My hand goes to my black hair and I scrunch my recently dyed pink bangs. Then I wink at him.

He chuckles. “It's a city. A big one. I think your witchy ways are safe.” He kisses the star tattoo on my shoulder before marking Wichita with a highlighter. His lean, muscled forearms flex with the movement.

I smile. Tyler's joked about my “Goth” look being “witchy” since I started dying my hair in high school. It's neither Goth nor *witchy*, but he's really cute when he says this, so he gets away with it.

And I'm relieved to hear him joking at all. After his mother died six months ago, I thought I'd never hear him laugh again. He's taken it so hard. Has been in such a dark place, where I feared he'd never find his way out. Lately, I've seen glimpses of the old Tyler peeking through the pain. So I whip out my best *witchy* smile, hoping to bring him back to me, if only for this moment.

Since we haven't been *intimate* for just as long, I'm hoping that changes tonight, too. Truth is, I haven't wanted to pressure him. I almost roll my eyes. But yes, I haven't wanted to pressure my nineteen-year-old boyfriend for sex. Because I know he's struggling not only with his mom's death, but the

absurd amount of stress his father puts him under...but damn. We haven't gone this long without sex since we were freshman in high school. I think I'm past blue balls here.

I've been looking forward to this night for the past month, since his classes and interning at his father's office have taken up most of his time. He works late hours on the island, and when we do have time to ourselves, he's usually too tired to plan any part of the wedding. And with everything that's happened, I haven't pushed. Not even for a ring.

The honeymoon is a different story, though. Tyler's been talking about traveling the country since before we were both walking. Okay, that's an exaggeration. But he's been dying to do it for as long as I can remember.

I suggested we travel before we actually get married, but he doesn't want that. He wants our trip to be special, to be the first time we see everything together, our start of forever. Only we have to set an actual date for the wedding first.

I was starting to feel like maybe he was second guessing it—*us*. Getting cold feet. We're only nineteen, sophomores in college, but we've been together forever. In some form or another. Always together. Best friends since diapers. A couple since our freshman year in high school. Wrestling partners in elementary school when he wanted to run off and join the WWF.

I even turned down going to NYU so we could remain together in college. Tyler staying close to his father's law firm guarantees a free ride through undergrad, with a stipulation that he joins Marks and Wilshire upon graduation.

Tyler's going to make the best damn lawyer. No one can debate him, and he can argue circles around anyone. That's why it really wasn't a sacrifice on my part; I can get the same art degree at USC as in New York. Well, maybe not. Technically I'm majoring in Art Studio (not the same), but after graduation, I can do distance learning for fine arts classes not offered here.

Sometimes I question if it was really my choice to stay, wondering if he

somehow talked me into it... He's that good, to change someone's mind without them even realizing it. But he loves me. He did leave it up to me, and would have supported my moving to New York. It's only my nerves talking now.

We just need this night together so bad...

"It's on our way," Tyler says, bringing my attention back to the now. "And it's just fun to say. *Wich-i-ta*. It reminds me of you, witchy and all. I officially declare it your stop." He kisses my nose. "And besides, I don't care where we go, long as we're together. And as long as I get to do you in each place along the way." He bites down on his lip and slaps my ass. My mouth falls open. "What? It's going to be our honeymoon. You know we have to christen the hell out of every state."

I can't help it, I laugh. And hope that Tyler's finally returning to me crests in my heart. "Why wait? I can think of a few things we haven't tried right here in South Carolina." Licking my lips, because I know it drives him crazy, I lower my gaze.

He groans and pushes the map off the bed. "You're maddening, woman. Come here." He flips me onto my back and moves above me, his knees parting my legs as he buries his face in my neck.

Wrapping my legs around his hips, I pull him closer and run my fingers through his already disheveled hair. "We're really doing this."

For the briefest moment, he stills. I feel him tense, and a nervous flutter seizes my stomach. But he quickly lifts up and smiles, the vise squeezing my insides releases me.

"We're really doing this. Nothing can keep us from doing this." His lips slowly find mine, and I open my mouth to his, tasting him. He breaths me in, deepening the kiss, as his hand caresses my bare thigh.

I didn't bother changing out of my pajamas before he came to my residence hall apartment. My black booty shorts have little skulls with pink bows, and they make my ass look good. And my roommates are out for the

night at some show that the whole campus has been raving about all week. It's just us.

As his hand inches under my shirt, I suck in a breath. "I can't wait to marry you, Tyler Marks."

A groan rumbles in his chest, and his hand flattens against my stomach, stopping its progression. "Shit, Sam. I forgot."

I lift up onto my elbows. "About what?"

He shakes his head and drives his hand through his hair as he sits back on his heels. "My brother's in town, and I promised I'd hang with him tonight. I missed his birthday last week." His brown eyes crease at the corners. "But I can cancel." He bounds forward, capturing my arms and bringing them above my head.

My back hits the bed, and his weight presses me into the comforter. I revel in the feel of his strong body on top of mine for a minute before the guilt kicks in. I run my hands along his back. "You haven't seen Holden in forever," I say through my disappointment. "You should go."

"Yeah, I should." He exhales against my neck, a forced breath. Then he pushes up to look at me. "I can stop by later." He dips his fingers beneath the elastic of my pajama shorts. "Pick up where we left off..."

I laugh. "No. I have an early class." I sigh, hating that, again, I'll go to bed without him. "I should probably pass out early anyway. Tomorrow?"

"You know it." He leans in and kisses me long and soft.

After he slips on his shoes and jacket, I walk him to the outside corridor and lean against the doorway, hugging my arms around myself against the cold. "I love you," I tell him.

With another groan, he pivots and races back toward me, scooping me into his arms, my toes grazing the floor. "Forever, Sam," he whispers in my ear.

Those were his last words to me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From an early age, Trisha Wolfe dreamed up fantasy 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 fantasy worlds as an excuse to continue talking to herself. Get updates on future releases and special bonus material at <http://www.trishawolfe.com/>

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