



IF THERE
IS NO
DEVIL

SOPHIE LARK

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Thanks For Reading!

Meet Sophie

Part two is for everyone who has suffered abuse.

I grew up poor and was severely bullied as a teen. I got married at 19 to someone who hurt me in every possible way, tearing apart my self-esteem until I felt lower than dirt.

Mara's struggles are drawn from my own experience. Her rebirth into a new life likewise parallels my own.

It doesn't matter where you started, or what you've done. Maybe you're all fucked up, and the world around you looks dark and cruel.

This book is about finding love and acceptance in another person, and more importantly, loving and accepting yourself.

You are worthy of love. You are worthy of a more beautiful future.

It can happen for anyone. It happened for me.

Love you all,

– Sophie

THERE IS NO DEVIL OFFICIAL SOUNDTRACK

[Spotify](#) → geni.us/no-devil-apple

[Apple Music](#) → geni.us/no-devil-apple

1. Terrible Thing - AG
2. Amore - Bebe Rexha & Rick Ross
3. 6 Underground - Sneaker Pimps
4. Psycho - Mia Rodriguez
5. Mad World - Gary Jules
6. Venom - Little Simz
7. Black Out Days - Phantogram
8. Paranoia - HAVEN
9. 911 - Ellise
10. I Don't Want To Set The World On Fire - The Ink Spots
11. I Feel Like A God - DeathbyRomy
12. How Villains Are Made - Madalen Duke
13. This Is Love - Air Traffic Controller
14. Heart Shaped Box - Neovaii
15. The Devil is a Gentleman - Merci Raines
16. Animal - Sir Chloe
17. Demons - Hayley Kiyoko
18. On My Knees - RÜFÜS DU SOL
19. Survivor - 2WEI
20. Always Forever - Cults
21. Girl With One Eye - Florence + The Machine
22. INDUSTRY BABY - Lil Nas X & Jack Harlow
23. I Did Something Bad - Taylor Swift
24. I am not a woman, I'm a god - Halsey
25. Bust Your Knee Caps - Pomplamoose
26. Fire Drill - Melanie Martinez



MARA

I wake to the sound of waves crashing against the cliffs below. Cole keeps all his windows open on the north side of the house. I smell salt and iron, the scent of the bay. Fog drifts into the room, swirling around the posters of the old-fashioned bed.

I slip out from under the heavy coverlet, naked, my nipples stiffening in the cold. The fog condenses on my warm skin, making me slippery as a seal.

Cole has left a silk robe for me—the kind a vintage film star would have worn. It swirls around my body, heavy, sumptuous, and ridiculously extravagant.

He left slippers for me as well, but I ignore those, preferring to pad across his thick Turkish rugs in my bare feet.

Walking through the halls of Seacliff is like walking through Versailles after hours. It seems outrageous that I'm even allowed inside this place, let alone that I live here.

I could never have imagined what real wealth looks like, what it feels like to the touch. Palatial, empty, echoing space. Priceless art hung in distant wings where months or even years could pass without a single person viewing it. The aesthetic perfection of every last faucet and doorknob—each made of the finest materials. Patinaed with age, but never becoming broken or run down.

Motion sensors are everywhere. He already knows I'm awake.

Cole is the most observant person I've ever met. He uses technology to enhance what he can see, what he can hear, until he's god-like in his reach.

Inside this house, he could always be listening. He could always be watching.

I want him to be.

I'm safe from the rest of the world when I'm under his eye, under his protection. No one can hurt me, no one can touch me.

Except Cole himself.

I walk down the wide, curving staircase to the main level, the long train of the robe trailing behind me like a wedding gown. I haven't belted it. I see the hunger in Cole's dark eyes when he sees my bare breasts slipping in and out of view within the folds of the liquid, shimmering silk.

He's already dressed for the day, the soft black waves of his hair still damp from his shower. Freshly shaved, the sensual curves of his mouth and the sharp line of his jaw look impossibly youthful. He's ageless. Eternal. Beautiful in a way that hurts me, that grabs hold of my heart in my chest and squeezes hard.

He holds out a double-walled glass, the layers of espresso, milk, and foam seeming to float in space.

"I made you a latte."

He must have started it the moment I opened my eyes. Perfectly timed to the minutes it would take me stretch, slip out from under the covers, pull on the robe, and pad down the stairs.

His precision terrifies me.

In the same breath, I feel deep admiration for what I—distracted and impulsive as I am—could never hope to accomplish.

I could never be this calculated, this patient, this effective. He really is superhuman.

And he's not even trying. It's just a game to him.

A game to hand me this perfectly prepared latte, exactly the way I like it. He already knows this, too: the temperature I want, so I can sip without burning my mouth. Sweetness enhancing the flavor of the expensive beans, but not obscuring it. Extra foam, thick and rich as whipped cream.

I trail my tongue through it, unembarrassed. I lick it off my lips. Because I'm learning too: he likes to watch me enjoy things. It gives him more pleasure to watch me lap up this foam, to lick it off my fingers, than it could ever give him to taste it himself.

I saturate my mouth with the delicious flavor, and then I kiss him so he can taste it on my lips.

The coffee makes my mouth warm and sensual.

That's why he made it for me.

This is all calculated so I won't walk over the fridge and start rummaging. He wants to select what I eat, what I drink, what I wear. He wants to choose better than I could choose myself, so I won't fight him, so I'll submit to him.

Each time I accept one of his choices, I see the glint of triumph in his eyes. This is how he intends to tame me.

I'm not an easy pet.

I'm wild and feral. What I want is capricious, it changes every moment.

"Do we have any more of those peaches from last night?" I say.

I see the flame flicker up in his eyes, irritation that he failed to anticipate this.

"You ate them all before bed."

"You didn't think I'd eat six at once?" I say, that light edge of teasing both infuriating and arousing him. He grabs my wrist, pulling me toward him.

His rough growl swipes up my spine like sandpaper: "If we were on a ship stranded in the ocean, and all we had left was one bar of chocolate, you'd eat the whole thing in five minutes and lick your fingers afterward."

I smile up at him, unrepentant.

“I don’t want to be hungry while I get that ship working again,” I say.

I gulp down the rest of the meticulously-prepared latte. “Rationing is for people who only want to endure.”

“I would have thought hard times would have taught you the value of planning,” Cole says, his other hand snaking around behind the back of my skull, gripping me tight, his fingers twined through my hair.

I tilt up my mouth to him.

“I don’t want to survive. I want to thrive.”

He kisses me like he does every time, like he’s eating me alive. He slips his hand inside my robe, cupping my bare breast. His sensitive fingers explore my body like a blind man: learning every curve by feel, not sight.

I try to resist the power of those hands, but it’s impossible.

I go limp, falling back against the supporting strength of his arm. The robe opens, giving him full access to the naked body beneath. I’m dizzy and swooning as that warm, powerful hand roams over my exposed flesh.

The ornate tin tiles of the kitchen ceiling fill my eyes with their silvery glow. His fingertips dance across my collarbone, before his hand closes around my throat. I feel his cock stiffening against my hip as he slowly cuts off my air.

“What were you dreaming about last night?” he murmurs in my ear. “You were moaning in your sleep ...”

“I don’t remember,” I lie.

His fingers tighten until black spots bleed over the tin tiles and I can barely feel his arm beneath my body.

“You can’t keep secrets from me, Mara,” he growls, his teeth bared against the side of my throat. “I will break you down systematically, relentlessly, until you give me what I want.”

I turn my head, looking directly into his eyes.

“What do you want?”

He licks his lips, our mouths so close together that his tongue almost touches mine as well.

“I want all of you. Every single part of you. I want to know everything about you: all your history, and every thought that comes into your head. Every desire, no matter how dark or how perverse. Every fantasy, no matter how impossible it may seem. And most of all, Mara, I want to occupy your thoughts like you occupy mine. I want you obsessed with me, bound to me, dependent on me. I want you to live *for* me, not just *with* me.”

To me, this is a more terrifying prospect than when I thought Cole might murder me.

My whole life has been a struggle for independence.

Every person who was supposed to love me tried to control me instead. They tried to bend me and shape me to be what they wanted, so they could use me, so they could consume me like fuel.

I pull away from him, standing straight, closing the robe and belting it.

“I put my life in your hands. I never said you could take my identity.”

Cole smiles at me, unabashed.

“I’m not trying to change who you are. I’m trying to reveal it. A diamond can’t shine until it’s cut.”

I cross my arms over my chest, already knowing where this is going.

“And where do you plan to cut me today?”

He’s trying to hold back a laugh—never a good sign.

“Always so suspicious, Mara. It’s quite unjust, considering I’ve yet to make a plan for you that you haven’t enjoyed.”

“That’s a generous interpretation. Especially since the journey to ‘enjoyment’ tends to be nothing less than horrifying.”

Now he does laugh, a sound that flushes me with heat. When the devil chuckles, the world tilts a little on its axis, and somewhere, someone makes a fatal mistake.

“There’s nothing horrifying about me taking you shopping.”

“No fucking way,” I snap. “You promised to get my things from my old house.”

“And I have—your ‘things’ will be delivered this afternoon. Though I ought to have them fumigated first.” He sniffs.

“Don’t want my thrift-store jackets hanging in your immaculate closets? Don’t worry—I’m sure there’s some wing of this house you’ve never even seen.”

“Oh, I know every inch of this house,” Cole assures me. “There’s nowhere you can hide from me out in the world, let alone here in my own home.”

Locked in his dark gaze, I believe him.

Opposing Cole feels like standing in the path of a freight train.

Yet here I stand, staring down the headlights as the horn blares in warning.

“I like my clothes,” I hiss.

“You don’t have your clothes,” Cole says. “I do. And I’m not giving them back to you until you come shopping with me. If you don’t like what I pick out, then you don’t have to wear it. But you will accompany me ... or you’ll have to go to the studio in that robe.” He grins. “Or naked. I’m happy with any of those options.”

I’ll wear this damn robe all week long to spite him. That would offend his sensibilities much more than mine. It’s only the chill gray fog outside the window that dissuades me—silk isn’t warm.

“Fine,” I say grudgingly. “But I mean it—I’m not wearing anything I don’t like.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” Cole replies with irritating smugness.

Cole stands outside the glass, his eyes roaming over my wet body.

He has no shame in watching me. He does it openly, all the time. Not bothering to hide his pleasure.

It's flattering.

I'm an exotic creature to him. Everything I do is interesting.

Cole's gaze makes me more aware of what I'm doing. How I tilt my head back under the spray, exposing my throat. How the soap suds slide down between my breasts. How my skin flushes in the heat.

I shower slowly, sensually. Running my palms over my own curves. Rotating in place so he can admire me from every angle.

When Cole watches me, his eyes come alive in his face. He leans back against the wall, arms folded over his chest, the clean-cut muscle of his arms visible through the thin material of his shirt.

Every turn of my body sends a twitch down the tight line of his jaw. His eyes crawl up my thighs, my ass, over his own artwork running from my hip to my ribs, even over the ugly scars marking both my arms: he likes it all.

I lift the showerhead down from the wall so I can direct the flow exactly where I want it. I let it rain down on my face, eyes closed, mouth open so the droplets pound on my tongue. I run the water across my breasts, in slow strokes in time to the music.

Sitting down on the shower bench, I spray the water on the soles of my feet, squirming a little at how it tickles. Then I run the water all the way up my leg, first one, then the other.

Cole stands motionless, watching me. His endless fascination creates a voyeuristic energy that spurs me on to stranger and stranger behaviors.

Leaning back against the cool stone wall, I spread my knees apart, opening my pussy to his view. Now he steps forward, eyes darker than an oil spill, lips pale.

I point the shower spray directly at my pussy. It's almost too hot to bear, so I splash the water lightly against my exposed lips until I'm used to it, until I can direct the pressure right at my clit.

My head falls back against the wall, eyes closed.

I'm not watching Cole watching me anymore.

I'm feeling it.

The water caresses me, sliding in and out of my folds, running everywhere. It's warm and powerful. The closer I bring the showerhead, the more intense the sensation becomes.

"That's right ..." Cole murmurs. "Good girl. Don't stop."

The flush rises up my body, filling my breasts, crawling up my neck.

The heat is almost too much. I want to turn it down.

Sensing this, Cole steps inside the shower. He drops to his knees in front of me, closing his hand over mine on the showerhead, locking my fingers in place. He points the spray right where he wants it and holds it there as the heat and pressure rises.

His trousers are drenched, as well as his expensive Italian loafers. Cole barely notices. For all his perfectionism, Cole is a pleasure-seeker just like me. He wants what he wants, and he's willing to pay for it.

Right now he wants to make me cum, and he doesn't give a fuck what clothes he ruins.

"You've done this before," he growls.

"Yes," I gasp.

"Is this how you learned to cum? In the bath, spreading your legs under the faucet?"

I press my lips together, hating how he uses sex to dig information out of me. Hating how arousal makes me weak.

Cole brings the showerhead closer, until it's only an inch from my pussy, until the pounding spray is almost unbearable. He wraps the rope of my wet hair around his hand and jerks my head back, growling in my ear, "Admit it, you dirty girl. You were taking baths to cum, not to get clean."

"Fuck being clean," I snarl. "I'll sleep in a dumpster if I feel like it."

Cole's chuckle is what tips me over—rich and wicked, vibrating down to my bones. "I know you would, you little psychopath."

The orgasm is as hot and pounding as the shower spray. My lungs fill with steam. My skin blushes redder than rose petals.

When I'm panting against the wall, limp and loose, Cole orders, "Stay right there. Don't move a muscle."

I couldn't even if I wanted to.

Cole exits the shower to retrieve something from his drawers. He's not rummaging—his toiletries are so perfectly organized that it only takes him a moment to gather what he needs.

He returns seconds later, carrying shaving cream and a straight razor.

"I can shave myself," I inform him.

"Not as well as I can."

It annoys me how true that is. Even though I'm pretty fucking good with my hands, I still can't match Cole in precision. He's a machine, if a machine had a soul. Or part of a soul, at least.

I lean back against the wall, thighs open, pussy swollen and flushed from the hot spray. It's deeply thrilling to offer him access to my most vulnerable parts.

My heart races as he flips open the razor, clearing the gleaming steel blade from its bone handle.

"Hold this for me," he says, pressing the handle into my palm.

I close my fingers around it, looking at the cruel edge of the blade, thinner and sharper than any knife.

Cole kneels before me. He squeezes a puff of shaving cream onto his palm, then gently massages it over my bikini line. His cheek is only inches from the razor, his neck exposed as he tilts his head for a better view.

I could cut his throat right now.

Cole spreads the shaving cream all across my pussy and upper thighs. It feels thick and cool after the heat of the water.

“Are you wondering what it would feel like?” he says in his smooth, low voice.

I grip the handle so hard that it bites into my palm.

“You’re wondering if you could do it quick enough to surprise me. Could you cut me deep enough that I couldn’t fight back? If you got me in the right place, one slash would be enough ...”

I shake my head so vigorously that it bumps against the stone wall.

“No. I wasn’t thinking that.”

Cole closes his hand over mine again, but this time he’s forcing me to grip the razor instead of a showerhead. Forcing me to brandish it between us. He looks up into my face, his dark eyes locked on mine.

“When the time comes ... don’t hesitate. You’re never going to be the biggest or the strongest in the fight. You have to be the most ruthless. You’ll only get one cut, so make it count.”

Who does he imagine I’m going to be fighting?

Shaw ... or him?

I twist my wrist away from Cole, dropping the razor on the shower floor.

“I told you—I’m not going to hurt anyone.”

Cole ignores the razor, only looking at me.

“Oh really? And what do you plan to do about Shaw, then?”

“I don’t know,” I say through gritted teeth. “Find some evidence. Get his ass tossed in jail where he belongs.”

Cole makes a contemptuous sound that hits me worse than a slap.

“You’re not going to *find evidence*. You go near Shaw without me right next to you, and all you’ll find is your head on a beach.”

I glare at him. “You want me to think there’s only one way this can end.”

“No. There’s two ways: Shaw dies, or we do.”

Cole is trying to drag me down this path I don’t want to travel. At the same time, I can’t help feeling perversely comforted that he said “we” instead of “you.” Cole thinks we’re in this together. And honestly, nothing terrifies me more than the thought of facing Shaw alone.

I want Cole right next to me. But I can’t see how we’ll ever agree on what we should do.

Plucking up the razor, Cole makes a *tsking* sound.

“Now I have to sharpen this again.”

He returns to the counter to bring out his leather strop. He moves swiftly, aggressively. Snapping the leather taught and drawing the blade down the grain with a vicious purr. The steam ebbs out of the shower. A chill runs down my spine instead.

Cole returns, kneeling before me, the blade gleaming bright in his hand.

He looks up at me, full lips curved in a smile. “Hold still. Don’t make me cut you.”

The touch of the blade is colder than ice. It slides over my skin like a whisper—cutting so close that my flesh looks strangely pale, stripped of shaving cream and every trace of hair.

Every place he bares becomes instantly sensitized. I feel the cool air on my pussy lips, and his warm breath.

His fingertips press against my flesh, spreading my lips apart so he can shave even the most difficult and delicate areas.

I keep expecting the bite of the blade, some slip of his hand, but he's too careful. It doesn't even scratch me.

He shaves down, then in, then up, touching me with his exquisitely sensitive fingertips, re-shaving any area that doesn't meet his standard of perfection.

He's intensely focused on the work, his face inches from my pussy, examining every part of me, inside and out.

Maybe I should be embarrassed. Maybe it should feel clinical.

It doesn't.

Instead, I find myself shivering under his touch. Hardly able to hold still when I'm dying to press my clit against his palm, aching for him to rub the ball of his thumb across it. I want his fingers inside me. His cock inside me.

Cole lifts the showerhead once more, rinsing the last remnants of shaving cream off my skin.

My pussy gleams, as smooth and soft as a fresh spring peach.

Cole can't take his eyes off it.

"Feel that," he says, taking my hand and placing it on the silky soft mound.

My fingers glide over the skin, ten times as sensitive as it's ever been. It feels like I was made this morning. Like nothing bad has ever happened to me. Venus, rising from the sea-foam.

Putting his hands on my knees, Cole pushes them all the way apart.

He leans forward and trails the tip of his tongue across my pussy—tracing the path of the razor back and forth, up and down. Testing his work with the most perceptive part of himself.

I let out a groan, thrusting my hand in his hair, pushing his face into my cunt. I grind that smooth little pussy all over his face, shivering with the sensation of his soft lips, wet tongue, and the barest trace of stubble. I feel it all like I've never felt it before, and I melt into his mouth, starting to cum before I even realize what's happening.

I ride his tongue, the softest part of him against the softest part of me. The warmth, the bliss, is intensely intimate. I've never had oral from a man who wants it more than I do. He's tasting me, smelling me, lapping me up. So hungry that I could never satisfy him, even while he's gorging me with pleasure.

When the second climax passes, I almost feel guilty. I reach for him, wanting to return the favor.

"Let me suck your cock."

"No." He pushes me back down on the bench, still holding the razor in his left hand. "I don't want a blowjob."

"What do you want, then?"

His right hand rests on my thigh, holding me in place.

"I want to taste you."

That's what he just did—my wetness is all over his mouth.

Then Cole lifts the razor over my thigh, and I understand.

My heart skips. Every time we cross another line, the edge of what I used to know retreats in the distance.

"Do it," I say.

He makes one thin slash on my inner thigh, so quick and sharp that the pain flares and vanishes all in an instant, before I even register it. Blood wells up, darker than wine. He catches it on his tongue, lapping the shallow wound, and then closing his mouth over it. I feel his tongue sliding across raw nerve, and then the gentle sucking as he latches on.

His mouth soothes me.

I lean back against the wall, eyes closed, fingers slipping into his thick, soft hair once more.

I scratch my nails gently against his scalp while he sucks at the cut. When he pulls back at last, I'm no longer bleeding.

I look at the mark, thin and clean. I know from experience this won't scar.

It's the ones you cut deep, the ones that are ragged, the ones you make over others that are still healing: those stay forever.

Cole rises, pulling me up with him. He kisses me on the mouth. I taste the sweet musk of my pussy and the metal of my own blood. Neither feels wrong. In fact, it's a combination so perfect I might have come up with it myself, given enough time to experiment.

The orgasms have made me placid and calm.

"What do you want me to wear?" I ask Cole.



HE DRIVES us to Neiman Marcus on Geary Street. The venerable stone building stands on the corner, its layers of glass display windows impossibly chic and imposing even from a distance.

"Can't we just go to Urban Outfitters or something?" I grumble.

Already I'm regretting the cooperative spirit that prompted me to climb in Cole's passenger seat. I don't want to go in some stuffy store where the sales ladies are sure to give me the kind of side-eye employed on Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. They can tell when you're poor, when you don't belong.

"Or better yet," I say, "I can keep wearing *your* clothes."

Cole let me borrow a pair of his old-money woolen trousers and a cashmere sweater. He even punched a new hole halfway down one of his belts to keep the pants up. It's all way too big for me, but I like baggy clothing.

"Absolutely not," Cole says. "That was a desperate measure. One we're about to rectify."

Just walking through the doors makes me uncomfortable. We have to pass under the glare of two security guards, entrusted with keeping the homeless people out. I'd feel more relaxed in one of the many tents camped out in

Union Square. I'd rather smoke a blunt with one of those dudes than cringe under the aggressive, "Good morning! What are you two shopping for today?" from a lipsticked blonde brandishing a perfume bottle.

"Good morning," Cole replies, coolly ignoring the rest of the question as he sweeps past her, keeping his vice grip on my arm while he steers me onto the steep escalator to the upper levels.

Compared to the crowded streets outside, the ladies' department feels oddly empty. I stare around at the pristine racks of clothing, organized by designer, bright and rich and appealing, but unseen by anyone else. We're alone up here, except for a few scattered sales associates.

"Where is everyone?" I whisper to Cole.

"There is no 'everyone.' You're shopping with the one percent—there's not that many of us."

The surreal silence unnerves me. I approach a rack of fall coats, gingerly lifting one sleeve. The material is thick and heavy, with elaborate embroidery along the cuff. Real elk-horn buttons are handsewn along the placket, and the fur trim on the collar is so rich and soft that it immediately makes me think of Arctic animals that burrow in the snow.

Flipping over the tag, I let out a startled bark of laughter.

"*Eight thousand dollars?*" I squeak to Cole. "For one coat? What's it made out of—hair clippings from Ryan Gosling?"

It boggles my mind that someone could stroll around in an outfit that represents a year's earnings for me. I mean, I knew expensive clothing existed, but I've never actually touched it before.

It feels different in every way. It smells different in here. I've stepped into another world—the world of privilege, where numbers become meaningless, and you just swipe your card for whatever you want.

Cole's not even looking at the price tags. He grabs whatever catches his eye, laying the garments over his arm. Before I can blink, a saleswoman materializes, saying with unctuous politeness, "Can I start you a fitting room, sir?"

Cole hands her the clothes, already striding toward the next rack. He surveys each collection with a practiced eye, pulling out a mix of tops and bottoms, dresses and coats.

I don't even try to help him. I'm intimidated and conflicted. I always wanted to make money, but I never really pictured myself using it. I have too much resentment for the rich to ever really believe I'd become one of them.

Besides, I'm not rich. I sold one single painting.

Cole is beyond rich. And apparently planning to splash out a lot more money on a new wardrobe than I was expecting.

I grab his arm, muttering, "This stuff is too expensive."

He takes my hand, pulling me toward the fitting room.

"You don't know anything about money. This isn't expensive—it's pocket change."

That only makes me feel worse.

The economic chasm between Cole and me is far wider than any of our other differences. We both lived in hundred-year-old San Francisco houses, but mine was a moldering shack and his a literal palace. The more I step into his world, the more I see how little of it I understood from a distance. He knows everyone in this city, everyone that matters. They're intimidated by him, they owe him favors.

He can accomplish things with a snap of his fingers that I couldn't manage in a hundred years. Even people who don't know the Blackwell name, like this woman waiting on us, even she falls under the spell of the effortless confidence that tells her Cole is someone of value, someone who must be obeyed.

I have never been someone of value.

Not to anybody.

Not even to my own goddamned mother, the one person on this planet who is supposed to give a fuck about me.

I've had friends, but I was never the most important person in their life, the sun in their solar system.

As fucked up as it sounds, the first person who truly took an interest in me ... was Cole.

His attention can be coercive and selfish at times. But I want it all the same.

The man who never cared about anyone is fixated on the girl nobody gave a shit about.

In some twisted way, we're made for each other.

And that really fucking scares me. Because I haven't even plumbed the bottom of the dark things Cole has done. If we're drawn together ... what does that say about me?

I always suspected I might not be a good person.

I tried to do the right things. I tried to be kind and helpful and honest. It never seemed to get me anywhere. Maybe because people could see that I had to try, that I was never naturally, effortlessly good.

As soon as I went to school, I knew I was odd. It wasn't just the too-small clothing or the fact that my lunch bag was a plastic grocery bag with the same bag of chips in it day after day. I never ate the chips, because then I wouldn't have anything to bring to school in the bag.

Other kids were poor. There was something uglier in me, something that repelled the other children. That made them whisper about me behind their hands and avoid me at recess.

I always thought it was sadness. Or the stories kids told, the few times anyone came over to my house and met my mother, and saw how we lived.

Now, I think ... it was just me.

Randall saw it the moment we met. I was only seven. A grown man shouldn't hate a little girl so much.

"What's wrong?" Cole says, zeroing in on my private thoughts with his usual eerie precision.

“I don’t fit in here,” I mutter. “This changing room is bigger than my apartment.”

“You don’t live in that apartment anymore,” Cole says. And then, because I’m staring at the carpet, he grabs my face and forces me to look into his eyes. “You deserve to be here as much as anyone. *More* than anyone. You’re talented, Mara, really fucking talented. You’re already a star. Everyone else doesn’t know it yet, but I do. You’re going to make art that makes people think and cry and burn with envy.”

If anyone else said that, I would assume they were only trying to cheer me up.

Cole doesn’t say things to be nice.

I loved his art before I ever laid eyes on him. It spoke to me, long before we met. His opinion matters to me more than anyone’s.

My eyes burn, my whole face hot. I can’t allow myself to cry because I won’t do anything that would make Cole think less of me.

All I can do is grip his hands and press them harder into my face until the pain brings me back to earth.

Cole says, “Now try on these goddamned clothes and enjoy yourself—feel the fabric, it’s gorgeous ... you’ll appreciate it more than anyone.”

Amore – Bebe Rexha

[Spotify](https://www.spotify.com/track/1234567890) → [geni.us/no-devil-spotify](https://www.genius.com/1234567890)

[Apple Music](https://www.apple.com/itunes/track/1234567890) → [geni.us/no-devil-apple](https://www.genius.com/1234567890)

Pulling on the first dress, I discover that Cole is right. He’s always right.

The clothes caress my skin. They fit my body like they were made for me—some heavy and comforting, others light and floating. The richness, the softness of the material ... the way it clings and stretches and flares around me like the garments are alive, like they’ve fallen in love with me ... I’ve never experienced anything like it.

Cole has impeccable taste. He seems to intuitively understand what colors and silhouettes suit me best. He's chosen rich jewel tones, mostly solid fabrics, a few prints. The embellishments are rustic embroidery or sumptuous draping—nothing that would scratch or irritate me. He hasn't picked out anything that would make me feel like I was cosplaying as a socialite. It's all bohemian styles with vintage influences. He knows me. He knows what I like.

I had only intended to let him buy me a few things, but piece after piece piles up in his arms, each so lovely that I can't seem to choose between them. Mini dresses with bell sleeves, satin rompers, peasant blouses, leather skirts, embroidered bell-bottom jeans ...

I, too, have to stop looking at the price tags so I don't make myself sick.

As he orders the sales clerk to ring it all up, I turn to him, forcing myself to meet his eyes even though I'm deeply embarrassed. I never meant to take charity from anyone. I always told myself I was strong and independent, that I could take care of myself.

"Thank you, Cole," I say humbly. "Not just for the clothes ... for everything you've done for me."

"Feeling grateful, are you?" he says, those dark eyes glinting wickedly.

"I was ..." I reply, already regretting it.

"Then why don't you do me a small favor in return?"

Oh god.

"What is it?"

"Don't worry, this will be fun."

Cole's idea of fun terrifies me.

He's leading me back inside the changing room, though I already tried on all the clothes.

I try to keep my heart rate within range of a light jog instead of an all-out sprint.

“What are we doing?”

“Calm yourself, little Caravaggio. I just want you to wear something for me.”

He holds up what looks like a small piece of rubber—soft, curved, and about the size of my thumb.

“What is that?”

“It goes right in here ...” Cole pushes me up against the wall, slipping the little piece of rubber down the front of my underwear. It nestles in place between my pussy lips. I can feel it, but the softness of the rubber prevents discomfort.

I have no idea the purpose of this. Still, I go along with it. Cole is so odd that almost nothing surprises me anymore.

Obediently, I follow him out so I can watch him swipe his credit card for a sum that eclipses my entire net worth, including the painting I just sold.

Breathless, I say, “Well, I guess we should head over to the studio ...”

“Not even close,” Cole laughs.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re not done shopping.”

“What could you possibly—”

“Come on.” He grabs my hand, dragging me along.

So begins the second half of our shopping spree, wherein Cole attempts to clean out Neiman Marcus in a single afternoon. I tire of arguing with him long before he tires of swiping his card. He buys me earrings, necklaces, perfume, cosmetics, shoes, and a collection of lingerie so scandalous that it would make Joseph Corr e blush.

I can hardly focus on the purchases because Cole is amusing himself in an entirely different way.

It starts as I'm sampling a selection of perfumes laid out by the willowy blonde who accosted us on our way in the door. She's wafting a sample of *Maison Francis Kurkdjian* beneath my nose when I feel a sudden buzzing in my nether regions. I jerk upright, almost slicing off my nose via paper cut.

"What the hell!" I gasp.

I whirl around, finding Cole with his hands in his pockets and an artfully constructed expression of innocence on his face.

"Mosquito bite?" he says.

My face is burning and my knees are going wobbly beneath me. The buzzing has dialed down to a low thrum, steady and insistent. I see Cole's hand shifting within his pocket as he manipulates the controls. The buzzing ramps up again, almost loud enough for the perfume counter lady to hear. I take several steps away from her, trying to squeeze my legs together, then quickly separate them again because that only makes it worse.

"Are you alright?" she asks me, her botoxed brow unable to wrinkle in concern.

"Could I ... have some water?" I squeak.

I'm trying to get rid of her so I can yell at Cole.

Wheeling on him, I bark, "Turn that off!"

Instead, he turns it up.

I have to lean against the glass counter, cheeks burning and hands sweating.

"Stop," I beg him.

He turns it off, giving me a moment of blessed relief to recover myself.

The perfume lady returns with a small bottle of water.

"Feeling better?" she says, handing it to me.

"Yes, thank you," I pant. "I think the perfume was making me dizzy."

“Try this,” she says, passing me an open canister of coffee beans. “It can help clear your head.”

I lean over to inhale their scent.

Right as I do, Cole activates the vibrator again.

“Oh my god!” I gasp, clutching at the countertop with both hands.

I’m helpless as the sensation thrums up and down my legs, churning in my lower stomach.

Cole has discovered a fatal weakness, one I didn’t even know I possessed. Vibration is my kryptonite, and Cole is employing it with Lex Luther levels of evil genius.

How the fuck did he even find one this small? He probably made it himself, that crafty bastard.

He’s ramping it up again, while I desperately try not to moan in front of the confused blonde.

“Do you need a doctor?” she says.

“She’ll be fine,” Cole assures her. “This happens all the time.”

That makes no goddamned sense, but Cole is so convincing that the blonde simply smiles and says, “We have a powder room if you need to sit down.”

Cole puts his arm around my shoulders, leading me away from the perfume counter, but not shutting off the vibrator.

I turn into his chest, holding him for support, hiding my face against his body as I start to cum. My legs shake like an earthquake, my arms wrapped tight around his waist. I’m making a muffled groaning sound.

When it finally passes, I gasp, “Turn that damn thing off!”

Cole complies, though I can feel him shaking too—from laughter.

I look up at him.

Cole is illuminated with the purest, brightest amusement I've ever seen. It lights up his whole face, making him beautiful on a level that awes me.

I can only stare.

Then I start to giggle as well.

Maybe it's the rush of dopamine, or maybe it's the fact that for the first time, Cole and I are laughing together, at a secret that only we share.

"Why are you so awful?" I snort.

"I don't know," he says, with real wonder. "I only want what I'm not supposed to have."

Me too.

Nobody wanted me to be an artist.

Nobody wanted me to achieve anything.

Until I met Cole.

He turns the vibrator on several more times while we're shopping. It becomes a game between us, him trying to do it at the most inopportune times, and me fighting my hardest not to show any sign of it on my face, to keep talking and picking out mascara while my knees tremble and my skin flushes as pink as a baby pig.

Soon I'm giddy and over-stimulated, hanging off his arm because I can barely stand up. Cole carries all the bags for me, laden down like a Sherpa.

I've never felt so spoiled.

I've never had so much fun.



COLE

When we return from shopping, Mara pounces on me, shoving me down on the nearest chaise, saying, “Now it’s my turn,” in that husky voice of hers.

If I could describe the attraction I feel for her, and the way it eclipses what I’ve ever felt before, I’d have to say that Mara is just ... gritty. She has an edge of roughness, wildness, neglect.

Even though I should dislike certain aspects of her person—the way she bites her nails ragged, for instance—it all becomes the spice that I crave more than any bland and perfect beauty.

The artist in me desires what is truly unique. The slope of Mara’s upturned nose, her wild fling of freckles, the fox-tilt of her eyes, the lower lip’s ratio to the top ... these proportions are so exaggerated that they ought to be wrong. Instead, they could never be more right.

She looks up at me, a wild creature. No captive pet ... I’ve lured her here but not yet tamed her to my will.

I lean back against the cushions, arms spread across the scrolled woodwork, looking down at her. Watching her work.

She unzips my pants, looking up into my face, her sleet-gray eyes flirting with mine. She’s smiling, licking her lips with anticipation, her fingers fumbling with the zipper.

Her excitement ignites mine like a firestorm. The more eager she seems, the more my cock throbs and rages for the touch of her tongue.

The sunset flowing in through the plate-glass windows colors her skin pink, peach, and gold. Her hair illuminates like electrical filaments. She seems to glow with energy and light.

She wore home one of the dresses I bought for her—cloud-light linen, soft and floating around her shoulders.

My cock springs out, almost slapping her in the face. Mara jumps and lets out a peal of delighted laughter. When she's happy, she laughs so easily. Each throaty note runs down my spine like a scale.

She floats her fingertips over the head of my cock, teasing me. Her hands look naked—bare and unadorned, no rings or polish. Stained around the nails by ink and paint.

Her mouth hovers inches away, partly open, the tip of her tongue curled up to playfully dance around her teeth.

Her lips are swollen as a bruise. I'm aching to feel them closed around my cock. I might blow the instant they touch me.

Mara puts out her tongue and runs it softly up the sensitive underside of my cock. It feels like she's stringing a wire all along the path of her tongue, then sparking it to life.

She enfolds the head of my cock in her warm, velvety mouth.

I make a sound I've never made before. My brain exits my skull, floating several inches up in the air.

She sucks slowly, gently, for what seems like forever. She's not trying to make me cum. She's blowing me like she intends to do it all night long.

I look down at her. Her eyes are closed in peaceful satisfaction. Her ear rests against my thigh. She might be asleep, except for the warm, steady pressure of her mouth, licking, sliding, sucking.

Some mistake has been made: I died, heaven exists, and they let me in.

After a long, blissful eternity, I start to cum. While I drift through this dreamy, eternal orgasm, Mara never stops sucking for a moment.

She finally raises her head to look at me.

I ask her, "How did you do that so long?"

She shrugs. "I like it. It feels good."

"I know it feels good," I say. "For *me*. Doesn't your jaw get sore?"

"Sometimes," she says. "But I just switch the angle or depth. The longer I do it, the more sensitive my lips and tongue and throat become. The better it feels, the longer I can do it."

I'm struggling to understand what she means.

"You're saying ... the better it feels *for you*."

"Yeah," Mara says, squinting at me like this is obvious.

It's not obvious, and I must look confused, because she frowns and says, "Doesn't it feel good for *you* when you touch me?"

"It does ..." I pause, trying to articulate something I've never consciously considered. "What I'm enjoying is the effect on you. The way it puts you under my control. If I can make you feel pleasure, I can get you to do anything I want. When I'm getting what I want, I can eat your pussy for hours."

"So when you suck my tits, you're doing it for me, because it drives me insane. Not because it makes your tongue feel good," Mara says.

"That's right."

We're looking at each other like we just discovered one of us has been speaking Spanish and the other Portuguese.

Slowly, Mara climbs up onto my lap, straddling me on the chaise. She pulls her linen dress overhead, letting it drop on the floor behind her. Underneath, she wears only a skimpy lace thong, no bra.

Her bare breasts sit directly in front of my face, small, round, soft, and ripe.

Her tight little nipples poke out, brown as her freckles, pierced through with silver rings.

Cupping the base of my skull in her palm, Mara draws my head toward her breast.

“Close your mouth around my nipple,” she says.

Flushed from that long orgasm, I don’t think or plan. I only obey.

“Suck on my tits,” Mara says. “Soft. Slow. Feel what they feel like in your mouth, against your tongue.”

My mouth latches onto her breast, taking the whole nipple in my mouth. Its stiff pebbled tip lies firmly against my tongue. The round swell of her breast presses pleasantly against my lips. Her skin smells of the intoxicating perfume Mara chose at the store, selecting the one that incited me the most without me ever saying a word.

I suckle on her breast, trying to shut off my impulse to look up at her face to gauge how effective I am. I close my eyes, focusing on my own sensations. Letting the soft sounds of her moans, and the tightness of her waist between my hands, guide me.

Her nipple swells in my mouth, warming and softening against my tongue. The silver ring remains cool and unchanging, ice that can never melt.

Slowly I increase the pressure, not because I can feel that it causes Mara to grind harder on my stiffening cock, but purely for the satisfaction of sucking harder.

Mara pushes herself up, then lowers down on my cock, her lace thong pulled to the side. Her pussy is drenched, so wet that I feel it on my thighs. She’s so close to climax that she’s already riding me hard, starting at a gallop.

I release her breast and seize the other in my mouth, sucking hard, ravaging it, trying to fit as much as possible in my mouth. The silver ring like the tine of a fork, or the lip of a glass: serving her nipple to me.

The sensation satisfies like eating, like drinking. I'm devouring her. Gulping her down.

Mara starts to cum. She's clutching the back of my head, pushing my mouth harder against her breast, slamming her pussy down on my cock.

I swallow her breasts. When I'm full to the brim, I explode inside of her.



SOMETIME LATER, we're still sitting on the couch in the same position. Mara's head rests on my shoulder. I'm trailing my fingertips lightly up and down her spine.

I can tell she likes it—her body is heavy and sleepy, her soft sighs tickling my ear.

I'm not thinking about that. I'm focusing on the feeling of her skin beneath my fingertips. Her warmth and her softness.

When Mara finally lifts her head and sits back on my thighs, the silver rings on her chest glint in the moonlight. We've yet to turn on any lamps. Stars reflect on the glassy ocean below us, like half have fallen down into the water.

I say, "Those rings are the only useful thing Shaw has ever done."

Mara's mouth falls open, letting out an outraged laugh.

"That's so fucked up!" she cries.

"Oh shut up," I say. "You like them too."

Mara smacks me hard on the shoulder, unable to hide that I'm right.

"Why is that?" I ask her.

She considers.

"They suit me. I like the way they feel. And in a strange way, as awful as that night was, it brought me to you. The value in horrible things is what you make of them. As long as you're alive, you can still turn shit into gold."

“You’re glad you’re here?” I ask her, my eyes intently fixed on her face. Wanting to know the truth, whatever she might say.

“Yes,” Mara says softly, without hesitation.

“Why?”

I’m thinking it’s what I bring her: the money, the clothes, the connections, the orgasms.

Mara grins. “I told you. It’s interesting. And I hate being bored.”

“Me too,” I say, just as passionate on this topic as Mara. “I really fucking hate it.”



MARA

When I first came to Cole's house, I thought our confrontation with Shaw was imminent.

Instead, Cole sucks me into a cycle of long bouts of labor on our respective work, hedonistic meals to recover, and wild, experimental sex.

Cole meant what he said, that he would always be with me, always by my side. He even breaks his own routine of working in his private studio, joining the rest of us plebs in the shared building.

With all his designs and materials filling the largest studio at the end of the hall, we're never further than a few doors down from each other.

This is to protect me from Shaw, but also to satisfy Cole's obsessive need to know where I am and what I'm doing every moment.

It should feel suffocating, but it doesn't. Probably because Cole is not trying to interfere with what I want to do. Quite the opposite. He wants to help me so he can increase my reliance on him.

Sometimes I wonder if he's going to pull the rug out from under me. Will he suddenly become violent and cruel when he thinks he has me trapped?

It's hard to believe he could still be tricking me, that he has some secret plan. I've seen him in too many unguarded moments.

But I may only be fooling myself.

Many people have believed they knew Cole, that he was their friend.

I don't know if that has ever been true.

He does seem to have some real affection for Sonia. He certainly respects how good she is at her job. She accomplishes her tasks creatively and effectively, without instructions from Cole. As kind as she's always been to me, she has an edge of ruthlessness when getting things done. I've heard her cut the Artists' Guild panel down to size when they dare oppose what Cole has ordered.

I don't believe Sonia's warmth to me is only because Cole expects it. She regularly comes to see my work, seeming to feel real pleasure when I'm invited to participate in another show, or when another painting sells.

On one of the last weeks of November, she comes to my doorway, carrying two mugs of tea.

Sonia doesn't ferry tea for anyone, not even herself—that's Janice's job. So I know she's here for a reason.

"Cream and sweetener, right?" she says, pressing a mug into my hand.

"Thank you," I say gratefully.

As much as I love all the bare glass in my studio, it's difficult to keep the space warm. Even with an oversized cardigan and fingerless gloves, I'm still chilly. The air lies heavy and wet outside my window, opaque as milk. Trails of condensation run down the glass like tears.

"Cole told me he's been working on a design for Corona Heights Park," Sonia says.

"He has a few ideas. I don't think he knows which he wants to submit."

I sip the tea, which is deeply steeped and just the right temperature.

Sonia mirrors me, watching over the rim of her mug. "He's been asked to do monumental sculpture several times before. He always refused."

I shrug. "I guess he's ready for it now."

Sonia lets that sit between us for a moment, taking another slow sip of her tea.

She remarks, “He’s different since he met you. He smiles occasionally. And he hasn’t made Janice cry in weeks.”

I squeeze my mug, trying to draw warmth through the smooth ceramic.

“I don’t know that I have any great effect on him. No tree can stop a landslide.”

Sonia’s mouth quirks up, enjoying that analogy.

“I’d call him a volcano. You can survive a landslide ... not a lava flow.”

I can’t tell if that’s a warning.

If it is, Sonia’s giving it from inside the volcano’s umbra. She’s not safe from Cole either.

She’s worked for him for the better part of a decade. As brilliant and observant as Sonia is, I have no doubt that she’s learned some of his secrets. Whether he intended to share them or not.

Yet she remains unusually loyal to her boss.

I set my tea down, picking up my brush once more, loading it with paint.

My new canvas perches on the easel, the shapes blocked out, but work only just beginning.

Swiping my brush gently across the virgin space I ask Sonia, “You have a son, don’t you?”

Her manicured nails tap against her mug. “Did Cole tell you that?”

“No. I saw you carrying a backpack out the other day. From the Cuphead patches and the skateboarding stickers, I guessed he’s about twelve.”

“Thirteen.” I can hear Sonia’s smile, the affection in her voice. “His name is Will. He goes to the STEM school in Laurel Heights.”

“Oh, so he’s a genius then.” I grin.

“Yes,” Sonia laughs. “And like all geniuses, absent-minded—he forgets that damn backpack in my car at least once a week.”

I dip my brush onto the palette, adding a little more navy into the silvery gray.

“Will lives with you full-time?”

Sonia wears no ring, and I’ve never heard her mention a boyfriend, let alone a husband.

“That’s right.” Sonia takes another leisurely sip of tea. She’s dressed in a tailored pant suit, no blouse beneath. The streaks of premature gray around her face look stark and bold, like she was struck with lightning in just that spot. “His father was an aerospace engineer, designing drones for military applications. That’s where Will gets his math skills. God knows it’s not from me.”

My respect for Sonia battles against my curiosity. As someone who hates personal questions, I don’t want to pry. On the other hand, I’m sure Sonia will have no problem shutting me down if she doesn’t want to talk about it.

“Where’s his father now?”

Sonia perches on the edge of my table, her long legs stretched out in front of her, crossed at the ankle. She looks down into her tea, swirling the mug slowly in both hands.

“It was an ugly divorce,” she says. “Will was eight, just starting third grade. His father wouldn’t agree on split custody. He worked long hours, weekends too, but he couldn’t stand the thought of me having Will even half the time. He hired a men’s rights attorney, a fucking snake, and they threw everything they could at me. Month after month, drowning me in paperwork and court hearings. Trying to intimidate me. Trying to drain our bank account to the point where I’d hand over my son just to make it stop.”

I stop painting, turning to look at her.

Her face falls into deep lines of exhaustion, remembering the ordeal.

“It was relentless. Vindictive. Irrational. He’d pretend to be willing to come to an agreement if I’d meet him for mediation, but then he’d yank the football away again. I started to worry that even if I could force him to come to terms, he’d never abide by them. He was already flouting the temporary custody agreement, refusing to bring Will back to my house, shutting off Will’s cellphone so I couldn’t call or text. He had family in Saudi Arabia and plenty of job opportunities overseas ... I lived in terror that one day he’d take my son and never return.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “That’s awful.”

Sonia nods, anger still burning in her eyes. “It was.”

“Did the judge sort it out?”

Sonia snorts. “Not fucking likely. The system is a stick in the hand of the biggest bully. The lawyers get rich and everyone else gets fucked.”

“What happened, then?”

“A miracle,” Sonia says. “I had Will at home for the weekend. For once his father wasn’t calling and texting, trying to interrupt us, blowing up my phone. I remember thinking that he must be slammed at work. I certainly didn’t believe he was turning over a new leaf—I wasn’t that stupid.”

Sonia’s voice goes low and dreamy as she gazes into her tea.

“Monday morning, I drove Will back to my ex’s house. He was renting a place in Oakland, a little modern bungalow with an attached garage. I parked out front, noticing that all the lights were off in the house, even though I was right on time and he should have been expecting us. I told Will, ‘Wait in the car.’ I must have known something was off. I walked up to the front door, rang the bell, knocked. No answer.”

I swallow, my throat tight with anticipation, even though this all happened years ago.

“I heard this sound. Sort of a low rumble, coming from the garage. I couldn’t have told you what it was, and yet, deep down inside, I already knew. I felt myself walking over, wrenching up the door. Standing still while exhaust billowed out all around me.”

“He was ... in the car?”

“That’s right. He had driven home late from some bar. Fell asleep in the garage. Never turned off the engine.”

I let out my breath in a long sigh.

“It was a ‘67 Camaro—his baby. I told him that car would be the death of him if he ever got in an accident on the freeway. I guess I was half right.”

“And that was the end of the custody battle.”

“That’s right.” Sonia nods. “Will came to live with me full-time. Cole even gave me a raise to pay off what I owed my lawyer.”

“He’s generous like that,” I say, my voice coming out faint and slightly strained.

“Oh yes,” Sonia says quietly, her pale blue eyes fixed on mine. “He can be very generous when it suits him.”

Sonia stands up, still holding the tea that has now gone cold in her mug. She only drank half of it.

“I’ll always be grateful to Cole for everything he did for me during that time,” she says. “It was the darkest point in my life.”

She’s walking toward the door, leaving so I can get back to work.

“That’s interesting,” I say.

Sonia pauses in the doorway, looking back at me.

“What’s interesting?”

I swirl my brush through the silvery gray, loading the horsehair with pigment. “I also met Cole on my darkest day.”

Sonia’s lips curl up, her smile enigmatic.

“That’s his gift,” she says. “He knows how to choose his moment.”

I start to paint again, thick clouds of gray, just the color of car exhaust.

“By the way,” Sonia says as she departs, “I love the new composition.”

I finished my *Sinners and Saints* series. There were six paintings in all, and each sold for more than the last.

Actually, seven sales occurred, because my painting of the beautiful devil has already resold for twice its original price to Betsy Voss herself.

“That’s a very good sign,” Cole told me. “Betsy has an eye, and she doesn’t make purchases just to inflate value. She really believes it’s an investment.”

The giddy trajectory of my bank account is terrifying. I try not to look at it. The numbers seem impossible.

I hardly need to access it anyway, living at Cole’s house. I don’t need more clothes. And I’d prefer not to spend the money in case it evaporates as quickly as it came.

I do withdraw \$1000 each for Frank and Joanna, who lent me money in my most desperate moments.

Cole drives me back to the old Victorian, waiting at the curb while I climb the uneven steps to the front door.

The house already looks smaller and infinitely shabbier. I feel ashamed, not of its ugliness, but that I’m now perceiving it. Judging it. I loved this house—I felt at home here.

I knock at the door like a stranger. The flutter in my stomach when Joanna answers tells me that I was hoping it would be Frank instead, or even Melody.

Her dark eyes are unsmiling. She doesn’t say hello—just waits for me to speak.

“I brought you some money,” I say awkwardly, trying to put both envelopes in her hand. “You and Frank. For the times you gave me slack ...”

Joanna looks at the envelopes, unmoving.

“You always paid me back,” she says.

I don’t know how to make her take them.

Her eyes flick down to the Tesla pulled up to the curb. Cole sitting behind the wheel.

“He give you that money?” she says.

“No. I sold some paintings.”

“Congratulations.”

There’s no warmth to the word. We might have only met this morning.

I helped her clean out her grandfather’s house after he died, stopping regularly to hug her while she cried. Joanna sublet her studio to me, over all our other roommates who would have jumped at the chance.

Friendship feels so real, until it pops like a soap bubble.

Her coldness doesn’t stem from jealousy or the belief that Cole is giving me an unfair advantage.

This is about Erin.

Joanna doesn’t know what happened, but she knows it’s my fault.

I’m the one who drew the evil eye upon us. I was attacked first. And I didn’t finish the fight—instead, I began to change.

I didn’t want to be the old Mara—the loser, the unlucky one, the victim.

Cole appeared in my life like a dark genie, offering me everything I ever wanted: money, fame, success.

I took his offer before I even knew the terms of the contract. Before I knew the price.

I shed my old life like a molted skin. And I left Erin to die in my place, in my bed.

For that, I feel as guilty as Joanna could wish.

I just don’t know what to do about it.

I have no evidence against Shaw. No way of fighting back against him, of getting justice for Erin.

Cole wants to kill him. That would break my vow to always keep swimming to the surface, never sinking to the bottom, becoming more vicious than the monsters trying to devour me.

My worst fear is to become like my mother. When I catch myself doing anything her way, I want to slap my own face. I won't do it. I refuse.

"If you don't want the money, will you give it to Frank?" I ask.

Now Joanna does consent to take the envelopes. I have no doubt she'll give them both to Frank. Joanna's principles are as iron-hard as her posture. I always respected that about her.

"Thank you again," I say. "If you ever need anything—"

"I won't."

She closes the door, not slamming it in my face, but certainly not waiting for my response.

Making the long descent back to the car, I can tell Cole has followed the conversation as closely as if he could hear it.

"She's still upset about Erin," he guesses.

"So am I," I tell him. "What are we going to do about Shaw? Why has he been so quiet?"

"He usually goes dark after three kills. This time it was four—but the third was a prop, to trap me. He meant the real climax to be you."

Cole's intimate understanding of Shaw's process unnerves me.

Stomach clenching, I ask him, "How do you know that? How did you find out what Shaw does? And how did he find out about you? Were you friends?"

Cole sits tall in the driver's seat, seeming to fill the whole space of the car. Seeming to loom over me.

Asking him questions is terrifying.

“You want me to tell you information that could put me in prison, while you refuse to share any of your secrets with me.”

I flush. “It’s not the same.”

“No. What you ask is more dangerous ... for both of us.”

I take several shallow breaths, no oxygen in the car. My brain races faster than my heart.

I don’t talk about my past with anyone.

And Cole is no therapist—he’ll use whatever I tell him to manipulate me. To gain even greater control.

On the other hand, we’re equally curious about each other. I want to know his history as badly as he wants to know mine.

Tit for tat. Pay to play. That’s how the world works.

Sighing, I say, “I’ll tell you what you want to know. But you have to tell me something first.”

Cole’s fingertips give one restless tap on the woolen thigh of his trousers. He weighs the offer.

“You can ask one question,” he says. “Not about Shaw.”

The devil always counters.

“Fine,” I say, so quickly that he narrows his eyes at me.

The silence stretches between us as I consider what he might answer fully and truthfully. And what I most want to know.

Finally, I ask:

“Who was the first person you killed?”



COLE

I start the car, turning the wheel in the direction of Seacliff.
“Aren’t you going to answer me?” Mara asks from the passenger seat.
“I’m not just going to tell you ... I’m going to show you.”

She falls silent beside me, watching the narrow roadways widen out as we leave her rundown neighborhood, venturing into the broad, tree-lined streets leading up to China Beach.

Tension builds in her body as each minute passes. Mara can’t help her curiosity, even when she’s afraid of what she might learn.

I rest my hand on her thigh to calm her.

It works—the tight muscle relaxes under my palm. She leans against my arm, her head resting on my shoulder.

I remember that Mara told me she doesn’t even have a driver’s license. In some ways she’s remarkably independent, but she has these holes in her education. Things she couldn’t teach herself, because nobody would lend her a car to practice.

Abruptly, I pull the Tesla against the curb.

Mara sits up. “What are you doing?”

“You’re going to drive us home.”

She sputters, holding up her hands. “I don’t even have a learner’s permit.”

“Oh, well in that case, we better not. I don’t want to break any laws.”

Mara snorts, but remains stubbornly seated on the passenger side.

“What if I scratch it? What if I run into a tree? This car probably costs a hundred grand!”

“A hundred and sixty, actually. It’s the performance model.”

Her face blanches, eyes widening.

“No fucking way!”

I reach across her to open the door, unbuckling her seatbelt and shoving her out.

“We’re not negotiating. You need to learn to drive.”

“What if I crash it?”

“Then I’ll buy another one. It’s a hunk of metal, I really don’t give a shit.”

I’m climbing out myself, trading positions with her. We cross paths in front of the headlights, Mara warily eyeing the car as if it’s an animal, crouched and ready to swallow her whole.

“Doesn’t it drive itself?” she asks, slipping behind the wheel.

“You’re gonna do it. Now sit down and buckle up.”

Once we’re both seated, I walk her through the controls, showing her the paddle shifters, the turn signal, the accelerator, and the brake.

Understanding that I’m not going to drop it, there’s no getting out of it, Mara pays attention. She remembers everything I tell her, and asks questions when she doesn’t understand.

“The regenerative brakes will kick in automatically once you lift your foot off the accelerator,” I tell her. “So you won’t even need the brake pedal most of the time.”

“Alright,” Mara sighs. “Let’s get this over with.”

She loves to be praised—she can't get enough of it. She'd probably take a compliment over a body-shaking orgasm.

I return my hand to her thigh, massaging gently.

“Turn left here. We'll go down to Skyline Boulevard, and then up along the beach. It's a prettier drive.”

We pass through Lake Merced Park, water on both sides, the zoo up ahead.

Mara is no longer driving ten under the speed limit, drawing honks and forcing annoyed commuters to speed around us. Now she's cruising along, sitting up straighter, loosening her death-grip on the wheel. Watching the birds soar low over the lake, and the golfers shank their shots into the hazards. Actually smiling.

“This feels good,” she says. “It's almost fun.”

She's doing great until it's time to exit onto Point Lobos Avenue, and a teenager in a Jeep tries to switch lanes right on top of her. Mara jerks the wheel hard to the right, way overcompensating, almost sending us spinning into the median.

I grab the wheel, wrenching it back to center again.

Mara is shaking so hard her teeth are chattering.

“Help me pull over,” she cries. “I don't want to drive anymore.”

“No,” I refuse. “You're doing great and we're almost home.”

She's pale and sweating, frightened to an irrational degree.

She knows I see it.

“My mother's had four DUIs,” she says. “I was in the car for three of them.”

Hot, roiling anger surges up inside of me. I'm really starting to despise this woman I've never met.

“She'd pick me up and at first I wouldn't know—it was hard to tell with her, because she was always some level of buzzed. But she'd start driving

faster and faster, missing turns, swerving across lanes. And I'd realize she was not at a normal level, she was fucking blitzed. By then it would be too late, I'd be trapped in the passenger seat. All I could do was make sure my seatbelt was clicked, clinging to the little plastic handle inside the door, hoping to god she'd take us home and not drive around for hours like she sometimes did when she was pissed at Randall, or when she just fucking felt like it."

Mara grips the wheel tight in both hands, staring at the street in front of her, but probably seeing a different road, one where the painted lines swoop back and forth under the tires of a weaving car piloted by no one.

"Anyway," she says quietly. "Cars scare me."

"Everyone should be more careful when they're in a three-thousand-pound death-machine," I tell her.

Mara glances at me quickly, her lashes going up and down like the flick of a butterfly's wing.

"You're very ... understanding," she says.

"It's not difficult to understand you. Of course you're scared of driving if your mother used to careen around like the fucking teacups ride. People drive their cars with one hand, scrolling on their phones like nothing can happen to them. Meanwhile, they're terrified of some statistically improbable event like a shark attack on their vacation to Hawaii. The real dangers are all around you all the time."

"Maybe even in the car with you right now," Mara says, throwing me another quick look, this time with a hint of mischief in it.

"Are you talking about me or about yourself?" I ask her. "You've gotten me in more trouble than I've caused for you."

"You think I'm a threat to you?" Mara says, her fingertips lightly caressing the wheel as she turns, already knowing the way to my house.

"You threaten everything I thought I knew, and everything I believed."

We've left all the other cars behind us, alone on the long, winding drive up to Seacliff. She's speeding up, taking the curves with confidence. She looks sexy behind the wheel of my car, wearing the suede moto jacket I bought for her. Her skin and hair glows with health. Even her nails look less ragged—she hasn't been biting them as much.

Mara is flourishing under my care. Becoming more beautiful, more powerful by the day.

I'm doing this. I'm changing her.

"You like it," Mara says. "You can't get enough of it."

I seize her face and force her to kiss me, pulling her eyes away while the car flies along the road.

She gasps as I let go of her, gripping the wheel tight once more.

"At first it was against my will," I tell her. "But now I'm all in. I have to have you. Even if it blows up my life."

Mara pulls into my driveway, the towering facade of Seacliff looming over us. The weathered dark stone is cave-like, as if the house is just more of the cliff, jutting up against the sky.

"Do you like this house?" I ask Mara.

She tilts her head to the side, examining it anew.

"It suits you," she says. "On the outside: stark and intimidating. On the inside ... surprisingly beautiful."

"You haven't even seen all of it yet."

"I know," she says, looking at me, not the house.

I take her hand.

"Come this way."

I lead her around the side of the house, on the stone path that winds through thick hedges of wisteria long past their bloom. The private entrance is

sheltered from all sides, so no one but my father could see who was coming and going.

I open his office door.

Mara steps inside first, looking all around her.

I follow her in.

The office has been destroyed. Books torn down from the shelves, their pages ripped out and scattered all around. The desk hacked to pieces with a hatchet. The artwork smashed where it hung on the wall. Even the sofa and chairs slashed open, stuffing hanging out like entrails.

Mara stares, mouth open.

Hesitantly, she approaches the desk, drawing her fingertip across its scarred and broken top, leaving a trail in the dust.

“Did you do this?” she asks.

“Yes. The night my father died.”

“Did you ... were you the one who killed him?”

“No. That’s why I was angry. He was gone, with too many things left unsaid and unanswered.”

“What happened to him?”

“He had a degenerative kidney disease. I knew it was coming, but it happened sooner than I expected. Then I was angry at myself. There’s no closure from the dead.”

Mara gazes at the photographs hung on the wall, the images distorted by the shattered glass in each frame.

Unerringly, she finds the one of my father. He’s standing on a windswept hilltop in New Zealand, wearing his hunting jacket, his rifle over his shoulder. His black hair and beard immaculately groomed despite the rustic setting.

Mara is drawn to the figure next to him. A man with hair and eyes as dark as my father's, but a much more youthful face.

“Is that ...” Mara squints through the spiderweb of glass. “Do you have a brother?”

“That’s my uncle. He was twelve years younger than my father. Almost as close to me in age.”

Mara turns, understanding that this photograph is the reason I brought her in here.

“He looks just like you.”

“That’s not the only thing we had in common.”

She crosses the detritus blanketing the floor, her boots crunching on splinters of wood and glass. Sinking down onto the slashed sofa, she says, “Tell me everything.”

I sit next to her, my weight causing her to slide closer until her thigh rests against mine.

“My uncle Ruben was the only person my father ever loved. My grandparents had him accidentally, late in life. He was wild and unruly, and they didn’t know what to do with him. My father was the only person he would listen to, at least some of the time.”

Mara sits up straight, hands clasped in front of her, eyes fixed on my face, like a child enthralled by a fairy tale.

“My family’s money came from hotels and breweries, but by the time Ruben came along, most of it had been parceled out or frittered away, so the Blackwells were no longer truly rich. Meaning, my grandparents still lived well, but there was only a modest trust fund waiting for their sons. My father used his to start his venture capital firm. He offered Ruben a job, but Ruben didn’t want it. He waited till he turned twenty-one, got his money, then fucked off to LA to spend it. Around that same time, my father married my mother.”

Mara interrupts, “How did they meet?”

“Have you ever read *The Great Gatsby*?”

Mara nods.

“It was like that. She was from a level of wealth that made the Blackwells look poor. My father wanted her from the moment he laid eyes on her. She was very beautiful, but innocent and sheltered. Her parents had full control over her. My father had to impress them first to get access to her. When his company went public, he donated six million to the Bay Area Youth Center, her mother’s foundation. That’s how he got an invitation to one of their dinner parties, so he could start the process of seducing their daughter.”

“Do you have a picture of her?” Mara asks.

“Upstairs. There’s none in here.”

I can’t hide the bitterness in my voice. Mara presses her lips together, understanding.

“My father wanted anything he couldn’t have. I guess that’s the one thing we shared. He had a chip on his shoulder and wanted to prove himself to anyone who’d ever looked down on him. But he was petty and vindictive. He didn’t just want acceptance—he wanted to rub their noses in it. That extended to my mother. He had to have her, but once they were married, he treated her like she had been the enemy all along. Like she was the one keeping him out of the Pacific Union Club.”

“She told you this?” Mara asks, brows drawn together in sympathy.

“I read it in her journal. She was confused how the man who wined and dined and complimented her could turn into a completely different person the moment they were alone in his house.”

I close my eyes, quoting from memory the words she wrote out in her delicate script:

“It’s like he hates me, and I don’t know why. I don’t know what I’ve done. He used to kiss my fingertips and tell me I was the most exquisite thing in the world. Now he snarls if I even touch him ...”

”Why did he change?” Mara asks.

“He never liked anything once he actually had it. It took him years to get this house—he had to bully and threaten the old woman who owned it. Had to fight with the zoning commissioner and the society that was trying to get it named a historic landmark. Once he moved in, he never stopped complaining that it was cold and drafty, and the wiring was ancient.”

“You’re not like that,” Mara says.

“No. To me, something has value if it’s rare.”

“I value things if they make me happy,” Mara says.

“But why do they make you happy?”

Mara considers. “Because they’re beautiful or interesting. Because they make me feel good.”

I put my hand on the nape of her neck, rubbing her gently. Making her purr. “That’s because you’re a pleasure kitten. You like anything that feels good.”

Mara cuddles up against me, comfortable even in this destroyed space.

“That’s true,” she says.

I continue the story.

“He was cold to her. Cruel, even. She wrote in her journal that she wanted to leave, but by that point she knew him well enough to be scared of what he might do. And then she found out she was pregnant.

“At the same time, my uncle Ruben came back to San Francisco. He’d burned through his money and was beginning to see the value of a place in my father’s firm. My father gave him a job immediately.

“My uncle was clever and could work hard when he wanted to. In fact, he was doing so well that my father promoted him again and again, until he was the acting VP, second only to my father.

“That wouldn’t have been a problem, except that my father now had an heir. At one point, Ruben might have believed that he would inherit the company, or receive equal shares in it. I was a complicating factor. Very much in his way. Especially after my mother died.”

I feel Mara stir against my side. I know what she wants to ask me, but she hesitates, knowing instinctively that this is the one wound inside of me, never healing, always raw.

I promised to answer her question, and this is a part of it.

“It’s alright,” I tell her. “You can ask.”

“What happened to your mother?”

Why is it still so hard to say the words out loud?

I hate that it hurts me. I hate that I care.

“She hung herself,” I say.

Mara winces. She takes my hand, squeezing it tight.

I look down at her hand, wondering why that feels so good. Why it comforts me.

Maybe because no one knows better than Mara what it feels like to be young, frightened, and deeply alone.

“I felt like an orphan. I had no warmth or connection from my father. Ruben terrified me. He was already showing his aggression, as much as he could get away with. He tripped me on the stairs. I broke my arm. He said it was an accident, and I was too young for my father to believe anything else. Later, he tried to drown me on the beach below the house. He kept pushing me under the waves, over and over again, laughing like it was a joke. All I could see was his teeth and the wild look in his eyes, and then he’d shove me under again, before I could get any air.

“That time my father saw it. He hauled me out. It was the first time I saw him truly angry at Ruben. Ruben was more careful after that. But I knew he hated me. He was jealous when my father gave me attention. He sabotaged me any chance he got.”

Mara rises from the couch to inspect the photograph once more. She brushes the glass out of the frame, frowning at Ruben’s handsome face, clear and uncovered.

“It was around that time I started to draw. I had always liked tinkering with machinery, working with my hands. My father encouraged that because he could see the use of it. He didn’t like me sketching. He didn’t care for the arts at all. He only donated to them because he knew philanthropy was part of empire-building.”

“What made you start drawing?” Mara asks me.

“At first I was sketching designs of machinery I wanted to build. The designs became more experimental, more aesthetic. Sculptures instead of machines.” I pause, because this makes me curious in turn. “What was the first thing you drew?”

Mara blushes. “The girls at school had coloring books. I didn’t have one, but I could get my hands on paper and pencils. I made my own coloring pages—mostly princesses in dresses, because that’s what they had. I realized I could draw any dress I could think of. Then I drew other things I wanted. Roller skates, unicorns, a bed with a canopy, ice cream sundaes ...”

She trails off as if realizing that, to her, roller skates had seemed as unobtainable as unicorns.

“Anyway,” she says, shaking her head. “Keep going ...”

I lost the thread, distracted by thoughts of Mara as a child. I want to know all her secrets. She keeps them buried deep. I’ll have to be the first one to break out a shovel.

Taking a breath, I continue, “I was having conflict with my father. I wanted to go to art school. He was, of course, opposed, expecting me to take over his company. He already knew by then that he was sick.”

“What about Ruben?” Mara asks.

“Well, that was the contrarian in my father. If I had wanted the business and Ruben didn’t, then he probably would have given it to Ruben. Ruben was acting up, pissing him off. I was playing hard to get—or at least, that’s how he saw it. The more I turned away from him, the more determined he became to mold me in his image. But I had already decided he was a fucking hypocrite.”

“Why?”

“Because he thought he was this ruthless titan of industry. He taught me to avoid emotional entanglements—only family deserved loyalty. But he never gave a damn about my mother, and *she* was the one who should have been his family. He loved Ruben, while Ruben would have cut the heart out of my father’s chest and eaten it raw if it suited him.”

“Ruben didn’t care about anyone,” Mara says.

“That’s right.” I nod. “And that’s what we truly had in common. I looked like Ruben, more than my own father. Sounded like him, even. Most of all, I understood him. I knew he was stone cold inside, because I was too. He didn’t only hate me because he was jealous—he hated me because I saw what he really was.”

“Was he still trying to hurt you?”

“Worse. He convinced my father to make him my guardian. I was sixteen. My father was getting sicker all the time. If he died, the money, the house, the company, all of it would fall under Ruben’s control. I’d be fucked.”

Mara looks down at the framed photograph clutched in her hands, lifted off the wall. She glances between Ruben’s face and mine, equally handsome, equally cruel. She understands the havoc he could wreak, in the two years before my eighteenth birthday.

“What did you do?”

“I organized a hunting trip for the three of us, knowing my father would be too ill to come with us. Ruben knew it, too. I think he anticipated what I planned—or at least, he thought he did.”

Mara returns to the sofa, but she’s stiff with apprehension, unable to sit back against the ruined cushions.

“Then why did he go?” she asks me.

“He thought he’d turn the tables on me. And I let him think it. We went out into the woods of northern Montana, just the two of us. It was the coldest week of January. That forest is thick and wild. I had been there before, and

so had Ruben, but not together. You have to leave long before sunrise to hunt mountain lions, tramping through snow up to your knees.”

Mara rubs her palms against her upper arms as if she can feel the chill.

“I was a teenager, skinny, half-grown. He was twenty-eight, bigger than me, stronger. He thought he was smarter, too. I let him load my gun with blanks, pretending not to notice. I let him walk behind me in the woods. I could hear his breath slowing, his steps pausing. I could feel him lifting his rifle, pointing it at my back ...”

Mara has her fingers pressed against her mouth. I know she desperately wants to bite her nails, but she refrains for my sake.

“I heard the rifle blast and I thought I’d timed it wrong, I was dead. Then I turned around and saw the hole in the ground. He’d walked across the deadfall just as I hoped. The rifle shot went up in the sky, and he plunged down twenty feet into the pit.”

Mara lets out the breath she’s been holding, her sigh caressing my forearm.

“Was he dead?” she says.

“No. It took six more hours for him to actually die. I sat and waited. That was the hardest part. He begged and pleaded. Then he cursed and screamed. Then he pleaded again.”

“Did you want to let him out?”

“If I did, I might as well cut my own throat. It was him or me, long before the pit.”

“What were you waiting for, then?”

“I was making sure no one else came along.”

Mara’s throat jumps as she swallows. Even with everything she knows about me, my callousness shocks her.

“What about your father?” she asks me.

“I told him it was an accident. That I tried to run for help, but I got lost in the woods.”

“Did he believe you?”

“He knew I would never get lost.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘That was the only family you had left. When I die, you’ll be completely alone.’ ”

Mara takes my hand again. Not squeezing it this time, just holding it in her lap, her fingers linked with mine.

“And you were,” she says softly.

“I thought it was better to be alone. Safer. More pleasant, even.”

“But you still did this,” Mara says, looking around at my father’s office, smashed to pieces with a rage that still screams from every corner of the room, all these years later.

“It affected me more than I expected,” I admit.

Mara lifts my hand to her mouth, brushing my knuckles against her lips.

“I can’t blame you,” she says. “Your uncle sounds terrifying.”

I set her hand down gently on her lap, facing her and looking her in the eyes.

“That was the first time I killed,” I say. “But there were more. It’s like losing your virginity ... the first time seems so significant. Each one after is less and less important. Until you barely remember their names.”

Her tongue darts out to moisten her pale lips.

“Who was the second person?” she murmurs.

“I was drunk at a club in Paris. Three men followed me out, planning to mug me. I fought one off. The second ran away. The third ... I slammed his head against the alley wall until his skull cracked.”

Mara’s hand floats up to her mouth. This time she bites down hard on the edge of her nail.

“That was the only time I killed on impulse, without a plan. The others were more strategic.”

“How many?” she whispers.

“Fourteen.”

Mara makes a faint choking sound. Her cheeks have gone pale and grayish, her knuckles white.

“None were women,” I say, as if that will comfort her.

“Why not women?” she asks faintly.

I shrug. “Men deserve it more.”

Mara sits forward, elbows on her knees, hands covering her face. I give her time to process, knowing that she suspected some of this, but could never have guessed the full truth.

After a moment, her shoulders stiffen and her head snaps up. She sits up, regarding me with sudden animation.

“You killed Sonia’s ex-husband,” she blurts out.

I frown at her.

“How do you know that?”

“Sonia told me how he died. I thought it was very ... convenient.”

“It was very *inconvenient* when he was dragging her to court for months on end. It affected her work.”

Mara squints at me. “You could have just fired her.”

“Hiring someone new is even worse.”

“You wanted to help her.”

“I helped myself. It just happened to benefit Sonia as well.”

Mara shakes her head at me, already recovering her amusement. “You have a soft spot for women.”

“The fuck I do. Don’t forget how we met.”

“I remember.”

The office is growing dark. I never switched on the lights, because I shattered the overhead fixture along with everything else in the room. We’ve been sitting in the little light that could filter through the wisteria and the dusty windows. Now it’s all fading away.

“You know, that wasn’t the first time I actually saw you.”

Mara blinks, her lips forming a small circle of confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“I saw you at the Oasis show. Shaw did, too. He saw me watching you. Jack Brisk spilled wine on your dress. I thought you’d leave the party—instead you used more wine to dye the dress. It surprised me that you were so innovative. Surprised me more how beautifully you did it. I was impressed. Shaw couldn’t understand that, of course. He thought I wanted to fuck you.”

Mara stares at me, mouth open.

She says, “Is that why he took me?”

“Yes,” I admit. “I insulted him. I said he was undisciplined, out of control. He wanted to prove I was the same ... under the right temptation.”

Mara blinks slowly, finally understanding.

“*You* chose me.”

“I didn’t know it then, but I already had. I tried to leave you on that mountain ... you survived anyway. From that moment, I was obsessed. I had to know how you did it. I had to understand.”

Mara’s eyes are dark and liquid in failing light.

“And do you? Do you understand now?”

I rest my palm against the edge of her jaw, stroking my thumb across her lips.

“I know you can’t be broken. I’m still testing if you can be tamed ...”

Mara catches my thumb in her teeth, biting down.

“You’re not tame yourself.”

I like how hard she bites, the little savage.

It makes me want to bite her back.

“No, I’m not,” I agree. “And I never will be.”

“Neither will I,” Mara hisses, equally fierce.

She’s not afraid of me. She never has been.

I remember how she confronted me in my own studio, eyes blazing, fists clenched at her side. Demanding to know how I dared leave her to die. Scoffing in the face of my lies.

I seize her by the throat and kiss her, pinning her back against the slashed sofa.

She’s out of her fucking mind, and so am I.

Our madness aligns in all the right ways.



WHEN WE’VE PULLED ON our clothes again, I remind Mara, “A question for a question. I haven’t forgotten.”

Mara sighs. “You kept your word. I’ll keep mine.”

I take her hand, pulling her up from the sofa. Mara doesn’t flinch away from me—she loves when I touch her, even knowing of all the blood on these hands.

Her normal-meter is broken. She’s been around too many horrible people. She doesn’t know how brutal I truly am, how unredeemable.

Lucky for me, I suppose.

“Come up to the kitchen,” I say. “I can’t get you a unicorn, but I can damn sure make you an ice cream sundae.”

Mara follows me up to the main level. Despite me telling her exactly what I was going to do, she’s still delighted when I put down a giant bowl of vanilla ice cream in front of her, covered in chocolate syrup and mounds of whipped cream.

She’s always more surprised by kindness than by cruelty.

Mara takes a massive bite, eyes closed, letting the ice cream melt on her tongue before she swallows.

“I needed that,” she sighs. Then, setting down her spoon, “Alright. I’m ready. What do you want to know?”

I sit next to her at the counter, our knees almost touching.

Leaning forward, I say, “Tell me about Randall.”



MARA

reflecting off the glossy black Steinway, I was hit with the horrible realization that I wasn't sure which key was middle C.

It sounds ridiculous after all the years I've played, but I always orient my hands relative to the chipped golden script on our own piano, which reads Bösendorfer across the fallboard, only missing the second "o."

I stared at the keys, the seconds ticking past.

I could see my mother standing just offstage, already starting to pace in agitation, snapping her fingers at me to start.

"I don't know where to put my hands," I whispered at her.

"Play the song," she hissed at me.

I was already sweating under the blazing lights, my hands shaking as they hovered above the keys.

Desperately, I repeated, "I don't know where to start."

She marched across the stage, furious and embarrassed, grabbing my arm and wrenching me off the bench. She dragged me off, not listening as I tried to explain that I could play it, I had practiced it over and over and knew it all by heart, if she would just show me where to put my hands ...

That was six months ago. It could be six years past and she'd still enjoy punishing me for it.

They're always watching, always waiting for me to make a mistake.

And that is the one thing in which I never disappoint them.

They can always count on me to fuck up.

The girls ahead look back over their shoulders, giggling and whispering behind their hands.

I can't hear what they're saying because I'm wearing headphones. This is the one gift Randall gave me that I truly love. He didn't want to hear music leaking out of my room. Wearing the headphones encloses me in my own bubble of song. It protects and comforts me. My own little pod that follows me wherever I go.

I drag my feet, trying to create more distance between me and the girls.

They're slowing in pace too.

Kinsley Fisher calls back to me, "Mara! Are you coming to Danny's birthday party?"

I can hear this, just barely.

Sighing, I take a bud out of one ear.

Before I can answer, Mandy replies for me: "She can't. She wasn't invited."

She makes the statement calmly, factually, her soft pink lips curved in a satisfied smile.

I thought Danny might invite me. Out of all the boys in our class, he's one of the few who is occasionally nice to me. Once he even gave me a pencil that had little black cats all over it. It was a week after Halloween and he said he didn't want it anymore, but I thought maybe it was because he knew how much I like cats.

"Why didn't Danny invite you?" Kinsley asks with mock concern.

She already knows the answers to these questions. In fact, she probably knows them better than I do. The three Peachy Queens—Kinsley, Angelica, and her royal highness Mandy Patterson—surely were party to the conversations where it was publicly discussed who would be invited and who wouldn't, how our classmates ranked as potential guests, and all the reasons why.

"Danny said his mother wouldn't like it," Mandy explains in the same matter-of-fact tone.

Mandy is not above lying, but this has the uncomfortable ring of truth.

The parents at Windsor Academy are much more involved than at my old school. They seem as highly interested in the social lives of the middle schoolers as the children themselves.

It's only too likely that Mrs. Phillips has seen and judged me on some scale I can't even begin to imagine. All I know is that I came up short.

“Maybe she knows Mara’s a little whore like her mother,” Angelica says sweetly. Angelica has the round, cherubic face you’d expect from her name, but she’s the meanest cunt in that whole group. Worse even than Mandy. “Everyone knows she married your stepdad for his money.”

This is something so fundamentally acknowledged, even between Randall and my mother, that I can’t possibly deny it.

The problem is, Randall doesn’t have that much money anymore. From the shouted arguments I’ve overheard, even with my pillow pressed over my ears, I’ve gathered that Randall’s sons are running his business into the ground and my mother is trying to spend whatever is left before it all runs out.

“I guess those short skirts don’t work on Danny,” Mandy says, smiling enough to show her pearly white teeth.

We all wear the same uniform at Windsor Academy—the same white blouse, plaid skirt, maroon knee socks, and loafers. That’s why accessories like cheerleader bows and smart watches are so important—they’re the only way to show who’s in and who’s out.

I’m out.

I was never even close to in.

The short skirts are a different problem entirely. Randall refused to buy me new uniforms this year, even though I’d shot up two inches. My home room teacher keeps making me come to the front of the class and kneel in front of everyone, to prove that my skirt doesn’t come down to my fingertips. She’s given me detention six times.

Randall punishes me every time I’m late coming home, but he won’t buy me new clothes.

I’m going to be late now if I don’t run the rest of the way home.

I don’t have time to continue this conversation with the Peachy Queens. It wouldn’t matter either way. I’ve tried being nice to them. I’ve tried fighting back. They despise me, and nothing will change that. Even the kids that

used to be nice to me, the ones I would have called friends, have learned better than to say a word to me where these girls can see.

“Tell me what does work on Danny,” I say to Mandy. “If he ever starts to give a shit about you.”

I’m already sprinting away as the calls of, “*Freak!*”, “*Slut!*”, “*Bitch!*”, ring out behind me.

I run until my chest burns and the backpack full of books slams against my ass with every stride.

Still, once I reach the red brick colonial, I stop and stand on the sidewalk, dreading opening the front door and stepping inside.

It’s hard to believe I was excited when I first saw this house.

I’d never lived in a house before. I’d never had my own bedroom, or even a proper bed with a frame.

Back then, I still believed I could win Randall’s approval if I was very, very careful and very, very quiet.

I knew I annoyed him. He wanted my mother, not another kid. His own sons were already grown. I met them at the wedding, where they barely consented to shake my mother’s hand. She laughed and said they were worried about their inheritance.

My mother never looked more beautiful than on her wedding day, her dark hair pulled up in a magnificent shining mass topped by a sparkling tiara, her mermaid gown encrusted with even more gems, to complement the rock on her left hand.

I was so proud of my flower girl dress that I couldn’t stop looking at myself in every window I passed. I had never had a dress like that, as puffy and ethereal as Sarah’s in *The Labyrinth*.

I got too excited though. I vomited, and a little splashed on the skirt of the dress. My mother was so furious that she slapped me across the face. I had to walk down the aisle trying to hold back tears, with my basket of petals and a livid handprint on my cheek.

The day ended sadly for her, too. She drank too much wine at the reception. When it came time to cut the cake, she smashed a handful of it in Randall's face. She laughed wildly, head thrown back, swaying a little on her stilettos. Randall couldn't say or do anything in front of all those people, but even I could tell he was shaking with rage.

That was the first night we spent in the red brick house. From down the hall in my new bed, I could hear the familiar sounds of my mother fucking. I was used to her theatrical shrieks of pleasure and even the banging of the bed against the wall. That night there were other sounds: slaps and screams.

In the morning, the left side of her face was more swollen than mine. She sat at the kitchen table, drinking her coffee and glaring at Randall, who ordered her to make him some eggs, then calmly sat down to read the paper.

She got up and made the eggs, scrambling them in a frypan. Then she walked over to Randall and dumped them in his lap. He hit her again, so hard that she slammed into the wall and fell behind the table, sobbing pitifully.

Randall might have been older, but he was tall and heavily built, with palms harder than iron.

I threw myself on top of her, blubbering and begging Randall to stop.

That was one of the last times I had pity for my mother. She wore mine out not long after Randall's.

Seeing how she treated him with open contempt, deliberately angering him, and then how she would crawl back to him whenever she needed something, sitting on his lap and talking in a baby voice, feeding him sips of her drink, destroyed my last shreds of respect for her.

Randall hates her, but he's also obsessed with her. He says he'll kill her before he ever lets her leave him.

I don't know whether it's worse when they're fighting or when they gang up on me.

They're both home all the time. Randall retired right before he met my mother, and she's never held down a job unless she absolutely had to. Her

only piano students were those who would put up with our succession of shitty apartments and her constant canceling of lessons.

Her real work has always been leeching off men. Randall has lasted the longest, because he was the first one stupid enough to marry her.

Even my father didn't marry her. Whoever he might be.

When I can't stay outside any longer, I slip my key in the lock and open the door as silently as possible.

I hate the smell of Randall's house. It stinks of dirt from his back garden—in which he is always laboring without ever managing to make it actually pretty—and of the brand of cheap boxed wine my mother likes to drink, and Randall's pine-scented aftershave.

The only part of the house I like at all is my own room. My goal is to get there as quickly as possible without being seen.

I creep down the hall, forced to cross the open doorway leading into the living room. I can see the back of Randall's head as he sits in his favorite recliner. I hate the blocky shape of his skull, the buzzed gray hair, and the fold of fat between his hairline and his plaid button-down.

I'm tip-toeing across that opening when Randall says, "Get in here."

My stomach sinks down to my loafers.

I creep into the living room, my hands already clammy.

He expects me to come stand in front of his recliner. I take a quick glance at his face, trying to gauge how bad his mood is today.

Three empty beer bottles sit on the side table next to him. Three isn't too bad.

However, the ruddy flush on his face makes me think those aren't the first three of the day.

"You're late," he grumbles.

Randall's voice sounds even older than he is. It sounds like a bag of rocks tumbling around in the back of a truck.

“I didn’t have detention,” I say swiftly. “I was walking home with some girls. Mandy Patterson and some others.”

I’m hoping this will appease him. Mandy’s father is a real estate agent so successful that his handsome grin is plastered across every billboard and bus bench in our town.

“I don’t give a fuck if you’re walking home with the pope. You get here on time,” Randall snarls.

There’s no actual reason I need to be home by 3:50. Other than Tuesdays and Thursdays at Mrs. Belchick’s house, I have no appointments. But Randall decreed it, and that means I have to obey or suffer the consequences.

Of course I’m not going to bring up that rational and reasonable point. That would be suicide.

Instead, I swallow my sense of injustice, humbly saying, “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

It *will* happen again, because something always happens to make me late. The universe wants Randall angry at me just as badly as Randall wants it himself.

I’m hoping this is the end of it. I can go up and hide in my room until it’s time to set the table for dinner.

Instead, Randall says, “Change your clothes and come down here to do your homework.”

Shit.

I don’t bother asking him if I can do it in my room. I simply set my book bag down by the edge of the fireplace, before trudging upstairs to change out of my uniform.

Changing clothes is my mother’s requirement. She says it’s so I don’t wear out my uniforms so fast, but I suspect it’s really because she’s noticed how much Randall prefers the plaid skirts. In fact, I’m starting to suspect that’s the whole reason he insisted I switch schools.

In response, my mother has been forcing me to wear more and more modest clothing. First, it was no tank tops, then no shorts. Last week she screamed at me over a scoop-neck t-shirt. I'll be wearing turtlenecks in July by the time she's satisfied.

I loathe the way everyone fixates on my clothing—the teachers at school, my classmates, Randall, and my mother. The taller I grow and the more my tits come in, the worse it gets.

I don't get it. It's not like I have some massive rack like Ella Fitz, who started growing them even before we left elementary school. Still, every sign of puberty seems to inflame my mother. She was furious when I got my period last year, and refused to buy me tampons, even though we have swim class as part of PE, and even though every other girl uses them. Mandy Patterson was delighted to tell the whole class the moment she spotted a pad in my bag.

I pull on my baggiest hoodie and jeans, so my mother won't pitch a fit when she gets back from wherever she's gone.

When I return to the living room, Randall has turned up the volume on the television. Either he turned it down so he could catch me sneaking in the door, or he's blaring it now to irritate me.

I take my book bag to the dining room table, which is in his sight range. I hate how he watches me.

I angle my chair away from him, spreading out my textbooks and notes. Windsor Academy makes us do a lot more homework than I'm used to. The other kids have been there since Kindergarten. I've been struggling so bad that my mother hauled me to the doctor for some stupid medication that's supposed to help me focus.

It doesn't help. Actually, it makes me jittery and my hands shake. Worse, it amplifies the problems I already had with lights being too bright and noises being too loud. Even normal sounds from the other students—snapping gum or a pencil tapping against a desk—sound like popcorn exploding inside my ears. It makes me jolt and twitch. Marcus Green calls me "Spaz," and some of the other kids are picking it up too.

Randall's blaring baseball game is driving me nuts. Every crack of the ball, every abrupt roar of the crowd, sets my teeth on edge. Even though I'm not supposed to wear headphones around him, I sneak one of the buds out of my pocket and slip it into my right ear, under my hair.

That helps a little.

I labor away on my chemistry assignment. We're supposed to draw a diagram of photosynthesis, something I'm actually enjoying. I spend much longer than necessary sketching out the details of the plant cell, filling in the sun, the leaves, and the chloroplast with colored pencils.

Randall hauls himself out of the recliner to get another beer from the fridge. He comes back with two.

"Where's Mom?" I ask him nervously.

"With Leslie," he grunts, sinking back down in the chair.

That's not good. Randall detests Leslie. Every time my mother goes over to Leslie's house, she comes home tipsy, making raunchy jokes. Last time she ran her car into the corner of our garage.

Leslie is my mother's oldest friend. They used to work together at *The French Maid*. My mother told Randall she was a cocktail waitress, but from the pictures in Leslie's old Facebook albums, I'm pretty sure they were both strippers. This was before I was born.

The longer my mother stays at Leslie's house, the angrier Randall will become. While I'm trapped here with him.

Once I switch over to math homework, baseball gets even harder to ignore. Knowing it's a risk, I slip in my other earbud, turning my music up loud to drown out the game.

I'm just starting to grasp the properties of parallelism when my earbuds are wrenched out of my ears.

I leap out of my chair, almost tripping over my feet trying to get away from Randall. He's holding my headphones by their cord, his eyes so bloodshot

and his face so congested that I realize in an instant that he's quietly been growing drunk while I was working over here, deaf and oblivious.

"I'm trying to talk to you," he snarls.

"I'm sorry," I gasp, holding up my hands in front of me, helplessly, desperately.

Randall's fists ball at his sides. I have no idea how inebriated he is, or how angry. He doesn't drink as much as my mother, but when he does, it can get just as ugly.

Luckily, he's not yet swaying on his feet.

"You know the rules," he snarls.

He takes my iPod and locks it in the living room cabinet.

I want to cry.

Who knows how long he'll keep it in there. I'll have no music, none at all, until he deigns to give it back to me.

I don't bother to beg—I already know that doesn't work.

And now Randall's out of his chair. Now he's focused on me.

"Your mother's obviously not coming home for dinner," he grunts. "You're going to have to make it."

I don't know how to cook. No one cooks with regularity in this house. Sometimes my mother does it, grudgingly. More often Randall orders in, or we scrounge leftovers out of the fridge.

After rummaging frantically into the cabinets and the fridge, I decide on spaghetti.

Before I've even filled the pot with water, Randall is already barking criticism at me from the kitchen doorway.

"That's not enough water."

"Why isn't it boiling yet?"

“No salt? Perfect—assuming you want your spaghetti bland as plaster.”

“Don’t break the noodles, are you fucking stupid?”

He doesn’t tell me what I *should* be doing. How am I supposed to make the noodles fit into the pot when they’re too long and apparently can’t be broken? Desperately, I poke them with a spoon, trying to get them to sink beneath the bubbling water.

The noodles bend and I’m able to close the lid of the pot. Moments later, it boils over, dousing the stove top in foaming pasta water.

“You fucking idiot!” Randall roars.

He yanks the lid off the pot, turning the heat down.

I want to scream at him to do it himself if he’s such a culinary genius. Because I want to keep my head on my shoulders, I bite my lip until it’s bleeding, hiding my face in the fridge as I search for the shaker of Parmesan cheese.

Randall has lapsed into sullen silence, furiously wrenching the lid off the jar of sauce and dumping it into the pot so hard that it splashes out on the kitchen tiles.

“Clean that up,” he orders.

I have to get down on my hands and knees to mop up the sauce with a damp paper towel. I can feel him watching me crawl around, wiping up every last spatter.

I have a horrible feeling that he’s angry enough to tip that pot of boiling noodles onto my back. As quickly as I can, I finish cleaning and throw away the paper towels.

I set the table for three, hoping, praying, that my mother is on her way home.

My throat is too tight to eat. Randall takes one bite and then spits the noodles out and shoves away his plate.

“Tastes like fucking play-dough,” he snarls. “How much salt did you put in there?”

“I don’t know,” I sob miserably.

He glowers at me, his pale, piggy eyes almost disappearing beneath the heavy shelf of his brow.

“You’re as useless as your mother. The only thing on this earth she’s good at is sucking cock. Did you know that, Mara? Did you know your mother is a world-class cocksucker?”

There’s no answer to this that won’t enrage him. All I can do is stare at my plate, guts churning, hands shaking in my lap.

“How do you think a woman gets good at that?” he demands.

When I remain silent, he slams his fists against the table top, making me jump.

“ANSWER ME!”

“I don’t know,” I say quietly.

“Practice, Mara. So much practice. I should have known the first time she put my cock in her mouth, looking up at me, smiling like a professional. I should have known then she was nothing but a whore.”

The thought of Randall’s wrinkly old cock brings me to the edge of vomiting. I have to swallow down the bile, my eyes fixed firmly on my plate. This is the only form of resistance now—staying quiet. Ignoring him. Not giving him anything that will justify what he actually wants to do.

He knows this, too.

Now we’re at the part of the night where he will do whatever it takes to break me.

He stands up, stalking over to me, looming over me. Invading my space, breathing on the top of my head.

“Is that your plan?” he grunts, each breath coming out in a hot puff that stirs my hair, that makes my stomach churn. He’s heavy and his breathing is

even heavier. I can hear it all over the house, anywhere he goes. “I’ve seen your grades. You’re not gonna be a doctor, or a lawyer. I doubt you could bag groceries right.”

He’s leaning over me now. Trying to force me to move or make a sound. Trying to get me to crack.

“No, there’s only one career path for you.” His chuckle is cruel, sending spit flicking out onto my cheek as he bends even closer. “You’ll be sucking cock, morning, afternoon, and evening. Just like your mother.”

He puts his finger in his mouth and wets it with a loud pop. Then he jams it in my ear.

That’s what makes me snap.

I leap out of my chair, already screaming at him, “DON’T YOU FUCKING TOUCH ME! I HATE YOU! I HATE YOUUUUUUUUU!”

My scream is cut off by Randall’s hand hitting my ear in a slap that sends me flying into the wall just like he did to my mother at their wedding breakfast.

He hits me so hard that I black out. When I sit up, shaking my head, all I can hear is a muffled thunder with a high whine on top of it.

I must have been out a minute because Randall is staring at me with vague alarm, like he was just wondering how deep he’ll have to bury my body in his garden.

“Stop hamming it up,” he grunts, as I grip the edge of the table and attempt to stand.

My head throbs. There’s a sharp pain on the left side of my neck. Wetness, too. I touch my ear. My fingertips come away bright with blood.

Oh my god. If he made me deaf, I’ll fucking kill him.

No, I’ll kill myself. I can’t live without music. It’s all I have.

At that moment, I hear my mother’s key scratching in the lock. Scratching and scabbling so long that Randall and I both know how drunk she’ll be

before she stumbles through the door.

My mother is no longer as beautiful as she once was. She used to brag how well she held her liquor, how she could party all night long and get up as early as she liked in the morning, with hardly a headache.

Time is catching up with her at last. A tube of fat runs around her once-slim waist, stretching the tight dress. Dark circles shadow her eyes. Her hair is no longer long and shining, but frazzled from constant changes in color and length.

She stares at us blearily, the strap of her dress slipping down one shoulder.

“You ate without me?” she says, her voice mushy and loose.

Either she doesn’t notice the blood on my hand, or she’s choosing to ignore it.

Randall’s piggy eyes flit between me and her, as if trying to decide whether to transfer his rage to a new subject.

My mother must intuit the same thing—she sidles up to him, laying a hand on his bicep, looking up into his face and batting her long false eyelashes.

“Should we go upstairs?” she slurs.

I see the struggle on Randall’s face—the offer of sex battling with his undrained rage.

“In a minute,” he says. Then, turning to me, “Get my belt.”

This is so outrageous that I gape at him. He already took my iPod and slammed me into the wall. There’s no way I deserve a whipping on top of that.

Through stiff lips, I say, “You can’t do that anymore. The gym teacher said.”

“*The gym teacher said,*” Randall mimics me in a baby voice. He points one sausage-like finger in my face. “FUCK your teachers.”

My mother makes a small sound from behind closed lips.

This wouldn't be her first visit from CPS. Or even her fifth. They've been called to our various apartments many times over the years. The end result was a couple of weeks where I had lunch packed for school and somewhat cleaner clothes. Only once was she subjected to drug tests—that made her angrier than anything. We moved again, and our harried social worker never reappeared.

“We don't want trouble,” she murmurs to Randall.

It's so rare for my mother to stand up for me that for a moment I feel a slight flush of warmth, the last vestige of an affection that once dominated my entire life. She was everything to me, my only family and my only friend.

Then she says, “Punish her some other way.”

And I remember that I fucking loath her.

They both stand still, thinking.

Randall says to her, “Go get the teddy bear.”

The effect on me is electric. I have no resistance anymore, no dignity.

“NOOOOO!” I howl. “No, I'll get the belt! Don't touch him! DON'T YOU FUCKING TOUCH HIM! Please! PLEEEEEEEASE!”

Buttons is the only thing I have from my father. I've kept him with me through every move, everywhere we went. I've never lost him and always kept him safe.

He's missing one glass eye, and I've sewn his rips with mismatched thread. But his warm, nubby texture is still the most comforting thing in the world when I press him against my cheek.

Randall pins my arms behind me while I thrash and scream. I can already hear my mother's stumbling steps ascending the staircase. I hear her bumping around in my room, and the thud of her knocking something over.

I'm praying she won't be able to find him. If I can get up the stairs before Randall, I'll hide him somewhere. And I won't tell them where, no matter what they do to me.

She descends a few minutes later. When I see the old bear in her arms I let out a scream that tears my throat.

Randall holds me fast, saying to my mother, “Put him in the grate.”

She opens the fire grate as I scream and beg. I don’t know what I’m saying, only that I’ve never been more pathetic, more sniveling, more weak. And I’ve never hated them as I do in this moment. It’s a white-hot rage, burning me alive from the inside.

My mother douses my teddy bear in lighter fluid. She seems strangely sober as she does it, her drunkenness evaporated, her eyes fixed intently on the bear.

I’m still hoping in some desperate part of my brain that this is all theater. The punishment is scaring me, making me cry.

But I know better than that.

She lights the match, the flame flaring into life with the bitter smell of sulfur. Only then does she hesitate, just for a moment. Probably because of how loud I’m screaming, like I’m being tortured, like I’ll die.

“NOOOOOO! PLEASE PLEASE NOOOOOO!”

“Do it,” Randall says.

She drops the match.

Buttons ignites.

I watch him burn and I burn too, howling with pain that feels physical, like I’ve truly been lit on fire right next to him.

His fur singes away, his cotton ignites. His glass eye cracks.

I’ve never known agony like this. I never knew how much I loved him till this moment.

Randall holds my arms, knowing that I would still lunge away from him and snatch Buttons out of the fire with my bare hands.

He holds me in place until the bear is nothing but a smoking, melted ruin.

Then Randall says, “You’re too old for stuffed animals.”

All the love I had inside of me is turned to hatred. I’d light this whole house on fire if I could. I’d burn them in their beds like they burned my bear.

I turn to my mother.

She’s pretending to be drunk again, eyes half-closed as she sways in place. Refusing to look at me.

Randall lets me return to my room.

I collapse on the bed. Crying so hard that I’m sick, that I’d puke all over this bed if I’d eaten any of that spaghetti.

After twenty minutes or so, I hear them having sex. My mother sounds like an excited chihuahua and Randall grunts like a buffalo.

I hold my pillow over my head, still sobbing.

Hours later, long after dark, my mother brings me a glass of milk.

I’m shaking so hard the bed frame is rattling.

“I need more medicine,” I croak.

I hate it, but when I don’t have it, the withdrawals are even worse.

“It ran out,” she says.

She keeps the bottle in her room. We both know there were thirty pills in it when we refilled the prescription earlier this week. She might have sold them to Leslie, but more likely she’s been taking them herself. She thinks they help her lose weight. Randall has been pinching her belly, telling her she’s getting fat.

“Call the doctor,” I beg. “I can’t wait two weeks.”

“I already called,” she says, the edge of frustration in her voice giving her away. “They won’t refill it early.”

I turn my face toward the wall, still shivering and shaking.

I can feel her sitting behind me, sullen and quiet. My mother knows what Buttons meant to me. But at the same time, she can't ever be at fault. So it's impossible that burning him was wrong.

"Randall was pretty mad," she says at last.

That's her version of an apology. Shifting the blame squarely on someone else's shoulders.

"You could have hid him," I hiss.

That's not allowed. No one can be a victim except her.

"You know what he would have done to me!" she snaps. "But you don't care about that, do you? You don't care about anyone but yourself. You're selfish. So fucking selfish. You're the one that made him angry! You think I like coming home to that?"

She goes on in that vein for some time. I stay facing the wall, ignoring her.

She hates being ignored. When she can't get a response out of me any other way, she falls silent to regroup.

Then, her voice low and soft and entirely sober, she says, "It was just an old bear."

Now I do turn and face her. She's wearing a *Sailor Moon* nightshirt that belongs to me. Her bare legs are tucked under her, below the short hem. In the dim light, she looks young again. Like my earliest memories of her: more beautiful than the prettiest princess in a fairy tale.

Her beauty has no effect on me anymore.

"That was all I had from my father," I accuse her.

Her snort jolts me.

"That bear wasn't from your father."

I stare at her, too numb to understand.

She nods slowly, the edge of her mouth quirking up. "It's true. I told you that so you'd shut up about him. He didn't leave you any bear—why would

he? He didn't give a fuck about you.”

I turn back to the wall, waiting for her to leave.

Late in the night, when I know they're both sleeping, I creep out of bed and rescue the ruins of Buttons from the fireplace. I want to bury him, but not in Randall's garden. Instead, I walk the six blocks to Percy Park and dig a hole under the rose bushes with my hands.

Then I trudge back home, feeling a level of misery so heavy that I might be standing on the bottom of the ocean with nine thousand pounds of cold, black water on every inch of my skin.

I don't know what hurts me more—the destruction of my bear, or the loss of the one tiny connection I had to my other parent.

I used to imagine my dad might be thinking about me. Looking for me, even. I hoped he'd take me to a lovely house in some other state. Maybe he'd let me have a kitten. I'd go to school where nobody knew me, where no one knew my mom.

My mother won't tell me anything about him. She relishes the secret that only she knows, that I can never discover unless she tells me.

Enough time has passed that I no longer think he'll come find me.

Still, the bear meant something. He meant my father had loved me once, if only for a moment.

I don't even have that anymore.

When I lay down in bed without Buttons, I'm lonelier than I've ever been.

I think to myself, there are 1794 days until my eighteenth birthday.

That's when I can leave. When I can run far, far away from here.

In school, we learned that fish brought up from the deep pressure of the ocean will explode when they come up into lighter water. They can only stand what they're used to.

I'm leaving either way. Whether I swim or burst.

Assuming I can survive 1794 more days.



COLE

The next morning, I wake much earlier than usual, long before the sun is up.

Mara sleeps heavily beside me, exhausted from relating just one of the countless ugly stories from her childhood. I'm sure she could tell me one like that every day for a year and never run out.

I'm filled with an anger that sickens me, that makes my muscles shake.

I've never been furious for someone else before. Never felt this need to right the scales. To wreak vengeance on their behalf.

The fact that Mara's mother and stepfather have never been punished for their rampant child abuse is an injustice that rankles like a spike jammed in my side.

The only time I've killed for someone else was when I spiked Michael Bridger's drink, drove him home, and left his car running in the garage. Even then, I was telling Mara the truth: it was mostly for myself. I was tired of Sonia showing up to work puffy-eyed and exhausted, distracted by streams of calls and text messages from her fuckwit ex and his rapacious lawyer.

Maybe an infinitesimal portion of pity influenced my decision. If so, it was unconscious.

I'm a selfish person, I always have been. I've always been alone. No one was going to look out for my interests but me.

Even now, the things I do for Mara are really for me. I like the way she looks dressed up in gorgeous clothes. I like watching her eat ice cream. I like the way she melts under my touch. I like that I have the power to further her career. It feels just and right when she gets the attention she deserves because she's fucking talented and her art is far more interesting than the shit turned out by commercial-minded egoists like Shaw.

Everything I do for her binds her closer to me. I want her dependent on me, so she can never leave. So she never even wants to.

Mara is distracted by everything beautiful, everything interesting.

I have to be *more* interesting, *more* useful to keep her attention.

When I have her focus, her energy surges into me. She fills me with life.

I can't lose her. I can't go back to numbness and boredom.

Which puts me in a dilemma.

I want her parents punished.

But Mara is vehemently opposed to revenge. She doesn't even want to kill Shaw, which has locked us in a bizarre three-way stalemate.

I hate how she binds my hands. And yet, I know Mara's stubbornness. Her boundaries are not where they should be, but they do exist. If I cross a hard line with her, I risk severing the fragile ties between us. She'll bolt and I may never capture her again.

I slip out from under the covers, careful not to jolt her. Mara lets out a sleepy sigh. I tuck the blankets around her so she stays warm and cocooned.

Her laptop sits on the dining room table. It's a piece of shit Lenovo—yet another thing I should replace for her. I hate when Mara touches anything shitty or cheap.

I open the lid, letting out an irritated *tsking* sound when I see that she has no password protection. It only takes me a moment to open her email.

She told me that she has her mother blocked on every social media platform, and she hasn't shared her phone number in years. But Tori Eldritch still emails her, the messages piling up in a folder Mara never reads.

I knew the messages were here. The volume still surprises me.

There are hundreds of emails. Thousands, even. The blue dots show that Mara hasn't opened a single one.

I start to read through them.

Thousands of messages, but each basically the same: threats, insults, and above all, guilt trips.

How could you? I'm your mother. What kind of daughter abandons her family? After everything I did for you. You're ungrateful. You're selfish. You're so dramatic. You think you had it hard? It's your own fault. Who do you think you are? You think you're an artist? Don't make me laugh. Everything you do is for attention. You have no talent, no brains. You're lazy. You're the reason I'm divorced. You're the reason your father left. You were a mistake. Everything bad that ever happened in my life is because of you. I should have aborted you. I was driving to the clinic to do it, do you know that? God I wish I could go back to that day. I'd be doing the world a favor. I'm so ashamed of you. You should be ashamed of yourself. The way you dress, the way you behave. You're a slut, a whore. No wonder men use you and throw you away. No one will ever love you. No one will ever want you. You're immature. Worthless. You don't deserve happiness, and you'll never get it. You're disgusting. You repulse me. This is why you've never had friends. This is why everyone hates you. You think you're pretty? With that face and that body? You're a scarecrow. A fucking mutant. You'll never be beautiful like me. You take after your father and he was hideous. You're disgusting just like him. I'll never understand how you came out of me. I carried you for nine months. You destroyed my figure, my tits have never been the same. You were a massive baby, they had to tear you out of me. You almost killed me. You owe me. You fucking owe me.

On and on, page after page. Sometimes rambling and misspelled, (particularly the emails sent late at night), sometimes long, eloquent paragraphs recounting mistakes Mara made, times she embarrassed herself. The piano recital is mentioned several times, how she humiliated her mother in front of everyone, how she did it on purpose.

This woman's pettiness could fuel a dictatorship. She's Lenin and Stalin and Mussolini all rolled into one. Nothing is her fault. Mara is the architect of all evil in the world.

Her hatred for her own daughter baffles me.

I assume some of it is jealousy. Like Snow White and the Wicked Queen, Mara grew in beauty and vitality while Tori was fading by the day.

And some of it is pure rage that Mara refused to be crushed, refused to be destroyed. Mara was the insect Tori stomped on over and over and over again, only to turn into a butterfly and fly far away.

I'm so distracted by the emails that I fail to see the motion alert on my phone. Mara rises and dresses, padding down the stairs while I'm still deeply absorbed in reading.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

I look up from the laptop. I must have an awful expression on my face, because Mara takes a step back, eyes widening.

It's hard for me to speak.

"I was reading your mother's emails."

"Oh," Mara says.

She isn't angry.

We each have our own brand of relentless curiosity. She knows me too well to expect privacy or reasonable behavior.

"They're all the same," Mara says. "She can't stop insulting me even when she's trying to get me to come visit."

"She wants you to visit?" I scoff.

“When she found out where I lived, she showed up at my apartment. I wouldn’t let her in and she broke in the next day when I was at work. Went through all my things. Read my journal.”

“You have a journal?”

I’m just as nosy as her mother. Worse, probably.

Mara snorts. “Not anymore. And I moved the next week. She can’t stand not knowing where I am. Not having control over me. Not having the power to fuck up my life. She used to show up at my job, trying to get me fired ...” she trails off, laughing softly to herself. “Actually, you two have a lot in common. You might really get along.”

“Oh, fuck off. First of all, I’m way better at finding people than she is. She *wishes* she had my skills. And second, I don’t fuck up your life, I fix it.”

“I know,” Mara says, her expression serious. “I’m grateful to you Cole, do you know that?”

“You better be. I’m taking you to Betsy’s party tonight.”

“Are you really?” she squeaks. Then, her excitement fading, “What about Shaw?”

“He’ll probably be there.”

“What does that mean? What will we do?”

“Nothing in the middle of a gallery. And neither will he. It’s safe.”

“I don’t want to see him, though.” Mara shudders.

“We can’t avoid him in this city. Besides, I want him to see that you’re living with me, if he doesn’t already know. I want him to see you under my protection. If we talk to him, I’ll make him believe there’s a truce. That I’ll leave him alone as long as he stays away from you.”

“Will you?” Mara asks, her fog-gray eyes fixed on my face.

“Never.”

Shaw is a threat. There's no fucking way I'll ever relax enough for him to put a knife in my back, or Mara's.

It's then that I realize Mara is wearing her old clothes—jeans and her favorite battered boots.

“Where do you think you're going?” I demand.

“Sweet Maple,” Mara says.

“The fuck you are.”

“I'm working this morning, and you're not stopping me,” she says, jaw set. “You can come along if you like, but I'm doing the full brunch shift.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You don't need a side job anymore.”

“I'm not doing it for the money. I owe it to Arthur.”

“He can find another waitress,” I say dismissively.

Mara crosses her arms over her chest, refusing to back down.

“My last year of high school, I applied to the Academy of Art. I spent that entire year working on my portfolio. The week I was supposed to submit it, my mother threw it in the tub and soaked it in bleach. Then she cleaned out the \$1200 I had hidden inside a book in my room. She thought I couldn't leave if I had no money and no scholarship. I left anyway, the day I turned eighteen. I bounced around a few couches, halfway to homeless. When I showed up at Sweet Maple, I had a backpack of clothes and six dollars to my name. No resume. Hadn't taken a shower in a week. My sneakers had holes big enough for my toes to poke through. Arthur hired me anyway. He gave me two hundred dollars up front so I could buy some better shoes. I bought these boots.” Mara sticks out one foot, showing the boots that look like they've been through a war. “He didn't know me. Didn't know if I'd take the money and never show up for a shift. He helped me anyway. So I'm not ever quitting that job, until Arthur doesn't need me anymore.”

“Alright, alright,” I say, holding up my hands. “I'll drive you over.”

Flushed with victory, Mara grins at me.

“Can I drive?”



MARA

It feels good to be back at Sweet Maple. This place has been my anchor through some of the most chaotic times in my life.

So has Arthur. He might be the only man who's ever done something kind for me without trying to put his hand on my ass afterward.

"There she is," Arthur says, chucking my apron directly into my face. "You know you're in the paper this morning?"

"I am?"

He tosses that at me too, already helpfully folded back at the right page.

It's an article in the *Chronicle*, in the arts section. Just two columns on the bottom of a page, but it includes a large color photograph of *The Mercy of Men*, and a smaller picture of me, lifted off my Instagram.

This is Cole's doing, I'm sure.

He's constantly working behind the scenes, pushing me into the spotlight. He seems to get more pleasure out of grabbing attention for me than for himself.

I try to catch his eye, where he's seated himself at the furthest corner table, but true to his word, he's not distracting me and is only quietly taking out his laptop like any normal business-bruncher. Assuming that person just so happened to look like an off-duty supermodel in a cashmere button-down.

Arthur raises one thick, grizzled eyebrow at me.

“Isn’t that your other boss over there?”

“Yes.”

“I could be wrong but ... didn’t you drive into work together? Quite early in the morning?”

I can feel my face flaming while I try to maintain a dignified expression.

“Yes, that’s right. I’ve been staying with him.”

“What!?” Arthur cries with mock surprise. “How did that happen? When you weren’t even trying to date him ...”

I take back everything nice I said before. Arthur is the fucking worst.

I scowl at him.

“We’re not dating. It’s ... complicated.”

“It always is,” Arthur nods wisely.

I throw myself into the business of waiting tables so I can avoid further interrogation.

Arthur is not going to be repressed that easily. He’s in a shockingly chipper mood, whipped into something approximating actual happiness at the prospect of teasing me all shift long.

This is catnip to Cole.

He immediately shoves his laptop to the side so he can gang up with Arthur against me.

I’m actually quite fucking busy as Sweet Maple hasn’t stopped being delicious. The sidewalk tables are crowded with people clamoring for bacon.

Meanwhile, Arthur has completely abandoned his duties and is sitting down with Cole, laughing and chatting like old friends. One thousand percent for

sure discussing every intimate detail of my life that I'm heartily regretting sharing with either of them.

As I carry a backbreaking load of mimosas past them, I hear Cole saying, "I'm setting up a show for Mara in December. You should come, I'll put your name on the list ..."

The thought of Arthur coming to see my new series is too much to bear.

The more intimate and personal my work, the more it frightens me for other people to see it. Especially people who know me. Paradoxical as it seems, I'd rather strangers view it, because they won't know how deeply self-referential my work has become. They won't recognize how I've opened myself up, guts and all, laying myself bare across the canvas.

It feels good to work for money again, in a direct exchange, where a tray of food carried out equals a five-dollar tip. I'm puffing and sweating, but in a nice way. The way of good, honest labor.

Cole has never had to work for money at a menial job. That's why money is only an abstract concept to him. He knows its power, of course, and wields it like a weapon. But he has no attachment to it. It comes easily to him, and he can always get more.

I don't know if his way is better than mine.

In so many things, there is no better or worse. Just differences.

Cole will never feel the wild thrill of opening up a billfold and seeing a twenty-dollar tip on a fifty-dollar bill.

One thing I know for sure about myself: wherever I go in life, however rich I become, I'm always going to tip big. I know what it means to the server. How it can change their whole day, or even their week. How it gives hope far beyond any dollar amount.

Another useful thing about waitressing: you're too busy to worry about anything else for long. I can't stress over what Cole might be telling Arthur, or vice versa, when I have ten tables shouting requests.

The six-hour shift flies by in a moment.

Soon the tables are clearing out once more, and Cole has eaten the meal I ordered for him, and Arthur has drunk way too many cups of coffee. He interrupts me as I start my closing duties.

“You don’t need to bother with that.”

I keep rolling clean cutlery into napkins, saying, “What the fuck are you talking about? You used to chew a strip off me if I didn’t roll up every last fork in this place.”

Arthur taps a heavy finger on the newspaper article, still resting on the table next to me.

“I’m sure you’ve got better things to do with your time.”

My stomach squirms. I don’t want to hear whatever he’s trying to say. I keep rolling cutlery, stubbornly refusing to look at him or the newspaper article.

Arthur rests his hand on my shoulder instead.

I don’t know if he’s ever touched me before. His hand is heavy, calloused, and warm. It lays on my shoulder like a blessing.

“I’m proud of you, Mara,” he says.

I look up into his wrinkled face, at his faded brown eyes behind their thick, smudged lenses.

I want to say something back to him, but my throat is too tight.

Arthur murmurs, “You’re really doing it, Mara. And look, whether you want to date this guy or not, take his help. Take as much as you can get. Don’t be proud—be successful. You deserve it.”

I put my hand over his on my shoulder, holding it in place so he can’t let go.

My eyes burn, his wrinkled face swimming before my view.

“Why do I feel like you’re firing me?”

“You’ll always have a home here,” he says. “But I don’t want to hold you back. Not even for a Saturday morning. You don’t need this place

anymore.”

I’ve worked at Sweet Maple for six years. Other jobs I quit or lost, but this one was always here. Arthur was always here.

“Come back to eat breakfast with everyone else who’s rich and famous and doesn’t have to carry a tray.”

“The best people carry trays,” I say ferociously. “You carry a tray.”

“I will if you come eat,” he says, squeezing my shoulder once more before letting go.

I leave quickly so Arthur won’t see me cry. Tears run down my face, hot and fluid, like there won’t be any end to them.

Cole chases after me, still stuffing his laptop back in his bag.

“Mara!” he cries. “What’s wrong?”

I wheel on him, furious.

“What did you say to him? *What did you say to Arthur?*”

Cole grabs me by the shoulders, forcing me to stop. I was running away from him down the tree-lined street, and I’m still torn between the impulse to shout at him or flee.

My life is hurtling down this new path, and I don’t know if I want it. It looks like a dream, but it’s mixed up with a nightmare.

Cole’s looking at me with his beautiful face set in an expression of concern, but I know what he is, I know what he’s done. Am I insane to think he cares about me?

Arthur does. But now Arthur is pushing me away because there’s no place for my new life in my old. I can’t be the Mara I always was, poor and desperate, *and* this new Mara, replete with money and success.

Cole forces me to look at him. Into those dark eyes that have always been the real window inside of him.

“Why do you hate when I talk to Arthur? Why are you worried what I’ll say to him? Or him to me?”

My face crumples up. I cover it with my hands, ashamed.

“I don’t know,” I sob. “I’m not used to people saying nice things about me.”

Cole wraps his arms around me, pulling me close against his chest. He’s warm and strong, his heart a metronome that never falters.

He tilts my chin up so I’ll look at him. So I’ll know he’s telling the truth.

“Mara, I will never tear you down to other people. I will never degrade you in their eyes. I want to build you up, do you understand that?”

I never knew until this moment that I believed every conversation about me had to be negative. It had to be an airing of all my mistakes, all my flaws. What else could they talk about?

“I thought you told him to fire me,” I admit.

“Why would I do that? We made an agreement. You can work here as long as you want, if you don’t mind me camping out in the corner. I’ll admit, it’s not just to protect you. I have to be around you. I’m addicted to you. You fuel me, you light me up inside. Just knowing you’re in the house enlivens me. I can’t go back to the way I was before. I’m afraid of it.”

I’ve never heard Cole talk this way before. I’ve never seen his face so naked, so exposed. Not blank and emotionless—raw and confused. I look in his eyes and I see that he’s telling me the truth: he’s afraid of losing me.

No one has ever been afraid of losing me.

No one wanted me in the first place.

I turn my face back into Cole’s chest, letting his arms envelop me. Letting him hold me tight.

“I don’t want to go back either,” I say.



THAT NIGHT, Cole takes me to Betsy's party at her Jackson Street gallery.

I squirm nervously in the passenger seat of the car. I'm worried we're going to see Shaw tonight.

"Maybe he won't come," Cole says. "That cop's still poking around. He came to the studio this morning, did I tell you that?"

I shake my head.

"Janice didn't let him upstairs, but he made such a nuisance that Sonia had to come talk to him. He's insisting on meeting with me later this week."

"Meeting with *you*?" I frown. "What for?"

"He pretended like it was all ticking boxes. But I'm pretty sure he's running his own investigation, separate from what the SFPD thinks they're doing."

I know Cole has been keeping tabs on it all through a casual acquaintance in the vice department.

I remember Officer Hawks. I remember his perfectly polished shoes, his neat haircut and black-framed glasses. This is a man who ticks boxes. But also a man who notices small details and doesn't leave a job half-done.

"He's perceptive," I tell Cole. "Not like that first idiot that interviewed me. Don't underestimate him."

"I don't underestimate anyone," Cole says. "I'm not as arrogant as you think."

"But you don't think Shaw will be here tonight."

Cole shrugs. "If he's smart, he's laying low. And besides, he killed four girls, one more than usual. He should be satiated."

I don't like Erin being grouped in as one of the four, like she's just another grape on the stem shoveled into Shaw's mouth. Erin had talent—she made watercolors so beautiful you could weep. She was funny and blunt. She loved to tease me and Frank, but never to the point of actually hurting our feelings.

She loved her life, and Shaw had no fucking right to take it from her.

The aggressive color envelops you, making your eyes burn and your head spin. You're trapped inside a rainbow prism that seems to go on and on forever, disorienting and intoxicating.

Cole stares around at the installation, not touching anything.

We both know the architect of this piece. The signature colors give it away. But it's nothing I could have imagined from him.

"Guess he's not laying low," I murmur to Cole.

Cole is unusually silent. I think I know the reason why.

Cole's disdain for Shaw has been apparent to me since before I ever met either of them. He's never spoken of Shaw's work with any level of respect.

But for the first time, Shaw has created something truly impressive. Something even Cole can't deny.

It's slapping us right in the face.

Marcus York comes bustling up to Cole, his frizzy orange hair puffing out on both sides like a clown wig, an impression not helped by York's short legs and too-tight waistcoat stretched across his large belly.

"Oh ho, Cole, someone's putting you on notice!"

"What?" Cole snaps irritably.

"This is Shaw's bid for the sculpture in Corona Heights Park! If chosen, he'll do a larger version of this. And I haven't even received your design yet. The deadline is this week ..."

"I know the deadline," Cole hisses.

"Well, better hurry," York says, his eyes glinting wickedly. "You'll have to come up with something good to beat this ..."

York hurries away again, probably spurred by the murderous look on Cole's face.

My own feelings of repulsion are so strong that I find it hard to speak. I feel exactly as Shaw intended: enveloped in this web, trapped by it, screamed at

from all sides.

Cole says, “He would never have had the confidence to do something like this before.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, turning to look at Cole’s black stare.

“Everything Shaw has ever made is commercial.” Cole gestures around at the brilliant, dripping ropes. “You can’t sell this. It’s an experience.”

I nod slowly. “He’s leveling up.”

As if summoned by those words, Alastor Shaw himself materializes, striding toward us.

He navigates the web with confidence, easily maneuvering his bulk through the fluorescent strands.

Shaw glows with health and happiness. His golden hair, rich tan, and shining white teeth beam at us. His shoulders seem a mile wide as he stretches his arms open, greeting us in his booming voice.

“Mara! Cole! So glad to see you!”

He’s so loud that a dozen people turn to observe our meeting. Camera flashes wink at us. Everyone loves a *tête-à-tête* between their two favorite rivals.

We’re frozen in place. Trapped in his web. Watching the spider approach, grinning at us both.

“Cole.” Shaw slaps Cole on both shoulders, with such a loud sound that it feels like a detonation between us. “My oldest friend. Look at you. You know the thing I love about you? You’re unchanging. Your principles unwavering. That must be what Mara loves about you, too.”

While I still don’t know everything about the dynamic between these two, I understand the barb all too well.

Shaw abducted me as a provocation. To try to tempt Cole into breaking his own rules.

And it worked. God, how it worked. Better than Shaw ever could have dreamed.

Cole is breaking every rule for me, and me for him.

We've ensnared each other, more deeply than Shaw could ever have dreamed.

Cole is changing. And Shaw is mocking Cole's pretensions of discipline and stability. I see how his words dig under Cole's skin.

Still, Cole stands silent—it's too true to refute.

Now Shaw turns toward me. It's my turn for a blast of his smug sarcasm.

"Mara," he says, his face twisted up in an expression of mock sorrow. "I heard about your friend. Erin, wasn't it? You know she and I had a fling once. She was quite the wildcat." He winks at me. "You know what I mean."

His pretend pout has turned into a lascivious grin.

I am boiling with anger. Shaking with it.

How fucking dare he talk about Erin to me. How dare he stand here, flushed with happiness and triumph. Gloating right to my face, in front of everyone.

I look at Cole, expecting him to say something. Expecting him to cut Shaw down to size with some devastating retort.

He's silent, the garish colors of Shaw's web reflecting on his pale face, in his dark eyes.

For the first time, Cole has no response. Because for the first time, Shaw truly does have the upper hand.

Raising his voice a little louder so everyone can hear, Shaw says to me, "And don't worry, Mara. I forgive you for pointing the finger at me. You must have been in a terrible mental state, after how brutally your friend died, in agony. What you must have felt, finding her there in your bed ... No hard feelings from me, it's all water under the bridge."

All his shots fired, and every one landing right on target, Shaw gives us one last aggressive, “Good to see you both,” and strolls away.

His departure feels like a vise around my skull finally releasing. I can breathe again, but I’m shaking harder than ever.

I’m sick. Furious. Choking on everything I wanted to shout at Shaw that I had to stuff down inside instead.

Everything about him enrages me, from his taunts to his gloating grin. Even now I can hear the excited babble of guests interacting with Shaw’s vast, triumphant installation.

Why should Shaw get to experience a night like this when he’s taken so many lives and caused so much pain for everyone else? He doesn’t deserve this.

Cole looks at me. “Are you ready to kill him yet?”

My fingers itch with violent impulses. My mind runs wild, too far and too fast for me to rein it in.

I mutter, “I’m damn sure getting closer. Right now, I might be angry enough to do it. But you told me what it does to a person. It changes you. Breaks you away from humanity.”

“Good,” Cole hisses, jerking his head toward the throngs of people fawning around Shaw. “Why do you want to be like them? A blind fucking sheep?”

I can’t take my eyes off Shaw, who stands surrounded by admirers, bathed in his own private golden glow.

This motherfucker killed my friend, and don’t forget, he abducted me too, cut my wrists, pierced my fucking nipples. He’s living flagrantly, joyfully, rubbing it right in our faces. He can kill anyone he wants, do anything he wants.

“I want revenge,” I mutter. “But I don’t want to take it. I don’t want to give in to it. I said I’d always rise above, I swore it.”

For the longest time after I left my mother’s house, I was tormented by anger. I had run away from her and Randall, but the memories of everything

they'd ever said to me, done to me, came along with me, jammed in my head. I couldn't get them out.

The longer I was away from her, the more I realized how wrong it all was. How monumentally fucked up.

I wanted them to pay.

My mother's always gotten away with everything. CPS came to our house, summoned by teachers who reported the bruises on my body, the lack of food in my lunch. My mother cleaned the house and bought groceries for a week until they went away again. She was pulled over multiple times for DUIs, she got the fines reduced or charges dropped on technicalities, on overcrowded dockets, by begging and pleading and deploying her best sob stories.

She brought men into my life and me into theirs. Not just Randall—a succession of assholes of every flavor: drug dealers, ex-convicts, even a fucking neo-Nazi who pushed hand-printed copies of *American Renaissance* and *The Daily Stormer* into my hands.

While Randall wasn't the first one who put his hands on my mother (or on me), and some of them went so far as to shove a gun in her face or push her down a flight of stairs, the devastation she wreaked in their lives was always greater than anything they did to her.

She's sailed through life unpunished, unrepentant.

The worst people are free to maim and defame however they like. There is no justice. There is no fairness.

Cole and I had intended to stay at the party for several hours, to network with the dozens of Cole's acquaintances all around us, but neither of us can stand Shaw's malevolent glee, or the omnipresent discussion of his work. To say nothing of the technicolor spiderweb wrapped all around us.

We leave a few minutes later.

We're both silent on the drive back to the house, Cole gripping the wheel with a rigid expression, and me replaying every taunt Shaw threw at me.

You know we had a fling once ...

Don't worry, Mara, I forgive you ...

You must have been in a terrible mental state ...

The moment we step inside, into the dark, cool interior of the house, the tension between us snaps. Cole jumps on me and me on him.

Black Out Days – Phantogram

[Spotify → geni.us/no-devil-spotify](https://geni.us/no-devil-spotify)

[Apple Music → geni.us/no-devil-apple](https://geni.us/no-devil-apple)

He tears off the deep plum gown I was wearing, ripping the straps so that the expensive beading scatters across the hardwood floor.

I attack him back just as hard, yanking open his shirt, ripping the material, losing the buttons.

We're kissing each other with more than passion. We're exorcising our anger, our resentment, our fear, and our rage.

It's not directed at Cole and it's not directed at me. It's a dark, swirling energy between us. A bitterness that has to burn out before it consumes us both.

Cole hasn't even got my dress all the way off when he throws me over the arm of the couch and takes me from behind. He wraps his hand up in the long rope of my hair, jerking my head back, using it as reins while he mounts me and rides me hard.

He's fucking me ruthlessly, roughly, the slap of his hips against my ass punctuated by actual slaps from his hand.

“More,” I moan. “Harder.”

I deserve this.

My guilt over Erin can only be assuaged by punishment. I want to be spanked harder, faster, meaner. I need the sadist in Cole. I need the psychopath.

And Cole obliges.

He forces me down on my knees, the back of my head against the arm of the couch. He shoves his cock into my mouth, my head pinned, no way to escape.

He holds my head between both hands, fucking my mouth. His cock is iron-hard and relentless, tunneling into my throat. I'm choking on it, drooling around it, trying to steal gasps of breath before he drills into me again.

There is something so satisfying in this. Something that I deeply need, that I've never been able to ask for before.

The more I come to trust Cole, to believe that he won't actually hurt me, the more I want him to push the line.

This is the broken, fucked up part of myself. The part that's furious over every time that I was hurt or used, but still craves the freedom to seek out roughness and even violence when I want it, on my terms.

I'm a tree that grew in cruel wind, twisted and bent by it. Sex and violence, passion and intensity, are inextricably entwined for me. I can't have one without the other. Right or wrong doesn't come into it. I am the way life made me.

Only this satisfies: biting, clawing, scratching, struggling. Cole and I fuck on the couch, on the floor. He slams me up against the wall, bodily lifting me off the ground.

I need to experience his strength, his power, his ruthlessness, because that's what I need in a man. It's the only way I feel safe. He has to terrify me so I know he'll terrify everyone else. I've never met a real hero, I don't think they exist. Only a monster can protect me.

We're fucking in the dark so we can unleash the demons inside of us.

Anguished sounds come out of me: sometimes sobbing, sometimes begging for more.

Our clothes are all gone now, torn to ribbons on the floor. Cole's back is a mass of scratches as if he's been whipped, his skin under my nails. His teeth

marks print my shoulders and my breasts.

Still I moan in his ear, “Don’t stop. I need more ...”

“You fucking lunatic, I’ll kill you,” Cole snarls. “You don’t know what I have in me ...”

“Show me. You promised to show me.”

He throws me down on the floor, so hard that all the air slams out of me and I see stars on his ceiling.

He climbs on top of me, our bodies slick with sweat. It’s dripping down from the inky tips of his hair, from the sharp planes of his jaw. It splashes on my face and my breasts. I open my mouth to taste the salt on my tongue, I lick it off his throat. I want his sweat and his cum all over me. I want to be filthy.

He rams his cock inside me. The harder he fucks me, the harder he gets. His cock is on fire, I feel it burning all the way up inside me. My wetness could be pussy or blood. I don’t fucking care anymore.

I look up into his face and I see the naked Cole, that real, true creature. The devil himself. Eyes as black as pits, always burning. Face as beautiful as sin. Mouth forever hungry, swallowing me whole.

This is Cole unleashed. Full of fury and passion and hunger. His control was always an illusion. The real Cole takes what he wants.

He’s taking me here and now. Pounding me into this floor. Fucking me mercilessly.

And still he wants more. I can see it in those eyes. He wants something from me that I still haven’t given.

His hands close around my throat.

At first I think he’ll only squeeze for a moment, the way he’s done before: cutting off blood flow so my head spins and my pussy throbs. Turning sex into delirium.

This time he doesn’t stop. He only squeezes harder.

“Stop,” I gasp. Then, more frantic, “*Stop!*”

The word comes out in a croak. My throat is too constricted for speech. No air, no blood can get through.

Still he chokes me.

He’s looking down into my face, his eyes dark and pitiless.

I try to knock his arms away, but they might as well be iron bars welded in place. His hands close relentlessly, real pressure now, real weight.

Black moths flutter into view: first one, then two, then dozens. Blocking out my sight.

I’m hitting at his arms, scratching at them, clawing. Trying to tear his fingers off my throat.

I’m too weak and he’s too strong. I’m helpless in his grasp, floating, slamming back into my body, floating up again.

Now Cole speaks and I can’t see his lips moving, but I hear that low, insistent voice burying into my brain:

“This is what it will feel like if you wait for Shaw to finish the job. This is what it will feel like when he’s on top of you. This is what it will feel like to die as a victim.”

“*Stop it! Stop fucking around!*”

The words are a rasp, a whisper.

It doesn’t matter if he hears them or not: Cole isn’t fucking around. He’s never been more serious.

He chokes me harder. Fucks me harder. Holds me there while he beats the lesson into me.

“This is your way, isn’t it? Hoping for mercy? Never fighting back? Trying to do the right thing? You want to be a good person ... good people die every day, Mara. Goodness never saved them.”

I'm clawing at his arms, desperate and dying. Black moths carry me away ...

He's looking down into my face, as cruel as Shaw as he taunts me. "Do you want to be a victim, or you want to be a fighter? I thought you were a fighter, Mara?"

I am fighting, I'm hitting him with all my strength but it's not enough, I'm only a girl, a skinny girl, it will never be enough against a man ...

I hate that I'm small. I hate that I'm weak.

The anger, the hurt, the goddamn fucking unfairness wells up inside of me. I'm the volcano now, I'm the fucking lava.

It all bursts out of me in a howl so raw, so animalistic that I don't even realize that Cole has let go of my throat. I'm screaming right in his face:

"I HATE HIM! I HATE HIM! I HATE THEM ALL! I WANT THEM ALL FUCKING DEAD!!!!"

I'm sitting up now, I don't know when that happened.

My throat is raw, my shrieks still echoing through the house.

I finally fucking snapped.

Cole watches me, calm and satisfied.

He got what he wanted.

I wait for the guilt and shame to wash over me, but I feel nothing. Only the hot throbbing of my throat with every frantic heartbeat.

Cole lays his hand on my head, gently stroking my hair.

"It's alright, Mara," he says. "It's always better to tell the truth. Lie to the world, but not to yourself."



COLE

I finally got Mara to crack and admit what I'd known all along.
After that, I back off for a while.

We don't talk about what she said or what we're going to do about it. I don't want to risk her retreating back into familiarity, back into what feels safe to her.

What *feels* safe and what will actually keep you safe from harm are quite different from one another.

It's not difficult to distract ourselves from the problem of Shaw.

Both Mara and I are continually pulled into our work so deeply that the rest of the world disappears around us.

Mara is painting a new series for the private show I'm throwing her in December.

I'm finalizing my design for Corona Heights Park.

I sketch it out first, and then I build a scale model that I'll deliver to Marcus York.

I visit Mara in her studio to see how her latest painting is coming along.

She's got her hair piled up on her head with several paintbrushes jammed into the bun to keep it fixed in place. Her face and arms are liberally

streaked with color, her overalls so battered and stained that I can't tell if they were originally black or dark denim. She's got the legs rolled up mid-shin, bare feet beneath, paint on her toes as well.

She smells of linen and flaxseed oil, with a sharp edge of turpentine. For this series and the last one, Mara is using oil paints, not acrylic. The paint dries slowly over several days, so the pigment is malleable. She can stack transparent layers, one over the other, to create deep shadows or the impression of light glowing from within. She can blend shades for seamless transitions.

Her technique improves by the day.

Her previous series was mostly photorealistic. This new series blends high-detail figures with rooms and scenery that in places look solid and ultra-real, while other areas melt and fade away like the edges of a memory. It gives a soft, rotting effect, as if the whole painting is beset by decay soaking through the canvas.

This particular piece shows a young girl in a nightgown walking down a placid suburban street. The roses on the hedges are past their bloom, brown at the edges. A charred teddy bear trails from one hand. Behind her, a half dozen birds have fallen dead from the sky. Beneath her slippered feet, the grass withers away.

"What are you going to call this one?"

"I'm not sure," Mara says, rubbing the back of her hand across her cheek. This leaves a fresh smear of pale pink along her jaw—the pink of the roses, which Mara is touching up in the lower right corner of the canvas.

"What about ... *The Burial*?"

Mara nods slowly. "I like that."

I'm looking at one of the fallen birds, pitifully laying on its back with wings splayed.

"What?" Mara says.

“I don’t like that orange on the robin’s breast. It’s too bright. Clashes with the roses.”

Mara squints at the robin, then at the roses, looking back and forth between them, comparing the shades.

“You might be right,” she grudgingly admits. “Here, tone it down. Make it a little more dusty.”

She holds out a paintbrush to me.

“You’re going to let me touch your robin? You almost bit my head off last time I came near your painting.”

“Well, you did pick my favorite design for Corona Heights.”

It was my favorite too. Mara inspired the design, in a sense. Hearing her enthusiasm spurred me on to build the model so I can bring it to York this afternoon, right before the deadline.

I had been debating whether I even wanted to enter. I still don’t like the idea of having to outsource the construction.

I add a little brown to the robin’s breast, dulling the orange until it almost matches the edges of the rose petals.

Mara examines my work.

“That’s better,” she agrees.

Our heads are close together, examining the canvas.

Unconsciously, Mara’s hand slips into mine. I turn my mouth into the side of her neck, kissing her at the junction of her shoulder. Her scent, laced with turpentine, makes my head spin.

“Do you want to come see the model?” I ask her.

“Of course!”

She drops her brushes in a pot of solvent to soak, wiping her hands off on a rag. My own hand is paint-smearred where she touched me. Instead of washing it, I let the streak of dusty pink dry on my skin.

Mara follows me down the hall to the studio I've been using on this same floor. I don't like it as much as my private space, but sometimes it's good to make a change. There's something energizing about the constant bustle of people in this building—the whistle of Sonia's kettle, Janice's snorting laugh, and the thud of Mara's music leaking out from under her door. The chatter of other artists meeting by the stairs.

“Isn't Officer Hawks coming to talk to you today?” Mara asks.

“Oh fuck, I forgot about that.”

I'm debating whether I should tell Sonia to cancel it. I don't want to waste even ten minutes talking to him. On the other hand, it would be stupid to miss the opportunity to observe the detective while he's interrogating me.

I push open the door to my own studio, which takes up half the floor on the opposite end of the building to Mara.

Our studios are equally bright and sunlit, but in truth, Mara has the better view. Hers looks out over the park, while I'm facing the busy intersection of Clay and Steiner streets. It doesn't matter—I'm here for the view down the hall.

Mara strides directly over to the model, not waiting for me to close the door behind us.

“It's going to be incredible,” she breathes.

She looks down over the black glass labyrinth. The smooth, sheer walls will be glossy and reflective. The maze includes a dozen routes, but only one that will take you all the way through. The correct pathway is hidden within the walls. The openings can only be found by standing at just the right angle, or running your hands along the dark glass to feel where it breaks.

“I hope they choose your design,” she says. “I want to see this built.”

“So do I,” I admit.

Mara looks up into my face, her eyes bright with excitement.

“They will. They'll choose you.”

I could probably strong-arm York into doing it, but I won't. My art is the one area where I don't manipulate. My work will live or die on its own merit.

My phone buzzes in my pocket with a text from Sonia:

The cop is here.

He's early—even more annoying than being late.

I stuff the phone back in my pocket.

"I've got to go talk to Hawks," I say.

"Should I come?" Mara asks, her expression strained.

"No need, I'll handle it. Keep working."

Officer Hawks waits downstairs, next to Janice's desk. He's not the lead detective on the case—that's an older officer named Potts. But according to my sources, the SFPD has egg on their face from all the young female bodies stacking up on their beaches. There's a good chance Potts is about to get the boot and Hawks will be promoted. A fact of which he is probably well aware.

That's why he's here at my studio, digging down on every possible lead.

I pause at the base of the stairs, examining him before I step into view.

When he interviewed Mara, he wore the standard navy uniform with his gold badge pinned upon his breast.

Today he's dressed in plain clothes—button-up shirt, slacks, and a sport coat. That could mean he's off-duty. Or only trying to put me at ease—trying to make me think this meeting is a formality, not an interview.

In the plain tan jacket and Buddy Holly glasses, he looks a bit like a professor. Only the haircut gives him away—too fresh, too short, and too presidential. Our boy Hawks is ambitious. That's the haircut of someone who wants his promotion badly.

He was polite to Mara when he interviewed her. Which means I don't have to hunt him down off-hours. At least, not yet.

I step out into the lobby, striding toward him.

"Officer Hawks."

"Mr. Blackwell."

He holds out his hand to shake.

Sometimes I don't shake hands, sometimes I do. It depends on what response I want to elicit.

In this case, I take the proffered hand. Hawk's shake is firm, right on the edge of aggressive. He gives me a sharp look through the clear lenses of his glasses.

I keep my expression calm and relaxed. I already showed Hawks my teeth when he had Mara locked in an interrogation room. Today, I'm all politeness.

"We can speak in here," I say, leading him into a conference room on the ground floor. I have no intention of allowing Hawks any deeper into the building.

"Is Mara here, too?" Hawks inquires pleasantly.

"She has a studio on the fourth floor."

That's not exactly an answer, something Hawks notes as well, his eyes flicking fractionally toward the ceiling before settling on my face again.

"I heard she's living with you now."

"That's right."

"How long have you two been dating?"

"It's hard to put a timeframe on these things. You know how intangible a relationship can be. The art world is small. We've been in the same circle for some time, orbiting one another."

I'm evasive on purpose. I say nothing that can be contradicted or disproven. Hawks will notice this too, but I don't care. I want to annoy him. I want to push him to tip his cards.

I gesture to the conference room table, with its assortment of midcentury modern chairs, deliberately mismatched. Hawks takes a seat directly across from me.

He's not taking notes, but I have no doubt he'll remember everything I say, and probably write it down afterward.

"Did you ever meet Erin Whalstrom?" Hawks asks.

"Once or twice. Like I said, it's an insular industry. I'm sure we attended the same parties and events."

"Did you ever see Erin with Alastor Shaw?"

"Yes. I saw them talking the night of Oasis."

"Shaw said that he and Erin had sex in the stairwell."

I shrug. "I wasn't present for that."

"Did you see them leave the show together?"

"No."

"Did you see Shaw leave at all?"

"No."

"What was the last time you saw him?"

"I have no idea. There's more wine than art at those things."

"Did you see Mara there?"

I hesitate a fraction of a second, distracted by the vivid image of the first time I laid eyes on her. I see the wine splashing across her dress, soaking into the cotton, dark as blood.

"Well?" Hawks prompts me, leaning forward, blue eyes keen behind his glasses.

“Yes, I saw her. Only for a moment, early in the night.”

“But you didn’t see her leave.”

“No.”

Hawks lets the silence stretch between us. This is an age-old technique, to encourage me to add on to my statement. To get me babbling.

I keep my mouth firmly shut. Smiling at Hawks. Waiting with equal patience.

Hawks switches tactics.

“How long have you known Alastor Shaw?”

“We went to art school together.”

“Really.”

He didn’t know that. *Sloppy, sloppy, officer.*

I can tell he’s annoyed at the omission—color rises up from the collar of his shirt.

“The *Siren* called you rivals,” Hawks says.

“The *Siren* likes to stir up drama.”

“You’re not rivals?”

“I don’t believe in rivalry—I’m only in competition with myself.”

“Would you call yourselves friends?”

“Not particularly.”

“Just another acquaintance.”

“That’s right.”

Hawks is tiring of these bland answers. He sucks a little air through his teeth.

“I’m surprised you agreed to meet with me without your lawyer present. You were adamant that any communication with Mara go through your attorney.”

“I still am. She was treated disrespectfully by the police after she was attacked.”

“That wasn’t my department.”

“I don’t care who it was. It won’t happen again.”

“But *you’re* not concerned about being ... disrespected.”

“I’m sure you know better than that.” I smile at Officer Hawks. He doesn’t smile back.

“Where were you the night of November second?” he abruptly asks.

“I have no idea. Do you remember where you were on random evenings weeks past?”

“Do you keep a calendar?”

“No.”

“Does your secretary?”

“No.”

This is true. I don’t allow Janice to keep any record of my appointments. Sonia memorizes my schedule—but she certainly wouldn’t recite it for Hawks.

“Do you know a woman named Maddie Walker?”

“No.”

Hawks takes a photograph out of the inside breast pocket of his sport coat. He slides it across the table toward me.

I look at the picture without touching it. It shows a dark-haired girl laying on a steel table, eyes closed, clearly dead. Her skin bluish-gray, mottled

with bruises around the jaw. Shaw was rough when he wrenched her mouth open and stuffed a snake in it.

I recognize her from the top floor of the tenements, where Shaw had her strung up in his spiderweb.

I want to rip his fucking throat out, remembering how he lured me up there and trapped me, calling in a fleet of cops to catch me with the body.

It was a stupid mistake, one that still humiliates me. But I can't let any hint of that emotion show on my face.

Hawks watches closely for a reaction. That's why he gave me a photo of the corpse and not a picture of the girl taken when she was still alive. He's looking for clues on my face.

Do I recognize her? Am I shocked by the image?

Or, most damning of all:

Am I man surveying my own work?

Am I satisfied?

Am I aroused ...

Blandly, I say to Hawks, "I've never met her."

"She was killed in the Mission District. Police saw a man fleeing the scene. He was tall and dark-haired."

"That only applies to half the men in San Francisco."

"It applies to you."

"And thousands of others."

Hawks takes the photograph back, tucking it into his pocket once more, right against his heart.

He takes this personally. It's not only ambition for him.

And he *is* losing patience with my stonewalling. Slowly and surely.

“Have you injured yourself lately?” he demands.

I never visited a doctor when I sprained my ankle jumping from that roof. It’s possible someone saw me limping in the week afterward, when I wrapped my ankle in a Tensor bandage and swallowed handfuls of painkillers until the swelling went down.

“Nothing comes to mind,” I say vaguely.

“Don’t have much of a memory, do you?” Hawks sneers.

“I like to keep my mind occupied with more interesting things than the minutia of my schedule and the time people leave parties.”

“What’s interesting to you?” Hawks asks, his jaw rigid, his hand still resting against the breast pocket of his jacket.

“I’m curious why you’re talking to me, and not to Shaw.”

“You think he attacked Mara? And killed her roommate?”

“That’s what Mara says.”

“You believe her.”

“She’s very perceptive.”

So is this cop. She was right about that.

Hawks knows something is fucked up here. He can sense the links between our strange trio, but he can’t conceptualize what they mean.

He has no evidence—I didn’t leave so much as a fingerprint at the tenements. I’m sure Shaw was even more careful.

How infuriating, to have to work inside the bounds of the law. Your hands always tied by rules and regulations. Only one side playing fair.

I see the strain on Hawks’ face. His impotent anger.

He’s been around enough criminals to know that I’m no law-abiding citizen. But that’s true of most of the wealthy elite in this city. We all flout

the rules for our benefit. He can't decide if I'm just another rich prick, or the killer he seeks.

I've already satisfied myself that Hawks has nothing. No evidence against me, nothing but suspicion.

Hawks takes a breath, steadying himself. Getting ready for one last push.

He leans forward, his voice low and steady.

"Was Erin perceptive? Would she have warned Mara about you?"

I snort. "Nobody needs warning about me. It's well known that I'm an asshole."

"You've made enemies."

"Only boring people are universally beloved."

"Take Carl Danvers, for instance."

Now a chill falls between us, which I have to pretend to ignore with every fiber of my being.

"Who?" I say.

"He was a critic for the *Siren*."

"Oh, right," I say dismissively.

"He disappeared thirteen weeks ago. All his belongings are still in his apartment. No message to anyone."

"Your point?"

"He was no fan of yours. Wrote a scathing article about you the week he disappeared."

"People write about me every day."

"Did you speak to him at Oasis?"

This is a trick. Danvers was already dead the night of the show. His bones resided inside my sculpture, on display for all to see.

Hawks is testing to see if I'll correct him, to judge how closely I followed the disappearance, and how well I know my own timeline.

"Jesus, who knows. I probably talked to fifty people that night."

"But you don't *remember*," Hawks sneers, his disdainful expression showing exactly what he thinks about that.

Enough obfuscating. It's time for Hawks to take a punch in return.

"This is pathetic," I sneer. "If this is all you have ... missing art critics, conversations that nobody heard and timelines that no one can pin down ... the SFPD is grasping at straws. Mara will be disappointed. Sounds like you've got no fucking clue what happened to her roommate."

Hawks snaps back, "Our profiler says the person who arranged that body fancies themself an artist and a genius. Sound familiar?"

"Oh, wow." I roll my eyes. "Did they also guess it was a white male? Hope Captain Obvious isn't getting a Christmas bonus."

"You think this is funny?" Hawks hisses.

"Well, you sure as fuck can't be serious," I say, pushing back my chair and standing up from the table. "Because this interview was a joke."

Striding over the conference room door, I wrench it open and call to Janice, "See Officer Hawks out, will you, Janice? Sounds like he's got a lot of work to do."

With that, I leave Hawks stewing in my disdain.

I'm a good enough actor that I don't think I showed any nerves.

But in truth, it rankled me that he connected the dots to Danvers.

Goddamn Shaw for shoving us both under the microscope. This is all his fucking fault. I've never had a cop so much as look my way before this. Now they have a fucking description of me. They'll be watching everything I do.

Usually, I'd head back up to my office to mull this over alone. I feel angry enough to bite the head off anyone who even looks at me.

But I don't want to be alone—I want Mara. I want to tell her everything that happened. I want to hear what she thinks.

I'm only halfway up the stairs when I collide with her hurrying down.

"I'm sorry," she gasps. "I couldn't wait any longer. I couldn't stand not knowing what was going on."

"It's fine," I say. "Hawks left."

"What did he say?"

I take her hand. "Come on. Let's get a drink, and I'll tell you."

We leave the building, after a quick glance down the sidewalk to be sure Hawks isn't still lurking around.

I take Mara to a dingy little pub that serves home-brewed cider, her favorite.

We sit across from each other in a dark and quiet corner, the oak tabletop already sticky long before Mara spills a little cider on it.

Briefly, I recap the conversation between me and the detective. I tell her everything, even the part about Danvers.

"Is Hawks right?" Mara whispers.

"Yes," I admit. "I killed him."

Mara's breath catches on the inhale, then releases in a shaky waver.

"Can he prove it?"

"Probably not."

The only evidence is enclosed inside *Fragile Ego*. It was insane for me to sell it. In that moment, my own ego had swelled past all reason.

No one knows about the bones, except Shaw.

Yet another reason he needs to die.

"The cop's a crusader," I say to Mara. "He's not going to drop it."

Mara looks up at me from under the fan of her dark lashes.

“Will you kill him, too?” she asks quietly.

“I’d prefer not to.”

Hawks is doing his job, and he’s not that bad at it. Nobody else noticed Danvers.

When the fuck did I make this rule for myself, not to murder people I respect? It’s inconvenient.

“Please don’t,” Mara says, relieved.

“Understand this, though,” I tell her, my voice low and cold. “I’ll do what I have to do. No one is going to take you from me ... and no one is taking me from you.”

Now she shifts in her seat.

She doesn’t want me in jail, but she also doesn’t want to be party to the slaughter of a decent human.

“It probably won’t come to that.”

Mara sips her drink, her throat clenching convulsively.

She knows better than to ask me to promise.



MARA

After our drink together, Cole and I briefly part ways so he can deliver his submission to the sculpture committee.

This is one of our first moments apart since I moved in with him. I know he's only allowing it because I'm holed up safely in the studio, with Janice on guard downstairs and security cameras everywhere.

I can never tell how much of his possessiveness is because of Shaw and how much is his own obsession.

Whatever the reason, it's not a one-way street.

I'm also becoming unhealthily attached to Cole.

When he's close by, I feel invincible. I can turn to him for help or advice. I'm completely safe for the first time in my life. No one would dare fuck with me, or even shoot a dirty look in my direction, under Cole's terrifying stare.

Even though we're so different from each other, I'm deeply comfortable in his company. His absence feels like a piece of me torn away. I want it reattached as soon as possible.

The minutes tick by slowly.

I work on my painting for a while, but I feel dull and listless. I keep staring at the robin's breast, now just the right shade of dusty orange.

I like that Cole put his mark on my work in a small, subtle way.

It makes me love this painting all the more.

My work was never self-referential. I kept my memories stuffed down inside me. I didn't mine them for material—I couldn't look at them at all.

It was Cole who picked at the lock, finally forcing me to crack it open.

Like Pandora's box, all the evil and ugliness came pouring out.

I thought it would kill me.

Instead, I pulled a splinter from my chest and a whole goddamn stake came out. I'm bleeding, but maybe now I'll finally heal.

Painting these scenes doesn't depress me. It feels like catharsis, like therapy. Once I have it down on canvas, the memory lives outside of me. Where I can view it when I want, but it no longer festers, poisoning me from the inside.

The paintings are so much better than anything I made before. They're dark and compelling. They pull you in. You stare and stare, a kaleidoscope of emotions turning before your eyes. Each angle a new image.

I'm proud of them.

I'm proud of myself.

I never would have gotten here without Cole. Not to the studio, the shows, or even the point of putting brush to canvas with this fount of inspiration surging through me.

Cole says that I light him up, that I fill him with energy.

Well, the same is true for me.

His dark power surges through me: strong, persuasive, compelling. You can't deny Cole what he wants. And you can't deny me, either. Not anymore.

My phone buzzes in the pocket of my overalls.

I pull it out, feeling a leap of excitement at the sight of Cole's name, even though he's only been gone an hour.

"What did they say?" I cry, by way of greeting.

"Marcus York seemed to like it," Cole replies.

"When will you hear back?"

"Soon. York is pushing this thing through as quickly as possible. He's got some finger in the pie, I don't know what exactly—probably a kickback on the construction."

"Do you want to win?" I ask him, wondering how disappointed he'll be if Shaw takes it instead.

"I always want to win."

"And if you don't?"

Cole laughs. "I don't know how I'll feel—I've never lost before."

I like the sound of his voice over the phone—like he's murmuring right in my ear. It makes the little hairs on my arms stand up. I don't want to hang up.

"Are you coming back now?" I ask him.

"I'm almost there already. I'm driving like it's the Grand Prix. Come stand at the window so I can see you as I pull up."

Impulsively, I unfasten the straps of my overalls and step out of them. I pull off my shirt and my underwear as well.

Then I step up onto the window frame, completely nude, looking down at the street below.

I see Cole's black Tesla zoom up to the curb, stopping short with a jerk. He steps out, tall and lean, his long dark hair tossed back by the wind.

He looks up at me.

I press my palm against the glass, phone to my ear.

“Fucking hell,” Cole breathes. “You’re a goddess.”



WE HEAD BACK to Cole’s house, which is beginning to feel like my house. Not because I own it, but because I love it so much. I love the stark, forbidding face, the jumble of pointed dormers and dark gables. The ornate woodwork and the black stone.

Most of all, I love this perch high up on the cliffs, with the endless cycle of waves crashing below.

The wind blows off the bay, wild and cold. It’s the chilliest November on record. People keep making stupid jokes about how we could really use that global warming right now. Janice said it to me this morning.

As Cole opens the door for me, I think perhaps I like the smell of his house best of all.

He’s lived here alone for more than a decade. The scent is all his: leather and clay, the spice of his cologne, ocean salt, wet rock after rain. And running through it like a vein, my own scent as well. As perfect a pairing as any I’ve created with food. More delicious than banana and bacon, or avocado and jam.

The textures and colors of his house soothe me. Everything is muted and dark, but so lovely. Cole could never bear anything garish or loud.

The deep chocolate boards creak beneath my feet. The diaphanous curtains blow back from the open windows with a sound like a sigh, letting the sea breeze into the house.

Cole heads up to his room to change out of his clothes. He’s fastidious and doesn’t like to wear the same shoes and trousers that made contact with the outside world. He’ll come down in a minute, probably wearing some old-fashioned smoking jacket and a pair of velvet slippers.

I’ll have to change clothes as well, as I’m still covered in paint.

For the moment, my attention is caught by my laptop, still open on the table where Cole left it.

I don't care that he was reading my emails. I would have been incensed if anyone had done it a few weeks ago, but we're well past that now.

I walk over to the laptop, intending to close the screen.

Right as my fingers make contact, I hear the soft chime of another email arriving.

Usually, my mother's emails are shunted over to a folder where I don't have to see them. Because that folder is already open, I'm hit with her name and the heading: *Your Mother's Day Card*.

I stare, confused, forced to parse that sentence.

I obviously do not receive Mother's Day cards myself, and I certainly haven't sent one to her.

My index finger moves without my consent, floating over to the trackpad and clicking once.

The email leaps up before my eyes.

For once, there's no rambling diatribe.

Just an image, which appears to be an open card, scanned and copied.

I recognize the childish handwriting:

Happy Mothers Day Mommy

I love you so so so so so so so so much. I made you cinnimin tost.

Im sorry I make so many misstaks. Your the best mom. Im not very good. I will try so hard. I will be beter.

I love you. I hope you never leeve. Please dont leeve even if Im bad. I wont be bad.

You are so pritty. I want to be pritty like you.

I love you Mommy. I love you.

Mara

Each word is a slap across my cheek. I can hear my own voice, my own thoughts, immature and desperate, crying in my ear:

I love you, Mommy, I love you.

I'm sorry.

Please don't leave.

I won't be bad.

Even my name signed at the bottom makes my stomach clench, the bile rising in my throat.

Little Mara. Desperate, pathetic, begging.

Every word of it is true—I wrote it. I felt it, at the time.

My deepest fear was that she would leave like my father did. She used to threaten me with it when I fucked up. When I forgot something or broke something of hers.

Later, it was me who wanted to leave. Who dreamed of doing it.

She's throwing it in my face, the intense connection I had to her. The love to which I clung no matter what she said to me, no matter what she did. It took years longer for that love to wither and die. Even now, some perverse remnant endures, lodged deep in my guts.

I still think about her. I still yearn for what I wanted her to be.

I hate that about myself.

I hate my weakness.

I hate that she wields it against me as a weapon. Shaming me because I loved her. Guilting me because I want to stop.

Cole comes into the kitchen, dressed as I expected in a dark brocade jacket.

“What is it?” he demands, seeing the look on my face.

Without waiting for an answer, he grabs the laptop and turns the screen toward him.

He reads the email in a glance. The look that falls over his face would make a grown man stagger.

“When did she send this?” he barks.

“Just now.”

I’m shaking. I feel like she walked into the room and spat in my face.

She still has so much power over me.

I’ll never be free of her. She’ll never allow it.

Cole slams the windows shut and strips off his jacket, wrapping it around my shoulders.

“I’m covered in paint,” I tell him.

“I don’t give a fuck.”

I feel him shaking too, with anger.

“Where does she get the fucking nerve,” he hisses.

“She has no shame.”

“The fact that she thinks that proves anything except how fucking brainwashed you were—” he cuts himself off, seeing that talking about it is only making me more upset. “Never mind. Come on—I’ve got an idea.”

Numbly, I follow him.

I thought Cole would take me upstairs to the bedroom, or maybe into the main living room.

Instead, he leads me down to the lower level, to a parlor we’ve never visited before.

The potter's wheel spins clockwise because he's left-handed. Moistening the center of the bat with a sponge, he sets a fresh lump of clay in place. He flattens the edges with his large palm, sealing with his index finger.

Once the clay is firmly in place, he increases the speed of the wheel and wets his hands until they glisten in the firelight.

I watch it all, mesmerized.

Cole's hands are beautifully shaped and marvelously strong. I could watch them work for hours.

The way he strokes and manipulates the clay reminds me of how his hands move over my flesh. I feel my skin burning, and not from the heat of the fire.

"Do you want to try?" Cole asks.

"I've never made anything on a pottery wheel."

"Come here. I'll show you."

He scoots back on his stool to make room for me. Shucking off his jacket so I don't dirty the sleeves, I sit between his thighs, his arms around me.

Cole wets my hands as well, until they're cool and slippery, his fingers gliding easily over mine. His warm chest presses against my back, his chin on my shoulder.

"Use your right hand to push the clay up," he says. "That's backward from normal, but it won't matter to you because you've never done it either way. Your left hand is the support. That's right—squeeze the clay inward, and let it rise up between your hands. That's called 'coning up.' "

Under his instruction, the softened clay does indeed rise between my hands like the cone of a volcano.

Cole's hands cover mine, guiding me. Keeping my motions smooth and strong. Caressing my skin.

The earthy scent of the clay mingles with the sweet apple and the smoke of the fire. The crackle of the record player and the pop of the logs send a

pleasant friction down my spine.

“I like how it feels,” I murmur to Cole. “It’s so cool compared to the fire.”

“It’s as silky as your skin,” Cole says, running his fingers up my bare forearm.

The wet clay streaks across my flesh.

I link my fingers into Cole’s, feeling the clay squish between our hands.

The cone collapses, but neither of us cares.

Cole rubs it between his palms, then runs both hands up my arms, plastering my skin. Painting me with the clay.

I turn to face him, straddling his lap, pulling my shirt over my head. Dropping it down to the floor.

Cole smears my bare breasts with the clay. It’s slick and cool on my burning flesh, my skin glowing pink in the firelight.

I let him paint me all over. I let him cover my face like a mud mask, leaving only my eyes and lips bare. He covers my neck, my chest, my back and belly.

The ancient Egyptians thought that humans were formed of clay. Their ram-headed god turned them on a potter’s wheel with mud from the banks of the Nile.

Cole is shaping me under the clay. Massaging my flesh, reforming my body.

I give myself over to him. I let him work.

I close my eyes, bathed in the heat and light of the fire. I’m laying on the rug now, Cole’s hands roaming over me. He’s stripped off my clothes. I’m naked as the day I was born.

I used to be Mara the victim. Mara the damaged. Mara the disposable.

The day I met Cole, I was dying.

Maybe I did die.

Through Cole, I was reborn.

Now I'm Mara the artist. Mara the star. Mara the unbreakable.

Only Cole could make this possible.

He wants to be the center of my universe.

I want that, too.

I want to worship him as the Egyptians worshipped their gods. I want to pray to him for help and protection.

I want to give him my mind, body, and soul.

Cole strips off his clothes and climbs on top of me. He slides his cock inside me, arms braced on either side, looking down into my face.

He's made my body so warm and relaxed that each stroke of his cock is pure molten pleasure. He slides in and out of me, watching my eyes roll back in bliss.

"Cole ..." I groan. "I ... I ... I ..."

"I know," he says.

He can't hold back his grin. He knows exactly what kind of effect he's having on me.

I gaze up at him.

"I love you," I say.

If I'd thought first, I would have been too afraid to say it.

Cole looks down at me, his eyes black and flickering, full of reflected flame.

"What does it feel like?"

"It feels like I'll do anything for you. Jump off a bridge for you, turn myself inside out for you. It feels like madness, and I never want it to end."

Cole considers this, his dark eyes roaming over my face.

“Then I must be in love,” he says. “Because that’s what I feel, too.”



A WEEK LATER, while Cole and I are taking a stroll through Golden Gate Park, his phone rings in his pocket.

He pulls it out and answers the call.

It’s still a little disturbing hearing Cole talk with his usual level of animation, while his face remains flat and smooth. He doesn’t bother to make expressions when he’s on the phone and the other person can’t see.

“Good to know,” he says. And then, after a pause, “Yes, I agree.”

He ends the call, slipping the phone back into the pocket of his peacoat.

I have my arm tucked in his, so I have to crane my neck to look up into his face. I’m trying to guess who it was and what they said—an exercise much more difficult with Cole than with anyone else, because he gives me no hints, only looking down at me with that enigmatic smile playing at the corners of his lips.

I can’t tell if he’s pleased from the call, or only because I’m looking at him so curiously. He loves when my attention is fixed on him.

“Well?” I say when I can’t stand it any longer.

“That was York,” Cole replies.

He’s still giving me no clue from his tone or expression.

I’m jumping on the balls of my feet, bubbling over with anticipation and mounting fury that he won’t break the suspense.

“And? AND?” I shout.

“And I got it,” Cole says simply.

It’s my shriek of excitement, my sprinting around and around him in circles that makes him grin. He doesn’t register the triumph of the moment until I

leap into his arms, my legs around his waist, my wrists locked about his neck, making him kiss me again and again.

“You got it!” I shout. “YOU FUCKING GOT IT!!!”

“I always thought I would,” Cole says, tossing his dark hair.

He doesn’t fool me. I know he didn’t really expect the win. The art world is all about momentum. While Cole has been distracted, Shaw has been putting out piece after piece, each more impressive than the last. He’s working almost entirely in sculpture now, deliberately stepping on Cole’s toes. Shouting his bid for Corona Heights Park in every way possible.

I think we both know how narrow a victory it probably was, Cole’s longstanding supremacy in this space just barely trumping Shaw’s rising star.

“They probably didn’t want to have to deal with him,” Cole says. “I may be an asshole, but Shaw’s fucking obnoxious.”

There might be truth in that. Shaw’s relentless drive for self-promotion would overshadow the sculpture and everyone else involved in the project. Besides, he doesn’t have the experience. He can’t make something that size out of wool.

“What’s the point of this project, anyway?” I ask. “Like, what’s it supposed to represent?”

“I dunno, unity and peace or some bullshit.” Cole shrugs. “I’m just doing what I want.”

I feel a deep thrill knowing that I gave Cole the idea. Or, I should say, David Bowie did.

Cole’s labyrinth is as dark and enigmatic as himself. One true path through to the center, and a dozen false trails that only turn back on themselves.

“I’m surprised they’re willing to make it,” I say to Cole. “Aren’t they worried about people getting lost?”

Cole laughs wickedly. “I told them it was like a corn maze. They think people will love it.”

“You’re a sadist.”

He kisses me, biting my lip hard enough to draw blood.

“You fucking know it.”



COLE

November flows into December, each day passing quicker than the last.

I'm already regretting winning the bid for the sculpture.

York is demanding I build it as quickly as possible, before the next round of elections in the spring.

And just as I expected, I'm fucking hating it.

I have to command an entire crew of construction workers, none of whom know the first fucking thing about working with these kinds of materials.

I'm out on the frigid, whistling flat top of Corona Heights Park, in the goddamned coldest December since 1932, shouting at welders who have already shattered a dozen of the smoked glass plates that make up the walls of the labyrinth.

This might possibly be tolerable if Mara was with me, but she's not. She's back at the studio, finishing up her series in time for the show I'm throwing next week.

Whenever I want to snap the neck of one of the incompetent glaziers, I pull out my phone and check the camera in her studio. It gives me a sense of peace watching her dab away at the canvas, her music blasting, her spare paintbrushes twisted up in her hair.

She's much too engrossed in her work to think about me.

Once, she seemed to sense that I was watching. She turned and faced the camera, grinning and giving me a saucy wave. Then she pulled up her shirt, flashing her tits at me, before turning back to her work.

She could only have been guessing, but my cock still raged against my clothing, demanding that I abandon this idiotic project and speed back to the studio so I could bury myself inside of her.

When Mara's working, I might as well not exist.

She's completely absorbed by the project, forgetting to eat or drink or sleep.

It makes me insane with jealousy. I hate when anything pulls her attention away from me.

That's not how my mind works.

I can think about many things at once, and one of those things is always Mara.

Like a computer that can run several programs simultaneously, I keep tabs on Shaw and Officer Hawks, supervise the construction of the sculpture, and think of every possible way that I can wrap another rope around my sweet little Mara and pull it tight.

When I can abandon the sculpture at the end of the workday, I head over to the studio to pull Mara's attention back where it belongs: onto me.

I used to hate the holidays. They seemed pathetic and manufactured, designed to give some semblance of structure to the year. So people could pretend to celebrate, when really they'd rather not see their family at all and would only use the excuse to drink as much as possible before passing out in front of the tree.

I'm learning how different the world appears when everything you do is for someone else.

Now, instead of Christmas trees and decorations striking me as tacky, I want to find the most beautiful ones possible, so I can surprise Mara when she walks through the door and finds the house bedecked in soft, silvery lights.

I want to see them reflected on her skin and hair, echoing the smoky color of her eyes.

It's easy to reduce Mara to childlike wonder. To give her what she never had before.

I pile the presents under the tree, dozens of them, all with her name on the tags. She doesn't care what's inside—the fact that she has gifts waiting for her reduces her to tears, and she has to go and hide in a distant corner of the house, headphones on, wrapped in a blanket, until she's ready to come look at them again.

Every stupid thing that people do, that I used to watch them do, now I'm in the center of it.

I take her skating on the holiday ice rink at Embarcadero Center. In this strange wintery weather, San Franciscans are giddy with the joy of actually donning scarves and pom-pom hats, zipping around under the frost-blighted palm trees, drinking their hot cocoa.

The city is loaded with twice as many twinkling lights, as if trying to drive away the freezing fog that blows in off the bay, each day colder than the one before.

The other skaters float in and out of view like ghostly wraiths.

Mara is an angel in the softly glowing light.

I bought her a snow-white parka with fur all around the face. She wears a pair of fluffy mittens and a brand-new pair of skates, freshly sharpened to a razor's edge. Only the best for Mara, no shitty rentals.

I never knew how good generosity could feel. My ability to make her life comfortable and magical gives me a sense of god-like power. Not a wrathful god anymore, but one overflowing with goodness and light.

I don't know if I have any real kindness inside of me.

But Mara believes that I do. She believed I wouldn't hurt her, when I had every intention of killing her. Now she believes that I have the capacity to love.

What is loving someone?

From all outward appearances, I'm very much a man in love. I shower her with gifts, praise, attention.

But I'm all-too-aware that everything I do for Mara benefits me. I feed off her joy like a vampire. The hot cocoa tastes sweeter when I lick it off her lips. The lights are more beautiful reflected in her eyes. The air in my lungs is fresh and sweet when we fly across the ice together, hand in hand.

For now, all our interests align. What's good for Mara is good for me.

It requires no real sacrifice. I'm only doing what I want.

But perhaps, I am changing in the smallest of ways.

Because for the first time, I wonder if she deserves more than this.

Mara thinks she sees who I am and loves me anyway.

Only I know how cold I truly am at heart.

I told myself I was always honest with her. While letting her believe what she wants to believe: that I always had good reason ... that I might be justified.

It's time to tell her the truth. To show her, the only way I know how.



I TAKE Mara down to the lowest level of the house. To the locked door she's never seen beyond.

I see her mounting dread as we descend the stairs. Mara is a curious kitten ... but she has an instinctive understanding of potential danger. She skirts away without ever acknowledging the boundary.

Now I fit the key in the lock. And I throw open the door.

Mara flinches, as if expecting a slap.

Instead, her eyes widen with wonder. She steps inside the cavernous space.

“What on earth ...” she breathes, her bare feet sinking into a thick carpet of moss.

How Villains Are Made – Madalen Duke

[Spotify](https://open.spotify.com/album/1234567890) → [geni.us/no-devil-spotify](https://open.spotify.com/album/1234567890)

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The air is rich with oxygen, the cave-like space stuffed with greenery. Ferns cling to the dripping rocks. It’s an underground garden, a riot of life and color, locked away in the heart of the earth.

“It was my mother’s,” I tell her. “She was trying to create a true terrarium—self-sustaining, self-perpetuating. It runs with very little maintenance.”

Mara is speechless, stepping into the surprisingly vast space. She had no idea what was hidden away under the house. No one knows but me.

“My god,” she whispers. “It’s so beautiful ...”

“She spent all her time down here. Especially at the end.”

Mara turns slowly, a shadow falling over her eyes.

She understands that I brought her down here for a reason. Not just to show her the garden.

“This is where I found her,” I tell Mara. “Hanging from that tree.”

I nod my head toward a holly tree, its gnarled bough tough enough to bear my mother’s weight when she kicked the stool out from under her feet. I ran to her and clung to her cold feet. Not even close to strong enough to lift her down.

Mara’s eyes are already welling with tears, but I need to explain this to her, before she gets the wrong idea again. Before she builds the narrative she wants to believe.

“I was four years old,” I tell her. “She already knew something was wrong with me. She’d been fooled by my father when they met, but since then she had learned to know him. To see the blankness on his face. His casual

cruelty. His lack of normal human warmth. And of course, in his brother Ruben, she saw the fullest iteration of what we are. The family curse.”

I give a hollow laugh.

Mara shakes her head, wanting to object, but I speak too quickly, determined to tell her everything before she can interrupt.

“She hoped I wasn’t like them. She hoped I was kind, like her. But I was already cold and arrogant, and too young to know better than to tell the truth. I told her how little worth I saw in the people who scrubbed our toilets, cleaned our house. I told her how our gardener disgusted me because he was stupid and could barely read, while I was already finishing entire novels. I could see that I was smarter than other people, richer, better looking. At four years old, I was already a little monster.”

“You were a child,” Mara says.

“That’s what she thought, too. She bought me a rabbit. A large gray one. She named him Shadow, because I didn’t care to give him a name. I hated that rabbit. I hadn’t learned how to use my hands and my voice yet. I was clumsy with it, and it bit and scratched me. I couldn’t soothe it like my mother did, and I didn’t want to. I hated the time I had to spend feeding it and cleaning out its disgusting hutch.”

Mara opens her mouth to speak again. I bowl over her, my lungs full of all this fresh, green air, but the words coming out dead and twisted, falling flat between us.

“I took care of that rabbit for three months. I loathed every minute of it. I neglected it when I could, and only fed and watered it when she reminded me. The way it loved her and the way it hated me made me furious. I was even more angry when I’d see the disappointment in her eyes. I wanted to please her. But I couldn’t change how I felt.”

Now I have to pause because my face is hot and I can no longer look at Mara. I don’t want to tell her what happened next, but I’m compelled. She needs to understand this.

“One morning, we went down to the hutch and the rabbit’s neck was broken. It was laying there, dead and twisted, flies already settling on its

eyes. My mother could see it had been killed. She didn't chastise me ... there was no point anymore. Looking in my eyes, she saw nothing but darkness. She hung herself that afternoon. Years later, I read the last entry in her journal: *I can't change him. He's just like them.*"

Now I do look at Mara, already knowing what I'll see on her face, because I've seen it before, in the only other person I ever loved. It's the look of a woman gazing upon a monster.

Tears fall silently down Mara's cheeks, dropping down on the soft green moss.

"You didn't kill the rabbit," she says.

"But I wanted to. That's what you have to understand. I wanted to kill that fucking rabbit every time I held it in my hands. I only didn't because of her."

I'm still waiting for the disgust, the repulsion. The understanding that what my mother believed was true: at four years old, I was already a killer. Heartless and cruel. Held back by my affection for her, but who knows for how long.

"But you didn't do it," Mara says, her jaw set, eyes locked firmly on mine. "You were a child—you could have been anything. She gave up on you."

Mara is angry, though not at me.

She's angry at another mother that failed in her eyes. A mother that looked at her own child and only saw ugliness.

"She was right to give up on me," I tell Mara. "I didn't kill the rabbit, but I killed many more."

"I don't give a fuck what you've done!" Mara cries. "I only care what you do now that someone loves you!"

She flies at me, and I think she's going to hit me. Instead, she grabs my face between her hands and kisses me, as ferociously, as passionately as ever she's done.

“I love you!” she cries. “I fucking love you. Your life starts here, today, now that I’ve told you.”

I look at Mara’s furious face.

I touch the tears running down on both sides. I kiss her again, tasting the salt on her lips.

In that moment, I finally realize what Mara knew all along:

She won’t die like that rabbit. I WILL keep her safe.



MARA

I understand now why Cole has always stayed in this house.

He destroyed his father's office but not the garden. He kept the garden living and growing for his mother, long after she was gone.

I wonder if that one act kept a spark of humanity burning inside him, in all the years that followed.

Cole seems strangely light since he told me this last piece of his history. He's unburdened—finally understanding that I *do* see who he is, without judgment.

I can't judge anyone. I've been a fucking mess for most of my life. A literal crazy person at times.

Everyone is a mix of good and bad. Can the good cancel out the bad? I don't know. I'm not sure I even care. If there's no objective measure, then all that matters is how I feel. Cole is a shade of gray I can accept.

He suits me like no one ever has.

He understands me.

How can I reject the only person I've ever felt connected to?

We were drawn together from the first moment we saw each other, when neither of us wanted it. Like recognized like. We bonded in place, like mercury atoms.

If Cole is wrong, then so am I.

When he pushes me to change, the change feels good.

It's like his corrections to my paintings—once he points out the improvement, I can see its merit just as clearly.

He's been encouraging me to promote myself more openly on social media. I was always hesitant to post anything too personal, too specific. Still plagued by that old fear of exposing myself as weird, broken, disgusting.

“You think the painting is the product, but it isn't,” Cole tells me. “*You're* the product: Mara Eldritch, the artist. If *you're* interesting, then the work is interesting. They have to be curious about you. They have to want to hear what you have to say.”

“I'm the product?” I tease him. “You know who you sound like ...”

“There's a difference between creating a fake version of yourself for market,” Cole says, sternly, “and simply understanding how to show people who you really are.”

Cole encourages me to dig out my old Pentacon and take photographs of my paintings in progress, before they're perfected, before they've even fully taken shape. I photograph myself at work, in moments of frustration, even breaking down in front of the canvas, laying on the floor.

I photograph myself in front of the gloomy plate-glass windows, thick with fog, tracing my finger through the steam.

I photograph myself eating lunch, food scattered amongst the paints, hands filthy on my sandwich.

When I need a break from painting, I pose naked and streaked in paint. Wearing a sunburst crown of paintbrushes, swaddled in a canvas drop-sheet like the Madonna.

The pictures are moody and grainy. Sometimes melancholy, sometimes charged with ethereal beauty.

I don't worry about my privacy or if I might look unhinged. I post the pictures and I tell the truth about my mental state, for better or for worse, as

I update my progress on the new series.

At first I'm mostly doing this for myself, a digital diary.

I have few followers, and most of the interaction comes from friends and old roommates.

Slowly, however, I start to pick up more friends. At first, it's people I've begun to follow myself: a girl who sews hand-drawn patches onto vintage shirts. A guy with phenomenal spray-painting techniques. A woman documenting her heartbreaking divorce with a series of self-portraits.

I comment on their posts, they comment on mine. My feed becomes more inspiring than before. I stop stalking old acquaintances from high school and begin the process of what Cole calls "real networking"—making friends intentionally amongst people I respect and admire, people who inspire me with their creativity.

I wouldn't have had the confidence to message any of these people before; they're legitimate working artists. But so am I now. I'm not a cosplayer anymore. I'm passionate about my current series, I believe in it. I'm not embarrassed to talk about it. Quite the opposite—I want to discuss childhood trauma and self-destructive impulses. My mind is full of ideas.

The more I open up, the more I realize how many other people share these experiences. My past was ugly, but not so unique that no one else can understand it. Instead of judgment, I find acceptance.

A few of my posts go viral; most don't. I don't pay attention to that. I care more about the growing conversation amongst our group of like-minded artists.

Opening up to Cole, seeing his calm acceptance of even my strangest statements, is helping me to trust other people. To believe that they could meet the real Mara and actually like her, flaws and all.

Some of my new friends live in San Francisco. We meet in person at shows. Some are already known to Cole.

Cole is different when he's introducing me around. He turns on the full measure of his charm, which is not as boisterous and loud as Shaw's but is

extraordinarily effective nonetheless because of his sly wit and his intense focus upon the person with whom we're speaking.

At a dinner at Betsy Voss' house, Cole sets the whole table roaring with an anecdote from art school.

Afterward I say to him, "I've never seen you like that. You had the whole room eating out of your hand."

Cole looks at me, pushing back his fall of dark hair with one hand.

"I only told that story for you."

"What do you mean?"

"You looked bored. Something inside me whispered, 'Say something funny. Make her laugh.' "

This touches me in the strangest way.

Cole and I had just spent the whole day together and fucked in the car on the way to the party. The fact that he still felt compelled to entertain me is ridiculously flattering.

The *Siren* prints a photo of us climbing out of Cole's car, Cole holding the door open for me, dark and moody-looking with his long black coat swept back by the wind, and me with my hair in a maelstrom, my sparkly mini dress glinting like a disco ball, my head thrown back in laughter as the gust tries to take me away.

The caption reads: *The Crown Prince and Princess of the Art World*.

Below that, a brief article talking about Cole's half-built sculpture in Corona Heights Park, and my upcoming show. The photograph shows one of my paintings, not Cole's work.

It's Cole who shows me the magazine, our glossy image looking far too glamorous to be anyone I know.

I glance up at his face, wondering if it bothers him that they talked more about my show than his sculpture.

"I'm sure they'll write about you again when the maze is finished," I say.

Cole snorts. “I don’t give a shit about that.”

I find that hard to believe. Cole is competitive, with a well-developed sense of his own merit. I can’t imagine he enjoys being overshadowed.

He catches my look.

“Give me a little credit,” he scoffs. “Whatever else I may be, I was never a man who had to tear a woman down to shine bright beside her. If you’re not as good as me, then you’re no good at all. And when I saw you, Mara ... I thought, *this girl is really fucking good*. I don’t want to hold you down, chop you down, diminish you in any way. I already know I found something special. Now it’s time for everyone else to see it.”



COLE

Shaw has killed again.

He might have done it out of anger at losing his bid for Corona Heights. But the body wasn't found in a state of mutilated rage. She was posed like *Flaming June*, something that was hushed up in the papers but *TruCrime* managed to splash across its site in full-color photographs.

The cold calculation of the slaying disturbs me far more than Shaw's usual lustful rage.

The girl is dark-haired, slim, beautiful. The close-up photographs show one pale hand with roughly-bitten fingernails. Two of those fingers missing entirely.

It's the only mark of brutality on an otherwise pristine body. Not a single tear on her flowing orange gown. Her face lovely and unmarked, eyes closed with a gentleness that might be sleep.

Even more disquieting, Hawks doesn't come calling in the aftermath of her death. Instead, I see his unmarked car trailing mine when I drive from the studio to Corona Heights. I see his tall, upright figure lingering on Clay Street.

He knows I see him. He wants me to know.

He isn't following Shaw.

Shaw is allowed to roam free with a different beautiful blonde on his arm every night of the week, these girls never suspecting that they're riding the cock of the Beast of the Bay, kissing the mouth that ripped chunks of flesh out of girls very like themselves.

Never guessing that Shaw's real preference is, and always has been, exclusively brunettes.

Erin was the only redhead, something Hawks' brain-dead profiler hasn't seemed to have noticed.

Sometimes I think I could do any job better than the people employed to do it. The rest of the world is a morass of incompetence, everyone playing dress-up at their jobs. Are there any actual adults? Or just children that grew tall?

Mara can't escape the news of the latest killing, which is whispered everywhere. I'd like to hide it from her, but I can't.

Janice pulls up *TruCrime* on her computer, and a dozen artists gather around.

I watch from across the room. Mara lingers at the edge of the pack, desperately wanting to turn away, but forced to look at the images. Witnessing what Shaw has done.

When she turns back to me, I see the horror in her eyes.

She feels responsible.

Shaw continues unchecked because of us. Because of her.

While she's admitted her anger, she has yet to act upon it.

Maybe she hopes I'll do it in secret, without her ever having to raise a finger. She'll wake up one morning and Shaw will simply be dead.

That's not happening.

There will be no pleasant convenience for Mara.

She's going to learn the difference between thoughts and action.

Everyone knows someone they wish would die. Very few will make it happen.

I stand on one side of a chasm. Mara has to join me.

It's the only way we can truly be together.



MARA

At night, lying in bed in the darkness, I can tell that Cole is not yet asleep. No slow, heavy breaths, only the stillness that tells me he's thinking about something with all his focus.

I'm also thinking hard.

Probably on the same topic.

We both saw those pictures this morning. And we both know what it means.

Shaw is starting another cycle of killing, with barely any break since the last. That means two more girls sacrificed to his hunger. Maybe more.

How many will it take for Officer Hawks to get the evidence he needs?

Cole says Hawks isn't even following Shaw. He's tailing us instead.

I'm dreading Shaw crashing my show. He wasn't invited, but I'm sure he'd love to turn up to gloat in our faces again.

I hate him. I hate that he's roaming around unchecked, more vicious and violent by the day.

I could have saved this girl. She was twenty-four, a year younger than me. A med student, apparently.

If I'd agreed with Cole right away then Shaw might already be dead. He never could have snatched her from whatever sidewalk or alleyway he

found her.

My refusal of violence was a pillar in my own sense of self. The evidence that I was a good person.

Now I wonder if I'm just a coward.

The idea of facing Shaw, of taking real action against him, terrifies me. I never stopped having nightmares of the night he grabbed me. I've never felt more afraid than when his bull-like body hurtled toward me, too fast to run or even to scream before he hit me so hard it felt like my head exploded.

This time, Cole will be with me.

But even Cole isn't looking forward to the battle with Shaw. He knows better than I the level of Shaw's brutality and cunning. It won't be easy to catch him off guard.

If I do nothing, as surely as the sun rises, I'll see another article about a murdered girl.

"Cole," I say, breaking the still silence.

Immediately he replies, "Yes?"

"We have to kill Shaw."

He lets out a small breath of air that might be amusement.

"I know that. I've known it all along. You're finally catching up."

"Well, I'm here now. How do we do it?"

"You're not ready yet."

This is so infuriating that I roll over in a huff, leaning on my elbow, trying to make out his expression in the dark.

"What are you talking about?"

"If you're agreeing that we need to do this, then you're going to help me. We have the best chance of success working together. But you're not ready."

This is outrageous. I've finally agreed to do what he wants, and now he's fucking with me.

"You think you're going to train me? Like fucking Miyagi?"

"I'm going to prepare you."

I don't know what that's supposed to mean. And I'm not sure I want to find out.

"We don't have time for that! Shaw's going to kill another girl. Or me!" I say, hoping that will spur him along.

Cole lets out a sigh.

"You are thinking in normal-person terms. That is not how Shaw or I think. Our time horizon is infinite. Now that the element of surprise is gone, he doesn't care if it takes a week, a month, or twenty years to destroy me. In fact, he would prefer to prolong it. He enjoys the game, that's the entire point ..."

It gives me a chill realizing that while Cole and I are coming to understand each other, it is still Shaw with whom he shares the most similarity of mind.

"I don't want to watch the bodies stack up," I tell Cole. "We have to do something."

"We will," Cole assures me. "Very soon."



MY SHOW TAKES place two weeks before Christmas.

It's the first time my art will be displayed all on its own, unable to hide amongst other paintings.

I feel the sickest sense of dread as Cole and I drive to the gallery in Laurel Heights, wondering what will happen if no one attends.

I once saw an author sitting alone at a table in Costco with a towering stack of books, and not a single person interested in having one signed. Her look

of hopeful anticipation as I approached, followed by crushing disappointment as I walked past, is still one of the saddest things I've ever seen.

I don't want to be that author.

"Don't worry," Cole says, squeezing my thigh as he turns the wheel with his other hand. "These things are always packed. Especially when I hire even better caterers than Betsy, with enough champagne to drown a horse."

"That actually comforts me," I laugh. "If the paintings are shit, at least the food will be good."

"I would never let you down with food," Cole promises solemnly. "I know it's your top priority."

"I better quit making it my top priority. I think I've gained eight pounds since I moved into your house."

"I like it," Cole says. "It's making your tits bigger."

I slap his shoulder. "Shut the fuck up!"

Cole grabs a handful of the breast in question, sneaking his hand down the front of my top faster than I can smack him away.

"I'm gonna feed you so much fucking cheese," he teases me.

I can't stop laughing.

"Please, no. I'll be four hundred pounds."

"I want to drown in your breasts. What a way to die."

We pull up to the curb, too soon for me to spend any more time worrying.

I'm relieved to see that the gallery is already packed with people, including Sonia manning the door in a gorgeous shimmering cocktail dress, and Frank and Heinrich lurking right behind her.

Heinrich pops out to pull me into an embrace. Frank does the same, after giving Cole a stare that is half admiration, half lingering nervousness.

“Thanks for coming!” I cry, hugging them both hard.

“Joss and Brinley are here, too,” Frank tells me.

I assume that means Joanna isn’t. I didn’t expect anything different, but it still stings.

The gallery throbs with the playlist I spent all week picking out.

Cole encouraged me to choose the music myself, even though I wasn’t sure anybody else would like it.

“Who gives a shit,” he says. “It’s what you were playing when you painted the pieces, so the songs will match the work. They already go together, whether you meant them to or not.”

He’s right.

Heart Shaped Box – Neovaii

[Spotify](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWW8uG1026181) → [geni.us/no-devil-spotify](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWW8uG1026181)

[Apple Music](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWW8uG1026181) → [geni.us/no-devil-apple](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWW8uG1026181)

As a cover of *Heart-Shaped Box* pours out of the speakers, the creepy music-box backing track perfectly suits my oversized painting of a charred teddy bear, glass eyes melted, fur still smoking in places.

I hadn’t realized ‘till this moment how the painting’s title echoes the lyrics of the song:

Meat-eating orchids forgive no one just yet

Cut myself on angel hair and baby’s breath

This one hurt me the most to paint. It’s just a fucking bear, but I was overwhelmed with guilt that something I had loved had met such a bitter end. I almost didn’t finish, putting the painting aside, then changing my mind, turning it around again, and setting it back on the easel. I tilted it, *I Remember and I Don’t Forget*.

This series includes eight paintings in all, each larger than the last. I want the viewer to feel dwarfed by the canvases, overwhelmed by them. Like they themselves have shrunk down to child-size.

I painted at a speed I never could have imagined when I had to squeeze in my art between endless work shifts, already exhausted by the time I lifted brush to canvas.

Some of the paintings are realistic, others include surreal elements.

One is called *The Two Maras*, a reference to Frida Kahlo's famous portrait.

In mine, the first version of Mara stands before a large mirror. The "real" Mara is battered and bruised, with a wide-eyed expression of fear. Her reflection in the mirror looks ten years older: glossy-haired and dressed in a diaphanous black gown, her eyes dark and ferocious, her entire aura crackling with the terrible power of a sorceress.

I called the painting of the girl in the nightgown *The Burial*, as Cole suggested.

The next one along is the same girl in the same nightgown, sitting barefoot on a bus, her feet filthy and scratched, her head leaning exhausted against the window.

All the adults gaze blindly in her direction, their blank faces nothing but a smear of paint. *Mind Your Business*, the title card reads.

Seeing all my paintings together, properly hung and lighted, is the most thrilling thing I've ever experienced.

I'm looking into the window of my own future—a dream I had hoped for desperately, but only ever half-believed.

Here it is now in front of me, and I still can't believe it.

"How do you feel?" Cole asks me.

"Drunk—and I haven't had a sip of champagne."

This time as Cole and I make the rounds, I'm starting to remember people's names and faces, and they're starting to remember me. I almost feel

comfortable chatting with Jack Brisk, who has forgotten that he ever dumped a drink on my dress and is asking if I'd be interested in showing at his collective exhibition in the spring.

"It's an all-female show," Brisk says pompously. "Supporting women's voices. Nobody loves women more than me."

"Obviously," Cole says. "That's why you've been married four times."

"Five, actually," Brisk says, roaring with laughter. "I could fund the UN with all the alimony payments I've made."

The pretty young thing on Brisk's arm, sporting an engagement ring that looks quite new, does not seem as amused by this conversation. When she flounces off and Jack Brisk chases after her, Sonia sidles up to me and says, "She's just mad 'cause she's the first one he's making sign a prenup."

As Cole gets pulled into a conversation with Betsy Voss, Sonia amuses me by whispering other bits of gossip about everyone else who passes.

"That's Joshua Gross over there—he tried to throw a pop-up show this summer. Displaying paintings in posh houses all over the city. Mixing art with architectural porn."

"Not a bad idea," I say.

"It was a fucking disaster. July was blazing hot, and everybody with money had gone to Malibu or Aspen or the Hamptons. Those of us stupid enough to attend were stuck in traffic for six hours trying to drive between houses. It turned out that he never got the right permits to sell paintings out of houses. The city slapped him with so many fines that I doubt he made a dollar off the show."

Poor Joshua still looks frazzled, with unshaven stubble and a haunted look on his face as he gulps down a glass of champagne, a second glass clutched in his other hand.

"And her over there—" Sonia gives a subtle nod toward a slim Asian girl with a long fall of shining dark hair. "That's Gemma Zhang. She's the newest writer for the *Siren*. Now this I don't know for certain, but I have my suspicions ..."

I lean in close so no one but Sonia and I can hear.

“The biggest art mag in Los Angeles is *Artillery*—they ran this gossip column written by a guy called Mitchell Mulholland. Mulholland was just a pseudonym, nobody knew who he really was. All they knew was that come Monday morning, this Mulholland seemed to have been everywhere and seen everything. He was writing about shit like he was hiding inside our houses, telling everybody’s secrets, stirring up all kinds of drama. Everybody was freaking out. He caused so much trouble that *Artillery* had to stop running the column. Mulholland disappeared. Now Gemma’s writing for *Siren* ... and all I can say is, a couple of her articles sound pretty damn familiar to me ... That biting voice reminds me of a certain someone.”

“You think Mulholland was actually Gemma?” I ask.

Sonia shrugs. “All I’m saying is be careful around her ... she’s a fucking shark.”

Watching Gemma take a sip of her drink, her dark eyes flitting everywhere at once, clever and bright, I think Sonia might just be right.

Cole escapes Betsy Voss, who was tipsy enough to require support from his arm, batting her false eyelashes at him until one fell off and landed on Cole’s wrist. He flicked it away like a spider, shuddering.

“You owe me for that one,” Cole murmurs in my ear. “Betsy has a buyer lined up for *The Burial*. But I had to let her run her hands all over my chest for that entire conversation. I’m practically your gigolo these days.”

“Yeah, you want a commission?” I tease him. “Or you just want to run *your* hands over someone’s chest ...”

Cole lets his eyes roam down the front of my jacket, slipping his arm around my waist and pulling me close.

“That might suffice ...” he growls.

I’m wearing a velvet pantsuit in dark plum. I feel like a rockstar.

Cole undresses me with his eyes like the velvet can be pulled away with a glance. He's charged up, maybe even more excited than I am. He gazes around the packed gallery, not bothering to hide his grin of triumph.

Cole wasn't lying.

He really does love to see me succeed.

"Look who's here," Sonia says.

Shaw comes through the double doors, a stunning blonde on his arm. The girl looks pleased and excited, clinging to Shaw's bicep.

Shaw bears no smile at all, sullen and abrupt as people try to greet him.

He locks eyes with me from across the room.

I feel Cole stiffen, drawing me even closer to him.

"He looks pissed," I mutter to Cole.

"I told you, he's salty about Corona Heights."

Shaw stares at me, ignoring the girl at his side. Every second that passes, I can feel Cole getting more agitated, as if he'd like to sprint across the room and put out Shaw's eyes.

When Shaw finally turns away, distracted by Betsy Voss, Cole says, "If he comes within ten feet of you, I'm going to tear out his throat."

"He's not gonna do anything here. You said so yourself."

"I don't want him here at all," Cole hisses. "I don't even want him looking at you."

I can still feel a pair of eyes fixed on me. Not Shaw's—it's Gemma Zhang, glancing between Shaw, Cole, and myself. She watched the entire exchange. As brief and uneventful as it was, she seems to have found interest in it, as she's now smiling slightly.

"I've got to pee," I say to Cole.

I head back to the bathrooms, where I hear the distinctive sniff of someone taking a pick-me-up in the adjoining stall, and the crackle of a tampon wrapper from the other side.

I take my time, savoring the solitude of the stall after the hubbub of the party. It's heady to be the center of attention, but also exhausting.

When I've finished and washed my hands, I almost collide with Gemma Zhang. I suspect she was waiting outside the bathroom to orchestrate just this sort of meeting.

"Mara Eldritch," she says, holding out a freshly-manicured hand. "The woman of the hour."

"Gemma, right?" I say, taking the hand and shaking it.

"Did Sonia warn you about me?" she smiles slyly. "She's quite the guard dog for Cole Blackwell. Can't take a step in his direction with Sonia barking at you."

"She's good at her job."

I'm trying to decide how I feel about Gemma. She's quite lovely, elegantly dressed in her silk jumpsuit, but there's a wicked edge to her smile that doesn't put me at ease.

"You must see a lot of Sonia," Gemma muses. "While you're seeing a lot of Cole. Living together already, aren't you?"

There's no point denying what everyone already knows.

"That's right."

"That was fast. Love at first sight?"

"Not exactly."

"I don't know if I've ever seen Cole in love at all. Is this all part of the rivalry?"

"What do you mean?"

“My sources tell me that it was Alastor Shaw who took an interest in you first.”

“Your sources are wrong. I’ve barely spoken to Shaw.”

“But he did date your roommate ...”

“I don’t want to talk about Erin,” I snap.

“Of course,” Gemma offers an expression of sympathy I don’t quite believe. “What an awful thing. I’m sure you heard about the girl they found down by Black Point ... people are saying she was posed like a painting.”

“That’s what I heard,” I say stiffly.

“Can you imagine if an artist was doing all this?” Gemma pretends to look around us. “They could be here right now.”

“Are you writing about the murders?”

“Actually ...” Gemma smiles brightly. “I’m writing about you. San Francisco’s newest rising star!”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Oh, it’s certain. Look at these paintings! Just stunning. Drawn from personal experience, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“Why so many references to childhood?”

“Childhood shapes us all—the events we remember, and even those we don’t.”

“It’s shaped you as an artist?”

I shrug. “Remedios Varo learned to draw by copying construction blueprints her father brought home from work. Andy Warhol was a sickly child who spent his days drawing in bed, surrounded by celebrity posters and magazines. Our history always influences our aesthetic.”

“These don’t look like happy memories.”

“That one might be,” I nod toward the painting nearest us, which depicts a girl and a cat curled up asleep in a bed of tulips.

When I was very young, maybe three, I woke up from a nap in an empty apartment. It might have been the silence that woke me. I slipped off my little mattress and wandered through the apartment, which didn’t belong to us, but where I’d been staying with my mother for several weeks. I navigated the empty bottles and trash scattered everywhere, afraid to call out and break the eerie silence.

I found the front door, which stood partially open.

I wandered out into the hall, and then down the stairs, never seeing another person.

When I came out onto the sidewalk, a large calico cat sat waiting on the steps, gazing at me with unblinking eyes. Being three, I was certain the cat waited for me. It jumped down off the step and began strolling around the corner. I followed after it.

Eventually, it settled down in the tulip bed of the back garden, stretching out in the sunshine. I climbed up onto the warm dirt and lay with the cat, my head against its body. We both drifted off with the gentle buzz of bees all around us.

Later, an old woman found me. She took me up to her apartment and fed me coconut cake. I had never eaten coconut before.

That was a memory I returned to in times of stress or pain. I believed the cat was there to take care of me. I believed it for years.

But I don’t tell any of that to Gemma.

“Even that one’s lonely,” Gemma says, tilting her head to the side as she examines *The Nap*. “The dark color palette ... the smallness of the child next to the cat ...”

It’s true. The cat is oversized, a calico tiger, larger than the girl herself, who almost disappears amongst the jumbled stems of tulips.

“The girl’s always alone,” Gemma persists. “Where’s her parents?”

“I have no idea,” I say before I can think better of it. “Excuse me—I’ve got other people I need to speak to.”

My heart twitches uncomfortably against my ribs.

I don’t like Gemma’s bright eyes trained on me, or her line of questioning.

The rest of the show passes pleasantly enough. Shaw only stays twenty minutes, slapping a few backs and shaking a few hands, but keeping his distance from Cole and me. It gives me a chill when he stands before each of my paintings in turn, examining them closely before moving on to the next.

I don’t like that he’s looking inside my head.

That’s the nature of art. You open yourself for everyone to see, to judge. You can’t make art at all unless you’re willing to lay yourself bare and risk what follows.

Shaw’s date lingers by the buffet, shifting her weight on her towering high heels, bored and probably a little lonely.

I want to sidle up and whisper in her ear to run far, far away.

“You don’t have to worry about her,” Cole says.

“Why not?”

“He’s not going to kill someone he dated publicly.”

“He killed Erin.”

“Only on impulse. He was there for you.”

I imagine Shaw’s heavy hand clamping over my mouth while I lay sound asleep on my old mattress.

Going to Cole’s house that night saved my life.

It will lose Shaw his.



THREE DAYS LATER, Gemma Zhang publishes her article about me.

She's complimentary to my work and the show in general.

But the final paragraph makes my stomach lurch:

I contacted Mara's mother Tori Eldritch to get her comment on the autobiographical show that references themes of neglect and abuse.

Tori said:

"It's all lies. Mara had a perfect childhood, anything she could ever want. She was pampered. Spoiled, even. She'll do anything for attention, she's always been that way. I took her to so many psychiatrists, but they could never fix her. I don't call that art. Fantasy, more like. A filthy, deceptive fantasy to slander the people who took care of her. My lawyer says I should sue her for defamation."

That puts a different spin on the collection of ostensibly personal images.

In speaking to Mara Eldritch, she told me, "Childhood shapes all of us—the events we remember, and even those we don't."

Perhaps Mara is leaning hard on those events we "don't remember."

I shove the laptop away from me, face burning.

"That fucking CUNT!" I shout.

"Gemma, or your mother?" Cole inquires.

"Both!"

"No one's going to believe your mother," Cole says dismissively. "She's nobody. You're the one with the microphone."

I'm still seething, the room spinning around me.

“She can’t let me have anything. She can’t stand what it would mean, if I succeed without her, in spite of her.”

“You already are succeeding,” Cole says serenely. “And she can’t do a damn thing about it.”



COLE

Mara's mother's giving interviews.
If Gemma Zhang can find her, so can I.

It's been too long since I put my online stalking skills to use. I spend an afternoon in my office at the studio, hunting down Tori Eldritch and Randall Pratt.

This is something I've been intending to do for some time now. I want to know exactly where those two are living and what they're up to.

Randall is surprisingly difficult to locate.

I assume somebody other than myself is interested in breaking his kneecaps, because his supposed address was only a rented office space, with no car registered under his name.

I still manage to find a phone number that I'm pretty sure is a working cell.

He answers the second time I call.

"What?"

Rough as a bag of rocks rolling around in the back of a truck—just like Mara said.

The voice I plan to use is clear and friendly, with a slight Midwest twang. The kind of voice designed to disarm Randall without quite mimicking him.

“Hey there Mr. Pratt. My name’s Kyle Warner. I write for the *Chronicle*, and I’m doing a story on an artist named Mara Eldritch. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions?”

A long pause.

“Not interested,” Randall grunts, rustling the phone like he’s about to hang up.

“Well, hang on!” I say. “Could ya at least confirm a quote I got from her mother Tori Eldritch?”

Another pause, even longer.

I hear his heavy breath on the other end of the line.

“You talked to Tori?”

“That’s right.”

“In person, or over the phone?”

“I flew up to speak with her.”

“Flew where?”

Now it’s my turn to let a brief silence fall between us. Keeping my tone cheerful, I say, “Well, we can discuss that in person. I need another source for this article. Pay’s five hundred bucks, and it won’t take but a little of your time.”

Breath. Breath. Heavy breath. Hot and wet in my ear.

“Alright,” Randall grunts. “I’m in La Crescenta. You can meet me at a pub called The Black Dog.”

A smile spreads over my face where Randall can’t possibly see it.

“Perfect.”



MARA and I drive out to Burbank together. She's going to be interviewed for the DBS morning show.

"I don't know if I want to be on TV," she tells me, raising her hand to her mouth, then quickly putting it back down on her lap, twisting her fingers together in anguish.

She got a manicure and doesn't want to fuck it up.

"You're going to be great," I tell her. "I'll be right there with you, watching the whole time."

"What do you think they'll ask me?"

"Nothing challenging—it's a morning show, for fuck's sake. If they weren't talking to you, they'd probably be interviewing the lady who baked the world's biggest donut."

"They *should* interview her," Mara laughs. "What an accomplishment."

"You know we have to be at the studio at 4:15 a.m. for hair and makeup."

"Are you serious!?" she cries. Mara's not an early riser.

"That's why they call it a morning show—'cause it's at the goddamned crack of dawn."

"I'm so nervous. I'm not gonna sleep a wink."

"Do you want an Ambien? I brought two with me."

She considers, tapping one nicely polished nail against her lower teeth.

"What if I can't wake up in time?"

"You'll be fine. I'll set an alarm."

"Alright," she agrees, sighing in relief. "Otherwise I'll be exhausted."

We settle in at the Chateau Marmont, where I've booked us a suite overlooking Sunset Boulevard. I thought Mara would like its architecture and the Old Hollywood history.

“Howard Hughes lived here,” I tell her. “Desi Arnaz would come stay whenever he was fighting with Lucille Ball. Bette Davis almost burned it down—twice. And Sharon Tate moved out of the hotel six months before she was killed. John Belushi and Helmut Newton both died here.”

I looked all this up beforehand, knowing it would interest her. Mara likes anything historical, tragic, or glamorous.

“The hotel’s in lots of movies, too,” I continue. “*La La Land ... A Star Is Born ...*”

“Really?” Mara gasps. “*La La Land*’s one of my favorites.”

“I know,” I laugh. “You play that one song from it all the time.”

“That’s right,” Mara says, pleased that I remembered.

Our room isn’t as luxurious as some of the places I’ve stayed, but Mara is never picky. She runs around the room, admiring the old-fashioned furniture and striped wallpaper.

She’s keyed up about the interview, equal parts giddy and terrified.

“I always think I want attention until I actually get it ... I hope I don’t say something weird that gets turned into a meme. Like when Brett Kavanaugh told everybody he was a virgin in school, and for ‘many years after.’ ”

Mara shudders, imagining her face splashed all over templates.

“All publicity is good publicity.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“It is when you’re this hot,” I say, seizing her and throwing her down on the bed, which creaks and groans beneath her.

“Wait,” she says. “Give me the Ambien first.”

“You sure? Those things are strong.”

“Yeah. I like that floating feeling in sex. Like I’m half in my body and half out. Like you could do anything to me ...”

My heart rate spikes as a gallon of adrenaline dumps into my bloodstream. I have to bite down hard on the inside of my cheek to keep control of myself.

“You kinky little fuck.”

I hand her the small pink pills and a bottle of water stamped with the hotel’s logo. Mara tosses down the pills, chugging half the water as well.

“Perfect.” She grins.

She’s full of rowdy energy, amped up with nerves and excitement. She pushes me back on the bed, saying, “Sit there.”

I lean back against the pillows, waiting to see what this wild little thing has in mind.

Mara is the only person on this planet from whom I occasionally take orders, purely out of curiosity. No matter how much time I spend with her, I still can’t predict exactly what she’ll do next. That’s why she’s endlessly fascinating to me. She doesn’t fall into routine. She doesn’t pick the obvious choice. And she sure as fuck doesn’t behave herself.

Mara takes my Bluetooth speaker out of her suitcase, the one that usually resides in the bathroom. She sets it up on the dresser, streaming music from her phone.

The Devil is a Gentleman – Merci Raines

[Spotify → geni.us/no-devil-spotify](https://open.spotify.com/album/1234567890)

[Apple Music → geni.us/no-devil-apple](https://open.spotify.com/album/1234567890)

The beat flows into the room, mysterious and sultry, with a hint of playfulness. As soon as she hears it, she closes her eyes and starts swaying, shoulders first, then hips. She knows how to move. In fact, she *has* to move. She can’t hear music without it taking over her body.

I liked music well enough, but I never understood its full power until I met Mara. She unerringly selects songs with an irresistible beat and an overpowering mood. She finds the songs that tickle your brain, that fire up the neurons until you can almost see the notes sparking in the air around you.

Mara throws open the heavy drapes covering the windows, letting in the last of the late afternoon sunshine, revealing the view of the Hollywood Hills.

She stands directly in front of the window, framed by the glass, her body a shadowed silhouette, gold around the edges. She's still dancing, running her hands through her hair and down her curves.

Slowly, she unzips the front of her hoodie. She shimmies out of it, languorously sliding the sleeves down her arms, then flinging it away from her so it sails across the room and lands on top of the lampshade. Underneath, she wears only a thin undershirt, through which I can clearly see the outline of her nipples, the shape of the silver rings, and the indent of her navel.

Next, her jeans: she unzips the front, her fingers light and teasing, taking her time. Turning away from me, she slides the jeans down over the round globes of her ass, bisected by her thong.

I want to unzip my own pants because my cock is raging against the fly, but I wait, eyes fixed on Mara, cheeks throbbing from how hard I'm biting them. She's stoking my fire. The impulse to jump up from this bed and seize her is torturous. It takes everything I have to stay still.

She hops up on the windowsill, lifting up her legs and resting her bare feet on the opposite side of the frame so she can slide off the jeans. She tosses her pants aside, getting up on her knees now, then on her feet, standing in the frame with her back to me.

Resting her hands on the upper frame, she makes slow circles with her hips, swaying that peachy little ass, teasing me, tempting me ...

Silhouetted against the setting sun, her figure glows like a caryatid, like she's holding up the whole building.

I could never sculpt anything so perfect.

She pulls off her undershirt and tosses it behind her. It lands on my lap. I pick up the crumpled cotton, still warm from her body and I press it to my face, inhaling her intoxicating scent.

The idea that someone else might be standing below that window, that they might look up and see the view that I haven't even yet seen myself, makes me wild with jealousy.

I like that feeling. I'm always in competition for Mara, for her attention and for her body.

I like competing.

I like winning even more.

Mara doesn't give a fuck that we're seven stories up, with only a thin pane of glass between her and a hundred-foot drop. She's still dancing, her body as lithe and sinuous as a snake, rolling and swaying, hypnotizing me.

Now she turns and hops down, taking slow, sensual steps toward me, her hands covering her breasts. She caresses those breasts, squeezes them, then reveals their perfection to me, like opening the doors into heaven.

I'm salivating.

My cock throbs with every beat of my heart.

The chorus of the song begins to play:

*Oh don't you know, don't you know
'Bout the devil ... he's a gentleman*

Mara gives me a naughty little glance, letting me know that she selected this song on purpose.

I was already well aware that she modeled her painting of the devil after me. After Shaw too—when she painted it, she wasn't entirely sure which of us had abducted her off the street.

She thinks I'm tempting her along the path of evil.

I disagree.

I want to help her find her true self, as she's helping me find mine.

I don't know if I'm becoming a better man. All I know for certain is that I'm finding new abilities inside myself. Powers I couldn't tap until Mara showed me the way.

Turning her body to the side, Mara pretends to slide her thong down her hip, then pulls it back up again.

I let out a groan.

Grinning wickedly, she turns the other way and repeats her tease on the other side.

“Get over here before I rip you to pieces,” I growl.

Mara lets out a peal of delighted laughter and pulls down her underwear, kicking it away.

The shape of her soft little pussy makes me die to rub my fingers over it, to taste it with my tongue. I want to push my face into it like I did with her shirt. I want to eat her alive.

Starting at the foot of the bed, she crawls up to me on hands and knees, her eyes locked on mine, her body moving with sinuous grace.

She reaches my belt buckle and stops, her slim fingers deftly working to release me from my clothes.

She unfastens the belt and my trousers, pulling them down, underwear too. My cock is raging, so congested with blood that the veins bulge and the pale flesh flushes with angry color.

When Mara closes her mouth around it, I groan like an animal, like a starving beast.

“Not that way,” I snarl. “Turn around and feed me that pussy.”

Mara flips around so her mouth is still encircling my cock, but her ass is up in my face. The shell-like shape of her pussy and the tight little bud above are so fucking erotic that for a moment I can only stare, hands clenching the meat of her firm, round ass.

She's wet everywhere, glistening with it.

Dancing for me turned her on as badly as it did me.

I dive in, licking and sucking and thrusting my tongue inside every place I can reach. I'm ravenous, my mouth watering, fucking dying for her. Craving the taste of her, lapping it up with my tongue.

Meanwhile, her hot wet mouth slides up and down my cock.

The deeper I push my tongue inside her, the deeper she takes my cock. When I lap her clit with my tongue, she sucks on the head, keeping pace with me, making me feel what I'm making her feel, together at the same time.

I can feel her mouth getting warmer and wetter, her lips swollen, her throat relaxing around my cock. The Ambien is kicking in.

I lick all the way up her slit, and then I press my tongue against the tight bud of her ass.

Mara shrieks and tries to squirm away, but I have her locked in place, hands gripping her hips.

I know this embarrasses her, that she doesn't want to let me do it. That's exactly what makes it so fucking hot. I'm gripping her, pulling her into me, forcing her to take it.

I lick her ass in steady strokes until she relaxes, and then I push my tongue inside her again.

The area grows warm and swollen, flushed with blood.

Soaked from her pussy, her ass tastes just as good.

The more I lick her, the more she relaxes, and the deeper I can push my tongue inside her. She can't help the sounds that come out of her: whimpers at first, and then helpless sighs of pleasure, followed by gasps and groans.

There are a thousand nerve endings here, just like the clit. Licking her ass brings the erogenous tissue alive. It awakens an entirely new source of pleasure.

Because it's new and untested, she's helpless before it. She's trapped in place, by pleasure as much as by my hands locked around her.

I eat her ass like a ten-course meal.

This is an act I never considered doing before. It would have disgusted me.

But nothing about Mara disgusts me. The dirtier our sex, the more it arouses me.

With Mara, I see it, I want it, I crave it.

I give in to my impulses. I lose myself in the frenzy.

I'm a wild animal, utterly unhinged.

This is the closest I get to the feeling of killing, only a thousand times better, because I'm not alone in it. Mara is right here with me, equally as wild, equally as feral. She's choking on my cock, trying to swallow it whole, while I fuck her pussy and ass with my tongue, one after the other, back and forth.

She gives in to me completely, and that's the greatest rush of all, that moment of submission, when I know she's lost in pleasure, she can't think or fight anymore. She can only moan and beg for more.

I go back to her clit, her hips clamped between my hands, using all my strength to force her to ride on my tongue.

She starts to cum, moaning around my cock, and then screaming as the orgasm rips through her, the hardest I've seen her have from oral alone. Her whole body shakes, and her teeth scrape my cock, so sharp that I'm worried she might bite it off.

Then she goes limp, rolling over on the bed, hands flopping overhead, nipples pointing up to the ceiling.

"Holy shiiiiiiit," she groans.

"I told you not to tease me."

I scoop her up in my arms, rearranging her on the pillows so her head is at the top of the bed, her feet down.

Her limbs are warm and heavy, her pupils dilated until I can hardly see the thin ring of silver around the black.

“You feeling that yet?” I ask her.

“Yeah, I’m feeling it,” she says, her voice soft and dreamy. “Eat my pussy, Daddy ... send me into outer space ...”

She’s never called me that before. I don’t know if it’s because she’s high, or if it’s something she’s wanted to say for a while.

I go down between her thighs, gently licking her pussy with my tongue. Slow and languorous, with soft, melting pleasure.

Looking up at her, I say, “Why am I your daddy?”

She sighs, her head turning slowly from side to side like the bed is a boat rocking her across the water.

“Because ...” she says softly. “Because you take care of me. You protect me. You do everything for me ...”

“Yes, I do.”

“You always know what to do ... you always know what’s best.”

I suck gently on her clit, smiling to myself.

“Keep that in mind,” I say.

Mara doesn’t respond. She’s already drifting away.



IN THE DARK HOTEL ROOM, I make my preparations for the night ahead.

The Ambien was for me, not for her. I need to know she’s safely locked away in this room so I can focus on the task at hand.

I close the drapes and hang the *Do Not Disturb* sign over the doorknob, taking the only key with me when I leave.

Exiting through the lobby, I hail a cab to the airport.

The cabbie drops me off at the sky bridge. Instead of walking over to the check-in desks, I turn the other way, heading toward long-term parking. This is the best place to steal a car. Unless I'm very unlucky, no one will notice that their 2018 Camry is taking a little adventure tonight.

It only takes me a minute to break into the car, and three more to bring the engine to life.

I pay the attendant with cash on the way out of the lot. He doesn't even look up, mumbling, "Have a good night," as I drive through.

I could have taken my Tesla, but California has too many toll roads with cameras.

I drive to La Crescenta, to the edge of town bordering the mountains.

The Black Dog pub is situated in the shabbiest neighborhood I've driven through on my journey, with tiny salt-box houses situated on bald patches of grass between chain-link fences. I'm sure these little shacks still sell in the high six-figures, because this is California, where a one-bed one-bath can easily run a million dollars. This winter notwithstanding, it's still the most temperate climate on the globe. People will endure any level of traffic or taxation to live here.

I wait in the parking lot for Randall to arrive. I'm an hour early, wanting to be there first so I can see which car he drives, and so I can ensure that he's alone.

Randall must have had the same idea. He pulls in a half-hour early himself, driving a beat-up Ford truck with paint so worn it looks like mange.

Mara told me that her mother and Randall eventually divorced, partly because their fights had turned so violent the neighbors called the cops every weekend, with Randall spending the night in jail at least twice. He was running out of money, which meant Tori Eldritch was no longer interested.

Looks like he's yet to make his fortune again. I found him through tax returns for the construction company for which he currently works. The

address on record was the empty office space. I still don't know where Randall lives.

Now that he's here, I make my way inside and pick up a beer at the bar. Selecting a booth in the darkest and most distant corner of the pub, I text Randall:

I'm here whenever you are.

Then I wait, hoping he's not going to back out.

Ten minutes later, Randall shuffles into the pub. He's well past sixty, but you can tell he was once a man with shoulders to rival Shaw. Now those shoulders droop and a hard, round belly causes his jeans to sag. His scarred hands testify to years of labor. The broken blood vessels on his bulbous nose and the yellow tinge to his eyes tell another story.

Randall walks to the bar to get his own beer. I watch his interaction with the bartender, checking to see if they know each other, if they're friends. The interaction is brief and impersonal. The bartender keeps his focus on the football game playing on the TV hung over the opposite corner of the bar. I doubt he'll look our way.

Just in case, I'm wearing a baseball cap, glasses, and the sort of plaid button-up that Randall should perceive as a slightly more stylish version of his own buffalo shirt.

I ordered a Budweiser, the same bottle Randall sets down on the table.

He sinks heavily into the booth, knocking the tabletop askew with his belly.

"They make these things so fuckin' tight," he grouses.

"Nothing's made for tall men," I agree.

It's Randall's bulk, not his height, causing the problem. But commiseration is the first step to friendship.

"Didn't even know if I was gonna come tonight," Randall grumbles. "Haven't seen that bitch in years."

“Mara?”

“Tori.”

I knew Tori Eldritch would be the hook. Once a woman has her claws in a man, he never quite gets free of it. Randall divorced her and moved across the state, but if Tori showed up on his doorstep in a tight dress, he’d make the same mistakes all over again.

“When’s the last time you saw her?”

“Nine years ago.”

“Mara would have been sixteen?”

“Fifteen.”

“She was your stepdaughter?”

Randall makes a dismissive, snorting sound. “I guess.”

She lived in his house for almost a decade, but he’s behaving as if he hardly knows her.

“What made you split up?”

“She’s a fuckin’ nutcase. And the apple don’t fall far from the tree.”

“I’ve had a hard time tracking down sources. I’ve gotta interview three family members, and it doesn’t seem like Mara has many.”

“We’re not family. We never were.”

“Alright.” I shrug. “They’re paying five hundred bucks though. So if you know anything, it doesn’t take much to get paid.”

Randall shifts in his seat, considering.

“And you’ll give me Tori’s address?” he says.

“Sure. When we’re done talking.”

Randall grunts his assent. “Whaddaya wanna know?”

“What was Mara like when you knew her?”

“Fuckin’ annoying. I never wanted another kid in the house. My boys were bad enough. Ungrateful too—she’s eating my food, wearing the clothes I put on her back, and she has the fuckin’ gall to skulk around the house glaring at me. Plus her and her mom were at it all the time like cats, fucking’ squallin’ and causin’ a racket.”

“Did you see any early evidence of her talent?”

Randall scoffs. “Drawin’ pictures is supposed to be a job now? Don’t make me laugh. Fuckin’ lazy, just like her mother.”

I don’t expect any actual insight from this man. There’s only one piece of information that interests me, and I’ll play through this charade until I get it. The rest is all just fuel on the fire. Though I can’t let him see any hint of the fury stoking inside me with every word that comes out of his disgusting nicotine-stained mouth.

“You said her relationship with her mother was bad?”

“Fuckin’ hated each other. Tori wished she never had her. Said it all the time. I told her she should pack her off to some relative, but there wasn’t anybody to take her. Besides, Tori had some weird thing about her.”

“What do you mean?”

“She talked shit on her nonstop. But she was obsessed with reading her journals, her text messages. She’d wear Mara’s clothes and her perfume. Especially around me.”

My jaw ticks.

“She thought that would attract you?”

“Fuck if I know. She was jealous as hell. Always screaming at me if she thought I looked at Mara.”

This is the delicate part, where I have to put out the lure without scaring off the fish.

I give a low chuckle, the kind that tells a man that locker room talk is on the table.

“Well ... Tori wasn't getting any younger.”

Randall snorts. “That's for damn sure.”

“And Mara's pretty enough ...”

Randall takes a long pull of his beer, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand and belching softly. Then he leans forward, fixing me with his bloodshot stare.

“That woman would have let me do anything to her daughter. She offered her up when she realized I was really gonna leave her. Flat out told me I could have her.”

I keep the friendly smirk fixed on my face, pitching my voice low and amused.

“Why didn't you take her up on it? Or maybe you did ...”

“Wasn't worth it by then. That cunt was gonna get me tossed in jail. And the daughter's all fucked up. A fuckin' spaz. There's something wrong with her. She's some kinda retar—”

He breaks off, eyes flicking to my upper lip, which is curling into a snarl I can't control. I have to turn it into a laugh that comes out harsh and braying.

“You don't say.”

“Yeah.” Randall takes another swallow of beer, face closing up, sitting back in his chair again.

I tipped him off. Couldn't keep hold of myself. I'm fucking sloppy.

Where's the old Cole when you need him?

I take a long, steady breath. Deliberately slowing my heart rate. Shelving all thoughts of Mara sleeping peacefully back at the hotel. Crushing my fury, and the sickening sense of disgust that threatens to overwhelm me every time I look at Randall's smug face.

I clear my mind of everything but the goal.

When I do, the old Cole is right there waiting for me.

Hello, old friend.

The room sharpens. The babble around me separates into distinct conversations. I smell the hops in Randall's beer, and note a pine sap stain on his left sleeve—evidence that he's been out in the woods sometime recently.

I can practically hear his heart beating.

I lean forward again, taking off my cap and running a hand through my hair.

“You might be right,” I say in a conspiratorial tone. “I know one fucked-up thing about her. My boss won't let me print it, which is a fuckin' shame.”

Randall can't resist this. He leans forward on his knees, too, piggy eyes glittering.

Everybody loves a secret.

“What is it?”

I look around as if making sure nobody can hear us. I already made damn sure this booth in the corner was out of sight, but it gives the proper effect.

“Guess Mara needed some cash a while back. She filmed a porn.”

“She did?”

Randall's trying to play it cool, but I hear his breath catch. I see the way his thick hand clenches around his beer bottle.

“Yeah. Some nasty, dirty shit. She bought it back from the studio, doesn't want anybody getting their hands on it, but you know the internet never forgets.”

“You found it?”

I grin, molars grinding in the back. “You're damn right I did.”

Now I sit back, triumphant, sipping my own drink. Waiting for what I know is certain to follow.

Another long silence from Randall. Then the low, urgent mutter, “You think you could send that to me?”

“I’ve got it on a flash drive back at the hotel.” I take another drink of my beer, letting him squirm. Watching the flush rise up his neck. Then I put out the real lure: the one he can’t possibly resist. “Some crazy shit in some kinda schoolgirl outfit ...”

He needs it now. He has to have it.

“You can send me a copy, can’t you?”

“It sounds like we’re negotiating.” I give him a smile with just enough sleaziness to seem genuine. “You got something for me? What about Mara’s dad—you know where he lives?”

“I don’t even know his name,” Randall grunts. “Tori never said shit about him.”

Damn it.

“Well, I need pictures for the article. Any old photographs, yearbooks, letters ...”

“I didn’t keep any a that shit,” Randal scoffs.

“Too bad.” I pretend to give up on the idea.

Randall can’t let go of the prize. He’s licking his lips, clenching that beer like a grenade. Then he thinks of something.

“I got a picture of her mom fuckin’ some Nazi.”

I grin. “That sounds like a trade. Bring it to my hotel room.”

“Nah.” Randall shakes his head. “I can’t drive that far. I got a cabin fifteen minutes from here. You can follow me up.”

“Even better.”



MARA

Cole wakes me up nice and early, already looking bright-eyed and freshly showered. He doesn't seem tired at all, but invigorated.

"Get up, sleepyhead," he says. "Time for your TV debut."

He's already got blueberry scones and a latte waiting for me, both warm and fresh.

"What time did you wake up?" I say, stumbling out of bed.

I'm still a little groggy from the Ambien, though my body feels warm and relaxed.

"I didn't sleep at all," Cole says.

"What? Why not?"

"No point when we had to get up this early. I'll catch a nap later if I feel like it."

I guess that makes sense. Cole rarely goes to sleep before midnight, so it would only have been a few hours' rest at most.

I wouldn't be that chipper on zero sleep, but good for him.

I climb into the shower, luxuriating in the hot, pounding spray, which feels particularly sensual after my hibernation.

“What do you think I should wear?” I crack the glass door to call out to Cole.

“What did you bring?”

“The blue dress and the velvet jumpsuit.”

“Wear the jumpsuit. It’s sexier.”

“Do I want to be sexy, though?”

I’m shampooing my hair, eyes closed, trying to picture both outfits. I do love the jumpsuit, but I don’t want to give the wrong impression. The world is so much harder on women than on men when it comes to our looks and our clothing. Especially when you’re competing in a male-dominated field.

Cole comes into the bathroom, leaning up against the doorframe so he can watch me.

“Which one do you like wearing? Which feels the most yourself?”

I consider, standing still under the spray.

“The jumpsuit.”

“There you go.”

I’m not used to someone agreeing with me, supporting my decisions. I don’t feel like a fuck-up with Cole. And I don’t agonize over the little choices so much. It feels like it doesn’t really matter what I wear—everything will work out just fine.

“I’m kind of looking forward to this,” I admit as I step out of the shower, vigorously toweling my hair.

“Of course you are. It’s exciting.”

Cole is in the most energized mood I’ve ever seen. His dark eyes roam everywhere at once, and he can’t hold back his grin as he thrusts a scone into my hand.

“Eat it while it’s hot—it’s fucking delicious.”

I laugh. “Since when do you eat scones?”

“I eat everything now.” He winks at me. “Remember last night?”

It all comes back to me in a rush. I shriek with laughter and outrage.

“Don’t talk about that!”

He chuckles, grabbing hold of me and pulling me close, not caring that I’m not quite dry yet and my damp body spots the front of his shirt. He kisses me, his mouth pleasantly warm from the coffee.

“You’re going to fucking kill it today,” he says. “I can’t wait to watch.”

As always, Cole is right.

The entire experience passes by in swift flashes, like a snapshot.

We’re hustled through the studio at lightning speed, with barely enough time for me to goggle at the brightly lit stages and the bustling desks full of people, before I’m back in hair and makeup, a paper bib tucked into the neckline of my velvet jumpsuit to protect my clothes from the thick layer of powder being dusted over my face.

“Don’t worry,” the makeup artist tells me. “It looks like a lot, but under the floodlights, you won’t see it at all.”

The hosts pass by to introduce themselves. I don’t watch much TV, but I’ve seen clips of Roger Roberts and Gail Mason, who have been running the DBS morning show for the better part of a decade. Like most celebrities, they’re much shorter in person than you’d expect. Roger is barely taller than me, and Gale is so petite you might mistake her for a fifth grader if you only saw her from behind, and her helmet of highly-teased hair didn’t give her away.

Both are wearing even more makeup than I am, their microphones already clipped in place and a folder of prompts tucked under their arms.

“Where’s your beret?” Roger ribs me in his broadcaster voice.

I wondered if that was something he turned on for the camera, but it sounds like he always speaks at top volume with careful enunciation.

“She’s not a mime!” Gail laughs. Then, patting me on the arm, “We’ll see you out there in just a minute!”

The producer gives me a brief rundown of the show, including the point at which I’ll be brought onstage and a few of the questions I’ll be asked.

“We’ll show slides of your paintings on the TV screen behind you,” she explains.

“Right, yes,” I nod my head like I understand, while glaring lights, bright colors, and ten different conversations scream at me from all sides.

Cole remains calm and steady, his tall, dark figure so familiar to me that I look at him for comfort every time my anxiety threatens to explode.

I watch the show from offstage, marveling at the hosts’ ability to talk and joke with each other while their producer continually barks orders into the earpieces nestled in their ears.

“Twenty seconds till the next segment,” she warns them.

With the speed of an auctioneer, Roger rattles off, “And that’s why I don’t cook turkey dinners anymore! Up next, we’ve got a little culture for you—an up-and-coming artist from San Francisco! She just had her first solo show at the Frankle Gallery, and she’s here to explain painting to us! Let’s give a warm welcome to Mara Eldritch!”

The producer shoves me forward. I feel myself striding across the stage, my body moving like a puppet on someone else’s strings.

Even though I was warned, the overhead lights press down on me like heat lamps. I can already feel myself starting to sweat.

I forgot where the producer told me to sit. I take the chair closest to Gail, hoping I haven’t made a mistake.

“Nice to meet you, Mara!” Roger booms, like we haven’t already met before. His capped teeth and spray-on tan compete with the glittering red holiday top worn by Gail, and her matching lipstick.

“Now, I can’t draw a stick figure to save my life!” Gail trills. “How did you get your start in art?”

They're both staring at me, eyes bright, teeth gleaming.

Under the glaring lights, with the muffled motion of the cameramen all around us—everyone trying to be quiet but making the tiny shuffles and breathing sounds that humans can never entirely contain—I'm thrust back to the last time I sat on a stage, expected to perform, while my mind emptied out like a sieve.

I can almost hear my mother snapping her fingers at me, ordering me to start.

I don't know what to reply. I've forgotten how to speak.

The silence drags on for several agonizing seconds.

Wildly, I cast my eyes around until they land on Cole.

He doesn't look nervous in the slightest. He stands next to the producer, hands tucked in his pockets, smiling at me with perfect confidence. He mouths, "*You got this.*"

I turn back to Gail.

The words flow out of my mouth like I rehearsed them. "I'm mostly self-taught. I never went to art school. But I watched a lot of YouTube videos and took books out of the library."

"YouTube videos!" Roger laughs. "If that's all it takes, then how come I'm not an expert at golf yet?"

I give him a sly smile. "Well, I'm not three beers in when I paint."

Roger roars with laughter and Gail shakes a finger at him. "She's got your number."

"Too true," Roger chortles. "The more I shank, the more I drink."

The rest of the interview passes by in an instant. The questions are easy. I know exactly what to say.

The commercial break is my chance to escape. Roger and Gail give me a brief handshake, already preparing for the next segment. The producer

hustles me off saying, “Nice work! You’d never guess it was your first time.”

“She’s just being nice,” I say to Cole, as we pass through the green room once more on our way out of the studio. “I froze up at the beginning.”

“It just looked like you were thinking,” Cole says.

“I wasn’t thinking. I was lost—till I looked at you.”

Cole gives a small smile. “You must be the only person in the world who finds me a calming presence.”

“I certainly didn’t at first.”

“What did you think when you looked over at me?”

“I thought ... even if I fuck this up, you won’t be embarrassed by me. You’ll still hold my hand on the way home.”

“I knew you weren’t going to fuck it up. You always find a way through.”

As Cole and I gather our bags from the hotel and head back to the airport, I think to myself that humans don’t learn things all on our own. Someone has to teach us. It might be necessary for someone to believe in us before we can believe in ourselves.

Unloved children are crippled because no one shows them the way.

Cole is so much more than a lover to me. He’s the teacher I never had. In some ways, the father I never had.

I blush, remembering what I called him last night when I was blitzed out and half asleep. I’ve never called anybody that word before.

I don’t want to be another fucked-up girl with daddy issues.

But god, it’s nice to have a daddy.



RETURNING to Seacliff feels like coming home. I run ahead of Cole into the house, practically skipping up the steps. Throwing open the doors and inhaling that familiar scent, increasingly mingled with my own shampoo, my perfume, and the old books Cole let me put on a shelf in the living room, even though the battered paperbacks clash with his hardcovers and leather-bound books.

I cook dinner for us both, delighting in using Cole's heavy-bottomed copper pots and wooden spoons. Almost nothing in this house is made of plastic. Even the items Cole never uses are the finest quality, as much for decoration as for the formerly-unlikely chance that somebody would make real use of the kitchen.

Cole only cooks the simplest meals for himself. Still, he's a keen student and watches carefully while I mix four egg yolks, freshly grated Parmesan cheese, and Italian herbs in a small bowl.

"That's a lot of bacon," he comments.

"If it's not half bacon and peas, then it's not carbonara," I laugh.

"I think the Italians might disagree."

"I'll tell you a secret that will shock you ... I don't always like the most authentic food."

"What do you mean?"

"I know this is sacrilege, but sometimes I like the American version better. We take all these foods from all over the world, amp it up, put it on steroids. San Francisco has the best food of anywhere, I'm convinced of it."

"How would you know," Cole laughs. "You've never been to Italy."

"That's true," I admit.

I must look forlorn, because Cole quickly adds, "I'll take you."

"I wish," I say, trying to laugh it off.

"I mean it."

I hesitate, my throat tightening. I have a desperate desire to visit Europe and see the most stunning art and architecture of human creation.

But I shake my head.

“You’ve done too much for me already.”

“I’ve done exactly what I want to,” Cole says, his expression stern. “Don’t try to prevent me doing more of what I want. You should know by now it’s impossible.”

I never know how to deal with Cole. He really is relentless.

I change the subject, saying, “Look at this—you can use the hot pasta water to thaw the frozen peas.”

“Genius,” Cole says, with a small smile.

When I’ve stirred the sauce into the hot noodles, and divided the two portions onto our plates, Cole twirls the carbonara around his fork and takes an experimental bite.

“Well?” I say, bouncing in my seat.

“I take back what I said. This is really fucking good.”

“Better than Italy?”

“You tell me after you try the real thing. You’re the one with the best palate.”

I flush with pleasure, attacking my own plate of food.

I’ve never enjoyed compliments as much as Cole’s. Men have always told me I was pretty, but that’s the blandest of tributes. It says nothing about me as a person.

Cole compliments my taste, my opinions, and my talents. He notices things that nobody ever bothered to notice about me before, like the fact that I can taste and smell more acutely than most people, which really does make me a better cook.

It's the silver lining of my sensory issues. While I'm often distracted or stressed by light, sound, smell, and touch, I also take deep pleasure from music and food, rich colors and textures, and the right kind of touch on my skin. It's a blessing and a curse. When everything is wrong, it's pure torture. But when all goes right, it's a gift I'd never give up.

Cole is more considerate of my sensory issues than anyone I've ever known. While he occasionally uses them to manipulate me, he's never tormented me like Randall used to do. Instead, he calls me his pleasure kitten and puts me in a state of such comfortable bliss that I feel I'd do anything to be his pet and live in this house forever.

When we're finished eating, and Cole has washed and dried the dishes in his meticulous way, and I've put them back exactly where they belong, he says:

"I have something to show you."

"What is it?"

"Come with me."

He takes me into the dining room, where we never actually eat, preferring to sit at the high countertop in the kitchen.

My laptop still sits in the same place. I suppose I've made this my office, not that I spend much time on my computer.

Cole opens the laptop, flicking through windows so quickly that I can hardly follow what he's doing.

Watching Cole navigate technology is eerie, his brain and fingers operating more rapidly than the machine itself.

"Have a seat," Cole says, gesturing toward the chair next to his.

I slip into it, feeling uneasy.

When Cole has an objective in mind, he becomes highly focused to the point where he doesn't blink and hardly seems to breathe. His face is smooth and unsmiling, his dark eyes fixed on my face.

He holds up a small black cylinder in his elegantly-shaped hand.

“I have something for you to watch,” he says.

Silently, I take the flash drive, our fingers briefly meeting with an electric spark, static passing between us.

“What is it?” I ask.

He doesn't respond, pushing the laptop toward me. Waiting while I insert the flash drive into its slot.

The drive contains only one file: a video, twenty-eight minutes long.

My mouth has gone dry. When I try to lick my lips, my tongue rubs across them like cardboard.

My index finger hovers over the cursor. I'm frightened, and I don't want to see whatever Cole is trying to show me. I know it won't be good.

He stands up from his chair, coming around the back of mine. Watching over my shoulder.

There's no way out of this.

I click the video to make it play.

The image that flickers onto the screen is dimly lit and grainy. It appears to be the interior of some kind of small house—wooden floors and walls, only one room that includes the kitchenette, single bed, and the door to the outside. It could be a cabin or a shack.

A man kneels directly in front of the door, shirtless, wearing only boxer shorts, his legs bent beneath him and his large, misshapen feet splayed out below. His graying hair is scruffy and his back hairy and sagging.

I recognize him immediately. I'll never forget the shape of that blocky head, with its roll of fat where the skull almost meets the shoulders.

The wave of revulsion that washes over me is physical, so strong I have to clamp my hand over my mouth to prevent the carbonara from making another appearance. I want to jump out of my chair, but my legs are rubber, bent under the table.

I thought the video was silent, but now I hear Randall let out a low moan.

His nose is pressed against the door. He appears to be kneeling on something—possibly marbles. He squirms with discomfort but doesn't dare take his nose away from the door.

“I can't ...” he groans. “I can't do it anymore ... you're gonna break my fuckin' kneecaps.”

“You spoke,” Cole's chilly voice cuts through the video, clear and unemotional. “That means another hour.”

Randall lets out a strangled sound that is part sob, part snarl of rage.

I'm mesmerized, staring at the screen. Watching this man endure the same punishment he inflicted on me at seven years old. I know how his kneecaps feel. There were no marbles in my case, but the wooden floor became agonizing all on its own as the hours crawled by.

Once, after three hours of punishment, I passed out and hit my head on the floor. Randall made me finish my time the next day.

I stare at his nasty old back as his hands begin to shake, bound at the wrists with zip-ties.

A maelstrom of emotions whips through me: guilt, fear, disgust, anxiety ... and also a dreadful spitefulness that whispers, *Serves you right, you motherfucker.*

I thought I had moved past this.

Now I'm finding that the rage was always there, deep down inside me.

What I told Cole was true: I hate Randall. I fucking hate him.

He delighted in tormenting me.

When my mother would frustrate him, he'd take it out on me.

He loathed me, but couldn't leave me alone.

And always, that skin-crawling edge to his attention—his eyes roaming over my body. His orders to put on the plaid skirt so he could whip me in it.

Even at seven, I knew. He was my stepfather, but his interest was anything but fatherly.

Randall can't hold the position anymore. His legs collapse beneath him, and he rolls over on his side.

Cole appears in the camera frame, striding forward, dressed in an outfit unlike anything I've seen him wear before—a plaid shirt and jeans, with a baseball cap. In his hand, a pair of bolt cutters.

The punishment is swift. He snips off Randall's thumb.

Randall howls and howls, animalistic screams of pain that buzz with distortion in the shitty speakers of my laptop.

I jerk in my seat, instantly breaking out in a sweat, my heart racing at a gallop.

"Jesus! Fuck!" I cry.

I don't know what I expected to see, but I've never witnessed anything so graphic. Every cell in my body screams at me to turn away, but my eyes are locked on the screen with sick intensity, my hands clamped over my mouth.

Cold and pitiless, Cole orders, "Kneel on those marbles. Your time isn't up."

I look up at Cole, the real Cole, standing beside me.

He's watching the screen with exactly the same expression as before, hands clasped loosely in front of him.

I can't believe those are the same hands that wielded those bolt cutters just ... just how long ago, exactly?

"When did you do this?" I whisper.

"Last night. While you were asleep," he replies.

My mouth falls open. I understand now why he booked that morning show for me—it seemed to come out of nowhere, but I'm sure he pulled the strings behind the scenes.

“Was Randall in Burbank?”

“Close by.” Cole nods.

I’m pulled back to the screen by a fresh round of cursing and screaming from Randall. He was only able to hobble back into position for a moment before falling over again. This time he loses his left thumb.

“Fuck,” I cry, covering my face with my hands. “How long does this go on?”

Cole checks the time ticking away on the video.

“Looks like twenty-two more minutes.”

“Oh my god.”

I don’t think I can watch this.

“Did you kill him?” I ask Cole.

“Of course I did.”

My heart races, the underarms of my shirt soaked in cold sweat. I can’t believe I’m watching this. I can’t believe I’m participating.

I had come to terms with the idea that Shaw had to die, but this is something else entirely. Randall wasn’t a threat to me. This is nothing but revenge.

More screams. Another finger gone.

“Why did you do this?” I ask Cole.

“I told you,” Cole says, his black eyes fixed on mine. “I need to prepare you. You think you know what it means to set yourself against another person. To lure them, to hunt them, to overpower them, and take their life. But you don’t know. You don’t know how they’ll beg and plead. How they’ll do anything to survive. How they’ll stick a knife in your eye the moment you lose focus, the moment you even think about offering mercy.”

Randall is begging and pleading. He alternates between cursing at Cole, thrashing around, trying to escape his bonds, then sobbing and sniveling,

offering money, secrets, anything and everything he can think of to save himself.

“What do you want?” he howls. “*What do you want?*”

The Cole on the screen looks down at Randall: an avenging angel, dark and pitiless.

“I want you to give Mara her childhood back.”

“FUCK Mara!” Randall snarls. “Fuck that little bitch and fuck her mother and fuck YOU! She deserved everything she got. I hope she fucking rots in hell!”

“Wrong answer,” the Cole on the screen says.

What follows is a bloodbath.

I stare and stare, all feeling draining from my body. All emotion, too. I become strangely calm, my head floating above my shoulders, my body a block of ice below.

I watch Cole murder Randall slowly, brutally, with obvious pleasure.

I watch my vengeance unfold in front of me.

When it’s finished, Randall is nothing but meat on the floor. Those heavy hands can’t hurt anyone anymore.

I feel hollow inside, all the anger, all the pain, all the resentment scooped out of me.

It’s over now. Truly over.

I close the laptop screen and turn to face Cole. I can’t tell if he’s a monster or my savior. He looks the same as always: stark, beautiful, serene.

“Did it feel good to do that?” I ask him.

“Yes. It was deeply satisfying.”

“Why? I already won. I’m happy now. I moved on.”

Cole raises one black slash of an eyebrow. “There’s no moving on. I learned that with my father. If Randall died of old age, the anger wouldn’t die with him. You have to kill it. I killed it for you.”

I don’t know how I feel.

Or perhaps I feel everything at once.

It’s wrong, so incredibly wrong.

And yet ... it also feels like justice.

I wanted Randall dead. Now he is. He made me suffer. And he suffered in return.

Cole plucks the flash drive out of the laptop and holds it out to me once more.

“You put your life in my hands once, the night you came to my studio. Now I’ll bet mine. Here’s the tape. You won’t turn it in. You know this was right.”

He pushes the flash drive into my hands, forcing me to close my fingers around it.

I could leave the house, and carry this directly to Officer Hawks.

But just as I knew Cole wouldn’t hurt me, he knows exactly what I’m going to do.

I walk into the kitchen and drop the drive down the garbage disposal.



THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up alone in the bed.

Cole is giving me space to process what happened.

I understand now that all of this was planned out by him, probably beginning weeks ago. All through dinner, he knew what he was about to show me. He probably knew how I’d react. Even what I’d say.

He once told me that there are very few surprises for him. In social situations, he always has a quick reply at the ready because he plays out the entire conversation in a fraction of a second, already knowing what he'll say and what the other person will respond, back and forth a dozen times, before either of them ever opens their mouth.

Everything is chess to him, eight moves ahead.

When his opponent plays by the rules, he almost never loses.

I throw a spark of chaos into the game.

Perhaps, so does Shaw.

Or Shaw becomes less predictable when I'm in the mix, distracting Cole, forcing him to make decisions against his best interests.

We're entering the endgame now. Am I a valuable asset—a queen to his king? Or only a pawn that Cole can't bear to sacrifice?

I keep waiting for guilt to overwhelm me.

The people Cole killed before were faceless avatars to me. I never met any of them. Most seemed to deserve what they got.

Randall is different.

I knew him. We sat at the same table. Ate the same food. I knew his favorite sports teams, the names of his sons. Which movies he liked, and even what he sounded like grunting and puffing as he fucked my mother.

I hated the intimacy between us, but it was there. I knew him as human, as a man.

And I watched him die.

Should I be sorry for him?

I felt some pity last night, in the moment. Seeing his graying hair and his wretched begging.

But because I know Randall, I'm well aware how little goodness lived inside of him. I can't remember a single instance of kindness to me. Not

one, not even when I was very small. Whatever he gave, he gave grudgingly. Angrily. Always rubbing it in my face afterward, lording it over me.

He was a petty tyrant.

Does anyone care when the tyrant's head is put on a spike on the city gates?

Does anyone shed a tear?

I'm certainly not crying.

In fact, as I rise from the bed, I feel clean and whole. A little bit lighter, as if I shed off a weight I didn't even know I was carrying.

I float out of the room and down the stairs, looking for Cole.

I find him down in the kitchen, readying his customary breakfast.

It's nice starting the day with the same meal every morning. Knowing that you have control over the day ahead.

He passes me my latte, fresh and flawlessly prepared. Cole would never slap milk and coffee into a cup. Whatever is worth doing, is worth doing well. He perfects his art, even when that art is only a latte.

I sip my drink, naked under my silk robe. Feeling the fabric against my skin, and the clear morning light streaming in through the windows.

Cole stands behind the counter, sleeves rolled to his forearms, damp waves of hair neatly combed back.

He looks like a man ready to work.

I say, "If we're really going to do this, then you're right, I have to be prepared. Tell me everything. Tell me how you met Shaw."



COLE

I knew I had to explain all this to Mara, but I've been dreading it.

I don't often feel regret. In fact, one of the few times I've ever felt it is the night I fucked up with Mara and she left the party with someone else.

I didn't use to regret anything about Shaw.

Now ... I wish I had done things differently.

I look out the kitchen window to the bright, sparkling waters of the bay, not watching the boats drifting past, but instead visualizing the flat green lawns and low modern buildings of the California Institute of the Arts.

Then I say to Mara, "It was my first year of art school. My mother was dead. My father was dead. My uncle was dead. I was an orphan, alone in the world.

"It didn't feel strange to me, because I had always been alone. People crowded around me, drawn by looks and money, and the charm I could turn off and on at will. But to me, all those people seemed the same, and not like myself. I was a wolf in a world that seemed comprised almost entirely of deer. Especially once Ruben was gone.

"You probably know CalArts is a small school, only a thousand students. Some of them were hoping for a career in film. Tim Burton was a famous alumni, as we were reminded practically every fucking day.

“I doubted he was popular when he actually attended. Art school was no different than anywhere else I had been. People didn’t suddenly become high-minded simply because we were studying art. The same rules applied there as everywhere else: money, connections, and strategy mattered just as much as the work itself.

“All the rules of subterfuge applied as well. Classmates like Valerie Whittaker were always going to get the most direct instruction from Professor Oswald because he loved bending over her canvas when she wore one of her clinging, low-cut sweaters.

“That irritated some of the male students in the class. I thought it was only natural. Valerie was using every weapon in her arsenal. She was talented, one of the best in the class, and I found it amusing how she had the professor wrapped around her little finger.

“All the professors at the school were working artists themselves. They spoke with reverence of the Damien Hirsts and Kara Walkers of the world, but couldn’t hide the edge of envy that they had failed to become one of the greats themselves, instead of scratching a living teaching the spoiled children of families rich enough to afford the tuition.

“If you were really poor, you could get into CalArts on scholarship. That was the case with Alastor Shaw.”

Even though she’s been waiting for his introduction, Mara gives a little grimace at his name, unconsciously touching the raised scar running up her left wrist.

“I disliked him immediately. Not because he was poor, but because he kept insisting that he wasn’t.

“It’s impossible to pretend to be wealthier than you are. You might as well plop yourself down in the center of Kenya and try to convince the Maasai that you’re one of them.

“Alastor was a terrible liar. His incompetence irritated me more than the lies themselves. After the Christmas break, he came back to school wearing a Rolex that was obviously fake. He kept flashing it at everyone, not realizing

that Rolex is the McDonald's of luxury watches. Even a real one wouldn't have impressed at our school.

"He hadn't yet learned to ingratiate himself with people. No one particularly liked him. He was not as you know him now. Back then, Alastor was chubby, moon-faced, awkward. Always trying to suck up to the popular students, especially me."

"Was he really?" Mara says in amazement.

"Oh, yes. He got rid of his glasses after first semester, but he still had terrible skin, the haircut of an incel, and he'd wear tent-sized t-shirts with hideous, bright graphics all over them ..."

I pause, chuckling to myself.

"Actually, those t-shirts might have been the inspiration for his entire aesthetic, now that I think about it."

Mara frowns, the much deeper well of sympathy she possesses distracting her from the inevitable end of this tale.

"It almost makes me feel sorry for him," she says.

"Don't. Don't feel sorry for either of us. At least not until you've heard everything.

"Alastor fixated on me from the beginning. He'd try to set up his easel next to mine. Make conversation with me between classes. Sit near me at lunch.

"It took a couple of cuts, me humiliating him in front of other students, before he backed off. Even then, he was always watching me. Always close by.

"You will probably understand that Alastor recognized something familiar in me. Those who don't feel the normal range of emotions are better at noticing when a smile comes a second too late, or when it doesn't quite consume the whole face. We learn to imitate sympathy, interest, humor ... but like Alastor's Rolex, some counterfeits are better than others.

"He tried to insinuate that we were like each other. That we might have interests in common. I shut him down hard. I didn't want to think I was like

anyone. Especially not him.

“Alastor hadn’t developed his own style yet. He imitated the professors and other students. The hierarchy of talent in our classes quickly became apparent: I was at the top, along with Valerie Whittaker and a few others. Alastor bounced between the middle and the bottom, depending who he was cribbing from on any given week.

“I was consumed by art school. It was the first time I had felt a sense of vocation. I couldn’t wait to get the fuck off of campus and start working full-time. I only stayed because I was aware how important it was to develop connections with professors and visiting lecturers. People in the art world who could help me once I had pieces to show.

“Professor Oswald liked me almost as much as Valerie. He invited us to private shows and introduced us to everyone. Similar to what I did when you and I first met.”

Mara nods, understanding perfectly as she just experienced the same mentorship.

“Oswald was no genius. He was competent, but he’d been making the same broken-mannequin-type sculptures for decades, and Robert Gober was already doing that better. It was clear he was burned out, frustrated, barely scraping by with his shitty Buick and sport coats with holes in the elbows.

“Still, I liked him, or at least, I found him useful and interesting to talk to. He knew an immense amount about his subject, and his suggestions for my work were helpful. I brought him a whole folder of sketches I had made for potential sculptures. Some were complex and would need custom equipment before they could be built. He went through each sketch, seeming particularly taken with a drawing I’d made for a massive figure that would look male from one angle and female from another.”

Mara leans forward on her elbows, chin cradled by her palms, fascinated by this story. I knew she would enjoy getting a peek at the younger version of myself, closer in age and stage to where she is now.

I’m not enjoying it as much. I don’t look back on that time with the same arrogance I used to.

I push ahead, wanting to get it all over with as quickly as possible.

“Professor Oswald was the first person who took an interest in my art. It meant something to me. So when he participated in a show shortly after Christmas, I wanted to attend. Even though he hadn’t mentioned it to me and I hadn’t technically been invited.

“It was Marcus York who put me on the guest list. He’s an old friend of my father’s, did I tell you that?”

Mara nods.

“It was the first time I’d spoken to him since my father had died. He was glad to do me a favor—after all, I was the one who inherited the money and the business, though I had no interest in running it myself.

“I went to the show. As soon as I got there I could see everyone buzzing around Oswald’s sculpture. I didn’t hear a word they said. I just stood there, staring.”

Mara’s eyes go wide as she anticipates what I’m about to say.

“It was an exact replica of the sketch I showed him. Almost every detail the same. The main difference was that it was smaller than I’d intended—probably because he didn’t have the means to make it bigger.”

Even though she knew what was coming, Mara lets out a groan of outrage. She understands how violating it feels to have an idea stolen before you’ve even had a chance to bring it to life.

“What did you do?” she cries.

“I walked up to him, almost in a daze. I didn’t know what I intended to say to him, which was unusual for me. I saw his surprise that I was there and his look of squirming discomfort. But then he pushed that away and greeted me with as much friendliness as usual. Clapping me on the shoulder, saying how glad he was that I had come.”

“Did you confront him?” Mara fidgets in her seat, unable to stand the suspense.

“Not then. It would have made a scene, and remember, barely anyone knew me yet. Oswald was the one with the connections and the tenure. This was his show.

“I stayed after class on Monday. I was too upset to be strategic. I just blurted it out like an idiot: ‘You copied my sketch!’ ”

“What did he say?” Mara murmurs through hands pressed to her mouth. She’s squirming with agitation, like she’s the one who stole the idea.

“He scoffed in my face. ‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ he said, ‘First of all, there’s hardly any similarity at all between your preliminary sketch of a concept and my actual piece. And second, I’ve been talking about the concept of gender perception in my classes for months. If anything, your sketch was more likely inspired by the lectures I gave as I was sculpting the piece.’ ”

“Motherfucker!” Mara shrieks, jumping out of her chair and pacing around the kitchen island.

There is no better audience for a story than Mara. Her empathy is so acute that she feels it all as if it’s happening to her.

It takes several moments for her to calm down enough to take a seat again.

“Alright,” she says. “What did you say back to him?”

“I just stared at him. Truly impressed with the absolute magnitude of his bullshit. He was lying so intensely that he actually believed it. He had been telling himself fairy tales late at night while working on the sculpture. Pretending that it represented this and that, while shaving away the bits of his memory that recalled the exact dimensions and proportions of my sketch.”

“Did you pull it out of your folder? Shove it in his face?”

I shake my head.

“You will never convince someone who has already convinced themselves. And you damn sure can’t reason with them. I left his office, wondering what I had hoped to get out of that encounter at all. Did I actually think he would publicly admit that he stole it? That he’d credit me for the work? Did

I forget how humans operate? There was never going to be resolution, or any kind of justice. I suppose I wanted to see acknowledgement in his eyes—shame, apology. But he robbed me of even that. He was so deep in delusion that he would fight my allegations with all the outraged fervor of a man who had actually been wronged.”

Mara lets out a sigh of frustration, understanding only too well what it feels like to be on the wrong side of a power dynamic.

“He was only a professor, but he was far more powerful than me in that particular space. I was an infant in the art world. He could crush me under his boot if I dared make an accusation. Blacken my name before I even got started.

“I was furious with myself. I had failed to see Oswald for what he was. Failed to see his real intentions for me. I was blinded by my desire to be nurtured and cared for in this endeavor that was personal and emotional to me. I felt humiliated—not only from the theft, but because I didn’t see it coming.

“I stormed out of his classroom, almost running into Shaw. He was eavesdropping with his ear practically pressed against the door. I could have cheerfully ripped his head off his shoulders, but I just shoved past him and kept walking.

“I told myself I’d let it go. I ripped up the sketch—there was no way to build it anymore without being called a plagiarist myself—and threw my efforts into new projects.

“I was having success at school. Getting the accolades I craved from professors and fellow students. Maybe I really could have gotten over it. Especially if Oswald made efforts to make it up to me.

“Instead, he did the opposite. And again, this was me not fully understanding human psychology yet. We both knew there was a debt between us. I wanted it repaid. But if Oswald acknowledged the debt, he would have to acknowledge what he did. And he couldn’t stand that.

“The sculpture he stole was the most acclaimed of any he had ever made. It sparked a renaissance for him, renewing interest in all his previous work.

Buoying him up to new heights in his career.

“The more success he gained from it, the more invested he became in believing it was all his. At first this manifested as him avoiding me in class, interacting less with my work. But soon that wasn’t enough—he had to enforce his narrative that I was talentless, that he was the real artist. He started marking me lower, and even criticizing me to other professors. Telling them I was lazy, that my ideas were unoriginal. Protecting himself, in case I ever decided to pipe up. He didn’t know I had already torn up the sketch.”

Mara rests her hand on my thigh, understanding two things at once: first, the pain of being slandered to the people you most want to impress. And second, the fucking rage when that slander is based off a lie, the exact reversal of the truth.

“It ate at me, day after day. This man stole from me, and he wouldn’t even acknowledge it. He was punishing ME for it.

“I began to notice all the other things about Professor Oswald that were loathsome. As his ego swelled, he became more and more arrogant in class. More inappropriate to Valerie. More careless of which days he was supposed to lecture. More boastful about his own work.

“I began to feel there was only one way to right the scales. I could hardly sleep or eat. The itch to remove him from existence became physical. It made my heart race every time we were in class together.”

Mara lets out a soft sigh, understanding what I’m about to tell her: the real crossing of the line.

“I had killed twice before. When I killed Ruben, I thought it would be the only time. I knew what he was, and I knew that even if I handed him every dollar of my father’s estate, he’d still cut my throat in the night because I’d once annoyed him. I had to do it—it was him or me.

“The mugger in Paris happened all in instant, in a burst of rage that left the man’s brains dashed on the wall before I’d even realized the other two had run. He scared me, that was the problem. My fear overwhelmed my self-control, and I acted without planning.

“Now I was contemplating something very different: a murder I would plan ahead of time and execute without real need. The damage had already been done, or most of it anyway. Oswald was slandering me, still impeding my career. But this was as much about revenge as protecting my future interests.”

I pause, truly pondering on my state of mind at the time.

“I believed I was gaining more and more control of my emotions by the day. I thought that made me powerful, and better than other people. I had my emotions locked down so deep that I hardly felt anything anymore. My anger at Oswald was one of the first encounters that had stirred me in a long time. And I *was* angry. I *was* emotional. Much more than I would have admitted.”

Mara squeezes my thigh. She still fucking feels for me. No matter what I did. Whether it was justified or not.

“I gave him one last chance. I asked him for a letter of recommendation for a study abroad in Venice. It was a competitive program—only two students would be selected from our school.

“Oswald fixed me with this look of pretend sympathy, and said with what I’m sure he thought was complete sincerity, ‘I wish I could Cole, but I really don’t think anything you’ve made this semester justifies that sort of recommendation. Maybe next year, if you really come into your own.’

“I had just made a sculpture that had the whole classroom buzzing with envy, every student in that room wishing they’d thought of it first, and several of the girls snapping photos on their phones. Oswald gave it a B+. I could have killed him for that alone.

“From that moment forward, I started making plans. That was when I created my method, that served me flawlessly since. I found an abandoned mine shaft, not on any map, far away from hiking trails. You’ll know where that was, because it’s where you and I first met.”

Mara’s mouth falls open as she finally realizes what I was doing that night. I wasn’t in the woods to find her—I was there to lose someone else.

“I spent four weeks researching forensic evidence, and four more planning the event. It all went off exactly as I planned. I entered his house via an unlocked window I’d scouted before. I wore a full containment suit. Knelt on his chest before he even woke up, already strangling him, pinning him down with my weight. He looked up into my eyes and I saw the comprehension on his face. He knew why I was killing him. I wanted him to know. I finally got the acknowledgement of what he’d done. It passed silently between us as he died.

“I dumped his body down the shaft in two industrial bins I’d bought in cash from a hardware store with no cameras. I doused his remains in oxygen bleach and left nothing in the house—not a single hair off my head, no blood from him. Only a little urine in the bed from where his bladder let go.

“The key to getting away with it is this: no body, no murder. I left his car in the driveway, but I took his wallet. He had no wife, no children. Our professors were hardly the picture of reliability. I knew it might be weeks before he was properly reported missing. By then, I doubted a police dog could get a sniff of anything in his house.

“I had no fear of being caught. In fact, in the aftermath, I felt deeply peaceful. No itch tormenting me anymore. I had righted the scales.”

Mara gives a slow shake of her head, understanding that wasn’t the end of it. Not even close.

“Shaw knew,” she murmurs.

“That’s exactly right. Alastor watched it all happen, from the moment Professor Oswald turned on me. The other students knew I’d fallen out of favor, but only Alastor knew why.

“Once the news of the professor’s disappearance spread across the school, Alastor intercepted me on the way to the library. By this point I’d given him enough verbal slaps that he knew better than to speak to me, but he did it anyway, sidling up and saying in his overly-familiar way, ‘I suppose you’re glad to see Oswald gone.’

“I played it off. I said, ‘The professors miss more classes than the students do. He’ll be back when he remembers he needs his paycheck.’ Shaw licked

his lips, giving me this grin like we both knew better. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said.”

“Was he threatening to tell someone?” Mara asks.

“No, no, no. The game with Shaw has never been about exposing each other. He wants to be in on the secret together. He never intended to be rivals: he wants to collaborate.”

Mara’s face blanches. She was another of Shaw’s attempts at “collaboration.” He began the process of killing her, hoping I would complete it.

I take a breath. This is the part I didn’t want to tell her. The part I’ve tried not to think about since. The only other thing that’s ever made me feel guilty.

“At that point, as far as I know, Shaw had never killed anyone. I’m sure he had thought about it. Fantasized. Watched movies, read books, looked at porn that scratched a certain type of itch for him. But it was all theoretical. All imagination.

“I had taken fantasy into the real world. And to Shaw, I was a hero. An icon. Everything he wanted to be, but wasn’t. Any boy at our school with talent or swagger wanted to be friends with me. All the girls wanted to date me. None more than Valerie.

“I liked her, but I wasn’t interested in dating anyone. All I cared about was the trajectory of my career. Now that Oswald was out of the way, every door stood wide open.

“Shaw was obsessed with Valerie. She had a specific look that you’ve probably seen replicated in every girl he’s killed: slim, beautiful, with long dark hair, and at least one tattoo.”

“Everyone except Erin,” Mara murmurs.

“That’s right. Everyone except Erin.”

“Even me.”

“Yes,” I admit. “Though for me, that had nothing to do with Valerie. I noticed you because of what you did with that dress. But I’m sure Shaw loved that our tastes were finally aligning.”

“He wanted Valerie because he thought *you* wanted her.”

“Yes. He could never understand the difference between respect and desire.”

Mara sighs. “I don’t know if they are that different. It wasn’t your looks that drew me at first—I admired you. So much that it overpowered everything else.”

“You didn’t want me for my looks?” I say, pretending to be hurt.

Mara laughs, despite herself.

“Not back then,” she says, “But don’t worry, I’ve become much more shallow. Now I notice them every minute of the day.”

“Thank you,” I say, tossing my hair and smoothing it back with both hands.

Mara sorts and punches me playfully on the arm. But then she remembers what we were discussing, and her smile falls away.

“I’m guessing there’s a reason I’ve never heard of Valerie Whittaker,” she says.

“Yes.” I’m likewise not smiling anymore. “There’s a reason. They found her body draped across the lap of the sculpture of Lincoln on our campus lawn. Her naked flesh covered in bruises and bite marks. The first appearance of the Beast of the Bay, though I’ve never seen the police make the connection.”

Even though she knew it was coming, Mara’s face falls into lines of deep misery. She feels for each of these girls as if she knew them.

In this case, I did know Valerie. Mara is right to mourn her loss.

“Shaw left her there for me, like a cat bringing a dead bird to your doorstep. I didn’t have to see his smug smile the next morning in class to know who had done it.”

I swallow down the disgust rising in my throat.

“He thought I’d be impressed. Proud of him, even. I shut him down hard. Turned away if he even tried to speak to me. That was the real start of our enmity. He had shaken off my snubs before. But failing to acknowledge his first kill ... that he couldn’t forgive.”

“Did you consider telling the police?” Mara asks.

“No. Shaw would expose me in turn. There was no evidence of what I’d done to Professor Oswald—Shaw hadn’t found my dumping ground yet. But he could draw attention where I didn’t want it.

“I felt sorry for Valerie, to a degree. But you have to understand Mara, I had no real attachment to her, or to anyone. Not until I met you.”

For Mara, who bonds with everyone she meets, this must seem incomprehensible. Still, she nods, understanding me even on our point of greatest difference.

“Valerie’s death drew much more attention than the professor’s disappearance. The arrival of TV cameras was exhilarating to Shaw. That was when he truly began to transform: he arrived at school with his hair freshly cut and combed, wearing an outfit that was almost stylish. He spoke confidently to the cameras, telling them how close he was to Valerie, how wonderful she was, what a loss her talent would be to the art world, and how he hoped whoever had done it would be caught quickly.

“Her death energized him. He made his first painting that scored the top mark in the class—a large abstract in brilliant color.”

Mara grimaces, finally understanding what each of those garish, vibrant canvases means to Shaw. His technicolor rainbows are the energy he feels when he brutalizes a girl, ripping her soul from her body in wild, erotic abandon.

“That’s what the inside of his head looks like,” I tell Mara. “And that’s why you have to be very fucking careful around him. I’ve killed from anger, or because I felt justified. Shaw delights in it. There is nothing more erotic to him than causing pain. Hearing a woman’s screams as he rips her apart. If he ever gets the chance, he will slaughter you without hesitation. He *wants*

to kill you. More than anything else. More than he wants to kill me. He wants me alive to see what he's done to you."

Mara sways in her chair, her skin dull as chalk.

I take her cold hands in mine, looking her in the eye.

"But that's not fucking happening," I assure her. "We will make our plan, and he'll never get closer to you than the length of a room. You won't fight him. You won't even touch him. I'll do what needs to be done. I just need your help to create the illusion. He's bigger than me—I need one moment of surprise. Just one single moment."

Mara swallows hard.

"I can do it," she says. "I want to do it. For Erin, for Valerie, for everyone he's killed and everyone else he'll hurt."

She lays her right palm over the scar on her left wrist, and the left palm over the scar on the right, clamping her hands tight like a covenant, like an oath.

"And I want to do it for me. He tried to kill me, too. I'm only alive because of myself. Because I ran down that fucking mountain."

"Yes, you did," I say, feeling another bolt of guilt. I could have carried her down. But I wasn't awake yet. Mara hadn't alivened me.

I explain to her, "Shaw has to die to protect you. But also, because I'm responsible. I didn't think so at the time. I thought whatever he did was his business, and had nothing to do with me. I see it differently now. I may not be Doctor Frankenstein, but I helped flip the switch on that particular monster."

"We're the only ones who can stop him," Mara says.

"We're the only ones who will."



MARA

Cole and I have made our plan.
We've run over it again and again in the safety of his living room.

Cole said he would prepare me for our confrontation with Shaw. At the time, I stupidly thought that meant that he would train me, like a fighting montage in a movie.

Now I realize how foolish I was.

I have no hope in an actual fight with Shaw. I might as well try to wrestle a grizzly bear. No training Cole could give me in months or even years could ever compensate for the biological imbalance in reach and mass.

Cole has no intention of me ever touching Shaw. But he's intensely aware of the danger I'll be in all the same. He knows what a killer can do. He knows Shaw's violence because he knows his own.

So he drills me again and again and again, even though my only role is to be the mouse running from the cat.

Cole needs that one single moment of distraction to put a knife in the side of Shaw's neck.

I'll lure Shaw.

I'll be the bait.

The real preparation was watching the tape.

Cole made me watch Randall die, because I had never seen someone killed before. Especially not someone I knew personally.

Cole knew I'd have to desensitize myself to blood, to screams, to the impulses of pity that might cause me to deviate from the plan. Cole knows the terror of violence, the physical effect it has on a person. He knows how it breaks apart your mind, causing you to act on instinct in all the wrong ways.

He drills me over and over and over, so that in the heat of the battle with Shaw, I'll stick to our agreement.

“If worse comes to worse,” Cole says, fixing me with his dark stare. “If things are going wrong ... you run, Mara. You don't try to help me. You don't try to stay. You fucking run. Because he'll be right behind you—and if I'm gone, there's no one left to save you.”

“That's not going to happen. He'll be dead before he even knows what's happening.”

“That's the plan,” Cole agrees.

That would comfort me, except I remember the old quote, “No plan survives contact with the enemy.”

Another complication is the continued surveillance of Officer Hawks.

Cole complained to the SFPD. He has enough connections in city government that Hawks has been told to back off. Hawks ignored this order, still trailing Cole on his own off-hours, showing up to every event where they'll let him in the door, and visiting Clay Street more than the artists that keep studio space in Cole's building.

Hawks takes his opportunity to intercept me when Cole is at Corona Heights Park, overseeing the final stages of construction on his monumental sculpture. Probably freezing his ass off, because a frigid wind is blowing in from the bay.

Officer Hawks steps in front of me before I can touch the heavy glass doors of the Alta Plaza building.

The wind whips our hair into our faces—his as well as mine, because Hawks hasn't had it cut in a while. In fact, his entire person looks ill-groomed. All these after-hours stakeouts are taking their toll on him. He's unshaven, eyes bloodshot.

“Doesn't it bother you?” he demands, “Sleeping with the man who killed your roommate?”

I round on him, equally as indignant.

“I told you who killed Erin,” I hiss. “I have to see him at every fucking party I attend. Shaw is the Beast, not Cole. Why don't you do your fucking job and arrest him?”

Hawks lets out a bitter laugh.

“He's really got you fooled, doesn't he?”

“Cole isn't trying to fool me, and I'm not trying to fool him. We've seen each other's scars. You think you're a good man? I bet there's something you're ashamed of. Something you've never told anyone. Cole's told it all to me. ALL of it. I'm not saying he's a saint. But he is honest.”

“An honest killer?” Hawks sneers.

“You've never shot anyone?” I sneer right back at him.

“I'm a cop. It's my job to catch criminals.”

“Yeah? I bet you only shot them when you had to, right? I bet every time you pulled your gun out, you absolutely had to do it, there was no other way. No part of you made a judgment on that person. No part of you thought they deserved to die.”

Hawks stares at me through the smudged lenses of his glasses.

My time with Cole has taught me to look for signals: the motions on the face that the mind can't control.

For Hawks, it's a twitch of his right eyelid, blinking over his iris like a camera shutter.

He doesn't even know he's doing it.

But he can't escape the confirmation in my face. We both know that he sees a killer in Cole because he sees something familiar: a man who crosses the line when he feels it's necessary. When he thinks he's justified.

"I'm going to put him in prison for a hundred years," Hawks hisses, his nose inches from mine. "Help me to do it, or I swear to god, I'll book you as an accomplice. I'll make sure you see prison time along with him. You'll be splashed across every fucking paper: the Karla Homolka to his Paul Bernardo."

Hawks has no idea how accurate that may soon become. But not in the way he thinks.

As I try to push past him, Hawks seizes my upper arm. I don't shake him off, not even when his fingers dig into my flesh.

"You live in his house now. You could let me inside. Let me search the place. I'll do it when he's not home. He doesn't even have to know."

Hawks is unaware that Cole has cameras all over the house. Regardless, there's no evidence to be found. Cole's not that fucking stupid.

He's only left evidence out in the open one time: inside *Fragile Ego*. I've begged Cole to buy the sculpture back and destroy it, but he doesn't want to. He says it's too beautiful.

This is the one point on which he is utterly irrational. Cole loves his art. He'd no sooner destroy it than he'd destroy me.

I almost want to let Hawks search the house just to show him how fucking stupid he's being.

On the other hand, he's not completely wrong. Cole is a murderer, just not the one he's looking for.

The only way to deal with Hawks is to keep him at bay until we can deliver Shaw gift-wrapped. Just in time for Christmas.

Calmly, I remove Hawks' fingers from my arm, grabbing his pinky and bending it back until he lets go.

"You're wrong," I tell him, flatly. "You'll see it for yourself soon enough."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The Beast of the Bay kills three times. Have you noticed that?"

Hawks goes still, eyes glinting behind his glasses. "Last time was four."

My stomach lurches.

Can't think about that. Picturing Erin drowned on my bed doesn't fucking help her.

"The point is, he started a new cycle. Why don't you try tailing Shaw on your off-hours? Either you'll catch him in the act ... or you'll save a girl from becoming his next victim."

To his credit, Hawks actually considers this idea. But then his eyes narrow and he hisses, "Sounds like you want to clear the way for your boyfriend's nocturnal activities."

I'm losing my patience.

"If that's what you think, then there's no point continuing this conversation. I would NEVER help a man hurt another woman. I'm a ladies' lady and always will be."

Shaking off Hawks, I storm into the building.

Sonia is already hurrying over, having seen the whole thing through the window. She looks ready to rip Hawks a new asshole if he hadn't let go of me.

Sonia is also a ladies' lady.

When she sees that I'm fucking fuming, she puts her arm around my shoulders

"You want me to call his boss?" she says. "Or better yet—I'll call Cole."

“No need. I told him off myself.”

“I’ll bet you did,” Sonia grins approvingly. “You’re turning into quite the little hellcat.”

I let out a laugh, thinking that Cole calls me a pleasure kitty, and Sonia a hellcat. I really don’t mind either of those descriptors. In fact, they suit me perfectly.

“I don’t want to claw his eyes out. But I will if I have to.”

Sonia snorts. “Now you sound like Cole. Must be a hazard of working here. We all become a little more ... utilitarian.”

Sonia and I part ways at the stairs, her attending to the monumental labor of running Cole’s empire, and me heading upstairs to work on my newest series.

Sonia is right. Cole is rubbing off on me, and so is she. We always become like the people that surround us. No human is an island. We’re more like rocks in a tumbler, knocking each other’s rough edges, polishing and refining one another as we pass.

These days, I have no problem with the company I keep.



COLE

Shaw dies on Christmas Eve.
That's the plan.

I've gone over it with Mara a thousand times, but I still hate that I have to involve her. She's the bait, and the bait is never entirely safe from being swallowed whole.

We're attending the East Bay Artists' Christmas party. In the art world, this is the biggest rager of the year—bigger than Halloween or New Year's. Holding it on Christmas Eve probably means something—that artists lack the traditional family ties that would usually consume this night of the year. That used to be true for me.

Tonight I wish I was home with Mara, far away from anyone else.

At least she looks fucking stunning. I love showing her off. Wish I didn't have to ruin it all in a few hours' time.

Mara wears a glittering gown, the halter top cut almost down to the navel, the long skirt hiding the fact that she's wearing her favorite boots beneath. No high heels tonight—that would be very stupid.

Her makeup is full of sparkles too, her hair tumbling down her back in dark waves, with little diamond stars and moons pinned all over it. She looks like the night sky come to life.

Her arms are bare, the long scars running up both wrists still dark and raised. They'll probably never fade.

Tonight, they're meant as an invitation to Shaw: come finish what you started.

I know he'll be here, though I haven't seen him yet. He wouldn't miss the biggest event of the year.

The party is in the Castro Theater on Market Street. The old baroque theater is currently being renovated, so all the seats have been removed, leaving plenty of space for socializing and dancing. The movie screen remains, playing a loop of psychedelic images: time-lapse video of flowers blooming, withering, dying. Raindrops falling upward in reverse. Spiraling mandalas that break apart and reform like beads in a kaleidoscope.

The music pumping from the speakers is dark and insistent, perfect for my current mood.

On My Knees – RÜFÜS DU SOL
[Spotify → geni.us/no-devil-spotify](#)
[Apple Music → geni.us/no-devil-apple](#)

Right before we left the house, I tucked a knife in the pocket of Mara's long black evening coat.

"I'm not going to need that," she said.

"I don't care," I snapped. "You're taking it anyway."

The knife is freshly sharpened, the blade finer than a razor's edge. I have its twin in the pocket of my tux.

Shaw won't use a gun, and neither will I. A knife is far more personal. And far more effective, once we're in close range of one another.

I'll keep my promise to Shaw: the next time we're alone, only one of us will leave alive.

We circulate through the crowd, Mara staying close by my side as we both search for Shaw. It's easy for me to make conversation with anyone we

pass, because I'm used to scheming and chatting at the same time. It's harder for Mara. Her smile is strained, her eyes darting around the party.

I keep my hand on the small of her back to calm her.

She makes a sharp sound, drawing in a breath.

"Do you see him?" I mutter.

"Not Shaw—Hawks is here."

Fuck.

I turn to look, spotting him over by the open bar. He's dressed in a rented tux to try to blend in, but his best disguise is his scruffy face and uncombed hair. That's what really makes him look like one of us.

Hawks has been demoted again. He was in charge of the investigation of the Beast of the Bay for two short weeks—then Alastor made another kill, and Hawks was booted back down the ladder.

Mara was devastated when she heard the news of another body on the shore. She said we waited too long to attack Shaw.

"The Christmas party is our best chance," I told her. "If we don't play this off flawlessly, if we tip him off in any way, it won't work. He'll bolt and we'll be right back where we started."

In a way, it benefits us. That was the second girl in the cycle. Shaw will be aching to complete the triad.

And Mara is the perfect prize.

If I know anything, I know that Shaw is salivating to take her from me. He wants it more than he wants money or success. Killing Mara would be the ultimate act of domination over me. Shaw ascending to his final form.

Too bad I'm gonna put him in the ground instead.

I want to get this over with. Where the fuck is he?

"We can't do anything if Hawks is here," Mara frets.

“Don’t worry about that—he’s not on the guest list, and there’s no way in hell somebody brought him as a date.”

I take a short detour to whisper in Sonia’s ear. Ten minutes later Hawks is hustled out of the party, arguing with security all the way out the door.

Sanity is a fragile thing—a few taps with a hammer and the whole psyche can crack. I think Hawks has had more than a few taps.

As Hawks leaves, Shaw arrives. He’s dressed in a midnight-blue tux, a stunning redhead on his arm. The girl looks suspiciously like Erin Whalstrom. I doubt that’s a coincidence—we knew Shaw would come, and he knew we’d be here, too. He can’t resist turning the knife one last time on Mara.

She watches Shaw twirl the redhead around the dance floor, her shoulders stiff with anger.

“Just a few more hours,” I promise her. “Then he’ll pay.”

“Bleed every fucking drop out of him,” she replies, never taking her eyes off Shaw.

We wait for him to get comfortable. We wait for the night to progress. This is an important part of the hunt: the false sense of security. Let the prey come into the clearing. Let them approach the water. And let them lower their head to drink. Only then does the crocodile lunge up out of the water.

Shaw drinks his champagne. He flirts with the redhead, and with anyone else who passes within his view. Occasionally he throws glances in my direction, or in Mara’s. I ignore him as I have at other events where we’ve been forced to share space. It’s never me who approaches Shaw, always the other way around.

Mara and I dance together.

She’s already beginning her part of the charade. She pretends to drink too much champagne, leaning heavily on my arm. And I pretend to become annoyed with her, snapping at her once or twice, before she spills her drink on my trousers and I stalk off, annoyed, abandoning her on the dance floor.

This is phase one.

Mara goes to the ladies' room to collect herself. She'll splash water on her face, pretend to attempt to sober up.

Meanwhile, I search for Sonia.

I find her engrossed in conversation with a broker named Allen Wren, pitching him on Mara's newest series.

"She's in high demand these days. Every painting sells for more than the last. If you've got potential buyers, you'd better put the wheels in motion—even a few weeks could cost them thousands."

"You're not going to railroad me, Sonia," Wren says, wagging his finger in her face. "I've been burned on these so-called rising stars before."

"Not this one," Sonia promises, sipping her drink. "Have you seen her work in person? Photographs don't do justice. The paintings glow, Allen. They fucking glow!"

"I'll come take a look this week," Wren says, finishing his own drink in one gulp and leaning forward to run his fingertips down the back of Sonia's arm. "But why don't you ever come visit my gallery, Sonia? It's been months since I had you alone in one of my back rooms ..."

Sonia arches an eyebrow at him, not shaking off his hand.

"I consider it ... I liked what I saw last time ..."

They both jolt upright when they see me standing only a few inches away. Sonia blushes and gives an embarrassed laugh, while Wren doesn't even try to hide what he was up to.

"Your *fidus Achates* is very persuasive, Cole. I think I'd do anything she asked ..."

"Come dance with me," I say to Sonia, ignoring Wren.

This is such a strange request that Sonia accompanies me without question, following me onto the dance floor and slipping into a formal position better suited to a waltz than the music actually playing.

She looks up at me quizzically. “Where did Mara go?”

“The bathroom.”

This is the part of the plan that neither Mara nor I particularly like. She wanted to explain everything to Sonia, but I told her that would be a mistake. Most people are terrible actors. If Sonia knows she’s playing a part, Alastor will see it. I need her discomfort to sell the story.

Alastor must see everything exactly as I’ve arranged, and exactly as follows:

Mara returns from the bathroom.

Sonia tries to cede her position on the dance floor, but I won’t let her. I’m rude to Mara, deliberately dismissive. Mara answers back sharply, carrying a fresh glass of champagne that sloshes onto the ground as she gestures angrily.

Sonia pulls away from me, trying to apologize to Mara, but we’re already ignoring Sonia, locked in an argument that escalates and escalates because I intend it to. I’m cruel and cutting until real tears sparkle in Mara’s eyes, until she’s red-faced and shouting back at me.

We’re drawing the attention of our fellow party-goers, but I don’t make the mistake of looking to see if Shaw is watching too. I pretend to be entirely engrossed in the argument, trying to quiet Mara, grabbing her by the wrist.

Mara pulls her hand away, and when I won’t let go, she slaps me across the face. The slap is sharp, cutting through the music.

I release her wrist, saying, “Fuck off then, you fucking lush.”

I don’t enjoy saying these things. In fact, I hate it. But it has the desired effect. Mara storms away from me, off toward the coat check to retrieve her purse and coat.

I don’t watch her leave. Instead, I snatch up a glass of champagne off the nearest tray, toss it down, and ask Betsy Voss to dance.

Betsy is glad to take me up on the offer, slipping her hand into mine and saying with ill-concealed curiosity, “Trouble in paradise? Don’t let her get

away, Cole—you're such a gorgeous couple."

"She's more trouble than she's worth," I mutter.

I haven't lied in a while. I'm out of practice. The words feel clumsy on my lips.

"You don't mean that," Betsy says.

I don't bother to answer. All that's required now is for me to keep dancing, looking as miserable as I feel.

This is the trickiest part. Will Shaw take the bait?

He has to slip out of the party without me seeing—or at least, with me pretending not to notice.

He might not leave at all.

The seconds tick past. I can see him in my peripheral, still dancing with the redhead. Twirling her around, laughing loudly, pretending to have the time of his life, his smile as phony as my fight with Mara.

Mara gathers her bag and coat, then storms out of the party.

Even then, Shaw lingers. I begin to believe he's not going to follow at all.

Then, at the very edges of my hearing, through a break in the song, I catch his booming voice saying, "Let me get you another drink."

Shaw parts ways from the redhead, first heading toward the bar, but then altering course to slip around the corner of the ornate plaster pillars leading into the theater.

Got you, motherfucker.

The trout is chasing after the bait, mouth wide open. I can't wait for him to swallow the lure before I slip in the hook.

Shaw follows Mara out the double doors.

I leave the opposite way, heading toward the glowing movie screen, then pushing my way through the emergency exit into the alley behind the

theater.

I don't have to follow Mara because I already know where she's going.

So intent am I on sprinting ahead of her, that I don't realize I'm not alone in the alleyway. I hear the click of a safety coming off. Then the voice of Officer Hawks ordering, "Don't fucking move."

I turn slowly, already knowing I'll be staring down the barrel of a gun.

Hawks is still dressed in his rented tux, though he's lost the bow-tie and unbuttoned the top two buttons. His glasses are slightly askew, the eyes behind them bloodshot with lack of sleep and at least one or two glasses of EBA champagne.

"What do you think you're doing?" I say, trying for boredom in my tone. Unable to hide the edge of tension running underneath. I don't have time for this—I don't have time for any delay at all.

Hawks doesn't give a fuck about my plans.

He's here to ruin them.

"Turn around and put your hands behind your back," he barks. "I'm arresting you,"

Fuck fuck FUCK!

"You can't arrest me," I sneer. "You have no warrant and no probable cause."

"Turn around," Hawks hisses through his teeth, "Or I'll put a bullet between your eyes."

FUCK!

I turn slowly, trying to buy time as my mind races.

My options are few.

"Mara just left the party," I tell him. "Shaw is following her. He's going to kill her."

“Shut the fuck up,” Hawks barks, coming up behind me. I hear the clink of metal as he pulls out his cuffs.

The urge to yank my hands away, to fight him, is overwhelming. But he’s closing the manacle around my wrist one-handed while he keeps his gun shoved against my side.

He frisks me roughly, finding the knife in my pocket.

“What’s this?” he crows. “Looks like probable cause to me. Can’t wait to run that through analysis.”

I want to slam the crown of my head against the bridge of his nose. I’m dying to do it.

Does he really think I’m stupid enough to carry a murder weapon around in my pocket?

I mean ... one I’ve already used.

“We have to get to Mara!” I snap. “I can show you where they’re going.”

“Shut UP,” Hawks hisses, jamming the barrel between my ribs. “I want to shoot you. I’m fucking itching to do it. Just give me a reason.”

I keep my mouth shut as he hustles me to the end of the alleyway, to the cruiser parked a block down the street.

God DAMN it! I was hoping he brought his own car.

He shoves me in the back, where the doors have no interior handles and I’m trapped behind the thick metal mesh separating the driver from the back seat.

Hawks drops my knife into an evidence bag and stows it in the trunk, before climbing into the front.

“This is pointless,” I tell him. “I’ll have a team of lawyers down at the station in an hour. I’ll run this all the way up the chain—you’ll be writing parking tickets in Excelsior by the time I’m finished with you.”

“Yeah?” Hawks scoffs. “Well at least I get to ruin your night first.”

He's right about that. With the speed the SFPD moves, I won't even get my phone call within an hour. By then, Mara will be long gone.

Hawks turns right on 18th Street, driving away from Corona Heights Park.

In the moment that his head is turned watching for cross traffic, I slip my bound wrists under my legs, bringing them around in front of me. Hawks glances at the rear-view mirror. I sit still, pretending that I haven't moved at all.

I wait, the seconds whipping past, the car traveling several agonizing blocks in the wrong direction.

Then Hawks turns onto Sanchez and speeds up. He's distracted, changing lanes to merge into traffic.

Leaning back against the seat, I lift my feet and drive both heels into the metal mesh as hard as I can. I kick it once, twice, as Hawks shouts and swerves the wheel, scrabbling for his gun. My heels breaking through on the third kick, knocking Hawks in the jaw and shoulder, sending the car careening the opposite direction.

Hawks pulls his gun free, but now there's no mesh between us. I drop my wrists over his head and pull the chain back against his throat, yanking it so tight that he has to let go of the wheel entirely, and the gun too, both hands grabbing for the chain as he strangles.

The cruiser barrels into the cars lined up along the street, hitting the bed of a Tacoma and flipping over. Hawks and I are both unbuckled. We're flung up out of our seats, still grappling and twisting in the air, landing in a crumpled heap on the inside roof of the car.

I keep throttling him with all my strength as he claws and punches backward. He hits me in the eye and the ear, but I hang on doggedly, choking him until I feel him losing strength. His blows weaken. Finally he slumps forward, both of us covered in broken glass, bleeding from a dozen cuts.

I ease the pressure off his throat.

There's no covering this up—I just assaulted a police officer. I'm in deep shit. I don't need Hawks dead on top of everything else. I steal the keys off his belt, unlock the cuffs, then leave him there with a livid chain mark across his throat and his pulse still beating.

I crawl out the shattered windshield of the cruiser.

A half dozen people have already gathered around, pulling out their phones, calling the police and an ambulance.

They stare at me as I slither out of the cop car, cut to ribbons by the glass, blood pattering down on the cement from the side of my face, my knees, and my hands.

“Are you okay?” a girl asks me.

A bald man in glasses takes a step back, understanding what it means that I was in the back of the cop car when it crashed.

“You better wait here for the ambulance ...” he says, hesitantly.

I'm not waiting for shit.

Ignoring the bystanders, I turn and start running back in the direction of the park.

I'm not returning exactly the way we came—I'm cutting through cross-streets, sprinting down sidewalks and through alleyways, taking the most direct route to Mara.

I'm running faster and harder than I've ever run in my life. My shoes pound the pavement, my chest flames like a furnace stuffed full of coal. My head throbs where it slammed against the car door as the cruiser flipped over. I can't pay attention to any of that—all I can do is sprint and sprint until I taste blood in my throat.

I've been delayed too long.

Mara might already be dead.



MARA

The wind hits me like a slap as I run down the steps of the theater.
For once, it actually feels like Christmas Eve.

The air is so cold that my breath comes out in silvery plumes, and my sweat freezes on my skin in an instant. Thick clouds blanket the night sky, blocking out every star.

I'm hurrying up Castro Street, trying to find the right pace where I can stay ahead of Shaw without losing him.

I have to look distraught, which isn't hard to do. Fighting with Cole was awful. I know we were both playing a part, but it made me feel like shit hearing him speak to me that way, seeing the ugly look on his face. I hated putting Sonia in the middle. I'll have to apologize to her for that—assuming I'm still alive come morning.

Alone in the dark, this plan seems like madness.

I know Cole is close behind me. In fact, he should be running ahead by now, taking the direct route so he can beat me to the park. I fight the urge to glance back over my shoulder, to check if Shaw is following as well.

I turn left on 16th, slowing my pace just a little. Behaving as if I stormed off in a rage, but I'm cooling down now.

It's almost midnight. I've never seen the streets so empty. I pass several houses with parties in full swing: Christmas lights strung up in the

windows, music thudding and people laughing. The sound of merriment from a distance always makes me feel lonely.

No one's out on the sidewalk with me. Barely any cars drive past. Everybody already got where they're going.

I've almost reached Corona Heights Park.

As I cross Flint Street, I feel the unmistakable sensation of eyes on my back. Every sound becomes painfully acute: the rattle of dry leaves blowing up the street, and the scrape of my boots mounting the curb.

Shaw is behind me. I fucking know it.

I know it because I feel it.

My flesh prickles, the sparkling gown scraping across my skin. The air goes still, the pressure dropping.

I've reached the park entrance.

I pause for a moment, at the head of the winding pathway leading into the trees.

If Shaw is watching me, I want him to think I passed this way by chance. And that I've only just thought of Cole's sculpture up on the flat top of the park, almost completed.

I hesitate, shifting my weight back and forth on my feet. As if I know I should continue along my way, but I'm drawn by curiosity. Wanting to see the sculpture in the moonlight.

I take one step along the sidewalk, then turn abruptly, heading into the park instead. Striding with purpose.

The path is narrow, bordered on both sides by cypress and eucalyptus. As I turn the first bend, I'm sure I hear the grit of heavy footsteps following after me. I stop, standing still in the middle of the path. The sound stops, too. When I resume walking, I hear him following again.

My heart rate doubles.

This is what I wanted. I wanted him to follow. But now that I know he's right behind me, I can hardly breathe. I want to get up to the sculpture as quickly as possible, because that's where Cole will be waiting.

I hurry up the long, winding path to the flat top.

Twice I stop and look behind me. The second time, I catch the edge of a dark figure stepping back behind a tree, only a dozen yards behind me.

"Cole?" I call out, as if I think it might be him.

Only silence answers.

I can imagine Shaw standing behind that oak, grinning to himself, his white teeth gleaming in the dark like a Cheshire Cat.

He's waiting. Watching me. Making sure we're truly alone.

I continue up the path, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Every creak of a branch, every rustle in the bushes makes me want to scream. It doesn't matter if Shaw can see the tension in my body, if he can see my footsteps quickening. He knows I'm frightened and that's just fine—it will only excite him.

He'll think I came here stupidly, in the heat of the fight, only now realizing that someone might have followed.

The air feels thick and expectant, as if even the wind is holding its breath to see what will happen next.

I step out of the trees, finally arriving on the high, flat vista where Cole built his sculpture.

It towers over me, the glossy black walls of the labyrinth over twenty feet tall.

The entrance yawns like a dark mouth. I know the route through, because Cole showed me his diagram dozens of times. But I'm also aware how disorienting it will be inside, with no proper lights and several false paths designed to trick me.

I step out into the clearing, slowly approaching the entrance. My boots crunch over the dry, frosty grass, the sparkling train of my dress whispering behind me.

Something soft touches my cheek.

I look upward.

Puffy flakes of snow drift down from the thick bank of clouds.

I stare in astonishment: I've never seen snow in San Francisco in all my life. It feels surreal, as if this is only happening to me. As if I truly have stepped into another world.

I turn to look back the way I came, to the tangled tunnel of branches and the dark path beneath.

A figure steps into view. Tall, broad, dressed in a midnight-blue tuxedo. Fists clenched at his sides. Chin lowered like a bull as he stares at me.

We both stand fixed in place. Frozen like ice sculptures. Waiting for the other to move.

Shaw's lips split apart in a grin.

He lowers his head and charges.

Survivor – 2WEI

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[Apple Music → geni.us/no-devil-apple](https://www.apple.com/geni.us/no-devil-apple)

He barrels toward me, arms pumping, legs churning, head down like a linebacker, crossing the space between us with horrifying speed.

I don't have time to think or even to scream.

I turn and sprint into the labyrinth.

The black glass envelops me, cutting off the outside world. The walls appear sleek and featureless, but I know there's hidden doorways in the

glass, impossible to find unless you stand at just the right angle, or run your fingers down their length until you find the openings.

I don't have to do this, because I already know the way.

I hurtle down the dark alleyway, taking a hard right, then a left. I head to the next intersection and run down the middle branch, hoping that I'm losing Shaw with all these turns.

Cole should already be inside the labyrinth, hiding up ahead.

My chest burns, my legs shaking beneath me. I underestimated how frightened I'd be, and how heavily it would affect me: my legs are rubber, my feet stone lumps inside of my boots.

I'm starting to worry that I misremembered the turns, and I should have gone right instead of left at this last turn. The reflective glass disorients me. Ghostly versions of myself chase along my left and right side, splitting off at dizzying angles every time I turn. These bits of motion in my peripheral make me jump and spin, thinking Shaw is right behind me. Now I'm not even certain if I'm going the right way. I might have turned all the way around.

If I followed the route, then I should meet Cole soon. He should be waiting in the center of the maze.

I run to the next intersection, expecting to see him. Expecting him to give me the nod that means, *keep running, head to the exit, I'll get Shaw as he passes.*

I burst into the middle of the labyrinth, which is a perfect circle, with eight pathways leading off like the spokes of a wheel. A black glass obelisk marks the exact center point, jutting upward to the cloudy sky.

The snow thickens, whirling downward in a spiral.

I see the obelisk, I see the snow, but I don't see Cole.

He isn't here. I'm all alone.

Where the fuck is he?

I spin in a circle, searching for him.

We agreed that he'd be here.

We agreed that he'd give me the sign that it was safe to run through.

Cole would slip into the wall up ahead. I'd wait for Shaw, to make sure he followed. The moment I saw him, I'd sprint down the aisle. As Shaw chased after me, Cole would jump out and bury his knife in Shaw's neck.

That was the plan.

Shaw will be here any second.

What do I do? What do I DO?

Shaw's heavy footsteps pound toward me.

Without waiting for him to reach the middle, I sprint down one of the spokes. This isn't the way I was supposed to go, but it doesn't fucking matter. If Cole isn't here, I only have two options: run all the way out and flee from the maze, or try to hide in the walls.

Shaw is chasing after me way too fucking fast. He's probably visited the maze himself, late at night while it was being built. He knows the way through. He's faster than me. If I run, he'll catch me.

If I hide, it might give Cole enough time to find us both.

Where is he?

I thought he'd be here. I was so sure of it. Not for a second did I believe he'd let me down.

He won't let me down.

He'll be here.

I just have to stay alive a little longer.

I dart into a tiny alcove hidden in the glossy black wall. There's a dozen of these niches scattered through the maze. I try to make myself as small as a

mouse, stifling my panting breath, covering my mouth with both hands while gasps leak out in a frosty mist, harsh and ragged.

I can hear Shaw's breath, even heavier. He's puffing like a buffalo, winded from chasing after me.

I hate that sound. I really fucking hate it.

His thudding steps pause as he reaches the center of the maze. I can hear him turning this way and that, pausing as he stares down each spoke, searching for me.

His voice cuts through the still night:

"I know you're in here."

I press both palms over my mouth.

His tone is low and flat, devoid of emotion. Just like the night we met.

I know you're awake.

He cut me open. Left me to bleed out on the ground.

We'll see who bleeds tonight.

Slipping my hand into the pocket of my coat, I find Cole's knife and close my fingers around the handle.

Cole said to stick to the plan no matter what.

Well, the plan is fucked.

I'm the one hiding in the walls. I'm the one with the knife.

Slowly, carefully, I flick it open.

The blade snaps into place with a minute *click*.

I can feel Shaw stiffening, his head jerking up, his ears straining to find the direction of the sound.

"There's no point hiding, Mara. Come on out and we'll talk. Face to face. Woman to man ..."

He gives a nasty chuckle.

He's coming closer, his heavy steps slow and measured. He knows I'm hiding close by.

"Are you afraid I'm going to hurt you? Don't worry ... I just want a little taste ..."

I think he turned down the path next to mine. I hear his voice moving off at an angle. But just as quickly, he turns and strides back again.

"You might even like it. Some girls do ... at least to start ... Your roommate Erin certainly enjoyed herself ..."

He's walking down my aisle now, I'm sure of it. Drawing closer and closer ...

"The first time we fucked she was bouncing and squealing so loud it echoed up the staircase ... Half the party must have heard her. The second time ... well, the second time I wasn't as nice ..."

He's walking right past me. The opening in the wall sits at an angle. I've wedged myself into the furthest corner of the alcove, out of view.

I see a slice of Shaw's broad back as he passes by. I see the carefully combed waves of his sandy-colored hair, and the high collar of his tuxedo jacket. In between, the nape of his neck ... thick and muscular, but unprotected ...

I clench tight to the knife, slipping out of my hiding place. Stepping behind him, smooth and silent as his own shadow ...

"I bit her nipple off and swallowed it whole," Shaw chuckles.

Gripping the handle of the knife overhand, I stab the blade toward the base of his neck, planning to bury it in his spine.

Maybe it's the motion that gives me away, or some whispering sound.

Shaw whirls around. The knife embeds in the back of his shoulder, wrenching it out of my hand. Shaw's bear-like arm swings around, clouting me in the side of the head, sending me flying into the glass wall opposite us.

“You fuckin’ BITCH!” he howls, clamping his hand over his shoulder. He’s trying to reach behind him, trying to grip the knife. His arms are too thick—his fingertips graze the handle, but he can’t pull it out.

He rounds on me, face flushed with fury. Genuinely outraged that I dared to fight back.

I’m already leaping to my feet again, sprinting away from him, back into the center of the maze.

My feet slip on the freshly-fallen snow, and I almost eat shit rounding the corner. I can hear Shaw barreling after me, grunting through his teeth, utterly enraged.

I’m running in a mad panic, all memory of the labyrinth wiped from my mind. I’m back in the center, but I don’t remember where I came in, so don’t know the way out.

I pick a spoke at random and sprint down it, taking turn after turn, praying that I’m not about to run down a blind alley into a dead end.

I find another alcove and jump into it, planning to hide again, but when I look back the way I came, I realize something awful: I’ve been leaving footprints in the snow. I can see exactly which way I came, and so will Shaw. He can follow me as easily as if I left a trail of breadcrumbs for him.

I drop out of the niche and sprint once more, chest burning, legs burning, eyes watering so badly I can hardly see in front of me. Snowflakes whirl into my face, sticking in my eyelashes, blinding me. The black glass walls seem to go on and on in every direction. A dozen ghostly Maras stare back at me every way I turn, faces pale, eyes black holes of terror.

I cross over my own footprints, and I can see Shaw’s right on top of them, twice the size, his weight churning up the dirt. I can’t hear him, but I know he’s close. Following my prints. Hunting me.

Picking up the skirt of my dress so it won’t drag, I run backward down the next aisle. I hope this might confuse him. Then, when I reach the next intersection, I run forward again. Then backward once more.

I still can’t hear him. Where the fuck did he go?

Is he hiding in the walls now?

Is he about to jump out at me?

I'm staring around on all sides, wild-eyed, fighting against the waves of panic threatening to overwhelm me.

Where is he? Where am I? How do I get out?

Dazed and distracted, I see my own reflection running right toward me.

I slam into the smooth black glass, falling backward onto my ass. Scrambling up again, I hear a low laugh.

Shaw stands at the other end of the aisle.

I'm trapped.

There's nowhere to run.

He's cornered me in the dead end.

Shaw isn't running anymore. He approaches calmly, casually. Smiling like he did as he walked through the technicolor spiderweb: knowing he has every advantage, and I have none.

He only pauses to reach around behind his shoulder once more, finally catching hold of the handle of the knife and wrenching it out of his back with a grimace. He examines his own blood on the blade, as dark and glossy as the labyrinth walls.

"Got me good, didn't you, you little cunt," he grunts.

He holds the knife upright, the tip as wickedly sharp as the point of a fang.

"I ought to peel your fucking face off with this," he says. "See how pretty Cole finds you then."

He opens his fingers, letting the knife drop to the ground, the impact causing a spatter of blood to flick across the fresh-fallen snow.

"I don't use a knife," he says, giving me that blinding white smile, bracketed on both sides by boyish dimples. "Why would I need one, when

I've got fingernails and teeth? I'm gonna rip you apart with my bare hands. That's what I like Mara—I like the taste of your throat tearing against my tongue. I like the feel of your eyeballs giving way under my thumbs. I want to feel you breaking, cracking, ripping. I want your warm blood pumping down my arms.”

I'm so afraid that I've passed right through to the other side.

A deathly clarity settles over me.

This is it. This is the end.

Whatever happens, I won't give in. If he kills me, I'm going to take some pieces of Shaw with me.

I slip out of my heavy coat, letting it fall behind me. Allowing the soft flakes of snow to settle in my hair and on my bare shoulders. Feeling their cool kiss one last time.

“You tried to murder me before,” I tell Shaw. “As a killer and an artist ... you're mediocre.”

Shaw's upper lip twists from a grin into a snarl. His teeth clench so hard I can almost hear them cracking, and his fists shake. With a howl, he charges down the alley.

He's running right at me, getting bigger and bigger, until his shoulders almost touch both walls.

He's a wrecking ball swinging right at me. There's nowhere to run.

Out of a passageway in the dark glass, Cole barrels into Shaw, diving at his legs, sending them both tumbling end over end, until they slam into the opposite wall.

There is no strategy. There is no plan.

Cole is already gasping and sweating and bleeding everywhere before the fight has even begun. He grapples with Shaw, no element of surprise on his side. From the second they make contact, it's a melee of madness: desperate, bloody, and brutal.

The men fight and claw, biting, punching, and kicking, rolling over and over in the snow. The ground becomes a morass of churned-up mud and bloody slush.

This is like no fight I've ever seen, wildly hectic, viciously brutal. I can hardly tell one man from another as they punch at each other's throats and gouge at each other's eyes. This is how predators fight: not to win, but to kill.

Shaw is bigger, stronger. Cole is faster, but that's of limited use now that they're already on the ground. Cole gave up all the advantage when he tackled Shaw, taking him down before he could plough into me.

Cole turns, wild-eyed, mouth bloody.

"Mara RUN!" he shouts.

I've never seen him scared. He thinks he's going to lose. He thinks we're both going to die.

I've been trapped in the dead end, pressed up against the cold glass, unable to move because the fight is too wild, I don't know to help.

But now I know what to do.

I dart forward, leaping over the men's churning legs, running away from them down the narrow passageway.

Shaw gives a strangled yell of rage, thinking I'm escaping. Cole is silent, focused only on Shaw, keeping him right where he is.

So much snow has fallen that for a moment I can't find it. Then I see the glint of steel, and I dive my frozen fingers down into the ice, closing my hand around the handle. I pull out the knife, already stained with Shaw's blood.

My fingers are so cold that I can hardly feel them, but I grip the handle tight all the same.

"COLE!" I shout.

He gives me one swift look, and in that moment, the terrifying computer in his head runs a thousand calculations.

He rolls over onto his back, letting Shaw take the advantage straddling him, throttling him. Cole puts himself in the vulnerable position, Shaw's hands around his throat.

With his own hands, Cole grips a fistful of Shaw's hair and jerks it back, while shoving the heel of his palm against Shaw's jaw, wrenching his head to the side, exposing his throat.

Our eyes meet. Everything that needs to be said passes between us.

I'm holding the knife, sharp as a fang, dark on its point like venom.

Shaw is the spider, but I'm the snake.

I never saw a spider kill a snake.

Sprinting forward, I raise the knife.

I slash it across Shaw's throat in one perfect swinging arc.

Blood scythes across the snow, a parabola of crimson on the blank white canvas.

Shaw sinks to his knees, lips parting in stunned surprise.

He can't even raise his hand to stem the flow.

The blood pumps from his throat, a fresh spurt with every heartbeat, each more vivid than the last.

I've never seen anything so beautiful.

I watch him die, the snow drifting down, his last breath hanging like smoke in the air before dissolving into nothingness.

He slumps over and falls. His body hits the ground, heavy and dull. Not a man anymore, or even a monster—just a sack of meat.

Cole rises from the ground.

He's covered in Shaw's blood and his own, his skin wetly gleaming in the moonlight.

I look at my own hands, drenched in blood. Droplets patter down on the pristine snow.

Then I look at Cole again, and his face breaks into a grin of relief.

Always Forever – Cults

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We run to each other, Cole sweeping me up in his arms. He spins me around, snow spiraling around us. He kisses me, his mouth warm and wet in the coldness, sweet and salty, with the taste of copper on his tongue.

Our breath mixes silvery between us. His wet hands slide over my skin, leaving red streaks vivid as paint.

He kisses and kisses me, both of us warm and alive, Shaw cooling on the ground.

Distantly, I hear the sound of sirens.

I don't care who it is, or how long until they find us. I don't care what happens when they do.

All I care about is Cole, and his arms wrapped tight around me.

He saved me, and I saved him. Not just from Shaw, but from everything else in this world that wants to destroy us—the demons outside, and the ones within.

I don't need anyone else.

I just need one person to make me the center of their universe. I want to be two stars locked in orbit, burning bright in the blackness of space.

The snow reflects on the glossy black walls, thousands of flakes swirling all around us.

Cole whirls me around and around, his mouth locked on mine.

He presses me against a cold black wall, lifting the long, sparkling skirt of my gown up around my waist. I'm yanking at the waistband of his trousers, ripping off the button, pulling them open.

He thrusts inside of me, his cock blazing hot, our gasps puffing into the air, steam rising off our skin. The cold can't touch me. I'm pure fire, burning and burning, but never consumed.

I'm floating outside my own body, watching us from a distance. I see us entwined, my legs around his waist, arms around his neck, his tongue in my mouth and his hands gripping me tight.

We're wrapped together, twisted up. Not one snake but two, the black and the white.

We are the same.

And I like what we are.



COLE

I fuck Mara in the snow, in the cold, like she's the only warmth in the universe, and I have to stay inside her to keep warm.

The scent of her skin fills my lungs, rich and alive.

The pleasure I feel is so much more than physical.

I finally realize what happiness feels like.

There's no malice in it. No greed. It's not something you seek for yourself.

It flows between two people, around and around, back and forth, given and received in the same breath.

Her happiness makes me happy.

And even if it didn't, I want it for her anyway.

That's what loving her means—I want her safe, protected, flourishing, whether it benefits me or not.

It hits me so hard that I let out a groan. Mara touches my face, tilting it so I look right in her eyes.

"I love you," I tell her.

"I know," she says.

That's what makes me cum. Not the physical act of fucking—the emotion of it. Finally being known. Finally being understood.

I explode into her. It rips through me, painful and pleasurable, just the way I need it—the only thing that satisfies.

She clings to me, biting down hard on my shoulder. Tasting my blood in her mouth.

When I set her down, the sirens are closer.

“Listen,” I say, holding tight to her hand. “I need you to do something for me. Can you do it quickly, before it's too late?”

“Yes,” Mara says at once.

“Good.”

I retrieve her coat and wrap it around her shoulders, explaining exactly what I need.

When I'm done, Mara nods and kisses me once more.

Then she runs away through the maze, leaving me alone with Shaw's body to wait for the cops.



MARA

3 MONTHS LATER

It takes several months, a team of lawyers, and some hefty “donations” to the right people before Cole is entirely in the clear.

In the end, the Chief of Police pins a medal on Officer Hawk’s chest for closing the case on the Beast of the Bay.

Hawks scowls through the entire press conference, not at all pleased with the deal Cole struck with the SFPD.

Hawks gets the credit, and Cole gets fifty hours of community service for flipping a police cruiser in the middle of Sanchez Street. He’s been serving his time at the Bay Area Youth Center, teaching delinquents how to draw.

He comes home from his sessions in a surprisingly good mood.

“Some of these kids show real talent,” he says.

“What kind of talent?” I tease him.

Cole grins. “All kinds. That’s why I like them.”

Cole’s lawyers argued that he was wrongfully arrested, and that he had no choice but to escape after he witnessed Shaw abducting me off the street and dragging me into the labyrinth.

I supported this story, including the part where it was Cole who cut Shaw’s throat, while I fled back to Cole’s mansion. I pretended to be disoriented

and in shock, freshly showered and hiding in bed in my pajamas when the police finally found me.

They couldn't question me too hard since I had been telling them all along that Shaw was the Beast. I was the girl who had to escape him TWICE because they wouldn't listen to me.

It helped that the cops uncovered a mountain of evidence in Shaw's apartment.

Most damning was Shaw's collage of stolen driver's licenses. He had spray-painted them gold, hiding them within one of his technicolor paintings. When the cops scraped off the paint, they found the IDs of Maddie Walker and twenty other victims, Erin's "lost" license among them.

They also found the wallets of two missing men: art critic Carl Danvers and Professor Oswald. The papers noted that Danvers attended a party with Shaw shortly before his disappearance, and that Shaw was one of the professor's students at CalArts when he likewise went missing. The professor's wallet finally allowed the death of Valerie Whittaker to be linked to the Beast.

Cole was extremely pleased that I managed to break into Shaw's apartment before the cops showed up.

"And you didn't leave a single print!" he said, admiringly.

"I learned from the best," I grinned back at him.

I've come a long way on my journey, to the point where planting evidence is exhilarating rather than horrifying. I'm beginning to understand how even the most reckless acts can feel like a game, the high stakes only enhancing the fun.

Still, I'm glad it's over.

Or I suppose I should say, almost over.

I have one piece of unfinished business to attend to.



I'M STANDING on the front step of a dingy, single-level house in Bakersfield. The grass is unwatered and uncut, the garden beds nothing but bare dirt.

I have to ring the bell several times before I hear the shuffling sounds of someone moving inside the house.

At last the door cracks open, and I see an eye pressed against the space, peering out suspiciously.

For a second, she doesn't recognize me.

Then she pulls the door wide, straightening up, blinking in the garish spring sunshine.

I almost wouldn't recognize her, either.

She's chopped her hair to shoulder length, frizzy and uneven. Threads of gray run through, poorly covered by an at-home dye job. She's gained weight, enough that she fills out the baggy oversized sweatshirt that once belonged to me. As faded as it's become, I still remember that retro Disney logo on the front. I never actually went to Disneyland—I bought the hoodie at a thrift shop, hoping other kids would think I'd been.

Makeup from the night before cakes around her eyes, settling in the wrinkles beneath. The lines are deep, etched in place from every ugly expression she's carried, hour after hour, day after day, all these years.

Her face bears record of every scowl, every sneer. No smile lines at the corners of her eyes—only trenches on her forehead, between her eyebrows, and in marionette lines running from her nose to the edges of her mouth.

She's become a witch from a fairy tale. Transformed by misery. The darkness inside finally reflected on her face.

Those gray-blue eyes still glitter with malice. The same color as mine—cold as San Francisco fog blowing in off the bay.

A part of her will always be in me.

But I choose which part.

“Hello Mom,” I say.

I can see her struggle.

She prefers to be the one showing up unannounced on people's doorsteps. She hates that I'm trespassing in her space, catching her unaware.

On the other hand, she's been trying to find me for years. She can't possibly slam the door in my face when she's finally getting what she wants.

"What are you doing here?" she croaks.

I must have woken her, even though it's ten o'clock in the morning. The sour scent of unwashed clothing, spilled wine, and stale cigarettes wafts out of the house. An old, old smell for me. One that recalls my earliest days.

"I brought you a gift," I say, holding up a bottle of merlot, her favorite.

Her eyes flick to the label and back to my face, narrowing. I have never bought her alcohol in all my life.

"A peace offering," I say. "I have something to discuss with you."

I already know she won't be able to resist. The wine is only half as tempting as what she really wants: the chance to dig information out of me.

"Fine," she grunts, holding the door wider and retreating back into the house so I can follow.

That's as good as an invitation.

I cross the threshold, closing the door behind me.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the interior gloom. I stand still until they do, so I don't trip over the piles of pizza boxes, empty beer cans, overflowing ashtrays, discarded clothing, scattered shoes, stacks of old magazines, junk mail, and moldering paper plates still marked with the remains of meals long past.

"Sit anywhere," my mother says, flopping down on a pile of blankets on the ratty sofa—clearly the same place she was sleeping moments before.

I have to move a pile of old newspapers off the closest chair before I can likewise sit down. I recognize the paper on top: it's the same one Arthur

showed me during my last shift at Sweet Maple. The one that contains a picture of me in the arts section.

A tiny smirk plays over my mother's lips as I set the papers aside.

She sparks up a cigarette, holding it in her usual way, pinched between thumb and index finger like it's a joint.

I know her habits so well. Their familiarity repulses me, like an old journal entry that makes you cringe.

"Do you have a bottle opener?" I ask.

Of course she has a bottle opener. I might as well ask if she has toilet paper. It's probably even more of a necessity in her eyes.

"In the kitchen," she says, making no move to stand and retrieve it.

This is a power play—making me fetch the corkscrew and the glasses, waiting on her like I used to.

I anticipated this, and it suits me just fine.

I carry the wine into the kitchen, which is even filthier than the living room. The stovetop is piled with so much clutter that I doubt she's ever laid eyes on the burners, let alone used them to cook. When I snap on the overhead light, several roaches dive down under the pile of dirty dishes in the sink.

The cabinets are empty. I find the glasses in the dishwasher, amongst a pile of plates speckled with green mold. Swallowing back bile, and avoiding the roaches as best I can, I wash the cups in the sink. I have to swish a little water in the Dawn bottle to get the last dregs of soap out of it.

My mother doesn't call out to see what's taking so long. I hear the faint crackle as she sucks on her cigarette, followed by an exhale and a wracking cough that rattles in her chest.

The glasses are wet, with no paper towel to dry them. I shake them off, then search for the bottle opener. Unsurprisingly, it's out in the open on the kitchen counter, next to my mother's keys, an open tube of lipstick, and a handful of loose change. Next to that, a dozen prescription bottles, some

in until they realized that everything about her is an act. She's allergic to the truth, she won't tell it even when it would benefit her to do so.

Which is why it will be difficult to get what I want from her.

"I don't care what you say to reporters," I tell her. "It doesn't matter. Nothing you do can tear me down now."

" 'Cause you're fucking some artist?" she scoffs. "I know how that works. You're nothing without him. When he's tired of you, he'll toss you aside and you'll be right back where you started."

She takes another gulp of wine, the glass more than half gone.

She really believes what she's saying. The world is so ugly to her. People's motivations so cruel.

I could almost feel sorry for her.

Almost.

"You're telling your story, not mine," I say.

She sets her glass down hard, a little wine sloshing over the rim.

"You think you're better than me because you stroll in here in your fancy new clothes, 'cause you got your name in the paper? I know who you really are. I fucking birthed you. You're weak, you're stupid, you're lazy, and you're nothing but a filthy little whore. You can paint a billion paintings and not one of them will change what you are inside."

Triumphantly, she picks the glass up again, downing whatever remains inside.

I watch her swallow it all, my own wine sitting untouched next to me.

"Good," I say, softly. "Now that you've finished, we can address what I actually came here to discuss."

She frowns, her forehead furrowing.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

I reach in the pocket of my suede jacket, pulling out a small bottle of liquid pseudoephedrine.

“I put these drops in your drink. Colorless, tasteless. You might have noticed a little bitterness, but it obviously didn’t stop you drinking it down.”

“You spiked my drink?”

Color rises up her neck, from the collar of my stolen sweatshirt.

“Poisoned it, actually.”

She makes a move to get up from the couch, but she’s already unsteady. Her elbow buckles under her.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. You’ll be dead before the ambulance arrives.”

“You sneaky little *bitch!* You filthy nasty—”

“I wouldn’t do that either,” I snap.

She stops talking, her mouth closing like a trap. Her eyes water until the pupils swim, and I can see the shallow hitches of her chest. Some of this is fear, but the rest is the drug taking effect.

“That’s better,” I say, as she sinks back down.

“What the *fuck* do you want?” she hisses, panting fast.

“I have the antidote. I’ll give it you. I just want to know one thing.”

“*What?*”

She’s writhing against the cushions, the pseudoephedrine taking hold.

I stare at her, face still as stone, not a hint of sympathy.

“I want to know my father’s name.”

She lets out several irritated hissing sounds, squirming on the cushions. Her face is deeply flushed now, her skin sweating. Her breath grows more and more shallow.

“Fuck you,” she snarls.

“Suit yourself,” I say, standing up from my chair.

“Wait!” she cries.

Tears run down both sides of her cheeks, mixing with the sweat. She clutches the front of the hoodie, pulling it away from her chest as if that will ease the pressure.

“Tell me his name,” I say, quietly, relentlessly.

She’s groaning and writhing, pulling at the shirt.

“Tell me. You don’t have much time.”

“Arghhhh!” she groans, rolling on her side and then on her back again, thrashing around in the blankets, trying to ease the pressure any way she can.

I’m colder than ice. I feel nothing but the relentless drive to squeeze this secret out of her. The one thing of value she could tell me, but she always refused.

“Tell me,” I order, my eyes fixed on her face while she twists in a rictus of agony.

She makes a mumbling sound, drooling a little at the strained edges of her mouth.

“Tell me!”

She shakes her head like a toddler holding its breath, eyes slitted, hatefully obstinate all the way to the end.

“TELL ME!” I roar, and I slap her hard across the face.

The pain jolts her. Fear replaces stubbornness as she finally realizes I’m not fucking around.

“I DON’T KNOW!” she howls, her voice strangling in her throat. “I NEVER KNEW! Are you happy, you fucking cunt? I never knew who he was! I don’t even remember it happening.”

She rolls off the couch, shoving the coffee table with her hip as she falls, toppling the bottle of wine so it tumbles on its side and pours the liquor onto the floor with a steady *glug, glug, glug*.

I make no move to right the bottle.

I don't touch my mother, either.

I watch her squirm and buck, her face the color of brick, her hands twisting into claws as she grasps at her chest.

Her mouth moves silently, her lips trying to form the word *antidote*.

I look down at her, pitiless.

"There is no antidote," I say. "There never was. Nothing can save you. Just like nothing can change you. You are what you are ... dead to me."

I leave her lying there, twisting and croaking out her last breaths. I won't even give her the comfort of my company. She can die alone, like she was always going to.

Instead, I carry both glasses of wine back to the kitchen and dump them down the sink. I wash the glasses and return them to the dishwasher, wiping my fingerprints off every surface I touched: the Dawn bottle, the faucet, the handle of the dishwasher, the interior handle of the front door ... Every place I touched while inside the house.

By the time I'm finished, my mother has stopped moving.

I don't bother to clean up the wine, but I remove my prints from the bottle, laying it back down on its side.

I put the drops directly into her glass. There won't be any trace in the bottle.

I doubt they'll even autopsy her body. The effects of pseudoephedrine are similar to a heart attack. Even if they run a full-panel blood test, the cornucopia of drugs in the house will muddy the waters. She was trying to kill herself long before I helped her along.

Leaving the house feels much better than entering.

Every woman who walks the galleries is laughing and pointing out their favorite images to their friends.

I've deliberately invited every woman in this city that I admire. I want them all here, celebrating who we are and what we can accomplish.

It's not about wishing we were JFK. It's about planning how we WILL be, in the not-too-distant future. The next person who stands behind the presidential pulpit and gives a speech that enlivens the heart of the nation won't be an old white man.

I put Sonia in charge of the whole thing, from the guest list to lighting to marketing materials. This is Sonia's gallery, a new space she's rented on a 12-month lease, primo real estate in the heart of the east end. The palatial galleries are already filling with her favorite female artists, some local, some international.

This is her debut as much as mine. She is slaying, holding court in a stunning black gown, closing deals faster than her newly-trained assistant can keep up.

I hold my glass up to her across the room in a silent toast to her future success. She grins back at me, letting Allen Wren believe that he's getting some kind of deal on the hottest new artist out of Mumbai as he signs the purchase agreement.

Cole is just as busy, arguing with Marcus York at top volume. Marcus is trying to rope him into another sculpture, this time for Golden Gate Park.

"No fucking way! The last one almost killed me."

"What, from a little snow? Come now, we'll build this one in the summer!"

"We won't build it at all, 'cause I ain't doin' it."

"You need time to think."

"I need time to drink," Cole says, seizing another glass of champagne off a passing tray. "I don't know if I'm going to work at all this year."

"You don't mean that," I say, slipping between him and Marcus York and stealing a quick kiss. "You love working."

“I used to love working,” he says, grabbing a handful of my ass, not giving a fuck if York is still watching. “Now I’m distracted by more interesting things ...”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear you say that,” I pretend to pout. “Because I heard about an opportunity opening up in Venice ...”

I pull the plane tickets out of my purse, fanning them open dramatically in front of him.

“I need a hot young artist to accompany me ... I could write you a letter of recommendation if you’re interested?”

“What’s gotten into you?” Cole says, pulling me into the adjoining gallery so he can kiss me deeper and harder. “Whatever it is, I like it ...”

I tilt my head up, running my tongue along the side of his neck, all the way to his ear. Then I murmur, “I took a little drive this morning. Stopped in Bakersfield.”

Cole goes still, his hand resting on my lower back.

“Oh, really?” he says, no hint of play in his voice now. “Did it satisfy?”

I hesitate, really considering how I feel.

“It feels right,” I say, at last. “It feels good.”

I can feel him smiling, his face pressed close to mine.

“Because it is,” he growls.



EPILOGUE

COLE

Venice
1 Week Later

Bust Your Knee Caps – Pomplamoose
[Spotify → geni.us/no-devil-spotify](https://geni.us/no-devil-spotify)
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Mara and I stroll along Salizada San Moise in the heart of Venice. It's the middle of Carnevale, and everyone around us wears full costume. A grinning Arlecchino in a colorful diamond-print suit dances in the doorway of a glassworks shop, and a white-coated Pulcinella serenades us from the balcony of the Bauer Hotel. Even the gondoliers punting the famous canal boats have dressed as characters from the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Mara wears a black velvet jacket and breeches, brocaded in gold. A magnificent scarlet ostrich feather adorns her tricorn hat, and her pale white mask stops above brilliant scarlet lips.

She looks like a pirate queen. I've never been more enthralled by her.

Carnevale is the perfect environment for my pleasure kitten. She's soaking in the wild sea breeze, the scent of fresh fried moleche, and the chaotic color and music of the street fairs bursting out of the narrow alleyways between the opulent old buildings.

Had I come here in my twenties, as an artist alone, I never could have appreciated the beauty of this place. Great cities are living things, and people are as much a part of their architecture as the buildings themselves. If I'm not here to laugh, and drink, and dance, and fuck on my own gorgeous balcony overlooking the canals, then why am I here at all?

I needed to feel that I was like one person to realize that I'm not so unlike the others.

Mara is my other half. Not my twin, but the parts of me that were missing.

I always thought the sense of emptiness that plagued me was the reality of the human condition. I never imagined the hole inside of me could be filled by someone else.

In all my arrogance, I missed a basic truth that other people already understood:

Everything is better when you share it with someone else.

Nothing feels insurmountable when you aren't alone.

It's so optimistic that I'd be embarrassed to say it out loud. And yet it's how I feel. I'm vibrating with the joy of it, until every color, scent, and sound around me seems a manifestation of what I'm experiencing inside.

I've never felt so much a part of something. I am the happiness of the day, and the day exists to buoy me up.

Right as I'm thinking that, some drunken oaf stumbles into my path, dumping his spritz down the front of my trousers, drenching my brand-new Italian leather loafers.

"Scansarsi!" He shouts. *"Brutto figlio di puttano bastardo Americano!"*

Since I speak Italian flawlessly, I catch every word of that insult.

I turn to Mara, that old anger already blazing in my eyes.

The drunk stumbles alone toward a dark alleyway. I could easily follow after him. In the chaos, no one would remember another Rugantino in a black mask.

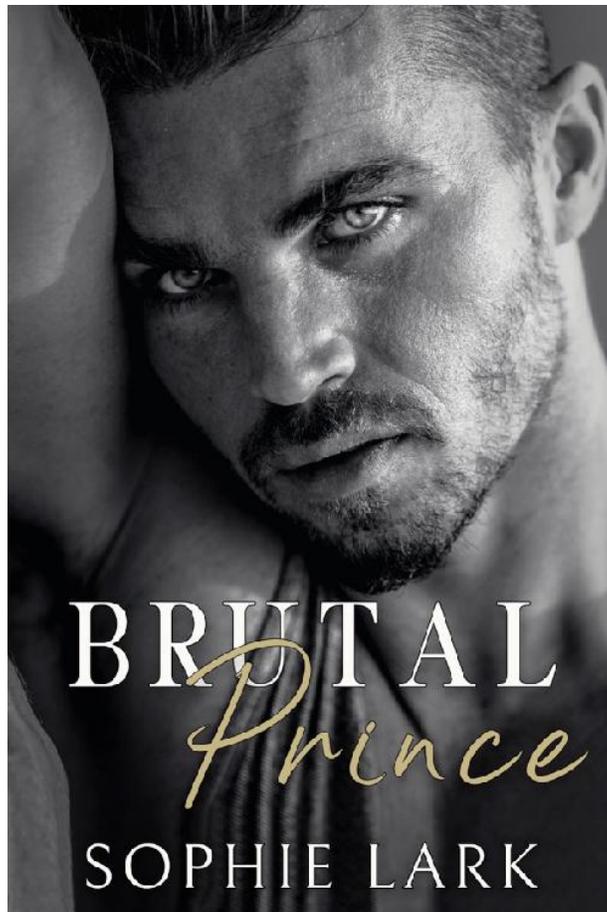
Mara follows my gaze, her eyes flicking ahead the alleyway, vibrant and alive beneath the smooth white porcelain of her mask.

Before I can move, she dashes ahead of me, seizing the drunk by the shoulder. She plucks the plume from her hat and draws it across his throat in one sharp motion, the scarlet feathers liquid bright against his neck. The drunk—insensible to manners, but fully alive to horseplay—pretends to stiffen up and fall over dead in the gutter, clutching his throat dramatically and making dramatic gurgling sounds.

“There,” Mara says, rejoining me, her feather tucked back into her pirate hat. “I got him for you.”

“Thank you,” I say. “Saves me the trouble.”

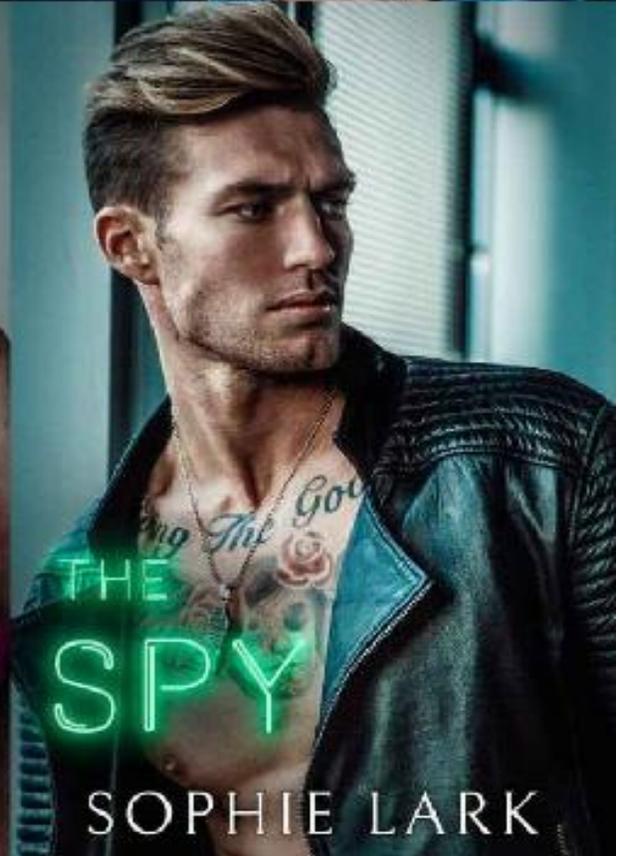
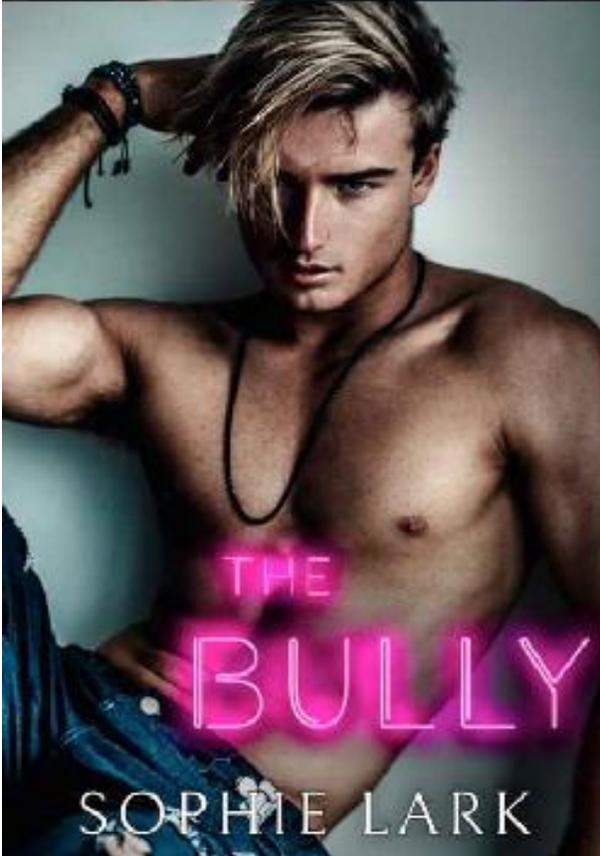
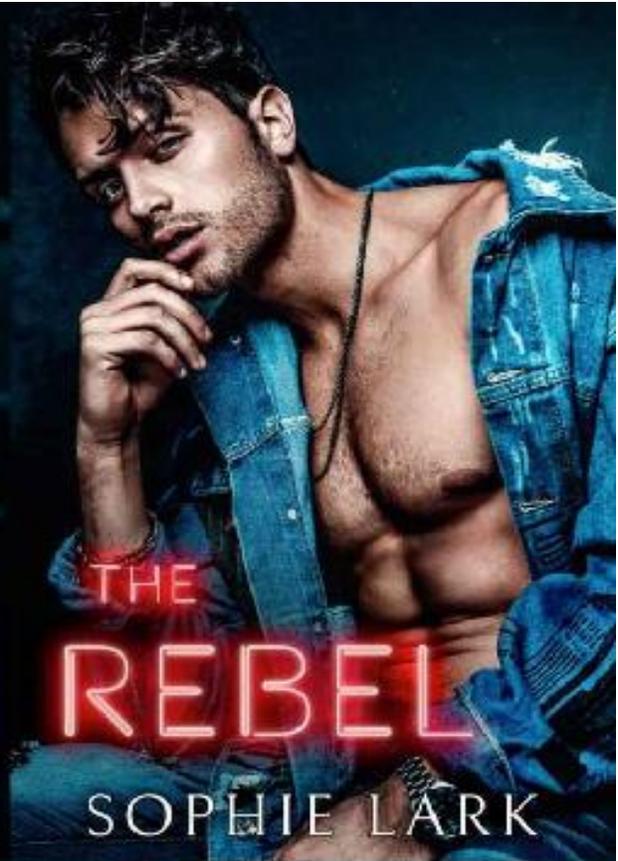




**IF YOU LIKED THE PUSH/PULL BETWEEN COLE & MARA THEN YOU WILL
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THE REBEL

MILES GRIFFIN (SON OF CALLUM & AIDA)

THE BULLY

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***** (SON OF *****)

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Sophie lives with her husband, two boys, and baby girl in the Rocky Mountain West. She writes intense, intelligent romance, with heroines who are strong and capable, and men who will do anything to capture their hearts.

She has a slight obsession with hiking, bodybuilding, and live comedy shows. Her perfect day would be taking the kids to Harry Potter World, going dancing with Mr. Lark, then relaxing with a good book and a monster bag of salt and vinegar chips.

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