



DEVILS PLAYGROUND: UNUS

# PERICULUM

SERVATIS A  
PERICULUM

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NATALIE BENNETT



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**Editing by: [Pinpoint Editing](#)**

# BLURB

## Tragic and Twisted fell in love...

*Ave Satanas, something wicked this way comes. It's time for the reckoning to begin.*

*Enter the Devil's Playground wary where you tread, for demons are lurking with trickery up their sleeves. Here good and bad cease to exist, and not all will make it to the end.*

*The price of freedom will be revealed only after bloodshed and rapture. A claiming of one and purging of others.*

That audio recording played exactly three minutes before the crash.

It was a riddle, a warning, and a promise. But they didn't know that until it was too late.

Now stranded with two friends and a group of apprehensive strangers, Liliana Serpine must decide who and who not to trust as she navigates her way through Hell in the form of an opulent city.

There's one person who stands out among the others.

He has a gorgeous face and a darkly enigmatic aura. Being drawn to him is inevitable, but staying by his side becomes a necessity for survival.

### **\*\*Warning\*\***

Devil's Playground is a **dark** new adult (not high school) series. There are graphic situations and content some readers may find objective. If you need fluff and sweet romance, this is not the series for you. Periculum is a **precursor** for Maleficium and reveals the lead-up to the events in that book. The remaining books in the series are standalones.

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*I desire the things that will destroy me in the end.*

**--Sylvia Plath--**

# PRELUDE

It's a penitentiary full of rhymes and riddles. A place where dark and light are one and the same.

Carnal passions await within.

Your screams won't save you; they'll only excite them.

Safety is but an illusion.

Trust no one. Question everything.

He's been watching. He's been waiting.

It'll be your turn soon.

Servatis Periculum.

Something wicked this way comes.

Take a journey to the Devil's Playground.





# CHAPTER ONE

They say that some of the best memories can come from a bad idea.

I can personally vouch for the truth in that. But you know what else is true? The consequences that will be waiting to remind you of all your dumbass decisions.

You'd have thought I'd learned this lesson eons ago, yet here I was, reaping everything I'd sown.

*Painfully.*

Too many shots of Tequila combined with too few hours of recovery made for a deadly combination.

I knew better than to drink the way I had the night before, even if I did have a laundry list of valid excuses to do so.

Unfortunately for me, this never worked out well. I had never been the kind of person who could drown their sorrows at the bottom of a bottle, though I envied those that did. There wasn't enough alcohol in the world to remedy the mess that I was. Not to mention I had shit tolerance and wasn't remotely attractive when I got drunk.

Some girls had the ability to be cute while intoxicated. I became the equivalent of a dying fish searching for water... with a hint of newborn calf. *Ugh*. The thought of consuming even a single drop more of treacherous ethanol made me disgustingly nauseated.

I'd brushed my teeth—twice—and could *still* taste it.

While getting drunk off my ass may not have been the healthiest way to go about dealing with my mental and emotional turmoil, it'd kept my sanity intact. That had to count for something.

Although, it would be comical if liquor were the spark of me completely losing the plot, all things considered. My odds of making it through life entirely sane had the same probability of a coin toss. Heads, I'd be like my father's side of the family. Tails, I would take after my mother's. I had yet to determine which was worse when it came to those crazy fuckers.

I weaved around a couple walking through the lobby of the resort, readjusting my shades and tightening my grip on my suitcase.

"I think I'm dying. Hangovers are so underrated," Melantha grumbled from beside me, tugging her beanie down further.

"I haven't felt this shitty since that party we attended the day we graduated high-school," Gracelyn agreed.

Both of those statements resonated with me. Deeply. I hadn't wanted to get out of bed unless it was to sit around butt naked and stuff my face with a

fry up and chug gallons of Powerade. That sounded like pure heaven right about now, but we had a flight to catch.

Feeling a soft vibration against my thigh, I pulled my cell from my pocket and swiped down to see the text. I was expecting it to be one of my parents or my *abuelo*. Weirdly, there wasn't any number displayed.

Even weirder was the text itself.

**Unknown: Something wicked this way comes...**

I stopped walking, brows furrowing as I read the message two more times before typing out a quick reply.

**L: Who is this?**

Almost immediately, a box popped up. *Sender Unknown.*

*Message cannot be sent.*

"You okay?" Mel called back to me.

"Yeah. Sorry." I fixed my face into a smile and started walking again, slipping my cell back into my pocket.

"To hell we go," Mel sighed, shouldering open one of the doors that led outside.

"Can we at least be on the plane before you start being all negative?"

"Is there a difference between doing it now or later? You know exactly how things are going to be when we get back."

"We don't know anything yet," Gracelyn refuted.

"I know we're well overdue for our 'precious' societal debuts. We're going to be dragged into the corporate office so our parents can explain exactly how they've mapped out our futures. They probably married us off to some deranged arrogant assholes already. The ones who organize their drawers and ties by color."

That sounded overdramatic, but sadly, she was right. It was the way things worked in our world. However, I couldn't openly agree. That'd open

the door to a conversation I wasn't ready to have. We'd attempted that already, which was how we'd wound up in our current condition.

Talking about it led to thinking. Thoughts came with feelings, most of which were bitter, angry, and conflicted—for various reasons. My new plan was to immerse myself in denial until we were back home. “Let's just wait and see what they have to say, and then we can go from there.”

She ignored me.

“Do you think they'll offer us pamphlets or use a full-blown PowerPoint to really get their message across and explain all the ways they ruined our lives?”

My lips twitched as I fought a smile. “There's a deadly disease that causes people to only see the bad side of things. My *abuelo* likes to refer to this as pessimism.”

“Your grandfather is the ringleader of this whole ordeal. And I'm not a pessimist.”

“She's a realist,” Gracelyn joked, forcing her voice to be deep and masculine.

I started to laugh, the sound coming from my throat akin to an angry toad's battle cry. “Shut up.” I playfully swatted her arm.

“Ow.” She poked out her lip and feigned being hurt, making her hazel eyes go big and round.

“I can't take you bitches anywhere,” Mel chastised, laughing quietly. “There's our shuttle.” She pointed to a sleek white bus idling nearby.

We approached at the same time two older women did, allowing them to go ahead of us.

As we waited, the sun continued to sink lower in the sky, slowly draining the light.

I glanced back at the resort and withheld a sigh. This would be our last time traveling leisurely. Indefinitely. I could count on one hand the number of times trips were taken for luxury versus ‘business.’

Melantha began climbing onto the shuttle. I followed, and Gracelyn brough up the rear.

“Sit anywhere you’d like,” the driver instructed in an upbeat tone, his bushy mustache lifting as he smiled.

I thanked him with a small one in return and then skimmed the interior. The seating was set for two per row, and there were already a few people up front.

Ignoring the stares aimed at her colorful hair, Mel breezed by all of them, wholly unbothered.

It was always done in one fun color or another. This time she’d gone with a deep violet, peacock blue, and white ombre bangs. She was one of the few individuals I knew who could rock it.

Mel could pull off anything, really. She had a classic kind of beauty. She’d always reminded me of those retro pin-up girls, complete with a small diamond Monroe piercing.

She wound up claiming three seats that were midway from the back. Directly to the right of them were a cluster of four guys that, with a passing glance, appeared to be in their early twenties, so around our age. Behind them, sitting by her lonesome, was a pretty redhead with ear-pods in.

Not the biggest fan of confined spaces, I placed my suitcase in the baggage cubby and then claimed the seat nearest to the aisle.

Gracelyn squeezed past me and sat by the window, leaving Mel no choice but to sit behind us.

“How long does it take to get to the airport?” Grace asked.

“Thirty minutes?” I guessed, pushing my sunglasses up to rest atop my head.

“For future reference, I was going to ask if you needed help, but you looked like you had it,” a husky voice snaked across the aisle.

“Huh?” I glanced over, nearly doing a double take as I got my first real look at who was beside us. If life were a cartoon, my jaw would have dropped through the floor. Somewhere in the back of my mind the Weather Girls began to sing about raining men.

“Your bag,” the guy closest to me said, nodding his head towards the luggage cubby.

He was sporting a rather dapper hairstyle—an undercut that was long on top and short on the sides.

The smooth strands were dark brown with naturally lighter pieces weaved in. It looked good on him—really good.

“Oh, well. Thanks for considering,” I quipped, cringing internally as soon as the last word fell from my mouth. *Thanks for considering? Way to be super awkward, Lana.*

“Anytime,” he replied smoothly, brandishing an amused grin. His teeth were so white, I wondered if they were real.

I didn’t want to ogle him. Then again, yes, I did. I mean, damn. Where the hell had he been hiding at these past two weeks? This trip would have been ten times better if I’d had this piece of art to look at every day. Preferably from underneath or on top of him.

One of his most notable features was his eyes. They were *gorgeous*.

I would call them blue, but that was like saying the sun was yellow, such an average adjective and hardly accurate. This was more a myriad. They reminded me of the sea, vibrant and serene, something churning deep within them that wasn’t easily identifiable.

Our staring contest was short-lived as two more girls got on the shuttle and passed between us, both looking as hungover as I was, only way more put together.

I shifted my attention off the eye candy across the aisle and did my best to get comfortable, toying with the necklace my *abuelo* had gifted me just before I left for my trip. He'd given Mel and Grace one too, as was customary for him when buying anything for me.

They were all different, each affixed with a silver pendant of some kind. I had no idea what any of the symbols meant, but it was my *abuelo* so that didn't matter.

I rarely told him no or turned him down. He was the sweetest old man ever.

At least, when it came to me, he was.

Once the last passengers were in their seats, the driver turned his radio on low and we began to move. Me and Gracelyn watched out the window until we could no longer see any part of the massive Royal Palms Resort.

And that was that.

We'd be on a plane heading home soon. Vacation was officially over. As was my self-righteous act of denial. I was going to miss staying up all night without needing to wake at the ass crack of dawn to pretend I knew what I was doing with my life. I hadn't the faintest clue what I wanted to be when I grew up—and I was grown. All I knew was that I didn't want to be who I *had* been.

I don't know, sometimes I thought it *would* be better for someone else to map the whole thing out.

My parents would rejoice if I simply let them do as they wished without argument. Not that arguing would matter much, anyway.

The Serpines had a reputation to uphold, after all. I couldn't risk tarnishing their immaculate image, even if it was utter bullshit. I knew firsthand what happened to anyone who did. My sister had paid the price for bringing shame to our family.

She'd thoroughly humiliated them, and whomever it was she'd been married off to, when she purposely got knocked up by a distant cousin. I hadn't seen her since the day our mom all but dragged from the house by her hair. Blood or not, the family wouldn't tolerate anything they saw as disrespect.

For those not privy to the real story, my parents simply said she'd taken off to some prestigious university. Was it wrong of me to be pissed at her too? She was the reason I became golden child *numero dos*.

Our big brother was cemented in at number one. The kiss-ass.

That was another key factor of our world: smarmy blue bloods and their selfish, never-ending schemes.

They fooled people into believing they were good while simultaneously doing whatever was necessary to further their personal agendas. Building familial relations was among them.

We didn't choose who we wound up with, they chose for us. Just as they did everything else.

Following a predestined path came with the elite lineage that swam through our veins. It didn't matter how we felt about our elders' decisions. I couldn't hate or resent them for it, though. I loved my family as much as I could, considering our peculiar dynamic, but that didn't make me blind to their sordid ethics.

Gracelyn nudged me with her elbow, interrupting my inner monologue. As I met her eyes, she did some weird brow movement that had me quirking one of mine.



“What?”

“*Look*,” she mouthed with a subtle nod of her head.

I glanced at the group of guys.

None of them were paying us any attention. I looked back at Gracelyn, and she shrugged and waved her hand as if to say, “*Never mind*.”

As she and Mel began a debate about one of the newer movies coming out, I adjusted how I was sitting once again. The new position gave me a better view of my mystery guy. He was intently focused on the cellphone in his hand.

Relaxed, and without a smile lifting strong-lined features, his expression was uninviting.

I’d go as far as to say intimidating.

I used his distraction as an opportunity to get a better look at him.

His toned arms had sleeves running all the way down to his fingers, each tattoo a well-placed piece of art on his sun-kissed skin. Every single one of them added to how damn fine he was. He looked like someone you’d find within the pages of a more sophisticated edition of *Inked Magazine*.

The tat on the nape of his neck was a leviathan cross being grasped by claws or something. I wondered if it held any real significance to him, or if he was like every other hipster douchebag that thought they were edgy. I dropped my gaze back down to his right arm, studying all the different pieces that were visible beneath the sleeve of his T.

There was a cluster of roses like the sole tattoo I had on my upper right shoulder.

His petals were pure black while mine were both purple and magenta.

Gracelyn and Melantha had the same one. Grace’s was part of the sleeve she had on her left arm, while Mel’s was on her hip. Their colors

were different as well. Each hue held a different meaning to who we were as people.

A devilish depiction of a weeping Virgin Mary was on his inner forearm. Beneath that was another rose, this one by itself with three numbers weaved into its petals.

On his hand was the face of a woman with skull-like features. I felt like I'd seen this before. Beside her was a word I couldn't fully make out unless I leaned way too close for either of our comfort.

Not wanting to get caught essentially assaulting him with my eyes, I looked around the shuttle bus, counting how many people were on board and taking in their appearances.

Had I not become enamored with the guy beside me, I would have already done this.

There once was a time I would go to the park just so I could people watch. I liked trying to guess someone's story, keeping in mind that most appearances were misleading. Everyone had a tale, from the grocery store cashier to the person who delivered the mail.

No one person walked through life the same as another.

There could be similarities and situations we related to, but in the end, we were all individual souls.

The thought had me appraising the gorgeous stranger once more. I was curious about him, more so than I should've been considering once we got to the airport, I'd never see him again.

He suddenly glanced away from the screen of his phone.

I pretended I was looking through the window, which probably made me twice as obvious. It was hard to play off you'd been staring at someone once you made eye contact. He didn't call me out on it, thank god, but the hint of a smile had his supple lips curving upward.

“Are you guys from the area?” he asked, pocketing his cell.

“Not remotely close.”

“Where are you from?” Mel asked him.

“Not here.” His tone was casual but dismissive.

He didn’t take his eyes off me to answer. Caught up in a tidal wave of blue, his stare seemed to grow that much more intense the longer I looked.

Piercing.

That was a good way to describe it.

He wasn’t staring at me, but *into* me, as if the armored shell I’d encased myself in was transparent.

Something about him was oddly familiar. I couldn’t pinpoint what, though. I was one thousand percent sure I didn’t know this guy. He came off as someone who would be hard to forget, no matter the circumstances.

“I’m Ciaran,” he introduced himself, as if he’d just plucked the thought of me not knowing him from my head.

“Maverick.” The guy beside him leaned forward with a smile, offering a small wave after he palmed a few loose strands of hair. His dark eyes lingered on Melantha for a full two seconds before he leaned back.

“The two assholes behind us are Charon and Kyrour,” Ciaran continued.

His introduction invoked their laughter, but neither of them looked away from what they were staring at. With him disclosing all their names, it seemed only natural to share ours in return.

I pointed to each of the girls. “Gracelyn. Melantha.” Then I motioned to myself. “Liliana, but everyone calls me Lana for short.”

“I knew a Liliana once,” Ciaran mused. “You’re much prettier than she was.”

“Wow. That was kinda smooth,” Gracelyn jested with a laugh.

“You should hear when I’m actually trying,” he countered, tacking on a playful smile.

I was semi-confused. Was that meant to be a compliment? I mean, I thought I was okay looking—cute, even.

My mother’s Hispanic roots had evenly meshed with my father’s Italian genes. My hair was black as coal, long with soft waves. Eyes were almond brown. Skin naturally bronze, much to Melantha’s dismay since her porcelain pigmentation refused to darken.

I stood barely over five feet tall, and while my stomach was mostly flat, I’d inherited my mama’s hips with an ass that jiggled to match. I didn’t have self-esteem issues or anything, but I was acutely aware of how I looked in that very moment.

Yesterday I’d been glammed up and ready to take on the world.

Now? I didn’t have on a stitch of make-up aside from some lip gloss. My red-bottomed heels, along with a hoochiefied bodycon dress, had been swapped for skinny fit sweats, a crop-top, and some retro Js. The only thing going for me was that I’d taken a quick hoe-bath and brushed my hair right before zombie-walking onto this shuttle.

“Were you three staying at the Royal Palms?” one of the guys behind Ciaran asked.

“No. We snuck on here to hitch a free ride to the airport because we blew all our money on coke and dick,” Melantha deadpanned.

Her tone was so casual, it would be easy to miss that she was being a smartass.

Grace sighed and shook her head, hiding a smile in the palm of her hand. We couldn’t even be embarrassed; this was simply Mel being Mel. We’d had plenty of time to get used to it.

I looked between the two guys, trying to determine who was who. I remembered their names, seeing as Ciaran had just introduced them, but I hadn't realized they were twins. There were subtle differences between them. One had amber eyes, while the other's were nearly the same shade as whiskey. Their hair was styled a tad bit differently too.

Unfortunately, none of that helped me determine who was Charon and which one was Kyrus. The twin closest to the window looked as if he were about to say something just as sarcastic in response, but the shuttle suddenly swerved without warning.

A horn blared from another lane as a mix of gasps, a small squeal, and curse words filled the air.

I gripped the leather headrest in front of me to stay planted in my seat. Once we were moving forward steadily again, I quickly checked over Gracelyn and Melantha.

"What was that about?" Maverick wondered aloud.

As if to answer him personally, the music stopped, and the driver's voice came through the overhead speakers. "Uh, really sorry about that, folks. The usual route's shut down. I guess we'll be taking a small detour."

Someone up front, a man with greying hair, began to complain.

The driver cut him off, still broadcasting his voice through the speaker.

"Rest assured this will only add about ten minutes to the ride.

I know you've all got flights to catch—you can count on me to get you *exactly* where ya need to be."

He clicked off, and music began to play once more.

"He *guesses*?" a twin scoffed.

Ciaran said something in response, but I was hardly paying him attention. I was too concerned about our suddenly reckless driver. Gracelyn

gave me a tight-lipped smile, attempting to downplay her own concerns for my benefit.

We cruised past the turnoff we should've taken and continued for a good ten minutes before the shuttle turned onto a side road. After another two miles or so, it became apparent that all signs of civilization were being left behind.

It took me another five minutes to notice there were no longer any other cars accompanying us.

"This isn't right, Lana," Gracelyn whispered.

I didn't have a good feeling about this either.

I wanted to chalk it up to us being overdramatic, but I knew to always trust my instincts. The further we ventured, the worse my nerves caused my stomach to twist. This was more than acute paranoia.

There was a sign coming up on the right. I peered around Gracelyn to get a clearer look at it. "Route Six-One-Six," I read out loud as we zipped passed it.

Gracelyn turned towards Melantha. "GPS how far the airport is from here."

"Already on it."

The shuttle took another turn, and someone up front demanded to know where we were going.

"What the fuck's that?" one of the twins asked. I peered over my shoulder and then straight ahead to follow his gaze, poking my head around the seat in front of me so I had an unobstructed view.

We were heading straight for a tunnel. A rather large one.

Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't have been anything to panic over, but it wasn't dark enough to overlook the vast blanket of white that seemed to be emanating from within it.

The driver kept going, his speed gradually increasing. I didn't understand why. There was no way he could see inside. *None*. Low murmurs filled the air, a few more people beginning to voice their concerns.

"My phone isn't picking up our location, and this route isn't on my maps," Melantha said, leaning forward to show us her screen.

Gracelyn brushed her hair away from her face, tucking the blonde ombre locks behind her back. "Is that normal?"

*No.*

"I'm sure it's fine," Ciaran reassured her.

He didn't sound as if he believed it.

I wouldn't say he seemed worried—more aware of the fact that things were looking extra sketchy.

As the front of the shuttle drew closer to the tunnel, the radio crackled. Ozzy Osbourne was replaced with an audible static, and then a rhythmic voice began to speak.

*Ave Satanas, something wicked this way comes. It's time for the reckoning to begin.*

*If you enter the Devil's Playground be wary where you tread, for demons are lurking with trickery up their sleeves. Here good and bad cease to exist, and not all will make it to the end.*

*The price of freedom will be revealed only after bloodshed and rapture. A claiming of one and purging of others.*

The voice stopped short, and the song resumed. I shared a look with the girls. That didn't seem like regular station interference.

There was no mistaking what was said. Each word had been precise and clear as crystal.

"What's going on?" someone yelled at the driver.

The radio cut off entirely just as we entered the tunnel. A loud bang erupted, the sound carrying inside. A scream tore through the air as the bus rocked from side to side, swerving through the fog.

I'm pretty sure we bumped the side wall, sending us careening to the left. Someone was flung into the aisle, crying out as they hit the floor. I dug my nails into the back of the seat in front of me, holding on as tightly as I could.

There was another bang, lodging my heart in my throat as we began to zigzag aggressively, brakes screeching as the driver tried to stop.

Everything thereafter seemed to happen in the longest seconds of my life.

The shuttle emerged from the tunnel.

We tilted.

I lost my hold, ripping a nail clean off as I fell from my seat.

And then there was nothing but screams, grating metal, and darkness.





## CHAPTER TWO

For a moment, I thought it'd all been a dream. When the fuzz finally cleared from my brain and I was able to see what had happened, I wished it had been.

My head was pounding ten times worse than it was when I woke up this morning, a consistent throb coming from the back of my skull, and my goddamn index finger was on fire.

Someone had me in their arms. I felt the solidity of them, breathing in their cologne as I peeled open my lids. Unsettled equilibrium had me staring down at a body that had its neck twisted at an unnatural angle. Dull gray eyes were fixed on the shuttle's ceiling, unblinking.

It took another second for clarity to swoop in and for me to realize the man I was looking at was dead.

“Calm down,” a husky voice gently commanded the moment I started to struggle.

I stilled and slowly looked up, straight into Ciaran’s eyes. The sight of him made me marginally relax. He must have felt it because a smile ghosted his lips.

“See, I’ve got you.” He tightened his hold and carefully made his way to the front of the shuttle, carrying me as if I weighed nothing and was more fragile than a piece of glass.

When we reached where the driver should have been, his body was nowhere in sight.

The windshield was shattered, blood splatter covering the remaining shards. I doubted he was still alive. Swallowing, I turned my head to seek out Gracelyn and Melantha.

Ciaran passed me through the doors—that looked as if they’d had to be pried open—and one of the twins took me from his arms.

A pair of whiskey-colored eyes peered down at me with no emotion within them as he helped me stand up.

“Which one are you?” I asked mindlessly, flexing my fingers.

“Kyrous,” he answered. “You all right?”

“I’m fine.” *For the most part.*

He nodded curtly, and then stepped away so fast you’d think I were contagious or something. Whatever.

My attention went right to Gracelyn and Melantha. Seeing they were all right, aside from being shaken up, a huge weight lifted off my chest.

Grace pulled away from Maverick, who’d had a comforting arm wrapped around her shoulders, and nearly ran to where I was standing.

“We couldn’t wake you up,” she breathed, her voice clogging with emotion as she hugged me.

Melantha was right behind her, squeezing my hand, relief reflecting at me from her silver eyes. I gave her a tight squeeze back and brought my free hand to the tender spot on the back of my head, belatedly realizing my sunglasses were gone.

“How long was I out?”

“Maybe ten minutes? Your suitcase bounced off your giant globe when you flew from the seat,” Melantha replied.

I appreciated her attempt to lighten the situation. No wonder it felt as if I’d been drop-kicked in the skull.

“You sure you’re okay?” Ciaran asked, coming to stand next to us.

Jesus, he was nearly a full foot taller than me. I had to physically lift my chin to look him in the eye. “Yeah, I’m fine. What about you?”

“I’m good. I was more concerned about you.”

That was sort of sweet. Gracelyn let me go, and I began to survey our surroundings, trying to get a better feel for the situation.

A few things jumped out right away. Our shuttle was partially on its side, wedged in a grassy ravine of sorts. The fog seemed to only be coming from within the tunnel we’d traveled through, which now had a solid looking grate prohibiting anyone from exiting or entering.

Straight ahead of us was a ridiculously tall fence with an equally as large gate. Small lights and what I think may have been barbed wire lined the top of it. A guard shack was back that way too, but it was totally dark inside. Suffice it to say, things weren’t looking too great. Oh, and the driver who got us into this situation was nowhere in sight.

I’d assumed he was dead. So why was there still no sign of his body?

“How did we crash?” I asked no one in particular.

“Look at the tires,” a curvy brunette answered, coming closer to our huddle. She had the kind of body people paid good money for. Her facial features, on the other hand, reminded me of the two faces of Squidward. Despite that and what had happened, she still looked fashionably put together.

I peered around Ciaran’s solid frame and examined the four wheels more closely.

What appeared to be hollow spikes were embedded in each of them. That was a terrible freaking sign.

“Seriously, what the entire fuck?”

“My sentiments exactly, kiddo,” an older woman voiced, trying desperately to light a cigarette.

“Does anyone know what the deal is with that being shut off?” I motioned to the tunnel.

“Yeah. Someone did this on purpose!” a dark-skinned man seethed.

Only a few inches taller than me with curly black-silver hair nearly reaching the tailored shoulders of a perfectly pressed navy blazer, his persona screamed ‘authority.’ I think he was the one who’d been yelling at the driver just before the crash. I wasn’t going to argue his opinion, but it didn’t make much sense to me.

“Did anyone call for help?”

“We can’t. None of us have a signal,” Maverick divulged.

I ran my hands down my sweats. Feeling the solid outline of my cellphone, I reached into my pocket and retrieved it. The first thing that popped up was the message I’d received back at the resort.

**Unknown: Something wicked this way comes.**

I’d nearly forgotten about this.

Seeing it again sent a wave of apprehension down my spine. The voice that came over the radio had used this same line. I was hesitant to mention that right now, though. It wouldn't add anything beneficial to our situation and could cause people to freak out even more than they already were.

"Anything?" Maverick asked.

I exited out of the text and took a quick glance at my signal. "Nope."

"You sure?" Ciaran pressed.

I swear it sounded like he *knew* I'd just lied. And the way he was looking at me... I diverted my gaze and moved the focus to something else.

"So, none of us has service? Does anyone here at least know how *that's* possible?"

"My guess? A signal jammer," Charon answered.

"That's what I was going to say," the pretty redhead agreed.

"Okay, so there isn't any way to call for help, and the way we came from has been blocked off. Now what?"

"Well, we can't just stand here and wait to see what happens next," the brunette stressed.

"She's right. Staying in one place seems like a colossally bad idea," Melantha seconded. "We have no clue why or who put out a spike trip."

The majority of the group seemed to agree with the two of them, but there was that one person that *had* to go against the common denominator.

"All I see is a fence, another fence, and trees. Where are we supposed to go? And what happens if the person who took the driver returns? I have a bad hip," another older woman questioned, clinging tightly to the one who'd given up on her smoke.

*Took the driver?* I had clearly missed something while being passed out.

I looked to Ciaran for an explanation since my friends had failed to fill me in. “What is she talking about?”

“There are two dead bodies on the bus, neither of them are the man who was driving. He’s missing.”

If I wasn’t who I was as a person, his complete indifference and casual tone regarding people who had just lost their lives would be concerning.

“How do you know he was taken and didn’t simply run off?”

Kyrous gave me a blank look. “You think he got up and simply walked away?”

“If he was taken, wouldn’t someone have seen that happening? He wasn’t exactly pint-sized.”

No one spoke up and admitted to seeing anything. So, he hadn’t simply flown through the windshield and kicked the bucket like I’d originally thought.

The alternative, him being snatched away by someone... that was mildly disturbing. All of this was like a scene ripped straight from a horror movie.

I wanted to blame some animal, but that didn’t correlate. As far as I knew, the only creature that laid down spike strips was human. But *why* would someone target a shuttle bus? I crossed my arms and searched the area for a second time.

It had grown dark now, any sunlight remaining in the sky blocked out by the trees surrounding us on all sides.

The heat of the day had been replaced by a cool breeze, and people speaking quietly, there wasn’t any other sound out here. The flickering of a light caught my eye. I looked past everyone to the guard shack.

“Over there.” I pointed, watching as the light flickered twice more before staying on.

“Is that... there’s someone inside,” Gracelyn said.

“What is he doing?” the redhead asked, narrowing her brown eyes.

That was a good question. He had yet to look up. Even if he somehow miraculously missed our group, he couldn’t overlook the damned shuttle.

“He could be a serial killer,” a girl with glasses and shoulder-length hair implied. I recognized her from when she’d gotten on board with the brunette.

“Yeah, I don’t really think that’s the case,” Maverick replied dryly, running a tattooed hand through hair dark enough to be black, manipulating it back into an unkempt style.

“Our driver is missing. If that dude’s been there the whole time, don’t cha think he saw what happened?” Glasses sassed.

While I didn’t agree about the whole serial killer angle, it was highly abnormal for someone to witness what this guy must have and not react whatsoever.

As I stared that way, though, it became increasingly obvious that something was wrong.

“He still hasn’t moved,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, like, at all,” Mel added.

“All right, listen. Whoever isn’t comfortable walking over there should wait here, as close to the shuttle as possible. You don’t want to be out in the middle of the road if that grate opens for another car,” Ciaran declared. Glancing at me, he added, “You coming or waiting?”

“We’re all coming,” I answered for the three of us. No way were we staying behind. Mel and Gracelyn made no objections, both on the same page I was.

Ciaran surveyed our group as a whole and nodded to himself. “Let’s go then.”

He started walking and everyone followed.

I guess no one was up for being the one person who stayed behind. Couldn't blame them for that.

Taking a quick headcount, I found there were thirteen of us in total. That was after I accounted for the people who'd died on the shuttle and the missing drive being.

I set my sights on the guard shack and the fence in front of us. It ran straight across on either side, disappearing into the dark of the woods.

"Where's that fog coming from?" Gracelyn asked.

"Shouldn't be there at all, it isn't natural," Kyrous responded.

As we closed in on the shack, a wave of confusion swept through the group.

"Um...?" the redhead trailed off.

I looked through the Plexiglas with a frown, stating the obvious. "He isn't real."

The man was nothing but a dummy, an actual wax figure dressed as a security guard.

Even more concerning than that was the laminated note and recorder taped to the window. The word PRESS ME had been typed out in bold, blocky letters. A small black arrow pointed to the device. Below the window was an oil drum with a decent sized hole drilled into the top.

Maverick took it upon himself to hit the button on the recorder. There was a slight whirring noise, and then a woman's cheery voice began to speak.

*"Please place all mobile phones into the drum, and then you may proceed to the route."*

The recording clicked off, leaving no further instructions or an explanation as to what the hell was going on.



“The route?”

I took another look around, my eyes eventually landing on a graveled path that ran between the trees on the other side of the fence. I was going to go out on a limb and assume that’s what they meant.

“There’s a sign a bit further up ahead,” the brunette said, gesturing in the general direction I’d just been looking.

“You’re not really going to do what this thing says?” Redhead objected. “That’s crazy.”

“You got a better idea, Pebbles?” Charon asked.

“*Selena*,” she emphasized, disdain for the nickname he’d used evident in her tone, “and no, not at the moment.”

“We should follow the directive. We’ve already determined we can’t go back the way we came,” one of the older women reasoned, reaching past us to drop her cell into the drum. There was a faint splash as it landed in whatever liquid was inside.

I began to protest, ultimately being ignored as the others followed her lead. I shook my head and moved away from the group, breaking free of their restrictive bubble. Mel and Grace were quick to do the same.

Hearing what I swore was a twig snap, I looked over my shoulder in the direction it had come from. Gracelyn and Mel met my eye. I silently asked, “*Did you hear that?*”

They both nodded, their body language becoming uneasy.

I strained to hear if it would happen again, but the brunette’s voice drowned out anything I could have detected.

“There, we’ve all done it. Your turn now.”

I ignored her and focused on the others. “After what just happened and that recording we heard on the shuttle, what makes you think this is a good idea?”

“That’s what I want to know,” Mel muttered, “and my phone’s back on the bus. I lost it during the crash.”

“I don’t have mine either,” Gracelyn said. “It’s in my bag.”

“Whoever does have a phone, can they please put it in the barrel like the sign says.” Mr. Authority pleaded.

“I’ve yet to hear why that’s a good idea.”

“Do you have a better plan?” Kyrus asked.

“Yeah. Not taking instructions from a tape recorder,” I retorted.

Something metal clinked from somewhere in the woods. The girl in glasses huddled closer to Maverick.

“I don’t think we’re alone out here,” she murmured.

Right on cue, another few branches snapped from the opposite direction—this time clearly closer than before. Had someone been watching us this entire time?

I looked over my shoulder again but still didn’t see anyone.

Melantha looked at me, the question of what to do in her eyes. The three of us wouldn’t split up—that wasn’t an option—and it was clear where she stood in her opinion. There was more breaking of twigs, another low clicking noise accompanying them. What the hell was that?

People began to talk at once, urging us—more specifically me—to give up our phones, starting to panic.

I was torn. One option screamed logic, but it was also laced with a fair amount of stupidity. Did I really want to go through the fence that looked as if it were meant to guard a maximum-security prison? Absolutely not. But the alternative was standing here to face whatever was coming my way. There wasn’t anywhere I could run or hide unless I fled into the woods. That was Dumb Shit Not To Do 101.

Ciaran, who hadn't said a word during any of this, suddenly maneuvered himself so he was the only thing I could see, planting himself right in front of me. My chin was lifted with a gentle tilt, eyes ensnared within his.

"You're going to give Maverick your phone to put in the barrel, and if that gate slides open, we're going in. Do you understand?" His vocal inflection didn't change, making his irrefutable command come across that much louder.

Something reflected in his gaze sent a chill down my spine, daring me to object.

I couldn't pull away or bring myself to remove his touch, invoking a flurry of different emotions that hit all at once. The note of command didn't sit well with me, though. I opened my mouth to tell him he could fuck off. Before I could get out one word of protest, he deprived me of my free will.

He dropped his hand and spun me around, securing me to his solid body with one arm going across my chest.

"Go stand by the gate!" he commanded the group. "We'll be right behind you."

They hesitated for only a second, then began racing towards the entrance.

"Get off me!" I demanded, tugging on his wrist.

"I'm doing this for you," he said softly, reaching into my pocket for my phone.

Mel and Gracelyn attempted to come to my aid, but Charon and Kyrous were all but carrying them away. Just as Ciaran retrieved my cell, something whizzed past us and made impact with the window, shattering it into pieces. My eyes rounded as soon as my brain registered what it was.

"Oh, hell no!"

I immediately gave up resisting, snatching the phone and throwing it to his friend my damn self.

Before I could see it land safely within Maverick's hands, I was being forced to run towards the others. I assumed it made it into the barrel, because the gate began to slide open.

We squeezed through with Maverick thankfully right behind us. When we came to a stop near the others, I tore my hand from Ciaran's and whirled around.

The gate was already sliding shut, a locking mechanism clicking loudly into place.

I took a few steps towards it, and then paused, mind scrambling to understand what the hell had just happened. My pulse was racing, heart pounding to keep up. Every muscle in my body was still tensed and ready to run.

The group began talking amongst themselves, all agreeing that we should keep moving. Gracelyn and Mel came to stand beside me, not saying a word.

There were a million things that could have been said, but where did we start?

I sucked in a deep breath, inhaling a cocktail of magnetic notes—a mix of warm cinnamon, mint, and masculine leather. I knew who had just stepped up on the other side of me without needing to look, but I didn't know what to say to him right now either.

I was livid that he'd forced me in here but also grateful, because it had more than likely just saved my life. The giant arrow sticking out of the wax figure was solid proof of that.

"You saw that the gate opened?"

"Obviously," I replied, still not looking at him.

“You saw it opened only after we put your phone in the barrel?”

I hesitated to respond, my anger ebbing as I turned that over in my head.

He didn’t need me to answer. The question was rhetorical. It also shed some light on a potential aspect of our current predicament.

“For my phone to be the one needed to get in here, someone would have to know I still had it.”

“Exactly,” he affirmed. “I think what just happened is proof of that.”

“Wait, hold up.” I crossed my arms and partially angled my body towards his.

“So not only did someone lay out a spike strip to sabotage our shuttle bus and then kidnap the driver, but they placed booby traps too? And now they’re somehow aware of minor details, like me having my phone but not Mel or Grace? That’s your theory?”

Now he turned, placing himself directly in front of me, bringing our chests inches apart with zero regard for my personal space.

“Someone *did* sabotage our shuttle bus. The driver *is* missing, and none of us could get through that gate until after we put *your* phone in the barrel.”

His matter-of-fact tone needled my last nerve. “Don’t forget the part where someone’s watching us.”

“Guys?” Gracelyn attempted to interject.

Ciaran rocked back with a small laugh, a cool smirk lifting one corner of his mouth as he stared down at me.

“Is two plus two not four to you, puppet? Did an arrow not almost impale your ass for refusing to follow simple instructions? If you have a *theory* that explains this shit better than mine, babygirl, feel free to share. I’m sure we’d all love to hear it.”

Everyone stared at the two of us, their silence elongating as they waited for me to respond. Ciaran slightly lifted a brow as if to say, “*Well?*”

I clenched my jaw and turned away from him, considering both his version of things and mine. One made much more sense than the other, mainly because his had logic to it—and proof, from the crash to them being unable to proceed without me giving up my phone.

My face heated from a mixture of frustration and embarrassment. I felt like a toddler that had thrown a tantrum.

“And the arrow?” I questioned, still stubbornly wanting to be right.

“I’m gonna take a gander and say that had its intended effect,” Mr. Authority added softly.

He was right. Whoever shot it had triggered me into cooperating. Meaning, they’d missed on purpose. My lips flattened into a thin line, I stared at the gate as if it were the reason for all our problems.

The idea of being shut inside whatever *this* was.

I dropped my eyes to the ground. Ciaran placed a hand on my shoulder as if to offer... comfort? An apology? Honestly, I didn’t need the latter or want the former.

I could have just gotten someone seriously hurt. Or killed.

I could’ve screwed us all. Although I wasn’t sure this scenario was any better.

We’d just been herded like a flock of sheep. There could very well be a pack of wolves waiting in anticipation to slaughter us one by one. I didn’t know about any of these other people, but me and my friends wouldn’t be going out like that.

“Do you need a minute to throw a fit?” Ciaran asked, his tone much too smug for my liking.

I clenched my hands and took another breath, this time to prevent myself from punching him in the dick. He suddenly brought his mouth to my ear and spoke loud enough for only me to hear.

“Put your claws away, puppet. It’s a little too soon for foreplay.”

My mouth slackened. A breathy, humorless laugh expelled from between parted lips. I had to have misheard.

I turned back towards him just as he began to walk away. “What did you say to me?”

“I said, you’re welcome,” he casually tossed over his shoulder, not sparing me a second glance.

The group eyed the two of us, ultimately trailing after him when he took the lead, kindly checking on the older women on his way. Gracelyn and Melantha stayed with me, varying emotions splashed across their faces.

“What did that asshole say to you?” Mel asked as soon as there was a semblance of space between us and the others.

I tampered down the inane urge to defend him.

“Nothing. Not anything important, anyway.” Gnawing the inside of my cheek, I stared after him.

A memory edged along my subconscious, triggered by something he’d just said.



## CHAPTER THREE

The white sign said ENTER in large black letters. An arrow beside the word was aimed at the graveled path the others had just vanished down.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to point out the obvious. A road in the middle of seemingly nowhere after what we'd just gone through was a huge red flag.

On top of the obvious reasons *not* to follow the arrow, you couldn't see where this path led or ended.

"This is getting way too weird for me," Mel grumbled.

"Weird?" Grace parroted. "You mean creepy, right?"

"Wait," I interjected. "What about that message we heard before the crash? The one about *entering* the Devil's Playground?"



“Fuck me,” Mel sighed, removing her flannel and tying it around her waist. She wasn’t wearing a bra beneath her tank, which made her nipple piercings clear as crystal. She wouldn’t give a damn who looked so there wasn’t a reason to point them out. “You think that’s what this leads to?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I can’t say yes or no for sure, but where else would it go?”

“Then what are we going to do?” Gracelyn asked, shifting closer to me.

There were only two options. Wait here and see if anything happened, or be productive in finding a way out of this mess and following everyone else.

“Let’s go, we’ve dealt with far worse than a dark road before.” I locked arms with each of them and started walking.



Have you ever felt like you’ve entered an alternate reality? That’s where I was at. There wasn’t any other way to explain what was happening, or the buildings beginning to take shape. As we drew closer to them, Melantha asked the million-dollar question.

“Why is there a whole fucking city in the middle of the woods?”

Neither me nor Gracelyn had an answer. If I were tripping off acid, I might've been able to come up with something. As it was, her guess would be just as good as mine. Though technically, the city was on the *other* side of the woods. We still had a bit of distance to cover before reaching it.

At the end of the road was a sheer drop-off, leaving us with only one direction. Right didn't lead to anywhere but more woods, while left would take us downhill and seemingly towards the city that had become visible.

Melantha crossed her arms, staring down at it. "Now I agree with you, Grace. This is creepy.

"I knew something wasn't right. Everything about this feels wrong." She grew quiet and trailed off, leaving her sentence hanging as she toyed with the hem of her racerback.

We needed to keep going, regardless. If Ciaran was right and someone was watching us, who was to say they weren't lurking in the woods right this moment? What if it was the person who'd shot an arrow, just waiting for one of us to attempt and go the other way?

I know that sounded insane, but at this point I wouldn't declare it improbable. The only problem was that we had no way of knowing if we were heading towards more danger or safety. I doubted it was the second, but I was trying to be optimistic.

"Let's keep going," I said, moving a little faster.

We speed-walked down the path, rounding a bend that took us deeper and deeper between the trees until the view of the city vanished completely. Hearing a twig snap from off to our right, we shared a look and picked up the pace. That was the first thing I'd heard since being back at the gate.

There oddly wasn't any sound out here. Not a bird. Not a cricket. I couldn't even hear the wind. There was only silence, a lone moon, and

infinite darkness that seemed to be pressing in on us from every direction. Good thing I'd never been afraid of the dark.

Rounding another bend, we nearly plowed into Ciaran and two of his friends. Caught completely off guard, even while expecting someone to be lurking, I gasped and drew back. Gracelyn squeaked, stopping so abruptly she almost fell. Kyrous caught her before I could and managed to keep her upright.

"What are you doing?" Mel questioned angrily, bringing a hand to her chest.

Maverick raised his brows at her tone. "Coming to make sure you three were okay."

Ciaran reached out and gently took hold of my lower wrist. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I nodded, not wanting to speak until my heart fell back into its normal rhythm.

"Come on." He skimmed his fingers down to capture my hand. Goosepimples followed in their wake. If he noticed, he did an excellent job of holding a poker face.

His grip was firm and secure.

If I weren't partial to having somewhat of a guide, I'd have pulled away.

Gracelyn wound up with Kyrous, allowing him to spot her as we began going downhill. He had an inch or two on Ciaran height wise, making Grace seem even smaller than she already was. I wondered if that's how I looked beside Ciaran.

"What's at the end of this thing? Is it that city?" she asked.

"Yes, and also something else," Maverick answered.

"Something else?"

“It’s better if we just show you.”

Could he be any more ominous?

It didn’t take us much longer to reach the bottom and discover what he’d been referring to. There was a sign centered directly in front of where gravel turned to tarmac. The rest of our group was waiting for us in front of it, the apprehension rolling off them stifling.

As we drew closer, I was able to see that a message was engraved into the wood.

“What is all of this?” Mel questioned rhetorically. I don’t think anyone had an exact answer.

When we were within hearing distance, Selena began to read off what the sign said, doing her best to sound out the foreign words.

“Servatis Periculum. Blissful decay. Amorous hell. A place where day is night. Tragic and Twisted fell in love—”

“Something wicked this way comes,” I chimed in.

“How did you know that’s what it said?” Brunette asked, eyeing me with suspicion.

Selena gave her an exasperated look. “Sweetie, it is literally written down right in front of us.”

“Sweetie has a name. It’s Abby.”

Before my hand found a way to her face for being an idiot, I calmly explained.

“It’s also one of the lines we heard on the shuttle.” *And I got in a text.*

I thought that would’ve been obvious, and not for the first time this evening. Ciaran cleared his throat and let go of my hand, proceeding to read off the remaining portion of words. “Suspend reality and step inside, Goetia will lead you to the Devil’s Playground.”

“Does anyone know who this Go-e-tia could be?” Abby’s friend asked.

“Only one way to find out.” Ciaran stepped back and gently touched my arm, making his way around the sign.

I wasn’t sure what the touch was meant to convey, but this time I followed him without objection or complaint. The rest of our wary group did the same.

“Do you guys see anyone?” Mel asked, squinting.

“Other than us, you mean? Nope.” I popped my lips on the P.

Selena slowed so that she could walk alongside our trio. “I haven’t seen anyone but you guys since we’ve been on the shuttle,” she remarked, clearly having been listening to our conversation.

I held back a sigh, wishing I could just take a minute to stop and think all of this over. There had to be some sense in the nonsensical, right? For our sake, I hoped so. Thus far, nothing had happened since back at the first sign. Whoever was shooting fucking arrows never made an appearance.

As we got closer to the city, silhouettes of skylines punched through the air, rising well into the clouds.

Various buildings were peppered throughout.

“There isn’t anyone around,” Mr. Authority said, announcing what was already apparent.

People should’ve been everywhere, but just like all the way back in the woods, there weren’t any sounds.

No traffic. No barking dogs. No one enjoying some nightlife. There was zero sign of any activity. This didn’t seem like a place that sustained life. Looking to the sky and seeing only the moon, it was as if the stars themselves knew not to shine here.

We moved from gravel to asphalt, finally crossing the threshold into the city. Only the sound of our footsteps filled the air, practically echoing due to the sheer emptiness of the space around us.

“Should we try in there?” one of the older women suggested, pointing towards the first building on our immediate right.

“The Visitor’s Center?” Melantha questioned.

“It has the customary arrow,” Abby replied dryly.

That it did. The sign on the door read OPEN with an arrow pointing inward, a string of lights framing it entirely.

Something inside was giving off a soft glow, but it was impossible to tell what from where we stood. There was a large front window, but a dark set of blinds prevented us from seeing through it.

On the other side of the road was what appeared to be a small Starbucks café, but it didn’t have any lights on at all. That made the decision ten times easier. If someone were screwing with us, then surely this is where they were directing us?

I meandered around everyone in my way and started walking towards the entrance. As I was passing Ciaran, he reached out and grabbed hold of my upper arm.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” I attempted to pull away, but he tightened his grip.

“You think it’s a good idea to go charging blindly into what could be a trap?”

“Oh, like the one you just forced me into?”

He laughed softly. “You mean when I saved you? I’m still waiting on you to thank me, by the way.”

“Thank you for what?”

“I just told you, for saving your life.”

“Thank you *so* much, you’re my hero,” I oozed sarcastically.

He stared down at me, his expression morphing into one I couldn't read.

"You can let her go now," Gracelyn chided. She had stepped up beside us, ready to intervene physically if necessary.

Much like on the shuttle, his hooded eyes—myriad blue and set beneath dark, long lashes—pierced right through me. Only now they were so... cold. I didn't know it was possible for someone's gaze to be this intimidating—yet enthralling.

"Bro," Charon began.

His tone was cautious, as if Ciaran were a wild animal that would maul me if provoked. That was all it took, though.

"Do me a favor? Start thinking with your head and not your emotions," Ciaran advised, his tone surprisingly gentle.

He released me and walked away, heading for the very building he'd *just* made a scene about me trying to enter.

"That guy has issues," Selena counseled, staring after Ciaran and the others as they began to follow him.

I guess she was going to stick with us.

"Are you okay?" Gracelyn asked. "Do I need to kick his ass?"

I gave her a tight-lipped smile. "He didn't hurt me, Grace. He actually made a good point."

"Yeah, he did!" Mel agreed.

I shot her a disapproving frown, watching from the corner of my eye as the group began to file into the center.

"I'm just saying, if you're going to go all Charlie's Angels, at least bring us with you for back-up."

I pursed my lips and followed the others, holding open the door for Selena once I stepped inside. The layout was like most Visitor Centers I'd

been to in the past, aside from the wall straight ahead. It was covered in a large wall mural of what looked like demons surrounding a naked woman. I wasn't sure what to make of that.

To the left was a wall of pamphlets advertising different venues and attractions of which I'd never heard of. Off to the right was where the group had gathered. A map unlike any I'd ever seen before was the culprit behind the glow.

The thing was huge. CITY OF GOETIA was displayed at the top of it.

"I guess that means we aren't looking for a person," Grace said, peering at the digitalized image from over my shoulder.

Maverick glanced back and waved us forward. We moved closer, our eyes taking in all the vivid features. I found where we would be by spotting a cluster of green dots.

"Our names are listed at the top," Abby's friend pointed out.

Dragging my gaze to the upper corner, I skimmed down the list, stepping around her so that I could get a better look.

I had to stand next to Ciaran in order to do so, but this situation went beyond any issue I had with him.

Seeing each of our official names displayed? That certified this wasn't random.

He and his friends. Me and mine. Selena. Abby. I didn't know who went with whom outside of that.

Two were crossed out altogether, a dark red line going straight through them.

"You think that's the people who didn't make it off the shuttle?" Mel asked.

"I would say so," Maverick replied.



“There’s a name missing. Three should be crossed out in total,” Selena said.

Charon shook his head. “Not if the driver isn’t dead.”

“Your brother said he was,” Gracelyn reminded him.

“I *said* he didn’t get up and walk away. Translation being, someone took him. Be careful how you interpret things, Gracie.”

Her lips slightly puckered at the play up of her name, but she didn’t comment on it.

“If anyone was wondering, I’m Margo,” the older woman who’d fought with her cigarette helpfully divulged. With flaxen hair in a single braid that hung down her back and a grungy outfit, that was *not* what I would have guessed her name to be.

I imagined she had a Harley stored in her garage—that’s the vibe she gave off.

“This is my aunt, Susan.” She touched the arm of the other older woman.

Her sleek gray bob could’ve given my *abuela*’s a run for its money.

I nodded and offered them both a quick smile, introducing me and the girls before glancing back at the list. The only names left to put with a face were self-explanatory. Leonard had to be Mr. Authority. Heather was the chick with glasses.

“None of our last names are on there,” Mel pointed out.

“Maybe they didn’t know them? Or they were irrelevant?” As I was saying this, I realized that made almost no sense. If whoever did this was savvy enough to pull off everything they had thus far, I’m sure listing our full names wouldn’t have been too hard a task. I sighed, chewing the inside of my bottom lip.

“I dunno, guys. Does anyone here know each other from somewhere else?”

Shared glances went around the group, not one person claiming that they did.

“How would someone know exactly who was on the shuttle?”

Gracelyn pondered out loud.

“I don’t think that information would be too hard to find.”

“That’s the curse of the internet,” Susan stated matter-of-factly. She was older, so I’d let her have that.

“You’re still not doing what was asked of you,” Kyrous implied. He addressed us as a whole, but his eyes were settled on Grace.

She noticed, meeting his gaze head-on. “Which is?”

“We were told to suspend reality. So, stop trying to figure this out logically, and *suspend* reality.”

They had a stare-off for all of five seconds, Grace being the first to look away.

“You see the black dots?” Ciaran asked me quietly—specifically, as if we were the only two people in the room.

I sought out what he was referring to, walking the path with my eyes once I spotted them. It reminded me of the old treasure maps restaurants gave kids to keep them entertained. You had to follow the X’s to claim the loot. Only, in place of riches this led to something called *Blight House*. The name flashing consistently cemented the fact that it was where we needed to go.

Visually, it didn’t appear to be that far away. Realistically, I’m sure it was much further. Looking at the image in its entirety, Goetia was huge. There was a massive wall or something that divided it unevenly, though, leaving a rather large portion of the map dimmed.

“This Blight House place seems simple enough to get to. We just need to keep going straight.”

“No argument? Are we making progress already?” he questioned with a partial grin, letting me know he was joking.

I planted a hand on my hip and half-shrugged. “I thought I’d ‘suspend reality’ and stop being so emotional.”

“I didn’t say anything about not being emotional. On the contrary, a little fear might do you some good.”

“I’ve yet to see anything I should be afraid of. Someone shooting an arrow doesn’t really invoke fear, it just pisses me off.” *Wait.* “Unless you’re implying, I should be afraid of *you*.”

He tilted his head to the side, a cool smirk replacing his smile.

“A *little* fear would never satisfy me, puppet. I prefer copious amounts of terror.”

There was that word again, accompanying a rather odd yet intriguing admission. I swallowed and took a step away from him. If that was meant to seriously frighten me, he’d failed. Nothing could scare me more than I scared myself.

He managed to pique my interest even more, though, which was almost worse. *And* now that our whole group had just heard what I’m sure was a semi-concerning conversation to their innocently unaware minds, I began to walk towards the exit, nearly dragging Melantha and Gracelyn with me.

“Blight House?” Mel asked as soon as we were back outside, thankfully playing off that she’d heard any of my and Ciaran’s discussion—if that’s what it could even be called.

“Either that, or we stand here and hope some other sign gets sent our way.”

“Blight House it is then,” Grace avowed.

“We still don’t know who the crazy bastard is that’s toting arrows. Let’s not give them a reason to help us to find out.”

Selena exited the Visitor’s Center a few steps ahead of all the others, offering a timid smile and tucking a strand of red hair behind her ear.

“I’m going to stick with you three, if that’s okay.”

I’d already assumed this. “You don’t need our permission. We’re all going to the same place.”

“What if we don’t? Maybe some of us should stay here, just in case,” Abby proposed.

“In case what?” Charon asked. “Do you think some gallant white knight is going to come swooping in here to save us?”

She gave him a dirty look. “Someone will come across the shuttle eventually, if they haven’t already. And I can’t be the only one here with a family that will start to worry.”

“Eventually could be hours, hon,” Margo pointed out.

“For us to be found, someone would have to take the same path we just did,” Gracelyn said, twisting her long hair into a messy bun.

“I don’t have the patience to stand around and *hope* for shit to happen.

“You wait here if you’re so inclined to, we’ll be going.” With that put as bluntly as possible, Ciaran turned and began walking up the street.

I was with him on this one. She could do as she pleased.

I was going to keep moving until my ass was safely back home with my girls.

“Come on,” I said to them.

Abby started to protest, but no one paid her much attention. Not a minute later, the clicking of her heels began to echo behind us.



## CHAPTER FOUR

This had to be how Alice felt before she descended into madness. Perhaps I'd surpassed that and gone straight to insanity. It wouldn't surprise me.

The unknown reality of this situation had my nerves winding so tightly there was a physically painful ache in my gut. I did my best to focus more intently on what was in front of me, the things I could control.

With a small sigh, I ran my fingers through my hair for the millionth time, tugging on the ends.

"Picked the wrong day to wear sandals," Mel grumbled.

"At least you're not the girl in heels," Gracelyn consoled.

I made a sound of agreement in my throat, taking in our surroundings as we walked. Whoever had done this, built such a place entirely off the grid, they'd spared no expense. The city was a collection of opulent buildings with roads clean enough for a queen to walk barefoot on.

A few store fronts were all set up like they were waiting to be open for business. Cars were parked on the sides of the street, all newer models. I had to go with what Kyrus said to do, suspend reality, because this kept making less and less sense to me.

My gaze went to the guy at the head of the group.

His movements were confident with a hint of caution, lacking all traces of fear. Dressed in predominately black—a V-neck T-shirt, dark jeans, and high-tops—he looked both criminal and powerful. His friends were dressed somewhat similarly, but I only had eyes for him.

We hadn't said a word to one another since leaving the Visitor's Center, but every so often he or one of his friends would glance back to check on us.

"Anything you'd like to share?" Mel prodded, gently bumping my shoulder with hers.

I tore my eyes off Ciaran and gave my attention to her and Gracelyn. For a moment I thought she was referring to the text I hadn't told them about yet, which I needed to do. One toss of her silver eyes proved me wrong. They'd gone right to our unanimous leader.

"I have no clue what that was supposed to mean."

"She's wondering why you keep looking at Ciaran like he's the moon in the sky," Gracelyn supplied, rather unhelpfully.

That was so majorly off the mark, I almost snorted. "I do not look at him like that."

Their expressions said they disagreed—even Selena quirked a brow. This was not the time for a conversation of this caliber, but I needed to convince myself as much as I did them that my interest in him wasn't anything more than natural curiosity and a terrible case of insta-lust.

“Okay, I admit that if things were different, he's someone I could see being another notch on my bedpost.” I shrugged.

In any other scenario this would have been a good excuse. They might've even believed it. Grace and Mel were all too aware of how I felt about sex and what I used it for.

I craved something I continuously failed to find, always searching for the sickest kind of high to fill the gaping void inside me. They knew exactly what that something was, and the filthy reasons I wanted it. Because of that, and as the two people who knew me the best, they also weren't buying the bullshit I'd just tried to sell them.

I don't know why I bothered. We'd been best friends since we could crawl, inseparable since our mothers stuck us in a baby pool together. There was very little I could slip past them without exerting a great deal of effort and implementing some superb acting skills.

“I *know* it's more than that, but until we figure a way out of this mess, I'll let it go... for now,” Mel said, shifting her eyes to Gracelyn.

Once we got out of here, it wouldn't matter what I thought of him.

I would never have to see Ciaran or any of these other people again. I would've pointed this out, but she was already onto her next target.

“And I hope you don't think you're off the hook.”

Grace looked up from retying the string on her terry-cloth shorts, her expression puzzled. “Me?”

“Yes, *you*. And Kyrous.” Mel whispered his name.

Grace's hazel eyes whirled in her head. "Do we not have anything better to worry about? Not to mention I've known him all of five minutes. He's not even my type."

As if he'd heard her, Kyrous glanced over his shoulder, but only for a brief second. She hadn't lied, he really wasn't her typical flavor. She liked the good, sweet, vanilla boys. I think they made her feel more normal.

From what I'd gathered thus far, Kyrous didn't fit into that box, but we also didn't know anything about him aside from a name and that he had an identical twin.

Giving him the benefit of the doubt, maybe beneath his cold and seemingly emotionless exterior was exactly what Grace was into. I knew his appearance wasn't a problem. The twins were more than 'pretty.' They had jawlines that would make Adonis weep, eyes uniquely their own, and flawlessly tan skin beneath a few tattoos.

Kyrous specifically had a body that appeared to be just as in shape as Ciaran's, if not a bit more ripped.

His hair was goldish brown with a fresh skintight fade while being left slightly long on the top. He wasn't anything like Grace's usual type. The way he kept looking at her, though, was as if he wanted to eat my girl alive. But, none of that mattered.

As she'd mentioned, there were much bigger issues at hand.

"So, where are you from?" Mel asked Selena, smoothly changing the subject.

"Nashville. How about ya'll?"

"Piedmont," Grace answered. "We needed a girls' trip."

"I wish that were the case for me. I was out here for my mama's bachelorette getaway. I could've brought a friend, but they all know how much of a cunt my new 'sister' is."



“Is that why you’re alone?” I asked.

She slid her hands into the back pockets of her jean shorts, nodding with a mischievous grin.

“Yeah, I may or may not have been booted from the festivities.”

“The joys of family drama,” I replied, laughing lightly.

“We can relate to that *so* hard,” Mel sighed.

Movement in an upper window pulled me away from the conversation. I let them get ahead and glanced up, trying to figure out what it could have been. A light cut on and then shut off. I searched the exterior, trying to figure out what the building was. An apartment complex, maybe?

“See something?” Grace asked quietly, slowing to walk beside me.

“Upper window. There’s—” I cut myself off, seeing a person pass in front of another window clear as day. They were wearing a dark hoodie and... was that a mask?

“Whoa,” Grace mumbled, grabbing hold of my arm.

“Whoa what?” Maverick questioned.

I darted a quick glance at the window again, but it had gone dark, no sign of anyone being up there. I waited for them to reappear, but nothing happened.

“I thought I saw something.”

“Someone,” Grace clarified.

“They said they saw something,” he announced.

“Someone,” Grace reiterated.

“Where?” Ciaran asked.

“Up there.” Maverick pointed.

Everyone stopped and lifted their gazes to the building’s upper windows, but they remained empty.

Ciaran looked at me, whatever he was thinking obscured behind an expressionless stare. “You sure?”

“I know what I saw. He was wearing a mask and a dark hoodie.”

“He?” Margo enunciated.

“I assume it was a guy...”

Charon gave me a quizzical look. “Isn’t that sexist?”

“Can’t call it sexist without being sexist,” Mel replied.

“He was joking,” Kyrous intoned. “And if someone’s up there, they’re more than likely staring down at all of us just standing here.”

“He’s right. Let’s keep moving,” Ciaran said.

We returned to walking at a normal pace, and I waved off Mel’s questioning gaze.

Every few seconds, I glanced back at the building, waiting for it to happen again, but it never did. I swallowed and took a small breath. There was no way I had been seeing things. Gracelyn saw him too.

Whoever it had been was obviously screwing with us, which was the last thing I needed right now. I *couldn’t* handle mind games.

If you started fucking with my head, I’d become a hazard to everyone. Most of all myself.

“What is it?” Ciaran asked.

I jumped, not realizing he’d fallen back to walk beside us.

“Nothing.”

He waved Gracelyn past him so that we could be side by side.

I nodded to let her know it was okay. Now in step with me, he draped an arm around my shoulders whilst continuing to look straight ahead. I probably should’ve moved away from him, but I didn’t. Being tucked against his side gave me a sense of comfort.

“You’re an extremely touchy feely kind of person,” I mumbled.

“I’m actually the complete opposite of that.”

“I’d be more inclined to believe you if you weren’t touching me right now.”

“Maybe I just like touching you, and you like it too.”

*Uh?* What was I supposed to do with that admittance? “I’m not sure that’s reciprocated on my end.”

“That’s twice now,” he said quietly. He dropped his arm and rolled his neck, cracking tense muscles. “Can you do me another favor?”

“Depends on what it is.”

“Don’t lie to me again.”

What the hell? When had I lied to him a first time? How did he know I was doing so now? I stared at the back of his head as he reclaimed his leadership position, leaving me with lungs full of his intoxicating scent and a loss for words.

I wanted to demand he get his ass back here and explain what he’d meant, but with one slight turn we were at the Blight House.



Despite it being the first natural sound I’d heard since walking through the city, the piano music didn’t encourage me to want to enter whatever this

place was.

Of course, there wasn't any other option. The road beyond was barricaded by concrete hedges with iron bars extending from the tops of them. This only solidified how I felt from the second we stepped through the gate that trapped us in here.

We were mindless sheep being herded to our eventual slaughter. I studied the place we were to enter, knowing it would be a waste of time for us to go backward.

The building was all brick, the words BLIGHT HOUSE spelled out above the entry doors in largely illuminated bubble letters.

"Do we just go in?" Margo asked, looking to Ciaran for instruction.

"Let's see," Maverick replied, walking up to the doors. He grabbed their double handles and pulled, easily opening both. A classic moonlight sonata spilled out into the night. The aroma of various foods flowed behind it.

Maverick glanced over his shoulder at us with a boyish grin. "That answers that."

He walked inside as if he lived here, waving at us to follow. We did—slowly. The girls and me, Selena now included, cautiously trailed in after everyone else.

A large chandelier hung from right above us, showcasing a square shaped foyer. The old-world styled floor was shined and polished, and dark demask like wallpaper covered the walls.

There was a grand staircase and wide hall straight ahead. Both had been effectively blocked off with various junk and stacks of chairs. Once again, we had to go left, where the piano music was coming from a speaker system.

Slowly filing in one by one, splitting into two lines, we entered a dining room. The table was covered with white linen. There was a fancy dish and silverware in front of every high-backed chair.

A variety of entrees ran from one end of the table to the other, a ham in the center.

Heather plucked two strawberries from a silver bowl, giving each a slight squeeze before taking a bite of one. "These are fresh."

She didn't need to eat any of the food for us to see that, especially not knowing where it came from. Everything looked recently prepared, visually appealing and of good quality. Round golden goblets even contained what I assumed was wine.

"What on earth?" Susan questioned, bringing her weathered manicured hands to her cheeks.

"Looks like someone was expecting our eventual arrival," Kyrus stated.

I began to look for any type of clue that would help us determine why we were supposed to come to this place. All the windows were covered by thick drapes, giving a deeper sense of privacy to the room.

Spotting a wax figure like the one from the guard shack in the back-right corner, I walked over to it, noting this one was dressed up like a butler. It looked so lifelike, as if it could've been a real person.

I guess that was the point, though. He was holding a metal server's tray. Right in the center of it sat a second tape recorder.

"Guys," I called to get their attention.

"Hit play," Mel urged, coming to stand behind me.

I glanced past everyone else crowding around me to Ciaran, who was staring intently. Not at the tape recorder or wax-figure, but at me. Licking

my lips and promptly ignoring the way his eyes tracked the movement, I hit play.

The entire room seemed to hold its breath in anticipation of what we might hear next. The voice that began to speak was identical to the one we'd heard on the shuttle.

*Mold. Rot. Beautiful decay.*

*Someone, anyone, take a seat.*

*Have a bite, relax with a drink.*

*Blight House offers you a feast in exchange for an eternal sleep.*

*Indulge just once, and you'll be free to leave.*

There was a soft whirring sound at the end of the last sentence, and then the tape cut off.

"I'm shit at riddles. What does any of that mean?" Margo asked.

"Don't eat the food," Kyrous answered, his tone flat.

"Too late," a strained voice carried from the rear of the group.

We all turned, finding Heather partially leaned over the back of a chair. Only one strawberry was in her hand, bitten nearly to the stem.

"Heather!" Abby yelled, snatching the remainder of the fruit away.

"Is that the only thing you ate?" Leonard asked, moving to stand behind her. He wrapped his arms around her waist like he was going to attempt the Heimlich maneuver.

Heather's mouth fell open, no words coming out, sucking in a jagged breath instead. Leonard stepped away, his eyes widening as he stared at her face. An audible *pft* came from the passing of gas as she began to urinate on herself.

"What's wrong with her?" Mel asked. I could've thrown something at her for failing to hide her morbid curiosity. Luckily, no one noticed. No one

other than Grace and me, that is. Gracelyn took hold of her hand and moved her out of the way as almost everyone rushed to Heather's side.

I stepped closer to Ciaran, both of us watching the whole scene play out like a picture reel.

Heather knocked the chair backward and keeled over, grabbing her stomach, coughing and gagging on seemingly nothing. Her nose began to run, tears streaming from her eyes.

Strings of saliva and red chunks of vomit spewed from Heather's mouth, landing at Margo's moccasin clad feet. I struggled to keep my face free of disgust, wincing when she fell to the floor with a loud thud.

What can we do?" Abby cried, crouching down in a valiant attempt to help her.

Her body broke into a fit of convulsions and foam coated her lips, reminding me of a rabid dog,

"What is happening to her?" Susan panicked, trying to keep her still.

Abby screamed Heather's name hysterically. More urine saturated the floor, soaking through her thin leggings.

The convulsions grew so extreme she looked as if she were possessed, like a demon was fighting to rip her apart so it could get out.

Her body arched, lifting off the floor with a spine-cracking force, eyes rolling back in her head. When she fell limply back to the ground, death had snatched away her lifeline.



## CHAPTER

## FIVE

She was lying in a putrid mess of urine and cardinal red throw-up. Abby ignored all of this, hugging her friend's body and sobbing so loudly the piano music became nearly impossible to hear.

I'd do the same if it were Mel or Grace in Heather's place. Fortunately, they were perfectly fine. I was no good with this kind of thing, therefore had no words of comfort to offer. I sincerely wished I did, but I just wasn't wired to be empathetic.

Death never fazed me, and I'd always been impartial to someone's emotional turmoil. I didn't want to be this way. I loathed the version of myself who could so effortlessly handle these things.



I was working on being a better person, but I hadn't made it far enough to be believably compassionate. I wouldn't say that I was heartless exactly, but I needed to give a semblance of a damn about you for empathy to kick in. So, it was better I kept my mouth shut.

Thankfully, Margo and Susan seemed to have the sympathy part under control, because it wasn't just me not offering any.

"What in God's name was in that food?" Leonard questioned, repeatedly running a hand through his hair.

"God had nothing to do with that. *That* was some lethal ass poison by the looks of it," Charon answered.

I placed the recorder back on the butler's tray, risking a glance at Ciaran. He was already staring at me; he'd only stopped to watch Heather die. Now he was paying no attention to the dead girl a few feet away from us.

"You don't seem too shaken up," he remarked. It almost sounded like a taunt.

"Because I'm not," I muttered, saying a bit louder, "Neither do you."

I wasn't entirely sure what there was to be 'shaken up' about to begin with. Yes, someone had just died. I was looking at her body. I was breathing in the stench of it. That didn't change the fact that what Heather had done was beyond stupid. Who decided to pop some random ass fruit in their mouth after what we'd been through—were *still* going through?

I didn't trust anything or anyone around me, aside from Mel and Grace. *Especially* the ocean eyed mystery with the darkened aura that was slowly sucking me in.

The piano music ceased abruptly, and a clunking sound echoed from the foyer at the same time a heavy black curtain slid across a track on the ceiling.

Behind it was a solid oak door, not a window like I'd have expected.

"I'll check that out," Leonard volunteered, nearly running from the room. He'd been staring at Heather's body, looking as if he'd personally killed her. Within seconds he was back, shaking his head and speaking beneath his breath.

"That was the sound of the front door locking us in; we can't go out that way."

"That's not anything to be shocked about," Mel replied.

"What was the point in us coming here?" Gracelyn asked, massaging her brow.

"I think it was for that." Selena nodded at Heather, crossing her arms tightly over an ample chest.

"We came here for my friend to die?" Abby snarled, lying Heather back down on the floor. She gently removed her glasses and closed her eyes.

"I doubt it was any one person specifically," Kyrous responded, his tone cool and collected. "The recording made that rather clear."

"That's true. I think whatever way this went, somebody had to die," Maverick shrugged.

"Any person that would have been dumb enough to eat this fucking food would be lying on the floor beside your little friend," Ciaran stated.

His tone was as disinterested as it had been when he mentioned the people that'd died on the shuttle.

This was one thing he and I had in common: being callous and detached. I'm not sure that was a good thing, but at least I knew how to keep my mouth shut. He could have faked some compassion.

"What is wrong with you people?" Abby yelled. "Do none of you care?"

“Of course, we do,” Margo comforted, wrapping Abby in a hug.

“We’re all a bit on edge right now. Maybe we should just take a minute to relax,” Leonard suggested.

He couldn’t be serious. Relax with a dead body while breathing in vomit and piss mixed with the aroma of honeyed ham? Yeah, that was going to be a hard pass.

“I think we should keep moving.”

“I’m sorry about your friend, Abby. I know that means absolutely nothing right now and you’re hurting, but I don’t want to stay here,” Gracelyn said, pumping out some commiseration for all of us.

Abby turned more towards Ciaran and I, tears still streaming down her cheeks. “And go where? What about Heather? We can’t just leave her here.”

“I don’t think she’ll mind,” Ciaran replied with what I dared say was a brazen hint of humor.

“That wasn’t right, son,” Leonard chastised.

“It was the truth,” he countered.

Feeling the tension growing, I stood taller and attempted to calm the waters.

“Heather is dead. Leaving her or not isn’t going to change that. We need to keep going if we ever want to figure out how to get out of here. Unless you’re gonna be the one carrying her around, Abby. She has to stay here.”

“You could pretend to give a shit, Lacy,” she ground out.

Huh, funny. I’d just thought the same thing about Ciaran. Now, because she wanted to be cute, I took it back.

“Lana,” I corrected, moving towards the door.

Once I was sure Grace and Mel were following me, I twisted the knob and opened it. I was met with the cool night air and a brick pathway winding through a gorgeous garden situated behind the Blight House.

Stepping outside, I turned my head left to right, keeping an eye out for, well, anything. I didn't know what we would or wouldn't encounter in this place, and it was now more apparent than ever that we weren't alone.

We'd lost three people, possibly four. There was someone cooking gourmet meals, another lurking with arrows, and a person donning a mask like some creepy ass phantom.

I had no idea how any of this correlated, but it wasn't my main concern at the moment. I just wanted to get the *fuck* out of here—here being this strange ass city. I took approximately five steps before Ciaran's voice was carrying from behind me.

"Puppet."

The way he said it had a chill skirting down my spine. I told myself not to stop, but my legs quit moving forward anyway.

Gracelyn slowed behind me, placing her hands on my hips like she used to when we were young and would go wandering in the woods. I waited, allowing Ciaran to move up beside us.

"You wanna lead?" I guessed.

"Nah," he replied, sidling past me, close enough that his cool breath fanned across my face. "I want to keep you safe."

"I think I can do that myself, but I am curious as to why you'd risk your safety for mine."

"What makes you think I'm risking anything? Maybe I just know what's best for you, puppet."

"Stop calling me that." I scowled at the back of his head. "And that doesn't even make sense."

“It will,” Maverick replied for him, moving past us on my other side. Charon and Kyrous were right behind him.

Whatever. If they wanted to be in front, that was more than fine with me. I didn’t even know where we were going. Plus, they could be shields if shit hit the fan.

“Those boys are too arrogant,” Susan huffed.

“They’re something,” Leonard agreed. “You gals go ahead; I’ll spot us from the back.”

I wasn’t going to object to that either. The more eyes the better. Abby already wasn’t going to do anyone any good right now.

As we followed the guys, Margo stayed with her, lending a shoulder to cry on.

The garden’s path wound around a small bend and continued back towards the street. From what I could see through a gap in the fluffy rose bushes, we were going to emerge on the other side of the barrier out front.

“Does anyone hear that?” Mel asked after a minute.

I glanced at her over my left shoulder. “No. What is it?”

Her brows slanted in thought. “...I know the melody, but I can’t place it.”

“Sounds like an ice cream truck,” Selena suggested.

“Why would one of those be in here?”

“Why is any of this crap in here?” Margo muttered.

“Touché,” I quipped, looking forward just as I slammed into one of the twins.

“Shit, sorry,” I cursed, grabbing onto his arm so I didn’t fall on my ass and take Gracelyn with me.

“You’re good,” Charon assured, offering a small smile. “Yo, why did you—what the hell is that?”

Realizing it wasn't just him who had stopped abruptly, I poked my head around his and his brother's unmoving forms.

It was easy to spot what had caused Ciaran to freeze in place.

"What's happening?" Leonard called from the behind us.

"There's a clown or something standing at the end of the walkway," Gracelyn answered, speaking loud enough for anyone that couldn't see around the bend to hear.

Her words prompted a girl to step forward. At first, her face became partially obscured by the shadows dancing through the garden, but then she shuffled forward a bit more and the lamppost near the curb was enough to illuminate her features.

That dim hue made her appear all the paler, but it was clear that she was wearing thick white make-up. Each eye was in the center of a black cross, and her mouth had a Joker-esque grin painted on either side.

I think she had on some sort of dress, but I couldn't tell for sure. The red and white fabric was skintight and pleated. Her hair was pulled back in two tight buns.

Clasped in her left hand was a bundle of black balloons. In the right, something that strongly resembled a pickax.

"We should turn back," Susan suggested, her voice starting to shake.

"No," I whispered. "You never turn your back on someone holding a deadly weapon."

"You just happened to know that?" Charon mumbled.

"I play a lot of video games," I lied.

"Is that an ice cream truck?" Maverick asked, his gaze trained on the girl staring back at us.

I finally detected the melody Mel and Selena had just brought up. It sounded more like a mixture between that and the tune of a carousel. There

was a low rumble accompanying it.

“He wants to play,” the creepy clown bitch sang, dragging out every word.

Grinning manically, she began to walk backward.

“Who wants to play?” Ciaran asked her.

“They’re coming...!” she sung louder, then turned to skip off.

“We need to go,” Ciaran ordered, surging forward as soon as clown girl vanished from view. There was no argument to be had; it was clearly in our best interests to move our asses.

We emerged from the garden, immediately going left. Sticking together, we moved down the street, everyone on high alert. There were too many damned crevices between the buildings. Every time we approached one, I half-expected someone to jump out at us.

“The truck’s getting closer,” Gracelyn quietly pointed out, “and what sounds like a motorcycle.”

She was right, but where would they come from? Spotting the partial intersection a few feet ahead, I answered my own question.

“Goddammit!” Leonard suddenly yelled.

I twisted around, eyes instantly falling on the clown girl. How had she gotten behind us? Leonard urged Abby and Margo to move faster while she maintained a slow, lazy gait, her pickax hitched over her shoulder, balloons still in hand.

Much like a serial killer.

The screeching of tires had me facing frontward again, pulse jumping as a blacked-out box-styled truck came barreling through the intersection.

A matching motorcycle was seconds behind it, creating its own path as the truck did a sharp U-turn, nearly taking out one of the cars parked by a meter.

“This shit can’t be for real,” Ciaran monotoned.

“Do you need the same speech I gave the girls?” Kyrous asked.

Window facing our direction, the truck’s continuous melody filled the air.

Four people stared out at us, all donning dark hoodies, their faces obscured entirely. Each wore a different mask. Two were LED, pure black with blue and orange X’s marking where the eyes and mouths were.

Another was completely blank. The one that stood out from the rest was half white, the other half blacker than midnight, including the eyes. A distorted cross was painted dead in its center.

Whoever was driving couldn’t be seen. The truck’s windows were too dark. And the person on the bike had on a helmet that concealed their head entirely, a yellow smiley face painted over the tempered visor.

“Holy shit,” Mel breathed.

Grace grabbed our hands and squeezed, as if to say, “*It’s going to be okay.*”

She’d done the same when I saw the person in the window. I’d believed her then. Now, I wasn’t so sure.

“There’s more,” Charon stated, gesturing to either side of the street.

On the left, another figure stepped from a crevice, a spiked bat grasped within their gloved hands. To the right came another, this one holding an automatic bow-gun.

My palms began to sweat, my mouth drying out. Not from fear—this was something else entirely, something I didn’t want to usurp.

Behind us, clown girl began to drag the pickax along the cement, the sound akin to nails on a chalkboard.

“What do we do?” Abby cried, her voice shrill and high.

“We run,” Ciaran replied flippantly, “before they surround us.”



“Run where?”

“Away from them.”

He glanced at his friends, and then as if they’d agreed silently, they all took off.

“Great.”

“Go,” Mel implored, shoving me and Gracelyn forward.

It was like they were waiting on us to do just that. The person with the bow lifted it up and powered away, nearly taking out the side of Maverick’s face, just barely missing. He whooped out a taunt when the arrow smashed into a storefront instead, shattering the glass.

Once we bypassed them and the person with the bat, I veered towards the sidewalk to get around the truck. Our shoes slammed against the concrete, breaths coming fast and quick. The truck had yet to move. The masked figures remained where they were, watching us like we were rats in a maze.

“Look out!” Ciaran’s warning carried to the rest of us.

“For what?” Margo coughed, keeping up surprisingly well.

We ran by the truck and got our answer.

An engine revved—the motorcycle leapt forward, the driver holding some type of wound-up chain in one of his fists.

Abby screamed at the sight of him and drew back, bolting from one side of the sidewalk to the other with Leonard hot on her heels. He ignored them and got right behind the rest of our small group, easily and rapidly gaining on us.

My heart slammed against my ribcage, desperately close to smashing clean through.

Ciaran abruptly turned back, weaving around his friends to get to me.

“What are you doing?” I gasped.

“Making sure you stay alive,” he retorted, latching onto my arm.

I didn't have a choice but to run faster. He would've dragged my ass otherwise. I made sure Gracelyn and Mel stayed close. I could hear the motorbike bearing down on us, the loud purr assaulting my ear drums.

“No!” Margo's abrupt screech nearly caused me to trip over my own two feet. Susan's followed, full of terror and pain. The motorcycle zipped by us, and I caught a glimpse of her being dragged behind it. The chain that had been around the biker's fist now had one end wrapping her throat like a lasso.

“Wait,” I huffed, trying to slow down. Ciaran simply tightened his grip, forcing me to keep going.

The motorcycle veered to the right, going back into the street. It did a U-turn in the middle of the road before coming to a sudden stop. Susan's body was flung across the tarmac like a ragdoll. Bloodied with noticeable patches of skin torn off, she tried to get up, yowling in pain.

“Hey!” Gracelyn shouted, grabbing the back of Margo's shirt when she attempted to run past us to get to her. “You can't go out there!”

We gradually slowed, watching as the smiley face cocked to the side, seemingly to regard Susan. She reached towards Abby and Leonard, as if one of them could grab her hand and pull her to safety.

The biker revved their engine, the loud rumble intermingling with the tune continuing to play down the street and Susan's wailing. I knew what was going to happen seconds before it did. He hit the throttle and rocketed forward, driving his bike right over Susan's body.

An inhuman sound tore from her throat, strips of flesh being ripped away beneath the tread of spinning rubber as bones visibly broke. The man on the bike didn't stop again, racing back the way we'd come. The chain

around Susan's neck snagged, cutting off her agonized screams, dragging her broken body behind him.

A trail of shredded clothing and blood smeared on the tarmac were all that remained in her wake.



## CHAPTER

## SIX

SANCTUARY.

It was another building.

When the truck began to move towards us, we resumed our grueling sprint to get away. Margo surprisingly kept up.

Ciaran still didn't slow again. He gripped my hand so tightly it hurt. At another intersection, Maverick went the usual direction, and we followed.

From my peripheral, I saw Abby and Leonard making their way back to us.

That's where we found it.

Much like Blight House, the sign was illuminated, indicating it was the right place to be.

Kyrous was the first to enter this time. With little to no caution, he went to the door and flung it open, causing the wood to groan from the force he exerted.

We practically poured in after him, leaving the door to automatically slam shut behind us, only there was no thud of wood, but a cool, metallic click...

"It's locked," Leonard heaved, wiggling the handle to no avail as sweat dripped down his face.

"That's for our benefit, supposedly," Maverick replied, motioning towards a large plaque hanging on the wall near a dining table.

*"The windows are bolted, the doors are armed; you'll be safe until time runs out?"* Gracelyn read in between shallow breaths.

"What is safe?" Margo questioned, pushing past us. "Did you see what they did to Susan?"

Her motions were stiff as she walked over to a leather sofa and sank down, cradling her head in her hands. Abby followed, offering the same comfort she'd been given. I noticed she was barefoot, having kicked off her heels at some point.

Leaving them to their grief, we slightly dispersed. Ciaran relinquished his hold on me as we took in this new space. Other than a small hallway with a visible bathroom and what appeared to be two individual bedrooms, the space was open concept.

With its slated floors, dove-gray walls, and soft leather furnishings placed in their respective areas, it reminded me of a bachelor pad.

A fire was going in an open-walled fireplace that partially separated the kitchenette from the main room, giving off an almost warm and inviting vibe.

I overlooked all of this for the map hanging where a television would usually go.

It was an exact replica of the one from the Visitor's Center but with a few updates. Most noticeable to me was the clock counting down from six hours in the upper left corner.

"Over there." I nudged Melantha and Gracelyn in its general direction.

"Names are crossed off," Mel said quietly once we got closer.

I looked to the right, seeing what she was referring to almost instantly. Heather and Susan both had the same line through their names as the people from our shuttle bus.

"I don't understand what the point of this is," Gracelyn remarked, sweeping loose strands of hair out of her face.

"Seems to me someone is watching us. And they plan to pick us off one by one," Leonard theorized, going to sit on the leather couch opposite of where Margo and Abby were seated. "Think that food's poisoned too?"

He nodded to a bowl full of multigrain bars resting atop a coffee table. Small individual sized waters sat in a huddle beside it.

"I wouldn't risk..."

I trailed off when Margo leaned forward and snatched two from the bowl. She was tearing one open and pushing it into her mouth before anyone could tell her otherwise.

"That wasn't smart," Kyrous scoffed.

"If I die, I die," she retorted, wiping her tear-filled eyes with the back of her hand. "We have to eat and drink something."

"In that case, we appreciate you volunteering as tribute," Ciaran joked.

Leonard frowned at him, lip curling in what could be disgust or displeasure, probably both. Meanwhile, I was biting my inner cheek, so I

didn't laugh. Ciaran's humor was dark and morbid—horribly timed, but I got it.

“What are we supposed to do now? Do you think our families will come for us? What am I supposed to tell Heather's?” Abby rushed out, rubbing Margo's back, almost robotically.

“How exactly would they do that?” Mel asked, kicking her sandals off. I was amazed she'd kept them on this entire time. That took skill.

“Track our cellphones.”

“The ones you all so eagerly dumped into an oil drum? Those phones?” I checked, shooting Ciaran a pointed look.

He returned it with an infuriating smirk. “You really going to hold keeping you alive against me?”

“We don't know what's happening outside of this place,” I replied to Abby, ignoring him. “Maybe they will find us. I know they'll realize something is wrong, but do you really want to sit around and wait for that?”

Not to mention Mel couldn't locate wherever this was using GPS. I was going to keep that tidbit to myself, though. It was liable to push Abby right over the edge.

“Our best chance of continuing to breathe is hinged on all of *this*.” I waved at the interactive map.

“Are you saying we have to go back out there?” She looked at me, horrified, her dark eyes round and refilling with tears. *Ugh*.

I did my best not to cringe. I even tried to force a small bit of empathy for this girl, because this situation was horrible.

I failed. My parents would be beside themselves from this lackluster effort. Mom always chastised me when I was younger for being so callous. There was this one time at my riding lessons... a girl fell off her pony and broke her arm. As she cried and cried, I was more concerned about us still

getting the ice cream we'd been promised than I was about her being in pain.

I was only around eleven then. My moral compass had changed quite a bit since, but I didn't have the mental fortitude to handle Abby or her tears. My head was in its own state of discord.

Thoughts and emotions swirled within me like a typhoon. My illusion of control was threatening to shatter. I couldn't let that happen.

I couldn't allow myself to revert to the woman I'd fought years to distance myself from because of a little death.

"We can't stay here," Gracelyn filled the silence that had spread amongst the group. "We've got almost six hours to accept that we'll be going back outside with a bunch of deranged freaks to get to the end of this map."

"And then what?" Margo asked quietly.

Grace shrugged. "I'm more focused on us getting through the city. We can deal with what's next after we've done that."

"So, what are you saying? I—"

"We've got to play along with whomever is behind this. *That's* what she's saying. Think of it as a game," Kyrous cut in cleanly.

"Like Jumanji," Selena suggested.

"*Game?*" Abby's voice pitched to a near squeal, causing Margo to wince. "People are *dying*."

"There are dead bodies just lying around. Susan just got dragged away like a dog on a leash. My best friend is —"

"Calm down. We were all there, Pistol Annie," Charon drawled.

She wound her fingers through her hair and pulled at the roots. With tears having smeared mascara all over her reddened face, the action made



her look like someone on the verge of a mental breakdown. I didn't blame her.

"I can't go back out there," she whimpered.

"And I can't take much more of this," Ciaran monotoned, crossing his arms. "If you don't think you'll last, then I guess you're shit out of luck. No one here is going to be your hero."

"Now that's enough," Leonard reprimanded, sitting taller.

"You can't go around saying whatever you damn well please, son. That isn't the way the world works."

"My world and your world are two *very* different places. I do whatever the fuck I want, while people like you remain bottom feeders striving to reach my level."

"You little mother—" Leonard caught himself, jaw clenching and fury igniting in his eyes. They stared at one another, hostility practically snapping through the air between them.

I risked a glance at Ciaran, seeing a grin spread across his face. It was downright cold and sinister. His silent threat was harsher than any he could've spoken.

Leonard took a breath, puffing up his cheeks and then slowly letting the air out, running a hand through his graying hair.

Wisely choosing not to make the situation any worse, he took two bars from the multigrain bowl and changed the subject.

"I think the food's okay. Same brand they sell in the stores and still wrapped."

"Why are they feeding us when we're just going to die?" Abby hiccupped, a fresh wave of tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Speak for yourself. I have no plans on dying here," Mel snipped, breaking away from us to sit at the kitchen table.

“Girl, you need to stop bringing bad juju to the rest of us. Have some faith,” Selena advised softly, following in Mel’s path.

“Does this mean the meeting is adjourned? We might as well make the most of these few hours,” Maverick spoke up. “I spotted a bathroom off the hallway, and I’ve had to piss since we got here.”

He sauntered towards the back hall in a rather chipper mood, considering we’d just been chased here and watched a woman being brutally dragged.

Everyone took his advice, taking off in different directions, most hunting down food or water.

I scrubbed both hands over my face, and then turned to go talk to the girls, bumping into Ciaran before I could go anywhere.

“You all right?” he asked. I had to stop from deeply inhaling more of his delicious cologne like a weirdo. I took a miniscule step back, so my face wasn’t planted in his chest. “Peachy. Having the best time of my life.”

“With me by your side, it would be hard to do much else.”

Despite myself, I smiled. With everything going on inside my head, the action felt like stretching a muscle that hadn’t been used in ages. “You really know just what to say, don’t you?”

“In order to get what I want? Always.”

“I hope you mean that in terms of seeing me smile.”

“Of course. What kind of guy do you take me for?”

“Honestly? I need a little more time to decide. Right now, you’re somewhere between a sweetheart and an asshole.”

“Huh, usually I get told I’m a fucking psychopath.”

Okay...

I was ninety-nine percent sure he was being serious. I was glad he felt comfortable enough with me to so bluntly admit that. It wasn’t usually

something someone casually inserted into a conversation. The fact that he knew he *could* tell me was what I found more disconcerting.

It served as an excellent and much needed distraction from my own mountain of problems, though, so best believe I was going to home in on it.

“Beautiful, charming, probably manipulative, cold but sweet when necessary,” I ticked off on my fingers.

“I can see that.”

He laughed softly, still close enough that his breath fanned the side of my face, causing an outbreak of goosepimples.

“You think I’m beautiful?”

I almost rolled my eyes. We were really having this discussion right now.

“You know damn well you look good, Ciaran. I’m sure there’s a bevy of unfortunate girls that experienced firsthand just how psychopathic you are because you batted those lashes and flashed a smile to get anything you wanted from them.”

“Would that work on you too?”

I scoffed. “Absolutely not. I don’t think with my vagina, and I’ve had enough guy problems to last the rest of my life, however long that’s going to be.”

He grew quiet, and the various activities in the room replaced his voice. I’m pretty sure someone was using the microwave. Margo was talking with Abby and Leonard between her soft sobs. I couldn’t hear any of the other conversations; everyone was speaking quietly.

“There’s only ever been one girl...”

He’d spoken so softly, I wasn’t sure I’d heard him correctly.

“Is that past tense?”

“It’s everything.”

I wasn't sure what that meant exactly. His tone didn't give anything away, and I had no response. I glanced over my shoulder to check on the girls. Mel was clear across the room, sitting at the table with a bladder-relieved Maverick and sipping on a bottle of water, smoothing down her hair. Gracelyn was standing by a bookshelf with Selena, talking to the twins.

I faced forward again, crossing my arms over my chest and studying the map. "Did you see the new path?" I gestured.

"I saw it the moment we stepped over here."

"Should we gather the team?" I was only half joking.

"Let them relax for the time being. Give those two time to finish crying."

I didn't need to look behind us to know who we were speaking about when I could hear them. "You're so caring."

"Is this the pot meeting the kettle?"

"That's fair." I shrugged.

So, he'd noticed that too? Interesting. It was kind of nice to be able to talk to a guy this openly—even if he was a total stranger. Then again, maybe that made it even better. It wasn't like we'd be pen pals or chat on FB when this was all said and done. In this place, I could probably get away with dropping my charade altogether.

Like we'd been told, good and bad didn't exist in whatever this city was. Letting my demons out to play wouldn't see me locked away for the rest of my life. I wasn't going to, but the thought of doing so was tempting.

"I do care, by the way. They just aren't lucky enough to be among the few individuals I deem important to me," he explained.

"I mean, same. I'm not some heartless vixen."

"I disagree, you're definitely the latter."

Oh, geez. I shook my head, biting back an amused smile.

“So, how did I get an invite to your special club? Because for some reason you seem insistent on making sure I survive this.”

“The reason is obvious.”

I combed through my mind for what it could be.

This *thing*, whatever this budding connection was that was trying to flourish between us, that couldn't be why. At least, I didn't think it could. I honestly wasn't sure what he was referring to.

When it came to Ciaran, there was a lot I didn't know. I probably never would, and I think he preferred it that way. Yet another thing we had in common.

“Are you bothered by the names of where we need to go? By any of this?”

I genuinely cared how he felt, which was throwing me even further off kilter.

He shrugged in response.

I waited for him to explain, but that's all he gave me.

“What do *you* think of all that's happening?” he asked, deflecting the spotlight onto me.

I took the moment and answered honestly.

“I didn't really know what to think. I still don't—I can't think of any reason why someone would do all of this to a random group of strangers. This took a shit-ton of effort. I mean, there are people out there riding around in an ice cream truck.”

“And a motorcycle, you can't forget about the badass biker.”

I coughed to disguise a laugh, looking back to make sure Margo didn't hear him. “That was so wrong,” I hissed.

“Yet, you almost laughed.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You’ve got a dimple that pops in your chin any time you remotely smile.”

I reflexively brought my hand up to cover said dimple. I already knew I had a few minor issues, but clearly this guy did too. That’s where the connection stemmed from—I’d discovered a kindred spirit. I hated it had to be under these circumstances.

“Okay, so we’ve got the purge squad roaming the city, and we’re the only people around to be purged.”

“How do you know they’re strangers?”

Pushed into a state of confusion, it took me a second to respond.

“Who?”

“The people in this room.”

“I already asked if anyone knew each other, remember?”

He thumbed his chin, looking thoughtful. “Maybe they don’t know that they do, but there’s no way that this is random.”

I agreed that this didn’t seem all that sporadic. I’d assumed as much when I saw all our names listed together back at the Visitor’s Center. Not to mention how strategically put together everything seemed to be.

As for his other theory...

I toyed with my necklace as I considered that angle, flipping the pendant between my fingers.

“You mean there’s a connection they aren’t aware of?” I contemplated aloud.

He didn’t answer right away, his eyes trained on what I was doing. He lifted them to mine after a few seconds. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

I tucked the pendant beneath the collar of my crop-top and turned to face him. “How do we figure that out?”

He raised his brows. “We could just ask.”

“Oh, duh.”

He smiled down at me, causing my stomach to flip. I swept my eyes over every inch of his gorgeous face before bringing my gaze back to his. He’d stopped smiling, an expression I couldn’t decipher now obscuring his features.

Ciaran had a darkness to him for sure, I could sense it in him as easily as I could tell when it was day or night. I was the cat curiosity couldn’t kill, eager to explore all his hidden depths.

“If you be Watson, I’ll be Sherlock,” he said after a minute passed with us simply trying to figure out the other.

“Please, I’m always Sherlock,” I scoffed, brushing by him to go play detective.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Ten minutes was all it took to prove his theory correct.

Kind of.

It'd taken longer to get Margo and Abby to join us at the table without physically moving them there ourselves.

I took a sip of water, almost moaning as it watered my dry throat.

Gracelyn had found some newly packaged crackers and placed them between us to share. It wasn't a fry up, but it was better than nothing.

Ciaran was sitting directly across from me, adjacent to Mel, with the straw of a boxed apple juice wedged between his pink, plump lips.

"So, what was everyone doing at the resort?" I asked, trying not to stare at him.



“Susan had—Susan was,” Margo corrected, drawing in a deep breath. “Susan was recently diagnosed with dementia. This was our last hurrah. We wanted some final memories.”

There was a brief lull. I’m sure this wasn’t what either of them had in mind. I could tell she was holding out hope that her aunt was alive. I wouldn’t crush that, but I think everyone else knew better.

It would be better if she were dead.

If she wasn’t, the amount of agony she’d be in right now had to be unbearable. We’d have to put her down once—*if*—we found her. Like the farmers did their wounded or sick livestock.

“Heather and I were attending a seminar for work,” Abby divulged, sniffing.

“I took a pleasure trip to celebrate my retirement. I was a P.O,” Leonard said.

His made sense. Abby’s too, I guess.

“You know why I was here. I got kicked out of a bachelorette gathering. That was two days ago, if time is relevant. I stayed to enjoy the trip already paid for. It was the least Mama could do for getting hitched to some creepy asshole,” Selena stated.

Charon and Kyrous shared a look, then both stared at her.

“No fuckin way,” Maverick started to laugh.

“You’re the one who assaulted Kennedy,” Ciaran said. Not a question, a statement.

Selena rolled her eyes and sighed. “I threw a pool towel at her, that’s hardly assault.”

“You all know each other then?” Grace interjected, looking between them.

“We would’ve met Pebbles two days ago if she hadn’t attacked our sister.”

“You may have known about me, but I didn’t know anything about either of you until this very moment. All the more reason I don’t trust whatever the hell is going on with my ma and your dad,” she affirmed, eyeing Charon warily. “And I didn’t attack anyone. I threw a *towel* at her. She deserved more than that.”

“Ken is a bitch,” Kyrous agreed in his typical detached tone.

“What a charming family reunion,” Mel stated sarcastically.

“Whatever you want to call it, there’s a link now,” Grace said.

“For them, yes. Not for the rest of us,” Leonard replied.

Which was true.

“How did you end up on the same shuttle as one another?” I asked.

“We were going to the airport to catch our flight home,” Maverick answered.

“The better question is why a group of young men were at a bachelorette party... unless they’d been hired as entertainment,” Margo said.

“Our father had his bachelor party at the same resort. He’s flying elsewhere,” Kyrous explained.

They had a few coincidences between their scenarios, but not wholly abnormal or anything to freak out over, and whatever family stuff they had going on didn’t have any relevance to the rest of us.

“What about you three? Why were you at the resort?” Ciaran asked, resting his elbows on the table.

“A girls’ trip,” Mel answered dismissively.

I recapped my water and sighed. “Okay, so you three are semi-related, but—”

“I’m not related to them,” Selena interrupted. “When this is over, I never want to see any of ya’ll again.”

She looked at the three of us and offered an apologetic smile. “No offense.”

“None to be taken, I feel the same way,” Gracelyn replied.

“Aw, don’t be that way, sis,” Charon goaded.

She smartly ignored him. This was some family drama they’d have to iron out at a more apt time. We needed to focus on getting out of here.

“What do we do now? Any ideas?”

“We have a little over five hours before we have to go back out there and deal with whatever is coming next. I suggest you claim a room and try to get some sleep. We can take turns on watch duty,” Ciaran said.

That wasn’t a bad idea.

No one spoke up and disagreed. With nothing else needing urgent attention, I recapped my water and slid back from the table, excusing myself to use the bathroom.



It had undeniably been the longest twenty-four hours of my life.

If it had even been that long. There weren't any clocks here. Time had dissolved into nothing.

The countdown was just that—a timer. It didn't tell us the minute or hour, whether it was AM or PM.

That would be something I never took for granted again. But neither lack of time nor the comfort of the cloudlike mattress beneath me could help me sleep.

I must have woken at least six times by now. With every interruption, thoughts assaulted my mind before I opened my eyes. They churned, none lingering for very long at the forefront.

I had no idea what was going to happen when we stepped outside of the Sanctuary. I wondered how our families were handling our disappearance. Would they know something was wrong? Or would they automatically assume we'd finally gone nomad? Foolishly, at that. Either way, they'd raise a cavalry to find us if need be. There was no real escape for us.

Just because they tried, though, didn't mean they'd be successful. How did you locate somewhere this clandestine? Who knew if I'd still be alive when they did?

There didn't seem to be a specific sequence of the deaths that had occurred around us. Those men in masks... they reminded me of an old wives' tale my *abuela* used to tell.

I wouldn't make it easy for them to hurt me or the girls.

Screw that.

The average human being could do terrible things to another. I wasn't an exception. I was raised to always go for the throat. I'd never lie down like a dog in the street and die. I'd let my beloved demons out of the cage I had them locked away in before that happened.

I didn't want it to get that far, though. It'd destroy years of pacing and calculated self-control.

I wasn't sure what it would do to my mental state either. Once, these demons had been my closest friends. Ever since I'd tried to expel them, they'd become my biggest tormentors.

Releasing a quiet breath, I brushed my hair away from my face and slowly sat up. Sleep was futile at this point. I wasn't going to bother trying to force it.

Careful not to wake Gracelyn or Mel, I scooted down the bed between their bodies, weaving my bottom around Selena, who'd stretched out across the foot.

Stepping over Margo and Abby, who were sleeping on a self-made pallet, I crept into the hall and shut the door. Voices were coming from the main room, quiet and low. I poked my head out to see what was going on.

Leonard was snoring quietly on one of the sofas. Maverick and Charon were sitting on another.

Ciaran and Kyrous were in front of the map, conversing with one another. When Ciaran's head started to turn my direction, I scampered into the bathroom, cracking the door the smallest bit.

Not bothering to turn on the light, I went to the double basin and turned on the tap, resting my hands one either side of the left sink's porcelain rim. Closing my eyes, I fought to clear my head—not an easy task when nothing but conflict was brewing within it.

I cupped my hands and placed them beneath the spicket, opening my eyes when I heard the door being pushed on.

Ciaran stepped in and shut it behind him, placing his back against the wood. I let the water in my hands escape down the drain and straightened. "What are you doing?"

“Coming to see why you ran.”

“Ciaran—” I paused. “If I had run, which I didn’t, that would be a sign *not* to follow me.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted me to do? Come after you?”

“Repeat that question back to yourself and then ask why I would want that.”

“I don’t think you know what it is you want, puppet.”

*The audacity.* “And you do?”

“I know far more than you’d like me to, little Serpine.”

I spun on my heel and took two steps away from him. “How do you know my last name?”

“The same way I know what that necklace around your neck stands for.”

My hand flew to the pendant as he began to advance towards me. I remained where I was, tilting my head back when he stopped, our bodies mere centimeters apart.

I didn’t know if I should wrap my arms around him or get ready to throw hands. My body certainly knew which option to choose.

“What do you want?”

“The same thing you do.”

I swallowed, shifting back slightly. “If you really knew as much as you just claimed to, you would have a different answer.”

He laughed lowly, the dark undertone causing the ache he’d created between my legs to grow. He cupped my chin, prohibiting me from looking away from him.

“And for you to say that means you haven’t been listening to a word I’ve said.”

“Ciaran,” I warned. “We *can’t* do whatever it is you’re trying to do.”

“If you speak lies without conviction, puppet, how can you expect anyone to believe them?”

“What does that even mean?”

“That if I were to decide I wanted inside you right now and not later, you’d do whatever I told you to because you want the same thing.”

*Later?* “Your confidence is really something, but you’re wrong.”

“Bullshit, you’ve been eye fucking me so hard I’m surprised I can even walk straight.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. So much for my being discreet. Unfortunately for him, he had no idea what he was setting himself up for. I didn’t know how he knew the things he claimed to, but that didn’t change anything about who I was or our situation.

He probably only wanted me because I denied that I wanted him. If not for the ease with which we connected, it wouldn’t even be *me* he wanted. There was a chance it still wasn’t. I couldn’t be mad about that. I wanted to sit on his dick, and he wanted to feel my cunt wrapped around it.

We were two people with a blatantly mutual attraction—a visceral one. Plus, I’d dealt with men like this before.

They loved the thrill that came with staking a claim on a woman who played hard to get.

It became a game of sorts for me. I let em think they caught me, conquered the unconquerable, so to speak. I allowed them to fuck me hard and fast just so I could turn around and fuck them twice as hard before leaving them even faster.

I’d only ever been with one man who met the quota for everything I needed, and I’d lost him faster than he’d made me come.

Under normal circumstances, I’d have let Ciaran give it his try to beat him.

I was dangerously close to doing it now. I'd slept with guys much faster than this before, and they didn't have anywhere near the allure he did. They also didn't spout off my last name without me giving any hint as to what it could be. I wondered what his angle was in letting me know he knew it.

Power? Blackmail? Fear?

"Are you trying to scare me, Ciaran?"

"We talked about this; I don't care for something as simple or basic as fear. I need terror."

"Is there a difference?"

"You know the answer to that."

I attempted to lean away. He released my chin and easily maneuvered us so that I was caught between his solid body and the sink. The heat wafting off him intermingled with the cool drops of water now lightly misting the backs of my arms.

I could have fought him. Easily. I didn't necessarily want to. He hadn't done anything more than slightly surprise me and nourish a few more seeds of curiosity. If he'd been expecting a livelier reaction, he had to be disappointed. Whatever his intention was, he made it hard to resist him.

"I think you've proved your point," I murmured, breathing him in.

"I haven't even gotten started yet."

"And you won't."

He grasped my jaw firmly. "Then I suggest you tell me to stop."

His mouth claimed mine—roughly. Lips soft as velvet were a stark contrast to the way he took all the control I hadn't been ready to give. He stole the access he wanted, wasting no time wrapping my tongue with his.

The hand imprisoning my jaw disappeared beneath my hair and slid to the back of my neck, gripping me so hard I knew I'd be bruised.



The feel of his fingertips was like acid on my skin. Slight pain had a small whimper of pleasure bubbling in my chest.

I smothered it, matching the intensity of his kiss. Our bodies seemed to mold together. The impressively large bulge in his jeans pressed exactly where I wanted him.

His free hand found its way to my ass, grabbing a handful. He nipped me, his mouth curling into a smile when I shuddered.

“Damn, you’re beautiful,” he implored softly, mouth reclaiming mine before I had the chance to respond. He kissed me deeper, making sure I felt exactly what he could do to me with something so innocent as the meeting of our lips.

I skimmed my arms over his shirt, feeling every solid ridge beneath it as my palms found their way to his shoulders. His teeth sunk into my lower lip, biting until tears filled my eyes and a low mewl slipped out.

I didn’t tell him to stop—I wouldn’t.

He pulled away on his own accord.

“I’ve got your number, puppet. I know exactly what to do with you, how I’m going to do it, and *when*.”

Even in the dark, I could see the promise blazing in the blues of his eyes.

I wasn’t afraid of him. If this was the start of his psycho showing, I wanted to expose every inch of it. I beckoned for it to come out and play, knowing I shouldn’t. This had always been my double-edged affliction. I wished for normal but craved the unstable, wanted the filthy and depraved.

If he had it in him, I would find a way to tear it out and consume every morsel to sate my own carnal desires. As if he could see every sordid thought swimming through my head, the next words that came from his mouth were what finally threw me into a realm of uncertainty.

“When you said you didn’t know how people could do something like this, I never answered,” he softly expressed, lips hovering in front of mine. “We’re all full of hellish intent, demons wrapped in pretty packages. The more beautiful someone is, the more vicious those demons tend to be.”

He ran his hands up my back, pressing me further against him. “Show me yours and I’ll show you mine, then I’ll make you come harder than you’ve ever come before.” He kissed me again, nipping me one last time before finally stepping away.

I dragged air into my lungs, consequently breathing him in once more. “Are you the reason I’m in here?”

“In case you failed to notice, puppet, I’m stuck in here too.”

I swallowed, straightening my spine to gain some of my control back. The ache between my legs had my pussy clenching, my skin flushed with heat.

I ignored it as best I could, watching him walk towards the bathroom door.

Something about this, about us. About him. It all rang familiar, but my mind refused to recall the memory.

“Who are you?” I asked before he could pull open the door.

Pausing for the briefest moment, he answered. “I’m the reason you’re going to make it through this part alive.”

He stepped into the hall and pulled the door all the way shut behind him. I lifted two fingers to my mouth, probing where he’d made me bleed.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

I shut off the sink and returned to the hall, wiping excess water off my face.

Purposely not looking out into the main room, I returned to the bedroom, making sure to keep what had just occurred from registering on my face even as my body burned. Mel was waking when I stepped in.

“Where were ya?” she asked around a yawn.

“Washing my face...”

Her eyes narrowed, the glow of a tableside lamp making them appear cat-like. “And getting fucked down, by any chance?”

“Really? Do I look like that’s what was I doing?” I spread my arms out to the side.

“You’re right, with the ‘wreck my pussy’ vibes you’ve been giving off, you wouldn’t be walking straight.”

I covered my mouth to smother a laugh. “I seriously cannot with you sometimes. How do you even know Ciaran was with me?” I crept closer, stepping over Abby.

“Because I know you... and I can smell his cologne. Also, your lips are swollen.”

“I need to talk to you and Gracelyn about that.”

“...Okay?” She gave me a quizzical look.

“I’m not talking about getting dick,” I hissed. “He knows my last name.”

That got her full attention, causing her to sit up taller. “How?”

I climbed up onto the king-sized bed and sat beside her. “I don’t know. He said he knows what this means, too.” I fingered the chain of my necklace.

“Did he hurt you?” She was already shoving the comforter back.

I bit back another laugh and grabbed her wrist. “I’d have hurt him more, you know that. All he did was fuck with my head and make me wet.”

“Oh, he’s absolute trash then.”

“Who’s trash?” Grace grumbled, rolling over to look at the two of us.

“Cici knows her last name,” Mel divulged. “And he didn’t make her come.”

I ignored the last part of that. “What’d you call him?”

“Cici, why?”

“Nothing...” I shook my head. “He said he was the reason I’d survive. What do you think that means?”

“He could be from one of the founding families,” Gracelyn suggested, her voice still groggy. “We know we’re all stuck in here for a reason.”

“That wouldn’t be all that surprising,” Mel agreed, tucking a violet strand of hair behind her ear.

“I’d be more surprised if it wasn’t some rando sick fuck our parents pissed off behind all of this.”

“Yeah, that list is pretty endless,” I mused. I wondered why I hadn’t considered that, him being from a different family. It made a fuck-ton of sense. From the way he spoke to his personality to his overall demented, albeit sexy, demeanor. That didn’t tell me how he knew who I was, though. It only made me equally suspicious and even more curious about him.

“Did you ask what his name was?”

“More or less. He wouldn’t say.”

“Figures,” she sighed. “If he’s from one of the families then they all would be, which means we really can’t trust them. Since he knows your name, I’m sure they know ours.”

“Yeah, and that could go either way. Not all of the families get along,” Gracelyn pointed out.

“Even if we are all in here because someone wants to wipe us out, their families could hate ours as well. This will become a giant bloody mess if we have to start offing each other,” she pouted. “I wanted a vacation, not a round-trip ticket to the modern-day Battle Royale.”

What an understatement all that was—true, too. Some of the families were still waging bloodshed and carnage on one another as we sat trapped in this hellish city. I gnawed the inside of my lower lip, tracing over the sore spot with the tip of my tongue.

“There’s our link,” I mumbled more to myself than them.

A soft rasp on the door interrupted our conversation. Charon poked his head in, grinning at three of us. “Hello, sleeping beauties.”

“Did you need something?” Mel asked.

“There’s twenty minutes left on the clock. Get them up and come to the map.”

Once he disappeared, the three of us shared a look. “Twenty minutes,” Grace repeated softly.

“Are you guys ready for this?”

“Do we have a choice?” Mel replied.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and moved to wake Selena.



Dressed in our regular clothes, we gathered around the interactive map.

The moment I’d stepped into the room, I found Ciaran almost immediately, as if our gazes were magnetic. He was standing with Maverick, Kyrous, Charon, and Leonard.

His eyes briefly went to my lips.

“Where do we go next?” Margo asked, sounding determined. “The quicker we get through this, the faster I can find Susan.”

That explained that.

“It’s numbered now. We have to follow the X’s from one to five,” Ciaran said, pointing to the marked path.

Each X marked a new location. First up was Beleth Pass. I looked at the timer, watching it get lower and lower.

“Should we wait closer to the door in case we have to run again?” Abby asked. “My feet have blisters.”

“I personally think we should stay right here in case someone’s waiting on the other side.”

“Then they could come right in here and get us,” she argued.

“Some of us are worse off than others,” Ciaran stated.

Leonard shook his head, brushing invisible lint off his blazer.

Abby’s face scrunched up. “You are the biggest asshole I’ve ever met.”

“I’ve been called worse.” He glanced at me with a gleam in his eye.

I looked away, choosing to remain focused on the countdown. When it got to three minutes, I began to mentally prepare myself for what might be waiting for us.

At one, I turned to face the door.

When the metallic lock fell out of place and we could leave, Ciaran was the first to start walking in that direction. One by one we followed him, keeping a safe distance when he opened the door.

He stepped outside, motioning for us to follow a second later.

“Which way do we go?” I asked once I was on the sidewalk. The temperature had gotten a little lower, and it was still dark. On the plus side, there wasn’t any sign of the men in masks. The city had gone quiet again.

That didn’t mean much, though. I knew they’d be watching from wherever their hideouts were.

“Map has us going left, again,” Maverick said, easing behind me to head that direction.

We all started walking, more cautious than we’d been thus far, moving from the sidewalk to the center of the street. Thinking of all that had

occurred in what I now knew was less than twenty-four hours, I slowed so I could be beside Selena. She'd been relatively quiet through all of this, inside her own pretty little head.

"Who is the guy your moms supposed to marry?" I asked quietly.

"That's what has me so out of sorts about this. I have never met this man more than once, and I can tell ya he ain't no rose. I didn't know the guy had any kids until the crazy chick showed up at our house to introduce herself.

"There wasn't no mention of brothers, either," she replied quietly, perceptive enough to know I was trying to be discreet.

"And his name?"

"Kyle. I don't know his surname. Ma wouldn't give it to me. Is there something I need to know?"

"No...or, maybe. If I figure anything out, I'll let you know."

"Likewise," she said, offering a smile.

"What are you two whispering about?" Charon asked, dropping back to walk on Selena's other side.

"If that was to be known, they wouldn't have been whispering," Mel answered for us.

"Chill out. You don't gotta be so hostile, babe," Maverick laughed.

She flipped him off without bothering to look his way.

"Care to share, sis?" Charon wrapped an arm around Selena's shoulders.

"Quit it." She tried to shove him off.

"You know, I've always wanted another sister. I didn't think she'd look as good as you do, though."

"If I'm your sister, you can't talk like that. It's wrong and disgusting."



“Actually...” he trailed off and leaned in, whispering something in her ear that earned him an elbow to the stomach.

“Sick fuck,” she growled, marching away from him.

“Guess you’re my buddy now,” he said, moving closer to me with a friendly smile painted on his pretty face. These guys seriously didn’t let anything phase them.

“Lucky me,” I replied absentmindedly, making note of how close Gracelyn and Kyrous were walking to one another.

“That, my new friend, is Ky making his move.”

I side-eyed him. “He makes his moves in silence?”

“Sometimes the silence is all you need.”

His tone implied there was a deeper meaning behind his words.

“What time do you think it is?” I changed the subject.

“One, maybe two in the morning. Why? You got somewhere to be?”

“Anywhere but here,” I muttered.

“There’s a sign,” Margo proudly exclaimed.

Sure enough, at the end of road was a sign with yet another arrow, this one pointing right for once. The road curved so we wouldn’t be able to see what we were approaching until we were around the bend.

“Come walk with me, puppet,” Ciaran said, slowing so I could catch up.

Not up for going back and forth, I moved up and fell in step beside him, cognizant of the shift that had occurred between us on all spectrums.

We rounded the corner together, his arm coming out to hold me back when the sign for Beleth Pass came into view.

It was a sweet gesture, but I didn’t need him to protect me. Besides, this wasn’t a building. The sign was attached to a gateway covered in moss

and vines. The passage beyond was narrow and looked as if it led to a damn swamp.

“Do we really have to go down there?” Abby whined.

Knowing he was going to say something entirely unnecessary; I grabbed his hand in hope of keeping the peace. It worked. He glanced down, then over at me with obscurity cloaking his features.

“We’ll go first,” he announced, threading his fingers through mine. “Pair up if possible.”

Normally I would not be the first one going any damn where so ominous, but I wasn’t going to argue this decision.

If I went first, that meant Mel or Grace couldn’t, and if one of those masked degenerates was waiting for us, Ciaran and I would be on the frontline.

“I’ll take the rear again,” Leonard volunteered quickly.

“Pussy,” Kyrour muttered.

It took me a second to catch on as to why he said that. I thought Leonard was going last to be helpful; I hadn’t considered he felt safer all the way behind us. Clearly, he was an idiot. If the incident with the clown girl strolling up on him hadn’t been clue enough that none of us were safe, he was a lost cause.

Grace slapped Kyrour’s arm and shook her head but didn’t object when he linked them together. Huh, Mel had been on to something after all. She always saw what most people failed to until it was right in front of them. I’d certainly overlooked this strange development.

She and Maverick paired up, which she didn’t seem thrilled about, leaving an even less happy Selena with Charon. I almost felt bad for Margo because she had to walk with Abby. Leonard was alone, all the way in the back just like he’d wanted to be.

“You ready?” Ciaran asked me, his tone soft.

“Let’s do it.”

He led, and I followed.

We passed through the gate without incident, immediately having to descend a small flight of concrete stairs.

No one said a word when the gate closed behind Leonard. I think we all just expected things like that to happen by this point.

The ground felt wet and slippery, like it was coated in something, but there was only the moon beaming down to offer any light. On either side of us was fencing and buildings, ensuring we remained on this path.

A strange smell began to creep in and ruin the natural evening air. It wasn’t neither a good scent nor a bad one.

“What is that?” Margo asked, sniffing loudly.

“Bacon?” Leonard guessed.

“It’s a body,” Ciaran answered casually, as if he’d just announced to them it might rain soon.

“How... how do you know that?” Selena asked.

“Maybe we’ve dealt with a few.”

I bit my lip to hold back an amused smile. I seriously dug how straightforward and unapologetically screwed-up he was. It made my dark heart beat a little faster.

We wound through the passage, slowing when the flicker of a flame began to dance ahead of us. Just beyond that was another gateway. This one looked as if it led to a clearing.

The smell—the body—was stronger here. As we slowly proceeded, the aroma grew. It was an extremely sweet smell and somehow familiar. That was more disturbing to me than when we passed an alleyway and got an up-close look at the burning corpse.

The fencing prohibited us from getting any closer to it, which was a small blessing because two masked figures were on either side of the makeshift pit—a man, and clearly a woman if the shirt dress and knee-high boots were anything to go by.

They stared at us from behind their masks, the man lifting his hand to wave.

“He hasn’t been burning long,” Kyrous remarked from right behind us.

I took in the person they had strung up by his arms, stripped naked. His face resembled something less than human. It looked partially smashed in or something.

As I was trying to figure out what they’d done to him, his bushy mustache gave away his identity.

“That’s our driver,” I said quietly, not wanting to cause an uproar for the few individuals that would freak out if they pieced that together. The lower half of him was already being eaten by flames, splitting open the flesh on his legs and leaving grease-like fat to drip down and fuel the fire.

“We should keep going,” Ciaran said, resuming our slow place.

There was a soft gasp from behind us, I think from Abby once she got a look at the body, but at least she didn’t start sobbing again.

Ciaran and I emerged from the passage together, entering what turned out to be an actual clearing. The fencing changed here, forming a half circle of sorts.

To the left was another sign with two images painted on it. Straight ahead was another gate, not yet open.

A type of lighted platform ran along the perimeter of the fence, lined with the masked men we saw before, plus three more additions. The clown was up there with them. I could feel their eyes on us, watching our every move.

Once we were all through the passage, one of them shut us in, slamming the rear gate by pulling on a rope. A lock clicked into place, ensuring we wouldn't be getting out unless they wanted us to.

The man with the automatic bow lifted it up and angled it at us.

One of the newer masked figures cocked a shotgun, doing the same on the flip side of the platform.

Ciaran gave my hand a gentle squeeze, a reassurance, I think.

"Woah, woah!" Leonard yelled, holding his hands in the air. "No need for any of that. Just tell us what you want, all right?"

"Solve the riddle," clown girl said. She motioned to the sign. At her instruction, the man in the half white mask tossed down a rope with a noose on the end.

"You have five minutes. For each additional minute you waste of ours, my friends get to take a life." She held out her palms to indicate the shotgun and bow.

"I already don't get it," Margo stressed, moving past us to get a better look at the sign.

"Don't you worry, I'll keep track of time," clown girl chirped.

Ignoring her and our audience, I nudged Ciaran so we could get closer.

"Any ideas?" I asked.

"I already figured it out."

"Are you going to say what it is?" Mel questioned dryly.

He ignored her and looked down at me. "What do you think?"

Of course, he wasn't going to just say what the answer was. Why on earth would he do that? I eyed the symbols that had been painted in red—the kind of red blood tended to be. There was an eye with a line through it, and an ear with an X. The gap between them was where the end of the rope hung.

“I think we know this,” Gracelyn said, moving up behind me.

“We do?”

“Yeah, you and that one kid used to play a game like this when we were little, but I can’t remember how it goes.”

I almost asked if she had me confused with someone else. I didn’t know what she was referring to.

“Three minutes,” clown girl called down.

“Ciaran,” I implored.

“Puppet,” he retorted teasingly.

What an asshole. I tried to pull my hand free of his, but he simply firmed his hold, pulling me into his side.

“Aww,” clown girl cooed, cocking her head like a curious dog. “He likes you.”

Ignoring her, I studied the picture, raking my brain for what it meant. “It’s...”

“One minute,” was sang from above us.

“The eye can’t see... ear can’t hear...” What was I missing? My mind raced in circles, homing in on those two things. I didn’t want anyone else to die if we could prevent it, not over a dumbass riddle.

“Is it about the senses?” Selena questioned.

I read it again and nodded. “I think you’re right.”

*Eyes. Ears.*

“Mouth?” I guessed.

“Yes! The mouth can’t speak,” Gracelyn rushed out.

“Good job, Gracie,” Kyrous praised, sounding like he had actual emotions for once.

“You’re not done yet...” clown girl stated.

The half-masked man gave the rope a swing to emphasize what she meant.

“Who the hell do they think is putting that around their neck?” Mel laughed.

He lifted his hand and pointed right at where I was standing.

“Not fucking happening,” Ciaran ground out, pushing me behind him. I bumped into Grace and Mel, who both latched onto my body as if the rope was going to reach over here and grab hold of me all by itself.

“Thirty seconds, lovelies,” clown girl called out.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Leonard chanted, shaking the gate behind us to try and reopen it.

I wasn’t going to just stand here and hope one of my best friends didn’t get killed if I could ensure they didn’t.

“Ciaran—”

“No,” he said bluntly, leaving no room for arguing.

I glared at the back of his head. “You don’t even know what I—”

“Shut the fuck up, puppet. No one’s fucking touching you.”

“Did you just—?”

“I agree with him. *Shut up*, Lana,” Mel reiterated, giving me a shake.

“Know what? I’ve got the perfect solution.” Ciaran turned and pushed me backward again, right into Maverick’s awaiting arms.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Keeping you safe,” Maverick replied good naturedly, holding me in a bear hug from behind.

“Not you, *him*.” I aimed another glare at Ciaran.

Paying me no heed, he grabbed Abby by the front of her romper and began dragging her forward.

“No!” she screamed, trying to get away from him. Her feet tangled together, causing her to trip.

“Get off her, you little shit.” Leonard tried to swoop in and save the day, being blocked by Charon and—surprisingly—Margo.

“It has to be one of us,” she tried to reason.

“You can’t do this!” he yelled.

“Already done,” Ciaran called back.

He released Abby’s romper and grabbed a fistful of her hair, easily thwarting all the swings she took at him as he wrapped the end of the rope around her neck. “Think of it as sacrificing yourself for the greater good.”

“Fuck you!” she screeched, the sound ending in a garbled mess.

Without delay, two of the masked figures began to pull. The noose tightened as she was lifted and ultimately dragged onto the platform.

She struggled relentlessly, screaming bloody murder as her arms and legs were pinned down.

“Hold still now,” clown girl advised as the person in the orange LED mask crouched down, a glistening blade in their hand.

Abby’s mouth was forced open by his companions. An audible snap carried down to us as her jaw was shoved out of the place.

“Oh, god no,” Leonard cried out, turning away so he didn’t have to see what was happening.

I remained transfixed, barely blinking as Abby’s tongue was pulled out, and the man in the LED began to slice into it. Her cries... Maverick let me go, and I grabbed Ciaran’s forearm, curling my fingers into his skin.

There was so much blood, I could smell it, see the rivulets beginning to form puddles on the platform and drip down. Something squelched and popped... her tongue being removed.



The masked man stood and held it up, ensuring he had our attention as he partially lifted his mask and put it in his damn mouth.

I could deal with a lot, but this was *disgusting* on a whole new level. I gagged and looked away when he began to chew.

“Dude, why?” Mel rasped, burying her face in my back.

“Can we go now?” Gracelyn asked when his companions started cheering him on.

I peeked up just as she tried to walk towards the unopened gate.

Kyrous was quick to stop her, wrapping an arm around her middle.

“Don’t just take off.”

“It’s *right* there.” She jabbed a finger in the gate’s direction.

I turned my head back towards the platform, watching two of the masked men reach down and lift Abby up.

With a careless toss, she was thrown back down into our enclosure. Her body hit the ground with a thud, but it didn’t seem like anything else broke. She was very much alive, jaw shoved too far to the right, her tongue gone. Copious amounts of blood continued to leak from her face, staining the grass and her chin. The sound coming from her reminded me of a pig being butchered.

“What do we do?” Margo questioned, hesitating to go to her side.

“Kill her,” I said simply.

“What?” Leonard shrilled. “We can’t—”

“Look at her,” I demanded, turning towards him. “Do you know of any hospitals we can take her to? A local ER?”

“She isn’t an animal, we can’t just put her out of her misery,” he snapped.

“She can’t even talk,” Gracelyn mumbled.

Abby began to stand up, showing she had more strength than I gave her credit for.

Though passing out would have been more beneficial to her than trying to come towards us. She took two steps before the side of her head imploded by a well-aimed blast from the guy with the shotgun, the sound echoing loudly.

Something wet hit my cheek as blood and brain matter expelled into the air, scattering over the grass along with tiny fragments of her skull. Her body jerked to the right and landed at our feet, face down with a gaping hole exposing the top portion of her innards.

Leonard turned and began to vomit, his hands going to his knees. Above us, the masked figures began to disperse. When the clown girl finally took her leave, she did so with a wave and a promise to see us soon.

The gate ahead swung open, granting us access to our next destination.



## CHAPTER

## NINE

We walked for hours.

I only knew it had been that long because the moon lowered, and the sky began to change from the first signs of sunrise.

My feet were killing me, I felt gross and sticky, and I was in desperate need of a shower.

Abby's dried blood or something had hardened to my cheek, only adding to how grimy I felt.

Ciaran hadn't left my side, but we'd barely spoken a word each other since leaving the enclosure. Did I thank him for saving my life yet again, even if it was at another person's expense? Or did I demand to know who the hell he was and why he kept doing so?

Both?

Neither?

Conversation flowed easily enough with everyone else. No one brought up Abby. I don't think we needed a rundown of what we'd just witnessed.

I didn't think her death had been as bad as Susan's simply because one suffered more than the other, but it'd been brutal. It had me wondering who the people beneath the masks were.

Specifically, the one with the half-white face and the guy who boldly ate a raw and bloody tongue. Even the clown...

I should have never let these thoughts fester so intensely. It went against everything I was so determined not to become. I hadn't even *tried* to save Abby, I'd requested she be put down like the animal Leonard had argued she wasn't, like the pig she reminded me of as her face was dismantled.

I sincerely thought that killing her would have been more humane than toting her around the city without a tongue and with a broken jaw.

Was that wrong?

I tried to see it from his perspective and couldn't. I don't know, maybe this was the old me talking. Until now, I'd done quite well making a liar of myself, pretending I could ever be anything other than filthy and tragically flawed from the life I lived outside of here.

This was officially a vacation from hell. Ciaran wasn't helping matters. He was what I could be, serving as a reminder of exactly what I kept trying to deny. He made being bad seem like such an easy thing to do. Beautiful and twisted to the core, he unapologetically owned who he was.

I envied him for that. I longed for that kind of self-acceptance and freedom of the soul.

Life would be much simpler if I could just stop trying to be someone I wasn't. That was easier said than done, though.

"Do you know where we're going?" I asked, watching Leonard from my peripheral.

I didn't trust anyone, but I really wasn't feeling him—at all. The way he kept looking at me didn't inspire warm and fuzzies.

If his disgusted glare was enough to decimate me, my body parts would be strewn all over the street.

"Don't worry about him."

"Huh?"

"I said it's right up there." Ciaran nodded with his head.

I didn't think that's what I heard, but okay. I skimmed either side of the empty street, overlooking a few lone cars and immaculate buildings until I found another Sanctuary.

"Another one?" I murmured.

"You prefer to keep going?" Maverick asked.

"I can't, I need to stop," Margo lisped, expelling a tired breath. "I'm not young like you kids, and I need a damn minute." Her voice cracked, causing the group to go silent.

All our sympathy givers were dead. She was the last one left.

Gracelyn must have been feeling the effects of the walk, because not even she could muster any up.

I guess stopping again it was. Not that we had much of a choice. This place seemed to operate like a well-oiled machine. Doing as we were told had been the only thing keeping us alive so long. Oh, and death. The only person who hadn't gone out like a sacrificial lamb was Susan and whoever the people were who'd died when the shuttle crashed.

We walked another two minutes to get to the entrance of the Sanctuary, this one looking nearly identical to the last.

Ciaran and I went inside together, leaving the others to follow.

Like the exterior, the interior was practically the same, all the way down to the plaque hanging on the wall. This one appeared to have an additional bedroom and a bigger kitchen, though.

The door slid shut behind us and Mel sighed. "Look at the countdown."

"On the bright side, we're one space closer to where we need to be," Maverick pointed out.

"There is no bright side," Leonard spat. He moved ahead so he could face the whole group. "Tell me, which one of you is going to die next? Who do we let them kill now that you're out of pawns? I vote for your little girlfriend." He glared at me.

Before I could blink, Ciaran had his hand freed from mine and Leonard down on the floor.

He crouched over his body, holding him by the throat. "Who said you weren't a pawn? In fact, the next time we need to off some weak piece of shit, it'll be your name getting a line through it."

"You—"

"Did I ask you a question that warranted a response?"

Ciaran tightened his grip to the point that his knuckles turned white, cutting off whatever Leonard had been about to say. "From this point on until you die, you're going to be nothing but chivalrous. Do you understand?"

Still unable to speak, he choked out what sounded like a yes.

"Good. Let's not revisit this conversation." He shoved him away and stood up, reaching for my hand again before stalking off towards the back hall. I didn't have any option but to follow.

We entered one of the bedrooms, and he released me, using his foot to kick the door shut.

“Sit,” he commanded, motioning to the large canopy bed.

I furrowed my brows. “Do I look like a dog?”

With a dark laugh, he destroyed all semblance of my personal space and began using his body to force mine backward.

The backs of my legs hit the mattress, and he kept going.

“Ciaran,” I laughed, bringing my palms up to press against his chest.

He caught my wrist, trapping them with one hand above my head.

“Don’t provoke me, puppet.”

“Maybe you should learn to control yourself,” I shot back playfully, flexing my fingers.

“That’s the last thing you want,” he countered. Using his knee to spread my legs, he settled his body between them.

I licked my lips, spreading my thighs further to feel more of him even as I said, “I’m filthy.”

“Exactly how I want you.” He dragged his tongue across my cheek, the one with dried blood on it.

“Ciaran,” I breathed, laughing softly.

He replied by pressing his lips to mine. Keeping my wrists bound, his free hand went between us, delving beneath the waistband of my sweats. He cupped my pussy and pulled my underwear to the side, slipping his tongue into my mouth when I moaned.

Two fingers thrust roughly inside me, going knuckle deep. He twisted them, pressing the pad of his calloused thumb to my clit, toying with me.

“You’re fuckin soaked, puppet,” he growled, abruptly pulling away.

I sat up, watching him back away from me, unable to hide my confusion. I knew what a hard dick felt like, and I knew this wasn’t one-

sided, so why the hell was he stopping?

“Don’t look at me like that,” he laughed, running a hand through his hair. “You don’t have any idea what you’re asking for.”

“Oh, that sounds familiar and really hypocritical,” I oozed in a fake sugary voice.

“There’s no need to rush, we’ve got all the time in the world for me to give you what you’re so desperate for.”

“*Desperate?* Ciaran, I can get dick from anyone. I’ve never been desperate.” I began to stand. He closed the space between us and wrapped his hand around my neck.

“The only person that’s going to be anywhere near your pussy is standing right in front of you.”

I started to laugh, the sound slightly off with his hand adding pressure. “That’s cute.”

“Nah. What’s cute, puppet, is how naïve you are. I’m going to fuck you like the whore you so *desperately* want to be fucked like and set a precedent no other man will ever be able to match.” He stroked the column of my throat and relinquished his hold. “But you have to earn it.”

I glared at him as he stepped away again. “You’re talking a little too much about how magical your dick is. I’m starting to think you’re full of shit.”

“That’s ironic, coming from you. You’ve been playing pretend for quite some time now.”

At my confused look, he laughed and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ve been able to see through this bullshit persona you’ve got going on more vividly than I can the shirt you’re wearing without a bra.”

I dipped my chin to my chest, already knowing what I’d find: nipples hardened, pressing against the fabric of my crop top.



Face flushing, I boldly met his eye again and cleared my throat. “Are you done now?”

“Like I said, I haven’t even gotten started.”

“You sound like a bitch.”

“The fuck did you just call me?” He lowered his hands to his side, his eyes darkening.

Okay, maybe that had been taking it too far. I lifted a strand of hair, toying with the ends.

“Speak up, puppet. I can’t hear you,” he goaded.

“You’re a cock-tease, Ciaran,” I shrugged.

Before I could take another breath, I found myself in the same position Leonard had just been in. He knocked me onto my back, nearly pulling me off the bed with the force he used to drag my sweatpants down.

My underwear went with them, shoes removed within seconds and tossed across the room, everything else joining them.

He tore his shirt off, revealing all the ink I hadn’t gotten a chance to see. His body was everything I imagined it would be perfectly muscled in all the right places.

His six-pack led to a perfectly V-shaped waist, the lines travelling to what I could only assume was an ample sized dick.

He didn’t let me ogle for long.

His hands wrapped around my thighs, pulling me forward until my ass partially hung off the mattress. Dropping down to his knees, he placed my legs over his shoulders and buried his face in my pussy.

The second his tongue pressed against my clit, I forgot about everything but him. All that mattered was this moment and what we were about to do within the confines of this room.

He ate me like he was starving, alternating between fucking me with his tongue and his fingers. His teeth nipped at the sensitive flesh, every added sting pushing me closer to the edge.

I whimpered and moaned, back arching as he assaulted my pussy with his mouth.

A chill swept down my spine, and I shoved my fingers through his soft brown locks, forcing him deeper, clenching around his tongue.

I was so wet I didn't just feel him slurping my juices, I heard it. He dragged his tongue up to my clit, closing his lips around it and biting down. I cried out, bringing my hands up to claw at the duvet, needing something to hold onto as pure fire ignited within me and my body convulsed. My eyes slammed shut as my head lolled back.

Laughter followed on the heel of the kisses he placed on burning skin as he moved up my body, lifting my shirt in the process.

He pulled it over my head, leaving me completely naked beneath him.

"Fucking gorgeous," he said softly.

I peeled my eyes open and reached for him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him down.

He pressed his mouth to mine in a kiss that was way more tender than I expected. I sucked the taste of my come and arousal from his tongue, pussy clenching for more of him.

"You should get some rest," he said when we finally broke apart, brushing some hair out of my face before beginning to move away.

"No." I sat up. "You know what I want. Don't make me beg."

He reached down and traced the outline of my lips with the pad of his thumb. "Then take it, puppet. It'll only make you want what I'm withholding that much more. I'm not rewarding your tantrum with what you need. You don't deserve it."

Despite his words, I didn't need any further encouragement. I went for the button of his jeans, pulse jumping when he laughed.

I forced them down over his hips, exposing neatly trimmed black hair until I got to what I wanted.

His cock. Veined and thick.

Hard.

*Perfect.*

Not so large that it would knock down my walls and cause irreparable damage, but still big enough that it would make quite a few dents.

"I think I might have to change my mind. Keep looking at my dick like that and you can have anything you want."

"I just want you," I replied, rising from the bed so that we were as close to chest to chest as we could be.

"You've always had me."

I didn't know what he meant by that, but my brain was full of a million other thoughts all centered around him.

I stretched up on my tiptoes, kissing him deeply.

He tangled his hands in my hair, angling my head back to match my fervor. It still wasn't enough. I twisted us and pressed down on his shoulders. He smiled against my lips but complied, letting me believe I had control. That was fine, I was still getting my way—still doing what my mother always told me to.

*"Fuck your demons before they fuck you."*

That's exactly what he was. Ciaran was depravity and darkness I could touch with my hands and taste on my tongue. He was dripping sin I wanted to drown in. I wanted all of him inside me, reaching the places no one ever dared to.

Once he was sitting on the edge of the bed, I straddled his lap, reaching between us to take hold of his dick.

He grabbed my ass, keeping his eyes locked with mine as I sank myself down onto him.

His dick was bigger than I'd just guessed, stretching me, creating a delicious burn as my body worked to accommodate his size. I sucked in a breath and moaned appreciatively, bringing my hands to his shoulders.

"Don't slow down now," he taunted. "You wanted to fuck me, so fuck me. And make it good."

His words urged me onward. I rolled my hips, rocking against him. Once I found a tempo, I rode him hard, shamelessly taking him deeper inside me, clenching my walls around to make us both feel more.

His hands kneaded my ass, slamming me down harder and harder until he was seizing back the control he'd given me. He grabbed a handful of my hair and wrenched my head back until tears formed in my eyes from the pain.

His mouth closed around my left breast, and he bit down hard enough to break the skin.

I cried out as I came—hard. I didn't have a chance to gather my bearings. He stood up and placed me on my back, shoving my knees up until the muscles in my legs began to burn.

"No one will ever get this part of you again," he ground out, pushing his dick back inside me, setting a grueling pace. He fucked me as if his main goal was to rip me in half. I'd never wanted to be broken as much as I did then.

When he finally released my legs, it was to wrap both hands around my throat and fuck me with a renewed vigor as his grip grew increasingly tighter. He had the ability to snatch my life away if he wanted to—he was

twisted enough to do it. The realization had another gush of arousal drenching his cock.

I screamed for him, begged him not to stop. Our sweat-slickened bodies slid together. I dug my nails into the flesh of his muscled back, making sure I marked it.

Coming with a dick inside me was so rare, I couldn't keep up with the frequency with which he forced me to endure the pleasure he repeatedly gave. If this wasn't his usual method of fucking then he was right: buried deep inside me, I already wanted more.

My body shook and trembled, hellfire coursing through my veins. His grip grew painful, a low growl unfurling from his throat. My vision danced with dots as he cut off my airflow.

When I thought I'd pass out, he withdrew completely and flipped me over onto my stomach, knotting a hand in my hair as he slammed back inside me and sunk his teeth into my shoulder.



## CHAPTER

## TEN

I woke to him gently dragging his knuckles down my cheek. He'd covered me with the silken top sheet, leaving only my shoulders exposed.

Opening my eyes, I glanced up at him, wondering what he was thinking.

My body was sore—everywhere—in the best way possible.

“We shouldn’t have done that.”

Ouch.

“Yet,” he quickly added. “Don’t get me wrong, being inside your pussy is going to be my new favorite hobby, but that wasn’t half of what I wanted to do to you.”

“I thought you did pretty good, but if there’s more...”

He grinned cockily. “I wasn’t going to fuck you mediocrely. At the very least you had to sing my name to the gods.”

“Okay, I take it back.”

“Too late. I just heard you chant my name like a prayer. Sooner rather than later, I’ll have you unable to speak at all. You’ll be too busy weeping in a mess of blood and come.”

I wouldn’t deny he had me hook, line, and sinker, with that proclamation. I wanted that as badly as I wanted to get out of this hellish city, but I couldn’t let myself get caught up in a fantasy because of good sex...

Because of the intense vibe I had with this gorgeous, psychotic man.

“Big words for a onetime thing,” I said, keeping my inner thoughts to myself.

“You know my dick will be back inside you too many times for either of us to count.” He moved from my cheek to my shoulder.

I snuggled my face deeper against the pillow, watching him touch me. The look on his face was one of utter concentration, like he was memorizing the feel of my skin.

He probably was, and that made me giddy... and sad. Ciaran was someone I would never be able to replace. He’d be another loss I’d try to

replicate for the rest of my life.

His gorgeous hues swept over my face, catching my vulnerability before I could mask it. “What’s wrong, puppet?”

“Why do you call me that?”

“That’s what you are, my perfect puppet.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about being compared to an inanimate doll.”

“That’s the point. When I tug on your strings, you come to life.”

The geniality behind his words had me raising my brows. “This convo just took a weird turn.”

“This conversation could never cover all the things you and I will be.”

I didn’t have words to make him understand what I meant, but if he was from one of the other families, he would already know the probability of us being anything to one another once we got out of this place was slim to none.

In this hell or the one I lived in every day, he and I could never—*would* never—be more than stolen and illicit moments. My family would make sure of it.

Even if we could be something, I wasn’t convinced we’d be good together once the carnality faded.

He was a little too twisted. I was well beyond tragic. Sooner or later, one of us would poison the other. That was the real shame of this whole travesty. I lifted my fingers to his perfect jawline, skimming over it. “My life isn’t that simple. *I’m* not that simple, despite whatever it is you think you know about me.”

He walked his fingers down my spine, slowly dragging them back up. “You just don’t get it yet.”

“Get what?”



He remained silent, refusing to elaborate. For a few minutes, he'd somewhat lowered the impenetrable wall he'd erected around himself. Now I watched it rise before my eyes, sealing off whoever he truly was.

I regarded the word inked on the side of his hand now that it was practically right in front of my face.

*Periculum*. Wasn't that Latin? "Are you going to tell me who you are?"

"I can tell you my favorite food is chicken pot pie. My favorite drink is rum. I've got three Doberman pinchers and can be a momma's boy, but I can't tell you that. Not yet."

"Why? You know who I am," I pointed out. "Is it that bad? I mean, I have a theory."

He laughed under his breath. "I'm sure you do."

"Ciaran."

"Let's just say you and I shouldn't have wound up in bed together," he replied.

My brows slammed together. For him to say that could only mean one thing. "So, you *are* from one of the other founding families?"

"I could tell you which one, but then I'd turn around and kill you."

"That's not really the kind of pillow talk a girl hopes for."

"I was joking."

No, he wasn't. At least, I didn't believe he was. Any normal girl would have been out of the bed and running by now. Me? I sighed and shifted beneath the sheet, thinking of my next move.

"Just focus on the here and now, puppet. We need to get through this part before you worry about the next," he said after a few beats of silence.

I contemplated his words, repeating them back to myself inside my head.

The way he'd worded that... it was the second time he had referenced a *part* of something.

"Are you two done now?" Selena's voice suddenly carried from the other side of the door.

"If you can walk, we've got about forty-five minutes left here," Mel chimed behind her.

"We'll be out in a minute," Ciaran replied.

"Oh, my god. They probably know what we were in here doing," I groaned.

"They knew what we were doing long before you kept screaming my name." He grinned, looking quite proud of himself.

"Wait, did she just say forty-five minutes?" I twisted around and shoved the sheet down. "Why'd you let me sleep that long?"

"Because you needed it." There was a silent *duh* at the end of his response.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, wincing as I stood. "Have you been in here with me the entire time?" I asked, examining myself. There was barely any skin he hadn't made sure to mark. "Jesus, Ciaran."

"Just Ciaran," he corrected.

I pulled his shirt over my head and gathered up my clothes. Leaving him on the bed, I slipped out into the hall and made a dash to the bathroom so that I could clean myself up. Before I could shut the door, Ciaran was entering behind me, shutting it once he was inside.

He stepped into my bubble and removed my clothes from my arms, leaving them to fall to the floor. From the predatory look in his eyes, I knew what he wanted.

"We don't have time for any more," I objected weakly.

His hand slipped beneath his shirt, grabbing two handfuls of ass and lifting me up.

“I need ten minutes to make you come—*twice*.”

“Ciaran,” I implored, wrapping my arms around his neck as he carried me over to the sink. “Fine,” I sighed.

“Good girl,” he teased, pushing my knees apart.



It was inexplicably strange to see the sun shining brightly on a city full of death and darkness. The silence seemed louder than it had when we had the moon above us.

Ciaran was ahead of us, as per usual, leading the way to our next destination: Cerberus Hall.

I lingered with the girls and Margo, quietly filling them in.

“Are you all right, though?” Gracelyn asked when I finished.

“Why wouldn’t I be? There isn’t anything to be bothered about, not right now.” And I meant that.

We knew that this was more than likely the case, that these guys were from another one of the other founding families.

I’d slept with him anyway.

I didn't have any regrets about it. I also refused to consider all the motives he could have for fucking me since admitting from his own mouth that we shouldn't have done it.

"He has to be from one of families at the top to know who you are without ever meeting you before," Mel pointed out.

This was true.

I had no way to narrow down which one he came from, though. There were fifty original members, and then they all had their expanded bloodlines and various betrothals, which equated to a ridiculously long list of people, more than half of whom I'd never met before. Unless Ciaran came out and told me himself, I wouldn't know who he was until we were out of here.

Regardless, I had to assume his family wasn't on good terms with mine, which still didn't help me narrow things down. I rubbed the back of my neck, inhaling a breath of warm summer air.

Unintentionally, I wound up by Ciaran's side again. I was convinced that there had to be some invisible chain with a ball weighing it down that kept ensuring I found my way to him. We walked together like it was the most natural thing in the world.

When we reached the next place we needed to be, it wasn't anything like I'd been expecting. Or I should say, when we almost got to where we were supposed to go. There were signs staked in the ground to point us in the direction of Cerberus Hall. That was a very underworld-ish name to use. I could only imagine what awaited us.

To get there, though, it was obvious we had to travel through this place.

There was another sign with a tape recorder a few feet ahead, a green light attached to the top part of it.

"Whatcha think?" he asked, staring straight ahead.

“It looks like a disaster waiting to happen.”

“I was talking about me and you.”

I glanced up at him. “There isn’t a me and you, but if there was, my answer would remain the same.”

“Damn, that’s brutal,” Maverick laughed from Ciaran’s other side.

“I almost believed you, puppet. Almost...” he trailed off, still not looking at me.

“This doesn’t look like it belongs here,” Margo said, walking up to the fence so she could get a better look inside. Thank god for her; I needed to stay focused.

And she was right.

We were essentially standing at the entrance of a junkyard. Someone had deemed the place Cerberus Crossing. It looked like a small stretch of wasteland. The area was enclosed by a high brick wall topped with broken glass and razor wire. Two gates hung open—gates I knew would shut behind us as soon as stepping past them.

From where we were standing, we could see a shed with a security window and various piles of rusted car carcasses.

They were placed in such a way that the path ahead reminded me of an obstacle course.

It ruined the whole aesthetic of the meticulous city we’d been wandering through.

“Can we just get this over with?” Mel asked, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Might as well,” Charon replied, walking through the entrance.

We all followed in after him. As soon as the last of us crossed the threshold, the gate shut and the green light on the sign turned red.

“What do you think that means?” Gracelyn asked.

“Someone’s about to die,” Ciaran replied casually.

“I think we should be open-minded about that,” Selena said. “So far we’ve lost someone with each riddle.”

She was right. They both were. I doubted we would all make it past this part alive... whatever this part even was.

I looked over at the guard shack, but the window was way too dark for me to see through. My gut said someone was in there.

“Think there’s anyone watching?” I asked Ciaran.

He reached for my hand and followed my line of sight. “Someone’s always watching, puppet.”

We gathered around the sign indicating to go straight for Cerberus Hall.

“If we know we have to go that way, why do we need this?” Mel asked.

“Have they made anything simple since we’ve been here?” Kyrour countered.

“I’ll do the honors this time,” Margo said, hitting play on the tape deck. There was a familiar whir, and then the rhythmic voice began speaking.

*One head in the past.*

*One in the future.*

*One leading the pack just around the corner.*

*Four legs, sharp teeth, guardians of the manor.*

*Servatis A Periculum, save yourselves from danger.*

Before the voice finished speaking, they were there. They’d arrived in silence, making their presence known with feral growls, massive blurs of black fur and gnashing teeth. Six of them came from different directions, bodies darting around the rusted cars with trained agility. I had hardly registered what I was looking at when Ciaran pulled me forward and started to run.

Not one person delayed in doing the same, screams and curses rising in the air. The terrain had purposely been muddied, causing our feet to slip and slide.

We struggled to put distance between us and the canines.

“Oh, fuck!” Charon yelled.

From my peripheral, I saw him splitting away from us to save his ass from being chomped on, pursued by one of the furry beasts and now alone.

We could hardly relax though, not when plenty more were right behind us. There was a building a few yards away, the illuminated bubble letters a beacon for temporary safety.

Running for it, my breath came in small spurts.

Having pulled free to run, my hands curled into fists, pumping at my sides as if it would make me run faster. Behind us, I could hear the snarls and howls of the dogs, could practically feel their rancid, heated breath.

At first sight of a familiar masked figure, my brain wanted to draw back. I threw myself forward, knowing that wasn't an option. And he wasn't alone.

Four of them stood on either side of exactly where we needed to go, all watching us get closer and closer but making no attempt to come towards us.

“Guys,” I gasped, the warning painfully ripping from lungs searching for air.

“Keep going,” Maverick rasped, as if we had any other options.

An anguished scream carried from behind us not a second later. I dared to look back already knowing who it had come from.

Leonard was down on the ground, clawing through the mud on all fours, screaming like no man should as he was mauled.

I couldn't watch and run, but I'd seen enough. His arms and face were torn into by teeth, body smothered by masses of black fur.

Three dogs remained on our heels, their excited yips and snarls seeming to heighten now that someone had been successfully hunted.

I veered as close to the center of the path as I could, racing past the masked figures without incident, Ciaran right by my side. When the girls and the remainder of his friends all made it, I thought they'd been standing there as nothing more than a scare tactic.

We were stride away from the Hall when Margo went down. Her cry of pain was what alerted me that something had happened.

Unlike with Leonard, I turned back for her, seeing an arrow sticking out of her right shoulder.

Before I could dare to run to her aid, Ciaran's arms were wrapping around my middle and dragging me the rest of the way to the door. Margo never stood a chance.

One of the dogs plowed into her chest, slamming her onto her back. The action caused the arrow to shove clean through, and the tip poked out of her, dripping blood.

The dog—now on top of her—buried its snout in her neck as the rest latched onto whatever they could, shaking their heads as if she were a toy to be fought over.

Maverick weaved around us and burst through the heavy wooden door, holding it open for the rest of us. We spilled in behind him, practically a tangled web of limbs and sweaty skin landing on a marbled floor.

The door slammed shut and a lock clicked into place.

As we stared at one another, trying to catch our breath and process what had just happened, I slowly realized another person was missing.

Charon had never made it back to us.





## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sixty minutes.

That's all the time we had before we needed to move on. By the look of the map, we were practically standing in front of the next place we had to go.

Maze of Mayhem.

It was the last part of the map before we reached where a checkered flag had appeared: Diablos Manor.

I scrubbed at my grime-covered face, trying not to let emotions get the best of me. For the first time since we'd gotten here, I was afraid. Not for myself but for the others. There were only eight of us left. How did we decide who got to live and who would die?

I couldn't lose Mel or Grace, but I also refused to offer up Ciaran or his friends as sacrificial lambs. Him for obvious reasons, them because they'd started to grow on me.

As if I conjured him by thought, Ciaran stepped up beside me, slipping an arm around my waist. He'd gone with Kyrous and Maverick immediately after we realized Charon was gone. I didn't have words of comfort to offer him, and not because I didn't give a fuck; I just knew there wasn't anything to say that would make it better or okay.

He wasn't showing any emotional pain or anger, but I didn't ever expect him to. That wasn't him, at all.

Still, I knew inside he had to be hurting. If the tables were turned, I'd be a hot mess, quite honestly.

"We're almost there," he said quietly.

I leaned my head on his chest, listening to his heart.

"Are we?"

"Don't do that. You're so close to making it to..."

I waited for him to finish, but he simply left the sentence hanging.

"I don't need false hopes, Cici. I need to know why this is happening. I need some explanation as to what caused someone to do something this elaborate...I—"

"Belair," he suddenly said, cutting me off.

I straightened and turned into him, confused. "What is that? Does it mean something?" I glanced at the map in case I'd overlooked that somewhere.

"It's my last name."

Time didn't exist here, yet it still came to a standstill with that abrupt as hell revelation. And he'd said it so... casually. I started to laugh, pulling

away from him. Of course, that would be who he was related to. Because my life wasn't already a circus or anything.

When he said we shouldn't have ended up in bed together, that had been the *understatement* of the fucking century. He and I shouldn't have been breathing the same air. Yet, he fucked me anyway.

I wanted to know why, but I *couldn't* deal with this right now.

I didn't want to.

I wasn't going to bother trying.

"I need to get cleaned up," I said calmly, turning away from him.

Weaving around the small sitting area, I headed for the bathroom, deciding to check on the girls on my way.

This place wasn't like the Sanctuaries—the luxurious interior was about three steps up. Shame I couldn't concentrate enough to give a flying fuck about any of it.

I sought out Mel and Selena first, having not seen either since they'd gone off to do what I was now. This place wasn't very big, so the task wasn't too difficult.

They were sitting on the floor near a mini fridge, backs against the wall, heads leaned on Maverick's shoulders.

I wanted to rush over and spill what I'd just discovered, but logic had me hesitating. If Ciaran was a Belair, what were his friends? I gnawed my lower lip, unsure how to handle this. I didn't want to be the reason for a divide or added tension. I wasn't the only person here with problems or mental battles to face down.

At the last second, I darted towards the bathroom. Gracelyn and Kyrous were still shut away behind the door adjacent to it.

Grace being the sweetest of the three of us, I'm sure she was in there offering him the comfort none of the rest of us could.

I didn't want to bother them either, mainly because I couldn't look at his face without thinking of Charon.

I already had to contend with my mind presenting all the possible things that could have happened to him. Alone.

He'd been all alone.

And then there was Margo. I didn't know her well at all, but she'd been one of the few individuals we were stuck with whom I wanted to live.

Moving into the bathroom, I shut the door and promptly flattened myself against it, pulling in a lungful of air in place of screaming like a homicidal maniac.

That's where I was at right now.

I wanted whoever was responsible for this dead—in the most gruesome, slow, and torturous manner there was.

All those masked freaks would join them one by one. Someone was toying with us; it was only natural to want to toy with them back.

The door began to open behind me, nearly causing my body to pitch forward. I caught myself and whirled around, coming face to face with my blue-eyed demon.

"No," I snapped, attempting to slam the door on him.

He laughed and shouldered his way in, slamming it himself. "I didn't come in here for that. I came to check on you."

His words seemed honest enough. Genuine, I suppose. I didn't trust his ass, though. Not even a little bit.

"Why have you spent this whole time trying to keep me alive?" The question popped out before I could tell myself to shut the fuck up. That this wasn't important right now. But it was, wasn't it?

Because I had no idea what would be waiting at the manor we had to get to.

“Because maybe I love you,” he replied flippantly, brandishing a grin.

I rolled my eyes. “Ciaran, if you don’t get the fuck out.” I pointed to the door, indicating for him to leave.

“I’m not going anywhere, puppet. We can fuck, though. I think we could both use a distraction.”

The nerve of him. I crossed my arms and regarded his demeanor. Slowly realizing something was off, the hairs on the back of my neck started to rise. I created ample space between us, pretending all was perfectly fine even as alarm bells told me to get the hell out of dodge.

I wasn’t afraid of him. Quite the opposite, which was way worse—*much* worse. “So, now you’re someone who uses sex as a crutch?”

“I use *you*. To fuck. To toy with. To make myself feel better.”

“Your psycho is showing.”

“And you fucking love it, don’t you? Tell me how wet that makes your pussy, puppet. Tell me how badly you want to feel my dick inside you.”

With every word he came closer, not making a noise. Each step was as predatory as the look in his beautiful blue eyes.

“This isn’t the time for this. Not to mention I know who you are now.”

“You don’t know anything,” he countered, now right in front of me.

“I know we need to forget what we did and never let it happen again.”

“Forget?” he mocked, laughing lowly. “We haven’t even begun yet. *This*,” his hand motioned in the small space between us. “You and I are never going to be done.”

“Say we do get out of here... what are you going to do, Ciaran? Fight my family to the death just to be able to lie between my legs?”

“You think I have an issue getting pussy? That I’m doing this just to know I’m the only man who will ever give you want you want?”

His hand snaked around to the back of my head, grabbing hold of my neck.

“You’re more than some random dirty fuck, puppet. I’ll kill as many people as I have to if it means I get to keep you.”

“Why?” I breathed, thoroughly confused. What the hell did he want me for? I was a fucking basket case he had yet to see unravel.

He didn’t answer me. His mouth pressed to mine, the kiss he delivered brutal and carnal—a kiss meant to stake a claim regardless of my protests. I melted into him with hardly any resistance, winding my arms around his neck, burning for his touch even as soreness plagued me from only hours before.

I hadn’t regretted it then, but I knew I would regret this.

I couldn’t bring myself to care right now.

He was every dirty, terrible, and forbidden thing I wasn’t allowed to have. My family—his family—would never let this happen.

There was too much bad blood, too much trauma. I should have been pushing him away and tearing his throat out, and that’s exactly why I pulled him closer.

He shoved my sweatpants down just far enough to give him access to the space between my dampened thighs. His jeans went next. He manipulated my body until I was in front of the standalone basin, turning me around.

I grabbed either side of the porcelain, a soft moan spilling from my lips when he ran the head of his cock up my slit, teasing me.

“We shouldn’t do this,” I breathed, one last pitiful attempt to stop what was seconds away from happening.

He gripped my throat from the back and grinned, whispering in my ear before he slammed inside me. “Better the devil you know.”

I cried out, feeling every thick, solid inch of him inside me, stretching my pussy.

The intrusion was so painful, my pussy clenched, a spray of liquid drenching his cock. His other hand went to my hip to keep me upright as my legs threatened to give out.

“Your pussy is a fucking dream,” he groaned, rolling his hips to sink himself deeper. A low laugh mixed with my moans.

“Watch the way I fuck you, puppet. I want you to remember every bit of it.”

Without further delay, he began thrusting in and out of me, riding my body so hard my nails clawed at the porcelain.

I watched us in the mirror, seeing how filthy we were, covered in specs of mud and a light layer of sweat, both hungry for what the other could give them.

The darkness that was so clearly etched into his soul was the ultimate fix for the degenerate junkies like me. It'd been so long since I'd had that high...

I tried to widen my legs, arching my back so he could fuck me harder, go deeper.

He gave me what I was seeking without needing my words. A moan, practically a sob of pleasure ripped from my lungs as his dick pounded into me, hitting every sweet spot.

“Come for me, babygirl,” he commanded, tightening his grip on my throat, digging his fingers into the flesh of my hip. I screamed his name, my muscles going taut as an orgasm swept through me, spreading an inferno so hot tears spilled from my eyes and I squirted all over his cock, toes curling tight.

“Damn, puppet,” he ground out, riding my body harder, groans of pleasure beginning to rumble from his chest. Soon, the only sounds in the room were slick skin hitting slick skin, and the moans that he wrenched from my lungs as he continued to ensure I’d never forget him.





## CHAPTER TWELVE

The moment we stepped outside, Kyrous kissed the back of Gracelyn's hand, which was odd to me seeing as he didn't give off that kind of sweet vibe at all.

And then he took off. He went right when we needed to go straight. Like the map depicted, Maze of Mayhem was right behind us. Literally. There was a small patch of grass, and then the entrance to another building.

"Where are you going?" Selena yelled after him.

He didn't answer, continuing without a backward glance.

"He's going to find his brother," Gracelyn replied softly.

"Poor bub," Selena murmured, blinking away tears.

I frowned, watching his form grow smaller and smaller. I understood the reasoning behind it, but I thought Kyrus was smarter than this.

It was a suicide mission, and Ciaran was right. We were so close to the end. All we needed to do was make it through this maze to get to the manor. Maybe death would be waiting there, but at least we'd be going to greet it.

"Are either of you going to go after him?"

"He wouldn't have wanted us to," Maverick replied.

"And I'm not leaving you on your own," Ciaran added, staring after his friend, his face clear of any emotion.

"I'm probably safer without you," I mumbled.

"Yeah? You're also dead." He grabbed my hand and began to walk towards the next entrance, leaving the others to follow.

He hadn't left my side once since we'd finished fooling around. He'd basically been my shadow, as if he thought I would run off or something now that I knew who he was.

He gave himself too much credit, but I wouldn't deny I liked him being near me.

We stepped through a small opening and into a circular room made of nothing but stone. As the girls and Maverick followed, I looked around, taking note of the minor details.

There were no windows, and the only light came from dimly lit wall sconces. It was cool here, too.

Straight ahead was another narrow doorway, beyond it an inky darkness, the kind no one in their right mind would ever walk into. A stagnant smell emanated from within it.

"Look at the floor." Mel pointed down at a large mural someone had painted.

"It's like the image from the Visitor's Center," Selena said.

I had forgotten about that, but she was right. Only now, I noticed the demons were wearing masks, all of them different, still surrounding the naked girl. Ciaran set his eyes on the next riddle and wandered over to it, keeping hold of my hand.

*“You’ve been trapped in a maze since you caught my eye.*

*Find your way out before you’re trapped for good.*

*Mystery, mayhem, darkness.*

*The Devil lurks on the other side,”* Ciaran read.

“I think this is the most ominous one we’ve seen,” I mused.

“Maybe, but we can do this,” Mel avowed. “We’re not going to die here.”

She sounded so confident, a complete flip from the pessimist she tended to be.

I smiled at her, reaching for her hand. “It’s dark in there. Let’s form a chain until we know what we’re walking into.”

We moved into a formation of sorts.

I stayed with Ciaran, holding onto Mel now as well. Gracelyn and Selena followed, leaving Maverick at the end of our line.

Entering the darkness, I don’t think any of us knew what to expect. My eyes strained to adjust as the light fell away, but there was nothing to see but black. The walls were still stone, covered in what felt like moss as I brushed against one.

There was a small splash, followed by a soft-spoken warning from Ciaran.

“Watch your step.” He stopped, helping me down.

“Ugh,” I muttered when I reached the bottom.

Cold water wicked into my J’s, soaking my socks and the bottom of my sweatpants. The stench of it was potent, mold and mildew. I firmed my grip

on Ciaran's hand and Mel's, making sure she didn't fall.

We began to make our way through the dark, using our human chain to ensure none of us got separated or lost. The passageways seemed endless. The only way we knew to turn was when we had no other choice, when the walls curved and made us go right or left. Every so often, there was definitive grinding noise.

The first time we heard it we all froze, waiting for something to happen—nothing did.

It came every few minutes, and after so many turns and times of hearing it I was beginning to wonder if we would ever get out of this place. I wasn't the only one.

"How ironic would it be to die in here?" Gracelyn asked.

"Don't put that idea in the air," Selena snapped.

We took another turn, this passage even narrower than the last. My brain had a lightbulb moment.

"The walls are moving," I announced.

"Yeah, I noticed that about two turns back," Maverick replied.

Then why the hell didn't he say anything? I gritted my teeth, keeping silent. My feet had become so wet I could feel them pruning. The walls shifted again, and this time I physically felt it.

"Let's pick up the pace," Ciaran commanded, sloshing forward.

Nearly running, we pushed onward, taking the different twists and turns. With one more right, a small light became visible, but by this point we were practically smashed between two slabs of stone. Fuck. I *really* didn't want to die by being squished like a bug.

Going as fast we could, the light began to grow brighter as we drew closer. We emerged from the passage just as the walls shifted again. I would

have melted in relief, but I wasn't going to take a single breath for granted until I was out of whatever the hell this place was.

I put my hands on my knees, taking a second to catch my breath and let my eyes get used to seeing light again.

"There are no doors or windows in here," Gracelyn huffed, twisting her hair up.

Doing a quick scan of wherever it was we'd wound up; I saw the space we'd emerged into was nothing less than opulent—on the same level the Cerberus Hall and Blight House had been.

The light we'd seen was coming from a chandelier that had been set to low, the gold gleaming as if it'd just been polished.

I didn't understand any of this shit.

Straightening, I skimmed my eyes over each of the damask walls, gaze bouncing between one that had a backlit sign and the rear wall that was covered entirely by a massive, velvet, black curtain.

"Now what?" Mel questioned, staring down at her pruned feet.

"I'd start with that wall," Maverick replied, crossing his arms.

"I can see it from where we're standing and it ain't a riddle, it's just names," Selena pointed out.

"Exactly," he shot back matter-of-factly.

These fucking assholes. Why could they never come right out with anything?

The girls all began walking towards the sign. I made to follow, but Ciaran stepped in front of me and cut me off. He'd been quiet, more so than usual, but I figured he was still dealing with losing one, now potentially two, of his friends. Maverick seemed just fine, though.

"What is it?" I asked.

He didn't immediately respond. His eyes blazed into mine with an unsettling degree of what I dared say was affection.

"I missed you," he finally replied.

"What the hell are you talking about? I never went anywhere."

He cupped my face with both his hands and kissed my forehead.

"Ciaran?"

"I'll see you on the other side." He stepped back and then moved around me, walking towards the curtain.

Maverick gave me a two-finger salute, and then followed behind him.

"What the fuck? Ciaran!"

I went to follow, but Mel's voice stopped me in my tracks.

"Liliana, no!"

The urgency in her tone had me turning to face the other direction.

"What's wrong?"

"This." Gracelyn pointed to the list of names on the sign they were standing by.

I took two steps in her direction, pausing at the sound of classical music and an array of voices. It was brief, lasting a few sparse seconds, but I still *heard* that shit.

"What the entire fuck is going on?" I turned back around and marched towards the curtain, wet shoes squelching across the marble floor.

"Lana, wait," Grace hissed.

I didn't listen. I tore back the curtain, spotting a solid metal door. As I slipped behind the hefty barrier to open it, the girls were following right behind me.

None of us—not even one—could have been prepared for what was on the other side.

“What is this?” Mel asked from behind me, grabbing my arm as we stepped into the room.

The space was filled with people in suits and ballgowns, walking the floor with glasses of champagne and conversing casually. Flat screens were strategically placed around the room, each one showing a different area of Goetia. Those who took immediate notice of us did so with smiles and waves.

A clinking sound came from above us. I lifted my head towards the upper balcony, every muscle in body going rigid. My family—*our* families—were right fucking there, dressed to the nines and shaking hands with people I’d never seen before. Beside them, standing in a nice row, were four familiar faces, all staring back at us.

“What is happening?” Selena questioned, grabbing hold of my arm as if she were about to flee and take me with her.

Unable to answer, I watched my *abuelo* accept a microphone from someone.

He cleared his throat to get the room’s attention, waving down at us proudly. I could hear blood rushing in my ears, my mind racing to make sense of what I was seeing.

This couldn’t be happening.

It wasn’t real.

I tore my eyes away from the balcony and looked around room, gaze coming to rest on two gilded double doors. Two words were displayed above them, both eroded and large as if they’d been here for quite some time.

*“Goetia will lead you to the Devil’s Playground.”*

How ironic was it that we’d been brought here by the devil himself?

This wasn’t the end of anything.

It was the very beginning.

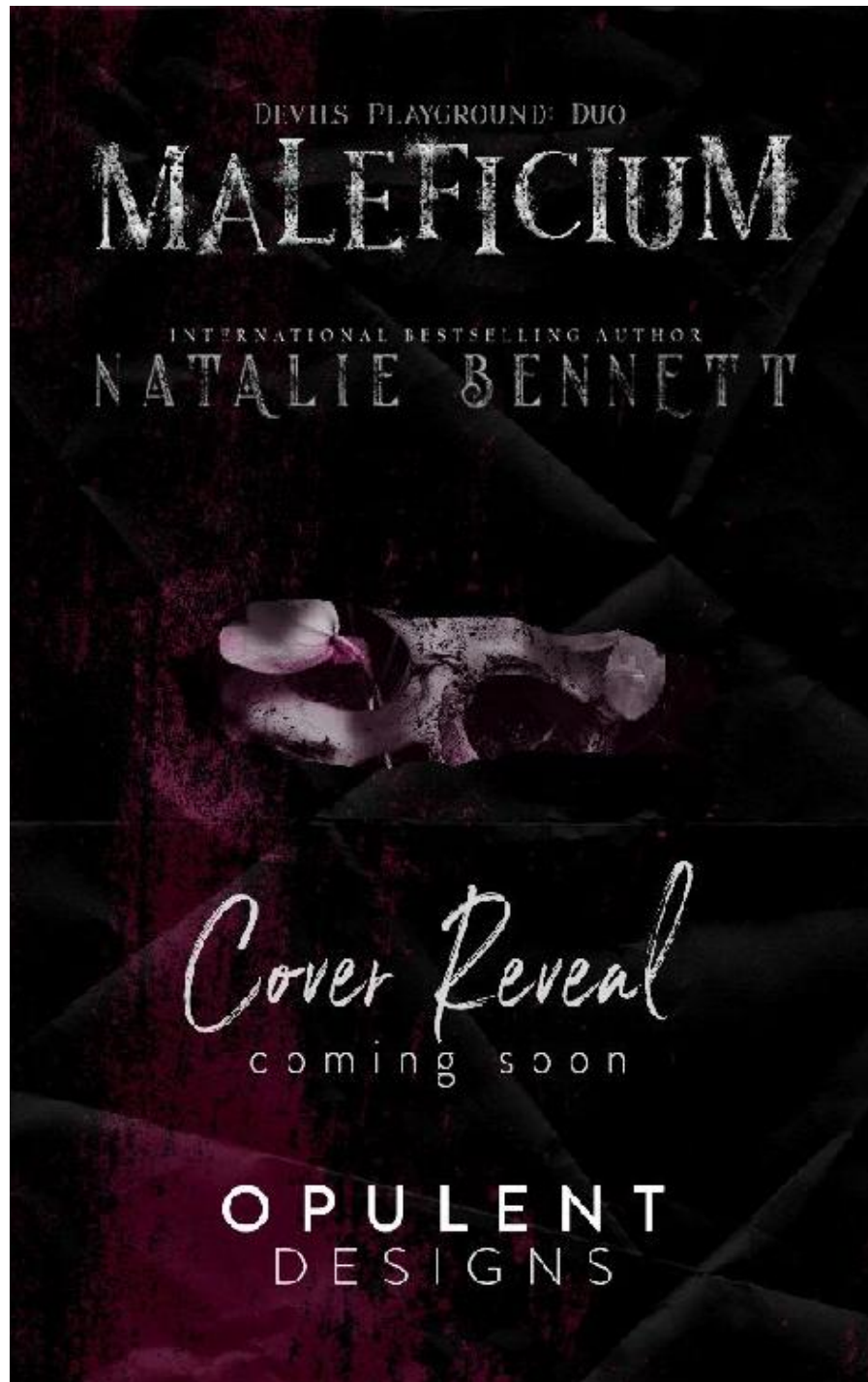




## EPILOGUE

I've waited patiently for this day to come.  
Always watching.  
Always lurking.  
Always a good boy who kept his distance.  
Until I didn't.  
She doesn't remember me, but I remember her.  
It's time to put my mask on and play.  
Every demon wants his pound of flesh.  
Psycho versus psycho.  
Let's see how vicious she can be.

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*TRAGIC & TWISTED FALL APART...*

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