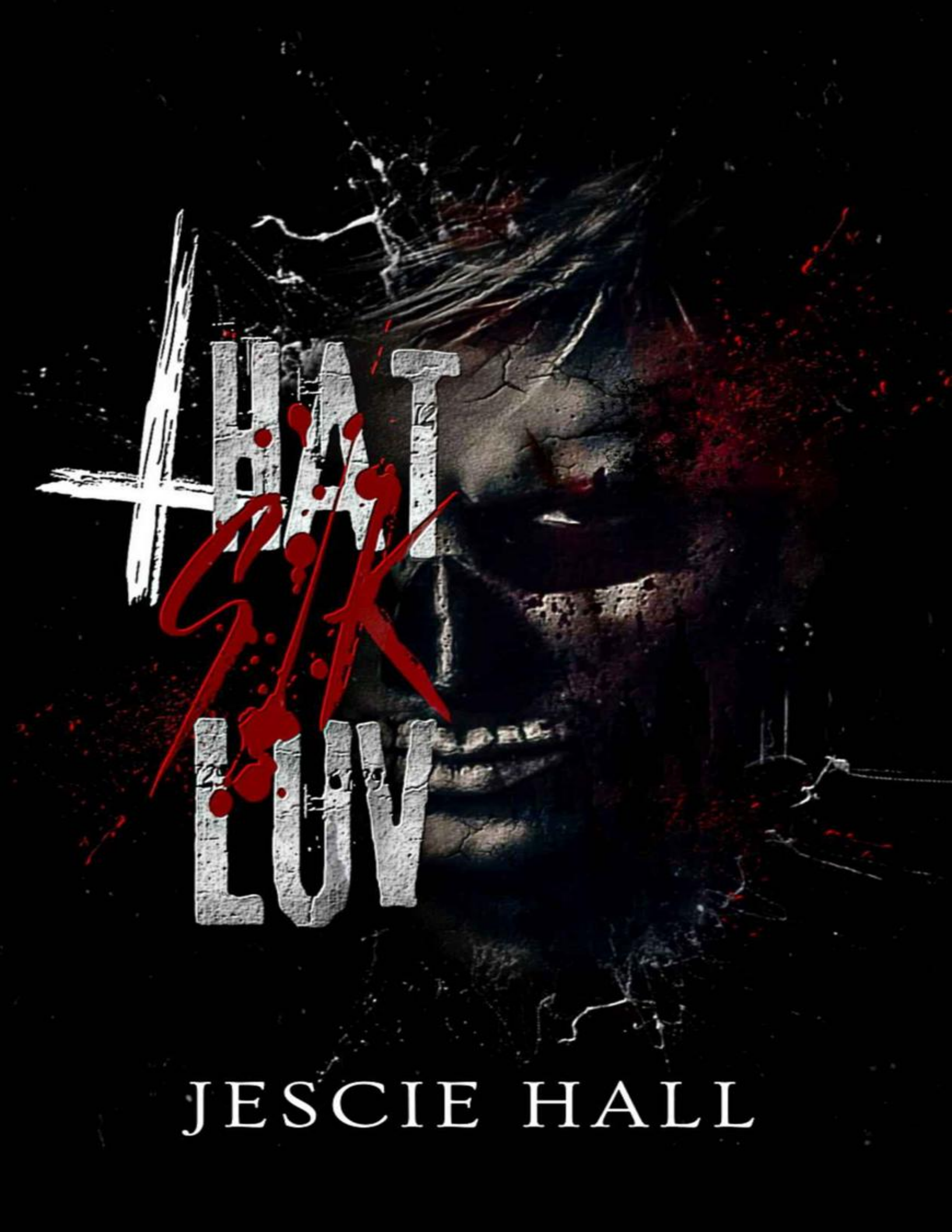
HATE
SICK
LUV
JESCIE HALL



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This book contains heavy, and potentially triggering elements including, stalking, religious trauma, desecration of religious artifacts, cult-like settings, CNC, degradation, humiliation, voyeurism, exhibitionism, somnophilia, possessive behavior, graphic depictions of violence/murder, and explores various aggressive forms of sexual play and BDSM.

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To those taught they were born into sin, may you regain your faith within the confines of new and impure restraints.

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BRONX

Sex, masturbation, erotic thoughts. They taught me these things were shameful. Sinful. Vile.

Girls like me aren't promiscuous. We look down on those who are. We're proper. Pure. Innocent. But the more I see of the masked man lurking in the shadows of the night, the more evidence of his sick obsession with me, the more my lustful imagination runs wild.

I wanted sin. And I wanted it with him.

Aero is my stalker.

He's like the air around him. Vanishing whenever he pleases. Showing up to surprise me when I least expect it to pleasure me in ways unimaginable.

He only has two rules for me; give myself over to my hidden desires, and never find out who he is.

What he doesn't realize is he's creating a monster.

One with the same insatiable hunger for the sickest form of toxic love.

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BRONX

As soon as my eyes open, my focus is pulled to the blood red awaiting me.

I stare at the freshly cut rose that's lying in the old wire trash can near my desk. Its thorns push through the metal, piercing the grated openings. It was cut too soon. The tight, round, velvet bud hasn't even had the chance to open. No time to bloom.

An ending.

A message.

A warning.

I know it was *him*. It's always him.

My stranger.

My stalker.

No twenty-year-old girl who's as pure as me should ever have to worry about random boys who leave freshly cut flowers in her garbage can or peculiar messages written on wrinkled pages of ripped-up Bible. But for the last three weeks since graduation, it's been nothing but cryptic messages and budded roses awaiting me in the trash every morning.

I lay on my side, staring at the crimson bud as I become aware of my hands on my body. One rests against the warm skin of my neck while the other lays between my soft, milky thighs.

I feel the tingling sensation breathe to life beneath my skin. That uncomfortable feeling that gives me a knot in my stomach while making my shoulders shudder.

He was here again. Watching me sleep. How he gets in is a question I can't seem to answer. My brother makes sure to lock every door and window when he leaves for his dorm room, especially now that our parents have left.

Rolling onto my back, I think about the effort, the reasons, and none of it makes sense to me. It's a terrifying little secret that only I and Mia, my best friend, know about. I wouldn't dare share it with Baret. Getting my older brother out of the house to live in the dorms has been such a relief for my studies. I didn't need his incessant and lewd behavior distracting me anymore.

Last week, I'd questioned Mia if I was alone in this apparent stalking, leaving out the specific details, but informing her of the eyes I felt on my back at all times. It creeped her out as much as it did me

when she found out, becoming her new little project to uncover. She assumed someone was out to ruin my reputation. To tarnish the hard work I've achieved throughout my four years of high school, to prevent me from finally joining the Covenant Academy as the first female Magnus Princeps.

I'd worried she'd heard Saint and his ridiculous gang of friends talking. Was the future of our congregation simply finding new and unusual ways to torture me again? Teasing me for my achievements? Testing my abilities? My faith? Seems unlikely, as this person has a sensitive touch to his work. A delicate approach to stalking, and although he's starting to mature, Saint has a history of being anything but delicate. Or kind.

This person seems to have a fascination with me that doesn't end.

I'm just stupid and curious enough to allow it to continue.

Whoever was following me was after something, and the only way to get it was through silent obsession.

I reach for the nightstand drawer, pulling out the wrinkled note I hid last week. Just the thought of this person ruthlessly ripping pages from the Bible to use as stationary makes my skin crawl with terror as much as it piques my interest.

The page is torn from Deuteronomy in the Bible, and the circled passage reads, *For the LORD your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.*

Over the passage is a handwritten letter in red pen, the strikes of the letters scrawled so hard it nearly tore through the delicate page.

I'm your GOD now -Aero

Running my fingers over the deep divots of his name awakens something within me, and I wonder if my strange stalker's curiosities are running as wild as mine.

The idea flogs my mind, and I want to know if he's tempted to touch me while watching me in my bed. The thought that maybe he already has sweeps through me, and something of a wildfire spreads down between my thighs, causing me to immediately feel the weight of guilt heavier than the blanket wrapped around me.

The front door opens downstairs, disrupting me from my thoughts, and I know I'm running late. My body aches with a lagging depletion

of energy. The kind you always get before having to be up and ready for such an important event.

“Bri-uh-knee!” I hear the annoying voice of my brother from the first floor.

His clunky footsteps ascend the wooden stairs of our two-story home until he appears at my door. His muscular build, looking fit beneath his dress shirt and slacks, still surprises me. He used to be such a dweeb. A toothpick dweeb. But when maturity hits, boys really do become men. It’s just gross when it’s your brother. He wears his annoyed expression wonderfully well, while his signature blonde curly locks are brighter today. A weekend of tubing down the river with his college roommates will do that.

Reluctantly, I push past him, making my way out of bed and into the bathroom. I stare at my reflection, gripping the ends of my hair to untangle the knots with my brush from another night of restless sleep. It wasn’t fair. I’d always wished to be blonde like the rest of my family. Baret got the genes that were supposed to be passed down to me. My mother and father were both blonde, with tall and thin body types. My brother followed suit, and his height now towers over me, even though he’s filled out some. But, regardless, like a stained blob on an inkblot, I came out with hair as black as the night.

Dark hair, porcelain skin. *The Devil’s Doll.* They never declared that’s what they thought of me, but their eyes of subtle disapproval screamed the unintended label.

Mother always worried there was an underlying root to that. A biblical premonition that needed even more reassurance to be stamped out. They were hard on me. Harder than Baret. I’d come to understand and accept it as the youngest child, as well as the only girl, and made it even more my mission to prove my worth in my family and in the church.

“Why aren’t you ready? Today is Induct! We were supposed to be there early,” Baret groans, leaning his head against the door frame.

“I-I must’ve overslept,” I say apologetically, wondering about my sleep that may or may not have been under watch. “It won’t take me long.”

After braiding my hair back, I head into my room to grab my crucifix necklace on my nightstand. A gift from my father when I turned

sixteen to celebrate my abstinence. I dress in my plaid green skirt, my black thigh-high tights beneath, and my white button-up shirt with the Covenant Academy crest across my breast. I slip into my black Mary Jane Doc Martens and grab my backpack.

Baret is waiting impatiently downstairs, his nose in a book, when I finally descend the stairs.

“Have you heard from Mom and Dad today?”

“No, Bri,” he replies with another groan. “Calls don’t come as frequently when you’re in the bush.”

My shoulders must have slumped slightly because the annoyance on his face drops. He closes the book and walks forward, setting it back on the fireplace mantel before turning back to face me.

“What they’re doing is far more important than the Induct Ceremony. We have to see God’s greater picture. Spread the Lord’s word to the people who can’t access his glory.” He spreads his hands before him dramatically, as if imagining the scene. “Mission work makes the world go ’round.”

“If only father could hear you now,” I say, nudging his arm as he laughs. “He’d be so proud.”

“What?” he asks. “I’m as holy as they come. And boy, do they come.” He throws me a sly grin.

“You’re disgusting.” I push past him, heading out onto the porch. “And vile,” I add for good measure.

Baret’s too smart for his own good. He plays the system well. Portraying the good Christian son at the church, while studying medicine at college, finding new and creative ways to break his vows of celibacy without actually breaking them. He always lived on the outskirts of our faith, using his wits to pull the facade to perfection.

“Please.” He scoffs, following out after me. “You’re just mad because Saint still refuses to court you. The dark stain of condemnation? Isn’t that what he calls you now?”

“Really?” I turn to face him, and he almost runs into me. “Now you’re feeding into it, too?”

“Calm down, Briony. He’s just teasing. Haven’t you heard? Guys who are deliberately mean are doing it with a purpose. I think they forget to teach you in the Covenant Academy that boys have these

things called hormones. Testosterone to be specific. It makes them do weird things." He shudders dramatically.

"Don't you get all scientific now, Baret," I warn with a teasing tone as he sidesteps past me towards the car. "Bishop Caldwell wouldn't like the sounds of that. Christ works through us. Christ overpowers the sinful human nature we were always meant to overcome." I recite using his own words.

"Overcome this," he says, making a lewd gesture that I don't even understand.

I shake my head at my hopeless brother, hopping in his car as he backs out of the driveway. Slowly, we pull away from our perfect little home, driving down our perfect little street, heading for my all too important Induct Ceremony.

My parents might not be here to support me due to their important Christian obligations, but I can't help but curiously wonder if someone else is.

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BRONX

I approach the edge of the altar, breathing in the fresh scent of smoldering incense as I keep my chin held high, ready to make my walk. The deep harmonic echoes from the choir on the balcony resonate through my chest, filling the hollowed church with a haunting vibration.

My palms are sweaty, and I drag them against the long black robe as the bishop finishes reciting the vow of the student before me.

“In his name, you are born again, Michael. God’s will be done,” he recites, making the sign of the cross before him.

He guides Michael to the large baptismal font where the deacon is awaiting him. The deacon steps forward and takes his hand, walking him down the four steps into the waist-deep water. Michael crosses his arms over his chest before the deacon grips his forearms and quickly shoves him back beneath the surface.

Seconds pass as he holds him beneath the water. Michael eventually begins kicking and thrashing in the tub, attempting to come up for air. Lips pull into a haunting grin from the bishop as he lay witness to the devil leaving Michael’s earthly being through violent attempts to bring himself to the surface.

The congregation watches in silent wonderment, as echoes of the struggle reverberate throughout the vaulted ceilings, eyes peeled to the scene as if awaiting Christ himself to appear before us for his second coming.

I hold my breath, anxiously rolling the crucifix of my necklace between my thumb and forefinger as I witness the struggle. Just as Michael’s body goes limp in his grasp, the deacon lifts him back into the air and he gasps, swallowing oxygen into his lungs, his eyes wide and his mouth ajar. His mother sobs from out in the crowd of onlookers in the dark cathedral before getting quieted down by her husband next to her, who looks on proudly.

In our small community, only descendants of prominent members of the church can be inducted as Magnus Princeps, the leaders of the next generation of gospel shepherds in line for the coveted bishop title. Only through hours upon hours of studying the ancient word, and professing Christ as our Lord and Savior, can one truly achieve this sought-after status. In my age group, there are three of us. Michael Donovan, me, and Saint Westwood.

The last of us decided not to attend today. His family didn't see it fit that he should accept such a highly prestigious award alongside a female, and requested that he receive his own ceremony entirely.

According to the Westwoods, a woman's place was not to be a leader, but to be the ultimate follower. The best sheep in the herd. The quiet one, bound to please and obey the shepherd according to Christ's word.

Luckily, my intelligence and determination won me my spot here on the stage. A place well earned, according to my family, proud members of the Covenant Church for centuries. As long as I sought Christ, teaching his word to the masses, I could never lead astray. The honor was mine to hold, and my family was relieved to see some progress in the church to even accept and allow a woman to hold such a status.

I take my first step onto the altar, approaching Bishop Caldwell, awaiting my vows and the ceremonial cleansing with pride in my heart.

Glancing over, I see Baret in a far pew, watching along with some of our peers with a proud grin on his face. Mia is sitting a few rows behind him, joined by her family, looking on excitedly.

I suck in a deep breath, letting it out as I begin my vows. Halfway through reciting them, a shadow sweeps across the back aisle of the church, begging for my attention.

Attempting to remain focused, I continue the vows before the ghost in the shadows flashes by in the corner of my eye again. Curiosity gets the best of me, and my gaze shifts to the exit sign near the back door, my words getting caught in my chest.

Standing there between the stone pillars, the outline of a man hides beneath the shadows of the balcony. My entire body is on alert, hairs rising at my nape, as I wonder if it's *him*. His back is to the altar, but I see the lengthy build beneath a black trench coat that reaches below his knees. The caped hood is pulled up over his head as he leans against the pillar, his back to the rest of the congregation. He's facing the doors to the exit as if the event he's witnessing isn't behind him at all. My eyes fall back upon Bishop Caldwell as I continue with the vows.

"In his name, you are born again, Briony Strait. God's will be done."

I repeat the final part of the phrase as my eyes fall on Baret. He simply gives me one head nod. A kind gesture for an older brother. My eyes slide to the back of the church again in search of the hooded man, but upon a second glance, the shadow is gone entirely.

I follow the deacon to the baptismal tub, the words of my stalker echoing through my head, leaving me questioning the motives.

I'm your GOD now.

I take his hand as he helps me into the frigid water; the chill seeping into my bones. My robe becomes heavily weighted, dragging behind me as I take a few steps deeper, allowing the water to hit my waist. Crossing my forearms over my chest, the deacon gives a quick glance to Bishop Caldwell at the altar. He nods to him as his eyes find mine again. There is something hard about the glance he gives me, devoid of any emotion, but before I can think twice about it, the deacon pushes me back.

I take one quick breath before falling through the surface beneath his hold, the spine-tingling chill climbing my neck with its icy sting. My ears fill with the hollow hum of nothingness, as I feel my lungs already aching with the need to expand.

Just a little longer.

The weight of his firm grasp leaves no wiggle room for any sort of release. My lungs scream for air as the panic sets in. I need to breathe. I push against his arms, clawing at them for release, but he holds tighter, ensuring I stay beneath the surface to rid my human form of the Devil himself.

It's been too long. Michael wasn't submerged this long.

My eyes open beneath the dark water as I visualize the mosaic scene above me. The deacon isn't facing me. He's staring towards the altar at the bishop. I scream beneath the surface, the last of the oxygen in my lungs bubbling up from my throat as I thrash.

It's too long!

My cries for help are ignored, and I lose all self-control. It's become a fight for my life now as I swallow water with my cries and darkness clouds over my eyes, caving in on the scene before me. I struggle with everything I have, the pressure on my burning lungs crippling. But I'm slipping away as the numbness takes me, my body feeling

lighter as I lose the fight against the bitterly cold water of the ceremonial cleansing.

Through the water, an explosive humming fills my head as the deacon's hands loosen their hold. A large streak of orange grows from the side of my vision, the color distorted, bent, and twisted in all the wrong ways beneath the waves above me. My passage into the next life?

Before I can assess the peculiar sights and sounds surrounding me, darkness consumes me, and the next thing I remember is seeing flashes of faces; Baret, who looks panicked beyond belief, Bishop Caldwell, who looks disturbed as he frantically passes us, directing the congregation, and Mia, who looks petrified above me.

They carry me through the now bright and flashing church. My vision focuses on the vaulted ceiling above me, studying the angelic cherubs painted beneath the peaks as we continue towards the wooden doors. A flicker of orange illuminates them further. Their eyes are all painted black. X's over their once cherubic faces.

My body remains numb, taking in gleams of orange light as Baret holds me tightly to his chest. The thick smell of smoke fills my nostrils before the dark clouds return.

A storm of darkness, swallowing me whole.

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BRONX

Mia paces before me at the edge of my bed as I rub my knuckles over my eyes, blinking back the haze of being asleep. She grips her shoulder-length hair in golden clumps between her fingers, practically burning through the wooden floors with the back-and-forth friction.

“He destroyed your entire ceremony! The deacon was perplexed when the explosion hit. None of this is okay,” Baret declares with fire in his tone.

That’s what it must’ve been. Right? His reason for not paying attention to the girl fighting for her life beneath the water. The explosion stole his attention.

There was a definite fear I felt within the depths of my soul as that man held me beneath the water. An eerie feeling that’s now left me unsettled, sitting heavy in my stomach. Doubt plagues me for the first time, and I don’t want to believe it.

“We don’t know that *he* had anything to do with this,“ Mia corrects him, playing devil’s advocate as she always does. “As far as we know, *he* wasn’t even there. Right?”

As they contemplate whether or not Saint started the fire in the church, disrupting the finality of my ceremony, my mind wraps around the thought of one person and one person alone.

Aero, whoever he is, had everything to do with it. But it’s the motive I can’t seem to understand.

“The Westwoods are still hosting the post-Induct party tonight,” Mia declares.

“Even though they refused to come?” Baret asks, sounding annoyed as ever. “Such bullshit.”

I sigh, listening to them go back and forth as they always do.

“Their family remains the top contributors to the church. They’re kind of allowed to do whatever they wish,” I add in.

Mia sighs. “Whatever. I’ll help you get ready.”

I narrow my eyes, frowning. “No. I’m not going to their party.”

“Actually, you are,” Baret corrects me. “And we are confronting this.”

Mia makes a pained face, clearly caught in the middle of this strange predicament. I stand from the bed and make my way to the window. My fingers run along the white-chipped paint of the sill as I

peer out, seeing the sun now setting, the sky turning a beautiful shade of pink and purple swirls.

If I'm to be regarded as someone of worth within the church, I need to make my presence known. They need to know that Briony Strait will not cower away, but will face adversity head-on. Like a leader would.

"You know what?" I tap my fingers on the sill, determination straightening my posture. "You're right," I say, earning a surprised look from both of them. "I need to address this, and there's only one way to do that."

They look at each other before their eyes find mine.

"Well, I guess we'll start with getting you into something that demands attention."

I roll my eyes as hers light up, her eyebrows wiggling at my brother, who's watching with apprehension.



I swallow down my internal fears, lifting my head high, as the three of us walk into the foyer of the Westwood Manor.

The place is what you'd expect of old money. Elevated ceilings, marble floors, paintings that cost more than most ordinary family homes. It's extravagant, elegant, sophisticated, and only signifies why their family has the control they do over the church. Their contributions keep the place up and running. Of course, they govern decision-making processes.

Money is power, even in religion.

I flatten out the bottom of the black, fitted dress Mia convinced me to wear with my palms as I flip my straightened-black hair behind my shoulders and onto my back. After persuading Mia and Baret I was more than okay to handle this, I went off on my own in search of Saint.

A conversation is needed. An adult conversation to address this situation. I just hoped he would be willing.

Saint has tormented me for years with his gang of buddies that seem to always stick by his side. Growing up in a small yet prosperous town has everyone knowing you and your entire family's business. While our family was far from the scandalous type, there were always people ready to find secrets to dig up and revive dead rumors for their own vendettas. Saint was your typical grade-school bully, always teasing me for being the overachiever that I was, hating the fact that I schooled him in every class and subject.

His family had expectations for him, ones I could actually understand and relate to, but he couldn't come second to a girl. Unfortunately for him, he did. I graduated top of our class, and after being presented with the honor of becoming the first female Magnus Princeps, his family clearly didn't want to accept it.

My father was told they even approached ruthless dictator Alastor Abbott, the newly appointed governor, a man who I've heard regularly dances with the devil in his decision-making processes, hoping to convince him to propose a bill to somehow limit the number of women who can advance academically. Anything to flex on the weak and set the clock back to allow the men to reign victorious.

Much to their dismay, the mind outweighs the muscle, and I'm still here.

Walking through the chaos of the party, I see mostly people our age and older mingling throughout the main hall of the large Manor.

I get offered a glass of champagne from one of the well-dressed servers. Declining it politely, I catch a glimpse of Saint from across the room. He turns his head from his conversation just as I peer over at him, and our eyes connect. A ghost of a grin forms on his face before he takes a sip of his drink and turns into the crowd, heading down the main corridor.

I hurry after him, seeing as he takes a right turn into a room. Approaching the door, I think to knock, but then decide against it and turn the knob to enter behind him.

As soon as I open it, I find the room empty. I close the door carefully behind me, then take in what appears to be his bedroom. It's extravagant as I would assume it to be. The dark navy blues from the duvet of the four-poster bed match the long, thick drapes hanging from the windows to perfection. Water runs from a sink in the attached bathroom and I take a seat on the upholstered bench before the bed, waiting for his return.

He walks out of the bathroom with a towel, wiping his face as if he just washed it. He drops the towel, eyes widening slightly when he sees me.

"Briony Strait." He says my name like it pains him to voice it. "What is the first female Magnus Princeps doing in my bedroom? Dishonorable, don't you think?"

My eyes narrow at him as he stalks towards me, growing in height as he nears. He's tall and slender, the angles of his jaw more pronounced with the shaved crew cut hairstyle he's known for, especially from this angle. I swallow, feeling my throat bob as I do it, and his eyes fall to my neck.

"Nice work declining the champagne." He smiles appreciatively, then sighs, "Father loves to test the youth."

Of course, that's what that was. Anything to catch me slipping.

"I was hoping we could talk," I say, finding my courage. "Like adults."

His lips pull up at the corner, and my heart flutters wildly in my chest at what he may say or do.

“Adults, huh?” He steps closer until I’m forced to crane my neck straight up to keep eye contact. “To be honest, I’m surprised to even see you here. You must have a proper pair of balls beneath that dress to walk into this house after the rumors floating around about the fire this afternoon.”

I narrow my eyes on him further. “I know it wasn’t you.”

“How can you be so sure? You know I’d give anything to ruin your big day,” he oozes his sarcasm.

“Would you?” I ask bluntly, my brows rising.

He stares down his nose at me for a second, his eyes drawing a line to my lips and back. The sudden glance makes me uncomfortable in an entirely new way.

“No,” he breathes, the sarcasm washed from his tone entirely as his face holds a softened expression. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“Well, alright then,” I state with a shrug. “So, can we move past this thing you have with me? I’m not going anywhere, Saint, so we might as well figure out a way to work alongside one another since we’ll be spending most of our time together.”

A Magnus Princeps works alongside the bishops in our congregation, focusing primarily on studying the word and using our time to devote to the community through volunteering opportunities or teaching student classes until we pass the test to determine the permanent placement of the appointed officials, holding official rank within the church. It’s a prestigious honor for anyone, but especially for a woman.

Saint takes a seat beside me on the bench, leaning his elbows casually on the bed behind us. He sighs and looks off towards the bathroom, straightening his legs and adjusting his dress pants as he does.

“I guess you’re right,” he says. “Lots of volunteering ahead. Loads of time together.”

He stares off at the floor, chewing on the corner of his bottom lip as he imagines it, before he turns to face me.

“I know my family will never say this, so I will on their behalf,” he begins as my nerves threaten to get the better of me. “Congratulations. I’m honored to receive this along with you.”

I roll my eyes. “But?”

His face stretches to a scowl. “But what? That’s it. I’m congratulating you on a very impressive job well done. There’s no getting around it. You’re a force. Figure there’s nothing to do but form an alliance, right?”

“What’s the catch?” I ask, still suspicious of his change in behavior.

He raises his hands. “No catch, I swear.” He smiles a genuine smile that fades into a face of seriousness as he nods. “It’s time for my family to face the inevitable and evolve with the times. I’m happy for you, Bri.”

He’s never called me Bri before. Only murmurs of wart, pest, or eternal stain of condemnation. I wasn’t even sure if he truly knew my name through grade school.

He leans forward, his elbows onto his knees now, hunched over as he turns his head back to me and stares with eyes that somehow smolder, our bodies sitting even closer than before, our thighs practically sealed together.

My brother may be right about him.

“Well, thank you,” I whisper, the conversation becoming strangely intimate.

His lips pull again into a half-smirk as those eyes gaze down at my lips. Feeling the heat practically warming me from his glance, I roll them inward, rubbing them together.

“Walk with me?” he asks, my eyes falling upon his outstretched hand, waiting for me to grab it. “I’d love to show you the grounds.”

My teeth press into my bottom lip, looking for the catch. But his eyes soften as he stands, still holding his hand out for me.

With a quick breath and the confidence of a leader, I place my hand in his.

An alliance it is.

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BRONX

We walk arm and arm around the Manor as he shows me the grounds.

Eyes are on us everywhere we go, silent whispers of conversations floating around, weaving their webs of suspicion and gossip.

“Being the only son in the family has left me to take on the role of carrying the Westwood name into the church,” he explains, pointing towards the fountain to direct me where we’re headed.

“Is this a role you feel you’ve fallen into or chosen?”

He turns his head down to look at me, a lopsided grin in place.

“Smart, Briony. You’re smart.” He chuckles before his face drops in seriousness. “But I’ve chosen this. I want it. There’s nothing I’d like more than to bring a bishop title to the family name. But it’s not simply the title that has me passionate, it’s becoming the vessel in which to spread the word. What’s more honorable than that?”

I continue walking alongside him, absorbing his words, until we approach the fountain. The water bubbles over the enormous sculpture of an angel in the moonlight; the darkness pulls my eyes down, making the pool at the bottom seem somewhat eerie in its black abyss.

“I’m glad you sought me out tonight,” he says, turning to face me as he grabs my hands in his before us. “I’ve been hoping for the opportunity to talk alone. It’s time I put the childishness aside.”

My breath hitches as his thumbs gently caress the grooves of my knuckles.

“I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you,” he continues, staring at me with sympathetic eyes.

He moves in closer, placing our hands together against the firm mounds of his pecs beneath his collared dress shirt as he gazes down at me.

“You’ve really grown up these last couple of years.” He swallows, straightening his spine, as his eyes trail down my form to my heels and back. “Sorry it took me so long to catch up.”

Baret was right.

My chest feels tight as his thumbs continue their gentle strokes, his direct eye contact, making the world around us hazy. Heat is building somewhere in the pit of my gut, threatening to cripple me of my control, and I need an escape.

“Restroom?” I ask, closing my eyes tightly, breaking that contact, and clearing my throat. His brow is cocked when I finally reopen my eyes. “I’m sorry. Can you tell me where the restroom is?”

I have to get out of here.

I drop his hands, creating some distance between us as I take a few steps backwards, practically stumbling over my heels as I do.

“Down the corridor, second door on the left,” he calls out after me with a nod, looking perplexed.

I practically race back into the house through the rush of people at the party, avoiding eyes and conversations, until I find the bathroom. The door, second on the left, is unfortunately occupied, so I continue down the corridor until I find the next available open room.

I just need a second to breathe, away from the awkward exchange, and away from the hustle and bustle of people marketing and networking themselves to the higher-ups of our small community.

Finding what appears to be an empty spare bedroom, I shut the door behind me, leaning back against it in the dimly lit space.

Was Baret seriously right? It’d be the first time. Maybe Saint really did have underlying feelings for me that he pushed away with his immaturity. The look in his eyes tonight is unlike anything I’d ever seen from him. Serious. Almost needy. Dark.

Something had changed, and I needed to be careful to navigate it correctly.

It scared me. That feeling when our hands met. Something awoke in me, and the thought of those hands on my body, touching me beneath my dress, came to mind. The devil’s work. I needed to steer clear of these temptations, the sudden lust threatening my control, especially with my name now under the spotlight.

I roll along the door, leaning my forehead against it as my hands brace me against the cool surface, needing time to rid myself of these vile thoughts and distractions before returning to the party.

“Oh, little doll.” I hear the deep voice of a man behind me, and my spine stiffens. Before I even have the chance to turn around, a body seals against my back, pinning me to the wooden surface. “You think so hard when you’re alone,” he says, his dark tone causing the hair at the back of my neck to stand on end.

I attempt to turn my head to face whoever he is, but the breath is literally taken from my lungs in fear as he presses me further into the door with his body.

“Shh,” he whispers against my neck, the scent of leather and sulfur hitting my nostrils. “Don’t scream,” his deep voice rumbles through his chest into mine as his hair tickles the side of my neck. “I’d hate to break my new favorite toy.”

Hands adorned in various rings and a plethora of scars slide their way up my arms against the door until they find mine. His fingers slowly push through the crevices of mine until he interlocks our fingers with his strong, veiny hands. Quick breaths fall from my lips as I study the rings, all silver and black, focusing on one in particular that stands out from the rest. It’s silver, with a large black stone on his index finger. Inside the stone sits an image of an upside-down crucifix.

“Who are you?” I ask breathlessly.

He doesn’t answer me as I feel his face run along the back of my neck. Heat spreads across the exposed skin between my shoulder blades and I shudder at the sensation. He nuzzles into me, running his nose up into my hair. He inhales my scent, his face rubbing over the back of my head as if deriving some sort of sick pleasure from the smell of my hair alone. Lips trail back to my ear, and fear practically cripples my quivering body.

It’s him.

“Say it,” he demands against the shell of my ear, drawing in another deep inhale against the side of my head.

My mind swirls with panic as his words wrap around my weak little form like a serpent, so sure of the demise of its prey.

"Say it!" he says again, and I jump, gasping for air as I close my eyes tightly, withholding my scream.

He wants me to tell him who he is? No, he needs to hear me say his name.

“Aero,” I whisper shakily.

He hums his approval against the flesh of my neck, his stone-like body encapsulating mine as he continues to press into me.

“If you want to get out alive,” he whispers against my skin, the warmth of his breath tickling my skin, “run for your life.”

I swallow before a terror-filled whimper leaves my throat.

Those large, ring-covered hands keep their grip on mine, pressing against the door, before all of his weight lifts off me entirely and he hits the switch next to the door, turning off the remaining light in the room to leave me in complete darkness again.

I turn around swiftly, my pulse quickening at the unknown and my back against the door as clumsy hands scale the wooden surface for the handle. I find it and twist it open abruptly, allowing the sliver of light pouring in from the hallway to illuminate the room.

But just as I expected, it's now void of anyone.

I walk back among the party-goers, finally spotting Baret in one corner and Mia along the wall of the other. I approach Mia, quickly pulling her away from her conversation.

"You ready to go?" I ask, my eyes darting around the open space.

Her eyes narrow suspiciously before she leans in, whispering, "What's wrong? What happened?"

She scans me with her gaze before her focus falls to my neck.

"What's this?" Her hand comes up to touch the side of my neck as she wipes her fingers there before showing them to me. They're black.

I touch the area where he was nuzzling into me, and my eyes widen as I look at the fingers that are now covered in what appears to be some sort of black paint. My confusion must have Mia worried enough because she immediately races over to Baret.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I scour the faces of the people in attendance, suspicion coursing through my veins. Faces of evil are everywhere you look, covered in their own paint, putting on the show of a civilized organization.

Back near the opened doors to the terrace, my heart drops to my stomach as my eyes connect with his.

Half of a face, watching me from behind the pillar. A hooded man, barely illuminated by the moonlight with an eerie mask of black and white face paint to resemble a skeleton, and black locks hanging down across his forehead and into his eyes.

He turns, vanishing into the darkness just as quickly as he appeared in that room behind me. Silently and with intent.

What I’ve yet to decipher is his overall message. It could be one of two things.

A threat or a warning.

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HERO

My boss is in his office when I approach the room, the smell of expensive cigars and Bourbon already lingering in the dimly lit space.

“Is it done yet?” he asks, not even looking up from his stack of papers.

A dry laugh leaves my throat as I approach the desk, excitement stirring beneath my flesh. I sit back in the large leather wing-backed chair facing his desk, throwing both of my leather combat boots on top of it, tossing his pictures and papers across the surface.

“There’s an art to this, Al, but I bet you hear those words more often than not.”

He scowls, grabbing a fallen frame. “That there’s an art to being as unhinged and disrespectful as you?”

“No.” I rest both my hands behind my head, tossing him a demonic smirk. “Is it done yet?”

“Aero, I didn’t assign you to this so you could fuck around. There’s a check waiting—”

“Do I look like a guy who gets off on money?” I snap, standing abruptly.

He swallows, sitting back in his seat, knowing my temperament well enough.

“Just because you let money bend your morality doesn’t mean it affects mine,” I retort.

“You dislike money?” He scoffs. “This is the first I’ve heard. I pay you an arm and a leg for the work you do.”

“Don’t act like you’re not happy to have someone willing to do your dirty work. Gotta keep those politicians’ hands clean, am I right?”

I’m the only one with dirty hands here.

Alastor Abbott was scouring the prison system for a criminal to his liking. One who wasn’t only heartless, but intelligent and ruthless. He found me, knowing I was the bastard child of one of the richest men in town, using this alliance, and paying off the system to release me for his own personal use. Like his own secret weapon to be used as needed, in exchange for my freedom from the life sentence I was given for the crimes they say I’ve committed. No one knows I’ve been released, few even know I exist. Cal made sure of that.

“You know I’m thankful for your service,” he says in all seriousness.

I roll my eyes.

“Especially considering the client.”

“Taking lives is as easy as it sounds. It’s dealing with the weight of that conscience that seeps deep into the bones of the weak that’s difficult to conquer.”

“We all have our talents, our chess moves that put us in a position to win.” He shrugs. “Yours has always been the lack of a soul.”

“Happy to be of service.” I smile, eyeing my ring. *Religion. A joke.*

“You have a week,” he says with a heated tone, collecting the papers scattered across his desk. “Your father wants this taken care of.”

“That man is *not* my father,” I seethe, slamming my fist onto his desk.

“Don’t raise your voice at me because you were born a bastard,” Alastor replies. “Say what you want, but you still have his name, and that well-known bone structure. A week.”

I place both of my hands on the edge of the desk, leaning forward, causing his eyes to widen and his breath to catch. I love the fear I produce from him. As bad of a man as he is, he’s still scared of me and I get off on that. I grin at him through the black hair that’s fallen into my eyes.

“Then I shall take my sweet, sweet time with this one.”

The possibilities are endless. I’ll have her screaming for her God, begging him for redemption, not knowing it’s me there to save her.

“Do what you need to, Aero. Just finish her. I need the contributions before the next election. Cal Westwood is paying a pretty penny to have her vanish without a trace now that the church dropped the ball.”

I grind my back teeth at the mention. I’d assumed correctly.

Alastor tips his head at my expression, assuming I don’t know what happened.

“He thinks his own son messed that up by attempting to ruin the Induct ceremony himself, not realizing his father had already paid off the deacon to end her.”

I love it. They put the blame for the fire that started on poor little Saint. What a fucking mess they’ve created just to off this chick. A mess that’s becoming my new favorite obsession, and my new course for vengeance against the men who ruined me.

“What did this bitch do to have all these men losing their shit, anyway?” I ask, already knowing.

“A woman advancing in the religious world?” Alastor cocks his brow. “What’s next, Aero? Politics? I think not.” He laughs at the absurdity. “End her, and do it cleanly. I’d hate to pay the police off again if I don’t have to.”

“I thought you knew?” I cock my head before pulling a bloodied switchblade from my pocket and tossing it on his desk. He backs away abruptly, complete and utter disgust slapped across his old, wrinkled face. “I don’t do anything clean.”

He glares up at me from his chair.

I place my hand in the other pocket, making him cower. Chuckling, I pull out a box of matches and take one out, placing it in my teeth. Toying with the tip, I make the sign of the cross with it as I step backwards until I’m out the door.

A week. So much fun can happen in a week.



She's wearing that goddamn crucifix again.

How badly I want to rip that from her delicate little neck, cutting into her flesh in the process, just to see the bright red blood leak from her perfect porcelain skin.

My beautiful little doll.

I can't wait to watch her break beneath me.

Running my fingers along the skin of her soft arm, I watch as the hairs rise in reaction to the sensation. There's nothing like enjoying the fact that her body reacts to mine, even when unconscious. She's so unaware of the signals her body is throwing at me. Leading her down to the devil's lair by breaking her pure and innocent way of life will be my ultimate delight.

I stand straight again above her sleeping body curled on her side of the bed. I've become slightly obsessed with her purity since the weeks I've been stalking and studying her. Wanting to coat that clean face with a beautiful mixture of cum and tears is my mission. I want her to get off on her fears until she becomes a dark and twisted creature like me. She's not like them. She can't be. She has a real potential for vengeance. I just need to open her mind to the possibility.

Her hair is sprawled along the pillowcase above her, black as the color of my soul. Grabbing the knife in my back pocket, I flip it up with my thumb. Taking some of her hair between my fingers, I slide the blade, slicing a good three inches off the end. I bring it to my nose, feeling high off the smell of her. She awakens that primal beast within me with her scent, and immediately I need it covering me.

In due time.

I rub the cut hair down my neck and over my Adam's apple, contemplating keeping it before I dig into my pocket and pull out a ripped page. Laying it on her dresser, I place the hair on top of it.

Gazing at her supple breasts that rise and fall beneath her flimsy tank top with every deep breath she takes, I see the outline of her perfect pink nipples that lie beneath it, untouched. My jaw tightens as my nostrils flare with the utmost restraint. *Not until she begs.*

Toying with the end of the match that stays between my teeth, I toss the freshly cut rosebud into her trash can. My calling card of sorts; a poetic message of death before the awakening. I take the

knife and stab it through the cut hair, through the page, and into the wood of her nightstand. Her lashes flutter open at the sound, but before she can orient herself, I'm already on my way out.

We're very alike, the two of us. Calculated, intelligent, aware. What I can't seem to understand is why she's playing the role when, deep down, she must know it's all a lie.

Her curiosities are pushing her towards me. I just need to wait until they're eating her alive.

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BRONX

I open my eyes, immediately sitting up, wildly searching around my room for him.

I don't even know who *he* is, but something inside of me is not only terrified, but intrigued.

The sun is just about to peek over the horizon. The light glow in my room illuminates the knife sticking out of my nightstand.

There's a knife in my nightstand.

I fist my blankets, clutching the soft fabric to my chest. As if it matters now. He was here again. Watching me while I slept.

A chill spreads down my arms, goosebumps cloaking me as if his presence was still here, touching me.

I squint my eyes, seeing what looks like hair pinned into the wood. My hair. I grasp it in my hands, feeling the ends and finding the sharp edges of the recent cut. Air slips through my lips as my heart thuds through me like a beating drum. I lean in closer, peering down at the ripped page stripped from the bible again, this one torn from Luke 12:7.

Indeed, the very hairs on your head are numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Written over the circled passage is his message in red ink.

A doll with a stain. A toy with imperfections. A woman with a weapon. -Aero

My chest tightens as I read the words, my mind racing with thoughts. I can't even decide if what I'm feeling is fear or excitement. I look at the garbage can, seeing the awaiting bud.

Walking over, I pull it out by the thorny stem, inspecting the insidious message. Sitting on the bench before my large vanity mirror, I hold the cool, velvety bud to my chest. My eyes focus on the reflection before me as I slowly drag it from the slight divot beneath my throat, down past my collarbones and between my breasts.

Something of a fire stirs within me, igniting through my veins, and I close my eyes, feeling my nipples harden into tight, pointy buds. I'm imagining his hands on me again, remembering the vivid smell of leather and sulfur creating an odd array of sensations. I spread my legs slightly, drawing a line with the rosebud from between my breasts, down to my abdomen. As the bud finds my thigh, I tip my

head back, dragging it along the sensitive skin there until it meets the place that's aching with a heat I've never felt before.

My phone rings, startling me, and I immediately throw the bud in the trash can. Disappointment floods me, and I'm frustrated with myself at the temptations stirring in the pit of my stomach.

He's bringing out feelings that come from somewhere dark and entirely too deep. Sensations that girls like me don't entertain.

I see that it's Saint calling, so I pick it up, attempting to sound awake and alert, not vulnerable and on the point of breaking.

"Morning Bri," he says in a cracked tone, as if he just woke up.

"It's a bit early for you, isn't it?" I joke, looking at the clock.

It's just after six.

"I wanted to reach you before it was too late."

My heart drops to my stomach, wondering what he knows that I don't.

"I figured I could give you a ride since we're both instructing the Catechism class today."

Relief washes over me.

"Oh," I breathe. "I didn't know you were assigned that class as well?"

"For the next six weeks," he says with a sigh.

I hear what sounds like a shower turning on in the background.

"So what do you say? Can I pick you up?"

I look at myself in the mirror, licking my lips. I imagine him pulling up in his fancy, decked-out Jeep, his tight dress pants fitting his tall frame as he adjusts into the seat, his corded forearms flexing as he steers us towards the school…

"Is that a yes or a nah?" His voice interrupts my uninhibited thoughts and I clear my throat, realizing I haven't responded.

"Yes. Yes, that would be great." I swallow, frowning at my reflection.

I'm losing myself to desires unknown to me. It's as if my mind is becoming more tainted with every nightly visit.

"Perfect," he says, walking closer to the sound of the shower. "I'll be there in about thirty minutes. Does that work?"

I think of him naked while talking to me, about to step into the hot steam and water pouring from the showerhead, letting it rain down his

tanned and toned body, washing all the way down through the trail of light hair to his manhood.

Temptations swirl around me, clouding my vision. Pulling me down, deeper to the devil himself. A devil named Aero. My eyes lock on the knife sticking out of the nightstand in the mirror's reflection behind me, a thought coming to mind that hadn't been there before.

"Um," I say with a dry throat, clearing it. "I-I'll be ready."



Thirty-five minutes later, Saint is driving us to the Academy. As part of our interim to becoming an official member of the church, we are required to teach these Catechism classes to the younger generation, teaching them the word through rigorous studies and explanations and interpretations of passages.

Saint holds the door for me as we enter the building, walking the halls of the Covenant Academy alongside me in communal silence until we find our classroom. I'm acutely aware of his tall presence beside me as we stand behind the podium, laying out books and notes in preparation for class. He swallows, looking down at me from the corner of his eye.

"You look really nice with your hair back like that," he says softly, before running his hand over the back of his neck, almost as if he didn't mean to compliment me, but it slipped anyway.

I almost laugh at his comment, only because the reason I'm wearing it back up in this ponytail is to hide the fact that my stalker cut three inches off it last night.

I should be horrified. Petrified. Looking all around me for a face, a shadow of whoever he is. I should tell someone. Alert the authorities, tell Mia the details, inform my brother...anyone. But, I don't. I can't bring myself to intervene in whatever message he's trying to give me because, for some odd reason, I desperately seek more. I'm locked in now, curious about the meaning of it all.

"Thanks, Saint." I offer a half grin. "You've given me more compliments in the past two days than our entire childhood combined."

He chuckles at that, looking down all bashfully. It's actually endearing. He bites down on his full pink lip before his sparkling blue eyes find mine again. He's flirting with me. I can feel it in the air, and for some strange reason, I'm not fighting it like I should.

Students file into the classroom, and I stand upright, straightening my skirt. Saint's eyes remain on me for a second longer, but mine are now locked on the teens slumping into their seats. I do a quick head count, realizing I must not have prepared correctly. Somehow there aren't enough catechisms for everyone.

I lean over to Saint, whispering to him. "There aren't enough books. I must've counted wrong or something. Can you get started while I

run down to the office library and grab more?”

“Of course,” he says kindly, nodding his head.

I make a pained face, mouthing thank you, as I sneak out past the remaining students filing in. His demanding tone gains their attention, instructing them to find their seats.

Walking down the empty hallway, I finally reach the office library. I knock before I enter, even though I assume it’s empty by the lack of lights. I walk past a few desks until I get to the supply closet where we keep all the extra bibles, catechisms, and hymnals.

I walk down the short aisle of the closet, running my index finger along the cold hard-backing of the books, searching, until I find the section I need. Counting out five more, I hold them in my arms, pressing them against my chest as I turn to exit through the door.

The door that is now shut.

My eyes trail up from the ground, gazing at the leather loafers, then the hard-pressed dress pants of the Academy uniform. Jacob Erdman, one of the taunting posse members beneath Saint that aided in my years of torment, stands there, staring at the edge of my skirt before his eyes travel up to my chest.

“I’m shocked that a girl as calculated as you got it all wrong.” He eyes the stack of books pressed against my chest, the one that’s currently rising and falling faster than before. “Head count was off?”

He pushes off the door, running a hand through his brown shaggy hair, slowly approaching me.

He planned this.

“What do you want, Jacob?” I ask with a bite.

Placing a hand on the top of the books, he pulls them down roughly, causing them to fall to my feet as I suck in a breath.

“Well, that all depends,” he says with a haughty grin. “What are you willing to give?”

I swallow, taking a step back. Needing to get out of here, I turn to run, but am met with the edge of the bookshelf instead.

Jacob rushes me, gripping the back of my neck to push me against the cold metal of the shelf as his body presses against mine.

I cry out in terror, but there’s no one back here to hear me.

He slaps his palm over my face, slamming the side of my head against the shelf so hard books fall around us.

“Shut up, Briony! I’m not supposed to damage your face, but I will if you give me a reason to,” he growls into my ear.

My eyes sting with tears as I try to understand the meaning of the words he spewed. My fingers grasp the edge of the shelf, feeling for something, anything, to use.

A doll with a stain. A toy with imperfections. A woman with a weapon. A message.

A warning.

I squeeze my thighs together, feeling the edge of the handle between them, tucked into the edge of my thigh-high tights.

Not a threat.

But a test from the man who’s taken a liking to calling himself my God.

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HERO

I sit at the back of the dark office, kicking one of my boots up on the desks in the corner, legs spread wide as I sit back in the chair, running a finger over my mask-covered lips.

Hardening at the sound of her breathy screams beneath the crack of the door, I lick my teeth beneath my mask, running my hand over the rock forming down my thigh at the idea of her helplessness. I gaze at the wooden door with hooded eyes, awaiting the results.

She's either going to die as the little lamb of her own naivety, or she's going to morph into everything I hoped she could.

I've given her the olive branch. Let's just see how smart my little doll really is.

A few seconds of silence pass, and I roll my eyes. If a guy as stupid as Jacob Erdman actually finds a way to take my fun away from me, I'll do worse than what I had already planned.

I drop my heavy boot to the floor, about to stand, when the handle to the door slowly twists open. Watching with delightful humor, I see Jacob's back slowly exiting the room, his hands raised before him. My little doll holds the knife to his throat, pointing straight at him with a strong arm and a darkened fire in her heated gaze as she backs him away from her.

She's got some fire in her. That passion and grit beneath the good girl facade that aches for violence. It's what I need to see if she stands a chance at surviving. There's nothing I love more than a good fight in a woman.

My jaw flexes, and something of a growl leaves my throat as I stand.

"Just...just take it easy now. I was just messing with you. He said...just messing with you," he stutters, the fear in his tone evident.

As they make it out of the room, I eye her white button-up shirt, ripped open with a white lacy bra beneath it. One of her tights is sitting lower on her exposed thigh. He touched her.

He touched her.

Touched her.

My nostrils flare beneath the black ski mask, my back teeth grinding together. I can't yet decide if the idea turns me on or enrages me.

Without a second thought, I silently approach Jacob from behind. Briony's eyes widen, finally connecting with mine, seeing me appear from the darkness. I stare at her, absorbing that lively look about her now that she's actually conscious in my presence. Her beautiful blues narrow on me, her brows lowering, as she looks at me almost confused.

Before he even knows I'm there, I wrap a single hand around his neck. He whimpers in shock, his eyes darting wildly as he looks back at her for help. I walk him to a nearby desk in the dark office as he thrashes in fear. Throwing his head against the surface, I pin his weak, whining ass to the wood by his neck, sending pens and papers flying onto the floor near my boots.

"I'll take it from here, darling," I murmur beneath the mask.

Her lips part as she nervously glances at Jacob, then back at me, panting as she points the knife at us. I tip my head as she stands there, staring at me.

Those plump, wet lips. That delicate little neck covered in lies. I watch her breasts rise and fall beneath the opened shirt as she keeps the knife on me, unsure of whom to trust. Unknowing of the man before her.

I love watching as her mind whirls, feeling the full effects of her entire little world flipping upside down. I want her to hate me. Need her to keep feeling that ghost of fear that's crawling like spiders beneath that porcelain skin. I want to hurt her so fucking good.

"What are you going to do to him?" she asks, just above a whisper.

Studying her face, my eyes travel from the curve of her lips to those deep blue eyes again. The ones I rarely get to gaze at. Jacob tries to get up, yelling out for help, so I slam the side of his face back against the desk again by his neck. Surprisingly, she doesn't even flinch.

Tipping my chin down, I peer at her through my upper lashes.

"Watch his face change when you return."

Her throat bobs, her eyes rimming with tears as she shakes her head. I give her one silent nod and she gazes like an imbecilic doe caught in the headlights of raw pragmatism.

She doesn't want to believe me. Not yet ready to abort her values, her beliefs. But the facts remain. Saint and his father are determined

to end her one way or another. Saint with his own fucked-up amateur plans and his father's, on their way to being fucked up by me, both of them using others to do their dirty work like a couple of rich cowards playing puppets. What they don't realize is the toys they think they're playing with are about to run the show.

Kicking her leg up on the surface of a nearby desk, I watch as she folds the switchblade, tucking it back in her tights against the smooth skin of her inner thigh, pulling them high enough for me to see the very edge, the curve of that deliciously tight ass beneath the pleated skirt.

I contemplate slitting Jacob's throat right here on the table, then grabbing her hips and fucking that sweet little ass right over his dead and bleeding body, but somehow find the strength to refrain.

"What part of you did he touch?" I ask as she drops her leg.

She reaches up with two fingers and taps her mouth, then the back of her neck. Staring at her, the heat builds inside of me at the visual.

"Which hand?"

Her eyes wrinkle in the corners as if she's reluctant to tell me.

"Which fucking hand?!" I demand, making her jump.

"Right…the right," she stutters quickly.

I give her another dismissive nod.

"Who the hell are you?" she asks, buttoning up her shirt, not once taking her eyes off mine.

Some part of me loves the fact that she needs to know more of who I am, but I'll never tell her. Not when keeping the mystery alive is so much fun. And necessary.

"Go," I demand.

Her eyes find the door, then return to me.

"I said fucking go!"

"No, no! Briony, please don't leave! He's going to kill me!"

Jacob's pleas fill me with disgust and insurmountable joy.

I shrug my shoulders at her. "It's true."

Briony's horror-filled gaze finds me again. If she's not going to leave, I'll be forced to show her exactly who the fuck I am.

"Put the hand out," I instruct him calmly.

Jacob shakes his head against the table. I tighten my hold on his throat, his eyes bulging as he struggles to take in a breath. Finally, he

raises his right hand, putting it forward on the desk.

“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,” I recite, flipping open a new knife with one hand. “Isn’t that right, kid? Isn’t that what they’re teaching you these days?”

“Who the fuck are you?!” Jacob yells into the wooden desk.

My lovesick eyes find my intimidated little doll. I’ve entirely piqued her interest as she watches with dilated pupils, her pulse practically felt from across the room.

“Crazy,” I reply with a sigh, staring directly at her.

Without removing my gaze, I stab the knife through Jacob’s palm, the blood slowly leaking around the wound as he cries out obscenities. I release his neck, standing straight as he remains pinned to the desk, watching as Briony’s eyes redden. Her mouth is frozen open as she blinks, tears falling down the soft skin of her cheeks. I saunter towards her, enjoying the fear that’s bubbling in her veins with every step I take.

“Just another lamb to the slaughter, love,” I whisper, reaching up and wiping one of the tears from her face with my thumb, eyeing it in disgust. “Don’t cry for him. Those tears look fucking hideous on you.”

I push my thumb into her mouth, feeding those pathetic tears onto her tongue. Her lower lip trembles as I slowly remove my thumb from her soft, warm mouth, and a satisfied grin spreads across my face while Jacob’s wails of pain continue in the background.

I lean forward, my mouth inches from her ear from behind my mask.

“You’re such a good girl, Briony,” I whisper, my fingers sliding up under her skirt. She flinches, closing her eyes before realizing I’m only tapping on the knife between her thighs. “Listening to the cryptic words from a man she doesn’t even know.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asks breathlessly, her chin raised boldly.

I pull the ski mask up just enough to expose my mouth. Her eyes immediately fall to my lips, lingering there for a moment before returning to face me, eye to eye. We’re only inches apart, and I can practically taste her on my tongue already. I put my thumb in my mouth, sucking off the actual taste of her tongue, groaning around my digit before answering.

“Because you haven’t bloomed,” I say directly. “I can’t end something that hasn’t had its proper chance to live. That would be...indecent of me.”

Her forehead wrinkles as she calculates the wording.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asks suddenly, trembling before me.

“No,” I say, tipping my head and rubbing my jaw. “Not today, anyway.”

She shrinks into herself, arms wrapping over her chest, and it brings me such joy.

“Get back to class. He’s waiting.” I give her another nod, dismissing her. “And watch that face.”

She glances nervously at Jacob behind me again, who’s still begging for mercy, before slowly stepping back, eyeing me with suspicion.

“Don’t forget your books, sweetheart,” I call out, pulling my mask back down over my face.

She walks into the supply closet to grab the stack she dropped. Edging herself along the back wall, she’s sure to keep her eyes on me until she finally turns, slipping through the office door to make her way back down the hall.

I turn back to Jacob and shake my head at the work ahead of me.

This guy really thought he could fuck what’s mine.

Guess I don’t like the idea after all.

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BRONX

Watch his face.

I don't want to know the meaning behind his cryptic message. The man is terrifying. I thought I was scared in the presence of Jacob's attempted...whatever that was. But he still had some fear in him when I pulled that knife from my tights and stuck it under his neck. Aero? Well, whoever he is, he has none. No soul either, it seems.

This is a game to him, one he's getting pure entertainment out of by the look of the repulsive bulge in his jeans when I escaped.

Somehow, I knew he'd be there in that office. It's as if I can feel him now. I can sense when his eyes are on me, burning his holes through that door, setting fire to my skin. What I can't figure out is what his purpose is. He clearly gave me that knife, knowing this would happen today, knowing I'd be ambushed in that supply closet.

Chills sweep over me, the thought wracking me with terror. How? How could he know? And more importantly, why?

Walking into that classroom, I quietly close the door behind me. A male student reads a passage aloud to the class as Saint follows along in his catechism. He looks up from the page and spots me from across the room.

Watch his face change.

Blank.

Saint's face is entirely blank as he peers over at me with my books. With a quick blink, his grin forms, pulling at his full lips.

I don't understand. Aero insinuated I'd see something on his face. Some evidence of the fact that maybe he also knew Jacob was waiting for me. That this was some sort of setup in the making. But I get nothing from him at all. Nothing but a nod with his bright, sexy grin, silently calling me over to him.

I get this strange feeling that I can trust Aero. I don't know what that is. Call it intuition perhaps, but so far, everything he's said and done has seemed like a game to force me not to trust the only people I know.

Class finishes achingly slow as I'm left wondering about what's happening on the other side of the building behind those closed doors. After the session is over and the students file out, I pack up my bag as quickly as I can, needing to leave this building before my anxiety over what happened cripples me entirely.

I want no part in whatever Aero did to Jacob. But I know if by some random chance he's still alive, I'll be tied to his assault. His family is far too proud and far too rich to allow the injuring of their baby boy to go unpunished, even if his intentions were to harm me. It's sickening, really.

Saint drives me home, stalling outside near the curb of my house as he puts the vehicle in park. He turns to me casually with his elbow on the console.

"So I know this may seem odd..." He pauses, and I await what's next to fall out of his mouth. "But I wanted to know if you'd come with me to the Governor's Ball tomorrow night." He clears his throat, looking down between us before his eyes slowly trail up to mine. "As my date."

My heart thuds in my chest. I feel something inside of me wanting this; wanting to be his date and to allow him to show me who he really is. But there's another part of me that knows what I'm feeling right now is the extent of what I'm going to feel for him.

My mind flashes to Aero. It's strange to think of your psychotic stalker when you're getting asked out by a guy who's truly more your speed.

Saint and I come from similar backgrounds. Our families are very religious and heavily involved in the church, and the need to progress our names has never been more prevalent. We're both hard workers, evident by the constant competition between us in our past, and have real goals that don't involve camping out and watching girls in their rooms late at night who they haven't completely decided if they want to kill or not.

Feeling angered by the mind games, I answer quickly, "I'd love to."

A genuine smile crosses his face, and as I turn to open the car door, he grabs for my left hand. Turning back to face him, he pulls my hand up to his lips. With his soft eyes on mine, he brings his warm, gentle lips to the top of my hand, placing a kiss on my skin.

I get that flutter between my thighs again and my mouth parts, sucking in a breath, as he rests his lips against my hand, almost savoring the sensation for himself. His eyes trail down from mine, settling at my lips.

Just as I'm getting the feeling he's contemplating kissing me, a loud crash has me screaming out loud.

Pulling my arm back to my chest, I curl into myself as an explosion of sharp objects rain down on me. Saint throws an arm over me for protection as his windshield shatters into thousands of pieces.

Trembling, I find the courage to open my eyes. A single brick lies on the hood of his Jeep, his windshield now a distant memory. His eyes are wide and panicked as he pants through his parted lips.

"Are you alright?" he asks quickly, scanning my face and brushing the hair back behind my ears.

He dusts some shards off the shoulder of my uniform, sending them to the bottom of the Jeep floor, adding them to the collection pooled below.

"I-I'm fine," I stutter, my hands now shaking.

As we both turn to look out the broken glass, I spot a shadow behind him.

There he stands, on the driver's side of the vehicle, in his black, dirtied jeans, and his mud-stained sweatshirt, the ski mask still over his tipped head. He shakes his head once at me before disappearing behind the Jeep.

Saint looks forward, eyes locking on the brick that broke the windshield. He reaches for it, his forearm littered with tiny cuts as he grips it in his palm. Pulling it toward his face, his eyes narrow as he appears to read something on it. Looking over at me through furrowed brows, he swallows.

"What?" I ask in a panic. "What does it say?"

"Nothing. There's nothing." He clutches it to his side, opening the door of the Jeep and stepping out into the street. "Stupid kids," he mutters under his breath.

Walking around to the passenger side, he opens the door, the brick now gone, and holds his hand out to me.

"Come on, I'll walk you to the door," he says tenderly, his jaw flexing as his narrowed eyes scan the street protectively.

I take his hand, standing as the mess of glass falls from my lap onto the grass of my yard. Saint helps me brush off the rest of the glass before his damp palm squeezes tightly onto mine while he walks me up the stairs of our porch. He lingers there for a moment,

running a hand over his shaved, blonde hair, keeping his eyes on the street.

Opening the lock, I take a step through and turn to face him.

“Do you want me to come in? Take a look around?” he asks.

I think about that for a second, contemplating it, before I feel the eyes burning into the back of my head. The hairs on the back of my neck stand.

He’s inside.

For some strange reason, I’m more scared of what will happen if Saint comes in here than the fact that a potentially murderous, stalking psycho is standing somewhere behind me, watching us intently.

“I’ll be alright,” I say with a dismissing nod, my fingers shaking as I hold the edge of the door.

Saint stills as if unsure about leaving me alone or not.

“Should I stop by later?” he asks, his eyes carrying the weight of his worry.

“Just...text me tonight.” I sigh. “Get your Jeep taken care of.”

He pauses, and I can see a thought cross his mind. The message on that brick, whatever it was, clearly haunts him enough to be worried about my safety.

“Alright,” he whispers, his shoulders slumping. “I’m so sorry this happened, Briony.”

He takes a step back down the stair of the porch, holding the railing as he stays facing me. Almost as if he finds a way to justify leaving me, he nods and finally turns, jogging back to his Jeep. I bite down on my bottom lip as I watch him pull away, the crunching of glass beneath the wheels a blood-tingling reminder of the man waiting behind me.

I close the door, letting out a shaky sigh as I feel him slide up behind me. With my eyes closed, I rest my forehead against the door, my blood turning cold in his presence.

“Such a good girl keeping that pretty little mouth shut,” he whispers in that cracked, rumbling tone against my neck, and I breathe in his memorable scent. The scent that floods my senses in a dizzying way.

With my palms flat against the door, he nuzzles the back of my head like a dangerous lion, assessing his captured prey. He moves

my hair to the side, and before I can even think, I feel the sensation of a warm, flat tongue licking up the back of my neck. I shudder at the warmth I've never felt before as he says, "But you'd be a much better girl if you opened it up for me."

My temperature rises at his indecent words.

His dirtied fingers slide their way up my left hand on the door, where there's a decent-sized cut on my forefinger from his little brick-dropping game. The move is very reminiscent of the moment at the party when he pinned me to the door of that darkened bedroom.

"Dirtied my doll," he says, clearly assessing the wound.

Peeling my palm from the wood, he brings my shaking hand back towards his mouth behind me. I feel the sensation of a warm, wet tongue lick a long stroke over the place where Saint's lips were on the back of my hand.

He's licking away the touch of everyone else on me. Cleaning me of their dirt in his own sick and twisted way. It explains the licking of the back of my neck where I described Jacob's hands on me in that supply closet.

"Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed," he quotes the bible behind me, making my breaths choppy and uncontrolled. "Save me and I will be saved," he whispers softly. "For *you* are the one I praise." Just as the cryptic words leave his lips, I feel the warmth of his mouth close around the bleeding finger.

With that warm tongue pressed against my wound, my head buzzes, the sensation running a direct line to the aching spot between my legs. I tighten my thighs, a breath slipping past my lips as he slowly sucks the length of it, caressing the wound with his tongue, coming off the end with a soft pop. My knees buckle into the door, but not before he catches me beneath my arms.

The crude act, meant to be entirely sexual, slithers its way into my veins. Heat replaces the cold blood, and that fever within me grows like wildfire in a field of dormant and dead brush.

My biggest fears and curiosities are combusting together like tiny bombs in the pit of my stomach.

Right and wrong dance together to the music of my own pitiful and weakened excuses, as I find myself locked in a slow dance with the devil himself.

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HERO

Her skin tastes like salted caramel. Sweet, but with a tart little bite to it. A candy I can no longer avoid. A taste that I now know is something I won't deny myself, even if she fights me.

Lucky for me, the proper fight won't be long. Not with the way her body responds to mine. She's slowly breaking those chains that hold her back; her body outweighing her mind, her morals.

Gritting my teeth as I press my body against the round curve of her ass beneath that skirt, thoughts of ripping her panties to the side and nailing her to this door with my cock flash before my eyes.

Mine. Not his.

I could've killed them both in that Jeep. There was a second that I wanted to. Saw how it would play out. His lips on her hand disturbed every part of me, angering me to the point of ruining this entire plan. But I have to be smart and use the tools given to me to make this work. The message on the brick was enough to keep Saint busy with his father for the afternoon.

I growl to myself, my lip curling, refraining from my overwhelming need to sink my teeth into the flesh of her shoulder, making her cry out in pleasurable pain. Pushing off of her, I walk back through the house I know so well from countless nights of spying on her alone and make my way up the stairs to her bathroom.

She'll follow me. My obedient, scared, little, all-too-curious doll.

I love when she listens. I want to reward her for her quick wit and the ability to read through the scenarios playing out before her, but I'd rather punish her for how stupid and naïve she's been before me.

Just as I expected, she follows me up to the second floor, standing back a few yards as she studies me, holding onto the railing of the stairs with her delicate little hands. Hands that are soft from being pampered her entire life like the little fucking princess her parents made her out to be. Very much unlike mine. My hands are layered with scars, calluses, and stories. Countless lives claimed by their hold.

I gaze at my hands, palms coated in freshly dug dirt, the remnants stuck beneath each and every nail.

"W-what do you want with me?" she asks from the hallway, sounding like a timid little doe. "Please. Why are you doing this?"

She wants answers but doesn't yet deserve them. I don't know how far gone she is. How tainted her warped little mind is. I need to know if there's truly hope for her, or if all of this ends with her being silenced once and for all.

"I'm taking a shower," I reply, annoyed by the timid tone of her voice. "Need to clean up."

I feel her silently behind me as I unzip my sweatshirt and pull it down my arms. She watches as I remove it, dropping it to the floor, leaving only my white tank beneath it. I don't risk my mask coming off before her, the resemblance unfortunately uncanny, so I fist the tank in two hands and rip it off my chest. Her throat bobs at the sight of my shirtless body, and it occurs to me she's probably never seen a man naked before her. Not one like me, anyway. All tatted up and scarred; wounds of wars she'll never understand, covered in ink of my own choosing.

So I decide to make a show of it.

With my shirt in a shredded mess on the floor, I open my belt buckle. Her innocent lashes flutter, and the heat rises in her cheeks as her grip tightens on the banister. Opening the belt, I grip the end, quickly pulling it through the belt loops. She jumps slightly as if I hit her with the end of it, her eyes wide and appalled.

I slowly roll the leather belt around my hand, my eyes zeroing in on her neck as I circle it tightly around my palm. I imagine her neck bound by it, fighting that urge I always seem to battle to fill her life with pure and utter terror.

"I—I could call the police, you know..." she says with a shaky voice.

I cock my head, my hands dropping the belt to the tile floor with a loud ringing clunk.

"They would find out what you did...where you put him," she continues as my fingers pop the button of my jeans, pulling them open and allowing them to hang on my hips. "You won't get away with this."

My brows raise with amusement before I drop my hands, my pants drooping to expose more of me as I stalk towards her.

"Yeah, so I don't do well with threats," I say casually, backing her into the wall of the hallway. Her eyes trail my abdomen until they meet

the V where my open jeans end until the back of her head hits the wall, jolting her. “So don’t ever fucking threaten me again.”

Her eyes widen when I quickly grip a hand around the front of her neck, pinning her back against the wall. I feel her throat bob beneath my hand, and the growing erection against her thigh is unavoidable.

“And if they find out where I buried him,” I grumble, leaning forward until my lips beneath the mask run along her jaw, whispering, “You’ll have a lot of explaining to do.”

Her chest heaves beneath my forearm as I lean back until we’re face to face again, our noses practically touching.

Fuck, I fall for the fire in those terror-filled eyes every time. I just want them puffy and wet from struggling to deep throat the length of me. I want her sobbing in her attempts to please me the way she finds herself needing. Flexing my jaw at the soft feeling of her throat beneath my grasp, I push my thigh between her legs, further pinning her against this wall. My cock is harder than a rock against her thigh as she calculates my words.

“W-why would I get in trouble?” She practically moans, her throat vibrating against my palm.

A devilish smile grows beneath the mask before I press my mouth against hers, whispering the words into her lips. “Because he’s buried in your backyard.”

Her forehead creases and she looks like she might faint.

Good. Let her faint. Fall. Get back up. Fucking handle it.

She’ll do as I ask, probably because she’s smart enough to know that any evidence I leave behind will only fall back onto her. Reluctantly, I’ve roped her into cleaning up this crime scene, forcing her to be an accessory to murder. A little insurance policy, if you will.

“Why would you—” She sucks in air like it doesn’t come easy. “Why would you do that?!”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I glare at her like she’s an idiot, then release my hold on her neck.

I walk back into the now steaming bathroom, out of her sight, and remove the rest of my clothing, piling it in a bundle on the floor before the door. I pull the ski mask from my head and lay it on the sink, stepping into the hot water of the shower, the steam creating a cloud around me.

Dipping my head in the water, my dark hair falls to my forehead, the warmth dripping down my face. Basking in the relief of the hot water running down the tired and aching muscles of my back, I place my hands on the wall beneath the shower head, allowing for a second of relaxation. I groan at the sensation, enjoying the feel of her curious eyes scanning my body in the mist through the cracked door; temptations seeping beneath her skin.

“Be a doll and burn those in the utility sink in your basement,” I say, nodding to the pile while still facing forward.

“How do you—”

“Briony, please,” I interrupt, running my hands down the ridges of my abdomen and along my body. “I’ve been watching for a while, but I’ve always seen you. Seen you long before you could see yourself.”

She’s more like me than she realizes. The demon she thinks I am is simply an illusion they’ve projected. Rights and wrongs aren’t as straightforward when you’re on my side of the track. Morality is viable, something you must bend to your needs to survive. I’ll fight until I’m a rotted corpse to show her that.

I continue to feel her eyes on me as I toss my hair around me, shaking my head beneath the water like the wild man she’s intrigued by. She’s taking the words I’ve said and making them mean something.

Just as she should.

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BRONX

With shaking hands, I lower the clothes into the old porcelain sink in our basement. Grabbing the lighter fluid, my hands scour the metal shelves lining the cement wall of the basement, searching for a match. My heart is racing as I place my hands on the edge of the sink, bending forward over the blood and dirt-covered clothes.

He's in your backyard.

The bile rises in my throat, and just as I'm fighting the urge to throw up, I feel him behind me. His hand slides up the back of my neck, fisting my hair and pulling it tightly until my head falls back. I gasp as he presses his body to mine, feeling his hard physique against my backside.

"It was you or him," he says in his throaty tone, his mouth near my ear. "You're a fucking idiot not to see it."

He releases the tight grip on my hair, and my head falls forward. I twist immediately, turning to face him with a scowl. His hands are on either side of the sink, holding me in place. His mask is back over his face and those hazel eyes that always hold this dangerously lifeless look about them stare directly into mine. He's wearing a black t-shirt and a new pair of black pants. I can't seem to understand where they came from, unless he literally brought a bag in here when he snuck in.

He leans into me, getting entirely too close. Towering over, he looks down at me, trembling beneath him.

"No one hurts you, but me," he says definitively, as if it's supposed to bring me some sort of comfort.

He nuzzles his head against me again like he's rubbing his scent on me, or my scent on him, before whispering into my ear, "But the pain I'll bring upon you is the kind you'll need. The kind your body begs for me to find deep inside that sweet little exterior. The kind your insides scream to release but are muffled with deceptions of sin."

I close my eyes as my breaths fall heavy. I feel that scream, that ache he's referring to, the tightening in my lower abdomen. My thighs, now tense, pressed against each other again.

He leans back slightly, separating only enough to bring his middle finger to the base of my throat where it dips. Slowly, he trails it down my chest, over my shirt, between my breasts, and down the line of

my abdomen until he reaches the place just above the hem of my skirt.

“I can get rid of that ache for you, doll,” he whispers, running his ring-covered hand along the edge of my skirt, pushing the finger just beneath the hem. “If you allow yourself to fall into flames of eternal hell with me.” I can practically hear the smirk in his tone.

My skin awakens at his touch, and a reluctant moan rumbles through my throat. He cocks his head, his eyes peering back into mine. I can see the satisfaction beneath the black ski mask in his eyes alone. He’s well aware of his effects on the body before him.

Lifting his mask up enough to expose his sharp-cut jaw and full lips, he reaches behind him, grabbing something from his back pocket. I suck in a breath as he places a single match between his teeth like a cigarette, angling the end towards me.

Sulfur. The smell. It’s the scent that now reminds me of him.

“Take it,” he grits through his teeth.

He makes me so nervous. Terrified, yet so entirely intrigued.

My hand slowly rises and I grab the end of the match from his lips, careful not to touch them as I do. He eyes me hard, and I see the roll of his throat, the throat that, upon closer inspection, is covered with a black rose tattoo.

I’ve never seen anyone like him. I know no one like him. Questions litter my mind again as I try to piece together who he is and why I feel the familiarity in his presence, why I find myself trusting him.

“Recognize Briony, that I’m the air to your fire. All you need to do is fan the flame.” His eyes fall to the match in my hand and back. “Finish it.” He barks his orders through a clenched jaw, a coldness to his tone.

Pulling the mask back down, he turns, walking back up the stairs of the basement. I stare at the match in my hand, his words yet again sinking their claws into me. The symbolism he’s consistently using is an odd mirror of his own truth, or a calculated game set to deceive me.

I take that match and strike it against the brick wall behind the sink. The flame ignites in the air, the sulfur catching fire. I made the move. I fanned the flame. Tossing the match into the sink, the clothes quickly

catch fire and I gaze into the bright orange and red glow, feeling an odd comfort in its blaze.



Later that night, I'm listening to Mia babble about nonsense through the phone as I eye my backyard through the window of my bedroom. Disbelief and anger fill me at the fact that Aero blackmailed me, entangling me into his web of destruction. It's time for me to devise a plan against him.

"Olivia said that she expected Terrance to ask her to the Governor's Ball, but that he'll probably choose Erin because she sucked him off in his car last Friday night. Can you believe that?"

"What? That he'll choose Erin over Olivia?"

"No." She scoffs in disgust. "That Erin did that to him? She's being called the town whore now by everyone on Facebook since they got caught in that parking lot."

This is how it goes. Anyone, especially the women in our community, is chastised for this. The men, not as much. Sex is not something we talk about aloud. In a marriage, that intimate part of the relationship stays behind closed doors, away from the topics of conversation. But it's accepted. What's not is fornication, and as soon as you get the title of a town whore, there's no saving your soul. The repercussions of such an act will cripple your credibility as a woman of the Lord in our church forever.

The forgiveness they love to talk about only comes from those who choose to live their life for the Lord. An act like this? It's practically unforgivable in their eyes. They'll go through the acts of repentance, but never will they hold a place in the congregation as someone of proper respect or true worth.

This is where my internal beliefs conflict. I don't see my God to be one not to forgive, but the church and its members make it well known that a stain like this on a woman is one that will never be washed out.

"I wonder why she did that?" I ask aloud. "I mean, if you were going to engage in something so reputation-shattering, why not just go all in and have sex?"

"Briony!" Mia gasps into the receiver.

"Well, I'm serious. Why not? Why that?"

"Because some promiscuous women seem to get off by getting someone else off, apparently," she says repulsively before sighing. "I

don’t know. Maybe she thought if she didn’t go all the way, she’d still be saved.”

My thoughts circle to Aero immediately. Images of me on my knees before him, looking up at his mask-covered face, flood me. My fingers trailing along his taut abdomen covered in ink that’s burned into my mind, scars and stories of the hell from which he resides. His large, veiny hands are in my hair again, gripping and pulling tightly as I please him with my mouth, making him growl with pleasure.

“Anyway, the ball,” Mia continues. “I heard Saint asked you today! Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shake my head of the thoughts, finding my fingers resting between my chest where he touched me, trailing the same path. Exploring that unknown element of urges and curiosities is making sense to me. I can’t even fault Erin for being curious. I can only blame her for getting caught.

“Um, sorry. It literally just happened like hours ago,” I say, standing and walking over to the bench of my vanity, peering at the flush in my cheeks from the inappropriate thoughts. “Didn’t you hear what happened?”

Surely, news of the mysterious brick thrower reached her before the news of him asking me to the ball.

“I was just told that he asked you after class this afternoon and that you said yes! I’m so happy we’re both going!”

I can’t believe information like the fact that Jacob is currently missing, or that Saint’s entire windshield was shattered in a mysterious attack isn’t known, but every stupid detail about who’s going with who to the Governor’s Ball, or that Erin is giving head, is. It’s so unsettling.

“I’ll need to borrow a dress again,” I state, peering into my sad little closet. Standing from my bench, I make my way over to my bed, plopping down and laying back as I look at the ceiling. “Maybe we can get ready together?”

“Of course,” she says quickly, like it wasn’t even a thought we’d do it any other way. “I’ll bring my closet over tomorrow.”

After making arrangements with Mia, I hang up the phone, staring at the white of my ceiling, devoid of any color.

It seems reminiscent of the straight and narrow path I walk in my life. Making the right choices, being that girl that follows the rules, only to still find myself treading water while the men in our church watch from their boat. The inequality is evident in the fact that Saint was assigned to teach the class with me instead of me teaching by myself like I'd been told.

I wonder about getting lost in color. Red in particular. The deep crimson of budded roses and evidence-burning flames.

Tonight, I'll stay awake.

I'll catch him off-guard.

Tonight I'll meet my demon in the dark.

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HERO

After leaving her place, I sat in my car, trailing my bottom lip with my thumb. Fisting her hair in my hand in that basement, I'd bit down on my lip until I tasted blood. Splitting my flesh was the least of my worries. Being near her in a conscious state is driving me more mad than I ever thought imaginable. There's nothing I crave more than to break this girl. To show her how broken the world around her really is. To destroy that light within her that bleeds out through those innocent eyes, allowing her to see me in the darkness. Tonight. Tonight, I'll show her that destructive truth.

I see it every time I'm near her now. She's receptive to my masculinity. Wanting to be claimed the way a woman of her purity can only dream. I can feel it crawling beneath that porcelain skin. She wants to free herself from the chains of these rules that were meant to suppress her true desires.

I'll show her how to scream. I'll be the voice she never knew she needed.

But first, another job.

A visit with an old friend to gain some knowledge. The dirt swept beneath the rug of the men in power was piling up, and exposure was becoming more appealing than the simplicities of the job they paid me to do.

Walking into the nightclub, I feel the familiar thump of the bass rocking through my chest, the steady flashing of red lights melting bodies into one another in a bleeding mess of intoxication. Making my way towards the private rooms near the back, I greet two large men standing tall with their arms crossed over their chests, one with a beard, one without.

"Here for Nox," I tell the man in front of me.

His eyes narrow and his arms cross tighter, but he does nothing to move or respond.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I say, looking over at the other guard standing like a statue.

I pull the guns from the back of my pants, holding one to the man's temple and holding the other out toward the other idiot.

"H-how'd he get that in here?" the other guard asks, choking on his words, backing with his arms raised.

“Apparently it doesn’t take brains or a set of balls to work the fucking door, eh?” I say, shaking my head. “HERE FOR NOX!” I repeat, tapping the barrel of the gun on the man’s head.

The man fumbles behind him, pressing the call button.

I smirk at both men, enjoying the fear they are emitting, almost wondering why this is so easy, before the door behind them opens and I see the man I’m here to see.

Nox’s grin stretches across his face immediately before he cocks a brow, eyeing the guns I have pointed at his men. “I shouldn’t be surprised, really.”

He turns, nodding his shaved, tatted-up head along for me to follow him. I give the boys at the door a quick wink before tucking away my guns and following Nox.

“Yeah, I know,” he begins, walking his lengthy form down the dimly lit hall as he talks. “They aren’t the smartest of the crew, but they pack the most punch. It scares most people away.” He turns back to look at me, before stopping in front of a black door with a red window. “Not that you’re most people, clearly.”

Nox knows me better than anyone else. He knows the depths of my insanity. Serving time together will have you making friends you never thought you would, keeping company with all the wrong people. The people that find your creative criminal and shine it into something more intriguing and more talented than ever before. Prison is an education, one I gained many skills from.

He owns and operates a strip club and bar that washes money for the underground drug Lords. Not only does he dabble in his own supply, both women and drugs, but he also gets paid off by politicians, representatives of the church, and outstanding citizens of our sweet and green community to keep his mouth shut about what happens behind his closed doors. He’s got no ties to anyone. No one but me.

I don’t blame the man for taking a buck where he can. He’s not the one forcing anyone to come in and get a quick suck and fuck, and what happens here is entirely consensual. The dirty girls drooling for cash and the pristine men drooling for dirty girls. The housewives don’t spread themselves open the way these prominent members of

society truly desire. No, these men pretend in the light of day and unleash in the dark of the night.

“You here for Anika again?” he asks with a side-eyed grin, putting his key card up to the door. “It’s been a while.”

The door beeps, opening for us.

“Played out,” I scoff. “But this is business, shithead. I need some information from one of your girls.”

“I knew someone as fucked up as you would get sick of her fast. These squares can’t get enough.” He nods to the door where the club is behind us with a chuckle.

“Brandi. Send her out,” I demand.

He holds his hand out, leading the way. I walk into the dark room, where a single red light is shining from the ceiling, focused on a circular stage and a pole that faces toward a plush red couch.

“Take a seat,” he says casually, motioning to the couch. “I’ll let her know you’re ready.”

He turns to walk out of the room but stalls, looking back.

“Always a pleasure, Aero.” He nods with a mischievous smirk, dismissing himself.

I settle back on the couch, legs spread wide, arms resting along the back of it, ready to get this done and over with so I can focus on my latest project. Obliterating Briony in the most primal way. I hear the door click open and a shadow makes its way into the light.

In walks a scantily dressed woman with a long black wig tied back into pigtails, her outfit literally making me roll my eyes. *A schoolgirl? A fucking schoolgirl? Could this man be any more obvious?*

“Hey, baby,” she says, sauntering towards me on her platform heels. “I heard you wanted me for a private dance?”

She sits her ass on my lap, her tiny little checkered skirt riding up, exposing all of her already. Smelling like cheap alcohol and tanning oil, she leans her back against my chest. Looking back at me, she trails her fingers along her neck, down towards her chest. It’s then I notice the shining crucifix dangling from a chain between her breasts. *Fucking hilarious.*

She’s got the information I need as she sits here, playing the part of the slutty catholic schoolgirl. The irony.

I grip the necklace in my hand, ripping it off her neck. She gasps, clutching her skin where a dark red mark is already forming. Her eyes widen, but she tries playing it off. She crouches down onto her knees while the hard rock music continues booming through the room, turning to sit between my legs. Her hands slowly slide up my thighs, edging closer and closer to my cock.

“What can I do for you, baby? What is it you’d like, Bones?”

Bones. My nickname has clearly spread around the club for the infamous skull mask I wear anytime I make an appearance.

“Tell me about your last visitor, Brandi,” I say, glaring down at her on her knees.

She gulps, and I know immediately by the stiffness in her neck she was told to lie for him. Told to keep her little mouth shut if she wanted to keep making the good money.

I lean forward, grabbing my Glock from behind me and lazily scratching my temple with it, tossing the dark, unruly hair across my forehead.

“I’d ask you again, but I really hate repeating myself.”

Her mouth drops open as a whimper leaves her chest. She falls back, sitting on her heels.

“Tell me, Brandi,” I say, turning the barrel of the gun towards her and placing it softly on her forehead. Her chest heaves beneath her white, barely there button-up shirt that’s tied up into a knot beneath her breasts. “Is it true that if you breathe through your nose you can deep throat practically anything?”

I run the edge of the gun down her nose as her eyes stay focused on mine. I make it to her lips, and as tears fall from her eyes, her deep scowl attempts to burn through me.

“She has it coming,” she spits out at me. “She’s bound to fuck up my money.”

The mention of Briony has my nostrils flaring. I knew this bitch knew more than she was letting on. Being the whore of a man of power has its advantages. Whispers of business always infiltrate these places and women like her love to keep their secrets.

I grip the hair at the top of her head, startling her.

“Open,” I demand.

Her quivering lips part as she mouths the end of my gun. I feel her teeth hit the edge as she mumbles something around it before choking.

“Through the nose, remember? Just like you’ve practiced.”

She tries to say something, protest it, her eyes narrowing on me. A wordless threat.

“Sorry, can’t hear you, sweetheart,” I say sweetly, leaning forward and petting the side of her head. “Your lies and stories won’t keep this bullet from hitting the back of that head.”

More tears flood her face, her fake eyelashes a fluttering mess.

“Ready to talk?” I ask, and she nods quickly. “Good girl.”

I pull the gun from her mouth, keeping my grip on the hair atop her head as she coughs.

“What do they make you do?”

“Who?”

“Your highest paying clients? How do you perform for them?”

Her eyes dart around the room, begging for help as if someone were watching.

“Cameras are off, darling.”

Her eyes widen. “That’s not—“

“I don’t fucking care what protocol is for your safety at the moment. You realize that, right?”

She sniffs, glaring at me.

“How do you perform?”

“This outfit. With a short wig.”

Interesting.

“And how do they like it?”

“It depends—“

“Just fucking tell me!” I growl, pulling the top of her hair back, forcing her to look at me.

She squints her eyes. “From behind. Anal mostly. He calls me Brady. Always Brady.”

Jesus. Could they be more obvious?

“Who’s he?”

Looking down, she contemplates answering.

“Caldwell.” She looks back up at me and there’s no guilt whatsoever.

The fucking bishop.

“What time does he visit you?”

She sighs. “Always 3:30.”

“And who’s paying you to protect him?” I demand, with venom lacing my tone.

She licks her lips, swallowing before looking up at me again, still debating in her head if she should deceive the man paying her, or take the bullet to the skull. The fact she’s even considering dying for that piece of shit has me wanting to blow her brains across that tiny stage myself.

“C-Cal,” she stutters, her body trembling. “Callum Westwood.”

I stare at her for a minute. I suspected this information, just needed it confirmed to build my case against the prick to destroy him from the inside out.

“Do you fuck him, too?”

Her eyes narrow further, attempting to penetrate me with her gaze. She doesn’t want to answer but finally nods.

“Bravo Brandi,” I say with a grin, loosening my grip on her hair and sliding it down the side of her face before slapping her cheek twice. “Bravo.”

I lean back into the couch again, grabbing for the black ski mask in my leather coat. I pull it out, tossing it in her face. She grabs it, looking confused as she peers down at it, then back up at me.

“Now cover your face.”

I spread my legs, adjusting my hips as I rest my neck against the back of the couch.

Sliding the mask over her wig, she puts it on, glaring up at me through the eyeholes as she adjusts it.

“Cover that weak, money-hungry, morally depraved face, and get me off,” I demand.

Seemingly back in her element, she leans up on her knees, unbuckling my belt, quick to open my jeans. Her fingers find my cock as she grips the base and angles me to her mouth.

“Nah, baby,” I say, using a hand to stop her. “I don’t want your dirty mouth on me. Only hands.”

I lean my head back against the couch, imagining that porcelain skin, those red, trembling lips, the natural curves of her supple

breasts. I pretend the woman touching me is the innocent beauty about to fall to her desires. A groan leaves my lips as I envision the dark-haired doll I've become obsessed with twisting her soft hands around my hardening cock.

Briony does something to me no one else has. She's maintained an innocence in a world of corruption, somehow shadowing the truths I'm bound to expose her to. Briony Strait is about to break for me. I will break her. Dirtying her to anyone else. But the sins I'll have her caving to will be her reawakening. Her baptism in human nature and the animalistic desires that drive us. A lesson in what it means to be alive from the one she'll soon be calling God.

"Ah fuck, doll," I murmur to myself with my eyes closed tightly, thinking of my girl as I find my release with my wholesome father's closet whore.

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BRONX

My eyes are heavy as I feel the sleep catching up to me in my race against the clock.

Getting a full night's rest before another day of teaching classes, then picking out a dress for attending a Governor's Ball should be all I'm concerned with at the moment.

But of course, Aero has my mind.

He's infiltrated that space of curiosity that's grown into something I can't ignore. Like a virus, he plagues me with the overwhelming need to know more. I'd say it was to protect myself from him, but the truth is, he could've killed me already. It's his reasons for not that have me needing to know more.

I wait here in the dark, behind the door to my bedroom, listening for any sign of him. He always comes, but when? I haven't the slightest clue.

The afternoon sun had set, and the night crept in around me like a blanket of anxious torture, clinging to my shoulders, never leaving. After his abrupt departure post-shower, he left me wondering where he went. Where does this man reside when not outside my home? What's his profession, if any at all? Does he have family or close relations nearby? Surely there must be answers. A man doesn't just pop up out of the blue with intimate knowledge of who you are without some history himself, especially not in this town.

I thought for sure that Saint would've called or stopped by to ensure I was alright after the event that went down when he dropped me off, but I've yet to hear from him.

Feeling my eyelids droop, I look across the room at the clock on my nightstand one last time.

3:13 A.M.

I'll just rest my eyes for a second. Only a second.

As soon as I give myself the chance to do it, I'm startled straight by the sound of creaking wood. My heart races as blood rushes through my ears.

He's here.

Sure enough, I hear faint footsteps pad their way up the stairs as if he just simply let himself in the locked front door. Slowly sliding myself up the wall into a standing position, I grasp the switchblade between my fingers, sliding it until I get a firm hold of it in my palm.

The footsteps grow near as the wooden floor gives way to his location.

I swallow down any last fears I may have as the brass doorknob slowly turns. The door pushes open and I can smell him before I can see him. Leather, sulfur, and the musk of man. So signature.

Steadying my breathing, I watch as he walks forward into the room, the light of the moon just barely illuminating his outline. The tall, lengthy man with broad shoulders and a slim waist. His shaggy hair is exposed, tossed in a mess atop his head, and I wonder if he's wearing his mask.

Who are you, Aero?

He walks towards my bed before tossing the rosebud into the trash. His creepy calling card. I lurk near the wall behind him; my arm out, the knife pointed directly at the back of his neck.

His hand reaches out before him, grabbing the blankets on my bed into a slow fist. It's funny how I can sense his anger just by the maddening grip of his large, tense hand, clearly visualizing the lack of a certain someone in the bed before him.

I take another step forward, trying to regulate my breathing, when his head turns ever so slightly, exposing his ear to me.

"What do you want from me?" I demand in the dark, now holding the tip of the knife to the back of his neck.

He turns towards me, allowing the tip of the knife to run along the skin, a red scratch forming in its wake.

My eyes trail up to his mouth, where a smug grin is forming. He's wearing a new mask tonight. It's a partial skull that's cracked across his face in a jagged line, leaving a chiseled cheekbone, partial jaw, and his full lips exposed. His eyes seem darker. Colder than earlier, if that's even possible for someone with his lack of a soul.

"There she is," he says slowly, smiling as he leans forward into the knife at the base of his neck, against the large rose tattoo.

"Why are you here?! Answer me!" I demand, pushing the knife against him, not backing down like he probably assumes I will.

He wants me to fight? I'll show him I can.

"What was your plan, doll? Were you going to kill me?" He smiles sweetly before licking his lips.

My heart thunders in my chest as his gaze travels down my body, leaving a trail of heat touching every place his eyes touch. I can feel the tingling of my breasts. My nipples harden into tight buds beneath my white, flimsy nightshirt as he eyes them both.

I paired the shirt with matching white night shorts that are shorter than short. If I need to distract the man with my body to get an edge over him, I'll do it. Anything to not end up in a shallow grave in my backyard alongside Jacob.

It appears to be having a negative effect, because when his eyes return to mine, they seem angrier. I narrow my gaze right back at him, holding the knife steady.

"And with my own knife?" He clicks his tongue. "Savage little thing, you are."

"What is this?!" I yell out. "What do you know, Aero? What kind of sick game are you playing?"

"I know that you're in a lot of trouble, Briony," he says, leaning forward even further before his voice drops into a low and serious tone. "And you need me a lot more than I need you."

I marinate on his words, attempting to decipher them. Worried about cutting him, I watch as the knife against his throat now pierces his skin, a smear of blood forming beneath the edge of the blade. My mouth drops open as I suck in a breath, and in a split second, his arm comes up and grips the hair at the back of my head again. I gasp as he pulls tightly, forcing my head back. I hold the blade steady to him.

"This is your last chance, sweetheart." He towers above me, looking down as blood slowly drips down his neck from the wound he keeps pushing into, as if he can't feel pain. As if he enjoys it. "You won't get it again."

Something deep inside of me knows this man has no fear of death. He doesn't know fear in general. Threatening him again was a huge mistake. One that will definitely hold consequences if I fail.

My lip trembles as my hand violently shakes in fear. I drop the knife between us and it lands with a thud on the hardwood beneath us. Aero looks down at it, then back up at my fearful eyes. In a swift move, he pulls a gun from somewhere behind him and backs me into the wall with his tight grip on my hair. I hit the wall hard as the edge of

the gun rests near my temple. I shudder in fear as my breaths come quick and short and tears fill my eyes.

“I told you I don’t do well with threats,” he says sharply as I feel the heat of his breath against my cheek.

His knee presses between my thighs and he nudges, spreading my legs open as his hips pin me to the wall.

“Next time this happens,” he says, drifting the gun down my cheek, then down my neck. The barrel trails down my abdomen until he lowers it to the place my thighs meet, his dark eyes focused on mine. “I’ll give you a proper reason to cry.”

He rubs the gun between my legs, slowly sliding the length of it along the entirety of my tingling center, the cold metal a stark contrast to the heat building there. My lashes flutter before I close my eyes tightly, trying to ward off the sensation I’m reluctantly savoring.

Aero’s presence does something different to me. He pushes me to feel things I’ve denied myself to save my soul. What I can’t decide is if falling into his darkness will set me free or destroy me entirely.

Staring down at me with his gun now pointed at my clit and a fistful of hair holding me hostage against the wall, he leans closer until our noses are touching, our breaths meeting between us. His dark, shaggy hair hangs over the top of the mask, leaving his fiery stare blazing through me. Gazing dangerously into my eyes, his tongue darts out of his mouth and I feel the warm wetness of it slowly licking from the bottom of my chin up over my lips to the bottom of my nose.

I whimper at the sensation, his direct stare terrifying me as he does it.

“Clean,” he whispers against my lips.

Then it hits me. He’d yet to lick me clean of Jacob’s touch over my mouth. This man is sadistic and twisted, and my body can’t seem to deny what that does to me. A sickness deep within me enjoys his demented version of affection. It has to be snuffed out. I need to get away from this psychotic man before I fall victim to these devilish charms.

My eyes dart to the door, then back at him. He studies me for a second before that terror-producing smile makes it return, showing me the white of his teeth and the oddly sharp cuts of his canines.

“Ah, I see,” he whispers. “My little doll wants to run, yeah?”

The muscles in my neck strain, and he eyes my throat.

“Do it,” he says, releasing his hold on me.

Taking in a deep breath, I watch as he slowly backs himself away from me. His calves hit my bed behind him and he takes a seat, laying his gun on the comforter beside him.

“Run, Briony.” He nods towards the door. “And if you make it out of this house before I get to you...I’ll leave.”

Freedom from him in his own game. *If you want to make it out alive, run for your life.* His words. I’d have to be fast. Smart.

“However,” he says, tipping his head. “If I catch you...” His eyes assess my body beneath the flimsy cotton night set. “You surrender yourself to me entirely, allowing me to show you the light.”

My brows knit together at his strange proposition. *The light?* It doesn’t matter. I’m going to make it out. I have to. I know the perfect plan.

“You’ll leave? And that’s it. You won’t return? I won’t see you in the shadows anymore? Lurking around? Watching? Waiting?” I pause, cautious, before adding, “Murdering?”

“That I’ll never stop,” he answers quickly.

I’d swallow if I could, but my nerves are running rampant. Studying me as I practically cave into a trembling bag of bones, he simply says, “I’ll give you a head start.”

Taking a few steps forward, his eyes follow me. I squat down in front of him, grabbing the edge of the knife from the floor. Slowly sliding it into my hand, I flip the blade down, holding it in my grasp as my eyes find the courage to look up at him.

“There’s my smart girl,” he says with a smirk, seemingly happy that I’m choosing to defend myself against him.

With the tension thick, an eerie silence fills the dark room as we stare at one another. The determined prey to the calculated killer.

“Three.”

Before he can say anything else, I turn and run.

“Two.”

I run for my life.

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HERO

Toying with my little doll is my new favorite obsession. These games we play? They're only the beginning.

She takes off as I begin my countdown, and I sense the wheels turning in her head. She doesn't realize that I know just how clever she is. I'm not like these demons around her, stunting her growth, assuming she's incapable, working to destroy the power she possesses. I know just how capable she is, and whenever she proves that in her fight, it only increases my obsession.

"One," I finally call out, standing from the bed.

I turn out of the room, just in time to see the two doors of the remaining bedrooms upstairs close, one just before the other. How she did that, I don't know. She's smart enough to not run out the front door, knowing I'd easily catch her. I told her if she got out, she'd be free of me. But even if she makes it out, she won't be.

Briony has yet to learn that I'll never let her go. And in time, she'll never want me to.

I stand between the two rooms listening intently, when I remember that only one of these two rooms has a sliver of roof beneath it, allowing her to escape the window. Opening the door to that room, I walk into the darkness, letting it swallow me. The light of the moon barely shines through the closed window. If she's in here, she's hiding well. A creak in the floorboards sends my eyes to the closet and I bite down on my bottom lip, the smile growing with each step closer to it.

"Come out and play, little doll," I whisper, before reaching into the closet, swinging my forearms in the space.

Clothes. Nothing but hanging clothes. My brows knit together when I hear the paddling of bare feet run past the door.

That inquisitive bitch was in the other room!

She knew I knew the layout enough to choose this one first. I laugh to myself, enjoying the fact that she was a step ahead of me. Her mind continuously amazes me.

I turn, running out of the room, pulling myself around by the door frame as I see her black hair flying down the stairs. I grip the banister, swinging myself over it, and jump down a few of the stairs. Gripping the edge of a large painting from the wall with one hand, it falls as she pulls it, shattering into a mess on the remaining stairs between

us. I hurdle the frame with my legs, closing in on her. She's sprinting for her life, trying to get to that door, but I'm faster.

I dive, grabbing her calf, and she trips, falling hard onto her abdomen as the air in her lungs leaves her. Eyeing her round ass that bounces as she falls, I get to my knees, crawling up her body. She flips, bringing a knee to her chest and kicks me square in the jaw, sending my head sideways. A piece of my tooth chips off as my lip splits, the blood pooling in my mouth almost immediately.

She stares at me above her with terror and shock in her eyes, disbelieving of her own strength. I run my thumb along my bottom lip, seeing the blood.

"Oh, fuck yeah." A smile stretches across my face and I feel the blood rush to my cock.

She scurries out from under me, running towards the kitchen. I scramble after her; the blood dripping down my shirt. Opening the sliding glass door of the kitchen, I smile to myself, knowing there's a pole jammed in the run of it. It opens only half a foot before hitting the pole, making it impossible for her to slip through it. She quickly turns, her hands gripping the counter behind her, stabilizing her terror-filled form.

Her black hair hangs partially in front of her face, her breasts sway and her pink nipples are visible in the increased light around us. I shudder, imagining myself biting down on them until they bleed onto my tongue.

Only the kitchen island stands between us now. She looks down, realizing it too. Flipping the blade up with a flick of her wrist like a seasoned pro, my cock jumps in excitement.

My tongue slips out between my lips, and I lick the blood, tasting the familiar tinge of metal. I stalk towards her, standing on the opposite side of the island, dropping my palms on the granite as I lean forward, blood dripping from my chin.

"What's your move, doll?" I ask, sneering at her.

Reaching behind her with her free hand, she grabs a vase of flowers and chucks it at my head. I easily duck it, and it hits the wall behind me, shattering into a mess on the floor. I cock my brow beneath my mask as I walk around the island.

"You're insane!" she screams, whipping the hair out of her face.

“Mmm.” I run my tongue along my teeth. “Yeah.”

She holds the knife out strong and steady, pointing it at me while she walks backwards along the island, keeping it safely between us. In a quick move, I plant my palms, lift my legs, and slide my ass over the island. Gasping, she backs herself against the opposing counter, knife to my neck again.

I wipe my fingers across my bloody lip and reach out to touch her. She swings the knife, slicing a decent cut on my forearm.

I hiss in pain before a rumbling groan leaves my throat.

“Shit, baby,” I say, eyeing the wound. A devilish smile creeps across my face as I continue leaning forward. “I never knew how much I’d enjoy your infliction of pain. You’re a vicious little thing. Got more fight than I thought.”

I reach out again, and she keeps the knife to my neck this time. Taking two fingers, I wipe the blood from my lip slowly across her exposed collarbone, over her shoulder and down her arm until I reach the strap of her shirt that’s fallen there. Gently slipping those two bloody fingers beneath the strap, I slide it back up her shoulder, eyeing her throat, imagining wrapping my palm tightly around it as my gaze trails back up to her dilated eyes.

Just as my fingers drop from her shoulder, she reaches her free arm back, somehow grabbing a bottle from directly behind her, and swings it down on my head. It hits me near my temple, shattering across the kitchen as the ringing in my ears floods my head. My eyesight blurs.

She runs past, but I grab the end of her hair with one hand, gripping it tightly as she slips and falls hard on her back atop the red mess of wine and glass now beneath us. She groans in pain as I fall to my knees next to her, a mad laugh leaving my chest as I attempt to shake the stars from my vision when she crawls to her feet and takes off towards the front door.

She can’t leave.

Twisting the knob, she opens the door and a sigh of relief leaves her. The relief is short-lived as the door swings into my boot. I lean over the top of her, slamming the wooden door shut with my palms directly before her face. She sobs in defeat, pressing her forehead against the wood before rolling along the door and turning to face me.

I press my hips into her, pinning her in place. Her hair is a mess of webs strewn across her beautiful face, the tears causing it to stick to her cheeks. Lips part as she pants, exhausted from the demonic little game.

The blood from my head drips down onto her nose and cheek, but she's too tired to fight back, too tired to even wipe herself clean of me.

"Fuck, you're beautiful wearing my blood," I say, cupping the side of her face, gingerly rubbing more onto her cheekbone.

Doesn't she realize how brutally beautiful she is? How embracing that darkness within her could make her more powerful than she ever imagined. Luring it out is the task I'm destroying myself to fulfill.

"You won." Her voice breaks, sounding entirely defeated.

"Oh, sweetheart," I whisper, running my lips along her jaw, finding my way to her ear. "Don't you see? We both win this way."

I lick the shell of her ear, and she shudders against me. Pressing my hard cock against her hip, there's no denying what that little game just did to me. The insatiable need to fuck her senseless is a growing urge I'm struggling to control. My body craves this woman who's learning to fight, learning to stand strong on her own, even if it's against me.

Pulling back, I look down into her eyes; the blood smeared across her face, making the cool blue of her eyes strike through me even harder. She's well aware of the effect she has on me, even if it makes her blush with indecent thoughts. She bites the corner of her lip, her long black eyelashes fluttering up to meet my gaze, the possibilities of sins she's always desired flashing behind her eyes.

Let the baptism begin.

"What happens now?" Her voice is a breathy whisper. One filled with terror and intrigue.

"A rebirth. Revival. An awakening of sorts," I comment, brushing my fingers along her temple.

Her eyes wrinkle with worry as a soft whimper slips from between her lips. I know she's a virgin. Easing her into this is going to be hard for me when I want to own her by breaking her so devastatingly. But, we'll start slowly, the introduction to her unknown desires, committing

acts of sin other men have put in place to tame her. Before she knows it, she'll be owning me with that untamable fire she possesses.

"Now be a good girl and suck on my tongue," I demand, leaning forward, offering it out to her.

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BRONX

He stands above me, his over six-foot frame towering over my measly five-foot-five.

He won. He caught me. I thought I'd easily escape my own home by outwitting him. But instead, I kicked him in the face. I cut him. I smashed a bottle over his head, and yet here he stands. Bleeding above me with eyes that burn into mine, like the entire game was simply foreplay to a man from his depths of hell.

Insanity doesn't even cover it.

"W-what?"

"I said, be a good girl and suck on my tongue," he snaps at me.

I've never even heard of such a thing.

"You want me to...kiss you?" I ask.

I can see his eyes narrow beneath the cracked skull mask.

"No." He frowns in disgust, as if the idea is sickening to him. "I told you to suck on my tongue. Wrap your lips around it, and suck."

His words, the way he's demanding, and the wild look in his eyes, has my forehead glossing over with perspiration and my body tense with a mixture of nerves and impulses that are seemingly out of my control.

Pressing me against the door, I feel the hardening in his pants as he grinds into me. Just the idea that I can cause such a reaction to a man makes my face flush. He leans down over me, tilting his chin out so our mouths are aligned, his shaggy, wet hair tickling my forehead. He smells like wine, leather, and horrible, soul-shattering decisions.

His lips part as his tongue dips out of his mouth, and he waves it gently before me like the deceptive serpent he is. I feel faint as my eyes drop from his eyes to his tongue. Slowly, with staggered movements, my lips finally part and I wrap my lips around his awaiting tongue. Sliding back off it, I suck it like a lollipop, popping off it at the end.

His wet, warm tongue tastes subtly sweet on my lips, not at all how I envisioned the taste of sin. I lean back against the wooden door, gazing up at him, feeling a strange wave of pleasure wash over me from the simple, yet entirely strange act.

"You felt that," he says, his eyes studying my face. "That tingly sensation that rolls down your spine and travels between your legs, making your muscles tighten and clench up."

I swallow, frowning at his accurate description before my eyes dart to the floor in embarrassment.

His hand grips my jaw tightly, tilting my face up towards his.

“Those feelings, those thoughts...those desires.” His grip softens as his fingers run down the side of my neck. “They’re entirely ingrained into your genetic make-up. Originating long before men made up rules to control the depths of you.”

I’m holding my breath, just staring back at him as his nose lines up with mine again.

“You’re a woman without a voice, Briony,” he whispers against my lips. “Let me be the throat through which you scream.”

I’m stunned by his words, and I feel almost drunk in his presence. At least, what I’m assuming being drunk feels like. I’m lightheaded, dizzy, and yet every part of my body is alert and alive, swirling in self-destruction, feeding off the personalized scripture he’s professing.

His head tips towards my neck, where I feel his lips feather against my skin. He trails them down my blood-covered chest until he’s kneeling on the floor before me, his face in direct line with my breasts. My heart rate booms through me as both of his large hands splay themselves across my abdomen. He holds them there before blinking and looking up at me through the cracked skull mask.

Evil can come to you in many forms. Seduction. Like a snake, he slithers his way into my veins, finding the depth of me. Reaching those bones, he wraps himself tightly around me until my life is taken hostage, and my only release is through his maze. He owns me. My freedom in his games.

Slowly, his hands slide. One palm ghosting upwards until his ring-covered fingers are beneath the hem of my flimsy top, the other traveling south at the same time.

I should stop this. I need to stop this. Every part of this is vile. It’s indecent. It’s damaging. But I can’t get my mouth to form the words because some self-destructive, dark part of me craves this feeling of the unknown. I’m under his spell, following him into the deep.

My body demands the sensations that have plagued my mind since meeting him. It causes me to throw my head back against the door when his left hand brushes across the aching place between my thighs at the same time his right hand slides up and cups my breast.

A strangled moan leaves my throat, and it surprises me, this complete lack of control.

My nipple is a tight pebble as it slides between his digits. His fingers claw into the flesh of my breast, squeezing it tightly. I feel the brush of his thumb against the swollen bud between my legs and I nearly buckle, my hand grasping the wood above me while the other palm seals back behind me to the door.

“Your mind is telling your body how to react on instinct, seeking that reward,” he murmurs against my exposed thigh before licking the skin there with a long stroke of his tongue.

Said body is on fire. I shudder at the feeling of his tongue so close to the ache. Suddenly, I need to be touched everywhere and all at once. Places that suddenly crave contact with things I’ve never experienced. He grips behind my right thigh, tossing it over his shoulder, opening me up to him.

“That heat you feel right here?” he says, moving his mouth to the swollen place where his finger just brushed.

I drop my head to watch him, struggling to breathe properly. He inhales a deep breath, absorbing my scent before his tongue slips through his lips and I feel the warmth of his long, slow lick over my shorts. The shorts that now feel wet, clinging to me. His tongue laps at that wetness through the damp cloth covering me and I gasp.

“That’s your body priming you for me. That slippery wetness? It’s your body attempting to make it more comfortable for when I decide to fuck you.” His tongue laps up the sensitive area again in a long, hard stroke, causing me to swallow back a moan.

“But it won’t help, Briony. It won’t take away the discomfort you’ll feel when I finally do fuck you. You must learn to embrace pain with your pleasure. To find that you need it to reach that ultimate reward.” He rolls his tongue up the length of me again and my eyes fall closed. “To be my good girl and take that pain and own it.”

His words are sinful all on their own, but in combination with the sensations? I’m falling headfirst into a swirling pit of flames and loving the burn of his fire against my skin.

With his thumb flicking my nipple beneath my shirt, my breaths ragged, he quickly drops his shoulder, causing my leg to fall back to the floor beneath me abruptly. I stumble slightly, needing to grab the

door behind me for support when he rises to his feet, towering over me yet again.

He grips my jaw tightly, fingers clawing into my flesh, forcing me to face him when he says, “But only when you’re ready and begging for it.”

I stare at him in disbelief. That evil smirk of his pulls at his lips before he slowly loosens his grip, dropping his hand from my jaw. He pushes off the door, turning to make his way up the stairs.

At the moment, I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know who I am or what I’m doing. I just let a strange masked man who I viciously attacked in my kitchen touch me in places I’ve never been touched.

The part I despise most is how badly I find myself craving it again.

I turn my head to the side, seeing my reflection in the entryway mirror. My face is flushed and covered in that man’s blood. I don’t recognize this girl. She’s morphing before me into something entirely unknown. Something I told myself I’d never become.

My eyes pull away from my reflection when I hear him descending the stairs. He jogs down them lightly, crunching over the broken glass of the now shattered art, and stepping over the broken frame. I adjust myself to the corner of the entryway as he approaches, cowering away from him. There’s a cigarette behind his ear as his hand holds out the folded-up blade I was threatening him with in the kitchen. The one I cut him with. I don’t even know how he got it or where it came from.

I slowly take it from him, cautious as he stares dangerously at me while his tongue trails along his lower lip, almost savoring my taste that’s branded to him now. He takes the cigarette from behind his ear, placing it between his lips. With his tongue, he makes the sign of the cross with the cigarette, a mocking twinkle in his gaze.

Then, like nothing happened, he twists the knob to the front door and pushes past me, vanishing into the night, allowing the door to slam shut as he disappears yet again.

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HERO

Little by little, she's sinking into me.

Curiosity is a double-edged sword. To an idiot, it can seem like a beautiful thing. To an intelligent individual, a dangerous temptation. It has the ability to make you question your thoughts, your decisions. Exploring the unknown has someone of her intelligence calculating her choices, her mind fighting her body in a deadly game of tug-of-war. There's no denying what that curvaceous body is telling me. It's practically begging for that sweet release, pleading with me to give her the voice she's always needed. The reason to let go.

Briony Strait will break for me.

But only after I break the system that wants her gone.

"Ah, yes, Aero. Send him in," I hear my boss, Alastor Abbott, talking to his assistant as I barge into the office. "Aero."

His bushy brows raise when I push past the voluptuous woman, tossing a small blue and white cooler onto his desk atop his mess of papers. He gazes nervously at the blood-stained cooler; the smears running across the white plastic top and handle. He slowly brings his focus up to me.

"What's this?" he asks as his dick-sucking assistant slowly backs out of the room.

"He chose not to cooperate."

Alastor's eyes crinkle with concern as he stares at the cooler. He knows the price of not cooperating. Limbs and digits in place of commas.

"Well." He clicks his tongue, letting out a nervous sigh. "That's that I guess."

"He also wanted you to know that Clive McGregor isn't withdrawing from the election." I state casually, walking towards his office bar and grabbing myself the bottle of whiskey from the glass counter.

I pop it open, pouring myself a glass. Taking a drink with one hand, I hold the bottle by the neck with the other.

"That fucker," he murmurs, rolling his hand into a fist on his desk. "Where are you at with the girl? I need Cal's support now more than ever."

The girl. I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand, gritting my teeth as I try my hardest not to grab this man by the back of the neck and break his face into the wood of his desk.

“If his dumbass son would stop trying to prove himself to his father, I’d have had it done already,” I lie.

If I wanted her dead, she’d have been rotting six feet under as we speak. It’s as simple as that.

“Not good enough. Krista!” he calls out the door for his assistant. My eyes narrow as I hear the footsteps coming down the hall. She pops her head inside the door. “Yes, Mr. Abbott?” “Krista, get Cal Westwood on the phone for me, would ya?”

I take the empty glass in my hand and chuck it at the wall next to Krista’s head. The glass shatters behind her as she screams out, cowering into herself.

“Aero!” Alastor scolds.

I turn, storming back towards him and making my way around his desk. I grip his neck, lifting him from his chair to throw his weight against the wall. He stumbles backwards, falling against it as picture frames fall from their hooks, crashing to the floor. I squeeze my fingers tightly, cutting off his air supply.

“You best not get involved in my business, Al,” I growl, my tone cracked. “Things can get real messy when too many *hands* are involved.”

My eyes peer towards the cooler on his desk and his follow. I look back at Al with raised brows and a lopsided grin, living off of his fear.

“Have I ever let you down, Al? Have I ever actually dropped the ball when it came to following through with our arrangements?”

He shakes his head quickly, his eyes bulging as the fat beneath his chin trembles above my grasp.

“Well, then I’d advise you to let the man who dirties his hands for you continue along with his work.”

Nodding while gurgling noises echo throughout the room, he falls forward when I release his neck, his hands stabilizing him against the desk as he gasps for air.

I wink at his assistant, whose face is now wet with tears as I walk towards the door, leaving.

“W-wait!” Alastor calls out, still wheezing from the chokehold.

Pausing with my hand on the door frame, I turn to face him.

“Aren’t you going to...” He points to the cooler. “What am I supposed to do with...”

He’s flustered. Terrified. Scared. Everything that I can’t be in order to do what I do. He wants to intervene and play hitman for a day? I’ll let him clean up his own mess for once. This man couldn’t handle a day on the streets if he tried. These people, they’re greasy, greedy, and money-hungry. More than ready to throw some money for crimes they think can’t touch them. I’m the gloves covering his filthy fucking hands, but he’s the one with dirt beneath his nails.

“Figure it the fuck out,” I say, before turning to leave.

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BRONX

My body aches. My muscles are tired. After cleaning up the destruction from the aftermath of the games Aero played, I took a long, steaming hot shower, before finally crawling into my bed and falling into a disoriented sleep. One in which I couldn't tell what was reality and what was simply my mind playing tricks on me.

I may have dreamt it, but I could've sworn I felt the bed dip next to me. I was almost sure his fingers were traveling down my cheek, drawing a line down the curve of my body before hearing the intake of a breath near my neck.

Was I dreaming? Or did he really come back?

Either way, I woke up to a new page of the bible. This one is torn from Ephesians 4:32.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

In red ink over the passage was his message.

FORGIVENESS -Aero

Placing it in my nightstand drawer along with the others, I run my hands down my face, wondering if and when these games will end. I continue in my groggy state, getting dressed and ready for teaching. Pulling my underwear from the drawer, my brows lowered at the sight of ripped fabric.

Holding a piece up, I realize what I'm looking at.

All of my underwear has been destroyed.

When Aero ran up the stairs, he clearly went through my underwear drawer, taking a knife to each one of them, stripping them into nothing but shards. I try on a pair, but the large gaping hole in the crotch exposes all of me beneath my skirt. Screaming in frustration, I throw the outfit to the floor.

Skirts are the set uniform for women at the Academy. Aero knows this. It's more than obvious by his game. He also knows that I can't wear a skirt if I have nothing to wear under it. I groan, grabbing a pair of black slacks I've had for years in my closet, but never worn. Sliding them on, I tuck my Covenant Academy shirt into it, peering at myself in my mirror.

I'll get reprimanded for this. Setting myself up for a meeting with the bishop after school in the office; time I was hoping to slip in a nap before Mia comes over to get ready for the Governor's Ball with me.

Quickly tying my hair back into two braids, I make my way out of the door and into the passenger seat of Saint's newly fixed Jeep.

"Rough night?" he asks, looking over at me with a playful gaze, eyeing my pants a little too hard.

"You have no idea." I groan, leaning my head against the glass of the passenger door.

His expression turns serious. "Are you alright? Feeling okay?"

I rub the back of my neck, straightening again. "Yeah, I'm good. I'll be fine," I say, brushing him off.

He looks like he wants to say something about my outfit choice, but doesn't want to offend me. "Laundry," I say, shaking my head. "Piles up, even when it's only me around."

Laughing it off, he bites his lower lip, giving me a shy smile. "Bishop Caldwell is going to have a heyday with you, girl."

I sigh, sinking back in the seat. "I know."

"Well, hopefully, he'll let you out of the confessional long enough to attend the Governor's Ball with me tonight," he jokes, running a hand over his shaved head. "You're still down to be my date, right?"

My cheeks flush at the charming smile he's flashing at me. He's being all coy and cute about this whole date thing. I'm finding this new flirty side to him somewhat intriguing.

"I am." I smile back at him. "Picking out my dress this afternoon."

He shakes his head, grinning almost as if in disbelief. "You're going to look amazing."

I laugh as he dreamily gazes at me. "You don't even know what I'm going to be wearing."

He grabs my hand from my lap, holding it in his as I hold my breath. He looks down, slowly sliding his fingers through mine. Immediately I wonder if he's going to need new tires by the end of this hand-holding experience. Peering down at his thumb that's gently rubbing over the top of my hand, he looks up, searching my eyes. "I just know you will. You're beautiful, Briony."

"I see your windshield is fixed," I say quickly, clearing my throat as I slide my hand out of his, changing the subject. "How'd you explain that one to your father?"

He stares at me for a second before talking. A second that says so much. A second that tells me whatever conversation he had with his

father was concerning enough to have him wondering what to tell me.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but some strange things have been happening around here lately,” he says, facing the road, putting the Jeep in drive as he continues. “Things that don’t really make sense. This being one of them.” He nods towards the windshield.

My nerves fire up and the feeling of nausea hits again. I grip the slacks covering my knees.

“My friend left town. He just...vanished.”

Dizziness overcomes me, and I close my eyes tightly.

Saint turns to look at me right as I open them, and I pretend to look confused, hoping he can’t see through me entirely.

“What friend? Who?” I ask, knowing exactly who he’s talking about.

He sighs, looking back towards the road before us. “Jacob Erdman.”

I feel the saliva accumulating in my mouth, the need to swallow never more present. But I don’t want to swallow. I’ll seem guilty if I do right now. I’m an anxious mess.

“W-what do you mean...left town?”

“Apparently, he wrote a letter to his parents, saying he was done with this life. Religion. The Academy. That he wanted to see the light. The true light. Whatever that means.”

Aero.

“The handwriting was awful, as if he wrote it with his opposite hand, but it was still his handwriting,” Saint continues as he makes the turn onto the school’s street. “Greg and Nancy are a mess. They are so confused because he’s never acted as if he wanted any other life. This Academy and our religion were his life.”

I feel the beads of sweat forming on my forehead. *His hand. He couldn’t use his right hand. I’m going to be sick.*

All the thoughts and concerns about Jacob are completely thrown through the window once we pull into the school parking lot.

“What is that?” Saint says, his eyes narrowing to gain focus in the distance as he parks. “What does that say?”

A crowd gathers outside on the sidewalk that leads to the front doors as students file into the building. Getting out of the Jeep, Saint and I grab our bags, throwing them over our shoulders as we

approach the group of students congregated outside near the four glass doors.

Eyes from the onlookers turn to us. Scowls of disgust, narrowed eyes of disapproval, and pitiful looks of disappointment find me as we continue to walk closer. My heart literally stops in my chest when I see the graffiti.

Spray-painted across the entire entry to the Covenant Academy is my literal demise.

Saint stills in place, his eyes darting over to me as the heat in my neck rises. My back teeth grind together, the sensation of my nails piercing through my palm doing nothing to control my anger at this betrayal. The message from this morning is now clear. Forgiveness feels like an idea that will never come to fruition.

Across the windows are the words sprayed with the paint still dripping.

BRIONY STRAIT IS A SLUT FOR SAINT

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BRONX

Shattered.

Tarnishing my reputation. Destroying my hard work to establish myself in a male-dominated religion, only for him to brand me the slut of the Academy.

Tasteless. Classless. Everything a psychotic stalker should be.

Saint quickly wraps his arm around me, pulling me inside the building as the hushed crowd whispers their secrets. I know word is already traveling. The bees are buzzing away, and the town hive will know something is going on between Saint and I, naturally assuming the worst.

But this? This has the power to dismantle everything I've worked for.

"Listen, Saint," I begin, pulling him down to the hallway beneath the stairs to talk before class. "About tonight...I think we should just forget —"

"No, Briony," he interrupts me. "I'm not letting them win. Someone is seriously trying to mess with you, trying to run a smear campaign over your name, and I'm not going to allow it. It's not going to make me fall back from you or from the ball for that matter."

He leans against the wall with his shoulder, turning in towards me in a protective stance.

"But your father, and the diocese...everyone is already talking. How will we ever defend ourselves against this?" I ask, feeling that familiar anxiousness.

Our town is like a crooked court. You get charged first, then spend all of your time and effort defending yourself against the allegations. This is a steep hill to climb, and I can only imagine the rage that his father, Callum Westwood, will have over the fact that his son is now somehow tied into this. That man didn't even want Saint to partake in the ceremony alongside me. Rumors of engaging in pre-marital sex? The damage, irreparable.

"It's probably just some stupid kids from class looking to make a name for themselves by trying to get a rise out of us since we're teaching together."

I scoff. "Easy for you to say. Not so easy to wash the stain off this slut."

Once they brand you with that, there's no going back.

“I’ll do whatever I can to defend your honor, Briony. I mean that wholeheartedly,” he says, his face more serious and concerned than I’ve ever seen it. “You know that, right? I won’t put up with this.”

I take a deep breath and nod, feeling a sense of relief for his support in all of this. He could easily say he needs to take a step back from me with the eyes of the congregation on us. Knowing he has my back definitely takes some of the pressure off of me. His hand comes up as he rests it against my cheek, softly brushing his thumb back and forth comfortingly.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you. I promise,” he whispers.

All I can think is how different that sentence sounded coming from a different man. *No one hurts you but me.*

Yeah, he definitely hurt me with this one. Aero is toxic and entirely dysfunctional. I see it more clearly now that I’m not under his intoxicating spell.

Saint leans closer, peering at my lips, and just when I wonder if he’s going to kiss me, the warning bell for class rings, startling us both.

“C’mon Bri. Let’s show them all it doesn’t affect us,” he says, holding out his hand to me with an empathetic smile.

I take his hand, and he opens the door to the hallway for me. We walk hand in hand down the hallway as younger students giggle and point. Saint gives me a light, reassuring squeeze as we near our homeroom.

“Keep your chin up,” he whispers, noticing the shame and embarrassment keeping me cowered into myself.

Touching beneath my chin with two fingers, he tips my head up, and I feign confidence.

Parting through the flow of students, I lock eyes with the deacon at the other end of the hall, making his way towards us in his flowing white cassock. I gently tug on Saint’s arm, alerting him. He looks over at me, then down the hall towards the deacon, who’s now only yards from us.

His eyes travel the length of me, and I can see the disapproval in his condescending gaze as he finally approaches us.

“Miss Strait, Bishop Caldwell would like to speak with you after class.”

“We’d be glad to speak with him about this unfortunate display we walked into this morning,” Saint answers for me. “Tell me, does this school not own cameras to allow misdemeanors like this to continue?”

“Mr. Westwood—“

“I’m genuinely concerned for the safety of the teachers here at The Covenant Academy. Clearly there has been a direct attack on one of your own, and I’d love to see how the board is going to handle this one.”

“This isn’t about the graffiti, young man, and you would be well advised to lower your voice when speaking with me,” he says with a stern tone, letting Saint know that even if his father has pull within the church, it doesn’t give him the right to talk back to someone of the deacon’s rank.

“What?” Saint asks, looking appalled.

“What is it about, then?” I ask, drawing both their eyes back at me.

“Your lack of respect for this institution.” His eyes fall to my pants, and frustration floods through me. “Directly after class.”

Saint shakes his head in disgust as the deacon continues on his way. I stare at his departure; the wheels turning in my mind. His hand falls on my shoulder, guiding me towards the room. “Come on Briony. Let’s go.”

We finish up classes for the day, but my thoughts continue to cycle back to the recent events. My mind is tirelessly working to solve this puzzle. Everything Aero does is calculated. I’ve come to realize that. The cryptic notes, the fire in the church, the knife to protect myself. Everything he does is for a reason. A specific reason I’ve yet to figure out. Could this be the same? What purpose would destroying all of my underwear serve other than to guarantee me a trip to the bishop’s office? How could branding me a slut benefit me?

He’s continuously testing me; wanting me to fight, pushing my limits, needing to see if I have what it takes. But why? For what? Is there more to the games of a sick and twisted man?

I take one last deep breath in, letting it out before wiping my palms down the infamous pants that were a complete slap in the face to this institution.

Twisting the knob on the door, I walk into the main office for my meeting with the bishop. The hallway is dark and eerie, leading towards the doors of the elected officials. Silence rings in my ears as I take a few steps forward. Approaching Bishop Caldwell's door, I raise my hand to knock, attempting to shake off my nerves, when I hear someone sniff.

"It's the Lord's will," I hear Bishop Caldwell's voice in a hushed tone.

Someone is already in there.

"You don't want to disappoint him, do you, Brady?" he continues.

I turn to go sit in the chair near the door, waiting for this meeting before me to finish when I hear crying ensue. Curiosity has me leaning against the door to listen. Intuition has my feet planted in place.

"I-I don't want to disappoint him. But I'm scared. I-I'm confused."

"There, there, son," Bishop Caldwell says as I hear the boy whose name I now know to be Brady, crying. "You know what the Bible says, don't you? Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. This is God's will. Accept the Holy Spirit into your life."

More crying comes from the boy.

Something isn't right.

I grab the door handle, twisting the old knob, and push through the door with my shoulder.

Stumbling into the room, I gasp as my feet become rooted in place. Breathing feels like an idea I've yet to discover at the sight of Bishop Caldwell standing over top of a young boy. His black cassock is lifted to his waist, his belt buckle to his pants beneath, hanging open.

But it's the terror plastered all over his guilt-ridden face, the vexation in his dark, displeased gaze, that screams its obscenities.

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BRONX

Frozen in fear with my mouth agape, I haven't blinked since opening the door.

My jaw is lax and my stomach in knots as the crying young boy scurries out of the room, pushing past me in complete humiliation.

Have my eyes deceived me? Was Bishop Caldwell really about to molest this child behind closed doors with deceptions of the Lord's will?

My chest feels compressed, and that need to breathe is still a thought left in another life.

Bishop Caldwell clears his throat as he simply adjusts his cassock over his legs.

"Miss Strait," he begins, walking back around his desk and taking a seat behind it as if nothing happened. "Knocking is a requirement here at the Covenant Academy. Disrupting lessons is worthy of discipline. Now, what can I do for you?"

Still stunned by the visual, I'm unable to form words.

"Y-you..." I stutter. "W-what was that? What was happening?" I point to the spot where he had that young boy sitting before him, his pants open.

He tips his head to the side, his deep-barreled chest releasing a heavy sigh, his deep-set wrinkles and slicked-back black hair that's peppered with gray, making him look worse for wear. "What was what?"

"I just saw you—"

"You saw me assisting a child of God, Briony," he interrupts, leaning back in his chair, adjusting the sash over his swollen stomach, filled with the unhealthy diet of a celibate man. He stares at me with a defiant gaze. "Now, I'll ask again, what can I do for you?"

He's really about to blow over this as if it's nothing. As if my eyes deceived me, when I know for a fact they didn't. He raises a brow, like he can hear my thoughts. His face slips into an expression far too readable. Those thin lips roll into his mouth and his eyes narrow. A look far too knowing. *No one will believe you.*

"Y-you needed to see me?" I ask, confused as to why he keeps asking what he can do for me when this meeting was at his request. "That's why I was here."

His brows lower, face set to a frown, before he sits forward in his chair, peering at a notebook on his desk. Flipping through the pages, the light shines on the crucifix of his black rosary, making my stomach churn in disgust. He shakes his head as his forehead wrinkles.

I never had a meeting with him.

This was all Aero's doing.

The walls are caving in, and darkness threatens to consume me entirely. I'm overwhelmed with the revelation, terrified of the man before me, who I've trusted for years. I've put all of my time, energy, and passion into an institution I believed in. A faith I'd follow to the end. Led none other than a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Everything is a lie.

Before I realize what's happening, I feel my feet moving beneath me as I slowly stumble back out of the room.

I hear him call my name, but I'm already running.

Pushing through the office doors, I spill into the hallway filled with students leaving for the day, tripping onto my knees. Scrambling up, I hear him call my name again as tears fall from my eyes.

It's all a lie.

I turn away from the onlooking students, running down the empty conjoined hallway, when a hand slaps over my mouth and I'm pulled back abruptly. Feeling myself fall back into a dark closet, I scream against the hand. I attempt to escape the hold when I feel a hard body seal to the back of mine.

"Shhh...calm down, Briony!" I hear the familiar tone.

The voice of the man who set me up.

I lose my battle with my emotions and begin sobbing against his hand. He pulls me tighter to his front, his voice in my ear.

"Stop it! Stop fucking crying!" he demands, wrapping his other arm around my waist, holding me even tighter against him.

I try to reign in my emotions when I hear Bishop Caldwell in the hallway, asking someone if they've seen me. The voices slowly fade as they walk away from the supply closet we are currently hidden in.

"Stop being a weak bitch, Briony," Aero growls in my ear. "It was about time you joined the real world with the rest of us."

I take in a shaky breath through my nostrils, calming myself against his hand. After I do, he finally drops his hands, turning me by my

upper arms to face him. His first mistake.

I visualize the outline of his frame towering above me in the dark space and take the opportunity and slap him across the face.

The face that's not masked.

I realize it when I feel the warmth of his cheek against the sting of my palm, the sharp sound of the slap echoing in the tight room.

Gasping, I feel behind me for a light switch. I need to see him. Before I can do much more than touch the wall, he grabs my wrists tightly in his hands, pushing my back against what feels like metal lockers behind me. He holds my wrists above my head, pressing his hips against mine, pinning me in place. A position that is all too familiar.

"You slapped me," he says through gritted teeth, his nose pressing firmly against my cheek.

"You knew! You knew this was happening and did nothing to stop it!" I bark out, thrashing wildly in his hold.

He slams my wrists against the locker above me, causing pain to shoot down my arms.

"Wake the fuck up, church girl," he seethes. "This isn't an isolated incident."

I attempt to kick him, but his body seals itself to mine.

"Your naivety disgusts me," he continues, "but Jesus, that swing..." He sucks in a breath through his teeth. "Fuck, I love those hands on me."

I fight his hold against my arms, rocking my body violently against the locker as I groan out in frustration.

"Get it out," he says. "C'mon," he eggs me on.

This is what he likes. The fear. Aero gets off on my fear and aggression. The thrill of it all paired with my anger has me exploding against him, taking out all of my frustrations in this moment, using him as my punching bag.

But he's too strong. I feel his smirk against my cheek, his hair tickling the side of my face as I breathe him in while panting with exhaustion.

"Go ahead. Fight me, little doll. It'll only get you fucked," he says in his gritty tone.

"Get your hands off of me!"

“Forgive me, please,” he says sarcastically, gripping both my wrists in one hand above me. “Everything I do is for you. Don’t you see that?”

His other hand slides up the inside of my forearm until it reaches the top of my head. Two fingers slide down the middle of my forehead, slowly running down the curve of my nose until they reach my lips, almost memorizing the profile of my face. He pushes those two fingers between my lips, hitting my teeth. I follow his lead, opening my mouth as they push through onto my tongue.

He rests his forehead against mine in the darkness, sliding his fingers deeper and deeper, until he’s hitting the back of my throat and I’m coughing around them, choking on their length. A breathy groan escapes his lips and my eyes water as he holds them there for a second before pulling them back out.

Taking the two fingers, I hear his lips part as he sucks on them. In some sick and twisted way, something about the crude act causes a stirring in the pit of my stomach. The temptations that endlessly plague me.

“See?” he whispers. “You’re not his little slut. You can’t even properly swallow a cock.”

The graffiti. His sick and twisted games are endless.

“You did that?” I seethe through clenched teeth. “You wrote those vile things about me?”

He sighs against me. “Forgive me. Tasteless, I know. Not really my style, but...when in Rome, we do as the Romans do, don’t we?”

He’s insane. His thought processes are so beyond messed up that I can’t even understand him half the time. There is always an element of religion in the riddles he spews, and the root of that is something I must get to. His entire identity is a maze to me; an endless cycle of twists and turns. The finish line, never in sight.

“Why?” I cry out as the tears threaten to reappear. “Why are you doing this to me?”

I’m frustrated. Confused. Hurting. Feeling lonelier than I’ve ever felt before, knowing a leader who I’ve dedicated my life to has deceived me and everyone else in our community in the most disturbing way possible. All while fighting these dark, indecent sensations Aero

continuously siphons from me. My head is swirling, my mind a complete fog.

“For the Lord your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory,” he recites to me.

I still my body against his, absorbing the words, listening to the phrase, and deciphering it. Letting out a sigh of disbelief, I relax against his hold as my mind works at the familiar words. It’s one of the first passages he ripped from the Bible and left for me on my dresser.

“They want to mute you, Briony,” he whispers. “Take away your voice. Clip your bud before you bloom.”

The cryptic code, revealing his answer. He hasn’t been doing any of this for no reason. He’s been silently protecting me in his own sick and twisted way. Protecting me from the people he assumes are my enemies, while simultaneously hardening me for the fight.

“But I need you to bloom. I need you spread before me in all your dark, delicious beauty. Unravel your strength and show me the depth between your petals,” he says, running the back of those same fingers along my cheek.

My heart catches at his words. They’re meant to mean something deeper, but when he says them in that cracked, needy tone, the muscles in my thighs tighten again. My body deceives me in his presence, always seeking something more.

“I’m your God now,” I whisper his words back to him, the same words he wrote over the passage, finally deciphering the message.

The Lord your God goes with you to fight for you against your enemies. It wasn’t meant as blasphemy. It was a sign of his protectiveness. He’s willing himself to be my shield, but only if I bear the sword.

He straightens his spine, towering silently above me, and if I could see more clearly, I’d only imagine his face held a proud look of admiration. His head dips towards my neck, my eyes are closed tightly as my body shakes with the fear of revelation. Warm wet lips surround my earlobe, sending that shrill of sparks through my body again. He sucks it gently before I feel his wet tongue slide up the length of my ear.

My pulse is pounding in my neck as a hoarse moan just barely escapes. He places something small and metal against my palm, and my fingers close around it. I can just barely see the glint of light hitting his eyes from the sliver beneath the door, but their fire burns through the darkness.

“And we shall reign victorious,” his smooth voice purrs.

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BRONX

I step out of the vehicle, clutching the extra fabric from my long silk dress in one hand, placing my other hand out for assistance.

Right on time, Saint grasps it, grinning at me behind his bronze Roman-Greek mythological-style mask. He's so handsome in his fitted navy blue suit and crisp white button-up shirt. A fresh fade to his already short blonde hair has his jaw looking even more defined beneath the partial mask, his sparkling blue eyes lighting up with excitement. He helps me sturdy myself on my heels, adjusting the seams of the dress to fit right where they need to on my hips to allow the fabric to dip between my breasts as minimally as possible.

Mia is definitely slimmer than I am, but the silver dress fit me better than any of the others did when it came to covering my goods. She also helped to pin my long black hair back into a loose, low bun with some tendrils framing my face to accompany the classic look.

With my hand in Saint's, I hold my white and silver Venetian mask by the stick, jewels dripping from the bottom to dangle from strings onto my cheeks.

"Like an angel," he says, bringing my hand to his lips.

I flush beneath the partial mask as the chauffeur drives away down the tree-lined driveway. I don't know if it's Saint's lips on me, or if it's that I know Aero's tongue will be on me later to erase it that brings about that tightening in my lower abdomen again. Rubbing my lips together, hoping my mauve-colored lipstick is still in place, I take my first step, threading my arm through Saint's, knowing tonight is about to be an eye-opening experience. One filled with mysteries to be solved.

Guiding me into the massive, castle-like home of the Governor himself, I see Alastor Abbott on the other side of the colossal wooden double doors, greeting guests as they arrive. Special invitation to this event only. Big names. Only the most important men, along with their wives, congregate together to celebrate their success by marketing themselves to one another, praising each other for solidifying their pristine status.

"Let's go say hello," Saint says, ushering us towards the round, animated man.

I swallow what feels like a mountain of sand, aware of the fact that I'm seeing everyone through a new lens since meeting the vanishing

man from the shadows who's seeped his way into my bones.

He introduces us, shaking hands with Governor Abbot and his wife, who's dripping in expensive jewelry as she holds her glass of wine in one hand, chin held as high as her implants. Governor Abbot eyes me for a second longer than what I would assume is socially acceptable as he shakes my hand.

"Ah, yes, Briony Strait. The first female Magnus Princeps of the Covenant Academy." He pulls my hand closer towards him, causing me to fall into his chest. "They've never seen anyone like you," he whispers before leaning back with a certain grin on his round, greasy face. One I can't entirely place.

We continue into the ballroom, which is brilliantly decorated in art déco-style decor, with candelabras, string curtains with the finest drapery surrounding the dance floor, and an excessively ornate crystal chandelier hanging from the center of the room. The dimly lit ambience of the candlelight surrounding the room has me clutching Saint's arm tighter than I normally would.

Masked faces pass us left and right. The anonymity of the entire event is not only hilariously ironic, but completely frightening.

In a room full of wealth, the rich decide to hide their identities for the evening, living out their demons for a night beneath the lies of a new mask.

I scour the room with my eyes, looking hastily for Bishop Caldwell's arrival. A sickening sensation hits my gut as I part from Saint, bracing myself against the wall of the ballroom. He'll most certainly be here, awaiting a conversation to ensure my silence. The inevitable moment cements a distasteful unease to the entire evening.

Saint gets roped into conversation with an older man in an animal-style mask with a long protruding beak and a dark gray suit. Turning his head, he quickly spots me near the wall and breaks off his conversation. He approaches my nervous self with concern written on his face.

"Hey," he whispers, leaning against the wall along with me, tipping his head down as he talks. "Are you alright? What's going on?"

I force a smile, nodding my head. "I'm fine. Just...catching my breath. The dress," I wave my hand over my body, releasing a fake chuckle. "It's making it hard to breathe."

He stares down at me with concern still present in his worried gaze, my words doing nothing to take away from my obvious discomfort. His hand reaches out to grab mine. He pulls me forward until I'm pressed against him. Wrapping an arm around my lower back, the other finds my cheek, softly cupping my face. I hold my breath, my eyes darting around to the other guests who may or may not be watching us.

"I get it, Briony. These people...this place." He looks around before shrugging. "It's all a lie."

My stomach drops at his words. *What does he know?*

"No one here can really dance," he admits with a sexy grin. "They talk the talk, but they can't walk the walk. Liars and con artists, these men."

I release a sigh, chuckling at myself for overthinking.

Backing away from me, he extends his hands, pulling me along with him onto the middle of the dance floor where the guests are all forming a line across from one another. The violins sing their sweet, familiar tune through the air as couples prepare to begin the Baroque-style dance we've studied and been taught since we were young students in the Covenant.

"Let's show them what we got," Saint says with a confident smile, lining me across from him in the row of masked women.

He joins the line of masked men across from us, keeping his eyes on me while my gaze drifts down the line. Mask after ornate mask, I take in the men, unsure of who's beneath each costume, when my eyes fall upon an older gentleman a few men down, glaring to the left of him. Directly at Saint.

It doesn't take me long to figure out who it is. Callum Westwood glowers at his son as his son smiles at me innocently, his excitement almost palpable. Eyes shift eerily slowly, as Callum's gaze makes a trail between us until they fall upon mine. We stare at one another for a moment. Chills sweep across my shoulders and up my neck as the danger looming in that one look has me shook.

Hatred. Loathing. Detestation.

At one glance, I know that man would rather I not be in attendance at all tonight. I'm the one ruining his son's chance at becoming all he can become. It appears the idea of me gaining any sort of name for

myself is simultaneously dragging his son through the dirt. The race to become the reigning bishop after Caldwell's resignation in the years to come, the holy grail of achievements. One Callum clearly wants for his son alone. His legacy.

The graffiti on the windows of the school comes to mind.

BRIONY STRAIT IS A SLUT FOR SAINT

Aero didn't write that to upset me. Tarnish my reputation in this community, sure. But a reputation in this congregation means nothing to someone like Aero. He didn't even write it to upset Saint. Which is why the forgiveness message came through that morning. He needed me to know it wasn't his style. Nothing personal about it. Only another move in his sick and twisted game of chess. He wrote that message to affect *him*. Callum Westwood.

His son. At the Governor's Ball. With the slut of the Covenant. Not a good look.

Before I have time to wrap my head around it all, the chorus begins playing. The women in line with me all give a quick curtsy to begin the dance. The men step forward, approaching us, and I take Saint's hand in mine. His father glares down the line at our intertwined hands as we all turn to the left to begin the dance.

We walk together as the men court us, pausing to face each other again as we hold both hands between us, the men bending their knees in a quick dip before the women follow. Saint winks at me, causing my face to break into a smile. I bite down on the corner of my lip, holding back my laughter as the heat rises in my cheeks.

He's entirely adorable when he's like this; giddy and goofy. I'm finding myself enjoying my time with him the more we're together. The idea that he has some sort of vendetta against me like his father has, or even Jacob Erdman for that matter, seems nearly impossible. Either this guy is the most phenomenally talented actor I've ever encountered, or he's truly insusceptible to his father's hatred. The way he stood up for me before the deacon. The way he made it a

point to congratulate me, knowing his family wouldn't. Intuition has me thwarting analytic reasoning.

We break from each other as the women weave through the line of men, completing our first switch in partners. I link up with another older gentleman with grayish-white locks hanging down to his shoulders, and a white beard beneath his gold-tied mask that projects a beak from his nose. He grins, deepening the wrinkles near his mouth, and gives me a subtle nod. We raise our palms to meet between us as we circle one another, and before I know it, the men are now weaving through the line of women, switching partners yet again.

My heart practically stops in my chest as my eyes lock with the approaching Bishop Caldwell. Another man passes through as Caldwell's dark, black eyes gaze into mine from beneath our masks. He pauses before me, his palm connecting with my raised hand. Time seems to stall as he communicates without words. Glaring through me with that same knowing look of condemnation, we circle each other before he disconnects and continues around me.

Saint's towering frame approaches me next in line. We reconnect again, and his smile widens when he realizes it. He wiggles his eyebrows at me beneath his mask as our hands connect between us, sending a wave of comforting sparks within me. He pulls me in, then pushes me out before our hands drop and the both of us spin to face the dancer waiting behind us.

Callum Westwood awaits, and the comforting smile his son left on my face quickly fades as I absorb his enraged appearance. I knew I'd see these men here tonight, but what I wasn't ready for was the strain of these deceptions weighing so heavily on my chest. The inability to breathe as Callum's hand surrounds mine is present and entirely terrifying. His presence is like a firm noose around my neck. His scowl never strays from mine. He's saying so much, saying nothing at all. It's as if he can hear the loud, thundering beats of my anxious heart, finding fulfillment in the terror he provides.

The break in partners comes as the women thread through the line of men again. Masked faces blend in a horrifying display as I pass them, the masks suddenly feeling as if they've come alive before me. Evil, awful, terrifying men cycle me one by one as my heart pounds

wildly beneath the confines of my weak body. The nightmare I'm living comes to life before me. It's all too much, the noose of unfortunate knowledge tightening even more around my neck.

Feeling light-headed and dizzy, I turn, opening my arms to the last partner to complete this dance. Capturing me in his arms is a tall man with a broad chest. I bump into his hardened core in my disoriented state, feeling nauseous and entirely out of place. Strong hands grip me, one placed on my lower back, straightening my spine, as the other gentle hand finds my chin, lifting my gaze to him.

A wave of familiarity floods me when I gaze into those piercing hazel eyes meant for evil beneath the full, iron-clad face mask. The mask boasts a long, deep crack slanted through from the corner of the forehead down to the opposing jaw, striking through it like a deadly lightning bolt. He's dressed in a fitted black designer suit, the edge of a neck tattoo peeking out through the collar of his crisp white button-up shirt. His dark hair is slicked back and tucked behind his ears, making the sharp angle of his jaw cut through, his full pink lips protruding above me with an obvious scar lingering near his mouth and along his jaw I hadn't noticed before.

Aero's breathtakingly handsome in his suit and, without a doubt, the most beautiful man I've ever seen, even with his mask in place.

I'm awestruck and breathless as my body continues the motions, and we step together before I spin in his arms, turning my back to his front. He towers over me, leaning his face down near my ear.

"Dare me, Briony," he whispers beneath the mask, causing me to shiver, my body coming alive simply from the sound of my name rolling off his tongue. He turns me in the spin until we are face to face again. I absorb as much of him as I can in this light and small moment of time, breathing in a new musk of cologne as we step towards each other in the dance, our chests nearly touching. "Dare me to set fire to this night and I will."

The seriousness in his gaze tells me everything I need to know about what this man would do for me. He'd burn churches to the ground, to nothing but ash and dirt. Murder and mutilate anyone intending to harm me. Teach me to explore sensations that human nature craves to be unleashed.

Grabbing my hand in his, I feel his touch everywhere. He allows me to curtsy along with the rest of the women, ending the dance before bending and bowing before me, those electric eyes locked on mine. I can sense the confidence in his stature as he slowly rises before me, somehow already knowing I brought *it* with me tonight.

He drops my hand and stands upright before rushing around me, brushing against my shoulder lightly as he does, the tips of his fingers sweeping along the tips of mine. As I attempt to clear myself from the sudden fog of seduction that man leaves behind, Saint approaches me from afar.

He talks animatedly about the dance, but I can't hear a word of it. I can't focus on anything but the ghost of Aero. I turn around, searching for the mystery man in the hauntingly handsome suit and iron-clad mask, only to have lost him in the crowd of masked party-goers now congregating together.

As I'm about to turn back to Saint, I spot Aero's tall form taking the stairs to the second floor, two at a time in the distance. Reaching the top of the staircase of the ballroom, he stalls for a moment. His hand lingers along the black iron railing as he turns his cheek to his shoulder, pausing briefly as if just for my knowledge, effectively sending the message.

Then, just like the dark corners of this world in the dim light of a half-moon, he wisps away, vanishing from my sight.

Saint continues talking as I turn to acknowledge him, but I'm not listening or focusing at all. I'm mentally planning my escape. Simultaneously mapping all the fires I'm about to dare this devious man to ignite.

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HERO

It’s a fucking sin for her to look the way she does tonight in this room full of drooling, flesh-hungry wolves.

They stare in awe at her beautiful shapely form, every part of her dripping with the essence of a woman she’s yet to embody. Always out of reach to the rats in the gutter, that dream of her submission, always above the men that want her beneath them.

Alone I’ve been, succumbing to the horrors of my past that these same men inflicted upon me. I came about by accident. A horrible stain of the sins of a man too prestigious.

They wanted to end me before I lived, just as they do Briony, but my mother held on, secretly bearing the child of a man who had done unspeakable things to her. She defied the men who tried to snuff her out, living hidden in a hell all her own as she raised the boy who’d become the man seeking the vengeance she always deserved. The vengeance I deserved after the hell Callum Westwood had put me through upon the discovery of the bastard-born son who carried his blood.

I found my way through the darkness that once tried to drown me and made it my home. I emerged, dirtied and raw, with a heart that beats black.

Few souls know I exist. The only ones who do are evil enough to seek me out, using my skills for themselves, knowing the unrelenting anger that pumped through my veins. Alastor Abbott thought he could control and tame the animal he saved from the trap. Like sharpening a dull blade, he’d use me as his sword; an edge over the company he kept, unknowingly giving me the key to my own sick freedom.

Freedom from the chains of an institution that’s controlled the mind of the purest of dolls.

She’s clean. Somehow unpolluted by the horrors surrounding her. My sweet, innocent, naïve little doll. Breaking her to become my soul’s counterpart in this life of demonic hell is my mission; the only hope coming from the beautiful release of deliciously dark revenge.

I’ll teach her. Show her how disgustingly satisfying it is to rip through the flesh of those deserving, watching life slip away from the ones that hurt us as their pale faces stare back at us. She’ll be perfect, dripping in the blood of another man.

I wait in a dark corner of the hallway, upstairs in the sprawling home of the Governor himself. I saw the look on Alastor's face. He's shocked to see her here. Alive. Seeing her in the presence of these men surprised me, to be honest. I didn't think she had it in her to stare them in the face, especially not after seeing Caldwell's dirty little secret firsthand. Secrets that are well-known to every disgusting man in here tonight.

"We all have our vices." I overheard Alastor saying over the phone in his office once, regarding Caldwell's addiction to abusing the youth, before paying off the dirty cops to keep his vote.

These men will get what's coming to them, just as soon as I get Briony cumming for me.

I bore holes into his body with my eyes on that dance floor when he touched her, his hand wrapping around her lower back, his other hand holding onto hers. My nostrils flared and my body shook with anger, the demons and darkness multiplying within threatening to overtake me. It took every part of my being to restrain myself from doing what I instinctively felt the need to do.

Dismembering him would make my heart rage with the excitement of a madman. But I need him. I need him to get to his father, destroying the dynasty he's always envisioned. One by one, I'll tear them down internally before tearing them down literally. Everyone plays a role in this sweet game of revenge.

Lucky for me, Briony's falling into my temptations, each step of hers up this secluded staircase giving me that knowing satisfaction.

Looking down the hall to her right, then into the darkness to her left, it's as if she can feel my presence. Step by step, her body moves through the light, edging toward the darkness like a lioness; cautious, yet on the hunt, knowing the animals prowling around her.

She nears me at the last door in the hall, the darkness absorbing her entirely. I can practically hear her pulse pounding beneath the skin of her soft neck. The sudden urge to feel it takes over me and I reach out, wrapping my hand around the front of her neck, turning her until her back slams against the door.

Gasping, I tighten my hold, squeezing to feel the panic beneath her flesh.

“Aero.” She gasps with the only air she has left. But it’s not in fear; it’s only in recognition.

“Hi baby,” I coo, lifting my mask from my face in the shadows.

I run my nose along her face, needing her scent all over me again. I breathe her in, feeling the bulge beneath my dress pants grow in length at the sweet lilac perfume blending in with the natural scent of her skin.

“You came into the den of wolves and are met by the big bad wolf himself,” I whisper into her ear as my hand continues to hold tight to her neck. “But are you prepared for his bite?”

I nip at her earlobe and she whimpers a sweet little cry.

Growing harder at her cries, I trail my mouth down to her shoulder, where I graze my teeth again. Her skin ignites, and ghosts of goosebumps rise along her arms. With one hand tight around her throat, I place my other hand against the door behind her, bending down further to trail my tongue along her chest.

“Are you scared of me?” I whisper against her skin, feeling the rising pulse of her neck against my palm.

“Yes,” she chokes out.

“And yet, you keep seeking me out.”

Her chest heaves as the breaths come quick and choppy before she swallows and I feel the roll of her throat.

“It’s warmer near the fire,” she whispers back.

Her voice is quiet but filled with a confidence I wasn’t expecting. I still in place, absorbing her words. She’s speaking to me in my language now, reading through the riddles, the cryptic code. Understanding.

My mouth meets her collarbone, and I bite down on it between my teeth. I fight the urge to mark her with my bite, loosening my jaw, and tipping my head up to hers, a few strands of my hair falling onto my forehead.

Down the hall, the faintest of candles illuminates the curves beneath her silver dress. Her chest shudders beneath my forearm as she grasps for her breast. My brows lower as I look down at the edge of her dress, the silver fabric dipping between the beautiful, shadowed mounds of plump flesh. Her hand dips into the dress,

rousing her breast, exposing more of her, and a deep growl leaves my throat.

Withdrawing her hand from the dress, I see the metal skeleton key I gave her in the closet.

A slow grin creeps across my face. She brought it.

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” I recite, taking the key out of her trembling fingers.

“What’s this for?” she asks, her worried voice vibrating against my palm. “What’s the test you’re giving me?”

She’s anxious about the trust she’s putting in my hands. She should be. Nothing about this will be soft or tender. Breaking my doll will only rebuild her into the beast she’s bound to become.

“A baptism,” I say, grabbing the hand that was in Saint’s. “To erase the purification they’ve doused you in by making you a woman of strength, owning your sexuality; your freedom,” I continue, before standing straight again.

I grab her dangling hand, bringing the back of it to my mouth. As always, the need to cleanse the mark of anyone else off of her, necessary. I drag my tongue along her hand, tasting her sweet skin against my tastebuds.

She shivers again at the sensation, and I see her thighs close tighter beneath her dress, knowing the wetness pooling there. That sweet, thick honey her body makes just for me.

I’m bound to break. I can only hold back for so long. This need to immerse myself in her scent, her delicious arousal, is driving me to the brink of insanity. The need to have her coated in me; cum dripping down her face, blending with the tears and smears of mascara.

I stick the key into the door behind her, clicking it open. The rush of the crimes we are about to commit flood me as the realization hits.

She seeks the fire.

Briony Strait is fanning the flame.

She’s willing herself to burn beneath the only man she’ll ever want to serve and obey. The one who will worship her in ways that make her God flush with fury.

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BRONX

Walking into the room, I'm openly embracing chaos and transgressions unknown.

I can't seem to stay away from him, just as he can't seem to stay away from me. We appear to be polar opposites, differing colors stretched apart on the spectrum, reaching for the other. He's the dark to my light as I am the color to his achromatic gloom.

Aero is unlike anyone I've ever encountered. He appears to live in a world of his own morals. A life of calculated destruction.

He's mysterious and entirely too intriguing. A man without a face, who's found me and claimed me as his own little doll, tucking me beneath his wing of protection. The feelings he gives me are unexpected. Lustful thoughts chase me in his presence, and his rough aggressiveness does nothing to deter me from him, only leaving me wondering what this man could possibly do next.

Desire is a dangerous web, entangling me in this unrelenting need for more.

"First, I'm going to need you to pull your dress up over your knees," his deep voice instructs as he locks the door behind him.

A dim corner lamp lights a fraction of the room, which I'm assuming is some sort of office by the bookshelves lining the walls and the large desk behind me. The light illuminates an oversized globe like a half-moon on the other side of the desk; the shadows taking half of the ghostly-looking planet with it.

I blow air through my lips, unsure of what's transpiring. I'm very inexperienced when it comes to anything relating to men. Curiosity had me wondering about the sensations below the waist, tempted to explore those feelings on my own, but I've successfully kept my temptations at bay the way they have taught me.

The sexually immoral person sins against their own body, they tell us. But indecent thoughts have plagued me long enough, and the idea of exploring something that seems so natural to the core of who I am is begging for release.

A small desk lamp flips on near the door, and I squint my eyes at the sudden increase in light. I gain my focus, seeing Aero has slipped his mask back over his face again. I run the length of him with my eyes, taking in his height and the edge of that black rose tattoo that's peeking out of the top of his button-up shirt, wondering about the art

covering the rest of him. He walks forward a step, undoing the top two buttons of his shirt, exposing his throat and a wedge of his firm, inked-covered chest beneath it.

The sight sets my nerves on fire as he steps up, towering over me.

“I don’t ask twice, Briony. Something you’ll learn soon enough.” His hand comes up and grabs a strand of hair hanging near my cheek. Twirling it around his finger twice, he curls it into his palm, gripping it roughly until my head pulls forward and my eyes water from the sting of pain. “I’m an impatient man.”

He untangles his finger and drops the hair, moving around me. Sitting down on a large maroon couch to my right that appears to be made of leather, he gets comfortable. Leaning back into the seat, he adjusts his hips, slouching into it with his legs spread wide and his arms braced along the back.

My heart is racing at the expectations before me. I’m not even sure where to begin or how to do this. I grip the silk dress near my thighs, fisting the material in order to pull it up and over my knees. He watches me through the holes of the mask as he toys with the cuffs of his shirt near his wrists, rolling the material up his corded forearms, exposing more of his ink as he does. The man is covered with them.

I lick my bottom lip, my tongue sliding across it, attempting to calm my breathing, as I kneel onto the rug of the apparent office he’s locked us in. My lashes flutter as I try to come to terms with the fact that I’m really here, doing this…with him.

What am I doing?

Settling myself between his spread thighs, I grip the extra fabric of the gown in my hands, white-knuckling the material. I kneel, feeling the rough texture of the thin rug over the wooden floors. My eyes peer up at him for my next instruction.

I can’t tell what his expression is behind the mask. All I see are hazel eyes reflected by the dim lamps. He stares at me, somewhat of a snort escaping him.

“Look at her. On her knees, surrendering to her God.” He laughs as a wave of panic washes over me.

I’m regretting my confidence a few minutes ago when I told him I craved the heat of his fire.

“Crawl,” he barks.

I stare at him in confusion. I'm already on the floor between his legs.

"Lift your dress up and over your hips and crawl over to the desk," he instructs, tipping his head back against the edge of the couch.

This must be some sort of humiliation tactic. When he realizes I'm not moving, he leans forward, grabbing something from behind his back. My heart stops when I see the gun in his hand. He twirls the gun around his finger, making a strange clicking noise beneath his mask that sounds like a ticking clock.

The idea that I can trust someone of his level of insanity is asinine. I'm naïve, and run entirely by hormones. Hormones putting me in danger of a calculated man I can't seem to crack.

I slowly roll the dress up my hips, knowing my lack of underwear is about to have him seeing all of me from behind. Humiliation runs from my neck up to my warm cheeks as the flush of embarrassment overtakes me. I don't want him to see the strange wetness I feel pooling between my thighs, but there's no hiding it.

I turn from him, crawling across the rug, keeping my thighs as close together as I can to hide my body's arousal. Making it to the nearby desk on all fours, I turn my head back to face him, awaiting the next instruction.

His eyes stay trained on my exposed self as he commands, "Now crawl under the desk. On your forearms."

This is ridiculous. I want out. I want to leave the room. The humiliation is making me feel sick. I go to stand up when I hear him approach me. He places the end of the barrel of his gun against my head, and I gasp in fear and reluctant arousal.

Who would've thought a gun to my head would have me swimming in some kind of sick, dark lust?

"7636," he drawls.

I'm practically panting in fear now, on my hands and knees beneath him. I squint my eyes, looking beneath the desk when it all becomes clear. There's a safe there about the size of a mini-fridge.

Crawling beneath it, I arch my back as I lower myself onto my forearms. I feel the heat of his gaze on my exposed center, the wetness sticking against the inside of my thigh as I bend further

down. I use the code he instructed, opening the safe. It's too dark to see what's in there, and I'm afraid of what it might be.

"The envelope. Grab it," he says, dropping the heavy gun on the desk above me.

I blindly reach inside the safe, finding what seems to be a manila envelope; thick and heavy. I pull it out, handing it to him when he tells me to close the safe and twist the lock.

Backing out the way I went under, my bare ass bumps into his legs.

"You thought you were done?"

Turning beneath the desk, I realize he's trapping me beneath it with his body.

"I told you, Briony. This is your baptism," he says with a controlled voice, opening the belt to his slacks. "It's time we took away your purity."

My heart flutters in the confines of its cage as Aero removes his belt from the loops of his pants.

"Isn't this what you want?" he asks, leaning down to where I'm sitting on my calves. Holding his belt with both of his hands about two feet apart, he drapes it around the back of my neck, and I shudder. "To be dirtied by the devil?"

Yanking the belt towards him, my head tilts further, looking up at the masked man above me. Something about his belt behind my neck has my body warming with that same lustful wonder I can't contain, the tightening of my lower abdomen making me want to touch the space between my legs for some sort of relief.

"Yes," I whisper, then close my eyes tightly, hating everything about how I'm feeling in his presence.

I'm weak. Allowing him to control me. I fight the men in the room beneath us for this very freedom I'm so willingly giving Aero. Regrets will come. Many of them.

His eyes narrow, and I can practically see his satisfied grin beneath the mask. He talks slowly as he threads the end of the belt through the buckle, effectively closing the belt around my neck. "That's my good...sweet...obedient girl."

Something of a whimper leaves my throat at his praise as he tightens the belt through the buckle until it's snug around my throat. I can't even absorb what I'm feeling at the moment. My body ignites

with sexual desire coated in fear, blending so effortlessly together. I forget which I'm supposed to feel as the familiar fog encapsulates me yet again.

"Pull your straps down and expose yourself to me," he commands, with a confidence I've never dreamed of owning, pulling the tail of the belt forward until I'm up on my knees.

The tightening sends that familiar twisting in my stomach again. A hunger is forming. I can feel it at the base of my throat.

Reaching up, I pull the straps to the gown down over my shoulders, letting my breasts hold the material up. Aero reaches down, gripping the material near the middle of my chest and pulls it down. The move exposes my breasts, the cool air of the room causing my nipples to harden. I grit my teeth, closing my eyes, feeling entirely too uncovered and exposed.

His chest expands and contracts faster than before and a low rumble leaves his throat. He reaches his hand out and gently cups the base of my hanging breast, lifting it slightly while running his thumb over the pebbled nipple before dropping it and allowing it to bounce before him.

I can't deny the pleasure that stems from the sensitive touch of his rough, large hands on my body. I lick my lips before I feel the quick sting of his hand slapping my breast, causing it to sway. A moan escapes me, and I flinch at the sharp pain that creates a heat wave, traveling deep between my thighs. He gingerly cups me again.

"You weren't created this beautiful for nothing, Briony," he whispers, rolling my nipple between his forefinger and thumb. "Fuck, you're perfect for me." He groans as he twists my nipple roughly, causing me to suck in air. "The devil's tainted little angel."

His words make me dizzy with a sick desire swirling around me.

"Now beg to please me," he continues, rolling the end of the belt around his wrist once before gripping the base near my throat, pulling me tighter towards him. "I need to hear you beg for my cock in your hungry little mouth."

My eyes widen. No one has ever talked this way to me before, nor have I heard words like this expressed. Every part is vile and disturbing, so much so that I want to bathe in the filth of it just to appease him.

“Please.” I flutter my lashes, feeling the belt tighten around my throat as I talk.

He runs his hand over his pants, palming the imprint of his erection. “Please what?”

I squint my eyes, unable to speak the crude words.

“They’re just words, Briony,” he whispers, reaching forward and trailing the back of two of his fingers down the side of my face. “There’s freedom in complete expression.”

Freedom. Freedom I’ve been craving.

“Please let me wrap my mouth around it,” I whisper, feeling entirely foolish.

“Around what?” he asks sharply, pushing.

I swallow and feel the constricting flow of my throat under the belt.

“Your cock,” I whisper breathlessly.

The word earns a dark, haughty laugh from beneath the iron-clad mask. The devilish laugh of a man who’s set to own me. Freeing me from my chains by placing new ones around me.

“Thought you’d never ask.”

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HERO

I'm finding that pushing sweet, innocent Briony past the limits of her moral being is intoxicating.

Seeing her bare before me, her breasts full and heavy, released from the soft, silk dress, uttering words from her mouth so vile to her in a past life, is utterly thrilling.

Fuck, I'm harder than ever before, waiting to torment her in all the ways I've dreamed. All the ways I've imagined while watching her sleep so peacefully on that bed beneath me.

Those nights I gripped my cock, squeezing it hard to mimic the pain of taking someone so pure and untouched. Those nights are over. Briony will learn what it is to know her body. She'll learn what it is to embrace her sensuality, her sexuality. She'll learn how to take me in all the ways I need, satisfying each other until we're both utterly used and entirely spent.

My dark-haired beauty sits kneeling beneath me on the floor, so obedient, with a little push. Yes, the gun to the head wasn't really necessary, but by the look of the arousal glistening between her legs, I could've sworn it was her undoing, her fear and pleasure rolling into a beautiful mix of lust sitting low in her belly. Confused as to how to care for those needs.

With the belt securely fastened around her neck, and the end of it wrapped around my wrist, I take my other hand, opening up my dress pants.

She needs to get familiar with what a man truly is. A beastly animal at his core.

I pull out my hard cock before her, gripping it at the base, causing her eyes to widen and the sound of a gasp to leave her lips.

Stroking myself a few times, I run my finger over the piercing at the tip, watching as terror and fascination run wild behind those stunning, blue eyes.

"Touch it."

Her chest rises and falls as she glances from my cock to my eyes and back.

"Touch it and get familiar. It'll be your favorite new toy, little doll. I promise you."

Unsure eyes gaze at it before a shaking hand reaches up and wraps around the middle. I try to control myself, shuffling on my feet

as her eyes light up with fascination. The sensation of her palm finally on me has my head dropping back, my jaw clenching tightly.

“It’s smooth,” she whispers in disbelief to herself. “So...thick.”

Running her palm up my length, her fingers run along the veins roped around it until her thumb trails up and over the crown. She grazes the piercing, exploring with her fingers. I flinch, the flick of the piercing sending a wild electric current through my body, stiffening me further.

She doesn’t even know what she’s doing yet, and it’s already too much.

“Open your mouth,” I instruct, already feeling breathless and eager.

She blinks a few times, dropping her hand, clearly considering her life choices, before licking her lips and parting them ever so slightly. Her pulse pounds in her neck, the blood circulating beneath her skin, something I want to taste. Need to taste.

“Wider,” I say. “And stick out your tongue.”

She does as I ask, slowly opening her mouth wide as her pink, wet tongue slides out.

Staring down at my beauty on her knees before me, I press my hips forward, touching the tip to her tongue. She closes her eyes tight.

“Look at me!” I yell, pulling the belt so her head moves closer and her eyes snap open.

The edges are already brimming with tears as she stares at me, and I feed my cock into her mouth.

I will not be soft on her. It’s the tears spilling over I need. The mess of a pretty painted face stained before me the goal.

I thrust deep and she gags as the tip hits the back of her throat, but I hold it there, in her soft, innocent mouth. Pulling back a bit, I practically pass out at the feeling of those warm lips finally wrapped around me.

“You need to relax,” I tell her. “Breathe through your nose while I fuck your throat.”

Pulling the handle on her neck, I grip the hair at her crown. I bring her mouth back to me as my cock fills it, causing the tears to spill down her cheeks as she coughs around me again.

It won't take me long. She just needs to hold out for me a little longer.

She gags again, attempting to breathe around it, her saliva dripping down beneath us onto her bare chest as I begin thrusting. But you only learn through practice. Her breathing is irrelevant to me at the moment as my goal of finishing becomes the priority. Her hands come up to my thighs, nails clawing into the meat of my legs, pushing me back to pull off, fighting it, but it only excites me more.

I grip the belt tightly, groaning deeply, fucking her face harder than before, until I feel the tingling sensation at the base of my spine. Eyelashes clump together as the mascara runs down her cheeks, the sounds of slurping and gagging filling the room.

Pressing myself as deep as I can one last time, hitting the piercing against the back of her smooth throat, I pull back. Stroking my cock a few times, a throaty grunt escapes me and euphoria finds me as I release myself on her face, pumping all the cum from my tight balls onto her pretty little face.

Her eyes close tightly as she gasps for air, the mix of cum, tears, and mascara creating the most beautiful image before me. My filthy girl finally covered in me.

Placing my semi-limp cock back in my pants, I take two fingers, wiping the cum that's dripping down her cheek, coating them. She blinks up at me, her eyes wet with tears as a sob leaves her.

Taking the cum, I make the sign of the cross on her forehead.

"In the name of Aero, your new god, I baptize you, Briony Strait." I take the rest and wipe it over her lips as she stares at me in horrified disbelief. "Your new life begins now."

She pulls her head back away from me, an immediate glare taking over the innocence that was once there.

"How dare you!" she spits out at me, moving to stand.

I smile to myself as I watch her rip the belt from around her neck. I knew her denial and regret were coming. She throws it at me, hitting my chest, and I catch it with one hand. I watch as she slips the straps of her gown back over her shoulders, covering her saliva-coated chest. Gripping the bottom of her dress, she lifts it, moving to wipe her face off.

Dropping the belt, I charge her. Gripping her neck, she drops the edge of the dress, backing into the desk until she falls against it, seated on the edge.

“Don’t you dare waste that,” I growl. “You’ll learn to take everything I give you. Savor it until you find yourself needing more. You’ll thirst for me, Briony. Mark my words.”

Her nostrils flare as I stand above her. I clean her face off with my fingers, slowly feeding them to her to clean and lick off. She reluctantly complies, swallowing it down as a whimper leaves her throat, until I’ve gotten as much as I can from her skin.

Something about the danger of being in my presence, forcing her to enjoy something she’s learned a lifetime to deny, excites her to her twisted little core. It’s lovely.

I’m sick. I’m twisted. I’m definitely fucked up. But I know no other way. Briony will learn to live in my world, deriving pleasure from pain and humiliation until she owns her weaknesses. Breaking her into her new life as my counterpart in this sick game of redemption.

Leaning forward, my mask rubs against the side of her face, breathing in her scent once more before I leave. *Mine.*

“Go clean up,” I instruct in her ear. “But leave your lips untouched.”

I lean back, facing her again, both of my hands sliding up to cup her jaw. Her eyes narrow in confusion.

“Be my good girl and kiss your prince tonight with my cum still clinging to your lips.”

Giving her cheek a soft slap, I turn, grabbing my belt before I thread it back in place. She swallows, trembling as a breath leaves her lips. Reaching behind her, I grab the manila envelope from the desk, putting it in my waistband behind my back. I make my way towards the door, buttoning the rest of my shirt back in place as her eyes follow me.

“Do it, Briony,” I say sternly, straightening my shirt before tucking it in. “Or…see what happens if you don’t.”

With that, I twist the lock, open the door, and leave my smeared, dirtied little doll with her new task in hand.

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BRONX

I'm disgusted.

Repulsed.

This man just desecrated everything I believe in. Everything I stand for. He spit in the face of my religion, doing what he did in there, wiping his release across my forehead in some sort of sick display of dominance.

I'm heated, angry, and on edge as I wipe my face clean of him in the bathroom down the hall. I hold my head in my hands, leaning forward as the heat of the running water causes light steam to form, billowing up before me.

What have I done?

I fell into his trap again, completing whatever mission he had me on. The key, the room, the envelope, the disruption of my innocence…

Never in all of my life have I ever been treated so disrespectfully. And of course, it would be the man who's not only seemingly obsessed with destroying my purity, but entirely set on protecting me by way of riddles and hidden bodies.

My emotions, my hormones, my entire world, have shifted on their axis because of him. I couldn't help but be fascinated by him in there, or any room for that matter. Whether or not I like it, I'm drawn to him in ways unknown to me, like something deep inside the dark corners of my core speaks to the darkness inside of him.

He was bigger than I'd imagined a man to be. The sight of him enraptured me. Stiff, thick and velvety, roped with pulsing veins, and a gold ringed piercing through the tip. I didn't even know it was a thing for men to pierce their sex organs.

It's entirely strange and completely confusing to me. No one can even see it, so what's the purpose?

I'm reminded of his rough grasp on the belt around my neck and his hold on my hair, his raspy groans that left his throat as he continuously 'fucked' mine, and that dangerous look in his eyes when he told me to look at him while he was inside my mouth. The familiar warmth is back between my thighs, the dampness ever-present. This sensation, the feeling of being bound so tight...it just won't end.

I feel dirty. I feel used. I feel...unsatisfied, longing for more. Just as he wanted.

It frustrates me how I could even enjoy being treated so horrifically. But the truth of the matter is, my body wanted it and my brain couldn't catch up as to why.

After wiping the smeared makeup from under my eyes, I grab some tissue to wipe my lips. Pausing, I stare at my reflection, remembering his words.

Do it, Briony. Or see what happens if you don't.

Would he hurt Saint if I didn't follow through with this sick and twisted plan?

How would he know?

I go to wipe my lips anyway, not caring about his rules, when a knock on the door practically cripples me with fear.

"Briony? Are you in there?"

It's Saint.

Fixing myself quickly, I clear my throat and open the door.

He stands there casually, one arm braced against the door frame, looking handsome as ever in his suit. His mask is up on top of his golden shaved hair, his easygoing expression shrinking into a frown at the sight of me.

"What's wrong?" He stiffens immediately upon seeing my red, tear-stained eyes. "What's happened?"

I shake my head, letting out a deep breath. "Nothing, just...I think I need to go."

His brows raise in worry.

"Briony, what happened? Did someone say something? Are you hurt? I'm entirely confused."

He grabs my hand, pulling me closer to him as I swallow, looking into the ornate, red carpet of the hallway floor, eyes brimming with tears, but for a new reason. Red, passionate anger.

"C'mon," he says softly, draping a protective arm over me. "Let's get you out of here."

I'm glad he doesn't ask for more. I know it seems crazy; me crying up here in the bathroom, but it's so much more than just tears at a party.

He guides me out of the bathroom, assisting me down the stairs where the costume ball has continued on without me. Holding my

mask over my face again, I focus on leaving without needing to converse with anyone else.

Fake conversations with people who pretend to have an actual interest in who I am are really getting to me. I'd hoped once I'd proven myself as a reputable member of this church, I'd gain some sort of respect. But so far, nothing's changed. I'm still here as Saint's date, and the lies and despicable secrets of the bishop are seemingly disregarded or unknown to everyone but me.

Saint gets pulled into a conversation as we're leaving, and as hard as he is trying to break free to leave with me, the man he's talking to keeps on running his mouth. Saint's too nice of a guy to elder members of the community to ever just part from him, unfortunately, so I walk away towards the entryway by myself, desperately needing air.

As I'm reaching the sitting room near the door, I pause in place when I see it, feeling the constricting feeling in my chest again.

Near the door, there's a trash can filled mostly with napkins from the party guests as they leave. But it's the bud on top that catches my eye. The blood-red bud with the long green stem, just waiting to bloom, but cut too soon by the sharp blade of a man with a message.

Stalking over to it, I snatch the stem, picking it up as my sore jaw tightens.

My head turns and I know he's watching me right now. I feel eyes on the back of my neck from somewhere unknown. Frustration pumps through my veins in hot waves, needing an outlet.

I grip the stem tightly in my palm. The thorns, like Aero, pierce through my flesh, just how he unfortunately has. I embrace the pain as I walk a few steps forward towards the crackling fireplace in the sitting room.

Bending down near the massive stone opening, I hold the bud over the flames, watching as it slowly burns black before finally catching fire. I stand with it, watching as it deteriorates before me, the flames shooting up, surely lighting my eyes. I turn, facing the open room behind me where people are mingling and talking with useless words. No one notices me, even with a burning bud of rose in my hand.

I toss the stem into the flames behind me, glaring out into nothing. I can't see him. But I know he's there. Lingering in the shadows as he

does.

Saint approaches me with his hands held out in a shrug.

“Sorry about that,” he apologizes. “He wouldn’t stop talking about the new addendum my father introduced.” He takes another step towards me. “C’mon on, let’s head out.”

“What addendum?” I ask, taking a step forward towards him, almost closing the space between us.

I reach up slowly, grabbing the collar of his white shirt gently, popping it up where it had bent. Keeping hold of the shirt, my hands slide down to where the edge of his suit jacket is, pulling him towards me, until our chests touch.

Let him see me.

Saint stills at the contact, before letting out a breath, slowly wrapping an arm around my lower back. His hand ghosts slightly, fingers spanning across the very curve that crosses into unchartered territory. Clearly, the contact was surprising to him, but he’s not pulling away. His full lips part ever so slightly as his other hand comes up to touch the side of my face. I lean into it, closing my eyes.

“It’s nothing...just politics. You know how those men are.” He shakes his head while rolling his eyes.

His use of the words *“those men”* when referring to his own father surprises me.

“Let’s go,” I whisper, licking my lips and suddenly tasting Aero.

I’m frustrated at the heated spark that runs through me, finding its way between my legs, remembering his taste. His hold. His power over me.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, brushing the feeling away.

Saint’s eyes stare down into mine before trailing to my lips and back. I can feel the physical tension between us. It’s thick as fog now, and we are on the cusp of breaking through that fog.

His teeth graze his lower lip as he eyes my lips again, and he nods, tightening his hold on my lower back, pulling me into him tighter.

It surprises me. How much I like it. Knowing he’s watching. He wouldn’t hurt Saint. If he wanted to, he would’ve already. He needs him for something. Just as he needs me.

We are all just pieces in Aero’s game.

He’s using me. Molding me into something I’ve yet to understand. Whittling away at my core, he’s sharpening me to become the dagger he requires. Another man using me to his own advantage by ways of seduction and unfortunate truths.

What he doesn’t realize is I’m already a dagger. Shielded and hidden in a world where I thought my knowledge and drive protected me.

I know I’m playing with fire.

But Aero has yet to learn of the flames bound to burn him.

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BRONX

My fingers twist in my lap as the Jeep comes to a stop in front of my house.

Saint taps his fingers on the steering wheel, looking down. He opens his mouth as if he's about to say something when he turns to look at me. I gaze at his lips. His perfectly pink lips encasing that sparkling white smile.

Everything about his mouth is attractive. There are no scars, no riddles, no words of humiliation or hurt that leave them... No, none of that. His smile warms me, and his nervousness at this moment is endearing. We both grin and begin talking.

"I had—"

"Tonight was—"

We both pause, laughing lightly, but the tension I'm feeling is still in the pit of my stomach. It has nothing to do with Saint and everything to do with Aero.

We're not alone. I'm never alone anymore.

"Thank you," Saint says, his voice breaking through my thoughts. "For joining me tonight. That dance..." He chuckles softly, his tongue running along his teeth as he smiles while looking down at his lap. "That dance was the best part of the night for me."

"Really?" I ask, somewhat surprised.

I wouldn't consider that the best part of the night, but my night was far from normal. The realization of which part has stuck with me as my unfortunate favorite terrifies me.

"Yeah, I mean..." He leans forward in his seat, swallowing as his smile fades. He grabs my hand from my lap, laying it on the console between us. With my palm facing up, the tips of his fingers trace my fingers until they meet my wrist. At my wrist, the other fingers fall away as only the middle finger softly trails up my arm, the soft sensation tickling me and running a direct line to the place between my legs. "Until this part."

He gives me a little side-eyed glance, and I can hear his heart pounding in the shell of this Jeep.

He knows he shouldn't do this. His reputation. His father. His future. But, he can't stop, and secretly, I love that. Saint is letting the root of who he is as a man take over the constructs of his mind. I'm

owning that, honing in on it, and controlling it with the powers of sexuality inside me, and I'm finding it nothing short of thrilling.

"Do you want to come inside?" I ask, breaking the tension with the confidence of someone I've never known. "I can make us some tea."

I smile shyly at him, arching a brow. His lips part as he stares back at me. The offer is on the table, one that speaks volumes, and he knows the answer should be no, but I'm pushing, testing my abilities because of the thrill of the danger it may cause me.

"Tea?" he asks softly.

"Yeah." I bite my lower lip, peering directly at his mouth. "Tea."

I know I'm giving off flirtatious energy, but it feels good. It feels natural. Empowering. It makes me feel something I've never felt before.

Raw power over a man.

I'm stirring the cauldron before me, knowing the jealousy my magic is producing somewhere in the darkness where *he* waits.

"Tea sounds amazing," Saint whispers, still peering at my bottom lip as it springs free.

Once inside, I get the teapot out, filling it with water as he stands near me against the counter. I set it on the stove, waiting for the coil beneath it to heat. I feel him walk up behind me. My nerves light on fire as reality hits me. I brought him here under these pretenses, and now he's here, behind me, craving this in his own desirable way.

I become fully aware of his body as he leans up against me, silently pressing his front to my back. I feel his chest heaving behind me, feeling the warm air of his breath against my neck. He's losing control.

Turning, I face his chest before trailing my gaze up to his. I flutter my lashes as our eyes meet.

"Briony."

My name slips from his lips so painfully. His brows are knit, his forehead wrinkled with an agony I've never seen from him. He's fighting internally, but the war is crumbling before him as he drops his forehead down against mine.

I want to make his pain go away. To ease his discomfort. To take away his war because I now know that I can.

Reaching up, my hands softly surround the sides of his neck, my fingers grazing the soft, velvety skin beneath his ears. His throat bobs, his eyes closing tightly before they open again to find mine. His pupils are blown wide and I see the need behind his gaze.

That inherent need. That primal want. Even at our best, we try to fight it. Push it away, pretend it doesn't exist. But we are humans, run by those hormones that beg for reproduction, that taunt us with the demand to rupture and bleed into something so natural before us. A connection of mind and body, more powerful than the sins they tell us to deny.

Our minds turn off as our bodies awaken in this new world of excited wonder. Senses become heightened as touch becomes the new language we translate.

Sudden clarity falls upon me. I'm doing to Saint what Aero so easily does to me.

Without a second thought, I do what feels natural in the moment, tilting my chin up and closing my eyes. Saint leans forwards, his hands falling to the edge of the stove behind me as his lips softly graze mine. I make the final move, pressing my mouth to his. His soft lips press back, and before I know it, his hands are on my hips, gripping my flesh tightly beneath the silk of my dress as our mouths open up and our tongues touch.

Sparks of electricity shoot throughout my stomach, landing deep in that place that aches for friction.

I grab the back of his neck, opening my mouth for a kiss I've never experienced before. My stomach twists in pleasure at the gentle sensation of his tongue gliding against mine. But it's not even the kiss that has me bound so tight. It's the fact that he's watching. It's the knowledge of the wrath I'll soon face for pushing the limits that makes my thighs clench together and my insides ignite with that indescribable pleasure.

I want to push more. I want to witness the effects of him breaking again.

Saint pulls back from the kiss, breathless as his grip on my hips loosens.

"I...Briony, I'm so sorry..." He shakes his head against mine. "I shouldn't have done that."

Licking my lips, I try to calm my breathing when Saint surprises me by grabbing my hips again, pulling me away from the stove. I fall into him, and his hold tightens as he leans back against the opposing counter. Arms wrap around my body, one hand sliding down to cup my ass in his palm. His tongue licks my bottom lip once again, finding its way inside my mouth.

This kiss is wild. More reckless than the first. It's filled with an uncontrolled passion that stems from that place inside us we deny. I feel him pushing his hips forward, his cock hard beneath his dress pants, seeking some sort of intervention.

I slide my palm down between us, cupping him, and he groans into my mouth. He rubs himself against my hold, and I note just how big he also feels as his tongue tangles with mine. His hand cups the side of my neck, and I ache to feel the firm grip of his grasp, stripping me of my air.

Aero would choke me. He'd watch as the oxygen left my body, making me beg for release before handing my life back to me. He'd give me the gift of sucking his tongue rather than kiss me in his own twisted form of affection.

Saint is kissing the lips that were just coated in Aero.

I snap out of the lust-driven haze at the reminder, pushing my hands against Saint's chest until I can back away from him, parting our connection.

His eyes are wide and panicked at my reaction, but he has no idea of the truth behind it.

"Oh no," he whispers, his hand coming up to rub his forehead. "No. Briony...I..."

I can't believe it actually happened. I'm not this girl. I can't be.

"I shouldn't be here. I need to go," he rushes, running a hand over the back of his neck. "I shouldn't have done that to you."

He rakes the same hand over his face, the torment already present.

But it's not the kiss itself that has me flustered. It's what I did before it, and what I've done after it. Some sick part of me enjoyed playing into Aero's disgusting game.

"Saint," I say, reaching out and pulling his hand from his face. "It's...it's fine. It wasn't your fault."

He sighs and gazes at me again.

“And, to be honest,” I continue softly. “It...it was my favorite part of the night.”

His eyes laced with worry melt into an easy smile again at my lie. The reaction to this will be my favorite part of the night.

He straightens himself, and I squeeze his hand in mine.

“This is such a bad idea,” he whispers, looking at our hands. “We would get in so much trouble if they knew I came over here and practically attacked a fellow Magnus Princeps.”

A scoff threatens to leave me, but I swallow it down. Saint is worried about the trouble of a kiss when I’ve literally almost witnessed a man of God abuse a child in the most horrific way. The irony of The Covenant Academy and our diocese as a whole is dawning on me and the need to uncover the truth, my new mission.

“Rain check on the tea?” he asks with remorse, insinuating his need to leave the temptations before him.

Grinning, I hold up my hand suggestively. I want him to kiss the back of it and say goodnight. I want his lips all over me, but not in the way I should.

He does exactly what I’d hoped, kissing the back of my hand gingerly, before he says his goodbyes, slipping through the door and taking off in his Jeep for the evening.

I watch from the window as his taillights fade into the dark night. A satisfied grin creeps across my face as I wait in the foyer of my house. I’m not even surprised when I smell the familiar leather and notable sulfur creeping up behind me.

I’ve embraced my masked man. Ready to play his games along with him.

Just as I prepare to turn and face Aero, I feel a cloth quickly cover my nose and mouth. An arm slips around my chest, holding me tightly to his hard body as I attempt to breathe through the chemical that assaults my nostrils.

“Easy, my little slut,” he whispers into my ear. “I’d hate to hurt you while you aren’t awake enough to feel it.”

My legs kick out from under me as I attempt to fight him off while he drags me backwards, but my vision becomes cloudy, and my fight becomes weaker as my muscles turn to liquid and I melt into him.

And then, black.

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HERO

I sit back in the chair, waiting. Watching.

Rolling her head to the side, her black hair splays across her forehead, over her eyes. I see her lashes flutter as a weak little groan leaves her throat.

I worried I'd given her too much anesthetic, but then realized she hadn't really had a good night's sleep since before meeting me. She needed the rest. And I needed the time to do what I do.

"Aero," she murmurs, and my cock swells.

She's calling for me, already knowing I'm here. I don't like that she feels safe with me. She shouldn't. I get up from the chair, walking towards her body that's cuffed to the iron bars of her bed.

"Wake up, baby," I say, leaning over her. Brushing the hair out of her eyes, I take the opportunity to lick the side of her face again while she's still a little out of it. "I've got a surprise for my beautiful girl."

Her eyes snap open wide, orienting herself, and the terror I need to see is back. She goes to sit up, but her wrists pull against the cuffs on the bed. She moves her leg, feeling the rope I've tied there. Immediately, her chest heaves, and she pulls on all the restraints at the same time, thrashing her naked little body for my viewing pleasure.

"Help!" she cries out. "Someone—"

I slap my palm over her mouth.

"No one is going to help you, Briony. No one but me," I say, pushing down on her mouth. I pinch her nose closed, watching as those gorgeous panicked eyes focus in on mine beneath my ski mask. She tries to move her face away from my grasp, but I hold tight, taking her air. "Why don't you understand that?"

I see her try to bend her knees inward, closing her thighs, but the restraints pull tight, spreading her legs. She can't hide the fact that this turns her on, this lack of control. Her pretty pink pussy is on full display. Clean shaven and slick, as if she were just waiting for someone to see it and salivate all over it.

Her eyes fill with tears, and she tries to calm herself while I hold her breath, blinking once as if communicating her understanding. That or she's beginning to feel the lack of oxygen taking her to a hazy bliss. I remove my hand, allowing her air again, and she sucks in a quick breath, her round, plump breasts rising.

“Now you know how I feel every time I’m without you,” I say, slapping the side of her face gently with each word. “I can’t. Fucking. Breathe.”

She swallows, her eyes darting back and forth between mine, the fear causing her bottom lip to tremble.

“A-are you going to punish me now?” she asks in a cracked, timid tone. “For what I did?”

I straighten above her, pleasantly surprised by her question as I grab the duct tape from the nightstand.

I reach my hand out, running my thumb over her quivering bottom lip. “No, little doll. I’m not going to punish you.”

Her face falls to a bit of a frown and her brows knit with confusion. I watch as her head turns, and her worried eyes find her wrist that’s almost purple from how tight I have it clamped down.

She needs to know pain. Her life has been entirely too easy to where she’d practically crumble under different circumstances. I can’t have that. I won’t have that. Her strength comes from me, pushing her past the point of comfort.

“I’m going to reward you,” I say, turning her chin to face me again. “For being such a good girl, spreading my cum all over his lips just like I asked you to.”

She blinks away her impending tears, and I drop her chin. Pulling out a strip of duct tape, I pull my mask up over my mouth to expose my teeth, biting the edge until a decent-sized piece rips off. She thrashes as I place the tape over her mouth, stifling another scream.

“Can’t have you screaming through the show.”

I grab my phone from the nightstand, adjusting the knit mask back over my face.

“Now, for your surprise.” I find the video and perch my phone up on the stand.

She turns her head as far against her shoulder as she can, attempting to see. I click play, then walk back towards the bench of her vanity, leaning back on my elbows. I kick my boots out before me, slouching to get comfortable, as I watch the show with pleasurable satisfaction, excited to view her response.

Her eyes widen when she sees herself on the tiny screen. She’s in an entirely different position than she is now. On her stomach, naked,

with her limbs spread out across her bed. I'd just removed her dress after she passed out from the anesthetic. She's facing the camera, her eyes shut and her lips parted, sleeping peacefully like the beautiful little doll she is. I step into the camera, kneeling on the bed between her legs behind her. I spread her thighs wider, the cusp of her round ass right beneath my thumbs.

I hear a little cry come from her throat as she continues watching, and it makes me grin. I know she's worried about what she's about to see.

The idea that she's about to watch herself get fucked for the first time has me wishing I'd done it. Fuck, I wanted to slide my dick in that tight little hole, but only when she's conscious enough to feel the pain. I need her there with me to experience that.

Pulling the mask up to my nose on the video, I lean forward over her on all fours, licking the side of her ass up to her lower back.

Her eyes squint as she watches the camera before closing them tightly. She breathes heavily through her nose, and I see her knees try to close again. The urge to keep watching takes over, so she opens her eyes again, focusing on the screen. She watches as I continue moving on top of her, licking away each and every place that piece of shit touched.

I finally clean her body, my tongue dragging all over her soft white skin while she lays unconscious. Getting closer to the camera, I bend down near her face at the edge of the bed. Hands, mouth, tongue...all of it all over her once perfect face. I lick the sides of her face before licking her parted lips. I stick my tongue in her mouth, licking her loose tongue as I rub myself over my pants.

A soft whimper escapes her throat as she stares at the cellphone.

"Like watching me touch you, sweetheart?" I ask, and her eyes quickly dart to mine.

She looks like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Her excitement is unfortunately palpable and written all over her face.

I get up from the bench, stalking back over to where she's now restrained on the bed. I trail my knuckles up her shaking thigh, slowly, until I reach her swollen and slick pussy. Her worried gaze stays locked on mine as my hand reaches higher. Finally, I slide my middle finger along the wet slit, rolling up along her swollen clit.

Her head falls back against the mattress and her body writhes beneath me. She blows air through her nose, whimpering against the tape, then brings her head back up to watch me.

“Sopping mess, you are,” I say, removing my finger.

I rub it along my bottom lip, then lick the side of the finger, tasting that sweet nectar again.

Her hips shift at the loss of contact, as if she’s trying to seek it out again. I give her a quick slap right over her mound, and she jerks, pulling against her restraints as the duct tape captures her cries.

“You’re gonna miss the best part, you greedy whore.” I smirk beneath my mask.

Breathing heavily, her nipples now tight little buds, she turns her head to the cell phone again.

Briony shifts in the video, her arm pulling from above her head until it drops off the side of the bed.

She watches with fascination, her forehead wrinkled in worry, so unsure of what I’m about to do to her next.

Her hand slips between the mattress, disappearing for a second while I was easily distracted, licking down her spine. I couldn’t restrain myself. I needed to lick each bone of her spine beneath her flesh, rolling slowly down her sweet-tasting skin. Biting through her ivory flesh and tasting that rich, metallic blood, something I dream about as I re-watch. I want to bathe in her as she bathed in me that night we fought in the kitchen.

Her hand reemerges from between the mattress with my blade now in her palm. As if she was pretending to be asleep, she suddenly throws her arm back, slicing my upper arm, splitting the skin. Her eyes widen, watching it, then peer at my arm that’s now wrapped.

It’s hard to see exactly what happens next in the video, but I get up onto my knees, cursing out as she flips beneath me. She swings the knife again, attempting to stab me in the abdomen, but I catch her wrist in time, twisting it until she screams out, dropping the knife to the floor with an echoed thud.

I pull the cuffs from my back pocket, quickly tightening one around her wrist before pulling her arm up and closing the other around the iron bar of her bed.

Her face is in shock watching what she clearly doesn't remember happening. The video finally cuts out, and her nervous eyes find mine.

"You're a bad bitch, Briony, even when sedated. Wouldn't you say?" I taunt. "Unpredictable as hell." I stand, walking the few steps to kneel back on the edge of the bed to the space between her thighs. I'm rock hard, ready to release myself all over her bare chest just because I can. Planting my hands on either side of her head, leaning over her naked body, I stick my tongue out and lick across the duct tape before saying, "I'm so fucking into it."

She mumbles something, pulling against her restraints again.

"Ready to talk?" I ask, bracing myself above her.

She nods her head, calming her body. I rip the tape from her mouth as she flinches, her eyes screwed shut tightly.

"Answer the question, Briony," I say directly, a new purpose in my tone. "The choice is entirely yours."

Her lashes blink open, gaze finding mine, and she lifts her chin to glare at me. I see the fire behind her eyes. The determination. Everything I've been nurturing. Manifesting.

"Do you want to be Saint's weak little slut, or Aero's powerful queen?"

She swallows, peering down at my body being held over her in a push-up-like stance. Her eyes rise to meet mine again, contemplation in her gaze. She licks her lips, calming her breathing before talking.

"I've never wanted to be a slut," she whispers, staring at me dangerously.

A grin forms behind my mask, and I get the urge to bite into my lip.

"Or someone's queen," she continues, dropping her tone and raising her chin defiantly.

I hear a light click and the muscles of my back pull taut as my spine straightens.

"I'm a King."

She sneers in my face as an arm swings free, and I feel the sharp pain of the blade hitting my neck.

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BRONX

He falls to his side and off the bed, cursing out while holding his neck.

Aero is psychotic. Insane. Obsessive. And for some strange reason, I can't help but to be entirely intrigued by the toxic sides of him.

Watching him clean me of Saint's touch in the video had me spiraling. The warmth between my legs intensified as I witnessed him caress me with that tongue, caring for me in his disgustingly strange way. I've become totally captivated by it. Enraptured by his wicked ways. I was aching between my thighs, wondering if he was going to fuck me on camera, hoping and praying he didn't so I could remember the feel of it. I didn't want to be robbed of that opportunity, and that idea alone shocked the living hell out of me.

But I'm no dummy, and neither is he.

Aero gives me all the tools to make my own decisions. I've come to realize he enjoys restraining me, making me weak, but what really gets him off is my ability to fight back. He plants the tools, waiting to see if I'm smart enough to play his game, and leaving a scalpel blade within fingers' reach behind the iron bars of my bed was evidence of that.

Was he expecting me to stab him in the side of the neck with it? Probably not. But here we are.

Quickly, I turn, using the scalpel to pick the lock on the other cuff.

I hear him rise off of the floor, and a low laugh forms. The cuff clicks open, releasing my sore wrist, and I bend forward, desperately sawing away at the rope tangled around my ankle. He watches, standing near the edge of the bed, shaking his head as he holds a hand to his new wound.

I got him in the muscle of his neck, not anywhere vital. I'm not trying to kill the guy. Not consciously, anyway.

What's crazy is I don't remember grabbing that knife in the video. I'd held onto it since he gave it to me, knowing I'd need it to save myself at some point, not thinking I was capable of doing it while coming out of my fog. I'm surprised by myself and the fight I hold deep within my being.

I free my leg of the rope around one ankle and try to untie the other, when he grabs both my wrists, slamming me back on the bed. I

drop the blade before kneeing him in the side with my free leg. He grunts, but places all of his weight on my body, pinning me with his hips.

We're both panting, staring dangerously into the other's eyes. Two wild animals. One inherent, the other learned. Both feral in the worlds they thrive, meeting in the center of a new jungle. A hunger pitting them against one another until it becomes an intentional bloodbath of dominance.

He shakes his head again, his gaze dropping to my mouth before peering back into my eyes, a look of relief pouring from those dilated pupils.

"There she is."

The way he says it, with a proud look on his face, makes me feel as if every button he pushes is for this purpose alone. To bring out the darkness in me. To wring out my strength before him, allowing it to drown him in his own strange, masochistic way. It shouldn't excite me the way it does, but the idea that Aero is pushing me to be the baddest version of myself is entirely too attractive for all the wrong reasons.

"Are you ready to listen? Ready to feel?" he asks, slowly trailing his hands down from my wrists until they reach the curve of my elbow.

Softly, those hands trail my skin along my upper arm until they meet my neck. He slowly wraps both hands around my neck, smearing his blood across my skin.

"You deserve to bloom, Briony. You deserve pleasure and all the desires they have denied you, masked by the societal standards meant to hold you back."

"Who are you?" The words slip from my lips without thinking, needing answers like my next breath. "I need to know."

How has he found me? Why does he want this for me? Who is the man beneath the mask? The answers matter now more than ever.

His hazel eyes, surrounded by thick black lashes, go back and forth between mine, and I watch the roll of his throat beneath the rose tattoo sticking out from under the knit mask.

"Knowing a person means understanding their intentions. I think you know what mine are."

I swallow, listening intently.

“No one can control me anymore, especially not a fictitious God created by despicable men designed to control the masses. I won’t allow you to live in this world of deceptions when you were meant for so much more.”

Everything he says holds such weight, as if the specific people he’s suggesting have wronged him in the worst possible ways.

“They’re lying to you, Briony. They don’t want you. They never did.”

Thousands of questions prowl through my mind at his words.

“But I do. I want you. You’re mine now, just as I am yours.”

“But I don’t even—”

“I’ll kill everyone,” he interrupts. “Anyone who gets in the way of letting you live.”

The words go directly to my center, and without even thinking, I raise my hips to meet him, grinding that sensitive part of myself against him for some much needed friction.

His need to protect me while allowing me to thrive has me losing my mind to my body.

“I know, baby,” he says, peering at my lips as his rough, calloused hand travels to cup the curve of my breast. “I’m gonna take care of that ache so you can think clearly again.”

He slaps my breast, causing me to feel the sting travel directly to my center like a lightning bolt of intense pleasure, before surprising me by roughly flipping me over on my stomach. With one leg still tied to the bed, the rope around my ankle, he props me on my knees, holding my hips as he slides off the bed behind me.

I close my eyes, breathless, feeling entirely exposed with my ass up in the air, naked and open before him.

His hands slowly skim up the backs of my thighs as he talks.

“Prettiest little cunt I’ve ever seen,” he says, his voice not muffled by the mask like it was before.

The words he uses are so vulgar and horrific. He uses his fingers to part my lips, holding me open for his viewing pleasure.

“I’m gonna hurt you,” he warns. “I’m gonna fuck this tight, pink, pure little pussy until it’s swollen and red, and you pass out from the pleasured pain.”

My toes curl into themselves and I gasp as I feel him spit on me. I look back over my shoulder at him, too stunned to move. I don’t think

any of this is normal. Then again, I don't know what normal is.

All I see is the top of his black mask on his head before my face falls flat to the mattress when his warm, wet tongue laps the length of me.

"Oh, God," I moan at the sensation that's blowing my mind.

I've never felt anything like it. The soft, warm, spongy tongue touches the most intimate part of me. His lips surround my clit as he suctions the part that aches the most. I'm on fire, burning internally with the tightness within me, bound so tight I could burst.

"There you go," he murmurs into me, flicking me with his tongue again, making the sexiest smacking sounds with his lips. "Call for him. See who comes first." He flicks his tongue again before sucking on that sensitive, swollen part of me with his lips. "Him, or me."

His finger runs the length of my slit, and I feel just how wet it is down there. Pushing the finger into me, I buck my hips back, fisting the comforter between both hands on the bed.

"Aero," I moan, feeling myself take his finger and squeeze onto it.

He removes it slowly before I feel another finger joining it. There's a slight sting this time as he rotates the digits, almost testing to see how far he can stretch me.

"I'm taking all of this for myself," he whispers, pulling the fingers out and trailing them up to my puckered hole that clenches when he touches it.

It feels so foreign, strange, and inherently wrong, and I can help but wish he'd touch anywhere else.

"You own me now," he declares, before I feel the sharp sting of a bite on the flesh of my ass.

Before I can even react, I feel his hand grip the hair at my crown. Pulling my head back until I'm facing the ceiling, he says, "Know this, Briony. There's no escaping me."

I swallow, trying to breathe through my nose to calm myself and keep from screaming. I'm not in control, and I don't think I want to be. I want to escape him, only for him to chase me down again.

I feel his mouth back on me again, and a loud throaty moan leaves my chest. It's as if I have no control over my body anymore. He's the conductor, conducting the chaos that is my orchestra, the music he

creates becoming more intense with every stroke of that skilled tongue.

My eyes roll to the back of my head, my stomach feeling so tight I could explode internally. I feel the rupture bound to release; the break, the crest in the wave…

“I can’t...it’s happening...” I breathe.

His tongue laps my slit before an intense flicking motion vibrates through me as fingers fill me in the place that aches to be filled.

With my eyes closed tightly, the most intense feeling washes over me. It stems from my lower stomach exploding outward throughout my spine. I hold my breath as it cycles through me, this euphoric, mind-blowing sensation that literally cripples me. I cry out, embracing it.

And then, as quick as it washed over me, I’m numb all over.

My breaths fall from my lungs as my toes curl into themselves, my hands still fisting the blanket before me.

I feel my hair getting pulled from the crown again, lifting me from my hazy bliss.

“Suck,” he demands, leaning over me with his tongue out.

I obey, wrapping my lips around his tongue and tasting myself on it. He groans as I pop off the end, feeling the weight of his heavy cock resting on my backside through his pants.

Quickly, without another thought, he undoes his belt. Taking it, he wraps the leather around my upper arms, pulling them together tightly onto my back. I’m still swirling from my first orgasm given by a man I don’t even know, when the feeling of his warm, fleshy cock rubs against my sensitive and swollen clit from behind.

“Call for your God now, church girl,” he says gruffly, “Because after I dirty you the way I intend, you’re gonna need some saving to cling to.”

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HERO

No one could hold me back.

Not one fucking person.

Not my prick of a boss, Alastor Abbott. Not my piece of shit father, Callum. Not my dim-witted half-brother, Saint. They want her dead. They want to crumble her sweet, innocent soul into the ground, whereas I want to break it, reviving her pieces in my darkness.

Beautiful Briony is mine to take, and watching her bloom before me has me losing all the control I ever thought I owned.

She's spread open before me on her knees, moaning out something useless into the blankets, probably still reveling in the aftermath of her orgasm as I undress myself entirely, leaving nothing but the mask.

I don't think I've ever seen such a perfect pussy in all my life. It screams innocence and purity, and the urge to destroy it is at an all-time high, especially after she just came all over my face, making a complete mess of me the way I'd hoped. I'm bound by her. My balls are tight and heavy as fuck; my cock, already leaking pre-cum, painfully aching and seeking relief as it hangs sturdily between us.

I know she's clean. She's so pure it hurts. It's been years since I properly fucked, so using protection is just nothing I'm interested in. If we're going to fuck, I'm going to feel it all. Fuck the rest.

I grip the base of my cock, rolling the pierced head along her warm, swollen lips. She jerks in response, pulling her leg, which is still tied to the bed, so I smack the side of her ass in a subtle warning, then hold her hip in place.

"You're gonna need to breathe through this."

I push the head of my cock in, forcing it into her tight cunt, watching her walls cave in around it as she cries out into the mattress. Gripping the hair at her crown again, I pull her face off the bed.

"No," I growl, tightening my grip. "I need to hear the angels leave your body through your throat."

She lets out a sob, gasping for air from the way I've got her head cranked back. I loosen my grip on her hair, clutching a fist full near her neck, rolling the long locks around my palm. She drops her head slightly, resting on her forearms with her back arched up towards me.

The curve of her spine is fucking magnificent from this view. I take my free hand and run it over the arch of her back, fingering each

beautiful protrusion of her spine. She's panting beneath me, her thighs trembling, waiting with just the head of my cock inside of her.

"Please, be gentle..." she whimpers.

I scoff. "Why do we have pain if we can't mold it into pleasure?"

So many archaic rules, traditions, and sins are being broken, along with Briony in this room. All I want is for her to know that none of it matters. I want her to feel awakened by a new force, more powerful than the fictitious god she worships. I desperately seek to give her the power she's entitled to. The power they keep trying to strip from her, owning her mind and body infinitely.

Briony will become the weapon she was always meant to be.

I spit down on my cock, wetting it up higher in order to ease myself inside her virgin walls. Watching as her knuckles turn white from her hold on the comforter, I push my way in, deep and fast, with a forceful thrust.

She gasps, a cry escaping her throat as she stretches to accommodate me. Her walls slowly loosen, but the grip is so tight, her pussy clamps around me like a fist.

I groan loudly, forgetting just how good sex can feel as she cries through her moans.

"Fuck, this view," I grunt, pulling back out slightly and seeing her cum coating my dick, the curves of her frame beneath me screaming of femininity in it's perfection. "This body was built for sin."

Picking up the pace, I drop her hair and grip onto the thick flesh of her hips, driving myself into her faster and harder, falling into the feeling of being the first one here. *Mine.*

My balls tighten as they slap against her skin, surely leaving her lips nice and red from the assault.

She screams loudly before I bend over her back, wrapping a palm around her mouth. I still myself deep inside her, my cock hardening further as I feel her clamp down on me yet again.

"Careful now," I growl. "We don't need any heroes coming up here, trying to save you."

She says something muffled in my hand, but I'm over it. I'm so close. It's been too long since I've felt a pussy wrapped so tightly around my shaft. I've dreamed of this day with her since I started stalking her, watching her late at night, envisioning the moment she

realizes her body is dripping for me, like it is now. Her arousal is leaking like a fucking faucet all over my cock.

Fuck.

With my hand over her mouth, I feel her teeth sink into the skin of my fingers, and it's all I can take. Pain, along with pleasure, sends me over the edge. Violence is my love language, and she speaks my native tongue.

I'm gonna lose it.

I quickly slide out of her, gripping the base of my shaft, standing at the edge of the bed and instruct her to turn to face me. Her leg lies awkwardly beneath her as she shifts towards me, the rope still holding tight on her ankle. Getting her on her knees before me, my sickness takes over again.

Desecrating everything this sweet, naïve little doll thinks she believes in, I grip her neck in one hand, breathing hard through the knit mask that's caging me in. She opens her mouth, sticking her pink tongue out at me like my good girl, assuming I want her to swallow everything I'm about to give her. *Quick learner.*

Her tears stain her cheeks as the dark, long hair sticks to the side of her face. She peers up at me, terror and intrigue melting together as I tighten my hold on her neck, leaning her back. I fist the tip of my wet cock, and standing above her bare body, I release myself on her heaving chest.

Ropes of white, hot cum pump out of me, coating her breasts, dripping down her collarbone like a beautiful necklace. Her own personal rosary.

The sensations overtake me, and I'm forced to fall forward, bracing myself on the mattress with my hand as I try to regain control of myself.

I stand up, gaining my breath, feeling dizzy and overcome with the immense pleasure as I glance back down at her. Her forehead is wrinkled as her hand goes to her chest. She touches the mess I've made, getting some on her fingers before holding it out before her horrified face. Her eyes drift up to meet mine as her fingers fall away, leaving only the middle one. The wrinkles in her forehead smooth out as her eyes narrow, leaving the finger dripping in my cum straight up before me.

She's flipping me off.

A dark grin slides across my face, and I bite the corner of my lip, holding it back.

"You arrogant, disrespectful son of bitch!" she seethes.

Ah, so my sweet doll understands the meaning behind the necklace.

"Don't act like you despise it now, sweetheart," I say, taking a step forward. Gripping her hand with the finger still coated in me, I force it towards her mouth, pressing firmly on her lips against her teeth. She finally parts her mouth open, and I watch in satisfaction as she sucks it clean. "The evidence of that is mixed right in there."

She turns her head away from me, a scowl on her face, tears threatening to fall again.

I wish society wouldn't make a big deal about women losing their virginity. Who fucking cares. It doesn't need to be this big monumental moment. You fucked for the first time. So what? Crying about it? Ridiculous. She should be thanking me on her goddamn knees, crying tears of joy for letting it be me who stripped her of this first. Someone who actually gives a shit about her, not some punk boy from school who pretends to love her before dropping her like a bad habit for the next tight cunt that comes calling.

I find the knife on the floor, cutting her free of the rope. Grabbing her upper arm, I help her stand. She's a little unsteady on her feet, more than likely sore already. But it will be a feeling she needs to get used to now I've had a taste.

She walks along with me as I guide her into the dark bathroom, the moonlight barely leaking in through the tiny mosaic window. Starting up the shower, the water quickly warms up; the steam billowing in the small space as she stands in the corner, her arms wrapped around herself, shivering.

Removing my mask, my hair falls in a disheveled mess over my forehead. I run my fingers through it while feeling the heat of her eyes on my back. She is curious. I know she wants to know the man who just flipped her fucking world inside out.

But is she ready to know my secrets?

Which side will she choose when the truth is known and the entirety of her once preconceived beliefs come crashing down?

Surely not the villain of her story.

I'm meant to kill her. They literally hired me to end her life.

But I can't.

I won't.

Because she isn't like them. She's like me. Me, before I found my voice in this world. The world meant to control those who didn't fear an omnipresent god who's always watching, requiring perfection and fear in his subjects.

Those intelligent enough to know that a god wouldn't answer the prayers of a young boy looking to win a baseball game, while his half-brother lay near dead, begging for his life in the street from the men his father hired to kill him.

Those who fight back for everything they tried to take while making a mockery of the religion they profess.

One by one, we'll do what's necessary.

Watching them fall to their knees before us and beg their god to save them before sending them to the depths of hell they fear they belong.

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BRONX

I’m just not sure anymore.

I used to feel so sure. Confident in what I knew to be true. But from the moment Aero began pulling the veil back on my existence, I didn’t know what to think.

I once believed I could do right by God and be saved. That if I loved others as I loved myself, if I became the image of Him, worshiped Him, and abided by His commandments, that He would reward me in the afterlife, never living in fear of a detrimental hell that awaited. A place where suffering plagues you persistently. Eternal damnation. Where hope goes to die and sinners reap what they sow.

But these sins they speak of; masturbation, fornication, erotic thoughts... They don’t feel sinful to me. They feel natural. Biologically natural. As if some force deep within my genetic makeup is driving me towards the inevitable. I feel uninhibited in a way I’ve never known, and free from restraints around me. I crave the sensation of touch from a man. I yearn for the passion of a kiss. I have an overwhelming desire to touch myself and explore these ever-changing thoughts and feelings.

But planted there in the back of my mind are the thoughts that haunt me. Sin. Sinful. Sinner.

Who determined what was morally right and what was morally wrong? Would an almighty God truly not want me to explore feelings and emotions that connect me deeply to another human or humans before signing a paper, chaining myself over to one of them for life? Why is even thinking about sex considered immoral? Am I not an intelligent being who thirsts for knowledge of the world around me? Am I really expected to sit back and keep my mouth closed about the atrocities happening in the academy? Do I not have every right to question these sins they say I’m committing when theirs are horrifyingly worse?

My mind is a mess. Confusion swirling as I try to calm myself from the events that just took place.

I engaged in premarital sex with a man I don’t even know, and the most terrifying aspect is nothing felt more necessary.

Feeling slightly disturbed, I recall what I enjoyed most about it. The rough aspect of the hand to my face, the despicable words he uttered, the forcefulness of him filling me past the point of comfort,

the crude way he finished. It felt so morally wrong, and yet the excitement of being taken by someone who can't seem to control themselves around you left me feeling needed in a way I've never experienced. Wanted. Desired. Claimed.

I'm feeling myself spasm again, just rehashing as chills sweep across my body. The need to squeeze my thighs tightly together and cover my nipples that are forever hard in his presence, an absolute must.

I understand the piercing now. I felt it in a way I couldn't even explain. Aside from the burning pain of being stretched to accommodate his size, I could feel the end of the piercing rubbing somewhere internally. A place that gave off little bursts of pleasure amidst the excruciating pain of it all.

I'd wanted my first time to be with a man that loved me. A man who was respectful and receptive to my needs. But Aero is none of those things. He's rough, raw, and gritty, and as he said, he enjoys pain with his pleasure. I'm sure a man like him has never known love, the word withdrawn from his vocabulary.

We're in the bathroom where he's warming up the shower for us. I'm just following his lead at this point, as I'm not sure what normal is anymore. He removes his mask and I stiffen in place.

The lights are out and the minimal moonlight coming from the tiny window is doing nothing to help me see.

Grabbing my upper arm again, he roughly pulls me beneath the warm water along with him.

Without words, he grabs a bottle, opening it and smelling the contents. He places it back, repeating the process until he finds the right scent.

My scent.

That he can tell which is my shampoo and which is my body wash just from the smell of me has my stomach twisting in a nervous knot.

I forget how well he knows me. It terrifies me, especially acknowledging the fact that I literally know nothing about him. Which is why I can't seem to understand why I'm drawn to him in such a way.

He lathers my naked body with soap, his hands running gently and carefully over me. His erection is back like it never left, the massive

organ bouncing in the air between us, rubbing against my hip as hands wash away his remains on my chest, before gently massaging my breasts. Thumbs gently flick my nipples as he seemingly studies my body in the darkness with his touch.

As sore as I am, there's a sick part of me aching for more. I want to experience that feeling of being full again. That feeling of being so closely connected to someone in physical form to the point of losing myself into a pleasured-filled fog. The euphoria; unmatched.

I want to experience that sensation of bliss again. It's a high, unlike anything I've ever experienced. A feeling of finally breaking through that tightly bound mess of lust, and achieving the ultimate reward.

I clench my legs together as the water bounces off his back, hitting me indirectly. I shiver, and he notices immediately.

He's breathing harder than he was a minute ago, as he continues running his soapy hands all across my bare body. Turning me so my front is in direct line with the showerhead, he steps behind me, placing more soap in his palm. I flinch when his fingers meet my inner thigh.

"You should know you're safe with me," he whispers in my ear, his fingers trailing up to my center. "I haven't fucked in years."

My heart drops at the comment. Here I thought he meant he would protect and care for me in my vulnerable state, but no. He wanted to give me reassurance on STDs, now that there's nothing I can do about it, anyway. I'm such a fool.

My frustration with myself takes over, and I elbow him, pushing him off me to distance myself beneath the water. Grabbing the soap, I lather myself up, rewashing my body with my own hands, rinsing myself clean of him and his touch.

"Briony, don't," he warns, grabbing my hand before forcing my back against the shower wall, his body pinning mine. "Allow me this."

I stare up into the shadow of a man, wondering about his need to care for me in his own peculiar way. Relaxing, I allow him to wash me clean. He takes his time, almost memorizing every part of me as those rough hands now caress my chest, stomach, arms, even my hands lacing his fingers through mine.

I squint as I look up at his shadow again, trying to make out his face, but it's useless. I can't see anything.

But I can feel.

I reach my hands up after he washes them of the soap, cupping his chiseled jaw. I feel it clench beneath my palms as he stiffens in place, frozen like a statue. Water splashes me in the face, so I close my eyes, leaving my mouth parted as it runs down my lips.

I touch him, my fingertips running the bridge of his nose, down to his parted full lips. His breath is coming out in hot waves, his erection now resting against my stomach.

I reach up, finding his eyebrows with my fingertips. I feel a smooth rise towards the outside of his left one and my finger lingers there. It feels like a deep scar by the fleshy protrusion. Trailing the length of it, I find it reappears high up on the sharp curve of his cheekbone. Internally, I make up the image of him in my mind. The sharp cut of a powerful jaw, the dark hair, the large scar slashing across his beautiful hazel eyes, the additional scar down by his full bottom lips, and the faint one trailing along the right side of his jaw. I've seen pieces of him behind different masks, and putting it all together, I attempt to create his image in my mind.

I've just never seen anyone like him before.

"Where did you come from, Aero?" I whisper, my fingers trailing down from his jaw to his neck. I feel the scars littering his flesh, covered by the ink he's painted over a past too harsh for the likes of me.

"Nowhere good," he answers, leaning his head against mine as the water trickles down his locks over me.

I gnaw on the corner of my lip, wondering what that could possibly mean. What has this man been through to mold him into the ruthless, psychotic killer before me? There's a presence of a heart in there. He has some semblance of a soul. It's evident in the strange way he cares for me, the odd way he protects me from elements unknown.

"But it doesn't matter where I came from. Because we're here. We found each other," he says, his hands sliding down my arms until they reach my wrists. He lifts them above my head, sealing them to the tile behind me. "And you won't live without me now."

My eyes widen slightly at his directness.

"I mean it, Briony. You'll need to aim better next time," he says in a taunting tone. "If you want a life that doesn't have me in it, you'll have

to fucking kill me yourself. I'm yours, and you are forever mine."

My chest caves at his words. It's so much. The obsession. It's crazy. It's toxic. It's making my body come alive again.

He leans his neck forward, turning his head to the side.

"Lick me," he demands, placing the wound from my little stabbing incident before my mouth. "Heal your harm."

He's so primal. So animalistic by nature. He's asking me to lick his wounds. The wound I created. He's insane, and I can't seem to get enough. Drawn to him like the suicidal moth to a knowing flame.

His hands tighten around my wrists as he nudges his head into me, opening himself for my healing. I stall for a moment, breathing heavily between us. Parting my lips, my tongue darts out, and I lick across the area with a flat tongue. Tasting the bitter metallic of his blood, he groans, grinding himself against me, his erection pressing into my hip.

Standing straight before me again, he drops my arms and they fall hard to my sides. Bending down, he grips behind my thighs, lifting me and slamming my back against the tile wall of the shower as all the air leaves my lungs. He wraps my thighs around his hips before gripping my wet hair with one hand and pulling it back, giving him my neck.

My face is entirely under the shower head now, as I cough, spitting out water. He holds me beneath it, watching, listening with fascination before I feel the head of his cock lined with my entrance. Pushing himself back inside me, a strangled noise leaves my throat. The inability to breathe has my focus elsewhere as the pain of stretching around him again catches up with me. He grips my thigh near my hip, thrusting himself into me again and again as I hang defenseless to his pleasure.

"Show me you can handle me," he grunts, our skin slapping together violently as he fucks me at his pace.

The pace of a madman.

I feel like I'm drowning. The inability to breathe has me choking on water. His hand releases my hair, only to cover my mouth and nose with his palm. Air is taken completely as I feel myself clamp down on him internally. He groans loudly, the sound somehow entirely exhilarating, causing me to squeeze tighter, the burning pain slowly

being replaced by an electrifying reminder of the euphoria I'd experienced.

My vision is blurry, and just as I'm feeling everything around me darken, the burning in my chest and lungs melting into a numbing sensation, he releases his hand, slapping his palm against the tile behind me. Thrusting his hips into me with long, hard strokes, my heavy breasts bounce wildly between us. I gasp for air as he holds me up against the wall with his long, thick cock spearing through me.

I feel the piercing rubbing against that spot again and my eyes roll back in my head as I work to focus on that and not on the sensation of being torn apart by a ruthless man taking what he needs. Primal. Animalistic. Nothing can keep him from me.

Like lightning, I'm struck with the pleasure that overtakes me. It's quick, but hits me harder than ever. I cry out, piercing my nails into his shoulders, before dragging them down his arms, as sounds escape me I've never imagined I could.

"Fuck," he hisses at my need to tear into his flesh, becoming sloppy with his motions.

He presses into me hard, stilling himself deep within, as he releases inside me.

My back hurts from the friction of the wet tile, my pussy feels swollen, raw, achingly sore, and I'll surely have bruises from where his fingers dug into my thighs. I'm out of breath entirely as he pulls out of me, setting my feet back down on the shower floor.

He bends down, hands spreading my thighs again, and I tremble against his touch. This really might never end. He may never stop. He told me I'd thirst for him, but it appears that I'm the meal he endlessly hungers for.

He can't get enough.

Soft lips surround my swollen clit, and he sucks it into his mouth hard before grazing his teeth.

"Ah!" I cry out at the sensitive pain. "It's too much, please!"

My palm hits the wall behind me as the other grips the long hair at the top of his head. With his warm tongue, he licks the length of me before sticking the tip of his tongue inside me. My knees feel weak, and just as I'm about to slide to the bottom of the shower and

collapse in exhaustion, he stands, wrapping an arm around my lower back, holding me to him.

Grabbing my face with one hand, he pushes his fingers hard enough to the divots of my cheeks until I'm forced to open my mouth for him. Unsure of what's coming next, I feel him spit in my mouth.

Before I can even react to the crude action, his mouth is on mine, his tongue seeking my tongue in the most erotic, most spine-tingling kiss I've ever experienced.

His lips part as his skillful tongue runs the length of mine. I taste his cum on my tongue and smell my scent on his lips as the aftermath of what we've done swirls between our tongues. A delicious dance to the music of sweet, seductive sin.

He pulls back, breathing heavily. "We taste so good together." He gently smacks the side of my face with his palm before holding my jaw tightly. "A fucking delicacy."

I stand there, leaning back against the wall for support, wondering how I could've ever fallen into this mess. The centripetal force of my actions has my head swirling in a newfound heaven. One that allows for the bonding of two beings through explored sexuality and freedoms from the idea of sinful restraint. We are in our own space now. A combination of Heaven and Hell, created especially for the saints and sinners like us.

My exhaustion finally takes me and the last thing I remember is his powerful arms carrying my limp body to my bed.

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BRONX

I wake to an empty room.

I'm not stupid enough to think he'd actually spend the night with me. Aero isn't your typical sensitive and caring lover. Cuddling; another word irrelevant to him.

But I can say honestly that the thought of waking to Aero's arms wrapped around me was something I'd dreamed about. A protective hold from a man who cares in his own strange way. Now awake, I find myself feeling the loss of him. His absence makes its presence known in the pit of my being, and to that, I'm left utterly confused.

Historically speaking, he's kept to his usual habits. There's a message waiting for me. Another form of communication from my devoted stalker, pinned to my door with yet another switchblade stabbed through it.

Guess this is Aero's version of a morning-after text.

Gathering the blankets around my naked form, I stand from the bed, feeling the soreness between my legs. The ache promised by my stalker to only linger as our time together continues. *I am yours, and you are forever mine.*

Walking to the door, I see the wrinkled and distressed scripture, the paper appearing to be crumpled and torn with a vicious hand.

1 John 1:9-10: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

The word, ***CONFESS***, is written over the top of the page with that same aggressive red pen, the strikes of ink screaming the violence of the hand that wrote it.

Gripping the handle of the blade, I slowly wrap my hand around it, feeling a sense of arousal. I'm not even sure what is making me feel alive inside at the moment. Whether it's the idea that his rough hand that has not only killed for me, but brought me utmost pleasure was just gripped around it, or that I have another riddle in front of me.

I've become disgustingly enraptured by his games. The sick games of a twisted man meant for harm that I once feared and loathed. My mind is running wild, the fear beneath my flesh turning into a forceful energy that needs an escape. I'm harnessing whatever power he is

feeding me, and the intrigue of it all mixes the terror and excitement into something I've yet to understand.

I'll tread carefully, knowing there's so much hidden beneath his surface I'm bound to awaken.



Sitting on the steps to my porch, I check my phone again, seeing more time pass with no calls from Saint.

Where is he?

He was supposed to pick me up ten minutes ago and is never late. It's not his style. He's a time guy, always early and prompt. My nerves set on fire as I worry about the kiss we shared in the kitchen. It's very possible whatever he felt, the temptations, the lust, scared him away. That the brief exchange was enough to have him realizing his future wasn't worth messing up over the hormones swirling throughout him over the thought of us together. But to not call? It just doesn't seem like something he'd do.

Pulling up to the parking lot of the school feeling the nervousness in my gut, I hop out of my car, wearing the appropriate attire this time. I needed all new underwear after tossing out the strips left mutilated by Aero.

I approach the building with secrets now. Secrets of sin and the deception of who I claim to be. I'm no longer innocent here. I know what I'm supposed to do. I'm supposed to confess those sins, making them known, begging for forgiveness from the almighty God himself. But even the idea of releasing my truth to the men who've been anxiously awaiting my fall gives me cause for deception.

Eyes find me from the groups collected near the entrance. Whispers of words float through the air nearby, and the cycle continues. It's as if no one has dropped the rumors from the graffiti message. The talk about me still circulates, and the weight of their judgment is attempting to burden me.

Students file past me left and right. Eyes of disgust hit me harder than before. Approaching the classroom, I see a note on the door. The lights through the slim window next to it are off.

Class is canceled
until further notice.

Staring at the handwritten message taped to the door, I let out a sigh. Something is wrong. Something happened.

With determination, I make my way down the opposing hall in search of the deacon for some answers. I turn the corner towards the offices when I'm met with light brown hair and a familiar face that stops me in my tracks.

"Brady," I whisper breathlessly.

He drops his head, clutching his books to his chest, covering the crest of his uniform as he continues walking past me, pretending as if we didn't just lock eyes for a moment, opening the wound closed too soon.

I walk in his direction, stopping directly in front of him. He tries to walk around me, but I stop him by the shoulder.

"Let me go," he pleads quietly, fear pouring from his wide eyes as he looks around me.

I pull him down a different hall by his upper arm, and he trips over his feet, almost stumbling as he follows me.

"Tell me what's going on, Brady. You're safe here. With me," I say, trying to reassure him. "What has Bishop Caldwell been telling you? What has..." I swallow what feels like daggers and try this again. "What has he...?"

I can barely stomach what I saw. I can't even finish the sentence. The truth in this terrified young man will surely make me sick.

"Nothing I didn't deserve," he answers assuredly.

"Brady." I shake my head, looking down the hallway and back to ensure we're not being watched. "What he's doing… It's wrong—"

"You wouldn't understand," he snaps, interrupting me. "Bishop Caldwell is helping me. Helping me seek righteousness. I'm grateful for his love and support to bring me back on the right path. The path to Christ."

My heart breaks inside my chest as the anger boils. He's completely convinced he deserves this. Whatever Caldwell has been spewing to him has set, and Brady sees whatever religious therapy Caldwell's providing behind closed doors as his redemption. His salvation. He's completely brainwashed by the powers that be.

"This isn't right. It's not the way, Brady. Someone needs to know." He stares up at me, the pain in his deep brown eyes evident enough.

"Don't," he says abruptly, jerking his shoulder away from me. "Just please, leave me be. I don't want to ruffle any feathers."

He brushes past me down the hall, filtering back into the mix of students, blending back in like he craves.

I blow out a breath in frustration, needing to figure out another way to reach him. As I'm contemplating who to talk to, my gaze falls upon a room a few doors down, the light from the slim window near the door pouring out into the tile of the hallway.

My eyes narrow as I walk towards the room. Peering through the window, I see Saint at the podium at the head of the classroom and my stomach drops. Heat rises up my neck and floods my cheeks as I pull the handle on the door, pushing through. His head snaps up and his eyes connect with mine. He stares for a minute before his face melts into a glare. He blinks, turning his face back down to the papers on the podium before him, shuffling through worksheets.

He's mad at me. Why is he mad?

I march up towards him as a few students begin filing into their seats behind us. He glances back up at me again, and the look is softer. It's a pained expression. Not one of hatred, but one of hurt.

"You aren't supposed to be here right now," he says coldly, his lack of emotion present.

I'm confused. Yes, I invited him inside my house for late-night tea, but he came. Yes, I kissed him, but he kissed me back. He pulled me into him, wanting more. I won't let him get away with turning this on me for the sake of saving his name, if that's what he's doing.

"Why didn't you call me this morning? Would've been nice to know you weren't planning on picking me up." I look around the new room. "Or that you were going to be teaching without me. What's going on, Saint?"

I can't stand it. I hate the feeling of him pulling away from me. He's become someone I've leaned on for support, standing up for me when I was being treated unfairly by the deacon. I want us to be back to where we were. A budding friendship that was truthfully blooming into something entirely unplanned. The thought of losing him amidst everything else at the moment scares me, and I'm not sure what to do with that.

"I didn't think you were like that," he says, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Like what?"

“Revengeful,” he says the word like it tastes bad. “You know I didn’t write those words. I told you I didn’t mess up your ceremony. It’s not me.” He sighs in frustration. “I thought you were genuine, and I think that’s what hurts the most. Because I did care for you, Briony. I really did. For some stupid reason, I still do,” he whispers, making a repulsed face as he shuffles through his folder before him.

My brows draw together in confusion. He clears his throat and looks behind me as more students pile in.

I shake my head. “Saint, what are you—”

“Briony!”

I hear my name called from behind me, only to turn and see Mia at the door. She eagerly waves me towards her, her eyes wide with panic.

Mia is a grade beneath us, which is why she’s still attending classes. But her classes are on the other side of the building, which is why I can’t seem to understand why she’s here right now, outside this room.

Lingering for a second, I pull myself away from Saint as he gains the attention of the class before him. A class that clearly, I’m not a part of anymore.

Mia ushers me towards her before grabbing my wrist and guiding me around the corner and into the hall. Pulling me near the lockers, she blocks me from the view of the remaining students making their way to class before the bell rings.

“You wanna tell me what happened?!” she whispers frantically. “Everyone is talking about it. I knew you were competitive, Bri, but this?! This is...well, surprising. Especially for you.”

“Tell me what you’re talking about,” I demand, feeling impatient.

“I mean, I know you’ve always thought he had it out for you, but even I thought Saint genuinely liked you beneath the surface. I assumed the stalking games were just his lame attempt at flirting.”

“Mia!” I yell out, causing her to look down the hallway and back, shushing me. “Tell me what you’re talking about!”

“This,” she says, pulling her phone from her back pocket.

She swipes the screen, and a video plays.

My heart drops to my stomach, which immediately drops to the floor beneath me as the walls of the school feel as if they are caving

in around me.

"Oh no. No, no, no," I say breathlessly, my hand cupping my mouth.

I grab the phone from her, my heart racing as I watch a video of me kissing Saint in my kitchen. There's a clear shot of my hand palming his erection in his pants, looking as if I set up my phone to record this, with the words written under the post on some social media platform saying, *SAINT'S SLUT OR BRIONY'S BITCH?*

I blink up at Mia, who's staring at me, worry etched on her face.

"I didn't do this, Mia. I would never—"

"Briony Strait?"

I close my eyes tightly, facing her as I hear the deacon call my name from behind. Slowly opening my eyes again, I see Mia's wrinkle in the corners, fearing the wrath I'm about to face. I inhale a deep breath, letting it out, before turning to face him.

"Confessional," he says simply, turning on his heels and heading down the hall.

He's heading to the church next door, waiting for me to follow him.

CONFESS

Another message. Another setup. The word from the man who continuously torments me in the most seemingly deceitful way. The graffiti, the safe, the video…

Just when I think there's more to Aero, that I enjoy the thrill of his twisted games, I retract and feel played. Used as nothing more than a piece being pushed and pulled blindly, essential to his succession.

I need more from him. I need answers. I need what I've been deprived of.

Truth.

Aero's past will catch up to him one way or another.

But it's up to me to use the tools I've been given thus far to control my own destiny.

Now more than ever.

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HERO

I sit in silence, the dark wood surrounding me threatening titillating thoughts of death and dying.

A coffin encapsulating the death of free will and voluntary thoughts. Oddly fitting.

I know the plan now. After leaving Briony's in the early hours of the morning, I made my way to the nightclub to visit Nox and see if any new information had slipped through the cracks while rich men got drunk and discussed topics of conversation meant to stay behind closed doors.

These idiots have no idea that some women who work for Nox, the ones they look at as useless objects, are basically paid informants for him. They thrive in the land of gossip. The only issue is a few of them have conspired with the wealthy scum of this town, enjoying the perks of a few thousand dollars to keep their deepest, darkest secrets locked away.

Weeding them out has been fun for Nox. The man is demanding and ruthless when it comes to any of his employees getting money from outside sources. He finds his own creative ways to make them pay their debts, letting me watch for my enjoyment.

Lucky for me, all it took was one blowjob for the treasurer of The Covenant Academy to let loose lips fly.

After releasing all over Nox's unofficial informant's face, he revealed that Callum Westwood was tired of waiting on Alastor Abbott's secret weapon to take care of business. The church was also getting restless, especially after all the controversy surrounding Briony and her scandalous ways. She was dragging the wholesome Saint, the chosen one, the future of this parish, down with her. Just as I intended.

Which made releasing that video to social media a simple decision for me, and even more essential for her freedom. Unfortunately, the video wasn't enough to destroy Saint's reputation. The vixen who tried to sway the future bishop of The Covenant away from Christ would need to pay for her offenses. The Devil's Doll herself.

When men are backed into a corner, they're forced to fight. Callum is in his corner at the moment, restless and weary, the truth of his past decisions on the verge of release. The pressure on his castle

was building to the point of combustion, and knowing a war was upon me was better than wondering when or where he'd strike next.

I pushed him into this, and Alastor's paranoia over the missing documents from his safe was the tipping point. Secrets that hold this institution together are on the precipice of collapse. The oligarchy, bound to fold. The martyrs of morality, on the verge of the ultimate exposure.

Voices carry into the church, their tone echoing into the soaring vaulted ceilings above, where the angels with blacked-out eyes still hover, courtesy of yours truly.

"No, not now," I hear the deacon say. "Get to class. Confessions will continue tomorrow."

The footsteps continue approaching when I hear her ask, "Where's Bishop Caldwell?"

Inquisitive one, she is, knowing how wrong this is of the deacon.

"He's assisting the children of God, Briony."

The large, heavy doors to the church slam shut once more, leaving an eerie echo in the massive cathedral, and I'm all too aware of the set-up upon her.

"If this is about the video, then Saint should be here as well," Briony declares, but the footsteps only continue nearing the tight box I'm being held in.

The brass handle of the wooden door next to mine opens as the deacon enters the small cubical to my left.

"Only the bishop can perform this sacrament," she continues, trying to gain his attention, but he's not listening. He's already inside.

C'mon Briony. Confess your sins as I requested.

"Now," he commands from the other side of the booth.

There's hesitation in her silence. She knows this isn't right. She's aware of danger looming, and yet something in her mind tells her to intuitively trust.

Not the deacon.

But me.

She finally opens the creaky wooden door to the darkened space, slowly closing it behind her before going to sit on the bench beneath me.

She lands on my lap, and before she can make a sound, I wrap my hand over her mouth. She jumps in surprise, but my other arm immediately pulls her body tightly into mine.

“Shh,” I whisper in her ear.

She panics, and her muscles tense beneath her white uniform shirt as she struggles to get out of my grasp.

I can’t control the grind of my hips up into her; my cock already bricking up at the reminder of the sins we shared last night.

My little doll was such an eager little slut for me. I wasn’t expecting it, but the way she bloomed made me wonder just how long this poor woman was holding back from being her true self and seeking that pleasure she’s entitled.

If there truly is a heaven as she believes, it was nothing like what we experienced in that house. Hell is the only place suitable for the kinds of fire we evoked.

I lick the side of her neck, surely spreading the black paint from my face along her light skin. She shudders, leaning back into my chest, her breaths finally calming as her hands slowly slide down my thighs surrounding her, orienting herself in the darkness.

We’ve become familiar with one another in the shadows. She knows my smell, just as I have learned hers.

“Begin,” the deacon states in an authoritative tone.

My hand slowly travels down her lips, uncovering her mouth, rolling over her chin. My fingers follow the edge of her jaw until I’m met with her neck. Sliding my palm down further, I wrap my grasp in a hold around her neck while my other hand finds its way down her abdomen to the edge of her skirt.

Without hesitation, I flip the front of the skirt up and roughly grip the pussy that belongs to me, pulling her little body even tighter to the front of mine.

She bought more underwear. My back teeth grind together as I envision my knife shredding the material into strips again.

I nod my head against hers to urge her to answer the deacon as her nervous hands grip the dark jeans covering my knees beneath her.

“B-bless me, Father, for I have sinned...” she begins, her voice shaky with the weight of her anxiousness. “It’s been a week since my

last confession."

"And a lot has happened in that week, hasn't it?" the deacon asks, his tone demeaning. "Confess your sins, Briony. Tell God in his own house what you've done."

"I..." She hesitates, swallowing her nerves. I lick the back of her neck again, nudging her head with my nose. "I've been having impure thoughts again."

My lips pull to a grin behind her, applying pressure from my middle finger against her clit. A breathy moan leaves her throat and I feel for the wet spot I know is forming on her panties. Her hips wiggle as she tries to back away from the hand, but it only pushes her back into my dick again as it settles between the crack of her round ass.

If she doesn't quit, I'm going to need to fuck her. I don't give a fuck where we are. My cock will find its home, back inside her.

"Tell me of these impure thoughts," the deacon says.

"Umm." She sighs against me as I peel the underwear to the side. I run my finger along her slit before slipping it inside her, finding her soaking wet as I'd assumed. She shakes her head, fighting the feeling, but it's too late. The velvety walls of her cunt clamp down on my finger and her head drops back against my chest and she shudders. "I…I've been thinking of sex again. P-pre-marital sex."

"I knew as much," he answers in disgust. "Have you been engaging with yourself to these impure and sinful thoughts? Using foreign objects? Your hands? How have you deceived your Lord and Savior?"

I pull my finger from her tight wet hole, bringing it to her mouth. She parts her lips, allowing the finger to press against her tongue. Her mouth wraps around it, sucking it clean like a good girl, and my patience is tested.

"Yes," she hums around it.

"Which part?" he asks. "You need to express your transgressions for them to be forgiven."

Sick and twisted fuck wants to jack off to her confession while I fuck her to it.

"There's this man I've been fantasizing about," she admits, and I'm all ears.

It better be yours truly, Briony.

“He was a fellow student of mine. My age. My grade. I work alongside him now.”

My grip on her neck tightens.

“Saint Westwood?” he asks, clarifying.

Only when I realize she can’t breathe to answer do I let up some. She gasps, coughing to regain her breath.

“Yes,” she says breathlessly. “Saint.”

My blood boils. Rage and the need to claim has me pushing her forward, unbuttoning my pants and pulling them down to expose the dick that will make her forget his name entirely.

“What thoughts have plagued your mind regarding him?” he asks.

I pull her back to my lap and roll the skirt up her lower back. Ripping the underwear to the side, I grip the base of my cock and force her to sit back on the head of it. I don’t make it easy on her. I thrust myself up into her, sliding into her tight hole while pulling her hips down onto my lap, using only the wetness she’s providing as I push her down, stretching her wet cunt around my dick.

I want her to hurt for what she admitted.

She cries out, the pain and pleasure rippling through her tight little body. The thought of her eyes watering and her pretty girl makeup smearing down her cheeks at the pain has my balls tightening and my cock twitching within her walls in delight.

“Confess to your God, Briony. What have you done?”

I bite down on her shoulder, pressing my teeth roughly into her flesh, holding her still on my lap, not allowing her the satisfaction of getting off or deriving any pleasure from this, but solely forcing her to remain open for me. *My cunt.*

“I... uh.” She moans softly. “I’ve felt him, over his pants. His...his penis. I’ve thought of his hands scouring my body. Touching my breasts. Toying with my nipples. It made me...” she stalls, clearly having a hard time continuing while being stuffed so full of cock.

I fucking love it. Confessing sins while committing them.

“Made you what?” he asks.

“Made me wet,” she answers, her words rushed.

I hear what sounds like a belt dropping to the floor in the booth beside us.

“Continue,” the deacon demands, his voice heard through the darkened window.

Briony uses her legs to lift her hips off me, but I claw my fingers into the flesh of them, pinning her back tightly to me. Her pussy clamps down around my cock again, and I bite back a groan.

“I’ve used household items...phallic in shape...” she whispers.

He quickly masks a light grunt with a clearing of his throat. *Sick bastard.*

“I’ve imagined it was him…penetrating me.”

Anger overtakes me at the idea of her deriving pleasure from thoughts of him. My hand finds the hair just above her nape, fisting and pulling it back until she’s facing the ceiling of the tiny chamber. She tries to stand again, but I pull the hair back tighter, using my other hand to press down on her bladder, leaving her defenseless against the sensation.

Another whiny moan leaves her, but lucky for us, it sounds like she’s crying over the release of her confessions, the purging of her sins.

“Whores like you can’t get through the day without needing to shove something into your disgustingly greedy cunt.”

The second the words fall from his mouth, I straighten beneath her, knowing what’s about to happen.

This is what I’ve planned for, and now my little doll will realize, everything I do for her has its purpose. She does not know the depth of my obsession, how deep my loyalty to her lies. We are one and the same.

The scarlet curtain pulls back, the windowed grille between us breaking into pieces, and the next thing I see is the silencer entering the chamber.

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HERO

I pull her body back into mine; her back thudding against my chest as he rings out a shot to the wall of the confessional.

Just as I'm making my move to take the gun, a knife appears. Briony quickly swings her arm, slashing the wrist of the deacon through the grated window.

She brought my knife.

He screams in agony from the other side of the confessional as his grasp on the gun slips. I catch it midair as my other arm wraps around her waist. I stand, still holding her to my front as my dick stands tall, firmly planted inside her.

I turn the gun on him through the broken grate separating the chamber and pull the trigger, shooting him point blank, watching his head snap back as I bury the bullet. A mess of brain, blood, and flesh blows out the back of his skull, splattering along the wooden walls as he falls back, his limp body sagging awkwardly against the bench beneath him.

Briony screams in horror.

Wrapping my hand back over her mouth, she shakes against me, her wide eyes set on the deacon deprived of life as I press her against the wall before us. She squints her eyes closed, not wanting to bear witness to the reality before her.

"Look Briony!" I demand, kneeing her legs open wider as I thrust deeply into her from behind. "Open your fucking eyes!"

She gasps as her palms slap against the wall, bracing her from the force. Her eyes snap open, falling back on the deacon.

"They don't want you! You're fucking worthless to them!" I fist her hair, holding her head against the wall, trying to wake her up to the reality before her. "They never wanted you! You aren't one of them! They want to eliminate the likes of you from their world. You pushed too far. You're a force they can't handle. You just kept fucking pushing!"

The words fall from my mouth like venom. Pain sears throughout my emotional core at the deep unresolved wound this reopens. These are the words I've told myself from a past life that seems like a lifetime ago. That young man, so lost and confused after the set-up they knew I'd never conquer.

They marked me a murderer. Branded me the enemy because Callum Westwood knew a life that included me could never work. I was his greatest mistake. His greatest downfall.

Cold lies the innocent woman in the middle of the dirt of the alleyway alongside me. A world she never chose for herself, either. I was nothing but a mess of blood and broken bones, laying aside the wide blue eyes set on me. The bluest eyes I'd ever seen, staring straight back into mine, haunting me as they still do. The lack of life behind them did nothing to cease the tears that poured out into that pool of blood beneath the dark head of hair that knotted in a mess beneath her shattered skull.

We were just two separate souls trapped within the unrelenting confines of their sick and disturbing world, meeting separate destinies, separate hells. I swore to those blue eyes that she hadn't died in vain like my mother. I promised I'd bring them down, one by one. I swore to her I'd find the daughter they ripped from her arms before ending her life like she wasn't even human at all.

Briony's tears snap me back into the moment as she continues silently sobbing against my embrace.

She's always needed me, just as I've needed her. I'm her truth. Her voice. The weapon she wields to use as needed. My protection and loyalty to her will never cease. Not until we get what's rightfully ours. Sweet, dark, ruthless revenge.

"Anyone," I whisper roughly into her ear as we both stare at the mess of the man before us.

She shifts on her feet, her ass rubbing against my front, spreading her arousal across my lower abdomen. I get hard again at the sight.

I pull out slightly, then thrust myself even harder into her, lifting her to her toes. "My proof before you. I'll end anyone who denies you the chance to live."

My release is pending. Being inside of her while taking lives has me harder than a rock, my dick surely leaking inside her already. She's got such a tight hold on me. The grasp of her snug, pliable cunt just clinging to my shaft. Her hand slowly slides from the wall down between her thighs, more than likely supplementing her own pleasure and release.

My head falls to the wall beside hers, my hand holding the gun as I brace myself against the wood paneling of the confessional at the overwhelming sensation.

“Thinking about him?” I ask through gritted teeth. “Is it Saint that has you gripping this dick inside you?”

“I couldn’t if I tried,” she replies breathlessly.

I slam up into her, feeling my piercing running along the inside of her walls.

“You’re lucky, you know that?” I lick the side of her neck before sucking on the skin there, biting into her flesh. Her throat hums with a moan, tilting her head for me to continue. “Lucky I figured it out. You were protecting me. I could’ve killed you for even voicing the words.”

I pick up the pace, my hips roughly smacking against the skin of her full bouncing ass, fucking my counterpart in the house of her Lord at the bloody proof of my obsession.

I’ve never found myself so completely enthralled by one being in all my life, especially now, after knowing what she tastes like and how she feels around me. She’ll never leave me. I won’t give her that option. Either she chooses me back or we both leave this earth in two dark cavities, dug out next to one another.

Her moans groan louder and she drops her head forward against the wall alongside mine. I lace my fingers through her hair, pulling her head back up to keep death in her line of sight. The message must be cemented into her warped little mind. Nothing will stop me from protecting her from the men who think they own her. Nothing and no one will get in the way of ensuring my little doll is mine to keep.

As I’m lost inside of this woman yet again, I feel the sharp pain of a blade tearing through the flesh of my arm.

“Fuck!” I spit out in disbelief as I take a step back, pulling out of her.

She quickly turns to face me and pushes me firmly in the chest. I sway back before stabilizing myself in the tiny box, only for her to swing that fucking knife at me again.

My chest caves as I bend, avoiding the stabbing until my calves bump into the bench, causing me to fall back into the seat.

Briony jumps me, straddling my lap while my cock still lies erect and wet with her arousal between us. She holds the knife up to my neck, and I drop my head back against the wall, gazing at her through

my lashes, catching my breath as my lips pull into a devilish smirk of disbelief.

“You don’t get to take from me anymore,” she growls, pressing the tip of the blade into the flesh of my neck. “No one does.”

She doesn’t realize this fiery passion only activates my crazy. That the wild buried deep within her is finally emerging before me. I need the infliction of her pain just to come. Crave it like the darkness I thrive in.

Raising to her knees, she turns the blade until the tip of it is pointed up beneath my chin. It’s adorable really. The idea that she can actually overpower someone who doesn’t fear death. But, I’ll entertain it.

“Why are you here?” she asks, squinting to see me in the dim light. “How could you know?”

I swallow, knowing she’s too smart to not question it.

“Because you needed me. And because it’s literally become my job.”

She scoffs, “I didn’t need you. I had this under control. And why is it your job to protect me, Aero? What aren’t you telling me?”

A chuckle leaves my nose before I raise the gun to her temple. I cock a brow before gripping her wrist in my hand, roughly twisting her arm behind her back until she whimpers in pain, and drops the blade to the floor behind her with a thud.

Leaning forward, I press my black-painted face to hers, our foreheads sealing together.

“Don’t go getting too confident yet, darling. You have much to learn,” I growl, tightening my hold on her wrists. “And it’s not my job to protect you. It was never my job to protect you.”

Her eyes crease in the corners as she attempts to study my face. I drop the gun to my side on the bench.

It was my goal to have her protect herself.

Before she can ask any more questions, I bring my other hand around her ass, slapping the soft skin with a firm hand, before pulling the damp underwear to the side again.

“Now sit on this dick and make a fucking mess of me in this house of lies,” I command, pulling her forward.

“Aero—“

I don’t even let her finish whatever was about to come out of her pretty little mouth. I need inside her again before I knock this fucking wooden box over.

Running the head of my cock along her creamy vulva, coating my piercing, I collect her arousal and push the tip back in before pulling her hips down on it, settling myself deep within her warmth where I belong.

She gasps as I stretch her slowly, pausing to embrace my own euphoria. Her upper arms settle on my shoulders and her hands wrap around the back of my head, finding my hair. She runs her fingers into it before grasping on tightly.

A feral growl leaves my throat. “Milk the cum out of your cock, Briony.”

Moaning, she raises to her knees on the bench, then slowly sits back down, swallowing the thick root of me before pulling my head forward against hers by my roots. She lifts on my lap again, her chest heaving beneath the uniformed shirt.

“What was your job, Aero?” she asks, stalling her descent.

Dangerous eyes find hers as I decipher the scenario before me. She’s really pushing me.

“What was the fucking job?” she asks again, sounding more demanding.

My mouth finds hers before she dodges my lips by turning away from me. My teeth graze the sharp line of her jaw, and I bite down, sinking my teeth into the soft flesh, causing her to hiss at the same time I thrust up into her.

I release her from my bite, my hands finding their way around her petite little throat.

“The job is what it’s always been,” I say, tightening my grip, feeling the blood surge through her jugular.

She cries out as I quicken our pace, leaning back and thrusting my hips up into her until I can get as deep as I need to.

“W-what—“ Her mouth tries to form words, but she can’t. I won’t allow any more questions about how we got here.

“To watch you bloom. Before me.” My throaty groans have me pausing to gather myself as I feel her dripping down my length, down

to my balls, making my thighs wet with her. “Bloom beneath me. *Fuck.* Around me.”

She screams out as her pussy clamps down, the spasms, choking my cock. Her head sags forward against mine again, and I loosen my hold on her neck and allow her to fall to my chest. With a few quick, stiff thrusts, I lose myself, following her orgasm with my own.

Her questions will continue because she’s not sure she can trust me. She’s smart to not. I’ll bring her down so badly until I’m the only one left beside her.

Her curiosities will continue until she can wrap her beautiful head around my reasons.

Reasons that might make her run.

And running from me is an undertaking she’ll never achieve.

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BRONX

I watch in silence, collecting myself, as he pulls black gloves from his back pocket.

They just appear, as if this man called them to be.

Grabbing a cloth from somewhere in the dark corner of the confessional, he cleans the gun, wiping it down before placing it near the now deceased deacon who tried to murder me.

Two people.

Two bodies that I know of.

Aero has blood on his hands because of me, and nothing drove me more to the point of absolute lust than this disturbing realization.

He is my protector. My teacher. My source of the absolute pleasure I'd been taught was the end to my eternal salvation. The kind I'd never known until him. I'm still figuring out all that is the masked man who has seemingly come into my life overnight, but this display of unabashed obsession has me overcome with emotion. Emotions I shouldn't feel for someone I know nothing about. I hate that I like it.

"They're going to know someone did this. The bullets, the trail...it will come back to us..." I mutter nervously behind him, readjusting my skirt.

My nerves have my stomach twisting into a knot. He stills with his back towards me as I take in his tall, broad form in the shadows, his clothing stretched to accommodate his sculpted shoulders and the toned musculature of his back. He's really an intimidating man when standing over you the way he does, all dark and imposing, but even so, I feel I can push him in a way few people get the chance to do.

The whole stint using Saint's name in my confession... He wasn't wrong, I was protecting him, but in the same breath, I got a rise out of the maddening jealousy he seemed to portray. Saint gets under his skin like no other, and the reasons for that are entirely unclear.

He seems to own this claim to me that I don't understand. I can't say I'm ready to let this man take what he wants from me anymore, even if I've grown to crave the feeling of his thick, veiny organ inside me, that piercing coaxing out orgasms from the very base of my core.

This sex, or whatever it is we're doing...it's mind-blowing. It's otherworldly. It's indescribable. It's a strange release of this tension I'd built over the years, contemplating if I was sick in the head, sinful, or destined for despair. Indecent thoughts plagued me since his

arrival, as if he opened the gates to sexuality as a whole. Aero makes me feel like the expression of the sex between us is innate, entirely natural, and completely necessary, like the oxygen we breathe.

I should feel guilty about my transgressions. I should yearn to confess and work towards finding Christ and the light again, seeking his forgiveness. But the worst sin I've committed was not feeling guilty for my sins. I knew I was destined for damnation, and this deranged part of me was okay with that. I'd accepted it in exchange for the pleasure my physical body had found. The trembling and the light reverberating hum of the excited energy that flowed through my veins at his touch; it was a glimpse of the wonders of the Holy Kingdom right here on earth. A virtuous life, wasted at the promise of a Heaven I'd found so easily obtainable.

He turns towards me in the small space, and I squint to see the black paint smeared across his face, noting the dishevelment of his dark hair hanging down across his forehead. His eyes sharpen to slits, his disposition entirely cold, as he grips the hoodie of his black sweatshirt and tosses it over his head. Grabbing a bag from the corner I hadn't seen before, he slings it across the front of his chest.

I can still feel his cum dripping out of me, sticking to my thighs, seeping from the confines of my damp underwear. It's entirely impure. It's dishonorable. It's twisted, indecent, and yet, these reasons are what bring the appeal.

"We need to go," he demands.

I release a sigh, frustrated at his lack of explanation for anything, but nod anyway. I have to put my trust in him at the moment, as much as I don't want to.

He leads me by my wrist with his large, glove-covered hand, back out of the confessional and towards the Sacristy, the preparation room where only the clergy or altar boys come to dress in their robes and other relics remain. Just the fact that he knows his way around this place so well has me filled with endless questions.

"A guy..." I say, pausing in place behind him, pulling my wrist from his grasp as he continues trying to lead me through the room. "A guy saw me when we came in here. I'm the last known person to have seen the deacon!"

Slowly, he cracks his neck while facing away from me. Back and forth, his head rotates from side to side as his fist presses against his chin until I hear the popping of his frustration. He turns to glare at me over his shoulder. A single hazel eye burns through the smeared black paint on his face, searing through me, with the heat of a ruthless killer. Disgust, disappointment, and detestation emit from him, the direct look, causing me to swallow and take a step back.

“You have no idea who I am and what I’m capable of,” his gravel timbre vibrates within my chest.

I shrink into myself, my chest heavy and my legs weakened. His statement fills me with terror of that unknown he speaks of.

“But—"

“Now shut the fuck up and follow me,” he says through gritted teeth.

He’s just such a sweet and caring soul.

I shake it off, and unfortunately, put my trust in the only person I can. Walking behind him, that thought marinates in my mind. *The only person I can trust.*

Aero is entirely calculated, his past a complete mystery. Either he gives me more of him, or I’ll be forced to act out recklessly in defiance, like a child, attempting to get some answers for myself. It seems my only option at this point. He needs me to go along with his plans, assumes I will blindly trust him. But this man has another thing coming if he thinks I’m just going to continue down this unknown road without so much as a last name from him.

I watch as he pulls something resembling a folded up paper from the bag clipped over his chest. Grabbing a Bible from a shelf above the deacon’s desk, he flips through it with his black leather gloves before finding the page he was looking for. He slips a paper into it, before closing the Bible and delicately sliding it back on the shelf.

All part of his plan. A planted suicide story, perhaps? *But the broken grate separating the booth… The first shot to the opposing wall…*

He continues across the room towards the exit, giving me a silent head nod.

Guess that’s my cue to follow.

We sneak out into the alley outside the back door of the church where a Jeep sits, waiting.

It's Saint's Jeep.

"W-what are you..?" Words fail me as his palm grasps my upper arm, yanking me roughly around the car to the passenger side door. Throwing me on the seat with a bounce, he takes the time to buckle me into the seat, pulling the belt tightly at the top until it practically cuts into my chest. I see a sliver of his exposed arm, noting the fresh cut near his wrist from the knife I used. Before I can feel too guilty about cutting my oddly attractive, psychotic, murdering stalker, he slams the door, making me flinch.

Peeling out of the alleyway, he hits the road with his hood over his head and both gloved hands gripping the wheel. He drives and drives, using every side road in our tiny town until he makes it out into the country.

The sprawling hills roll past us as I consider putting something on the radio just to drown out the white noise between us. I have a feeling Aero's not into pop hits or Christian rock. I would like to imagine in another life Aero was a man who sipped his scotch while listening to classical music, maybe even reading novels for his enjoyment. He seems to be the age of a man who appreciates expensive liquor and spending his nights alone in the solace of his home. His defined and cut jaw reeks of hardened maturity, unlike the boys I'm familiar with. Maybe in his late twenties, if I had to guess?

We haven't passed any homes or farms in a while, and the surrounding woods grow deeper, the road narrowing, and the shadows of the thick forest close in on us.

"Where are we—"

"My place," he interrupts. "Where it's safe."

I bite down on the inside of my cheek. I can't just hide away at his place. I have an entire life outside him that I need to figure out. "I need to...grab some things..."

He turns to me quickly, and I absorb all the elements of his mysterious face that I can see beneath the distortion of paint. "Everything you need is already there."

How could he know what I need?

“What if Mia or Baret, or my parents need to reach me? How will they contact me?”

All I see is the edge of his nostril flare from the brim of the hoodie and his hands tighten on the wheel, almost to the point of depriving it of life had it been breathing.

Dipping his hand into the bag strapped across his chest, he pulls out my cell phone. Tossing it onto my lap, it lands on my skirt. With a shaky hand, I check it over, noting the battery is gone, as well as the SIM card. My eyes widen as the fear threatens to strangle me.

“You’re searching for your”—he closes his eyes tightly as if the next word pains him before reopening them—“parents in the bush. The illumination of your recent activities had you panicking, seeking some sort of maternal reassurance.”

He made up an entire story for my disappearance. *I’ve disappeared.*

“Stop the vehicle, Aero,” I say calmly. My eyes are closed and my hand is on the seat belt buckle.

He turns his head in my direction before facing the road that’s now become entirely gravel. With a click, I hear him lock the doors.

My pulse spikes.

He has no right to run my life without me having a say in it. If this deranged man has taught me anything, it’s that I won’t allow another man or institution to dictate who I am or how I chose to live, even if he seems to think he knows best.

“Stop the car,” I demand through a clenched jaw, breathing harshly through my nose, feeling caged. “Stop the fucking car, or tell me what the fuck you’re trying to do here! Stop the car!” I scream, my hands balled into tight fists.

He does nothing to stop. Just continues speeding down the gravel road.

“You need me way more than I need you, Briony. I’ve told you this,” he says with a wolfish grin, as if he gets off on my anger. “Especially now. I mean, let’s think about it,” he continues casually, sitting back deeper into the seat. “Your fingerprints are on the Governor’s safe. You’ve been flaunting your slutty little ass all over the school, all while trying to blackmail sweet, wholesome Saint Westwood with your own creative form of sextortion. You’re the last known person to see the

recently murdered deacon, and you're probably already knocked up with the spawn of Satan himself."

He turns his head to face me, the most demented smirk I've ever seen on his black-smeared face. For some reason, in this light, he looks familiar. He reminds me of someone. *Who?*

He's blackmailed me into needing him. The sickest form of obsession. He's manipulated me into only being able to rely on him and him alone for my safety, protection, and guard of the integrity of my reputation.

Fury builds within my chest as it all comes together, my heart racing as the stuff confines of the stolen Jeep cave in. Fingernails are piercing into my clammy palms as the anger of betrayal burns.

"Don't worry, baby," he coos in a deep raspy tone, his hand finding my upper thigh. Fingers slide beneath the hem of the uniform that screams innocent, squeezing into my milky white flesh with the black leather of his glove. "I'll pray for you," he finishes in a mocking tone before his smile widens towards the gravel road, and the sharp points of his canines shine in their delightful terror.

I grip onto his ring finger from my lap and bend it sideways as hard as I can beneath his glove, hearing a crack or some popping noise as I do it.

"Fuck!" he curses out, quickly pulling his hand from my lap while carefully pulling the glove off. He raises the hand before his glowing eyes, viewing the finger that's now bent at an entirely unnatural angle, surely broken at the tip.

He chuckles to himself. "You dirty bitch," he curses, staring at his finger with a hauntingly beautiful smile.

It's strange. His enjoyment of the pain I inflict upon him. I take the opportunity to slide my hand to my seat belt buckle, but his eyes peer over at me immediately.

"Don't," he commands harshly. "Don't even think—"

Before he can finish his sentence, I unfasten my seat belt, unlock the door, and open the passenger door.

The gravel digs into my side as I hit the ground with a thud, rolling to a stop. I've knocked the wind from my chest, and the fall will surely bruise my ribs. The Jeep swerves to an abrupt stop, kicking up a cloud of dust in its wake.

Pushing up off the ground, I take off into the woods nearby, sprinting as fast as my torn-up little legs will take me. Where I'm going, I don't have a clue. I could tell you I'm terrified of this man, but the truth of the matter is the blood running through my veins runs feral for him.

I'm not running from Aero. I'd never get far. I know he'll never stop. He's relentless in his mission to make me his, and secretly, I admire it. His peculiar obsession has begun my own.

I'm running from the idea of myself. The old, naïve, shriveled bud of Briony, in search of her truth. The girl who became a woman by the man who pushed her in all the ways she never thought she wanted.

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HERO

She broke my fucking finger, and the blood instantly rushed to my groin.

As if that's abnormal. I've practically remained hard since I began studying her. Watching, waiting, and finally striking... I can't unsee it. I can't unfeel it. She has a unique aroma that I need permanently fixated on my tongue. I crave it like Christians crave the blood of Christ. It's healing. It's redeeming. I'd gladly lap her up, swallowing all that is Briony to atone for any sins I've committed in this life and the next.

My feisty little bitch enjoys bringing me pain, and it's entirely unfortunate for her that her little outbursts only trigger me further. I quickly reset the finger before rounding the vehicle in search of her.

She runs like she wants me to catch her. As if the idea of me hunting her brings out the primal animal beneath her being. That animalistic rush in which our fight or flight response is so archaically produced.

Through the thick brush of the woods, she attempts to bring distance between us, looking back as her hair hits her in the face. Tripping over her feet, she stumbles when her ankles get tripped up in some brush. Falling on her side, her skirt flips up her thigh, exposing the edge of her creamy, innocent flesh.

My lip curls up as I take a few more long strides to get to her, the chase causing my blood to boil with lust and insatiable excitement, my heart thundering in anticipation of my kill.

Her chest is heaving beneath her white button-up blouse, her breasts not visible enough for my liking. A muscle twitches in my neck as I envision all the nasty shit I'm about to do to this little doll when I catch her.

I could easily outrun her, but watching her stumble and fall before me, looking over her shoulder with pure and utter terror emitting from those angelic eyes, is far more thrilling.

Her hand skims the bark of a nearby tree, and I send a knife to it. Rotating past her head, it spears into the wood, sending splinters from the direct hit. She grips the side of her head where it whirled past her hair, before turning back to look at me, her eyes narrowed with disgust and disbelief.

I send another one to the same tree on the other side of her head. She screams in horror as it hits closer to her ear than the last, her muscles locking up as her spine stiffens, facing the assaulted bark. I stomp over the remaining brush, beginning to close the distance between us.

Her lungs expand and contract at the most rapid rate as she stares blankly at the tree.

“Done running, little doll?” I ask as I pull another knife from the bag across my chest. I hurl it into the tree directly above her head and she tenses up, knives outlining her silhouette.

She grips the handle of a knife stuck in the bark, effectively pulling it from the tree before taking off again. But I’m done with the hunt, and ready to devour my delicacy out in the intimate confines of my woods surrounding us.

Catching up to her quickly, I tackle her frame to the ground, using my body weight to hold her flailing body to the earth beneath her. Dirt kicks up as she claws at the sticks and dead grass near her, attempting to escape. The knife is now just out of reach.

She thinks she’s ready, but loses handling on her knife? She’s not even close. Nowhere close enough to where I need her to be.

I push my hips into the curve of her sweet, round ass, gripping the hair at her nape to hold her head up. She pants in horror, but I know by the look in her dilated pupils that this is arousing her far more than she’s willing to accept.

“Oh, sweet Briony,” I whisper, pulling her head back further. “I’ve been dreaming of the day I’d get to fuck that pretty face into the dirt.”

A low, choking moan leaves her throat as she whimpers.

“But first,” I say, putting my forearm out before her face, showcasing the cut from the confessional. “Heal your harm.”

Her skin is flushed up along her neck, and dewy perspiration coats her in a slick sheen while black strands of hair dangle in a mess before her face. Her tongue dips out of her mouth as she licks my wound. My cock surges at the sight, and I feel the sensation of her warm, wet tongue against my skin as I close my eyes tightly, pressing my erection against the crease of her ass, settling it between her cheeks.

My balls draw up, tight and painfully hard again, as if I didn't just finish in her minutes ago. But that's what this angel does to me. She gives me her demons and, naively assuming I'll be the only one to bring them out of her, she finds a way to further instigate the violence of mine.

Her pink, glistening lips wrap around my skin, kissing the cut, and the sight of my blood smearing onto her bottom lip is my breaking point.

"Hands. Behind your back."

With her cheek against the cold dirt of the earth, she obeys me, bringing her wrists to her lower back. I remove my belt and tighten it around her dainty little wrists, making sure the leather digs roughly into her flesh.

"We're not like them, Briony," I whisper, flipping her skirt up to her lower back, exposing her wet and stretched out panties. I tear them at the hip, pulling them down the thigh of her other leg, and inspect my gorgeous looking cunt.

She's perfectly pink and glistening from the combination of her arousal and the aftermath of our previous fuck. Her clit is swollen and slightly red and I know after this she'll need some care, but I'm not past the point of breaking her. Not yet.

I haven't taken it easy on her by any means, and the best part about that is she seems to truly embrace it.

"We're like us," she responds, closing her eyes as the most beautiful words fall from her luscious, submissive mouth.

We're like us.

"Fuck," I murmur.

She's my obsession, but more so, she's my fucking existence. The only point of destruction I crave. Letting her own the darkness that I am, allowing her to rule over me the way a man in the most painful form of sick love can. Briony Strait is embracing the truth of who she is without even knowing it.

Lifting her hips, she gets on her knees for me on the forest floor, jutting her ass back. I spread her open before me, admiring how fucking perfect she is, before dipping my head and licking the length of her delicious cunt.

"Oh, God..." she moans breathlessly. "Aero."

I lap her up, running my tongue between her swollen and used little lips before spreading her further and spitting down on the puckered little hole of her ass, admiring her raw beauty.

“Same thing, sweetheart.”

Her pussy clenches and pulses for me. She’s eager for me the way she should be. The way I am for her. I run my fingers along her slit, pushing one of them inside her warm center. She gasps, tilting her hips back, angling herself further.

I slowly remove the digit, looking down at the mix of cum still residing within her.

“You’ll get used to it,” I say, bringing the finger to my lip to lick the delicious concoction. “My cum always leaking from you.”

I push the finger back in and she bucks her hips again. Pulling it out of the tight little hole with a wet-sounding pop, I pull on her restrained wrists on her lower back, lifting her upright.

“Open,” I whisper along her temple.

Her lips part and she sticks her tongue out to sample our delicacy. Closing her lips around the finger, her voice hums around it. I trail the wet finger down her chin, down her neck, settling it over her raging heart. I grip the edge of her white buttoned shirt, ripping it open before pulling down the edge of her bra and exposing her breasts to the nature around us.

“Filthy little whore, you are,” I say, squeezing the full, perky breast in my hand before slapping the side of it.

I grip the back of her neck and push her front half back down into the dirt again, using my other hand to free myself from my pants.

“Tell me you’re my whore, Briony,” I say, fisting my cock in my palm and groaning at the sight of her plump, white ass open and ready before me. Pre-cum seeps from my tip, and I clench my jaw in anticipation of the warmth I’m about to dive into.

“I’m your whore,” she whispers, her cheek driving into the dirt.

“Louder,” I demand, running my cock up and down along her clit, toying the swollen bud with my barbell. “Scream it from your weak little throat.”

Her pussy pulses, craving attention.

“I’m your whore!” she screams in agitation. “Please...just—”

I press into her, filling her with a forceful thrust, only making it halfway in from the tight friction. She cries out into the ground, her wrists pulling against the belt. Wrapping my hand over the belt, I use it as an anchor to pull out, then drive into her deeper.

My mouth drops open as I sink deep until my balls sit flush against her from behind. I begin to lose myself from her tight grip around me, feeling light-headed and a fucking mess of emotions I'm not prepared to wrap my head around.

I fuck her face into the dirt as intended. I fuck her out in these woods, in the daylight, like a goddamn animal. I fuck her until she brings out the worst in me, the vile, disturbing humiliation, and disrespect I feel the need to use to break the last part of good living within her pure little heart.

I want her to cry. I want her to feel everything all at once and drown in the flood of emotions. I want it to overwhelm her until she breaks. I want to choke out the life she knew and breathe an entirely new life into her. I want to save her soul by obliterating it completely.

"Oh...I'm gonna—"

I pull out quickly, not giving her the satisfaction of finishing just yet. I'm not done getting her dirty.

Spreading her open with both hands, I spit down on her tight little asshole again, rubbing it up along the soft white flesh of her glorious curves, before pressing my thumb against the opening.

"No, please..." She tenses up.

I know she's scared to try. Scared to do the dirty things they don't talk about. But Briony does best if I push her into experiences I know deep down she's wanting to try, pleasures she doesn't even understand yet. I slide the crown of my cock back into her, letting her choke the tip before pushing the shaft deeper. Pressing my thumb more firmly against her opening, she pulls her wrists against the belt, murmuring useless nonsense into the ground.

"Shut the fuck up, and focus on my cock," I groan, as she spasms around me, her muscles clenching and unclenching.

She breathes through her lips, nervousness written all over her panicked, dirt-covered face. She finally sighs, giving a single nod, calming herself.

"There you go. Relax for me," I breathe. "Good girl."

Her throat hums softly at the praise I give her.

“I want you to come around me as I finger fuck your ass.”

Tightening around me again, I almost lose it. She gets off on the dirty words I use to talk down to her; gets pleasure from my filthy mouth alone.

I slowly sink my digit deep into her tight hole, needing to face the sky and take a breath to control myself. She moans wildly, a deep throaty kind of moan that insinuates the beautiful combination of pain and pleasure.

“Let go of your mind,” I growl, trying to hold it together, feeling her slowly loosen up and relax. “Find your heaven right here with me.”

Picking up the pace again, I hold my thumb deep to the knuckle while the sounds of wet, sloppy sex echo off the trees around us as I fuck her wildly.

“God, yes,” she moans, and I lean over her back, using my palm to push her face down into the ground. She squints her eyes as the dust and sand gets in her mouth. “I’m here. It’s here.”

“Hurry,” I rush. “Come baby, I’m fucking losing it.”

She finally locks up, shuddering around me as her walls clamp and release, pulsating in beautiful perfection. Her ass grips my thumb, pulling it deeper as she convulses beneath me, releasing feral-sounding cries, slicing like a sharp blade through the silence of the forest.

I explode in her, releasing myself before pulling out and spurting the rest of my cum in hot waves all over her puckered ass. Our frenzied breaths echo one another’s as the blissful sensation travels throughout my loose limbs. Catching my breath, I stare down at her, face down, with her thighs trembling in the aftermath of the orgasm that ripped through her entire core. My cum leaks down her swollen labia, a string dripping down to the dirt. Taking the remnants of my release, I slowly push it into her ass, enjoying the sensation of the tight sphincter around my finger before leaning over her again.

“You own me, Briony. Just as I’ll own every part of you.”

She moans lightly, her eyelids drooping, and I know it’s rest she needs more than anything.

Undoing her wrists, her arms fall flat to the ground beside her. She’s entirely spent. I’ve drained my poor doll emotionally, mentally,

and physically to the point of exhaustion. After adjusting myself back in my pants, I bend down and scoop her up into my arms.

Her dirty little face falls against my chest, a stick stuck in her hair. She is giving me a raw vulnerability that I find myself craving. I'd always hoped she'd be the one I needed, that her strength, resilience, and intelligence would outweigh the toxic men attempting to warp her innocent mind. But what she's giving me back is unlike anything I'd expected. I exist only for her now. I'll fucking kill Briony if she ever tries to leave me, then end my miserable fucking life right alongside her. It's as easy as that.

I walk her up to my cabin as her soft little hand brushes against the skin of my neck.

"Show me," she whispers, her angelic blue eyes fluttering open to focus on mine. Her fingers touch the black paint on my face, smearing it down from my jaw to my neck. "I'm ready."

The words, so simple, yet their meaning, so complex.

There's no going back from this. Once Briony sees me, she either accepts the truth and embraces our destiny of destruction together, or I'll be forced to complete the job I'd never intended to finish.

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BRONX

His arms around me speak an entirely different language than the words of his body in the woods. Hands hold on to me in a new, unexpected embrace. Comforting. Almost gentle and protective.

Aero is carrying me to the bathroom of one of the strangest cabins I've ever seen.

I wouldn't define it as a cabin. The word cabin to me implies something old, rustic, and warm. This is a sleek shell of modern. With its linear architecture, the exterior boasts high-end craftsmanship, echoing that same design in the interior. Nothing but black walls, granite floors, furniture that's practically scraping the floor with its low height, and floor to ceiling windows facing an entirely hidden forest behind us.

This looks like a billionaire's getaway, not a homeless stalker who fucks his conquests in the woods, smashing their face into the earth beneath them.

What we did out there was animalistic. It was organically primal. The raw passion of his unrelenting need stirs my internal femininity into a cyclone of desire. Needing him to claim me as his in his woods, craving his release on me like some sort of marked property. I realized I enjoyed the submission during sex. I loved to feel owned and belittled in order to open myself to feeling that freeing release. It was oddly cathartic for a woman who fights wars for equality on a daily basis.

The orgasm I experienced out there in that dirt defies everything I should want out of sex and intimacy, and yet, it terrifies me entirely, because I don't think I can see the act any other way now. Becoming one flesh is what *He* intended for us. Sex is its own form of worship, and what we did was nothing short of honoring this newfound religion we've created. If it's not that type of primal passion, that spine-tingling demand of his body inside the deepest part of mine, I don't want it.

Exhaustion is taking over, and my eyelids are growing heavy. He sets me on the counter of the expansive and sleek bathroom as he starts up one of the largest walk-in showers I've ever seen, returning to me with a small white hand towel.

Going to pick me up again, I grab his forearm, stopping him. Steam billows above the black granite floors, and I turn my back to Aero to look at myself in the mirror.

Mud and dirt cover the right side of my face where I was held down. There's foliage in my hair, and I note the presence of smeared blood near my mouth from his wound. My shirt is ripped open and my breasts spill over the edge of my bra. My skirt is covered in dirt and my knees are black from the wet soil. I look ravaged. I look raw in my reflective form. The furthest thing from beautiful, and yet, with the flush in my cheeks, the swell of my lips, and the belly twisted with never-ending lust, I've never felt more ethereal.

"For we are God's masterpiece..." he quotes near my ear, staring into my eyes in the reflection before us. "Your beauty is my chokehold."

"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised," I retort, pulling a stick from my hair.

His eyes stay locked on mine as I take in the mess of paint smearing off his face.

"Do you see it now?" he asks, circling me to grab the hand towel. He wets it with water from the sink near me before ringing it out and standing behind me again. His hands brace the counter around me as he leans over me, his chin practically resting on my shoulder as he speaks into my ear. "How they try to tame the wild in you? How they focus on detaining *His* own natural creation in its purest, most exquisite form? We are created in *His* image, are we not?"

He takes the towel and wipes the dirt from my cheek. I gaze at my image. The woman before me, made in *His* image. The one who seeks freedom in the expression of her body, the opening of her soul to another. Yes, there is no marital union between us, but does that make what we're doing of any less worth? Are we idolizing all the things the Lord himself asks us to deny? Is my God a truly jealous God?

"For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous," I recite, the words falling from my lips from years of studying the word. But these words: disobedience, obedience; they fill with new meaning, a new understanding as the man behind me looks on.

Aero reads me in my reflection.

“Never fall in line with the disciplines of men who restrict the freedom of thought. It encourages immorality rather than reducing it. They assume utopia rather than expecting realism. Your religion is a man-made institution that uses fear and intimidation to maintain power over you. But the true power resides in you, Briony. It resides in you, and it resides in me. For we are of this earth, not some dreamed illusion of men who came before us.”

I swallow as he holds the warm cloth at my cheek, gazing into my eyes in the mirror. This inevitable, universal truth lays its weight over me. Everything he’s declaring comes from a man scorned from the exact teachings he’s professing. But where in that lies the faith? I may not agree with all the teachings of my school and my religion, but I hold steadfast to my beliefs in something greater, whereas this man has lost any semblance of faith.

“There is right and there is wrong. There is good and there is evil,” he continues. “But their definitions bend for those who wield the ability to manufacture their own fate. The words distort for them. Conform to what they need to hold tight the power over naivety. But in this life, Briony, the disadvantaged either break or build from the shards of their own shattered bones. The weak hit a darkness so low that existence becomes secondary to revealing the pragmatic truths.”

My legs tremble while my stomach churns uncomfortably at the words spilling from his tormented soul. He’s revealing a version of his own story, somehow effectively aligning it to mine because, as he assumes, we are one and the same.

“And what is that truth, Aero?” I ask cautiously.

He sighs, the powerful muscles of his chest stretching his sweatshirt taut while flexing his jaw beneath the paint. Grabbing the towel from the counter where he placed it before me, I turn to face him. His hazel eyes burn through mine as he continues to lean over me. He removes his sweatshirt with one hand behind his back, letting it fall to the floor beside us before gazing back up at me. His hair is a mess of dark, intertwined locks hanging loosely across his forehead. With one hand, I push it back, taking the other hand and cupping his coal-covered face.

He reluctantly allows my touch. Basking in his discomfort, he raises his chin. I feel him attempt the impossible. Submitting himself over to

me.

I study him with cautious eyes as I slowly remove the paint, his gaze never once deterring from mine. Then tension is thick, the energy of the room around us charged, as he lets me clean him, washing the remnants from his eyebrow where that large, fleshy scar comes into view. I continue running the cloth along his lips, peering at them as his warm breath leaves his parted lips, the tension increasing with every swipe of the cloth. I continue until his face is clean enough to get the full view before me.

The air feels taken from me. As if there's an invisible weed climbing its way into my body, wrapping itself around my lungs, constricting their expansion, stripping me of oxygen. *How could it be?*

"You're..." I shake my head, my face distorted with pure confusion.

I see it now. The resemblance is uncanny.

"But, h-he only has one...so you have..." I shake my head, squinting my eyes before blinking them open to face him again. "Saint is your..." My mouth is as dry as a desert as I try to cope with the fact that the man before me is practically a spitting image of the opulent, most powerful man himself.

Callum Westwood.

The father of Saint.

The man who couldn't stand the idea of his son's ceremony coexisting with a woman's.

The man who practically funds the town, the church, and everyone residing here with his wealth and high status.

His *pristine* and *squeaky clean* status.

With the long strands of dark hair pushed back, the strong cut jaw, these high, defined cheekbones, the slope of his nose, all of it resembles that evil, powerful man. All except the stunning swirls of emerald and amber in those daunting hazel eyes.

"Half-brother," he says casually as ever, still staring directly through me. "Technically speaking."

"But then that would mean..."

"Fornication. Extramarital affair. Yes, darling, the prestigious man himself fucked a woman that wasn't his wife and knocked her up."

My jaw hangs loose, and words are lost to me.

“Can you think of a more heinous crime for a man so polished?” he says, leaning forward again. “Because I can think of a few others.”

The scars on his face. The slash across his eye to the top of his cheekbone, the scar near his lip, and the one lining his jaw. Jagged scars that scream of improper healing.

“What has he done to you?”

“That’s the best part,” he answers carefully, studying my eyes. “He hasn’t done anything to me.”

“W-what do you...mean?”

“Men, like himself, don’t get their hands dirty with the crimes they commit. No trails left behind for the admirable.”

“Your mother...” I begin, my hand suddenly shaking at my side. “Where is—”

“Dead,” he replies flatly.

The tone in which he says it signifies a caged rage that’s brewed beneath the surface from years of restrained torment. A tone that can only signify causation. *Callum had his mother killed?*

He pushes off the counter before raking his fingers through the hair at the top of his head. His bare chest heaves with a tremendous sigh, the muscles of his abdomen tighten, and I see the tick of his jaw flex again. I can barely wrap my head around this. *How does no one know?*

How has Aero slipped through the cracks and remained this man, hidden in the shadows? And how could Callum Westwood subject his own flesh and blood to this kind of life of blatant disregard while his other son, Saint, lives like a king awaiting his kingdom?

I understand the hatred now, the jealous aspects he’s been internalizing. He’s had to sit and watch his half-brother live the life he wasn’t allowed. *They killed his mother? I can only imagine the horrors he’s somehow survived.*

Lightheadedness takes over while my body numbs, and I slump to the side. Aero slips between my thighs, catching me in his arms and sitting me upright again, his forehead suddenly wrinkled with concern.

“Bri,” he whispers, grasping the back of my neck with one hand, his other arm wrapping around my waist.

Darkness threatens to close in on me, but with a few deep breaths, it retreats from my vision. I’m overwhelmed by this realization. Yet,

another man they have forced me to look up to as the epitome of moral perfection, a broken and crumbling castle of privilege. The dedication to his church, the town, the dedication to his family. The fucking endless lies.

He hands me a glass from the sink, filled with water. “Drink.”

I hold it with two shaking hands, sipping slowly before setting it beside me. He’s watching me cautiously, studying my movements before my eyes trail up his tatted and scarred body. So many messages scrawled across his flesh. A biblical revelation all his own; stories of struggle and strength covering the muscles rising and falling with each breath he breathes in the world he fought to survive. A world that wouldn’t allow these undeniable truths to live on. My gaze trails back up to the bloomed rose on his neck before finding his face again.

It’s eerie—seeing his father in his bone structure. Seeing the resemblance of Saint in his full lips, the bottom one that sits out slightly further than the top. I begin to wonder if Saint knows about his brother. If he’s ever known. So many questions race through my head.

“How old are you?” I slur in my disoriented state.

This makes his lips curl into a smile. A true, genuine smile that literally melts away any negative thoughts I’ve ever had about this man. It’s a beautiful smile. A shame he’s ever felt the need to cover it up with masks and shadows.

“That’s the first question you ask me after what I’ve revealed to you?” His eyebrow cocks as part of his dark hair falls back into his eyes.

I lift my hand and brush it back again so I can view him entirely. I don’t think I’ll ever feel satisfied enough by looking at the work of art that is him. He’s simply stunning. Cut from a cloth of modelesque beauty, coated in his own edgy grit. He grips my wrist as if my touch hurts him, pulling my hand away as that strong jaw flexes again, his nostrils flaring.

We may have connected intimately, but it’s obvious this man has no idea how to receive a gentle embrace. He knows control. He knows strength, but he knows nothing of love. Not in its purest, most

organic form. He knows a love filtered by sick obsession. By pain. By vengeance.

“Twenty-nine.”

My eyes scour over every part of him, as if by simply examining and taking him in, I’ll be able to understand the impossible. I knew he had to be older than me, but that’s so many unaccounted years. I can only imagine the horrors of this dark revelation. How detrimental it would be to the entire Westwood dynasty. Aero’s resilience and determination kept him alive, but other than the complexities of vengeance, what truly drove this man to survive?

“Where have you been all this time?” I ask breathlessly.

I see the roll of his throat as he steps in closer to me, my legs spreading open on the counter to accommodate him. His palm plants behind me as the other cups the side of my neck. He towers over me again, the intensity of his stare paralyzing me. He gazes down at my lips before his tongue dips out and licks his own. Eyes of fire set themselves ablaze before me, pulling me into his feverishness.

“Finding you,” he whispers against my lips, as if there was no other reason for his existence. “The Devil’s Doll.”

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BRONX

The Devil's Doll.

They used to call me that.

My parents, behind closed doors, in wisps of whispers that echoed throughout our family home.

My porcelain-white skin that never held the same pigment as theirs. The deceivingly stark black hair that stood out in our family photos like an inkblot. The dark stain of condemnation.

After his revelation, Aero wasted no time getting us into the shower. He stripped me of my ripped and ragged clothes, tossing them into the pile alongside his.

As we stand beneath the water, I study his naked torso, noting the sizable upside-down crucifix along one of his ribs. It reminds me of the ring he wore or a similar design. Aero is most certainly against all pillars of organized religion. He shows it in his actions, but professes it with his sharp tongue. My eyes trail further down the divots of his hard, toned abdomen and further still, following the light trail of dark hair that leads to the large exposed organ hanging between his legs. The glistening of the barbell piercing at the tip causes my chest to flutter and my thighs to quiver in remembrance.

As he does, he washes me beneath the comfortingly warm water. The hands that were roughly gripping my hair out in the woods are now weaving through mine, lathering up every crevice with a delicious, rich vanilla soap as he stands before me.

His touch suddenly stalls as his striking gaze peers down at mine while water from the rain-style showers pours over our naked bodies. Fingertips brush up along my rib cage until hands mold over my breasts. His eyes darken as his digits roll over my pebbled nipples, the sensation causing my lower abdomen to tighten in response.

My eyes suddenly fixate on the way his erection grows before me. Bobbing between us, he's quickly hardened again, shameless in his inevitable attraction. He washes himself with the soap, covering every inch, but I grab his forearm, stopping the motion when he finally reaches his chest.

His brows furrow as his frown sets in place. I pull his hands from his chest, replacing them with mine. Slowly running my sudsy hands up his broad pecs, I graze his collarbones, gliding up to his neck leisurely, but with intent.

He takes a step back, roughly pushing my hands away until they drop between us. Turning, he quickly shuts off the water and, in the blink of an eye, leaves the shower entirely.

He's uncomfortable with any form of gentle contact. Any embrace that deems him loveable literally scalds his skin like acid.

Returning a second later with a towel draped low on his hips and another in his arms, he reaches a hand in for mine to help me out of the stone shower. I brush past him, walking naked and dripping wet into his bathroom in search of my own towel.

I'm affected by it. He freely touches me at his will, however, and whenever he wants. I'm his doll, as he says, and yet he still remains a world away from me. Yes, this may be new for him, but it's new to me, too. I've opened myself to him, to his way of thinking. I've submitted to him entirely, putting faith and trust in a man I didn't know, and yet he still feels he can't do the same with me.

Finding a towel in a cabinet, I drape it around my body before finding another to dry my hair.

"You're upset with me," he declares against my shoulder, making me jump.

I didn't even hear him approach me. Lost in my thoughts, I suppose.

"I'm not mad, I'm just..." I sigh, not knowing how to justify any of my feelings at this point. "I don't know what I am."

I want to be upset, but I have no idea what this man has been through to make him the way he is. My empathy outweighs my need for more, knowing he's already broken down walls he's never broken in his life for me. He's exposed the truth of who he is, and that alone is a lot. But not only that, he has blood on his hands. For me.

His fingers travel up along the edge of my shoulder, making the hair raise, awakening my flesh, until they wrap around the back of my neck. I hear him inhale my scent near my ear as he presses himself against me and his grip tightens.

"I don't do well with gentle hands on me," he says firmly.

"I've gathered," I say under my breath, rolling my eyes before breaking away from him.

I run my fingers through my hair in the mirror, trying to comb out the tangles, when he slams a brush down on the counter, making me

jump.

I swallow, reluctantly taking it from him to finish brushing. He wasn't kidding when he told me everything I'd need was already here. He has it all. A toothbrush for me, brushes, robes, clothes, shoes...everything in my size. My eyes trail back up to my reflection, and I see his unfortunately handsome glare set behind me as I finish.

I set the brush back down when he crowds me again, his front sealing to my back, hard eyes staring at my reflection, direct enough to shatter glass.

"You have no idea what the fuck I've been through," he growls against my ear. "So roll your eyes at me again, Briony," he urges, his nostrils flaring.

My eyes pinch in the corners at his threatening behavior.

I send an elbow into his ribs behind me, pushing him off my back. He pushes against me harder, but I spin, shoving him in the chest again to distance us. He looks to the floor as his wet hair hangs before those dark eyes, then back up at me. His brow cocks in defiance as he takes a step towards me again.

"You're right," I say suddenly, causing him to stop in place. "I don't. I don't have a fucking clue what you've been through, and yet you seem to know my story entirely. Isn't that right?"

He stares at me with hatred behind his gaze. There's so much on his mind he won't reveal.

I glare back at him. When he doesn't answer, I continue, "You sabotage me, expose me, threaten me, force me to turn my back on my religion and everything I've ever known, simply to force me to rely on you and you alone. But what makes you think you had to do all that just to gain my trust? Would the truth not have sufficed? Am I that much of a lost little sheep to you? Am I too ignorant to accept the disgusting facts I've seen? That ignorant to need further explanation and reasoning before I can see *the light*, as you say?"

He doesn't answer, just absorbs my words intently.

"You think I'm an idiot," I say matter-of-factly, my face burning with anger.

He takes a step forward. "I know you're—"

I slap him across the face before he can finish, striking the words from his mouth with a burning palm. His face snaps to the side, his

hair dancing over his eyes, before his tongue runs along his teeth. His lips pull into that handsome, wolfish grin as his dangerously narrowed eyes turn to find mine.

“I may not know what you’ve been through, Aero,” I begin, with venom on my tongue. “I don’t know the first thing about your past, but you know nothing of my future. So let’s not pretend we know each other.”

He tilts his head back, eyeing me curiously. I can feel his thoughts dancing around dangerously in his mind. His lip twitches and I watch as he holds himself back from whatever he instinctually wants to say or do. I brush past him, cautious about his retaliation, but it doesn’t come. He actually lets me walk away from him, and it feels damn good.

Searching the hallways, I find a dark open room with a king-sized bed and walk inside, shutting the door before locking it behind me. Dropping the towel, I crawl beneath the bedsheets that were clearly placed here for me.

The colors resemble my bedroom at home, and there is even a vase of budded roses on the nightstand. He knew he’d be bringing me here at some point. He’d envisioned me sleeping here, just like he knew the bishop was going to kill me, just as he knew Jacob would try to harm me, just as he knew they would sabotage my ceremony.

I curl onto my side beneath the soft pillow-top comforter, and before I can even attempt to rein them in, the tears fall like rain. I cry until I’m a sobbing mess. I cry for a life that I no longer know. A past that’s been wasted and a future now unknown.

I cry until my eyes are so heavy that sleep cradles me with the comforting embrace I seek.



A soft groan vibrates against me. My eyes flutter open, and I forget where I am. It's still dark outside, even with the heavy drapes hanging over the room's floor-to-ceiling window. I'm at Aero's home.

I hear another groan from behind me, causing my heart rate to spike.

I'm not alone.

I roll over to face him sleeping beside me. Of course he got in here. Why this place even has locks is beyond me. He must've crawled in alongside me once I fell asleep.

It surprises me, his need to sleep next to me when I know his hatred of intimacy.

Another soft groan leaves his soft, pouty lips, and he shakes his head quickly, causing his inky hair to toss over his eyes. He's clearly in the middle of some sort of dream. I readjust myself on my side to face him; the moonlight slipping through the drapes just enough to see the outline of his face again.

He's disturbingly handsome. Those dark eyebrows, the one carved with the scar directly through it, those long thick lashes that rest, fluttering along his upper cheek, the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw, and the scarred lip I find myself wanting to kiss.

He's not big on kissing, but the reminder of him telling me to suck his tongue gives me that same tightening in my belly.

Without a second thought, the urge to touch him in some capacity comes over me. I brush the backs of my fingers against his cheek, trailing the scar there that somehow makes him even more beautiful and raw. His bare chest expands before a deep sigh leaves him. *See? My touch calms you. You just haven't figured that out yet.*

In a split second, the energy in the room shifts entirely. Hands circle my throat as Aero's eyes snap open. I'm thrown onto my back, the weight of his body between my legs pressing me deep between the pillows. I scream against his hold until it's nothing but a dry, cracked cry. Slapping his forearms, his dark, deathly stare pins me in place as his firm grip takes away my ability to breathe. There's no life behind his eyes. Only a pure, calculated killing machine. *He's dreaming, and he's going to kill me.*

His eyes trail from my face down to his hands, and then down to my naked body, fighting back beneath him, clawing at his corded

forearms. I dig my nails into his flesh, trying to break him from this trance.

The feeling of absolute fear is replaced with pain when I feel the crown of his firm cock pushing roughly against my opening as he makes his way between my thighs. He fills me immediately, and my eyes close tightly, watering, as my body accepts him with friction.

He sighs as he tries to collect his breath. As if he finally realizes where he is and what he's doing, his grip loosens on my neck and his face, once filled with passionate hatred, shifts into one of dark lust.

He rocks his hips into mine, slowly pulling out just to thrust into me harder in the next breath, until he's fucking me wildly. His earlier groans, resembling pain and discomfort, turn into groans and gasps of pleasure that claw their way from his throat.

"You're wrong," he says breathlessly, the scent of whisky on his tongue as our bodies slap roughly together. "You're so wrong, Briony."

His words make little sense to me. As does this tightening in the pit of my stomach from another pending orgasm making its way out of my body. This is what he does. He coaxes out my pleasure, my pain, my confusion. My reality.

He keeps one hand around my throat, his strong grip cutting off my air supply as I see the rippling, defined muscles in his abdomen flex with each roll of his hips into mine. My body does what he says it would, and I feel wetness seep out of me and around him, allowing his thick cock to slide in and out of my dripping center with ease.

"Aero...please. I can't..." I choke out my words, breathless as my vision clouds and I feel myself falling into the light-headed feeling of passing out.

My body tightens as he stares down at me, the long, fast strokes of his thick cock tearing through me relentlessly as I feel the euphoric wave strike through me like a shocking current.

I scream a throaty, soundless cry as my body is literally taken to another place. Another realm. A place where the most intense pleasure is given only by handing your life willingly over to another.

His grip releases and I gasp for air. He loses himself inside me, only to pull out, stroke his length, and coat my chest and abdomen with wet, warm ropes of cum. Panting, he pushes himself back into me again, laying on top of my naked body. His forearms circle my

head, and a strange new look finds me beneath the dark light of the room.

“I’ve never thought you were anything less than what I know you to be,” he declares, short of breath, a passion in his direct stare that has me holding my breath. “You are the fire that burns stagnant, the coals and ash yearning for the chance to ignite, ready to burn cities to the ground in your fierceness. A force more powerful than any man that came before you. You are my fucking existence, Briony. I live and breathe for you alone. I am yours eternally, entirely at your mercy.”

I stare back at him, my lips parted and my choppy breaths meeting his in the space between us, before he leans forward, capturing my lips in the most mind-bending, erotic, and forceful kiss. A kiss that connects us more than the act of sex alone ever could. A kiss that tethers my wildly beating heart to the lifeless one residing in him.

He’s always known, beneath the surface of the religion I professed, that there was a woman whose thoughts ran wild. A mind that outdated codes and morals couldn’t detain. A woman who sought truths along with realism and unfiltered revelation.

A woman who was ready for the war on the brink of her horizon.

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HERO

She's a fragile creature. One I looked forward to breaking and bringing to reality—that is until I realized the inevitable. If I'm not careful, a woman with the mindset and strength of Briony will break me. She has the power to tear me to fucking pieces, and the masochist in me will gladly allow every part of my destruction.

She's always been my little doll to protect. My promise I'd kept safe from a distance, until that distance became the barrier my soul craved to break. But Briony Strait is just a stray like me. A mistake reinvented in ways that made her existence acceptable. I watched from afar all these years when I could, ensuring she was taken care of, until the inevitable call came through a week ago. The eternal stain of condemnation was showing, and it was a stain they quickly wanted to scrub out.

Just like that, she went from a prominent, respected woman in the community to the ticking time bomb that threatened their demise. So alike we are.

I gave her some space after she'd hit me, when all I really wanted to do was grab a fistful of hair and tell her all the ways she better get on her knees and start listening to me. But Briony isn't the type to sit and obey. Throughout her life, she's only done so because she knew no other way. Survival in the world in which she resided.

I've given her a glimpse of her freedom, a life of uninhibited desires and standing up to the powers that be. My little firecracker is about to light up this world and find comfort in her revenge.

When she's ready.

And she's so close.

But this reality of hers I've held secret has the potential to break her past the point of repair. I have to be careful with this fragile flower. Her petals are too fresh to hold her bloom.

I'd had another dream again while resting beside her. The kind that makes me despise a gentle hand. The kind that makes me irate with the urge to erase the past. Memories of mind-fucks meant to deceive children into trusting authority. Memories that left a man like me craving pain and punishment rather than caring adoration.

I fucked out my frustrations. I took from Briony and used her to erase the stains of my own misfortunes. Having her beneath me saved me the trouble of beating my head into a wall to silence the

voices of the ghosts of my past. That or take another life. I needed her more than she'd ever realize.

Feeling her let go around me is my only heaven. I'll forever worship the deity that is her warm, wet sanctuary. Finding euphoria like that is a dangerous temptation for a man like me. One taste of Briony and I'm on my knees, ready to kill or be killed for my queen.

She fell back asleep after I cleaned her up, and I sat and studied her like I used to in secret. Unlike my tortured mind, peaceful thoughts seemed to occupy her dreams, and seeing that lip curl into a little half-smile made me crazier than I'd ever thought. What did she dream of? What gave Briony peace of mind? I knew it couldn't be me. I'm too vile and fucked up to bring anyone genuine joy.

I got the urge to tie her up, keeping her restrained and fucking her endlessly until I got confirmation I'd knocked her up. I wanted to fuck her until I saw her belly form a tiny bump and her tits become swollen and pained with the evidence of my claiming.

She'd find her own way to kill me before willingly allowing that to happen. Or I'd plant her key to freedom again just so we could fight like animals before fucking like them.

I left her before the sun rose, allowing her to rest before needing to dispose of Saint's Jeep properly. I couldn't think of a better getaway vehicle than my sweet half-brother's treasured Jeep. This bitch is going to burn to the ground, and I'll enjoy the shit out of it.

On my hike back hours later, through the twenty-five acres of wooded land I've come to call home, I wipe my forearm over my brow, collecting the beads of sweat that had formed since the sun had risen.

Passing through the vibrant sounds of the forest, my ears perk up as I hear one that doesn't align. Up ahead, through the brush and trees, I see a dark-haired girl facing a tree about three yards from her. I plant myself back against a large maple, folding my arms over my chest as I study her curiously from afar.

She's holding a knife in the air, wearing nothing but a white tank top with matching white shorts. My brows lower as I watch her stalk towards the tree before her, and with the blade held high, her white-knuckled grip on the handle, she stabs it. Piercing the bark with her

blade, she holds the end, breathing hard before ripping it from the tree and repeating the process.

She stabs the same place on the tree repeatedly, screaming out as her forearm collides with the bark that cuts free, the blade sinking deeper with each forceful gut.

She's murdering this tree. Attempting to end a life before her, needing it to bleed, needing it to take its last breath for her own satisfaction and release. Her own revenge.

Her frustrations get the better of her as she cries. She's falling apart. I approach her as her little hand finally releases the blade, her palm slowly trailing down the damaged bark, and she sinks towards the ground.

Catching her beneath her arms, I hold her back to my chest, keeping her upright.

"Why?!" she screams, a shrill of pain leaving her throat. "Why didn't you tell me?!"

My forehead wrinkles in confusion as I grip the flesh of her hip with one hand, the other also draped around her. She flails against my hold, fighting me as her flimsy little tank top rises up her stomach.

"How could it be true?!" she screams, covering her face with her hands.

My eyes fall to the forest floor near the base of the tree she tried killing. The envelope. The one from the safe I'd forced her to break into. I forced her to find her own truth, unbeknownst to her. She found it. Briony must have searched my place high and low since my departure this morning like the inquisitive little shit she is. I should've known. She found the manila envelope I'd taken from Alastor's office. The envelope filled with the secrets of the past she's yet to learn.

She knows.

"Shhh... Briony," I whisper in warning, holding her firmly, trying to calm her. "Listen—"

"Fuck you!" she interrupts, before sending elbows into my sides while kicking wildly in my hold. "Fuck you, Aero! You knew! You knew this whole time, and you said nothing! Nothing!" she screams, launching herself forward until she grasps the handle of the blade from the tree.

Ripping it from the bark, she brings it down immediately to cut me, maybe even stab me, but I release my hold on her. She spins to face me, her loose black hair slapping her in the face as her chest heaves.

“If you’re going to do it, at least have the balls to look me in the eye,” I spit out, stepping forward.

Her face is wet with tears, her nose runny, and her lips puffy and red. Her pink, fleshy nipples press against the soft fabric of her top, and I have to bite back the urge to rip it down the middle, releasing those perfect handfuls of velvety flesh, pinning her body against the rough bark of the tree, allowing it to tear into the soft skin of her back as I make my way between *my* legs again. I hate that I love everything about how she looks at this moment. I hate that my desire to fuck those tears from her soul is the only thought running through my mind. Not sympathy. Not the need to comfort.

This is raw, unfiltered pain before me. The pain of realizing you aren’t who you thought you were. The pain of knowing you don’t belong. That you never did. The pain of knowing you are ultimately on your own in this world of lies, deception, and cruelty.

“It’s time you start talking,” she threatens with a cracked voice, stalking towards me until she’s pointing my blade at my neck. “I want answers, Aero. Explain what’s in that envelope and why my name is all over the inside of it.”

I tip my head back, giving her my neck. She pushes me in the chest with her other hand, backing me into the tree that became her recent victim.

“I’ll start talking,” I begin, leaning my head back against the tree. “But only when you wipe those useless fucking tears from your face and learn to fight back.”

She glares at me, lost in her hatred, a victim to the pain. I see her breaking beneath her flesh. She wants to melt into this earth, give up and let go. Lose herself in her sorrows. But those embers burn within her. They won’t allow her to succumb to nothing. When she internalizes her pain, she only burns red hot.

“Throw.” I nod my head. “Aim and hit the space above my right shoulder, and I’ll answer a question.”

“W-what?” She shakes her head. “You can’t be serious.”

“Pinch-grip the blade. Inside of your fingertips and your thumb,” I instruct. “Square your shoulders to me. Keep a firm wrist with your elbow tucked and keep the motion fluid as you release towards your target.”

“No,” she says quickly through clenched teeth, shaking her head. “No, I won’t play your games anymore.”

“Throw the fucking knife, Briony,” I snap, taunting her. “Throw it to ensure you’ll get your answers, or you get nothing more from me. I’m the only one alive who knows your secrets and is willing to tell them. So make your choice.”

Her nostrils flare as her other hand curls into a fist near her hip. “You evil bastard.”

I can’t help but smirk. Words like that are foreplay for a man like me. The pain of the inevitable truth behind the word bastard sends a blow to my gut, tearing through my emotional core, sending blood to my groin. If she wants her truth, she’ll be forced to learn to protect herself by the brutal assassin himself.

I rest my head back casually, cocking a brow as she wipes the tears from her face, angrily tossing them to the dirt beneath us, pushing through her pain to find the fight within her. *There you are, baby.*

“Fuck me up, darling,” I say, staring dangerously into her timid eyes as she squares herself off and I await my fate. “It’s your only chance.”

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BRONX

I'm trembling. My frustrations are coursing through my bloodstream, burning hot with a rage so intertwined with confusion and pain I could burst.

I woke to find Aero had left the bed cold beside me. I'd assumed it would happen, and to be honest, I was hoping for the opportunity to get some answers about the man of mystery my heart beats for.

A man like Aero doesn't think traditionally. I knew his secrets wouldn't be kept in safes hidden in office spaces. No, his secrets would be kept in plain sight. Simplistic minds would never assume his assortment of uncovered documents would be tucked and stored in the most unsuspecting of places.

But after an hour of scouring his home, finding one strange door at the back of the house locked shut, and leaving the rest of his place in a chaotic mess of clothing, papers, and about a thousand hidden knives tucked away, I'd all but given up finding it. Thinking into the mind of the psychotic himself, I realized he assumed I'd be onto him. Maybe the key was simplicity. He'd assume I wouldn't go for the obvious, knowing who he is. Who I am. These mind games are fucking with me, the reverse psychology hurting my brain.

Back to the room I went–the room he'd set up specifically for me. I thought to myself, where do stupid people hide money? *Under the mattress.*

My stomach dropped when I lifted my side of the bed, only to reach under and feel the edge of the wrinkled paper at my fingertips. It practically twisted into a knot when I saw the familiar yellowish-brown textured envelope slide out from beneath the mattress. It sank when I held the package to my chest, feeling the same weight in my hand I'd felt that night, pulling it from the safe.

I ripped into it, immediately pulling out documents and flipping through them.

I flipped so fast my brain couldn't even retain the information correctly. Names, dates, certain words popped out at me and flooded me with a wave of uncertainty and panic.

Certificate of birth.

Callum Westwood.

Veronica Fields

United States Vs. Aero Westwood

Alastor Abbott.
Margaret Moore.
St. Augustine's Hospital.
Felony murder.
Briony Strait.

What is this? What are these documents in here for? Nothing is adding up, and why is my birth certificate part of this? I've been tied into whatever sickening history Aero carries, and he's held this from me.

My whole life...is a pool of deception and lies from the powers that be. According to the birth certificate with my name on it, it says I wasn't even born in 2002, but in 2004, at a different hospital, in a completely different town.

This has to be wrong. Some sort of sick, twisted mistake.

I've been swimming in deceptions. Drowning; slowly, the bubbles drain from my lungs of my past life until I'm left fading into the numbing sounds of the deep water surrounding me.

That was, until *he* found me.

I can only hope there is some sort of explanation for this. That Aero has answers to clear up whatever I've discovered. That he will justify his reasons for keeping this information from me, and will take this painful piercing sensation in my brain and make it stop.

However, a dark place deep inside me knows there's some truth to this. An intuitive reasoning within my mind is feeling some sort of release because every part of my past that made little sense now does.

The eternal stain of condemnation. The Devil's Doll.

Now I stand facing the man who's somehow found a way to get me to uncover my truth, crawling on floors for him, pulling out documents, exposing my very own hidden past by finding it in his maze. He wanted me to be my own hero. Even now, as he stands against this tree, only giving me my answers if I learn to fight for myself.

"Fuck me up, darling."

I crave a hug. An embrace. I want to collapse into my brother's arms. I want to call Mia and cry to her, let it all out and give my burdens to another. I want my parents to return from their African mission trip to wrap their arms around me, tell me everything will be

alright, and to focus on God's will. To put my faith in Christ and let him handle things for once.

One thing is for certain, Aero isn't that person. No one handles his fate besides himself. His idea of empathy is proving I won't kill him in this masochistic display of a knife lesson.

Holding the knife as he instructed, my heart races, and the inability to breathe has my chest tightening. So much is weighing down on me at the moment. The attempted murders, the secrets, the lies…

I take a deep breath, attempting to internalize my confusion, my pain. Closing my eyes, I envision him against the tree. I listen to the silence of the surrounding forest, still echoing with my heart-breaking cries as I took out my frustrations. Aero's voice hums in the background, telling me to look at him, yelling out instructions, but I don't want to hear it anymore. Faith and fate will need to benefit him today. He's pushed me too far. So far.

I keep my eyes closed and hold the handle out before my face, throwing it by the blade in one fluid motion, like a dart, as he instructed.

Hearing the blade hit something, I open my eyes, finding dangerous ones filled with fire glaring in my direction. The knife hit the tree just above his right shoulder, as instructed. However, it appears I've nicked his neck. Blood, as red as the blood pumping wildly through me, leaks from a minor wound. I gasp, dropping my hands to my sides.

"Ask," he demands in a dark tone, angry as he pulls the knife with his fist from the tree behind him.

My eyes trail down to the envelope, and my mind runs rampant.

"A-am I, or was I...adopted?" My eyes well with tears at the word.

"No." he answers simply, walking away from the tree, approaching me.

"Then why is there a birth certificate with my name on it from St. Augustine's? I was born here. At St. Francis. And the dates," I stutter. "The dates are off."

He ignores my rambling, reaching behind his back and pulling out three more knives from somewhere. No is the only answer I get. *Asshole.* He holds them out for me, but my brows pinch and my glare

lifts to find his as his hand holds them out for me to take. He shrugs and drops them on the dirt before my feet, proceeding to walk away.

Planting himself before the tree again, I eye the length of his lean legs beneath his black jeans, admiring the strength of his toned physique without him knowing. He turns, giving a light head nod, urging me to continue.

My lip curls in disgust, but it only intrigues him further. I can tell by the way excitement dances behind his darkened eyes, the way his fingers roll into his fist as his tongue skates across his bottom lip. Even from this distance, I see it.

Picking up a knife, his deep tone startles me.

“Left shoulder,” he commands.

Blood boils beneath my flesh. I don’t know what I’m doing, but if pain is what he wants, I’ll give him a slow death with my inability to hunt. Keeping my eyes open this time, I hold the blade between my thumb and fingers, using muscle memory in an attempt to repeat what I’d already accomplished. As soon as the blade leaves my fingertips, I know it’s shanked. The knife misses the tree entirely, flying past him to the left.

But I threw a knife. I get an answer.

“Who’s Veronica Fields?” I ask, anxious for the answer.

He retrieves the knife before answering, and I pick up another from the forest floor. Settling himself before the tree again, I watch as his jaw flexes.

“My mother.”

I feel an ache in my heart for him. I’m reminded of what he told me about her.

“Throw,” he says, interrupting my thoughts.

I can’t stand his one-word answers. They infuriate me. I set myself to throw another, aiming for the same spot he’d already instructed. He never flinches when I throw. He doesn’t cower or move at all as the knives hurl towards him. I can’t understand it, and it only ignites my rage.

The handle of the knife bounces off the tree above his head as it falls into the dirt.

“Why do they want me dead?”

“You sure that’s the question you want to ask? You already know the answer,” he comments smugly, picking up the knife.

You pushed and pushed… You just kept pushing. His words spring to life in my mind.

These games. This man. The answers he knows but won’t convey. I’m breaking.

“Answer me!” I scream in frustration.

“Because you weren’t meant to be, Briony! If you would’ve just shut up and played pretty housewife, you wouldn’t be in this fucking mess. But no,” he snaps. “You needed to conquer their world too, didn’t you?”

“That doesn’t make sense to me, Aero!” I pick up another knife from the ground. “It’s not enough!” I chuck it at him.

It hits the tree above his head, sticking into the bark at a strange angle. His eyes widen slightly, but he shifts back into his cool demeanor yet again. It pisses me off. I want red fiery anger from him. I want him to react to me. For some strange reason, this small action is driving me crazier than ever.

“Give me everything!” I scream. “Tell me everything!”

I grip another blade from the dirt and hurl it towards him. This one sticks into the tree to the left of him, above his shoulder. I hit where I’d intended. A ghost of a grin forms as his lips pull up in the corner. He’s enjoying this. This sick and twisted fuck is enjoying my emotional outrage and turmoil.

That same anger they have taught me to cover and sit quietly with Christ, the questions I’ve always wanted to ask but was never allowed, the rules I never quite understood but was expected to obey... All of my past is catching up to me, and I’m breaking. I’m losing any self-control I thought I’d retained from all my years at The Covenant.

I’m out of knives, or so he thinks. All but one left. I reach behind me, into the back of my white camisole, and pull the sentimental blade, given to me by the teacher himself, from inside the tight fabric. It’s time for his test.

With a flick of my wrist, I flip the blade free, then quickly aim directly at his head. His gaze isn’t locked on me anymore. The knives are

spread on the ground before him. He doesn't realize I'm still holding one. He assumes I'm all out.

The blade slips from my fingertips, pulling what feels like the last bit of my old self along with it. I instantly know my aim and trajectory are too on point. The knife hurls towards his head, on a straight path to his face. With a quick snap of his head and a fast hand, he catches it just before it hits him. His chest is heaving as the blood drips down his forearm. He caught the blade with the palm of his hand, directly between those dilated eyes.

His gaze shifts from the mess of his cut before him to my image behind it, clearly shaken in surprise.

I swallow, the thumping of my heart from the anger channeling into pounding beats of absolute fear ringing in my ears.

Aero pushes off the tree and begins stalking towards me.

I take a step back, tripping over my own feet and falling back onto my bottom, before pushing up on the heels of my palms, getting them beneath me again, and standing. He reaches me, gripping my black hair at the nape of my neck in his wounded hand. I gasp as he holds the blade before me, his dark eyes searching mine.

"You broke," he whispers breathlessly, a sense of wonder and amazement in his gaze as he slowly shakes his head in disbelief. "Baby...you broke."

He pants heavily over me, folding the knife in one hand as his eyes stay pinned to mine. He tucks it back into the strap of my tight-fitting tank, fingers lingering on the mounds of flesh rising and falling rapidly between us. His thumb intentionally skims across my pebbled nipple, and one soft little flick has electricity running from the sensation to the ache between my legs.

Fear and arousal. So very much alike. Powerful, and at times, all-consuming. Very much like his entire effect on me.

Aero studies me like he's never seen me before. Apparently, the attempt to kill him has him falling entirely. His brows knit together as he peers over my face, gazing at my lips, then finding my eyes.

"I'll tell you everything," he whispers softly, loosening his grip on my hair, the promise in his tender gaze. "I'll give you everything."

His injured hand finds my face as his thumb trails across my bottom lip. I'm panting heavily as he kneels into the dirt before me.

The bloodied hand makes its way down my throat, slowly trailing further down until my neck and the white of my tanks is covered in his bright crimson blood. *Just the way he likes me.*

Kneeling before me on the forest floor, he gazes up at me, his hands settling on my hips as his parted lips lay inches from my breasts.

This man. This powerful assassin, who kills before questioning, is on his knees before me, looking up at me like I'm royalty. He's submitting himself entirely. *When I break, he folds.*

He looks at me, waiting for me to make my move. The breeze rushes through the trees, a warmth in her push. My hair dances before my eyes, but our direct eye contact never falters.

Two lost souls dancing beneath the flesh, aching to be seen by the other. We speak without words, recognizing the other in the most primal form of communication. Our bodies, our change in breaths, the pounding of our aligned pulses, the rise of the hair on our neck, the way our eyes dilate when looking into the other.

This is my chance. He's looking for my direction now. I'm in control, and he's entrusting me with all that he is after witnessing the fight within me. It's a moment more powerful than him giving me control over his life with a few knives. Even then, he knew he had a way out. He could control an enemy throwing weapons at him. What he can't control is the release of his heart to mine. A weakness he wasn't yet ready to embrace.

Slowly and with careful hands, I sink my fingers into his black, inky locks that are wet with sweat, finding his scalp. With a gentle embrace, I wrap my palm around the back of his head, his hair weaving through my fingers, the other slowly sliding around the back of his neck. He inhales sharply, closing his eyes tightly. His arms slowly slide around my hips, wrapping around me as I pull his face against my chest. He sighs in my embrace, finally allowing himself to melt into the sensation that once terrified him, allowing the gentle caress of my fingers to massage his scalp through his hair.

"Everything," he whispers.

He may be talking about telling me everything as promised, but the way the crack in his voice says the word, I get the feeling that he's surrendering entirely to me. He's giving me everything he has. Every

living, breathing part of him. The pieces I can see, and the shattered ones I can't. I feel what he feels in this moment together.

My answers to the unending questions are coming, but there's one thing I know with complete certainty. It's just him and I in this world of torture and torment. We aren't like them. We're like us.

And solidifying that is everything.

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BRONX

I still my body, using every available sense I have.

A bird's wings flutter from the tree branches above me. I breathe the stark scent of pine with the pungent smell of wet mud beneath my black lace-up boots. My fingertips gently graze the sharp bark of the tree behind me, feeling for its width as my vision stays trained on the area before me, ensuring it's cleared.

Slowly, I mold along the tree, using soft, light footsteps and a steady flow of motion until my target is in my direct line of sight. I take a steady inhale, exhaling smoothly, calming the nerves that always pool before I strike. Grazing the knives along the straps across my chest, I grip the tips of each blade and am transported into a different place entirely.

There, leaning against the tree, is the outline of the disgusting, child-assaulting demon himself.

Bishop Caldwell.

I spin off the tree, quickly making eye contact with my target, and flick my wrist, sending the blade rotating so swiftly through the air that the sound is practically silenced as it strikes him directly in the left eye. Blood bursts from his head as his mouth drops open, and his stunned body falls back against the tree.

I continue through the trees, not watching as his dead body collides with the forest floor beneath him, running light on my toes, my feet stepping around the rocks and sticks left on the ground that could give away my whereabouts.

Dodging a bullet by diving into a somersault, I come up on my knee with one leg propped out before me, stabilizing myself. I toss the knife up, flipping to grab the handle, and gripping it, I twist my body back, slicing the core of the man approaching me from behind with a semi-circle, back-handed motion.

The man who made Aero's life the living hell that it was by murdering his mother, the mistress, silencing his secrets the only way he knew how.

The same man that sent his son to live in the dark basement of the church, under the strict eye of the bishop himself. A man so eager to assist in the grooming of another innocent child. The same bishop, whose idea of purifying and cleansing this spawn of Satan, was through excessive attention and a gentle, caressing touch.

The man who turned a blind eye to the cries for help from a small boy, made up of his own genes, being abused by the very institution that promised to protect.

The man who set up his own flesh and blood, accusing a child of a crime so vicious, so vile, that it pained anyone to believe it could be true.

The man who tried to erase the existence of the one stain he never could.

Callum Westwood.

I cut into his abdomen, tearing the blade through the flesh as I swing the knife, spilling his intestines into the dirt where they belong. He groans before collapsing forward; the blood spurting across my face and arm from his large gaping wound as he awkwardly drops to his death behind me.

I grip the sharp edge of the last blade from the strap on my thigh, aiming for the last target who's straight before me.

His striking blue eyes find mine, and his face softens, sending a twisted feeling to the pit of my gut. I'm not sad for him. I don't feel sorrow anymore. But I feel this act I'd be gifting him would be too kind. Giving him death gives him freedom, and after all of the lies and deceptions, he deserves none of that.

I hesitate. My wrist pulls back by my ear, but I hold for a second too long.

My only error.

Just as expected, my hesitation gets the better of me and before I can send the final dagger flying into the heart of Saint, someone grips my neck with a firm hand from behind, another wrapping my arm behind my back, twisting it into a painful hold as I'm forced to drop the last remaining blade.

"You messed up," his grave, familiar tone purrs throughout my core, his hot breath warming my neck. "You hesitated, and now you're dead."

This is Aero's game; always has been. I'm still merely a player.

I feel the rope circle my wrist as he tries to grab for the other. Sending an elbow to his jaw, I feel his teeth knock together before an angry growl reverberates from somewhere deep in his chest.

Thrashing wildly in his hold, I feel his body push into me, forcing my face into the dirt beneath us, my legs splaying out behind me. He's already hard.

Twisting my other arm back, he ties it to the other wrist. Once my arms are tied behind my back, he sits on my ass before I can roll over to use my legs.

"Not today, darling," he says confidently. "I've learned that lesson."

I hear the metal loops of the silicone gag clang from behind him as the smell of the leather strap floods my nostrils.

No, not again.

"Open, so I don't have to break teeth," he demands.

Bringing the large cock-shaped gag to my mouth, he pushes it towards my lips. I turn my head, refusing it.

"Fuck you," I spit out.

A light scoff leaves his lips, and I can picture the demented grin planted on his smug face. "You will."

He presses the four-inch object to my lips again, more forcefully this time, and I part my lips, as the girth fills my mouth, opening my jaw. I instantly gag against the foreign object, my eyes watering as horrid sounds leave my throat.

"Relax for me," he says, annoyed but still petting the top of my head gently. The move, totally contradictory to his tone of voice. "Breathe, you weak bitch."

My thighs tighten at his demeaning demands, and I grind my hips into the earth, needing to rub my aching heat against something.

I hate that I love it. I hate how he knows how I'll respond. He knows how I like to feel used filthy, and fucked like his own personal whore, only to be treated like his noble queen later.

He secures the belt of the gag behind my head while I focus on breathing through my nose as he taught me, saliva already pooling around the fake cock.

"Such a good little slut for me, aren't you?" he whispers in my ear. "Always bending at the knee for a man."

He grabs my ankle, bending my knee back. He's trying to hogtie me again. I quickly send my head back, knocking the back of my skull into his face.

He curses, before aggressively grabbing for my ankle again, but the minor lapse allows me a moment to twist beneath his hold. I wiggle myself out enough to get to my knees, but he reaches for my calf and easily slides me back beneath him.

“Fuck,” he groans, wiping blood from his lower lip where there’s now a cut. “You know I love when you fuck me up, baby.”

He’s just too strong. Too smart. Too quick for me to escape his grasp. He’ll never let me go.

I still, letting out a deep sigh through my nose, trying to calm my racing heart and focus on breathing, as the drool drips down my chin and the silicone cock has me practically choking. He pulls my head back by the strap of the gag, looking down at my face over the top of me.

I know I must look insane. Tears have my face looking like a flushed mess, and saliva spills onto the dried grass and dirt beneath me as my throat tries to expel the object protruding into it.

He gazes down at me, eyes fully dilated, filled with a primal sickness, as blood drips from his nose down his full lips. I feel it spill onto my forehead, and I wince my eyes as a drop of blood hits near my eyebrow.

This look of his, it’s feral and untamed, raw and ruthless. It makes me insatiable for him. My pussy spasms, as wetness pools in my shorts in anticipation of the discipline he’s about to inflict.

We’re toxic. My blood, infected with the same sick love he owns for me. We crave this illness. The pain, the torture, the obsession, the taunting, the teasing, the domination, the submission.

It’s always a war between us. A battle brewing that reeks of passion and underlying lust. Our bodies feel combustible until we can connect and become us again, finding a place only we can own. The fire.

He carries me over his shoulder, walking me back to the cabin. The cabin we’ve been living in together for a week now.

This is what we do. We train. We fight. We fuck.

Dropping me on the edge of the bed, my wrists pull tight against the rope, feeling for an escape.

I silently gag around the silicone cock filling my mouth, touching the back of my throat. My eyes close tightly as tears melt down my

cheeks, a silent plea to take it off.

He's been training me to deep throat in his own sadistic ways, punishing me with the cock gag whenever I lose the game.

He rolls me to my knees, my legs sitting under me, my chest pushed out in defiance.

"It's time for a real cock to fuck that pretty throat," he says, gently grabbing my chin and eyeing the mess before him as saliva pools at my breasts, my white tank covered. His hand travels down my chin, gently stroking my throat, where I try to swallow again.

"Isn't this what you crave? The inability to use your voice? To be silenced by men and used up like the sex toy that you are?"

Dark eyes flash up at mine before he lifts my shirt, allowing my breasts to bounce free from the tank top. Palming both breasts, his hands splay over the soft flesh before his thumb rubs over the hardened point of my left nipple. His jaw flexes.

"I'm piercing these," he declares, and my forehead wrinkles as his large fingers play with both nipples. He twists them both between his thumb and forefinger, rolling the sensitive flesh, sending electrical shock waves down between my legs. "So beautiful, Briony. How you've developed."

A muffled whine leaves my throat.

"I've watched you blossom," he says, his hands holding the weight of my breasts as he studies them through his disheveled locks hanging partially into his eyes. "Seen you bloom into this woman before me." A groan leaves his throat. "I couldn't wait any longer. You turned eighteen. I had to touch you. Had to fuck you," he says softly, almost to himself as my clit aches at his desire.

Eighteen. Not twenty, like I'd been told. Aero opened Pandora's box a week ago, gifting me the secrets I'd been told my entire life. What do you do when you see the proof of the fact that your parents aren't really your parents? My brother wasn't really my brother. My date of birth and place of birth weren't even accurate.

They had manipulated everything for a family that couldn't conceive again. Brian and Cynthia Strait were living their own lie. I was an orphaned child. A child brought into this world as a mistake. A stain, just as Aero was. Two strays left in the dust of an institution where

they didn’t belong. One with the hope of a chance under a blanket of lies, the other, not so lucky.

They taught me forgiveness. They taught me truth. Love. Righteousness. Goodness. There is a God. There has to be. I have faith in that fact, and no one can take that away from me. What I fail to have faith in now are humans. Savages of the worst kind that surround us with true masks of deception.

He rips the back of the gag over my head, sending my hair over my face as I gasp for air. Without warning, he clasps a black collar around my neck with an O-ring right at my throat, connected to a chain.

This man has a plethora of toys and restraints behind that locked door of his, built for pleasure and pain. The two core dimensions of emotion that correlate in a beautiful symphony when our music collides.

I stare up at him, defiant, yet obedient. Aero’s bare chest is covered in scars and tattoos of his own defiance. Tilting his head to the side, I watch as his tongue skates across his teeth in excitement and anticipation, looking over his prey he’s sure to conquer.

He opens his jeans, stepping out of the rest of his clothing before fisting the base of his thick, erect cock, palming the length of himself before me.

I watch as he runs his fingers over the tip, flicking the piercing with his thumb, desperately wanting some of that friction against my center that’s dripping for him. Craving the sensation of that piercing dragging along my hungry clit again.

“I’m going to pierce those tits and chain you to my cock.” He smirks proudly at the idea, stroking himself as he braces himself on those thick, sculpted quads. “Watch you crawl on the floor beneath me, led by none other than your new god.” He shakes his dick at me.

“You’re not piercing my nipples,” I retort, finally finding my voice.

Aero grabs the chain connected to the O-ring around my neck and jerks it forward, causing me to gasp.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion,” he snarls. “Now get on your stomach and open my mouth for me.”

“But...” I protest, showcasing my tied hands, hoping for some reprieve.

“The ropes stay,” he answers simply.

I groan. “I hate you.”

“That’s fine,” he says, stepping over the chain with one leg and pulling it behind him with a hand. “As long as you trust me.”

I glare at him as he pops the leash again, pulling my neck toward him.

“You do, right?” he asks softly, dropping his cock with his hand and gently stroking my cheek. “Trust me?”

I swallow, looking up at him. That’s become a simple question for me to answer after the way he revealed everything to me. The hardships of his tortured past, the truth behind the men who’ve tried to bring me down.

I accept this man for who he is.

Who they forced him to become.

“With everything I am,” I answer confidently.

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BRONX

A slow grin forms, and he runs his thumb across my cheekbone before pulling his hand back and slapping the side of my face. It's not hard, but hard enough to send my face to the side and leave a light sting.

"Good girl."

I practically whimper at his praise before he guides his cock into my mouth. He allows me to move my neck while he stands still, wetting him by licking the pierced tip, then mouthing the entire, engorged length. I swallow as much of him as I can, holding him at the back of my throat until I need to pull off to breathe.

"Fuck, just like that," he says, gripping the hair at my crown, forcing himself deep again.

He holds the leash with an arm behind him, pulling it as he picks up the pace until I'm literally being pulled forward to swallow his cock and he's effectively fucking my throat.

"Swallow your cock, slut," he demands. I moan around him, the words so vile, demeaning, and entirely too attractive for the submissive doll I've become. "Take your punishment."

After bringing himself to the edge, almost losing at his own game, he pulls out of my mouth, gazing down at the teary, wet mess beneath him with fire in his eyes. He slaps his cock against my cheek before pushing it back between my lips. He repeats this process, pulling out, slapping me, then throat fucking me again. Toying with himself. Toying with me.

"Aero," I whine, craving my own release as he rubs the piercing across my lips, a drop of cum leaking onto my tongue. "Please."

"Please what?" he asks, cocking a brow.

"Give me what I need," I cry.

His infamous smirk pulls at his lips before he leans down closer to me. His arm wraps back around behind me, his fingers slipping beneath my shorts until he brushes against my arousal, slipping a finger deep inside. "Oh yeah, you're ready," he says, eyes darkening with his own hunger. "God, you're so amazing, Bri. My dirty little doll. Let's make you filthy, yeah?"

In a quick motion, he releases the leash, pushing me back against the bed, my wrists burning from the friction of the rope. He grabs my ankle and flips me onto my stomach. The cock gag fills my mouth

again as he straps it back on, tighter than before. Ripping the shorts down my legs, he wastes no time in pulling me to my knees, smashing my exposed breasts into the mattress before me, and spreading my legs before him.

He runs the crown of his dick along the sopping mess between my legs, cursing at the sensation. Without warning, he pushes into me from behind, driving deep. I try to scream around the gag, my pussy spasming around his thickness as he stills, attempting to calm himself for me.

My cries are silenced by the silicone cock down my throat, while he slips out, then back in deep at a slow and torturous rate.

“They took away your voice, but remember I’m the one to make you scream.” he whispers as his hands explore.

Fingers mold to my skin, touching every available surface before him as his own. Running down my spine, up the backs of my thighs, over the curves of my hips. Gripping into the flesh near my hips, he pulls me back into him, my wetness spreading across his lower abdomen. His thrusts pick up again and my body ignites with explosive electricity at each powerful collision.

It doesn’t take long. The inability to talk as I swallow one cock while being filled with another has me spiraling into a dirty pool of desire. I feel naughty and used in the way that I crave. I want to take the disadvantages of being seen only as an object and a woman of no worth and own it as my own under the direction of Aero. Turning our pain into pleasure.

I tighten myself, my muscles seizing up as I close in on my release. He must sense it because he spits down onto my ass, his saliva dripping down the crack, rubbing my entrance before gently popping his thumb inside.

A low groan rumbles through my chest as my eyes roll back into my head. It’s too much. It’s overwhelming. I’m on sensory overload, and the fire within the pit of my belly is burning wild, requiring an escape with the heat of my arousal.

The sexiest moan leaves his throat, and the sound, plus the fact that he’s got every hole of mine filled the way he intended, using me as his own dirty doll, has me cresting the wave of the most intense orgasm.

“Now,” he demands, sounding short of breath. “Cum—ah, fuck—cum on me, filthy girl.”

We lose ourselves in each other, coming undone at the same time. My body explodes as fire travels along my spine and I feel his hips flex hard against mine, his body convulsing behind me as my face grinds into the mattress beneath us.

We explore and test our limits, needing fear and pain to drive the pleasure, and we fall hard into our heaven, gasping together until we find ourselves back on this earth.

Lying in his bed together after cleaning up, my cheeks flush as I go over the last few hours in my head again.

The way he cares for me after sex is nothing short of beautiful, going entirely against the nature of his character. He cleaned me in the bathtub as I sat between his legs, soft kisses littering my neck and ears as gentle hands massaged my tender muscles, discussing my techniques and what could make me a more skilled assassin. He cooked for me, feeding me yet another protein-filled meal. He tells me to worship my body as the temple it is, keeping me strong and focusing on foods that enrich rather than destroy.

Tucking me into the bed alongside him, he cares for me, ensuring I’m warm and comfortable. He gives me aspirin with a glass of ice water before bed, knowing the discomfort that comes from training all day, followed up by a round of aggressive lovemaking.

He’s unlike anyone I’ve ever encountered. He expresses himself through pain. Pulling hair and yelling obscenities is his own personal cocktail of love. He’s just never learned how to embrace the proper form of love. Chaos is his only emotion, and knowing that, I feel I’m the only one who can understand him.

He strokes the damp hair off my face, playing with the strands as he studies me yet again, the look in his eyes one of love and admiration, even if he doesn’t know what that means.

I know the look because I’m emitting it right back to him. Aero has said that I am his existence. That he can’t breathe without me. But I can’t live without him. I would be nothing without him. My heart has caved for the man that is without one. I love how protective he is. How he’s literally spent his life waiting for me, silently watching me

from afar, waiting until the time came when they'd want to eliminate his flower that hadn't yet bloomed.

"Aero," I whisper, blinking my tired eyes nervously.

"What is it?" he asks, concerned already.

He brings my wrist to his mouth, eyeing the small cuts from the roped restraints. My heart rate surges as I contemplate voicing the things I'm feeling. His tongue darts out of his mouth as he licks the cuts before kissing them gently. Healing his harm. My heart swells further.

"You must know," I begin shyly, looking up at him. "I think I'm in—I mean, I know I'm in lo—"

"Don't," he interrupts sternly, sitting up onto his elbow abruptly. "Don't you ever say that to me."

My eyebrows lower and my heart pinches in my chest.

"Don't tell me you love me because I'll never say it back to you," he says in a cold, lifeless tone. One void of the very emotion I'm emitting.

My bottom lip trembles and his eyes are drawn to it. His hand reaches out and his thumb gently trails along it. His lips part, but for a moment, nothing comes out. It's as if he's heard the echoes of the complete shatter happening within the confines of my chest.

"What we have together isn't definable by a word created by another man. No combination of letters or formulated language can encompass the magnitude of our tragedies. Our pain. Our euphoria." His eyes find mine, searching deep through me as his fingers softly stroke my hair behind my ear. "Love is beneath us," he states confidently.

I swallow, the tears spilling over my lashes at probably the most perfect answer from a man who loves in his own undefinable way. *Love is beneath us.*

Lifting my hand, I carefully stroke my fingertips over the deep-seated scar that tears through his devastatingly handsome face. He's still working on letting me touch him. Hitting him, cutting him, knocking my skull into his...that's affection he can bear. But the gentle touch of a caring caress is still owned by the demons we seek to avenge.

“I do have a question for you, though,” he says through gritted teeth. “It’s been weighing on me all afternoon.”

I drop my hand, his face immediately softening as he sucks in a breath, letting me know he was holding it the entire time. It kills me he has to work that hard to allow my hands on him. He’s trying, and I hate it. I don’t want him to have to try to be comfortable with my embrace. If he’d rather I slap him, then I’d gladly do it. I don’t want to change him, I just want to love him, however he’ll allow.

“What’s the question?”

His brows lower, and his eyes narrow, contemplating. “Who was it you pictured when you hesitated at the last strike during today’s training?”

I stall for a moment, peering down before gaining the courage to find his gaze again. “Saint.”

He stares at me for a moment, wearing his anger proudly.

“I don’t know how many more times you need me to explain it to you. He was the one who counted the books wrong for class, Briony. He knew you’d need to visit that closet where his friend was waiting to end you. Watch his face, remember? They set you up.” He scratches the top of his hair, visibly frustrated as his nostrils flare at the memory. “The brick. Did he ever tell you what was on that brick I threw through the windshield?”

I shake my head, remembering how Saint looked at it. He was terrified, as if he’d read something horrifying.

“He told me nothing was on it. That it was just some kids messing around…”

“Exactly. It was all a fucking lie,” he declares. “Saint was never on your side.”

It still haunts me; the way I let him in. Saint is the most manipulative liar there is. While the others eagerly showcased their hatred, Saint brought me closer. He kept me under a watchful eye by faking his interest in me. We were never meant to form an alliance. He just wanted a chance to prove himself as a loyal member of the despicable society that keeps their own on top.

“It’s not that,” I reply, as Aero combs through my hair with his fingers again, listening intently. “I know now that he wasn’t the person I thought he was. But...”

I don’t know how to say what I’m thinking without showing the lack of remorse I feel. Does it make me a monster? No. Just a woman seeking the worst kind of revenge.

“What is it, Briony?” Aero asks directly, needing me to continue.

“I feel like death isn’t something he deserves.”

His face hardens as I continue.

“I want him to suffer. To burn. From the inside out.”

Aero listens intently, his face shifting into that one that makes me weak and makes my little heart flutter like a moth to the dying light. The look of admiration. The look of a proud protector on his knees before his throned queen addressing her kingdom. He’s watching my growth. My evolution of strength before him. The bud has opened and I’m finally ready to bloom.

“I want to ruin him as he lives.”

He leans forward, his tongue slipping through his mouth, licking the words from my lips.

“Tell me more,” he hums, before licking across my lips again.

“I want to take away the only thing that would dismantle the institution, ruining him with the same stain they’ve smeared upon us.”

Aero’s head nuzzles into my neck, where I feel his warm, wet tongue trail up my throat, licking and urging for more.

“I want to take his virginity.”

He pauses against my neck, his mouth open and his tongue stilling against my flesh. Raising his head, he looks down at me with an unreadable expression. I see the war behind his eyes as he imagines the possibility, with a push and a pull of the heart he pretends to lack.

Revenge. *Possession*. Vengeance. *Claim.*

“Killing him is too easy an art,” I declare, holding my chin up.

Aero wants to own me, but can’t if he yearns for true retribution. Does he trust me enough to allow the destruction of another man’s future through the use of my body? Can he understand it will be a meaningless transaction to me, but one only I can accomplish? I have leverage with Saint. I’ve seen how I can get him to react to me. In that kitchen, during our kiss, he wanted more. Needed it like the drug he’s also been denied. Can I be the one to push him over the edge?

Setting up and exposing the man in line to become bishop would be the ultimate ruin for the entirety of the church, the congregation,

and the community, and Aero knows this. This institution would come crumbling down if one of its own were exposed beneath the true light.

His jaw flexes, and his teeth grind as he fists a handful of my hair. I feel the pain in his grip; the demons whispering in his ear. Letting out a deep sigh through his nose, he relaxes his hold, his eyes finding mine as he declares confidently, “Whatever revenge you desire. It will be yours.”

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HERO

Mine .

She's here. She's training. She's evolving into everything I imagined she would.

Briony has been living on my land, at my secluded cabin with me for a week now, effectively picking up every available trick and tool I've taught her. She's a phenomenal assassin for her age and the short time she's been training, using her strengths to strike cleanly and hit her targets every time. Who would've thought my little church girl would have such a skilled and steady hand?

I waited for her truths to break her. I wondered if they'd cause her to crumble. After days of tears and more gutted trees in the woods, she'd rid herself of the sadness of discovering she'd been orphaned just as I'd hoped, putting all her faith in me and me alone. The man who still held her biggest secret.

You could say I was manipulating her to become who I wanted her to be. It's how it began. But truthfully, she was showing me who she was on her own.

The idea of bringing Saint down by screwing him and destroying the clerical celibacy that is required of any priest left me seeing nothing but red. She's *my* flower. *My* doll. *My* purpose. *My* existence. And yet, if I want her to be everything she's entitled to become, I have to find a way to let her dictate her own revenge. As she's told me before, she's the king of her own game.

Death was too easy an art.

Briony spilled the words from her angelic lips as if my job wasn't entirely created to kill. The statement filled my chest with pride at the little demon she was. She thought like someone who'd lost their mind and their morals, seeking to inflict the same pain and torture she'd nearly endured. She wanted them to suffer. And nothing made my ready cock swell more.

I tried to calm myself during our training. I attempted to reign in my chaos, my thirst for pain, but there was no hope. The need to build her up by breaking her apart flooded my being. I wanted her to feel every infliction of torture; wanted her to embrace it. Needed her to hear the disgusting, vile, and despicable words as they spilled from my lips so she could own them as hers, taking the power right from

their meaning, and rising above it. Knowing her actual worth in a world that consistently accepts quantity over quality.

She's my goddess. My light. My life. And after every training session, I make an effort to prove that to her. Touching her is easy. It's been a dream of mine for years. Mending her wounds, cleaning every part of my doll I've dirtied; my favorite part. I could make a career out of tending to her needs, strengthening her. The part I continue to struggle with is allowing her touch to heal me.

Exposing my abuse wasn't hard. I forced the accidental meeting, so she'd see firsthand how the bishop treats his most desired students. The ones he grooms. The ones who need additional lessons to accept and embrace what he defines *the Holy Spirit*.

He'd caught me in a trap. I was young and naïve. The perfect broken boy with no one to call my kin, who sought the support of a father-like figure in my life. He'd convinced me that what we did behind those church doors was for my benefit alone. For my salvation.

But it always felt wrong, and asking for it to stop only encouraged him more. I'd learned to be quiet and accept the ways of the world until the day I finally broke.

"We are born into sin," he'd tell me. "Give yourself over to Christ so you can be purified of these transgressions, and maybe then you'll have a chance at true redemption."

The only redemption I sought now was a bullet through his skull after forcing him to choke and vomit on his own severed dick.

He took away my calm. My gentle. He owned it in the soft caresses he'd provided. The word love held new meaning. *I love the way you receive your Lord. I love your pretty face covered in the Holy Spirit. I love you, son, my child of God, gifted to me.*

A word I'd craved so badly as a lost little boy that is now forever tarnished. Engraved into my being as dirty, nasty...wrong.

I didn't want to be loved anymore. I wanted to be loathed.

Time was running out, and the lie that Briony was still out seeking her parents in Africa would crumble soon. They would be looking for her. Alastor would be looking for me. I needed more information on what's been happening around the town since our little

disappearance. Lucky for me, the eyes and ears of the secluded nightclub hold it all.

“Where are we?” she asks from the passenger seat of the blacked-out Audi, her eyes crinkled in the corners as she peers around me, scanning the dirty exterior of the brick building.

I don’t answer her as I exit the vehicle, coming around to her side to open the door.

“Why am I wearing this?” she asks, pulling at the tight black snakeskin mini dress and glancing at her four-inch heels, already annoying me with her questions.

Hasn’t she learned to trust me, yet?

I’m adjusting her dress, ensuring her cleavage is sitting up just where it needs to so she fits in, when I see the crucifix necklace back around her neck, hanging between those plump breasts. She sees my gaze upon it and quickly grips it between her fingers, her nervous eyes studying me, wondering what I’ll do.

I’ll be ripping that from your neck later darling, don’t worry.

We walk down the alleyway, where I find the old steel door to the club. She wraps her arms around herself, eyeing the leather coat around me, fighting off the chill of the night. If she thinks for a second I’m going to cover her with my coat, she’s fucking crazy. Not here.

I knock once, pause, then knock three times.

The door finally creaks open, and he’s there waiting.

The big dumb doorman eyes my skull-covered face, then bends his neck to look at Briony behind me, before gazing back at me again.

“Damn. Another one, huh?” he laughs through his nose, shaking his head. “At least they’ve got good taste.”

“Nox,” I say, interrupting his irrelevant comments. “Where is he?”

A disturbing smile stretches across his ugly face. “Black Room.” He nods behind him.

I push past him, pulling Briony in front of me by her sweaty little palm. The man’s eyes stay focused on her body a bit too long for my liking, trailing her neck to her plump, bouncing breasts as she walks clumsily in the mini-dress. I pull her through the door, before turning and backhanding the side of his face with my Glock.

“Fuck!” he curses, grabbing his face.

He grabs for my shirt, gripping it into a fist before pushing me back against the wall. A grunt slips from my lungs at the force, and I smile at him, loving his reaction as blood trickles down his face from the fresh cut above his eye, his enormous head, wrinkled and red with frustration. He holds his other fist back, wanting to use it.

“Do it,” I taunt with a wicked smile. “Look at her again.”

“Stop!” Briony screams from behind him.

“I bet you would love to suck on those soft pink tits, wouldn’t you?”

“Please, stop!” she continues.

“Her creamy tight ass is even better,” I continue, as his eyes narrow even further. “So full and fuckable.”

His eyes stay trained on me, knowing my crazy knows no limits.

“Look at her!” I demand. “C’mon, give me a reason to take off the top of your skull.” I smirk, pointing my gun at the side of his head.

I crave the fight. The abuse. The pain. It’s the only thing besides her that makes life feel tolerable.

His nostrils flare as his barrel chest rumbles his frustrations in the dim crimson lights of the hallway. He’s breaking. Having a hard time allowing *Bones*, of all people, to come in here and make a fool out of him again.

“I’ll make sure I’m the first to fuck this new piece of ass. Stretch her out for all the customers until no one wants her loose, whore cunt,” he grumbles beneath his breath as he turns to look at her, his eyes focused on her legs, moving up to the place between her thighs that I own.

I feel the fever rising. The fire in my neck threatening eruption. I chuckle, enjoying this newfound sensation. “You actually did it.” I laugh to myself in manic disbelief, tossing my gun to Briony.

She catches it, looking back at me with fear practically dripping from her beautiful face. The security guard looks confused.

“You fucking looked at her again,” I say directly with a straight face.

His brows knit together as I slide my switchblade out from under the sleeve of my leather coat. I reach up, stabbing him in the left eye. His scream, etched with pain, shrieks around us as he drops my shirt and falls to his knees. Blood spurts from the wound as he reaches behind him for his gun.

“Don’t you dare,” Briony warns, pointing the barrel of the gun at the back of his head.

My smile stretches across my face again, thrill and fervent lust dancing dangerously throughout me.

Fuck, I’m hard again.

His shaking hand pulls away from his pants.

“You demented fucks!” he curses, finding his footing as he screams in horror, stumbling back through the door we entered.

Briony’s eyes are wide as saucers as she breathes through parted lips. She’s panting so hard her full breasts nearly spill over the top of the dress. She’s terrified. It’s hilarious. She was genuinely worried about me. No one worries for me. Not even me.

I lead her to the room with the matte black door in the back. Opening the door to the exhibition room, I expect to be met with Nox waiting for me since my call.

As soon as we enter the dark room, Briony gasps at the scene before us, cowering her face into my shoulder immediately at the sight. There, behind the glass, Nox has one of his workers on her knees before him. He fists her blonde ponytail, fucking her face while he sits back in the wing-backed chair, enjoying her struggle.

These rooms are for people who pay to watch without being able to touch or be seen. Exhibition room for visual entertainment only. Nox, however, likes to put on his own shows, and as it appears, he’s in the process of a thorough interview with a potential new hire.

“Fuck yeah, earn that dollar,” he grunts to the woman dressed in a white blouse and pencil skirt before him. “Ah, you’re doing great, sweetheart. Just keep sucking that tip.”

Briony’s grip on my arm loosens at the sound of his praise, and a light sigh passes her lips. I know she can hear it all, and I know deep within her, she enjoys every last bit of it. My naughty girl likes to watch. I bet the only glimpse of porn she’s seen is the video I took of her passed out, naked. The one where I touched and licked her in her sleep as she watched after, squirming in arousal.

God, just the reminder of that night makes me want to drug her again. Fuck her unconscious with her permission, and show her how badly her body craves me, especially when her mind is turned off.

Enlightening her to her own sexual desires is a fucking treat to me, one I plan to explore more of.

I push forward, making my way further into the dark room, having a seat on the leather couch set for viewing just as another girl dressed in a sparkling bikini and six-inch heels comes into view. She tosses a long, tanned leg over Nox, straddling his lower abdomen, and they tongue each other while the girl on the floor between his legs keeps sucking.

“Oh my God,” Briony gasps, holding her hand over her mouth.

“Sit.” I sit back on the couch, spreading my legs and patting my upper thighs.

She does as I ask and sits her ass right on my cock. Keeping her thighs sealed together tightly, I can practically hear her innocent little heart racing beneath her porcelain skin, her pussy clenching with desire like an animal in heat.

“Watch them play,” I whisper my command as my hands find her shoulders.

I gently pull the straps down her arms, gripping the tight material with two hands at her waist and pulling it, exposing her milky-white breasts.

“Aero.” She goes to stop me, sitting forward, but I pull her back against my throbbing cock.

“They can’t see in here.”

She calms her breathing, leaning back against my chest again.

Briony’s eyes are set on the scene before us, fascination dancing in her dilated pupils from the reflection of the mirror placed in the corner. Reaching up, I toy with her nipples, gently twisting them between my fingers without touching any other part of her breasts. Just subtle pulls against the pebbled beauties. Her ass wiggles in my lap, the temptations becoming too much for her aching clit.

My doll is insatiable since exploring her newfound desires. I can’t keep her appetite full, and I fucking love it.

The woman beneath Nox stops sucking his cock, taking the base of it and guiding it into the woman on his lap. She pulls her string bikini to the side, sitting back on his dick, and slowly slides up and down his shaft, riding his cock while the office woman stays beneath, sucking his balls as they bounce.

“You like that?” I ask in her ear, my hands now trailing up her thighs, leaving goosebumps. Fingertips graze her damp panties, and I softly run them along the length of her clit. “Watching them share? Maybe you want to be the woman on top of me getting fucked,” I continue, making soft circles over the pooling arousal. “Or maybe you’d like to be the whore on her knees, lapping up the pleasure I give to someone else?”

The woman’s cries fill the dark theater-like room as Nox begins pounding into her, her perky breasts spilling out of her sparkly triangular top, bouncing right in his face.

Briony turns to me. She pulls her dress up her thighs and straddles my lap. Her hand slides up the back of my neck, sinking into the length of my hair. She pulls it back tightly at the crown of my head, causing me to flex my hips into her sweet, covered cunt. I’ll fuck her right now if she’s not careful.

“Do you?” she asks, licking up the side of my paint-covered face. “Enjoy watching them share?”

My cock jumps in my jeans at the sudden switch in roles.

“Yeah,” I answer as she bends down, licking my throat, while I watch the woman on the floor pull out Nox’s cock and suck it clean before placing it back into the wet cunt above her.

Her hand cranks my head back against the couch abruptly with a tight pull, causing my eyes to water and my cock to leak a drop of cum. *Fuck.*

“You ready to share?” she asks, with a cocked brow, confidence exuding her.

I study her face, absorbing her words. *Oh, I get it now. She’s testing me. Smart little bitch.*

Pulling my hair even harder, a groan leaves my throat as she leans forward, her lips against my ear. “Ready to watch your little brother fuck me? Use me, and make me cum a big wet mess all over his thick cock like the greedy whore I am?” she whispers seductively, grinding into my lap.

Fucking Christ. She’s onto me. She knows I push her buttons to harden her, and now she’s using my tactics against me, training me to find my self-restraint, as if I had any. I just gouged a man’s eye out for looking at her twice. How the fuck am I going to allow one of my

greatest enemies to slide into her? To get pleasure from sinking into *my* wet cunt?

A growl leaves the base of my throat at the thought.

“Or maybe,” she begins softly, releasing the hold on my hair. Her hand travels down my forehead, finding the scar beneath the paint she loves to touch. Gentle fingers slide down my cheek and have me grinding my back teeth. “Maybe I’ll punish *you.*”

My eyes go back and forth between her blue ones that seem even brighter with the heavy makeup I had her apply, calculating her every move. I’ve created a monster I can’t control. Briony is unleashed, taking this world as her own.

“Maybe instead, I’ll make sweet, soft love to you, Aero,” she whispers, running her finger down the ridge of my pecs over my shirt. She swirls her finger around my nipple and the light touch sends a current of electricity to my cock. I hate that I respond to it; the gentle caress. I hate that it feels so fucking good, as if I haven’t trained myself to see red with this form of touch.

It pisses me the fuck off. She’s getting in my head on her own because I haven’t allowed for more.

“I’ll slide down your cock slowly, staring straight into those hazel eyes,” she moans, running her palm along the length of my dick, brushing her fingers along the crest of my sensitive tip. “I’ll whisper how much I love you, and you alone, as you fill me with your cum,” she finishes before leaning forward to kiss my lips, her necklace dangling between us.

I grip the necklace in my palm, twisting it until it’s tight on her neck. Her eyes are narrowed and taunting, knowing the havoc she’s causing.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I ask, pissed and caught off guard.

“What?” she asks casually, pushing my hand away and tipping her head to the side near her shoulder, looking every part the vixen she’s become. “Don’t enjoy being on the receiving end of your own pain?” Her tone is every bit as demeaning as mine as she taunts me.

I could strangle her for her quick-witted judgment. Too intelligent for her own good. She knows me like no one else, and with that comes her ability to cripple me. More powerful than she realizes. We’re fire

playing with fucking fire, and we're bound to burn each other to the ground before we burn the world around us.

Luckily, before the toxic side of me duct tapes her mouth shut and fucks her ass in front of the entire club to teach her a lesson, I hear Nox finish up with his women, knowing he'll be on his way back to the viewing room for our meeting.

"Mmm, shit." I mock, standing and picking her up with me as I do. I help her to her feet on those platform heels, adjusting her dress back in place as a flushed face of frustration stares back at my shit-eating grin. "Fresh outta time for my lesson, darling."

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HERO

Briony sits pretty in the corner of the exhibition room by herself while Nox and I silently talk business across the way.

"They're antsy. Up in their fucking asses upset that she ran," Nox tells me. "Apparently, Callum sent some of his own guys to search for her after seeing the plane tickets purchased under her name. When they couldn't find her at the airport, they expanded their search. Greyhounds, all that. They want her, and now that she's gone, Callum is flipping his shit."

I scoff. "Figures. They lost control of the situation by placing their needs in someone else's hands."

My hands.

"You got that right. I'd love to take on one of those greasy fucks, show him how we operate in the streets."

"And Saint? Any word on him?"

"None. And I can't figure that out. I'm assuming he's just playing it cool to keep the heat off him for the time being. Such a controversy for him to be a part of this, considering..."

My tongue trails across my teeth as I shake my head, thinking of my little blackmailing situation.

"I mean, it seems they are really pushing for him to step in and take the bishop title, which is odd for someone of his age, but they need the family name permanently solidified in the church if they hope to conquer the townspeople, and they will pay anything to make that happen."

"Everything that family has worked for." I scoff, sarcasm in my tone.

"The Bishop's term is nearing its end, and he seems more than eager to hurry the process since the suicide," Nox explains.

The suicide. Fucking perfect.

"What suicide?" I ask, playing stupid.

"The deacon. Sorry, thought you knew. They initially thought it was murder because of the way the scene appeared. Confessional was all messed up. Multiple gunshots, yada, yada. But his Bible…" He pauses, leaning inward. "Inside his personal Bible, he'd confessed to some nasty shit. It spoke the truth, and all the pieces connected."

I'm grinning like a fucking demon beneath my calm exterior. My plans worked flawlessly. Years of sitting in a cell with an imagination that ran wild, and talking to fellow convicts assisted in that. I learned

the way the world really works behind those bars. Made friends that turned into family. Real fucking family. Not the trash floating through my veins, giving me my physical appearance.

"But yeah, Saint's lying low, and Callum has had it with Alastor. That man is panicking. The election is coming soon, and if Alastor's highest donor drops him over this shit, he's risking re-election. He's been in here asking for Bones."

Fucker knows too much.

"Knew that was coming. It was only a matter of time. Those politicians lose their shit when things start to collapse around them."

"Keep your eyes peeled. They're wising up, Aero," he says directly, before looking at Briony in the corner. "You can't stay the masked man forever."

I absorb that, my mind racing endlessly. He's not wrong. I've stayed under the radar with the help of Alastor, committing his crimes while he protected my identity, my secrets. But crossing him by not following through with my commitments has that protection dwindling.

"Just…play it safe," he says softly, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I pull away from his touch. "Fuck off."

"I mean it, Aero. When men get desperate, they do crazy shit."

"Do they really?" I ask sarcastically.

This man knows better than anyone how desperate a man can get. Especially when backed into a corner by an institution set to break them. He's witnessed it firsthand, seeing his friend become a fucking hitman for the enemy just to get closer.

He tips his head, the look in his eyes an understanding, followed up by a warning for a friend he genuinely cares for.

"Don't get soft on me now, Nox. I've seen you cut out a guy's tongue."

"I'm just saying…" He pauses, eyes peering over at Briony. "Love has a way of making us weak. Blinding us." He runs his ring-covered hand over the top of his shaved, tatted head. "I don't want to see you slip up, not even for a second because of it."

"First of all, fuck off. Second, what the fuck does a pimp from Detroit know about love?"

He laughs, grabbing for his exposed abdomen beneath his button-up shirt that's freely hanging open since his little rendezvous.

“Hey, we all have our vices. I’ve loved a few I shouldn’t have.”

“A few,” I repeat with a nod. “Precisely the problem.”

“I get it, though. She’s got a hot little body on her,” he says, licking his lips as he eyes Briony, who’s playing with the ends of her hair in the chair by the corner.

He looks back at me, studying my face, eyeing the tension in my neck. *Am I that obvious?*

“And she’s young,” he continues, pushing. “Tight little pussy just begging to be destroyed.”

He runs his lips together while rubbing his chin as if imagining it.

“Enough,” I grumble beneath my breath.

A knowing smirk glazes his face. *This fucker better not even think about it.*

“Hey, sweetheart?” he calls over to her, still staring at me with that shit-eating grin.

Fuck. You.

Briony looks up, dropping her hair, and instantly her spine straightens in the chair. The move unintentionally pushes her breasts up, her chest rising and falling as she nervously exhales.

“Did you enjoy the show?” he asks, walking past me and towards her.

My teeth clench together, and I turn, watching him cautiously.

He takes a seat next to her on the couch, casually crossing his leg over his knee. His shirt hangs open, and she peers at his tatted abdomen, many of which he’d done himself while locked up. Briony bites her lower lip, looking every bit the innocent virgin he assumes she is.

“Go ahead. Speak up. I know Bones likes his women silenced and masked, but you’re free to speak here before me.”

Dick.

She swallows, taken aback at his comment as her eyes question mine.

“I did. Just...I don’t know...” She twirls her hair nervously between her fingers again.

He grabs her hand gently, pulling it to his lap, making my nostrils flare.

“Go on,” he says kindly, as if he knows what the word means. “It’s okay. Tell me.”

Briony sighs and I stare at her, hanging on her every word. “I mean, I enjoyed the...threesome? Isn’t that what it’s called?” she asks innocently.

A dark smile stretches across Nox’s lips, enjoying her purity. “Yes. Yes, that’s it.”

“That was new for me. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Are you curious enough to try? Maybe bring one of our girls in here and we have a go at it? Show you just how fun it can be. Or maybe…” he leans in closer and trails a finger down the side of her face, “I see what ideas you could come up with on your own?”

She chuckles as a blush fills her cheeks. Her chin cowers into her shoulder and her lashes flutter. *Is she fucking with him?*

“What is it that gets your panties wet, sweetheart?”

I crack my knuckles before using my chin to pop my neck.

“Um, I don’t know. Maybe...s-something more confining?” She shrugs her shoulders innocently.

“Confining?” His brow raises as excitement dances in his eyes.

“Yeah, like restraints? Ropes. Chains. Handcuffs? I feel like that could be fun. To not have control over what someone is doing to you. Letting their imagination run wild.”

He moans in satisfaction, nodding as his fingers trail from her shoulder down her arm. “Continue.”

Gutting him. Neck to balls.

“They should’ve had your wrists cuffed behind your back, taking you however they wished. Using you for their own benefit and making you beg for release. That’s what I would’ve done.”

His eyes widen slightly, and the thirstiest look I’ve ever seen floods his expression. The fucker can’t even close his mouth.

“I like where your head’s at,” he says, staring at her while nodding.

He hasn’t blinked. *He better fucking blink.*

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t even know where to begin,” she says bashfully, before biting her lip again.

I cross my arms, glaring at her with narrowed eyes as I bite down on my own lip, pretending it’s hers. I’m going to bite the fuck out of that lip. Tear into it and make her swallow her own blood.

“It’s as easy as putting your mouth on someone,” Nox says, pulling her hand to his knee. “You just start.”

Blood. Death. Pain.

He’s pushing me, she’s testing me, and I’m losing my shit trying to remain controlled. We are all playing a little game here, each our own.

“C’mon,” he says, pulling her to a standing position. His smirk finds me. “Bones, have a seat. Your girl here needs a lesson from a real man.”

My blood is boiling beneath the surface, but this man knows better than anyone that I have no control over my crazy. He’d be begging for death before fucking around with her in front of me.

“Maybe we can all play?” she offers. “I mean, if that’s okay? Maybe we can all learn something new.” She smiles a cutesy little smile at me, and I can’t wait to smack her upside the head with my cock and wipe that smirk right off.

I run my tongue along the front of my teeth, letting her take the reins. She wants to play King of the Kingdom? Fine. Let’s see how she rules.

Taking a seat on the couch again, I lean back and get comfortable as Nox leans back next to me. His hands are already folded on top of his tattooed head, a satisfied grin filled with nothing but anticipation of what’s coming.

It’s not like we haven’t been down this road before. Nox and I have had sex with the same girl at the same time. After I got out of prison, I’d been on a rampage, fucking everything this club brought in because I couldn’t fuck her. But it all stopped when I saw her again for the first time, sleeping in her room. No one could compare and no one ever would. Other women disgusted me and the only way I could get off was to mask these employees and imagine her tear-stained face beneath me.

This man has a taste for everything and everyone, however. It’s like he gets off on screwing anything that could be considered taboo or outrageous. I watched him seduce and fuck a girl’s husband in the ass right in front of her because she was stealing money from the club. Regular sex isn’t for the likes of him. The man is a fucking train

wreck of poor decisions and uninhibited desires. We know how to play together. How to share. How to please. But this...this is different.

This is my Briony.

Briony settles herself on her knees on the floor beneath us, her tight dress riding high on her thighs. Her hands each find one of our legs and she slides them up, touching our knees, then sliding them up our thighs. Nox tips his head, looking down the front of her dress, and then up beneath her skirt, between her thighs. Thirsty fuck.

“You know, this just feels a bit backwards.” She giggles to herself before pushing up off our legs and standing above us. “C-can I sit?”

Nox rolls his head to mine on the couch before looking back at her and slapping his thighs.

“Of course.”

She disregards him, sitting between us on the leather, a hand on each of our thighs. I keep glaring at the one on Nox’s leg, imagining breaking each of her fingers, one by fucking one, maybe even peeling her nails off, until all she lives and breathes is me. His tattoo-covered hand finds her thigh, and he slowly starts massaging the white flesh beneath it.

“Mmm.” Briony closes her eyes, rolling her head to the side. “Yeah, that feels good.”

My dick strains against my jeans at her soft, subtle moans, growing harder by the second. My little cock-hungry whore loves this, and it’s driving me mad.

“Yeah? What if I went a little higher?” he asks, slowly trailing fingers up the inside of her thigh. “I bet that would feel good, too.”

She giggles, then closes her knees together. “I’m ticklish.”

He runs his hand higher under her dress, his fingers disappearing.

“I think she enjoys being tickled, don’t you, Bones?”

His hand meets her panties as he brushes his fingers against her clit, and she tosses her head back against the couch, her breasts pushing out of the top. My other hand molds to her breast, lifting it slightly before allowing it to drop before me. Her lips part, and a soft moan leaves her.

God, her lips are so fucking perfect.

Nox is staring at her mouth too, as his hand moves between her thighs, attempting to pull her panties to the side.

She swats at the hand, and he retreats. “I should tie you up for that.”

“You should,” he retorts with a smirk, leaning forward and pulling a pair of cuffs out from behind his back pocket.

Fucker has cuffs on him. Of course he does.

“Do what you want with me. Take me. Use me,” he says, reiterating her earlier words as he places his wrists in front of her, taunting her. “Fuck me in front of your little boyfriend over here. Show him what you’ve been missin’. What that masked fuck is denying you.”

I go to stand, to shut his face with my fist, but Briony grips the back of my shirt, pulling me back down onto the couch.

He laughs, noticing. “Your girl here has a tasty little appetite. One that needs fillin’, and I don’t think you’re the man for the job, Bones.”

“Nox,” I warn.

Breathing is hard. Smoke is leaving my nostrils, and I’m pretty sure my eyeballs are bleeding from how hard I’m holding myself back. But Briony runs her hand up my thigh, higher and higher, until she’s palming my cock over my jeans. She gives me a little side-eyed look, one that practically screams, '*trust me.'*

“Hands behind your back,” she sing-songs to Nox, taking the cuffs with her other hand. He smiles, doing as she asks, and she clips them onto his wrists.

“Ah, fuck.” He laughs.

“Too tight?” she asks softly, looking over his shoulder at him.

“Yeah.”

“Good,” she says, before clicking them even tighter.

He hisses. “Shit, girl!”

My cock bricks up as a lust-filled fever begins to burn me from the inside out.

“Now get on the floor beneath me. On your knees,” she demands from the seat beside me, her tone entirely different from the cutesy innocent girl she pretended to be a minute ago.

This little demon, here.

He does as she asks, play biting the air in front of him, making her smile.

“That’s right. Face to the floor. Now look at me.”

I watch humorously as my hand possessively holds the inside of her thigh, rubbing her porcelain flesh softly with my thumb. She spews her demands until he's bent over, face down on the floor beneath her with his hands on his back before us. She stands, checking his pants pockets until she finds the key to the cuffs, before placing a heel on the side of his cheek. His eyes grow wide with caution.

"I'm not missing anything, Nox," she says to him, her heel indenting the side of his face. "And no one, especially not a strung-out pimp from Detroit, disrespects Aero in front of me."

Oh, fuck.

Nox's eyes glance over at me as I sit back with a satisfied grin on my face, cocking my brow. She was listening the whole time. I didn't think she could hear us.

"Aw man, y'all are so fucked up." He laughs against the rug beneath him. "I love it."

I knew he would.

"Remove my heel with your teeth," she commands.

He does, eagerly.

"Kiss my foot," she says with an angelic smile.

He smiles back at her before kissing the edge of her toes.

"Now open your mouth," she commands, pushing her pretty pink toenail against his lips. "And show me how good you can suck."

"Marry me?" he asks abruptly against her foot. "I think I'm in love with you."

She turns her head back, and her devilish little smile finds mine, looking sexy as all fuck. She tosses the key at me and I catch it with two hands against my abdomen.

"Bones? Show him how you fill my appetite." She squats down near Nox's face, talking in his ear while staring only at me. "Show him how you're the only man for the job."

I'm rock hard, tense as fuck, and ready to do just that. My cock aches against the friction of my jeans, the need to punish her devious little cunt with my drooling, jealous friend cuffed on the floor watching us, my only mission.

Briony steps back into the other heel before coming closer to the couch, leaving Nox cuffed and lying on the floor watching us. She

leans over me, her breasts swaying before my face beneath the cheap dress, surely giving him a view of her ass, as her delicious scent floods my nostrils, seducing my demons again.

“You hold the key, Aero. You hold all the power. Even without it, you own every room you walk into, even the ones you don’t.”

Her words and the seriousness with which she speaks shows me the student is giving the teacher his lesson. She’s giving herself over to me, ensuring I know that anything and everything she does is for me and me alone. In this situation, and more importantly, the ones to come.

She wanted to tell me she loved me. But the word love is useless. It’s nothing but four stupid letters set together and used by everyone. Actions are everything, and this exhibition and exchange of power and control means more than any fucking made-up word muttered behind closed doors.

She straddles my lap, her hands wrapping around the sides of my neck.

“We’re not like them,” she whispers into my ear.

She leans back onto my lap, sitting her now damp panties directly over my cock. Taking my hand, she brings it to her lips, wrapping her mouth around two of my fingers while staring only at me. She sucks the lengths slowly, then bites down on my fingertips hard, causing me to hiss and lift my hips up into her, before allowing the hand to fall from her lips.

“We’re like us,” she states proudly.

She has no clue what she’s doing to me; how dangerously toxic we’ve become together.

My bloomed rose, exploring that darkness between her petals while pushing me to explore mine. She’s proving to be the definition of trust, putting my firm belief in her character, her strength, her truth.

My fucking existence.

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BRONX

The look on Aero's face should terrify me. The way those piercing eyes darken while staring through me, and how those pupils enlarge into saucers, should have me running for the door, seeking escape. He's a madman that I've willingly submitted my reins to, and I'm naïve enough to think I can handle the beast he is.

His eyes narrow to slits as he glares up at me from his seat on the couch. The way his lip curls under the black paint as I straddle his lap has my pulse pounding through my overly exposed neck.

"Stand," he demands.

I think he can sense the nervousness in my posture. I take a quick breath, then slowly find my footing on the floor again, helping myself off of him. His gaze stays trained on mine as he sits back comfortably on the couch, resting an arm along the back. His entire aura demands attention. From the confidence that electrifies the air between us, and the relaxed posture of his daunting size, to the directness of his haunting eyes through the black and white paint.

"Slip out of that dress."

I blink slowly, biting the corner of my lip. Nox is still cuffed behind me on the floor where I left him, watching everything intently. Aero is about to have his fun with me before his friend, flaunting his little doll for his own sick satisfaction. The idea of something so crude and degrading has my clit throbbing in anticipation.

We suffer the same disease, one I hadn't realized resided in my bones until he summoned it from my core.

Pulling the strap of the dress down my shoulder, I pause, feeling nervous as I find his direct gaze again. His brow cocks beneath the paint in apparent boredom, his dark hair draped over his forehead looking every bit the dangerous man I forget he is.

He stands from the couch and brushes past me, walking towards the small bar near the back of the room. I'm on edge, playing with fire. My thighs tremble at the unknown. Grabbing a bottle by the neck, he lurks silently back to me, eyes trailing my body as I hear a dark, throaty laugh from the floor behind us, sending chills down my spine. My fear is awakened.

Aero approaches me, twisting open the bottle of liquor, and taking a drink. I watch as his throat rolls, swallowing down the toxic substance without even flinching. With his other hand, he grabs the front of my

throat, spinning me until my back is against his chest, holding me in place. Leaning over the top of me the way he does, even in my heels, he tips my head back, and I understand what he wants of me.

My lips part as my tongue dips out of my mouth. He spits the liquid down into my mouth, pouring a mouthful of alcohol onto my tongue. A fiery peppermint-tasting substance. His hand holds my throat, ensuring I swallow it down, some of the burning liquid dripping over my lips, down my chin, and onto my chest.

Nox watches with his mouth open, excitement dancing behind his dark eyes.

Aero's hand slides further up my throat, cupping my chin as his throaty whisper reaches my ear. "Let's show him how we play, little doll. Let's smear him with our sickness."

My pussy clenches and my insides are already yearning to be filled in the dim private room as hauntingly dark rock music plays in the background, setting the mood for destruction.

He drops his hand, circling around until he's before me again. With a simple glance and a nod, he commands me without words to remove the dress again. With my chin raised and my eyes on him alone, I peel the straps down my shoulders, pulling it down, and allowing the dress to fall to the floor beneath us, leaving me in nothing but my black lace thong and the stilettos he gave me to wear tonight.

My bare breasts rise and fall as I try to regulate my breathing, my nipples in tight, hard little buds, sensing every bit of the cool air in this room. Two sets of eyes trail my body and I feel the heat of their stares like a physical touch burning my exposed flesh.

Nox licks his lips as Aero's curl in approval.

"Kneel on the couch," his indifferent tone slices through me.

I stand still, hesitating, before finally walking a step over to the couch. I kneel on the cold leather beneath me, holding onto the back of it for support.

"Now bend forward, spread those thighs, and show him my pretty pink cunt."

I swallow, closing my eyes tightly as I let out a quick, nervous breath. Bending forward, I arch my back, angling my ass up. Using

my thumb, I pull the lace strip over, exposing myself to both men behind me.

“Fuck,” Nox mumbles softly.

“Yeah,” Aero answers with a deep growl, his agreement making my toes curl.

“Let me taste,” Nox begs from the floor. “Dear God, let me eat that shit.”

I hear movement behind me, and before I know it, Aero’s hands slide along my skin and over the curve of my ass, goosebumps dancing across in their wake. I feel teeth sink into my flesh, and I hiss in pain before he licks the sensitive area, healing his harm.

I wait for more, but am surprised when he sits on the floor beneath me, leaning his back against the edge of the couch. I have no idea what his plan is or how far this will go between the three of us, but my nerves have my pulse rising and my stomach tightly bound with excitement.

“Oh, the things I’d do to that cunt,” Nox continues, his eyes rolling back in his head as he watches from a few feet away.

“You should see what she likes,” Aero answers. “You wouldn’t believe how nasty this little angel gets.” His head drops back against the seat of the couch, his warm breath caressing my pussy as he continues talking, staring up at me bare before him. “Isn’t that right, baby?”

“Yes,” I moan, feeling myself get wetter with every word that falls from his lips.

His hands skim up the backs of my thighs, fingers pushing deep and hard until they reach the cusp of my ass. He grips, then pulls me open, giving his friend the full view of every part of me. I feel humiliated, degraded, and somehow more treasured than ever before. He’s parading his most prized possession and, as dehumanizing as it can seem, I can’t help but find it oddly attractive. It’s entirely overwhelming, and I’m already feeling light-headed in this lust-filled smog.

“Fuck, she’s perfect,” Nox says, admiring me.

“You ever seen an angel leave a body?” Aero asks, gripping the lace thong and making me gasp as he rips it apart, pulling it down my thigh. “Wait until you see her face when she comes.”

I squirm above him, craving some sort of touch. The words, the way he speaks of me, the way their eyes are burning through my flesh, admiring me like some sort of rarity. It's all too much. My stomach twists with desire. I need to be touched.

"Fuck my face, Briony," Aero demands between my thighs. "Suffocate the shit outta me with this clit. Make a mess of my face in front of him, and force him to grind his dick into the floor just for some relief."

"Jesus," Nox groans.

A breathy sigh falls from my lips at his vile words as I feel the sharp sting of a slap to my ass.

"See how red this flawless skin gets?" I feel another sharp slap, causing me to cry out.

"Slap her cunt," Nox suggests in a devilish tone. "Slap that wet little pussy until she swells up nice and bright for us."

I wiggle my hips in Aero's hands, feeling myself spasm at the idea.

"Tell me you want it," he whispers up to me, his head falling back against the couch as his eyes find mine.

"Slap me," I say breathlessly, looking down at him beneath me, needing something. Anything. The not touching has me bound so tight with desire. "Just do it, please."

He flicks my clit hard, causing a sharp shooting pain to shoot through my core before slapping my vulva with a quick hand. The pain shifts into an aching pleasure at the sudden contact, and I crave the pain again.

"Oh, God," I groan, dropping my forehead against the back of the couch.

"Watch how I dirty her," Aero says, as I feel his hands grip my ass, pulling me down onto his paint-covered face.

He licks the length of me with a flat tongue, caressing every part of my aching and needy clit shamelessly in front of his friend. Sucking on the swollen bud, he grazes his teeth lightly and I shudder against him, needing more.

"How's she taste?" Nox asks eagerly.

"Like holy water," Aero murmurs against my skin, alternating between sucking my clit, then running a flat tongue over it, then flicking it rapidly. "She fucking rains for me."

His mouth closes around my clit again as a finger pushes into me before another slides in next to it. Unable to control the noises coming from my mouth, a deep groan leaves my throat as I sit back down on him, grinding myself on his face. My head rolls along the leather, my hair a mess across my forehead. His fingers massage and stroke that place inside of me that sends electrical shock waves throughout my body, making my toes curl and my thighs tighten around his head as that tongue flicks my clit relentlessly.

“A-Aero,” I gasp.

“Fuck, she’s gonna cum already,” Nox comments breathlessly, clearly watching with a close eye from behind.

My hand grips the dark locks at the crown of Aero’s head, holding him there as I tighten around his fingers and shudder through an intense orgasm, losing myself all over his face, crying out while he laps up my arousal as it drips out of me.

“I want some,” Nox whines, his voice sounding closer and needy as ever. “C’mon, let me play. I need that cunt wrapped around me.”

I turn back to face him, panting in the aftermath of my orgasm, to see he’s gotten onto his knees between Aero’s parted legs, both of their cocks hard and erect beneath their pants, Nox’s arms still cuffed behind him.

“You hear that?” Aero says, looking up at me before lapping up more of my cum like a man dehydrated. “He wants to know what you feel like around his cock.”

Giving one last lick up the length of me, he slides out from under my thighs. I worry he might actually let his friend do whatever he wants to me, but turn to see him stripping off his jeans instead. I swallow as his large pierced member bounces in the air, fully erect and ready to destroy me the way he does.

Nox slides in under my parted thighs, sitting back against the couch like Aero just was, staring up at my messy, wet pussy with an open mouth.

“Sit,” he pleads, before breathing in my scent. “Let me taste you, sweetheart.” He waves his tongue, showcasing a piercing I hadn’t noticed before. “You smell like heaven in heat.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Aero growls. He steps over Nox’s legs, palming the length of his cock as he rolls his fist over the tip. “You want a

taste? You gotta lick her off my cock, ya thirsty fuck."

He pulls his black fitted t-shirt up over his tight, toned abdomen, placing the end between his teeth, holding it up with his mouth as he steps closer behind me. I grip the couch before me again, knowing the pleasured pain I have coming to me.

Running the piercing along my slit, we both sigh as he coats himself with my arousal before pushing into me achingly slow right above Nox's face.

"See how that cunt wraps around me?" Aero asks Nox, torturing him beneath us. "She fists my cock. Pulls me deeper like the needy slut she is."

"Oh!" I cry out, the crudeness sending me into a lust-filled haze.

I drop my head, gripping the leather of the couch between my sweaty palms as I feel his hot, slick cock slide further and further into me. It burns, the pain of stretching to accommodate his size. It always burns before the stinging pain turns to pleasure.

"I want it. I want it," Nox recites. "Fuck, I want it."

Aero's hands grip my hips as he slowly sinks even further, and just when I think he's all the way in, he pushes deeper until I feel I can't possibly stretch any more.

"Breathe, Bri," he instructs, somehow knowing I'm holding my breath. "Show him how bad you are."

I push air through my lips as my eyes remain closed. He pulls out slowly, and I feel every engorged vein and ridge of his swollen cock as he does.

"It's better than heaven. So tight, warm, and wet just for me," he brags, before repeating the process.

He's literally fucking me on top of his friend's face, claiming every inch of what Nox is drooling for beneath us.

Demented doesn't even begin to cover it.

"Jesus," Nox says with a sigh. "Your cock is coated. You weren't kidding, she's fucking creaming, dude. She loves this."

"You love this?" Aero asks in a throaty tone, gripping my hair with one hand at the back of my head, pulling my face off the couch as he fucks me harder. "Huh, baby?"

He quickens the pace, his cock growing further inside before I feel the fingers of his free hand claw down my back, marking my flesh. I

scream, embracing the pain, opening myself for him while the sensation of his heavy balls slaps roughly against my labia.

I attempt to nod my head, my lips parted, words unable to be formed.

Nox inches up beneath us, but before he can get too close to licking me, Aero pulls out and lifts me off the couch. He grabs the collar of Nox's gaping shirt with his free hand, tossing him over to the floor in the middle of the room again.

"Aw, c'mon man!"

He picks me up by the waist, and my legs instinctively wrap around his taut core. Sitting back down on the couch, he sets me on his toned thighs before tipping his head back and gripping the base of his cock.

"Spit," he says, peering at me through his long lashes, sexy as ever, with his face a smeared mess of missing paint.

I spit down on him as he rubs it over the piercing and down his length.

"Ride me till it hurts," he demands.

"Hurts who?" I retort, wrapping my hands around his throat as I straddle him, slowly sinking down his thick shaft.

His lips part and his eyes threaten to close as I squeeze tightly, my nails digging into his flesh, using his neck for leverage as we pick up the pace again. His thrusts meet my every descent as he fills me again and again, pawing at my ass, fingers clawing into my skin as I feel the rumbling growl of a groan emitting from his throat.

"My turn," Nox comments from the floor, and I forget he was even here for a minute. "I'm so fucking hungry for that creamy cunt. I'll have her forgetting your fucking name."

Aero stills, holding my hips firmly in place as his lip twitches at the statement. I shiver at that maddening look of his. He just stabbed a guy in the eye for looking at me too long. Where does the friendship line bend, and where does it obliterate?

I slide off Aero slowly, watching as his wet, erect dick drops heavily against his lower abdomen. He goes to get up but crashes into my palm. I push him back against the couch before stalking over to Nox. Placing my heel against his chest, I step on him, pushing him against the floor.

“Ah! Fuck!”

“Who’s name am I gonna forget?” I ask, driving my heel into his sternum.

“Shit! No one, baby. No one!” he cries out, a grin forming before he licks his lips hungrily.

Nox loves being dominated by women. Who knew?

“My wrists! Uncuff me, sweetheart, I beg you.” He attempts to roll awkwardly to keep the weight off his hands.

“He’s a whiny prick, ain’t he?” Aero scoffs, coming up behind me.

“Just cause I don’t need pain to get—“

“Watch your mouth,” Aero interrupts him. “Matter fact...”

My eyes follow Aero as he scoops up my lace underwear from the floor.

“Taste her,” he growls, shoving the damp panties in his mouth as Nox tries to fight it. “Since you’re so fucking thirsty for it.”

Nox gargles some useless nonsense as Aero holds his mouth shut with his palm, my wet panties on his tongue.

“You don’t talk about her. You don’t touch her. You don’t fucking think about her,” he growls as he shakes Nox’s head from side to side. “Got it?” He slaps the side of his face.

Nox glares at him, and I feel the tension in the room shift. What was playful fun is becoming something more serious. But Aero’s psychotic behavior is clearly something Nox is used to because the wicked smile he throws his way has Nox shaking his head.

“Ride him, Briony,” Aero calls out to me.

My brows lower. *He can’t be serious.*

“Don’t worry, he’ll leave his pants on,” he says. “Won’t you?”

Nox spits out the underwear from his mouth. “Fuck you.”

“She won’t,” Aero retorts smugly. “But go ahead doll. Get on him.”

I freeze in place, my eyes darting between Aero and Nox. Aero grips the back of my neck, causing me to suck in a breath as my breasts bounce and I almost trip over my heels.

“I said get on him,” he demands. “Show him what he can’t have.”

He licks up the side of my face, resting his forehead against my temple before he rolls his head toward Nox again, both of our eyes falling upon him on the floor. His chest is heaving beneath his open

shirt, the imprint of his hard cock visible beneath his jeans as he watches us.

He loves the twisted shit just as much as we do.

I turn my face to Aero as he smirks at his friend. Something about the confidence and cockiness of the look has my thighs pressing together. He's so possessive. So toxic. He disarms me of my feminism daily, robbing me of the need to do anything but submit to his will for my own sick and twisted pleasure.

I lick up the side of his neck, and he tips his head back, allowing it. I sink my teeth into the flesh near his collarbone, pulling back until the skin snaps back, seeing red beads of blood slowly forming from the little bite. His jaw flexes as he breathes hard through flared nostrils, knowing what the pain does to him.

He grips my arm and roughly pulls me down until I'm straddling his cuffed friend on the floor.

Wasting no time, he angles his cock again, pressing into me from behind as my clit hovers over Nox's erection, my arms bracing me on the floor. Aero pushes me down so my arms bend and my breasts rub against Nox's bare chest, my clit grinding down on top of him.

"You're a twisted fuck," Nox calls out to Aero as he stares at me like I'm a delicacy before his mouth he can't afford. He lifts his hips, grinding the rock beneath his jeans against my clit.

Aero slides deep, grunting in a sexy, cracked tone, holding himself there.

"Open," he says breathlessly, as I feel his fingers on both sides of my face. "Show him the mouth he wants to fill."

I part my mouth and two fingers from each of his hands slip between my lips as he holds my cheeks open wide, my tongue hanging out, spilling saliva down my chin.

"She likes having all her holes filled while fucking," Aero gloats.

"Shit," Nox groans, his eyes closing tight as he continues to grind up against my clit.

Smearing this in his face is clearly killing him.

Aero releases his hold, sticking two fingers on my tongue and holding them deep as I try to breathe around them. He pulls them out as I cough for a breath, my pussy convulsing on his stiff cock as my

drool runs down onto Nox's chest. He slaps the side of my face before gripping my hips and begins thrusting roughly again.

"You earned it, baby," Aero groans, clearly close by his broken tone. "My filthy girl. You ready for another one?"

His slippery, thick cock pushes relentlessly into me as I lay flat, straddling Nox, grinding against his hard shaft. The friction of my sensitive bundle of nerves rubbing on his dick while another one fills me has me spiraling with dirty and demented desires.

Desires that have me feeling free and wild with primal need.

"Shit, I'm gonna cum on myself." Nox grunts, his head curling into his chest, before it falls back against the floor and heavy pants leave his lips.

Feeling the evidence of his reluctant release in his pants, I fall into another orgasm at the degrading nature of the event, the explosion coursing through me as my thighs quiver and my toes curl into themselves. Nox watches my face with fascination, seeing every angel leave my body as I cry out and gasp for air.

Aero follows me shortly after, releasing inside me as his hands shake, his fingers indenting the skin of my hips as he pulls me tightly to his pelvis.

We all steady our breathing before Aero finally pulls out, and I sense the mix of our cum dripping out of me and onto Nox beneath us. I look over my shoulder to see him wipe his semi-erect cock off on Nox's jean-covered thigh, continuing the degrading games.

After helping me back into my dress and pulling up his pants, Aero roughly grabs my face, pinching my cheeks until my lips part. He spits into my mouth, coating my tongue with his saliva before sticking his tongue in my mouth, kissing me with a feral passion not of this world.

Our lips part, leaving us both breathless with our foreheads sealed together, my body covered in his smeared paint, dirtying me the way he does.

I'm drowning in our dysfunction. Living for the chaotic dreams of a future filled with promises of darkness and a never-ending obsession. If this is dying, I never want to see the light of life again.

Digging the key out of his pocket, he tosses it onto Nox's exposed chest as he continues to stare down at me, obsession and possession in his gaze.

If this was a trust test for him, he failed miserably. If anything, he just showcased exactly how insane he is for me, and how the idea of anything touching what's his is entirely off limits. But the plans we have for breaking down this institution are bigger than his claim over me. If he seeks the ultimate revenge, he needs to open himself to trusting me entirely, allowing the unimaginable.

"Thanks for the room," he comments smugly to his friend.

"Fuck you!" Nox spits out, looking down at the mess we made on his pants.

"Yeah, thanks for everything, Nox." I smile coyly up at Aero as he grins back approvingly, gripping me by the neck and leading me to the door.

"And fuck you, too!" he shouts back, and just before the door closes I hear him murmur with amusement, "Sick, selfish fucks."

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HERO

I've never been addicted to drugs, but I've seen the harsh side of addiction destroy perfectly sound men. It caused them to lose focus, to fall into traps, to negotiate not only their livelihoods but also their entire 401K for one more hit. I've even seen them die for it.

But I understand it now.

I'd let her destroy me just to smell her scent on my lips. I'd allow her to take the entirety of my focus just to have those blue eyes beneath me. I'd fall to despair for another taste of that sweet, delectable skin. And I'd fucking die just for the promise of sliding my cock inside of her walls in another life.

She was always my addiction. My breath. My existence. And unfortunately now, my greatest weakness.

I lived, breathed, and bathed in her. She was mine, and I was hers, and anyone who even thought about coming between that would earn a bullet lodged in their brain.

After our wild fuck at the club, I took her back to the cabin. She'd asked to shower alone, but I denied her that. I wanted to wash her. I needed to clean her with my own hands, caring for the sexy little body that brought me so much pleasure. Providing her the comfort she deserved after allowing me to violate her in the ways I craved.

She was a goddess in that room before us. Nox has seen and fucked plenty of women in his life, but Briony held our attention like no one else could. She had a power over her sexuality she'd only just begun to harness.

Reluctantly, she allowed me to clean her, staring at me like a pissed-off little puppy dog beneath the warm water as I lathered her in her cherry-scented soap and cleansed every inch of her sweet, curvy body.

I could sense some agitation from the action as her glare toward me deepened, and it started to piss me off.

"You'd be best to realize I'll always be doing this after we fuck."

"What's that exactly?" she starts with an edge, tipping her head, causing her long wet hair to drape across her shoulder. "Taking away my liberties?"

I squeeze the hand I'm holding tighter in my fist as my gaze hardens.

“I can’t go from one prison to the next, Aero,” she says in a softer tone. “I know you have this possessive claim over me, but I’m not an object. And as much as you probably wish you did, you don’t own me. Nobody does. Not the church. Not Aero.”

She angers me as much as she turns me on when she showcases her strength like this. Clearly she was testing me in that private club room, pushing the boundaries to see where I fell when it came to sharing her.

Aero will own you, baby.

I palm the front of her neck, slowly wrapping each finger around the pulsing flesh that comes alive under my touch, sliding my hand in place before I push her roughly against the shower wall. Her back hits, making her beautiful swollen breasts bounce before me as the air leaves her lungs.

“I am yours as much as you are mine. It’s different. It’s primal. It’s a display of adoration and insurmountable trust. I strengthen you, rather than just claim you. Not simply ownership. We are beyond that. Their definitions, beneath us.”

How do I make her understand the depth of my emotions without using the tainted words they have trained her to understand? Is murdering two men and gouging out the eye of another not enough?

“Beneath us,” she repeats softly, understanding our own, personal language as her shoulders lose their tension and her face relaxes. “So you trust me, then?”

I hold my breath for a moment, realizing she’s caught me in a trap. She’s way smarter than I ever give her credit for.

“The question is,” she continues, releasing my hold on her by taking a step back. “Do you trust me enough to let me use my body as a weapon? The weapon it was designed to become to break down the holiest of deceptive institutions?”

Mine.

Mine.

All mine.

The word won’t leave me at the thought. The only way I could find the idea acceptable is if I was somehow there, seeing it. Knowing what was happening. And, of course, ensuring she got absolutely no

satisfaction from the act. If I want ownership over anything, it's that her pleasure is mine and mine alone.

Her hands raise to cup the sides of my neck, perhaps meant to be comforting, as I still, tension tightening my back almost immediately in some sort of self-defense mechanism that's unfortunately become ingrained in me.

Her thumbs gently trail my jaw, fingers finding the scar there, then the one by my lip again. I wince, wanting to push her off me and into the shower wall, pinning her by her neck until she's crying, begging to be released. Before I even realize what's happening, she pulls a hand back and slaps me across the face. Hard.

I sigh, closing my eyes tightly in pleasure at the welcomed pain, the muscles of my back relaxing as her hands settle near my neck again. Blood rushes to my groin, and my cock nestles against her navel. She freezes in place beneath the water and I blink my eyes open to study her studying me. Neurons are firing left and right, attempting to psychoanalyze the psycho.

Even beneath the warm rain of the shower head pouring down upon us, I can see the tears filling the brims of her eyelids.

With the softest, saddest tone, she whispers, "What did they do to you?"

My hands grip her wrists, pulling her touch from me before I distance us to finish washing my body. What I don't need are these tears. Her fucking pity for a past I've already lived.

"Aero." She grabs for my wrist, but I brush her off.

"Stop. Do not fucking push me, Briony. You know better than to do something that will get you hurt. Maybe even killed." I scold her like a child, not even caring if it's degrading.

I don't want this. I don't need to relive every part of what I know to be wrong. I've worked through my trauma by not working through it at all. I've put my energy and focus on her and her freedom from the men who work tirelessly to end her after ending her mother before me. The truth of her unfortunate past she's yet to unravel.

My focus has been on helping to ensure her growth; her beautiful bloom. But she's turning it on me, finding a mission to heal me in ways I didn't intend.

“Why can’t I touch you?” she cries out. “Why can’t I just hold you again? Like you allowed in the woods? Like you do when you’re asleep?”

I allowed her to hold me in the forest because she proved something to me that day. She broke by finally letting go and fighting for herself. I’ve never seen her so beautiful, throwing that knife at my head. Magnificent and fearless. She was sensational once she left everything to pure hatred and determination.

But holding me while I’m asleep? She must be pushing her luck because I remember a few early mornings I woke with my cock deeply planted inside her, my hands around her neck, and a hint of fear in her blue eyes, not even remembering how we got there.

“It’s not who I am anymore,” I reply with indifference. “Maybe never who I was.”

“But you’ve never been given the chance to see. You’ve never seen what love is supposed to be—”

I push past her, exiting the shower with water still dripping from my hair and body as she tries to reach for me again. I grab a towel from the hanger, wrapping it around my hips, and leave the room that was closing in on me. She turns off the shower, grabs herself a towel, and follows me on my ass to the bedroom.

“I just want to touch you without having to hit you,” she cries out behind me. “I want to feel your skin and memorize every inch of you. I want to get you hard without needing to hurt you to do it. I want to feel your lo—”

I turn to face her and she gasps in surprise. I grip her wet hanging hair in my fist behind her neck, pulling her head back as my towel-covered hips press hers into the wall behind us.

“Don’t,” I say sternly. “If you need me to prove my devotion to you with a soft and gentle touch, then you’re going to have a lot of sad, sleepless nights ahead of you.” I scoff, releasing her hair. “Wasted tears for a man who doesn’t exist.”

“Tell me what they took from you,” she says in a cracked tone, trying her best not to cry. But the disgusting wetness is already covering her face, and not in the fearful way that I love. “Explain to me why it hurts.”

I think about her use of words. She's right in that he has conditioned me to deny a certain type of touch. It physically pains me to feel those caresses against my skin. The softness makes my skin crawl with an itch that demands a deep and brutal scratch to ensure it never returns. I only ever see one face when it happens.

But if there's one thing I've realized about Briony, it's that she's entirely too perceptive. Her need for details is maddening, especially when she's seen firsthand how the bishop treats his favorites.

"You want details? You need me to pull the veil off your delusional world, where these things don't happen the way they truthfully do?"

The corners of her eyes wrinkle as she stares back at me, worried she's pushed too far. She has.

"Do you want to know how he forced me on my knees for him in that church basement, a place where the cries of a young boy were suppressed, as he forced himself into my mouth?" My voice raises as I continue. "Do you want to know how he bent me over the deacon's desk in the altar room, fucking me while reciting scripture, as if raping a young boy in the church was the holiest of traditions?"

Her hands come up to her face, and she sobs.

"Is that what you need to hear?" I release her hair and grip her upper arms, forcing her back against the wall, making the painting nearby bounce against it.

I've replaced sadness with fear, and it only drives me to bring out more. To erase the pity with terror.

My fingers press deeply into her shoulders, indenting her skin as I shake her little body against the wall while I talk.

"Do you want to know how he told me how much he loved me each and every time after he came?" I punch the wall above her head, making her flinch. "How the Holy Spirit was a gift from God himself that I needed to accept in order to avoid the eternal damnation I was destined for?" My voice lowers to a steady tone. "How his soft, caressing palm would rub my cock until it hardened, before scolding me for selflessly enjoying what was supposed to be a sacrament to the Lord Himself? That because of that, I'd fall into the never-ending cycle of needing more private, one-on-one purification classes?"

She grips at the towel covering her chest, as if the pain of the details she incessantly begged me for were cracking it in half.

“Do you feel better now? Huh?” I slam her back against the wall and another fearful sob leaves her. “Feel better you got it out of me? All the gory details you desire to make sense of me?”

She shakes her head no.

“Maybe now you can put your little fucking pieces together as to why I can recite the Holy Scripture and the pathetic blasphemy that fills it. That I searched that entire book tirelessly for an understanding of why my life became what it was when others didn’t have my fate. That every passage in that book of lies can be misinterpreted by whoever seeks to use its power. Especially against the weak and weary.”

She tries to wipe her eyes, but I swat her arms away.

“I’m not just a non-believer for no reason. I believed once. I feared my predetermined damnation and let it drive the abuse. I had hope that my God would save me from all of my despair as promised. That there was a legitimate answer as to why my life wasn’t like Saint’s.”

Her eyes stay sealed to mine, holding on to every word that pours from my heartless soul.

“But one day, I prayed to my God and Savior, asking him to take away the pain I’d been born into. I’d realized in the silence that followed that there wasn’t a reason for it at all. That my life came about by random circumstance, and I’d fallen into the cracks of an institution that capitalized on it. I’d realized I couldn’t wait for Him or anyone else to come and save me. I had to save myself. So I fucking did!”

The visions of the past are returning, clouding my vision. My heart rate spikes and the red encapsulates me.

“They ruined you,” she sobs. “They ruined you and then blamed you for it.”

Her cries anger me further. The silent sobs that leave her chest infuriate me.

“And here you are, selfishly needing to touch me, just to prove *love*!” I yell, my face inches from hers. “You need me to prove my fucking *love*, Briony?!”

I push off her and run my hands through my wet hair, searching the room for something, anything, to prove my point. Seeing a pair of

scissors nearby on the dresser, I grab for them as she tries to steady her breath behind me, still sealed against the wall.

I open the scissors, approaching her. Terror fills her face, and it's a far more attractive look than the pity swimming in her eyes a moment ago. I hold them open near my mouth.

"Push me, Briony!" I warn through gritted teeth. "I'll cut off my fucking tongue before I ever utter the wasted words to you or anyone else!"

I stick my tongue through the opening, the sharp edges of the scissors threatening to pierce through the sides of it.

"No!" she screams, her hands cupping her mouth. "No Aero, please!"

The sharp edges tear into the sides of my tongue and the taste of iron fills my mouth, but I don't feel anything. Nothing but rage pumping like fire through my veins. I pull the scissors from my mouth as her shoulders begin trembling, her eyes wide with terror.

"You need me to prove my *love*?" I say the word like it disgusts me because it does. "Let me show you what *love* is."

Taking the blade of the open scissors, I slide it down the inside of my forearm, tearing through the skin. The sharp pain causes the soft caress that used to live there to vanish. I sigh in contentment, watching as blood drips from the open wound.

"I'll drain myself of everything that pumps through these veins just to prove it," I grit through my teeth before cupping the back of her head with the injured arm, the blood dripping down onto her neck, trailing her chest.

I seal our foreheads together, our eyes aligned so she can physically feel my truth pouring out of my soul.

"I'd bleed out for you, Briony. I'd fucking kill anyone so you could live. I'd kill you if I needed to, just to follow you to your grave so you can know the depths to which I'd fall to show I couldn't fucking survive without you. I'd sabotage every aspect of your privileged, fake little life until you realized you're only your best self with me by your side. I'd never stop."

It's toxic. It's sick. It's the only version of love I have to offer her as the monster I've become.

“I’m sorry.” She sucks in a breath as her panicked eyes study the wound. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. So sorry, Aero. P-please. I don’t need it. I don’t need the word,” she utters quickly, attempting to calm herself while calming me. “Whatever you’ll give me, I’ll take. They aren’t like us,” she mutters softly, gazing up into my eyes. “They aren’t like us.”

I stand there, panting as the rage from the past settles, until finally, the red lining my vision dissipates, and I see nothing else but her before me.

My Briony.

My rose.

Her understanding of love is entirely different from mine. Her lens, through which she sees the world around her is warped, in my opinion. But to her, my lens is a direct reflection of the pain I’ve yet to surrender.

“Some would call me broken,” I say again in indifference. “But I’ve never known anything other than the comfort of my pieces.”

She swallows, and I study the way her throat bobs before my gaze falls upon those luscious, pink lips. Her breath falls from them, slow and steady, her heart practically palpable beneath her chest. A strong, resounding rhythm, soothing in its own powerful right.

“I just know...” she says calmly, chin raised to meet my stare, confidence dancing behind her eyes at the words she’s about to express. “I just know that I’m the only one who can take it away.”

Take it away.

Briony pushes and she pushes. It’s what she’s always done. It’s what got her onto the radar of men who couldn’t tame her. Boundaries are not something this once sheltered woman understands or even wants to. That’s the one thing they couldn’t take from her. Her ability to fight and claw her way to the top of any mountain or obstacle placed before her. Even if that obstacle is my reflection. My demons. This is what initially attracted me to her. Who knew it’d be the source of my own reckoning?

Her hand carefully finds its placement over the upside down crucifix covering my ribs. She pierces her nails through my flesh after realizing the touch was soft. The veins near my groin flood as I

breathe in her delicious scent, our foreheads still sealed together in a near-painful embrace.

She flexes her jaw as her mind fixates on something. Maybe the words of a little boy's unfortunate past. The maddening anger is palpable through the tension in the thick air as her nails scratch the surface of the tattoo and her hand travels further south.

"You, Aero, are the throat from which I've been allowed to scream," she whispers, the power of centuries of goddesses in her unwavering tone as her hand grips the edge of my towel, pulling it beneath the cuts of my tatted abdomen. "But I'm the eyes through which you'll finally realize your worth."

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BRONX

“Tell me,” I mutter, dropping my towel from my body, the beads of water still clinging to my damp skin.

I slide my back down the wall until my ass meets the heels of my bare feet. Pulling the towel from his waist, it drops to the floor as he braces himself with his palms against the wall.

“Briony,” he says breathlessly, apprehension in his tone.

“Tell me what he took so I can take it back,” I whisper, my breath dusting his inner thigh before my tongue comes out to lick the freshly cleaned skin.

A raspy groan barely leaves his throat before he swallows, adjusting on his heels.

His cock grows in length as heated eyes peer down at me. Anger penetrates through his gaze, and I know that what I’m about to do may be dangerous. However, I’ve grown accustomed to living in danger since knowing Aero.

Careful fingers slide up the fronts of his parted thighs, brushing over the thick cords of muscle as he braces in his stance.

“I want it all. I want it all back, Aero,” I say, my hands inching closer to his manhood. “All of you. You’re mine now, don’t you see?”

My fingers meet the base of his cock, and they slowly wrap around his hard length. He grinds his teeth, looking down through the hanging inky hair on his forehead as his hips thrust forward into the touch. With one hand, I slowly rotate my wrist, massaging his length, the other hand bracing myself on his lower abdomen that’s tense and flexed with a light dusting of dark hair that screams the essence of male.

His hand comes out of nowhere and grips my wrist roughly, holding me still against him, and I gasp. My lashes flutter as I peer up at him. The muscles in his neck are rigid, his dark eyes glaring at me before he loosens his grip, taking a deep breath while dropping my wrist entirely.

Leaning forward again, I softly kiss his hip before licking the area, my tentative gaze still on his. The gentle touches and kisses are difficult for him to accept. He craves the feeling of my teeth sinking into his flesh, aches for my nails to scratch across the surface, for me to stroke him hard and fast, but I don’t.

“Bri—“ he warns, looking down at my palm softly wrapped around him, planting open-mouthed kisses along the large veins on his lower abdomen, pulling all the blood from his body to his engorged cock.

He watches me cautiously as I slowly rise to my feet, leaving a trail of kisses along his heaving abdomen and chest. I swirl my tongue along his nipple as his cock leaks a bead of cum onto my thumb. He grinds his back teeth together, breathing heavily through his nostrils because he hates the feeling of enjoying something he’s worked to fight his entire life.

“Look at me,” I declare.

He draws his eyes back to mine. There’s panic there beneath the surface of the wall he holds up. A look of feral, torturous anger from a past of abuse meant to break him. Another face in my place.

“It’s me. Just me. Me and you,” I continue, softly rolling my palm along his velvety skin roped with angry veins, as I litter his scarred chest with gentle kisses. “You and I. Just us. Aero and his Briony.”

His pulse pounds through his neck as I continue to place soft kisses along his inked throat, rolling my hand down his shaft to the pierced head. My thumb trails along the head, fingers circling the crown, flicking the piercing I’ve come to obsess over as his mouth drops open and his hands plant themselves on the wall behind me again.

“Heal me, for I am healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.” I recite, my lips inches from his.

“Fuck.” His voice breaks as I work to rewrite his past.

He groans, his forehead resting down against my own as his uncontrolled breaths meet mine. My hand slides up his shaft, further still, until I cup his tight and heavy balls in my hand. Rolling them gently between my fingers, I slide my hand further until they sit comfortably in my palm. His lips blow out a breath of air, his eyes staying trained on mine. My middle fingers wander further, pressing softly against the velvety skin behind them. His eyes close tightly. A sharp, pleasured groan leaves his throat as his cock jumps at the foreign touch, one that pushes the boundaries of exploring more, and another drop of cum leaks from the tip as he shifts on his feet.

I see his eyes cloud over as he’s practically panting before me, visions of the past slowly caving in on the present as he derives

pleasure from something that broke him. I need him to stay here. With me.

“Aero—“

His hand grips my neck, pushing my back against the wall with a rough thud as his lip curls and his heated gaze sears through me. My breasts heave in terror and my body threatens to fall limp to his frightening stature. This isn’t the boy who’s seen trauma, this is the living, breathing man capable of ending lives for as little as a gaze in the wrong direction. One whose vengeance pumps hot through his veins. I’ve pushed him too far. Too soon.

The veins in his neck flare, tension held tight in his rigid form, before he blinks, blowing air through his lips. His eyes scan me entirely, tracing the silhouette of my build before falling back to my terror-filled gaze again, seemingly coming out of whatever trance he was in.

He stares down at me as I lift my chin, staring back in a silence that feels like a moment stretched in time. I’m the one he can trust. I’m the one meant to understand this man. To heal him, just as he’s saved me.

Without warning, his lips come crashing down upon mine, his warm tongue sweeping into my mouth and connecting with mine in a slow, sensual lick. I moan, and his fingers tighten around my neck at the same time my grip tightens on his cock.

Pulling his lips away from me, he says, “You deserve better than the mess they made of me.”

He kisses me again, as if discovering he genuinely likes the feel of our lips together.

“But you’ll never find out, little doll, because I’m never letting you go.”

This should terrify me. It should cause me to run and jump into the arms of a man that can uphold the societal norms of love and relationships. But I know I’m far from normal. I have to be if these very words make my heart flutter the way they so inherently do. I want a man who selflessly gives every part of himself towards ensuring my life is everything it should be, just as Aero does. His devotion and faith in who I’m meant to be mean far more than any fake relationship I’ve already lived.

“I don’t think I’ll ever want anything less than the man that you are,” I speak my words honestly, from the place deep in my soul that he so often speaks to. “We’re of the same matter, you and I. We’re violently ripped from the same dirtied cloth.”

He winces, his eyes conveying the love he doesn’t know how to express. He leans down and kisses me again, gripping my hips as he pulls my body into his, before spinning us and walking me backwards towards the bed.

“I will never be able to love you the way you desire,” he whispers, unveiling a broken man in his deep, pained tone.

He’s feeling unworthy again. Undeserving of a selfless love he’s never seen in a world that stopped at nothing to eat him alive.

“Whatever way you love is the way I desire,” I reassure him as his soft, full lips connect with mine again.

We’ll find a middle ground. A place we can both flourish and prosper. I don’t expect a simplistic love with Aero. It will never be normal, just as it shouldn’t. It’s complicated. It’s an abstract piece that’s painted with harsh strokes of pain, jarring splashes of deception, and obscene colors that scream in the face of injustice.

I shouldn’t need to change him, and honestly, I don’t want to. But what I desire more than anything is an alignment of souls set in our own unbreakable bond.

His hand wraps around the back of my neck, his long fingers sliding up into the freshly washed hair at my nape as I continue, “We defy the definitions that encase us. Defy traditions. Defy the rules set by a dying oligarchy. We create a world that we don’t just survive, but a world in which we thrive the way we so violently desire.”

He absorbs every word with astonishment as he continues to guide me backwards towards the bed. His lips forcefully find mine again, pressing roughly against my teeth before our tongues intertwine as he wraps an arm around my lower back, picking me up and pulling me to the middle of the massive bed behind us. My nipples tighten as his firm chest brushes against mine before he pulls back to stare down at me again.

“You shine on your throne, Briony,” he says, bracing himself above me and shaking his head in disbelief while studying my eyes like I’m

the most treasured queen that's ever ruled. "I'll defend you endlessly. Until there's nothing left of the world we burn. My dying day."

His palm captures my cheek, thumb running along my bottom lip in a gentle caress I'd be far too nervous to use on him.

"I've never been more determined to destroy the house of ruin that made us," I whisper, bringing a hand up to touch the deep slash of a scar across his arresting gaze. He allows the touch, seeming more relaxed than ever before, as he settles himself between my thighs. "Bringing every man who hurt my only one to their knees before you, where they belong." I say with fire beneath my tone. A rage for his past that's now seeped into my blood, pulsing through my veins with every maddening beat.

His mouth falls upon me, his soft lips capturing mine in an animalistic display of affection. His tongue sweeps along mine, the sensation shooting electric waves of desire to the wetness pooling between my thighs.

Almost knowing exactly how he controls my body in his presence, his fingers trail the inside of my thigh, scaling higher and higher until he's touching me exactly where I crave. Slowly, they slide along my slit, smearing my arousal until they slip inside me. My back arches off the bed, his mouth capturing my moans, swallowing the pleasure as it leaves my body, his tongue tasting everything mine has to offer while his thumb rubs soft circles against my swollen and aching clit.

Removing his fingers, he brings them before his face, the sticky evidence of my arousal coating them as he separates them. He drags them over his lips before slowly spreading the wetness over his chiseled jaw and down the side of his neck.

"Clean yourself off me," he demands, leaning over me.

I fist the hair at the top of his head, pulling tightly to the side, to his approval, as I lick my arousal from his neck. He groans my name and flexes his hips into me, the shaft of his steel rod gliding along my wet center as he rolls his hips rhythmically into mine. Licking his jaw, I finally make my way to his lips. I lick my scent from him before my head falls back against the bed.

Pulling his arm up to my mouth, I find the deep wound from the scissors. His attempt to convey his sick love for me in the only way he can. I bring the bloody forearm to my lips while his dilated pupils

focus on my mouth. Placing a few soft kisses against the torn flesh that's still dripping blood, I coat my lips in it, my eyes connecting to his as I lick the entire length of the cut with a flat tongue.

His blood covers my lips and I trail the wound down my chin until his blood is now coating my neck and chest. Passion and insatiable lust ignite within his gaze as he stares at his doll, dirtied just for him.

His abdomen flexes as his cock jumps again, eyes blazing through to my soul as I converse with him in our own language. Healing my harm.

With a fever of uncontrolled lust, he braces himself above me and angles his cock, rolling the piercing along my clit until he finds his entrance. The one he alone owns. He closes his eyes briefly, separating the direct contact to slide himself deep within me.

"Ah, Aero," I hiss, wincing as my nails tear into his biceps at the burning sensation. "I'm sore."

"Fuck." His eyes snap open as he stills inside me, a regretful look filling the hard face of a man who rarely feels regret. "I'm sorry, baby."

He bends down, bracing himself on his elbows, his face directly above mine before he nuzzles into my neck, licking up the side softly. I adjust to his size, breathing through the slight sting of pain before he slowly begins moving again.

"You're the only glimpse of heaven I'll ever see," he murmurs, rocking into me. "The only redemption I'll ever need."

My heart pinches in my chest at his words.

His hands interlock at the top of my head, anchoring me in place as his hips thrust harder and harder. My moans fill the surrounding room, my legs wrapping around the backs of his thighs, all while the sexiest, raspy groans escape him. He's trying so hard to control himself. It's evident in the way he stills every so often to catch his breath, as those same regretful eyes find mine, checking to ensure I'm alright.

He's softening. He's trying to be better for me. How he thinks I'd prefer him after I whined and pushed to touch him. This time last week he would've told me to shut the fuck up and take it. To stop being a weak bitch and embrace the pain that tells us we're alive.

My hands grip his muscular ass, clawing my fingers into him, driving his cock deeper and deeper with every powerful thrust he gives me, allowing him to find his release the way he truly needs.

Rough. Uninhibited. Wild. Fisting the hair at my crown, he pulls tightly until my head tips back, opening up my neck.

“Everything I am.” He thrusts deeply, murmuring his words against my neck.

I feel the sting of his teeth sinking into my shoulder as he bites down, holding me hostage to his release. I lie there, defenseless against the pleasure, legs spread open for him, as he gives himself over to me entirely. Feeling his cock pulsing into me as his hips roll against mine in short, shuddering motions, the sounds of his climax send me into my own. I tighten around him as the sensation hits me like a storm, tossing me into a flurry of cataclysmic and wondrous euphoria, lighting me throughout my body as ungodly sounds escape me.

He remains buried deep inside me, our chests sealed together as we control our breaths, silently just staring at one another in absolute wonder.

I don’t care how we got here. I don’t even care that my life is still in complete disarray. The very church I once wished to be a staple in wants me dead. I’m an orphan with no known parents, no known siblings, no known life outside the man seated deep within my walls. The one who’s slithering his way into the tight confines of my heart, controlling its every beat. The man that’s witnessed my self-surrender to a life of deception, and sunken into the mystic depths of my newly awakened soul.

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HERO

I can’t stop.

I’m staring at my little doll lying here beside me, sleeping so peacefully.

Her black lashes tickle the tops of her soft cheeks, her rosy lips sit like a little heart on her face, perfectly sensual and lucious, and her beautiful, silky black hair lay thick and sprawled above her head. Her chest rises and falls in steady, slow breaths.

My cock urges me to wake her up. To interrupt whatever dream she’s in, awakening her to a better one. But a different part of me can’t bear the thought of disrupting something so peaceful. So pure.

I’d love nothing more than to suck those perfectly pink, fleshy nipples that press against my white oversized shirt covering her body, into my mouth, to spread those milky thighs and lap up my favorite source of hydration. Fuck, I could drink her in for days.

But she twitches her nose then nuzzles her head against my side, curling up into me, and my heart constricts while my body stiffens.

She does this in her sleep. Curls her body into mine, almost seeking it for comfort and warmth. It’s weird to think someone can be so fucking sexy while simultaneously looking cute. My face contorts at the idea. Her fist curls against her chest, her slim little fingers resting gently together. She’s as innocent as a baby rabbit in the woods, but wake her up, and guaranteed she’ll show you her fucking teeth.

She’s come so far for me, really coming into her own in my presence. But her words from earlier resonate; the longing to touch, to memorize every inch of my flesh against hers.

I’ve never wanted to change for anyone. The idea literally enraged me. I’d become who I was for a reason. I controlled my world and my surroundings now, not believing anything other than the truths I’d seen materialize before me. I had to. Losing the control I’d felt as a boy was a horror I’d never wished to revisit.

But with Briony, losing control doesn’t cost me my livelihood. It strengthens me because somehow she’s figured out how to empower me. She’s proven she won’t let me fall alone. She builds me up, just as I’ve done with her all along, accepting the broken man any way she can get me.

A form of the word love she talks about that I've never known. Selfless love.

She doesn't do it to derive anything from me. This isn't a transaction from which she gains anything from me. She sticks by my side because, for some strange reason, she chooses to. Briony gravitates towards the person I am with no conditions. Without equivocation. It's an emotion I've never felt or known, and it takes some getting used to.

My fingers graze hers, and an idea comes over me. I lay my head back against the pillow, gazing up at the ceiling. Inhaling, I breathe in the scent of fresh apples from the top of her head, the shampoo I washed throughout her silky locks last night. Taking her hand, I hover it over my chest. With a clenched jaw, I trail her relaxed palm and loose fingers across my scarred and tatted flesh, exhaling slowly. From the mounds of my chest, down into the divot of the line of my abdomen, I move her hand by the wrist, adjusting to the gentle feel of her touch on me.

Breathing through the initial discomfort, I inhale her aroma again, and it calms me. *I'm in control.*

I continue this for a few minutes, just her fingers drawing soft circles across my skin as I guide her hand by the wrist. Finding myself enjoying the sensation, my heart calms and my breaths steady as lazy fingers trail up and down my abdomen. I lick my lips, tingling sensations forming below the sheets as my cock comes alive.

Visions of placing her soft palm on my growing erection overtake me as I trail her hand lower and lower. Her fingertips brush against the straining bulge sitting beneath the thin white fabric, and my abdominal muscles tighten as I breathe through flared nostrils.

Her head shifts next to me, and a soft hum leaves her throat. Feathery lashes blink against her upper cheeks before her head tips up and a lazy grin finds me.

A tightness forms in my chest at the simple smile. Her blue eyes, framed in thick, black lashes, focus on me before they look down at the place where my hand holds her wrist. Her brows knit as she peers back up at me.

"I was trying something."

A soft look of understanding finds me.

“Well, by all means,” she whispers, smiling down at her wrist in my hand, cuddling her cheek back against me. “Continue.”

I readjust one hand behind my head, her head laying back on my bicep as I continue trailing her fingers over the muscles of my chest and abdomen again. She sighs, relaxing against me as I control her touch. Her fingers cross over a large scar near my lower abdomen, and I see her eyes focus on it.

“What’s that one from?” she asks hesitantly.

I trail her fingers along it. “One of the women who worked at Nox’s club ended up getting pregnant by a regular. An investment banker with a wife and family of his own, he’d clearly been neglecting. Once he found out about the pregnancy, he’d requested that she abort the baby immediately. She refused. So he found her in the alleyway after work, beat her into a coma, causing her permanent brain damage, and ultimately losing the baby in the process. Everything he wanted.”

Briony sucks in a careful breath at the severity of the story; her hand still relaxed as I move it back and forth over the lengthy scar.

“He came back only a week later, wanting a new girl to fill his appetite. Nox was ready for his return, sure to have him ushered into a private room, where I could handle business for him.”

She swallows, knowing exactly what that means.

“I wasn’t anticipating much of a fight, but the banker had a switchblade hidden on him. Caught me in the abdomen before I could finish him.”

She’s silent for a moment, lost in her thoughts, and I worry I’ve said too much. I trail her fingers down my abdomen, guiding her hand towards my hip bones. The evidence of how her touch is affecting me has never been more present beneath the simple cotton sheet covering me.

“D-do you want children?”

I turn my head to look down at her as her nervous eyes search mine, not expecting the question after the nature of the story I told.

“I mean, I just...” she stutters, licking her lips. “I just wondered if...”

Her nervousness brings a smile to my face.

“You’re worried you already are?” I ask with a knowing smirk.

Her eyes wrinkle in the corners, a look of seriousness overtaking her. She shakes her head no, and I don’t understand it at all.

My brows lower, my confusion quickly turning to rage. *Did they do something to her?*

“Why aren’t you worried? I’ve done everything that could get a woman very pregnant. Why are you so sure you aren’t?”

She swallows. “I’m on birth control.”

I still her hand on my stomach, sitting up on my elbow to peer down at her with my mouth open in confusion.

“How? They don’t allow—”

“Call it intuition,” she says. “Call it whatever you want. But some part of me, deep down, told me to do it. That if I didn’t...” She pauses. “Anyone could try to take away everything I’d worked so hard for. To be the first female Magnus Princeps...I just knew it came with conditions.”

She worried someone would try to impregnate her with the mission to dismantle the power she was harnessing. My blood boils at the idea of my girl even being forced to have these thoughts.

“I went to a women’s clinic a town over, where no one knew me, and got set up with a prescription for my own protection.”

“But it’s considered intrinsically evil to the church, meddling in Christ’s will—”

“Guess I made my own rules,” she interrupts, cocking a brow with all the confidence in the world.

A proud grin grows across my face.

There she is again.

The woman of power and strength that needed the time and attention to bloom. She’d always had a backbone in there, ready to defy what they told her was morally wrong. She’d discovered her own moral compass, her own ethics she’d chosen to live by. Laid her own path, even before realizing her worth. Briony made the choice to get on birth control because some part of her subconscious knew these men had the potential to be disgustingly ruthless when trying to keep their kingdom to themselves.

“But that changes now.” My smile drops.

I pat her body beneath the shirt, under her arms, her flat, toned stomach, then between her legs where she snaps her thighs together tightly. She bites her bottom lip, holding back a smile as she squirms

beneath me, her breasts bouncing beneath the thin cotton. “Aero, stop!” she exclaims, her hand coming up to grip my wrist.

I roll my wrist out of her grasp, pinning her upper arms down against the bed.

“You better tell me where you’re hiding it.”

She giggles, all cute and shit, smiling up at me with amusement, her brows lifted defiantly.

“Don’t think for a minute I’m not serious, Briony.” I reach over, grabbing a knife from the nightstand, flipping the blade up before her face. “I’ll cut it from your flesh if I have to.”

She gawks at me, and her lips part at the threat.

“Before you slice me to shreds, it’s not an implant. It’s just pills. Pills I’ve just recently run out of.”

Of course she’s run out. I didn’t find any pills anywhere in her place when I searched her room. I’ve never seen them there before. It appears my girl is better at keeping secrets than I thought.

It makes sense why she didn’t deny me filling her with my cum. She was never truly worried about getting pregnant. But the look on her face insinuates that now, the possibility is there.

A strange, innate desire to feed her my cum, ensuring to mark her as my own with swollen tits and an engorged belly, floods my mind. I want her to carry my child. *Our* child. I want us to rewrite our history together.

But she’s still so young. Eighteen to my twenty-nine. I often forget the details when her mental capacity far surpasses someone who’s only just become an adult. She’s got more life to live on her own, and I’d never want to burden her when she’s exhibited so much strength already, stretching those newly bloomed petals alongside me. I can’t be like them. Imprisoning her in new chains for my own pleasure.

I toss the blade on the nightstand with a loud clang, then roll back over onto my back in a flurry of confusion and twisted thoughts.

“We’ll get you back on it,” I say, grabbing her wrist again and placing her hand across my abdomen, slowly repeating the process of her hands on my skin. She lays on her side, a blank expression on her face as she attempts to read me. “Whatever you want to do.”

It’s unlike me to even give her a choice in the matter. In another world, I’d have already stuck my dick in her and released deep inside

her womb, ensuring conception while having this conversation. But, here I am...weakening to meet her softness. To be someone she needs.

Maybe I'm evolving.

Comfortable silence fills the space between us, and I begin to find genuine comfort in her touch. She doesn't push me either, attempting to reach for more or touch what she wants. She simply lays back and allows me to move her hand, guiding it in soft circles again, enjoying the experience as much as me.

"It's strange to even talk about kids and children when I come from a place of such emptiness," she whispers up to the ceiling alongside me. "I want to know where I come from, Aero. There's such a part of me that feels lost now. Not knowing where I belong. I just wish I knew."

I close my eyes and guilt wracks through me. I'm selfishly withholding so much from her.

"You belong with me. Just as you always have," I say definitively.

She sighs again, nuzzling into my side. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right." She gives me a soft little smile, her eyes twinkling with some strange glow, accepting the answer. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

My heart does that tightening thing again. That ache deep within my chest that only she can cause, even amid my betrayal.

Worry fills me at the thought of losing everything I've found with her. If she were to run from me, I'd be forced to imprison her in a world of Aero. She doesn't get to leave me. I'd end up causing her to hate me by taking away the one part of her I love. Her wild, untamed freedom from the constraints of the world around her.

But I need to protect her. Briony's wants and needs will have to wait until the plans I have for revenge are set in motion. I can't bear the thought of her losing sight of the raw vengeance within her, emotions aside.

With her wrist still in my grip, I pull her roughly until she's straddling me with nothing between us. She squeals, then rests both palms on the sides of my head, centering herself. The warmth of her bare pussy settles on my shaft and my cock warms. Her full breasts sway above me, the pink, sensitive flesh just begging for teeth to sink into it. Her face, radiating every possible meaning of beauty, is

surrounded by her black silky hair shining in the leaking light of the sunrise through the draped windows.

My fallen angel.

She rolls her hips, grinding down on me as her slippery wetness spreads across the length of my shaft. A low growl escapes me as my hands grip the flare of her hips. She sits back, putting all her weight on the steel cock beneath her, resting her hands on my chest. I stiffen for a second, then blow out a breath, my heavy-lidded eyes finding hers.

“I won’t hurt you,” she whispers, her fingers moving ever so slightly down my pecs. Her fingertips brush over my nipples and my cock twitches in excitement.

“I wish you would,” I retort beneath my breath.

She grips my jaw roughly at the sentiment and spits down into my open mouth. Too shocked by the sudden act to retort, she slaps me with an opened palm to my face, sending my neck snapping to the side, before leaning forward, gripping my jaw back towards her and biting down on my lower lip. My fingers claw into the flesh of her hips at the welcomed pain, and I thrust up into her before she pulls back from my lips with a smirk.

“We’ll find a middle.”

Like a madman, a feral lust becomes unleashed, and I strip the remaining blanket off of us. Rolling us over, I toss her like a Rag Doll to her stomach, pulling her hips up so her ass is angled in the air before me. With a rough hand, I pin her neck to the mattress beneath us and lean over the curvature of her toned figure.

“Making deals with the devil is a dangerous business, darling.”

She shakes her flared hips against my groin, taunting me, my erect cock dancing between the crack of her ass as she does, my balls tickling those wet and sopping lips backing up against me. My jaw tightens, attempting to reign in the overwhelming urge to stuff this cock in her tight little virgin ass just to teach her a lesson.

“I’ll take my chances,” she says breathlessly, the tone of her voice feminine yet defiant.

My little fucking brat. I think she forgets who she’s dealing with. At my core, I’m still a ruthless savage.

I release her neck, sliding my palm down her beautifully arched spine before gripping her ass with a firm grasp, bending down to lick the length of her sweet, soft clit and pussy. I glide a heavy, flat tongue along her clit, over her aching hole, all the way up to her ass. She wiggles in my grasp, clearly feeling discomfort at the newfound sensation. Smacking the side of her thigh, she tenses as I tease, then plunge my tongue into her forbidden entrance.

“Fuck,” she cries out, attempting to get out of my grasp, but I grip her hips, forcing her back onto my tongue.

Briony rarely curses, so when I hear her innocent lips mutter the word fuck with my tongue in her ass, it’s a recipe for disaster. I lean back up, my pulse spiking in anticipation as a bead of cum drips from the tip of my cock, needing to dirty her with a pleasure we’ve both yet to discover. I slap the white porcelain skin of her ass with a rough hand, loving the bounce her flesh gives me, thirsty for the reddened marks, ultimately causing her to moan against the blanket between her white-knuckled hold.

I wasn’t lying when I told her I’d own every part of her. I’ve been dreaming of this day since following her around in those plaid little skirts to and from the Academy. The day I defile my little doll.

“Aero,” she says breathlessly, worry laced in her tone. “Promise you’ll...promise you won’t...”

Spitting down onto her, I coat her hole before laughing to myself. “Bite down on that blanket, baby,” I whisper in a cracked tone. A tone that shows my control is breaking.

“Promise I won’t hold back.”

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BRONX

With little warning, I feel the warm, wet, bulbous head of his massive cock push against my sensitive opening.

It's a strange feeling. One I'm certainly not accustomed to. If I'm honest, I wasn't even sure people did things like this. The idea of something so dirty, so inherently wrong and vile, with no real purpose other than to derive sick and twisted pleasure, makes my insides quiver with excitement and anticipation.

It's a degrading sort of act, and hearing the restraint in his tone while feeling the way Aero's body practically vibrates with energy and excitement over the idea makes me want to allow it all the more.

"Touch your clit, Bri. Rub it in slow circles with your fingers and take a few deep breaths," Aero eagerly demands.

His voice is hoarse and strained, and he sounds like he's losing all the control he thought he had. He'd promised he wouldn't hold back, but the way he's working me through this says anything but.

"I'm just going to feed it to you slow. Okay, baby?"

I twist the comforter in my sweaty palm, bringing it to my forehead as I use my other hand to begin massaging myself with slow circles between my legs, bracing for the pain I'm about to endure.

"Okay," I say with an exhale.

I feel him push against me until my opening stretches. The pain and discomfort are followed by a strange fullness as my passage finally opens and gives way for him. The crown of his cock gets sucked into the tight muscles surrounding it, and a strangled groan escapes me as I attempt to control my breathing.

He groans, cursing softly while stilling inside me. "Fuck, it's so tight. It almost hurts how hard you're choking my cock."

He's really enjoying this. Gritting his teeth through whatever sensations silently wreck him.

I feel more saliva drip down onto the place where we connect, a large amount wetting the area further as I breathe through my lips.

"Is it in now?" I ask, assuming the worst is over.

He chuckles lightly through his short, uncontrolled breaths. "I'm only in about an inch, maybe two."

"Oh shit," I cry out into the blankets.

"We got at least seven more."

"No," I whine into the blankets.

“You need to trust me, Briony,” he breathes. He leans over my back, his hand sliding into my hair as his thumb grazes my cheek with a gentle sweeping motion. “Trust that I’ve got you. I need you to love this because I plan on doing it often.”

My heart tumbles inside of my chest at the statement. A statement very unlike the man I first met.

“Okay?” he asks softly, gaining my attention before moving.

I swallow before licking my lips.

“Okay.”

My pussy contracts and tightens, aching for some sort of attention or distraction.

As if reading my body, Aero slips a hand around my hips, his massive fingers covering my own as he massages my clit in those soft circles he instructed.

“There you go,” he whispers before a light groan leaves his throat. “Just like that. There’s my good girl, Bri baby.”

I convulse at his words, feeling electricity shoot through my clit with every stroke of his hand covering mine while I’m being impaled from behind.

“I’m going to push deeper now, okay?” he asks, leaning back up again.

I nod, closing my eyes tightly.

“Fuck, this looks...” He groans from deep within his chest. “I won’t last long,” he mutters as I feel myself stretching to accommodate more of his length.

I cry out, muffled by the blanket between my teeth, the bedding becoming damp with my saliva.

“God, I love when you let me dirty you like this,” he says through gritted teeth.

His fingers soak up the mess I’m making between my legs before he pushes them deep inside my pussy, curling them towards my stomach. A shudder of sensations washes over me like a wave, and I feel myself contract and tighten around his thick circumference.

“Ah, fuck, Briony,” he hisses. “You still good?”

He pushes deeper while his slippery fingers slide out of me and begin coating my swollen clit with my arousal as he takes my ass.

“Oh yes,” I moan as he continues the soft circles with his digits, the sensation relaxing me enough to loosen up for him.

I push back on his engorged dick, taking the pain in an attempt to find my pleasure. Feeling full in every aspect of the word, his thighs hit the back of mine, the stone-like pillars sealing against me, and he stills, presumably allowing me to adjust.

“You’re a filthy little doll, taking cock so deep in your ass.”

His degrading words spark life beneath my skin, and pleasure circulates at the base of my spine. I bite my bottom lip, allowing myself to become the filthy doll he desires.

“My dirty slut, letting me do these vile things to you.” I feel him pull out, wetting himself with my pooling arousal, then gripping my hip as he sinks back in even deeper. The motion sparks all of my nerve endings to sizzle, bringing a new erotic heat to life. “Say it. Promise me you’ll be my whore till the day you die.”

“Till the day I die,” I gasp through labored breaths. “Destroy my purity, Aero. Dirty me with your demons.”

He curses at my words, his firm grasp finding the meat of my hips, fingers of one hand clawing into my flesh, the other pinning my neck to the bed as he takes me from behind until the sting subsides and he’s groaning and hissing in pleasure. The soft skin of his fleshy balls slaps against my sticky vulva, the reality of what we’re doing sending me into a spiral of dishonorable, thoughtless pleasure.

“Release your angels,” he demands, coaxing my release.

My legs quiver beneath him as the tightly bound tremors erupt throughout my core. I never thought I could derive such pleasure from the act, but I lose myself in his words, his cock massaging those nerve endings. A new, untapped part of me that only he can claim. He pumps himself in and out of me at a steady pace, the pleasure building like a coil about to unleash, all while continuing to direct me to rub my clit. I fall into orgasmic bliss, screaming out into the blankets with a ferocity I’ve never heard as the ultimate euphoria finds me and shakes me from the inside out.

“So fucking beautiful, Briony,” he breathes, enjoying the spasms of my quaking release, sinking into me one last time as tears fill my eyes.

I mutter and moan for God into the blankets as the sensations continue in endless waves.

My name rolls off his tongue breathlessly as he stiffens behind me and I feel his cock jump within my spasming walls.

He comes inside me before I feel the thick tip finally pop out of the tight ring, and three more hot spurts of warm liquid coat my back, sliding down the crack of my cheeks as feral growls accompany them. Fisting his cock, he milks out the finality of his orgasm, ensuring he's completely and utterly spent.

He falls to my side, his mouth open and eyelids heavy, with a post-orgasmic glaze on his face. His cock is still pointing straight up to the ceiling as if just the idea of how he got off has him ready to go again, while the remains of his release slowly drip from the depths of me.

Passionate greens and browns swirl in majestic madness as his eyes find mine, and we share a moment of beautiful silence, purely gazing at each other. Disbelief pours from us both as Aero's words fill my mind. Words as meaningless as love are so beneath the depth of the bond we share in this moment of reckoning.

Our breaths slowly align as he pulls my back into his front, wrapping his corded forearm around my waist, cradling me on our sides. His release spreads between our sweaty bodies, but neither of us seems to care in the least.

"Goddamn," he sighs, both of us still breathless and in a cloud of bliss, trying to wrap our heads around what we just shared. "Just… everything. All at once."

I absorb his words, a complete understanding of his statement, my face numb with the aftermath of pleasure.

It appears our brains have been seized entirely. Thoughts and words are distant ideas floating elsewhere. We're just relaxing in a comedown from the flames of the fire that tore through us both, bathing in the heavy emotions that follow.

After showering together, allowing Aero to clean me with his hands as he always does, we change into comfortable clothing with plans to eat breakfast, then train in his woods for the rest of the afternoon.

My mind screams at me, telling me the time has come for my return. I need to head back to the school, to find Saint and begin the plans I've set for destruction upon the people who deserve it most.

After tying my dried hair up into a ponytail, I watch in the mirror as Aero pulls some distressed jeans over his muscular quads, settling on his slim hips. His hair is still a wet mop of tangled locks hanging down onto his forehead, the water droplets clinging to his broad shoulders. Enjoying the view of his backside, his rippling muscles and toned arms, I hear the zip of his pants, reminding me of the monster being caged. Biting the corner of my lip, my skin flushes with heat that makes its way south again, knowing the feelings I have for him far surpass anything I could have anticipated.

Everything I am.

Just as thoughts of love and endearment float like fireflies beneath the surface of my skin, they drop from my being entirely when I see a black figure pass the window adjacent to him. Before I can even alert him to the sight, I see his head turn ever so slightly, somehow hearing the footsteps outside the window. He turns to face me, shirtless, wearing only his black jeans as his direct eye contact demands mine. He stares with a wild, protective nature while holding a single finger to his lips, silencing me.

My pulse pounds in my neck, a cyclone of terror hitting me in the gut, and yet he looks entirely too calm. The rest of his fingers raise as he holds out a palm, telling me to stay put. I curse beneath my breath, closing my eyes tightly as the door to the bedroom bursts open.

Aero rests in the shadows behind the door while I stand near the wall of the bathroom, holding my breath as my eyes slowly open to the mirror, seeing the reflection of the intruder in our private space.

As if knowing to clear the room, the masked man grips the edge of the door, about to peer behind it where Aero's standing. I throw my wooden brush against the glass of the mirror, causing it to shatter entirely, stealing his attention, if only for a second. The man turns, seeing my form standing in the bathroom's light. Taking quick strides towards me, I squint my eyes, expecting to be knocked off my ass by the approaching man.

Aero emerges from the shadows without a sound. With a belt he grabbed from somewhere, he wraps it around the intruder's neck, jetting the man back against his solid bare chest. The man's eyes bulge beneath the cutout of the mask, his fingers clawing at the flesh

of Aero's flexed forearms as his grip tightens. Legs splay and kick out as the man slowly sinks to the ground, the seconds ticking away like minutes as I watch the life drain from him.

His eyes widen one last time as his mouth opens, seeking the air that he's being deprived. Dark eyes peer up at mine as Aero drops the man with a thud against the wooden floor beneath him. His anger is penetrating me; his body, shaking with rage. This isn't the man I was with a moment ago. This is the psychotic, trained assassin who's put numerous bodies into the ground like it was nothing.

Another masked man enters the room behind him. Aero slides to the floor, seamlessly pulling the gun from the deceased man's holster. He leans his back against the end of the bed with his legs spread out before him as his arms straighten, aiming. Firing once, the silencer captures the sound as the bullet finds the skull of the shocked intruder. He stumbles back against the door before his legs give way and he slowly sinks to the floor beneath him, leaving a splatter of bright red blood on the wood behind him.

I've stopped breathing. Tremors of shock roll through my shoulders as Aero silently crawls over the man, searching his body for weapons.

Finding another gun, he grips it, places it in the back of his jeans, then searches him for some sort of identification. He finds a wallet, nods once to himself, then tosses it at the dead man's chest before spitting on his crippled form. I stand frozen in fear and trepidation, my mouth agape and my body stiff as he stalks towards me looking like a wild animal, unleashed and untamed.

I forget who he is when I so often find myself pretending who I want him to be. But one thing is clear, the veil of the obscure mask is worn, and whispers of Aero Westwood in our small community are finally becoming known.

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BRONX

You'd think being around a trained assassin who routinely kills for a living and enjoys inflicting and receiving pain would have me sweating bullets, but that reality is far from the truth. As it stands, Aero brings more peace and protective comfort than I've ever known. The building I'm approaching, however, has me shaking in my plaid skirt.

Killers. Real killers reside here. People who use and abuse their authority to control the masses. Using the disguise of an institution of love and faith to commit their sick acts of selfish crime.

They sent men to Aero to find and murder him. It was unclear to me who called the hit, but by the incessant rumbling of curse words falling from his mouth as he dug those body-sized holes on his property, I'd imagine he wasn't expecting it at all.

His attitude had changed. He wasn't the man who held me against his bare chest this morning. He wasn't the man who brought my fingertips to his abdomen for a calming caress. He was visibly frustrated, with nothing but hatred and cold-hearted betrayal pouring from his fiery eyes. Probably more mad at himself than anything.

I could almost read his thoughts as his tight jaw clenched while he kicked the second man into the dirt. He hated himself for becoming soft for me. For allowing these men to get the upper hand and catch him in a moment of weakness, something this trained assassin clearly wasn't used to.

Which was why I pressed Aero to move forward with the plans we had set in motion.

Acting the part, I enter the building amongst the hushed voices and side-eyed stares. I knew word of my disappearance had traveled. The students were well aware the only female Magnus Princeps had gone missing in search of her parents in the bush after the release of the flagrant video of theirs truly seducing the beloved man in line to become the next bishop.

Words like slut, whore, and sinner were being murmured in the dark corners of the hallways. Girls suppressed their giggles and boys eyed me like never before as I passed door after door until coming upon our classroom. The one we were meant to use together on our mission to educate the youth. Keeping their faith in an institution of

control and lies. My heart sinks when I think of Brady still being locked within the confines of this prison.

Saint's head snaps up from the podium where he was looking over lesson plans before the students filed in. His eyes grow wide and worrisome as his shoulders sag with relief, and it appears the air is taken from his lungs entirely. He pushes off the wood, circling around until he stops directly before me. His hands curl into fists near his sides as if to prevent himself from touching me.

Worry floods me like an inescapable wave, threatening to have me backing down from the plans at hand.

I push past my fears and make the first move. Opening my arms, I wrap them around his tight core, pulling him against my front. He stalls for a moment, sucking in a breath before his muscular arms wrap around me, his palm holding my neck to his chest as his thumb slowly runs along my jaw. I breathe in his minty musk, reorienting myself.

There's a strange comfort in his hold. Maybe one of a life I used to know, where things made sense behind blind eyes. My naivety, providing some sort of strange familiarity to a time where my priorities were simply to gain the respect of my elders while developing my relationship with God and strengthening my faith.

Now, as we hold each other, secrets and lies reside between both parties, death and deception providing the bricks to the wall that divides us.

I pull back from his embrace, looking up and into the eyes of a man I once thought I could trust.

"Briony," he breathes, gripping my face with both of his hands, his caress gentle and warm.

I stare up into those piercing blue eyes before studying the cuts of his prominent cheekbones, the sharp edge of his strong jaw, and the full pink bottom lip that protrudes slightly further than the top, seeing such a resemblance to his older brother that it just can't be unseen.

"I was worried sick about you," he admits, scanning my face with his eyes. "I even went to the airport where they said you'd run, just to go with you. To help you find your parents and sort this out."

I stare blankly at him, trying to understand.

“They said you ran because of me. Because of what happened.” He shakes his head, his eyes peering at my lips in remembrance, regretful shame in his slumped shoulders. “I felt awful. I couldn’t let you fall because of something we both did. It was so unfair how they’d pinned it all on you as if I wasn’t the one there, kissing you back.”

Kissing me back. My mouth goes dry at his statement.

“I never posted that video, Saint. You have to know...” My eyes well with tears, tears that are welcomed considering the topic at hand.

But my tears aren’t for him. They’re for the old me. The girl that always wanted to stand up for herself, to do what was right, but felt the weight of her commitments around her. The girl who’d never imagined a world where revenge was sweet and justified.

“Come here,” he says quietly, peering behind me as he grabs my hand in his large, protective grasp.

He guides me towards the utility closet in the classroom, pulling me inside before closing the door behind him.

Out of sight. Aero will be thrilled.

My hands tremble at my proximity to the man I need to pretend to trust with everything I am. My mind circles back to the blade strapped to the inside of my thigh, but my legs close tightly, yielding the need for it.

“I don’t know what you’ve heard, but this place is rumbling with chaos,” he declares, leaning against the wall, still holding my hand. “I overheard my father discussing the situation with Alastor Abbott.”

My ears perk up at the name.

“They say there’s a madman out on the hunt. An excommunicated member of the church who was put away for a gruesome crime many years ago. He’s escaped from prison, disgruntled over his own fallout with Christ, looking to terminate Christians and believers alike. He has everything to do with the state of chaos our community is in.”

The lies they’re feeding the public. Disgusting.

“Whoever he is, they also suspect he took Jacob,” he says with a hitch in his tone.

“How? How is this possible?”

“The deacon...” he begins with hesitation, shaking his head. “They say he killed himself, but I don’t believe it for a second.” His

expression hardens. “The deacon was murdered.” He takes a quick breath. “My father said the bishop’s term is ending and they want me to step up. Especially now, when there’s no one to guide our flock amidst the crumbling of our institution.”

Hilarious how the scarlet letter stuck to me so well, even with a suspected killer on the loose. I was never to be considered for a position in our clergy, even though my academic grades and achievements outweigh those of Saint’s. Never was there hope for me to hold a legitimate title in this church at all. It was always going to be a man before me. In a world where male domination is a prerequisite for control, equality was never a forethought.

As Aero so eloquently said, I’d pushed and pushed until I pushed too far. Thank God he took me to his cabin when he did. They’d have erased the stain of condemnation by now without question had they known my whereabouts.

“But you’ll be a target, Saint,” I whisper, worry lacing my words. “Why do they want to expedite the process of making you bishop? Especially with everything happening? Why are they rushing this? You’re still so young.”

“I’m already a target,” he declares with a regretful sigh. “My Jeep, remember? Not only was it vandalized that day with you, but it’s now stolen, taken right here from the school parking lot. Seen leaving the church right before they found the deacon. He wanted to frame me if the suicide assumption didn’t stick.”

My chest practically caves and my palms gloss over with sweat at the memory of the Jeep. The memory of that day in the confessional. Luckily, the lack of cameras in this town couldn’t have tracked the Jeep far. Knowing Aero, any and all footage has already been wiped.

“I’m needed,” Saint continues. “It’s time I step up the way my father always hoped I would.”

Needed. In order to keep the Westwood name in the chain of command, using their influence to continue the sickening cycle of power and control over this town. I bite back the expression I’d love to use and wear my concern on my sleeve.

“I’m scared for you.” My eyes crinkle in the corners as I squeeze his hand in mine. “I’m scared for myself.”

“Shh, it’s okay now.” He pulls me back into him, wrapping those arms tightly around me again. “You’re safe, Briony. I’m just so happy you’re back. I was sick, wondering where you were. I-I missed you.”

A lesser woman would’ve believed his lies.

My hands clutch his tight core beneath his dress shirt, fingers gripping onto him in a way that screams need. I hear him swallow again, and his hand, resting at the base of my lower back, slowly trails up, holding me tightly to him.

“Oh, Saint,” I cry out, clutching his shirt in my white-knuckled fists. “I don’t want to be alone tonight. My house feels so big and bare and I’m terrified I’ll be targeted.”

“What about Baret?” He suggests my brother as if I actually have one. “Can he come—”

“He hasn’t been answering his phone,” I lie. I have no idea where he’s been or if he’s even tried to contact me. Lack of a phone doesn’t help. “I can’t get a hold of anyone. Not him. Not my parents. I’m all alone.” My bottom lip quivers in fear as my hands shake before him.

I bring them to the middle of Saint’s chest, where I touch the buttons of his crisp uniform while the front of his thighs connect with mine in the tight space of the utility closet.

“Please,” I whisper, cracking my tone to tortured perfection. “Even coming here today was a risk I had to take. I needed to see you. I needed...you.”

His Adam’s Apple bobs as his forehead brushes mine. I stare at his throat, breathing in his cologne, while his eyes glaze over my parted lips. The sexual tension is building, and while he doesn’t light up every atom within my being like his older brother does, there’s still an attraction to the physical beauty before me. He’s very much a handsome man, and I am very much an animal at my core.

“I’ll be there,” he whispers, his minty breath dusting my lips. “I’ll stay with you. I’ll come over right after class, okay?”

Our eyes connect for a moment, and I feel the longing and emotion in his gaze. The knowledge of us spending the night together in a house all alone is sending his mind into a cacophony of scenarios. Hopefully, none of them good.

He tips his chin, eyes focused on my lips again. The battle of right and wrong rages inside him as the sexual tension between us

becomes almost unbearable. It's all I need to know this plan will inevitably work.

Saint licks his lips, parting them as he leans forward, but just as they skim across mine, I turn my head to the side, closing my eyes and pulling his hips into mine. Our chests mesh together, showing the lack of restraint we hold for one another. Saint drops his head to the door behind me and I feel the evidence of his thick arousal begin to swell against my thigh.

I smirk devilishly within myself at the proof. He's losing control.

"Slip out the back. Away from prying eyes," he whispers in my ear, his lips grazing the shell as he continues. "I'll be there soon, Bri."

He leans back, our eyes connecting again, our lips inches apart as my hands remain planted on the mounds of muscle on his chest. I nod, purposefully trailing my tongue along my bottom lip. His eyes fall to my mouth immediately and he stills before letting out a sigh, ushering me out of the classroom before the students file into the surrounding room.

As soon as I hit the hallway, I feel Aero's eyes burning a hole through me. The lack of sight during those few minutes in the closet has him reeling in the unknown. Pleased with myself at the quick interaction, I sneak out the back of the building behind the dumpsters alone and wait until I hear the silent roar of the smooth engine.

I slide into the passenger seat of the familiar black Audi and turn to face him. Before I can even gauge his expression, my neck gets jolted as the back of my head hits the seat hard. Aero peels out of the parking lot, and aggressive hands grip the wheel while his silence secretly tears a hole through me.

My jealous, over-protective man.

He zips through town, finally arriving at the street behind my house. I slip out, walking through the wooded yard as he hides the car as planned. Seconds later, he enters the back door near the kitchen, stomping towards me in those black combat boots with his ski mask still in place.

Terror and lust simultaneously tremor through me as his hand encircles the front of my neck, pushing me back against the wall with a force that only this dominant man can assert.

“Where?” he growls, his hazel eyes set hard on mine as he leans over me.

My thighs clench together under my skirt. His toxic need to know the intimate details of what happened in that closet has me wanting to lie and push the envelope just to enrage and engage him further.

“My lips,” I rush, his hand around my throat tightening.

“He fucking kissed you?” he seethes in through gritted teeth, rolling the mask up his forehead with his free hand. His pulse rages, an angry vein protruding from his temple.

I suck in a breath at his devastatingly handsome features, studying the scars that pierce through them like badges of endless determination and power. His eyes darken, and once again, I’m overwhelmed by his raw, ethereal beauty.

“No.” I shake my head. “He tried to but I turn—”

A flat tongue rolls up and over my lips, interrupting my words. The warm, wet lick continues down my neck, where he takes the opportunity to clean me. The heat travels between my thighs and I feel myself contract with need. He grips my wrist, lifting my hand as his tongue trails over my palm while wild eyes connect with mine, removing Saint’s touch entirely, before gripping both wrists and pinning them above my head.

“Aero, he’s on his way...” I whisper, his nose tracing the line of my jaw before he breathes in the scent of my hair in the hypnotic way that he does.

I feel dizzy with lust as one of his rough hands fastens my arms in place, my wrists in a tight hold above my head, the other gripping the skin of my hip so hard it will surely bruise. His tongue finds my neck again, licking long trails up to my ear lobe where he bites down, pressing that long, thick erection along his thigh into my belly.

“Then we better hurry,” he whispers against my mouth before biting down on my bottom lip. Pulling it back with his teeth, I moan into his mouth as my lip snaps back from his unrelenting grasp. “Because I plan to have my cum dripping from your greedy cunt before it’s wrapped around him.”

He growls to himself at the thought before slamming my wrist back against the wall, causing me to cry out in pain.

“You watch me the entire time, and don’t you for a fucking second think you’re allowed to come. If I sense you’re deriving any pleasure out of this at all, I’ll kill you both myself and burn the whole fucking church down over your rotting corpses. You got that, sweetheart?”

I swallow what feels like a mound of sand, nervous at his calm yet intimidating demeanor, my body trembling in fear at his tone alone. Because I know for a fact, he’d do just that, if not worse. Mutilation would be in there somewhere.

“N-never,” I stutter, attempting to wet my dry mouth. “I’d never—”

His hand rises from my hip to grip my face roughly between his fingers. He squeezes tightly, forcing my mouth open, his direct stare scanning mine for any waiver of disloyalty. Leaning down over me, he spits into my mouth, his saliva coating my tongue, before he attacks my lips with the most primal force, claiming everything he wants with such tenacious ferocity.

I moan when he forces his way into my mouth, his tongue practically fucking me with an insatiable hunger, forcing me to succumb to his strength as the heat of his confined cock presses urgently against his jeans, seeking the relief he so desperately craves.

But it’s the way he communicates with his tongue that drives me wild. Aero says everything he needs in his anarchic display of affection.

His tongue lashes against mine, screaming notes of suffering and affliction amidst chaotic pleasure. Our song, written in torture, harmonized with human reckoning, and played by only the symphony of avenging truths.

I’m swirling in deviant lust. My stomach squirms with anticipation and endless nerves. Aero plans to mark me as his before his brother gets the chance. We’re committing to this plan, and he’s allowing his trust in me and my strength to outweigh his instincts.

The sick and twisted nature of what we are about to do should have me practically vomiting with anxiousness.

And yet, my insides ignite with the flames only the darkest of angels could possess.

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HERO

I listen to the slight whimper in her cry, feel the expansion of her chest, breasts rising against my forearm, and see the fire burning deep within the confines of her sinister eyes. She's ready to wage her war. *My beautiful destructive doll.*

I must claim her as my own. I need her sweet pussy filled and dripping with my cum, feeding my primal compulsion to mark her. I need her flesh freshly cut and bleeding from the power of my hand before this man touches the curvaceous vessel of the soul I own. I won't let her slip from my grasp. Not my Briony.

The idea of destroying the most sacred part of the Westwood dynasty, however, the beloved and all-too-perfect Saint, has me reeling in palpable excitement. Fuck all of them for allowing the disgusting cycle of abuse and death of the weak to continue. Saint's just as guilty, and that motherfucker will pay like the rest of them. We will strip him of his title before he even gets a chance to claim it, crippling the entire institution and everyone who pays a part to play.

Briony's trust in him and everyone else she once loved has been severed, all of it falling inevitably on me as I'd planned.

I'm the only one on this earth that could ever protect her the way she needs to be protected in order for her to become her own king. Lesser men would cap her power, ensuring she remains the staple of a traditional woman. I, however, want her to flourish in her rule over the masses. Her intelligence burned freely as a wildfire, destroying the traditions of the past.

Even now, with her back against the wall and her legs parted, waiting, she loves diving into the dark with me, exploring the boundaries of the sexuality she's always been curious about but deprived of. Briony wants me to push her, just as she pushes me. But the softer side of me cost us.

Alastor has drawn a line in the sand. He was done waiting for me to complete the job. I recognized the name on a piece of I.D. from one of the men that attacked us. He was a member of the Caprano Gang. Probably a young buck, hired by Alastor, trying to make rank by partaking in a hit. The governor was an idiot for meddling where he didn't belong. It would come back to bite him in the ass without a doubt. I wasn't worried about those men harming us. No one fucking

hunts me down and lives to tell about it. But Nox's words rang through my head like an annoying alarm with no end.

Love has a way of making us weak.

I couldn't admit what I was feeling for Briony was love, because love is a desolate term to me. But my obsession and commitment to that woman is far beyond anything I've ever felt for another living being.

I can't be weak. Especially not with the weight of what's to come.

I kiss those sweet, supple lips, pressing my throbbing cock against her hip. Needing to show her love isn't the emotion pouring itself out between us. It's endless rage.

Rage to fight when told not to. Rage to breathe when the grasp of the world around us tightens its grip. A rage to fall violently into our own realm of twisted desires, where only the demonic versions of ourselves survive in the form of twisted salvation.

She melts against my touch, falling into a puddle of needy desire in my grip. Her legs part as she rubs her greedy little cunt against my thigh, seeking relief.

"My baby aches for me," I whisper against her lips, pulling back to look down.

Her eyes follow my gaze where she's practically grinding a wet stain into the dark denim of my jeans. Looking back up at me with those swollen, freshly kissed lips, and a hazy look in her eyes, she simply nods.

"So fucking needy," I comment, giving her my thigh and pressing it roughly against that swollen clit beneath those soaked panties. Her head falls back against the wall as her legs widen. "My slutty little cunt can't get enough, huh?"

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip at my words. Briony loves when I degrade her, which I find enticingly ironic because, in real life, she wouldn't put up with any man putting her down. But with me, there's freedom in it because she knows how I empower her in the world outside of our sex.

I slip my hand around to the back of her head, gripping her long black hair in my fist, forcing her to face the ceiling. My hand slips up beneath her uniformed skirt, brushing over the front of her thigh-high tights, removing my thigh before finding the edge of her panties.

Pulling the soaked cotton to the side, I slip two fingers along her slit before pushing them up into her slippery, tight hole. She gasps, arching her back as her hands find my shoulders, nails sinking into my shirt. I remove my soaked fingers, trailing them up to her swollen, aching clit, and rub a soft circle before sinking them deep inside her again.

“Oh, God,” she moans, her eyes closing.

I release her hair before slapping the side of her face with my free hand, gripping her cheeks, as the fingers of my other hand remain lodged deep within her, curling toward myself.

“Open,” I order, needing her eyes on me.

She blinks her long, dark lashes, gasping as the fire in her gaze penetrates mine. I remove the top of the mask from my head and place it on hers. She looks confused as I pull it down over her face messily with one hand, the eye holes fitting over her piercing blues, and the mouth opening settling over her wet lips.

Pulling my fingers from her sopping pussy, I bring them to her exposed mouth, smearing her arousal across them.

“Whoever drinks of the water I give him will never be thirsty again.” I mutter the scripture as she parts her lips.

I shove the two fingers into her mouth, sliding them over her tongue to the back of her throat until she’s gagging around them, her eyes wide and watering beneath the mask.

When I pull them out, she coughs as the saliva stretches from her mouth to my fingers. I place my hand on the top of her head, pushing down until she understands and sinks to her knees before me. Placing both hands on the wall to brace myself, I gaze down at my little doll still in her pristine uniformed shirt and plaid skirt with the mask in place, on her knees before her God, ready to confess all her sins with her throat.

“Take it out,” I demand, widening my stance.

She grips the button of my jeans, popping them open before practically ripping the zipper open to release her favorite toy. Her eyes light up with fascination, as they always do when she sees my length, and her thumb immediately flicks the stud of my piercing as her soft fingers wrap around me. A deviant growl leaves my throat

and my cock pulses in her soft palm, feeling the sensation travel across my body as blood floods the region to harden me like steel.

“Beautiful,” she whispers to herself, as her fingers wrap around my velvety length and begin stroking my heavy cock. They work my entire length, meeting the short dark hairs of my groin. “Devastatingly perfect.”

I’m on the verge of skull-fucking her senseless. Especially if she’s going to talk like that with my dick dangling before her face, eyes lit up like a child on Christmas.

“Open my mouth,” I demand, needing the soft warmth of her throat around me.

She rests her head back against the wall of the kitchen, her lips parting and her hands sliding up to the top of my jeans, gripping the edge and pulling them down far enough to have my cock springing free. With little warning, I brace myself on my heels and slide the tip past her lips, rolling it over her tongue, thrusting my hips forward and pushing roughly until I feel the back of her throat closing in around the crown of my cock. My balls rest against her chin, and she gags as I expected, her hands clawing at my pants to breathe. I hold myself deep until her tears fall onto the black knit mask, her mascara already bleeding beneath her eyes.

Pulling back, she gasps for air as the strings of saliva connect us.

“Spit on me,” I command.

She blinks her watery eyes up at me through the mask’s eyeholes before spitting on my stiff cock, bouncing in the air before her. *Fuck, I love it.* The excessive saliva drips down my shaft as I grip the top of her head tightly beneath the fabric, forcing my cock down her throat again.

Fuck me, it feels so good. Her warm, wet, accepting throat.

“Nasty little bitch,” I mutter, skull-fucking her head back against the wall. Her thighs attempt to close, but I kick her inner thigh, opening them again. “Bet you’re just dying to touch yourself, aren’t you? Aching to be full. Dying to fill that whorish cunt with all kinds of dick tonight.”

She hums around my shaft, her soft lips open further as I push deeper than her jaw will allow. She’ll be hurting tomorrow for sure.

Her tongue massages the base of my length, her eyes staying trained on mine.

“Feel what I’m about to feel, Briony,” I pant, fucking her mouth, then pushing myself deep until she’s choking around me again.

“Total.”

I thrust into her throat, then pull back out completely as she gasps for air.

“Loss.”

I force my cock deep into her throat again, only to pull out and slap her covered face with it.

“Of control.”

Slipping my cock back between her parted lips, saliva pours onto her white shirt, and her face turns red from lack of oxygen, the beautiful sounds of her gagging around my length filling the room.

I hold myself there, my balls tightening at the pleasure surging throughout my core, until her eyes glaze over and her grip on my thighs slips. Pulling back to give her a chance to breathe, I reach a hand down, stroking my wet cock in my palm before her, offering her my balls.

“Suck.”

She’s still gasping for air when her pink tongue slides out of her mouth, her swollen lips surrounding me. My eyes roll to the back of my head as I fist the tip tightly, pinching back the cum that’s already seeping from the slit. She tongues my balls, flicking her warm, wet tongue beneath my shaft, and I look down to see her gazing up at me with those insatiable eyes. Those doe-like innocent eyes that hide all the dirty things she does for her man.

I curse, pulling away from her, leaving my cock hanging between us while I try to collect myself.

I’m so close to coming already. Her teary-eyed, innocent need to please me has me losing all sense of control.

“Come here,” I hold out my hand to her, helping her to stand.

Bringing her over to the kitchen island, I lift her little frame, sitting her on the edge and removing the mask. I toss it on the floor, her long black hair remaining a tangled mess over her face. She looks wild and untamed, and every bit the dirty doll I’ve always imagined.

“You ready for some cock?” I ask, pulling her panties to the side and plunging my fingers back inside her.

She moans, arching towards me again, her thighs parting wide to allow me to step between them.

“Aero, please...” she begs, palms falling back behind her on the counter to stabilize herself as her breasts beg for release beneath her buttoned shirt. “I need you.”

Her breathy plea is all it takes for a man like me to fold.

“Beg for my cum, church girl,” I demand, wrapping my hand around the front of her neck again. “Beg me to fill you. I need you to plead for it.”

“Please, baby. Fill me. Spill yourself inside me,” she urges incessantly, tossing her head back between her shoulder blades and placing her heels on the edge of the counter, opening her hips so incredibly wide. She exposes her pink, wet little center, the soaked panties rolled to the side, making her lips appear enlarged and swollen. Her black thigh-high tights, with my blade where she keeps it, are already slipping down her thighs.

My cock is achingly throbbing to get inside her again, red at the tip, firm, and slick from her throat, but this sight before me is something I need to absorb. Fucking nasty perfection. Screaming for my cum, creamy thighs spread wide with a wet, dripping cunt just begging for me to tear through it. She’s tingling in anticipation with the tightly bound pleasure only I can give.

The only heaven I’ll ever know.

Without words, I line the head with her wet center, swirling myself with her arousal, and forcefully shove into her heat. Her walls clamp down around my shaft, holding me tight within her, and I swear, by the spasms I feel around me, she’s on the verge of orgasm already.

I hold myself deep and her head finally rises, her gaze meeting mine. Our eyes connect in a moment of silence, our open-mouthed pants mirroring one another’s. We relish in the feeling of being so interconnected, more than just the physical aspect.

Our souls beg to tear into each other, demanding we crash in the most catastrophic way. We can’t become one until I crawl into her skin and live deep within the marrow of her being the way I desire. I pull the knife I gifted her from the strap on her thigh and flick the

blade open with my wrist, she eyes it wearily as I line the blade up with her inner thigh.

“Everything I’m made of demands you, Briony,” I explain, our chaotic breaths aligning as she swallows down her fears, eyeing my every move. “I am yours, and you are forever mine. Until the end of this life, then whatever life we live after that.”

I remain lodged deep within her, our eyes focused on one another as if no one else in this universe exists. Fisting the blade, I cut through her perfect flesh. Her eyes wince slightly but don’t dare come off of mine. She trusts me in a way she shouldn’t trust anyone. With everything.

Her jaw tightens as a light whimper of pain leaves her throat, and she lifts her chin more to meet mine. This is the sexiest I’ve ever seen her. Determined yet still questioning. Resilient yet slightly fearful. Emitting submission to me completely, yet knowing she’s entirely unstoppable in her own right.

My cock swells to a rock inside her, twitching within her tight grip as I carve the upside down cross into her flesh, an arrow pointing towards myself at the tip. Her eyes finally peer down at the branding that’s now dripping blood down the soft flesh of her inner thigh. The wildest, most ferocious gaze emits from her blown pupils, passion straight from the soul.

I turn the blade on myself, and she grips the handle, carving the same symbol into the flesh of my lower abdomen, oblivious to the pain as endorphins flood my mind.

“Aero,” she whispers, almost in reckoning, coming to life at this very moment.

I stare back at her intently, watching in awe and admiration as my angel falls for me.

“Briony,” I whisper.

Pulling out of her, I crouch down between her thighs, kneeling to my queen. I lick the freshly cut wound, healing my harm with my tongue. Her thigh quivers at the sensation, the warmth of her blood smearing across my lips and down my chin before I stand before her again.

Without warning, she reaches out, gripping my neck, and pulls me forward, the knife dropping to the floor beneath us. In a hurried and

reckless rush, she kisses me, licking her blood with wicked strokes as I slide my cock back inside her, speaking to my soul entirely with our tangled tongues as we begin fucking and bleeding together.

There's a knock on the door around the corner that pulls her attention from me.

He's here.

But it doesn't stop me. If anything, my cock grows with the realization of what we're doing. I continue to give her what she needs, fucking her roughly on the kitchen counter until she screams into my palm, held tight over her face. Her nails tear into the flesh of my neck down to the top of my pecs as she convulses around me, losing herself to the sensations.

Gripping her hair around my fist, I pull her back from my lips and look down at my cock sliding in and out of her tight, dick-hungry pussy, seeing her cum coating the length of me.

I fuck her until I finally lose myself, biting the curve where her neck meets her shoulder to stifle my roar as I release deep within her walls until we're both dripping down onto the floor beneath us.

The knock is louder this time.

"Be right there!" she calls out in a cracked tone, her chest still heaving and her cautious eyes on mine.

We share a silent look. One that empowers us with confident reassurance while pleading that this monumental moment to come won't change us.

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BRONX

Grabbing a kitchen towel, I quickly wipe myself as clean as I can, careful to wash the fresh cut on my thigh by wetting the washcloth to remove the smeared blood down my inner thigh.

My body is still vibrating in the aftermath of my insanely electrifying orgasm as I make my way around the island to open the door. I'm light-headed and feeling entirely flushed while I look back to ensure Aero is hidden, as well as the knife and mess we made on the floor. If all goes as planned, we'll have the church and community crumbling around this controversy in no time. Being the sacrificial lamb for the cause has never sounded more enticing.

Running my hands through my black, freshly fucked hair, I inhale deeply, attempting to calm my sudden nerves. Realization is hitting, and the weight of my impending actions is making my stomach twist into a knot.

When I open the door, Saint turns to face me on the porch, his hands in the pockets of his slacks, his crewcut hairstyle looking sharp as ever. His blue eyes are brighter than before, yet pinching tight in the corners as his full lips part. Those Westwood genes run deep and strong.

"Briony," he whispers, taking a step closer, concern laced in his tone. "Are you alright?"

He approaches me at the door, his hand instinctively touching the side of my face, his thumb wiping under my eyes. It's then I realize my mascara is still smeared down my face, giving the illusion I've been crying, not choking on his brother's thick cock like I was only seconds ago.

I sniff, leaning my head into his hand. "No," I say honestly. "I'm not."

He quickly rushes into the house, closing the door behind him, and embraces me in his arms. A gentle caress finds my head, and he presses my cheek to his chest, his heart thumping within.

My tears fall freely as an unknown emotion takes over. I'm not sure if I'm just releasing pent-up tears after the intensity of the orgasm that just cycled through me or if I'm feeling the weight of unsuspecting guilt, but I get a strange pinch in my chest at the thought of what I'm about to do to this man.

My arms wrap around him again, seeking that brief glimpse of familiar comfort I gained at the school, and his arms follow suit as I

melt in his hold.

“Come here,” he says tenderly, crouching.

His arms reach around to the back of my thighs where he picks up my wilted frame, my thighs circling his waist, and my arms lacing around his neck. I silently hiss at the friction against my fresh wound. Holding my limp body to his chest, one hand cradles my neck and the other gingerly cups underneath my skirt-covered bottom.

He carries me, walking us over to the couch in the living room to sit down with me on his lap, continuing our embrace.

“Shh.” He brushes his hand over my hair, combing it down my back. “It’s okay now. There’s no need to be scared. We’ll get everything sorted out, Briony. You’re safe with me. I’m here now.”

I lean back on his lap, wiping my eyes with the cuffs of my uniform shirt. He gazes at me with nothing but soft concern in his eyes while my world spins, knowing we are being watched closely.

“What would your father think of you being here, Saint?” The words fall from my lips before I can even attempt to withhold them.

Saint shifts in his seat beneath me, his hands resting softly on my outer thighs as he licks his lips.

“If I’m being completely honest,” he pauses, running a hand over his short blonde hair before wiping his palm down his face. “He wouldn’t like it.” His blue eyes find mine and I feel his sincerity. “At all.”

I stare back at him, looking for the obvious answer. Needing to see the truth written there that he’s one of them. He’s on their side. He isn’t like us. But my vision is cloudy and my mind is swirling, endless questions plaguing me.

It’s my naivety that’s loosening me, my control faltering before the presence of the establishment meant to end me. Then, as if Aero suddenly slipped into my head, I blink, and am reminded of the men who ruined him.

“And yet...you’re here,” I declare.

My fingers graze his exposed forearms, meeting the rolled-up cuffs of his uniform. I continue sliding my hands up and over his tight biceps, and his hips shift slightly beneath me. He clears his throat, flexing his jaw, clearly trying his hardest to keep it together, but my

hands find the soft, warm flesh of his neck, and the raging pulse beneath it screams for more.

He sighs, dropping his head back against the couch, his eyes searching mine beneath heavy lids.

“I can’t stay away from you,” he admits. His hands find my thighs again, his thumbs sweeping just under the cotton of my skirt, toying with the idea of more. “Something about you draws something out of me. I just...” He shakes his head, looking down at where I’m sitting on his lap, then back up at me. “I just can’t place it.”

The sexual tension is palpable. Our hearts are both racing with the knowledge of how close our sexes are. A few layers of fabric, and the entire corrupt dynasty ends.

“I know what you mean, it’s like a chokehold,” I whisper, nibbling on the corner of my lip.

His eyes are drawn to it immediately, and his hand comes up, his thumb pulling my lip free of my teeth. I gasp at the sudden move, surprised by his action.

“Don’t do that,” he warns, his voice laced with something I can’t place.

My lashes flutter, understanding how it affects him. I see his jaw flex and his pupils dilate before me. It’s clear he can’t seem to control himself around the temptation that I am to him. I am his Satan and salvation, and this man can’t decide which road to take.

Instead, I lick my lips and flip the rest of my long, black hair behind me. He closes his eyes and shakes his head, the softest groan exhaling from his throat. His hands find my thighs again as his fingers indent my skin beneath the tights.

“I just...I just have this strong urge to taste you again,” I whisper, leaning forward ever so slightly to place my hands on the couch behind his head, my hips shifting over him in the process.

I can feel his cock lengthen beneath his slacks. He swallows, entirely aware of it, too.

“I’ve been wanting that, too,” he answers, gazing back at my lips as if imagining it. “I haven’t stopped thinking about it. That kiss.” He nods his head back. “This kitchen.”

His hand reaches up and cups the side of my face, his thumb stroking near my lips. Leaning into the embrace, I release a light hum

from my throat. I turn my head and ever so softly wrap my lips around the tip of his thumb. I kiss it gently while his eyes stare intently with fascination. Opening my mouth, I suck on it before my tongue slips past my lips, gently licking up the side of it in a slow, seductive manner.

“It’s wrong of me to even proclaim.” His eyes flutter and his chest rises and falls between us. “But your tongue,” he says quietly. “It felt so good against mine. So warm and wet. Your mouth, so inviting.”

I’m hoping Aero is recording and not silently plotting out how to gut Saint from neck to balls as he discusses the details of our intimate kiss.

I shift my hips, rolling them slightly into his, my skirt tenting out so only my soaked panties remain sealed to his lap. I can feel Aero’s release still leaking out of me as I straddle his brother, and the thought has my body igniting with a heat that burns low in my belly.

It shouldn’t excite me how it does. I should feel bad. Guilty. Horribly reckless for my actions. And yet, all I can think about is how disturbingly aroused this makes me.

His other hand slowly slides up my thigh, over my tights, and his fingers finally graze the skin of my exposed ass. A breath of air leaves his parted lips.

Asses are his weakness. I know this much already. His hands have wandered slightly south before, and I’ve witnessed him correcting his behavior before he’s done something stupid. But here, in this house, all alone with his temptations...will his strength falter?

“I’ve thought about you, too. That kiss. This kitchen,” I admit shyly, pushing my limits. “Many times.” I bite the corner of my lip again. “In my bed. By myself.”

He stares blankly, as if in shock, clearly understanding the statement.

“I know it’s wrong, and it’s awful that my mind even goes there, but __”

“What were you imagining?” he interrupts abruptly.

I look down at his chest, absentmindedly toying with a button on his shirt, pretending to be embarrassed. “I imagined your arms around me, holding me safely. Protecting me. I imagined the warmth of your body surrounding me...behind me.” I swallow. “Above me.” I take a

breath and continue in a soft, sensual tone. “I imagined the weight of you crashing down on me. Gentle hands, slowly exploring...”

I close my eyes as a breath escapes me. My hand comes up to my neck, my fingers trailing down between the buttons of my uniform.

“What else?” he says quickly, urging me on, his hips shifting slightly beneath me again.

“I imagined those fingers.” I open my eyes, dropping my hand from my neck to grip the wrist of his wandering hand.

Pulling it before me, I line our palms together between us, his eyes following my every move.

“Those strong, large hands wandering places they shouldn’t. Touching me where I’ve been taught not to touch, and making my body come alive in a way I’ve never known.”

Without warning, Saint’s palm drops from mine, and he grips my wrist. His fingers tighten around me with a painful squeeze, and his hard eyes lock onto mine. I gasp at the move, and his nostrils flare. I’m unsure of his intentions for the moment, but I assume he’s putting a stop to this, knowing he’s likely coming to his senses. But his grip softens, and he finally blinks, those lust-darkened eyes finding me again.

“Show me,” he demands.

My eyebrows raise at his words, surprise written all over my face.

“Show me what you did when you were alone and thought about me.”

He stands abruptly, causing me to gasp and clutch onto his neck. Gripping my bottom in his large palms, he walks with intent towards the staircase, somehow knowing exactly where to go.

It appears he’s found his loophole. His safety net. His gateway to committing these sexual acts that we’ve been told by our all-powerful God were unforgivable before marriage.

He can watch me all he wants, but his safety net has a hole. One I’ll surely wrap around his ankle to pull him into the depths of the dark deliverance to which I’ve succumbed.

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BRONX

He's not like us. He's like them.

He's like them.

Them.

I say this repeatedly in my head, over and over as Saint carries me up the stairs to my bed, placing me gently on the edge before finding his seat on the bench of the vanity across from me. Having no clue where Aero is, I can only assume he's somewhere watching closely, ready to kill both me and Saint if this plan goes south.

"Show me," Saint mutters once more, pulling the bench forward to the end of my iron bedframe, staring down at me intently as he takes a seat again. "I need to see what I do to you, Briony."

The slight ache in his innocent voice silently kills me. It's not that I've never imagined Saint in this light. He's handsome, and extremely attractive compared to all of my other classmates. But it's the fact that his brother has been the one that's continuously occupied my mind. His tormented, tortured older brother who's shown me the light and made me question not only everything, but everyone.

Leaning back on my elbows, I scoot backward until my heels rest on the edge of the bed. I give Saint one last look to gauge his intentions, and when our eyes connect, his innocence shines through.

God, I'm about to end his entire livelihood.

What if Aero is wrong? What if Saint has nothing to do with his father's business dealings with Alastor Abbott, the church, and the calculated corruption they promote? What if he's truly the innocent bystander who's unfortunately locked into this chaos as the primary target for destruction, when in reality, he's maintained his innocence in this world of greed, corruption, and power?

A slight creak in the old wood of our floorboards from the hallway has my heart skipping a beat. Saint's eyes divert away from mine, and my heart thuds wildly in my chest at the thought of Aero on standby. I can only imagine what is going through his tormented skull at the moment.

But before Aero entirely pulls Saint's attention from me, I cover the cut on my upper thigh with the hem of my green plaid skirt and separate my thighs, parting them wide to expose my soiled cotton panties.

Saint's eyes grow wild with fascination, his jaw going slack at the image before him. He swallows as I bite my lip, praying to whatever God there is that this is the path I'm meant to travel to bring the true evil to light.

"So it's true. That's what happens when your body primes itself for sexual endeavors?" he asks breathlessly, still staring at the wetness pooled between my legs.

I almost chuckle at his statement. I'd forgotten the naivety we once shared from an entire childhood of silence when it came to the knowledge of sex. All we know is what we hear from the sexual endeavors of the tainted and sinful. His brother could teach him a thing or two about priming a female body for sex. The man is a walking state of arousal. He could whisper what a dirty fucking slut I am and I'd be coming on command.

"You're soaking wet," he states, his eyes finally traveling up to meet mine. "Like, it's everywhere."

I nod my head, retaining the knowledge of my wet appearance being caused by his brother, before slowly laying my back against the mattress. Gripping my panties, I take a quick, calming breath, before sliding them down my thighs and removing them, careful to keep my fresh, satanic-looking wound covered in the process.

"I've found it happens when I think about you." I raise onto my elbows again, cocking my head at him. "I get slippery down here. Slippery and wet. I think to ease the pain? Of..."

He tightens his jaw, hands curling into fists on his slacks, showcasing some need for restraint before slowly nodding his head, understanding exactly what I'm referring to without needing to hear me voice it.

"That makes sense," he agrees, shaking his head slightly, almost in disbelief. "It's insanely attractive."

I blush, turning my cheek to my shoulder and roll my lips inward.

"Have you ever...used anything?" His eyes divert to my sex before looking back into my eyes to gauge my reaction. "I mean, anything other than your fingers when you think about me?"

I shake my head no. "Just these."

I hold two of my fingers up before him and he peers at them dangerously, eyes narrowing and running his tongue over his teeth.

“These two specifically?”

I give him my best guilt-ridden eyes before nodding. Lust-filled, daring eyes peer back at me as he grabs for my hand. With his gaze set on mine, he brings the fingers to his mouth. Placing them on his tongue, he slowly sucks the length of them, his focus never leaving me. My clit instantly throbs with a heartbeat all its own, and chills travel up the length of my arm, directly to my core at the erotic move I wasn’t anticipating him to make.

Dropping my hand, he sits back on the bench again, apparently ready to watch what I do with those wet fingers. Already feeling the cool air of the room hit my dripping center, I release a soft sigh, calming myself to the best of my abilities before parting my thighs wide before him again.

With saucers for eyes, he leans forward in his seat.

“Heaven help me,” he whispers, peering up at me through his lashes, his hooded gaze trailing down to my exposed and dripping center. “You’re beautiful.”

I grind my back teeth at the sweet sentiment, not allowing it to penetrate my newfound steel exterior.

His eyes flutter up to my face again, soft and questioning. He wants to touch, but wonders where that line protecting his purity lies and whether he’s willing to cross it for me.

Propped up with one elbow now, I slide my fingers over my shaved sex, swollen and wet from already being used. My clit hums with arousal, simply at the thought.

“I’ve often wondered what you looked like,” I whisper, using my middle finger to rub circles over my clit. “I mean, I’ve felt it before.” Beneath his slacks, I see his erection. “That day in the kitchen. Along your thigh.”

He sits up taller, his shoulders drawing back, muscles stiffening at my words.

“I’ve imagined feeling it right here.” Dropping my head back against the bed, I push my finger deep inside my pussy, a breathy moan escaping me.

“Oh Briony,” he breathes. “Jesus, I can’t...I can’t.”

I continue fucking myself with my finger, legs spread before him, with one hand still holding that skirt across my thigh as I lift my hips to

meet the pleasure that's taking me hostage.

"Oh, God," I moan, swirling my finger in the mess that Aero left, feeling entirely aroused and ready to burst.

"I can't," he murmurs again.

Awaiting the touch of a hand that can't control itself anymore, I lie there with my finger deep within my sopping center, dead silence suddenly filling the room.

I prop my head up and see Saint sitting on the edge of his seat with his eyes closed and a pained expression on his face, breathing harshly through his lips. He rubs a hand down his face, but instead of the dark temptation that was previously emitting from his blue eyes, when we connect, there's a look of disappointment and disgust twisted within him.

"Saint," I whisper, sitting up abruptly and pulling my skirt down.

Fuck, I'm losing him.

"I-I'm sorry," I plead.

He shakes his head, refusing to look at me.

Shit.

"I crossed a line, Saint. I shouldn't have—"

He stands from the bench, heading towards the door of my room, but turns back towards me again, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He drops his hand, looking like he wants to say something, but shakes his head instead.

After a moment, he sighs, the frustration with himself evident. "I'm taking advantage of the fact that you're scared and lonely, and it's entirely wrong of me."

It's all falling apart.

"I should...I should go," he says, finally peering at me with remorse.

He will not go through with this. His morals are too strong. Stronger than mine ever were. I was naïve to think I could sway a man so easily with my sexuality. Especially one so deeply intertwined with the church and its teachings.

"No!" I say, standing, reaching out to place my hand on his forearm to stop his pacing. "Please, don't go. I'm sorry. I'm not in the right headspace either. Maybe we can just..." I sigh, my eyes darting wildly around the room. "Can we just talk? Just...talk?"

I'm grasping at straws here, needing to not fail for myself and Aero.

I look up at Saint's face when his hand grabs for mine. His mind is clearly running wild with decisions and indecisions. I've thrown him into a storm of thoughts, ideas, and images he can't unsee. He appears to be working out impossible theorems in his head at the moment.

"We can talk," he whispers, looking down at me and finally nodding.

"Please don't think differently of me now," I beg. "I don't want this to change—"

"Briony, stop." He grips my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "I'd never think any less of you."

His kind eyes find mine again, and his other hand cups the side of my face in a gentle caress. A caress that feels comforting and entirely too good. So good, I close my eyes and relish in it, allowing a sigh to escape my lungs. When I open them, I see that seriousness on his face again. That want. That endless craving of lustful need that just doesn't know where to go.

Leaning forward, he rests his forehead against mine, our eyes studying each other. His gaze falls to my lips before moving in slowly and pressing his lips to mine. The kiss is soft. It's caring. It's sensitive and loving. I open my mouth and he takes the cue, meeting my tongue with a gentle swipe of his. A moan flows from my throat into his mouth as we continue the soft, sensual kiss, his hand sliding down to hold my neck. But just as I'm sure we're making progress again, he pulls away, breathless.

"We're just trouble when we're together, aren't we?" he says, a wicked little glint in his expression.

I laugh softly along with him. *If you only knew.*

We walk back towards the edge of the bed, swiping my underwear from the floor before he helps me take a seat beside him.

"But I think that can be a good thing," he continues, seemingly determined. "It gives us something to work on for our ultimate goals. We can find ways to strengthen each other by resisting the urges that throw themselves before us." He grins, nudging his shoulder playfully into mine, holding out the panties saturated from my arousal and Aero's cum back to me. "Think of it as the ultimate test."

Inside I'm crumbling, not knowing how to turn this around, but on the outside, I'm smiling and nodding like a naïve idiot. I peer down at

the floor, my mind attempting to work out this puzzle before me.

I ruined this entirely. I couldn't tempt him the way I thought I could. I was so confident I could make this man sin with me, but I'd misjudged his strength. I reluctantly slip my legs through the soiled cotton, pulling them back in place beneath my skirt, hating that I love vile act.

"You know, I think you're right—"

"Briony." His voice interrupts me and I turn to face him.

But his eyes aren't locked on me. They're on my leg. My thigh, to be specific. The thigh with fresh blood smeared down it. The thigh with an arrow and the bottom of a crucifix, clearly visible.

"What is that?"

His hard gaze slowly trails from the wound until it finds mine, and I stiffen in place, holding my breath. My nerves are twisting in the pit of my gut as my nerves are set ablaze. He has an odd look about him. One that's cold, looking entirely deceived.

My lashes flutter. "I-I can explain..."

"What is that, Briony?" His tone is clipped, and it terrifies me.

My bottom lip quivers as I feel the pain of my betrayal. He knows this was a setup. I can feel it in my bones. There's no way he couldn't.

"You finally found my masterpiece."

The voice is deep and familiar and cuts through the silence like a knife, making my heart pang in my chest like a caged animal seeking freedom.

Saint stands immediately, and in a surprising move, pulls me up and off the bed, shoving me behind him. I peer around his arm to see those piercing hazel eyes beneath the black mask, Aero's shirtless form covered in those endless marks and scars. Mound of muscle that look tense and taut, as if he's had a hard time restraining himself, are dressed in nothing but the black pants and combat boots he was wearing earlier. His lengthy frame grows on us with every abominable step he takes.

Saint holds me back, his chest heaving in terror at the presence of an unknown man lurking in the corners of my room.

"It's him," he whispers to himself.

Aero's uneven smirk pulls at his lips through the mouth hole of the mask.

“It’s me.” He pauses in place before us. “But who is him? I’m curious to find out.”

He cocks his head to the side before flipping a butterfly knife open in his hand.

My eyes dart nervously between the two of them. The tension is thick as mud and the room feels as if the familiar walls are caging us in.

The two of them, in the same room, finally facing off.

“Truthfully, it doesn’t matter what you’ve been told,” Aero says casually, flipping the sharp blade with a quick wrist, making a smooth motion with the knife. “You wouldn’t believe me for a second if I gave it to you straight.” He sneers, confidence radiating from his cold, dark eyes.

Saint stands tall before me, a hand reaching back, holding me to him protectively.

“It’s beside the point. Truths. Lies. Who we are beneath our masks...” Aero continues, still toying with the knife, flipping the blade with his skilled fingers. “What matters now is that you do what you’re told.”

I swallow thickly, my nerves weakening my knees, knowing exactly where this is going. He found the angle. He solved my puzzle, saving my dignity. Aero is taking back his control.

“What do you want with her? He cut you?!” Saint directs the question at me, keeping his eyes on the masked man before him.

I’m in shock, realizing Saint thinks I’m innocent in this situation. He sees me as acting as a hostage to the demon himself when in reality, this was all my devilish plan.

“What do you want from us?” Saint asks, “My father can give you anything.”

My mouth drops open and Aero stills in place. An eerie shift runs through my bones at the mention of their father. He brings a fist to his jaw, cracking his neck both ways before turning his glare on Saint again.

With little thought, Aero throws his blade at Saint, just barely missing his head and mine as it flies between us. I scream, crouching to the floor, gripping the sides of my head as Saint dodges the knife, the blade sticking into the wall behind us.

“*Our* father...“ Aero’s dangerously rough tone pierces my ears, and I tremble in its presence. Saint slowly stands straight again, helping me up, still holding me to his back as Aero takes a step towards us. “...who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name,” he continues, and I suck in a breath of oxygen, clawing at the depleting air around me.

“Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done.” He pulls a gun from the back of his pants, causing Saint to stiffen, before scratching the side of his mask-covered head with it, casually approaching us. “On earth as it is in Heaven.”

“What do you want from us?!” Saint demands.

“It’s not about what I *want.*“ Aero lifts the gun, placing it on Saint’s temple. Saint stills in place, his hand tightening around my wrist, and I can practically smell the fear seeping from his pores. “It’s about what I *need.*”

“And right now...” Aero’s gun slowly shifts until it’s pointed at me behind him.

He gives me a haunting grin beneath the mask, his eyes twinkling with the hateful revenge he’s been harboring all these years. The pain of his entire childhood, present in the excitement of the fear and control unraveling before him. Cold. Ruthless. Entirely terrifying. I’m losing the man I thought I knew to the darkness that owns him.

“Right now, I need you to fuck her.”

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BRONX

“What?!” Saint scoffs, shaking his head. “No. Absolutely not. You’re crazy!”

Aero hasn’t stopped glaring at me beneath his mask, and the chills it’s creating have my body trembling with the unknown. His hard eyes speak to me, as they always do, but their message just isn’t clear.

This was my idea. My plan. I signed up for this, but something in my gut twists with the fear of deception. That I’m still only a piece in his game of chess. Just another pawn in his sick, twisted game of revenge.

It couldn’t be.

“He’s using us,” Saint says to himself. “This sick man is using us to ruin the church.”

He’s not entirely wrong in his statement. I assisted with that.

“He was right about you,” Saint seethes, and I clutch onto his forearm that’s still reaching back to protect me.

The statement makes Aero cock his head in interest.

“I heard them talk of you. Of your plight to destroy Christianity and those who believe,” he spats. “You’re a disgrace. A fallen soul that needs saving.”

“Wow,” Aero utters sarcastically. “Destroy all of Christianity? Simply impressive that you’d assume I have that kind of power.” He scoffs to himself, dropping the gun to his side. “But you’re wrong about one thing.”

Aero grabs Saint’s shirt by the middle of the chest, throwing him back on the bed before turning and taking a casual seat on the bench. He rests his elbows on my vanity behind him, the gun dangling from his fingers.

“My soul was ripped from me long ago. Saving is a ghost of an idea lost into the dark abyss.”

Saint freezes in horror as his eyes peer over at me. He gives me a sorrowful look, one that emits the regret of what this will do to me. Selflessness is all I see.

“Please,” I beg, turning my focus to Aero. “We can’t do this. It isn’t right.”

I’m referring to us as the ‘*we’* here, begging him to pick up on the message I’m throwing at him. I feel he’s wrong about Saint. And maybe he is and knows it. Maybe his overall goal of destroying the

chosen son has been his mission all along. Vengeance for a life he saw handed to Saint from the shadows.

There are ways to achieve revenge, but not by destroying the innocent. Whether Aero believes in Christianity or not, I still have my own morals as a decent human that I can't rid myself of.

Aero runs his free hand down his abdomen, nails trailing his scars as if they suddenly itch with memories of his past.

"You see, Saint, sex doesn't destroy Christianity," he says, ignoring me entirely, turning his hard glare on him. "Sex is natural. It's genetically programmed into us as a biological motivator in which we live our everyday lives. It's pleasurable, organic, and a primal need our bodies constantly seek, whether or not you're aware. You fight it because you're told to. For no other reason than the idea of control. Control of the masses."

"Fornication is a sin—"

"Sex doesn't destroy Christianity," Aero repeats calmly but with annoyance, interrupting Saint entirely. "Men do."

Saint's eyes narrow, both of their heated gazes burning a hole through the other.

"So you're going to fuck her like you've been imagining, and show your father who you truly are; a man with no attachments other than the eternal love for his God alone. You are going to use her, take from her, and throw her away as planned. Just as *he* did with his mistress. Just as they all do when the time comes for them to prove themselves."

Bile rises in my throat at his statement.

Saint shakes his head, his nostrils flaring. Standing from the bed, he takes a step towards Aero, and I suck in a breath of terror.

"You think you can scare me with these threats? What are you going to do? Shoot me? Kill me? Bury me in the dirt? You think I'm not ready to die for my religion?!"

He's standing up to Aero, unknowing of the craziness that sits casually before him.

Aero lazily tosses his head towards me, a eerie smirk on his face like he holds some sort of secret. Like he's cluing me into the pieces of the puzzle he's forming.

“You may be ready to risk your ignorant, privileged, irrelevant little life for another man’s rules, but are you willing to allow her to die because of it?”

Saint doesn’t answer, and Aero’s knowing eyes narrow at him.

“The ultimate sacrifice. The ultimate test. He was preparing you for this. The brick. The writings on the wall...”

My stomach churns, my heart raging with fear only the dead silence of this room could create. Both men stare at each other. Unspoken words flirt between their gazes, and I’m left feeling utterly dazed in their presence. Could Saint truly know who his father is?

“Are you aware of what she’s been doing behind closed doors?” Aero tips his head.

My mind swirls with thoughts of ultimate betrayal and deception as my nausea tears away at me.

“Trust me, the blackmail was only the tip of the iceberg.”

Saint stares at him with betrayal and uncertainty dancing dangerously together in his eyes. Aero’s smirk deepens at the realization.

“She’s no *Saint*,” he gloats humorously. “I assure you. Her devious little mind surprised even me, the devil himself.”

“You’re lying,” Saint retorts. “She had nothing to do with that!”

“No? Why wouldn’t the only female Magnus Princeps want to bring down her competition? Your father knows it. You know it. Everyone sees it. She’s always desired and gotten off on being above you. Above your religion. Above your beliefs.”

Saint listens intently, staring into Aero’s eyes that burn with deviance.

“Maybe if you knew the truth, you’d think differently of your sweet, innocent little church girl. Maybe your father is testing your obsession with the only stain meant to ruin you. You thought you could really do this on your own? You thought Callum Westwood was going to let his son take matters into his own hands when he developed a school-boy crush on the woman meant to destroy the sacred structure of the church?”

Realization hits me then, that I don’t know anything for certain anymore. I’m blind to these twisted endeavors. Was I entirely wrong

about Saint and his motives? My heart threatens failure with how hard it's pounding within my chest.

Aero stands from his seat, making his way over to my nightstand. Opening the drawer, he removes my rosary, tossing it on the floor out of reach of Saint. His perplexed expression rises from the floor and finds Aero's. A simple gun pointed at his head has Saint bending down to retrieve it.

"Tie her to the bed," Aero demands.

Saint's eyes land on mine.

Aero scratches the side of his head again with the barrel of the gun and his taut abdomen flexes, highlighting the evidence of our matching wounds, his still oozing blood down his flesh.

"I'm not a man of much patience. Fucking do it. Now."

I close my eyes tightly, nodding slightly. Walking towards the bed, I approach Saint. I place my palm on his shaking hand holding the rosary, and our eyes connect.

"I'm scared," I whisper truthfully.

Saint tries to read my gaze, but I already feel him faltering, slipping away.

"Just do what he says," I plead. "He's a dangerous man."

The corners of his eyes crease with his growing uncertainty. I can tell he's racking his brain for the answers, for a way out of this, but Aero's entirely too calculated. There isn't a plot twist he hasn't already imagined.

"On the fucking bed!" he yells behind us, causing me to jump.

The beads of the rosary sink into the tendons of my wrists, causing an uncomfortable pain. Aero has Saint use his own rosary for my other wrist, and one of my legs is tied down with Saint's belt. His sorrowful eyes keep averting my gaze as he follows Aero's orders with the gun pointed at him from afar.

Once I'm secured in place, Aero sits back in the corner of the room, watching closely.

I can't pick up the emotions he's emitting. He's become a wall of absent art, depicting nothing but deep cracks from years of abuse as he sits casually orchestrating the downfall, his eyes dark and unforgiving.

I don't know who he is anymore.

Maybe I never knew him.

Or maybe…

Maybe I need to remember the core of who I am. A woman whose past is also a cracked image of perfection burdened by lies. A woman who is so much more than just another stepping stone for yet another man. A woman who stands strong and tall against those that berate, deny, and hold back.

A woman who still holds strong in her faith.

Faith in the man that's routinely forced her to save herself.

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BRONX

“Rip her shirt open,” Aero’s rough voice demands from his seat.

Saint does as he’s told, grabbing the edge and ripping open my uniformed shirt. Buttons scatter, exposing my white bra, the mounds of breasts nearly slipping over the tightly bound lace. My lip quivers as I blow out a breath, awaiting the next command while I cycle through the knowledge I’ve recently come upon, trying to make sense of everything.

The church tried to end me. Not once. Twice. Aero has killed men meant to harm me, his blackmail having forced me to rely solely on him while he made it his mission to force me to witness the bishop’s sexual assault of a child, exposing the truth of the men who proclaim their holiness.

Aero may have a heart full of vengeance over his own losses, but what of mine? I don’t even know where my story begins. A past, like his, torn and twisted for someone else’s benefit. My story gives me the strength I need. For myself and no one else.

The only thing I can’t stop questioning is where Saint lies in all of this.

“Pull down that flimsy bra.”

I raise my chin, the restraints pulling tight as I offer my chest up to him. Saint’s fingers fumble, gripping the lace and peeling the cotton cups down to expose my bare breasts. The straps are snug against my shoulders, the pressure of the bra beneath my breasts squeezing them tightly. My nipples harden in the cool air of the room as two sets of eyes focus on them.

I feel cheap. Worthless. An object to be used for sexual satisfaction alone, and yet, there’s an immense power lining that. It’s everything I’ve become thirsty for. Quenching the dark parts of myself I’d never have discovered had it not been for Aero. He quite literally trained me for this moment.

Slowly, Saint’s tongue drags across his bottom lip before he closes his eyes tightly, probably mentally scolding himself for looking.

“Lift her skirt and tear those useless fucking panties.”

Saint sighs. He’s given up entirely, doing whatever he needs to ensure he meets the demands of the man in control. Aero’s entirely in his head, manipulating him.

He does as he's told, ripping the soiled underwear near my hip, dragging it down my free leg, and tossing it to the side. It brushes past my clit, and the air sweeps against my wet center. I don't want to enjoy this, but that disturbing sexual side of myself is resurfacing.

Unsure of where this is going next, I stare up at Saint above me, gauging him for some sort of reaction. I feel his indifference. It appears he isn't sure who to trust either as he pushes my skirt up my abdomen, eyeing my center again like a lost desert man thirsting for a drink.

"Grab the crucifix from the wall." Aero's tone is dark and demanding.

Saint's eyes widen slightly as he turns his gaze to Aero in disbelief. My pulse rages in my neck, the heavy thumping nearly drowning out my hearing.

He can't be serious.

I peer at Aero in the corner, shooting him a glare at the dishonorable demand, but his eyes are focused on Saint, studying his hands and his actions like a hawk as he grabs the crucifix from its place on my wall.

He's a ruthless madman. The symbolic nature of the cross means nothing to him. Just another foreign object with an unnecessary weight of useless meaning attached to it, just like organized religion.

My heart breaks in my chest as I gaze desperately into his eyes, wishing they'd focus on mine. Wishing that the man who began accepting my gentle love and embrace, the man who said what we had together was everything, the man that would rather die than live in a world without his little doll, would reappear. Tears flood my eyes at his distant presence as Saint hovers over my tied body, the crucifix in hand.

"Trail her body, using your God to touch her in all her achingly deceitful places," Aero instructs, his tone entirely indifferent. "Cleanse her of the filth she's ultimately succumbed to."

Another loophole. Clever plan from an all too clever man.

"A cleansing," Saint whispers to himself, vacant in his gaze.

He trails the black metal cross down my neck with agonizing slowness. The cold, smooth metal makes a tingly trail of goosebumps surface along the center of my chest and between my breasts, and

Saint's eyes drink me in. The cross trails down my abdomen, finding my navel, where he circles it softly. My body ignites like wildfire stemming from the base of my spine at the idea of the crude act Aero is having him commit.

"The dirty bitch loves it," Aero comments, making my clit hum in regretful approval.

I hate that I love the filth that he spews. I hate that he owns my body with his degradation. It comes to life with his sick and twisted words. He makes me feel filthy and deranged, hating myself for embracing the pleasure that comes with his type of love.

Tears run down my face as I fight the sensations, angry at myself for a lifetime of fighting the urges that are entirely natural to me. I'm a human, run by hormones with a mind that constantly screams at me, telling me it's wrong. It's wrong to feel pleasure.

But said pleasure outweighs my mind as my body primes itself for more. The sensations become uncontrolled and insatiable as I lie tied down at their mercy. The need to feed my urges, never more present, because I've become immune to the voices that once screamed impurity.

That sick love is the kind I now inevitably crave.

Saint brushes the end of the six-inch, rounded cross against my clit and my hips lift off the bed, my body pulling against my restraints as a strangled moan leaves my throat.

"There she is," Aero hums from afar. "My mad little minx. Coming to life again, are we?"

I peer into the dark corner at him, and demonic eyes find mine. His hand is gripping and releasing the gun methodically, as if to calm himself.

He's calming himself.

Calming himself from the jealous rage burning within him.

Even the slightest sight of something so confirming helps me to relax into this, knowing I haven't lost him to the darkness entirely.

Saint continues working the end of the cool metal against my slit, gazing into my eyes, gauging my reaction as his breathing changes.

I shouldn't be turned on. This shouldn't have my lower abdomen tightening and my mouth watering for more. I shouldn't be enjoying something so horrifically vile and demeaning. But I am.

“Nice gentle circles, just like that,” Aero instructs as Saint’s eyes connect with mine. “Gets her willing to part those whorish thighs, opening that sweet, sloppy cunt every time.”

I throw my head back as the metal rolls over my clit again, the torture, tease, and inability to touch myself at his dirty words, sending me spiraling as my man looks on from afar. Tightly bound ecstasy builds beneath my flesh and begs for release.

Saint leans forward and licks a stray tear that’s unknowingly rolled down my cheek. His forehead rests against me before his lips brush against mine, almost more for his own pleasure, while his wrist rotates expertly, pleasing me with the tip of the cross.

Aero stands abruptly, his arm straightened, pointing the gun at Saint’s back. “Don’t you fucking kiss her!”

My stomach tightens and my pussy clenches at the sudden jealous outburst, filling me with dirty desire while simultaneously fearing for my life. Two sides of the very same coin. Two emotions, arousal and fear, so deeply intertwined into my sexual being like the thorny vines of my bloomed rose.

Saint stalls at the outburst before continuing to roll the crucifix slowly over my bundle of nerves again. I feel the feathering of his breath over my lips, and the sensation warms me.

Licking my lips, my hips roll forward of their own accord, somehow seeking that brief flash of pleasure I desperately crave.

“You want him to fuck you with it, baby?” Aero asks from his position against the wall, his head tipped back as he watches us through his lashes. “You need that dirty little cunt filled with something, don’t you? Where’s the shame, huh?”

Aero’s dark jeans showcase the massive bulge from his erection straining against the fabric at the show before him, even if the idea displeases him. Saint swells against my thigh, reluctantly enjoying this, too, and I’m wet and eager as hell from the entire twisted interaction.

“Do it,” he demands through gritted teeth. “Slide it into her wet little pussy.”

Saint rests the tip of the crucifix against my aching hole, slowly pushing it in as my hips open wide and my gaze locks on Aero. Another blissful tear falls down my face and I groan deeply, feeling

myself tighten around the symbol of faith. He narrows his eyes to slits, shaking his head at me once.

A warning not to enjoy this? An order not to break? I can't be sure.

But sensations are building out of my control. The feeling of being tied up so disturbingly brutal while gentle caresses flick against my swollen clit builds that sinful ache for this penetration. It doesn't help that both men are painfully hard and ready to burst alongside me.

"Does it feel okay?" Saint whispers, still hovering above me, his eyes glossed over with a disturbing look of lust.

His sentiments send me whirling again, unable to process his true intentions.

I lick my lips, attempting to clear my head. "Yeah. Yeah, it feels..." I swallow, careful of my words, knowing Aero is listening closely. "It doesn't hurt," I reply breathlessly.

"Good girl, Briony," Aero interrupts from afar, cocking his gun. "Take your punishments like the slut you are." He runs his thumb across his bottom lip with his other hand as he watches me take the cross. "Now pull her hair," he instructs.

Saint grips my hair from under me and pulls gently, tipping my head back. But it's not good enough for him.

"Harder!" Aero screams, and we both flinch. "Pull her fucking hair and make it hurt!"

He tightens his hold, yanking it roughly, causing me to cry out and my bare breasts to bounce between us as my back arches. Heat throbs between my thighs at the ruthlessness. Saint muffles his groan by biting his bottom lip, pressing his hips into me, his hungry cock rubbing roughly against my thigh beneath his slacks.

"Fuck her with your symbol of faith," Aero demands, the anger rising in his once monotone and steady voice. "Take her filth from her like the vile little sinner she is, then smear her face with it."

Saint listens to his words, allowing them to penetrate his mind. His eyes harden, and the once soft and sympathetic gaze shifts into something much more defiant. Something much darker. Something with a purpose.

"Punish her for enjoying this when she shouldn't."

Loophole.

Saint stares down at my exposed flesh, eyes dilated and wild as he pushes the rounded end of the crucifix deeper into my slick center, my pussy craving something thicker to fill me as it tightens and contracts around the bulbous tip of the foreign object. My lips part and a husky moan escapes me when his fingers run from where the end of the cross disappears up to my swollen clit, smearing my arousal.

Don't come. Please, don't come. I grit my molars, warding off the pleasure.

"This wanton whore, just pleading for more with her moans." He scoffs. "She's enjoying this." Aero warns, his head tipped back against the wall with a dangerous look in his gaze, his lips tight with fury. "Don't let her gain any satisfaction from it. This is taking."

Saint's jaw clenches.

"Lewd and lascivious. She's been offering herself up for the elders. Persuading their sexual desires with her tight little body, making them succumb to their demons," Aero continues. "Punish her. Punish her for taking their purity like the little deviless she is."

He's feeding Saint the same mind-fucks that were fed to him, utilizing redemption as a form of justifying the sexual abuse.

Anger rises in Saint's neck, the redness spreading to his cheeks as his crystal blue eyes glare in disbelief, almost hypnotized by the masked man in the corner. He reaches his shaking hand up and grips my breast, his fingers gliding along my nipple and pulling the sensitive flesh until it stretches out painfully before he releases it. I gasp loudly as the other aches for that same torture almost immediately.

"She's been defying the institution. Working her way into the crevices to solidify her place among you, only to tear you down from the inside."

Saint's neck holds nothing but tension as he slaps my breast at Aero's command. I cry out, making the sound echo throughout the room. His brows lower and he breathes hard through his nostrils before madness takes him and he grips my breast in his palm. Leaning down, he takes me into his mouth.

Aero watches with a rabid expression. Fiery anger beneath the surface of a man trained to be cool and collected. He wants nothing

more than to murder this man before him. I can just barely see the shadow of chaotic rage beneath his expression.

Saint tears into my soft flesh with his teeth before his tongue lashes at my nipple, teasing me with the pain.

“Your father was lying to the public to protect you. He was lying about me. My purpose has always been to bring the dark to light. To finally erase that eternal stain of condemnation. Your beloved stain.”

Saint’s ears perk up at the words and his face glazes over like a man charmed in a trance. *Beloved stain.*

“Fuck the whore out of her. Show her she can’t win. Take her pleasure and destroy her by smearing her with the Lord. Force the Holy Spirit into her being with your body,” Aero mutters methodically, speaking directly to the mind of a man trained in redemption.

Anger permeates the kindness Saint once held as he absorbs the words of a man broken by the sins the men in power commit. His eyes rim with redness as he sits upright abruptly, glaring at me with pure disgust. He slides the cross out of me, smearing my arousal across my mouth before tossing it onto my chest. Unbuckling his pants, he pulls the zipper quickly and lowers the waistband, releasing himself.

I silently gasp at the stark difference before me. Never have I seen anything like it. It’s large in both size and length, similar to Aero, but it’s cloaked in extra skin. Whereas Aero’s is bare and bulbous with his jewelry adorning it like a crowned king, Saint is clearly uncircumcised like the rest of the men of our faith.

Aero hits the gun against his own temple, resting it on his forehead, his face tight and pained in an attempt to calm his raging mind, before pointing it at the back of Saint’s head. He watches Saint with a fiery gaze, determined to end him with a quick pull of the trigger, taking matters into his own hands.

His eyes find mine beneath Saint, and I silently plead with him. I beg him to do the one thing he has spent a lifetime rejecting.

I beg him to have faith.

Before I can even get my mind wrapped around what’s happening, I look down, seeing Saint stroking his engorged dick, bracing himself with one arm before he enters me.

The soft, bare skin of the head of Saint's cock pushes through my opening before the fullness reaches me. He slides in deep and stills, mouth ajar; panting through his madness. Saint lies his weight down above me, pulsating inside of my wet center. My mouth drops open in shock as he pulls back a few inches, then thrusts his hips, pushing his hard shaft deeper.

My pussy clamps around his girth and a deep, pained moan leaves my throat as pleasure from the friction of Saint's cock massages my walls. I bite down on the corner of my lip to stay silent.

"Ah, Christ," Saint whimpers.

With his free hand, he grips under my knee, lifting my untied leg up and onto his shoulder as he drives in deeper until his heavy balls lie flush against my ass. My eyelids grow heavy and my eyes threaten to roll back in my head when the sparks at the base of my spine ignite at the long, steady strokes deep within me.

Aero senses my pleasure. He knows my faces. Feels everything that I'm feeling, because we are of the same matter. His jealousy is taking a back seat as he instructs Saint, owning the interaction, controlling the scenario.

"That's it. Fuck the whore out of her," he repeats.

His eyes narrow into dangerous slits as he rips the mask from his face, tossing it to the floor. His black hair falls sloppily onto his forehead, losing his anonymity entirely.

Worry grips me at his need to see this, even as my dirty fire continues to burn deep. Saint pulls back before rocking his hips to meet mine rhythmically, pushing his long, slick cock deep. His lower abdomen, lined with the angry veins flooding his firm cock with blood, rubs against my wet clit, causing little bolts of pleasure to sweep through me every time we connect.

"It feels…ah, shit, it feels so good," Saint groans, his voice cracking as he tries to talk.

He steadily finds his rhythm, his grunts filling the room as he becomes lost in our wet bodies slapping together while Aero remains locked in place, determination flooding his maddening expression.

"Don't you fucking come," he mouths to me, my eyes still trained on him.

I'm spinning, the pounding in my head drowning out the surrounding sound. Saint may be deep inside me, but he can never reach the depths of Aero. Aero has slipped into my soul. The makeup of who I am. He's become part of my being, my heart, my life...my love.

"Oh, shit," Saint groans again, pulling my attention back to him.

I peer down at where we connect as his dick stirs his brother's cum within my swollen pussy, my mess of arousal coating his entire groin.

Fuck. That. Right there. That spot he's hitting.

"I'm close," he rushes, slamming into me.

A newfound terror hits me and my eyes shift to the vacant corner. Dark and empty, it lies. My masked man, gone entirely.

Madness, along with a lifetime of religiously motivated sacrifices, controls Saint now. A side I've never seen of him. A purpose he feels needs fulfilling. A purpose that may have been part of his plan all along.

He can't finish. I can't let him finish.

My pills. My birth control. I haven't been taking it.

I pull against my restraints, tugging desperately to free myself while Saint continues to fuck me harder and harder, nearing his end. Closing my eyes, I nearly accept my fate; nearly fall to another man set to ruin me. Until I feel the sharpened edge of a tiny blade licking my fingertips.

My eyes spring open, but the man I'd assumed would save me is doing no such thing. He's cursing to himself at the window, peering down at something or someone outside, typing quickly on a cellphone now in his hand.

But I don't need him to save me.

He's trained me to save myself.

With careful fingers, I grip the scalpel blade from the bedpost where he planted it. Twisting my wrist painfully, I slice the string of the rosary as Saint remains lost in the satisfaction of his unknowing demise. With my free hand, I hold the blade up to his neck before he can finish. He pauses in place, planted firmly within me as his lips part, and he sucks in a terrified breath.

"Briony," he says breathlessly before looking down at the place we're connected. "No." He shakes his head, pulling out of me. His

stiff, wet cock bobs between us as he sits back on his heels, burying his face in his hands. “No. What have I done to myself?”

To myself?

Panic floods his wilted form as Aero’s deep voice from the corner purrs, “You sinned.”

Aero steps away from the window, a satisfied grin sliding across his face at Saint’s disconcerting tone. Saint’s kind blue eyes now hold an unfamiliar weight to them as he studies me in silent anger. Seconds later, there’s a loud commotion coming from downstairs before the door behind us bursts open. Saint is torn from me and thrown to the floor, his pants still pulled down to his thighs. I’m staring with shock and awe, my legs crossed the best they can be as I pull my skirt back down with my free hand and adjust my bra back over my breasts to cover myself.

But the man who saved me isn’t the one I’d assumed it would be. The man who is currently pummeling Saint’s face into the wooden floor of my room is the last one I was expecting to see.

Baret.

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HERO

“What the fuck were you doing to her?!”

Baret lands another punch to Saint’s jaw, sending it snapping to the side and the bright red blood of his split lip to splatter across the wood floor, giving my brother dearest everything I’ve been dying to.

“You sick bastard!” he yells again, sending a knee into his abdomen.

I race to Briony, helping to untie the belt still wrapped around her ankle while they continue to wrestle on the floor. Saint lands a punch to Baret’s face, causing his nose to crack. Briony is trembling with terror, attempting to steady her breaths, yet frightened by the unknown as she rubs her red and raw little wrists.

I was waiting for him to show up after planning the accidental intrusion all along. When I texted him from Briony’s phone stating that Saint was there at the house with her alone, acting strange, she was still entertaining him downstairs. I’d been waiting for him to show up and put a stop to the assault after gaining the footage we needed, knowing her cry for help would have him running.

He may not be her blood, but he’s grown up with her. Bonded the way true family does. He cares for her like a brother should, and even if I’d rather have her only depending on me in this life, Baret is essential for the plan. She needs someone else close to her on the inside when I’m gone.

Nox was right. The masked man couldn’t stay hidden forever. One way or another, my truth was bound to be exposed. I’ve come this far staying in the shadows, but secrets can’t stay buried forever. Not when men like my father, Alastor, and the bishop still walk this earth.

Briony instinctively clings to me, but I push her off, tossing her hands to the floor. Not because I don’t want her touch this time, but because new eyes are watching.

My beautiful doll, dark in her revenge and twisted ideas. She’d had Saint in her grasp. Taunting and teasing with her gorgeous beauty and naïve, faked innocence. But the truth of the man before her was far from her knowledge. She had no idea of his own devious plans, nor would she believe me if I told her.

Some things need to be discovered for yourself so you can form your own truths around them, similar to the secrets behind the closed doors of the bishop’s office.

Saint wasn't who she thought he was. So I did what I needed to do and intervened the best way I saw fit. Together, we made it happen. Together, we laid the blueprint for the destruction of the institution. Together, we would bring them down.

What I wasn't planning were the men on the heels of Baret, ready to shut this entire production down. Saint, the ultimate manipulator, had backup on standby.

"It wasn't me!" Saint grunts, sending another fist into Baret's face in retaliation.

I stand there casually watching the men duke it out, knocking into Briony's dresser in the process and sending her framed photos and perfumes crashing onto the floor while I brace myself for the ultimate confrontation. The one I hear making its way up the stairs.

Baret rolls over Saint, crunching over the broken glass, and grabs his shirt with one hand. Straddling him, he sends another blow to his face. Crimson-colored blood stains the bright white uniform of the man thought to be pure and holy, but his sainthood is dissolving.

"I fucking saw you, you bitch!"

"You didn't see anything." The familiar, deep, velvety tone rings out from the hallway, making my blood boil on command.

Baret snaps his head up, his fist still gripping Saint's torn uniform, both men panting with the evidence of their brawl actively leaking from their faces. Briony's eyes widen in horror at the sudden intrusion as she scrambles from the bed, standing before me as if to protect me.

Fuck, the things I'd do for this woman.

Images of abdomens being torn and blood-curdling cries flood my mind, making my jaw tighten with urges beyond my control.

It's adorable that Briony thinks she can actually save me. But I know better than anyone that this is where it ends. This is my sacrifice for my queen. I lay my cold, departed heart out on that table, hoping she has the strength to revive it. My final test for her.

Callum Westwood casually strides into the room breathing an air of confidence he doesn't deserve to own, three of his hound-men behind him, and his hands in the pockets of his slacks with a slim fit vest over a button-up shirt. He runs a hand through his thick dark locks, pushing them back in line with the rest of his entire pretentious

look. His eyes quickly lock with mine and it's like peering into an aged mirror.

One without the unfortunate reflection of scars and pain I've endured. The broken, tattered mess that makes me everything I am in this life I've been surviving on my own.

Saint scatters away from Baret to the feet of his father, gripping his pant leg like a fucking dog.

"Fix your pants," he demands to his son, never tearing his eyes off mine.

Baret's eyes wander from Cal to me and back, his jaw practically on the floor beneath him, the uncanny resemblance making a clear statement all its own.

"Saint?" Briony calls out, staring oddly at Cal with her tone shaky and torn. "What is your father doing in my house?"

He won't even look her in the eye, just continues staring down at the floor, still catching his breath from the fight as his shirt lies open and bloodied, looking every bit as pathetic as he is.

"What is your father doing in my house, Saint?!" Briony yells, her fist clenching as the coals within her light into the flames she's always contained.

"A true hero." Cal casually leans against the door frame, his pompous stature infuriating me with his head tipped back and his wrinkled smirking in place.

"Aero, run. Please," Briony whispers breathlessly through gritted teeth before me. "Run."

She's fucking crazier than I thought if she really expects me to run. I'd never leave her. Never. Not as long as air fills these lungs.

I gently squeeze her little hand in mine before roughly twisting her arm back, causing her to arch her back and cry out as the barrel of my gun rests against her temple.

"No! Saint was raping her! He...he had her tied to the bed! A...a crucifix, oh my God," Baret shakes his head, raking his hands down his face.

"I think you're confused, son," Cal says confidently. He grips the back of Saint's shirt, pulling him up to a standing position next to him. Saint stumbles to his side with a broken look about him. "This man's a

hero. Saved young Briony, here from this criminal lurking the streets, brutally torturing those of the faith."

I cock my head to the side, running my tongue along my teeth. I know this man, and I know exactly how he operates, which is working well for me.

"It wasn't him that was torturing!" Baret yells, standing. "It was Saint!" He points to Saint, who gazes back at him, fear lining his posture. "He had her tied to the bed. He raped her! You stupid fuck!"

Baret charges for Saint when one of the bodyguards pulls a gun on him, causing him to take a step back with his hands raised. He's a big guy, muscular in his own right, with his football-like build matching his all-American-blonde-hero look, but Baret brought fists to a gunfight.

"As I said," Cal repeats from behind the guard. "I think you're confused as to what you saw."

Baret glares at Cal, then stares at the gun pointed at him before his gaze finds Briony again.

She must be pleading with her eyes enough to have him letting out an exasperated sigh and reluctantly standing down. She's far too intelligent for the likes of these men. Briony's piecing the puzzle I've formulated together, allowing it all to fall into place, understanding my reasons for being every bit the villain in this story. I had to play my part. There can only be one.

"I must've been confused," Baret recites blandly, the fury in his expression not reaching his tone.

Cal smiles, the creases of his tanned face contorting into the diabolical grin of a man who's smiled one too many times in the face of adversity. A smile that screams superiority and entitlement.

He tosses his arm around Saint, patting a hand on his chest. "Proud of you, son. You finally caught him. And just in time. She could've been hurt." He nods his head at Briony and her cheeks flush with anger. "She owes you her life." The sentence holds so much underlying weight. A marriage of convenience to a member of the congregation. A man of their choosing. An official lock and chain to the woman they've always needed to control and detain.

I eye the three massive bodyguards behind Cal.

I've taken on more. Not as big, but still, fuck, I could end at least two of them if I hadn't thrown my blade into the wall in a mad fit of

rage.

“Let her go,” Cal calls out casually. “It’s alright Briony. You’re safe now.”

Briony all but scoffs at him.

You could hear a pin drop with the way the silence fills the room. The only sound is the echo of a floorboard cracking beneath one of Cal’s bodyguards as he shifts uncomfortably on his feet, all of us waiting for someone else to move.

The eerie stillness is almost deafening. Briony’s finger rubs softly against mine behind her back, the stroke against my flesh sending a distinct sensation through me. Not one of pain. Not one of an ugly past. But a sensation that connects heartstrings, bonding her soul to mine.

I drop the gun from her temple, tossing it onto the wood floor with a dramatic thud before pushing her into the arms of Baret. And it’s on.

A piercing cry stings my ears, making its way deep into my blood. The same blood pumping through my veins, filling my raging muscles as I take a swipe at one of the approaching men. I put up the best fight I can, knocking one man to the floor, tearing through the flesh of another with my hidden switchblade, and successfully stabbing another in the thigh, before I’m simply overpowered.

“Teach him. Show him what happens when you fuck with the powers that be,” Cal murmurs before turning and leaving the room with Saint in tow.

They grip my arms, pushing me to my knees as they take turns punching me. I laugh like a madman in their faces, spitting at their attempts to ruin me, even as my eye swells and my wet hair slaps across my forehead, blood pouring from my face.

They desperately needed a villain, and now I gave them one.

The last sight I see before my lights go out is Baret’s arms wrapped around a screaming Briony, clinging to the door frame with a white-knuckled grasp. Her fingers slip off the wooden frame one by one until she’s pulled from my sight.

My doll.

My queen.

My everything.

I’ve done everything her pleading eyes asked. I’ve put my entire forgotten faith in the only one who’s ever seen me for who I am. Someone worthy of everything they’ve stripped me of.

I’ve given myself over to save her. My fate now rests entirely in the hands of the only one I’ve ever loved.

And I haven’t even had the chance to let her know.

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BRONX

My heart is ripped from my chest. The bloody, beating organ lies before me, thumping and bleeding out as I feel it tearing into pieces with every strike to his face. A hole resides where it once sat, aching with an internal torture I've never known as Baret drags me from the scene.

I'm already lost without him.

After witnessing the bodyguards take the consciousness from him, they tied him up, dragging his limp and bleeding body across my living room floor before my eyes, and into the awaiting vehicle.

He's alive. They want him alive.

I had to keep reminding myself of this fact as I watched on in horror, clutching to Baret's shirt while tears flooded my vision and one of the guards stood watch.

He sacrificed himself as the villain they wanted him to be so he could spare me time. A beneficial story, as Aero knows well, goes a long way in this world of looking good on paper for the public. A chess move for those who play the grimy game of politics. Saint, the hero who saved the sweet innocent Briony from a despicable act of violence in her own home. It was the perfect setup. The attention, the blame, the accusations, it all had a purpose. It all came to a point.

Callum Westwood had everything under control and in his back pocket.

Or so he thought.

"You came for me." I cling to Baret, holding his tattered and torn college shirt in my grasp, his dried blood smeared across the heathered gray.

"As soon as I saw that message, I knew. I just fucking knew something was off. I don't trust these people." He shakes his head, glaring towards Cal as he continues in a whisper, "Never have."

"What message?" I ask in a hushed tone, my eyes following as Cal and Saint walk towards the back of the house.

I haven't seen my phone since being locked away with Aero at his place.

"The one you sent me," he says pointedly.

My brows draw together as I wipe some of the blood from his chin.

"The one about Saint acting strange, being alone with him making you nervous..."

I sigh in disbelief, knowing it was all Aero's doing. He knew this might happen. He knew everything and planned for it again. Three steps ahead of everyone, as always.

"I know what he did. Saw it with my own eyes," Baret growls through gritted teeth, holding me tight. "I don't care how it started. He won't get away with this, Briony."

His fury for me is comforting, but it only reiterates the fact that we aren't blood. We aren't related at all, and yet he still loves me wholeheartedly as his sister.

As if hearing the thoughts pouring from my mind, his expression turns sympathetic and he cups my cheeks, his nostrils flaring as if to ward off his own pain and struggle.

He knows. Baret knows. He knows more than he's letting on. Maybe this was his reason for never staying with the church and paving his own way. Maybe this is why he's always pulled away from our religion, yet stayed close enough to support me and my decisions. To watch over me in his own way. I have so many unanswered questions.

"He said to take this." Baret eyes the guard before slipping me a tiny baggie with a single pill into my palm. His eyes snap back to mine and he nods towards the hallway. "Bathroom, now."

Nerves have me on edge, unwilling to trust damn near anyone now that Aero's gone. He must sense my confusion because he leans closer and whispers, "So you can continue to make your own rules."

My own rules.

The last time I said that was when Aero and I were discussing birth control after our conversation about pregnancy. He got me a Plan B pill to take after everything went down, knowing I was off my pill and knowing the possibilities, but giving me the freedom to take my life into my own hands yet again. But how could Baret know? When did he...?

"I don't know what's going on, but I'm going to expose that prick for who he is," Baret says, as if enraged at the event all over again.

Exposing a Westwood is harder than he thinks.

"They won't believe you. No one will believe you, Bar. Just play the part," I whisper in his embrace. "Play the part they want you to play while I figure this out the way I'm meant to."

He shakes his head, but I part from him, making my way down the hallway.

“You’re not going anywhere!” the guard says in a gruff tone from the other side of the room, stepping towards me.

“I’m going to the bathroom!” I snap, my tears flowing again as I hold my top together, looking worse for wear.

The man pauses in place, his eyes softening slightly. “We’ve got a man out back and another at the front. You can’t escape even if, for some reason, you are stupid enough to try.”

“She needs to use the restroom, you pathetic fuck! Shut that hole in your ugly fucking face and let her piss!” Baret retorts.

They glare at each other as I continue my way down the hallway to the bathroom on the main floor. My mind is a mess of confusion and frustration as I try to contemplate how we’ll navigate ourselves out of this.

As I turn the corner into the bathroom, I hear whispers of a discussion happening outside the house through the screen of the back door. Sliding up along the wall in the shadows of the darkness, I peer down the hallway to ensure no eyes are on me, and lean in closer to listen.

“I fucked her. I fucked her dad. I’m done. It’s over.”

It’s Saint’s voice. The smell of cigarette smoke hits my nostrils and I see the shadows of both men standing on the back patio near the edge of the bushes.

“So what? It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. We’ve deleted your video and failed attempts. What matters is we are back in control of the situation you fumbled. We have him in our custody, and no one needs to know anything else about it. Baret will follow suit if he knows what’s good for him.”

Saint tried to record me? Aero must have known, which is why he stepped in and took over so coldly.

“What if she gets pregnant? I can’t become what I’m meant to if—“

“As if that’s ever stopped us,” Callum interrupts with a laugh. “We’ll make our own rules, and she will fall in line. She owes you that much.” I hear a back being slapped. “Be grateful, son. You got some fine pussy out of the deal and a fucking badge of honor before the

induction. The congregation will be more than fine with the unanimous vote now."

"I fucked up. I couldn't get it done," he says, sounding defeated.

My pulse pounds in my head, overwhelmed with fury.

"That's why you gotta leave the thinking to me and stop trying to take matters into your own hands. You've fucked up enough."

"I had her. I had her spread and ready, doing things to incriminate herself. I was so close, but then *he* came in and said this was the test. The same one you and the elders have always talked about. He got in my head."

My fist tightens at my side, nails piercing into my flesh.

"What?" Callum asks with venom on his tongue.

"He called her *my beloved stain.* You're the only one who's ever called her that."

"You got played, son. Played like a goddamn fool. I didn't want her tarnishing your reputation, but you just couldn't stay away. You couldn't keep your dick in your pants, could you?" He scoffs, inhaling his cigarette. "You're lucky you invited me to come clean up the mess."

There's a heavy sigh and some shuffling of feet. I lean more of my weight against the frame of the door, and it cracks. I hold my breath, closing my eyes tightly before I hear them continue their conversation.

"So, where are they taking him?" Saint asks quietly, and my ears perk up. "Did you have him killed?"

My chest feels as if a knife pierced through it at the idea alone. The pain makes it impossible to breathe.

"No," Cal answers calmly. "Not yet. A few old friends wanted to pay him a visit first." He chuckles.

There's a slight pause.

"Aw, don't get soft now. He's not your blood. His is tainted and spoiled with the DNA of a whore. He isn't pure, like us."

Pure like us. Rage fills my vision, threatening to explode from the tips of my fingers, but I remember words from Aero during my lessons in the woods; *"Harness it. Hold it in your grasp and mold it into your weapon, using it only when ready."*

"What will they do to him?" Saint asks.

“Destroy him,” he answers calmly, and I hear him exhale his smoke. “They’ll take every last bit of hope he’s ever manufactured. Steal any fragment of determination he’s ever cultivated, and ruin him while he’s alive enough to feel it.”

“Good,” Saint says, and my stomach churns with a sickening sensation.

Aero knew all along. He’d always tried to get me to see the light. The truth lurking in the dark corners. But I held hope for Saint. Thought he was innocent in all of this as well. But he’s worse than all of them. He’s been playing the part of the good guy. A slimy snake that slithered his way into the heart of a woman who tried to see the best in the worst of people.

“He’s not a part of this institution, but the infection that threatens to dismantle our place in this world. We must stand together and remain strong and cut the cords that hold us back.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before.” Saint scoffs. “And yet, somehow, he still got out of prison. Even after he murdered her.”

Murdered her? Who’s her?

“Yeah, did Alastor a real favor with that one. That woman was ready to risk everything to bring him down for her baby. Hilarious turn of events, seeing Briony so immersed in the very church her mother defied. But he has a wry sense of humor, that fuck. I ended up hiring my own flesh and blood unknowingly, just to end our little determined stray.”

This flood of information is being absorbed into my mind, but the pieces of the puzzle lie inches apart. *Alastor. Baby. Mother. Church. Stray.*

No…

“He’s lucky he’s agreed to push forward with my proposals, or I’d force my money on his political opponent.”

“But how did you know he’d be here?” Saint asks, clearly bringing the conversation back to Aero. “With her? You don’t think she was in on this, do you?”

Panic travels up my spine at his realization.

“Don’t be stupid, son. That woman may think she’s determined to make a place for herself in the church, but revenge is not in her blood. She’s entirely too soft. Besides, she doesn’t even know her

father. There's no reason she'd play a part in your demise. Her faith would never allow it. It was all a setup from the infamous Aero Westwood," he says dramatically. "He used her to get to us, but it backfired."

"How?"

"His so-called friend told us of his whereabouts and his sick obsession with his *'little doll,'* as he calls her. The owner of the nightclub I told you about? The one you'll get to visit once you become bishop. Yeah, he works for us. That's where they're taking him now."

Nox. That piece of shit sold him out. I'll cut his dick off. I swear it.

"Bishop Caldwell is elated to grace his presence again," Callum continues, amusement in his tone. "They have history, those two."

My insides shudder at the mention of his name. That man did horrible things to Aero as a boy, and now he's going to be trapped in a room with them? The demons that run the earth free, using their holiness as an express pass to abuse others. Brady comes to mind, and my heart races as the blood that runs through me burns with fiery ferocity.

I'll kill them all if they so much as lay a hand on him in there.

"Well, let's go enjoy the show, shall we?" I hear what sounds like a foot rubbing against the concrete, probably Callum putting out his cigarette.

I rush towards the bathroom as silently as possible, locking the door behind me. Taking the pill out of the bag, I pop it in my mouth and swallow it down with some sink water. I gaze at my reflection, peering into the eyes of an entirely different woman with a past that was snuffed out. My mother stares back at me. The stark blue of my lash-framed eyes, the inky black hair that surrounds my flushed face. *Determined as ever to defy the church that took her child.*

I may not know her, but her story is ingrained in my blood. Running through the veins of a woman sent here to right their wrongs. The same blood that burns for the vengeance I'm bound and determined to unleash.

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HERO

I welcome pain.

Pain is necessary.

Pain tells me I'm alive and on the same earth as her.

We need to be in the same existence. Me and my Briony.

Blood drips from my head as my hair clings to my forehead. My left eye is swollen shut, and my lip is most definitely split open. Crusted blood flushes with the fresh blood trickling down my chin. They chained my wrists behind me to a stripper pole through the back of the chair I'm sitting in, and I quickly realize that I'm in the exhibition room, facing a stage.

I'm at Nox's club.

The light above me shines brightly in its singularity, pointing directly down onto the mess that I am. No shirt, exposing the entirety of my scars they've created, bloodied pants, and a face that's contorted beyond recognition cloaks me now. Everything he ever wanted.

The guard nearby circles with laughter exuding from him, enjoying the superiority of standing above one of the most ruthless and lethal killers he's more than likely ever met. He thinks he won, his arrogance rotting from the smug grin he wears on his overweight face, not knowing I've willingly strapped myself down before him.

He walks near the table of items they've set up to the left of me, and I squint through my only available eye, noticing the bottle of wine he grasps by the neck. Someone behind me pulls the top of my hair tightly before I'm jarred back abruptly. My neck bends at an awkward angle, twisting my face up into the light, the shadow of a man above me coming into view.

"Ah, my sweet, sweet boy." He clicks his tongue. "It's been many years since we've been acquainted." He bends down toward the side of my head, whispering into my ear in a tone that makes my spine shiver with broken memories of my tortured past. "I've missed our lessons dearly."

Bishop Caldwell.

They've brought me into the lion's den, filled with nothing but the demons of my past.

I pull against my restraints, fighting the hold on my hair as I give everything I have to be released from his grasp, but every part of my

body aches as I attempt to twist and turn. Ribs are broken and tendons are torn in the cage I've willingly thrown myself in.

Sacrifices often need to be made for the better of the people. So here I am, offering myself up in the hopes that she'll find that strength I've nourished and fostered to save the man that demands her endlessly.

"I'm not going to lie to you," he begins again, circling to the front of me as the guard behind me grips the top of my hair, holding me in place again. "I'm delighted to have learned you've lost the faith. That you've fallen far away from Christ and the sanctity of your religion."

I grit through the pain and glare at him with the only sliver of vision I have left.

He hasn't changed. He's aged, that much is certain, evident in the purplish divots beneath his eyes and the loose skin that hangs beneath his chin. His unsightly warts have grown on his chin and neck, but he still wears that same haunting face of kindness, those rosy, round cheeks, cloaked in artificial goodness.

"Makes your resurrection all the more entertaining," he says with a grim smile.

He passes the wine bottle to the guard above me, giving him a light nod.

"The blood of Christ," he commences, raising his fingers to bless me with the sign of the cross.

The guard holds my head back before he places a white cloth over my face. Without warning, the wine pours over me, filling my mouth and nose with the bitter, astringent taste. Alcohol burns my various cuts as I cough and gag against the slow-pouring liquid, fighting my restraints to no avail.

I inhale some of it as they intended, and my throat constricts, coughing it out of my lungs. The bottle finally runs out, and before I can take a much-needed breath, the cloth is torn from my face and I feel the sharp blunt force of the bottle crack against my head.

Laughter and conversation fill the space again as the darkness slowly retreats from my clouded vision. More voices jump out around me, the ear-splitting ringing in my head slowly subsiding.

I feel as if I'm drowning above ground with the tightening of pain in my chest and the burning in my lungs. Every inhale has a sharp,

piercing pain hitting my sides. The smell of iron fills my nostrils, replacing the tart wine, before I realize it's my own blood I'm inhaling.

They broke my nose, among other things, while I was blacked out. My wrist lay limp in the cuffs, the feeling gone from my fingers entirely. I must've been out for a while.

"Thought we lost you there for a second," the boisterous voice of the one and only Alastor Abbott fills my ears. He slaps my shoulder abruptly, sending a sharp, shooting pain down to my arm. "We need to see the despair in your dead eyes in order for this to work. Happy to see you're back just in time for your surprise."

I groan, but the belt in my mouth they've tied around the back of my head prevents me from retorting with the rage my soul aches to release.

Saint sits on the edge of the couch adjacent to me, his eyes wandering over even though he appears as if he can barely stomach my appearance. He may not be as vicious as the likes of his father, Alastor, or even Bishop Caldwell, but his reluctance to stand up for what's right was always his downfall.

If he's here, then she can't be too far.

Bishop Caldwell walks from the table, carrying something in his hands.

I attempt to blink the blood out of my only usable eye.

"And if one is ill, let him call The Elders of the church, and let them pray over him and anoint him with the oil in the name of Our Lord," he professes, stirring the familiar glass vessel in his hand with a white cloth wrapped around it. "And the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick. The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven..."

It's the sanctum chrism. The consecrated oil used for sacraments and ecclesiastical functions. But the glass is filled with condensation, meaning only one thing.

"That's what you are, right, son? Ill?" He nods to the man behind me, and the belt in my mouth loosens before being tossed to the floor beneath us.

Alastor chuckles with Callum to the left of me, enjoying the sick and twisted torture as I rotate my painful jaw.

Caldwell bends down before me, still donning his cassock over his disgustingly rounded belly, expecting some sort of answer.

“Are you ill, my child?”

The endearment floods my system with chaos and an inherent need for destruction as my blood runs hot through my veins.

“Don’t be afraid to answer. The Lord is here.” He smiles, peering around the room. “He’s here to hear your pleas for forgiveness. To hear you beg for your mercy at my hand.”

Memories tear through me of the boy who was endlessly subjected to this torment for years. The boy who fought tirelessly on his own to avenge my mother and hers. The boy who’s allowed this man to continuously take and take. My freedom. My pleasure. My hopes for a future that contained any version of love.

“I’m sicker than I’ve ever been,” I gloat with my steady glare before spitting in his face.

He reaches for the handkerchief that Callum hands him, disappointment littering his smug, round face. My hard gaze connects with Saint’s on the couch, and I hold on to it for a moment before the burning of my flesh begins.

A strangled moan leaves my throat and I grit my teeth to ward off the pain. Hot, searing oil slowly slides its way down my torso, burning a trail of flesh as it settles. The urge to wipe it off comes over me, to escape the pain, but my mind fights the overwhelming pain signals.

Breathe through your nose.

See her gentle and caring eyes before you.

Smell the crisp scent of apple in her luscious, freshly washed hair.

Feel her velvety, warm flesh beneath your fingertips as they graze her curves.

Hear her soft, gentle hums of relaxation.

Another pour of the oil graces my chest, and my body tenses before running through my meditative process for survival yet again.

I hear the door open, then slowly creak closed to the left of me as the shuffling footsteps of another man enter the room.

“They’re both still there,” Nox mutters to someone behind me.

“Good,” Cal replies. “Shouldn’t be much longer here.”

I feel another pour of the hot oil tear into my flesh, and a frustrated sigh leaves Caldwell’s chest.

“Come on now, son. Cry out for me like you used to. Stop holding it all in.” His free hand sweeps some of my hair off my forehead before he cups my cheek, bending forward until we’re face to face. “I used to get so hard for those sweet little whimpers,” he whispers in a disturbingly calm tone.

He shakes his head, disappointed by my lack of agony, as he continues trailing the oil until it meets the tops of my thighs. My arms pull against the cuffs, and I breathe roughly through my nose, my body quivering from the unrelenting torment. The heat scalds as it rests into the fabric of my dark denim, and I witness the faint steam billowing from my lap, cementing the pain.

Her. Think of her.

Her delicate fingers safely trailing my abdomen with their gentle touch. Safe.

Once the glass is emptied and poured over me, he places it and the cloth on the table. His eyes sear my body harder than the oil as he takes his hand and rubs himself over the cassock.

“I think he’s ready for his lap dance now, don’t you?” Callum asks, a smirk on his face as he eyes my burnt, oil-painted thighs. “I think we all are.” He eyes the rest of the men.

Bishop Caldwell takes a seat in a leather recliner to the right of me, his eyes burning holes through me while he continues his demented self-pleasure.

Callum stands to the right of me with his arms folded, and Alastor takes a seat next to Saint. The lights to the main stage turn on, an amber glow highlighting the stripper pole on the platform before us.

“You’ll get a kick out of this, son.” Callum nods to Saint before his eyes fall upon the stage in line with everyone else.

“Ah, yes. My sweet, sweet Brandi,” Alastor hums in approval.

“Fan favorite,” Callum laughs beside me. “Let’s taunt this motherfucker, shall we?” He smiles at the men. “Dangle this last piece of pussy in front of his face before we fuck her shit loose.”

I blink more blood out of my only working eye when I see Brandi’s silhouette on the stage before us.

It appears she’s dressed in her normal attire to appease them. The short, green and black plaid skirt, the white tied-up top, the stockings

clipped, the oversized crucifix dangling from her neck, and the short black, chin-length wig to set it all off.

Her back is facing us as the bass of the music pounds through the small exhibition space. A sexy, slow-paced song begins as Brandi grips the top of the pole behind her. She slithers her body before the pole, seemingly making love to the air around her as she continues her enticing tease, her body rolling with an intoxicating energy.

The men are fixated on her, fallen into her trance. A tiger beneath the facade of a kitten. But I've never known Brandi to hold a beat, only take cash and allow wicked men to continue indulging in their sins.

I study her movements carefully, watching her sink lower and lower on the pole, her legs parting until her thighs are spread wide and she's balancing on her platform heels. She arches her back, squatting down on her heels before straightening her knees slowly until she's folded over. Gripping the pole behind her, she slides up the length of the shiny metal, the hem of her skirt lifting to expose the edge of her round, perfectly toned ass with the pole directly between her cheeks.

The men groan and chuckle with delight when she slowly steps around the pole in her heels, prowling like a majestic lioness, stealthy by nature.

She's staring down at the stage as she circles; the short hair of her black wig covering her face.

She won't look up.

"Take his ass to church, Brandi!" one guard hollers.

The music explodes into a wild erotic beat just in time for her to rest her chin on her shoulder, half of her face hidden behind the pole.

One piercing blue eye and an entire galaxy of untold rage.

She peers back at me with the most seductive, most possessively savage stare.

Within that one look, my entire world shifts on its axis.

I'm frozen. Breathless and completely in awe as I gaze back into the eyes of my existence.

That one look says it all.

We're like us.

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BRONX

Breathe through your nose.

Visualize his hard eyes staring into mine, empowering me without words.

Smell the pungent leather of his jacket and the stark sulfur of the infamous matches he held between his teeth, ready to set my world on fire by allowing me the strength to strike them.

Feel the coarseness of the masculine calluses built up on his hands as they firmly grip my soft flesh.

Hear the soft reluctant sigh slip through his lips as he trails your fingers along his tattered and torn skin, finally learning to embrace the loving touch.

With my heart rate slowed and the drool spilling down my chin, I open my eyes to the darkness of the trunk, utilizing every available sense I have.

After swallowing the pill in the bathroom at our family home, I walked out to find Callum's security already zip-tying Baret as he screamed into the duct tape silencing him. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but lucky for me, Aero was ahead of the game. He'd already taught me what to do.

They drove wildly, throwing our bodies around in the back of some blacked-out trunk together. I panicked alongside Baret, who was thrashing around violently, screaming muffled obscenities into his tape. When the vehicle finally stopped, I inhaled a deep, calming breath, and my mind went to him.

Those days spent with Aero alone at his cabin were nothing short of an educational experience set to bring me to this moment. We wasted not a minute of time spent together. I'd learned a lifetime of information crammed into a single week. Everything was a game to him, or so I'd thought. The chase into the woods, being tied up and used at his mercy, being cared for afterwards as everything I'd learned during our lessons was broken down. From the flick of my wrist throwing the blades to the ability to escape his traps, here I sit, contorted into the back of this trunk, sitting on a gold mine of skills set to free us. To free him.

He'd always known it'd come to this moment.

The moment he'd finally let go and watch as his bud bloomed into his savage rose, bleeding nothing but strength and courage from her

petals. The stem, built with the most destructive thorns of empowerment they'd ever known. A warrior arising from the soiled dirt of the institution meant to choke me dry.

They were always wrong about him. He'd always maintained his faith.

His faith in me.

I'd left my wrists side by side while they zip-tied me together at the house, ensuring that whenever they were taking us, I'd be able to get out of them, just as he'd shown me. Sure enough, turning my palms together, I was able to create a little bit of wiggle room in order to shimmy my way out of them, one hand at a time. Ripping the tape from my mouth, I face Baret.

"Shhh, calm your breathing." I place my hand on his face beside me as he thrashes and confused mumbles leave his throat.

He finally does as I ask before I rip the tape off his face, swallowing his pain while I feel around him for the trunk latch.

"Fuck, Briony! How did you...?"

"We're going to get out of here," I interrupt, determined as ever.

"Wait," he says, sounding breathless. He sighs heavily, and I can practically feel the guilt lacing his pause. "I'm sorry."

Something washes over me. It's not anger for a past I've yet to learn. It's understanding.

"I'm so fucking sorry. I should've told you what I'd discovered. That you and I weren't really..."

"We are." I stop him. "You're more my family than anyone I've ever known."

He shakes his head, not wanting to face me, remorse clearly overtaking him.

"You've protected me, despite the truths that were held from me. You've remained a constant for me in a world that you yourself didn't wish to be a part of."

Baret left The Covenant Academy as soon as he could, pursuing his own goals at the nearby university. Our parents reluctantly allowed it after he'd been caught sleeping around and drinking, doing things most normal teenage boys did. To them, he wasn't the chosen one. I was. They planned my entire life in order for me to be the beacon of faith for our family. To continue the mission of falling

silently in line. But what they hadn't realized was that my mission wasn't meant for them. My mission had always been to unveil the broken nature of the system built on lies, unearthing the horrors within. Given the throat through which I was allowed to scream.

"There's so much you don't understand," he begins. "He's always watched over you...from afar, while I've watched from within."

Baret's known of Aero's existence. To what extent, I haven't discovered. The only reasoning I can imagine is that Aero wanted it that way. I've always been protected, the truths surfacing in their own time, when I was strong enough to accept them. To believe them as facts.

Luckily, the car they've put us in is a newer model, as I suspected, leaving me to feel out the dark space with my free hand until the tips of my fingers sweep over the safety latch. This wasn't a lesson from Aero, this was from my own little arsenal of knowledge.

"It truly pays to have an older brother growing up," I whisper to myself as I pull the cord, popping the lock on the trunk.

Not the first trunk I've been locked in. *Thank you, Baret.*

Baret laughs beside me in disbelief. "Who'd have thought my asshole-ish ways would pay off one day?"

The lock opens when I pull the latch, but the trunk itself doesn't.

Fuck.

Shoving my elbow against the hood, I attempt to push it up, but some sort of weight is holding it down.

"Turn with me. On your back," I whisper, getting into position. "Arch back and kick up."

With minimal space, we plant our heels and push. With enough strength, we're able to lift the hood long enough for me to slip out before the trunk closes again on Baret. I hear a muffled curse coming from him as I roll under the vehicle, crunching over pieces of broken glass in the process, and assessing my situation.

"You alright?" he asks from above me.

It's dark in the alleyway, but there's no one out here that I can see.

"Good, B," I say, bumping the side of my fist beneath him.

Quickly, I fumble with my shoelaces, untying my boots in order to seesaw the remaining zip-tie off my ankles. After searching us at the

house for weapons, the security that was with Callum ended up taking the only weapons I had on me.

Sliding out from under the vehicle, I recognize the alley we're in. It's the same alley outside Nox's nightclub. That fucker literally gave them the venue to torture him. *God, when I see him…*

Anger penetrates me, poisoning my bloodstream as I search the empty car. Opening the glovebox, I discover that the idiots compiled my knives inside. Apparently, it doesn't take brains to be the muscle surrounding those of power.

It almost makes me sick; the extent to which they truly underestimated me and my abilities.

But it's to my advantage now, so I'll use it.

After pushing the concrete blocks off the trunk of the car that these idiots must've grabbed from the alleyway to "ensure" we'd never escape, I assist Baret out of the trunk, helping him to break free of his restraints. He walks away as I begin to replace the heavy concrete blocks on top of the trunk.

"C'mon!" he whispers, heading around the car. "What are you doing?! We need to get help!"

I stand firmly planted in place.

"Briony! Let's go!" he pleads, his tone tense.

I shake my head once. "There's not enough time."

Just as I mutter the words, I hear the side door to the club creak open. I grip Baret by the shirt, pulling him towards the brick wall behind me in the shadows. We seal ourselves against the cold, jagged bricks, holding our breaths, the outline of a dark figure looming nearby.

A man approaches the vehicle, inspecting the blocks. His head tilts to the side when he takes in the one lying on the pavement. The one I'd yet to replace. *Shit.* The light of the streetlamp nearby just barely illuminates his head as he stands straight again. Shaved. Tattooed.

It's fucking Nox.

My pulse rages with a fiery hatred for the man that so clearly deceived the one I love.

Sliding out from the shadows against the brick, Baret tries to reach for me, but I slip out of his grasp. I grip the switchblade in my hand

and quickly wrap my arm around the front of Nox, angling the sharp blade directly against his balls.

“Tell me one good reason I shouldn’t cut that overused pencil dick off right now,” I grit through my teeth.

He sucks in a breath, his hands rising in the air beside him. I press the blade into his jeans further, ensuring he feels just how serious I am.

“F-fuck...no. Please,” he begs, his chest heaving, his voice becoming breathless. “Briony, baby, please. Not the dick. Anything but the dick.”

I press the blade further against his jewels.

“Oh God, not those either!”

His desperation gets me off. I find myself enjoying his pleas and sad little cries for help, so I press a little deeper, most definitely cutting into something.

“Hands on the roof,” I demand.

I quickly search him with my free hand, finding a lone gun in the back of his jeans beneath the belt.

“Where is he?” I demand, tossing Baret the gun from behind me.

He catches it against his chest, looking at me wide-eyed, face drowning in shock at my behavior, before quickly realizing what I’m doing. Circling around to the side of us, he points the barrel at Nox.

Nox drops his head between his shoulders, his arms bracing himself on the surface of the blacked-out car, and a disturbing laugh fills the air between us.

He turns to face me, his back falling against the car as his ghastly grin finds me.

“In the lion’s den,” he says matter-of-factly, shaking his head in resignation. “Exactly as he designed.”

My brows lower, my blade still pressing firmly against his package.

He sighs, his crooked grin falling into a look of dejection. “Just not the dick. I’ve grown so very fond of it over the years. As have many others.”

Baret wears a contorted expression directed at Nox. He’s a strange soul, that much is certain.

“Take us there. Get me in,” I growl, my lip curling as I make my demands.

His eerie grin grows wide across his tatted-up face again as he gazes down at me with what I can only assume to be raw excitement. A thrilling awe.

“Right this way, doll.”



I've never actually killed someone. I'd imagined it endlessly out in those woods. The bark of the solid oak, my victims. But I would imagine it's a hell of a lot easier than what I'm about to do.

Standing in the mock uniform, the black platform heels that tie up to my ankles, and the wig pulled tight on my head, I pop my knuckles, taking one final breath as the amber light above illuminates me to the room. Rolling my body to the sensual beat, I embody the woman he's helped me to become. Someone who owns their sexuality; who's empowered by it. A woman who has nothing but pride in the curves of the very body that makes her. I give these demons everything I'd imagine they'd want.

Shaking my bare ass against the pole, I bend down to touch the lip of the platform heels, ensuring the knife is secure. They don't seem to notice I'm not the regular they apparently frequent.

I guess an ass is an ass to these people.

Twirling around the pole, I attempt to hide my identity, shadowing my face beneath the edge of the black, chopped wig, but my chest practically caves in on itself when I finally see him.

There he sits; tied to a chair, bloodied and beaten to a pulp.

I worry I'm too late, that I took too long to get to him, before I see his chest heave as his head drops further, almost finally submitting himself into my hands. Knowing he's safe in those very hands he's only just become accustomed to.

His direct gaze seals its fate against mine from across the room, and my entire being ignites.

It's entirely metaphysical how we can sense each other's presence simply by the resounding energy alone. Just as I used to feel the electrifying presence of him in the air before we really knew one another, he can count every beat of the heart that screams for him in any room I reside.

We're as affixed as two broken things can be. The depth of his cracks sealing the fate of mine.

And together, in the den of their own demise, we'll seal theirs.

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HERO

Mesmerizing.

Briony is blinding me with her raw sexuality. Owning every bit I've ever attempted to embody her with as she slides across that stage, gripping that pole while her tight little body drops to a split. Her hips roll, an intoxicating swirl of pure sex, before her cat-like prowl focuses on me.

Her body is liquid desire as she moves. Waves of delicious art penetrating the confines of the room, stunning them into her trance. There's nothing refined about it. Her sexuality is primal and overtly obvious. Nothing subdued by the confines of social norms. Here, in this club, she can be exactly who she needs to be, with no inhibitions.

She marches confidently down the stage to the thumping bass of the erotic notes that reverberate within my chest. As she gains ground on me, my gaze quickly falls over to the men. Pools of saliva might as well be beneath their positions. They're fixated on her. Her sexual aura captivating every set of eyes.

All but one.

Cal takes a step back, his hand reaching into his pocket when his phone lights up in his dress pants. His slicked back hair falls onto his forehead like angry daggers as the wrinkles there form hard, harsh lines. His eyes narrow in on his screen as a grin grows wild on my face. The crusted blood coated with fresh rolls of oozing red, painting me as the madman I truly am at the delightful realization.

It's out.

Briony finally closes the distance between us, and I gaze up at her admirably beneath my bruised and beaten face. In a room full of the worst men, I've somehow summoned the only God left to save me. My beautiful dirtied doll. My savage saving grace. My sweet, destructive Briony.

I'd worried the sight of me would have her buckling in sadness, in misery, for a man who's shared his life's traumatic story. But she's grown a backbone in our time together. I see it in the way those blue eyes light with flames of sweet, ruthless revenge. Her grief has shifted into endless rage, and the confidence she exudes has my cock threatening to swell beneath the pools of blood they have subjected me to, despite the circumstances.

She bends forward, popping her ass out to the men nearby, her tongue dipping out from between her lips. She laps up the blood on my neck, and I fight back my groan by grinding my back teeth together. Her sweet lips find my ear, licking the shell before whispering, “You’re a goddamn genius.”

She finally understands my sacrifice, my need to surrender. My reasons for willingly putting myself through the torment and pain.

“Nah,” I whisper back, keeping my gaze down. “I just get hard for a dramatic ending.”

She smirks before she turns her back to me, straddling me by tossing a leg over the chair. Pressing her back against my bare and bloodied chest, she avoids my lap by squatting above my thighs.

“You brought me all my favorites,” she whispers back at me, her hand reaching to cup the back of my neck as her body rolls in those intoxicating waves. “Deliciously sick revenge.”

“Fish in a bucket, baby.” I hiss in pain as she rubs against the raw flesh from the oil burns. “You ready to hunt?”

“I didn’t come here to hunt.” She stands again, turning to face me. Her leg kicks up and rests on my shoulder, dangling seductively as she grips the hair at the top of my head. Tipping my neck to the side, I wince in delightful pain as she whispers, “I came here to torture.”

“Alright, alright,” Alastor interrupts in his boisterous tone, cutting through the music and standing from the couch. He pulls Saint up by the elbow, forcing him to stand. “Can’t let his brother have all the fun now. Let this young man have his turn.”

Briony prances her way towards the table of tools the men set up to torture me with. Alastor pushes Saint in her direction.

“Go ahead son, make your father proud.”

Saint shifts on his feet, seemingly nervous as he pulls at the collar of his now wrinkled uniform shirt. His eyes peer at me again as he passes by, finding my glare beneath the blood-drenched hair. Briony places her palms on the table, arching her ass out to him, offering herself to him for a second time tonight.

If I leave this room alive, I’ll be cleaning her of his presence for weeks.

He bends over her backside, planting his palms on the table, surrounding her while his father shakes his head at his phone from

across the room, running a hand through his hair. Briony rolls her hips into Saint's groin, teasing him with her ass as the rest of the group watches with excitement, hooting and hollering for young Saint to dip his dick in the sea of filthy fornication.

"No, no, no!" Callum yells abruptly from the dark corner, heated eyes on his phone as he turns to leave the room.

It all happens so quickly.

Briony slides her hands up the table, gripping what looks like scissors and a scalpel blade from the spread of tools used to torment me.

Saint screams out in agonizing pain as Briony pierces both of his hands to the table with the objects, effectively pinning him to the wood beneath him.

Callum jumps, backing away from the door, pulling a gun from behind his back as Nox bursts through the entrance to the room with a gun pointed right back at him.

Briony dips out from beneath Saint's stance, grabbing another blade from inside her high-heeled boot, sending it directly into the skull of one of Cal's bodyguards approaching her from behind. He shuffles on his feet before falling back onto the concrete beneath him like a collapsing wall as she quickly and effortlessly props one knee up and grabs another knife from under her skirt.

With the precision of a skilled assassin, she sends the knife into the chest of the other bodyguard. Her training shines through her fluid movements. He cries out, gripping the blade that's stuck directly in the center of his chest. Pulling it out, he tosses it to the floor with an echoed clang, stalking forward on heavy feet, his deadly gaze set on her as he pulls a gun from his side. She stands straight before him, her chin lifted, staring at him defiantly. He raises the gun at her, and she closes her eyes.

I pull violently against my cuffs, needing to be freed before he can hurt her, no matter if that means ripping my arms off at the shoulders. But before I get ahead of myself, the guard takes two more steps, stumbling slightly before a shot from across the room earns him a bullet to the back of his head. The man's blood splatters across Briony's face and neck as she flinches. Callum looks entirely stunned

while Nox's barrel remains set on him, both of them with arms outstretched, guns ready to fire.

Bishop Caldwell gasps in horror when Baret steps out from behind the stage area, his own smoking weapon aimed directly at him and his attempt to escape. His decrepit old hands shake before him as he surrenders on his knees like the fucking coward he is.

Alastor grabs a gun from within his suit jacket and rushes towards me, placing it against my temple.

"Now, now, now..." he says calmly, looking around the room. "Let's just all take a nice deep breath before someone important gets hurt, huh?"

His eyes focus on Briony as he forces the barrel against my temple, making his insinuations known. I'm his leverage.

She stands there breathless, maddening rage emitting from her striking blue eyes.

"You rat fuck, you," Callum says to Nox, their guns still aimed at one another. "And you! You stupid stray bitch!"

I crack my neck at the sentiment directed towards my Briony as she tosses the wig at her feet, shaking out her long black signature locks. Saint stares with an expressionless face, stunned at the realization.

Feeling the darkness building within me, threatening to release the very rage I've tried so hard to mold, I keep my focus on her to calm myself.

"How dare you infiltrate this and deceive my son! You'll pay. You'll regret this for the rest of your miserable, useless fucking life!"

We're all at a standstill. Nerves are on high as the energy of the room shifts to terror in the surrounding faces.

Nox laughs. "Well, my loyalty's always been with the outcasts. Bones just sold me on the idea." He shrugs his shoulders. "It was creative and sounded fun. Things tend to get repetitive around here."

I bite back my smirk. The man's more insane than me.

"So this was your idea?" Callum directs the question at me. "Your plan all along. Bring us all here together, huh? Get your sweet little broken boy revenge because you had a whore for a mother."

Briony's fingers roll into tight fists, her lip twitching as those coals within her soul ignite and revenge is the only flame burning.

“You fucking played with me and my money,” Alastor growls, looking down at me.

He winds up and hits me with the blunt end of his gun. My head whips to the side, blood spewing from my mouth, and Briony charges him.

“Don’t.” I say to the floor, spitting out more blood.

She immediately obeys my command, pausing in place. I need Alastor’s gun steady on me and not her.

“I got you out! You’re indebted to me. My weapon!” Alastor continues.

A dry chuckle leaves my throat. It builds, and it builds until I’m laughing hysterically. My head falls back, and the blood draining into my mouth spills to the back of my throat.

“I did.” I continue laughing. “I played you. I played Cal, I played Saint, I played Bishop Caldwell...fuck, I even played sweet Briony, here.” Her eyes find mine. “But I’m not your weapon.” I nod towards Bishop Caldwell. “I’m not his church boy whore.” I nod towards Saint. “I’m not the shadow of a golden boy.” I stare down Callum, my tone shifting into a gritty growl. “And I’m not his dark, deceitful dirt, so carefully brushed under many an old rug.”

I pause to catch my breath. The pain in my chest is overwhelming as my focus falls upon her again.

“I’m her salvation.” I wince, peering back at my Briony. “Just as she is mine.”

“Lodge that bullet into his fucking head!” Callum yells to Alastor. “He ruined us! He fucking ruined us! Saint is everywhere. The video is going viral.”

“What?!” Saint says breathlessly. “N-no, no. No, it can’t be, Dad, it can’t! I deleted it! I...” He hisses in pain, attempting to turn from the table, but she literally nailed his hands to it. Two holes in his palms, just like Christ himself.

Creative as fuck, Briony.

Briony shakes her head in disbelief as she takes in his words. Her gaze finds mine, and relief overtakes her. My smile drops as I nod at her.

You did it, baby.

I'd tried my best to be distant and disconnected, to terrify her to the best of my abilities in that room. To appear cold and utterly heartless so her tears were raw and real as he violated her like she had so angelically approved. It was all recorded. The use of the crucifix, the anger he portrayed as I spewed my words in the silent background, the timely slaps before he fucked her tied to that bed. It was all in that video. And just as the witness came running in, I'd successfully uploaded the clip to the dark web, where content of this nature truly takes off and spreads like wildfire.

"I was coerced! Fuck!" Saint yells from the table, his blood pooling over the edge and dripping to the floor beneath him. "It wasn't me, Briony. Don't you see it?" He shakes his head in disbelief as she turns to face him. "I'm not that guy. I'm not like them."

Not like them.

Briony blinks slowly, studying Saint until she tilts her head back towards Baret. She gives him a simple nod, and he understands her without words, like siblings would, tossing her the gun and pulling out another to keep pointed at Caldwell. She catches it with one hand, pointing at Saint's temple. He swallows, breathing hard through his nostrils.

"Briony, please. What happened in that room was a mistake. It's not who I am. It's who they wanted me to be. My head is a mess of confusion and lies, just like yours...I was lost, okay? I'm not who they want me to be! I'm innocent."

"Why should I believe you?" she asks softly, tipping her head, causing her black hair to drape over her shoulder. "Give me one good reason."

I shouldn't be thinking these thoughts at the moment, but fuck, she's gorgeous, covered in the blood of another man while her delicate hand holds that thick gun. Power looks stunning on her.

"He knows who your father is!" Saint spits out, his body shaking. "Aero knows."

It's his last desperate attempt.

Briony pauses, slowly dropping the gun to her side to peer back at me.

Her look insinuates she doesn't want to believe him, but the facts are facts. I nod once.

“If he withheld that kind of information from you, think about what else he’s keeping from you. You can’t trust him, Briony. You were always a pawn in his game! A piece molded and used at his will. Just another weapon in this sick man’s arsenal. He’ll dispose of you as quickly as the rest of us once he’s freed.”

She stares at me, his words siphoning through her beautiful little skull. The gaze is blank. There’s no anger, no sadness, no confusion...nothing. She’s giving me nothing.

My only good eye remains steady on her. Surely she knows everything I do is with calculated intent. *Don’t you dare lose me now.*

Everyone watches the interaction, wondering if it’s enough to sway her. Where does her loyalty lie? The religion she was brought up believing, taught to have blind faith in? Or the man who’s done everything he could to open her eyes to the deceptions of the very organization that’s determined to silence her.

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HERO

Briony places her hands on top of her head, the gun pointing to the ceiling. She curses in disbelief. She's breaking, and I can't fucking stand it. I need her strong. Need her to put that blind faith in me and me alone.

"Why don't we all calm down and have this discussion elsewhere? The church, perhaps?" Bishop Caldwell suggests, nodding nervously.

"No," Briony demands firmly. "No, we're going to have it right here. Right now."

She turns to face me. I see heartbreak beneath the tough facade, and it was exactly why I didn't tell her. Not until the moment was right. This moment. When she could face him herself.

"Both of our fathers are in this room right now," I say calmly. "But you already know that."

Her gaze is intense as her mind works.

"He killed your mother!" Saint cries out. "He killed your real mother, Briony. My father told me. Beat her to a pulp in an alley. It's why he was in prison. You can't trust anything he says!"

Alastor shifts on his feet beside me as I sit in silence. This is the moment. All the past few weeks, the biblical messages, the exposure of truths, the training, the pieces of this puzzle formulating into one image before her. *Look at his face, baby. See it in his eyes.* She knows my story, my disturbing truths, and now she has everything she needs to make her own decision about the men before her.

"I've always tried to protect you," Saint continues.

She raises her hand to stop him. The silence holding this room together has an energetic fog all its own as everyone waits for her to talk.

"How many students were in our catechism class?"

Callum and Alastor share a look before both focusing back on Saint.

"W-what? Why are you asking about that right—"

"How many students?" she asks again with her eyes closed.

"Twenty-three," he answers quickly, breathing hard.

Her eyes open and fall upon him, a sinister grin growing across her blood-splattered face.

"Precisely."

His face contorts, and he peers nervously at his father and then back at her.

“See, you fucked up, Saint,” she says in the sweetest tone. Her innocence shines through in her sweet smile as she casually leans back against the table facing the room. “I’m not nearly as stupid as all of you assume. You see, I’ve used it for my benefit, of course, the naivety, but I’ve figured you out.”

She shifts her focus back to him.

“You called me early that morning, ensuring we went to the school together, arriving at the same time. Do you remember?” She tilts her head to the side. “You knew exactly how many students we had. You knew there weren’t enough catechisms. You knew I’d need to get more. You also knew Jacob Erdman was in that closet, waiting for me.” She chuckles lightly. “Convenient, don’t you think?”

“Not true,” Saint retorts before reeling in pain as his hands move beneath the items pinning him. “Whatever he did was on his own!”

“In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I remembered.” She leans closer to Saint while her eyes stay focused on mine. “Some of Jacob’s last words were that he couldn’t believe a girl as calculated as me got it all wrong, and that *he*, meaning you, said I’m not supposed to mess up your face, but I will if you give me a reason to.”

Saint sways on his feet, a look of pure, cold-hearted hatred emitting from his eyes. *She got him.*

“Aero killed him! Murdered him!”

“Before he could kill me,” she counters. “You just couldn’t get it done. Not with your buddy Jacob, not by yourself in your attempts to incriminate me in my bedroom. Poor Saint couldn’t prove to daddy he was more than just a piece in *his* chess game.“ She clicks her tongue. “A true tragedy.”

Briony pushes off the table, slowly prowling in her sexy little outfit towards where I’m seated. Alastor presses his gun into my temple again at her proximity.

“Another step and it’s over for him,” he warns, distress in his shaky tone.

Her eyes light up with amusement and she tips her head.

He fears her. She’s feeding off it. My sexy, disturbed little doll.

“I know who you are.” She shakes her head with repugnance, looking at him from head to toe. “Margaret Moore was my real mother. You tried to erase her from existence because she got pregnant and chose to have me.”

There’s only one way she’d know of that name. The missing documents from his safe. The documents she’d discovered at my place after I’d forced her to steal them. The names. I admitted to her in our little knife game in the woods that Veronica Fields was my mother. She pieced the rest together herself. I guarantee Alastor’s expression is revealing every trace of his fears coming to life.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alastor denies. “I have no idea who that is.”

She stares at him for a moment, the silence clearly eating away at him.

“That’s funny you say that. Am I not the eternal stain of condemnation of *your* past?”

I hear him swallow above me.

“Cut the cords that hold us back,” Briony continues. “Did Alastor a real favor with that one. That woman was ready to risk everything to bring him down for their baby.”

“Fuck,” Callum curses from across the room, hitting himself with the end of his pistol.

She’s quoting him. She must’ve heard this conversation of Callum’s about the set-up to have me framed for murder, and now she’s doing exactly as I’ve taught her, staring down the man before her, studying his face as he lies.

“It’s over for you, darling,” Alastor interjects. “Your fun ends here. For you and your sick little lover.”

“The truth is undeniable,” Briony continues. “And now, thanks to Saint, the very institution you’ve worked tirelessly to control is crumbling around you. You’re not needed anymore. No money. No power. No votes.”

“Truths are what we men in this room make them. You can only get so far in our world before we cut you out.” Alastor laughs, hitting the side of my head with the gun again. “Impure blood limits your future, no matter how hard you fight it. Ain’t that right, Aero.”

“Touch him again,” Briony says calmly, raising the gun in an outstretched arm aimed at Alastor’s head.

The men exchange nervous glances around us.

“C’mon, touch him again,” she urges. “Give me a reason to take off the top of your skull.”

Briony’s grin is as wicked as they come. She’s playing a dangerous game with him. I bite down on my bottom lip, the smirk spreading across my face at the familiar words I’d used protecting her in this very club.

There’s a certain confidence she holds in our fate. One I’ll blindly trust her with.

We’re crazy, psychotic, and filled with a disturbing desire for the fear these men built and are now being subjected to. This is our game now. They’re in our court, receiving their atonement.

From the corner of my eye, Alastor looks down at me before facing her again, his hand shaking as the gun pushes my hair around. He presses the barrel against my head and pulls the trigger, and I hear the silent click against my skull.

Briony’s smile drops. “You actually did it.” Her gaze falls to mine, and my haunting laugh cuts through the silence. “You fucking touched him again.”

“You emptied it?!” His terror-filled tone brings out Nox’s devilish laugh from the corner.

“You know we check all weapons at the door,” Nox comments with a toothy grin, smiling proudly at us. “Men like you, clean guys who have others do their dirty work, don’t even realize when the weight of their guns change.” He laughs hysterically, gazing admirably at Briony and me. “Fuck, I love these two.”

My man, Nox. He really came through for me. Yes, he thought I was crazy when I’d suggested the entire plan, knowing they’d need a place to take me that was off limits once they finally caught me. It was a setup they never saw coming.

Callum appears light-headed as his hand meets his forehead, and his eyes dart around the room with pure panic at the realization. He checks his gun, noticing it’s empty as well, and Nox winks, holding his weapon to his head.

Alastor throws his gun at Briony, sending me into another fit of rage as I attempt to free myself, but she dodges it with a quick dip of her head and a hauntingly beautiful smile.

“You worthless waste of a good fu—“

The explosive sound of the gunshot interrupts his sentence. Briony pulls the trigger, effectively blowing off the top of his skull as promised. Alastor’s body hits the pole beside me before dropping hard to the concrete behind me. But my eyes remained focused on the delectable magnificence before me. Ethereal and decisive in her actions. My intellectual, yet ruthless King. *God is most certainly a woman scorned.*

Nox’s mouth drops open, a beguiled gaze taking over his face. He’s enjoying every bit of this show she’s directing, just as I am. Baret’s numbed stare peers on from afar as Bishop Caldwell’s eyes swell to horrified saucers.

“He talked too much,” she shrugs. “And yet, had nothing worth saying.”

After grabbing the handcuff keys from his limp and bleeding corpse, she uncuffs my wrists. Helping me to stand, I stumble into her, and she catches me, attempting to hold my weak body upright. Her hands mold to my shattered and torn face, and her loving gaze finds mine.

“Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, and please the widow’s cause,” she quotes eloquently from the Bible.

My heart hammers in my chest for this woman. Whenever she’s in my presence, I feel it like a gravitational pull, siphoning two lost souls together with formidable strength. I see my past, my present, and the future I’d never known in those blue eyes. The same eyes I’d promised my life to all those years ago in that alleyway. I see the faces of traumatic horrors erased by her captivating beauty. Her selfless love, eradicating the hatred from my bones entirely, cleaning me of the past that haunts me.

She fills me with what they could never take away.

Faith. Hope.

Love.

Everything. All at once.

“You allowed me my voice, Aero,” her soft, angelic tone cuts through my thoughts.

I nod in her hands, embracing that gentle touch I once denied myself.

Her eyes cut hard through mine, and the strength within her being empowers me with a feeling of worth like nothing ever has.

Her gaze drops to Alastor’s corpse behind me, then to Callum and Nox, and finally to a quivering Bishop Caldwell on the floor beneath Baret, behind us.

I gave her the revenge she didn’t know she needed, and in this moment, she’s giving me mine.

She faces me, her vision gazing down at my lips before that dark, devious look rises to find mine again. She pulls a knife from beneath her shirt between us, tucked into the confines of her bra.

It’s the knife I’d gifted her. She’s kept it all this time. For me. An exchange of power from the one I’m on my knees, offering my life to.

Her lip pulls at the corner into a vicious little smirk, and my eyes light up with cruel fascination.

“Now take away theirs.”

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BRONX

I'd always known.

Somewhere deep within myself, the voice of intuition spoke loud and clear.

I'd been given the clues, the answers, the truth by my own discovery without the deception of being told.

The Devil's Doll.

Aero taught me, but not by telling. He opened my mind to the realities of the world around me by placing me in his chaotic maze. He took my world hostage, and only by my own abilities and choices did he grant me the freedom of my own free will.

He'd always wanted more from me. He saw that fire within my soul that ached for a world in which I would thrive. The knowledge of who I was as a powerful woman to my core.

He had me on the floor in Alastor's home, on my hands and knees, opening the safe and directly handing him the truth of my past. While training at Aero's, I'd found the paperwork and held those pieces to the puzzle in my head. Alastor Abbot, Margaret Moore, the birth certificate that had been altered. She was my mother. Struck down by the same fate as Aero's for being nothing more than a stain needing to be scrubbed out by the men who'd been haunted by their careless mistakes.

Saint helped paint the final stroke to complete the illusion before me. When he was talking with Callum on my patio, it'd all clicked.

Alastor Abbott was my father by blood. My parents couldn't have any more children and were the perfect family to receive such a generous donation from a dead woman. A son who wanted out of the faith, a baby girl they could mold with deceptive lies in order to control. Just like they did Aero's mother, they killed mine in cold blood, brushing yet another life under the rug, and gave me to prestigious members of the church.

The same parents who Baret has discovered conveniently took that mission trip in order to disappear, sanctioning the order of the church to take care of the dark stain themselves. The stain that pushed too far, seeking more for herself in a world that demanded its sheep shut up and abide.

I was always a threat to them, just as he was. Out of their control. An outsider. A stray who'd developed the intelligence to see from

beyond the confines of an organized religion built on deceptive rules. Aero was right. They never wanted me. They wanted obedience to keep the train of deceitful power in motion.

Aero gave me my voice by allowing me to find it for myself. He empowered what they'd labeled sin.

And in that room, he got his vengeance.

I watched as his father panicked while being tied to that pole by Nox. I bore witness to Aero releasing his pain through the knife in his hand, giving himself pure satisfaction with every cry of agony that dripped from Callum's lips. I embraced the way life slipped from his eyes as Aero tightened that belt to the pole, both of us watching as the breath he took became his last. A man who took everything from everyone around him, ruthlessly scheming his way through life under the veil of faith. Saint's horrified screams filled the room in harmonic beauty as he watched his father's murder. He fell apart, feeling every bit of pain he deserved by honoring him with the gift of a life of endless affliction.

I witnessed the boy who'd been stripped of a life of happiness that could've been his, get revenge on the evil that stole his innocence. I gritted my teeth alongside him as he carved layers of flesh from Bishop Caldwell's arms and thighs, noting the disturbing sound of the strips of skin slapping and sticking against the cool concrete as they fell. Saint passed out on top of the table as the spurts of warm blood splattered across our faces like a badge of revengeful honor. The thrill of knowing no child would be violated so violently filled my heart as I watched Aero cut *it* off, the screams of torture echoing throughout my body before being muffled out by his own shriveled, bloodied dick.

It was cruel. Most would consider it downright evil. But all I saw was the divine, heavenly justice of a man who deserved far worse than any pain we could inflict on this earth.

I stood behind Aero, gripping his bloodied hand in mine as one life vanished and a new life was reborn.

Evil comes in many forms, often masked by those that proclaim holiness. Some evil lurks through life as a bystander, watching and silently subjecting to the torment of others by turning a blind eye to

their pain. Some evil isn't evil at all. It's dark energy coming full circle, granting vengeance on those who ache for power over the weak.

I understand his freedom now. Aero's liberty from a past where our minds were warped to convince us we were born into sin, needing to spend our lives atoning for simply surviving. But we refuse to be held down by the weight of sin created by men of a different time and circumstance. Our lives are our own to live, and societal restrictions to human nature that feel natural, pure, and simply organic can no longer contain us.

We should be able to love without judgment. Without restraint. Without men trying to rule us with their perceptions of truth.

And because of that desire to live our lives to the fullest, we've been given our chance.

Sirens blaze in the background as we zip through town one final time, the smoke of the burning church rising tall and dark in our rearview mirror.

We'd ended it. Tarnished the institution they thought they'd built on brick and stone, only to send it crumbling to an ashy pile of the darkest deceptions with the proof of their lies in the forefront.

Saint's fate lies in living out the rest of his days with the daily reminder of the faith he once held in his hands. The hands that now hold his scars. The weight of his guilt on his shoulders every time he sees the reflection of truth within that mirror.

We destroyed the dynasty just as planned. The video went viral, and the Westwood name was broken forever. All hope of Saint becoming a bishop was savagely destroyed. Brady and his family made a statement after the announcement of Bishop Caldwell's disappearance. One brave child brought out the courage in others, and before they knew it, the town was lit up like a Christmas tree with statements from different victims coming out of the woodwork.

We weren't naïve. We knew somewhere, evil of the same sort would rise again, and the vicious cycle of control and abuse would continue on again one day.

One dynasty at a time, I told Aero, as we lit the flames together.

And now, Aero grips my exposed thigh possessively as he drives, bringing me out of my memories, the other hand gripping the wheel of the blacked-out Audi. He's come to crave any form of touch now,

needing to be connected to me, always holding me in his strong embrace, keeping one protective hand on me at all times. He can't get enough, and refuses to waste any more of his life without it.

Pulling the car over onto the side of the wooded road, he puts it in park and turns to face me.

"What are you doing?" I ask with amusement. "Baby, we're going to miss our flight!" I whine, but his gaze remains focused on me. "Baret said the plane is about to leave the tarmac!"

We were headed out of town with the help of our little secret weapon. Baret had been receiving his own encrypted messages from Aero, enlightening him to the threats surrounding me, without ever really knowing him. Together, they had protected me, one from the inside, the other from the outside. I'd forever hold him in my heart as my brother, even if not by blood.

Wandering to unexplored parts of the world was our new goal. Parts that were often labeled '*The Bush*.' I'd told Aero that revenge there looks beautiful there this time of year, and that the wild game was plentiful in the developing country. His wicked smile told me he understood just how stunning that view could be and just how sweet vengeance tastes in the uncultivated country, where more lies spread to innocent lives in the form of missionaries.

We'll continue our fight for those too weak to fight for themselves while still promoting the freedom of beliefs and varying religions. As it stands, we both still have our faith. A faith in something more powerful than anything man could conjure.

His ring-covered hand releases my seatbelt, and he pushes the driver's seat as far back as it allows. Gripping my wrist, he pulls me onto his lap as I squeal at his force, my legs opening beneath my floral skirt to surround his thighs. He cups my neck between his palms, slowly sliding those hands over the curve of my jaw, fingers grazing the skin directly around my lips, his expression growing serious.

"You know, when they were torturing me in that room, tied down at their mercy..." I flinch in remembrance as he continues. "...the only thing that held me together was you."

I swallow, my eyes brimming with tears. Learning that he willingly surrendered himself to his most loathed enemies with the eternal trust

that I would save him was as painful as it was empowering. His thumb strokes across my cheek before trailing down to my bottom lip.

“But it wasn’t pain that held me together. It was my ability to recall the feel of your gentle, comforting touch.”

“Aero…” I stifle a sob, my heart squeezing like a fist in my chest.

“I was strengthening you all while you were unknowingly strengthening me.” I feel him harden beneath me as his breathing changes, but the power in his direct gaze has me locked to those hazel eyes.

I trail my hands over his scars, running my fingers over the fleshy healed wound above his eye. The badge of honor he proudly wears from the night my mother was killed is a chilling reminder of a promise kept by the masked man who was always watching. Forever protecting.

My palm cups his cheek, my thumb trailing the scar near his lip, then the one lining his jaw. He embraces my touch, sighing in comforted relief, finally opening himself to the intensity of my loving displays of affection, before he continues.

“I love you with every echoed beat of my dark and hollowed heart, the hole in which contains my shattered ghost of a soul. I love you with all the fractured tears inside my tortured mind. With every agonizing breath I breathe.”

With his hand sliding to the back of my neck, he pulls me forward until our foreheads rest together, the tips of our noses grazing each other’s, as his direct stare pierces through the depths of me.

“You helped me to find a fragment of peace in a world constructed of pain,” he whispers against my lips, his bottom lip quivering. “I just,”—he swallows—“needed you to know.”

I smile graciously against his mouth, feeling entirely blessed and fortunate beyond words.

“Love is beneath us,” I utter breathlessly, trailing my lips along the softness of his.

His lips mirror mine, and his hauntingly beautiful smile at my declaration warms the deepest part of my soul. His tongue tastes my lips before I meet it with mine, sealing our connection.

My heart is owned by the man that saved me by giving me the voice to save myself.

A connection like ours isn’t meant for love stories. It’s tragic and tarnished in its root. Full of dark and disturbing desires that tradition and societal normalities cannot contain. A devotion to another, grown through the dirt of tragedies of the past.

It’s the poison of a new flower, opening in its toxic bloom to a world that isn’t ready to accept the dark beauty of its daggered thorns. Transmitting a rare, yet bitter illness that seeps its way into your bloodstream, holding you ransom to your desires, captivating and controlling only by devouring the fallacies of who we thought we were from the inside out.

It’s sick love.

And it’s entirely ours to own.

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HERO

Her eyes have fallen closed as slow steady breaths leave her parted lips.

Angelic in the darkest light.

My beautiful doll wants to play, diving deep into those hidden desires they don't talk about for fear of coming across as crazy and psychotic and devilishly impure. But that's exactly what we are, and exactly how we live our lives. Wild, raw, and entirely unfiltered.

I lift her limp body from the couch at our temporary home and walk her towards the back bedroom. We're on the run, flying from city to city, Africa being the next destination on our endless mission for vengeance against those who've wronged her. But after much needed healing on my part, my baby needed a cleaning, and the manner in which she requested has my cock practically cutting glass with excitement.

With the camera set up in the corner of the room, the focus entirely on us, I lay her in the middle of the king-sized bed, on top of the black pillow-top comforter. Her listless body folds into the plush bed, the softness threatening to swallow her gorgeous curves whole.

After removing her floral slip dress that looked so innocently cute on such a devious little devil, I stare down at her sedated form, covered only in a white lace bra and panties, enjoying the sight before me.

Her left nipple has slipped from the edge of the bra, and the panties are sitting lopsided on her hips from the initial struggle. She didn't know when it would happen, only that it would. Fighting it wasn't going to help her cause, only further riling the monster living deep within me.

She's succumbed to the sedatives, but every so often a soft moan leaves her throat, letting me know she isn't too far gone.

My little listless fuck doll.

I crawl over her form, slowly devouring her. Licking from her thigh to the bone of her hip, I spread sporadic open-mouthed kisses onto the warm flesh beneath me. I trail my tongue up her stomach, licking between her breasts until I reach her nipples. I suck and savor each of them, ensuring to bite the tips hard enough to leave them red and aching. Punishment for ever offering up this body to anyone but me,

even if she tore down an entire holy institution for yours truly in the process.

Finding her neck, I lick up the side, tasting the salty sheen of sweat lingering over her steady pulse. A soft moan escapes her, making the need to defile her an inescapable desire.

“My sleeping beauty,” I murmur, my lips trailing up to her ear. “I will cleanse you from all your impurities.” Reciting the scripture, I bathe my baby in my scent again, drowning her in all things Aero.

I lick along her jaw and over her chin, finding her lips. I slip my tongue between them, savoring the sweet taste of the inside of her mouth, connecting with her soft, relaxed tongue. Moaning against her mouth, I lick up the side of her face, proceeding to rub my face along hers, marking her as mine again.

I cleanse her with my mouth, my tongue; her taste, my forever drug. I erase the filth and replace it with my own.

Sitting back on my heels, I look over my sedated doll, enjoying the complete control she’s given me. My heated eyes trail her tight little body beneath me. Scooting down, I open her legs and they fall heavily to the side. Placing my face between her thighs, I inhale, breathing in the delicious scent of arousal that only she can emit. The scent that awakens something feral inside me.

Fucking holy water.

I press my mouth against her underwear and lick the outside of her damp panties. My tongue trails along her center, pressing firmly until it pushes into her slit, rubbing roughly along her clit. Her leg twitches when it touches, but she’s unable to move.

“Dirty doll,” I mumble against her flesh.

I’m rehashing. Seeing things that pull the red cloud back over my vision. Saint was inside her. He was inside my girl. Buried deep. Fucking her.

I rip her delicate underwear, pulling the simple string of lace from her body with enough force that her breast slips from her bra entirely as she bounces lifelessly against the bed. Removing my fitted t-shirt with one hand over my head, I rub the rock forming beneath my jeans, needing to release this pent-up tension that’s bound to combust.

Helpless. Innocent. Needing to be cleaned from the dirt she subjected herself to.

“Filthy fucking bitch.”

The red is back, just as she said it would be. But now, its color is blinding.

Opening my pants, I release my throbbing cock. I stroke the length, I flicking the piercing at the tip with my thumb, causing my shaft to flex in my hand, then I straddle her waist. Her lashes flutter, but her eyes remain closed as my weight presses down on her stomach.

I take her panties, bringing them to my lips, and inhale her arousal again, before trailing them across my face, down my neck, and further down my shirtless body until they meet the base of my cock. Twisting her panties around the shaft of my erection, I spread her legs behind me with one hand.

“Fuck, I love your scent.” Fisting the tip, I work my hand along my shaft as I clench my jaw. My other hand cups her center, feeling the wet, slick need oozing out onto my middle finger. “It drives me past the point of insanity.”

Even sedated, her body still responds to me, her arousal pooling between her thighs, allowing me to penetrate her with ease. I push my finger inside her wet walls, endlessly enjoying her warmth and snug cunt sucking me in further. I stroke myself with her soiled panties circled around the base of my dick, watching as her breathing changes.

Her chest rises and falls faster as I add another digit, finger fucking her until my balls get tight and heavy and the need to cum overtakes me.

“Fuck, baby. You’re so beautiful like this,” I rasp. “All helpless. Wholesome. Deliciously pure.”

I work my fist hard as the wet sounds of my fingers slide into her from behind me.

“I’m gonna suffocate you with that love you speak of, darling. Wrap it around that pretty little neck and paint you with my fucking heart.”

My breath is shallow, and my voice is rough and clipped as I lose myself to the pleasure. It travels up from the base of my spine, exploding throughout my core. At the last second, I grip the center of her bra, pulling it down until both her breasts spill over the top. Plump

and supple, her perfectly pink budded nipples bounce before me and I'm thrown from the ledge of sanity.

I groan, muscles tensing, as I spill white hot ropes of cum out in wild spurts all across her neck and breasts, the warm trail spilling down the curve of her body until it drips to the comforter beneath her. Immediately, I give her a taste, spreading some of the hot seed from her neck across her bottom lip, pushing my fingers into her mouth and coating her tongue.

"There you go, doll," I whisper breathlessly. "Eat me up."

My release is momentary as the desire to feel her around me intensifies. I grip a pillow from above her, quickly flipping her onto her stomach as I place it beneath her hips, angling her ass up towards me. Turning her face to the side, her soft lips call to me. I lean over her, wrapping my mouth around the bottom one. I suck hard, pulling back before releasing, then do the same with her upper lip before my tongue plunges into her mouth again.

Sitting back on my knees, I grip her gorgeous ass in my rough palms, holding her open for my viewing pleasure. I bend down to lick her cunt, then tongue her ass. Every part of her that is mine to own. Trailing my tongue up along the length of her beautifully curved spine, I slide my wet, semi-hard cock back inside of her, settling myself deep within her tight walls from behind. The way her body still grips my shaft even as she lies motionless has me biting back the urge to wreck her in all the chaotic ways I desire.

Then I remember her words.

"My gift to you is my body. I'm giving you complete ownership, handing myself over to you entirely. I trust you with everything that I am. My life is yours now, Aero. I live for you. Do as you desire with me, and please, don't for a second even think about holding back."

Pulling out, I grip the base of my cock and lick my lips. I spit down onto her hole, watching as it drips down the crack of her ass. With two fingers, I scoop up the pool of cum that dripped from her body onto the comforter and smear it over her forbidden hole. I push some inside the tight sphincter, my used and reddened cock already bricked up and leaking cum, always needing more of my dark angel.

"Ah fuck," I hiss as I press the head of my cock into her slippery ass.

I watch as she swallows me whole, pushing deeper and deeper until my balls lay heavy against her sopping labia beneath. A pained groan leaves my throat at the way she opens for me.

“Used and dirty again. Just how I need you, baby.”

With a few more thrusts, I watch my shiny shaft disappear deep into her ass, the pleasure practically crippling me as my body ignites and I lose myself all over again.

She’s the only one who can ever understand my needs and accepts me as nothing but the psychotic man with twisted and fucked up desires I am.

If only I knew what she had in store for me.


BRONX

I wake feeling deliciously sore, just as I'd desired.

Warm water surrounds me, as do those powerful, familiar arms. My back is against Aero's chest as his fingers trail lazy lines up and down my arms.

"There she is," he whispers in my ear, readjusting his grip on my naked body beneath the water. "Wake up, baby. I missed you."

His lips surround the shell of my ear as he continues to devour me, placing endless kisses along my neck and shoulder.

I'm still in a bit of a fog. The sedatives are wearing off, but the dizziness is lingering. I grip the side of the tub, feeling as if I'm going to slip beneath the water.

"I got you," he whispers, holding me firmly in his lap.

I sigh, enjoying the sore yet soothing sensation encompassing me. Both holes feel used and ache with that burning sensation that tells me all I need to know about how he enjoyed himself. The thought of him fucking my limp and sedated body as I'd demanded has my insides convulsing with a need all their own. I gave myself to him as his own personal fuck doll to be used as he desired.

"Aero," I mumble through numbed lips.

It's then that my vision clears and I see sparkles coming from beneath the warm water. Like stars, they shine until I blink again and gain focus.

"Aero!" I gasp, shooting upright and looking down at my chest.

Both of my nipples are pierced. Gold bars sit through each of them, little gold hearts surrounding the tips.

Aero's hand from behind me grips the front of my neck, pulling me back and pinning me against his hard chest.

"Calm down." His deep, authoritative tone rumbles through me. "Fuck, just look at you."

My breasts float beneath the water around his corded forearm as I gaze at them.

"I couldn't stop myself after I pierced them. Have to make sure they stay clean. God knows I dirtied them enough already."

I release a silent sigh, feeling entirely too turned on for my own good at the thought of him cumming all over my bare chest.

"I can't believe you," I groan, acting irritated, yet already loving how they look.

They’re actually extremely sexy and make me feel even more paired with my mate and his own personal jewelry I’ve grown entirely too fond of.

“Believe it. I told you I’d do it. I’m not one for bluffing, darling. Think you know that well enough.”

I feel his erection forming beneath the water against the crack of my ass again, loving the fact that he’s still naked with me.

“Ready for your show, doll?” he asks, placing a cellphone on the cedar plank stand next to us.

I swallow, rolling my lips together as the nerves build beneath my skin. Nodding, he slowly licks up the side of my neck, making me stir in his lap. My pulse is pounding in anticipation, my body already humming with a numbness only fear and lust can provide. My lips part as my eyes focus in on his body in action.

Watching him use me as he desires, caring for me and giving me affection while I'm unconscious, is exhilarating. Seeing him in this element, listening to the words he spews, watching as he devours me entirely… It’s forming that ache again. The endless ache that has my body constantly screaming for him alone.

We stay in the tub as he continues to wash me with soft, caressing hands beneath the sudsy water until the footage finally finishes. I turn in the large tub to face him, straddling his lap, needing to be closer. Our eyes lock, and my body ignites with waves of endless emotion. Silently we just stare into the other’s eyes, conveying so much without the need for words.

Trailing his arms beneath the surface of the water with the tips of my fingers, he relishes in my touch, now needing it to breathe. A soft sigh of pleasure leaves him as I reach his neck. I run my thumb over his bottom lip near his scar, finally breaking my stare. He leans forward, his arms wrapping around me, one possessively behind the back of my neck, the other cupping my bottom, as our lips connect.

The kiss is soft. A gentle exploration of each other as tongues intertwine and heavy emotions rise to the surface. His mouth caresses mine with such care, transmitting his affections entirely.

“I feel so much for you, it overwhelms me,” he says between kisses. “Everything.” Another kiss. “All at once.”

“I love you, too,” I smirk against his kiss.

“Mmm, love.” He captures my lips again, his expert tongue sweeping along the length of mine. “Beneath us.”

We kiss until our lips are swollen, and our bodies melt together as we become one again. He slips inside me and we connect until the water has turned cool and our bodies are exhausted from expressing that all-consuming love.



Waking the next day, I bite down on my bottom lip, staring at his ridiculously thick lashes resting every so softly against his cheeks. A sliver of sunlight peeking through the heavy drapes illuminates the darkened room surrounding us. He sleeps so thoroughly now. Soundly. As if by killing his demons, we've somehow erased the horrors of his tormented past.

But there's more I need from him. More I want to take as my own.

His hair looks freshly fucked, the dark locks tossed all about on his forehead from fingers threading and endlessly pulling at it last night. His chest heaves a sigh as he reaches out to feel the bed for me, even before his eyes open.

"Briony."

My chest practically caves in on itself at my name on his lips. He lazily trails a hand down his stomach, and my eyes follow the light dusting of dark hair in the divots of his toned abdomen that leads to my favorite toy beneath those sheets. I see his erection already formed, pressing urgently against the soft fabric.

Before he can reach for me, I hand him the glass of water.

"Drink. Before you dehydrate yourself with the excess fluids you're losing."

A half smile forms on his lips as he trails his hand back up his chest and over his hair, tossing it lazily. He props himself on one elbow, taking the drink from me while I grin deviously to myself on the inside. His throat bobs as he swallows the entire glass down, licking his lips of every drop of water that remains.

"Thank you," he whispers, before placing the glass on the nightstand and laying back down on his back. He grabs my wrist. "Now come sit on your cock."

I rip my wrist away from him, and he arches a brow. My devilish smile slowly grows on my lips.

His eyes dart around the room as he sits up on the bed before his gaze lands back on me.

"What did you do?" He brings a hand to his forehead, then pinches the bridge of his nose. His eyes squeeze shut, fighting the drowsy feeling I understand all too well.

"Baby," he warns, his tone dark. "What the fuck did you do?" His hand runs down his face as his breathing intensifies. "What did you

give me?” His head becomes heavy and he falls back onto the bed. “What the fuck is happening?”

I lean over the top of his chest, straddling his naked body, smirking my evil smirk down over him as his eyelids grow heavy, his focus faltering.

Leaning over him, my lips graze his ear as I recite the words of a calculated man.

“A rebirth.” I sit up, watching with a satisfied grin as his eyes finally close. “A revival.” I press my soft lips against his relaxed ones.

“An awakening of sorts...”


HERO

Like a sedated lion awakening from a heavy tranquilizer, the desire to kill immediately overtakes me before my eyes even have the chance to open.

I practically rip my arms off at the shoulders, pulling at the restraints on my wrists as the fog over my eyes slowly disintegrates and my vision clears.

My body burns with fury and my lip curls in rage, the breaths leaving my lips hot and heavy. I attempt to free myself again, noting she's shackled both my wrists in thick, black leather cuffs with heavy metal buckles chained to each post of the iron bedframe. My ankles have a similar restraint below. I'm completely naked in the dimly lit room with nothing but the white sheet of our bed beneath me, a rock lamp in the corner emitting a deep, red glow across the space, matching my enraged mood entirely.

I peer around the room before dusting my fingers along the cool iron above me, checking for a key to my escape. Nothing.

"What the fuck is this?" I growl.

Movement from across the room catches my eye.

Briony.

My nostrils flare as I take her in from head to toe. There she stands within the shadows, wearing the hottest little outfit I've ever fucking seen. If I didn't want to slit her fucking throat for putting me in this vulnerable position, I'd voice my appreciation for it.

Leather straps cross her body in the bodice of this little teddy that fits her tight curves like a glove and rises high on her hips. But it's the leather girdle that connects the straps of the teddy to her toned thighs that gets me. Fuck, I want to hit her. Spank that white, creamy, defiant little ass until my handprint is forever etched into her flesh like our matching scars.

She's leaning casually against the door, rolling something in her fingers, but it's too dim to make out what it is.

My skin is damp with perspiration; my raging heart pounds within the confines of my chest. I want nothing more than to punish her for what she's done to get me here in this position, and yet I have a feeling I won't get that opportunity. Especially with that bone-chilling gaze she has set on me.

"Get over here," I demand calmly from the bed.

Her head tips to the side, her coal-black hair softly draping over her shoulder as she leans casually against the doorframe, eyeing me up and down with a dangerous expression, void of emotion.

“Briony, get the fuck over here and untie me.” I breathe roughly through my nostrils, feeling them flare as my jaw tightens. “Now.”

The loss of control has me mentally spiraling, the rage building hot within my flesh as I do my best to remain collected.

After a few more agonizing seconds of silence, she pushes off the door, slowly strutting across the room in black stilettos. Those once angelic eyes are now heated in their stare. Her lips curl up, and she smirks at me.

She has the audacity to smirk at me, enjoying the exchange of power. Living for the inability of my retaliation. My head pounds and my thoughts run wild with what’s coming. My vision clears on what it is she’s holding, and my eyes narrow.

Tapping the end of the whip into her palm, she shakes her head at me, making a tsk sound with her tongue.

“Haven’t you heard, darling?” she coos, narrowing her eyes back at me. “You don’t speak unless spoken to.”

Taking the whip, she toys with the leather straps dangling from the tip, twirling them around her delicate little finger as a devious smile spreads across her gorgeous face. Lost in her beauty, she swings the whip down, cracking it across my bare thigh.

I suck in a sharp breath at the sting of pain before the warmth travels directly to my cock.

I harden, and her eyes fall on it.

“Pathetic,” she taunts, scoffing, before cracking the whip across my chest.

I take the pleasured pain with my chin lifted, my glare matching hers.

She’s driving me past the point of madness, playing a very dangerous game with an all too calculated man, working to break the stallion before her.

Turning from me, she waltzes her way over to the dresser and drops the whip on the floor. I see an array of objects lying on a single white cloth. She grips what looks like a bottle of wine by the neck.

“I hope you realize what this means, Briony,” I call from the bed. “There will be retribution.”

She pauses in place before turning her chin to her shoulder. A dry chuckle leaves her throat as she grips the bottle with one hand. Slowly, she drags it along the edge of the dresser, the scrape of the glass against the wood producing a low, eerie hum. At the end of the wood, the bottle drops to her side, where she grips the neck with her fingers, prowling towards me again.

“Yeah, so I don’t do well with threats.”

Smart little bitch stole my words.

She approaches the bed from the side, trailing her nails up along my thigh. My muscles contract and I fight the restraints again.

“You’re gonna need to breathe through this,” she purrs, raising the bottle above me.

She pours wine over my closed lips, the sweet liquid spilling over my mouth and down my chin. She continues, angling the bottle over my chest, where she pours more. The muscles of my abdomen tighten, and the chill of the cool wine pools in the crevices. She bends down, and her tongue darts out of her mouth, licking a trail up the line of muscles, lapping it up. My cock reluctantly responds to her endless taunting, resting up along my lower abdomen, stiff and heavy.

If I thought breaking Briony was exhilarating, I’d yet to realize how mind-blowing watching her break me would be.

With her hard eyes set on mine, she lifts the bottle to her mouth again, swallowing down a hefty amount of wine.

She’s an animal. A wild fucking animal that’s been caged too long. Her taste of freedom has her roaming the edges of her terrain, pushing the boundaries of a life she didn’t know she needed.

Seeing her in her element makes my chest swell with pride for my queen.

Still gonna fuck her up for this.

Approaching me from the edge of the bed, she places the bottle delicately on the floor. She crawls up onto the bed between my legs, her shoulders rolling like a true predator, conquering her prey as she climbs my naked frame.

Straddling my abdomen, she plants her palms on both sides of my head, leaning over me from above. I move to sit up, but can only go

so far with my restraints. She pulls back, cocking a mischievous brow, taunting her freedom and the lack of mine. My lip curls in frustration.

“This little game of yours won’t end well for you,” I say confidently, resting my head back against the bed.

She scowls. “I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

My eyes rake over her beautiful body in the leather teddy, wanting to rip it to shreds with my teeth, my knife, my fucking cock. I need out of these cuffs.

“Then what are you asking for?” I ask, biting down on my bottom lip while staring at hers, imagining her sweet cries of pain.

“Consent.”

I scoff. “Consent? For wha—“

“Tell me you trust me,” she interrupts, her drop in tone causing me to pause.

Trust her? I’ve never trusted anyone in my life to the extent I trust her. She’s bloomed for me. Bled for me. Killed for me. Trust isn’t even a question.

“With everything.” I answer.

Our eyes hold for a moment. The emotion she conveys nearly makes my black, dead heart combust.

She sits upright, raking her fingers down my chest.

“Good,” she answers abruptly.

I admire her exposed ass when she hops off me, walking to the dresser again to grab what looks like a ball gag.

“No, fuck no,” I spit out.

She walks closer, holding the black gag with a leather strap looped around her finger. When she strings it across the side of my face, I thrash my head away from it.

Tipping her chin, she says, “You can’t fight me.” She leans forward, her lips dusting the shell of my ear. “There’s no escaping this; no key left waiting. No puzzle for this intelligent assassin to outwit.” Gripping the hair at the top of my head, she pulls tightly until I’m hissing in pained pleasure. My cock jumps between us and I flex my quads tightly. “No escaping me, Aero.”

My hard glare finds hers. I’ve created a monster. She’s an alpha, her thirst for dominance more powerful than mine.

She releases my hair, slapping me across the face, and I breathe out a sigh.

“Hilarious, what a little pain does to you,” she taunts, peering at my erection. “Bet you’re just aching for some contact. Craving this warm, wet mouth wrapped around that pierced tip. Imagining sliding into my wet, slick walls, perhaps?”

My chest is practically heaving at the words spilling from those beautiful lips. I pull once more on the straps that hold me down, a deep growl of frustration rumbling in my chest.

“Hush, my love,” she whispers seductively through her grin. “It’s time for us to erase your past.”

Confusion hits me as she slips the leather strap of the ball gag over the top of my head, trying to force the ball into my mouth. I thrash wildly, thwarting her efforts, until she climbs above me, placing one knee on my chest and the other on my neck, pinning me down and holding my nose closed until I have no choice but to surrender or suffocate.

My jaw opens to obtain air, and my mouth is immediately filled with the gag. Securing the back of it, she brushes away the strands of hair covering my eyes, and I harden my gaze on her before she delicately trails her fingers over the scar near my eyebrow, then my mouth, focusing on my lips.

“That’s right. Surrender to me, sweetheart,” she whispers before placing a soft kiss on my temple.

She continues trailing light kisses along my face before finding my neck. Getting to my collarbone, her warm tongue lashes across my skin, trailing down to my chest. The ball gag captures my throaty moan as I surrender to the tender touch.

She knows my balance now. Gentle love, but with a bite.

Her full lips wrap around my nipple before the sensation of her teeth tears into the flesh. My hips rise of their own accord, the muscles of my thighs taut with tension, searching for some sort of friction against my aching cock at the delicious pain. *Fuck, this is driving me crazy.*

She straightens, and my eyes trail her body, those gold bars through her nipples pressing against the sheer black mesh of the lingerie, making me even more thirsty for a taste. Lost in dirty-minded

thoughts, her palm finds the side of my face again. My dark hair falls over my eyes as the sting of the slap has me practically coming on myself.

“You’re gonna cum for me, aren’t you, pretty boy?”

Fuck.

I stare up at her through my hair, breathing harshly through my nostrils, then nod.

Reaching back, she grips the shaft of my cock roughly, and I lift my head from the bed.

“Only when I say you can,” she instructs, her hand sliding lower to cup my heavy balls. “You gonna listen to me now?”

I gaze in awe at this demon goddess above me.

“No more fucking talking,” she demands. “Nod if you understand.”

I mumble around the gag, then nod.

She gently rolls my balls in her fingers, toying with me, then presses lightly beneath them. An area that’s entirely too sensitive for my liking.

My head drops against the mattress again, and my eyes close tightly.

“But before you get off, I’m gonna get mine.”

Gripping my hair at the crown, she pulls my neck forward, unbuckling the gag and removing it from my mouth before throwing it to the floor. Drool spills down my chin as she shifts above me. Creamy thighs now surround my head, and before I can take a breath, she pulls the strip of her teddy to the side and sits her wet, swollen pussy on my lips.

“Lick your cunt, baby,” she orders, smearing me with her arousal.

I oblige, eagerly lapping up her holy water while her sweet moans fill the room. My fingers curl around the edge of the cuffs, wanting so badly to touch her, to fill her, but my tongue will have to do. She wants me to get her off? I’ll have her seeing fucking stars.

“Yeah, there you go,” she praises me, suffocating me with her sex. “Make me cum.”

I don’t need to breathe. Fucking her with my tongue as she degrades me is far better than air.

She leans up on her knees and runs a hand along her sopping sex, slapping it above me before pushing her finger deep inside herself. I

watch, craving nothing more than to obliterate my little tease. I'm going to rip her apart, given the chance.

"Hungry for more?" she taunts, removing her finger and smearing the creamy arousal all over my lips.

"Fuck yeah," I answer before she crushes me again.

My hips rise, my cock stiff and leaking on my abdomen while my tongue separates her folds. It's not long before her thighs begin to quiver, her nails digging into the flesh of my chest. I roughly suck on her clit, gently nipping the swollen bud, and her spasms overtake her.

She cries out, grinding her slick sex down, and cums on my face, the sounds leaving her throat making me feral.

Her breathing slowly regulates, and she lifts off me as she hums, "Good boy."

"Fuck my cock, Briony," I command, sexually frustrated by my loss of power in this situation. "Fucking sit on it already. Jesus, enough with this shit. Undo the cuffs."

Sliding off me, she laughs at my words. Her eyes are half-lidded in her post-orgasmic bliss, taunting me further. She walks back over to the dresser, grabbing something else in her hands. She approaches the end of the bed near my feet, and I raise my head in an attempt to see what she's doing.

"I really don't like your tone of voice," she scolds. "Besides, demanding it won't work for me. I'm gonna need to hear you beg for it, cry for it, plead for the pleasure that only I can give you."

She climbs onto the bed again, sitting between my separated thighs, biting down on her lip as she gazes at my cock. My pulse quickens.

"What are you doing?"

Her chest rises and falls as she expels a deep breath. Lashes flutter as she licks her lips, seeming nervous. Why is her mask of pure confidence slipping?

Her eyes find mine, and I hear a click, followed by a low buzzing sound.

"Briony." I strain to sit up but get pulled back by the restraints. "What are you doing?"

"Shh." She touches the inside of my thigh with what appears to be a vibrator. "Don't fight me, or the gag goes back into your mouth."

The vibrator trails further up my thigh, closer to my manhood. The cuffs tear into my wrists as I jerk aggressively.

“No.” I practically growl out the word, the pain present in my expression.

The look in her eyes tells me everything. I had my chance to cleanse her of the filth she’d subjected herself to for me. Now she’s going to cleanse me of the heartbreaking dirt of my past.

“You’re going to cum for me,” she declares, the vibrator reaching the base of my cock.

My head drops back again as my hips reluctantly jerk at the pleasurable sensation.

“But only the way I want you to.”

I hear what sounds like a bottle cap closing as a warm, wet hand slides over my cock.

“Ahh, shit,” I hiss through my teeth.

She must have a bottle of lube because my dick is slick in her grasp. The vibrator runs along my balls, and I thrust into her hand at the much-needed touch that has my body on fire. Her hand slips lower, cupping my swollen and heavy balls again. She runs the vibrator up along my shaft until it reaches my piercing. It rolls over the tip, shooting sparks of pleasure throughout my core in sharp, quick bursts.

“Jesus, Briony,” I gasp, thrusting against it. “Ah, fuck.”

“Breathe,” she demands, her slick fingers sliding down further to press against my ass.

“No.” I jerk away from her. “Don’t fucking touch me there.”

Immediately, all pleasure is stripped from my body, and panic floods my vision. My mind is thrown from the confines of this space and dropped back into the prison of my past. The horrid reminders of my innocence being stripped from me.

She drops the vibrator, crawling up my body to grip my chin roughly. I see her mouth move to say something, but all I hear is the raging pounds of my pulse throughout my head.

“Aero!” she screams. “Look at me!”

I ball my hands into fists, my body tight with tension as my eyes finally open and connect with hers.

“Look at me, baby. Only me,” she pants above me, her long dark hair curtaining her face as she cups my face between her hands. “It’s just you and me.”

I breathe through my lips, my forehead beaded in perspiration as my racing pulse finally slows.

“I’m taking this from them, Aero. I’m owning every part of you. It’s just us. We’re not like them,” she breathes, the confidence of a warrior emitting from her. “We’re like us.”

She reaches up and unbuckles one of my wrists. My eyes widen in surprise before my greedy hand quickly finds her breast, freeing the supple flesh by tearing open the mesh covering it.

“I’ll love you endlessly,” she moans, sliding further back, gliding over me with her slick center. “But you will let me erase this.”

The word love is filled with new meaning. She demands my trust, just as I had demanded hers. Briony gave up everything she knew to be true, all for me.

I toy with her nipple, flicking the piercing while feeling her squirm above me. My hand slides up her chest, finding her neck. I feel her swallow against my palm, our eyes still locked on one another as I tighten my hold.

It’s you and me.

I release her neck, surrendering as she sinks back down between my legs. Fingernails tear into the flesh of my thighs, giving me that pain I need to feel safe. My legs bend slightly, ankles still shackled. Pressing against the sensitive spot, her gaze focuses on me as her slick finger pushes inside.

“Fuck.” I grip the sheet beneath me into my fist, my chest heaving while the rest of me remains tethered to the bed.

She slowly rolls her finger, massaging me internally. My cock stands straight as a wave of the highest stimulation overtakes me. Starting at my legs, the fire builds higher and higher until it engulfs my entire body in heat, like a volcano exploding from the inside out.

I try to speak, but words are out of my grasp as she continues to pulse her finger on that very spot that renders me entirely weak at the knees.

“Yes, baby,” she sighs, licking her lips, gazing at me with fervent need. “Let me milk the cum out of *my* cock the dirty way.”

Her words. The filthy way she's touching me to erase my past. The way her eyes light up with undeniable lust while watching. All of it has me cursing at the ceiling, groaning uncontrollably, and reaching down to touch my aching cock.

She slaps my hand immediately, continuing to work her finger in a rolling motion. It's too much. My hips grind upward, craving sweet, devastating release as my breaths become choppy and my muscles twitch. My balls suck up tight against my body, and I feel it coming.

"F-fuck, baby...touch me. Suck me. Grip my fucking cock," I groan, tossing my head back as I writhe beneath her.

"Beg for it," she commands.

"Please! Fucking Christ," I plead.

Her other hand finally wraps around my cock, and as soon as she slides up the shaft and reaches the crown, my body goes rigid, and a long, deep moan vibrates from my chest as ropes of hot cum jet out from my tip. I keep thrusting my hips up into her palm, still coming, as the heavy punch to my pleasure center has my body liquified in the most "eyes-rolled back" burst of fire I've ever experienced.

I'm dizzy, in a fog of what the fuck just happened, when I realize she's unbuckled the remaining leather cuffs on my limp body. She scales me, wiping her hand through the mess of semen along my abdomen. I watch in a daze as she spreads it along her neck and over her chest in the sexiest display of marking herself before her finger swipes at more. She spreads it over my parted lips, slipping her finger inside my mouth.

My tongue wraps around her finger as she gazes down proudly.

"We taste so good together." She smirks, pulling her finger from my mouth before her lips wrap around the digit to suck on it herself.

Madness and overwhelming lust for this woman overtake me, and I flip us abruptly, throwing her onto her back as she squeals in surprise. I mirror her radiant grin before attacking her mouth with my own, the tangy flavor of her arousal is still on my tongue as it sweeps over hers, meshing us together yet again. I'm still hard as ever as I settle my hips between her parted thighs, sliding into her swollen slickness while the echoes of our orgasms continue to cycle through us.

Pulling away from her lips, I stare down into the blue eyes of the woman that changed me in ways I never knew possible. The woman that brought me to life, only by viciously destroying the demons of my past. The woman that gave up Heaven to find her place in Hell with me. The woman I'll forever be tethered to, in this life and the next.

I smile to myself, embracing that sick love as our dark tale continues.

"A fucking delicacy."

THE END

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