

A STANDALONE TIME LOOP BULLY ROMANCE

# DEVIL'S DAM PARTY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C.M. STUNICH

Hot bullies, busted cars, and the party of the  
year.

On an endless loop.

I don't know how, but I'm living today over  
and over again.

Every year, the town of Devil Springs holds  
a celebration known as Devils' Day.

There's no magic, but there might as well  
be: we wear masks, we play tricks, we party  
hard.

Every year, the students of Crescent Reform  
School party the hardest.

They're the lewdest, the most wanton,  
ribald, and lascivious.

Why shouldn't they be? Our ultrarich prep  
school sits in the middle of the woods, a  
place for wealthy families to dump their  
black sheep.

Except for me.

My parents sacrificed everything they had  
to send me to Crescent Prep.

I can't let Calix Knight, Barron Farrar, and  
Raz Loveren ruin that for me.

They've bullied me for years, and I've  
never known why.

At least today, they have something real to  
be pissed about.

I crashed my shitty yellow VW Beetle into  
Calix's Aston Martin.

And somehow, someway, I keep waking up  
at the moment of the crash.

I can't undo it; I can't run from the Knight  
Crew.

My mantra has always been: *this too shall  
pass.*

But not today.  
Not the worst day of my life.

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## **Devils' Day Party**

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*this book is dedicated to the devil inside of all of us.  
play with that delicious darkness, but do not let it consume  
you.*

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## Author's Note

\*\*\*Possible Spoilers\*\*\*

*Devils' Day Party* is a reverse harem, high school, enemies-to-lovers/love-hate/bully romance. What does that mean exactly? It means our female main character, Karma Sartain, will end up with at least three love interests by the end of the book. It also means that for a portion of this story, the love interests are total assholes. This book in no way condones bullying, nor does it romanticize it. If the love interests in this story want to win the main character over, they'll have to earn it.

Should be interesting, considering they only have one day to do it ...

If you've read my other high school romance series—[\*Rich Boys of Burberry Prep\*](#), [\*Adamson All-Boys Academy\*](#), or [\*The Havoc Boys\*](#)—then just know this one falls right in the middle in terms of intensity. It's not quite as gritty as [\*I Was Born Ruined\*](#) (the first book in my *Death by Daybreak Motorcycle Club* series).

Any kissing/sexual scenes featuring Karma are consensual. This book might be about high school students, but it is not what I would consider young adult. The characters are nuanced, the emotions real, the f-word in prolific use. There's underage drinking, marijuana use, sexual situations, and other adult scenarios.

None of the main characters is under the age of seventeen. This is a stand-alone novel, meaning we get a happy ending in this book.

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*Forever is composed of Nows –*  
**Emily Dickinson**

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There's blood all over my steering wheel.

The strange thing is, I can't remember how it got there.

Reaching shaking fingers up to my head, I come away with a smear of ruby red on my hand, the perfect match to the blood on the steering wheel. *This is my blood.* The thought comes to me along with fits and spurts of memories from this morning. *Running late, spilling scalding coffee down my chest, finding my dress for tonight's party missing from the clothesline out front.*

I shake my head, and a wave of dizziness washes over me. Looking up, I see the shiny black surface of Calix Knight's Aston Martin dented and streaked with yellow paint. My bumper is very firmly planted into his passenger door.

Speaking of ... my own door flies open, and Calix's warm hand is on my upper arm, not, unfortunately, to offer assistance of any kind. Instead, he jerks me out of the seat and slams me back against the side of my car.

"Are you fucking insane?!" he snarls, releasing me as several concerned citizens approach us, all of them huddled under the protective awning that covers the gas pumps. Just past its barrier, rain pours in a seemingly endless wave, a cold chill working its way into my skin as I shiver and try to remember how I managed to crash into his absurdly expensive car. *Without insurance.*

Swallowing a lump in my throat, I glance over to see that his car's parked perfectly straight in the space, right next to the gas pump. My

own car—which I bought off my neighbor for about five hundred bucks—is perpendicular to his, T-boned into the side of Calix’s like I did it on purpose.

Did I? Would I?

After all the years of suffering he and his friends have put me through, it wouldn’t surprise me.

I glance back at his face, too handsome for his own good, with cheekbones carved by the gods, and a mouth that’d be worth millions if it ever smiled. The only expressions I’ve ever seen Calix Knight wear on his face are a cruel frown and a red-hot smirk.

Once, I saw his orgasm face. And even that was vicious, his hands a hot cruelty on my hips, triumph written into every line of his wicked visage. I should never have slept with him. My mistake. I don’t often make the same mistakes twice, but ... I’ve just rammed him, apparently. Different sort of ramming, still not a good idea.

Calix looks at me like he’d very much enjoy wrapping those beautiful hands of his around my neck. Luckily, we’re surrounded by people.

“Are you okay?” an older woman in a bright yellow shirt asks, approaching us cautiously. I notice she has tiny daisies painted on her nails. Calix levels a dark glare on me before taking a step back, his hands curling into fists at his sides.

“I’m okay,” I reply carefully, watching him to see what he might do next.

“Should I call the police?” she inquires, and the crowd, realizing that nothing interesting is going to happen, begins to disperse back to their cars.

“That won’t be necessary,” Calix replies easily, fixing a smooth smile on his face, one that’s made up of black moths and bats, full moons and starless skies. There’s a darkness to it that makes it sinister, rather than comforting. “We’re classmates; I won’t be pressing charges.”

My heart thunders in my chest as Calix leans forward, under the guise of brushing some stray strands of purple hair back from my face.

“*You know what tonight is?*” he whispers, his breath hot against the side of my neck as the woman moves away. But her gaze doesn’t

leave me, almost as if she knows what's really going on beneath the surface of this seemingly pleasant interaction.

Of course I know what tonight is. The whole town knows what tonight is. But I can't seem to find the words to respond.

Calix presses his lips to the side of my throat, but I'm neither flattered nor excited by the attention. Instead, I'm terrified. Because today is officially known as Devils' Day in our shitty little town outside Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

And tonight ... tonight is the Devils' Day Party.

"I know what tonight is," I say finally as Calix runs his tongue over my pulse, and I shove him back as hard as I can. He laughs, but at least that move puts some distance between us. His dark eyes flick over to the front of the convenience store as the little bells on the door ring and Raz and Barron step out. *The cavalry has arrived*, I think, feeling my palms get sweaty. Any one of these assholes is hard enough to deal with, but all three of them? And on Devils' Day?

Supposedly, the holiday is named after some ancient Native American tradition. The local tribes would set up bonfires all around the edges of the woods and perform ritualistic songs and dances to draw the demons and devils from the earth. Everyone in the tribe would wear masks, to confuse the spirits as to who was human and who was one of them. And they'd play tricks on each other—cruel tricks—to prove they were just as cunning.

Today, we celebrate in much the same way. Except the bonfires burn next to state-of-the-art sound systems, and alcohol makes its rounds along with weed and psychedelics. Masks are still worn, tricks are still played, and I swear that the devils still rise from the earth to torment humanity.

My devils come in the form of Calix, Barron, and Raz. Every year. Like clockwork.

"What the fuck happened here?" Raz asks, a plastic grocery bag clutched in one hand as he circles the cars, surveying the damage and then looking up at me with a sharp smile. "Little trailer trash bitch thought she'd get the first Devils' Day trick on us, huh?"

*Is that what I did?* I wonder, my head ringing, my mouth tainted with the taste of copper. I think I bit my tongue when my head hit the steering wheel. I've never liked Calix and his friends, and it's true: I've played my fair share of tricks on them during Devils' Day



in the past, but ... Would I really hit Calix's car like this, in front of all these people?

"I'll pay for the damage," I say, managing to keep my voice firm as I lift gray eyes up to Calix's crow-black stare. He meets my gaze, a smirk crawling across his face as Barron watches us from one side, silent but no less scary than the other two.

"With what money, Trailer Park?" Calix asks, moving back over to the gas pump and pulling the hose from his car. "The change your dyke mothers pay you for working part-time at that dump they call a business?"

"Don't talk about my parents like that," I say coldly, feeling my temper get the better of me. I have to keep it in check though. I *have* to. They like it far too much when I get riled up. "At least my mothers didn't ship me off to another state like a dirty little secret. That's more than any of you can say about your own parents."

"Say that shit again," Raz spits, coming around to stand in front of me and tossing his grocery bag into the backseat of the car. He slams his palms on either side of me, pinning me in against the side of the Aston Martin. Ever since I can remember, Raz has worn red contact lenses over his pale blue eyes. I think, mostly, it's to piss off that conservative senator daddy of his. But for whatever reason, the effect is monstrous. *Monstrous, and yet, he smells far too good. Probably to lure in prey, like a carnivorous plant or something.*

"Back off of her," Barron says in that low, deep voice of his, like gravestones and cold, dead things. But he isn't defending me because he likes me. He's defending me because he wants to wait for the dark and quiet to play his tricks. I might like him and his big hands, stained with charcoal because he draws too much, if he didn't work so damn hard to make my life miserable. "People are watching."

Raz pushes off the car, his long, lean athlete's body a testament to his position on the track team. From what I hear, dear old dad was disappointed that he couldn't hack it in football. Even as the star sprinter on the team, he's a fucking disappointment.

"I'll find a way to pay for it," I repeat again, desperate to avoid having the cops called on me. Based on the way my car is positioned against his, I can't seem to come up with any way that I might've done this accidentally. Although, knowing Calix is loaded, what does it really matter? He'll pay to have the car fixed—or more than

likely just buy a new one—and I'll have gained nothing except for a burden the boys can hold over my head.

“Maybe I'll let you pay for it tonight with your mouth?” Calix opens the driver's side door of the car as Raz shoves me aside, leaving me to stumble and fall to my knees on the pavement. His laughter rings out as I turn and throw a handful of rocks as hard as I can at the back of the car, the wheels kicking up dust that I cough on as I rise to my feet.

As the boys—pretty much everyone calls them and their friends *the Knight Crew*—speed off, they drag my car along with them for several feet, metal screeching against metal, exponentially fucking my vehicle up.

Typical.

I've never liked Devils' Day, and I've especially never liked the party that follows it.

But I always go.

Always.

Because if I don't, they'll find me anyway, and I'd rather be in a crowd, wearing a mask, than at home alone like I was that one night.

*This too shall pass*, I repeat, as I climb in my car and, on the third try, manage to get the engine to turn over.

At least today, the guys have something real to be mad about.



There are only two schools in our county. One is over an hour away via a bus that starts picking up kids in our area at around six in the morning. My mothers—yes, they're lesbians and I have two—didn't want that for me. Instead, Mama Jane, who grew up wealthy, liquidated what was left of her trust fund and prepaid four years at Crescent Preparatory Academy.

It's a nice school, much nicer than Devil Springs High, the public school that struggles to get a fraction of the funding that the Crescent enjoys. But it's also in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere—and that's no accident. It used to be called *Crescent Reform School for Boys*. Back in the 1800s, any wealthy family east of the Rockies with a troubled son could send their kid there, either to get rid of them or to ... fix them. Today, the school functions in much the same way,

though not officially. No, now Crescent Prep is where wealthy families send any kids—boys *and* girls—that they want to disappear. We have pregnant senator’s daughters, disgraced heiresses running from leaked sex tapes, and teen boys too wicked with privilege and hate to fit into high society.

And for three years now, I’ve gone to school with all of them. Outclassed, outmatched, outspent.

The only friend I had at Crescent Prep before our newest addition—a girl named April—enrolled here, was my bestie, Luke.

Luke, who describes herself as a *pansexual, genderfluid otaku*, has highfalutin fucking asshole parents who can’t handle their kid’s identity. They basically tossed her into the backwoods of Arkansas, so she wouldn’t embarrass them in front of their fancy friends.

“You did *what?!?*” Luke—born Lucille, which is *hilarious* if you know her—chortles as I narrow my eyes and tap my red and black nails against the side of the rock I’m perched on. “I can see the headline now: *three-hundred-thousand-dollar Aston Martin crushed by shitty yellow VW bug with eyelashes*. What a glorious start to Devils’ Day!”

“You’re not helping,” I murmur, turning to the third member in our little group of outcasts. April Iseman, the heavily pregnant sophomore that enrolled at Crescent just four months prior, stares back at me, pushing her glasses up her nose and huffing a sigh. Her mom is a state senator for Louisiana with big ambitions, and a pregnant fifteen-now-sixteen-year-old does not fit into her carefully laid plans. “Can you back me up here? There’s nothing good about this. Today is Devils’ Day, for fuck’s sake. Calix and his minions don’t make life easy for me on a normal day. You think today, of all days, was the right time to stage a coup?”

“Well, why did you do it then?” April asks, tilting her head to one side, long, brown hair cascading over her shoulder. She sits primly on another rock, dressed in our school uniform—royal purple skirt and white dress shirt, her tie loose around her neck, Mary Janes polished to a shine. Despite her official status as an outcast, April is leagues apart from the rest of the students who attend Crescent Prep—even me. She’s punctual, studious, respectful ... which is why she had little choice but to team up with me and Luke.

“I ... don’t remember,” I say, reaching up to rub at my sore head, my hand coming away with a bit of dried blood. The excuse sounds lame, even to my own ears, but it’s true. Something about the way I

hit my head must've knocked my brain around a bit. No matter how hard I try, how hard I concentrate, I can remember driving down the street toward the gas station and then nothing else until the pain of impact. "But I know I'm not stupid enough to start shit on Devils' Day." With a long sigh, I glance up toward the towering sides of Crescent Preparatory Academy.

This area is rife with German influence, brought over by early pioneers, and our school reflects it. The damn thing looks like the fucking Matterhorn entrance at Disneyland, with wood shutters painted with tiny flowers, white stucco walls, and decorative half-timbering.

I've never hated a single locale more.

Glancing back at Luke, I find my painted lips pulled down into a severe frown. She's still laughing at me, stuffing a powdered donut between her lips and grinning.

"Regardless of *why* you did it, or whether it's a good idea, it's still funny. I can just imagine Calix's stupid face all squinched up with rage. How *dare* the poorest girl in school stand up to him and his ultrarich friends?" Luke rolls her brown eyes and stands up, stretching her arms above her head. Despite her preference for pants—shorts, actually, even in winter—the school forces Luke to wear the girl's uniform, complete with pleated wool skirt. "Well, are you going to sit here and sulk all day? Or are you going to stride in those doors like you own the place? I mean, you started the day off with a bang. Don't disappoint me, Karma."

Luke pulls out a grotesque, goblin-esque mask with a hooked nose from inside her book bag, sliding it over her face, and then grinning at me. The effect is eerie as hell, especially with the fall leaves whispering in the cool breeze all around us.

"God, this town is weird," April murmurs, resting one hand on her swollen belly and looking between me and Luke as I pull my own mask from my bag, studying the glittering black tree antlers that protrude from the top. "And this whole Devils' Day thing is even weirder. Do you just get used to it after a while or something?"

"You never quite get used to it," I say, slipping the mask over my face. "You just try to survive."



I'm just one devil among many, situated in the back row of my first period French class. There isn't a student on campus that isn't wearing a mask—not a single member of faculty either. No, we take our Devils' Day celebrations seriously here.

“How do you say *you're going to burn in hell, bitch*, in French?” Raz asks, leaning forward and planting an elbow on his desk. He cups his handsome face in the palm of his hand as the fourth member of Calix's rotten little crew—a girl named Sonja—sneers at me from beneath her red leather mask. They're all wearing matching masks—Calix, Raz, Barron, and Sonja. The only difference is that Calix's mask is black while the others all wear bloodred, complete with horns wrapped in dark ribbons, their wicked mouths the only part of their faces still visible.

“*Tu vas brûler en enfer, salope*,” I answer, before our poor French teacher—*Madame Dupré*—can react. It's hard to read her facial expression behind the far-too-pretty white mask she's wearing. If the whole purpose of Devils' Day is to confuse the dark spirits, Mrs. Dupré has clearly missed the point. “You might also say *va te faire foutre Raz, sale queutard contaminé*.”

“*Mademoiselle Sartain! Monsieur Loveren!*” Mrs. Dupré chokes out, but as horrified as she is, that's nothing compared to the dark gleam in Raz's red eyes as he narrows them at me. He might not know what I've just said, but Sonja does. *Get fucked, Raz, you diseased slag*. As I watch, she leans over and whispers in his ear. For years, we've been trading insults, bone-deep thrusts of verbal swords

that sever bits of the soul. But in the last year, Raz has really amped up his game; I'm almost afraid of him now.

The way his mouth twists to one side makes my stomach roil with nausea. His eyes shine like rubies behind the mask, as red as the blood on my steering wheel.

“Oh, you're going to regret that later,” he purrs as Mrs. Dupré writes us both up and resumes the lesson, her thin lips pinched just a little tighter beneath her fluffy white mask.

I stare Raz down because Luke is right: I already started this morning off on the wrong foot with Calix and his minions, so why not go all the way? Sonja smirks at me, her lips as red as her mask, before the bell rings and both she and Raz rise to their feet and disappear out the door together.

The way he looks over his shoulder at me, I know I better be prepared.

Their Devils' Day tricks are legendary, and I'm prepared to be on the receiving end of all of them.



The walls of the school are plastered with posters advertising a lock-in for teens at one of the local churches—and trust me, there are *many* out here, in every possible faith. This one's being held at Thorncrown Chapel, a tourist destination with exterior glass walls that proclaims it's open to all people. Starting at seven tonight, they'll lock the doors and have a chaperone-filled evening of sober fun inside their glass house of worship.

Hah.

Every student at Crescent Prep knows where the real party's being held: in the middle of the fucking woods, at a spring known as Devils' Den. There's a cave there that leads deep into the earth, to a beautiful trickling stream and bottomless pool that, inevitably, will be filled with drunk, naked teens before the end of the night. Last year, right before the climax of the party, Calix approached me at the edge of the spring and said he wanted to talk.

Like an idiot, I believed him.

That's how I ended up losing my virginity, in one of the off-season treehouses nearby.

Gritting my teeth, I walk past his little group and ignore their stares, eerie behind the leather of their masks. Today, I'm wearing two masks: the one on my face, and the one that *is* my face. I can never be my true self within these walls, not without risking everything. And it's not just Calix and his friends who make my life miserable: it's everyone. This entire school is filled with monsters—monsters with trust funds and credit cards and malice scribed into their wicked, black hearts.

*"Tu vas avoir des problèmes toi ce soir, Karma,"* Calix whispers as I pass, his dark eyes flinty. I ignore him, but his words follow me down the hall like an arctic breeze: *you're in for a load of trouble tonight*. Thankfully, I manage to get past the Knight Crew without showing my unease, but as soon as I round the corner, my shoulders slump, and I swipe a sweaty, trembling hand down my face.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Luke says, the goblin mask turning her pixie-like face underneath into something truly grotesque. Since freshman year, Luke's gone out of her way to find the creepiest, ugliest mask in town.

"Worse: the Knight Crew," I say, licking my lips and glancing over my shoulder as they come around the corner in a group, dressed in the white and purple of the academy uniform, the Crescent Prep logo stitched in silver across their breast pockets. It's a crescent moon, tilted slightly to the left, skewered with a crossed knife and rod, backed by stars. It's been the same logo for over a hundred years, when the official motto of the school was *spare the rod, spoil the child*. Goddess only knows what the knife represented.

Luke grabs my arm and drags me into the classroom, moving into the corner to sit by April while the Knight Crew takes their seats in the front row. Sonja glances over her shoulder, making eye contact with Luke. The two of them have been playing some bizarre cat and mouse game for years.

"Don't encourage her to look this way," I grumble, crossing my arms over my chest and knowing that I can't fault Luke for having a crush on Sonja when I've had a crush on each of the other members of the Knight Crew at some point over the last three years. This year, senior year, it *has* to be different. I've only got nine months left, and I'm out of this nightmare forever. I'll move somewhere big, coastal, someplace where my purple hair and Luke's *Pansexual Goddess* t-shirts and April with her baby don't make people hate us.

"Why not?" Luke asks, dark brown eyes studying Sonja's bloodred hair and matching mask with interest. "You let Calix trick

you into bed last year. Why can't I let Sonja trick me into the same thing?" My mouth tightens as I turn a glare on Luke, the ugly words I want to say dying on my lips before I can spout them. She's right: I *did* let Calix trick me into bed, even when I knew his words were a lie, his intentions rotten, his love a trick.

"It's your funeral," I murmur, pausing as the door opens and the Devils' Day committee comes in, bearing sweets and crystals and jewelry made from invasive insects. Shiny green beetles—called emerald ash borers—as well as brown gypsy moths and Asian long-horned beetles are encased in resin and hung with pretty silver, gold, and black chains. Others are pinned behind glass and framed like art, shiny exoskeletons gleaming in the overhead lights.

It's a bit macabre, giving out insect corpses as gifts, but Crescent Prep has been doing it for years, since long before Mama Jane even attended. I'll admit, dressed up and mounted as they are, some of them surrounded by crystals and beads and even precious gemstones, they're beautiful.

"Lucille Perdue," one of the masked students calls out, their mask dripping with leaves and bits of dangling vine. Luke rolls her eyes, but raises a hand anyway, and the student places a red velvet cupcake, complete with jewel-toned ruby frosting on the desk. Beside it, she sets down a pair of red jewelry boxes. Luke cocks a brow at me, and I grin.

"Only one of those things is from me," I say as she carefully lifts the lid on one of the jewelry boxes. Inside, there's a bracelet made from black tourmaline, a crystal that's supposed to protect the wearer from negative energy. Yeah, we're a little weird over here in Devil Springs, Arkansas, population two thousand and seventy-six. "Just be careful with it; black tourmaline breaks easily."

"Oh, I love it," Luke croons, slipping the bracelet onto her thin wrist. "But if you sent me this, then who's the cupcake from?" She pulls the little napkin out from underneath the plastic container and smiles at the petite, feminine handwriting. "April." Luke passes the napkin over, so I can read the note. *When I was desperate and alone, only your smile shone through the crowd.*

"Aw," I murmur, feeling a genuine smile tilt my own lips as another student volunteer calls out my name—*Karma Sartain*—and gives me a cupcake of my own. *So glad we're having a baby together. Chicks over dicks. Love, April.* I chuckle and tuck the napkin into my pocket for safekeeping as another set of jewelry boxes is set on my desk, and I quirk a brow of my own.



“Again, I only sent one of those things,” Luke says, opening her second jewelry box and pulling out a beautiful brooch made from the shiny green body of an emerald ash borer. She frowns and checks the card, face flushing as her dark eyes flick up to find the back of Sonja’s head. Luke reaches up to ruffle her anime-blue hair and then glances toward the row of windows on our left. I decide not to press, but if one of the Knight Crew sent a present, then we’re in for a *really* fucked-up Devils’ Day Party.

I open my own boxes up, the first one a present from Luke: it’s also a black tourmaline bracelet. Laughter escapes in a rush as she turns back to look at me, and I hold up my matching bracelet.

“We’re so similar it’s scary.”

“Basically the same person,” Luke agrees, taking the bracelet from my hand and cocking a brow. “May I?” She slides the bracelet onto my arm as we grin at each other. “I sent one to April, too. You?”

“Yep. It all works out though, right? One bracelet to protect her from negative energy tonight, and one to protect the baby.” I wink and pop open the top on the second box, frowning as I peer down at the butterfly inside. It’s black, with orange-tipped wings, and it’s most *definitely* not on the list of invasive species that the Devils’ Day Committee uses to make their jewelry and shadow boxes with.

“This is a *Diana fritillary*,” I tell Luke, holding out the box for her inspection. “Not only is it the state butterfly of Arkansas, but it’s *endangered*.” My teeth clench as I look down at the necklace, the butterfly encased in what looks like amber, its wings speckled with red that could very well be blood. Or paint. It’s probably paint, right? “Who would send me this?” I check the box for a note, but there’s nothing. Pushing up from my chair, I head out the door on the heels of the committee.

“Karma!” Luke calls out, but it’s too late. The door closes behind me, and I grab the shoulder of the girl with the leaf mask. She turns back to look at me with a raised brow. Pretty sure she’s the heiress of some big hotel chain or something. For the life of me, I can’t remember her name. Unsurprising, considering nobody in this school has ever bothered to remember mine.

“Who sent this?” I ask, showing her the butterfly necklace, still carefully tucked inside the red jewelry box. The girl frowns down at it before lifting ice-blue eyes to mine. “And how did this end up in

the committee's Devils' Day sale? Culling invasive species to make jewelry, I get, but this is fucked."

"We never sold any of these," the girl says, taking the box from me and then lifting her eyes accusingly to mine. "Mr. Aldrich would never allow it." She tries to hand the box back, but for some reason, I'm hesitant to take it. The butterfly's still form stares accusingly up at both of us. Mr. Aldrich is one of the biology teachers on campus, with doctorates in entomology and environmental science. He most *definitely* wouldn't have allowed his students to kill and display an endangered species. "Is this a Devils' Day trick? Because I'm not in the mood."

The girl drops the box when I refuse to take it, and the amber casing around the butterfly shatters to pieces as she tosses raven hair over her shoulder. I drop to my knees, scrambling to pick it up as I stare at the torn wings in horror. The damn thing was already dead; the least we could've done was respect it.

"I'll let Mr. Aldrich know about this," she says with a smirk, kicking the rest of the pieces aside with her shiny shoe and then leaning down to get in my face. "And don't think he won't roast you for this. It might just be a stupid bug, but he takes this shit seriously. Here's to hoping you get expelled, Trailer Park." The girl moves down the hall, the long vines on her mask trailing behind her.

I clench my jaw as Luke steps out and bends down to help me clean up, my own hands shaking with rage. I shouldn't be surprised at this sort of behavior. After all, I've lived with it for three years now. *You're almost done with this shitty school*, I tell myself as Luke and I gather the pieces together and tuck them back in the box. The necklace is ruined, but I suppose it doesn't matter. I don't even know who sent it to me.

"The Knight Crew?" Luke suggests, before I can even bring it up, lifting my gray eyes to hers. "That'd be just like them, to find an endangered animal to kill for fun. They probably kick puppies on the weekend, just for the laughs."

"If it was the Knight Crew, they'd send a note," I say confidently, tucking the box into my back pocket. "They like their cruelty to be acknowledged. It's always better with an audience." *Except for that one time*, I add, but so only I can hear it. Luke already knows what happened with me and Calix. "It doesn't matter. It's Devils' Day, isn't it? I'd be more surprised if strange shit *didn't* happen."

Luke doesn't look convinced, but at least she nods and holds open the door to the classroom for me. As I head back inside, I take note of the Knight Crew and their desks, piled with gifts from their many admirers.

Calix has the most out of all of them, smirking at me with an expression that reminds me of spiders and dead things. Raz watches me, too, but Barron refuses to even acknowledge that I exist. If we're in the hallway together, he'll walk right into me, knock me out of the way and then move on like it never happened. Sonja chucks her cupcake at me, bloody frosting hitting me right in the chest and staining my uniform.

Our teacher, too occupied with a haul of Devils' Day gifts on her own desk, doesn't notice.

With a snarl, I take my seat in the back and decide that maybe, just maybe, I did hit Calix's car on purpose this morning.

For years, I've endured whatever they could throw at me, fighting back just enough so they wouldn't see me as a victim, but not so hard that they'd see me as an adversary.

I'm just not sure I can take it anymore.

"Don't do something you might regret," Luke whispers as I glare at the backs of their heads.

"I won't," I reply easily, but I'm pretty sure I'm lying.

No, I'm certain of it.

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The town of Devil Springs where I was born and raised is, on most days, a fairly religious, conservative place.

But not on Devils' Day.

On Devils' Day, things get weird.

At lunch, I sit with Luke and April in the outdoor courtyard at the back of the school. Weather permitting, there's a large window that opens up from the kitchen, allowing students to line up for food outside. Beyond the tall, black chain-link at the back of the campus, the Diamond Point forest sweeps up and away, blanketing the hills in red and orange leaves. Deciduous trees dominate the woods here, with occasional loblolly or shortleaf pines dotting the landscape with green.

On the opposite side of the courtyard, one of the girls sits painting pentagrams on the foreheads and hands of her friends while the others unzip duffel bags and show off diaphanous dresses in red or black silk, sack-like white gowns that look like they're meant for a witch on her way to the stake, and crowns made of thorny branches or antlers.

"I wish it were Devils' Day every day," Luke says with a sigh, face planted in the palm of one hand. Her goblin mask is pushed up above her pixie-like face, dark eyes focused on the girls dancing in the center of the courtyard, the colorful ribbons in their hands knotted and tied with dried flowers. "This is the sort of world I want to live in, where people like Cami Alhambra wear gauzy fairy wings

to school, and Barron Farrar sits and sketches like he's an artist instead of an asshole."

I glance over and find Barron—tall, broad-shouldered Barron with his short, rainbow Mohawk—sitting on the bench of one of the picnic tables, a sketchbook on his lap, charcoal smeared across the side of one hand. His dual-colored eyes (he has heterochromia, meaning one is brown while the other is blue) are focused on the page, but when he senses me looking, his gaze lifts up and catches on mine. The leather mask on his face turns his cold expression into something dangerous, like an icicle ready to fall and impale me. I turn away, but not before noticing the angry red gash on his left hand. Interesting.

"I don't know about that," I say, tugging my own mask back into place. "The break from boring is nice, but I could do without all the weirdness. Last year, I found Cami and her friends naked and dancing in the woods like witches."

"Exactly!" Luke says, slapping her hands on her thighs and standing up. She spins to face us, reaching up to ruffle her short, blue hair. Crescent Prep used to have strict rules about unnatural hair color, eye color, tattoos, and piercings, but I think after a while they realized they had more important things to deal with and dialed back the dress code a bit. Part of me wonders if Raz wasn't responsible for a big portion of that. He spit in the vice principal's face freshman year when she asked him to remove his red contacts.

Corralling troublesome kids in the middle of the woods is hard enough. Harder still when most of them have the net worth of a small country. They might be in exile, but they get what they want anyway. Most of the things the Knight Crew puts their energy into are awful yet on this one thing, I applaud their efforts. My own purple hair dances in a quiet breeze.

"Exactly, what?" I ask, raising a brow as she steps directly between me and Barron, cutting off his intense stare. I shiver as I look up at her.

"I want to live in a world where I'm free to be as weird as I want without judgment, where other people care more about living their own lives than they do about how I live mine." She glances over her shoulder at Sonja and Calix, their faces close as they whisper about something that I just know is going to end badly for me. I don't just get to hit the Knight Crew's leader's car this morning and walk away unscathed. "Tonight, I'm making a move on Sonja."

“Stupid idea,” I murmur as April sips a fruit smoothie, her pale green eyes nearly hidden behind the thick, black frames of her glasses as she listens intently to our conversation. The pair of black tourmaline bracelets rests against the pale skin of her left arm.

“Really? Because I let you make the worst decision known to man last year, and I didn’t say anything about it.”

“What decision?” April asks, sitting up and groaning as she cups her belly with one arm. She’s, like, maybe five foot two and pregnant as fuck. It’s a bit terrifying to look at sometimes, her dress shirt untucked, purple blazer unbuttoned to accommodate her belly. “I feel like I’m missing part of a story here.”

Luke turns to her with a puzzled expression, and then flashes a grin. I give her a warning look in response, but I can tell she’s undeterred. Maybe I’m just not that scary? If I were, maybe I wouldn’t be subject to so many awful Devils’ Day pranks. Like, for example, the one I just know is about to come out of Luke’s mouth.

“Last year, Calix Knight”—thankfully she lowers her voice some—“confessed his supposed love for Karma.”

“What?!” April squeaks, sitting up and leaning forward, her mousy brown hair plaited into pigtails and slung over her shoulders. Her mouth hangs open, the straw from her smoothie stuck to her bottom lip. I roll my eyes and stand up, but Luke isn’t done.

“Oh, it gets better. Not only did he confess his feelings, he told Karma he’d been in love with her for *years*, that he thought about her every night, touched himself to the very idea of her ...”

“Luke, come on,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest, my pleated wool skirt dancing against the pale white of my upper thighs. “I think she gets the picture already.”

“After that, Calix took her up to one of the treehouses—the fancy ones meant for tourists—and fucked her virginity sweetly away.” Luke casts a disapproving glance in my direction as I frown, my cheeks flushed with heat. I try very hard not to glance in Calix’s direction, but it happens anyway. He’s staring right at me, his devil’s mask an ebon black to match his eyes. I look back at Luke, willing her to shut the hell up with every fiber of my being. “And I mean *all* of her virginity. I’m not sure there’s a position or variation on the sex act they didn’t cover.”

“The sex act?” I choke out, shaking my head, and adjusting my own mask, glitter smearing across my fingers. My mother—not

Jane, but Cathy this time—made it for me. She’s a professional artist. They both are, actually, and they own a shop in Eureka Springs that manages to support our family. Of course, we *do* live in a trailer park, but I’m not ashamed of it. The trailers there are all nice, well-maintained, surrounded by flowers and winding paths made of local limestone.

“The sex act?” April repeats, casting a sympathetic look my way. “That’s what my parents called it when they caught me in bed with my boyfriend. Come on, Luke, up your vocabulary.”

“Well, *I* happen to still be a virgin,” Luke says, touching her fingers to her chest and then frowning. “Although I’m not sure I even believe in the concept. I think virginity might be a social construct presented to us by the patriarchy.”

“As much as I enjoy conversations about the patriarchy,” I start, noticing that Barron’s finally stood up, his multi-colored eyes on me. “I think we should go.”

“Why?” Luke asks, brows furrowing as she glances back in the Knight Crew’s direction. They’re all looking at me now, them and their cronies, their groupies. I try not to judge the hangers-on. After all, they’re drawn to the power, the danger, the impossibility of the Knight Crew. But yet ... I can’t help wrinkling my nose at the small crowd around Calix’s table, the gleam in their eyes that says they’ll work for snacks. Like dogs. Pathetic.

“Let’s go,” I say, standing up and grabbing my book bag. I barely make it three steps before I’m slamming into Raz’s chest. I hadn’t noticed him move, but there he is, sly mouth twisted into a rictus grin beneath his mask. His fingers curl around my wrist, tight enough to bruise. *Shit*. He’s magnificently—almost *disturbingly*—handsome in his cruelty. The universe isn’t fair, is it? He shouldn’t be so pretty.

“*Bonjour, Karma,*” he purrs, yanking me close as Calix, Barron, Sonja and their awful horde of followers—dressed in glittering faerie masks, grotesque goblin faces, and the grinning visages of hag-like witches—approach, circling me. Cutting me off from April and Luke.

“I’m not afraid to go to the administration!” Luke calls out, but I’m surrounded now, forced to look up into Raz’s red eyes, the vicious, spiteful gleam in them sending chills down my spine. For the past three years, I’ve worried about Devils’ Day, wondered what trouble the Knight Crew might bring my way. I thought last year’s

ruse of Calix confessing his love and then fucking me was the worst they could do. But the way Raz is looking at me right now? Maybe I was wrong.

Maybe things can get a whole lot worse.

“An eye for an eye,” Raz says, dragging me forward. I start fighting him the moment he begins to move, but Barron appears on my other side, restraining me. Even outside their little circle of influence, the other students watch hungrily, their filthy rich maws wet with slaver as they seek out violence and discord with glittering black eyes.

I know—I *know*—that Devils’ Day isn’t supernatural, that it doesn’t mean anything, but sometimes, it feels like there’s some truth in it. The demons and devils ... they really have come out to play.

Raz clamps a hand over my mouth to keep me from screaming as he and Barron drag me down the halls toward the front entrance of the school. We don’t pass by any staff members on our way, and as much as I’d like to believe that Luke or April will get help for me, they’re probably trapped in the courtyard by the remainder of Calix’s worshipful mob.

We stumble down the front steps of the school and toward the gravel parking lot that’s designated for students. All around us, the woods stand a silent witness to whatever torment the Knight Crew has in store.

As soon as I see my car—affectionally dubbed the Little Bee by my family and friends—I can see what Raz means by *an eye for an eye*. The tires are missing, the windshield is smashed to pieces, and the rear hood is lifted up, exposing what’s left of the engine.

The boys release me, throwing me to my knees in the gravel. I cringe as rocks and bits of debris get stuck in my skin, sending a wave of agony through me. Raz adds to the torment by kicking dust up in my face and laughing as I choke on it.

“You fucking assholes,” I grind out, trying and failing to push up to my feet. Barron puts a hand on my shoulder and shoves me to my knees with little effort on his part. The crowd swarms around us, blocking me with a wall of human flesh, their masks eerie in the afternoon light. My body quivers with adrenaline as I look up and find Calix in his black mask, staring down at me, Sonja smirking on his right side. “Don’t think I’m afraid to report you,” I quip, because I’ve done it in the past, and I’ll do it again. That’s what started all of this, I think. Freshman year, I reported the three of them for



harassing a fellow student. No, no, not just harassing but *assaulting*. They beat the shit out of some poor boy and left him with broken limbs.

Of course, I don't know for sure that that's why they hate me. My complaint was anonymous, so they're not supposed to know. I just always assumed they'd found out somehow.

"Report us?" Calix asks, his voice like a cool winter night. When dark first starts to fall, when the sun first sets, and the quiet and cold set in, you convince yourself you can last until first light. But slowly, hour after hour, it just gets colder and darker and quieter until you find yourself shivering, half-frozen, and counting down the minutes until insanity, frostbite, or death. That's Calix, in a nutshell. "You're not going to report us. Karma, *ne fais pas l'idiot*." *Don't be a fool*. "You hit my car this morning—on purpose. I'm just going to assume you don't have insurance. And we both know you don't have any money." Calix reaches out and runs a finger down the side of my face. I consider biting it, but that won't make my day any easier.

I'm surrounded.

I settle for glaring, my hands balled into fists, my body quivering with unspent rage.

"Consider us even—for now." He smiles at me again, and then leans forward, putting his lips near mine. "But tonight *is* the Devils' Day Party. We both remember what happened last year." I haul back and slap him in the face as hard as I can, and he rears back, a sharp frown curving his lips as his cheek turns pink.

"What a feisty little kitty-cat," Raz growls, grabbing me by the hair and yanking my head back. The crowd around us hisses, as if they're as wild and fae as the masks they're wearing. "Do you *like* pissing us off? Because you're so damn good at it." He looks up, glancing to Calix before running his tongue over his lips—hungrily. "What do you think we could do with her this year? If I confess my love, do you think she'll fuck me, too?"

I jerk my hair from Raz's grasp, despite the pain in my scalp, but when I make a run for it, Barron grabs me, folding me up in strong arms and yanking me back to front against his hard body. The sleeves of his white hoodie envelop me as he sucks on a lollipop and clinks it against his teeth.

Raz peels bits of purple hair from his fingertips in disgust and gives Calix a look. Just then, the bell rings, and one of the

administrators appears on the front steps, watching us with an expectant look.

Nobody at Crescent Prep gives a shit about what the staff has to say, but—despite their bravado—they sure as hell care about news of their disobedience getting back to their parents. Most of them have a lot to lose, after all—trust funds, inheritances, monthly allowances worth more than my parents' yearly wages. They're always very, very careful to keep their games hidden.

“Let's tie her to a tree and leave her there overnight, see what happens when the devils come out to play,” Raz suggests, fingering the edge of my now-dirty academy jacket. His red eyes gleam as he rakes his other hand over his dirty blonde hair.

“Mm. We'll deal with her later,” Calix says, cupping my face in a cool hand and looking at me with crow-black eyes. “That is, if she's brave enough to show for the party tonight.”

“I think I'd rather deal with her now,” Raz says, reminding me that they might be called the Knight Crew to the rest of us, but that Calix Knight is hardly in charge of either Raz or Barron. No, I have no delusions that if Raz made up his mind to hurt me here and now, the other two would do little to stop it.

Calix looks bored as he stands up straight, the wind ruffling bits of dark hair around his black devil mask. He turns away, pausing just once to glance over his shoulder, a magnificent halo of cruelty in his cold half-smile.

“Do whatever you want. I'd rather keep to my family's good graces.” He turns away, leaving me to Raz and Barron as he walks across the parking lot in his royal purple slacks and matching jacket, as if the academy uniform is a set of plush robes and a scepter, like he's some sort of king among princes.

Barron shoves me forward, knocking me back to my knees on the gravel. I turn back to glare at him, fisting my hands in the loose rock and readying myself to throw a handful or two into his face. His brown and blue eyes bore into mine as he squats down and knocks the lollipop around in his mouth, his elbows on his knees, his white hoodie stained with charcoal at the ends of the sleeves.

“Don't come to the party tonight, Karma,” he says, rising to his feet just as I turn to launch the gravel at him. It hits him in the knees of his slacks as he stalks past, leaving me alone with Raz and Sonja. The rest of the group has already started to filter back toward the front entrance, glancing hungrily over their shoulders for one last

look at whatever delicious cruelty the remaining Knight Crew might inflict.

“Whatever you do, don’t get caught. One more call to Daddy Loveren and you’re in deep shit. We need you at the party tonight.” Sonja gives me one, last scathing look before leaning down just far enough to whisper in my ear. “How did you ever believe he could love you?” she asks, like she feels sorry for me.

I decide it’s best to say nothing.

If she leaves, it’ll just be me and Raz. I can probably fight him off, but I’m not sure if I could take them both on. I’m an artist, not a fighter. Although, over the years, I’ve tried. I never take their shit lying down, but I’ve never been able to match them blow for blow either.

Sonja stalks off and I look up to see Raz staring down at me with narrowed red eyes.

“You’re fucking disgusting, do you know that?” he asks, but I say nothing. Instead, the fingers of my right hand curl into the dirt and dust, and I ready myself for a fight. Raz is strong, but I don’t have to beat him. I just have to last long enough for a teacher to hear the commotion and come running. “Don’t let me see you at that party tonight, Trailer Park.”

Raz grabs my book bag as he passes, reaching inside and tearing out my lunch. He throws my bag aside and keeps going, twisting the top off the kombucha I packed this morning. He takes a drink and wrinkles his nose as I climb to my feet, brushing gravel and blood down my knees. When I move to grab my bag, Raz makes a sound of disgust.

“Is this that rotten hippie tea shit?” he asks, turning and throwing what’s left of the drink into my face. The smile that lights his own face is wicked and awful. “Too bad. If you’d packed a soda, I would’ve just drank it. Try not to be so goddamn weird, you fucking liberal snowflake. I know it must be hard, with those dyke moms of yours.”

“At least my parents love me,” I say, the words snapping hot and fast from the end of my tongue. As soon as they leave my lips, I almost regret them. Almost. Raz’s entire body goes stiff, but the cruel smile doesn’t leave his sharp lips.

“I bet they do,” he replies, making a ‘V’ with his fingers and sticking his tongue between them in a lewd gesture. My eyes widen

and fury sweeps over me in a hot wave. I chuck the dirt and gravel as hard as I can, right into Raz's red eyes. He doubles over with a sharp sound—I bet that *really* hurts with those contacts of his—but I'm not done. Years of frustration overwhelm me, and I charge him, knocking him onto his back as he struggles to get the debris from his eyes.

“Miss Sartain!” a voice shouts, and before I get a chance to do anything more than knock Raz over, hands are grabbing me by the upper arms and dragging me back. Mrs. Dupré kneels down next to Raz as Mr. Aldrich, the biology teacher, pulls me up and away from my bully.

The last thing I see before he marches me into the office is the awful smile on Raz's face.



I'm given a week's worth of detention for attacking Raz, despite my protests. The administration can only punish what they've seen with their own eyes, and as far as they could tell, my attack on Raz Loveren was unprovoked.

But I know they don't miss the wet, stickiness of my clothing or the bloody patches on my knees. It's just easier for them to punish the poor kid than the son of a prominent senator. My mothers don't donate extra money to the school to make up for their unruly child, not the way Raz's family does.

So, even though it's Devils' Day, even though everyone—including most of the staff—will be heading out to some party or another tonight, I'm forced to sit for almost two hours after school in the library. At one point, I see Raz walk by the window outside, shouting into his phone, but I can't hear what he's saying, and I don't care. My only hope is that his asshole dad is finally cutting him off.

When I'm finally released, I check my phone for messages from Luke and April. I sent them home to get ready for the party, promising that I'd get a tow truck for Little Bee. Neither of them wanted to leave, but April relies on Luke for rides, and she's too far along in her pregnancy to sit around an empty school waiting for me.

I brush my fingers against Little Bee's fake eyelashes, attached to her headlights and only partially mangled from crashing into Calix's Aston Martin. There's only one towing service in Devil Springs, and

when I dial them up, I get a pre-recorded message from the owner about taking the day off. *If it's an emergency*, he says, *call the police*. Well, that's hardly an option for me, is it? After hitting Calix's car this morning, I can't make a big deal out of this. Whatever damage I did to his fancy ride is worth far more than a car I got from my neighbor for a few hundred bucks.

My thumb swipes down the screen of my phone, searching my contacts for a possible ride. Crescent Prep is about twenty minutes away from Devil Springs proper, and everyone I know is either prepping for the parties tonight, or going out of their way to avoid them. My aunt's already left to visit a friend in Little Rock, and my moms are both at home in their studio, phones set to silent. If I call them, they'll answer, but then they'll want to know what happened to Little Bee and they'll make a big deal out of it.

I don't have the energy tonight.

Instead, I decide to walk to the bus stop.

It's a good thirty-minute walk, but I enjoy the peace and quiet, book bag swinging by my side as I cut through the woods, taking a shortcut past the creek and around the edge of the lake. The terrain's a bit rougher, but there's little chance of running into anyone out here, so the extra effort it takes is worth it.

Fortunately, I make it to the bus stop just in time to hop on, sighing in relief as my ass hits the seat and I put my head in my hands, forgetting briefly about my mask. My fingers come away stained with glitter as I tear it off and clutch it in my lap. After the crap I've been through today, I'd be an idiot to attend the Devils' Day Party tonight.

I'd be an idiot not to.

I can't let the Knight Crew start dictating where I go and what I do; I never have.

I lean my head back against the seat for the rest of the drive, not even bothering to open my eyes when we stop and several other people get on. After ten grueling stops in the middle of nowhere, we end up at the edge of Devil Springs, where the Diamond Point Mobile Home Park sits, surrounded by trees. It's not a bad place to live; there's not a resident here who doesn't take pride in their home and yard. I'm not ashamed of it, despite what the Knight Crew might want to believe.

“I’m home!” I call out, tossing my bag on the sofa and knowing that if my moms are in the studio out back, that they won’t hear me. I’m not sure whether I’m relieved or frustrated when Mama Jane peeks her head out of the kitchen.

“I’m making tea. Do you want some?” I shake my head, and she frowns, slipping back into the kitchen to answer the whistle of the teapot. All around me, art fills the colorful walls from floor to ceiling. There are original oil paintings, framed prints, wall hangings made of metal, and mosaic tiles. The entire house is a spectacle, somewhere between a gallery and a maelstrom. “Are you sure you don’t want tea?” Mama Jane asks, reappearing with her dark hair coiffed on the top of her head, the only mark on her otherwise perfect clothes and skin a bit of blue paint on her left elbow. An elfin mask sits atop her head, just in front of her bun, the skin speckled with freckles, just like the ones on Mama Cathy’s face.

“I’m sure,” I say, noticing as her eyes drift to my bloodied knees and stained dress shirt. Jane was raised in a house where people didn’t talk about their feelings. That means, of course, that we talk about our feelings a lot here.

I brace myself for an interrogation, just before my little sisters rush in the back door, covered in paint and wearing matching butterfly masks. They’re not twins, but they might as well be. My moms decided to get pregnant at the same time, with the same donor sperm they used with me. The girls were born two days apart, and they’ve been a pain in my ass ever since.

“What took you so long to get home?” Emma asks, sweeping her mask back from her gray eyes. They’re a bit bluer than mine, but less green than Katie’s.

“And where’s Little Bee?” Katie asks, frowning, her own black and orange butterfly mask reminding me of the Diana fritillary necklace I received today. The broken pieces are still in my backpack, a mystery for another day.

“Broke down,” I say, and Mama Jane cocks a brow at me, holding out the cup of tea I didn’t want. I take it anyway, just to get her off my back. I feel irrationally irritated right now, pissed off at the Knight Crew for my car, for hurting me, for making me feel like they might take things too far one day. I exhale sharply as Jane takes a step closer, opening her mouth to ask about the car.

“It just wouldn’t start. No big deal. We can deal with it tomorrow.”

“Karma,” she begins, her voice a warning, but I just need a moment alone to decompress. It’s been a long day, and I still have to decide if I’m going to the party tonight. It feels like giving up to stay home, but at the same time, I’m just so goddamn tired. If anything, that’s what the Knight Crew’s managed to do—wear me down. I could sleep until the end of senior year.

“Karma, come paint with us,” Emma blurts before Jane gets a chance to continue. “We’re making a mural in the carport. It’s the Horned God.” *Cool, a pagan deity on the side of our house in a deeply religious small town.* I decide to voice my opinion aloud.

“Great. Another visible sign to tell the world how weird we are.”

“Karma,” Jane repeats, the softness in her face hardening just a bit. “Your sisters are excited about this project. They’ve been waiting hours for you to come home and look at it. I know you have the party tonight, but can you spare a minute or two please?”

“You’re right,” I snap back, knowing that my anger’s misplaced, that I should be yelling at Calix or Raz or Barron or Sonja, and not at my family. The stress is just wearing down on me; I can’t take it anymore. “It’s my fault my car broke down, and I got detention for fighting with Raz Loveren, so I’m late. Maybe if you checked your messages as much as you stare at your art, you’d know about it?”

I turn and storm down the hallway, slamming the door before either of my sisters or my mom can follow. The locks slide into place, and I stuff my headphones in my ears, using my phone to blast the band New Years Day until my head begins to ring.

I have a text from Luke waiting for me.

*What’s up with the party tonight? April wants to go, but I don’t feel comfortable with her being there. Can you talk some sense into this girl?*

With a sigh, I sink down to the edge of my bed and rub my forehead with my fingers. My easel sits quietly in the corner, mocking me with a tiny canvas covered in black paint and silver stars. I’ve been working on it for months, adding layer after layer until the designs began to pop up off the surface. There’s a crescent moon in the center, a lone tree shining silver beneath it. I’m not sure what I’m going for with the piece. Mama Cathy says all art starts with intention, so if that’s the case, I guess I’m fucked.

Staring at the piece, I feel my anger start to ride hot and heavy through me.

Before I can think better of it, I stand up and tear it from the easel, using an X-Acto knife from my desk to score the canvas over and over again, imagining it as Raz's face. Barron's. Sonja's. Calix's. And then I throw it against the wall and sink to the floor.

*One more year, Karma, that's it.*

One more year and I'll be free of the Knight Crew and this stupid, shitty town.

But for now, I'm here, and I have to make the best of it.

*I'm going to the party tonight, I tell Luke, tapping out a quick group text to her and April. If you guys want to come, meet me at the bus stop at seven.*

It's a bit of a copout, ignoring the message that Luke sent me about April—she's probably right about April staying home—but I'm just not in the mood to deal with it. Instead, I stand up and throw my closet open, looking for something to wear tonight. You know, since my goddamn dress was stolen from the clothesline this morning.

Whatever I wear, it has to be good.

Because whatever Devils' Day tricks the Knight Crew thinks they can pull on me, I've got to do better.

Or worse, rather.

Much, much worse.

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The Devils' Day Party is always held at Devils' Den, a remote spring in the bottom of a shallow cave. Just behind it, there's an old steam train and several passenger cars, sitting on a bit of broken track that leads to nowhere. About a five-minute walk from the spring are several glamping treehouses, locked up and waiting for the spring and summer rush. During the Devils' Day Party, they're inevitably broken into and defiled. The owner's tried everything: security cameras, plywood over the windows, and even once, he sat outside with a shotgun.

Didn't matter.

Somebody—nobody knows who—hit the man in the back of the head with a baseball bat and left him inside one of the treehouses until morning. After that, he pretty much gave up. We have exactly two police officers in Devil Springs, and they have far more important things to worry about on Devils' Day than a bunch of teens getting drunk and fucking in some stupid luxury cabins made for tourists.

I'm standing at the edge of the clearing, the bonfire leaping and dancing in front of me, reaching orange claws up to the heavens where a crescent moon sits—much like the one on the Crescent Prep logo. Much like the painting I just destroyed. My heart aches a little at the thought, but I push the emotion aside, eyes scanning the gathered crowd for any signs of the Knight Crew.

They're not hard to find, clustered around a very familiar yellow car with mangled eyelashes. Calix lounges on the roof like a dark

god, smiling at his worshippers, his dark mask fixed in place—both the physical one he’s wearing, and the emotional one he uses as a shield.

*“Karma, listen, I ... don’t expect you to believe me.” Calix turns away, his face tight, raw with emotion in a way I’ve never seen. Either he’s a really good actor or else ... “But I never hated you.” He looks up at me with a burning intensity, one that steals my breath away, makes my heart pound like thunder. “I’m in love with you.”*

I choke on shame and guilt, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

“Hey, let’s not start tonight off with bad thoughts,” Luke says, outfitted in a sequin dress shirt, black slacks, and boots. If it weren’t for the hideous goblin mask on her face, I’d say she was as handsome as I’d ever seen her.

“This is fascinating,” April murmurs, her green eyes sparkling behind her glasses as she takes in the scene like a grad student might observe subjects for their master’s thesis. “It’s so ... *wild.*”

“Hedonistic, isn’t it?” Luke asks, flashing a sharp grin. “Full of debauchery? A bed of licentiousness? Heathenish? Corrupt? Primal? Pagan?”

“Okay, Luke, we get it,” I say with a small laugh, feeling a bead of sweat drip down my spine. *I can’t believe they dragged my car over here*, I think, seething on the inside, wondering how the fuck the Knight Crew managed that one when I couldn’t get a tow truck myself. My initial response is to freak out, and I’m pretty sure Luke knows it.

“Look, you crashed into his car, this is their retaliation. Don’t react to it. That’s what they want you to do.” Luke looks askance at the Knight Crew, luxuriating on the remains of my car like it’s a chaise lounge in a faerie palace. I have to close my eyes to keep my murderous thoughts at bay. “My parents always give in at Christmas and send me money; I’ll buy you a new car.”

I open my eyes and glance over at Luke and April, both of them watching me with wary expressions, like they’re prepared for me to fly off the handle. Because the three of us are Crescent Prep outcasts, bullied by the Knight Crew, always hiding in one corner or another, I sometimes forget that even among misfits, I’m the pariah. I’m the only one at this school who’s poor, who gives a shit about a five hundred-dollar junker.

“Luke,” I start, but she cuts me off, putting her hands on my shoulders and giving me a squeeze.

“I can you get a much nicer car than Little Bee—as much as I appreciated her lovely eyelashes.” She grins and I make myself smile back, even though that’s not what I want. I don’t want charity. I *earned* the money for that car by working at my mothers’ shop.

Instead of saying any of that aloud, I just smile and give Luke a hug that she returns before pulling back and looking me over. I’m wearing black skinny jeans, painted with glitter, and an oversized red sweater that shows off a bit of midriff. Some of the girls here are dressed in designer gowns, their shimmering trains dragging through leaves and sticks and mud, and not caring that the outfits they’re destroying cost thousands of dollars.

“I’m not up to snuff on the dress code, huh?” I ask as Luke cocks a brow, throwing a glance back at April, who’s still dressed in her school uniform. Her parents sent her to Crescent Prep with two pairs of pajamas, two PE outfits, and every possible combination of the academy uniform—the sweater vest, the blazer, the bow tie, the silk tie, the fur-lined boots, the Mary Janes. But that’s it. They won’t give her a cent for maternity clothes—or anything else for that matter—until she agrees to give up her baby. Clearly, they don’t know April as well as Luke and I do because, even though we’ve only known her for a few months, it’s clear she has every intention of keeping her child.

“You look edgy, too cool for school,” Luke declares, turning back to me with another smile. “It’s April who’s not up to snuff.”

“I’m pregnant,” she says with a loose shrug of her shoulders, slipping on a delicate pixie mask with sparkly antennae on the top. She’s cut out the bit between the eye holes, leaving room for her glasses. The effect is ... interesting, to say the least. “I don’t have to participate; I just get to observe.” She takes off before Luke can stop her, wading into the fray. Most of the other students go out of their way to avoid her, unsure how far, exactly, they can take the bullying of a pregnant girl. Looks like some of my fellow students have scraps of morality still clinging to their hollow, wicked bones.

“I’m gonna keep an eye on her,” Luke says, already nervous at the distance between them, and I nod. She gives me one, last look before she takes off after April, and I get the sense that I’m about to be admonished here. “Don’t go looking for trouble tonight, okay?” I just stare back at her and Luke hits me in the shoulder, a little harder than necessary. “Karma, please?”

“Okay,” I say, but she narrows her brown eyes at me, unconvinced, and I reach up to flick the long, bulbous tip of her goblin nose. “I won’t go looking for trouble, I promise.” *But that doesn’t mean trouble won’t come looking for me.*

She nods, once, satisfied and then takes off through the gyrating bodies around the bonfire. The crowd doesn’t part nearly as easily for her as it did for April. While they might hesitate a little at bullying a heavily pregnant girl, Luke isn’t afforded the same protections. I frown as she squeezes between them, and one of the girls grabs onto the gauzy fairy wings on Luke’s back, the ones she made herself, and rips a hole in them.

I move forward to help as the girl dances away, laughing, but Luke gives me another look from inside the crowd and I pause, right at the edge of the fire’s light, where the shadows live.

“Happy Devils’ Day,” Barron whispers on my right side, startling me. He’s sucking on another lollipop, an infuriating habit of his, clicking the candy against his white teeth as he looks up at me. He’s crouched low, still wearing the red leather mask on his face, his outfit akin to something my mother might paint on a troll prince, this white jacket with long tails that drag across the ground, even as he rises to his full height. The ends are curled and dashed with a bit of black glitter. Of course, he’s shirtless underneath, wearing tight leather pants and boots covered in charms.

He looks like fucking trouble.

See, I knew it’d find me, and much quicker than I’d thought.

“What do you want?” I ask, feeling a drip of sweat trail down my spine. It’s cold out here, fall leaves still clinging to the trees but threatening to let loose at any moment and welcome winter in. But the fire? It burns hot; I can feel it on my face, a singeing, violent sort of heat.

I take a step away from Barron, and he follows.

Around his neck, he wears a rusted, old key. I’m pretty sure I know what it goes to . . . and I want it.

Licking my lips, I lead Barron just outside the edge of the firelight, leaning my back against a tree and popping my boot up to rest against the bark.

“I think you should come over and talk to us,” he says, his face bereft of emotion, like a cold slate. His eyes—one a warm, auburn brown and the other a pale blue—watch me carefully, like he thinks

I might bolt. Instead, I reach up to adjust my mask, making the glass beads and metal charms in my hair tinkle. It's the only real bit of dressing up I did besides putting on some makeup. Last year, I sewed myself a new gown for Devils' Day, but then I let Calix defile me in it, and I can't bear to look at it.

I decided this year that a sexy, modern look might work a bit better.

"Maybe I will," I say, as if I have some choice in the matter. If I don't go, eventually Barron will just drag me over there. "But I should warn you, I've had a bit to drink." *Lie*. But I don't feel bad lying to him, or any of the Knight Crew for that matter. They don't deserve my honesty or anyone else's. Stepping forward, I slide my hands up Barron's bare tattooed chest, enjoying the sweaty planes of his muscles as I curl my fingers together behind his neck. *God, this is painful*, I think, lying even to myself. I'm pretending I don't like touching him, like this is some sort of chore ... but it's not.

"You must've had quite a bit to drink," he observes, but he doesn't move, reaching up to pull the candy from between his lips. I raise up on my tiptoes, skirting my tongue along his bottom lip. He lets me do it, too. Even though he hates me. Even though I hate him.

Our mouths slide together with a surprising amount of heat, making my skin prickle with gooseflesh. *This is all an exercise*, I tell myself. But that's not true, is it? I'm ... enjoying this. And I'm disgusted with myself for it.

Barron leans forward, pushing the kiss a step further, sliding his own tongue between my lips. I use that moment to snap the key from his neck, tucking it quickly into my back pocket as I return his attentions with a sweep of my own tongue.

And then I pull back and he lets me go, frowning, like he isn't quite sure of my motivations, like he suspects that I'm up to something. He'd be right, of course, but he's also a dick *with* a dick. That comes first, right?

"Come with me," he repeats, sticking the lollipop back in his mouth, as if he didn't just let me kiss him, as if I didn't have his sweat on my palms or the sweet taste of watermelon candy in my mouth.

Works for me.

With a shrug, I follow Barron around the edges of the revelry, to the bright yellow splotch my car makes against the green and brown

of the woods. The sun's already gone down, leaving the bonfire and the scattered torches to give off the only light. Not too far from us, there's a makeshift stage set up with a band—all dressed in masks of their own—testing their instruments.

Live music, what an upgrade.

I suspect we have the Knight Crew to thank for that. From what I hear, the public school—Devil Springs High—has these outrageous, wild parties in an old junkyard, with music blasting from the open doors of a car someone borrowed from their parents. The beer is cheap, the masks are rubber Halloween decorations or shitty paper cutouts, and the Devils' Day Party is legit.

It feels forced out here, with the stuffy faces of the Crescent Prep students, the fancy masks, the over-the-top outfits, like two different faerie courts battling it out to see who can be the worst, the most lewd, the most wanton, ribald, and lascivious. Although the Devil Springs High party sounds like more fun, I have no doubt who would win in a contest.

Nothing refines cruelty like unlimited resources.

“Looks like Trailer Park didn't take our warnings seriously,” Raz bites out, pretending to smile beneath his mask. But his eyes look irritated and weepy from the gravel I threw in them earlier, although it seems he didn't bother to take his contacts out. He's shirtless, the tattoos on his chest impossible to make out in the low light from the fire. “Or maybe she just likes a firm hand?”

Sonja chuckles, seated beside Calix, her red hair up in a bun, a crown on her head made up of thorny branches and gold glitter. She watches me with eyes like emeralds, ready to lap up whatever drops of blood or tears I might shed.

Calix says nothing, one long leg extended, the other bent at the knee. His eyes are as black as the night sky above the trees, starless, moonless, depthless. He, too, has a crown on his head, but his looks less like a prop and more like the real thing. There are berries threaded onto the ends of the branches and as I watch, one of them drips red onto Calix's forehead, like blood. He swipes it off with a single finger and then sucks it into his mouth.

“I'm fairly certain I asked you not to come tonight,” he muses after a moment, clearly not concerned with hurrying this conversation along. After all, he has all night to torment his fellow Crescent Prep students. There's a girl named Pearl that he *really* doesn't like. She'd probably be a part of our little group of misfits if

she didn't call April a whore, Luke a freak, and refer to me like all the others—as Trailer Park. “But then, you started the day off by crashing into my car.” Calix’s face tightens up slightly and he sits up, slinging an arm across his knee. His eyes are ringed with liner beneath the mask, his lids shadowed with black. But it’s his mouth that really gets me, a slash of awful menace that curves to the side in a smirk. “You’re not particularly concerned with consequences today, now are you?”

“You don’t tell me what to do,” I snap back, feeling my anger ride hot and wild inside of me. For years, I’ve tried to keep my cool, but my patience is wearing thin. “None of you do. If I want to be at this party, I have every right.”

“Mm.” Calix looks to Sonja, then Raz, then Barron. “What do you think? Should we lock her up?”

“Lock her up,” Raz agrees, grinning as Calix hops off the car and I feel my heartbeat pick up speed. But I prepared for this. Fuck, I was *hoping* for it. I yank the keychain off my belt loop, the one that looks like lipstick. Twisting the top off, I press down on the nozzle and shoot pepper spray in an arc, not caring who I hit.

And then I turn and run.

See, trouble found me. I just retaliated.

I can hear screaming and groaning behind me—pretty sure I nailed every member of the Knight Crew and most of their followers, too—but I don’t stop running. Shoving my way through the crowd near the bonfire, I make my way past the tables laden with alcohol before bursting into the abandoned train that sits behind the entrance to the cave.

There are plenty of people in here, too, and it’s standing room only, but that doesn’t stop me from working my way through the crowd to the front of the train. On either side of me, couples are entwined in intense make-out sessions ... and more. There’s a lot of sex happening on this train, but even with all the kissing and groping, the masks stay on. The illusion is there. I wonder how many of these hookups are Devils’ Day tricks? Each kiss like a venomous bite that won’t be felt until morning ...

Inside the locomotive itself, I find the conductor’s seat empty and slump down on it, panting hard and holding my hand to my chest. My heart feels like it’s about to explode from my body and go bouncing, bloody and wild, down the length of the train. But I can’t rest, not yet. My plan is only half-executed.

After all, I can't enjoy the party with the Knight Crew hunting me.

I check the grimy windows to make sure I don't see any of them waiting for me and then slip back outside, pulling the rusted key from my pocket.

There's only one place out here for the Knight Crew to wash their eyes—and that's inside the Devils' Den.

The shadows keep me hidden as I creep back around to the front of the cave. The entrance is about fourteen feet wide, maybe seven feet tall, at most. Just a few steps in and I'd have to crouch down. The thing is, I don't plan on putting a single foot inside this cave.

On the right side of the entrance, there's a metal sign that talks about the importance of the Devils' Den and Devil Springs in general. During the spring and summer months, it draws quite the crowd. Supposedly, the waters found deep within the cave have healing properties.

Guess the Knight Crew will find that out firsthand, huh?

There's a rusty gate made up of spiky metal poles in varying sizes, so that when it closes, the cave and the spring beyond it are completely off-limits. It's supposed to be locked through fall and winter, and then opened on the first day of spring, but somehow, year after year, the students of Crescent Prep find a way to open it.

This year, Barron had the key.

And now it's mine.

I pause at the edge of the cave entrance, listening to the snarling and cursing from inside. Someone's lit paper lanterns all down the sloping path that leads to the water, stalactites dripping from above, stalagmites creating a maze of obstacles that make it hard to get in and out of the den without tripping.

It's difficult to see from up here, with the angle of the sloping ground, but I can just make out Raz's blonde hair and the deep rumble of Barron's voice. Calix and Sonja got the worst of the pepper spray, so I just assume they're down there, too, washing their eyes out with spring water.

My hand wraps the rusted edge of the gate and I start to drag it into place.

"I'm so disappointed in you, Karma," Calix says, just before he wraps an arm around my waist and hauls me back. One of his hands clamps over my mouth as he puts his lips against my ear, breath



fanning against the side of my neck. “Be quiet, and this doesn’t have to hurt quite so much.” My elbow goes back and hits Calix in the stomach, but his stupid abs are like rocks and the move doesn’t seem to have much effect.

He drags me back across the gravel as I struggle, reaching for my pepper spray again and accidentally knocking the keychain to the ground instead. If I don’t get free from him, he’ll call his friends up here and I’ll be outnumbered. *Lock her up*, they’d said. I’m not exactly sure what that means, but maybe they were planning to do the same thing to me as I was to them?

“Karma!”

Relief washes through me in a wave as Luke appears in her sparkly blue shirt, racing across the dirt toward me. April stands behind her, eyes wide, one arm banded across her belly. With a curse, Calix releases me, but it’s too late. Not for him, but for me.

“Where the fuck is she?” It’s Raz, ducking out the entrance of the cave with Barron and Sonja on his heels, a good half-dozen of their little followers on his tail. Two of the girls are dressed in diaphanous gowns of yellow and blue, but their faces are masked with long-tongued demons that hide their mouths. The boys that are with them are all wearing intricately painted monster masks that I recognize as coming from the shop next door to my moms’. Each one is worth several hundred dollars, at least.

“Don’t you dare lay a finger on her,” Luke warns. “I’m not afraid to call the cops, and you know it.” The thing is, she won’t have her phone on her; none of us do. In order to get past the gate at the end of the road, you have to give your phone to the gatekeeper. No phone, no entrance. They’re all stuffed into plastic bags, labelled with names, and then put into a net and hauled into a tree.

Told you the Devils’ Day Party was weird.

“Goddamn snitch,” Raz snarls, but it’s Barron who grabs Luke by her small wrist to keep her from bolting for help. The two demon-faced girls even have the audacity to grab April by the arms and march her forward, like she’s somehow a part of this, too.

“Leave them alone, and do whatever you want to me,” I say, feeling lightheaded and dizzy as I try to avoid Luke’s penetrating stare. *You lied to me*, is what she’s saying, but I didn’t, right? I didn’t seek the Knight Crew out. No, it was the other way around. All they had to do was leave me alone and none of this had to happen.

Sonja grabs for my arm, and I tear myself from her grip, the band on my black tourmaline bracelet snapping. Black beads fly everywhere as I clutch my arm to my chest, eyes narrowed, breath coming in violent pants. Some small part of me is excited by her red-rimmed, leaky eyes. *Bet that pepper spray hurt*, I think, but I'm not a violent person. I don't like to have to fight all the time. I don't like feeling *scared* all the damn time.

"Eye for an eye," Raz growls out, his own eyes even more red and swollen than Sonja's. He's finally caved and taken his contacts out, his blue eyes feverish with anger behind his glasses. "Too bad it can't be literally this time." He's holding the pepper spray that I dropped in one hand, but when he goes to spray it, nothing comes out and he chucks the pink container. "Where's the key, Karma?"

"I don't have the key," I lie, beginning to shake as I scan the Knight Crew's unforgiving expressions. I drew blood tonight, and I imagine I'm not getting out of here without them doing the same. I just don't want Luke and April to pay for my choices.

"Let's find out," Barron says, grabbing me around the waist and trapping my hands against my sides with his strong arm. With his other hand, he searches my pockets, fingers sliding into the back right one to find the key. He lingers a bit too long there as I struggle, gritting my teeth as Luke's eyes widen with fear. Barron cups my ass and presses his lips to the skin just behind my ear. "Clever, pretending to kiss me, so you could get ahold of this." His breath smells like watermelon from those stupid suckers he's always eating, and when he finally lets go of me and pulls away, I'm left with a smear of charcoal across my midsection.

"It didn't have to be this way, Karma," Calix says, his mask sitting on the top of his head. Black streaks run down his face on either side, making him look even more ghastly in the firelight. "But I can't protect you now."

"Protect me?" I choke out with a laugh. He smirks at me, and my temper flares. "What's your problem with me anyway? Is it because I'm poor? Because my moms are gay?" I shouldn't fan the flames, but I can't help myself. Now that I'm standing here, looking into Calix's dark eyes, I think I know why I hit his car. I snapped. I broke. There he was, at the gas station with his awful, awful friends, lounging next to a car that costs more than some people make in a decade. And yet ... he looked miserable to me.

That's what really pissed me off.

How can someone who has everything look so damn miserable? Calix is handsome, smart, rich, connected, *normal*. He fits into society like a puzzle piece while people like me and Luke and April, we're singled out and cast aside like extras, like pieces to a puzzle that nobody wants to finish.

That's why I hit his car.

And look where it got me.

"We were going to lock you in the treehouse, the one where you gave it up for Lix," Raz sneers, circling me like a predator homing in on his prey. "But I think I like your idea better."

"Put the others in with her, for company," Sonja suggests, looking straight at Luke as she says it. Luke's shoulders tighten, a familiar disappointment clouding her face. With all the subtle hints, the flirting, the gift this morning, Luke thought Sonja might actually like her. But it was all a bunch of bullshit. I wore that same look on my face when Raz and Barron stumbled on me and Calix, naked together in the treehouse. I remember watching his expression, marveling at the change in his face, even as my heart broke into pieces. It was like watching the moon eclipse the sun, cutting off all the light, plunging me into darkness.

"April's pregnant," Luke says, like the crowd gathered around us doesn't already know. "It's cold and wet in there. Your prank will be a hell of a lot less funny if something happens to her."

"She'll be just fine," Sonja says as the demon-faced girls drag April toward the cave. She doesn't fight them, which is probably for the best, but panic settles in my chest as I turn back to Calix. There's something just behind his eyes that makes me want to plead, like maybe I could crack through to the other side where he hides all that misery I saw on his face this morning when he thought nobody was looking. "We'll let you out in the morning, won't we, Raz?"

"What Sonja means is, we'll let you out when we wake up tomorrow." He flashes a sharp grin, reaching up and sweeping his hands through his dirty blonde hair. "Considering the amount I plan to drink tonight, it might be more like late afternoon."

"Not April!" Luke screams, struggling against the boys holding her as they pull her toward the cave entrance. "This is a huge, fucking mistake! This is false imprisonment. Do you think I won't report this?"

“Nobody cares what you have to say,” a girl with raven-hair and ice-blue eyes says, shoving Luke forward into the cave. She trips and falls, cutting her hand on a stalagmite with a hiss. I can see the ruby red blood blooming as she falls to her knees. “Your parents don’t even give a shit if you live or die.”

Some of the other boys move forward to grab me, but I keep my eyes on Calix, Raz, and Barron. One of them is smirking at me, one is grinning, and the other looks impassive, almost bored. The monster boys push me into the cave next to April, slam the gate, and lock it tight.

The last thing I hear before the Knight Crew moves away is Raz’s laughter, echoing through the trees.

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It's cold and dark and wet in the Devils' Den, the pleasant trickle of the spring and the constant sound of water droplets falling from the roof echoing strangely in the narrow space. The music from the Devils' Day Party is loud enough that we have to shout to have a conversation of any kind, but I suppose that doesn't matter because it's pretty obvious that Luke doesn't want to talk to me at all.

One of the demon-faced girls kicked over all the lanterns after they dragged April into the cave, so the only light we have is from the massive bonfire. I'm a little concerned at how big it's getting, fed with logs and old furniture and gasoline. The heat makes the rusted bars warm against my fingers as I hang off of them, my heart beating so fast that I feel dizzy.

"You just had to poke the bear, didn't you?" Luke asks finally, lifting her face up from her knees, her goblin mask discarded and stuffed into a back pocket. "After you *promised* me ..."

"I said I wouldn't go looking for trouble," I say, but as soon as the words are spoken aloud, my excuse sounds as weak and pathetic as I feel. "Trouble found me."

"Come on, Karma," Luke says, turning to look at me, her brown eyes dark with fury—and not just fury for the Knight Crew, but for me. "You started it this morning when you hit Calix's car. As amusing as I'm sure that was—and as deserved—you knew what would happen, how things would end."

I turn away from her, focused on the crowd of masked students, sweaty and drunk and high, the skunk-y scent of weed mixing with the stink of the campfire. I'm not sure *what* I wanted for tonight, but this wasn't it.

"So I'm to blame for their bullying?" I ask quietly, even though I know that's not what Luke's trying to say.

"Please don't fight," April says, using the stone wall to help herself to her feet, glasses reflecting the orange glow from the fire. "Look, it's not all that bad, right? This cave is fascinating." She points a single finger up toward the ceiling. "These stalactites are thousands of years old. I'm honestly surprised people are even allowed in here."

"The Knight Crew stole the key," I say, thinking of Barron's hands on my hips, a pink flush creeping its way into my cheeks. "And I stole the key from Barron."

"How, exactly, did you go about doing that anyway?" Luke asks, also pushing herself to her feet. The three of us have been stripped of our dignity and left to rot in here. All I can hope is that when I don't come home tonight, that my moms will call the police, and someone will find us here long before Raz sleeps off his drunk. "Really, I'd love to know."

"Luke," April warns, leaning against the cave wall and looking warily between the two of us. "What's done is done. Karma can't go back in time and change things, so what does it matter? I'm sure she feels bad enough as it is."

"Bad?" I ask, looking over at April with her brown hair plaited and slung over one shoulder, her green eyes dark in the shadows of the cave. It's strange, looking at her in that uniform with her dress shirt untucked, taut around her swollen belly. I think that was her parents' plan all along, to shame her by forcing her to stay in her school uniform every day. "I don't feel bad. *I* didn't put us in here and lock the door; *they* did. I figured you of all people wouldn't be one to victim blame," I say, looking directly at Luke.

She frowns heavily, her brown eyes dancing with carefully repressed anger.

"You know why I'm mad, and it's not because the Knight Crew is a bag of diseased dicks. It's because *you* started things today. You hit Calix's car; you stole that key; you promised me you wouldn't fuck with them." Luke scoffs and shakes her head in disgust, reaching her

fingers up to tousle her blue hair. “And the goddess only knows what you did with Barron to get that key.”

“What the fuck are you implying?” I ask, turning away from the bars and the masked revelry beyond so that I can look her straight in the face. My own is burning with shame, but I just hope it’s too dark in that cave for her to see it. “That I screwed Calix last year as some sort of Devils’ Day Party prank? That I *wanted* to be naïve enough and desperate enough to believe he really did like me?”

“You brought up Calix,” Luke snaps back, moving away from me to stand at the opposite end of the cave entrance. “I was talking about Barron. Did you steal that key spur of the moment? Or was it something you planned? Either way, you’d already made your promise to me, so it was wrong, no matter how it happened.”

“As if you wouldn’t have shoved your tongue down Sonja’s throat at the first opportunity.” I gesture at the glittering green beetle brooch clinging to the front of her shirt. “You wore the jewelry she sent, didn’t you? Maybe I wasn’t the only one planning on seeking out the Knight Crew against my better judgment? They were already planning on locking me in the treehouse, Luke. The fight was already on.”

“If they locked you in, we would’ve let you out, and they would’ve been too drunk to notice. Stealing their key, pepper spraying them, and then trying to lock them up in the Devils’ Den is a whole different animal. You messed up, Karma. Just admit it.”

“At least I *tried* to do something about it,” I snap back, my hands shaking, bits of purple hair sticking to the sides of my sweaty face. “At least for once, I attempted to fight back. Unlike you. Since freshman year, you’ve been letting the Knight Crew push you around, and you just take it. The worst you’ve ever done is report them which just makes you a snitch.”

“A snitch?” Luke laughs, harsh and low, shaking her head like she can’t believe I just said that. “What is wrong with you, Karma? Because you’re not acting like the person I thought I knew. The cool, quiet artist who didn’t give a shit what anybody else thought. Even the thing with Calix ... I mean, I was surprised, but I understood. Lately though? I feel like you hate the Knight Crew and worship them at the same time.”

“I don’t give a shit about the Knight Crew,” I say, but it feels like a lie, tumbling off the end of my tongue like a boulder, heavy and

dangerous and unstable. “I’m not the one who cries myself to sleep every night because she’s so desperate to fit in.”

Luke’s eyes widen, and I know I’ve gone too far, throwing one of her secrets back into her face. It’s like earlier, when I shouted at my mom, when I stabbed my canvas. I don’t mean to do it; I don’t want to do it. Hell, as soon as I say it, I wish I could take it back.

“Come on guys,” April says softly, but it’s too late. Luke turns away from me, one shoulder propped against the wall of the cave. A few moments later, a girl in a pearlescent white mask appears, holding up a key. It’s not the same one that Barron had—this one’s much less rusted—but it fits into the lock just the same, and the gate swings open.

“This is only because I hate them so much, not because I like you,” Pearl Boehringer says, her blond hair orange in the strange half-light. She takes the key with her and walks away, her mask glittering with eight gemstones set to look like a spider’s eyes. The effect is eerie, especially when paired with the derisive sneer on her face.

Told you: everyone at Crescent Prep is an asshole. Including me, apparently.

“Do you want to apologize before I give you a ride home?” Luke says, grabbing April by the hand and pulling her out of the maw of the Devils’ Den. “Because you know I’m going to give you one either way.”

A lump of pride gets caught in my throat, and I say nothing. I’m too frustrated by the way the party’s gone, too pissed off at the Knight Crew, and quite frankly, hating myself too deeply to say anything at all.

With a scowl, Luke leads the way back to her car, this beautiful white vintage Cadillac. Her parents thought this was a punishment, buying her an old car like this. It’s worth maybe thirty thousand dollars at most, so to them, it’s basically garbage. But Luke’s the one that asked for it. For her, this is a dream car. It’s one of the things I’ve always liked about her, how she’s unapologetically Luke. I should say that, along with *I’m sorry*, but instead, I sit quietly in the backseat as she takes me home and drops me off just outside the entrance to Diamond Point.

I’ve barely hopped out before Luke is speeding off into the night, leaving me alone in the quiet darkness.



“Jesus.” I rub a hand over my face, suddenly so tired that I could collapse right here in the cold and sleep for a week. Something rustles in the bushes, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. Could be a cougar or a bear ... or worse—a person. I force myself to walk slowly but confidently back toward the front door of our pale pink house. The mural the girls started earlier is hard to see in the weak porch light, but when it’s done, I’m sure it’ll be visible to every single car that drives down this road. The Horned God, in a state where most people are likely to think it’s the devil. Fantastic. That should help with my popularity.

I let myself in and find both of my mothers waiting for me.

Mama Jane stands up right away, her long dark hair unbound, face twisted into a frown. Mama Cathy stays seated on the couch, her own mouth tight with worry.

“What?” I ask, because it isn’t that late, is it? The Knight Crew took my phone from the gatekeeper (so we discovered on our way out of the party), so I look toward the clock on the wall instead.

It’s after three in the morning.

Shit.

“Did you enjoy the party?” Jane asks carefully, looking at me like she has no idea who I am anymore. It’s the same way Luke looked at me earlier, like maybe there’s something seriously wrong with me that I didn’t notice until right this second. I pause in the doorway, one hand still on the knob, when I notice the ruined canvas sitting on the coffee table. Is that what this is about?

“Not really,” I say, stepping inside and pulling the door closed behind me. Despite everything, I’m still wearing my mask. I’m not sure why. Maybe because I don’t feel comfortable without it right now? Like the emotional mask I’m used to wearing is starting to fracture in places ... “Why?”

“Honey, come sit down,” Cathy says, her green-gray eyes studying me with an even mixture of pity and parental frustration. I don’t like the way this is going. My gaze flicks back to Jane, clearly the more furious of the two.

“I don’t feel like sitting down,” I say, wishing I’d climbed in my window instead of coming through the front door. All I want right now is to be alone. “I’d rather just shower and go to bed, why?”

“Please sit down,” Cathy repeats, looking pleadingly in Jane’s direction. Cathy’s orange-red hair is braided, much like April’s, and

splattered with paint. Her hands, too. Some of my earliest memories involve paint-covered arms enveloping me in lilac-scented hugs. Right now, however, the sight of Cathy wringing those colorful hands is filling me with dread.

“What is it?” I ask, my heart fluttering, my head spinning. I start to think of worst-case scenarios, like something happening to one of my little sisters, or finding out one of my parents was diagnosed with something awful ...

“Do you know a boy named Calix Knight?” Jane asks, clearly struggling to maintain her composure. The blood drains from my face, and I feel my hands curling into fists at my sides. Is this about the Aston Martin? It has to be, right? But how could he say anything, after what the Knight Crew did to Little Bee?

“He goes to Crescent Prep,” I say with a shrug, trying to feign nonchalance when all I feel is dread. “Why?”

The moms exchange a look before turning back to me. It’s the way Cathy reaches for her phone that first sets me off. *Please no*, I think, exhaling sharply. One of my worst fears after being found naked with Calix in the treehouse was that he—or one of his awful friends—would have a video of some kind. Like, if it was all a trick, then surely he’d want evidence of it to hold over my head? For an entire year now, I’ve had this gnawing feeling low in my belly, this sense of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Are you two seeing each other?” Jane asks, and I shake my head. My tongue feels swollen and numb. I mean, so what if they saw the video, right? They’re both progressive, understanding parents, aren’t they? And it was just sex ... Or maybe I’m overreacting and there’s no video at all? “From what Luke tells us, he bullies you. Why have you never mentioned it to me or Cathy?”

“When did you talk to Luke?” I ask, feeling my trepidation fade a little. The anger comes clawing back, raging through me like a monster on a rampage, like the mask on my face is a real thing, sweeping over and consuming me.

“We called you a few hours ago, but you didn’t answer,” Jane says, and I wonder how many times they called, and I didn’t notice, too intent on revenge against the Knight Crew. Because obviously they had to have talked to Luke *before* we dropped our phones at the gate. “So, we called Luke and talked to her about it. Apparently, she already knew.”

“Knew what?” I ask, looking to Cathy. Tears prick the edges of her eyes as she stands up from the couch.

“We’re not mad, honey,” she says, but Jane looks it. She looks *furious*. “But someone posted a video of you and that boy online ...” My heart plummets to the floor and shatters, spattering the walls with metaphorical blood; my body begins to shake.

“Where? When?” I choke out, wishing I had my phone so I could look it up.

“We’ve been working to get the videos removed for hours,” Jane continues, “but it could be some time before they come down. Karma, is there something you want to tell us? Did that boy coerce you into sex? Did you give your consent?”

My head is spinning, and I have to put a hand up against the wall to steady myself.

“If he hurt you, baby ...” Cathy starts, but I can’t breathe. Did Calix coerce me? Well, he lied to me, but that’s not a crime is it? It’s not against the law to be an asshole. And I wanted him. I wanted him so badly I couldn’t breathe. The way he cupped my face, put his fingers beneath my chin, looked into my eyes. The words he spoke were so raw and real, so impossible to fake, and yet ...

“He didn’t hurt me,” I choke out, “not physically.” But into my heart, he stabbed a knife, twisted it, laughed as I bled. “It was consensual.”

Jane doesn’t look convinced. No, she looks about ready to storm over to the fancy dormitories that house every Crescent Prep student *but* me, and make some blood rain down from the sky. I should love her for that, for wanting to protect me. Instead, I just feel sick to my stomach.

“You don’t have to be afraid to talk to us,” Cathy says, moving around the coffee table to come toward me. But I don’t want to be touched right now. All I want is a hot shower and to be left the fuck alone. Part of me wants to go online and search for the video; the rest of me knows what a terrible idea that’d be. *How many people have seen it? Has it gone viral? Will this shit haunt me for the rest of my life?*

“Can I go to my room, please?” I ask, but Jane frowns, not quite finished with our conversation.

“What happened, Karma? Why didn’t you come to us?” I give her a dark look that she returns. There’s a struggle in her face as she tries

to figure out why I'd hop into bed with a bully. *Whatever possessed you to do it?* That's what her face says. The answer though ... I'm not sure I have that. I don't know. I consider myself a strong person; I was raised to demand respect and give it when earned. Calix has never earned it.

"I don't have to tell you every little thing I do," I say, moving over to the table and snatching up the destroyed canvas. The words are an echo of what I told the Knight Crew earlier.

"What happened with your art, Karma?" Cathy asks, studying me as I clutch the painting to my chest. "You've been working on it for months."

"Sometimes things just don't fit anymore," I snap, feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, trapped. *And I'm going to kill Luke. She talked to my parents and didn't bother to tell me?* Betrayal sits like lead in my stomach, making me queasy. "It's my art; I can do whatever I want with it."

"Karma?" It's Emma, standing in the hallway in colorful Pusheen pajamas, decorated with plump little gray cats. "Do you want to see our mural?" she asks, rubbing at her eyes, obviously missing the entire point of this conversation. Katie stands just behind her in *Star Wars* pj's.

"No." I bite the word out, too harsh, too violent. "I don't."

I storm past them, ignoring Jane's shouts for me to stop, and lock myself in my room. My phone is gone, but I stick my headphones in anyway and use Bluetooth to connect them to my laptop, blasting my music and hating my life.

Even though I know I shouldn't, I Google the video. It comes right up when I type in *Crescent Prep, Calix Knight, and Karma Sartain*. It's everywhere, under my real name, plastered on every social media site there is and then some.

My stomach drops, and I choke on bile as I click the first link that pops up.

The video begins to play, and I'm horrified to see that it starts right at the beginning, with me crossing my arms and demanding to know what Calix wants, with the soft tenderness in his face. "*You don't understand ... for years, I've been wanting to tell you how I feel. It's just ... the crew, and Raz, and Barron ...*"

I skip further along in the video, watching his cool, pale hands undress me with reverence, watching as our mouths clash in a swirl

of heat and desperate, clawing need. It gets worse after that, image after image of him entering me, going down on me, coming in me ... I scroll past to the comments, choking on the vile hatred in them, the dark vitriol, the judgment.

A message pops up from Luke on the side of my screen.

*I just saw the video. Are you okay?*

I stare at her message for a moment, quiet and still on the outside, an explosion taking place inside of me.

Am I okay?

Fuck no, I'm not okay.

*You spoke to my parents and didn't tell me. How could you?*

She starts to type a response, deletes it, starts over again.

*Fuck you. Don't talk to me for a while.* I hit send, slam the lid closed on my laptop, and crack the window. I hop down, the icy wind blowing against my face, making the tip of my nose hurt. I'm shaking now, and I have the desperate urge to just get out, to be anywhere but here. The thing is, how can I run from something on social media? Even if that video gets taken down—it's pretty goddamn sexually explicit so I'm assuming it will—people will have downloaded it, screenshotted it, shared it. It'll be everywhere, always.

*Always.*

Forever.

Heartbreak clogs up my throat as I turn and look into the eyes of the Horned God, his outline painted on the inside wall of our carport. Seated in a throne beside him is the goddess, his lover. In one of her hands, she holds a chalice, representing femininity, and in his, he holds a knife, representing masculinity. *I bet he never hurt you like this*, I think, knowing that my moms probably put the outline up for the girls to color in.

On the ground in a wooden crate, there's a whole rainbow of spray paint. Before I can think better of it, I grab one and pull the top off, spraying the mural with red that looks like blood. By the time I'm done, tears are streaming down my face that I can't seem to stop. It's like there's a monster inside of me, making me do bad things, and I can't fight it. Maybe I'm just too weak?

"Karma?" I turn to see my sisters looking out their window at me, staring at the damage I've just done to their art. Katie is already

crying. *Because of me.* “Why did you do that?” Emma asks, looking at me like she doesn’t know who I am. Not the first time I’ve gotten that look today.

Without a word, I drop the spray paint to the ground and head for my mom’s car. She has a tendency to lock herself out of it, and it’s old enough that it doesn’t have a key fob or auto-unlock or anything like that, so she keeps a spare key under a small concrete statue of a goblin. I snag it and let myself into the shitty ’95 Taurus with too many miles, starting the engine and backing out of the driveway fast enough to wake the whole park.

I don’t care.

I just need to move.

I start driving, with no particular destination in mind, the windows rolled down, the breeze whipping my purple hair around my face. And still, still I wear the mask. Because if I had trouble taking it off before, I most *definitely* can’t bear to remove it now.

Even though I know I shouldn’t, I head back to the Devils’ Day Party, parking next to Calix’s dented Aston Martin, and marching through the woods to the bonfire.

Even though it’s now close to four in the morning, the party barely shows signs of slowing down. The whole clearing smells like weed and booze, sex and smoke. I storm right through it all and back to the train cars, looking for the Knight Crew.

When I find them, they’re all sprawled out across the seats in the rear passenger car. Raz has a girl on his lap while Barron sits in the corner, sucking on a bag of cough drops and sketching. Calix, meanwhile, holds a bottle in his hand and smirks while some girls dance naked around a much smaller fire just outside the door, wearing their masks and panties and nothing else.

I shove my way through them, taking the steps up into the train car with my chest heaving. I’m sure they can all tell that my face is streaked with tears from crying, but I don’t care.

“Who did it?” I snap, my voice cutting through the music and the laughter. All eyes turn to me—Calix, Raz, Barron, Sonja, the demon-faced girls, and the boys wearing monster masks. “Who posted it?”

“Who posted what?” Calix drawls, looking bored out of his mind. He tosses the full bottle of liquor in his hand and lets it crash to the floor, soaking the leaf-covered ground in vodka. He’s clearly drunk

as he squints at me from behind his mask, dark eyes narrowed but bloodshot. I've caught the Knight Crew at the tail end of their party, and every single one of them is trashed.

"The video," I grind out, barely able to force the words past my clenched teeth. Raz is looking at me like he can't believe I'm standing here, like he thinks I should still be locked in the mouth of the Devils' Den, while Barron's face is as impassive and empty as usual. Sonja sneers, but she's got a girl on one side kissing her neck, and a boy on the other. Pretty sure none of them have the energy or mental fortitude to come after me right now. "Who posted it?"

"How the hell did you get out of the cave?" Raz asks, staring at me like I've materialized from space.

"They were gone hours ago," Barron says, his voice like steel and velvet, both hard and soft at the same time. "But we don't know what video you're talking about. Our phones are in the tree, just like everybody else's. Well, except for yours; we smashed it."

"Bullshit," I snap, choking on tears. I look from Raz's blue eyes behind his glasses, to Barron's multi-colored gaze, and then back to Calix's dark one. "Somebody posted a video from last year's party," I say, trying to get the words out but failing miserably. *I can't say it; don't make me say it.*

"There shouldn't *be* any videos from last year's party," Raz growls out at me, pushing the girl from his lap and standing up. He stalks over to glare down at me, the whites of his eyes still slightly reddened from the pepper spray. "To get into the party, you ditch your phone; everybody knows that."

"Yeah? Like it'd be impossible for anyone at Crescent Prep to have a second phone? Grow up, Raz." He reaches out to grab my arm, but I jerk out his grip, keeping my back to the doorway but putting some much-needed space between us.

"What was in the video?" Calix asks, blinking at me from his position on the old, torn cushions of the train car. His eyes bore into mine, like steel spikes, blinding me to the rest of the world.

"Us," I say, and there's the slightest tightening of that pretty mouth of his.

"Somebody posted a video of you two fucking?" Sonja asks with wide eyes, and then she throws her head back and laughs. She's not the only one. Within seconds, the train car is filled with it. Every member of the Knight Crew howls with pleasure at the thought of

my humiliation. It takes Calix several seconds to join in, but then he does, too.

The sound rings in my ears, a deafening cacophony that makes me want to claw my own eardrums out.

“This is gold. We need to bail on this party, so we can look it up,” Raz says, and I realize that I’ve made a mistake in coming here. A big one. “Maybe we could take Karma here with us, so we can all watch it together?”

I shove him out of the way—*hard*—and take off running. Shouts echo behind me, and I just know that some of the crew are giving chase. The last thing in the world I want is to be there when they all see it, when they watch it together and laugh at me. It’ll be like the comments section in real life.

*God, she has an ugly body. She should just be glad he’s willing to fuck her.*

*That girl is a straight-up ho. He says the magic words—I love you—and she just falls into bed with him?*

*I go to school with these people. Karma Sartain is white trash, through and through. She must really hate herself to sleep with someone who despises her.*

*I’d tell the bitch I loved her, too, if it’d get her to screw me.*

I skid in the gravel as I come to a stop beside the car, using my palm to slow myself down, and tweaking my wrist at the same time. But when I glance over my shoulder, I see several of the monster-masked boys catching up with me, and fling the door open.

This time, when I peel out of there, I’m driving twice as fast as before. Tears stream down my face as I push the pedal down harder, all the way to the floor. I take Highway 62 toward Eureka Springs because ... why not? I don’t want to go home, and I don’t want to see Luke at the dorms, and I sure as fuck can’t stay here.

The road winds through the trees and then skirts the edge of a steep cliff, passing by Thorncrown Chapel on one side. The signs flash beneath my headlights as I sweep past, warning me to slow down, to stay at fifteen miles per hour.

I don’t listen.

I’m not thinking.

I’m not sure that I care.



And then it happens. I hit the brakes, but I can't take the curve at the speed I'm going, and I can't slow down fast enough. The tires skid as my heart leaps into my throat, and the old Taurus slides to one side. More, more, more. It hits the edge of the road, and then I'm weightless, flying through the darkness and into nothing.

There isn't even time for a scream.

Just regret.

*I fucked today up, I think, but really, not just today. Everything. Everything.*

My thoughts spin to my mothers, my sisters, Luke, April, the Knight Crew ...

And then nothing.

Because the universe just doesn't give out second chances.

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There's blood all over my steering wheel.

I sit up, shaking, disoriented, certain that I must be dead. I reach my quivering hand up to my head and pull it away, staring down at the splotches of ruby red as I blink through the rush of memories. *Getting locked in the Devils' Den, finding out about the video, confronting the Knight Crew.* My stomach lurches as I remember driving along Highway 62, the tires skidding, the weightless feeling as I plunged into blackness.

I look around, but I'm not sitting in the woods, surrounded by the mangled remnants of my mother's car. No, I'm at the gas station again, tucked inside of Little Bee, her front end buried in the side of Calix's Aston Martin.

*What ...*

I barely get a chance for the thought to form before my door is flying open and Calix is yanking me out, slamming me back into the side of my car. I stare into his dark eyes, rife with anger, and try to remember how I got here. This isn't like yesterday, when I had a momentary lapse of forgetfulness. Today, I'm just surprised that I'm alive at all. Did I drink something at the party that I forgot about? Did I smoke something?

"Are you fucking insane?!" Calix snarls, releasing me as a crowd gathers once again, the rainy weather eerily similar to yesterday morning. I blink back at him, but I'm not sure how to respond. Why did I come here? Why did I hit his car again? How am I still alive?

“How did I get here?” I whisper, my entire body shaking as my knees go weak, and I collapse. Surprisingly, Calix catches me before I fall, scowling as he sets me down on the pavement and steps back. The look on his face is impossible to read, but at least he’s not wearing that black leather devil’s mask anymore. “How did I get here?” I repeat, feeling my eyes tear up.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Calix growls as an older woman approaches, leaning down to put a hand on my shoulder.

“Are you okay?” she asks as Calix glares at me from behind her, scowling and turning to look at the entrance to the convenience store.

But today, this time, I’m *not* okay. It’s one thing to forget a split-second in time, between driving down the road and seeing Calix’s car, to hitting it. I’ve forgotten an entire *night* this time. I have no idea how I got here.

Glancing down, I see that I’m dressed in my uniform instead of the outfit I wore to the party. My mask is gone and, after a quick look over my shoulder, I see that Little Bee is fully intact. No more spray paint, no more smashed windows. Her tires are back on and, obviously, if I just used her to hit Calix’s car again, she must run okay.

“Should I call the police?” the woman asks, and *déjà vu* washes over me. She asked me that exact same thing yesterday.

“That won’t be necessary,” Calix replies smoothly, standing up and plastering a fake smile on his face. It’s sickening, the way he does it, affixes that look to his full, lush mouth. “We’re classmates; I won’t be pressing charges.”

My eyes widen as the woman nods and gives my shoulder a quick squeeze before moving away. It takes me a second to realize that she’s the *same* woman from yesterday, wearing the same clothes. I stare after her, dumbfounded, until Calix bends down and reaches out to smooth some stray strands of hair from my face.

“You know what tonight is?” he whispers, and I go completely still, a strange coldness sweeping over me that I can’t explain. *What tonight is? Tonight is nothing. Yesterday was the Devils’ Day Party. Today is just ... Saturday.* So why am I wearing my school uniform? And why is Calix asking me that?

He leans in even closer, pressing his lips to the side of my throat. Reaching both hands up, I shove him away as violently as I can and

rise to my feet. He hits the ground on his ass, but I get no satisfaction out of it. Instead, panic is creeping over me as I glance back into the car and see my phone lying on the passenger seat.

The phone I left at the party last night, that the Knight Crew claimed they destroyed.

So how did it get there?

“Goddamn it, Karma,” Calix snarls, rising to his feet like a shadow, a tall, dark handsome shadow that I can barely see through the white stars in my vision. The little bells on the front door of the convenience store ring and out step Raz and Barron, the former carrying a plastic grocery bag in one hand as he circles the cars and surveys the damage—*exactly* the same way he did yesterday.

“What the fuck happened here? Little trailer trash bitch thought she’d get the first Devils’ Day trick on us, huh?” I stare at Raz, but I don’t even have it in me to be angry. Instead, I’m just confused. Frustrated. Panicking. *I’ve finally lost my goddamn mind*, I think as I look between the three of them with a strange taste in my mouth, like old pennies. *The taste of copper, of blood.*

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I say as Barron pauses on my right and Calix sneers at me like he could give two shits whether I’m hurt or not.

“Sick? Nice try, Trailer Park.” Calix steps forward again, getting in my face, towering over me like this is any normal day, like a video of us fucking wasn’t posted online during the party last night, like I didn’t drive off the edge of the road in the dark and ... end up here. “Who’s going to pay for the damage to my car? Not you. The change your dyke mothers pay you for working part-time at that dump they call a business isn’t going to cut it.”

*That’s what he said yesterday*, I think as I start to sway on my feet, and Barron frowns, pulling the lollipop from his mouth and pointing at me with it.

“She doesn’t look very good,” he says, and Raz laughs, loud and cruel and obnoxious.

“You think?” he asks, tossing his grocery bag into the backseat of the car. “Like she ever does. Trailer Park looks like a goth reject most days and some tree-hugging femi-nazi the rest of the time.” He stalks toward me, like he’s thinking of grabbing me, but Barron reaches out to grab his arm.

“Back off of her,” he says carefully. “People are watching.”

“Maybe I’ll let you pay for it tonight with your mouth?” Calix suggests as he opens the driver’s side door of his car, and I feel the world tilt around me like I’m on a carnival ride. Before he has a chance to climb in, I see the world rush up toward the sky—or maybe it’s me that’s falling—and then pain, sharp and blinding, straight through my skull like a knife.

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There's blood all over my steering wheel.

*Shit, no. No, no, no.* I sit up, my body quivering uncontrollably as I look out the window and find what's now a very familiar scene. There's my little yellow VW bug, the front end planted in the side of Calix's car. Blood drips down my face and onto the front of my uniform. This time, I don't reach up to touch it. This time, I grab my phone from the passenger seat and stare at the date and time.

Friday. Devils' Day.

Bile rises up in my throat just before the driver's side door is wrenched open, and I'm dragged from the vehicle by Calix. Again. Shoved up against the side of Little Bee. Again.

"Are you fucking insane?!" he growls, but maybe I am, because I *just* went through this. I went through it yesterday and then ... five minutes ago? Then I fell onto this cement right here and woke up in my car. Yet I remember none of it.

"Very possibly," I whisper, and there must be something strange in my expression because Calix pulls back, narrowing his eyes like he thinks I'm trying to pull some elaborate Devils' Day prank on him. Or hell, maybe *he's* the one pulling a prank on me? That makes sense, doesn't it? For the Knight Crew to set me up like this, over and over again, just to fuck with my head?

"Are you okay?" It's the old woman again, the one in the yellow shirt with the purple hat. I'd remember her anywhere. Her eyes are

as sharp as tacks, and her nails are painted with tiny daisies. They must've paid her to get in on this, to keep up the charade.

I turn an awful look on Calix, enjoying the slight tightening of his face when he sees the venom in my expression.

"I'm just fucking fine," I snap, feeling my anger get the better of me. It's been doing that a lot lately, hasn't it? Taking over everything and blinding me with white-hot rage. I reach up and find that the cut on my head is open again. Since it was scabbed over last night, that means the Knight Crew must be reopening it every time I pass out.

*Karma, you drove off the edge of a cliff. The Knight Crew didn't engineer that.*

And yet, I can't come up with another logical explanation for what's happening, so I roll with it. Besides, it feels good to hate Calix, to look at him and want to kill him, to look at him and blame him for everything that's going wrong in my life.

"How are you doing it?" I hiss as the woman takes another tentative step forward, clearly unconvinced by my proclamation.

"Should I call the police?" she queries as the rain pours down from the sky, and I try really hard not to wonder how the Knight Crew could possibly engineer the same weather patterns over and over again. *I just need to go home and lie down. That's it. It's Saturday, so there's no school. I can take a moment to collect myself.*

"That won't be necessary," Calix says, smiling in a way that sends chills down my spine. He's good at it, I'll admit, following the same script over and over. "We're classmates; I won't be pressing charges." When he leans forward to swipe some hair from my face, I hit his hand back, and his jaw clenches with anger. "You know what tonight is?" he snaps, much less practiced than he was the last two times we played this game.

"Fuck off, Calix, I know what you're up to," I snap, so freaked-out by the whole situation that I forget how bad the Knight Crew can really make my life when they put their minds to it. "And I'm not sticking around to play this game."

"Play this game?" he repeats, his own anger rising in a violent wave. I can see it in his eyes, teetering on the brink of destruction, like a tsunami about to crash into shore. "What game? *You* crashed your car into mine. So what could I possibly be up to?"

"I'm not buying this *Groundhog Day* shit." I shake my head, thinking about that old Bill Murray movie, the one where he wakes

up over and over again on the same day. Life doesn't give second chances, and it most definitely doesn't give third or fourth or fifth ones. Sorry, but the prank is over before it's even really started.

"*Groundhog Day?*" Calix echoes, looking at me like I've truly and utterly lost my mind. "You must've hit your head pretty hard, Trailer Park. Maybe I should call an ambulance and let you explain how this all happened?" He gestures at our smashed cars as the bells on the front door of the convenience store ring and Raz and Barron appear, right on schedule.

"What the fuck happened here?" Raz asks, still carrying that plastic grocery bag as he circles us. Like Calix, he plays his part very well. I'm almost convinced. Almost. But time travel does not exist. People do not get caught up in an endless cycle of days. I mean, imagine that? Imagine having to live Devils' Day—and the Devils' Day Party—over and over and over again. "Little trailer trash bitch thought she'd get the first Devils' Day trick on us, huh?"

I turn and head around the back of Calix's car, climbing in the driver's seat of Little Bee before Raz catches up to me, grabbing the door to keep it from closing. Doesn't stop me from trying the engine and, on the third try, getting it to turn over.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" Raz asks, leaning in with a menacing sneer on his face. Barron steps forward, smelling like watermelons, and touches a hand to his friend's shoulder.

"Back off of her; people are watching."

Raz scowls at Barron and throws his arm off, but at least he lets go of the door and steps back. Behind the two of them, Calix just stands there, watching me with dark eyes.

"Maybe I'll let you pay for the damage tonight with your mouth?" he says, before turning away and removing the gas hose from his car. I ignore him and hit the pedal, reversing out of the parking lot and heading straight toward home.

*This too shall pass*, I remind myself.

And at least for now, in this moment, I find some comfort in that.



During the drive, I play *Lost* by the band Stitched Up Heart and let my mind drift to distant things. I don't think about the Knight Crew's prank or Calix's face, or anything else. I just focus on getting



home. Once I'm there, I feel better, turning the engine off and leaning back into my seat with a sigh. The rain's just slowed down, the same way it did yesterday. *Don't think like that.*

I climb out, taking my phone with me. I don't look at the date on it again. If the Knight Crew had access to my phone to sneak it back into my car, they very easily could've fucked with that, too.

"Karma?" Mama Cathy asks when I walk in and find her in the living room, bent over a small canvas, a pile of bubble wrap on the floor beside her. The moms are always ordering art. Sometimes it's to keep, sometimes it's to sell. "What are you doing home?"

"Um, it's Saturday?" I say with a breezy laugh, pretending like her look of confusion isn't a terrifying thing to behold.

"Are you bleeding?" she asks, standing up from the couch at the same time that Mama Jane comes in, her face pinched.

"Did you get in an accident, Karma?" she asks as I turn to look at her and she spots the blood on my forehead. "Oh my god, are you alright?" Jane comes forward, cupping my face in her hands as I struggle to swallow past a sudden tightness in my throat.

"I told you yesterday that something happened to Little Bee," I say, and Jane's eyes narrow with worry. She flicks a glance in Cathy's direction.

"Call the doctor," Jane says, but I brush her off, stepping back and crossing my arms over my chest. *Google today's date, Karma, my mind urges, but I won't.* I refuse.

"I don't need a doctor; it's just a little bump," I argue. "Can I just chill in my room please?"

The moms exchange a long, worried look.

"Do you have any other injuries?" Jane asks, but I'm already shaking my head.

"Look, I'm fine. It's nothing. I can even leave my door open if that'll make you happy." I tap my foot and raise my brows, trying to give off the impression that I'm okay. I'm not, but it doesn't matter. I'll smoke some weed on the back porch, take a nap, and everything will be ... well, not okay. Things will never be okay again, now that the video is making its rounds on the internet, but they could be better. Things will be better.

"If you leave the door open ..." Jane hedges, but I highly doubt she's going to leave me alone for long. More than likely, she'll call

the doctor—there's only one in Devil Springs—and see if she's making house calls today.

I head down the hall, breathing a sigh of relief once I'm back in my room.

My parents, despite being 420-friendly, will freak if they find out I smoke weed—they think I should wait until my brain is done developing—so I make sure to always smoke out the window to help hide the smell. I grab one of the joints I have tucked in my desk drawer and open my bedroom window, hopping up to sit on the sill as I light up.

Of course, from here I can see the mural on the inside wall of the carport.

The mural ... that isn't there at all.

My hands shake as I hold the lighter to the end of the joint, remembering the can of red spray paint and Katie's silent tears. *They painted over it*, I tell myself, because that's the only logical explanation. But then my eyes flick over to the perfect square of canvas on my easel, the one that's still fully intact, despite my fit with the X-Acto knife.

Logic.

I have to hold onto logic.

A group of teens—one of them wearing a Devil Springs High sweatshirt—passes by, wearing masks and laughing.

“We're already late; I say we ditch today, hit the party early,” one of them says to the others. I can't hear their responses because they're walking too fast, but that does nothing to melt the ice forming in my belly. My eyes stray back to my bed, to my phone lying innocuously on the comforter.

*If there's nothing wrong, why can't you just pick it up and look at it?* I ask myself, taking a drag on the joint and then perching it carefully on the edge of my glass ashtray. Carefully, as if it's a venomous snake about to strike, I approach the silent rectangle of my phone.

“This is stupid,” I murmur after a moment, snatching it up and pulling up Google.

*What is today's date?* I type, my stomach clenching before I hit enter.

When *yesterday's* date—Devils' Day—pops up, I start to feel woozy again, like I did at the gas station earlier.

“What the fuck?” I whisper, hands shaking as I try typing in my name, then Calix's, along with Crescent Prep, just like I did last night.

There are no videos. No sex tapes. Not even a *mention* of a sex tape. Frantically, I start checking the social media accounts of the Knight Crew. Some of them—like Calix's—are private, but in typical Raz fashion, he posts every aspect of his life for the world to see.

And yet ... he doesn't mention the video. Neither does Sonja.

I throw my phone down on the bed and step back, like it really has bitten me, infected me, poisoned me.

*It's the weed*, I try to tell myself this time, even though I know two drags on a joint does not a high person make. Sliding into the seat at my desk, I open my laptop and perform the same searches, the same social media sweeps, just to see if maybe the Knight Crew really did fuck with my phone.

The results are the same.

“Mom ...” I call out, not caring which of them responds to me. Of course, they're both hovering nearby, so they appear within seconds. I turn to look at them, trying not to give into the fear I'm feeling inside. “I think I need to go to the hospital.”



*This too shall pass*, I murmur, over and over again as I sit in the backseat of my mothers' Taurus. Yeah, the same Taurus I drove off the edge of Highway 62. After telling my moms the full story, they bypassed our local doctor and drove me straight to the ER.

Everything seems fine, they said. I don't have a concussion, they said.

“Just because the CT scan doesn't show anything doesn't mean you don't have a brain injury of some kind,” Mama Jane says, frowning hard. Sometimes I forget that she used to be a family medicine doctor. I wasn't born until after she'd left her career. It's one of the reasons her family doesn't speak to her anymore. But just *one* of the reasons. Mama Cathy, and in turn, me and my sisters, are

some of the other reasons. “I want you to go to sleep as soon as we get home.”

“If you really think I have a concussion, isn’t it best if I stay up?” I ask, but even though it’s only early afternoon, I’m fucking exhausted. *All* I want to do is sleep. Because, according to my parents, to the whole *world*, today is September 25<sup>th</sup>, Devils’ Day. Although ... it can’t be because it was Devils’ Day yesterday, right?

Goddamn it, I just want to go to bed. When I wake up, I’ll figure this all out.

“That’s a myth,” Jane says as Cathy looks over her shoulder, brows pinched with worry. “As long as you’re awake and you can hold a conversation, sleep is actually best for concussive patients.” We pull into the driveway beside the mural that, apparently, never existed in the first place?

That must’ve been one hell of a dream last night.

I don’t think very hard about this morning, about how I passed out and hit the pavement and then ... woke up and started all over again.

Instead, I head inside and change into some pj’s. My moms bring me soup and warm milk, like I’m five years old again, and leave the door cracked with promises to check in on me every hour or so. As soon as they’re gone, I finish my joint, let the munchies help me clean up every last bite of food, and then curl up in bed.

*There is no video*, I tell myself with a relieved sigh. As weirded out as I am about the intensity of last night’s dream, I feel better. I never fought with Luke or pepper sprayed the Knight Crew or ruined my little sisters’ mural.

I’m still smiling when I finally drift off to sleep.

I am most definitely *not* smiling when I wake up again.



There's blood all over my steering wheel.

I wake up with a start, my heart pounding, a scream lodged in my throat. *No! No, this is a fucking nightmare!*

This time, I don't wait for Calix to tear my car door open. I open it so fast and so hard that I hit him with it. He grunts and grabs onto it, but I'm already climbing out. I'm already running. I make it as far as the grassy patch on the edge of the parking lot before I collapse and throw up.

"Are you fucking insane?!" Calix growls, breathing hard as he catches up to me.

"Stop saying that!" I scream, turning to look at him while my head swims with fear and I choke on a sense of dread and foreboding. *This isn't happening to me, it's not. This isn't real.* I figure I must've taken some psychedelics at the Devils' Day Party and now I'm tripping hard. How else could I be reliving the same day over and over again?

"Stop saying what?" Calix snaps back as the older woman in the yellow shirt jogs over to us, phone clutched in her hand.

"Are you okay?" she asks, and I have to bite back the urge to scream. "Should I call the police?"

"That won't be necessary," Calix replies, and I cut him off before he can continue. If I hear another line repeated, I might very well go insane.

“Please leave us alone,” I say, looking back at the lady with what I hope is a fairly sane expression. I don’t feel sane. Not even close. In fact, I’m considering driving three counties over and checking myself into a mental health facility.

“We’re classmates; I won’t be pressing charges,” Calix says anyway, and I begin to sob. The woman moves away, still watching us, like she always does. “Good god, Trailer Park, what the fuck is wrong with you?” he asks, but there’s something strange in his voice, an edge of ... well, it can’t be concern, but something I’ve never heard before.

Except for that one time.

I choke on a sob, burying my face in my hands.

“You hate me so much,” I murmur, not caring what he thinks of me. “Why don’t you just kill me now and put me out of my misery?”

Calix goes disturbingly still, like we’re both in a play together, but I’m not saying my parts right.

“Is this a Devils’ Day prank?” he asks, sounding annoyed, rather than pissed off. “Because I’m not in the mood.”

“A Devils’ Day prank,” I quip with a dry laugh, dashing the tears from my face and rising to my feet. I throw him a look of pure hatred. I hate him. I hate him. I fucking *hate* him. “I wish. Just ... get the hell away from me, Calix.”

I start walking down the sidewalk, not caring what happens to my car. He can have it towed for all I give a shit. If I wake up tomorrow and that’s the worst of my problems, I’ll jump for fucking joy and compose a ditty to sing the rest of the day. The Knight Crew can hang me by my shoelaces from the loblolly pines near the courtyard and I’ll thank them for the privilege.

After about half a block, I realize that Calix is following me.

“What do you want?” I snap, turning to face him without an ounce of fear or trepidation. The Knight Crew and their bullying means nothing to me right now. *Nothing*. Not when I’m losing my goddamn mind.

“You just hit my car,” he says, scowling at me, dressed in his academy uniform. I hate how handsome he looks in the royal purple jacket, how well it complements his raven-dark hair and obsidian eyes. They glitter with anger as he takes me in from head to toe, a muscle in his jaw ticking with frustration. “Do you really think I’m

going to let you walk away?” He reaches out and uses the knuckle of one finger to swipe some blood from my forehead. Despite everything, my heart stutters and I feel a bit of emotion rise up in me, emotion that I thought I’d wiped away after last year’s Devils’ Day party. “Do you have a head injury or something? The press is all over this one-percent, rich versus poor crap. If something happens to you, I might actually serve time for it—even though *you* were the one that chose to rev your engine and hit my fucking car.”

“You’re a real piece of work, aren’t you?” I snap back, unfettered by my usual inhibitions. *Don’t piss the Knight Crew off; don’t draw their attention anymore than necessary.* But who cares? If I’m going to be locked away, my mind trapped in a never-ending cycle of crazy, then I might as well be bold. “I said I’m *fine*. Leave me alone, Calix.”

I start to walk again, but he reaches out to grab my arm, his fingers tight against the purple of my own blazer. I look back at him, meeting his dark eyes with my gray ones.

“You’re not going anywhere until we sort out this crash; I’m calling an ambulance.” He pulls his phone from his pocket, and I knock it away, sending it flying into the road. A passing car runs right over it, and his teeth clench so tight I wouldn’t be surprised if one were to snap off. That insouciant air of privilege is fading around the edges, like a mask with a crack down the middle. Fitting, considering it’s Devils’ Day. Again.

“Calix, if you don’t let go of me, I’m going to start screaming, and I won’t stop until there’s a crowd hauling you off of me.” His grip tightens and some of his usual haughtiness floods his expression.

“Go for it,” he challenges, yanking me toward him hard enough that our fronts bump together. I look up at him and for the briefest of seconds, I can remember what it was like last year when he came to my house looking for me. When he invited me to the party. Took me to the spring and the treehouse. When he confessed.

My cheeks heat and I glance away.

I guess I’m not so beyond caring that I want to scream and draw a bunch of attention to myself. Calix releases me, and I grip my wrist to my chest, as if his touch has left some sort of permanent mark on my flesh.

“Karma,” he starts, and the tone in his voice catches me off-guard, like he’s about to say something he may very well regret.

“What the fuck happened?” Raz shouts, jogging up to us with Barron on his heels. “Why is Trailer Park’s car shoved up the ass of yours?” He sneers at me, red eyes darkening with hate. “Little bitch thought she’d get the first Devils’ Day trick on us, huh?”

It’s not quite the same script, but close enough that I feel my ears begin to ring. Calix steps back from me, like he’s just realized I’m the ugly, weird, poor girl he’s never liked. One he hates so much that he was willing to spend hours fucking her just to prove a point, just for a *joke*.

“Leave me alone,” I whisper, wishing they’d all go away, so I could have a moment to think.

“Go away?” Raz echoes with a laugh as Barron sucks on his stupid lollipop, watching me with those dual-colored eyes of his. “You’ve got to be kidding. You think you get to pull this shit and just walk away? I don’t fucking think so.”

“Back off of her,” Barron warns, glancing over at the busy shopping center on our right. “People are watching.”

A long, tired sigh escapes me, and all three boys look at me strangely, like I’m not acting the way I’m supposed to.

“I’ll suck your dick tonight to pay for the damage,” I deadpan, stopping Calix before he can feed me the next line in the story. His eyes widen, almost imperceptibly, before he’s scowling again. Raz just starts laughing, like a braying donkey, and doesn’t stop.

“You think I want your filthy mouth on my dick?” Calix snaps, but there’s something about the way he says the word *filthy* that makes me wonder. It’s almost a caress, coming out of that menace of a mouth.

“You didn’t seem to mind last year,” I snap back as Barron studies me with an intensity that reminds me of the way he draws, like I’m a subject he just has to capture in charcoal. I’ve seen his art; he’s good. But he lacks passion in his work. It’s as empty and cold as his voice or that unnerving stare from his brown and blue eyes.

“Aw, are you still salty about all of that?” Raz taunts, pushing his bangs back from his forehead with a smirk. “Did you get your heart broken last year?”

“Since you’ve inconvenienced all of us,” Barron interrupts, his voice like a cool fog on the morning of a funeral. It’s ... almost depthless, but also cold. Sad. Indifferent. There’s something about it



that's always scared but simultaneously fascinated me. "Maybe you can meet us at the party and suck us all off?"

"Oh, this I like," Raz says as I stand there with ice in my belly and fear in my heart. What's happening? *Why* is this happening? And how can I make it stop? "I might not like you much, but I never turn down a BJ."

"And you have all the diseases to show for it," I blurt before I can stop myself. Raz's face darkens up, and he spins on me, grabbing me by the shoulders and yanking me close. The way his red eyes search my face, I can tell he hates me about as much as I hate Calix. Maybe more.

"The more I think about it, the more I like this idea. Meet us at the party tonight and we'll work something out." He releases me, and I stumble a few steps, but I'm not afraid of the challenge in his eyes, the darkness in Calix's, or the unnerving stare from Barron.

I won't be going to the party tonight regardless.

"Fine."

They all look at me like I'm somewhat of a disappointment, like this is *not* how I'm supposed to act or how things are supposed to go. There's no challenge here, and if there's no challenge, there's no fun.

"When did you get so goddamn boring?" Raz quips with a dramatic roll of his eyes. "Come on, let's leave the bitch to whatever emo bullshit is plaguing her. Maybe she can write a sad poem about it and read it in front of the class?"

Raz turns and starts off down the sidewalk. After a long moment, Calix peels away and follows after him.

Barron waits for a beat longer, watching me, almost like he's committing me to memory.

*This too shall pass*, I tell myself, but maybe that isn't true. Maybe some things don't pass? Maybe this is punishment for all the mistakes I made in life, reparations for all the people I hurt? Maybe I really did drive my car off the road that night and this is purgatory?

Or hell.

More than likely, it's hell.

"See you at the party," Barron says, and then he turns and leaves me to stand alone on the sidewalk.



“You did what?!” Luke crows as I stand in front of her, trying my best to maintain some sort of calm. But it’s hard, I’ll admit. All I want to do is go home and sleep, but I’m terrified to close my eyes again. The last few times I did, I woke up at the gas station. So today, I’m going to do my best to go through the motions without hurting anyone I love, and see what happens. Maybe that’s all I need to do? “I can see the headline now: *three hundred thousand-dollar Aston Martin crushed by shitty yellow VW bug with eyelashes*. What a glorious start to Devils’ Day!”

I say nothing in response. In fact, I probably look like a weirdo, standing there quiet and sullen as Luke laughs and April tilts her head to one side.

“Are you okay?” she asks after a moment, breaking the script. I almost sob with relief. If I had to hear another line repeated over again, I might’ve just collapsed to the ground and given up. “Because you don’t look it. There’s some blood on your forehead and your eyes are a bit glassy. I think you should go to the nurse’s office.”

“No,” I say, but the word comes out in a whisper and Luke stops laughing abruptly, turning to look at me with a hint of fear in her gaze. “I don’t need to see the nurse; my moms took me to the hospital, and it turns out that I’m just fine.”

“They took you to the hospital?” Luke asks, exchanging a look with April. “It’s over an hour away. How did you get there and back so quick?”

“I ...” I don’t know how to respond to her question, so I don’t. Instead, I glance over at the imposing form of Crescent Preparatory Academy and wonder if this where I have to spend the rest of eternity, in this big stupid Tudor building with a bunch of rich rejects that I hate, but only because they hate me. I never wanted that. When I started here in freshman year, I thought I could change their minds, show them that their wealth and privilege didn’t make them any better than me.

I’ve completely and utterly failed to do anything of the sort. I’m not some kind of folk hero. Instead, I’m just a girl living a nightmare and wishing it would end.

“April is right,” Luke says, squeezing the pack of powdered donuts in her hand enough that they’re probably ruined. “You’re pale. I mean, you’re white as fuck, so you’re always pale, but ... this isn’t a normal sort of paleness. You’re ashen, Karma.”

I stare at her and before I realize it, the tears are coming, hot and salty as they run down my cheeks.

“Oh, Karma,” she says, exchanging a quick look with April before she pulls me into her arms and squeezes me so tightly that I can’t breathe. I think about her talking to my moms about Calix, spilling my secrets without telling me about it. But it’s impossible to be mad about something that might never have happened. “What’s wrong?” Luke leans back, looking at me with her dark brown eyes, her anime-blue hair wafting gently in the breeze. “You still love him, don’t you?”

“I never loved him,” I snap back, but it feels like a lie, even though it’s not. I never loved Calix. I ... I don’t know why I gave into him last year, but it wasn’t because of that. Maybe I just wanted to try the whole sex thing, so I could stop wondering about it? He was good, too—probably a byproduct of all his whoring around—so at least there’s that. We did it; it felt good. End of story. *You’re such a liar, even to yourself.* “Look, I’m just having a shitty day, okay? I don’t want to talk about Calix or the Knight Crew or anything else.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course, no worries,” Luke says, pulling the goblin mask from her book bag. It makes me feel sick, watching her put it on. No matter how I deviate from the formula, the universe steers me right back in the same direction.

“God, this town is weird,” April murmurs, and I decide I just can’t take it anymore. I thought I could force myself to follow the original day step by step, but I can’t. I can’t stand how surreal it feels, how *wrong* it feels. My mouth burns with the taste of copper, and I turn away, storming into the woods and away from the school as April and Luke call out after me.

Then I start to run, and I don’t stop until I’m climbing inside my car and peeling out of the parking lot.



I head back to my parents’ house, parking outside the Diamond Point gates and then sneaking inside on foot. Once I’m sure that both of my moms are in their art studio out back, I let myself into the

house with my key and load up as much weed and alcohol as I can find. Neither of my parents is much into substances of any kind, so there's not a lot, but I do find a small container of pot brownies on the top shelf of their bedroom bookcase, and a case of wine that Mama Cathy bought for her book club meeting. There's even a full bottle of tequila that some acquaintance of theirs gifted them for Christmas last year and they never drank; it still has a red and green ribbon tied around the neck.

After that, I head for the woods where the party's being held later, intent on staking my claim in one of the train cars and getting wasted. I'm not sure why that's the first plan that comes to mind. There are so many other things I could be doing right now, but I feel paralyzed. Helpless. At least the alcohol and the weed, they can take the pain away.

When I finally get to the train car, however, I find that someone's already beaten me there.

It's Pearl, sitting on one of the seats with her knee propped up, a small razor blade in her hand. One by one, she makes these perfect, tiny cuts on the inside of her right arm and watches ruby red droplets of blood well from each wound before moving onto the next.

As soon as I see her, I'm torn between wanting to rush in and tear the blade from her hand ... and fleeing before she can see me. Unfortunately, my foot bumps an old beer can and her honey-brown eyes lift up to find me standing in the doorway.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asks, but I don't know how to respond to that, so I lift up the case of wine in response and she scowls. "Wow. Red wine for a rager. You're a real rebel, aren't you, Trailer Trash?"

"What's your problem with me anyway?" I snap back, even though I know that a girl who spends her afternoons cutting class *and* cutting herself probably should be handled with a bit of respect and understanding. But I'm tired, and I'm confused, and I feel like I'm floating through a nightmare, so I don't act with the compassion that I should. "You're such a bitch, like everyone else at Crescent Prep. You, the Knight Crew, the Devils' Day Committee," I add, thinking of the raven-haired girl who smashed the butterfly necklace. "Everyone. No wonder your parents all shipped you off to butt-fuck nowhere, Arkansas."

Pearl rises to her feet and comes over to stand in front of me, silver-blond hair shiny in the sunlight, the red of her cuts a brilliant

ruby against her pale skin.

“I don’t like you because you’re desperate,” she sneers, getting in my face, the razor blade still clutched in her hand. For a moment, I wonder if she’ll strike me with it. She doesn’t, tucking it away in her pocket as she moves around me toward the open door. “You act like you’re better than the Knight Crew, but you look at them like you’d give your left tit to *be* one of them. That’s why. You’re even worse than they are.” She elbows me out of the way, and I let her go, shaking, my hand clenched around the cardboard case with the wine in it. Slowly, I set it down on the leaf-covered ground and draw out a bottle. Using the bottle opener I stuffed into my pocket, I pull the cork out and toss it aside, putting the wine to my lips and drinking deeply. I barely stop for breath, downing as much as I can stomach before I haul back and just throw the bottle as hard as I can into the wall, like Calix did that first night with the vodka.

It shatters to pieces, stinking up the room with the cloying scent of grapes and cherries. But holy shit, it feels good, freeing.

*“You’re even worse than they are.”*

Fuck Pearl.

Fuck the Knight Crew.

I pull out another bottle, but I don’t bother to uncork it this time. Instead, I throw it at the last intact window there is. It’s beyond satisfying when they both shatter, and a strange, strangled laugh tears from my throat as I sink to the floor, twisting the top off the tequila and swigging several mouthfuls of that. It burns as it goes down, but I don’t care. Anything to make this day go away. Anything at all.

The alcohol burns in my veins as I take my mask from my book bag, slipping it on and then stumbling out of the train car to the pit where the partygoers start the fire every year. It’s just a hole, dug deep and filled with rocks, but it works. Somebody’s already stacked firewood nearby, making it easy for me to set up. I brought my own lighter fluid and a box of matches, so by the time the other students start showing up, I’ve already teased the flames into a roaring frenzy.

“Showed up early to get warm for us, huh, Trailer Park?” Raz asks, circling around me like a shark. I just stay where I am, situated on a log near the fire, the half-empty bottle of tequila clutched in my hand. When Raz reaches out to snatch it from me, I let him have it. He swigs a bunch and passes it over to Sonja, his partner in crime.

Pretty sure that amongst the Knight Crew, they're best friends. It's rare to see them apart, like I did this morning, and I'm pretty sure that they spend a lot of time scamming on girls together. A perfect pair of monsters.

Barron sits down on my right side, his sketchbook tucked under his arm, another lollipop in his mouth.

"I heard a rumor once," I slur as the Knight Crew gathers around the fire, one of their lackeys setting up a net near the parking area to collect phones. No phone, no entry. If you don't have a phone, well, you're clearly not a student at Crescent Prep because every goddamn kid there has the latest technology in their hands at all times. It's considered taboo to share anything that happens at the Devils' Day Party anywhere outside of it.

What happens here, *stays* here.

Or it's supposed to.

If that first day was somehow real—although as I'm sitting here, drunk off my ass, I can't for the life of me figure out how it could be—then someone has a video of me and Calix. More than likely, one of the people in this circle of firelight does.

"A rumor about what?" Barron asks absently, still sucking on the candy and staring at me with that penetrating gaze of his. On the right, his brown eye seems contemplative, almost warm while the icy blue of his left comes across as cold and distant. A dichotomy. Heterochromia of the soul as well as the eyes. I laugh and reach for one of the bottles of wine, fumbling as I try to get the cork out.

"That you eat all that candy because you're trying not to drink," I slur as Barron finally takes the wine bottle from my shaking hands. He doesn't give it back though. Instead, he hands it over to Sonja and I scowl, swaying in my seat. *Stupid Barron and his white sweatshirt smeared with charcoal, the smell of watermelons, and that weird way he always defends me and destroys me at the same time.* Once, after I fell off a horse during a riding lesson—yeah, our school is so posh we have riding lessons for PE sometimes—Barron picked me up and carried me to the nurse's office while everyone else in the Knight Crew laughed.

Of course, as soon as I finished up there and headed into the locker room to change, I found my uniform shredded into pieces. Barron wore my bow tie around his neck for the rest of the week, while my moms struggled to come up with the money to afford a

new uniform. They ended up selling several original paintings at a steep discount.

“Is that what the rumors say?” he asks, but I notice he doesn’t take any of the bottles making their way around the campfire. I blink at him, but my alcohol-addled brain can’t decide if he just answered my question, or presented me with a whole new one. Instead, I lean forward and squint, trying to make out the ink on his chest. He’s wearing the same outfit as before, the white jacket with the curled coattails, black leather pants, and boots. When I reach out to run a finger down his bare chest, he snatches my hand in a crushing grip and then pulls me into his lap.

My head spins, but at least I can finally see what his tattoo is.

It’s a butterfly, but not just any butterfly, it’s a Diana fritillary, that same orange and black insect that I received as an anonymous gift. *How did I miss that the other day?* I wonder, bringing up the memory of our kiss. It was too dark, the night filled with too many shadows.

My eyes lift to Barron’s, but he isn’t looking at me. Instead, he’s watching as Calix saunters into the clearing with an entourage of his own, wearing that stupid crown with the berries that drip red onto his pale skin like blood. The raven-haired girl with the ice-blue eyes, from the Devils’ Day Committee, is clinging to his arm. He shakes her off with a bit of a scowl before turning his attention to me.

“It seems we have a willing guest,” Barron says, his voice rumbling beneath me as I struggle to put together my thoughts. *Did he send me that necklace?* And if he did, why? If it was Barron, I can only assume it was both a gift *and* a punishment, the beginning of some cruel trick. That’s how he works, in dichotomies. I just can’t figure the angle on this one. Or maybe I just don’t care?

“Oh?” Calix asks, like he’s bored, his black velvet doublet unbuttoned to the navel, his crown askew on his head. “You actually showed up. More’s the pity.”

“Really? Because I’m pretty damn excited about getting my dick sucked,” Raz quips, his dirty blonde hair streaked with silver glitter, his bloodred leather pants slung low enough on his hips that I can follow a trail of hair from his belly button down to his waistband. His cock is probably a scant few millimeters from popping out the top. The thought makes me giggle, and Raz shoots me a dirty look, like I’m not supposed to find any of this funny. I’m supposed to be

the victim, right? This is not my role, sitting on a bully's lap and reaching for a bottle of vodka.

I stare at it for a long moment, vision blurring in and out of focus as I try to remember if I brought it here. But nope, it must've been somebody else. There are leaves and bits of dried flowers swirling around in the bottom, like this is some debauch offering for the demons and devils that live in the earth beneath our feet.

Barron steals the bottle from me before I get a chance to drink any and hands it back to Sonja. Her lids are covered in bright red glitter and her dress is so tight and short that I can see her panties underneath. I have no idea why Luke likes her, but maybe it has something to do with the forbidden? We all like to test our boundaries every now and again, don't we? That must've been what drew me to Calix, wanting something I knew I couldn't have.

*Lies.*

"No more alcohol for you," Barron chastises, clicking his tongue and sucking on that damn lollipop of his. It's turned his tongue a brilliant neon pink. He leans in and pushes some hair back from my ear, nuzzling the spot between my neck and shoulder and making me groan. Raz stares at the pair of us like he's witnessing aliens setting foot on planet earth for the first time. I *know* I'm making a spectacle out of myself, but I can't stop.

Just like it felt good to throw that bottle, to watch it shatter, this feels the same way.

Wild. Out of control. Broken.

Free.

"If you drink too much, you might not have the energy to suck me off," Barron continues, and I laugh. There it is, that softness mixed with the deep, dark shadows of hate. We have a lot of practice in this game, me and the Knight Crew.

"Really?" Calix asks, taking a seat between the two demon-faced girls with the diaphanous dresses. One of them is named Tamika and the other is Ariel, like the mermaid. I think. The only members of the Knight Crew I ever bothered to memorize were the ringleaders: Calix, Raz, Barron, Sonja. "You're eighteen. Do you really want to fuck a drunk minor? Count me out."

"Are you stupid or something?" Raz growls out, looking at Calix like he'd rather choke him than party with him. At least there's that, seeing him turn his hateful self on his friend. That was worth coming



all the way out here for. The band begins to set up their instruments, and I wonder if tonight, I might actually get to see them play. “You have Karma Sartain right here, ready to open that pretty little mouth of hers and wrap those plump lips around your cock, and you’d say no to that?”

“Drunk girls are sloppy fucks,” Calix says as Sonja hands the bottle of vodka with the dried flowers back to him, and he takes a drink. He doesn’t spill a single drop, and I find myself mesmerized as his throat works while he swallows. Tamika—or Ariel, I forget who’s who—presses her lips to the side of his neck and starts kissing him.

I turn away with a scowl and spot Luke, staring at me through the trees with a wide-eyed, terrified sort of expression. As soon as she starts heading our way, I curse and stumble off of Barron’s lap. He catches one of my small hands in his big ones before I can take two stumbling steps.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks as Raz observes our interaction with a smirk. “We have special plans for you tonight.”

“I know,” I slur back, leaning down and putting my hands on either one of his shoulders. It’s interesting, to be so close to those brown and blue eyes of his. The only time I’ve ever been this close was that first night, when I coerced him into making out with me, so I could steal the key. “You want to lock me in the treehouse where Calix took my virginity. Whatever. I’ll be back. I just want to talk to Luke.” Barron’s eyes widen slightly, and he flicks a glance in Calix’s direction.

“Who the hell told you that?” Raz asks, but Barron is releasing me, and I’m stumbling away and falling into Luke’s arms with a laugh.

“Karma, what the actual fuck?” Luke growls out, dragging me into the shadows and doing her best to steady me. Doesn’t work. I end up sitting on my ass in the leaves, still dressed in my stuffy Crescent Prep uniform. I tear off the purple blazer, loosen my tie, and unbutton my shirt to the navel, just like Calix. “Shit, I knew I shouldn’t have come here tonight.”

“Why did you?” I slur, trying to squint up at her.

“Because I was worried about you,” she says, frowning and then sighing. “Rightfully so it seems, since it looked like you were ready to stick your tongue down the Knight Crew’s throats.”

“Where’s April?” I demand, wishing I had another drink. I feel like I’m losing my drunk, and I really don’t want that. As soon as that happens, I’ll have to face reality, a reality that feels more like a nightmare than anything else. Something surreal is happening to me, something wrong. But how can I tell Luke that? I told my moms and they rushed me to the ER and still, nothing happened.

“I convinced her to stay home,” Luke says, and I frown. That’s not in the script. April is supposed to be at the party. “Which is where you’re going. Now, can you get up or do I need to carry you?”

“I’m supposed to suck their dicks tonight,” I say, even though I never planned on doing any such thing. “The Knight Crew is expecting me.” I sweep an arm in their direction, indicating the glittering cruelty of their licentious little court.

Luke curses under her breath again and then sweeps an arm around my waist, attempting to haul me to my feet. She’s unsuccessful, and I’m far too drunk to stand up on my own. Shame sweeps over me, hot and itchy beneath my skin.

“I’m sorry, Luke,” I murmur, my eyes watering of their own volition. *Don’t cry here, Karma. Don’t do it. They’ll see you and you’ll never live it down, no matter how many todays you have to live.* “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she says, standing up and sweeping both palms over her hair as she looks around for a friendly face. The thing is, there are no friendly faces at Crescent Prep. There are even less friendly faces in the masked gathering that makes up the Devils’ Day Party. We may as well be on an island in the middle of the sea.

Barron appears, stepping from the firelight and into the shadows, and my heart sinks. I’m going to end up drunk and helpless on a bed in a treehouse, and then ... I don’t want to think about what could happen if the Knight Crew manages to get me away from Luke.

“I know you don’t like her, but she’s way too drunk to be fooling around,” Luke says, glaring up at him from behind her goblin mask. Barron’s red leather devil mask sits on the top of his head and as he stares down at me, he very carefully pulls it back into place. “I’m honestly worried she’s going to get alcohol poisoning, or like, pass out and choke on her own vomit.”

“Luke,” I start, realizing suddenly that I still have my phone on me. Everybody else’s has been put into the net and hauled into the tree. But not mine. That must mean Luke—who didn’t have her

phone on night one—talked to my moms *before* she found me at the party. “Did you get a call from my parents before you came here?”

My best friend freezes up, going perfectly still, like a deer caught in the headlights. She doesn’t even *breathe* as she drops her eyes to mine. Fury fills me in a vicious, violent wave, and even though I know I should keep my mouth shut, I don’t.

“You talked to them about the sex tape?” I hiss out, my voice thick with alcohol and menace. Luke cringes and glances sidelong at Barron, like I should know better than to have this conversation in front of him. But even if this day were to end when I fell asleep, what would it matter? Because the video would still be out there, circulating in the cruel, idle hands of the Crescent Prep student body.

“That’s why you’re drunk,” Luke says, casting her eyes to the side, where a group of students sits in a circle with a spell book on the ground between them. They don’t believe in it, most likely, or even care if it’s real. It’s all just a bit of Devils’ Day fun. Pranks, spells, sex. There’s nothing that’s off-limits tonight. The way she says it—*that’s why you’re drunk*—makes it seem like I need a valid excuse to let go, some reason that Luke can use to excuse my behavior.

“Sex tape, huh?” Barron asks, sounding intrigued as he swirls his candy around in his mouth. “This is an interesting turn of events. What sort of sex tape?”

“None of your damn business is what,” Luke snaps, but what’s the point of hiding it? It’s not like the whole world isn’t going to find out come tomorrow. Tomorrow. I almost laugh. Tomorrow is supposed to be one of the few guarantees in life. So long as you’re alive, *this too shall pass*. There is *always* a sunrise; there’s always a tomorrow.

“If you tell me, I’ll help you get her in the car,” Barron offers, sticking to his usual role of being half-saint, all asshole.

“Me and Calix,” I blurt before Luke can respond. Now that I’m sitting in the cold, away from the fire and the glitter, I’m starting to feel sick. The last thing I want to do is throw up in front of Raz. “From last year.”

“Somebody has footage of last year’s Devils’ Day party?” Barron clarifies, dark shadows sliding into his gaze. That’s a *big* no-no. Huge. Anyone caught taking pictures or video of the party becomes a social pariah—one with a social ranking far below even mine. One of my fellow freshmen in ninth grade made that mistake. The seniors

turned him black and blue and broke his ribs. He never came back to Crescent Prep after that.

“Apparently,” Luke snaps, sounding tired as she rips her goblin mask off and stuffs it into her back pocket. “Now, are you going to help me get her into the car or not?”

Barron sticks his lollipop back in his mouth, reaching down and grabbing me with warm hands. He hefts me over his shoulder like so much luggage and starts off in the direction of the parking lot. I can’t see much except for his ass. That, and the long, curled tails of his coat, dusted with glitter and dragging across the ground.

Luke sticks close behind, wary at having Barron’s help. The Knight Crew has *never* been kind to us. Any semblance of social nicety has always been a double-edged sword, a blade dipped in poison. It hurts, and then it keeps hurting. On their best behavior, they’re indifferent toward us.

So although Barron’s carrying me to the car, we’ll pay some additional price for it later.

If there is a later, that is.

Manic laughter escapes my throat as he tosses me into the backseat of Luke’s convertible, staring down at my sprawled form with a curious expression on his wickedly handsome face.

“Thanks ... I guess,” Luke grinds out, doing her best to get me into the seatbelt before climbing in herself. She leaves the top down, despite the cold weather, and we reverse out of the parking lot, taking the windy trail through the trees slowly, carefully. Luke is always careful. “Stay awake for me, Karma,” she says as she turns her blinker on and turns left onto the main road, heading back toward Diamond Point.

I let myself relax into the seat, staring up at the sea of stars above our head, as shiny and unfathomable as Barron’s gaze. Closing my eyes, I think of how it felt to sit in his lap, to feel him beneath me, and I wonder if I would’ve liked fucking him as much as I liked fucking Calix?

More ludicrous laughter escapes my throat as I struggle to sit up, draping an arm over Luke’s seat and watching the road through the grimy windshield. There are fast-food wrappers all over the floor, along with bags of brand-new baby clothes that Luke’s bought for April and keeps forgetting to give her, even when they ride in the same car together.

“You talked to my moms today; you betrayed me.”

Luke stiffens up, but she doesn't acknowledge my words. I'm not being fair, I know, but I need someone to blame for all of this. And here she is, right in front of me. Besides, even if she *did* have my best interests in mind, I'm hurt.

“Karma, I'm worried about you is all. You've been acting weird all day, so when I got the call ...”

“That's not the only reason,” I argue, sniffing in the cold air. We're going slow enough that we can still talk, even with the top down and the wind in our hair, but I still have to raise my voice to be heard. “Even if it were a normal day, you'd have talked to them, told them all my secrets.”

“You can't know that,” Luke retorts, but I can; I do. “And anyway, so what? They were worried. They weren't sure if it was consensual ...”

“Did you watch the video?” I choke out, feeling my eyes water again. “Did you see it? Nobody could watch that and not realize how much I wanted it.”

“Karma, stop,” Luke says, but I'm not done.

“Nobody could watch that and miss the look on my face, the one on his ...” I trail off, but there it is, out in the open. I can't take it back.

Luke takes the next turn much slower than the posted speed-limit, but as soon as we come around the bend, a pair of deer leap into the road in front of us. Just like it did the other night, things seem to happen in slow-motion. Luke does what she's been told—accelerating instead of braking, doing her best to avoid the animals.

But a third one hops out of the darkness of the woods at the last second, directly in front of us. The beast comes up and over the windshield as Luke screams and loses control of the convertible. Everything around me spins, the stars above me, then the road, the stars, the road.

We come to a stop, sideways and straddling both lanes, upright.

I force my aching body up, tearing off my seatbelt, the world blurring around me. But when I reach around the front seat for Luke, she isn't there.

Instead, I turn and find her lying in the middle of the road.

A scream lodges in my throat and I scramble my drunk ass out of the convertible. Nearby, the buck we hit huffs and struggles to get to his feet, his antlers casting shadows that are eerily similar to the ones cast by my own mask.

“Luke,” I whisper, voice shaking as I kneel beside her, choking back vomit. There’s blood streaming down the sides of my face, but I ignore all of it, reaching down and turning my friend’s body over.

Dark brown eyes stare up at the blanket of stars above us. Sightless. Unseeing.

My best friend is dead.

The scream in my throat claws its way out, echoing around the dark woods, startling the buck into finding his feet and limping off, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

That’s when another car comes around the bend, and I look up into the brightness of their headlights.

Fortunately, that’s the last bit I remember.

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There's blood all over my steering wheel.

I lift my head up ... and find myself looking out at the gas station parking lot.

Again.

Calix hauls me from my car again.

And we start all the hell over—again.

The first thing I do when I can get away from him is to call Luke.

Because I have to know if she's alive.

The thing is ... at this point, I'm not sure that I am.

“Hey chickee,” she says as she answers, and I collapse to my knees in the grassy patch at the edge of the parking lot. I can feel Calix watching me from his position near our crashed cars, but I don't care. His animosity means nothing in the face of the empty feeling from last night. “What's up?”

Tears stream down my face as I sit in the muddy grass, the rain plastering my hair to the sides of my face before the clouds crack and the weather clears up for a brief moment.

“I'm ... I crashed my car into Calix's,” I whisper, voice cracking. A nervous laugh escapes Luke's lips before she dials back her reaction, clearly reading my emotions in the tightness of my voice.

“I want to laugh about this, but clearly you're not. Are you hurt?”

“Are you?” I ask, the image of the bleeding buck and Luke’s cold, brown eyes flickering across my vision. “I’m fine,” she replies, clearly confused by the direction of our conversation. “But I’m not going to be for long. You’re freaking me the fuck out. Where are you?”

Before I can reply, Raz tears the phone from my hand and chucks it into the road. A passing car drives right over it, shattering the screen to pieces. It’s a strange echo of yesterday, when I knocked Calix’s phone into the road. My throat closes up, and I feel the first edges of panic creeping in.

Raz grabs my arm and tries to yank me to my feet, but my body is boneless. In the narrative of my own story, I was drunk all of ten minutes ago. Got in a car crash all of five minutes ago. Saw my friend’s dead eyes staring at a thankless sky two minutes prior.

I am not okay.

“Stand the fuck up,” Raz growls, but my legs are weighed down by the heaviness inside my heart, and I end up slumping back to the ground. When I turn my tear-stained face back to Raz, I catch him in a brief moment of surprise. He releases me and shakes his hand out, like I’ve burned him. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Back off of her,” Barron warns, glancing back at the curious stares of our fellow gas station patrons. “People are watching.”

Hearing him repeat the now familiar phrase wrenches something inside of me and I bend over, wrapping my arms around my midsection and doing my best to breathe. If I don’t force myself to take in some air, I’ll pass out. If I pass out, I’ll wake up inside Little Bee again. There’ll be blood on my steering wheel again. I’ll wish I really were fucking dead.

The tears change to wracking sobs and my body begins to shake as I struggle to pull in enough air. My head swims, and I lean forward, putting my palms into the wet grass.

“This is ... unusual,” Barron says, pulling the lollipop from his mouth with a sharp popping sound. He bends down next to me as Raz backs away, like the sight of true pain is too much for him to handle. “Should I call an ambulance? It wouldn’t likely end well for you, considering you fucked Calix’s car up. But I think it’d be even worse if you died.”

“Leave me alone!” I scream, shoving up to my feet and stumbling like a newborn fawn. I turn to look at Barron, still crouched down



with Raz behind him. Calix has yet to move from his position near the cars, dark eyes boring into me. “You want to fuck with me today? Go for it. Do your worst. Kill me, if that’s what you want.”

My gray eyes meet Barron’s dual-colored ones in challenge, daring him to come for me. He stands up slowly, sliding his red lollipop back between his lips, staining his tongue the color of blood. His rainbow Mohawk is the only color in an otherwise gray day.

“Kill you?” Raz spits out, scoffing and spitting before tucking his hands into the pockets of his purple Crescent Prep slacks. “I always knew you were screwed up in the head, Karma, but this is a new level. Just remember that when today sucks for you, you started it.” He points at me and turns, sweeping back toward the Aston Martin and yanking the rear passenger door open. It slams into my yellow Bug with a screech of metal on metal, and I cringe.

“Why do you hate me so much?” The words come out in a whisper, drowned by a passing truck. I’m not sure that Barron hears them.

“I’m calling an ambulance,” is what he says instead, more to himself than to me. His voice is distant, almost distracted as he turns and starts to dial 911. Calix stops him, tearing the phone from Barron’s grip. Calix turns an apathetic gaze in my direction, as distant and cold as the spring waters inside of Devils’ Den, buried deep in the dark mouth of that awful cave with its stalagmite teeth.

“She doesn’t need an ambulance,” he says, turning his gaze back to his friend. “Get in the car; we’re late to get Sonja.” Calix nods his chin in the direction of his car and Barron narrows his eyes. Like I said, the Knight Crew might be a convenient name for their group of merry assholes, but they have no leader. They’re wanton, ribald, lascivious little mischief makers. They have no king.

Barron looks at me once more, snatches his phone back from Calix, and takes off.

After a moment, Calix steps toward me. He reaches up with one hand and uses his thumb to swipe away one of my tears, staring at it for a long moment, mouth turned down in a frown. I almost expect him to lick it off, just to taste the saltiness of my pain, to savor it. Instead, he wipes his palms on his slacks.

“Meet me after school at the spring,” he says, and for a moment there, I’m sure I haven’t heard him correctly. But then I realize that this, much like everything else regarding Calix, is likely a trick. His voice is monotone, as smooth and perfect as a river rock.

“Why? So you can tell me you love me again?” I snap back, hating myself for even saying it. My words to Luke from last night come filtering back like a beautiful nightmare. *“Did you watch the video? Did you see it? Nobody could watch that and not realize how much I wanted it.”*

Calix scowls at me, reaching out to grab me by the tie, tugging me closer.

“Karma,” he starts, like he’s about to scold me. Calix closes his dark eyes and then releases me abruptly enough that I stumble. “Either be there or fuck off. I don’t care much either way.” His eyes snap open, blazing with hate, and he turns away, storming across the parking lot and pausing next to Little Bee. He gestures at it with an angry hand. “And get your piece of shit car out of my fucking way.”

Calix climbs in and slams the driver’s side door, but I just sit down heavily on the grass again, smearing my skirt and socks with mud. After just a few moments, Calix takes off, dragging my car along for the ride and leaving it askew in the middle of the parking lot.

I don’t get up until one of the employees comes out to check on me.

“I’m leaving,” I snap, before he can say anything.

I shove to my feet and head for Crescent Prep.



“Holy shit,” Luke says when she stumbles out of class to meet me in the hallway. I’m covered in mud, my hair wet and plastered to my skull, my makeup bleeding in two dark trails down my cheeks. My shoulder is leaned up against a bank of lockers, my head resting against the scratched gray metal. Crescent Prep might be full of rich assholes, but they’re delinquents first and foremost. We don’t get fancy shit here like they do at Burberry Prep or Adamson Academy, two of the richest high schools in the country. “Where have you been? You hung up on me, and then you didn’t answer when I called back ...” Luke trails off, pushing blue hair off of her forehead.

“Luke, I can’t do this,” I tell her, wanting to cry again, but feeling like my eyes are as empty and broken as my heart. *She was dead. If the universe hadn’t reset, she’d still be dead.* And yet, all I can think about is how to get out of this. How to escape. And what might happen if I do.

“Yeah, okay, we can cut class today,” she says, misinterpreting my declaration. “It’s Devils’ Day, after all. Nobody will care. Let me grab April.” Luke reaches out to squeeze my arm and then starts to turn away. I snatch her wrist to keep her from leaving me. I’m not sure what I’ll do if she goes just now.

“Not just class, Luke, but ... everything.” The soft whisper of my voice makes her pause, her brown eyes widening. She nods once, pulls her phone out, and sends April a text before looking back up at me. “Let’s go.”

Luke takes me outside, gaping at the ruin that used to be Little Bee, and then leads me to her own car. The very same one that flipped on the road just an hour ago ...

“No,” I whisper, stepping back and shaking my head. The sight of the bleeding buck flailing around on ruined legs, his eyes wild, antlers casting strange shadows in the glow of the headlights ... I’m not doing it. I’m not getting in that fucking convertible. “I’m sorry, but I can’t get in that car.”

“Okay,” Luke says, holding up her hands in a placating gesture and watching me with a nervous expression. “We don’t have to get in the car. Do you want to take a walk? We could go the bus station and ride to the bubble tea shop.”

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I nod.

I’m going to tell her. I’m going to tell her everything. And if she doesn’t believe me, if she thinks I’m crazy, so what? It’ll all start over again tomorrow.

We head toward the woods together, taking the same shortcut I used on the real Devils’ Day, the one that started all of this shit. *The one that I royally fucked up.* I swipe my hands down my face. That first night, I died. Essentially, I killed myself by acting like an impetuous asshole.

“I want to tell you something,” I start as we pick our way through the woods and Luke tries to surreptitiously study my muddied clothing. A thousand questions dance in her worried gaze, but I’m not sure I’m about to answer any of them. More than likely, I’m about to introduce about a million more. “But you can’t judge me. Even if you think I’m crazy, even if you think I’m lying.”

“I would never think that,” Luke assures me, but she has no idea what she’s in for. It’s been happening *to* me, over and over again, and I still don’t quite believe it myself. “What’s wrong, Karma? Is it

the Knight Crew? Because Raz, Barron, and Calix all looked weird as hell when they came in this morning Sonja seemed fine though ...”

“They looked weird?” I ask, glancing over at her. She shrugs her thin shoulders and then reaches up to loosen her silver tie with the purple plaid pattern. “How so?”

“Just ... distracted? Raz was clearly pissed. Barron was distant. Calix was ... Well, I’m not really sure. More asshole-ish than usual? If that’s even possible. He kicked Pearl’s book bag against the wall, and then whispered something to her that sent her running for the girls’ bathroom.”

I bite my lower lip, but refuse to let myself look too deeply into it. So what? The Knight Crew bullying people is just par for the course.

“Something’s happening to me, Luke,” I whisper, looking over at her as she jumps the creek. I follow after, stumbling and falling into the water, soaking my already wet and muddied shoes and socks. Luke grabs my arm, helping me up, her face drawn and tight, deadly serious. I look up, meeting her gaze and knowing that this isn’t going to end well for me. She’ll take care of me, she always has, but she’ll think I’m crazy and I won’t be able to blame her. Hell, maybe I really am? I could be in a coma for all I know, lying in a hospital bed and drifting further and further away from reality.

“You can tell me anything, Karma. I’m here for you.” My eyes water and I slump down on a nearby log, swiping my hands down my face.

“This is fucking nuts,” I murmur as she kneels in front of me, putting a hand on my knee and looking up at me, completely ready to trust in whatever I have to say. *She talked to the moms without telling you; she lied.* I swallow hard, but I can’t bring myself to be angry with her, not anymore. Not after last night. I look up, steeling myself for any possible rejection. “Luke, I’m living the same day over and over again.”

She pauses for a moment and then nods, turning up the barest of smiles for me.

“I feel like that sometimes, too. Every day is just a repeat of the last, you know? School, the Knight Crew, the dorms ...”

I’m already shaking my head. She’s not getting it. She’s trying to be understanding, but ...

“No, no, not like that,” I say, exhaling sharply and shaking my head. I thread my fingers in my purple hair and try to figure out how to explain this. “Luke, I keep waking up at the moment of the crash.” Her brows come together, and she opens her mouth once, closes it. She looks at me for clarification, and I stand up, pacing in a small circle in the dried leaves. A breeze picks up, swirling them around my calves, and I swear, there’s something different about it. It’s like the world knows it’s Devils’ Day, like there really are spirits living in the woods. “Anytime I ... fall asleep or pass out, I wake up with my head hitting the steering wheel.”

“Karma,” Luke starts, but I just have to keep going or I’ll lose my nerve.

“Listen to me,” I plead, turning to face her. I feel suddenly hot, so I strip my blazer off and toss it over my arm. “I thought maybe I was hallucinating or that I was dreaming, but Luke, it’s happened five times already. Five. And on one of the days, you died.”

“I died?” she asks, rising to her feet and slipping her hands into the pockets of her own blazer. “Is that why you called me in a panic this morning?”

“Luke, you ... we crashed your car. We crashed and you were dead, and then I ... somebody hit me.” I swallow again and look her straight in the face. “We both died, and then I woke up.”

“I’m not really sure what to say,” she replies honestly. “I mean, I believe that you believe that ...”

“Oh, fuck off,” I snap back, exhaling sharply. “I know it sounds fucking crazy, but I can prove it to you.”

Luke considers this for a moment, her *otaku* nature taking over.

“You can prove we’re in a time loop?” she clarifies, and my lips part.

“A time loop?”

Luke grins, clearly pleased with the direction of the conversation. This is her wheelhouse, after all, fantasy and sci-fi shit.

“A time loop is a storytelling device wherein the main character experiences the same day over and over again.” Her eyes shimmer as she explains this to me. “The character masters their surroundings, their environment, and even the people in it, thereby learning life lessons they can use to break the loop. It’s pretty brilliant, actually.”

“Learning life lessons?” I choke out. “What lesson am I supposed to get out of this? Wouldn’t the universe be better served by teaching a lesson to someone like fucking Raz?”

“Maybe we all go through a time loop at some point and then just don’t remember after it’s done?” Luke suggests, but the thought makes my head hurt, so I don’t bother examining it. “Look, I’m not saying I can’t be convinced, but it’ll take some work. You know I’m open to limitless possibilities.” I roll my eyes, but Luke’s willingness to accept that the world isn’t quite so narrow as it seems is the *only* reason I might actually have a chance at getting her help here. “Tell me something that’ll happen later today. Anything.”

*Fuck.*

I choke back a lump and close my eyes.

“Somebody—I don’t know who—is going to post a sex tape of me and Calix online, from last year’s Devils’ Day Party.”

“What?!” Luke shrieks, storming over to grab my shoulders. “Who? The Knight Crew?” I shake my head because I don’t *think* it was them, much as I want to believe that. The way Calix looked at me that first night, I’m damn near positive he’d rather cut off his own finger than show the world that tape.

“I don’t know, but ... that’ll happen sometime this evening. And before that, my moms will call you and ask about it.” Luke’s brows come together as I take a breath and forge on. “On the first day, the Knight Crew smashed Little Bee’s windows, popped her tires, dragged her into the woods, and used her like some sort of fucked-up throne for the party. They may very well do that again today.”

“Damn,” Luke says, her eyes wide as she studies me. “If this is all true, you’ve been living a pretty shitty day on repeat, huh?”

Tears prick the corners of my eyes, but I force them back. There has to be something else I can tell her to seal the deal.

The Devils’ Day Committee.

That’s it.

“You bought me a black tourmaline bracelet for today,” I tell her, my heart thundering as the leaves rustle in the trees above our heads. “And I bought you one. We both bought one for April, so she’ll get two.”

“Whoa.” Luke blinks back at me in surprise, but there’s enough hesitancy in her gaze that I know I haven’t won just yet.

“April will send us both red velvet cupcakes, and Sonja will send you an emerald ash borer encased in resin as a brooch.” At this point, Luke has gone completely speechless. Probably because she doesn’t believe there’s a chance in hell that Sonja would ever send her a Devils’ Day gift. But still. “I’ll get a butterfly necklace—a Diana fritillary in orange and black—from a secret admirer. The girl with the raven hair and ice-blue eyes that always clings to the Knight Crew’s coattails will give it to me.”

“Jesus, Karma,” she breathes as I exhale and swipe both hands over my face.

“If all that comes true, is it enough?” I ask, because most of what I told her, I could feasibly know about some other way. But right now, it’s all I’ve got.

“Let’s just see how it goes, okay?” she says, but she looks skeptical. That’s a good thing. Skeptical means she’s considering the possibilities. If she were resolute, I’d have cause to worry. “Should we go back to class then? I bet we could make it in time for the committee?”

I’d rather have bubble tea, but ...

“Let’s go,” I say, because I *need* her to believe. I need her help.

I don’t know if I can survive this alone.



Luke leans over, breathing hard into a paper bag and trying to control the sudden wave of nausea she felt at seeing Little Bee with her windows smashed, her tires slashed. Calix stormed past us with his jaw clenched, like he was furious. Barron was as neutral as always, and Raz was positively radiant with malicious joy.

If the universe wanted to break someone, why not him? Why me? I’m just ... average. There’s nothing special about me, no reason for this.

“Everything was just like you said it would be,” Luke whispers, staring down at the black tourmaline bracelet on her arm. “Did you bribe someone in the committee to tell you what I’d bought? What I was getting?”

I give her a dark look that she returns with a shake of her head, looking over at Little Bee with a desperate sort of skepticism. Luke

wants to believe this is real, that I'm telling the truth, but she isn't sure if she can. If she should.

"Of course not," I spit, hating the Knight Crew more than I ever have before. They saw me at my lowest this morning, and they didn't give a shit. It didn't inhibit their cruelty in the least, now did it?

"This is insane," she whispers as April comes down the front steps, one arm banded across her belly, a straw stuck between her lips. She sips on her water as she comes over to us, groaning and rubbing at her lower back.

"Where did you two disappear to this morning?" she asks, and then nods her chin in the direction of my ruined car. "I'm guessing this the Knight Crew's work?"

"It is," I reply, looking to Luke to help. "I'm having a really hard day today." I gesture at my ruined uniform and shrug my shoulders. Luckily it was Devils' Day today or I'd have been written up for it. "I just needed to talk." April nods in understanding. She's an integral part of our group now, but she knows that Luke and I sometimes need our moments. "Oh, and by the way, Calix wants me to meet him at the Devils' Den after school."

"You're shitting me," Luke snorts as she gives April a sideways glance; it takes me a minute to remember that in this timeline, April doesn't know about me and Calix. I mean, the whole world will once that video drops, but for right now, my secret is safe. "He must think you're stupid. Either that or he must believe you have amnesia. Why on earth would he even consider asking you that again?"

"I'm going to go," I say, feeling my stomach clench in knots. Today's going to reset anyway, so why not? Why not go and confront Calix the way I always should've? He owes me an explanation, at the very least. "I have nothing to lose." I look Luke right in the eyes, but she's already shaking her head and backing away.

"No. Just ... no. I don't support any of this. Even considering what you told me this morning"—she gives me a meaningful look—"this isn't going to end well. Say Calix up and forgets what he's done, you never will."

"Just wish me luck and give me a ride, okay?" I ask, and Luke sighs. She'll do it, whether she thinks it's a good idea or not. Luke lets me make my own mistakes, but she's always there when I fuck-up and need a friend.



“Fine. Just ... be careful with him. He’s pretty to look at, but I’m sure that underneath all of that, he’s nothing but hate and privilege.”

*But he’s not, I think, even as I hate myself for it. Or at least, I don’t want him to be.*

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Calix is sitting on the steps of the old train car when I arrive, trudging through the leaves and the dappled sunlight in my ruined uniform. He lifts his head to look at me, a lazy prince with a hard edge. It's all a facade though, that insouciant slump. His muscles are tense, his eyes like flint, his lips turned down in a sharp frown.

I stop about six feet in front of him, strands of stringy purple hair hanging over my face. I'd considered going home to take a shower and change, but what's the point? I'll wake up in a crisp uniform soon enough, the only imperfection the bright splotch of blood on my dress shirt.

"What do you want, Calix?" I ask as he surveys me from head to toe, a strange emotion on his face that I can't quite place. He takes his time studying me before he bothers to respond, playing with that thorny crown I saw him wearing the last few nights. Or rather ... the same night over and over again. I exhale sharply.

"Maybe I should ask you that same question?" he says, his voice as dark and depthless as the water inside the Devils' Den.

"Meaning what?" I snap back, because I'm quickly running out of patience. Why is this the day I have to live on repeat? Why not the day we fucked each other? At least in that, there was a mistake I could correct, a monumental choice to change my fate. What do I have here? A sex tape I can't stop from seeing the light of day. A car accident I can't undo. Three bullies who I wake up facing day after day.

Calix's face darkens, and it's like watching a lunar eclipse, that silver light darkening and then flaring with the hot white anger of the sun. He stands up, pushing the crown into his dark hair. His fingers brush the berries and come away stained with red that looks like blood.

"Meaning what?" he repeats with a scowl, walking across the forest floor like he truly is the king of the dark devils that live within its shadows. He owns them. He commands the dark. It's his to break and abuse, to lift up with strong arms and caress with soft fingers. "You hit my car today. You did that. Why?"

He moves so close to me that I can smell him, this expensive cologne mixed with the earthiness of the crown on his head. There's a prick of sweetness from the berries, too. I can almost taste it.

Calix stares down at me with those hard, dark eyes of his, like I've royally pissed him off. I mean, in a way *other* than destroying his three-hundred-thousand-dollar car.

"What do you mean why, Calix? I can't fucking stand you. You and your friends treat me like shit."

His mouth curves up in a cruel smile.

"You mean the Knight Crew? I'm flattered that you think I have any control over what Barron, Raz, and Sonja do."

"Don't you though?" I ask, thinking of this morning when he sent Barron to the car like a scolded child. "Then again, if you did, maybe you wouldn't have freaked out and lied to them about what happened between us."

Calix's face shutters like there's a storm on the horizon, his ebon eyes narrowing to slits. He snatches my wrist in his hand, too hard, bruising. Does it make me sick in the head that I like that? That I want to hit him back? That I want to brawl and make him bleed and fuck him in the leaves beneath our feet?

"What makes you think I lied?" he says, tilting his head to one side, studying me like I'm some foreign entity, a creature from another race whose customs are alien in nature.

"Because when I saw the video, I saw your face," I snap back, yanking my wrist away. Calix refuses to let go, and I end up stumbling even closer to him as he draws my hand to his chest. The eclipse in his face is gone now, leaving a velvety blackness that forces me to remember that we're alone in the woods together. Anything could happen. Anything.

“What video?” he asks, his voice a beautiful hiss, like the wind through thorns, stirring the dark things that live in the forest.

“Someone has a video of us at last year’s Devils’ Day Party. They’re threatening to post it online tonight.” It’s not a total lie. Not that it matters if I lie to Calix. Either he lied to his friends last year or he lied to me. I hate how much I want to it be the former.

“Who?” he demands, releasing me suddenly. I clutch my wrist to my chest like I’ve been burned, and my mind strays to Raz and the strange way he looked at me this morning. “*Who?*” Calix snaps, his voice like venom when I don’t answer right away.

“I have no idea. Honestly, the reason I came here was to see if it was you,” I growl back. There’s nothing to fear today, is there? Because today is just one in a string of repeats. *Maybe if I fuck up badly enough, the universe will let me move on, like some big cosmic joke.*

“Like I’d want anyone to see that shit,” he snarls, raking fingers through his hair and cursing under his breath. “Show me the messages.”

“My phone got smashed in the road this morning, courtesy of Raz,” I grind out between clenched teeth.

“What a goddamn nightmare,” Calix murmurs, looking back at me like he isn’t sure if he wants to kill me or fuck me. “Was it a text? An email? Social media?”

“A text,” I lie. “Unknown number.”

He curses again and adjusts his liling crown, further smearing his fingers with the bright red juice of the berries.

“I’ll take care of it,” he says, his voice a poisonous kiss that makes my blood hurt. How can he do that? Hurt me with such simple words. Take care of it? Like what we did is so unspeakable, so awful. “But before I go, I want to know the truth. Stop fucking lying to me. You didn’t just decide to hit my car for no reason. What is it you want? Attention? Is that it?”

A scathing laugh escapes me, and Calix scowls.

“Attention?” I ask, pushing purple hair back from my face. “I want you and your goons to leave me alone. I want to know why you hate me so much. I want to know why you told me you loved me and then broke my fucking heart. Grow some balls, Calix Knight, and step up.” He grits his teeth and something bold arcs through me, a

devil summoned up on the darkest day of the year. Before I can stop myself, I step forward and throw my arms around his neck.

You'd think I slapped him, the way he reacts.

Calix jerks away from me, but I don't let him go. I force myself to my tiptoes and slam our mouths together in a rush of heat and hate and violence. There's so much pain in that kiss that I immediately draw back, my blood infected with the shadows of a dark faerie prince and his terrible tongue.

But Calix doesn't let me go.

He locks one hand on the back of my head, his fingers tight, digging into my scalp. His other arm encircles my waist, tugging our bodies together. He's hard beneath his academy slacks; I can feel the thick length of his shaft through his pants, straining for me, an undeniable piece of physical proof that he's attracted to me. His tongue slips between my lips as he slams my body back into the side of the train car, moving his hand from the back of my head to beneath my skirt.

Those fingers of his, the ones I remember all too well, stroke across the wetness of my panties, teasing whimpers from me that are as undeniable as his erection. We want each other; we were good together. So why? He asked me that question, but he never bothered to answer mine.

It doesn't matter.

His fingers are playing my body like an instrument, and my life could use a little music. I let him do it, too, reaching a hand down to fumble with his slacks. Calix makes this dark, awful sound against my lips, trapped somewhere between loathing and lust as I free his cock and take the warm, velvety length of him into my palm.

"You crashed into my car because you wanted this," he growls as I tighten my fist around his shaft, squeezing him until he grits his teeth in pain. Calix pauses his stroking of my panties to snatch my wrist, forcing me to loosen my grip. "Say it."

His command is imperious, peccant in nature. It very nearly demands a laugh, but I can't seem to get my lips to form anything but a moan as Calix returns his fingers to their sinful little dead, sweeping my panties aside to tease the slickness of my opening.

Instead of responding to him, I lift my palm between us and spit into it, our eyes locked together in defiant sexual challenge. He's

*demanding* that I admit my need for him while adamantly denying that the same feeling dances behind his own shuttered gaze.

Well, he can eat shit for all I care.

I drop my hand back to the scalding heat of his shaft, pumping him with the slickness in my palm, using my thumb to trace around the head of his dick. Calix bites my lower lip, and he isn't very nice about it, as wild and fae as any evil spirit that lives in this forest. I taste blood, but I don't care, kissing him back with teeth and tongue, claiming him even as he tries to claim me.

In these woods, on this day, we are both truly devils in our own right.

"Fuck me," I whisper, when I get a moment of breath. We're so close that his breath is my breath, like we exist only in relation to one another. The feeling I get when Calix draws back to look at me is exactly the same as the one I felt when I saw that car coming at me last night, headlights flashing around the curve of the road.

Dangerous inevitability.

There is no escaping this.

There is no denying this.

I hate Calix Knight more than I have ever loved anything else in my life.

The intensity of our passion hits me as hard as that car, killing me in a completely different sort of way.

"And don't use a condom," I add, because as much as I wish I could wake up tomorrow and find a new day waiting for me, I know it won't be. Hopelessness floods me, but the hate I feel for Calix helps push it back, stirs up the empty void where my feelings should be, and lights me on fucking fire. If I'm going to live Devils' Day on repeat, then I'm going to taste its debauch waters and revel in its sinful embrace.

"Mm," Calix murmurs, stroking his wet fingers down my cheek. I should stop him, but it's so deliciously *wrong*, so ribald and feral and everything I ever wanted to be a part of, even when I knew I shouldn't.

He makes me want to be evil, even when I know I might regret it later.

No, no, when I *know* I will.

“Don’t ask me why,” I breathe, my body quivering with anticipation, my thumb teasing the bead of pre-cum on the head of his dick. “Just do it.”

“Only if you admit that your reckless act this morning was for my benefit,” he purrs, snatching my wrists and slamming them against the train car above my head. His mouth is swollen from kissing, an aristocratic smirk resting on those delectably wicked lips. “Admit it, Karma,” Calix growls again, kissing down the side of my neck and infecting me with this savage, untamed energy.

A pair of bats explodes into the darkening sky above the trees. We could be those bats, wild and free and careless. Hell, maybe they aren’t bats at all, just devils in disguise? I know Calix Knight is for sure.

“I won’t admit to a damn thing,” I murmur back, my eyes closing in pleasure as he sucks on my neck like a vampire, biting my skin and leaving his mark. Claiming me. Possessing me. But even the most basic part of me can’t help but wonder why he wants me so badly in private, and yet rejects me so spectacularly in public.

“Then you get *nothing*,” he snaps, his voice like the broken strands of a dew-covered spiderweb. Fragile for some, a deadly trap for others. I’ve just gotten caught in a loose thread, and my wings are bound. I couldn’t escape if I wanted to.

“I did it because you’re an asshole,” I whisper back, closing my eyes for the briefest of moments. But there’s something in me, some dark, twisted part that feels the need to drink in his face, his cool expression that belies his true emotions, and the heat in his eyes that tells the real truth. I open my own eyes again and nearly gasp at the fire burning in Calix’s ebon gaze. “You have no right to do the things you do. No right.”

“Yeah? What things, exactly, are you referring to?” Calix puts more pressure on my wrists, keeping me trapped as he drops his head, his breath warm against the shell of my ear. “How I fucked you? How I took your cunt, and your mouth, and your ass and made them mine for a night?”

*You could’ve made me yours a lot longer than that*, I think, but I’d rather die than say those words aloud.

“No.” Calix pulls back to look at me, drawn by the steel in my voice. “You had no right to lie to me, no right to lie to yourself and your friends. You have no right to treat me the way you do.”

He grits his teeth, jaw clenching tight, and then he turns me around, pushing me up against the cold iron sides of the old train car, my palms pressed against the metal. My eyes close again as he grips my hip in one hand, using the other to shove my panties down to my thighs, trapping me in a lacy prison.

“Interesting,” he says instead, projecting an outward sort of calm that doesn’t translate to his tight fingers or his quivering body. “And yet, you’re still here. You asked for my attention this morning with your little stunt. Well, your wish is my command.”

Calix lines himself up with my opening and shoves himself in with one violent thrust.

The first time we slept together—the only time—he was so careful with me. He was gentle, patient, observant. This is not the same, but I don’t care. Not today. His cock fills me up completely, making me feel deliciously whole in a way I haven’t experienced for an entire year. One whole year apart, the sexual tension between us almost painful, both sweet and sour at the same time.

I needed this.

Even if he won’t remember it tomorrow.

No, no, it’s probably better if he doesn’t.

“Happy Devils’ Day,” Calix whispers, fingers digging into my pelvis, my purple and white plaid Crescent Prep skirt bunched up around my hips. It’s a wanton scene, crude and filthy. Just fucking filthy. “It’s obscene, really, the two of us fucking like this in our school uniforms, after we’ve barely said a handful of words to one another,” he continues, echoing my thoughts aloud, his voice strained with the tension of holding back.

This is taboo for him, too, isn’t it? If he’s so damn scared about that sex tape being leaked, then why are we here together, doing this again? There must be something to it. There just has to be.

Hate is an emotion that requires a lot of strength and energy to perpetuate, and Calix and I, we’ve been working at this for a long time. My eyes squeeze shut on fresh tears as I think about how much I fucking loathe him, how many times I’ve wished for him to break his leg, or fall on his face, or fail in some way, shape or form, just so he could understand a modicum of the suffering he’s bestowed on me.

And yet ... the hot feel of his cock between my thighs makes my entire body tremble, arcs of pleasure clashing with my hatred,



mixing into a storm. He makes lightning inside of me when he starts to move, slamming us together without preamble, just a tangling of two beasts, just simple biology.

“You’re the fucking worst,” I murmur on the end of a sob, my eyes still squeezed shut. Calix stops thrusting for the briefest of moments, his hands tightening on my hips. “You’re so goddamn awful.”

“Am I?” he echoes, starting to move again, pushing himself balls-deep into my heat as I struggle to hold back the sounds of my moaning. I can feel him everywhere, not just in my pussy. He’s taking over me, drowning out my logic, playing my emotions like a trick. “Then why are you here? Why did you even come here?”

I open my eyes, staring at the flat surface of the train car. When I try to turn around, Calix stops me with a hand on my shoulder, his own breathing labored, heavy, almost desperate.

“I can’t bear it if you look at me,” he says, his voice a harsh whisper. He starts to step back, like he’s going to stop, like he’s going to walk away and leave me here. My own hand comes down on top of one of his.

“Don’t stop.” The words are quiet but firm. “It doesn’t matter if you’re ashamed of me, or if you hate me, or if you’re ...” *Or if you’re lying. I wish you’d just tell me that you were. I wish we could drop all of this bullshit.* “Keep going.”

After a brief pause, the silence of the forest creeping in around us, Calix starts to move again. His cock slides deep into me, churning up that shame and that hate along with all that pleasure. It feels so good, and the fact that we shouldn’t be doing it only makes it hotter, harder to stop. A guilty pleasure that won’t matter come tomorrow.

Surprisingly, he reaches around me to touch my clit, pressing his body along the back of mine, his breath stirring my hair against my neck. Calix’s long, beautiful fingers find the swollen flesh with ease, using my own juices as lube for his games. Devil’s fingers, that’s what he has. They dance across my aching nub, making me gasp, my body tightening around his, holding him close. It’s a greedy feeling, that pulsing tightness, keeping Calix locked in, attached to me.

I shouldn’t like that.

But I do.

My body rocks with the greedy motions of his, and my breasts ache, desperate for the touch of his awful hands. He's not going to touch me there though. No, this is going to be short, dirty, and addictive. I'm going to come out of this wanting more, and he knows it, too.

It's not until Calix kisses my neck that the climax unfurls inside of me, taking over every inch of my body, making my knees weak. He holds me up, thrusting in deep, finishing himself inside of me the way he did that very first night, spilling his seed with a long, low groan that makes my insides clench.

Unlike that first night, there are no pretty lies tangling between us. We both know what this is, and why we're here.

Calix and I stay where we are for several minutes, the forest whispering in snippets of bird song, running water, and rustling leaves. When he pulls out and I turn around, slumping back against the side of the train car, I see that he's wearing his black leather devil mask. When he put it on, I have no idea, but there it is, hiding everything but those flint-like eyes of his.

He's barely breathing, standing there like some sort of statue, a devil carved out of privilege and hate.

"Wow. Just wow." A familiar face comes from the shadows and a cold chill chases down my spine. My eyes flicker over to where Raz is standing, leaning his shoulder against a tree, his mouth twisted into an awful sneer. "I mean, I knew you were a Trailer Park slut, but I guess I underestimated you."

He pushes up off the tree, dirty blond hair ruffled and mussed, red eyes gleaming. He stalks toward me like he's angry about something. I've never understood how he could get so worked up over what I do with Calix. It's not any of his business if his friend and I want to use each other, now is it?

"Screw you, Loveren," I snap, and then just for good measure, I add it in French. "*Va te faire foutre.*" He storms toward me, teeth clenched, probably too stupid to even understand what I've just said. "Well, are you going to say something?" I ask Calix, but he just takes a step back and lets Raz grab me by the arm, jerking me around to face him.

"Don't look at him like a savior. He fucking hates you. And yet you bent over for him like a good girl? I thought you couldn't get

any lower and you managed to prove me wrong, Karma. I'm impressed."

"Get your goddamn hands off of me," I snarl, jerking back from him. He doesn't let me go, fingers tightening on my upper arm, bruising me through the thin, muddied fabric of my shirt. Raz's eyes shimmer with malice, his tongue sliding across his lower lip as he summons beautiful venom to choke me with.

"You came all the way out here to screw a guy who hates you. Who fucking played you. And now his hot cum is running down your thighs and you act like you've got a pedestal to stand on?"

"What I don't understand is why you care!" I shout, wrenching back. He releases me and I end up stumbling, slipping in the mud and going down on my ass. In my already ruined uniform. With wet panties tangled around my legs. And yeah, with Calix's cum on my thighs.

The prick in question just stands there in his black mask, his eyes unreadable, his posture rigid. He reaches up to adjust the crown on his head, lazily, lackadaisically, like he's bored out of his mind. It's all a goddamn act. And I hate him for it. I hate him. I fucking *hate* him.

I hate Raz more.

"Why do I care?" Raz asks, throwing his head back in a laugh. He takes a step forward and then leans down to look at me. "Why do I *care*? You're an infection at Crescent Prep. An anomaly. You walk around there with your weird friends and you flaunt everything about your life that's wrong, things that other people would hide. You pretend that you're strong, but in reality, you're nothing but a weak, pathetic whore."

My fist flies forward of its own accord and smashes Raz in the face, knocking his head back as I scramble to my feet, pull up my panties, and take off running. Blood smears my knuckles, but I don't pay it any attention, sprinting through the woods as if my life depends on it.

Maybe it does?

*He's so angry. Why is he so fucking angry?*

I slip in the wet leaves, going down on my knees hard enough to bruise. Just like the first day. Unlike the first day, Raz doesn't follow me. Instead, when I turn around, all I see are the quiet faces of the

trees, watching me silently, judging me. I push up to my feet, brush off my skirt and try to recollect my dignity.

But I'm pretty sure I lost it somewhere near Calix's feet.

Fool me once, shame on you.

Fool me twice ... shame on me.



It takes me almost two hours to circumvent the party site and walk back to the road. Luke left to take April home, so they could get ready for the party. She left me her phone because she's a goddamn angel like that.

"Fuck." I sit down on the side of the road, putting my head in my hand and trying to decide if I should call April so the two of them can come and pick me up. Instead, I dial Mama Cathy.

"Luke, I was just planning on calling you," she says, her voice weak and muddled with tears. *She was crying over me?* I think, imagining my parents watching the video of me and Calix. Hating him. Questioning me. Wondering if they'd royally fucked up somewhere, to have such a weak girl for a child instead of the strong woman they'd hoped for.

"Actually, it's me," I say, and Cathy pauses, her sharp inhale of breath making my chest hurt. "I know you've seen the video. I'll talk about it all you want, but ... can you please pick me up?"

I tell her where to find me and hang up before she can start asking questions I'm not ready to answer.

When Cathy finally pulls up and sees my disheveled state, her eyes widen, and she starts to cry again. I climb into the shitty green Taurus, the one I rocketed off the edge of a cliff in, and lie down in the back seat.

"Baby, are you okay?" she asks me, and my heart aches and throbs with the need to tell her the truth, to spill all my secrets and demand to know why boys are so mean. Why they pick and poke and needle away until there's nothing left. "That video ... did he hurt you?"

"Only in my heart," I whisper, because that's the only truth I'm willing to admit to aloud right now. When I close my eyes, I can still feel Calix's lips on my neck, his hands on my hips. Shifting, I feel

the wetness between my thighs, undeniable proof that we were together. There's only one way to wipe this slate clean.

"I love you, Karma, you know that, right?" Cathy tells me, looking in the rearview mirror. But I'm just tired. So fucking tired.

*Raz. What the hell is wrong with Raz?*

"I love you, too," I reply, closing my eyes against the pain I feel, painted across my heart like a mural I can never scrub clean.

Mom's worried, I get that. But she needn't be.

She won't remember this moment soon enough.

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There's blood all over my steering wheel.

I sit up, calm for the first time in days. Dying triggers the ... curse, or whatever this is. Passing out triggers it. Sleep triggers it.

I sigh and lean forward, putting my forehead against the wheel, a familiar trickle of blood running down the side of my face. My left hand reaches out and pushes down the manual lock on my door, so that when Calix predictably storms forward to open it, it doesn't budge.

"Are you fucking insane?!" he snarls through the window, and strange laughter bubbles up in my throat. No matter how many times I go through this, it doesn't get any less surreal.

Turning to face him through the dirty window, I lift my lips in a grin, my bloodied white teeth the only part of my reflection I can see. And then I flip him off.

Sitting up, I turn the engine once, twice, three times—as always—and then put the car in reverse, peeling out of the parking lot and leaving Calix Knight in the rearview mirror.

When I get to Crescent Preparatory Academy, I park down the road, hiding Little Bee in the woods and jogging back to make sure I have time before the Knight Crew officially arrives for the day.

I make a quick stop in the locker room to clean up, changing into my only spare dress shirt, dabbing some of the blood off the lapel of my purple blazer, and trading out my ruined tie for a fresh one.

“Aren’t we looking peppy this morning,” Luke says when I find her in the hall, sliding my glittery black mask over my face, the antlers catching the morning sunlight and casting strange shadows on the wall behind me. “Something good happen?”

“I crashed my car into Calix’s Aston Martin,” I quip, smiling as he storms in the front entrance with Raz, Barron, and Sonja on his heels. Their entourage follows behind them in a cloud, like a swarm of angry bees. No, more like locusts, intent on consuming everything in their path. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that these ugly-beautiful people were the harbingers of the end-times.

They’re all wearing their masks, somehow even more macabre in the bright early morning light. When Calix turns and spots me standing there, his lip curls to the side in an angry sneer, and he starts toward me. The others follow along behind him like trained dogs.

“How fortunate for you to be standing in view of a security camera,” he purrs, schooling his face back to some semblance of cruel civility.

“Did you think that was unintentional?” I quip back, throwing years of worthy self-advice out the window. *Don’t draw the Knight Crew’s attention. Let their insults wash off like water off a duck’s back. Make yourself a target and you’ll become one.*

I’ll admit, it’s a challenge to look Calix in the face. I can still feel him inside of me, his hands on my hips, his breath feathering against my ear. And Raz ... my eyes slip past Calix to find him grinning beneath his red devil mask, a perfect match to his eyes. But even if the slate of the world’s been wiped clean, I’ll never forget the way he looked at me yesterday.

Like I meant nothing.

Like I meant *everything*.

My hands shake as I lift my chin in defiance and Luke’s brown eyes go wide. She’s staring at me like I’ve lost my damn mind, pulling her goblin mask from her book bag and snapping the elastic against the bright blue of her hair. Sonja watches her for a moment before turning that sharp emerald gaze of hers to me. Barron watches me, too, sucking on the red lollipop he’s had every day since we started this mess.

“You think you can hit my car and then walk away like it’s nothing?” Calix asks, voice steady but laced with a cold anger that

makes my chest hurt. Even yesterday, after he saw me cry, after I threw myself at him, I got nothing out of him. He may as well be carved of stone.

“You think *you* can bully me for years and walk away like it’s nothing?” I return, cocking a brow. Luke whistles under her breath and shakes her head, but I can tell she’s fighting back a grin as I stare the Knight Crew down. “Well, guess what? I’m fucking sick of it.”

I step forward and snatch Raz’s mask from his face. He retaliates much quicker than I expected, snagging me by the wrist and yanking me in close. It’s quite clear from his expression that he doesn’t understand where I’m coming from or what I’m doing.

I like that.

Something about his confusion makes me feel powerful.

“I’ll take my fucking mask back, Trailer Park,” he sneers, yanking the mask from my hand as I stare him down and Luke grinds her teeth in nervousness. Behind Raz, his minions titter behind their pretty masks. They’re barely human on the best of days, their feral cruelty too much for even their ruthless families to handle. Add Devils’ Day into the equation, and they’re as wild as the spirits their masks are supposed to scare off. “You’re awfully ballsy today. Something up that we should know about? Maybe your dyke mommies are getting a divorce that doesn’t mean shit since they shouldn’t be married in the first place?”

“Maybe you’re so obsessed with me and all my weirdness because you’re fucking jealous?” I retort, putting together a million insults, a million looks that I never bothered to interpret until now. Raz attacks my parents the first chance he gets. He attacks my love of art. My bat earrings. My rainbow pride shirt. The faerie mural on the front of my mothers’ art studio.

Things he isn’t allowed to have, to like. Because his father doesn’t allow him to be who he wants to be. Raz lives inside strictly drawn lines, a box of his parents’ making.

“Jealous?” he asks, throwing his head back with a laugh. Before I know it, he’s swinging me around and slamming me into the row of gray lockers, getting in my face. His body is pressed up against the front of mine, a lean, perfect line of muscle and malice. He leans into me hard, crushing me against the metal wall behind us.



“Watch it, Raz,” Luke warns, her voice rigid but spiced with fear. She’ll stand up to the Knight Crew, but she’s not an idiot. She knows how fucking scary they can be sometimes.

“Crashed into Calix’s car, fucked with me. What are you up to today, Trailer Park?” He shoves his mask back on his face as Sonja slithers up beside me like a serpent. She’s always at Raz’s side, like a sexy lesbian clone of the asshole himself.

“You must really like pain,” Sonja suggests, her perfume smelling of violets, lipstick a brilliant red that reminds me of the blood I cleaned off my face earlier. “A gazelle who prances before lions doesn’t often last long.”

Calix moves up on my left side, putting his forearm up against the lockers, his face as blank and perfect as it always is. He drives me goddamn nuts, wearing a mask of his own making every fucking day of the year. The only difference today is that he wears two.

“Clearly, you’re looking for attention. If that’s what you want, we’ll give it to you.”

“Make me a part of the Knight Crew today,” I say, and I swear I can hear Luke choking on her own disbelief. My eyes stay locked on Raz’s red ones in challenge. There’s a flicker of surprise there followed by sick pleasure. He moves back just slightly and then slams his palms against the lockers on either side of my head.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” he laughs as Barron watches from behind him, snapping the red candy in his mouth in half. The sound gives me the chills.

“She wants to hang with us? Let her,” he suggests, his voice a perfumed poison, seeping into my ears and threatening to flip my own logic on its head. How can someone so awful sound so grotesquely beautiful? “But she follows our rules.”

“If you want to play with us,” Calix starts, pausing and then looking over his shoulder, his eyes trained on someone down the hall. His gaze narrows before he turns those flinty eyes back to me. It’s hard for me to align my view of this dark-hearted asshole with the man that touched me yesterday with frenzy and passion in his possessive hands. “Then you can go tell Pearl exactly what we think of her.”

My heart leaps in my chest as Luke hisses under her breath, gaze flicking to the girl in question. I’ve never liked Pearl, but I also

despise cruelty for cruelty's sake. Fear flashes through me like lightning, choking me.

"Are you kidding?" Raz says, cocky smirk falling in place on those sharp lips. He leans back and gives me a disapproving once-over. "You're asking a mouse to do a wolf's work. Trailer Park doesn't have it in her."

"Just like I didn't have it in me to hit Calix's car?" I quip back, shaking with adrenaline but determined not to back down. If I were to put a pause on this day, sit down and really think about, I bet I could find a lot of deep psychological issues for my behavior.

But I feel wild. Reckless. Out of control.

The universe is fucking with me, so I'm fucking with it.

"Let her try," Barron says, sliding a dark chocolate candy bar from his pocket. He snaps the end off in a very visceral sort of way, like each bite of food, each suck on a lollipop, each snap of gum, is a sexual act. He stares me right in the face as he does it, licking flakes of chocolate from his full lower lip. "Go tell Pearl what we think of her."

"Which is?" I manage to spit back as Sonja chortles with laughter and the horde of dark fae minions behind her snicker in mean-spirited laughter.

"Go tell Pearl she's a useless whore," Calix says, his voice pleasant enough, smooth and silky, like the petals of an ebony tulip. "Tell her that she isn't worth the air in her lungs. Tell her that the whole world would be happier if she were dead."

My eyes widen and Raz sneers, shaking his head in disgust.

"See that expression on her face? That look of self-righteous morality? That's why you'll never be a part of our crew. Fuck off, Trailer Park. We'll come for you later to say thanks for the car."

I shove Raz back and shoulder Calix out of the way, but he snatches my arm before I can get past him.

"You'll tell her that she's weak," he whispers, voice so low that I'm certain I'm the only one that can hear him. "That she's pathetic, that she's cares far too much what the world thinks of her, that she's *afraid*." I turn my face just enough to look at him, but he's already releasing me and stepping away, face closed-off and cold, as always. I can't help but wonder though ... is he talking about Pearl right now? Or is he talking about himself?

With a shake of my head, I storm down the hall, my entire body quivering as my conscience screams at me to stop.

*Don't do this. You know how bad this hurts. You know what's it like to be on the receiving end.*

“Hey Pearl,” I say, drawing the attention of the pale girl with the white-blond hair. *She let you, Luke, and April out of Devils' Den that first night.* But she also calls April a whore. Luke a freak. Me, Trailer Park. *She cuts herself, Karma, she's hurting.*

“Karma, wait!” Luke calls out, the fear in her voice slicing through me like a knife. I glance back and see that the Knight Crew has boxed her in at the end of the hall.

“Hurt her and I'll kill you all!” I shout before turning back to Pearl, knowing even before I do this that I'm going to regret it.

But ... then I'll go to sleep. Or I'll fucking die. And it'll start all over again. Maybe this is hell and I'm paying for every mistake I ever made in life? Maybe this is purgatory, and I'm being judged? If so, then I'm headed for the ninth circle of hell after this.

I'm not sure that I care.

“What do you want, Trailer Park?” Pearl snaps, looking me up and down with a similar expression to Raz's. Just ... less hungry maybe. Raz Loveren might hate my guts, but he wants to fuck me, that much is for sure. I mean, I'm not exactly flattered. Pretty sure he fucks anything with a pussy.

It occurs to me as she sneers my way that she could be the one who uploaded the video of me and Calix.

“You're nothing but a useless whore,” I say, my voice a cold deadpan, a dead ringer for Calix's. As the words leave my mouth, I pretend like it's one of the Knight Crew saying it to me. Like it's Raz.

“Excuse me?” Pearl asks, taking a step back from me. She's wearing a silver pleated skirt—an alternate uniform choice—and her purple blazer, an iPad clutched against her chest. She scowls at me, like my words don't bother her. I can see in her eyes that they do.

“You're not worth the air that you breathe,” I continue, taking a step forward, hating myself more and more with each word that falls from my lips, each one a toxic cloud that hurts me as surely as it does Pearl. The Knight Crew isn't worth this; my soul isn't worth

this. Tears sting my eyes, but I don't stop. I won't. "The world would be better off without you in it."

I do not repeat the last few sentences that Calix told me; I'm fairly certain they were meant for my ears only anyway.

"Fuck you, Trailer Park!" Pearl screams, dropping her iPad to the stone floor with a crack. It hits the ground and shatters, her words echoing off the limestone walls of the old school. "Fuck you!" She turns and runs down the hall, leaving her iPad behind, the sound of her footsteps making me sick to my stomach.

"Color me surprised," Raz purrs, sliding up on my right side and slinging a companionable arm around my neck. "You're ruthless, Trailer Park. I guess we'll let you hang with us today."

Barron sweeps past me without looking my way.

He doesn't need to.

I can see it written in the thin line of his mouth, the dark shadows in his eyes: disappointment.



"I can't believe you did that to Pearl," Luke says, shaking. Her eyes shimmer with unshed tears. "You of all people should know how it feels to be treated so poorly."

"Me of all people?" I retort as we stand in the hall during break. "Because I'm such a fucking loser? Because I'm always the one that's keeping my head down, hoping they won't notice me?"

"You know I didn't mean it like that," Luke whispers as April storms up to us, shoving her glasses up her nose. She slaps me across the face, and I stand there in shock, my cheek stinging, my palm reaching up to press against the hotness of my cheek.

"How could you?" April fumes, her brown hair braided and slung over her shoulders. She's so mad she's shaking, glaring up at me with a disappointment as thick and cloying as Barron's. I still have no idea why he's disappointed, considering he's one of the ones who sent me off with that task in the first place. "You're supposed to be different than them. You're supposed to be *better*."

"Maybe I'm tired of being better?" I whisper, fighting back tears. "Maybe I'm just plain tired? It hurts to keep trying, only to end up at the exact same place over and over again."

“It doesn’t matter how tired you are or how hard it gets,” April shouts, her normally gentle voice rising in hysterics. Now she’s crying, too. “The line between bully and bullied is always one small step away. You just crossed it.”

“April,” Luke warns, but even she doesn’t have the energy to defend me. Why should she? I deserve all of this and more.

“Well, hello there, Trailer Park,” Raz says, slinging an arm around my neck and licking the side of my face. He chuckles and then flashes those bloodred eyes of his over to April and Luke. “You don’t have to hang with the Virgin Mary and your dyke friend today. Welcome to the Knight Crew.”

He pulls me away from my friends and, much to my own complete and utter disgust, I follow.

Insulting Pearl isn’t going to win me much of a reprieve from my own bullying. I know that. And yet, I’m playing along anyway. Maybe if I’m bad, maybe if I’m the *worst*, then I’ll wake up and it’ll be tomorrow. I’ll have a bunch of shit to untangle, but that’s better than being stuck in purgatory for all eternity.

“You surprised me today, Trailer Park,” Raz says as he guides me over to his crew’s table in the center of the courtyard. Some of the other girls scowl at me as I approach, dressed in their Devils’ Day spoils, with long-horned beetles hanging from their ears, or European wood wasp clips in their pretty hair. I very clearly see Cami Alhambra shove her dress back in her bag and lift up her nose with a sniff. One of the other girls, the one in the leaf mask from the committee, scowls at me in a way that makes my stomach roil. The Knight Crew’s cronies know I don’t belong here as well as I do. “Didn’t think you had the balls.”

“Didn’t think you had the stomach for it,” Barron adds, a ring candy pop on the middle finger of his right hand. He lifts it to his lips, sucking on it as his dual-colored eyes find mine. “But I guess you’ve managed to shock me before.”

Calix sits on the table, one leg extended, one knee propped up. He doesn’t bother to look at me, carefully hidden behind the textured leather of his ebony devil mask.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask Barron as Raz lets me go, propping his foot on the bench seat and reaching up to undo the top buttons of his shirt. I stand next to him as Sonja settles herself on the edge of the table, legs hanging over next to Raz’s as she studies me with bright green eyes.

“It doesn’t matter what it means,” Barron Farrar says, looking up at me with that same disappointment from earlier, one of his eyes a warm brown, the other a cool blue that seems to cut into my chest, expose the blood and bone and pain resting there, a web of flesh that makes me feel trapped. He snaps his sketchbook closed, sitting up and leaning his left elbow back on the table. Barron brings his other hand to his lips and swirls his tongue around the green candy ring on his finger. “So, what spurred your interest in us today?”

“I’m trapped in an eternal hell,” I say, putting my hands into the front pockets on my blazer. I can *feel* Luke and April watching me from across the length of the courtyard, but I don’t bother to look back at them. If I do, my resolve will crumble, and I’ll end up doing something drastic, just to start this day all over again. “I’ve been living the same day on repeat, so I figured I’d try something different.”

Raz laughs at me, but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t get what I’m saying. None of them do. Barron slides a hand over his rainbow-colored Mohawk, studying me like I’m the subject in one of his drawings.

“Nice necklace,” he says as I finger the *Diana fritillary* around my neck. It matches the tattoo on his chest, and I’m starting to wonder if there’s any coincidence in that at all. It feels like fate to me. A dark, twisted sort of fate, but still.

“Thanks. Did you send it to me?” I ask, and now it’s Barron’s turn to laugh. The sound is nothing like Raz’s crowing guffaws. Instead, it’s slow and dark and dangerous. Barron rises to his feet, towering over me, several inches taller than any other member of the Knight Crew. He reaches out with his left hand, lifting the necklace off my chest and making me shiver. He fingers the butterfly for a moment and then snaps the chain off my neck. “What are you doing?” I whisper as Sonja and Raz laugh.

“I’m taking back my gift,” he says, and my eyes widen. So Barron really did send the necklace? He cups it in his palm and then tucks it into the pocket of his Crescent Prep slacks, smiling at me in an empty, meaningless sort of way before walking off and leaving me gaping behind him. That’s Barron in a nutshell: gift something to me, and then take it back. Light and dark, just like his eyes. Just like his *soul*.

“Ignore that asshole. He has impossible standards,” Raz says as I sit down on the bench, my heart beating frantically, trying to figure

out why I'm so upset. Why would Barron send me a necklace at all? Most especially, why would he take it back?

"Impossible standards for what?" Sonja asks, sliding off the tabletop to sit on the bench beside me, her hair as red as Raz's eyes. "It's not like he'd ever date Trailer Park over here. Fuck her, maybe, but that's about all she's good for."

"Says you," I growl out, my face flaming, my fingers curled around the edge of the bench seat. People are staring at me, their faces covered in masks, some of them pretty, some grotesque. I prefer the latter ones. Pretty things lie. Pretty things glitter and sparkle and beckon. At least the ugly ones just portray on the outside what's already on the in. "But then, you don't know shit about me, do you?"

"Oh, I know plenty, sweetie," Sonja purrs, leaning over and pressing a red kiss to my cheek. I turn to look at her as Raz smirks, eyes flicking between the two of us in sadistic pleasure. "I know you like your clit licked counterclockwise, that you shed tears when you come, that you actually enjoy anal."

I turn to look at her, my chest heaving as I let my attention continue past Sonja to Calix. The only way she could know any of those things is if he told her.

"You're a real piece of work, Calix Knight," I snap, thinking of his hands on my hips. He was frenzied for me. Truly wild for me. But yesterday feels like a million miles away. If I'm the only one that can remember it, what's the point?

"At least I don't pretend to be anything other than what I am," he says, glancing over at me like I mean as little to him as the Knight Stars (Luke's term for the minions) circling his orbit. The bell rings and Calix gives me an awful sort of smile. "Happy Devils' Day, Karma. *Bon voyage.*"

My eyes widen as Raz and Sonja grab onto my arms from either side and drag me across the courtyard. *Fuck!* No matter how many times I change the course of the day, some things stay the same.

The two of them carry me over to the cellar door as I struggle, my phone falling from my pocket and hitting the stone ground with an unpleasant cracking sound. Fucking great. Just great.

During prohibition, the school staff actually made the students of the school cook up moonshine. The old, damp cellars are still there, locked unless they're being used for a history assignment.

But of course, Calix has the key.

Raz and Sonja carry me down the steps as I flail and kick, throwing me to the sandy ground the way Raz and Barron did on the first day of this never-ending nightmare. I gasp at the pain in my knees as I spin around, just in time to see Raz and Calix pushing the metal grate back over the hole in the ground.

The latter crouches down to look at me as his horde of pretty goblins titter and float around him in glittering masks and cruel laughter.

“You will never be a part of the Knight Crew, Karma. No matter what you do. No matter how hard you try. You are cut from a different cloth.” Calix slides my broken phone into his pocket as anger, hot and wild and untamed, sweeps over me.

“Fuck you, Calix!” I scream as Sonja and Raz high five each other and take off for class. “Fuck all of you!” I put my hands over my face and sink back to the floor, sobs taking over me as I realize that I’ve ruined Pearl’s day for nothing. That I shunned my own friends for a piece of the dark glittering fruit that the Knight Crew poisoned and held out to me like Snow White’s apple.

Putting my back against the wall, I close my eyes and brace myself for a long wait. I could scream, but nobody will hear me while class is in session. Instead, I try to fall asleep, figuring I could start the day over again.

Unfortunately for me, sleep doesn’t come easily. Instead, I end up thinking about Barron and the look on his face when he tore the necklace from my throat. What does he want from me? How dare he look at me like I’m the one that’s done something wrong. He’s been treating me like crap for years, and I’m supposed to feel bad because I’m not living up to his weird expectations? Screw that.

I push myself up to my feet, exploring the two small rooms that branch off the narrow hallway. The walls are made of stacked limestone with alcoves along the bottom, just the right size to stack barrels of alcohol. Above those, old wooden shelves lie empty, stamped with barely visible scribbles from the bootleggers who used this place. *Whiskey* is written on one, *Moonshine* on another.

I run my fingers over the old wood, exploring every possible means of escape before I settle on what I already knew: there is no getting out of here without help. Even though I know there’s no point, I move up the stone steps and push against the metal grate.



Using the bells between classes, I mark the hours until class is over, sitting on the top step and waiting until I hear the back doors of the school open up.

“Hey!” I shout, waiting as the footsteps come closer. Raz appears, smirking at me through the slats in the grate. I frown at him as he unlocks it and shoves it aside, wearing only his white dress shirt, the sleeves pushed up, revealing strong arms corded with muscle. “I’m surprised you came to let me out,” I quip as I climb the steps and emerge squinting into the late afternoon sun.

“None of the others wanted to let you out. You should thank me.” Raz leans in, much like he did this morning. I don’t move away, and my defiance seems to amuse him. “Well, it’s true. Let it be known that I appreciate ruthlessness.” He stands up straight, giving me some space. I can still smell him, this mix of laundry detergent, crisp pine, and zesty orange.

“Just don’t expect me to drop to my knees and suck you off as a sign of my gratitude.” I flip my hair and move around him, but Raz reaches out to snatch my wrist, grabbing too hard, holding too tight. I glance back at him, ready for a fight, but he’s still smirking at me. We haven’t transitioned into beating the fuck out of each other. Yet.

“If it were up to Calix or Barron, you’d still be down in that hole. They wanted to leave you in there overnight.” Raz sounds like he’s testing me, an action I don’t fully understand. Looking at him now, with those red contacts over his blue eyes, his dirty blonde hair disheveled and sexy, his face painted with derisive antagonism ... I decide to make him my first project.

If I’m stuck on today, then I may as well use it to my advantage, learn what makes my enemies tick.

“And that makes you a good guy? Because you let me out of the hole you trapped me in?” I clarify, turning back around. Raz doesn’t drop my wrist, and I think about his face yesterday, when he caught me and Calix together. He was pissed. He was frustrated. He was *hurt*.

But why?

“Listen, Trailer Park. A deal’s a deal. You told Pearl off, so you deserve something in return. Come with me to the party tonight. I’ll make it worth your while.” He releases my wrist and tucks his fingers into the front pockets of his slacks, lifting his chin and smirking down at me like he owns the world. His father is a prominent senator, a deep red asshole with a family that favors

nepotism over hard work. Raz might be the black sheep of the family, but he's set to inherit a billion-dollar company regardless. Maybe, in his eyes, he really does own the world? Or at least a substantial portion of it.

"Yeah?" I ask as he pulls his red mask from his pocket and slips it on. "How so?"

"You like weed and booze?" he replies, cocking a brow. "Because we've got top-shelf shit set up tonight. That, and a live band. How do you like the sound of that?"

"Daddy sent you a little stipend to keep you happy out here in the middle of the woods?" I quip, and Raz's smirk turns into a grin.

"You want to see what else he sent me? If you're lucky, maybe I'll let you drive it, too."

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Raz takes me through the nearly empty halls of Crescent Prep, rolling his eyes dramatically as I stop at my locker for my bag, and then leads me down the front steps. There are only a few cars left in the parking lot, but it isn't hard to figure out which one must be his.

A black convertible waits at the edge of the lot, a bow stuck to the hood that Raz tears off with little appreciation, tossing it aside with a bit of a scowl. There's something in his expression that says this gift from Daddy Dearest is a double-edged sword.

Frankly, I'd rather have loving parents with no money than loaded parents with no love.

I don't consider Raz to be a very lucky person in that moment. In fact, he looks as lonely as Calix did that first morning, when I drove by the gas station and noticed the empty, melancholic expression coloring his face, like a dark watercolor painting with bleeding ink.

"I'm not much of a car person," I begin, touching my palm to the white stripes on the hood. "Explain this to me."

Never one to miss a good quip, Raz lifts his head up to smirk at me, pulling a joint from his back pocket at the same time. He lights up, tainting the air with the bitter stink of weed before handing the joint over to me.

"That's right. You act so high and mighty that I forget how fucking poor you are sometimes." He smacks the side of the car like it's one of his groupie's asses and smirks at me, blowing out a cloud

of smoke as he tosses me the keys. “This is a ‘65 Shelby Cobra. And it’s worth more than you’ll make in your entire life.”

I purse my lips as I take a drag on the joint, closing my eyes as the THC sweeps over me. It happens quick, when you smoke, blurs the edges a little. I pass the joint back to Raz and open the driver’s side door, climbing into the sumptuous leather seat and fastening my belt. Maybe I should be surprised that he’s letting me drive it, but I’m not. The car—and me—mean so little to him that we’re both fair game to be used for his amusement. He thinks it’s funny, letting me drive. He might not think that if he knew I’d driven my parents’ Taurus off a cliff the other night.

“A used car?” I ask, cocking a brow as Raz hops in and throws one leg over the door, letting it dangle outside of the car. I notice he doesn’t bother with his seat belt, and I’m not his fucking mother, so I’m not about to ask him to put it on. “That doesn’t seem like your thing, Raz. *Tu n’aimes que les choses les plus raffinées de la vie.*” *You only like the finer things in life.*

“I have no idea what you just said, but this *used car* is worth a mill and a half. Start the fucking engine.” He takes two drags on the joint before offering it up to me again. I accept, puff twice and hand it back before checking my mask in the mirror. Once I’m sure it’ll stay on, I put the key in the ignition, turn the engine with a sweet purr, and put us into drive.

We crush the bright red ribbon on our way out of the parking lot, leaving it in the dust behind us, my purple hair whipping in the wind as I head down the winding dirt road toward Highway 62.

When I get to the end of the road and start to turn right, toward the spot where the Devils’ Day Party is being held, Raz reaches over and grabs the steering wheel.

“Go left,” he says, joint hanging lazily out of his mouth. Since I’ve got nothing better to do than attend a party I’ve already been to twice now, I do as he says. We continue on, past the Diamond Point Mobile Home Park, and towards Eureka Springs.

Raz doesn’t elaborate on where we might be going, using his phone to connect to the fancy Bluetooth stereo system. The car might be from ‘65, but it’s got a sound system that’s more than current, almost futuristic.

*Feel Something*, a collaboration song between three different bands—ILLENIUUM, Excision, and I Prevail—starts playing. It’s a slow song at first, amping up into a dubstep mix with some raucous

screaming vocals. My brow goes up as the song continues playing. This is not what I expected from Raz. Usually, when I hear him and the Knight Crew blasting music, it's rap and hip-hop exclusively.

"Where are we going?" I ask, but Raz just lifts a hand and gestures languidly, encouraging me to keep driving. When we approach the curve near Thorncrown Chapel, my heart jams in my throat, and my eyes go wide. *This is where I died*, I think, wondering if my actions that first night are what brought me to this point. That day was not a repeat. Not some cosmic joke. That was *real*.

I died.

I fucking died.

If there'd been anywhere to pull over in that moment, I'd have done it. As things stood, I had to keep driving until we pulled into Eureka Springs proper.

"Where are we going?" I ask again as Raz gets out another joint and lights up. He takes my cracked phone from his pocket too, wiggles it to get my attention, and then tosses it into a cup holder.

"To get some guns," he says, clenching the joint between his teeth. "We're going to shoot targets tonight at the party."

"That sounds like a really bad idea," I respond with a roll of my eyes. "Besides, where are we going to get guns? Neither of us is a legal adult." I don't remember dealing with guns at the previous Devils' Day Parties. I can only assume that some action I've taken today has spurred Raz onto a different timeline. "My head is fucking killing me. Why don't we get coffee or something instead?"

"Coffee?" Raz scoffs, turning to look at me with those unnerving red eyes of his. "You want to get coffee with me?" He throws his head back against the seat and laughs, the bottom half of his face cruel enough that the devil mask looks like just another part of him. "What on earth would make you think I'd say yes to that? This isn't a date, Trailer Park. Take me to the Riverside Gun Shop. My dad has a friend who works there."

"I'm not your servant," I snap back, feeling my face heat. There's something between me and Raz that I can't figure out. I've never had the luxury to examine what that is, this tense, achy hot feeling beneath our back-and-forth insults. May as well use the time I have to dig deep into the lives of the people around me. At the very least, if I ever get to see tomorrow, I'll have emotional ammo to use against the Knight Crew. "We're not going to the gun shop."

“Have you forgotten whose car you’re driving? I’m taking you to the party tonight as my guest. Try to be grateful you’re not spending the night in the school cellar.”

Without warning, I turn the wheel sharply and send us flying down a narrow gravel road toward Black Bass Lake. One of my aunts—I have a lot of aunts, only one of which is actually related to me, while the rest are just good friends of my mothers—owns a house down here that she rents out on Airbnb. It’s usually unoccupied at this time of year and stocked with plenty of coffee for future guests.

“What the actual fuck?” Raz snaps as we hurdle down the road and turn right toward the open gate. Two other neighbors live down this way, and they usually don’t bother closing the gate. We come to a screeching stop in front of the house—this adorable little two-story cottage full of old wood floors, quilts, and happy memories. I need this right now.

I turn the engine off and snatch the keys away from Raz when he lunges for them.

“Get your ass back here!” he shouts as I take off up the steps toward the front door. There’s a keycode lock for the Airbnb guests and since I know the code, I’m inside in a matter of seconds. Part of me considers locking Raz out of the house, but that’s something regular old Karma would do.

Whoever it is that I am today is reckless. Uninhibited. Fuck it. Let him come in here and rage at me. He needs someone in his life to tell him *no* for once. Maybe it’ll straighten him out a bit?

I shove the keys between the pages of the guest book as I pass by, heading into the kitchen to start up some coffee.

We’re about two hours away from the woods where the party’s being held, so we’re likely to be late, but screw it, it’s Devils’ Day. Nobody cares what time we show up.

The screen door slams closed as Raz storms into the house, pausing briefly in the living room before moving into the kitchen to glare at me. He takes his lit joint and stabs it out on my aunt’s rustic table, making my blood boil.

My eyes snap up to his and fury takes over me.

I *know* in my heart that I’m not getting away with my shitty take on today. I’m not waking up tomorrow. No, I’m going to open my

eyes and find blood on my steering wheel. My Aunt Donna's table will be fine.

But I don't care.

Raz needs to learn that the world is not a playground for his arrogant ass.

"Why would you do that?" I ask, gesturing at the table, surprised at how calm I am right now.

"Where are my fucking keys, Trailer Park? We're going to the gun shop and then heading back to the party." He takes a menacing step toward me, but I'm not afraid of him. Raz thinks he's some terrifying force to be reckoned with, but in reality, he's nothing but a spoiled rotten brat who needs a good spanking.

"We? Why don't you just find the keys and leave me here?" I grind out, watching his feral face as he moves up to the peninsula and slams his palms on the epoxied brick surface. My brow goes up as he curls his lip into a sneer.

"Because it's more fun with you around, Karma. What good are tricks with nobody to play them on? Get the keys. *Now.*"

"Get *fucked*, Loveren," I snap back, pushing the button to start the coffee maker. It gurgles to life as my eyes stay locked with Raz's in a life or death struggle. When he moves to come at me, he's almost too quick. I have barely enough time to grab the bag of coffee grounds and throw them in his face. Raz howls in pain, much the same way he did when I threw sand in his face that first day, and takes off after me as I snatch the keys and flee out the side door.

I'm far enough ahead of Raz that I don't expect him to catch up to me. Instead, I've just decided I'm going to drive his car into the creek near the house, swollen with the morning rains and deep enough to fuck the interior of the Cobra up enough to really get Raz going.

I don't bother to pause and psychoanalyze why I want him so riled up.

Why I care about him at all.

It takes a lot of energy to hate someone as much as I hate Raz Loveren.

But I just barely have time to open the driver's door before he's grabbing me from behind and lifting me off my feet. Hauling my arm back, I chuck the keys as hard as I can, sending them flying

through the air. They hit the water with a splash, sinking to the bottom and moving away with the current.

“You goddamn bitch!” Raz snarls, throwing me over the side of the car and pinning me there with his muscular body. “You just totally *fucked* our Devils’ Day plans over. Nobody’s going to drive all the way out here to pick us up now.”

“Maybe this *is* how I wanted to spend my Devils’ Day, you narcissistic meathead?” I try to struggle, but Raz is *strong*, stronger than I care to admit. For the briefest of moments, fear spikes through me. We’re in a remote area during the off-season. *Maybe* one of the neighbors will come up the drive. *Maybe* somebody will head down toward the lake.

But not likely.

I fling my body back as hard as I can, letting my head crash into Raz’s face. His grip only tightens, and I end up flailing like a wild animal, scratching at his arms, kicking at his shins. He releases me but only briefly, giving me a moment to spin around before he shoves me into the front seat of the convertible.

Red streams from his nostrils and a split in his lip as he swipes a hand over his face and flicks the blood away, spattering the side of the car with crimson droplets. Teeth gritted, body quivering with rage, Raz comes toward me as I sit up, putting his hands on either side of the open door and leaning down until our faces are inches apart.

“If you weren’t a woman, I’d beat the fuck out of you right now.”

“Don’t let my gender stop you from being the total prick that I know you are deep down,” I snap right back, leaning in so close that I can feel his hot breath on my lips. “Do it, Raz. Punch me. See how it makes you feel. You’ve done all sorts of other things to me: locked me in cellars, caves, lockers. Poured acid from the chemistry lab on my lunch. Painted a red ‘A’ on the back of my gym uniform. Go ahead. *Hit me.*”

His jaw clenches so tight I actually feel sorry for his teeth. One of these days, he’s going to crack one of those pearly whites his Daddy paid so much for. When he makes no move to touch me, I lift my own hands up to shove him back, but he grabs me by the wrists.

My tongue flicks out, teasing blood from his lower lip.

Knowing that tomorrow doesn’t exist is making me reckless.



And ... I can't help but love the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

Raz's red eyes narrow and he shoves me back, climbing on top of me and kissing me with hot, bloodied lips. My black-and-red painted fingernails slide down the front of his shirt, tearing it open and sending buttons flying.

His tongue invades my mouth, as angry and aggressive as the erection I can feel straining against his slacks. He's so uninhibited compared to Calix—the only person I've ever slept with—and the contrast is startling. Whereas Calix feels like he's always on the verge of breaking, Raz is already snapped and unfettered, a wild devil raging in the light instead of sneaking in the shadows.

I dig the fingers of my left hand into his hair, careful to keep from knocking his mask off. I want him to wear it. It bumps against my own mask, but that's okay. We're not meant to be Raz and Karma in this moment. Instead, we're as savage and feral as any faerie creature hiding in the woods.

He pulls back from me abruptly, his shirt hanging open to reveal a smooth, muscular chest that belongs to a man and not a boy. This Raz Loveren is a bit different than the freshman kid that I first met. He's an undomesticated brute. Blood drips from his face to stain his shirt as I sit up, gasping, my skirt pushed up enough that he can see the black lace panties underneath. He gives them a good stare before moving across the gravel drive toward the creek.

I'm not letting him get away from me. Not today. Not in this one of a million Devils' Days.

I head after Raz, shoving him from behind as he leans down to look into the cool waters of the creek. He plunges in with a splash, but he's quick, much quicker than me. Raz emerges from the water and spins, grabbing me by the ankle and yanking me forward and into the creek beside him.

The water is so cold that my teeth are chattering before I even come up for air. Raz doesn't let me get that far, shoving my head back down. I end up sucking in water and panicking, but he doesn't hold me under, and I come up a second later, gasping and sputtering.

“Are you crazy?!” I shout as he climbs out, shivering and spitting blood and ice water on the grass. Raz pushes up to his feet and turns a look of pure fury on me. He can't hide the bulge in his wet slacks or the pebbled points of his nipples as he strips off his shirt and chucks it into a wet heap on the brown grass.

“Me?! You’re a crazy bitch, Trailer Park!” Raz swipes his hand over his face again, laughing and shaking from the cold at the same time. “Jesus, what the hell is wrong with you?”

I crawl out of the creek, fed from snow runoff from the mountains, with my teeth chattering so hard I’m seeing stars. My blazer’s come unbuttoned, showing the wet white shirt underneath, and my now very visible red bra.

Raz’s eyes find it right away, heat flaring in his gaze before he turns and takes off toward the car again. He pulls his phone off the passenger seat and makes a call as I kick off my wet shoes and socks, losing my sopping wet blazer as I walk.

“Hey. I’m sorta stuck in Eureka Springs,” Raz says, doing an admirable job of keeping his voice steady as he talks to someone—probably Sonja or Barron. “If you don’t get over here *now*, I might just kill Karma.”

I pick up a decorative rock from the garden bed, turn, and look Raz right in the face before I use it to smash one of the car’s headlights.

The look in his eyes ... I should probably be afraid, but I’m not.

He drops the phone on the seat and comes for me, vaulting over the hood in an effort to keep me from smashing the second headlight. Too late. Raz’s fingers close over mine as I draw the rock back from the second smashed bit of plastic, tearing it from my hand and chucking it as hard as he can into the pond. The spring peepers—tiny, loud, absurdly annoying frogs—scatter in the wake of the splash as Raz yanks me forward, putting our wet bodies together before he shoves me back and onto the hood of the car.

His hands reach down for his slacks, unbuttoning them and freeing the hard length of his cock as I lean up on my elbows.

Our eyes stay locked as Raz steps forward, grabbing me by the ankles and yanking me down the hood so I can hook my legs around his waist. I sit up, shaking and shivering as I slide my palms around to the back of his neck.

“You didn’t post the video, did you?” I ask, and he narrows his eyes at me.

“What fucking video?” he snaps, but I cut him off, leaning forward and crushing my mouth to his. Raz doesn’t leave me in control for long, cupping the back of my head, fingers digging painfully into my wet hair. Based on the look on his face, he doesn’t

know what video I'm talking about. *It wasn't him.* If it were, he'd probably gloat about it.

Raz puts his hands up my skirt, tearing off my wet panties and then lining the head of his dick up with my warm folds. I don't bother mentioning that he doesn't need to use a condom. He'd have to be specifically told to put one on or he won't bother. Calix and Raz in stark contrast: the former thinks too much about consequences while the latter cares for them not at all.

"Screw me like you hate me," I whisper, and then we're coming together in a frenzy. Raz grabs my ass with his left hand, guiding his cock into me with a violent thrusting of his hips, filling me up and making me gasp. We're both soaking wet, ice-cold, and shivering, but it doesn't matter. With our bodies, we create heat, undulating movements of our hips that bring our pelvises together again and again.

It's impossible to miss the slick, wet sound of Raz's cock pummeling my body.

He grinds my ass into the hood of his fancy new car, my plaid skirt wet and bunched up, my panties shredded, a button gaping on my shirt. With a growl, Raz reaches down and tears my top open, revealing two small mounds wrapped in lace. His thumb brushes one pebbled nipple through the fabric as I throw my head back in a moan, lifting my hips to meet his frenzied thrusts.

"Say it," Raz manages to get out, blood still blooming on his pretty lower lip, his teeth chattering. "Fucking say it, Karma."

"I hate you," I whisper back, my own teeth clacking together. Raz leans in and kisses me, warming up all those cold places on the outside. On the inside, I'm still nothing but frost. But I won't let myself go there just yet.

Our masks slide around as we kiss, glitter brushing off mine and onto his. We make quality masks out here in Devil Springs, Arkansas. They don't come off unless we take them off, and neither Raz nor I is ready to take off our masks just yet.

Moving my own hips in rhythm with his, I grind my clit against Raz's pelvis, feeling these warm, fluttering sensations that make my stomach muscles clench at the same time my cunt locks around Raz. He slows his own motions, groaning and digging his fingers into my hips as we nip and kiss at each other's mouths, tasting the hot copper burn of blood on our tongues.

My orgasm sweeps over me, and I let my head fall back, the red-lace covered mounds of my breasts lifted up toward the sky, my back arched. Stars sweep across my vision as the sensation takes over me, and I collapse at nearly the same time as Raz does, groaning and leaning over me, his blond hair wet and dripping.

“Fuck, I forgot to pull out,” he murmurs, too tired for a brief moment to sound much like an asshole. There’s a hint in his words of a different Raz, a hidden softness underneath all of those sharp edges. “Shit.” He stays where he is for several minutes, my own heart beating wildly as we both probably sink into hypothermia. It is fucking *cold* out here.

Gently enough, I push Raz in the shoulder and he steps back, breathing hard as he puts his cock back in his pants.

“Are you on the pill?”

“Do you have a vasectomy? Don’t make assumptions, and get fucked, Raz.” I stand up, pushing my skirt back into place as he grabs me by the upper arm.

“Don’t play with me, Trailer Park.” I tear myself from his grip and head for the steps leading up the small hill into the house. I’m very careful to step over the broken plastic from the headlights as I go, calculating all the while how long it’ll take Raz to follow me inside. *Three, two ...* I hear footsteps padding behind me as he makes his way into the warm, cozy interior of my aunt’s house. “Where’s the shower? I’m fucking freezing.”

Still, I say nothing, leading him into the downstairs bathroom with its two-level countertop, one portion set lower with a big mirror for makeup, a wooden stool parked underneath. Inside the glass door of the shower, there’s a faux black marble surround with a cutout in the center, showcasing the limestone that makes up the foundation of the house. It’s threaded through with the glittery white shapes of naturally formed crystals that were hauled in with the stone. It’s worthless crystal, but beautiful, nonetheless.

I turn the water to a mild temperature, so we don’t burn our skin, and glance over my shoulder.

There’s only one shower in the house. Technically, there’s a tub in the bathroom upstairs, but that’s not what this is about.

I step back into the water, still watching Raz as he struggles with his own inner bullshit, torn between wanting to fuck me, and wanting to kick the shit out of me. He must come to terms with the

former—that, and the fact that he’s freezing his ass off—and steps forward, dropping his slacks and underwear to the floor before climbing in with me. He’d be naked, if he weren’t wearing that mask still.

“This is goddamn weird,” he says as I stand under the warm spray in my skirt and shirt, my bra and even the shredded remains of my cum-soaked panties. As we adjust to the temperature, I crank it up so that it burns a little, shedding my skirt and undies, my shirt, my bra. But the mask, that stays.

We’re so close that when I breathe, my nipples brush up against the front of Raz’s chest, his red eyes straying to the point of contact.

“Whose house is this anyway? I’m not about getting busted for breaking and entering.”

“Shut up, Raz.”

He scowls at me as I place my palms on his chest, my heart racing wildly. *What is this? What the hell is happening between us? How can he go from hating me to holding me like I mean everything?*

“This is my aunt’s house.” The words come out in a whisper, barely audible over the spray of the water, but I can’t help it. I’m confused. I’m aching. And there’s a fire in my core that I need stoked.

I thought I was in love with Calix Knight, but maybe that isn’t true at all?

Because something very strange is happening here.

“She doesn’t live here; she rents it. There aren’t any guests staying today.”

“Why the fuck did you bring me out here?” he asks, reaching up his left hand to cup the side of my face. His thumb brushes down the crease in the center of my lower lip, and I bite down on it. A small sound escapes Raz’s throat as I flick my eyes up to his. He’s scowling at me again, but his cock is thickening as the pace of his breathing intensifies. “To screw me like you did Calix? Is this your version of a Devils’ Day trick?”

“It’s not a trick,” I say, tracing my own fingers down to his nipples. He sucks in a sharp inhale and mutters a curse when I begin to tease them, hot water sluicing over my gently parted lips. “And neither was last year. What happened with Calix wasn’t a trick. Not for him and not for me.”

Raz snorts, but his hands manage to find their way to my hips. It's almost possessive, the way he holds me, but for him to hold me like that ... he'd have to really want me. And not just in the way a boy wants a girl, but something different, better, more intense. I'm not saying he loves me, but there's hate there, and that's a powerful emotion in and of itself. It takes effort and energy to hate someone when, if you truly didn't care for them, it'd be so much easier to just forget.

Raz has never forgotten me. He barely forgets me for one single moment during the school day. His eyes never stray far. His words are often meant for me. I even dictate the shape of his mouth—whether it's a sneer, a scowl, or a smirk.

“Maybe it wasn't a trick on your part, but don't tell me you're stupid enough to believe Calix fucking Knight?” Raz leans in and looks me straight in the face, sneering viciously. “After all this time, you're still holding onto hope that the bullshit he fed you was real?”

I don't like the direction this conversation is going, or how angry Raz is getting, not when it felt like we might tip in a different direction.

My hands cup either side of his face as I lean in and kiss him, closing my eyes against the spray of the water and the gentle kiss of the steam against my naked flesh. My nails dig into Raz's cheeks, making him hiss. When he doesn't stop me, I do it a little harder, this time, making him bleed.

“Shit.” He reaches up to take my wrists, pulling my hands away from his face as the continuous spray of the water cleans the blood away. “You like to hurt me, don't you?”

“You like to hurt me, too, right?” I retort, but Raz doesn't reply, and there's something in his gaze that says that isn't entirely true.

Our mouths slide together as his right hand skims over the curve of my hip, slipping between my legs and inserting two fingers into the aching heat between my thighs. A small quiet sound escapes me, making my cheeks flush as Raz hooks his fingers inside of me, working my body up into a frenzy as he stares down at me with red eyes that hide nothing. Calix is a locked box with a missing key, impossible to open or understand.

Raz is impossible to miss.

My hands curl around his biceps as I look up into his face, wondering when I decided that being vulnerable in front of my worst

enemy was a good idea. *At least he won't remember this tomorrow*, I think, a mixed sense of relief and despair flooding me.

Tomorrow, I'll wake up and it'll be today again.

Raz will forget everything that's happened, and I'll be alone in my memories.

Again.

His thumb flicks across the swollen nub of my clit, making my knees feel weak. I lean back against the cutout in the surround, my ass pressed into the glass. Raz leans in, refusing to allow me any space at all as he puts his lips to my neck, tasting the hot water on my skin as he licks me, his lips hovering over my frantic pulse.

My eyes slide closed of their own accord as he plays with my body and tangles the strings of my heart. On the outside, I'm calm, if a little shaky, but on the inside, my emotions are like shattered bits of glass, cutting me even as I try my best to piece them together again.

"I hate you, Raz Loveren," I moan as I let my head fall back against the wall, Raz's teeth grazing my skin before he bites down, sucking on that tender spot between my neck and shoulder, leaving his mark. He isn't shy about it, or overly cautious. He kisses and bites me in equal measures, and sometimes the latter hurts, but only for a brief second. Once the pain settles in, it's twice as intense as the pleasure of his kisses.

Almost like the dichotomy between love and hate.

"I hate you, too, Karma Sartain," he growls, removing his fingers from my core and slapping my hand away when I go to reach for his cock. Raz grabs me by the upper arms and turns me toward the wall opposite the shower head, pushing me over so that my palms rest on the built-in bench seat. "Now, bend the hell over and let me fuck the loathing out of you."

He grabs my hip hard with one hand, using the other to line himself up with my cunt. I bite my lower lip as I anticipate the forceful push of his cock between my folds. Instead, Raz teases my swollen body with his shaft, using the head of his dick to push against my clit. My knees quiver, and I end up putting one on the bench seat, lifting a hand up to press into the wall.

"Oh, that's even better," Raz hisses, reaching around to cup one of my breasts and kneading the small pert mound with assertive, ambitious fingers. His touch is just this side of cruel as he tweaks my

nipple, and I cry out. “You know, when you asked to be a part of the Knight Crew, I just about lost my shit. I was going to show you *everything* that you’ve been missing.”

I’m not entirely sure what Raz means with that statement, but it doesn’t matter. My body is greedy, aching, and all I can think is: *what’s the timeline on this?* At what point does my day stop—regardless of sleep or unconscious spells or deaths—and I wake up at the gas station again?

I’m not ready for this day to be over just yet.

“Why do you hate me so much?” I whisper as Raz moves his cock to my opening, hesitating briefly there and making me curse myself for asking a question like that in a time like this.

Instead of answering me, Raz thrusts in, balls-deep, a long, low groan of relief escaping him in a rush.

“Why are you so wet for me, Karma?” he asks, and I notice that he doesn’t call me Trailer Park while he’s fucking me. I’m glad. I’m not sure that I’d *let* him touch me if he kept calling me that. “If you hate me so much?”

It’s my turn to ignore the questions, pushing my hips back against Raz’s hot pelvis. He grabs onto me with one hand, holding me tight, fingers a punishing pressure against my overheated flesh. With the other, he grabs the long, purple strands of my hair, rubbing them between his fingertips before giving my hair a hard yank.

My cry is a mingled sound of pleasure and pain as he moves inside of me, working up fervid friction between us. The pain in my scalp turns into delicious pleasure, and I realize that I may very well have some masochistic tendencies.

When the water goes cold, Raz and I move to the twin bed downstairs. It’s in the corner of a sitting room with a whole wall of shelves filled with German-themed knickknacks. It seems like a weird place for a bed, but since this is an Airbnb and guests always seem to want more beds, my aunt put one in this little nook.

It’s a cozy place to spend some time naked—even if that time is with Theodore Rasmus Loveren aka Raz. His nude body is all the hell over me, thrusting between my thighs, our fingers tangled together, his mouth claiming mine.

He’s a strangely skilled and possessive sort of lover, leaving me in a panting sprawl beside him, the sheets a mess of our mingled juices as Raz cracks the window next to the bed and lights up a joint he



dug out of his pants pocket. He exhales smoke out the window before turning back and passing the joint my direction. I'm surprised he was even able to light it, considering how wet it was.

Our fingers brush, sending an electric tingle through me as I sit up, tugging one of my aunt's quilts over my body to hide it from Raz's view. Him looking at me now is nothing like being naked when we're both sweaty and swept away by hormones. I feel our old dynamic locking into place between us like an iron gate and open my lips, desperate to break old habits.

"It's like nine o'clock," Raz says, before I get a chance. "We could head back to the party." He reaches up and, for the first time since we got here, pushes his mask up his face to sit in his still-wet dirty blonde hair. "Sonja is blowing up my fucking phone."

"We *could* head back to the party," I suggest, biting my lower lip and looking down at my fingers twined together on the blanket. This might be business as usual for Raz, but this is only my third time having sex. It's all still new to me, and I'm struggling a bit. "Or we could stay here." I pull in a drag on the joint and pass it back, being careful to keep my fingers to myself this time.

"You want to stay here?" Raz asks, clarifying as he turns to look at me, his red eyes catching a bit of silver moonlight and shining like the eyes of a demon. I move my own mask up my face to sit in my tangled hair. "With me? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I'll make new coffee," I blurt, taking the quilt with me as I stand up and pad into the kitchen. Oddly enough, he follows me, still smoking the joint, still naked as the day he was born. He doesn't seem to give a shit, yanking out a chair from the table and folding himself into it with every bit of arrogance and self-aggrandizing privilege as usual.

"What is it with you and coffee? That's what people in their thirties do—go out for coffee on a date. We should be shooting targets in the woods with a Glock and fucking in the mud." Raz takes another drag on the joint as I turn and cock a questioning brow at him. He isn't looking at me though, content to glare out the window with narrowed bloodred eyes.

"Who said this was a date?" I ask, my feet kicking up clouds of coffee grounds as I move around the kitchen. Can't possibly forget we had an actual fight just a few hours ago. "We're just ... hanging out."

Raz throws his head back in a braying laugh, shaking it in disbelief as he drops his chin and smirks at me.

“Yeah? Like you hung out with Calix? Is it that easy for you?”

My hand squeezes tight around the handle of the coffeepot as I dump the liquid from earlier and start fresh.

“Rich of you to judge me like that, considering I’ve only ever slept with Calix once.” I pour the coffee grounds in and press the start button, using one hand to hold my quilt up. “And then you once. That’s the extend of my sexcapades. What about you?”

“Me? I’m a virgin,” Raz says with absolutely no truth in his voice whatsoever. There’s something else there though, something he’s trying to hide from me by being a prick. Surprise. “The hell you think?”

“I don’t know *what* to think,” I respond, getting angry. My swollen lips turn down in a frown as I lean over the counter, propping my elbows on the smooth, epoxied surface of the bricks. The only light in here is coming from the crescent moon outside, and even then, it’s diffused and dreamlike. “Do you actually date girls? Because it seems like all you do is fuck them.”

Raz looks back at me, offering up the joint, but I’m not about to move around the counter to take it from him. Instead, I shake my head and wait for a response of some kind. In the half-dark, how could he not answer me truthfully?

“I don’t date,” he says, the joint crackling as he inhales again. He’s too stoned to be a super asshole like usual. I almost like him this way, mellow and snarky but lazy and satisfied, too. “One-night stands work better for me. Nobody wants to eat the same meal twice.”

I roll my eyes and turn back to the coffee maker as it beeps, pouring us two hefty mugs. Raz sounds like he’s telling the truth, but like he’s holding back at the same time.

“Cream? Sugar?” I ask, keeping my eyes on the mugs and then jumping as he steps up behind me, too close, his body heat seeping through the thick fabric of the quilt.

“*Black*,” Raz quips, the ‘K’ sound snapping off his tongue like a whip. He reaches past me and takes his mug, pausing for just a beat too long as my breathing picks up, my exhalations loud enough that I know we can both hear them. Finally, he steps away and heads

back through the living room. I hear the screen door snap closed as Raz moves out onto the deck.

I add a heavy dollop of cream and no sugar, taking my coffee outside and over to where Raz is leaning on the railing.

His eyes scan the darkness, and we both go completely still at the sound of rustling in the bushes across the gravel road and beyond the creek, where the forest begins. A huffing sound follows, and I realize it's a buck.

I shudder in horror at the memory of the bleeding buck that killed Luke and, subsequently, me as well.

“At least it isn't spring,” Raz murmurs, taking a sip of his coffee as he uses the ashtray to snuff out the last of his joint. “Males get crazy when it's time to mate.” He casts a strange look my way and then gives that cruel laugh of his. It feels more hollow than usual, almost like his facade is cracking to pieces. “Sometimes, they even kill people ... or each other.” He glances back out at the woods, tilting his head to one side as he takes another drink of his coffee. At this point, I'm not entirely sure we're still talking about the deer.

When I glance over at Raz, I can see how damaged his lower lip is, the split clearly visible, his face slightly swollen from the rough impact of my skull. Just because he's a guy, I shouldn't be hitting him like that. But ... he manhandles me all the damn time, right? Still, seeing him hurt doesn't feel like justice; it just feels like two wrongs struggling to make a right.

“Do you want to stay the night here and head home in the morning?” I ask. It's a Saturday, so it isn't like we'd have to leave early for school or anything. I *will* have to call the moms though and let them know I'm okay. Luke and April, too. Even though the thought of calling my friends makes me feel physically ill. What I did to Pearl ... I will not soon forget. How the Knight Crew can live everyday with these feelings is beyond me. Either they lack empathy entirely, or else they've just learned to live with this nauseous feeling in their gut.

“What are you doing, Karma?” Raz snaps, turning to me with his teeth gritted tight. He reminds me of a wounded animal, cowering back and baring its teeth for fear of getting hurt. Raz would rather bite me than admit he carries any weakness whatsoever. “We're not friends. Don't act like you didn't hit me in the goddamn face earlier. Having sex doesn't change that.”

Hurt strikes me like a match, setting my emotions on fire.

But then I remember the way he came at me in the woods, when he caught me bent over for Calix.

“Having sex changes everything,” I say, looking away from him toward the woods. The video of me and Calix is already out there, making me realize that no matter how well I try to get things to go between me and Raz, he’ll always see it. And if he’s this mad now, how mad might he get after he watches it? “But if you want to leave, I won’t stop you.”

I start to turn away and Raz grabs my arm, causing me to drop my mug. It hits the deck and bounces away, sloshing lukewarm milky coffee onto my toes as Raz leans in and crushes his mouth against mine. My surprised fingers drop the quilt, leaving us naked in the moonlight, his coffee cup still held out to one side in his right hand, like a shield to protect us from getting too wild.

He tastes like barely restrained desire, malicious narcissism, and dangerous temptation, all wrapped into one. When Raz pulls back, I naturally lean forward. My palms settle on his chest and we stare at each other again.

“You never answered,” I reply, gesturing toward him with my head. “When I asked why you hated me.”

He’s silent for a pause, setting his coffee down and then grabbing me by the wrists. He takes a step back, putting some space between us.

“You’re ...” Raz starts, hesitating just long enough that I can hear my phone ringing in the silence. When Raz turns away and grabs his coffee again, I sigh and pick the quilt back up, shambling down the steps of the deck and across the grass. My phone sits in the small space between the front seats, and I lean down to grab it, ignoring the cracked screen as I unlock it.

There are dozens of missed calls from my mothers, from April, from Luke.

I decide to glance at my texts instead; the most recent one from Luke grabs my attention.

*It’s about Calix and Pearl. Please call me first.*

All the weirdness of today flees in a wave and I forget, for the briefest of moments, that I’m living in a time loop. Fear strikes me cold and wild, making my hands shake as I frantically call Luke back.

“What is it?” I blurt as soon as I hear her start to speak. I’m moving up the steps with one hand clutching the quilt, the other holding the phone, collapsing into the cushioned bench on the deck. Raz pretends to ignore me, his elbows resting on the railing again. “Please tell me it isn’t bad.”

“It’s really bad, Karma. Really, really bad.” Luke snuffles, like she’s been crying. “Do you want the shitty news or the shittier news first?” I close my eyes and wet my lips, sucking in a breath of icy nighttime Arkansas air.

“Hit me with the worst first,” I say, knowing it’s going to be about the video.

Of course, I’m completely wrong.

“Pearl is dead,” Luke gushes, sniffing again. “She killed herself. There’s a note.”

*No.*

“Apparently, she mentioned you in it. The police are looking for you, Karma.”

Luke keeps talking, but I don’t hear anything she says after that. My vision focuses to a pinprick of white and I have to scramble my way to the railing to throw up my coffee over the top of it.

“The fuck?” Raz snaps, but I’m not listening to him either.

*The things I said to Pearl ... did they push her over the edge?*

The indisputable fact that I’m now a monster as big as Barron or Raz, Calix or Sonja ... that’s a hard pill to swallow.

“What? How?” I stutter, my head spinning as my fingers curl around the rough edges of the old wooden railing.

“She shot herself, Karma. *At the party.*”

“At the Devils’ Day Party?” I choke out as Luke snuffles again. What if she saw something? I mean, this timeline will likely end come sunup—or sooner, I’m sure—but that doesn’t mean some part of that trauma won’t stick to Luke’s soul like glue. What if, with each day that passes, we all just collect bad memories in our psyches?

“Yes, at the party,” Luke repeats, exhaling sharply. I can just imagine her pinching her brow with her short blue nails. “Where are you? I can come and get you if you need me to.”

I'm staring out at the darkness, my mind slipping away before I can catch myself, and trying to talk some sense into my emotions. *Today will end and tomorrow will give you another chance. It's okay, Karma, it's going to be okay.* But it isn't, really, not for me. I will never forget the things I said and did today. A universal reset does not absolve me of my own actions.

"I'm with Raz," I whisper, shivering as the night air finally seems to settle across my overheated skin. "We're at my Aunt Donna's place. We've ... I think we like each other."

"You ... what?!" Luke shrieks as Raz rips the phone from my grip and hangs up. He's panting for breath, looking at me like I've lost my damn mind. But then he seems to notice the tears glinting on my cheeks.

"Who was that?" he snaps, squeezing my phone in his fist.

"Luke. She said Pearl killed herself at the Devils' Day Party tonight. My name was mentioned in a suicide note, and the cops ..." I trail off, letting my honesty pour forth. What does it matter? It's night already, and I'm certain that our evening has a time limit. Midnight, is my first guess.

"Jesus Christ," Raz hisses, putting his fingers in his blond hair for a moment. He looks up at me, almost like he's ... feeling sorry for me? "Over this morning? Seriously?"

"You should always be nice, Raz, because you never know when someone's so full of pain they might snap. Maybe one kind word could've saved her?" I move past him and into the house, heading for the kitchen and hoping there's food in the fridge. Sometimes renters leave it when they go, unwilling to throw out the unopened items they bought for a trip and didn't need.

I really don't expect to find a container of unopened chocolate ice cream, but there it is, beside an open bag of popsicles. I take it out, grabbing a spoon and heading upstairs to my favorite room. When we stay here with Donna, she always lets me have the master. *Teenagers need their own bathrooms, damn it.* The words of my aunt ring in my head, making me smile briefly through the tears.

Doesn't last long.

As soon as my ass hits the upstairs bed, I feel the tears again, stinging my face.

Raz appears in the doorway just a few minutes later, his academy-issued slacks pulled on but left unbuttoned.

“Do you need me to take you back?” he asks, narrowing his eyes in irritation. “I left my spare key with Sonja; I can make her drive out here.”

“I’m going to stay the night,” I say, resting my chin on my knees, the ice cream probably melting as I clutch it in my hand. My gaze slides over to Raz as he stands with a forearm against either side of the doorjamb. “But you can go if you want. I’ll get a ride back ... tomorrow.” My eyes close, but I know I’m not going to sleep tonight. I need to see how long I can go before I’m sitting back inside my little yellow car with blood smeared across the wheel.

Raz hesitates for a moment before retreating, and I feel loneliness and sorrow sweep over me again.

Weirdly enough, he actually comes back with two fresh cups of coffee.

He hands one to me and sits down on the other side of the bed. After a strange span of tension, we both end up properly getting on the bed and leaning into the mountain of pillows, our bodies just inches apart.

I open the ice cream and swallow a spoonful before offering it up to Raz. He curls his lip at me, like I’ve lost my damn mind.

“You just came inside of me like, three times,” I say, gesturing with the food and utensil. “What’s a little saliva between friends?”

Nostrils flaring, he takes the ice cream, our fingers tangling briefly and filling my belly with heat. It’s hard not to stare at the long, lean length of his exposed torso. He has a few tattoos, too, nothing quite like Barron’s ink, but sexy, nonetheless. Raz digs in, swallowing a massive spoonful of chocolate. The way he’s staring down at the food makes me wonder if he’s actually exposing himself to deep thought in that cruel head of his. He looks a bit shaken.

“I’ve never come in a girl before,” he says, taking another bite of ice cream before handing it back. Like marijuana etiquette: puff, puff, pass. Only this time, it’s chocolate ice cream etiquette: lick, lick, pass. “My dad doesn’t believe in abortion.”

The leap of logic between those two statements makes my eyes widen and my head spin.

I turn to look at Raz with what must be an expression of complete and total shock. He scowls at me again, but that doesn’t change what he’s just said. *I’ve never come in a girl. Just in case. Because pregnancy means ... something. Because, reasons.*

With a groan, I snatch the food back. I don't have to worry about silly things like STDs or pregnancy, not with my life on a loop, but Raz does. That's what he's doing now as he looks up at me, worrying.

"Why did you tell Luke that we liked each other?" he asks, lips curving into a small frown. When he reaches up for the red leather mask still sitting on top of his head, I grab his wrist to stop him. If he puts that back on, I may never see him without it again.

The metaphor makes my chest hurt as I try to figure out how to respond.

"You ... the way you were raised, I think ..." I pause, mulling over my words. "You hurt the things you like. And I'm pretty sure you don't want to like me. You're angry about it."

"You're everything you want to be while I'm nothing like I want to be." He pauses and exhales, shoving his hair back from his forehead violently enough that he ends up knocking his mask to the floor. "You know, some part of me wants you to get pregnant." He flexes his jaw, turning to look back at me with a face as sharp and cunning as a fox's. "Because then I'll be allowed—no, *encouraged*—to be with you. Otherwise, my dad will never let me have a girl like you."

My heart jumps at the same time my body heats with anger.

"A girl like me, huh?" I whisper as Raz catches my chin, keeping me from looking away. His fingers are a little too tight, his gaze just this side of too much.

"He would hate you, Karma," Raz grinds out, his breathing heavy. "I should hate you. And I want to. I want to hate you so bad."

"But?" I ask, my voice the barest slip of a whisper, like bat wings in the night. The moon catches on the curve of Raz's nose, making his red eyes glow like a devil's.

"But I don't." He exhales, his breath warm against my lips, tasting like chocolate. The ice cream container rolls off the edge of the bed and onto the floor, likely spattering the drapes with brown droplets.

It doesn't matter.

Nothing matters but for me and Raz.

"I never have, not even when you ratted us out freshman year." He leans forward, kissing me with harsh lips. His teeth almost hurt. "And then you went and picked Calix. *How?* How could you pick



*Calix?*” Raz laughs, and the sound is far from pleasant. “All those years and all I wanted was you. Every girl I fucked had your face. Every movement I made, I did for you. But you let his cruelty go and punished me for mine. I’m mad, Karma. I’m righteously *pissed.*”

“That’s ...” I start, because what Raz is saying is toxic. He’s broken and angry and wrong, but he doesn’t know it. All he knows is that I hurt him, and he can’t figure out why. My mothers would tell me to run. I should. I should run as far and fast as I can, be glad that Raz is a high school enemy whose memory I can wipe clean after graduation.

Instead, I feel something else entirely.

“I’ve always liked you,” I whisper, straddling his lap. His hands find my ass, kneading the round curves with ireful fingers. “I wanted you to notice me, but in the right way. You never did. Calix came to *me*, he ...”

“Fuck Calix,” Raz snarls, curling his lip up and breathing heavily beneath me. When I tilt my hips back, I can feel his cock slide between my folds. We both groan as he snatches a handful of my hair to bring my face to his. “Screw motherfucking Calix. Karma, you shouldn’t have brought me here if you wanted to see Calix.”

“Why’s that?” I whisper before Raz jerks my head back and bites my throat, his other hand caressing my ass.

“Because you gave me a taste of what it’d be like if you were mine.”

Raz encourages me to lift my hips, hitting my opening with his cock. When I sit back, he fills me and I groan, wrapping my arms around his neck. My thigh muscles help me slide myself up and down the length of his shaft, until he’s shuddering and bucking his hips up, spilling himself in me yet again today.

We press our sweaty foreheads together for a few seconds before I slide off, lying slumped and sated in the pillows next to him.

“I’ve always wanted to dye my hair,” Raz says, his eyes half-lidded. He turns to look at me, frowning again. The smell of oranges and fresh sweat tickles my nostrils. It seems I just like ... the smell of him? I shudder briefly, closing my eyes for a moment.

When I feel his fingers in my hair, I open my eyes in time to see him pull my mask off and toss it aside.

“What are you going to do with me tomorrow?” I ask, knowing I should take a more proactive role in all this, but understanding that it’s likely I won’t get to see what tomorrow will ever be like. At the very least, Pearl won’t be dead, and I won’t be going to jail for one of the most heinous things I’ve ever done.

“I don’t know,” Raz replies honestly, the sheets pulled over his crotch. He lifts one knee up, his other leg straight out in front of him. His expression is as fierce as ever, his eyes breaking with a wild storm. It’ll never be easy for me and Raz, but we can take steps forward. We can change the way we look at each other.

But what if ... I can only change the way one of them looks at me? Calix or Raz.

Or Barron.

I can’t forget that he sent me a necklace ...

“I don’t know, but I’d be lying if I said I’ll be able to keep my hands to myself.” He cants a look my direction, sharp mouth curving into a rare smile. “If you don’t break my nose again, that is.” I smile back, scooting tentatively closer until he hooks an arm around my shoulders.

The way I feel being pressed against Raz’s body is honestly terrifying. He’s every awful, ugly, broken thing I never wanted. He’s as sharp as a devil, just as tricky. There are evil parts inside him that should make me hate him. And they do. But he also makes it so that I like the jagged bits of him.

*This boy is going to bleed you dry, Karma Sartain.*

“If I’d walked up to you this morning, thrown my arms around your neck, and told you I loved you ... would you have hugged me back or thrown me to the ground?” Raz hesitates for a moment, but then he wraps his arm tighter around me and pulls me closer.

“I’m not sure,” he replies hesitantly, but there’s enough doubt in his voice that I decide to give it a try. Because my own special version of tomorrow will be here before you know it. “I’m also not sure we’ve ever had a conversation that’s lasted this long.”

“*Non jamais*,” I reply, and he grunts in annoyance, his exhale ruffling my tangled hair. “We haven’t.”

“Then let’s talk. What’s it like to live a hideous little trailer with dykes for moms?”

“It’s ...” I pause for a moment to consider, ignoring his homophobia for a brief moment—exposure and education can cure that. “Fucking wonderful, actually.”

“How?” he asks, but the question doesn’t sound as awful as it could. So we talk. We talk until the sun peeks above the horizon and the clock on the nightstand reads 4:22 in the morning.

That’s the last thing I remember.

And then ... there’s blood all over my steering wheel.

Nothing lasts forever.

That is the nature of beautiful things.

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“Are you fucking insane?!”

Calix pulls me out of the car and pushes me up against it. I let him do it, my mouth etched into a deep frown, my head feeling like a balloon, ready to float away into the rainy sky.

“Not today, Calix,” I murmur, reaching up to push his arms away from me. He doesn’t budge, but his ebony eyes do narrow as I lift my suddenly heavy face up. From weightless to impossibly heavy in an instant.

“Not today?” he barks back at me with a sharp, dark laugh. “Are you fucking kidding me, Karma? You crashed into my car.”

A moan escapes me as I collapse forward. This time, for whatever reason, Calix catches me. He throws me up into his arms, holding me against his chest with a frown.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

My heart picks up speed as the woman in the yellow shirt with the daisy nails approaches, leaning in hesitantly toward the pair of us.

“Are you okay?” she asks as I sigh and turn to look at her, remembering the script from day one.

“I’m okay.”

“Should I call the police?” she inquires, right on schedule.

“That won’t be necessary,” Calix replies, again sticking to the usual script. *But what if we flipped the script on its head?* I wonder.

*What if I throw a wrench so strange in their routine, they have no choice but to react?* My eyes slide toward his dark ones, as depthless and unreadable as an abandoned well, its stone sides crumbling, moss emerging from between the cracks. “We’re classmates; I won’t be pressing charges.”

Calix leans down toward me, much the same as he did on the first day.

I kiss that poisonous mouth of his before he can spew venom, throwing an arm around his neck and knowing that at least partially, the reason I’m doing this is because of Raz. Because I’m too raw to face him just now and see him reject me. Last night, it felt like I’d really and truly found the one thing I’d been looking for in my life.

Calix rears back, looking down at me like I’ve shattered his entire existence.

“Calix, I feel like you’re hiding something from me. Like, you’re lying to yourself. Do you like me? Did you mean what you said last year at the party?”

“What the ... fuck?” he whispers, almost in disbelief. I definitely do not expect him to essentially drop me on the hood of his car. “Get off of me, Karma.” He shoves back from me with a violent, cutting sneer on his face.

“What the hell?” Raz asks as I hear the sound of a plastic grocery bag hitting the concrete. I turn to find Barron staring at Raz with an intensity that makes me uncomfortable, like he sees something in his friend’s shocked face that he’s never understood until just now. Barron then cants his head back to look at me, the white hood of his sweatshirt pushed up over his rainbow hair, dual eyes shining with fascination. He sucks on his red lollipop, staining his mouth with what looks like blood. “Did you just kiss each other?”

The hidden layer beneath Raz’s words makes me feel like I might just throw up. He sounds like I’ve just sucker-punched him. His red gaze jumps from Calix to me, the anger in his eyes amping up to dangerous levels—and *fast*. From zero to a hundred in a millisecond.

“Oh, fuck this,” he snarls, coming across the parking lot like a predator. I scabble off the hood and back away from him, suddenly afraid of what he might do.

Calix steps aside, perfectly coiffed in his Crescent Prep uniform, his dark hair shiny and swept to the side, ebon eyes darkening. He leans in as Raz gets close to me.

“You two deserve each other,” he whispers, smiling wickedly as Raz pauses above me, opening the drink in his hand and dousing me with it. “Grab her, Raz.”

My lips part to scream as Raz scoops me up off the ground and throws me over his shoulder, opening the back door of the Aston Martin and pushing me in before he joins me on the seat.

“You’re kidnapping me, really?!” I shriek, torn between crying and laughing hysterically. “What fresh hell is this? And all because you’re jealous of each other?”

“Jealous?” Raz barks in an angry laugh. The way he looks at me now, it feels impossible that yesterday actually happened. It seems like just moments ago he was holding me in his arms, speaking to me in soft whispers under the cover of a starry night. This isn’t fair. It isn’t fair, and it fucking *sucks*. “You’ve got to be kidding me. We’ve had a plan for you all week, Trailer Park.”

Calix and Barron get in the front seats, starting the engine and peeling us out of the parking lot, dragging Little Bee along the pavement behind us. I glance out the rear window and then turn back to the luxe interior inside the car.

I did not expect to ever end up *inside* Calix’s stupid Aston Martin whatever-the-hell-it-is.

“Coffee?” Barron asks, sliding his lollipop from his mouth with a sharp popping sound. “Caramel or mocha, those are your choices.”

“What’s happening right now?” I ask as I look between the three of them. When Barron actually offers me up a pair of coffees to choose from, my eye twitches and nausea rises in my stomach. This moment is truly surreal. I take the caramel one from his left hand with a frown, noticing that angry red gash that caught my attention on day one. He didn’t have it before Devils’ Day, and I can’t help but wondering where it came from.

“We’re taking you somewhere special today,” Calix replies blandly, like a vampire in desperate need of blood. Senses dulled, but very, very dangerous underneath. The edge of his mouth curves sharply to the side. “Clearly, you have your own Devils’ Day tricks planned.”

The pulse in his throat jumps sharply as I turn to look at Raz. His nostrils are flared, his eyes so violent and edged that when he turns them to me, I swear that I’m bleeding all over.

“You thought I kissed you because I had a plan?” I ask, trying to keep my anger from getting the better of me. “Like your plan last year? You’re an idiot, Calix Knight, and I’m not afraid of you.”

“Maybe you should be?” he replies, turning us onto the road that heads up toward the site of the Devils’ Day Party. I pop the top on the iced coffee drink and sip it as we come to a stop, taking it with me when we climb out. There’s no point in resisting; Barron and Raz are likely to just drag me along after them.

“Are we sure we want to do this?” Barron asks, but Calix ignores him as he marches off through the woods, the only one of these three boys that absorbs darkness like an impossible void.

“Do what?” I ask as Raz shoulders me out of the way to move past.

“We’re doing it,” he says as I consider if I should turn and run. But this is something that hasn’t happened on any other day. And if they’ve had it planned for a week, that means it’s something that could’ve happened at any time. But only on this day have I managed to get this series of events to play out. “We worked really hard on this one.”

The Knight Crew takes me past the train and deeper into the woods, toward the treehouse cabins where I lost my virginity last year. *Fuck*. They’d said they planned on locking me in the cabin where Calix and I slept together. Guess that’s happening even earlier today.

We indeed head to that very same cabin, and I climb the ladder willingly. Honestly, I’m sort of excited to be locked in. I can rest all day by myself then fall asleep at night to start the day over again.

After what happened with Raz, I could use a break.

A lump forms in my throat, but I push it back.

Raz likes me; I know that now. No matter how many resets I’m forced to participate in, I’ll never forget that.

Barron unlocks the door with a large golden key he pulls from inside his hoodie pocket then pushes it open, revealing Luke and Sonja, naked and in bed together.

My eyes widen, and I clamp my hand down on the cool glass bottle of the coffee to keep myself from having an overreaction. That’s *exactly* what the Knight Crew wants me to do, and I refuse to humor them.

“Karma,” Luke chokes out, gathering the blankets up to her chest while Sonja turns forward and crosses her legs, breasts up and out. She smirks at me, and I’m flooded with memories of me and Raz, of how Sonja and Luke are like an echo of us together.

“Tell Karma you’re a part of the Knight Crew now,” Sonja says, turning back to look at Luke. My bestie’s eyes are downcast and dark with embarrassment, but she has no idea how fucking mad I am. No goddamn clue.

This isn’t the first day she’s done this, is it?

I’ve just never seen it before.

That means every day before this, she was lying to me. And not just about the phone call with my moms. She not only refused to share a secret with me that she knew I could understand, but she *actively* lied about it.

“Well, I happen to still be a virgin.”

Her words from the first day ring in my ears as I look at her with some expression of abject horror on my face. Luke’s eyes widen in response as she looks from Sonja and back to me. Her blue anime hair is stuck to her sweaty forehead as she clutches the blankets close.

“Tell her she’s a useless whore,” Sonja says, and *déjà vu* floods over me. “Tell her that she isn’t worth the air in her lungs.” Luke makes a sound of protest, but she doesn’t stop Sonja’s ugly words. The very same words Calix gave me that day I tried to join the Knight Crew, the ones I told to Pearl. The ones that made her kill herself. I struggle to think how I’d feel right now if I hadn’t witnessed this all before, if this was my very first Devils’ Day. “Tell her that the whole world would be happier if she were dead.”

“I can’t say any of that,” Luke whispers, shaking as she stares at Sonja and then turns back to me. Now she looks as if we’ve *both* betrayed her. “I would *never* speak to anybody like that, especially not somebody I love.”

“Well then,” Sonja says, standing up as Raz leans his shoulder against the wall and grins, watching me with the dark eyes of a hungry predator. Such a change from yesterday, when we shared a tub of chocolate ice cream and cuddled. *Fuck my life*. “Guess I’ll just have to take this with me.” Sonja grabs her phone from what looks like a charging station on a shelf, and proceeds to flash the screen at us, showing a still from an explicit video.



I don't see much, just Luke's bare breasts, but it's enough for me to understand what's going on here.

Sonja's been recording them.

My stomach knots up as I turn to look at Calix, my breath coming in heavy pants. I mean, for the Knight Crew to have arranged this meeting, that means they planned it. So they must've planned what happened with me and Calix, too, right? They really *did* engineer the whole thing. Raz seemed to think so yesterday. My head spins as a momentary bout of dizziness overtakes me.

All this time, every single day for three hundred and sixty-five fucking days, this asshole has been telling the truth? He was pranking me, that was it.

That's all it ever was.

Deep down, I wondered if he were harboring secret feelings for me. If he changed his tune because his friends had shown up and caught us.

But that wasn't the case.

That wasn't the case at all.

My knees feel weak, and I end up putting a hand on the wall to steady myself.

Calix ... I'd always thought that Calix liked me. But all along, it was Raz? My mind is blown.

"Are you going to post this at the same time you post the other one?" I snap, turning sharp eyes on Sonja. The look of confusion in her face is almost believable.

"Sonja ..." Luke starts, her voice soft and almost tender. It kills me to hear her sound like that, like I did last year when I fell into Calix's arms like a fool. "What's going on?"

"Happy Devils' Day, bitch," Sonja says, yanking her blazer and skirt on and gathering up the rest of her clothes from the floor. As she does, I swear I see something melancholic flash in her green eyes, but it's gone in an instant and I'm left wondering if I imagined it. "Thanks for the cherry, baby."

Sonja storms out the cabin door and Raz follows, sneering at me as he goes.

I can't even begin to decipher the way that sneer makes me feel, how empty and sad and lonely. So I don't bother, pushing the

emotion down, burying it in the shadows of a broken heart.

“Lock them both in here,” Calix says as he slips past, moving out the door and avoiding my stare. He has a triumphant smirk on his face, but he doesn’t look at me. Not even once.

“Why?” Luke whispers, looking down at the blankets as Barron steps up to me and grabs my chin. He stares into my face for a moment before giving a small half-smile and pulling the golden key from his pocket again. He places it in my palm before pushing my face away.

“Maybe don’t come to school today?” Barron suggests, stepping past me and closing the cabin door behind him. He disappears, leaving the sweet scent of cherry candy and laundry soap in his wake.

I turn back to Luke and find her sitting with silent tears rolling down her cheeks.

Whereas I’d abandoned her and April to be with the Knight Crew, she didn’t make the same mistake. Luke stuck to her guns, to her heart, and she is a vastly better human being than me—even if she lied about Sonja. I will not forget that.

“Are you okay?” I whisper, feeling guilty, wondering if she’d be happier if she had just said it, if Sonja would’ve let her go with them then. It’s a possibility. At this point, I’m starting to wonder if each and every member of the Knight Crew is a sociopath.

“I’m ... are we really locked in here?” Luke asks, looking at the two tiny windows, boarded over on the outside to try and discourage break-ins. Discourage, being the key word. “Because I could really use a moment to myself right now.”

“Barron gave me the key,” I start, looking down and opening my palm. The gold key catches the light, turning dust motes into faeries. It feels for the briefest of instances that we’re in another world entirely.

“Yeah, and you don’t think there’s not a lock on the outside?” Luke asks, flushing from head to toe. I should be furious with her, and I am. But I’m also aching for her at the same time, remembering how it felt last year when Calix screwed me over. I turn and try the knob, feeling like a complete and total idiot. Again, I thought *maybe* in his weird way, Barron might be okay with me, too. Obviously not. “Great.”

Typical fucking Barron—give me the key, act like he’s doing me a favor, but in reality, he’s fucking me over just as much as his asshole friends.

“Do you have your phone?” I ask, turning as I realize I left mine in my car, the car that’s still sitting at the gas station. Wow. Today *sucks*. I’m never kissing Calix again. Unfortunately, I can’t unsee what we walked into, Luke and Sonja’s mouths clashing in heat, their hands between each other’s legs.

I feel dizzy again. The last thing I want is the image of my bestie banging a bully in my mind. Then again, in most of these timelines, Luke has to see me with one. Maybe I understand how my moms feel just a little bit better.

“It was right here,” Luke chokes out, searching frantically around the nightstand that was closest to where Calix was standing. Great. “Fuck!” she screams, leaning forward and putting her forehead on her knees. “This is the goddamn worst. The *worst*. I didn’t want you to find out this way.”

“Yeah?” I ask, cocking a skeptical brow and putting my fist on my popped hip. “How did you want me to find out?”

“I was going to tell you ...” she starts, trailing off as she realizes what a cop-out statement that is. “We’ve been sleeping together for a while now.”

“How long?” I gather her clothes from the floor and toss the pile into her lap, trying to control my rage. It’s not fair of me. It’s hypocritical as fuck, but I can’t help myself.

“Since last year’s Devils’ Day,” Luke whispers, keeping her eyes downcast.

Now that, that is a blow.

I exhale sharply, closing my eyes and wishing I had my mask with me. Instead, it’s back at the gas station, in my abandoned car. *If this were day one of this nightmare, I’d be terrified about Little Bee, about her getting towed away, about how it might look that my mangled car was left in the parking lot.* Interesting how a little perspective can change everything.

I care little to nothing about my car right now.

“You’ve been sleeping together for a whole year?” I repeat, sitting down heavily on the edge of the bed. No way I’m moving any further onto it. If I happened to sit in a wet spot ... well, I’d just

rather not test the fates. “How? Why?” I glance back at Luke, my mind whirling with all the new things I’ve learned in the last ... week? How many days has it been since this started? I should probably be keeping track.

A quick count in my head tells me it’s been six. Six, long, strange days on repeat. Seven, if you count the first day.

“How?” Luke echoes, yanking her shirt over her head and not bothering with a bra. Like me, she probably realizes that we’ll likely be stuck in here all day. As far as pranks go, it isn’t a big deal. Maybe it would have been, on day one, but a lot’s changed since then. *Raz was spitting mad today, wasn’t he?* After yesterday, after all those revelations, my heart feels shattered and raw.

Behind all of that anger and rage, Raz is just ... waiting for me.

In the span of just a few hours, he can be mine.

But I can never keep him.

Not with my world the way it is, a continuous cycle of a day that should have only happened once.

“How is ...” Luke starts and then shakes her head, as if to clear it. “Sonja found me while you were with Calix last year. But ... then after, I went looking for you, and then you called me, and well, I couldn’t exactly tell you with your heart broken to pieces.”

My mouth tightens and I look toward the boarded-up window, wishing I could see out and into the thick canopy of the trees. *“Karma.” Calix’s fingers light on my shoulder as I stare out into the darkness, at the strings of yellow Edison bulbs clinging to the tree limbs. “Come back to bed.”*

“I kept looking for the perfect moment to tell you, but Sonja wanted to keep our relationship a secret.” I hear the blankets rustle behind me and keep my gaze straight ahead, so Luke can slip back into her skirt and panties.

“And you didn’t see any problem with that? Fucking a member of the Knight Crew and keeping it a dirty, little secret? She’s been using you, Luke.”

“No,” Luke says firmly as I turn back to look her, her blue hair mussed up, her lips slightly swollen from Sonja’s kisses. My nose wrinkles, but how can I be so judgmental when—according to my own timeline—I slept with Sonja’s male clone just yesterday. My chest clenches with pain as I remember curling up against Raz’s

side, of murmuring sleepily until the wee hours of the morning. “She’s just ... damaged. They all are, you know? The Knight Crew.”

“That excuses the way they treat people then?” I ask, feeling a guilty pit in my stomach when I think of Pearl and the things I said to her. *She killed herself because of you, Karma.* At some point, I’m going to have to find her. If she’s that close to the edge, then I can’t just keep living day after day without doing something.

What was it that Luke said? That I needed to master my environment? Master my own timeline ...

“It doesn’t excuse anything.” Luke is standing up now, at the edge of the bed. As I turn to glance at her, she redirects her gaze to the floor, shame apparent in her expression. “People are imperfect; they make mistakes. Some people just make more than others. I’m sorry that I lied to you, Karma, or that the Knight Crew thought bringing you here was awful enough to count as a Devils’ Day prank.”

On a different day, in a different timeline, I’d be furious with Luke. I’d yell. I’d scream. I’d say things that I regretted.

Instead, I squeeze my skirt in my fist and close my eyes, searching to control my temper, to bring my emotions in check.

“Are you bleeding?” Luke blurts suddenly, stumbling in her haste to get around the bed and kneel in front of me. She reaches out, as if to brush my hair back from the dried blood on my forehead, but stops at the last second. “Did they hurt you?” Her voice hardens to a steel-edged blade, and I know that if the Knight Crew really had escalated to physical violence, Luke would lose her shit.

“I crashed my car into Calix’s,” I say, the line as familiar to me as any other in this cosmic comedy of errors that makes up my life. My lips twitch into a small smile as Luke’s brown eyes widen and she struggles to choke back a sound a surprise. “I was driving by the Gas and Go, and I saw him out the window, filling up that stupid Aston Martin ...” My words trail off as I remember the look on Calix’s face, drawn and tired, loneliness etched into the shape of his mouth, barely repressed rage glinting in his dark eyes. “He looked so sad and lonely, Luke. He doesn’t *get* to look sad and lonely. He’s handsome, rich, he has friends, he rules the school ...” My eyes sting as I suck in a sharp breath. *And all this time, I was operating under some bullshit lie I told myself to survive. Calix really did play me last year, didn’t he?*

“Karma,” Luke says, starting to put her hand on my knee and withdrawing it. “Uh, I would touch you, but ...”

A laugh escapes me as I recall the scene I just walked in on.

“Please don’t, until you wash your hands.” We look at each other, and then we both just start laughing, and we don’t stop until tears are bleeding down both our faces. It takes Luke a second to realize mine are real, and she curses, dumping her book bag on the floor and grabbing a small container of hand sanitizer. Luke’s always joking that if a pandemic occurred, toilet paper and sanitizer would be the first items to go, that they’d be used as currency in place of money. She has a small hoarded stash back at her dorm room.

After she cleans her hands, she throws her arms around me and hugs me close.

“Sonja tried to act like she was playing me today, but do you really think even a monster like her would spend a whole year courting me in private for such a stupid joke?”

“I ...” I start, unsure of where, exactly, she’s going with this. “What does that have to do with Calix? He very clearly doesn’t care about me. Do you know what I did this morning to make him so mad? I kissed him and asked him if he liked me. That’s it. That’s what brought me here.” I don’t feel like re-explaining the time loop to Luke, so I don’t.

She smiles at me, sitting back on her ass on the hardwood floor.

“Of course that pissed him off. He very clearly can’t handle rejection or the disappointment of others. Kissing him like that ... he’d have to think you were bullshitting him. That, or he was worried about what would happen when Raz and Barron saw you.”

*Raz* ... My heart skips a beat and I feel suddenly choked up. The intimacy between us yesterday was like stained glass, perfect and beautiful, but so easy to break.

“They set you up the same way they set me up,” I say, hating how much I want Luke to be right. “Sonja recorded you two together; she tried to get you to say those fucked-up things to me.”

“She’s as broken as the rest of them. They might be friends, but they’re not like us. They think their vulnerabilities make them weak. Instead, what they don’t realize, is showing another human your flaws and your imperfections, your dreams and desires, that’s true strength.”

My eyes fill with tears again.

“I love you, Luke. I don’t say it enough, but it’s true. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Same girl, same,” she says, sitting up enough to wrap her arms around my waist. “I love you, too. Now, how the hell do we get out of here?”



The answer to Luke’s question is: we don’t.

Even after she gets up the guts to break one of the windows, the plywood is impossible to get loose. It must be screwed in in multiple places.

“This fucking sucks,” she groans as the night sky gets dark, and we both hear the beginning notes of the metal band that the Knight Crew invited to play. “Hopefully April stays home tonight. I don’t like the idea of her going to the Devils’ Day Party without us.”

“As monstrous as our classmates are, they seem to draw the line at hurting a pregnant woman,” I say, leaving out the little detail about how we were all locked inside the mouth of the Devils’ Den once upon a time.

“I suppose,” Luke hazards, and we both pause at the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Heavy footsteps. “That’s not April ...” she says, standing up and grabbing a heavy book from one of the low shelves. They decorate the rounded walls of the tiny single room cabin with its airplane-sized attached bathroom, but there’s little on them to use as a weapon. I decide on a round glass bauble, figuring I could hit any would-be attacker in the temple with it. On the plus side, if I do die here tonight, I’ll just wake up at the gas station tomorrow. No big deal.

Only ... it sort of is, isn’t it?

The padlock on the door hits the deck outside, the sound of metal on wood making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. If this is the Knight Crew, dressed in masks and bullshit, come to drag us into the woods, then I’m going to fight back.

The door swings open, Barron leaning his shoulder against the jamb, a small key dangling from his right hand. He’s wearing a different mask today, one I’ve never seen before.

A butterfly mask

A *Diana fritillary* butterfly mask, in orange and black. He has on the same strange white coat, exposing his chest and all of his tattoos, the long white tails curling on the ground behind him like the hindwings of a butterfly.

“Off you go,” he says to Luke before turning his multi-colored gaze on me. I very purposefully put the glass bauble down, just to let him know how close I was to hitting him with the damn thing. “Sonja’s waiting at the bonfire.”

“I’m not leaving Karma here with you,” Luke scoffs, her sports bra—she definitely is not into frilly bras of any kind—hanging out of the pocket of her unbuttoned blazer. She pulls her goblin mask from her other pocket and slips it on. “Especially after the shit you pulled this morning. Shame on you.”

“Oh, yes, shame on us,” Barron deadpans, tucking the padlock key into the pocket of his black leather pants. He’s barefoot, his rainbow Mohawk slicked back down the center of his head, the short dark hair on either side shaved with a matching design buzzed in. My lips tingle suddenly, remembering the deliciously wicked kiss we shared on the first night. “If you’d rather, I could lock you in until tomorrow morning? That’s what Raz wants.”

“Why are you doing this?” I ask as I gather my shoes and socks, throwing my blazer over my arm as Luke lifts the book between her and Barron like a weapon, sidling past him and out the door. He glances back at me, his expression difficult to read on the best of days, let alone tucked underneath a mask.

*What did I do today to get him to wear this mask?* I wonder, pondering over my actions from this morning.

“Nature likes balance,” he replies, which is creepy as hell, especially in that low, dark voice of his. “Come with me.” He steps back and turns, moving down the stairs with heavy footfalls.

“He’s so ... *off*,” Luke whispers, rolling her eyes as we head down the steps after him. I’m not sure what’s going to happen between her and Sonja, but I’m curious to find out. “Why is he always eating? Besides being a possible serial killer, the only thing I can pinpoint for his future is that he’s going to develop type two diabetes before the age of twenty-five.”

“Oh my god, Luke,” I murmur, pausing at the bottom of the steps, the glow of the Edison bulbs bringing Barron’s colorful hair to life. Whatever gel he’s used to slick it back seems to have glitter in it, causing his hair as well as his chest to sparkle as he moves.



“Get lost, Lucille,” he says, gesturing with his chin in the direction of the smoke from the bonfire. “Karma and I have business.”

“I’m not leaving her here with you,” Luke blurts out, frowning in disgust, the hideous green goblin mask lending an air of fantasy to her expression. “And I’m not going to run off and throw myself into Sonja’s arms after the bullshit she pulled this morning. Karma and I are leaving.”

“What business do we have?” I ask Barron, unable to resist the bait of his words. If this were a normal night, I’d happily leave with Luke and spend the rest of the night getting high and snacking, watching shitty old movies. But that won’t stop the cycle I’m stuck in. Luke said I needed to master my environment. Well, I know these woods, the school, the town, like the back of my hand. What else could that mean then, if not the people that populate it?

Barron says nothing, leaning his big body against the trunk of a tree and pulling a plastic-wrapped rock candy sucker from the front pocket of his strange coat. He removes the wrapper, tucks it away again, and carefully wraps his tongue around the end.

“Luke, I’ll catch up,” I promise, glancing back at her with a brief nod. “If I’m not at the bonfire in fifteen minutes, come find me.”

She gives Barron a hesitant look, but finally sighs and gives me one more quick hug.

“I’m going to see if I can’t get my phone back to call April.” Luke takes off into the trees as I turn back to Barron, the intensity of his stare making me shiver.

“Come with me,” he says, turning and heading into the darkness of the woods with no explanation. Strange laughter rings out around us, punctuated by small shrieks of joy, and the occasional thready, desperate moan.

I set my shoes, socks, and blazer on the bottom step leading up to the treehouse, and then match my footsteps to Barron’s. He seems to have a knack for picking his way through the dark and avoiding thorny plants and the sharp edges of dry twigs. My feet are so small that they fit easily inside his prints.

After a while, the distant glow of the cabin lights fades away, plunging us into inky blackness. Threads of silver moonlight tease the earth in silver stripes, here and there, but their presence only detracts from my night vision, making it even harder to see.

Barron pulls a tiny LED flashlight from his pocket and flicks it on, guiding us down the steep edge of a ravine. He pauses about halfway down, turning and holding a hand out for me. Licking my lower lip, I take it, realizing that it's probably already been fifteen minutes and that Luke might be looking for me.

"Sonja knows where I'm taking you," Barron replies, his words strange and heavy in the endless darkness. The woods are far from silent, the creek at the bottom of the ravine burbling softly, the sound of frogs and crickets almost deafening. "She can tell Luke."

"If you knew this was going to take a while, you should've warned me," I say, placing my hand in his. His fingers are surprisingly warm, his grip tight as he pulls me a tad roughly down the hill, causing me to stumble and fall into his arms. Barron sets me down at the bottom of the ravine and releases me, still sucking on that stupid rock candy sucker. "Why are you always eating?" I ask, because now isn't the time for subtlety or shyness. I only have so much time each day to learn what I can about the people that influence every aspect of my life. Barron is one of those people, whether I like it or not.

"Because it's better than other things I could be doing," he replies easily, wading through the creek and not caring that it gets the ankles of his pants wet. I'm dressed in my Crescent Prep uniform still, and my skirt is far too short to touch the water, so I follow after him, shivering a bit. It's always a bit nippy during the Devils' Day Party, but it never seems to matter because of the bonfire and the booze.

It's a bit too cold for my liking out here.

But I'm intrigued.

"Like what other things?" I ask as his flashlight beam sweeps the trunks of slash and longleaf pines, interspersed with oaks and maples, an occasional cherry or hawthorn tree dotting the dark landscape. Last year, our biology class took a whole month to study the local landscape. Apparently, I've retained a lot more of that information than I thought.

"Like alcohol," he says, and I pause, long enough that Barron has to stop and turn, lighting my body up with his flashlight. "I'm an alcoholic, Karma. Or I was. I've just switched one poison out for another." He sucks on his candy for emphasis, turning his tongue purple as he flicks the flashlight up to point at his chin. "Sugar might kill me eventually, but I don't hurt people when I overdose on it. So for now, this works. Come on."

Barron drops the flashlight down and turns, leading the way deeper into the woods.

I follow him. What's the worst that could happen? I die and wake up at the gas station again? But as awful as the Knight Crew is, I don't think they're capable of murder. Or rape. Following a boy that bullies me into the woods is not the best idea ever, but I'm feeling bold tonight, almost invincible, thanks to my universal resets.

Hopefully I don't wake up at the Gas and Go, regretting this moment.

Fireflies appear after a while, blinking in strange synchronization, and lighting up the darkness. The presence of their little lights makes me smile.

"Did you know there's a species of fireflies where the females blink their lights to draw in potential suitors, and then eat them?" Barron says absently, turning to look at me over his shoulder. "They remind me of you."

"Oh, do they?" I ask dryly, feeling irritation prickle my skin. "You're right: I lured Calix in last year, forced him to confess his love to me. How could I have forgotten?"

"I wasn't just talking about Calix."

Barron pauses at the edge of a limestone formation, shining the light at the narrow V-shaped crevice that leads between the two soaring rock towers. A bit of red-brown glimmers at the edge of the rocks, like someone cut their hand trying to get in or something. If it's not a bloodstain, it sure as hell looks like one.

My mind strays to the cut I noticed on Barron's left hand this morning, and the tiny red droplets on the wings of the butterfly in the necklace. The blood drains from my own face, and I feel suddenly lightheaded and dizzy.

"Be careful climbing through here; the rocks are sharp on the sides." He starts climbing, in bare feet no less, and then slips into the crevice. The flashlight illuminates the opening from the inside as he waits for me to follow. My heart is pounding, but I can't resist the lure of the unknown, this day so different from all of the others.

Against my better judgement, I follow him, heart racing as I warily pick my way up the ragged edges of the limestone. It forms in sheets, one layer on top of the other. There's a smooth, table-like surface at the top that I balance on before avoiding the bloodstained rocks and grabbing a natural handhold in the stone.

I drop down to the soft dirt on the other side with a grunt, maidenhair ferns tickling my ankles. If I'd thought it was dark in the woods, this little valley between the two rock formations takes that darkness to a whole new level. The edges of each rock curve inward, meeting in a ragged kiss over our heads, blocking the pinpricks of stars.

“What are we doing here?” I ask as Barron turns to look at me, digging a box from his pocket. He passes it over to me, and my eyes widen as I recognize the red jewelry box as the one that I received from the Devils' Day Committee. Inside, I know what I'm going to find: an orange and black, male *Diana fritillaria* butterfly.

“I was going to have this sent to your class, but plans changed.” He hands the box over, our fingertips touching with a zing that reminds me, oddly enough, of Raz. My cheeks flush as I pop the top and find the now-familiar necklace, the butterfly's still wings encased in resin, droplets of what I can only guess is Barron's blood staining the specimen. I lift my head up, mouth in a small 'O' of surprise. I don't have to fake my surprise: I'd suspected Barron was the one to send me the necklace, but I never thought he'd go out of his way to give it to me.

“You know this is an endangered species, right? And the state butterfly of Arkansas?” I don't mean to sound like an asshole, but I still can't decide if his gifting me the necklace is meant as a gift or a prank.

“I know. I didn't kill it; I found it dead.” He nods his chin to the dark crevice surrounding us. “Here.” Barron turns the flashlight down to the fern-dotted forest floor, still damp from this morning's rain. “Look,” he commands, and I follow his attention down to our bare feet ... and the dozens of blue-black and orange-black butterflies dead on the ground. *Female and male Diana fritillaries*, I think, remembering that their species has strong sexual dimorphism, that is, when males and females appear quite different in a species.

“Where did they all come from?” I breathe as Barron redirects the beam of the flashlight to the rock ceiling above our heads. The necklace nearly falls from my hands as I gasp, my eyes wide as I look up to see hundreds—more like *thousands*—of butterflies above our heads, their wings fanning slowly as they rest on the limestone rock.

“I assume one got in here to lay its eggs, and when the larvae hatched, they got trapped.” He shrugs his broad shoulders, causing

the light to bob slightly with the motion. “Or maybe I’m totally full of shit, but I keep coming back here, and they haven’t left.”

“How did you find this place?” I ask, rubbing my thumb over the smooth surface of the necklace. I feel much better about it, knowing that the butterfly was found dead.

“I come out here to draw,” Barron answers, and I wonder if, like with Raz, this is the single longest conversation we’ve ever had. “Stumbled on it. When I saw them, I thought of you.”

“When you saw hundreds of dead butterflies, you thought of me? That’s not at all creepy.”

Barron laughs, dark and low, as deep as the shadows surrounding us. We’ve been going to the same school for three years now, and all I *really* know about him is that he makes impersonal art, has a little sister who attends Burberry Prep Academy in California, and that his parents have disturbingly questionable political ties with Russia. His mother works in Washington, D.C. with Raz’s dad. Frankly, both their families’ politics suck.

But that’s all I know, facts.

I can’t quite figure his motivation here.

His lush mouth twists to one side in a smile. Unlike Calix, it’s not too rare to catch a smile on Barron’s lips. Sometimes, his eyes even reflect his mirth. But directed at me like that? I’m not sure that I’ve ever felt something so deeply in my bones.

“You did a freshman project on them,” he says, his voice echoing slightly off the curved rock walls. “I remembered it, so when I saw them, I thought I’d send you one for Devils’ Day.”

“Why would you send me anything for Devils’ Day at all?” I wonder as Barron steps forward and hands me the flashlight. I take it, slightly confused at his motivations, until I realize he’s planning on putting the necklace on for me. As soon as he takes it from the box, I turn around, putting my back to his front.

When I thought about Raz’s behavior yesterday, everything fell into place. I could recall dozens of scenarios in a given week when he might look at me, talk to me, tease me. But Barron is so reserved, so closed-off. I am most definitely *not* the sole focus in his day.

“Your friend, Luke, she has big lady balls.”

“Also known as ovaries,” I say, and Barron laughs, the sound ruffling my hair against the back of my neck. My body goes

completely stiff, my heart thundering as he hooks the ends of the necklace together, fingers dancing over my shoulders and down my arms. I look back at him, but without the flashlight, he's nothing but a shadow in the dark, the glitter on his mask catching the smallest hint of moonlight, peeking through in a single crack in the rock. "What does any of this have to do with Luke?"

"I've been looking for an excuse to talk to you," he says as I turn around and Barron steps back, pausing and looking down, causing me to swing the light in the same direction. We're stepping all over the dead butterflies, the orange, blue, and black pigments in their wings staining the skin of our dirty feet.

With a small gasp, I kneel down to check some of the others, assuring myself that they are, in fact, dead, and not just paralyzed from the cold. Not a single one of them moves at all, their abdomens curled forward, wings worn away and disintegrating into the dirt.

Still, it doesn't feel right, to crush their fragile bodies like this.

"Why would you need an excuse to talk to me?" I ask, rising to my feet.

"If someone like Luke trusts and loves you as much as she does, well, that's enough for me."

"Enough for *what*?" I grind out, remembering yesterday, when Raz and Sonja told me that Barron had—quote—*impossible standards*.

He steps forward, grabbing my face with two hands, his thumbs curving beneath my chin, lifting my face up to meet his. Barron leans down and captures my lips, taking them hostage with a strong hot tongue and the teasing edges of teeth. He tastes like the devils I'm supposed to be avoiding on this most unholy of all nights. Even Halloween is nothing when paired up with Devils' Day; All Hallows' Eve is the bastard child of this wicked night.

Barron keeps me still, even when I might pull away, and before I realize it, my palms are lying flat against his chest. When I try to move closer, he resists, keeping me in place with his hands cupping my head.

The flashlight is stuck between my palm and his chest, pointing up at his face and limning it in strange light.

"I debated whether to give you a male or female," he says, flicking his eyes down, as if he can see the dead butterflies lining the forest floor. His dual-colored gaze turns back to me, terrifying in its

intensity. I'm still not fooled, but *damn*, the boy knows how to kiss. "After a while, I knew it had to be a male."

"Why?" I ask as Barron steps back, gently extracting the flashlight from my grip.

"Because," he says, his mouth a wry twist of lips, darkly playful, almost ... interesting. "I knew you'd never appreciate an analogy where the female is kept trapped in a resin cage." He moves to the opening in the rock, and then expertly hauls himself out, glancing over his shoulder. For a moment, I expect him to extend a hand out to help me. But I should've known: this is Barron Farrar we're talking about. "I'll see you later, Karma."

He hops down and then takes off, flashlight beam streaking across the trees as I shout his name.

"Barron Farrar, get your ass back here!" I scream, voice echoing off the walls of the cave. With a curse and a sudden shiver of terror, I do my best to fumble my way out of the opening, remembering just in time not to touch the jagged bit where Barron must've cut his hand before. He didn't say as much, but I'm getting good at putting puzzle pieces together.

I hop down onto the soft earth, noticing a lantern in the distance.

Once I come up on that one, burning soft and low, there's another, then another. Eventually, I find myself back at the bonfire with everyone else, but I don't see Barron again that night.

Instead, I return back to the cabin, and let myself drift off into a strangely peaceful sleep.

The next several days, I experiment with different ways to start the morning. One thing that I can pinpoint for sure: if I piss off two of the three boys, we go to the woods to see Luke. Otherwise, it never occurs.

And that, that is the part that intrigues me.

That means on day one, when I hit Calix's car, and he and Raz were acting like monumental dicks ... they weren't really that mad at all.



I've spent half of the last week locked in the cabin with Luke, so today, when I open my eyes and see that there's blood all over my steering wheel, I decide to try a different approach. As soon as I sit up, I lock the door, and take off before Calix can confront me—just like I did on the day that Raz and I ...

*Raz.*

Is it weird that I miss him? My heart keeps telling me that we settled things, that there's an attraction between us that's too electric to ignore. Yet, he remembers none of that. As far as he's concerned, he hates me as much today as he has any other day.

With a sigh, I head back to the school, clean up, and then proceed to stay the *fuck* out of the Knight Crew's way, watching them when they arrive on campus, during breaks and lunch, but without them ever seeing me.

"Is the Knight Crew just extra scary today or are you up to something?" Luke asks me after school, when I slip into her car for a ride. April takes the front seat, and we pull out of the parking lot. Mentally, I'm calculating their movements, Barron's mostly.

If I start the morning upsetting Calix and Raz, but leaving Barron alone, he lets us out of the cabin, and we head to see the butterflies again. Every night, despite knowing it's coming, I let him kiss me. My lips tingle, and I touch my fingertips to them, wondering about all the things I've learned.



Instead of asking about the candy he eats, or about his struggles with alcohol, I've led us down different paths.

*What's your favorite color?*

Orange.

*Are you planning on going to college?*

I'd rather not.

*What do you like to draw in that notebook of yours?*

Scenery, mostly. Sometimes girls.

That notebook ... I want to see what's inside of it.

So today, I let Luke take me home, missing my moms and sisters so much that the emotions surprise me. It's been over a week since I've seen them, and I hadn't realized it until just now.

"Are you okay, honey?" Mama Jane asks, appearing from the kitchen and asking if we all want tea, just like she asked me on day one.

"I'm fine, and no thank you," I tell her, taking April and Luke into my room to get my clothes. I'd sewn a dress just for today, but one of my little sisters—neither will cop to it—spilled spaghetti sauce on it, so I had to handwash it and hang it to dry.

When I woke up on the first day, it was missing from the clothesline.

So I do what I did before, and make a new outfit as quick as I can, leaving with my friends and heading to Luke's dorm.

"April, you're in Barron's art class, right?" I ask, and she nods as she waits for Luke to unlock the door, one hand cupped under her swollen belly.

"I am. He's pretty talented, actually. The teacher used his sketch of a loblolly pine as a lesson on light and shadows."

"Come on in and don't mind the mess," Luke says, holding the door open with her back and leaving the way open for April and me. With a groan, April sinks into one of the two cozy chairs in the center of the room. Dressed in blue velvet and tufted with silver buttons, they're one of Luke's projects. She found the pair of chairs on the side of the road, used some of the money her parents sent her for the fabric, and spent a whole week engrossed in their design and refurbishment.

There's a queen-sized bed to the left, with a nightstand on either side. On the opposite side of the room is a kitchenette with golden oak cabinets circa 1995, and a countertop in a particularly ... interesting shade of granite, a pale beige with orange and black streaks through it. The room reminds me of a motel room, save for the few pieces of furniture that Luke has put her personal touch on. That, and the art on the walls. The rest of the stuff—issued by Crescent Prep—is shabby at worst, standard and unremarkable at best.

I'm the only student in the whole school who lives at home, further setting me apart as a target. I imagine a lot of the hate I receive has to do with jealousy. Raz himself admitted that was the case.

"If you call this messy, what did you think of my room?" I say with a cocked brow. I know that Luke regularly cleans April's apartment for her. It's pretty cute actually, the way she clucks around like a mother hen, albeit one with bright blue hair and an obsession with Japanese anime.

"Good point," Luke says with a laugh, moving over to the small fridge and withdrawing several cold bottles of kombucha. I accept one gratefully. April, on the other hand, clamps a hand over her mouth.

"Please take that away from me; I feel like I might be sick."

Luke backs away, holding her hands up and out in surrender, the bottle of kombucha clutched in one fist. She swirls in a spin of purple plaid skirts and shakes her head.

"No kombucha, got it. Is there anything you do want?"

"Celery with peanut butter and little raisins," April groans, letting her head fall back in bliss, her glasses sliding up her nose, brunette braids hanging behind her. "*Please*. I'd do anything for it."

"My moms used to call that snack 'ants on a log'," I say with a grin. "Like, the celery is the branch, the peanut butter makes it brown, and the raisins are the ants ..."

"Don't say ants," April chokes out, shaking her head. "I've got strange triggers right now. Everything makes me feel sick."

"How's Thad doing?" I ask, realizing that I haven't been giving my girls much attention. What's the point of living in an endless cycle if I don't use at least some of it to catch up? Thad is April's boyfriend and baby daddy. They have that pure puppy love thing

going for them. I'm not sure if it'll last, but for now, the only things keeping them apart are their parents. They're both head over heels for each other, and they both wanted to keep the baby.

"Thad," April says with a girly little sigh. Both Luke and I exchange a glance, wrinkling up our faces in mock disgust. It's hard to ignore what I know about Sonja and Luke, but I can't spend an hour everyday convincing Luke that I'm living in a time loop, and therefore know about her and Sonja, even if the boys don't take me to the cabin in the morning. "He's living in Paris right now. His dad owns an artist cooperative where he steals paintings from the artists for like, pennies on the dollar, and resells them for millions to his rich buddies as a tax write-off ..." April trails off, and shakes her head, caught up on a tangent. "Anyway, Thad is staying there. They gave him his own apartment. He actually said they've been spoiling him between attempts to convince him that we should give the baby up to them for adoption."

"You're kidding me," Luke says, horror tainting her voice as she does something on her phone. Peeking over at her screen, expecting to see Sonja's name in her texts, I find her doing an online grocery order for celery, peanut butter, and raisins, with a rush delivery to the dorms. My lips twitch into a smile as I look back at April. "Obviously you told them to go eat their own toenails, right?"

"Thad and I want to get married and have a family." April shrugs her shoulders, rubbing her belly affectionately. "Maybe it doesn't make me a feminist, but that's what I want. To raise a bunch of kids with Thad in a cute pink house with a yard and a pet ferret. That's it."

"Oddly specific," I say with a soft smile and a laugh. "But that's what feminism is about: you make your own choices, whatever makes you happy. If it's a fucking ferret, it's a fucking ferret."

"Oh, the ferret is the most important part. Maybe I could get a t-shirt that says *Ferret-Loving Feminist Housewife*? That'd work for me."

"I will silkscreen you that shirt!" Luke says, finishing the order and then pointing at April in enthusiasm. "We'll all wear them when we go out for our weekly luncheons."

"We're going to have weekly luncheons, huh?" I say, lifting a dark brow in response. My natural hair is a blue-black, very similar to Calix's, which makes it a huge pain in the ass to dye. I had to bleach

it four times to get my hair the color it is now. “Where we will all live? I was thinking ... New York.”

“New Orleans, duh,” Luke says, glancing my way with a smile. “You’ll be the artist in residence, Karma; I’ll either be a manga artist or studying engineering at the university, probably both. April and Thad will move down there after they both turn eighteen, and we’ll help raise the baby—like a proper village.”

“Thad is deathly afraid of alligators, but I bet I could convince him with uh, the sexual act.”

“The sexual act?!” Luke howls, throwing her head back with a laugh. My heart pings strangely in my chest and my lips part in surprise. This is a completely different circumstance to day one, but yet, an eerily similar echo. “I thought I was the only person that called it that.”

“I don’t know why I said that,” April laughs, clutching her belly as she chuckles. “I swear, I’ve never used that term before. That’s the term my parents used when they caught me and Thad together. Fucking, that’s what I should’ve said. Fucking.”

“You’re such a goof,” Luke says, rolling her brown eyes and moving over to her closet. She takes out the sequin dress shirt I saw her wear the first day, with a strange bow tie made of sticks and dried flowers that I didn’t notice before. “Hey, question about the Devils’ Day Party tonight ... do we even want to go?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, thinking about Barron and his sketchbook. He most *definitely* had it with him on some of the nights I was there. What thing is it that I do that triggers him to bring the sketchbook or not, I can’t figure, but my plan is to steal it. I feel like to understand him, I have to see what’s inside.

“I mean, let’s just stay here. We’ll order in food. Karma and I can smoke weed, April you can OD on sugar, and we can ... I don’t know, what do girls do on sleepovers? Paint their nails?”

I roll my eyes at her. She’s been to plenty of sleepovers with me.

“You know better than that: we either paint our nails or fuck shit up.” I grin and Luke grins back, probably recalling that time in ninth grade when we snuck out of the moms’ house in the middle of the night, pedaled our bikes to the twenty-four hour convenience store, and stole some beers under the guise of buying powdered donuts.

“The donuts do not make us rebels of any sort or breed,” Luke says with total confidence. “So don’t even bring that up. But if

you're talking about the tiger thing ...”

“Can you two stop with the bromance and explain *both* the donut and the tiger thing to me, please?”

“Luke and I once climbed into a tiger’s cage at the wildcat refuge outside of Eureka Springs. The damn cat was even awake and watching us. Fortunately, it was one of the nice ones ...”

April shoves up from her chair and turns to face both me and Luke simultaneously, throwing her arms out to either side.

“You can’t tell me stuff like that and expect me to stay home on Devils’ Day. This is my first Devils’ Day Party; I have to go. Especially if you might climb into a tiger cage or ... I dunno, kill one of the Knight Crew with a package of powdered donuts.”

“I’m going to try to steal Barron’s sketchbook tonight,” I offer up, and Luke howls with laughter.

“Okay, okay,” she relents, shaking her suit out and lifting it higher with a grin. “This, I have to see.”



When we get to the party, the guard at the gate—wearing a grinning white fox mask—takes our phones and lets us through. We park Luke’s convertible next to Raz’s Shelby Cobra and my heart cracks a little in the middle.

“I’m going to sneak in,” I tell the girls as they climb out. I’ve switched up not only my mask today—trading it out for one of my moms’—but also my makeup, my outfit ... and my hair. I’ve dyed it half-bloodred and half-black. Pretty sure I’ve just bleached it to death, but if my assumptions are right, when I wake up, I’ll be back to my purple hair. After all, if I can die here and wake up without any injuries beyond what I got in the initial car crash, then I must not be ageing. My nails don’t seem to have grown out, nor the roots of my hair.

Time is quite literally standing still for me.

I’m not sure how I feel about that: important enough for time to bow down to ... or so insignificant that my entire life can be manipulated on a whim.

“If you see the Knight Crew, tell them I’m not here,” I say, smiling at Luke, who just so happens to be dressed in my original

mask. She gives me a thumbs-up, and I slink into the woods, dressed in a black ballgown that I wore for Halloween last year. It has flouncy skirts and a sleeveless, corset bodice with red ties down the back.

Lifting it up to move through the woods, I feel like some sort of dark princess, especially with the crown of branches on my head. Luke made it in about ten minutes after I told her how much I loved her bow tie. My new mask is a butterfly. It's black with silver sparkles, and most definitely not a Diana fritillary, but that's okay. Close enough.

Moving around the circular clearing where the bonfire's located, I keep my eyes out for the Knight Crew. Since I've been hiding Little Bee from them, they aren't able to drag it out here and make a throne of it. So where the fuck are they?

Eventually, I find them already tucked inside the train car, passing around several joints and a bottle of crazy expensive vodka. But it's just the three boys, nobody else yet, not even Sonja. *She's probably out looking for Luke.* The thought makes me frown.

"She has to know if we see her ugly fucking face around her, we're going to send Sonja to beat her ass silly." *Raz.* My heart clogs in my throat at the sound of his awful words, followed by a surge of wild rage. Wow. After all that I've learned about him, I never would've guessed he'd still be able to talk about me like that behind my back.

He's lucky I don't have a weapon of any kind on me right now.

"She's been calling my dad again," Calix says casually, and I pause, putting my fingertips up against the cold, steel sides of the train car. I'm wearing lace gloves today, but the metal seems to freeze the bits of my skin showing through the fabric. "That, and she threatened my brothers. Found a video they made on TikTok and then stalked her way into their emails. I thought if I let her hang with us, she'd back off, but she's only gotten worse."

"Let's find her and lock her in the Devils' Den tonight. She can spend the night there. I mean, you guys pussied out on our plan for this morning. It's Devils' Day; we have to prank somebody." *Raz,* again. Even without being able to see the boys, I know their voices. I could probably pick them out of a crowd, to be honest.

"Don't act like we were the only ones who didn't want to get Karma this morning." *Calix.* He pauses, and then exhales, like he's

either smoking or has just taken a huge sip of vodka. “You got all weird about it, too.”

“Like it even matters. She took off and we haven’t seen her since. Do you think she’ll be here tonight?” It’s interesting, how eager Raz sounds when he asks that. *So they obviously weren’t talking about me. Who then?*

“No clue,” Barron says, and I can hear a sound, like charcoal on paper, that distinctive scratching that makes my heart beat wildly. *Yes!* He has his fucking sketchbook, and I’m going to take it. “Why do you think she hit your car?”

Calix makes a small sound of disgust, his voice far away, distant.

“I have no fucking clue. Maybe she wanted a repeat of last year’s Devils’ Day Party?”

I have to resist the urge to punch the side of the train car. I settle with cursing him out inside my head instead. *Cocksucking son of a bitch.*

“You think she hit your car because she wanted you to fuck and run again? Adjust your expectations, Lix. To be honest, I was worried she was still into you. Not anymore, not after today.” *Oh, Raz ...*

“She obviously hit my car because she wanted my attention,” Calix snaps back, and this time, it’s Barron who laughs. There’s a bemusement to the sound, like he finds both of his friends completely and utterly ridiculous.

“She isn’t interested in either of you; she’s better than both of you.” Barron goes back to drawing as Raz scoffs in disgust.

*I can’t take anymore of this,* I think, moving around to the front of the train car and pausing in the doorway. They all pause to look at me. Calix is wearing yet a different outfit today—he seems to have as many outfits for the Devils’ Day Party as I have timelines. Tonight, he’s dressed in a red military jacket, undone and showing off his bare chest. It’s lined with silver buttons and silver caps on the shoulders. Paired with skintight black jeans and boots, he’s a vision in nightmare colors, his dark eyes lined with kohl, a crown of raven feathers and branches on his head, his black devil mask firmly in place.

“Who are you?” he asks casually, lazily, canting his head to one side.

“Are you deaf?” Raz asks, smoking a joint and looking me over like he’s enjoying what he sees. He’s wearing the same outfit as he did on night one—red leather pants slung criminally low, and a Luciferian sneer that brings goose bumps up on my arms. His tattoos catch the light from the lantern in the corner of the room, drawing my attention to a small crescent moon that I just vaguely recall pressing my lips against.

My gaze flicks to Barron who’s paused in his drawing to stare at me. On his lips sits a knowing smile.

He can tell it’s me.

I pull the pepper spray out of the small bag slung on my shoulder.

“Sorry boys,” I say, spraying all three of them before they can react. My hand clamps down on the sketchbook, and I take off out the door and into the woods, Raz howling in pain behind me.

“Who the fuck was that?!” he screams, voice echoing as I lift my skirts and sprint through the woods to the car. Luke’s put the top up as I asked, and left the doors unlocked. I climb in and hunker down in the back seat, panting heavily, shaking with adrenaline. The spicy scent of the pepper spray seems to cling to me, making my eyes burn. I have no choice but to open one of the back doors and sit on the ground against the tire. In the bag where I carried the pepper spray, I have a flashlight that reminds me of the one Barron uses when he takes me into the woods.

Clicking it on, I stare down at the page in front me.

The blood drains from my face, and my throat gets tight.

There’s a beautiful girl in charcoal, staring back at me, her smile almost too tight but happy, even if she doesn’t know it. Her eyes say she tries really hard, but she’s human, and she’s not perfect, and she fucks up a lot.

She’s standing in an alcove, beneath curving rock walls, a butterfly in her hand.

Baron’s drawn ... me. In a timeline he doesn’t even remember.

Choking on my own breaths, I keep flipping through the pages, realizing that I’m staining them with my tears.

He was right: he does like to draw scenery. He also likes to draw girls.

Or more specifically, *one* girl.



Me.

On the next page, I see myself kneeling on the grass in front of the gas station, tears streaming down my face. In the drawing, Barron stands behind me, a lollipop between his lips. I flip the page again. There's me, wearing the necklace. Next page. Me, sitting on the picnic table bench next to him. Next page. A drawing of me and him, kissing while my fingers toy with the key around his neck.

Holy shit.

Closing my eyes, I lean my head back against the car and try to process what I've just seen.

Barron draws me. He dates each piece, and, flipping back to the beginning, I see they go all the way back to freshman year.

That, and in some strange, small way, he remembers the other timelines.

My friends and family might not remember the day is going in repeat, not really, but they're here with me in heart and spirit; we're in this together. We'll get out of this together.

Barron steps around the rear of the car, crouching down beside me as he reaches up to push his mask away from his face. His beautiful eyes are red and weepy, but he doesn't say anything as he reaches out, grabs the corner of the sketchbook, and yanks it away from me.

"You remember the other timelines," I whisper, and he gives me a look like he's fighting between fury and genuine interest.

"I'm not very happy with you right now, Karma Sartain. Why don't you explain yourself before I decide to tell Raz and Calix where you are?"

"You told them it was me?" I ask, but when Barron doesn't respond, I realize that no, he hasn't. How could he tell them? The way he draws me ... It makes sense he'd keep it a secret. There's care and focus and attention in those drawings. "You deserve to be pepper sprayed, drawing me all these years while treating me like crap? That's some creepy stalker ass shit."

"What timelines?" he grinds out, looking down at the sketchbook. All the images he's drawn that show the timelines, he must've drawn today. So he's clearly been thinking about it. Obsessively so. I wonder if he does that every day? Draws what he can remember.

"All those scenes you drew in there, like me with the butterflies. Or ... at the gas station, crying? Even the one with us kissing, I

know about all of that. Because I lived it.”

He narrows his eyes at me, dropping into a full crouch and pushing the sleeves of his jacket up to reveal his black and gray tattoos.

“My eyes are killing me. Explain.” He rests his elbows on his knees, watching me with trepidation and unease, like he isn’t certain I’m not about to pepper spray him again. There’s a bit of betrayal in his eyes, too, like I let him down tonight.

“You and Raz and Calix were planning on taking me to the cabin in the morning, the treehouse cabin where Calix and I slept together last year. Sonja and Luke were there, and you were going to surprise me with that. Today, you decided not to do it, but that’s not always true. Some days, you do. And then you come and get me from the cabin after dark, lead me into the crevice in the woods with all the butterflies. We kiss, and then you run off after telling me that I’d prefer a male butterfly trapped in resin because I’d never accept a fairytale where the female was trapped like that.”

Barron stares back at me with equal parts frustration and confusion.

“Karma, you’ve lost your mind,” he whispers, but there’s a doubt there. *Something* about this is rubbing him the wrong way. “If you wanted to see my sketchbook, you could’ve asked.”

“And you’d have shown it to me?” I ask skeptically, raising my eyebrow. “Don’t act like you would have.”

He says nothing, rising to his feet and then, reluctantly, holding out a hand. I place my gloved hand in his, and he pulls me to my feet. Our bodies are too close, and his face seems raw and exposed without the red devil mask. Even with his eyes red rimmed and swollen, Barron is remarkably handsome, just as much a devil as either Raz or Calix, but in a different way. He’s like black and white, light and dark, a dichotomy of errors.

“Did Calix drive you here?” I ask and Barron shrugs one, large shoulder.

“Does it matter if I have his keys?” he replies, lifting a key fob out of his pocket with a single finger. We head over to the dented Aston Martin, and I slide into the front seat. Before we leave, Barron turns on the song “Shut Up” by *New Years Day*, and my heart lodges in my throat.

“This is my favorite band,” I tell him as he puts the car in reverse and then pauses to glance my way. He says nothing though, taking us back down the drive and pausing to get our phones at the gate.

Part of me wants to ask where we’re going, the rest doesn’t dare. I decide to lean back and enjoy the ride, surprised when we end up at Thorncrown Chapel, the glass and wood church near Eureka Springs.

“There’s a lock-in here tonight,” I say, but Barron just shakes his head as we pause at the bottom of the driveway, just in front of a chain that’s hung across the road. The sign reads *Closed*.

“There was supposed to be, but nobody showed up. By eleven, they decided to cancel, and everyone went home.”

“How do you know that?” I ask, my heart thundering as I consider the possibility that Barron is on a time loop of his own. But of course not.

“My parents are friends with the owner of the chapel.” Just that, a succinct response. Barron sneaks a honey-colored sucker from a bag between the front seats, and then climbs out, tearing the wrapper off and sticking it in his pocket as he goes. He slips the sucker between his lips, and then bends down to unlock the bolt on the chain with a key.

It seems that Barron has keys to everything.

He gets back in the car and drives us the rest of the way up the hill. We park and climb out into the moonlight, Barron’s rainbow-colored hair impressive in the ambient silver glow. He pauses to slip into the detached bathroom to wash his eyes while I stand at the end of the walkway and look up at the steep spires of Thorncrown Chapel with gently parted lips.

“Impressive,” I say as Barron pauses beside me, stray droplets of water catching on his lip. As I watch, he swipes his tongue across it to clear them away.

“Isn’t it?” He takes off walking, his sketchbook tucked under his arm, the long, curled white tails of his coat bobbing across the ground as he moves, barefoot, to the door, and unlocks it. Tonight, I’m down for any challenge.

I follow after him and inside, to the rows of pews, the dais at the fair end, and the Jurassic-like ferns decorating the interior. All the lights are off, but we don’t need them. The entire chapel is framed in

wood, and the walls are glass. We can see the woods from in here, the moon, the stars.

“How did you get the keys to this place?” I ask, briefly surprised that the chapel hasn’t already been broken into. I mean, it’s Devils’ Day for fuck’s sake. But then I remember that Devil Springs is the only town in the world to officially acknowledge the holiday. The world’s loss, I suppose.

“My parents wanted me to chaperone tonight, so they got me a set of keys.” Barron looks back at me, his wicked mouth curving into a slight smile. “Let’s draw something.” He heads up the aisle and takes a seat on the frontmost pew. After a moment of hesitation, I move up to sit beside him. “I like the new hair color,” he says casually, glancing my way and admiring the half-black, half-red locks cascading over my shoulders. “Very Devils’ Day of you.”

We sit close, our thighs maybe six inches apart.

Barron flips his sketchbook to a fresh page and lifts his pencil, his already-stained hand smearing charcoal as he starts drawing the dais, and the giant ferns on either side. He sketches me as I am now, wearing the ballgown and gloves, sitting on top of the podium. After a moment, I decide to humor him, and take up the same position.

“How do you know about the butterflies?” he asks me, still sketching. “Did you follow me?”

“Don’t rationalize or justify tonight,” I tell him, feeling my skin sparkle with moonlight and magic. “It’s Devils’ Day. Nothing makes sense.”

Barron’s smile gets a little wider as he continues to draw, finishing the picture relatively quickly and then standing up to bring it over to me. I’m perched on the edge of the podium, my booted feet crossed, my skirts frothing in black tulle around me.

“What do you think?” he asks, handing me his sketchbook.

The rawness in his face as he passes it over, the look in his dual-colored eyes ... I can tell that he knows the jig is up. You don’t just draw someone you don’t like over and over again, for years. And you most definitely don’t draw them so passionately. All the coldness and impersonal feeling I’ve seen in Barron’s other art ... that’s missing here. What’s in this sketchbook brims with possibilities, with *passion*. There’s an organic fluidity to it that speaks of understanding, of both his subject and how he sees her.

How he sees me.

Barron moves around behind me, so we can look at the drawings together.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper as he presses a kiss to the side of my neck, and I exhale in a wild rush. Sensation shivers across my skin as Barron reaches around me and hands over the necklace. “A male Diana fritillary, in orange and black, encased in resin and spattered with blood.” I open the box as Barron curses under his breath behind me. “Thank you, Barron.”

“I still don’t understand how you know all these things,” he says, but there’s a dark wonder in his voice that says he’s willing to leave it to the devilish spirits that are supposedly roaming the earth tonight.

Barron takes the necklace and hooks it around my neck, my eyes closing in pleasure as his fingers tease over my clavicle. The necklace sits heavy above the mounds of my breasts, propped up by the corset portion of the dress.

“I remember when you wore this for Halloween last year. I got home at dawn, and I started to draw you. I didn’t stop until my hand was bleeding from rubbing across the paper so much.” I shiver, realizing that in its own way, Barron’s love is just as dark and dangerous and toxic as Raz’s.

*Love. Did I just think the word ‘love’? This isn’t love; it’s obsession.*

And it isn’t sweet or lovely, it’s nightmarish, wicked, lurid at best.

There’s no part of me that wants to leave right now.

“That’s how you knew it was me?” I ask, almost disappointed. “The dress?”

Barron comes around to stand in front of me, and I open my thighs so he can step between them, cupping my face in his right hand. I lean my cheek into his palm, leaving it to my mask to keep me safe here, to protect me. Because this obsession, it’s going to hurt in the best possible way.

“No, it wasn’t the dress,” he says, leaning in, wearing the red devil’s mask. He seems to only wear the butterfly mask on days when I’ve managed to impress him *before* the party starts. “It was the curve of your lips, the shape of your face, your eyes. I’ve drawn you enough times, Karma; I could pick you out of any crowd.”

Barron leans in, teasing my mouth with his, cupping my chin in tight fingers as he licks my lower lip. For a long time now, my bullies have been hiding just this side of confession, hovering, waiting with their secret desires while they burned me on the outside by taunting me with mine.

Here we are, stripped bare together.

Just like me and Raz.

*Is there some way to get them both to confess on one day?* Even if they did, what would I do with that? How would I ever survive a tomorrow knowing I had to choose between them?

And then there's ... Calix.

I'm not even sure how to feel about Calix.

I lift my face up desperately towards Barron, but he pulls back, teasing me with his warm breath and the smell of honey from the lollipop. He kisses the edges of my mouth, moonlight shimmering off his rainbow hair and his mask, the glitter decorating his chest.

"Raz and Calix are both in love with you, just thought you should know," he says, almost matter-of-factly, but with a deep longing making his voice crack. "If that changes anything, I'll take you back to the party."

I pause as he lifts my chin up to look at him, standing between my legs in that white coat with the butterfly tails behind it, his pants low-slung enough that I can see the 'V' shape indents on his hips.

"You all treat me like shit," I retort, and Barron's mouth makes that beautiful smile again.

"Jealousy, maybe, has something to do with it." He leans in closer, teasing my mouth with his lips, brushing our bodies together without committing to anything at all. It's infuriating. I close my legs on him, squeezing his body between my thighs.

"Jealousy?" I ask, my voice thready and husky with desire. How could I not be turned-on in this moment? We're in a beautiful chapel in the middle of the woods, moonlight streaming through the glass panels in the walls and ceilings, the whisper of some Devils' Day magic in the air.

"Mm. Jealousy." Barron slips his tongue between my lips, cupping the back of my head, fingers digging into my red and black hair as he brings my face toward his. Our mouths slant together, fanning that ember in my belly to a raging flame. My fingernails dig into the

glittery surface of Barron's chest, marring his butterfly tattoo with angry red lines.

His left hand sneaks behind me, reaching for the laces that crisscross down the length of my spine. With an expert little tug, he manages to undo the knot, and I breathe an immediate sigh of relief as the pressure of the corset loosens.

"What are we doing here, time traveler?" he whispers against my mouth. His words are meant to be teasing, I think, but there's something else in them, a distant sort of hope that I might actually be telling the truth. I mean, it *is* Devils' Day. Who knows what's real and what's not?

"Why don't you tell me? You've been drawing me since freshman year. There must be a reason for that."

Barron chuckles against my lips and then draws back, pushing my frothing black skirts up, so he can see the length of my leg, naked and silver beneath the moonlight. He props my heeled boot up against his chest and starts to undo the laces, looking over at me from behind the safety of his mask.

"What do you want to do, Karma?"

"Not Trailer Park tonight then?" I ask, and Barron smiles tightly.

"Not tonight." He pulls my shoe off and tosses it aside, removing the sock underneath, and then digging his thumbs into the arch of my foot. For a moment there, I'm too shocked to move. Not only have I never had a foot massage before, I most definitely never thought I'd be getting one from the boy who bullies me for fun. "Does it bother you? Knowing that I've been watching you, drawing you all this time?"

"Considering you told me a sea of dead butterflies made you think of me, I'm not bothered or shocked by anything you might say."

"You see," he starts, really digging into my foot and making me groan. "That's what I'm not understanding. How do you know about the butterflies? You must've followed me. That, or you really are a time traveler." Barron releases my foot and moves to grab the other, pausing as I lift my own foot up and put the toe of my shoe to his lips. He grabs my foot and pushes it back down toward his chest. "Either way, I guess you've been paying attention to me. Why?"

"I have no idea," I respond honestly, letting him take my other shoe off. I always thought I was in love with Calix Knight. Maybe I still am? But what does that mean for me, that I can break these boys

of their cruelty so easily to see what lies underneath? I shouldn't have to put up with their bullshit, just because they're too afraid to admit that they're into me. "Why don't we just see where tonight takes us?"

His smile is slow and dark, full of temptation and secrets, as he strips my lace gloves off. He takes his time, plucking them away from my pale flesh, finger by finger, before tossing them aside. By the time he's finished, I'm shaking with need. Who knew having one's gloves taken off could be so ... erotic?

Barron kneels down between my legs, like a faerie prince, one who commands butterflies, who crushes them beneath his bare feet and wears their pretty ruined pigment like jewelry.

"Too bad you spent your first night with Calix; we would've had so much more fun."

I gasp as Barron's hands slide up my thighs, curling around the black lace panties I wore, just in case. He retrieves them with his teeth, grazing the swollen flesh underneath as he takes a bite of the lace. I'm not sure what he does with them after that, since he's basically swallowed up by the mountain of black tulle and lace, but I don't care because his lips are on my inner thigh. Barron kisses his way up one leg and then the other, going out of his way to avoid touching the one place where I want his mouth and hands. I put my own hands back on the smooth surface of the podium, letting my head fall back, red and black hair cascading around my shoulders. I can see the crescent moon, as sharp as a scythe in the dark sky, the stars twinkling like the galaxy is being cheeky, winking back at me.

*He's been drawing me all this time*, I think, closing my eyes against the sensation of his mouth against my thighs. It's a bit of a surprise when he finally touches those fervid lips of his to my core, kissing me and dragging his tongue along my wet heat. A gasp escapes me, echoing in the quiet space, our only audience the stars above and the giant ferns on either side of us.

Barron's hands grasp onto my hips, holding me in place as he teases me with his breath, clearly in no hurry whatsoever.

At least that's something I have right now, time. I mean, as soon as I fall asleep, it's over, but as long as I'm awake, the here and now is all that matters.

He uses his tongue to tease my folds before sliding up to my clit and working around it in a circle, causing my breath to skitter and



jump with the sensation. The only time I've ever done this was that first night with Calix; it's all new to me.

Slowly, Barron introduces new movements, slipping his tongue briefly inside of me before adding a finger, then two, then three. By the time he begins to move them in and out, I'm lost to the feelings of pleasure collecting in my lower belly, making my muscles tighten around his fingers. My nipples are so hard they hurt, and if I didn't need my hands to help keep me balanced on the podium, I might reach for my breasts and squeeze them, tease the hard, pink points with my fingers.

"Shit, I can't take it anymore," I whisper, my voice hoarse but velvety, pleading. My right hand grabs for Barron's hair, fisting in the lacy skirts instead.

"You're not a guy, are you?" he asks, lifting his head up and pushing the skirts aside as he stares up at me with one brown eye, one blue. "Based on my research down here, I'd say ... no. So, let the orgasm come and stop fighting it." He smiles at me, a smile made of shadows and unsaid things. When he puts his head beneath my skirts again, I lose control to his lips and tongue, to long fingers stirring up friction where I need it most.

My climax rides up and over me like a wave, and I cry out, the sound echoing in the glass chapel as Barron continues to push his fingers inside of me, leaving me a hot, shaking mess. Sweat beads between my breasts and on my forehead as he stands up and pulls me close, kissing me with a sweet taste on his tongue, the taste of my own body clinging to his lips.

"You're so wet and so hot, so tight," he murmurs, taking my mouth for his own, cupping my face with a possessive hand. His other hand kneads my ass with wet fingers. "Let's keep this going, shall we?" He picks me up off the podium and I cross my ankles behind his back. "This hard-on I'm nursing is going to kill me if I don't do something with it."

Barron lays me down on the smooth stone floors, kissing me and rolling his hips at the same time. A groan escapes me, swallowed up by yet more kissing. I'm surprised by the gentle possessiveness in his touch, the way our bodies fit together like we were made for each other.

"We don't need a condom," I murmur as Barron grinds his hips to mine, ruining the front of his leather pants as he pushes the hard

bulge of his cock against my aching heat. He pauses briefly to look down at me, balanced on his elbows against the stone floor.

“Why not?”

He’s the first one to actually ask me that, and I have no idea how to respond. I figure the truth is as good as anything.

“I told you: I’m living in a time loop. It doesn’t matter if we use one or not; there’s no such thing as consequence tonight.” *At least, no physical consequences. I can’t stop these moments from being etched into my heart and soul, can’t stop them from bleeding me dry when they disappear forever.* “It’s Devils’ Day, Barron Farrar.”

He looks down at me, clearly trying to puzzle out my motivations as I dig my fingers into his rainbow-dyed hair, fingertips teasing the shorn sides of his head and the dark hair there. He has EKG lines buzzed in on either side, like the lines on a heart monitor.

Like everyone else at Crescent Prep, he was sent away for failing to comply with his parents’ wishes. I don’t know much about the Farrars, other than that they own a series of superstores similar to Wal-Mart, with an online shipping business that’s up-and-coming. The rumor is that Barron threw a Molotov cocktail through the front window of their flagship store during a drunken bender mid-freshman year. That’s when he showed up at Crescent Prep, climbing from the back of a white limo with a red lollipop between his lips, sketchbook tucked under his arm.

Raz, Calix, and Sonja took him in right away, and within just a few weeks, he was one of them. A part of the fucking Knight Crew.

“It *is* Devils’ Day,” he agrees, biting my lower lip and sucking it in between his teeth. “But I also don’t want a baby, do you?”

“I’ve got that taken care of,” I lie, rocking my own hips up and against his pelvis, encouraging him to keep up the not-so-dry-humping we’ve got going on. “And I’m clean.”

“You’ve only slept with Calix?” Barron guesses, not entirely inaccurately. If this had been the real Devils’ Day, the first one in this never-ending timeline, that’d be true. Technically, I only slept with Raz in a dream, right? I nod my head and Barron chuckles. “He got tested twice after that, neurotic fuck. So you should be good.”

“And you?” I ask, wondering how he knows about that, and why Calix got tested twice. Was he concerned that I’d given him something? He *knew* I was a fucking virgin. Also, apparently a big mouth. It’s quite clear he kept almost nothing about our encounter a

secret. Not that it matters, considering there's a video floating around out there now, too.

"Me?" he asks, his eyes bright as he lifts the red leather devil's mask up and then off of his head entirely, tossing it aside. Baring himself to me. He looks tough, but I imagine his true feelings, the ones he keeps so carefully locked away, are as fragile as the wings of those dead butterflies. It'd be so easy to grind them into the dirt beneath my feet, but he's lucky: I'm not like him, and I'd never do that. "My parents make me get tested every six months, whether I like it or not, whether I've had sex or not. But are you really going to trust me when I say that?"

"It's Devils' Day," I repeat again, using my legs to pull him closer. Our mouths slant together, like two pieces of flint, striking hot, starting an ember, edging into flame. The corset-like bodice of my dress is attached to the full skirts; it takes Barron a moment to figure that out and he curses. Sitting up, he grabs hold of the waist part of the dress and tugs on it, sliding it over my breasts, my stomach, my legs, before tossing the garment onto the blue-covered cushions on the pews.

I cross my arms over my breasts, hiding my nipples from Barron's assessing gaze.

"I just ate your pussy out, Karma," he says, and I groan, closing my eyes in frustration even as Barron chuckles at me. "What do you think hiding those perky nipples of yours is going to do for either of us? Don't you *want* me to touch them?"

He leans forward, putting a palm on either side of my face, waiting for me to open my eyes and look up at him. I can smell him now, this mix of fresh sweat and a woody aroma that brings to mind a fresh case of charcoal pencils, just waiting to be sharpened and put to the page. That's something that he and I have in common that neither of the other boys does: we're both artists.

"Have you ever drawn these?" I ask, my voice getting huskier, darker, thick with need. Slowly, I draw my hands away, so Barron can see the small but full mounds of my breasts. His mismatched eyes take them in hungrily, and I have to bite back a gasp of surprise when he drops his mouth to them and takes the right nipple between his teeth.

"Do you remember last year, during our swimming sessions?" he asks, releasing my nipple and then running his tongue in a circle around it. "I couldn't get that swimsuit out of my mind."

“It was a school-issued suit,” I murmur, remembering the tight blue one-piece I’d worn during PE last year. Barron was in my class, and I remember thinking how weird it was to see him shirtless and wet, and without any snacks or sketchbooks around him.

“But the way you wore it ... I drew you in a hundred different positions in that suit, nipples peaked against the fabric ...” He trails off again, sucking my nipple into his mouth as he settles his body between my legs again, grinding the bulge of his cock against the scalding apex between my thighs. “But I can only draw something I’ve seen.”

“Now you’ll draw them?” I whisper, wondering if he’s realized what he just said. “*I can only draw something I’ve seen.*” So all those images in his sketchbook, of me and him in the butterfly cave, of us kissing during the first Devils’ Day party ... Does he wonder where those came from?

“I’ll draw them,” he says, looking down at me with a stark hunger in his face, years of repressed want spilling out of that dual-colored gaze. Barron cups my left breast with his right hand, kneading the tender flesh and rubbing his thumb across the pink point of my nipple. He drops his lips to my neck, kissing up my throat and along my jaw. The longer we go, our bodies pressed up against one another, the more I want him. “No condom, huh?” he finally says as our bodies grind together, seeking that hot, wet friction that we both need. “This’ll be a first for me, I’ll be honest.”

I don’t let him know how much I like the sound of that. Instead, I sit up on my elbows, watching in earnest as Barron leans back on his heels, reaching down to his leather pants and opening the fly. His cock springs out, thick and heavy, pre-ejac beading on the tip in excitement. I sit up a bit further, reaching out to wrap my hand around the base. My black and red nails look ghastly beneath the silver light of the moon as I tease them along Barron’s length, loving the heavy, desperate sound of his breathing.

He takes my wrist between his fingers and then leans forward, pushing me back into the floor and pinning my wrist above my head. Our mouths eat at each other hungrily as my right palm slides over the tip of Barron’s cock, using the slick moisture as lube. He thrusts against my hand, his dick slipping and sliding in my grip as his moans fall against the sensitive skin of my throat.

*He’s a bit bigger than Raz or Calix*, I think, trying not to squirm as Barron sucks on my neck, leaving hickeys that I don’t have to worry about or figure out how to explain. Tomorrow, my red and black hair

will be purple again, my skin will be blemish free, and my heart will very likely chip at the edge, leaving a sharp, ragged scar to tear up my insides.

I move my hand between my legs as Barron thrusts into it, the tip of his cock teasing me with the slightest hint of penetration. He shudders above me, moonlight falling across his slicked back hair, his tattooed chest, and that fabulous white coat.

When I release my grip and move my hand, his next thrust fills me up, his shaft slipping into my wet folds with little resistance; I'm more than ready for him. Sounds of pleasure fall from our lips, mingling together in the silence of the chapel.

"Fuck, you're tight," Barron murmurs, closing his eyes briefly as he settles in between my legs. He's fully sheathed inside of me, my body stretching just a bit to accommodate his length and girth. There's no pain though, just a delicious feeling of fullness. Barron very carefully takes my other wrist and pins it beneath his right hand, holding both my arms captive with one of his own.

He looks down at me before he starts to move, making sure our gazes are locked, that I'm looking at him as the clapping sound of his hips thrusting into mine echoes around the quiet space. My face lifts up, my tongue running along my lower lip as Barron uses his other hand to slide down between my breasts and over my belly, almost like he's worshipping me.

"I can't believe you pepper sprayed me tonight," he says, and then he thrusts deep, hitting the end of me, almost like he's proving a point. "You know who the real devils are, don't you, Karma?"

"Are you talking about yourself?" I whisper between thrusts, my thighs quivering as I trap Barron between them. Now that he's here above me, I want to hold him there forever, keep him to myself. I want to see the pictures he draws of me when I'm not looking; I want to know all the deep, dark thoughts inside his head.

*He used to be an alcoholic,* I think, wondering what that must've been like, for a teenager to suffer with something that's normally reserved for adults.

"Don't think," Barron commands, grabbing my chin with his hand. "Don't disappear into those wild thoughts of yours."

He releases my wrists, so I can wrap my arms around his neck, bringing our mouths together for a long, sensual kiss, an exchange of tongues and saliva that borders on the obscene. Why shouldn't it

though? I hate to admit how much I like this lascivious little rendezvous, but ... I'm wondering now how I'm supposed to walk away from today. It'll be like losing Raz and Calix all over again.

Barron's tall, much taller than me, so to kiss me, he has to make a serious effort. Once our hips are grinding and thrusting in unison, he braces himself with his elbows, his chest at eye level with me. I decide to take advantage of that, sucking on his nipples and making him groan, even as I get some of that dark glitter on my tongue.

He begins to thrust harder, deeper, and I find it suddenly hard to breathe, like his body has taken up every inch of extra space that I had inside of me. There's no room for oxygen or doubts or fears. Instead, I drag my nails down his back, lifting my pelvis to meet his.

Barron's big, muscular body shudders, and he slams his hips harder and harder into mine, climaxing with his cock buried balls-deep inside of me. We're both panting as he rolls off to lay beside me, my body quivering as I turn and put my head on his chest, closing my eyes and listening to the rapid-fire thundering of his heartbeat.

Lying naked on the floor of Thorncrown Chapel, my much smaller body pressed up against Barron's big one, I feel a sense of impossibility. It shouldn't be so easy to break my bullies down into lovers, and yet ... it is.

The question now is if I could manage all three of the boys in one go.

Unlikely.

Very, very unlikely.

"What's going to happen tomorrow?" I ask, because even though I'm pretty fucking sure tomorrow is never coming, I have to at least voice the question.

"Meaning what?" Barron asks, sitting up and sliding his fingers through his hair. His Mohawk is slicked back, but not so full of product that he can't get it to stick up a bit while messing with it. "You mean, as far as you and me go?"

"What will the rest of the Knight Crew think?" I sit up, too, shivering slightly at the feeling of my ass on the cold stone floor. Barron pulls me into his lap, even as I struggle to squirm away. "You're going to ruin what's left of your leather pants," I murmur, but he just chuckles in my ear, sucking my lobe between his teeth and making my core heat up yet again.

“I don’t care. I like knowing my cum is dripping out of you. I like knowing that you’ll have to wait to clean up. That part of me will be inside of you for some time.”

“You’re a pervert behind all of that candy eating, and sketching, and quiet brooding asshole-ness,” I murmur, closing my eyes as Barron strokes his fingers up my belly and cups my breast, playing with it as he kisses his way down my neck and shoulder. “Now answer the question.”

“Well, we have a whole weekend to play with,” Barron suggests, making my chest feel tight. *I wish*, I think, suddenly desperate to see what he’d do with me for a whole weekend. “There’s a party at Erina’s parents’ lake house tomorrow. I suppose, if you let me, I’ll take you there and show you off. You know, barring this whole time loop situation.”

I frown, but the expression doesn’t last long as I capture my lower lip between my teeth, fighting back another moan as Barron plays with my breasts, using both hands now to tease me.

“Barring this time loop,” I manage to choke out, knowing that he’s humoring me but not caring. The sensations his hands are working up are just too much. “What would you tell Calix and Raz?”

Barron pauses for a moment, resting his hands on the curve of my waist instead, his breath stirring my hair.

“I suppose I’d tell them that you were mine,” he muses, sounded slightly surprised himself. He reaches up to finger the butterfly necklace, still hanging from my kiss-bruised throat. “I wasn’t sure about you, you know. Obsessed, perhaps, but unsure. I couldn’t stop drawing you, but I also couldn’t understand why you’d sleep with Calix, after everything. Now that you’re here with me, I wonder if the situation wasn’t something similar.”

“Well, you could tell me now that you don’t like me, that this was all a Devils’ Day trick. Then maybe you’d understand what happened with Calix.” I try not to get mad, but Raz and Sonja’s words about Barron’s *impossible standards* are ringing in my head. “You don’t get to judge me, Barron Farrar, not after the things you’ve done.”

“Fair point,” he says, but almost like that’s never occurred to him before. “I haven’t exactly been a knight in shining armor.”

I turn in his lap, so I can look at his face, marveling at the beauty of his eyes. Heterochromia is rare, occurring in less than one percent

of the population. Barron is truly one of a kind.

“What color is your natural hair?” I ask as he studies me, observing the lines of my face in a way only an artist could.

“I’m a brunette underneath all of this,” he says, cocking his head to one side and then playing with a strand of freshly dyed red hair. “And you?”

“As black as ...” I almost say *as black as Calix’s*, but I don’t want Barron to think I’m obsessing over his friend. In all reality, in this moment, I’d choose Barron over Calix any day. “A raven’s feathers,” I say instead, and Barron chuckles.

“Poetic.”

We sit there for a while longer, my eyes studying the trees just beyond the glass walls of the chapel, their shadows long in the moonlight.

Barron cups my chin again and kisses me, igniting that fire in my belly. He knows what he’s doing, reaching a hand between my thighs and playing with the swollen nub of my clit. I wiggle on his lap, turning to straddle him and feeling him thicken and lengthen beneath me in anticipation of round two.

“Tomorrow, I’ll tell Raz and Calix that they fucked up,” Barron says with an evil smile. “That they missed their chance.”

“Missed their chance?” I whisper back, our mouths so close together that I’m not entirely sure if we’re talking or making out.

“To make you theirs,” he says, hands tightening possessively on my hips. “You’ve stumbled into my lair on Devils’ Day, Karma. You’re mine now.” He stands up suddenly, taking me with him, and a small sound of surprise escapes my lips.

Barron carries me down the length of one of the pews and sets me at the end, my bare ass against one of the cushions. I’m making a mess, but there’s nothing much to be done about it. Cleanup won’t be a problem because there won’t be a tomorrow, as much as the thought brings sharp tears to my eyes.

“I’ll be right back,” Barron tells me, moving over to my abandoned boots. As soon as his back is turned, I swipe the wetness from my eyes and force my mind away from tomorrow. I’m here *now*, and that’s what’s important. “Put these on.” He hands my boots back and waits, his dick tucked back in his pants, arms crossed over



his chest. The coattails of his faerie prince jacket float just above the floor, like the folded wings of a butterfly.

“My boots?” I ask, flushing as I cross one arm over my breasts, my other hand holding the shoes. “Why?”

Barron’s full mouth quirks to the side in a sensual smirk.

“You’re going to need the height,” he says, leaning his ass back against the pew behind him, his expression as self-satisfied as any I’ve ever seen. He could certainly give Raz and Calix a run for their money. “When I fuck you from behind against the glass. Now hurry up.”

I give Barron a look and then release my breasts, enjoying his sharp intake of breath as he watches me slip into the boots. I feel ridiculous, naked and wearing nothing but heeled boots, but then I see the way that Barron’s looking at me.

It’s quite clear in his gaze that he’s into me.

Mine, he said. So Barron is interested in not just fucking, but dating?

“Okay,” I say, standing up in front of him, several inches taller than before. “Do your worst.”

With a wicked smile, Barron grabs me by the hips and backs me up until my ass is pressed against the glass.

“Thank you for defiling this sacred space with me,” he murmurs, kissing me so deeply that I forget what it’s like to breathe. Barron then pulls back and turns me around, pushing me over so that my palms press against the glass, the trees trailing up the hillside in front of us. There’s nobody out there, but there could be. My heart beats rapidly as Barron finds my opening, already primed, wet, and ready for him.

He sweeps some red and black hair over my shoulder, leaning down to kiss my upper back.

“You smell too good tonight,” he murmurs against my skin, tasting me with his tongue. “Like sweat and desire, like some sort of sweet, wicked perfume.”

He presses the tip of his cock inside of me, and I gasp, my head falling forward so that my hair hangs down around the sides of my face. His hands grasp my hips, giving him good purchase as he begins to move, slamming his pelvis into my ass. The sound echoes around the wooden rafters as I lift my head back up, staring into my

own gray eyes as my body rocks back and forth with each thrust. My breasts sway as I watch my own reflection, my pupils swollen with desire, just two black voids in a pale face. My lips have never looked so red, my cheeks so flushed.

Lifting my gaze up, I can see his reflection, one brown eye and one blue studying me in the glass. Sweat drips over his pecs, making the butterfly tattoo on his chest shiny in the moonlight.

We stare at each other through our reflections as Barron buries his cock deep inside of me, making my toes curl inside my shoes. I end up dropping one hand between my legs to rub at my aching clit, and my body clamps down around him, milking his body of its own accord. Biting my lower lip, I struggle to control my panting breath, leaving little clouds of fogged-up glass in my wake.

My knees begin to buckle from the rush of pleasure, but Barron doesn't let up. He fucks me harder and faster, grabbing hold of my hair and pulling my head back so he can keep looking at my reflection. The way his eyes roll up to the ceiling when he comes nearly undoes me, watching him shudder and pump into me, spilling every last drop of seed he has.

He lets us both fall to the floor then, covering me with his body and kissing his way back to my clit. Barron uses his mouth to bring me to another orgasm, his hands keeping my pelvis from bucking too wildly against his face.

Even after I come, Barron continues his assault of lips and tongue and teeth, until I'm shaking, my eyes shimmering with tears.

"Sorry," he murmurs, stretching his body out alongside mine. "You taste too damn good."

He runs a finger down my sweaty forehead as I bat his hand away, my body worn-out, but not entirely sure that I'm ready to call it quits. "I'll take it slower next time."

*Next time.*

"If there is a next time, you won't know it," I say with a sad smile. "Once I fall asleep, everything resets. I'll see you at the gas station, holding a bag of snacks and hating me, your sketchbook tucked under your arm."

Barron chuckles, the sound warm and deep and low.

"Hate you? I never hated you. Perhaps, I judged you too harshly sometimes, but hate was never the name of the game. Karma, stop

giving a fuck about the Knight Crew. That's all I ever wanted."

I say nothing. He really is a bit too judgy, but then, nobody's perfect. Most definitely not me.

Barron's phone starts to vibrate, still lying on a pew near the front of the room. He ignores it, stroking that single finger down my forehead and nose as I stare up at him, marveling at the beauty of our locale, and the way my tired body feels sated and well-taken care of. When the phone vibrates for the third time, he curses and moves to stand up.

"I'll be right back," he says, but I just smile softly because I can already feel my lids drooping, because I know the video of me and Calix is out in the world, because I know our time is already coming to an end. "Holy shit."

I hear the words come from him in genuine shock and horror, laying my head back against the stone floor and closing my eyes.

Heavy footsteps follow Barron as he moves over to stand beside me. When I open my eyes, he crouches down to look at me.

"What?" I ask, trying to pretend like my heart isn't beating a million miles an hour. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Pearl Boehringer killed herself," he tells me, and my eyes widen. Holy shit. Again?! Even when I take different paths, Pearl's seems to remain relatively the same. Guilt curdles in my stomach, but I swallow back the nervous lump in my throat. Tomorrow, it won't matter, right? Because everything will go back to the way it was. "That ... and there's something else."

"I don't want to talk about it," I say, sitting up suddenly and looking him straight in the face. "Whatever bad news there is, it can wait until tomorrow, can't it?"

Barron's mouth flattens into a thin line, but, to my surprise, he nods, tucking his phone in the back pocket of his ruined leather pants. There are ... love juices, so to speak, all over the front of them. His and mine both.

"Do you want to see my art studio?" I ask, feeling breathless suddenly, desperate to keep this night going, if only for a short while. The surprise reflected back on his features is second only to the sudden look of triumph and pleasure on his face.

Barron *wants* me to want him.

“I would love to see your art studio,” he says, his mouth curving into a vicious smile. A small spark of fear ricochets through me as I remember his signature personality trait: light and shadows. Nothing Barron ever does is white or black; he’s all shades of gray. Instead of disappearing out the door and leaving me alone and naked in the chapel—something I wouldn’t have put past him before—he retrieves my dress and helps me pull it over my head, tightening the laces as I struggle to pretend that his presence is having no further effect on me.

“Panties might be nice,” he adds, handing my discarded underwear back to me. “There’s also the outdoor bathroom. You could use that to cleanup if you want.” His attention flicks down to my thighs, as if he knows that he’s left his mark between them.

“Thank you,” I snap, tearing the panties from his grip and putting them on over my boots. I lead the way out the door as Barron collects his sketchbook, following behind me as I pause in the bathroom for a moment.

He doesn’t give me any privacy either, slipping in to draw me while I wet a paper towel and slip into one of the stalls. It doesn’t bother me as much as I thought, to have him there. Instead, I feel comforted by his presence. That doesn’t change when we climb into Calix’s stolen car and head back to the Diamond Point Mobile Home Park.

The only light on is the porch light, and a quick peep inside the house shows me that both my parents are asleep. I back up and bump into Barron, spinning around to find him smirking down at me, his palms on the wall on either side of my head.

The way he’s looking at me, I expect a trick. With him, I’m *always* expecting a trick.

“I know this probably won’t help matters much ...” I start, swallowing back a sudden surge of desire at the closeness of his body, his smell, even the cocky arrogance spreading across his lush mouth. “But please don’t hurt me here.”

There’s a pause where the smirk nearly falls from his face, but he recovers it quickly, moving one of his hands off the wall to stroke strong fingers down my cheek.

“I won’t hurt you again, Karma,” he says, sounding almost surprised at the admission himself. His mouth thins into a flat line and he backs up a step. I smile back, but it’s hard to resist the words clinging to the tip of my tongue: *yes, you will*. He will hurt me, even

if he doesn't mean to, just by not remembering tonight ever happened.

"Come with me." I push aside my feelings and take Barron's warm hand in mine, dragging him down the steps and over to the greenhouse door. It's unlocked, as always. We don't really feel the need to lock our doors out here. There are some definite positives to living in such a small community. Everyone in Diamond Point knows my moms and appreciates the care and effort they put into the park where we all live.

"A greenhouse turned art studio," Barron comments as I push the door open, the sweet fragrance of violets and jasmine stirring in the cool air around us. "Interesting."

He follows me in, and I'm struck suddenly by how intimate this moment is. Glancing over my shoulder, I notice his eyes scanning the sacred space, and my pulse begins to thunder. This is me extending trust that I shouldn't rightfully give, far more invasive even than sharing my body. If Barron rejects me here, now, the violation will be something I'll never be able to forget, not in this timeline, or any other.

"My moms believe art is the pinnacle of human invention," I say, plugging in the lights and smiling as the strings of Edison bulbs strung through the space bloom to life.

"Not medicine or space travel or bio-engineering?" Barron asks, but not like he's judging, just curious. He pauses next to the pottery wheel and then moves over to a stack of paintings, thumbing through the canvases as my heart freezes in terror. Some of my work is in there, and if he starts shit here ... I'll probably kick him right in the balls.

"All necessary inventions to keep people healthy and safe, so that they can make art," I say with a laugh, the sound trailing off as Barron pulls out one of my pieces. It's just an oil painting of Little Bee, the bright yellow of the car at contrast with the dark woods behind her. There's a set of paints on the car's hood, a myriad of colors spilling over the sides and dripping to the grass beneath the wheels.

Barron stares at it for a long moment, and then turns to look at me, his face dark and serious, contemplative as always.

"Can I buy this from you?" he asks, and my brows go up.

“Wh... What?” I stutter, pushing red and black hair over my shoulders. It’s pretty, but I had to bleach the shit out of it to get it here, and it’s dry as hell. Likely, I won’t be doing this again anytime soon.

Barron pauses for a moment to pull a unicorn-horn lollipop from the front pocket of his jacket. I’m honestly not even sure where it came from, probably some secret stash in Calix’s car. He unwraps it, careful to keep the painting beneath his arm, and then sticks the whole damn thing in his mouth, twirling it in a circle as he studies me with one blue eye, and one brown.

“I’ll give you two thousand for it.”

“Two ... what?” I rub the bridge of my nose and close my eyes for a moment before opening them back up as Barron covers the length of the room in just a handful of careful strides. He gets far too close to me for propriety’s sake, but I like it. It’s almost like he can’t bear to keep his distance anymore.

“It’s all I have in cash,” he says, clearly a son of privilege. He has no idea what two thousand dollars could do for me and my family.

“Why would you pay two thousand dollars for that?” I ask, pointing at the painting. “I have better ones ...” My voice trails off as Barron chuckles, pulling the rainbow lollipop from between his lips. *I traded one poison for another*, he’d said.

“Because this is a Karma Sartain original. It’ll be worth much more when you’re famous one day.” Barron studies my face, absorbing every emotion I have before I’m even feeling it. “My parents are supporters of the arts,” he adds, and I decide it’s best not to mention how my moms feel about rich people playing with art as tax write-offs. “Maybe they’ll hang it in their gallery in New York?”

“Please don’t say things like that,” I tell him as he puts the canvas down on the worktable, next to a cluster of potted begonias. Barron puts the candy between his lips and then puts his hands on my shoulders.

“I don’t talk much,” he tells me, which is something I already knew. “Do you know why?”

“Because words don’t mean as much as actions?” I guess, and he laughs.

“Because there’s often nothing happening worth talking about. But you, Karma, you’re worth talking about. Sell me the painting, please. And sign it.”

“You’re nuts,” I tell him, but I grab a metallic silver pen from an old coffee can sitting near the edge of the table, and I scribble my name and the year into one corner. Barron nods, like this is an acceptable outcome to him, and then pulls out his wallet, handing me a wad of hundreds like it’s nothing. I don’t bother to count them. Nobody will be spending this money, and tomorrow, Barron will have forgotten he gave it to me.

Even though I tell myself I’m prepared for another reset, I’m not. I’m not at all.

“Thank you for the painting,” he says, grinning around the candy in his mouth. He leans down to kiss me, and then we both pause as the door to the art studio opens and Mama Jane appears in a sea green robe. Her arms are crossed over her chest, and her expression is a nice even mix of surprise and confusion.

“Karma,” she says, looking at Barron in his faerie jacket and dirty leather pants, his buckled boots and his rainbow Mohawk. “And who is your friend?”

“Mom, this is Barron Farrar,” I say, lifting up a hand uselessly in his direction. Mom notices the wad of cash in my hand before she registers Barron’s name. I try to keep my issues with the Knight Crew mostly to myself, but there’s been a time or two when it’s all come pouring out. My moms know Barron’s name. “He just bought one of my paintings,” I offer up, forcing a smile as Barron studies my mother the way he studies everyone else—with an artist’s eye. That’s what that intense stare of his is. I’m just wondering why it took me so long to notice it.

“That’s lovely,” Mama Jane says, but she doesn’t sound convinced. “Are you okay, honey?” The way she’s looking at me, it’s like she thinks the cash in my hand is for something else. Wouldn’t she be shocked to learn that Barron didn’t need to pay me for sex; I wanted him as much as he wanted me.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. ...” Barron trails off and pauses, waiting for Mama Jane to fill in the empty space.

“Jane Sartain,” she says, stepping forward and offering her hand. It’s weird, seeing Barron in the same room as my mom. My head spins with the implications. “Karma, I ...” She starts, but then she looks at me in my black funereal gown, my red and black hair, and the glitter all over my face from when it rubbed off of Barron’s chest and onto me. I just hope she doesn’t make the connection as to how it got there.

“Yeah?” I ask, heart beating like a hummingbird’s wings. She’s going to bring up the sex tape. And that’s the last thing I want to spend my limited time discussing.

Jane opens her mouth, pauses, and closes it again.

“Never mind. We can discuss it tomorrow.” She turns to go, pausing in the doorway to the studio before looking back at me, brown eyes dark with worry. “If you two want to come in the house, that’s okay, just don’t wake your sisters up. There are condoms underneath the sink in the bathroom.”

“Mom!” I snap, gritting my teeth and giving her a look. Barron just chuckles and swirls his candy around in his mouth as he watches us. “Please *leave*. We’re just fine in here. Barron is an artist, too.”

Her expression shifts slightly, but I can tell she’s going to wait up and peek out the blinds in her room every now and then.

“Your daughter inspires creativity,” Barron says, but mom still gives him a dark look.

“I can agree to that,” she says before turning to me. “Your mom and I are inside if you need us.” She disappears back the way she came, padding down the curved path between the art studio and the house. It’s made of mosaic tiles, each one handmade by me, the moms, or my sisters. Everything in my world is designed to be both functional and beautiful at the same time.

I never realized until now how lucky I am to have that.

“She doesn’t like me,” Barron says, but not like he’s surprised. He picks up the painting of Little Bee, cracks his candy between pearly white teeth, and then disappears out the door. I watch him head toward the Aston Martin, my heart sinking and a well of loneliness opening up within me. That’s it? He’s just done with me now?

I watch him, hating how happy it makes me when he actually comes back.

That’s the shit I need to stop doing, letting other’s actions influence my own happiness. I am the source of my happiness. I must also remember that I am the designer of my own catastrophe.

Barron has his sketchbook now, that and a couple of beers. He uses a bottle opener from Calix’s key ring and then hands the drink over to me. It’s even cold.

“Cooler in the trunk,” he says, gesturing with his chin in the direction of the stolen car. Calix, Raz, and Barron act like they don’t



even really like each other, yet Barron took Calix's fancy ass car, as if it were nothing.

We clink our bottles together as Barron takes a seat in Cathy's favorite chair, this paint-splattered green Adirondack chair in the corner. He flips the cover up on the sketchbook and then glances over at me.

"I may very well draw your tits this time," he says, giving me a lascivious little smile. "Or other parts of you. My face is well-acquainted with your—"

"What about your friends?" I quip, interrupting him before he can mention his tongue on my cunt again. Just the thought of it makes me want to take him into my room for the rest of the night. "What if they see those drawings?"

"Then they'll know you're mine," he says, his voice dark and dangerous. But that anger, it isn't directed at me. I bite my lower lip for a moment, wondering if I should challenge his bullshit caveman *mine, mine, mine* nonsense. Only ... this is my night. Tomorrow, it'll all be gone. If I want to enjoy a guilty pleasure, that's my prerogative, isn't it? "But they won't look. They know that anyone who touches my sketchbook gets their face broken." Barron pauses to look up at me. "Except for you. You pepper sprayed me, and I let it go. That must account for something?"

A long moment of silence follows, and I glance toward the glass walls of the greenhouse, reminded of the chapel and my palms pressed into its own cool, glass exterior. I move over to the plug-in and yank the lights free, leaving us with moonlight and shadows.

"I'm tempted to make a *Titanic* joke ..." I start, reaching back for the laces on the corset. "Draw me like one of your French girls?" I let the gown fall to the floor in a puddle of black tulle and lace. "But you probably haven't seen it."

"Will the lifeboats be seated according to class?" Barron retorts, quoting the movie and then smirking at me as he puts his pencil to the page.

"I'd be locked below deck with the other peasants as the boat sank," I reply, sitting on the edge of the table in the center of the room, fern fronds teasing my naked skin as the sound of Barron's charcoal tip scrapes across the paper, staining his beautiful hands.

"I'd rescue you; I'd be the Rose to your Jack."

*Fuck, he's charming when he wants to be ...*

I close my eyes, a smile lighting on my face.

I stay that way for a while, until Barron's footsteps bring my head up, my eyes opening to see him standing in front of me. He shows me the drawing, of this beautiful girl with her head thrown back, moonlight creating enigmatic shadows on her bare skin.

"There's no way that girl is me," I whisper as Barron chucks the sketchbook aside, and steps between my thighs.

"No," he agrees as he slides his palms down the curves of my waist. "You're much prettier."

His mouth finds mine as my hands fumble with the fly on his leather pants, freeing the velvety length of his cock into my suddenly sweaty palm. I stroke Barron as he kisses me, claiming me with his tongue, imprinting himself on me in a way that I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forget.

I guide him to the wet heat between my thighs and let him fuck me into the table until I come.

"Stay with me tonight?" I ask, sweaty and shaking in his arms. Barron nods and lets me lead him inside and down the hall to my bedroom, watching as I shut and lock the door behind us.

He strips down so that we're both naked, crawling into my bed and curling up behind me, sliding into me and moving until he's coming again, too.

We spend hours like that, naked, touching, kissing, fucking.

I don't even remember falling asleep.

But when my eyes open, and I see the blood on my steering wheel, my heart breaks just a little.

It feels impossible to leave Barron after that, like being separated from him and Raz both might just break me. So that next day, I repeat the script exactly, ending up naked in the chapel with Barron tasting me between my thighs, rising above me in the dark and the moonlight, fucking me with my palms pressed to the glass. Every night, I ask him back to my mothers' house, and he comes. He always comes. The only difference is that he picks a different painting to buy, every single time.

I do that for four nights, until, on the fourth night, I resist the urge to fall asleep for once, climbing out from under Barron's arm to look at his sketchbook again. There are some new drawings in the back I didn't see before.

One of them ... is me, sitting on the podium inside the chapel as I did the first night. Every night, he draws me in a different place, and as I flip through, I see all four days represented somehow, someway.

My throat closes up as I curl up beside him and cry myself to sleep.

I don't repeat that same day again.

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Waking up every day at the moment of the crash is *exhausting*. There is no respite for me, no early morning sunrise, no lying in bed and waiting for one of my moms to bring me coffee or tea. And it's not like I can take the day to nap and recuperate. If I fall asleep, I wake up right back where I started.

Over and over and over again.

Today, I hit the lock before Calix can get to me, and then head straight home.

Now my heart feels not only cracked, broken, but also torn. Looking at Raz makes me feel sick, looking at Barron makes me feel sick, looking at Calix has *always* made me feel sick. Today, I just want my moms.

“Karma?” Mama Cathy asks, sitting in the living room like she was on day ... three, was it? I can't quite remember anymore, but the scene of her bent over a small canvas, bubble wrap heaped on the floor next to her, is one I recognize. But not just from today. This is a common occurrence. The moms order art from all over the world for their store in Eureka Springs. “What are you doing home?”

“I'm in desperate need of a mental health day,” I tell her, knowing that at least in this, the moms will understand. I don't have to make up an excuse or pretend I'm sick. *God, I'm lucky to have a family that actually gives a shit about me.*

Last time I came home during this stupid time loop, I was still bleeding. This time, I paused at a rest stop bathroom and cleaned up.

No point in having the moms drive me all the way to the hospital, only to find out that I'm just fine.

"Is everything alright?" Jane asks, coming out of the kitchen, perfectly coiffed and put together as always. She's so damn meticulous that I decided to park Little Bee on the end of the driveway, facing away from the house, so she wouldn't see the damage and start asking about it.

Then again ... there's no getting around that. No matter how many repeats I live of today, when I finally get to tomorrow, my car will be damaged. I'll have hit Calix's Aston Martin. It's inevitable.

"Everything's fine," I say, setting my book bag down near the door and taking a seat in the comfy old recliner across from Mama Cathy. "I'd love some tea, if that's alright?"

Mama Jane smiles at me, one of those rare smiles of hers that feels like a hug. She doesn't smile much, but unlike Calix, it's not because she's trapped inside a mask of her own making. She just doesn't hand them out easily. When she does, they're spectacular.

"Of course I'll make you some tea. Darjeeling?"

"Please," I say, feeling my heart thunder in my chest. For the last week of repeat days, I've managed to avoid the leaked sex tape of me and Calix. Either I ignore my phone, or I'm in the butterfly cave with Barron, or fucking him in the chapel ... Or I'm with Raz, cuddled up at my aunt Deb's cottage.

But I can't avoid it forever.

I have to find a way to stop whoever has it from posting it.

"You know," Mama Cathy begins, her freckled hands covered in splatters of paint. "I've been wanting to talk to you about something for a while now, but I haven't found the right time." She looks up at me, an easy smile forming on her pale lips. Cathy's always made up for Jane's rare smiles by having heaps of her own to give out, always free and easy and open.

"Okay ..." I hazard, a bit surprised that I'm still able to learn new things, open up new pathways in a timeline that seemed so concrete at first.

Yet, this Devils' Day is anything but.

Raz and Barron, they have feelings for me, feelings that I reciprocate.

I exhale sharply, but keep a smile on my face to match Cathy's.

“I was thinking, we could start carrying some of your work in the store. Prints, as well as originals.”

“My stuff?” I ask, feeling dizzy all of a sudden. I’ve literally waited *years* for this. Years. “Really?”

“And don’t think this is nepotism or anything,” Cathy says with a laugh as Jane comes out with a tray, setting it on the side table next to my chair. She ruffles my once-again purple hair with her fingers before moving over to sit beside her wife. On the tray, there’s a plate of homemade shortbread cookies, the cup of tea I asked for ... and ‘ants on a log’, the celery snack I was talking to Luke and April about.

My throat gets tight as I look back up at the two of them.

“You’ve grown into a brilliant artist, Karma,” Jane says, her dark curls wrapped up into a bun on the top of her head. She blows on her own tea and then sips it carefully, watching me over the rim of the cup. “That piece in your room, it’s brave. There’s a lot of heart in it. We talked it over a few days ago, and we truly believe you’re worthy of wall space at the gallery—starting with that canvas.”

“The one with the moon?” I reply, feeling my chest get tight as I think about how I destroyed it so needlessly on the first day. Wall space at the shop is in high demand; some artists even *pay* my mothers to put their originals in prominent spots. Even artists whose work the moms have been selling for years have yet to claim wall space. “Are you serious?”

“You know how seriously I take the shop,” Mama Jane says, setting her cup down. She looks up at me with dark eyes, tinged with worry, before glancing over at Cathy for a brief moment. When she looks back at me, she’s smiling again. “Why don’t you bring your canvas out to the studio today, and we can all work together? It’s been a long time since the three of us spent time creating together.”

“Like a coven of artsy witches, making art on Devils’ Day,” Cathy says with another smile. “Are you still planning on going to the party tonight? Or should we do our own thing here? I bet your sisters would love to have you.”

Little does she know, I’ve had my fill of Devils’ Day parties in the last two weeks. Two. Fucking. Weeks. *And yet, I don’t feel much closer to figuring my way out of this.*

“I’ll stay in tonight. We can get stuff for biscuits and chocolate gravy, and I’ll cook.” That’s pretty much the *only* meal I know how

to make from scratch, but I do a good job at it. Besides, it's an Arkansas staple. I've got to represent, especially when I'm the only student at Crescent Prep who was actually born and raised in the state.

"Your sisters will be thrilled," Cathy says, standing up and taking the small canvas with her. She hangs it up on a nail in the only spare bit of wall in the living room. It's an oil painting of a girl with big, grey eyes. "She reminded me of you," Cathy explains as she glances back at me, her brows furrowing together. "Only, you seem different now than when I ordered it."

"Different, how?" I ask, picking up a piece of celery and biting into it.

"Less ... afraid," Cathy says, before turning and heading for the sliding glass door that leads to the backyard.

She has no idea how much her comment means to me.



The small canvas sits in front of me, mocking me with my lack of intent. When I started this, I had no idea where I was going with it. There's the black sky, the silver stars, the crescent moon, and the lone tree. As I study it, basking in the sunshine that fills the room, meaning begins to appear between the carefully painted lines, a feeling that I didn't understand until just now.

"I feel like I'm starting to understand my own intentions here," I say as Cathy sits down at a potter's wheel and begins to throw a new bowl. Jane pauses on my right side, studying the piece with a critic's eye. "Before now, I actually thought I had no intent whatsoever. But now I'm getting it."

"Sometimes we create art; sometimes art defines us. You might not know what it is that you need until you start to put brush to canvas, pen to paper, or hands to clay. The truth is in the medium." Jane kisses the side of my head and moves away, through a sea of green plants, the fresh fragrance of flowers wafting in with the breeze.

The moms' art studio is really a modified greenhouse, filled with canvases of all sizes, acrylic and oil paints, a pottery station, a woodworking station, and even a desk with a computer and a Cintiq drawing pad, for digital art. If you can dream it up, you can create it

in here. One whole wall is reserved for bookcases filled with Mama Cathy's poems, all handwritten in her calligraphic penmanship.

Before picking up my paintbrush, I move over to my phone and start *Toxic Thoughts* by Faith Marie, closing my eyes as the music drifts softly from the Bluetooth speakers around the room. The moms are big into art, as any medium. Sometimes they play movies, sometimes audiobooks, sometimes they just sit and listen to the drone of cicadas in summer.

As Faith sings about writer's block, I sit down on the paint-spattered stool and take a deep breath, knowing my phone's in airplane mode, that I'm alone, that nobody can bother me in here.

And then I start to paint.

A fever starts inside of me, hot and burning, as the hours swirl away into oblivion, the quiet of the afternoon broken up the shrieking giggles of my sisters as they wear their matching Devils' Day masks and play hide-and-seek in the studio while the moms and I work.

"Karma, come paint with us," Emma blurts, repeating a line she said to me on the first day, almost exactly. "We're making a mural in the carport. It's the Horned God."

"Can I help tomorrow?" I respond automatically, wrapped up in my work, carried away into an artist's euphoria, this brilliant moment when the rest of the world falls away and there's nothing left but you and your art. It happens with any medium: sculpting, writing, painting. It's known as *creative euphoria*, and it's a real phenomenon.

"Tomorrow is *soooo* far away!" Emma drawls dramatically, but I can't stop. My hand won't let me stop, not until the next layer of my creation sits before me. Knowing that I'll likely wake up and that it'll all be wiped away again actually gives me courage. I need not fear mistakes. There is nothing I can do to this canvas that would be wrong, that could ruin it.

"Oh, Karma," Jane says, her praise as rare as her smiles. Don't get me wrong, she's always encouraged my sisters and me to push harder, further, to be better, but true praise, like I hear in her voice now, is not a common commodity. "This is incredible."

We stand there together, staring at the freshly painted stars in the sky, each one a different color, the butterflies dancing in the moonlight, the coffee cup smashed to pieces on the ground. There's



a little yellow Bug in the distance, the bumper crumpled up and streaked with black paint. Masks hang from the limbs of the tree: a black leather devil's mask, two red ones, an orange and black butterfly mask, a goblin.

“As soon as this dries, I'm tackling another layer,” I say, sweeping my purple hair back from my forehead and smearing my skin with paint. It doesn't occur to me in that moment that the images I've just created will disappear before they get a chance to dry. “For now, dinner's on me.”

I head inside, grabbing my mask from my book bag and slipping it on before Katie and Emma peek into the room to watch me toss an apron over my neck.

“Do you guys want to cook with me?” I ask, and their eyes light up like stars. Sometimes, it's easy to forget how a simple question or an easy smile that doesn't mean much to you, can mean the world to someone else. *“You should always be nice, Raz, because you never know when someone's so full of pain they might snap.”*

I exhale, forcing a smile to my own face as I dress the girls in their own aprons, their butterfly masks reminding me of Barron as I pull two stools up to the counter to make things easier for them.

“Are we doing Bisquick biscuits?” Emma asks as Katie stands shyly on my other side, always the quieter of the two, her eyes watching me like I'm doing something worth memorizing, planting inside her brain to look at years after this moment has passed.

“No way. We're doing biscuits from scratch. Katie, can you get the flour?” I ask, and her cheeks flush with pleasure before she scurries off.

“Happy Devils' Day,” Cathy says, a furred deer mask on her face, made with real antlers. The moms believe in sustainable hunting, so every deer season, they bring home plenty of venison to feed not only us, but some of the older residents who live in the park. She pops the top on a bottle of champagne and pours three glasses, bringing one to me and kissing me on the forehead. “Don't tell your teachers,” she says, and I laugh, helping Emma and Katie mix up the dough for the biscuits and forming it into perfect little patties.

Once they're in the oven, we start the chocolate gravy, mixing butter, milk, vanilla, cocoa powder, and flour in a saucepan until it's nice and gooey and warm.

“I like cooking with you,” Katie tells me as we drizzle the chocolate over the fresh biscuits, serving the moms plates at the table as they light candles and dim the lights, the air crackling with the smell of burning sage.

“I like cooking with you, too,” I say, feeling my lips turn up into a smile. We serve everyone ice-cold milk with their food and sit around the table, candles flickering on every surface, the sound of my music still drifting from the speakers in the studio. It’s just loud enough for us to hear at the dining table, all the windows open to the flood of silver light from the moon. My playlist must’ve ended and started over again because *Toxic Thoughts* is playing again.

“This is my favorite Devils’ Day Party ever,” Emma declares, chocolate splatters on her mask that I can’t even begin to guess how they got there. “We should do this every year.”

“I’ll remind you that you said that when you’re in high school,” Jane murmurs under her breath, but Emma isn’t fazed. She turns her blue-grey glare right on our mom and frowns.

“Karma is in high school, and she’s here,” she declares, and a laugh bursts from my throat. A sob is close behind, and I have to clamp a hand over my mouth as the tears slide down my cheeks.

“Oh, Karma,” Cathy says with a bubbly champagne laugh, reaching over to rub my knee. “You’re okay, daughter. You’re okay.”

We make a circle on the living room floor after dinner, consulting one of Mama Cathy’s spell books and reciting a simple mantra for love, health, and happiness, lighting a red candle and sprinkling pink rose petals into a bowl of water from one of the local springs. There are over forty natural springs in the city limits of Devil Springs, and over a hundred in the county.

“Now what?” Emma asks, bouncing in place, her eyes glittering with boundless energy behind her mask.

“Now? It’s two in the morning,” Jane says with a yawn, three champagne bottles drained. I was only given one glass because the moms like rules too much, but that’s okay. I don’t need alcohol or weed or boys tonight.

“Why don’t we go work on the mural?” I suggest, and even Katie gasps in excitement. I laugh as my little sisters drag me outside to look at the lines of the image, drawn by the moms, and sloppily colored in with paint by the hands of eight-year olds. The left half of the mural is nearly done, but the right is just waiting for color.

On the ground below my window, I spot the box of spray paint and shame washes over me. Somewhere, someday, the memory of that must be buried in my sisters' brains, just like Barron remembers all the time we've spent together.

"Let's paint," I say, picking up a bucket and opening the top.

My sisters dig in as the moms sit on my porch and lean against one another.

As the hours pass and the moonlight moves across the sky, the girls fall asleep on the cement, paintbrushes still clutched in their hands, and the moms take them to bed before leaving for their own room.

"If you stay up long enough to see the sunrise, paint it," Cathy says, kissing my forehead before disappearing into the house behind Jane.

I head inside, grab a band and put my hair into a high pony, before returning to the mural. Even though I'm yawning, my eyes brimming with tired tears, I keep going until a bit of orange-yellow light on the wall draws my attention away from the face of the Horned God and over my shoulder, to where the sun is just beginning to kiss the sky.

Throwing my paintbrush down, I head around to the backyard and grab a ladder, climbing to the roof of the house and perching on the eaves so I have the best possible view of the sunrise.

"It's tomorrow," I whisper to myself, putting my chin on my knees. This is the latest I've ever stayed up and, beyond all hope, I'm wondering if I've just managed to beat this thing. Frankly, that'd probably be the best thing that ever happened to me. I wouldn't change a thing about yesterday. Not a damn thing.

When I climb down and head inside, I see that it's nearly seven thirty in the morning, and my heart swells.

"Take that, Devils' Day," I say, wondering if I spent too much of my time worrying about the boys when I could've been here with my fucking family. Maybe that's the lesson I'm supposed to learn? That the toxic love offered up by Barron or Raz or ... well, Calix, that I don't need any of that to be happy.

But ... even if I don't, I still want to spend more time with them.

I start a pot of coffee and then head into the studio to get my phone, switching it off of airplane mode to look at my messages

through blurry eyes.

*Pearl killed herself tonight. Call me.*

The text is from Luke, waiting on my phone to fuck with my whole day. I sit down suddenly on the paint-covered stool next to my painting, the excitement in my chest dulling to a painful ache. *Pearl isn't your problem, Karma*, I tell myself, but yet ... I can't help but wonder. Does she die in every timeline, and I've just been missing it? Or is there something I can do to save her? My heartbeat picks up and I close my eyes, clutching my phone to my chest.

The sound of a car rolling down the gravel of the driveway draws my attention, and I glance over to see the shiny black curves of Calix's Aston Martin. I stand up from the stool and make my way over to where he sits inside the blacked-out windows of the idling car. After a moment, I decide to move around the front and get in the passenger's seat, cringing a bit at the rumpled surface of the door.

Calix Knight turns to look at me as I climb in, his devil's mask pushed up into his hair, black makeup bleeding down either of his cheeks, like it's possible he might've been crying. But no, that mussed hair, those blurry eyes ... he's just coming down from a long night of partying.

"Pearl killed herself," he says, almost matter-of-factly. I nod and close the door behind me.

"I know."

Calix takes off down the gravel road, the circular shape taking us back to the highway. I'm so tired that my eyes keep drifting closed of their own accord, but then I snap to with a gasp, scrabbling to stay awake, desperate to see what tomorrow will finally bring.

"You can sleep if you want," he says as I glance over at him, his own lids droopy, his dark eyes distant as he gazes out the front window.

"If I fall asleep, I'll wake up and this'll all be a dream," I tell him, setting my phone into the cup holder between us. Calix's face tightens up, but he doesn't reply. Instead, he drives us almost an hour out of the way, to Beaver Bridge aka the Little Golden Gate Bridge.

The five-hundred and fifty-four-foot long bridge was built in 1947 and is the only remaining suspension bridge in the state that can still be driven across. It really does look like a San Francisco miniature, but miniature it is. There's only one lane that Calix doesn't seem to mind taking up, parking right in the middle of the bridge before

climbing out. This early in the morning, in the off-season, we'll probably be okay.

Table Rock Lake glimmers brilliantly in the early morning sunshine as Calix climbs over the railing and takes a seat on the edge of the bridge, legs dangling over the side. At least if he fell, he wouldn't have far to go. It'd be easy to jump down and then swim to shore.

I decide to join him, sitting there in an old *Falling in Reverse* band shirt, streaked with paint, and paired with last year's Crescent Prep skirt. It, too, is spattered with paint in every color.

"You look different," Calix says with a long sigh, fingers curled around the wood planks of the bridge as he glances my direction. A flock of white cattle egrets alights on the lake, and I frown. They're technically an invasive species, a pest, but then, so is humanity, so who am I to judge? I'm sure the egrets do far less damage to the environment here than we do.

"How so?" I ask, my pulse thundering in my head, so loud that the bird calls perfuming the air around us seem to blend into white noise. After everything I've discovered during this time loop, I thought I'd figured Calix out.

He never liked me. He wasn't lying to his friends; he was lying to me.

But ... why would he have come to Diamond Point at seven-thirty in the morning if not to see me?

"Never mind," Calix says, turning back to the water and frowning with that gorgeous mouth of his. Does he even realize how pretty that mouth is? And how much prettier it'd be if he smiled? I yawn, and Calix flicks his dark eyes my way before turning back to the lake. "What are you doing up so late? Worrying about all the awful things I've decided to do to you, now that you fucked up my car."

"Not really. I actually haven't thought about you since I hit your car ... yesterday." I try the word out on my tongue and decide that I like it. I miss having today's and tomorrow's and yesterday's and next weeks. "I spent the day with my dyke moms that you hate so much."

"I don't hate them," Calix says with a sigh and a slight scowl, turning back to the lake. A fish jumps near the bridge, and I let out a small sound of surprise, putting a hand to my chest as my heart thunders. I've been awake too long. I could probably stay up later, if I overdosed on caffeine or something. Hell, Crescent Prep kids are

really good at getting cocaine. If I wanted some, I bet Calix would know where to find it.

“You don’t? You shit talk them enough,” I say with a snort. Last night, the moms were content to leave their phones off for the whole of Devils’ Day. After all, their kids were home and safe, so what could they possibly need them for? They haven’t seen the video yet, but I’m assuming Calix has. “Anyway, I just took my phone out of airplane mode for the first time since last night. I saw Luke’s text about Pearl, and then you showed up. What do you want, Calix?”

He cringes slightly, and then curls his fingers in his dark hair, closing his eyes briefly against the shimmer of sunshine off the lake. I doubt that he’s slept, so he’s nursing a morning hangover paired with exhaustion. He looks like hell. And yet, I’m not sure if I’ve ever found him more handsome than I do in this moment.

Stripped of his pomp and circumstance, there’s that tired face I recognize from the gas station parking lot that fateful morning, the one that pissed me off so damn much. It’s not fair for him to do that, to shed both his masks. When he looks like that, I start to question everything.

“There’s a video,” he says absently, looking back out at the lake. Eventually someone might come along and hit the Aston Martin in a much worse way than I did, but for now, everything is quiet. I pretend not to know how this conversation is going. “Of us,” Calix adds. “I don’t know who took it, but it’s everywhere online.”

I’m pretty sure he expects something out of me, some iota of surprise. Instead, I just turn my face toward his and smile wryly.

“Why am I not surprised about that?” I ask, trying to remember why I was so upset about it on day one. After living through seventeen time loops, I’d just be happy to see tomorrow, whatever it might bring.

Calix narrows his eyes to slits, looking at me like he’s certain this is a Devils’ Day trick. There’s a darkness in his expression that I’m not sure I’ve ever seen before. It’s as if, even in the sun, with that black makeup running down his cheeks, hair mussed, mask lifted, he’s still the dark king.

“I knew it was you,” he whispers, and my eyes widen slightly. “You posted that shit. Why? Are you as much a stalker as Erina?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I ask, but Calix is already reaching over to grab my shoulder, his fingers gripping tightly,

bruising me. “I didn’t upload anything.”

“If you wanted to talk to me, you might’ve just done it, instead of hitting my car ... or ruining my life.” He pushes me off the bridge even as I protest, and then just sits there staring down at me like a goddamn devil as I rise to the surface, my teeth chattering as I swim to the shore. I’m certain—*certain*—that he’s going to drive off and leave me here, but to my surprise, he stays.

When I stomp up to the Aston Martin, dripping wet and shaking, Calix tosses me a towel, some oversized sweatpants, and a hoodie that smells like him—like some unsweet dark-blooming flower—and smirks at me. When he looks at me like that, it’s really hard to hate him.

“You didn’t leave?” I ask, not sure why I’m questioning my good fortune, but doing it anyway. If I can get close enough, I’m going to slap his ass, too.

“Why did you upload that video?” he asks, blinking too long lashes at me. Calix reaches up and takes the crown of thorns from his head, tossing it over the railing of the bridge and into the water. Somehow, that only makes him look even more regal, like he’s beyond something as earthly as a crown.

“Because, Calix,” I start, knowing he’s never going to believe me now. Protest is futile. “I like you, and I just ... wanted you to like me back.”

He stares at me for a long moment and then scrubs both of his hands down his face.

It’s as if ... Raz was jealous of Calix all this time. Barron was judging me. And Calix cared too much what other people thought.

I drop my gaze to the wood beams beneath my feet, the lake sparkling beneath them, then glance back up to find Calix watching me.

“I’m pretty sure Pearl is dead because of me,” Calix says, dropping his arms to his sides.

“Why would you think that?” I ask, and he just smiles bemusedly.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter either way,” he scoffs, shaking his head like he’s going to turn away from this entire conversation.

“Maybe you think it matters?” I ask, taking another few steps closer. Calix ignores me and turns back to the Aston Martin, opening the driver’s side door before glancing back at me.

“If you don’t want to be left behind, get in.” And then he slips inside and slams the door behind him, leaving me little choice but to scramble over to the passenger side. There’s no doubt in my mind that he really would take off and leave me out here.

Another yawn escapes me as I plop my wet ass onto the leather seat, hooking my seat belt as Calix curls his hands around the steering wheel and stares out the window at the trees surrounding the lake. It’s funny to me, how his parents think sending him off to Crescent Prep with a three-hundred-thousand-dollar car is considered punishment. I’ve never seen any of my fellow students hurting for spending money either. Even Luke’s parents send enough to keep her in fabric and paint for her projects plus plenty of cash to take us out to the diner twice a week.

“Do you want to go eat breakfast somewhere?” I ask, shivering a bit in my wet clothes. Calix glances my way, but I’m already one step ahead of him. “Somewhere that nobody will recognize us. Mud Street Café in Eureka Springs is always a hit with my family.”

Calix turns back to the front, putting the car in first, and peeling out as he sends the Rapide flying down the bridge. A small shriek of surprise escapes me as he whips us around the corner.

“This baby corners like it’s on rails,” I choke out as I find myself plastered to the seat. Calix is going *fast*, way too fast really, but I roll my window down anyway, the wind whipping my purple hair into a wet tangle.

“My mother loves that movie,” Calix says after a few minutes, slowing down a bit as we near Eureka Springs. The small-town cops around here are anti-Crescent Prep. They *really* don’t like rich kids being thrown into their neck of the woods to cause trouble, and none of the parents of the students seem keen on paying off local law enforcement like they probably did back home. I figure it makes them feel like they’re sending their kids off for some real punishment, but then, a speeding ticket has never broken any of their backs, now has it?

“*Pretty Woman?*” I reply, surprised that Calix even got my reference. It’s a little weird, thinking of Julia Roberts and her character’s rich benefactor with his fancy car. Too close for comfort, although my body is most *definitely* not for sale.

“That’s the one.” We slow down even more as we come up behind a van with a New Hampshire license plate. Several cars are heading down the opposite side of the road, leaving us zero room to pass.



“Have you ever sat down to watch it? Or just heard that line in passing?” Before I question myself, I slip my wet t-shirt over my head, followed by my wet bra.

Calix says nothing, but his dark eyes do flick my way briefly, taking in the hard pink points of my nipples. He’s seen all this before, so even though my cheeks are burning, and my body’s flushing with heat, I pretend like his stare doesn’t matter.

It does.

I’m such a fucking liar.

I yank the baggy hoodie over my head, glancing down at the *Burberry Preparatory Academy* logo on the front—a pair of griffins holding a shield—and cock a brow. Calix never attended Burberry; the only high school he’s ever attended is Crescent Prep. I know because he’s been there since my first day, climbing out of a red sportscar and staring up at the Tudor-style building with a scowl before he dropped his gaze and found mine.

We didn’t hate each other then.

Or ... anything else for that matter.

I’m not sure what, exactly, Calix did to get sent to Crescent, especially since he seems so fucking concerned with what everyone around him thinks—much to his own detriment. He’s a cruel asshole, but he’s also subtle. I’m surprised that he was ever caught playing his devil’s tricks.

“I’ve seen it. Poor girl fucks her way into a rich guy’s heart. What’s so interesting about that?”

With a scoff of my own, I chuck my wet clothes into the back seat, and kick off my skirt ... and my panties. “Jesus.” The word is barely there, more like a surprised exhale than anything else, but I hear it. My lips twist into a wry smile.

The clock on the dashboard screen reads *9:17 am*.

I am *officially* living September 26<sup>th</sup>—the day *after* Devils’ Day.

My heart swells with excitement, even as I slip my red panties over my toes, my bare ass heated by the seat warmer. *Don’t get too excited, Karma. This might not be it. And why would you want it to be? Pearl is dead.*

I glance over at Calix and, after a moment of consideration, slip my panties over his head. Not enough to obscure his vision, but

more like a racy red hairnet. He narrows his eyes, but he doesn't bother to remove them.

"These better be clean," he says, but he doesn't sound entirely convinced by his own statement.

"They're not," I retort defiantly, yanking the sweatpants up my bare legs. They smell like him, the sweatshirt and the pants. My cheeks heat even further as I settle back into the seat. "And also, screw you."

"Screw me?" he asks, driving a luxury car—that I ruined with my yellow hunk of junk—with panties over his perfect ebony hair. "Screw me, how? You uploaded a sex tape of us. The repercussions of that will follow us forever."

"Aww, you can't be president now? What a shame." I make a moue of disappointment before rolling my eyes. "Also, if forty-five could grab women by the pussy and still be president, I'm sure you'll be just fine. I'll even vote for you, how does that sound?"

Calix says nothing, but what he *has* done is rile up some of my long-buried fury toward him. It's mixing with a new and righteous anger as I realize that I have *no clue* what this man's true motivations are, what's actually real and what's bullshit.

"If you really think I'd upload that, after everything, then you're an idiot, by the way." His mouth tightens, and his fingers curl even more tightly around the steering wheel as we slow even further, entering the historic downtown area of Eureka Springs. Nobody will know us here, so Calix and I can eat together without him freaking the fuck out about his reputation.

"If you didn't upload it, then why weren't you surprised? I thought you'd burst an artery."

"Well, maybe you don't know me too well then." I cross my arms over my breasts in challenge, turning another glare his way. He shouldn't be so pretty, sitting there with wet panties on his tousled hair, his eye makeup dried in black lines down his face. But he is. It's effortless for him, to look like he owns the world. "I don't regret what we did that night, and neither should you. There are worse things in the world than some stupid video of us having consensual sex. Pearl is *dead*. She killed herself."

The car suddenly lurches forward as Calix whips the wheel to the side, taking us over the curb and throwing the Aston Martin into a parking space ahead of a car that had been waiting patiently for the

previous occupant to pull out. They lay on the horn, but Calix pays them no mind, turning the engine off and then taking the panties off his head. He looks right at me as he sticks them in the pocket of the white velvet doublet he's wearing, unbuttoned and showing off his smooth chest and abs.

“Did the Knight Crew have anything to do with her death?” I ask, trying to keep my voice soft. The way Calix scowls at me, I know I've pressed some serious buttons.

“Stop calling my friends the Knight Crew. It's fucking stupid. They aren't my *crew*; we just like to hang out together.” He opens the door, and I search around for my shoes, realizing that I wasn't wearing any when I climbed in with him. Crap.

I watch out the window as Calix takes off around the corner, to where the entrance to the café lies. As I sit there trying to figure out what to do—there's no way the café is letting me in without shoes—Calix comes back and yanks my door open. He thrusts a pair of flip-flops in at me, and then leans down, his forearm resting on the roof of the car.

“Only in shitty teen novels does any group of friends have a *name*. You don't want to know some of the names Raz has for you and your shitty friends.” He steps back as I pull the plastic tag off the shoes, and slip them on my feet. Oddly enough, they fit. They're only half a size too big.

I stand up, but Calix doesn't move back like I thought he would. Instead, we end up pressed fairly close together, with him staring down at me, crow-black eyes unreadable.

“Hey asshole!” a male voice shouts, and I jump, terrified that one of the Knight Crew has found us, that our moment together is over before it even begins. Adrenaline floods me, and I decide that I might just kick the shit out of whoever it is. Why not? Today is the start of my new forever.

Instead, we both glance over and find the couple that was in the car Calix just screwed out of a space.

“You nearly crashed into us,” a woman adds as the pair of tourists storm up to us. It's a little late in the season, but we're never entirely without over here. How do I know they're tourists? Because they're wearing matching olive green tees with the shape of Arizona on them. *Arizona Homegrown* the words underneath the design read. “That was our space.”

“I’m calling you into the police station,” the man snarls, his nostrils flared, face red with frustration. Rightfully so. Calix barreled right over the curb and snatched that space. The fact that he’s driving a car worth more than most people’s houses probably doesn’t help either.

“Why don’t I give you some money to fuck off?” Calix says, completely deadpan, his eyes flicking to the woman as she gives his outfit a strange once-over. It’s not often you see a hot dude dressed in a white doublet and leather pants with boots, black makeup streaked down his cheeks. As tourists, they’d likely be unaware of the existence of Devils’ Day. “Would five hundred bucks help?”

“Five hundred bucks?” the guy asks, glancing over at his female companion. Her eyes widen slightly, as if to say *take the fucking money*. I quiver slightly, gritting my teeth as I watch the situation play out. How can their dignity be worth any amount of money? Yet ... I know what it’s like to struggle. Maybe they really need the cash? “I want eight hundred.”

“Fine. A thousand. Take it.” Calix throws a wad of cash on the ground, and the man and his wife scramble to collect it before the wind carries it away. Calix doesn’t even bother to wait around to see if they manage to get it, grabbing my hand and dragging me away from the scene. My hand burns where he touches me, even as my heart simmers with anger.

“You can’t just throw money at people and get away with being a jerk,” I snap, yanking my hand from his, just outside the front door to the café. It’s getting later and later, and I’m *exhausted*. As soon as I eat, it’s going to be game over. I can’t fight sleep forever.

“Can’t I though?” Calix asks, looking back at me with one dark brow raised. “It’s worked for me thus far. Maybe those people need money more than they need me to smile and pretend to be nice?”

My mouth drops open as Calix continues past the front entrance of the café and toward a storefront with men’s clothing in the window. I jog after him and grab his arm before he can step inside. We both pause to look down at the spot where my fingers curl around the white sleeve of his doublet.

“You don’t need to buy new clothes right now,” I challenge, looking up into his ebon eyes.

“I’m dressed like fucking Shakespeare,” he growls back at me, and one of my brows goes up. I redirect my gaze to his pants.

“Pretty sure Shakespeare never wore low-slung, ass-hugging leather pants.” Calix rolls his eyes and tries to pull away from me, but I just cling tighter to his arm. He lets me keep holding onto him, refusing to drag me along the sidewalk in front of all the passersby. He seriously needs to stay in his own lane and stop worrying about what other people are thinking. If he’s so interested in the thoughts and feelings of others, maybe he should try philanthropy instead of paranoia over his own self-image? “You don’t need to change, Calix. Just ... maybe button up the jacket for the restaurant. Hygiene, and all that. Plus, nobody wants to see your nipples.”

That last statement’s supposed to be funny. Only ... it doesn’t come out that way. A strange tension pulls between us. One of, uh, a sexual nature.

“People are staring at me,” he says, lifting his gaze up and surveying the people passing by. Occasionally, someone glances our way, but even with the tourists, Eureka Springs is still an artists’ colony. The shops sell tie-dye and crystals, glass pipes and gay pride flags. There’s even a haberdashery—that’s a fancy name for a hat shop—that sells steampunk top hats. The town is basically the antithesis of the rural Arkansas.

“Nobody here *cares*,” I insist, pointing across the street to where a guy with neon pink hair stands outside the tie-dye shop, kissing a man with a ponytail and a dangling earring. I look back at Calix. “Let’s just go have some eggs and pancakes, okay?”

With another gentle tug, Calix finally starts toward the front doors of the restaurant.

I yank the glass door open and take him in with me, keeping hold of his arm as we move down the stairs.

“Did you know the café used to be on street level?” I ask, trying to distract him. Calix’s dark eyes constantly scan his surroundings, always looking for trouble. “Did it ever occur to you that trouble comes to you because you’re *expecting* it?”

The host takes us to a two-seater table and hands us some menus.

“Anyway,” I continue, scooting my chair just a bit closer, so we can talk. You’d think I fucking slapped Calix, the way he looks at me. I ignore him. “The café used to be on street level, but there was a lot of flooding and mudslides in town back in the late 1800s. The street was eventually built up, but the café remains on the original level.”

“You memorized the menu,” Calix says, lifting up the plastic menu in his hands and pointing at an inner flap with the history of the restaurant printed on it. “How quaint.”

“I’ve taken many a tour around Eureka Springs,” I quip back, meeting him blow for blow. My old rules—*don’t attract the attention of the Knight Crew*—no longer apply to my life. Whether I’ve really broken the loop or not doesn’t matter; I’m tired of trying to make myself small for them. Nobody can make me feel small, if I don’t let them. “If you’d spent even a modicum of time trying to appreciate where you live, maybe you’d know some facts about the area, too?”

“What do I care about *Arkansas*?” Calix purrs back, putting an elbow on the table and resting his chin in his hand. The way he stares at me, I’m not sure if I should be offended ... or charmed? Calix is like a cat who’s rubbing on you, asking to be pet, but then scratches you as soon as you do. I can practically see his metaphorical tail twitching, one ear laid back in mock aggression. “As soon as we graduate, I’m heading back to D.C.”

“You shouldn’t just live for tomorrow,” I say, smiling slightly as I glance back down at the menu. My eyes are so tired they burn, and as I stare at the blurring words in front of me, I realize there are tears waiting in the wings, wanting to be shed. “Sometimes, tomorrow never comes. Now is just as important.”

Calix chucks his menu on the table, almost angrily, but when I glance over at him, he isn’t looking at me.

“Are you two ready to order?” a busy waitress asks, pausing by our table.

“Coffee, black,” Calix says, and then after a heartbeat too long, he adds, “and blueberry pancakes.”

“Espresso, iced tea, and blueberry pancakes for me, too.” I smile as I hand back my menu, and the waitress scurries away.

For a while there, the two of us sit in complete silence. Neither of us even looks at our phones. I’m pretty sure we’re both ready to pretend we don’t even have them.

Yet another yawn hits me as I blink droopy lids, my eyes scratchy and aching as I reach up to rub at them. *There’s no time like the present*, I think, forcing my eyes open so I can look over at Calix. Surprisingly, I find him watching me.

“Who do you think uploaded the video?” he asks, but I don’t have any answer for him, so I just shake my head. “Probably fucking Raz,” Calix grinds out with a scowl, and it occurs to me that there’s no love lost between the two of them. It’d be difficult, to try to spend a day making them *both* happy. Add Barron in, and it seems like a lost cause entirely. *But I bet you could do it, Karma.* That is, if today isn’t my new reality. I sure as hell hope it is.

“It wasn’t Raz,” I say with complete confidence, shaking my head again. “Not Barron either. Could it be Sonja?” I try to pretend like I don’t know Luke’s fucking Sonja, but it’s hard. The temptation to question Calix about the boys’ morning plan of taking me to the cabin is hard to resist. If I mention it, it’ll make him even more suspicious.

“I think it was Pearl,” Calix says, voice low. He ignores the waitress as she sets down his coffee, staring into the dark brown liquid like it holds all the answers. Finally, he sighs and sets his elbows on the table, putting his chin in his right hand. “Too easy. Maybe Erina?”

“Who?” I ask, and Calix gives me a look.

“Erina Cheney?” he echoes, and I shake my head. “Are you fucking kidding me? She fucks with you all the time, and you don’t even know her name?”

“I don’t make it a habit of memorizing my tormentors’ names,” I say, thanking the waitress enthusiastically when she drops off my espresso and iced tea, just to make up for Calix. He doesn’t seem to have much to say to that statement, but maybe he’s wondering why I know so much about him?

“Erina is the one with the pale blue eyes,” he says, picking up his coffee and leaning back in his chair to drink it, boots crossed underneath the table, leather pants so low that a bit of skin shows between the waistband and the bottom of the doublet. “Pale skin, raven hair?”

Ah. The name clicks in my head as I think of the girl from the Devils’ Day Committee, the one who broke Barron’s necklace on that very first day.

“Why do you think she would upload something like that?” I ask, and Calix shrugs one shoulder, like he just can’t be bothered shrugging both.

“More likely it was Pearl,” he says again, but he’s right: that’s too easy.

“I knew that she was cutting herself,” I tell him, pursing my lips as I add some sugar to my espresso. “And I didn’t do anything to help her.”

“Did you actively hurt her though?” he asks, frowning slightly and looking askance at me. “I mean, did you actively go out of your way to make her life hell? Because we did.” Calix takes another sip of his coffee, turning his own attention back to the table. “That’s why she’s dead, because we hurt her, and then just kept hurting her.”

“Why?” I ask, the sound of that one word so desperate, it’s like I’m asking for myself at the same time. *Why did you do it? Why do you keep doing it? Especially if it hurts you just as much as you hurt everyone else?* “What did she ever do to you?”

“Pearl is my brother’s ex-girlfriend,” Calix starts, and then pauses. “Was.” Another sip of coffee, a deep frown. “She got sent to Crescent Prep because of him.”

“Because of him?” I repeat, still not getting where he’s going with this.

“She was pregnant,” he tells me, looking back up again. Sitting here, talking to him about something so sad ... I still enjoy Calix’s presence. It’s weird, but I just ... like being around him. There’s a connection between us that’s hard to explain. We both think too hard about things, and consequences—different for each of us—mean too much. I’ve always cared too much what the Knight Crew thought, even if I pretended not to. Calix cares too much what the whole world thinks. “Her parents sent her to Crescent, and then they gave the baby to my parents to raise.”

“Did Pearl *want* to give up her baby?” I ask, but I don’t really need an answer to that to know.

“She started our feud, even before freshman year began, calling my parents and telling them shit about me and Raz. Pearl is the reason why he’s here, too.” Calix scowls, but there’s a desperate pleading to that expression that I’m not sure he’s realized he’s wearing. He wants out of this, an escape, some way to start over and change things, put life on a different path.

Fuck.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*



Pearl is a mom. Pearl's baby was taken by the Knights—two of the most awful people I'd ever had the misfortune to meet. Pearl ... can't die here, alone and sad and wanting.

I'm going back.

I know before I even close my eyes that I'll be going back.

"Are you crying?" Calix asks, leaning forward and setting his coffee cup down. "About Pearl?"

"Not about Pearl," I whisper, glancing up at Calix and finding him almost too close to me. Well, maybe it's a little bit about Pearl. "I'm going to miss this."

"Miss what?" Calix is staring at me like he wants to understand, to unwrap all of my secrets.

"This." I gesture between us with a finger as the waitress comes back with our pancakes, and my heart breaks in two because I know we share the same favorite breakfast food. "Me and you. This talk." *You won't remember this tomorrow; you'll stare at me like you hate me, leaving me to pick up the pieces to understand why.* "Us hanging out."

"It's not like we can't have breakfast again," Calix says, as if I've irritated him, picking his coffee back up. "Don't cry, Karma."

Slowly, I pick up my fork and eat my pancakes, wondering if this exhaustion I'm feeling will still be there when I wake up at the gas station next. Because it's coming. And now I know one thing that I have to do to move on: I have to save Pearl. Not just because the universe wants me to set things right, but because it's the right thing to do.

On our way out of the café, I grab Calix's wallet before he can put it away, and I grab the last few hundreds inside. Two of them go in a tip jar on the host stand, and the other two go into a plastic slot on an animal shelter donation box.

I barely get up the steps before I turn and look down at Calix, two steps behind me. We're on eye level now.

"Let's get a room at the Crescent Hotel," I blurt as my chest aches with fatigue. I don't have much longer, I know, before I have to go back. But I'm not ready, not yet. "Tonight, we can go on a ghost tour together. Tomorrow, we can tour one of the local caves. Let's ... buy an expensive piece of art together and pretend for a moment like we don't hate each other."

Calix stares at me like I've lost my fucking mind.

“On Monday, we can go back to school and then, when everyone's looking and you feel most ashamed, you can ignore me.”

“Karma,” Calix says, taking the last two steps, until we're nearly standing toe to toe. “I was never ashamed of you.” He puts one hand on the side of my face, his dark eyes still virtually unreadable.

“You could've fooled me,” I reply softly, hardly daring to breathe. My head swims with exhaustion, but I push the feeling back, in favor of listening to my heart beat wildly.

“I lied to someone on Devils' Day last year,” he tells me, his own face softening. “You can pretend it wasn't you for now, and we can try this lame-ass ghost tour. I can't promise anything about tomorrow.”

“Sometimes tomorrow never comes,” I remind him, but then he wraps his arms around me and pulls me close.

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The Crescent Hotel looms above us, a veritable castle in its own right. It shares the same name as our school, but I'm not sure, exactly, what the meaning behind it is. I'm going to be whimsical for a moment and pretend they were both named after the sharp shape of the Devils' Day moon.

"This is one of the most haunted hotels in America," I tell Calix, glancing over at him as we stand in the parking lot, a crescent moon sculpture guarding the front steps of the hotel. My heart flip-flops in my chest and butterflies take flight in my belly. He glances back at me, his face carefully blank, but not empty.

There's too much between us for him to pretend right now, especially not with Pearl's death hanging over both our heads. My eyes are sticky with fatigue, and I keep watching the time tick by, wondering how long the universe is going to let me get away with this.

"If you believe in that sort of thing," Calix adds, turning back to the hotel. I'm just sort of assuming he has a credit card to pay for the room and the ghost tour. Goddess knows I don't have any money.

"Even if you don't, it's fun to pretend sometimes." Looking down, I spot his pale hand resting near the leg of his leather pants. Before I can second-guess my intuition, I reach down and curl my fingers around it.

Calix stiffens up, but he doesn't pull away. Instead, he starts forward, dragging me along behind him toward the entrance. A

doorman steps up and opens it for us, letting us into the grand lobby with its glorious fireplace, flames crackling merrily. There's even a cat sitting in the middle of the floor runner, staring back at us cheekily. There must be some Devils' Day sorcery in this scheme, a time loop crafted of magic and trickery. If there is, this cat is certainly a part of it.

I resist the urge to flip it off, and it yawns at me, standing up and stretching before sauntering off like it owns the place. For all I know, maybe it does?

"Can I help you?" the man behind the counter asks as Calix pulls me up to the window, leaning his elbow on the counter. The way he moves, acts, it reminds me of that fucking cat. Imperious. Domineering. Masterful. It's both part of his charm and his Achilles' heel, all wrapped up in one darkly beautiful package.

"We need a room for the night," Calix purrs, his eyes narrowed slightly. He yawns, just like the cat, and even that has a haughty air to it. "For me and my lover." He gestures back at me, using my hand to drag me closer to the counter. Calix stands up and slides his right arm around my waist, making me shiver.

"Of course." The employee checks his computer and then glances back at us. "How easily do you scare? Because Michael's room is available."

"Michael's room?" Calix retorts with an annoyingly superior air. "Who the fuck is Michael?"

"Only the Crescent Hotel's most famous ghost," I say, and it must be true that yawns are contagious because one slips out of me before I can stop it. "He was a stone mason who fell to his death."

"How romantic," Calix deadpans, pulling his wallet out of his pocket with his left hand. He manages to get his credit card out without removing his right arm from around my waist. Having him touch me like this, so casually, it's warming me up in places I didn't even know were cold. How? How can I let such a lordly asshole as Calix Knight have such an effect on me?

Love is irrational, certainly. Mad as a hatter.

"We'll take it," he adds, when the man behind the counter doesn't seem to quite understand his arrogant quip. The credit card is run, and we're handed a key. Not a key card either, but a real key. It's a nice touch. "I can't believe I'm paying to stay in a room where someone died. It's a bit macabre, don't you think?"

“Not at all,” I retort, steering him to the concierge. There’s a sign next to the podium where the employee stands, advertising ghost tours for tonight. I so desperately want to go on one. Now that the idea’s come to me, I feel almost frenzied for it. *A night that doesn’t end in the Devils’ Day Party, an outing with Calix, a chance for us to do something together.* But holy shit, I’m tired, and I’m worried I’m not going to make it.

Never hurts to try, right?

Calix buys us two tickets for ten o’clock that night, and then leads me down the hallway toward the elevator. It’s strange, being with him like this. We’re not fighting or fucking or putting on a show for the Knight Crew.

“I like being with you,” I tell him, and he stops with his hand halfway to the button for the elevator. “A lot. I hope you know that.” He just stands there, staring at me, so I take the initiative and call the elevator myself, pressing my finger into the button slowly, almost teasingly.

“Why?” he replies, blinking dark eyes. His black liner is smeared, almost like that sharpness of his is smudged, too, his infamous cruelty blurred at the edges. “I’m a total dick to you.”

“You can’t help who you love,” I tell him as the elevator pings and the doors slide open. “But you can demand respect. Could you give it to me?”

Calix is silent as we step inside the elevator, leaning our butts against the railing and waiting patiently as the old doors slide closed.

“I could try,” he says, voice cracking slightly. Calix reaches up and runs a hand down his face. I recognize the motion; he’s tired. He’s fucking *exhausted*. And I don’t just mean because neither of us slept last night. No, there’s more to it than that. He’s tired in his heart, his soul.

“Don’t try, Calix. Do. Just do.”

The elevator doors open, and we step out, taking our time in the hallway to examine the old photographs lining the wall. At least, I’m examining them. Calix, on the other hand, is examining *me*.

“What?” I ask after a moment, tucking some stringy purple hair behind my ear and wondering how dead on my feet I must look. I’m still wearing the Burberry Prep sweatshirt and sweatpants, so I can’t be painting a very pretty picture. Speaking of painting, my hands are

stained with color. A quick glance at my reflection in the glass of the picture in front of me shows a splotch of pink on my right cheek.

“You just ... I don’t know.” Calix turns away, pretending to be interested in a black and white photograph of some girls in old-fashioned PE uniforms. Once upon a time, this place actually served as a college for young women, sometime around the early 1900s. Meanwhile, my school, Crescent Prep, was being used to beat filthy rich boys into submission.

“We’re alone here,” I repeat again, and he spins, grabbing me by the shoulders. But gently. He doesn’t throw me into the wall or squeeze me until I bruise. He just looks at me, and I know in the fucking depths of my soul that even if he can’t remember the last few weeks, there’s a mark on his soul because of them.

“You’re so ... you, Karma. I fucking crave it.”

“What?” I ask, blinking at him in shock. A couple comes out of their room and gives us a wide berth. Must be strange, to see a girl in baggy sweatpants with paint-spattered hands facing off against a boy who looks like a disheveled faerie prince.

“I crave you,” Calix tells me, using one hand to rake fingers through his ebony hair. “I have for years. I try to talk myself out of it, tell myself that I don’t care what you do or where you go, but I do. I’m obsessed with it.”

My cheeks heat, and I run my tongue over my lower lip, trying to buy myself a moment to decide how to respond. Calix releases me, standing up straight and staring down at me with a face that could make angels cry. He’s too pretty, too devilish, for his own good.

“I’m obsessed with you,” he corrects, before I get a chance to add anything to the conversation.

“Pretty sure the feeling’s mutual,” I whisper back, my voice hoarse. “Couldn’t you tell last year?”

“I could tell,” he assures me, lush mouth turning down into a deep frown. “That’s why I hate that you like me back. You shouldn’t. You deserve better.”

“What if I don’t *want* better? What if you’re just what I want?” I don’t mention Raz or Barron. That part of the equation, I haven’t figured out just yet. Three boys. Three shards of my heart. No easy answer. I mean, considering I can even break this time loop at all. I may not even have to worry about choosing between them if I can’t escape this. I’ll just spend each day spiraling deeper and deeper into

hell until my mind shatters. A shiver overtakes me, and I shake my head to banish the awful thoughts.

“What if?” Calix repeats, and then he reaches down for my hand, pulling me close. His eyes are droopy with fatigue, but as beautiful as a moonless sky, smudged makeup and all. “What if everything I said to you was true, and I’ve loved you even harder since I let you go?”

“What if?” I choke out as he closes his eyes and presses his lips to my knuckles, reverently, longingly, desperately.

“That was my first time, too,” he says softly, opening his gaze with a rawness that steals my breath away. There are endless emotions buried in there, but instead of hiding them behind a mask, he’s revealing them all for me to see. “I haven’t touched another girl since.”

“You’re kidding me,” I blurt, and his pretty eyes narrow, like two sharp blades of obsidian.

“You think I’d joke about that shit?” he snaps back, clearly wounded. I ignore what’s very obviously a defense mechanism and slide my arms around Calix’s neck, hugging him. It takes a moment before he finally wraps his arms around me and hugs me back. “I didn’t mean for Pearl to die,” he whispers next, and then he’s squeezing me so hard that I can’t breathe, tears pricking the corners of my eyes as I listen to the deep regret in his words.

“I know you didn’t,” I whisper back, hating the universe for this bullshit. Wishing I could just be here with Calix and have it all be real, that I could wake up tomorrow and start living.

But I can’t.

So I’m going to enjoy every single fucking second that brings me happiness.

“Let’s go.” I pull back and grab Calix’s hand, leading him to our room and then sucking in a sharp breath when he reaches around me to unlock the door with his key. His body is draped over mine, shadowing me, his warm breath feathering against the back of my neck. Calix turns the knob and the door creaks open.

Our room is freshly made-up, the curtains parted to let in the sunshine.

That’s the first thing that Calix does, storm over to that window and banish the sunlight. It seems more appropriate for our illicit

tryst, like we were made for nightmares and shadows.

“Come in,” Calix tells me, speaking from the darkness.

With another shiver—a much different sort of shiver this time—I step into the room and lock the door behind me.

Calix is there in an instant, slamming his palms into the door on either side of me, his breathing suddenly ragged. He’s clearly tired, upset, confused. But there’s no doubt in my mind that what I’m seeing is real. This isn’t some bullshit play he’s putting on for the Knight Crew. No, it’s no longer Devils’ Day, and Calix Knight’s mask is cracked and shattered to pieces.

What I’m witnessing is him coming unraveled.

“You’ve really only ever had sex with me?” I repeat, marveling at the novelty of it. As far as he’s concerned, in this timeline, I’ve only ever had sex with him either. *Barron and Raz*, I think, desperately missing them and feeling guilty about how happy I am with Calix, all at the same time.

“Does that bother you?” he asks, like he isn’t sure. “Nobody else knows. Not Raz or Barron or Sonja.” He exhales and I turn slowly, staying in the space between his arms. When Calix lifts his face, his lips are within kissing distance. “Sometimes I play with girls, let them suck on my neck or kiss me, sit on my lap. But nothing else. I never want anything else. I barely want that.”

“Stop it,” I tell him, suddenly uncomfortable with his shift in demeanor. The Calix at the café, who was biting and cruel but flecked with shimmering shards of humanity, I know how to handle him. This Calix is the exact opposite, and it’s freaking me out. If I thought I liked him before, when he was little more than a taint-headed asshole, this is a whole new level.

“Kiss me, Karma. And then ride me. I don’t care if I see a ghost. He can watch if he wants, but we’re not stopping until the goddamn ghost tour.”

“Holy fuck,” I groan as he drags me back toward the bed, pulling me down on top of him. Calix tastes like first love and heartbreak both, and I find that I’m addicted to it, addicted to him. His mouth is lush and sweet, but venomous. I can feel the poison pumping through my veins, making me lightheaded and dizzy as he rolls us over and then pushes my shirt up, exposing the two pale mounds of my breasts.



There's only a sliver of light peeking through the curtains on the right side of the room, but it's enough that I can see Calix run his tongue over his full lower lip. He leans down and takes my mouth, using his right hand to cup my breast and circle my nipple with this middle finger and thumb.

Part of me wants to prolong this moment, encourage him to keep talking. The rest of me can't shove my sweats down my hips fast enough. Calix helps me wrestle the pants off and chuck them to the floor before he descends on me again, sucking my nipple into his hot mouth as I search desperately for a way to open the fly on his tight pants.

He groans as my fingers tickle his lower belly, teasing open his button and shoving down his fly. My fingers slip inside the leather of his pants, freeing his cock and greedily wrapping around the base of it.

"I haven't had sex for a *year*," he murmurs against my ear. "An entire fucking year. Do you know how goddamn horny I am?"

"And whose problem is that?" I whisper back, swallowing back my emotions as Calix trails his lips up to my collarbone then my throat, recapturing my lips with a pirate's frenzy, desperately searching for blood and treasure both.

My hand pumps Calix's shaft, encouraging ragged moans to slip from his throat, unpracticed and raw but oh so sexy. He's so natural at this, so smooth, and I wonder if that's just because he's so damn good at controlling himself, of playing the modern aristocrat.

"Get rough and messy with me," I beg, squeezing him a little harder, remembering how, even with me bent over and propped up against the side of a train car, Calix was too practiced, too in control. "Let that tension out, so we can slow down. I want this day to last."

He lifts his head up, but all I can see is the shape of his face, limned in that tiny bit of sunlight. As I've asked, Calix slows down on trying to please me, letting me work him up to a climax. He spills himself across my belly and breasts and then collapses to the bed beside me, breathing hard.

"I don't have any condoms," he growls out as I roll toward him and reach out to unbutton his doublet. He not only *looks* like a fae prince, but he sounds like one, like a pissed-off royal with a grudge ... and an insatiable desire for pleasures of the flesh.

“We don’t need any,” I whisper against his lips, and whatever he takes that to mean—that I’m on some sort of birth control, that I just don’t care, that I’ll get a morning-after pill later—I don’t know and I don’t care.

“Good. Because I’m not sure I have the self-control to leave right now and find some.”

“I wouldn’t have let you if you’d tried,” I repeat, running my hands up his chest and marveling at how much his muscles have developed over the last year. *A man, not a boy.* Our lips work together like we were made for each other, and I find myself arching my hips against his, seeking more.

Calix chuckles and pushes me back with a hand on my pelvis, tracing the bone beneath my flesh with the smooth whorls of his fingertips and making me shiver. “Take it slow, huh?”

“Well, you know, I meant ... give you time to recover ...” I trail off, thinking of last year and how long it took Calix to recover. That is, not long at all. But every boy is different, every encounter is different. *As if you’re some sort of expert, Karma, having been with only three boys a handful of times.*

“Recover is a subjective term,” he purrs, taking my hand and placing it on the already rigid length of his shaft. “But don’t worry: we’ll take our time.” Calix drops his lips to my breasts, teasing my nipples with that hot slash of menace he calls a mouth and then trailing down to even hotter, wetter places.

He tastes me like I’m something to be savored, working me up into a sweat, my naked flesh slick as he sits back up, chucking his doublet and pants.

“Come here, Karma Sartain,” he tells me, leaning himself up against the headboard and pulling me onto his lap. “And kiss me like I matter.”

My arms go around his neck, and our mouths meet in unbearable heat. *This can’t be happening; this is a dream.* Only it’s not. It’s real, and yet ... no more attainable than a perfect nightmare.

“Can I call you Lix now?” I whisper against his mouth, wondering where this would go if we really had a tomorrow. I can feel him smile. A smile. A real goddamn smile.

“You can call me whatever you want, so long as you scoot back a couple of inches.”

I do as he asked, moving back just a bit and reaching between us to guide his cock to my opening, Sinking back with a groan, I take every inch of him into me, breathing hard as his warm hands find my breasts.

My eyes are beginning to adjust to the dark now, and I can just make out his pale skin against the dark headboard and bedspread. My fingers trace his cheeks as I begin to move my hips, forward and back, nice and slow.

It feels way too fucking good.

“Marry me, Karma,” he says as we begin to pick up the pace, his hands on my hips encouraging me to go faster, plunge him deeper, rock harder. “Run away with me after school is out; I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

I pause, my body slowing its natural gyrating motions as the words he just said click into place.

“What?”

“Marry me. My parents have my older brothers. They honestly don’t give a fuck about me. They’ll give me money and tell me to get lost. I’m just asking you to get lost with me.” My heart breaks as my body stops moving completely. I end up falling forward, my palms slamming into the headboard on either side of his face. “What’s wrong?” There’s a sharpness in his voice now, torn halfway between empathy and fearful anger. He thinks I’m going to reject him; he’s sure of it.

“I like that idea,” I tell him, but I can’t decide if I’m talking about the getting married part, the getting lost part, or ... something else entirely. “Let’s get lost together.”

Calix seems to take that as a yes, bringing my face to his and destroying my mouth with those beautiful weapons he calls his lips. With some more encouragement from his hands on my hips, I begin to rock again, working my clit hard against his pelvis so that I’m actually the first to come. My body’s natural motions of squeezing and tightening draw a climax from him, too, and he bites down on my lower lip as he comes, not enough to hurt, but just enough to mark me possessively.

We stay where we are, his strong arms banded around my middle.

“You were so mean this morning, like usual. I mean, you were an ass all the way through breakfast. What changed?” I lean back, soaked in sweat, my heart pounding as I see his lips curve into a

smirk. Calix is bathed in shadows, but I couldn't miss that haughty expression if I tried. *Please don't do this to me*, I think, fear sweeping over me in a cold wave. *Don't trick me again; I couldn't bear it.*

"I got sick of it," he says, shaking his head, still smirking. "I got sick of playing pretend. You never do, no matter how hard or how long I play my parts, you just never show up to the act. Maybe I wanted to see what would happen if I didn't? Just for a minute."

"And?" I ask, even though I almost don't want to.

"I loved it," he says, and I hear that same tenderness in his voice now that I did when he first confessed to me. "I love you, Karma. Always have. Don't think I can ever stop." When I reach up to touch the side of his face, his lids flutter closed against his cheeks. He's very clearly exhausted and running out of steam.

But I can't sleep.

I don't want to.

I'm not ready to lose this yet.

"Stay awake," I whisper, my voice hoarse from sexual satisfaction and fatigue both. "Stay with me."

"I'll be here when you get up. We'll hunt for ghosts together. On Monday, we'll ..." He trails off and then rolls me over, tucking me in against him and resting his chin on top of my head. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I want to get up and get in the bath, go find some coffee, try my hardest to stay awake. But now that I'm tucked up against Calix, loving this moment and terrified of it ending, what can I do?

I wrap my arms around him, my eyes stinging.

"Everything will be different tomorrow," Calix promises, doing the very thing he said he couldn't do. Promise me a tomorrow. "In the morning, I'll tell you about the ghost I saw as a kid ..."

"Sometimes tomorrow never comes," I repeat for the last time as a stray tear leaks down my face, and my eyes close of their own accord. *Big, stupid idiot, telling me he doesn't believe in ghosts when he's already seen one.* Love blooms like a rose inside my chest, complete with thorns, cutting me to pieces and leaving me to bleed to death.

"*Je t'appartiendrai malgré tout. Toujours,*" he murmurs as I drift to sleep, wrapped up in Calix's arms and feeling his breath in my hair. *Regardless, I'll still belong to you. Always.*

I have no choice but to spend the next three days crying at home.

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There's blood all over my steering wheel.

I'm too stunned by the reset of my life to move the way I should, to push the lock down on my car door and drive off. And I'm punished for my inaction, on top of everything.

Calix rips the door open and yanks me out, just days after promising that everything would be different. It's an emotional blow, one that I've avoided for three fucking days. If I'd had to deal with his animosity just *minutes* after falling asleep in his arms, his cum still warm between my thighs, I'd have probably puked all over his shiny Crescent Prep shoes.

I find myself thrown against the side of Little Bee anyway, Calix's hands gripping my upper arms, his grasp dangerously tight. It's a chore not to roll my eyes, to just stand there and pretend like this is any other day. Because it's not. Each new day on this time loop hurts in a way that's impossible to put to words.

"Are you fucking insane?!" Calix snarls, and I decide I can't take it. Shoving him off with both hands, I turn and run toward the convenience store, bursting through the glass doors and looking around frantically.

"Where is Raz?" I ask Barron, my eyes meeting his as I swallow back that moment in the chapel when he pulled my shoe off and began to massage my foot. *Do not go there, not right now.*

Barron looks up from the aisle he's bent over, the hood of his white sweatshirt pulled up, a pink lollipop between his lips. He

points back in the direction of the cold drinks, and I dart down the aisle.

Raz turns as I get close, eyes widening slightly as I barrel into him, throwing my arms around his neck and closing my own eyes against tears.

I *know* what I have to do, but it's hard. It's fucking hard. I gave up a timeline I wanted to live for somebody I don't even like. And it *hurts*.

"I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do it," I whisper against his ear, knowing he has no idea what I'm talking about. "Raz, I like you. I always have. Can't you tell, the way we always shoot shit back and forth? You're a verbal curb-stomper." I turn back to him and press our mouths together before he even gets a chance to react. My tongue slides along the seam between Raz's lips, and after a brief instant of hesitation, he kisses me back, hands gripping my ass. Heat spirals through me, followed closely by relief.

A touch on my shoulder startles me, and I break away from Raz as Barron drops his hand to his side.

"What the actual fuck?" he asks me. Barron, not Raz. His dual-colored eyes are bright with a frustration that it takes me a moment to untangle.

"Nice Devils' Day trick," Raz says with a sneer, pressing his advantage by squeezing my ass. "If you want to fuck me to prove a point, I accept. Tell me you love me, and I'll believe it."

"I love you," I say, but without an ounce of mirth, just a gentle frown and drying tears. Raz's expression is priceless; I've shocked the shit out of him.

Seconds later, Calix comes storming into the store, making his way over to me in the sharp creases of his Crescent Prep uniform with its clean, tailored lines. The logo—the moon on its side, the knife and rod crossed behind it—shimmers in silver stitching from the purple fabric.

"This bitch just hit my fucking car," he snaps, and I have to close my eyes against a feeling of nausea.

"You did what, Trailer Park?" Raz asks, but he doesn't set me down. His fingers relax on my ass, but he's still holding me. I open my eyes and look him in the face.

“I’m running out of options, Raz,” I tell him, knowing he’s going to misinterpret my words. “For how to do this, so why not just be honest from moment one? I love you.”

“Set her down, Raz,” Calix snaps as Barron cracks the lollipop in his mouth with his teeth.

“What are you doing, Karma?” Raz looks at me like he’s never quite faced a problem of this magnitude. “We get it: you want to fuck with us today.”

“I want you to look at me the way you always do, like you hate me. But I want you to do it holding my hand. Can you do that?”

Raz looks at me like he has no idea what to think, and I close my eyes, pressing my face into his shoulder. That day at the hotel with Calix was like a dream, one that I was so desperate not to wake up from that I fought sleep for almost thirty hours. But trying to force my tired body through hours of exhaustion is not a way to escape this time loop.

I have to figure out how to balance all the things that I want to happen. And then I need to keep doing that until it sticks somehow. That’s the only way.

“Put her down,” Calix repeats, his words a clear command. The only thing his statement seems to do is cause Raz’s fingers to tighten on my ass. At this point, I half-expect the boys to throw me in the back of the Aston Martin and take me out to the cabin again. All I have to do is piss off at least two of the three guys to trigger that timeline, right? “Let’s take her with us.”

I guess I’ve never tried it when one of them is actively on my side though.

“Nah, I think Karma’s made it pretty clear what she wants today,” Raz says, looking back at me, his face torn between his mask of hatred and that deep, inner want that I saw from him at the cabin. “*Some part of me wants you to get pregnant. Because then I’ll be allowed—no, encouraged—to be with you.*” It cost him something to admit that to me, to be that raw and honest and open. I need to see that side of Raz again, even if it’s just for one, last day. “For whatever reason, she wants to spend Devils’ Day with me.” He smirks at Calix, and I swear, I can feel the other boy’s eyes boring into my back. “Drive us back to the school, will ya? My dad’s having something dropped off for me today.”



“I at least have a right to ask why you thought to hit my car, if all you wanted to do was run in here and throw yourself into Raz’s arms?” Calix’s voice is thick with shadows, like a swirl of fog in an empty graveyard. I have completely and utterly pissed him off today, worse than usual even.

Raz releases me when I lean back, dropping my feet to the floor and putting his hands possessively on my hips. I stare up into his red eyes, but his expression is an enigma; I can’t quite figure out what he’s thinking.

*“J’ai embouti ta voiture pour te faire une crasse, Calix, rien de plus,”* I whisper, turning to look at Calix over my shoulder, even though the words kill me. *“Everything will be different tomorrow.”* He promised, but he couldn’t possibly know the odds he faced in order to keep that promise. *I hit your car as a prank, Calix, nothing more.*

“Let’s take them back to the school,” Barron says, voice as dark as the night sky in his secret cave of butterflies. He pulls his red devil’s mask from his pocket and slips it over his face, dual-colored eyes still watching me from beneath it. “You can afford to get your car fixed.”

He turns and walks down the aisle, tossing a wad of cash onto the counter before heading outside. I notice as he leaves, that he takes the sketchbook out from under his arm and shoves it in the garbage can.

My heart stutters, and I feel the tears at the edges of my eyes again.

“What are you doing, Karma?” Raz asks me as Calix leaves the store in a fury, the bells on the door jangling as he throws it against the wall on his way out. *Karma, he called me, not Trailer Park.* “What the fuck do you want?”

“I want you, Raz,” I say, reaching up to wipe the tears from my eyes with the end of my blazer sleeve. After a moment, Raz takes his own blazer sleeve and wipes the blood from my forehead.

“Why would you hit Calix’s car?” he asks, that cruel, cruel face of his carved into lines of confusion. He’s adorable like that, all muddled up. I almost smile. Almost. But then, I should’ve spent the weekend sleeping in Calix’s arms, waking up for a cheesy ghost tour, watching seconds and minutes and hours tick by. Instead, I spent three days crying alone in my room.

“I was driving by, and I just couldn’t take it anymore,” I tell him, a partial truth that I know he won’t be able to see through. *I hit Calix’s car because I was angry; I was punishing him. Because I care too much, because now that I’m stuck here, I care even more than I ever did before.* “We’re evenly matched, Raz. Tit for tat. You know how to verbally spar with me like nobody else.”

“You hit Calix’s car because you wanted to talk to me?” he clarifies, his voice edging on cruel hysteria, like he wants to maintain the status quo, put me down, destroy me ... but that he’s holding back.

“How else could I get your attention?” I ask, lifting my face up to his. “I work so hard at being invisible for you, so that you’ll leave me alone. Something like that, it’s hard to undo.”

Raz is silent for several long moments, as customers come in and out of the doors to the convenience store.

“I’ve thought a lot of things about you over the years,” Raz starts, his voice hesitant as he eyes me with narrowed red eyes. “But invisible? You’ve never been invisible to me. I couldn’t forget you if I tried.”

It’s hard to fight back the sudden rush of emotion, the memory of my mother’s words telling me, *if you stay up long enough to see the sunrise, paint it.* Of that text from Luke, telling me that Pearl was dead. Again. Of Calix’s story, told over coffee in the Mud Street Café.

“Maybe, just for today, you hold my hand?” I repeat, and Raz’s eyes narrow, but he nods, just once, almost reluctantly. His gaze follows me as I head for the doors to the cooler and pull out an iced coffee, taking it to the counter before I realize I don’t have any money. “I’ve got it,” he says before I even get a chance to ask, chucking some cash on the counter before following me outside.

Glancing quickly over at the car, I see that Barron’s in the front seat, hood pulled up, his big body bent over the screen of his phone. While he’s not looking, I take his sketchbook from the trash and flip it open.

My face stares back at me from light and shadow, from beautiful organic lines, heavy with all the sentiment and emotion that’s missing from the rest of his work. *He puts up a façade with his art, the same way as he does with his emotions. Only in here is he real.*

“Jesus,” Raz says, staring at the notebook over my shoulder. “Stalker, much?” I tuck the sketchbook under my arm and head for Little Bee, pausing when Raz grabs onto my arm. “Where are you going?” he asks, and I smile, nodding my chin in the direction of the passenger side door.

“Climb in, and I’ll show you,” I tell him, getting in the driver’s side and waiting with heavy tension for Raz to join me. After a moment, he does, folding his long body into Little Bee and curling his lip at the torn gray seats and the stickers plastering the dashboard. Most of them are the antithesis of everything he believes in. Well, that his dad believes in anyway.

“This car is a shitbox,” he observes, leaning back in his seat as I put us in reverse and remove my bumper from Calix’s car, the very same car I sat in just a few days ago, where I stripped naked as he clutched the steering wheel in white knuckled hands.

“Thanks for noticing,” I murmur, but I smile anyway, taking us straight to Crescent Prep, over winding roads with golden fall foliage on either side. We don’t talk much. Mostly Raz just stares at me, like he’s expecting me to pull a serious Devils’ Day prank on him. “Do you know where Pearl usually goes during lunch?” I ask, wondering if I can’t nail two birds with one stone today.

Save Pearl. And spend time with Raz.

“Pearl?” he asks, blinking through his sudden confusion. “Are you fucking kidding me? Fuck Pearl. She’s the one who got me sent to Crescent Prep in the first place.” Raz’s scowl is legendary. Actually, at this point, it’s pretty obvious that he never really hated me. The way he looks now? That’s true ire burning in his bloodred gaze.

“How?” I turn to glance at him briefly before flicking my attention back to the road. I’ve had enough trouble with cars during this stupid time loop. Cars, and death. Two constants. Now, if I could just get through today without anyone dying, I’d consider it a win.

“Does it matter? She’s a nightmare, barely human.” Raz puts his foot up against the dash, resting his head in his hand as he looks over at me, calculating as always, sharp as he always is. “What do you give a crap about Pearl anyway? Doesn’t she hate you, too?”

“She calls me Trailer Park,” I say, purposely vague as we head up the gravel driveway toward Crescent Preparatory Academy. “If that means she hates me, then I guess you’re right.”

We park in one of the front spaces, and I decide I'll use this as a test for Raz. Will he help the Knight Crew smash up Little Bee and then drag her to the woods? Or is everything going to be different today? It almost seems too easy.

But maybe that's because when Calix and Barron pull up in the busted Aston Martin and climb out, I can see fury burning in both their gazes. Their masks are fixed firmly in place, and I can see what I should've already figured out: I've bought Raz's approval by trading for yet more animosity from Barron and Calix both.

Seeing that, after the incredible experiences I just had with both of them ... that kills me.

"Don't think I'm going to forget what you've done to my car," Calix sneers, giving Raz a withering look as he passes. His face is filled with shadows, his eyes burning with a dark fire beneath the black leather mask. Thinking of things from his perspective, standing outside the gas station lonely and wanting and broken, I can only imagine the pain he must be feeling.

Words sit on the tip of my tongue, desperate to escape, to bridge the gap between us. *Remember when we had breakfast at the Mud Street Café? Then we went to the hotel, and you skimmed my bare arms with your fingertips. You even mentioned a ghost you saw as a child, and you owe me that story! We fucked on those crisp, white sheets, and you looked down at me like you would never leave.*

Instead, I say nothing.

Unless my intuition is completely broken, then I know today is not the final day. I'm not sure how or why I know that, but there will be another repeat of Devils' Day waiting for me on the other side. My only trepidation comes from knowing that somewhere, deep down, Calix will remember this hurt and pain.

"It's just a car, bro," Raz says, grinning that sharp grin of his, red eyes bright with mischief. "As far as pranks go, you've got to admit: Karma has some balls."

"Ovaries," I correct automatically, my eyes sliding over to Barron's dual-colored ones. "*I'd be the Rose to your Jack,*" he'd said. I'm dying to know what he might draw today, what images of a timeline he can't quite remember. Or if, perhaps, confessing my love to Raz has changed everything and he might not draw me at all.

My head fucking hurts; the ripple effects of my actions on everyone around me are clear as day now.

“Yeah, sure, big ass fucking ovaries,” Raz says, looking down at me as I study Barron. He’s stripping off his white hoodie and slipping into his purple Crescent Prep blazer, with the moon, knife, and rod symbol on the breast. When he sees me looking, he returns my stare. If he doesn’t have his sketchbook, he most definitely can’t draw me, now can he? I look back toward Raz, knowing that I’m playing a dangerous game of balance here. He throws an arm over my shoulders as Calix’s nostrils flare and his dark eyes flick up to Raz’s red ones.

“Ovaries or not, I’m pissed. Maybe you should stay home tonight, Karma? Skip the Devils’ Day Party.” Calix turns and heads for the front steps as I feel a hot, itchy anger coming over me. *This fucking sucks!* I think, wishing I could just slap my hands over my face and scream until my throat gives out.

“If Karma wants to go to the party, we’ll go to the party,” Raz growls dangerously, and Calix pauses on the top step, looking back at Raz like there’s something he needs to say. Only ... he doesn’t. He just scowls and continues on inside. Where Sonja is, I have no clue. Usually, if the boys don’t take me to the cabin, they pick Sonja up on the way to school.

The familiar sound of Luke’s car on the gravel drive draws my attention, and my brows go up as I see Raz’s redheaded bestie sitting in *my* bestie’s car, April in the backseat behind them. Luke spots me right away, her brown eyes going wide as she pulls into the space on the other side of Little Bee.

“This should be entertaining,” Barron says mildly, and I cringe inwardly, knowing he’s about to come down on me with all of that darkness and shadow he keeps locked away inside. *“I won’t hurt you again, Karma.”* Does he even know what a goddamn liar he is? “Sonja is fucking Luke; Raz is fucking Karma. And none of us ever knew.”

Raz just throws his head back in a braying laugh, cupping his hands together over his mouth before dropping them to his sides.

“Oh, we haven’t done it yet,” Raz says, giving Barron a look that’s overflowing with cocksure energy. “But I’ll send you the memo once we do. Bitterness doesn’t look so good on you, bro. Why don’t you fuck all the way off?”

Barron pauses and then dips back into the car to grab something, but I’m too distracted by Luke and Sonja to see what it is.

“Karma ...” Luke starts, getting out of the car with her palms raised toward me in what’s either a form of surrender or protection, I’m not sure. “We need to talk. *Now.*”

“Talk about what?” Sonja asks, tossing her bloodred hair over her shoulder and smiling with pretty, venomous lips. “That you and I have been fucking for a year? Oops, or maybe I shouldn’t have said that?”

“If you two are happy together, then that’s all that matters to me,” I say, and I swear, Raz, Sonja, Luke, and Barron all turn to look at me like I’ve grown a second head. Calix is long-gone, spiriting himself away into the relatively small prison we call a school. In the craziness my life has become, I almost forgot that I go to school with a bunch of rich delinquents, outcasts that nobody else wants.

The only place for monsters like Sonja and Raz, Calix and Barron, is right here in the backwoods of Arkansas.

Raz looks down at me with a perplexed expression, narrowing his eyes like he still suspects I’m up to some sort of trick. Too bad none of them realize that life is much less complicated when you start practicing the mantra of *live and let live*.

I mean, I’m in desperate need of a new one. My old mantra—*this too shall pass*—doesn’t exactly hold up anymore, now does it? It’s nice to know that the universe can throw a wrench in things if she so chooses.

“Wait, what?” Luke asks, dropping her hands and blinking at me like I’m a crazy person. April climbs out of the backseat of the convertible, pushing her glasses up her nose and looking between Sonja, Luke, Raz, and me like we’ve *all* lost our damn minds. “You’re not mad?”

“Starting the drinking early on Devils’ Day, huh?” Sonja quips, but I’m not looking at her. I’m staring at my best friend, at the fear in her face. Fear of rejection from *me*, the one person in the world who she should be able to talk to.

“If Sonja makes you happy—and treats you well,” I add, exhaling sharply, “then I’m happy, too. I wish you didn’t feel like you had to lie to me though, about anything.”

“Whoa, this shit is getting deep,” Raz purrs, quirking his lips up in a sharp smile that can only be a defense mechanism. Speaking of sharp ... Barron removes a hunting knife from a leather sheath and makes his way over to a vehicle with a car cover on it. I remember

seeing it there on the first day, but now that I put two and two together, I'm guessing it must be Raz's new Shelby Cobra.

Without hesitation, Barron lifts up the cover and tosses it aside, revealing the black convertible with the white stripes on the front. The red bow shimmers in the morning sunlight as Barron takes the knife and slits the tires, one by one.

"What the actual fuck?!" Raz shouts, moving across the parking lot as Sonja and April try to make sense of what's going on. Luke just stares at me like I'm the second coming, her eyes filling with unshed tears. This is what my friend needed, somebody who would stand by her side without judgment. After being rejected by her parents and sent to Crescent Prep, of course that's what Luke needed. How did I miss that before? "Lay off the fucking car, man."

"Guess it does matter when somebody you care about screws with your car, doesn't it?" Barron asks, slipping the knife back into the sheath. Raz looks like he's about to hit his friend, but then Barron steps close to him, and their height difference—plus the fact that Barron's carrying a knife—seems to set in. Raz clenches his jaw as Barron turns and heads for the front of the school.

I can't let this moment escape, diving back into my car and grabbing the sketchbook. Just inside the front cover, I scribble the words *you're the Rose to my Jack* and then leap out, racing to catch up with Barron before he can head up the front steps.

"Here," I say, breathless, not caring if Raz sees me. There's nothing I can do for Calix now, but I can at least make sure that Barron doesn't end up with a negative memory in his collective consciousness. He looks down at the sketchbook and then back up at me, nostrils flaring. "I left you a note inside."

I leave him with the sketchbook, moving back over to Raz and his new car. He's positively fuming, eyes closed, hands on his hips. I'm not even sure he saw me give Barron the notebook.

"Hey." I put my hand on his shoulder and his eyes open, red irises sliding over to look at me. "Is this the present your dad sent?"

"He doesn't even love me," Raz says simply. "So, he sends me nice things because he feels guilty." He turns his attention back to the car. "I was going to let you drive it, but well, fuck it, I guess." My lips part as Sonja makes her way over to stand next to Raz, red hair blowing in the breeze.

“What was that all about?” she asks, flicking her green eyes my direction. “Ah, that’s right. All my friends are in love with the weird girl. Barron must be pissed.”

“In love with me?” I echo as Luke and April come over to stand beside us.

“Calix, Barron,” Sonja adds, shrugging loosely, her dark purple skirt rolled up at the waistband, so that it sits much higher on her pale thighs than mine does. “For the life of me, I can’t understand it, but you’re a hot commodity, I guess.”

She doesn’t say Raz’s name, but I suppose that’s implied.

“Karma,” Luke starts, looking between me and Raz with her brows raised. “We should probably talk.”

“You two should probably talk? What about me?” April asks, looking at both Sonja *and* Raz with suspicion clear in her pale green eyes. “Sorry if I’m struggling to understand this, but ... are you two both secretly fucking the people you hate?”

“We haven’t had sex yet,” I say as Raz looks back at me, his dirty blond hair mussed, his devilish face pinched, eyes narrowed. He smiles a bit at the word *yet*, but it’s just another one of his defense mechanisms. The lie sticks to my tongue like ash, but I have no choice but to tell it.

“Yet?” Luke echoes, cringing slightly. “Sorry, that came out wrong.”

“Yet,” I repeat, reaching down to take Raz’s hand. He leans back to look at me, his face breaking apart with confusion. He can’t understand simple kindnesses, and that’s sad. Just like Calix. Whenever I’m too nice to him, he rears back like I’ve kicked him in the balls.

“Maybe we’ll correct that at the party tonight?” Raz says with a snide little smirk, using my hand to drag me close. He puts his hands on my hips, like he’s testing me. When he leans down for a kiss, I meet his mouth hungrily, our tongues twisting together like we’re old hats at this. Luke lets out a little whistle as Sonja cackles and tosses her hair over her shoulder.

“I have to say, I expected this morning to go quite differently,” she says as I pull away from Raz, noting the fire burning in his eyes. It’s amazing. We think our actions have little effect on the world around us, but that isn’t true. Just one person, one moment, one single word can change somebody else’s world entirely.



Was it okay for Raz to bully me because he didn't know how to express his feelings?

Fuck no.

But people are human, infallible creatures capable of beautiful destruction.

We're also capable of selfless acts, acts of true love, acts of compassion.

My hand squeezes Raz's. I have no idea if he's going to turn on me later today, if he thinks this is all bullshit. But I've seen what lies inside his heart, and it's worth it to me to try.

The bell rings and we all glance toward the building reluctantly.

"It's Devils' Day," Raz says, flashing one of those razor-sharp grins of his. "Let's bail and go to town. Fuck, let's go to Eureka Springs or something. We could get some guns and set up a target during the party." My mouth thins at the idea of garnering illegal weapons for a wild, wanton party filled with teenagers, weed, cocaine, and alcohol. Bad idea.

"I have something I need to do today," I say, thinking of Pearl. "Is it too late to buy something from the Devils' Day Committee?"

"You can shop through first break," Luke says, speaking up, her forehead dotted with beads of sweat. She pulls the goblin mask out from her blazer pocket and slips it on, offering up the sparkly pixie mask with the antennae to April.

"You can get your Devils' Day shit tomorrow," Raz says, yanking me toward him. There's a hint of suspicion in his gaze that says if I don't go with him, everything I've said to him this morning will unravel. "And you know, if you were thinking of buying me a dead bug on a chain, I'd rather have your ass in my lap."

A smile tilts my lips. The thing is, I know if I don't find a way to save Pearl, I can't feel okay with moving on. That is, if the universe gives a crap about how I feel. Presumably, I'm supposed to learn some lesson from all of this, right?

"Alright, fine, fuck it, let's go."

"Can't use daddy's pity present," Raz says, eyeing the car with a scowl on his lips. It's not really fair for him to look at a million-and-a-half-dollar car like that, but then, I don't know what his relationship with his father is really like. Everyone deserves to be loved. Well, except rapists and pedophiles; they can eat shit and die.

“We can take my car,” Luke offers, holding up her keys and jangling them a bit. She keeps side-eyeing me, like I might very well take a bite out of her. But I’m not going to judge her, not anymore, not after what I’ve been through.

*“Marry me, Karma; let’s get lost together.”*

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

How am I supposed to go on with my life, knowing those words, those wants and needs, are hiding inside of stone-cold Calix Knight with his dark eyes and lush mouth? That’s why I went to Raz today. I can’t bear to look at Calix. Or Barron, either, for that matter.

Although, now that I’m standing here, and Raz is turning to look at me over his shoulder, I’m remembering our time at my aunt’s cottage, and I’m wondering why I thought this would be easier, better.

It’s still hard.

It still sucks.

I just want to see tomorrow.

“Wouldn’t that be a sight?” Raz snickers, shaking his head and running his fingers through his dirty blond hair. “Crescent Prep’s biggest losers cutting class and getting fucked-up with us today.”

“You’re calling me a loser?” I ask, standing my ground as Sonja chuckles evilly beside her bestie. “After I stood in front of Barron and Calix and admitted my feelings for you?”

The sneer on Raz’s face slides right off, and he frowns, like he didn’t expect me to be so fucking honest.

“Shit, okay, well ...” He glances at April, and then shrugs his shoulders. “Never partied with a pregnant chick, but what the fuck ever.” Sonja pulls out a pack of cigarettes, handing one to Raz. He slips a lighter from his pocket and chuckles, talking around the cigarette tucked between his lips. “We’re all sinners here, right?”

“Not Karma,” Luke says, and everyone turns to look at me.

My lips purse tight.

They might not know I’m a sinner, but I am. I’m as steeped in the devil’s deeds as anyone else here. Maybe more so. There must be a reason the universe chose me to suffer.

“Not Karma,” Raz agrees, almost reluctantly, narrowing his red eyes.

“Theodore Rasmus!” One of the administrators is standing on the front steps, his lips turned down in a sharp frown. Upon closer inspection, I can see that it’s actually Mr. Aldrich, the teacher in charge of the Devils’ Day Committee. “Are you smoking on school property?”

“Me, smoking?” Raz asks, taking a long drag and blowing gray smoke into the cool, autumn air. “No way.”

“Be a little more defiant, it suits you,” I say, starting toward the school. Raz snatches me by the upper arm, and I glance back at him, surprised to see such blatant fear of rejection in his sharp-lined face. “I’ll be right back, promise.” *At least I’m making I promise I can keep.* My throat gets tight, but I can’t exactly blame the boys for not knowing they were making promises to a time traveler.

He lets me go—reluctantly—and I swear, I can feel his eyes boring into my back as I make my way to Mr. Aldrich.

“I’m going to write him up, mark my words,” he grumbles, but more to himself than to me it seems. We both know he isn’t going to do shit to Raz Loveren. Raz’s daddy wants him to suffer, obviously, or he wouldn’t have sent him all the way out here, but he also gifts him cars worth an average person’s lifetime salary, so ...

“I’d like to send an anonymous Devils’ Day gift,” I tell Mr. Aldrich, studying his brown bear mask with interest. It looks like it’s made of real fur, but even if it is, I know Mr. Aldrich’s opinions too well to think he hurt an animal to get it. Likely, it’s an antique. A lot of families in this area pass down their Devils’ Day masks from generation to generation. “Could you help me with that?”

Mr. Aldrich drags his attention away from Raz to look down at me, blinking like he can’t quite place me. I slide my mask up into my hair and smile at him, but my face still doesn’t seem to ring any bells.

Even the staff forgets my name sometimes. How nice.

But ...

I glance over my shoulder to see that Raz is still watching me.

He never forgets me, not even for a second.

“Of course,” Mr. Aldrich says, leading me inside and down the hall. He takes me to the classroom where the Devils’ Day Committee has set up shop.

They've pushed together several desks and covered them with glittery black tablecloths. A banner hangs across the front with the slogan *Be Somebody's Little Devil, Send a Gift*. According to the sign, all the profits are being donated to Ditch the Label, an anti-bullying charity.

How ... ironic.

I mean, considering the cadre of people sitting behind those desks, hawking their wares. I don't know any of their names, but I recognize them—the demon-masked girls are there, along with the monster-masked boys who helped them lock me, April, and Luke in the cave. And then there's that girl from the first day, with the raven hair and ice-blue eyes. What did Calix say her name was? Erina Cheney?

He seemed to think she might be the one who posted the video.

I gnaw on my lower lip in thought, hesitating in the doorway long enough that Erina looks up from behind her leaf-mask and catches me staring at her.

"Can I help you?" she asks, her voice sharp enough to cut. I move forward, pausing in front of the makeshift table.

The tablecloth is covered with treasures: quartz crystals, tourmaline bracelets, suncatchers strung with an entire rainbow's worth of gems. There are cupcakes on a separate desk, sitting beside containers with fresh biscuits and little tubs of chocolate gravy. Directly in front of me, I see an array of insects trapped in shadow boxes, sealed into resin coffins and strung with chains, or mounted on the ends of branches and tied together in macabre bouquets.

I pick up the insect bouquet, marveling at the craftsmanship that must've gone into it.

I'll admit: I'm impressed.

"Do you know Calix Knight?" I ask casually, lifting my eyes up to meet Erina's. The bouquet has real roses mixed in, and even though I'm burying my face in a sea of dead insects, I drop my nose to the flowers and breathe in their sweet scent.

If this time loop crap has taught me anything, it's that I need to stop and smell the fucking roses. Literally. Even if—no, *especially* if—they're surrounded by invasive pests.

Erina scowls at me, but she can't really get around answering that question, now can she? I've seen her with Calix, even in the span of

my repeated days. The last distinct memory I have is of her hanging off his arm, the night where I got drunk and Luke ended up ... Well, never mind that bit.

“Of course I know Calix Knight. Only an idiot would pretend they didn’t. What do you care?”

“I want you to send this to him,” I say, holding out the bouquet. It’s the most interesting item on the table, and while I’m not sure he’ll fully appreciate, I ... My hand shakes as I hold onto the bouquet, my mind spiraling into despair as I remember how close I got to winning this thing, how I made Calix mine, how I saw the fucking sunrise. “And then I want one of these sent to Barron Farrar.” I drop the bouquet in front of Erina, so she can ring it up, and then add a necklace to my order. It might not be a Diana fritillary butterfly in there—just one of those awful gypsy moths—but it’s the thought that counts.

Erina’s nostrils flare as she snatches an iPad from the table and starts punching in numbers. Mr. Aldrich sits behind her, sipping on a Styrofoam cup filled with coffee, and monitoring the proceedings with an expression stuck somewhere between pride and complete and total boredom.

“And this.” I grab a beautiful stone cut into the shape of a heart. It’s about the size of my palm, nice and cool, and made from beautiful teal amazonite. “This I want sent to Pearl Boehringer.”

Erina actually stops typing to look up at me, narrowing her blue eyes in suspicion.

“You want to send a heart to Pearl Boehringer?” she asks, like I’m the stupidest human being to ever live. “Why? Do you think that bitch likes you anymore than the Knight Crew does? Or is this your pathetic attempt at charity?”

“Does it matter what I’m doing?” I ask, frowning hard and clenching my hands into fists at my sides. “Just put my order together and send everything anonymously.”

“Anonymously?” Erina echoes, tilting her head to the side like a confused dog. “What’s the fucking point in that?”

“Erina ...” Mr. Aldrich warns, but then he stands up and wanders over to the food table, picking himself out a red velvet cupcake.

“Yes, anonymously,” I say, exhaling and waiting for Erina to type in all the recipient info. “Hey, by chance, do you happen to have a recording of Calix and me fucking at last year’s Devils’ Day Party?”

I wish I could've recorded her face in that moment. If ever there was an admission of guilt, this is it.

She sits there, stone-still, finger poised above the iPad. There's just something about blurting a dark secret into the bright light of day that chases away all the shadows. It isn't easy for most people to lie well enough to escape, even if it's only their body language that gives away their treachery.

"Why on earth would you ask me that?" she purrs, her voice almost maniacal as she glances up at me, the vines on her mask caught on the shoulders of her academy-issued blazer. Suddenly I feel like I'm the insect in this scenario, and she's the masterful artisan covering me with clear resin, trapping me. Fuck, this girl is scary. Calix did refer to her as a stalker, and as much as I hate the guy ... I've realized now that it's love-hate, which is a totally different thing.

As far as I'm concerned ... Calix is mine.

Erina cannot have him. Nor can she post a video that will follow us both around for the rest of our lives.

I lean down and put my palms on the table, looking her dead in the eyes.

"If you post that video tonight, I will see to it that you suffer for it."

"How so?" Erina asks, her mouth curving up into a deviant smile. It's beyond absurd, the way that rictus grin stretches across her pretty face. "With your parents' money? Oh, wait, they don't have any. How about their considerable political influence? Nothing there either." Erina stands up, the legs of her chair scraping across the floor with a screech. "You can't stop me from doing *shit*, Karma Sartain."

I close my eyes for a moment to gather my thoughts, opening them back up on Erina's creepily joyous face.

"Why would you want to hurt Calix? Don't you like him?"

"Like him?" Erina chokes, and the other students in the room glance our way. Luckily, they're all too busy trying to buy Devils' Day gifts before the first bell, so they don't pay us much attention. "He and I have been friends forever. When his dad sent him here, I followed."

“You came to Crescent Prep on purpose?” I ask, surprised that anyone besides, you know, me would be stupid enough to do that.

“Calix and I have a future together,” Erina says, coming around the side of the table to get in my face. She fingers my tie, and I slap her hand away, narrowing my eyes as frustration and righteous anger bubble up inside of me. “And you are getting in our way. So, do I have a video? I don’t know. I guess you’ll have to wait until later to find out.” She wrinkles up her nose as she spits these last words, pushing the iPad up against my chest. “Your total is three hundred dollars. Cash or credit? We can take either.”

“Three hundred dollars?” I snort and shake my head. “For three items?”

“Check the price tags, sweetie,” Erina says, wrenching the iPad out of my hands. “But I’m guessing you don’t have that kind of money?”

“She might not, but I do,” a voice says from behind me. Erina and I both startle, turning to find Barron Farrar in the midst of the early morning buying frenzy. His charcoal-stained hands are tucked into his pockets, his dual-colored eyes resting on me. “Here.” He pulls his wallet out and then flicks a credit card at Erina. It hits her right in the tit, which I enjoy more than I probably should. Then again, anyone that posts revenge porn—particularly when they barely know one of the people in it—is a total fucking asshat with no conscience and zero empathy. “Charge that, but don’t give yourself a tip; you haven’t earned it.”

He turns to me, reaching down to grab my arm, and puts his lips up against my ear while Erina seethes and bends down to pick the card up from the floor.

“You saw what was in my sketchbook,” he whispers, and I nod, turning toward him, so close that our lips nearly brush together.

“I did. And I know that today, you’re going to draw me many more times. In Thorncrown Chapel. In the treehouse cabin with Sonja and Luke. In that beautiful little butterfly cave you found out in the woods.” I turn back to Erina as Barron’s eyes widen in surprise, watching as she runs the card and then throws it back at Barron’s chest.

He, however, has no problem catching it between two fingers.

“What are you standing there staring for? Get back to work,” Barron says, his voice as cold and icy as the autumn wind outside.

The way he looks at Erina, well, I'm not sure I'd want to be in her shoes right now.

"I'd ask why you paid for my things, but then ... I don't really need to," I say as I turn and head for the door; Barron follows but then, I knew he'd do that, too.

"Oh? How so?" he asks as I notice Calix standing at the end of the hallway, arms crossed over his chest, eyes narrowed. When he glances our way and sees me, he scowls and turns away.

"I know you paid for those things because you're in love with me," I tell him, pausing in front of the row of gray lockers and looking up into his eyes. He pushes the red devil mask away from his face and studies me with an intensity I'm well-familiar with. "I'm in love with you, too. But today, I'm going to skip class and spend time with Raz." I shrug my shoulders, my heart thundering like crazy in my chest. This isn't an easy conversation to have, most especially not with him staring at me like that.

And then there's Erina and the sex tape.

Calix suspected her, and I'm pretty damn sure he's right.

So what do I do about it? This day, or any other, really.

"Karma Sartain, you fascinate me," Barron whispers, tugging the mask back down. "Well done." His lips curve into a smile. "Go then. Spend your day with Raz. Maybe tomorrow I'll stop by your place and you can go on a little drive with me?"

"I can't decide if that's creepy or charming," I tell him, smiling because I know that no matter how I work future days out, that Barron is just a sketchbook away. Once he knows that I know his secret, he doesn't try to fight it. He's the easiest of the three boys, that's for sure.

"Consider it both," he tells me, pausing as Calix moves up beside us, clearly pissed at being left out of the conversation.

"Before you say anything you might regret, just remember that I love you, too."

Calix's dark eyes widen, and his attention flicks immediately to Barron, judging, calculating.

"All three of us, huh? You're a very interesting young woman, Karma." Barron laughs and leans back against the lockers, sliding a can of spray paint and a stencil from either pocket on his blazer. He



turns around, presses the stencil to the gray metal locker, and then sprays it with black paint.

When he pulls the stencil away, there's a devil's face left behind, in the shape of a mask. The very same shape, in fact, that he's wearing now.

"Walk," he tells me, and I listen, because I'm not about getting caught and dealing with trouble from the administration today. Calix does the same, his jaw tight, nostrils flared. "All three of us, Lix. What do you have to say about that?"

"This is the most idiotic Devils' Day trick I've ever heard of. You really are a disappointment, Karma."

My own mouth flattens into a thin line, but he *did* call me Karma, so there's hope there.

"Don't, Calix. Just don't. That spitefulness, it doesn't fucking suit you." We stop walking and I glance back, toward the front entrance. "I have to go before the bell rings, but look, if you—"

I pause as Erina appears in the doorway of the makeshift shop, her eyes lighting on me and Calix.

She starts straight toward us as I glance back at him. Barron is still smirking, shaking his head, and chuckling. He's murmuring things under his breath, but I ignore him. We both know the jig is up; he clearly remembers the past timelines more than anyone else.

"If you want to talk later, at the party or something, let's do that. Because I'm done fighting with you, Calix Knight. It's tearing me apart." I put my hands on his shoulders and lift up to my toes to kiss his cheek. His grits his teeth, but he doesn't stop me.

Erina, on the other hand, grabs my hair as soon as she gets a hold of it.

"Stop telling him lies!" she shouts as I spin around, tearing my hair from her grip. "Don't you dare," she hisses, eyes wild with fear. It's very clear now that she not only has the video, but that she doesn't want Calix to know that she does.

I mean, if he did, it would ruin her chances of ever getting with him. She must know that.

"Telling me lies about what?" Calix snaps, turning his ireful attention on Erina. "Stop acting insane, Erina. I'm tired of it. First, you stalk my brothers' emails and now this?"

*My brothers' emails ...* My lips part in surprise as I recall the conversation I heard from outside the train car. Calix and Raz were talking about a girl they hated in a much different way than they do me, about her harassing Calix's family. I kinda thought that might be Pearl, after what Calix told me. But no. No, it was clearly Erina.

“Calix, listen to me,” Erina says, taking a step back from me as I hold my hand to my hair, my breath coming in violent pants. She must sense that I'm about to haul off and beat her ass. “Karma has a video of the two of you, from last year's Devils' Day party.:

“What?!” I shriek, loud enough that several students pause and glance our way.

“Hey Karma, hurry the hell up.” It's Raz, stepping into the hall near the front entrance and calling out to me. But he has no idea what's going on right now.

“You have a video?” Calix asks me, narrowing his eyes.

“She was going to post it tonight, to try and get you to, I don't know, acknowledge her or something,” Erina continues as I feel all the blood in my body rush to my head. I can barely hear past the sloshing sound of it, my pulse thundering like crazy.

“That doesn't sound very like the Karma Sartain we know,” Barron suggests, but I don't get to see his or Calix's reaction because my fist is lifting up and moving seemingly of its own accord.

Before I know it, my knuckles are hitting Erina Cheney in the nose, splattering blood across the stone floors beneath our feet. She stumbles back as I stand there panting. *I shouldn't have done that; violence begets violence. What the fuck is wrong with me?*

If the universe is trying to make me into a better person, I'm fairly certain that I just failed.

“You cunt!” Erina screams, throwing herself at me and knocking me back into the lockers. She tears my mask off, snapping the elastic and yanking on my hair. But if the universe needed me to not fight back in order to get to tomorrow, well ... I'll go another day on repeat if it means beating this bitch's ass.

I shove her back with all my strength and she stumbles. This time, it's my turn to push her into the wall, holding her there as she struggles. My adrenaline must really be going though because it's as if she weighs nothing to me right now. Nothing at all.

“How dare you film my first time.” I slam her into the wall again and she grunts. “How dare you make my mothers cry.”

“What?” Erina manages to choke out, but I don’t care if she knows what I’m talking about or not. I slam her into the wall a third time.

“But on top of all that, you have the audacity to lie to Calix about it? Get him to blame me? Don’t you have any shame at all?”

Erina pushes me and then swings for my face, but I duck, throwing my body into hers and knocking her down to the cement. Her head hits the floor harder than it probably should, but I throw a punch anyway that cracks her in the cheek. Blood pours from her nostrils as she tries groggily to raise her head up from the stone floor.

I might’ve hit her again, had Raz not appeared and grabbed me around the waist, hauling me up and back.

“No more, Karma,” he says, dragging me down the hallway as a horde of students in macabre and fantastical masks line the hall, watching us hungrily for any drop of blood they can lick from the floor with their gossiping maws. They could very well be the Unseelie court, the dark, ugly fae court that revels in cruelty and misshapen things.

I spit at them as Erina’s girlfriends rush forward to help her to her feet.

When I look back at Barron, I see him smiling at me, offering up a little wave as Raz drags me toward the door. Calix, on the other hand, is staring at me like he’s seen a ghost.

“She has the video, Calix. Don’t let her post it!” I shout, my voice echoing off the stone walls of the school.

Raz shoves me out the door and then grabs my arm, yanking me down to where Luke’s waiting inside the Cadillac, April and Sonja already seated inside of it.

“Hurry up before the teachers flock the fuck over here,” Raz growls, encouraging me into the back seat.

I end up sitting squished between him and Sonja which is literally one of the weirdest places I’ve yet been on this journey.

“What the hell happened back there?” Luke calls out as we take off down the long, dirt and gravel drive toward the highway.

“Karma, you’re shaking like crazy, and there’s blood all over your shirt ...”

“Don’t worry; it’s not mine,” I say, which just makes Luke choke and sputter in disbelief. It’d be funny if I weren’t so pissed off. Erina Cheney, a girl whose name I didn’t even know, is the one responsible for the sex tape. That means that night, when I was bare and vulnerable in Calix’s arms, she was watching.

Fuck, that’s creepy as hell.

“Just a girl fight is all,” Raz says with a smirk. I glance his way and find him with his elbow propped on the side of the car, chin parked in his fist. His gaze never leaves mine. “Didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Yeah, well,” I start, swiping my hands on my skirts to clear away some of the blood. “She has a sex tape of me and Calix. Not only is she planning on posting it tonight, but she tried to blame me for it. She hold him that *I* was the one with the video.”

“Are you shitting me?!” Luke shouts as Sonja cackles and Raz’s mouth turns down in a sharp frown.

“What are you going to do about it?” April asks, glancing over her seat at me, brown braids flying in the wind as the convertible makes a sharp left turn, sending us flying down the highway.

“I think I just *did* do something about it,” I reply, and Sonja laughs again, head thrown back, bloodred hair billowing like the petals of a blooming flower.

I sit up and lean forward, grabbing Luke’s phone from between the seats so I can change the music. I choose an obscure song that I bet not a single person in this car has heard of—“Wasting Away” by *The Confession*—and I turn it up as loud as it’ll go, sitting back down and resting my head against the seat.

With my eyes closed, I just chill out for a while, letting myself get lost in the music as I try to process ... well, everything.

Calix and his proposal the other night, Barron’s prophetic drawings, Erina’s bullshit.

*You must really hate me, universe*, I think, giving her a mental middle finger. *You must really, really hate me.*

After the album is over—it’s only five songs long, after all—Luke turns down the music.

“Hey, so, where exactly are we going?”

“Let’s get some guns and go shooting,” Raz repeats, and I swear to god, I almost reach over and pinch his nipple to get him to shut up. What is his fascination with guns anyway? One of these days, something bad is going to happen if he actually manages to get a hold of them. I don’t have any opinion on gun control—for or against—but seriously, Raz does not need weapons during Devils’ Day.

“Why don’t we get tattoos?” I suggest, lifting my head up. “I mean, it’s illegal for anyone under eighteen to do it, but clearly, Raz, you must have some connections?”

“Fuck,” is his response as he blinks confusedly at me. I must really be going off-script today. Even during the day we spent together at my Aunt Donna’s, he didn’t look at me quite like this. Like he’s *impressed*. “Actually, I do.” Raz smirks, regaining his composure, and then leans forward to look across my lap at Sonja. “You want to call up that hillbilly cousin of yours?” he asks, and Sonja gives him a little sneer and a raised lip in response.

“My cousin *in-law*, but sure, *Rasmus*, I’ll call him up.”

“Fuck you, Sonja,” Raz responds, but there’s no heat to it. He’s still looking at me, studying me.

“Is somebody going to tell me what’s going on?” April asks, clearly exasperated at this point. “Luke is with Sonja, Karma is ... apparently in love with Raz?”

Hearing those words—*in love*—is making my head ring. I did it today. I told all three boys. Didn’t exactly go fantastic for me, but at least I know it can be done, period.

“Sonja and I ... we’ve been sleeping together for about a year,” Luke whispers. “I don’t know how Karma knows, but I should’ve told both of you. A long time ago.”

I flick my attention toward Sonja, but she’s checked out of the conversation, searching her phone for this supposed contact of hers.

Luke pulls over into the parking lot of the only supermarket in all of Devil Springs.

“What if, instead of a tattoo, we got some snacks and went to the lake?” she suggests, turning the engine off and then swiveling around in her seat. “Even if I wanted to get a tattoo today, April can’t. So how about we rethink our activity choices?”

“She’s available, and she’ll see us at the shop in an hour,” Sonja announces, turning back to the rest of us, her red-painted lips twisted into a smirk. She flicks her emerald gaze to Luke. “Don’t bitch out on us, Lucille. Don’t you want to get inked with me?”

“I ...” Luke starts, her mouth slightly parted, attention wholly focused on Sonja. Slowly, she turns her brown eyes back to me, and I shrug.

“You only live once,” I say, and then I laugh because, well, that’s not exactly true, is it? Luke and I have both died during these ridiculous repeats, haven’t we? “Just get something small. It’s on Raz anyway.”

“Yeah, sure, it’s all on me,” he replies, still watching me with a sinful little smile in place. “But I think your friend has a good idea. Let’s load up on supplies and then head out to Diamond Spring.”

“Nobody knows where Diamond Spring is,” I reply with a snort as Raz reaches out and grabs me, pulling me into his lap. Luke makes a strange sound, and April’s eyebrows go up, but neither of them says a thing.

“I do,” Raz replies smugly, leaning forward to put his lips too near my ear for comfort. I shiver, but not in a bad way. Well, okay, it depends on context. One might say it was in a very, very bad way. “My dad owns a hunting property out here; it’s how he knew about this stupid ass school in the first place. You want me to take you there?”

“Karma ...” Luke warns, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of heading to an unknown, remote locale with our bullies. Then again, we’re both in love with them, so they can’t be all bad, right? We must see something in them worth loving.

“I’d love to see Diamond Spring,” April says, pushing her glasses up her nose. “I read an article about it online. Not only does it contain immense historical importance, but it’s supposed to be a place of reflection. Some even say the waters there have magical healing properties.”

“So the hippies say about all the springs around here,” Raz quips, eyes shimmering as he reaches up a hand and cups the side of my face, running his thumb along my lower lip. My own eyes close as I savor his touch, biting down on his thumb gently. Raz shivers and shifts beneath me, like he’s perhaps a bit uncomfortable in his slacks now. “Let’s get some beer and shit, stick it in a cooler, and then go get our tats.”

“You know you can’t swim with fresh tattoos anyway, right?” Luke reminds us, but I’m already climbing out of the convertible and hopping down to the sun-warmed pavement. It’s still wet from this morning’s rain, but the sunlight on my skin is hot enough that I think we might be able to get away with an afternoon swim.

“Come on, Luke, live a little,” I say, holding out my hand as the others climb out on April’s side. Luke opens her door with a sigh and takes me up on my offer, letting Sonja and Raz get a little ahead of us. I notice that Raz keeps looking back at me though, like he isn’t sure if I’m really here, with him.

“Are you going to tell me how you knew about me and Sonja?” Luke asks, and I smile prettily.

“I’m living in a time loop, Luke. This is day number twenty-one. I learned about you guys over a week ago.”

“Karma, stop it,” Luke chastises, but then she exhales as we enter the store, giving me a cautious side-eye. Isn’t it strange, how sometimes we can tell the truth and still be looked at like a liar? “Still, however you found it, I appreciate you taking it in stride.” She flicks her dark eyes over to Raz. He’s standing near the cooler with Sonja, picking out some beer. How they’re going to buy it is beyond me; I’m just assuming one or both of them has a fake ID. “Are you going to tell me how long this thing with Raz has been going on?”

“Since ... forever ago,” I say with a smile as April moves up to join us. Like I said, she’s one of us through and through, but she can always sense when Luke and I need a moment. “Raz and I have been into each other since freshman year. But if you’re asking when we decided to scrap our bullshit and actually give into each other, that happened this morning.”

“How?” April asks as Luke stares at me like she’s never seen me before in her life, like I’m a total stranger. That’s a good thing; I’d hate to be predictable, especially after everything that’s happened. I’m done with predictability; I want adventure.

“I crashed my car into Calix’s, ran into the store where Raz was, and threw my arms around his neck.” I grin as they gape at me, moving around the store to gather snacks for later. I don’t hold back either: cupcakes, cookies, chocolate bars, chips, jerky. What does it matter what I eat today? If I don’t save Pearl, then I can’t go on to see tomorrow. Then again, maybe the stone heart I sent her will help? Just one kind gesture can make a difference.

“You seem ... different today,” Luke tells me, helping me carry the food up to the counter.

“Good way or bad way?” I ask, and her lips tilt into a small smile.

“Good way, definitely.” Her eyes flick to Raz’s back as he flirts with the cashier in what I assume is an attempt to get her to overlook his obviously fake ID. I’m not jealous; she’s at least a decade older than us, probably more. She does seem to be enjoying his attention though. “Except, I’m not sure how I feel about this. He’s so ... cruel.”

My brows go up, but it’s actually April who intervenes, pointing at Sonja’s back as she, too, attempts to put the moves on the poor, confused cashier.

“Pot, kettle, black.” April points to the assholes in front of us and purses her lips. “If you plan on bringing them both to New Orleans with us, Thad is going to lose his shit. He doesn’t play well with cruel people.”

*New Orleans.*

We’ve briefly talked about where the three of us might go after graduation, but we’ve never really pinpointed a locale. That is, until the day I hung out in Luke’s apartment with her and April, the same night I stole Barron’s sketchbook for the first time. That’s when Luke announced New Orleans as our destination and, somehow, April remembers that.

“They’re just ... sad,” I say softly. “That’s all. Just sad.” I step up next to Raz and dump the food on the counter. He glances down at me as Luke does the same on Sonja’s other side. His sharp mouth turns into a grin as the employee rings up everything and sends us on our way. “I’m surprised you were able to pull that off,” I admit as we head outside with bags of groceries and boxes full of beer.

“I have my ways,” he tells me as we load everything into the trunk. “I always get what I want.” The way he looks at me when he says that has me shivering. I can’t decide if I hate that statement ... or find it dangerously attractive.

“Do you?” I echo as the others climb in the car, giving us the briefest moment alone.

“I do.” Raz touches a finger to the side of my face, dragging it down to my chin.



“And what is it that you want right now?” I retort as he runs his tongue across his lower lip, leaning in and putting his palms on either side of me, flat against the trunk of the car.

“Do you really need to ask that?” Raz growls out, his red eyes hooded, bedroom eyes in the bright light of day. It’s obscene, and I love it. “Because from where I’m standing, that’s pretty fucking obvious.”

“I want you to say it,” I tell him, fully aware that there are three people waiting on us right now. Our eyes are locked, and I wish suddenly that I could see his real eye color, those blue eyes of his tucked behind black glasses. I’m hungry for it.

“You better not be playing a Devils’ Day trick on me,” Raz murmurs, leaning down and putting his mouth right up against mine. “Because I’m not as strong as you. I wouldn’t survive what Calix did to you.”

My heart thumps violently, and my throat closes up, but I can’t think about Calix right now. It’s just Raz, just me and Raz.

“So you knew he lied?” I whisper, and Raz turns his head away, closing his eyes for a brief moment. “All this time, you knew.”

“I knew.” Raz turns back to me, face dark, as serious as I’ve ever seen it. “But I didn’t care. Because if Calix wasn’t such a coward then you’d fall for him, and I wouldn’t stand a chance. I’m a selfish, ugly bastard, Karma. I wanted him to fail. I wanted it more than anything.”

I’m struggling to breathe now, tears pricking the corners of my eyes. I’m past the point of needing to grieve for time lost, past the point of wanting revenge, of needing justice. Instead, I just want honesty and apologies.

I want to see the real faces of these three boys, hear the truth of their feelings pass by their pretty mouths.

“If you liked me, you could’ve just told me. Instead of bullying me, or engaging in witty repartee, you could’ve said something.”

Raz exhales and then nuzzles his head against the side of my neck.

“That would make too much sense. It wouldn’t be messy and bloody and stupid enough for me. Besides, how could I ever compete against Calix?” Raz pauses for a moment and then barks a sharp laugh. “Or Barron.”

“You know about Barron?” I ask, and he lifts his head back up to look at me in surprise.

“You do?” He sounds shocked, so I’m guessing Barron’s feelings were meant to be a secret. “Because he’s as bad as Calix. Fucking coward. You know he spends half his time defending you, right? Trying to stop the rest of us from being pricks.”

“And the rest of his time being a prick himself,” I add, and Raz grins, shrugging his shoulders loosely.

“Can we do the heart-to-heart *after* we get to the lake?” Sonja calls out, clearly exasperated at having to witness her evil other half participating in a real conversation for once. “You two can kiss and giggle and carve your names into a tree after we get inked.”

“Shut the fuck up, Sonja,” Raz snarls, giving her a death glare that I’m more used to seeing directed at myself. He turns back to me, softening his expression as his bestie sighs dramatically from the back seat. “Now, where were we?”

“You were going to apologize for letting me hurt for so long, and I was going to forgive you. Then we were going to kiss and go get our names tattooed on each other.” The words are bold, almost sticking to my throat as I force them out, but I’m done with all the bullshit from my old life. If this time loop has taught me anything, it’s that you have to ask for what you need. You have to give yourself a voice, or you can’t expect anyone to know what’s really going through your mind.

“Our names, huh?” he asks, raising his dark blond brows. “Shit, that’s next level.” His mouth splits into a wild grin. “But I like it.” Raz leans in close to me, putting his lips up against my ear as my eyes close in bliss. Having his warm breath on my neck makes me think of the cottage, of standing in the hot spray of the shower with him, of lying in the twin bed downstairs and smoking out the open window. “I’m sorry, Karma. I really am. And if this is a Devils’ Day trick, and you want to fuck me over, that’s okay. Because I deserve it.” He pulls back, but I don’t let him get very far, throwing my arms around his neck and pressing our mouths together.

Heat sweeps through me like a firestorm as Raz gathers me up in his arms and lifts me clear off the back of the car. My legs go around him as his tongue slides between my lips, claiming me at the same time his hands cup my ass beneath my Crescent Prep skirt.

“Seriously, bro? What the actual *fuck*? I know you’ve got your dream girl and all that shit, but it’s Devils’ Day. Let’s go.”

Raz pulls away from me, scowling, but he doesn't put me down as he moves over to the side of the car, and then simply hauls both himself and me over it and into the seat.

Jesus.

I hadn't realized how strong he was—physically *or* emotionally. Now I'm even *more* intrigued.

“Hit it,” Raz says, slapping the side of the convertible. I can see Luke roll her eyes in the rearview mirror, but she releases the parking brake and off we go.

To get some motherfucking illegal ink.

What a Devils' Day this is turning out to be; I like it already.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



The tattoo parlor sits on the outskirts of Devil Springs, but with a name like *Kismet Ink and Design*, it's gotta be good. Kismet means fate, after all. And karma, well, that's cosmic justice. Put the two together, and I'm certain that I'm exactly where I was meant to be.

"I am *not* letting you get Raz's name tattooed on your hip," Luke hisses as I browse through fonts on my phone, trying to decide which one to use. It's illegal as fuck, us being here and doing this, but I don't care, not today.

Part of me realizes that this is my last hurrah, my last chance to dive in headfirst and see what the dark waters of the world hold. After today, it's not about me: it's about Pearl. Once I find a way to save her, I'll get to see tomorrow, I'm sure of it. But I can't spend time with Raz or Calix or Barron and still have enough hours left in the day to deal with Pearl.

"I appreciate your concern, and on a normal day, I'd heed your caution. But not today, Luke." I find the font I want, and glance back to find Raz lounging on the red leather sofa at the front of the store. He taps the cushion next to him with his palm as Luke gives me the stink eye.

"You can't just wipe a tattoo off, Karma. Once it's there, it's there until you get some very expensive laser treatments. This is as permanent as permanent can really get. And Raz, of all of people? Really?"

“I’m in love with him,” I tell her, looking up from my phone to find her frowning at me. “Even if we don’t end up together in the end, I love him right now. Besides, it’s Devils’ Day. There’s magic in the air.”

“Don’t blame me when you wake up tomorrow and find it’s no longer Devils’ Day, and you’re stuck with a hideous tattoo you never really wanted in the first place.” She rolls her eyes and then points to a gay pride flag tattoo on one of the iPads near the front counter; each one is set up with the individual artist’s portfolio, to help customers gauge their style. We don’t exactly have a lot of choices as far as tattoo artists go—no choice at all, in fact—so it doesn’t help us much. At least the tattoo that Luke is pointing to belongs to the shop’s owner, some hot young chick whose name *really* doesn’t suit her. *Abigail Grantham*, I believe it was.

The green-haired woman stands behind the counter, covered in tattoos and piercings, and watching us with a carefully calculated sense of boredom that reminds me of Sonja. Maybe they really are related? Although I have to wonder how Sonja ended up with a cousin in the backwoods of Arkansas.

Another dirty, little secret, perhaps?

“This one,” Luke declares, lifting her chin. “I want this one.”

“Let me get it sketched up,” the woman says, nodding her chin to the chair behind the counter. “And have a seat.” Luke exhales sharply and moves to follow her instructions as I give her a thumbs-up and head back over to sit with Raz. Once the design is ready, I’ll join her. No way is she getting the first needle of the day without me holding her hand.

April is sipping on a Slurpee from the gas station and scrolling the shop’s Instagram account while Sonja follows Luke behind the counter like a puppy. A very angry, very bitchy puppy, but a puppy, nonetheless.

“Are you really gonna do it?” Raz asks when I settle onto the cushion beside him. “Get my name tattooed on your body?”

“Are you?” I retort, raising a brow at him.

“You think I’d bitch out now?” he replies, his expression smug and dripping with male satisfaction. “Besides, I like the idea of you being branded with my name. And if I don’t do it, you won’t do it. So, here we are.”

“Here we are,” I respond, leaning into him and putting my head on his shoulder. *Either today was easy because Raz has always been waiting around for me or ... the last three weeks have had some sort of effect on him.* I want to believe the latter, desperately so. “Too bad we’ve wasted all these years hating on each other when we could’ve been together from the beginning.”

“The sex’ll be even hotter this way,” he assures me, and I grin, closing my eyes for a brief moment of rest. I’m very, very careful not to drift off to sleep though. No fucking way. Not before I get this goddamn tattoo. “Hate sex is the best.”

“How much hate sex have you had?” I question, and he laughs, throwing an arm around my shoulders and dragging me into his lap again. It’s like he can’t bear to not be touching me, like if he doesn’t have a hand on me at all times, I’ll disappear like dandelion fluff in the wind. Too bad for me it’s the other way around. He’s the dream and I, I am stuck in a nightmare.

“Ehh, hate sex is too much work. You have to love the person you’re having hate sex with, too, or else it’s just a regular old one-night stand.” He pauses as I mull over his words, reading between the lines the way I did when he mentioned coming inside of me plus his father’s anti-abortion views all in one, strange sentence.

“Are you saying you love me, Raz Loveren?” I ask, lifting my head up from his shoulder and opening my eyes. He’s watching me with a too-serious expression on his face. It almost makes him look like a different person. I wonder then what it’d be like to wake up next to him in the morning, watch him slip his glasses on, find his blue eyes watching me as I lay curled beside him. Fuck. I need to break this damn time loop; I *have* to. And not after ten years or however long Bill Murray’s character was trapped in *Groundhog Day*.

Now.

I need to break it *now*.

“Because you said you always get what you want, but you never committed to what, exactly, that was.” I dig my fingers into his hair, enjoying the silky texture of it, loving how casual he is about letting me touch him.

Raz throws me a saucy grin and reaches up, grabbing a handful of my hair—much less gently than I grabbed his, I must add—and pulling my face down for another kiss. He slides his tongue between my lips, making me groan and shift in his lap.

“Shit, you can’t do that Karma,” he murmurs against my mouth. “I have little self-control on a good day. With you ... I don’t have any.”

“So, do you?” I repeat, not willing to let this go. There’s no more beating around the bush here. This is the last day I’m giving myself to just ... be. Tomorrow, I’m on a mission. That is, unless today somehow works itself out. I’m quietly hoping for that, although my skeptical side is warning me against it.

“Do I love you?” Raz asks, blinking his red eyes at me as I muss up his hair with my fingers. “Of course I do.”

My hands still, sliding down to rest on his shoulders. It feels suddenly hard to breathe, but I have to say something, don’t I?

“Of course you do?” I repeat, and Raz shrugs one shoulder, like it’d be too much effort to bother with both.

“I get what I want; you’re what I want. What is there to argue about?” My eyes sting with tears, and Raz chuckles, reaching up both thumbs to swipe them away. “Don’t cry, Karma. I’ve made you cry enough already.”

“I’m happy crying,” I groan, putting my forehead against the side of his neck. But I’m not entirely telling the truth. I’m happy crying ... but I’m also terrified. What if I break the time loop but fail to get the boys to admit their feelings after today? What if there’s some special Devils’ Day magic in there? Or, what if, like Luke suggested, *I* forget the time loop after I break it?

Ugh.

“And, you know, you can be my first true hate-sex partner,” he announces, stroking my purple hair back with his hand. “That’s something, right? Taking my hate-sex virginity. Lost the regular kind in freshman year to some senior chick whose name I can’t remember for shit.”

“Don’t talk about other girls right now,” I grumble, and he laughs again. But then I remember how sketchy he was at the cottage, when I asked about his prior sexual experiences. “Actually, how many girls *have* you been with anyway?”

Raz frowns, and then glances away, toward the front door of the shop. There’s a little something in his face that looks like ... shame? But it can’t be, no way. Not Raz Loveren.

“Too many. I haven’t been kind to any girls, or to myself, Karma. That’s why I knew Calix would be better for you.”

“Maybe I should get to decide that part for myself?” I suggest, turning Raz’s face back to me and kissing him. He groans as I shift on his lap again, feeling the distinct shape of his cock beneath my ass.

“I never loved any of them, if that helps,” he offers, licking his lips. “The only girl I’ve ever loved is you.”

“Jesus, I’m going to fucking hurl before I even get my ink,” Sonja barks, snapping both of us out of our lovesick reverie. “Stop pawing all over each other and spouting your Disney prince crap and get over here. *My* girl is about to get inked.”

“I seriously hate you sometimes,” Raz murmurs, standing up and taking me with him. He seems to like carrying me and, well, I can’t exactly complain about it. “If I am in a Disney movie, then I’m most definitely the villain. Karma’s just managed to find the unreleased ending where I actually win the day.”

“You know, I never realized how cute you could be,” I say as Raz rolls his eyes and carries me over to where Luke waits, a design stenciled on her left arm. It says *Love is Love* in rainbow colors.

Perfect.

I couldn’t agree with that statement more.



“Holy shit,” Luke blurts as she shuts off the engine, and then stands up in her seat, lifting her sunglasses to gape at the crystal-clear water in front of us. “We’re actually here?”

“Told you I knew where it was,” Raz brags, hopping out of the car and then holding out his hand for me. I take it and climb out, cringing slightly when the plastic wrap over my tattoo tugs and pulls on my skin. Glancing down, I lift up the edge of my dress shirt and study the name *Raz* carved into the flesh of my hip. With a grin, Raz lifts up his own shirt, showing off the word *Karma* on his own skin. It’s hard for me to pay too much attention to it, what with the delicious ‘V’ shaped lines of his hips on display. Raz drops his shirt, and I narrow my eyes slightly. “You want more, princess?” he asks, and then strips his top off, tossing it aside and holding his arms wide, as if to say *you like what you see?*

“You’re such a dickhead,” I murmur, shoving him back and then turning to help Luke with the grocery bags. April grabs a few of the



blankets Luke bought for her, the ones that have been sitting in the car with their tags on for ages, and lays them out on the grass near a moss-covered statue of a small imp-like creature.

They're everywhere, those statues. There are dozens of them around and even in the water. A crumbling stone arch stands guard near the shore; that's where April decides to set up the blanket.

"This is beautiful," I murmur, carrying the bags over to our picnic spot while Sonja and Raz handle the beer. Luke is already unloading the other bag, setting out our impressive array of junk food on the grass.

"It'll be even better with some beer and a joint," Raz suggests with a grin, popping the cap off a bottle and handing it over to me. When I take it, I make sure to let our fingers touch, spreading heat up my arm and into my chest. "Then we can hit the party later, all loosened up." He flops down to the blanket, dragging me with him.

"Do we have to go back to the party?" Luke asks, wrinkling her nose in disgust and glancing over at Sonja. The way Luke's brown eyes take her in makes me realize that whatever it is they have going on, it's more serious than Sonja would like any of her fellow Knight Crew members to believe. I look at her, stretched out on the blanket, bloodred hair thrown back, emerald eyes staring out at the water, her skirt scandalously short. When she catches me looking, she scowls, but she doesn't say anything. The look Raz throws her says she better leave me the fuck alone.

That makes me smile, thinking he might actually stand up to his other half for me.

"You want to stay here all night?" Sonja asks, blinking confusedly back at Luke. "If so, we should call the cavalry and get a real thing going. Calix will be pissed, but then, what's new?" She gives a caustic laugh and shakes her head, grabbing a beer and opening it before passing it to Luke.

"We hired that band and everything," Raz comments, cocking his head to one side in thought. "Besides, this is our last Devils' Day party. It's senior fucking year. We can't pass it up now."

"If you ask me, the Devils' Day party is overrated," I say, pulling my mask from my pocket and slipping it on. "It's the same every year. We could do much better out here." I down my beer in just two gulps before starting on another. The alcohol leaves me with a pleasant buzz, turning the landscape into a watercolor dream. Surreal, perfect, unattainable.

“Should we call the others?” Sonja asks, and I assume by *others* she means the Knight Crew. Specifically, Calix and Barron.

“Please don’t,” I say, even though this morning didn’t go all that badly. Honestly, it went surprisingly well—minus, you know, the catfight with Erina. But at least I know now who has the video. It’s a relief to discover that the boys are innocent in all that. “Let’s just ... hang out here.” I gesture toward the clear waters of the spring, and all its strange statuary. April mentioned that this was a place of reflection. Well, I can feel it.

A butterfly flutters through the air near our picnic blanket and then settles on the arch near the water, folding its orange and black wings up as it comes to rest. Fuck. It’s a Diana fritillary again. My throat gets tight and I down another beer.

The universe is very clearly sending me a cheeky *hello*. I’d like to send a very cheeky *fuck you* in response.

“You know, Karma’s right. We’ll go back, and it’ll be a bunch of politics and bullshit. Let’s just hang here, get high, eat, and swim.” Raz leans in toward me, brushing his lips against my ear. “Besides, I don’t fucking feel like sharing your attention with Calix and Barron, not today.”

A small grin splits my lips as he leans back, his eyes as red as a demon’s, his heart as dark as a devil’s. But there’s nothing inherently wrong with darkness, now is there? Light is only beautiful in contrast, the shimmer that chases away the shadows. Raz doesn’t have to be my sunshine; he can be my moonlight instead.

“I didn’t bring a swimsuit,” Luke says as she studies the rainbow-colored tattoo on her arm. It reminds me of Barron, and my heart clenches. My eyes turn up to the butterfly again, just sitting there, taunting me. *I see you, universe, and I’m trying. Can’t you see I’m fucking trying?* “Besides, I know Abigail said these new wraps she used on us are waterproof, but should we really test fate?” Luke traces her nail around the edge of the plastic cover protecting her tattoo. Sonja glances down at her own ink, this small black heart on the left side of her chest, just above her breast. It has red stitches around the edges, and an arrow that makes the heart bleed where it punctures it.

Darkly poetic.

That’s how my heart felt after Calix punctured it last year, like it was bleeding and would never stop.

“I’d rather not swim, but I’m content to stay here for the rest of the night. I can always go to the next Devils’ Day party, after you guys graduate and leave me here for two more miserable years.” April unbraids her hair, letting it hang in loose waves around her shoulders.

“Good thing we brought the weed with us then,” Sonja says and then laughs, kicking over her book bag and spilling out several large freezer bags filled with green flower, pre-rolled joints, and chocolate chip cookies. I’m assuming even the latter is laced with THC. “The others are going to be pissed.”

“Screw them,” Raz says, his eyes on me. “We don’t need them to have a good time.”

“No, all you need is some of that mystical Karma pussy,” Sonja suggests, and Raz chucks a bag of snack cakes at her face. She laughs as she catches them, tearing the plastic open with her teeth and then gesturing his direction with a single cake. “But you get to deal with Calix and Barron tomorrow, when they’re whining about how you stole their girl.”

“My girl,” Raz corrects, pointing at my name on his hip. He glances my way and I lift my beer in salute. We clink our bottles together as Luke rolls her eyes.

“Don’t get too excited, okay? This is your first day trying things out. It doesn’t have to work. It might, but it doesn’t have to.” Luke gives me a sympathetic look. “It takes more than one day to know you’ve made the right decision.” *If only she knew how many days it’s really taken.* Three years, plus three weeks on repeat.

Trust me: I know.

We hang out as a group for a while before April wanders off to take a call from Thad, and Luke and Sonja end up sitting together on one of the stone benches, passing a joint back and forth and talking in low, husky tones.

“They’ve got some chemistry, don’t they?” I ask, watching them as my head is muddled with drink and joints. Technically, the rule is to smoke first, drink later, because alcohol amplifies the effect of weed, but that’s okay. We’re here to have a good time today, right?

“I’m surprised you’re not pissed about Luke lying to you,” Raz says, smoking a cigarette. He’s leaning back on his elbows, that chiseled midsection of his catching my attention. It’s impossible to

ignore the fact that he's unbuttoned his slacks, letting them hang far too low on his hips. "I would be, if Sonja had lied to me."

"How long have you known about them?" I ask, scooting a bit closer. We've kicked off our shoes and socks, tossed our blazers and ties. It feels nice, to sit and relax for a while. Dragonflies buzz across the surface of the water and music plays from Luke's car stereo, just barely drowning out the chatter of the birds in the trees.

"Since last year," Raz says, turning onto his side so he can look at me. "Sonja sucks ass at keeping secrets. She kept telling us she was going to use Luke, string her along a bit, and then dump her. Actually ..." Raz starts and then pauses, shaking his head. "Never mind."

"Oh, come on," I say, reaching out and grabbing his red leather devil's mask from the grass. I slip it over his head, using the opportunity to play with his hair again. But as soon as I take my hands away, he pulls it off, like he just can't bear wearing it. Not today. I appreciate that more than he'll ever know. "Just tell me. We're past lies and bullshit now, right?"

"Yeah, but when you hear this, we might just fall right back into it," he says, glancing over at the water. But I know what he's going to say: Sonja was going to let the boys use her relationship with Luke to fuck with us both. Little do they know it never works. Never. I went through that scenario several times, and we handled it well every single day. "If I promise to tell you later, can we forget about it for now? The point is, Sonja is full of crap. She likes your weird friend, and I can't even judge her. I like you, and you're just as weird. Maybe weirder."

"Me, weirder?" I ask with a laugh. "Luke paints tiny orc figures and sets up mock battles with them."

"Well, shit, why did you tell me that? It's gonna be impossible not to make fun of her now." Raz takes a drag on his cigarette and then stabs it out into the dirt.

"You can't make fun of her, period," I tell him, reaching down for the buttons on my shirt. Raz watches hungrily as I undo them, nice and slow, lifting my eyes up to meet his gaze. "We once climbed into a tiger cage at the wildcat refuge."

"You're shitting me," he replies with a sharp-edged grin. "You and the uptight, morality officer over there committed a B&E to pet a goddamn tiger?"

“That’s exactly what we did,” I reply, pushing my shirt over my shoulders. “So, are we going to swim or what?” I stand up and push my skirt down my hips, turning and walking backward toward the water. Raz shoves up to his feet with a grin, raising his brows in surprise as I chuck my bra and step out of my panties.

“Oh, come on,” Luke groans. “Nobody wants to see that.”

“Speak for yourself,” Raz growls, and I turn with a shriek when he comes for me, leaping into the water before he can catch up. I’ve just barely broken the surface to grab a gulp of air when a splash sounds next to me, my body bobbing with the waves as I look around for Raz. When he doesn’t come up right away, panic overtakes me, and I start searching for him, certain that the universe is going to pull one over on me yet again.

Hands grab me and I let out a shriek as Raz yanks me under the water and presses a kiss to my lips before letting me go. When we both come up, he’s laughing, the sound echoing around the ancient statues and their moss-covered grins. Raz swims over to a small island and uses the cracked cement wing of a demon to pull himself out of the water.

“Who do you think put all these statues here?” I ask, swimming over next to him and folding my arms on the mossy concrete edge of the little island.

“Who the fuck knows or cares?” Raz asks, not giving two shits that his dick is on full display for everyone else to see. My eyes catch on it, and I have a really hard time pretending that I’ve never seen it before. “See something you like, Karma Sartain?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I tell him, raising my eyebrows and then pausing to glance over my shoulder as Luke turns up the stereo loud enough that we can hear the music from all the way over here.

“No? My dick seems to have some idea.” Raz reaches down and gives his junk a squeeze. Pretty sure I can hear Sonja gagging from all the way over here, too. He leans down to look at me, red eyes bright in the sunshine. “You want to find a private spot to, you know, talk? And then fuck. Preferably, we’d actually fuck first, talk, then fuck again.”

“You’re the worst,” I groan, pulling off my sopping wet mask and leaving it on the island. I’m the only one wearing it, perhaps more attached to the idea of Devils’ Day than I pretend to be. Maybe I’ve always put too much stock in that party? Last year, I swore I wasn’t

going to go, even after I'd put all that work into my dress. Calix showed up at my house when I was home alone, and he convinced me to go. Then, later, he found me at the spring and urged me to come with him to the treehouse.

And it was exactly what I'd wanted to happen, even if I refused—still refuse—to admit it to myself.

“Or maybe I am? I think I care too much what people think,” I murmur, not expecting Raz to really respond to that. He's shown a lot more depth of character today than I expected, but I'm not going to crack him wide and find out all of his secrets on day one. Luke is right. We need more than one day.

*We need that.*

I want to develop a real relationship, not just start a new one every fucking day.

But, like everything else on this journey, Raz manages to surprise me.

“Not you,” he says, shaking his head and then slicking wet hair back from his face. Droplets of water bead on his lower lip and slither down the hard surface of his chest. It seems impossible to look away, like I'm the studying the face of some young Adonis, only ... one that's been carved of shadows and stuck here in this field of forgotten statuary. Beautiful, yes, but a demon, surely. “You don't care what people think. You dye your hair weird colors and paint faerie murals on your house.” He looks askance at me, and I remember him confiding how much he wanted to dye his own hair. “Nobody in your family seems to care. Trust me, I'd know if you did. Mine does. They care so much about what people think that my dad's going to freak the hell out when he finds out we're together now.”

“And what are you going to do about that?” I ask with a small sigh, kicking my feet in the water and appreciating the fact that we're even able to swim in fall whatsoever, especially since it rained this morning. But while the water's cold, it's not impossible. No, the initial temperature shock was a small price to pay.

“I don't know,” Raz admits, shaking his head and sending stray droplets of water everywhere. The demon statue next to him doesn't seem to mind. “He already hates me because ... Well, Pearl told him some things.” He shrugs his shoulders again and looks at me like he's afraid I'll judge him. I just want the chance to prove to him that I won't. “Anyway, he hates me because of that. He hates me because

I couldn't hack it at football. He hates me because I don't want to be him. All of it." Raz looks at me with an assessing gaze, like this is something he's thought about before. Based on what he said at the cottage, I'm certain he already has. "There's nothing he could do to keep me from you, now that I know."

"Know what?" I ask and Raz smiles, not a grin, but a smile. Okay, fine, it's almost a smirk, but it's close enough.

"How you feel about me," he says with another shrug. "I wanted you to like me, at first. But then you reported us for beating up that kid freshman year, and I figured you didn't like me and never would."

"Why *did* you hurt that kid?" I ask, and Raz sighs, narrowing his eyes slightly.

"He snuck his phone into the Devils' Day party." He glances my way, as if searching my face to see how I'm going to react to this. "He was threatening to ruin a good twenty students at the school, including me and Calix. He had videos of you, too, dancing in your bra around the fire."

"Everybody dances in their bra around the fire at the Devils' Day party," I reply easily, but at least I'm finally starting to understand some things that I've wondered about for years. "What about you and Calix? What did you guys do?"

Raz laughs, harsh and loud, shaking his head and swiping his hand down his face.

"What we always do: get fucked up, fool around, dance. But you know how it works: there are no phones allowed at the Devils' Day party." He pauses for a moment, staring out at the trees. They're all around, rolling hills covered in foliage, not a building of any kind to be seen. We truly are in the middle of nowhere right now, and I'm loving every minute of it. "You know Erina has to pay for what she's done, right?"

"What are they going to do to her?" I ask, a chill working its way down my spine. Suddenly, it feels too cold to be in the water, so I climb out, scooting close to Raz's sun-warmed skin and shivering until he wraps an arm around me. "And by they, I mean ... Calix and Barron, right?"

"Unless Calix is stupid enough to believe Erina's bullshit then, yeah. They have to deal with her. And not just for the video, but

because she won't leave Calix alone. Much as I dislike the guy, he puts up with a lot from that bitch."

I remember the kid they beat up during freshman year. They hurt him—badly. Would they beat Erina up the same way? I can't imagine it. It seems whenever the Knight Crew has trouble with a girl, they send Sonja. But Sonja's here with us, so now what?

I almost ask what Erina's done to Calix, but then it occurs to me that Raz doesn't want to talk about Calix. He was jealous of him for years. Best not to stir that fucking pot.

"Didn't you have an idea on what we could be doing right now?" I ask, watching as Raz's lips curve up to either side in a cocksure smirk. He drags me into his lap for the millionth time that day, but it's a much different situation with him naked beneath me. As I wiggle into a comfortable position, he groans and curls his fingers against the back of my neck, drawing our faces together.

"Now, who's being cruel?" he asks, leaning down to nip at the pulse point in my throat. "If I fuck you right here, in front of Sonja, she'll never forgive me."

"Damn straight!" Sonja calls out, her voice echoing across the water. "Don't make me witness something I can never unsee."

"We can kiss, at the very least, now can't we?" I murmur, pressing my wet lips against Raz's. We're both wet and shivering again, just like we were when we climbed out of the creek at my aunt's house. *Even as I take the timeline in different directions, there are themes here. Raz and I are destined to be naked and vulnerable and wet together.* A small laugh escapes my lips, but Raz kisses it away, his fingers tangled in my wet purple hair, his mouth a hungry monster I very much want to be devoured by.

"You sure as fuck bet we can," he growls back, our mouths pressed so close that I feel his words more than hear them. Raz uses his other hand to cup my ass as I turn toward him, straddling his lap, my wet heat far closer to his cock than it ought to be. The temptation is there, but it's the resistance that'll make it so much sweeter later.

My hands come to rest on his wet chest, playing across the few small tattoos that he has, finding the edge of the plastic bandage covering his new ink. I tease the edge with my fingernail, breaking our mouths apart and pressing our foreheads together, so I can look down and see both of our tattoos at the same time.



“Are you convinced this isn’t a Devils’ Day trick now?” I ask, and Raz chuckles, slanting our mouths together again. He tastes like danger and uncertainty, but also like passion and desire. He wants me, and I don’t just mean in a sexual way. There’s a craving in his eyes that says he wants to know more, learn more, see more. Raz has grown up in a gilded cage, and I so desperately want to show him the world.

“Permanently inking my name onto your pretty little hip, that just about convinced me,” he whispers, sucking my bottom lip between his teeth, tasting me, savoring me. “You know what might work even better?”

“I can take a guess,” I start, smiling coyly, but then Raz shoves me off of his lap and into the cold water. I emerge sputtering, briefly reminded of Calix pushing me off the bridge the other day. Raz leans down, putting his elbows on his knees and smirking at me, but in a more playful way than I’ve ever seen before.

“You thought I was going to say sex, didn’t you?” he asks, shaking his head slightly, blond hair falling across his forehead. “But I want to prove something you.” He sits back up, cocking his head slightly to one side, his smirk falling into a self-assured smile. “I’ve had plenty of sex, but it didn’t mean shit. You mean something to me. I’m going to prove that to you by *not* fucking you today.”

“You’re kidding me?” I splutter, folding my arms on the edge of the island again. “You don’t want to have sex with me?”

“Don’t I?” he laughs, slipping off the island and into the water next to me. Raz grabs me with one arm, using the other to hold onto the moss-covered concrete edge, keeping us afloat. “I’ve never wanted anything more.”

“But ...?” I continue, wrapping my legs around his waist. He’s very obviously hard and ready for me. It wouldn’t take much for us to come together ... but I appreciate the thought behind the sentiment.

“But, I respect you enough to wait.”

I shake my head as Raz releases me, turning and using a few backstrokes to move through the water before I come to a stop, treading in place.

“Okay, who the fuck are you, and what happened to the real Raz?” I ask, but it’s Sonja who answers.

“That isn’t Raz out there; it’s *Theodore Rasmus*,” she shouts, and Raz sneers, turning back to look at his bestie as she strips off her clothes, standing stark naked on the edge of the spring while Luke blushes furiously behind her.

“Stop using my real name, *Sonja Marie Jane Marquette*,” he snaps. “Or I swear to fuck, I will ruin the rest of Devils’ Day for you.”

Sonja jumps into the water, splashing Luke and giving her little choice but to strip down and join us. April walks along the old, rotten dock, making me nervous as hell. She sits at the end, taking off her shoes and socks and dipping her feet into the water.

“And how would you go about managing that?” Sonja asks, swimming circles around Raz.

“I’d tell them all about how you cried to me when you got your first period, and I had to rub your back for four hours and feed you chocolate-covered marshmallows. Oh wait, I just *did* tell them. My bad.”

“You fucking prick!” Sonja snarls, and then the two of them get into a water fight, splashing each other as Luke and I swim up to the end of the dock to be near April.

“How’s Thad?” Luke asks, glancing back at the two troublemakers we’ve somehow invited into our lives. It seems surreal. And it is. Because it isn’t going to last, is it? *You don’t know that for sure. Pearl might ... she could be okay, right?*

“He’s good,” April says with a soft smile, looking down at her reflection in the water. She lifts her head up and I follow her gaze, across the water to where a pair of angel statues dance in a silent swordfight, forever doomed to be trapped in a violent altercation neither can ever win. Although, I suppose if you note their cracked and broken wings and moss-covered faces, it seems that mother nature is the true victor in this scenario. “He wants to be here when the baby is born. He told his parents we’d consider giving up our baby to them if they bought him a plane ticket to come over here.”

“Total lie though, right?” Luke asks, sounding a little nervous. She loves with her whole heart, Luke does. Now that she’s decided she’s going to be this baby’s aunt, nothing will stop her from lavishing affection and care on it.

“Total fucking lie,” April says, grinning. “Nobody’s getting their hands on my baby. If my parents want to cut me off, if his parents do

... It doesn't matter."

"All you need is love," Luke agrees, and Raz snorts from behind me, surprising me as he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me close to him, kissing down the side of my neck and across my shoulder.

"That, and a trust fund," he says, grinning. "Luckily for you, Sonja has one. Her great-grandmother *Marguerite* left her a shitload of cash when she died. Marry her and you'll be set for life. Of course, I'm pretty sure she's half black widow, so you might get your head bitten off after the wedding, so there's always that risk to consider."

"I'm going to drown you, and you'll never get the chance to consummate things with your dream girl. Be careful: your dick *is* just sort of floating around down there." Sonja gestures to the surface of the water and then clacks her long, black fingernails together. "I could very easily rip it off."

"You two have an interesting relationship," I tell them, glancing over at Luke and seeing her brows raised, her lips in a soft smile. "But carry on. Just ... maybe don't rip his dick off? I'd sort of like to keep it."

"That all depends on his behavior," Sonja gloats, smirking and pushing off the edge of the dock. She takes Luke's hand and drags her away. They end up swimming across the length of the spring and disappearing behind the limbs of a bowed tree, its branches dipping low to kiss the water.

"Go," April says after a minute, her pale green eyes focused on the blue of the sky, and the gently drifting clouds. "I've got my baby, and thoughts of Thad to entertain me. Get out of here." She splashes me with water, and I grin.

"Thank you, babe," I say, pushing up and out of the water. I give April a quick kiss on the cheek before jogging across the dock, hopping over broken boards. With some beers and plastic-wrapped snacks in hand, I get back in and join Raz at the island in the center of the spring.

Later, when it gets dark, we make our own fire using some dry branches and Raz's lighter. It isn't anything like the raging bonfire back at the party, but we don't need it to be. It's just big enough for the five of us to huddle around it for warmth, wrapped in the blankets Luke bought for April. No big deal, she already has dozens.

I sit in the circle of Raz's arms, wondering how he managed to hide this side of himself from me for so long. Even at the cottage, I didn't get to delve so deeply into his psyche. Is he damaged? Sure. Ignorant in many ways? Yep. But he's not a bad person, and there's enough good in him that I just want more. More, more, more.

When the cold gets unbearable, we put the top up on the Caddy and let April sit inside with the heater while the rest of us clean up the mess we made, leaving this sacred site just as we found it.

"I haven't had anything to drink for hours," Luke says, standing in the beams of the car's headlights in her panties and bra, keys clutched in one hand, her phone in the other. "I'm good to drive."

"You're sure?" Raz asks, closing the trunk and moving around to stand beside me, ruffling up his still-wet hair with his fingers. "I just got Karma to tattoo my name on her fucking body. I'm not about dying tonight."

With a laugh and a shake of her head, Luke takes one, last look around to make sure we've got everything and then turns back to us.

"We're all good. I would never risk the lives of the people I love by doing something that stupid. Hop in." She puts her seat forward, so Raz and I can crawl in the back. With the top up, we can't climb over the side like we did before. Besides, we're all too wet and tired and—in mine and Raz's case—drunk for that.

April is asleep in the back seat, while Sonja sits in the front, glancing back at me and Raz with a sated smile as Luke closes her door and puts her seat belt on.

"I'm so tired," I murmur, curling up against Raz's side and laying my cheek on his chest. My eyes close of their own accord, but I won't let myself fall asleep, not just yet. Not fucking yet. Forcing them open again, I dig my phone out of the pocket of my discarded blazer.

"Sleep, babe," Raz murmurs, his own head leaned back against the headrest, eyes closed. "Come keep me warm." As if in response to his statement, Luke turns the heater up and off we go.

My hands shake as I take my phone off of airplane mode, shaking from more than just the cold. No, I'm terrified about what I'm going to find there. Without Luke and April, there's nobody at the party to give me updates, so I don't expect any. What I want to do is try Pearl's social media accounts, or the accounts of our fellow

classmates. If Pearl is dead, I'll know about. The students at Crescent Prep are incorrigible gossips.

Instead, when I turn the phone on, I find several texts from Calix's number. I know it's his because he put it in my phone last year, and I've never had the heart to delete it.

*Pearl killed herself. Oh, and Erina had the video; you were right.*

My mind goes blank, a dizzying buzz taking over my hearing, white splotches killing my vision. For a moment, I wonder if I might pass out.

"You okay?" Luke asks as I shoot a quick text back to Calix, my heart racing, wondering if he'll ignore me, or if he'll respond.

"Yeah, yeah, everything's fine," I whisper, swallowing the lump in my throat. I don't want Luke to know anything's wrong, just in case she crashes the car again. "Just a stupid text from my mom."

*How? Where?* is the text I sent, but while I'm waiting for Calix to reply, I add, *Are you okay?*

Glancing over, I find Raz sleeping peacefully beside me. Luke and Sonja are talking, but quietly enough that I can't quite hear them over the whir of the heater.

*Barron's the one that found her. She was dead in the treehouse, gunshot.*

My hands shake as I stare down at his response, trying to put things together in my mind. The universe most definitely hates me. Despises me, more like. I should've known that sending a stupid stone heart wasn't going to make a difference. That was too easy. Why did I let myself think it would ever be easy?

I just wanted one, last day to myself. Selfish. I'm still being selfish. Do I deserve to be punished for that?

But I should know that the universe doesn't punish anyone; all things are balanced. I've been given wonderful days on this time loop, time with my mothers and sisters, time to understand my feelings for the boys, time to appreciate and forgive my best friend.

I'm not getting any of that for free.

*Erina didn't post our video, but I don't like what I did to stop her. We bullied her, Karma. Why can't I stop hurting people? I killed Pearl; I know I did. What if Erina is next?*

I start to type up a response, but another text comes through before I get the chance.

*I'm sorry. For everything I've done. I'm a liar, and I love you, too, Karma.*

I look up just in time to see the massive buck step into the road, his antlers casting strange shadows as the headlights catch him in their bright glare.

*Oh, come on!*

Fuck.

“Luke, stop!” I scream, startling Raz awake. He reaches out for me, and that’s all she wrote.

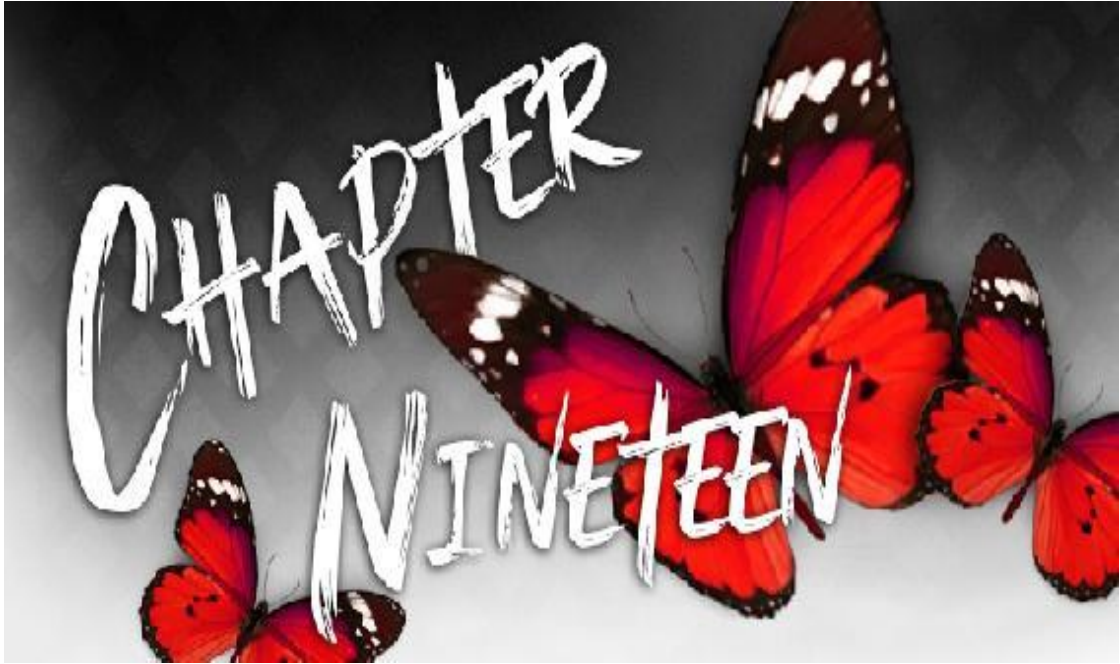
Live to fight another day, right?

Or die to fight one.

Either way.

Another day, it is.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



There's blood all over my steering wheel.

*Why can't I just spend the day curled up in bed, screaming into my pillow?*

I sit up, knowing I can't indulge my own wants and needs today. *Last night was a clusterfuck. A goddamn clusterfuck.* This time, I have to think about Pearl. As usual, I lock the doors and peel out of the parking lot, heading straight to the school and hiding Little Bee in the woods.

When I get there, I have to turn the engine off and lay my head on the steering wheel for a while. No part of me wants to get out of this car and go into that school. All I want to do is dream about the way Raz's blond hair shimmers in the sunshine, how his lips taste, how hot his hands are. Then I want to go home and paint with my moms, cook with my sisters.

But today isn't about me.

That's the whole point.

If this didn't hurt, it wouldn't be a sacrifice.

The day I tried to join the Knight Crew, I found Pearl walking through the hallway just after they arrived at Crescent Prep. Today, I hide from Calix's dark angry eyes, Raz's laughing sneer, and Barron's scrutinizing stare, waiting until they disappear down the hall before I come out of the empty art classroom.

Pearl Boehringer appears at the end of the hallway, and I start after her.

Unfortunately, she doesn't like me much.

"What do you want, Trailer Park?" she snaps at me, her bite as caustic as any member of the Knight Crew. If she didn't have a beef with Calix and Raz, she might actually be one of them.

"I was wondering if you wanted to, like, hang out or something."

Shit.

I did not think this through, did I? I'm still disoriented from last night, from the sight of the buck in the glare of the Caddy's headlights, of Raz's frantic grip as he reached for me.

Why on *earth* would Pearl want to hang out with me when we've barely spoken two words to one another?

The way she looks at me, like she's absolutely horrified by the prospect, does not leave me with much hope. The thing is, I have the ability to play this scene out over and over and over again until I get it right.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she asks, looking me up and down, like I'm the scum of the fucking earth. "Why the *hell* would I want to hang out with the Knight Crew's bitch?"

"Knight Crew's bitch?" I echo, blinking back at her. "They hate me as much as they hate you."

Oops. Again, probably not the best choice of words. Pearl scowls, tossing white-blond hair over her shoulder, her diamond crusted spider mask glittering on her thin, pale face.

"Seriously? Only an idiot would miss the dick measuring contests those boys are in over you. And you just eat it up, don't you?" She tosses her hair and scowls at me. "Stay out of my way, Trailer Park."

Pearl takes off down the hallway and I purse my lips, turning and heading out the front door to my car. I decide to head home and paint for the rest of the day. It seems that if I go home and tell the moms that I need a mental health day, they tell me they want to carry my art in the store. And I like that. A hell of a lot.

One quick nap in the afternoon and I start at the gas station again.

"Hey Pearl," I say when I see her on the second day of my little mission, pausing next to her and tucking my hands into my blazer



pockets. “I was wondering if I could talk to you about Calix Knight?”

She pauses, scowling at me, but there’s a curiosity in her gaze that tells me I’ve picked the right subject to start with.

“Luke heard a rumor that you’re the reason Calix and Raz were sent to Crescent Prep.” I pause and lick my lower lip as Pearl narrows honey-brown eyes at me. She’s wearing the lavender version of the school blazer, and the solid silver skirt. It looks good on her. Maybe a compliment would help? I file that away for tomorrow. That is, if I can’t get this right today.

“The only reason Calix and Raz are here is because they couldn’t keep their hands off of each other,” she replies with a smug little smirk. “Didn’t know that, did you? That your boyfriend and his buddy were fucking each other?” I’m stunned speechless for a moment, and I can tell that Pearl just loved dropping that little bomb on me—whether it’s true or not. Calix told me I was the only person he’d slept with; I believe him. There’s not a soul who could’ve spent the day in his arms and thought he was lying. “Have fun digesting that, Trailer Park.” This time, she flips her hair in my face and takes off.

Fuck.

I need to talk to Raz and Calix, don’t I?

Only, that isn’t as easy as it sounds. In order to get one of them to talk to me, I sort of have to snub the other. Scrubbing my hands over my face, I add another item to my list of things to deal with later, and head home yet again. Paint again. Nap again.

“Hey Pearl,” I start, smiling at her in a way that I hope seems open and friendly, welcoming, easy to talk to. “I was hoping I could talk to you about Calix Knight? He ...” I pause and summon up some of that old hurt. It used to be like an ember, burning deep down in my belly at all times, but his apology the other day has cooled it to ash. “He broke my heart after last year’s Devils’ Day party.”

“Why are you telling me this? You have the whore and the freak for besties, don’t you?” Her smirking expression pushes all my buttons, but I curl my hands into fists and remind myself that she’s hurting, that she cuts herself, that nearly every day since I started this time loop, she kills herself. “Go vent your emo bullshit to them.”

“We ... slept together again recently, and I’m pregnant,” I blurt. It’s a lie, but I need something for Pearl to cling onto, some reason for her to trust me. “I—”

“Why the *fuck* would you tell me that?” she asks, and I can see her pulse thundering in her throat. *Goddamn it, why does this have to be so freaking hard?!* Honestly, all I want to do is paint, hang out with my friends and family, and spend time with the boys. If I have to live on repeat, then I might as well enjoy this. I enjoy none of my moments with Pearl.

But that’s the point, right?

This isn’t about me.

“Calix told me you had a baby with his brother, and they ... the Knights, I mean ... have offered to buy my baby.” I feel like a total piece of shit making up this crap, but I have to save Pearl. I have to get her to trust me. *You’re not being honest, Karma; this isn’t going to work out in the end.*

She just stares at me then, nostrils flared, body shaking. It occurs to me that if I really do make it to tomorrow after this, I’ll have spent all day avoiding the boys, avoiding Luke, avoiding my family, to save Pearl. And then I’ll have a big bag of lies to deal with, too. I’m hoping this is just legwork for a future day.

“They’re monsters,” she tells me, turning away and staring at the floor, her eyes shimmering suddenly with unshed tears. “But I can’t help you. I can’t even help myself.” She glances back at me, a modicum more interest in her gaze than there was before. “I’m not getting my baby back without a huge legal fight. And I can’t do that without money, which my parents won’t give me. There’s no point.”

We stand there in silence for a moment.

“Do you want to skip class today? We can get something to eat or buy new dresses for the party or ... whatever.” My voice cracks with hope which, I think, helps seal the deal for me. I still feel bad about lying, but I’ll feel a lot better if Pearl *doesn’t* kill herself today. “I’ve got my mom’s credit card. We could have some fun?”

Pearl looks at me like she’s never seen me before, like maybe I’m not such a bag of ugly dicks.

“Yeah, okay. You have a car? My parents didn’t bother to let me keep mine.” Her tone darkens, and I can see the shadows falling across her face. She looks back up at me, almost contemplatively. “Alright, fine. Let’s go.” Pearl turns and heads for the doors with me

following behind. The teachers at Crescent Prep aren't really prepared to deal with their ultrarich students, so discipline is definitely lacking; we walk right out the door as the bell rings, and nobody stops us. Further proof that the academy isn't a place meant for rehabilitation, so much as it is a prison in the middle of the woods to dump unwanted kids.

I lead Pearl into the trees where I've hidden Little Bee, and she raises her eyebrows at the damage to the front end.

"I noticed Calix's car was trashed. Your doing?" I nod and Pearl grins, adding yet another thing to my mental checklist that I can use on her for a different day. There's no point in *actually* making a checklist; come tomorrow, when everything resets, it'll be gone anyway.

Pearl examines my myriad bumper stickers before climbing in, settling herself into the seat and locking her belt, her eyes taking in the stuffed soot sprite hanging from my rearview mirror. It's a little black ball with eyes, tufted with bits of fake fur, and it's from some Japanese anime movie that Luke is obsessed with; she's the one who bought it for me, and even though I haven't seen the movie it makes me smile.

"I was thinking we head to Eureka Springs, start off with some breakfast and then dress shopping?" I start the car—takes three tries for the engine to turn over, as usual—and start us down the dirt logging road that leads to the highway.

We drive in silence for a while before Pearl nods toward the stereo.

"No offense, but does this piece of crap play music?"

With a laugh, I reach down and grab my phone from the cup holder, passing it over to her.

"My moms splurged on a new sound system for me last year; it has Bluetooth and all that shit." I smile, my hands tightening slightly around the wheel as it occurs to me how much I take my family for granted. Fuck, as soon as this is over, I'm going to make more of an effort with them. Next time my little sisters ask to paint a mural with me, I'm not going to act like it's an imposition. "Choose whatever you want."

Pearl browses for a few and then starts one of my playlists, one that I forgot I had titled *I Hate the Knight Crew*. It's angry and wild

and full of screaming vocals. She starts it off with “Venom” by *Icon For Hire*.

“So. Why are you being so fucking nice to me? This isn’t some bullshit Devils’ Day trick is it? Because if I find out you’re using my baby against me, I will cut a bitch.” A chill shivers through me, but I force a smile anyway, glancing her way. But only for a second. Goddess knows I’m not taking my eyes off the road for long, not after suffering *three* fatal car crashes in less than a month’s time.

“You’re the only one I thought might understand what I’m going through,” I say, trying to word things carefully. I’d rather not dig myself an even deeper pit of lies. “Besides, there’s no reason why we should hate each other. I mean, I don’t hate you, but you’ve never seemed to like me.”

Pearl scoffs and glances out the window at the passing trees. That’s all there really is out here, trees and springs and lakes. Personally, I like it, but I want to try living in a city once I graduate, at least for a little while.

“You’re always panting after the Knight Crew,” Pearl says with a shrug of her shoulders, removing her mask and setting it between us. Eureka Springs doesn’t celebrate Devils’ Day the way we do in Devil Springs. Likely, most of the locals have some idea of what we do out here in the boonies, but most won’t be wearing masks or celebrating themselves. “And any friend of the Knight Crew is no friend of mine.” She plants her chin in her hand and keeps her gaze out the window. “How far along are you? Maybe an abortion would be best?”

“I’ve never panted after the Knight Crew,” I say, frowning hard and tightening my hands around the wheel. Pearl glances back at me with a pale brow raised, smiling wickedly at the sight of my anger.

“No? Well, you watch them the same way they watch you, and that’s pretty much the same thing.” Pearl leans back in the seat as the song switches to “The In-Between” by *In This Moment*. It’s the perfect tune for Devils’ Day, I must say. Even the video reminds me of the holiday, with the lead singer dressed in a white shroud, a crescent moon symbol on her forehead. I shiver. “Don’t have a baby just to give it to the Knights. Look what they’ve done to Calix.” Her mouth tightens and something strange comes over her expression. “And his brother, Cooper, is even worse.”

“Abortion laws in Arkansas are draconian,” I say, although that wouldn’t be an excuse I’d use if I actually needed one. Women know

when they're ready to become mothers, and if I wasn't, I wouldn't let some bullshit laws stop me from traveling out of state. "What sort of food are you into?" I ask quickly, trying to change the subject. The more I have to dig into this lie, the worse I feel. I shouldn't be lying to get Pearl to pay attention to me; that won't change shit for either of us.

"Mud Street Café," she says easily, and I feel my gut churn slightly. The last time I was there, I was with Calix. We had a good fucking morning. I almost—*almost*—believed that I'd made it to September 26<sup>th</sup> for real. But then Pearl ... And knowing she'd committed suicide was killing Calix, too.

"One of my favorites," I say, trying to choke back my feelings.

We're quiet for the rest of the ride, pulling into the historic part of Eureka Springs and nabbing a lucky parking space, just two over from where Calix stole one just the other day.

We head inside and end up sitting at the exact same fucking table.

Clearly, the universe is messing with me.

"What sort of dress were you thinking of wearing to the party tonight?" Pearl asks absently, not even bothering to pick up the menu. When the waitress comes by to grab our drink order, she rattles off some fancy coffee that's not on the menu, and the woman doesn't even blink. "Make it two," Pearl corrects, turning back to me as our waitress leaves.

"Actually, I'd made myself something new to wear," I say with a small sigh. "But my little sisters—they're only eight—spilled some spaghetti sauce on it. I washed it and hung it up to dry, but this morning, it was gone."

Pearl watches me, but says nothing, and I decide that there's something about her honey-brown stare that's a bit unnerving. Even if I manage to save her, we'll never really be friends. But that's okay. Not everyone in the world needs to agree or to be friends with each other, but we can all respect one another, show a little love, and get along.

"It was gone because I stole it," she says, and my head snaps up from the menu, my eyes widening in disbelief.

"You ... what?" I ask, blinking through the shock. "How? Why?"

"I have a friend who goes to Devil Springs High." Pearl shrugs her shoulders, and I frown. "She lives in the same mobile home park

as you.”

“So, calling me Trailer Park served what purpose?” I snap, before remembering that I’m here to be a small kindness in Pearl’s day.

“It pissed you off, didn’t it?” she retorts, shrugging again. Here and there I see someone glance over at our pleated skirts and blazers. They all know Crescent Prep and the rich city kids who populate it. Except, I’m not one of them, the only local at a local school. “Anyway, I saw the dress, and I just ... took it. I thought about wearing it to the party; I probably wouldn’t have.”

“Why would you take my dress?” I ask, confused. I close my menu and glance up at Pearl. On day one, her admission is something that would’ve made me angry. Furious, probably. But after all I’ve been through, it doesn’t seem like such a big deal anymore. Perspective is important, isn’t it? Something that seems so horrible one minute, is like a drop in the ocean the next.

“Because you always look so put out and sad,” she says, gritting her teeth in a way that reminds me of Raz. My heart jumps in my chest, and I try really hard not to think about the day at the spring, and how his hand felt wrapped around mine. “And you have no right to be.” My mouth drops open as Pearl says to me what I almost verbatim said to Calix. “You have two parents who love you, two sisters, two best friends. Nobody took your baby away, nobody shipped you off to live in another state because they’re embarrassed of you. Your family lets you—no *encourages* you—to do whatever you want, dye your hair however you want, paint whatever the fuck you want. And then you have the audacity to act like life is so hard?” She shrugs again and shakes her head. “Look, I’ll give the dress back, in light of this bullshit with Calix, but you need to get your shit together.”

I just stare at her, the girl who I caught cutting herself in the train car, the one who *shot* herself during a Devils’ Day Party days prior. And here she is, telling *me* to get my shit together.

Fuck, maybe she’s right?

No, no, she *is* right.

I spent day one of this mess acting like a spoiled brat, and I ended up off the edge of a cliff for it. Closing my eyes, I exhale and then open them when our waitress sets the coffees down on the table and takes our order. Pearl gets a spinach and mushroom omelet while I order a croissant sandwich and three different kinds of muffins. Why not? I may as well binge today. There are some bakeries and candy

stores here in Eureka Springs I'm going to load up on while I have the chance.

"Okay, deal," I say, and Pearl pauses with her straw halfway to her lips. I pull my own iced coffee close and take a drink. "You're right. And you can keep the dress if you want."

She just stares at me for a moment before her cheeks turn pink and she looks back down at her drink.

"Well, you said you'd buy me a new one. I'd rather have that. You can keep your homemade rag." She starts sucking on her coffee drink and I burst out laughing, letting my head fall back and not caring if anyone stops to stare. If you can't find time to laugh loud enough to piss somebody else off, then you're not really living, now are you?

"Deal. Let's eat and then get you a new dress. And maybe a hat from the haberdashery." I grin and take a sip of my own drink, groaning loudly enough that I could play Sally in *When Harry Met Sally*.

Pearl looks at me like I'm crazy, but some of the ire leaves her expression.

After breakfast, we make our way up Spring Street, using the emergency credit card the moms gave me to buy dresses, shoes, jewelry, fresh taffy, and even two stuffy hats that cost a pretty penny.

"Your moms are okay with you spending all this money?" Pearl asks when we take a break at the Eureka Daily Roast for some chai tea. The answer to that question is a resounding *fuck no*, but before they ever find out I've blown every cent of credit they have, the day will start over and this little shopping spree will be nothing but a distant memory.

"They'll be mad," I say, thinking about how they'd actually act if tomorrow really did come. "Likely they'll make me work in the store to pay it all back." My lips twist into a smile as I look up from my heaping plate of pastries. Pretty sure Pearl thinks I've got an eating disorder at this point, but that's okay. "Want to see their store after we're done here?"

"Sure," she says, her cheeks coloring pink again. I've noticed she does that every time I compliment her, like when I said her hair was pretty, or that she looked good in the emerald green dress she picked out. "Why not?"

We head up the sloping hill toward the moms' store—*A Little Slice of Karma*.

“They named their store after you?” Pearl asks, and I shake my head.

“They named *me* after their store.” We step inside to the musky smell of incense and the gentle tinkling of an antique bell that the moms got on some trip to Cambodia or something before I was born. The walls are painted a soft heather and lined with original art. Sculptures fill every nook and cranny, and handmade jewelry decorates the glass cases that line the edges of the shop.

“Oh, Karma!” a young woman calls out, moving out from behind the counter.

“Hey, Jaymin,” I respond with a grin, trusting my moms' employee to keep my ditching school a secret—at least for now. The school sends out robo-calls when a student misses class, but the moms are likely in the studio with their phones on silent; they won't know until later. Even then, it *is* Devils' Day.

Jaymin gives me a tight hug, her tortoiseshell glasses and turquoise hair giving her a funky sort of look that fits in well with Eureka Springs.

“Who's your friend?”

“This is Pearl,” I say, nodding my chin in Pearl's direction. “We decided we'd rather go shopping than spend Devils' Day at school.”

“Girl, the things I did on Devils' Day ...” Jaymin laughs, and shakes her head. “Yeah, no, I promised your moms I wouldn't tell you the shit I got into. You know, so you don't get any ideas.” Jaymin winks one of her brown eyes at me and then turns to Pearl with a smile. “So, do you two need something funky to take to the party? How about a six-foot statue of a glittery penis?” She gestures to the statue in question as Pearl's mouth drops open. She recovers her surprise fairly quickly and ends up running a hand over the head-sized ... well, *head*.

“Your moms must be interesting people,” she says with a raised brow. “Lesbians who sell giant dicks in their store.”

“We have giant vaginas, too,” Jaymin offers, turning and pointing to yet another very fascinating statue in the store's opposite corner. “Take a look around and let me know if you see anything that catches your fancy. Family and friends get a special discount.”



Jaymin winks again and then turns away as another customer comes in.

“We have masks here,” I tell Pearl, moving over to one of the glass cases and pointing down at the row of beautiful masks, each one a work of art in its own right. “If you want one, I’d be happy to get it for you.”

“Why though?” Pearl asks, glaring at me before dropping her gaze to the row of monstrously beautiful caricatures beneath the glass. The first mask is a pixie-like pink with translucent wings where the ears should be. The second is a metallic green with long antennae, reminiscent of the emerald ash borer beetle, that awful pest that’s become a symbol of Devils’ Day. There’s a witch mask with a hooked nose, a lion with a glittering mane, and a pale faerie-like face with tiny horns wrapped in gold leaf.

“Because we’ll look fierce as hell if we show up in one of these,” I say, moving behind the counter to snag the key for the case from the back wall. Jaymin is busy helping the other customer with the penis statue—believe me, a local artist makes those, and they sell like hotcakes—so I don’t bother her, opening the case myself and handing Pearl the fae mask with the horns.

She takes it from me, studying the price tag and raising her pale brows, before finally slipping it onto her face. I take the pixie mask and try that on.

“Too soft,” Pearl says as I glance in the round mirror on top of the counter. I agree with her and put the mask back, trying the green beetle one instead. Pearl slips the fae mask on, but it’s clearly far too large for her fine-boned face.

“Try this one,” I suggest after I put the beetle mask back, grabbing a black mask with a twisted sneer and fangs. “It’s terrifying. You’ll scare the shit out of Raz.”

“Nothing scares the shit out of Raz,” Pearl says with a sneer, but she puts the mask on anyway and looks at herself in the mirror for a long, long time. I busy myself trying on masks and then decide to check the drawers underneath the case, where my moms put extra inventory. As soon as I open the drawer and spot the Diana fritillary mask I almost choke. It’s blue and black, indicating a female of the species. The males are always orange and black, like the necklace Barron gave me. Or the tattoo on his chest.

*“I’d rescue you; I’d be the Rose to your Jack.”*

My heart stutters and I stand up quickly, clutching the mask against my heart.

“This one,” Pearl says, looking up at me from behind the façade of a beast. “I want this one.”



By the time we get to the Devils’ Day party, it’s in full swing.

The gatekeeper grins at us from behind a red imp’s mask and takes our phones, ushering us through with a bow, his shirtless chest covered in dark glitter.

We park next to Raz’s Shelby Cobra, and I find that I can’t resist running my fingers over the hood as we pass. *He fucked me on this hood, and he doesn’t even remember.* The thought is sobering, but I make myself smile anyway, my arm hooked through Pearl’s as we head to the party. My plan is to stay up all night and watch her, make sure she makes it to sunrise. After that ... I don’t know.

One step at a time.

I’m wearing the gown I made, the one that Pearl stole from the clothesline that I haven’t seen since the day before the original Devils’ Day. It’s a floor-length gown, made entirely of black lace. Underneath, I’m wearing a black bikini that just barely shows through, giving little hints of skin elsewhere.

As soon as Barron glances over his shoulder and sees me in the butterfly mask, something strange happens in his face. He’s sitting around the campfire with Calix, sucking on a honey-colored lollipop with a tiny *scorpion* inside of it.

Everything goes on Devils’ Day, I guess.

“Have you seen Luke?” I ask, pausing next to the Knight Crew’s small fire. The bonfire rages behind us, surrounded by the sweaty, gyrating bodies of students wearing masks of all sorts. They look wild tonight, wanton, the very opposite of everything their families wish they could be. To the left of the bonfire, Cami Alhambra is sitting in a circle of other girls, white candles lit between each of them, and a spell book open on the forest floor in front of her.

I turn back to find Calix looking at me like he’d rather wring my neck with his black-gloved hands than answer my question.

Then I remember that today, I didn't make nice with a single one of the Knight Crew boys.

Fuck.

"Grab her," Calix says casually, and Barron rises to his feet, several of the diaphanous-gowned, demon-mask girls swarming to do their master's bidding.

"Not tonight," Pearl says, stepping in front of me. The girls titter in confusion as Barron stares at me over her shoulder.

I better come up with something and *fast* or else I may very well end up locked in the Devils' Den—I can see the rusted key hanging around Barron's neck—or in the cabin where Calix and I first had sex.

"Barron, your notebook is filled with drawings of me," I say, and even over the screams of the band on the makeshift stage, I know he can hear me. His dual-colored eyes narrow in suspicion. "Please don't hurt me tonight." My voice is even, almost deadpan. That little hiccup at the end really gets me though. "I will kick you in the nuts if I have to, but I'd rather not."

The sound of a gun going off draws my attention, and my stomach roils with nausea.

"What is that?" Pearl asks, cocking her head to one side as Calix stands up, dressed in what looks almost like a butler's uniform, but with snazzy cufflinks in the shape of crescent moons, his jacket open and his chest bare. A new outfit every single night. I can't figure what I'm supposed to make of that, especially since so much of this day runs on a script without my interference.

"Raz brought some guns to do some target practice with," Barron says absently, and I can't decide if he's saying that to freak me out or because something about my mask or what I said about his sketchbook is throwing him off.

"Where?" I ask, fear filling me as I lift my lacy skirts and prepare to run. I have to find Raz before something bad happens.

"Near the cabins," Barron suggests as Calix steps forward, dark eyes shining with righteous anger.

"Something you said this morning pissed him off. If I were you, I wouldn't go over there," Calix purrs. "And don't think I've forgotten what you did to my fucking car."

I ignore him, taking off in the direction of the cabins, past the mouth of Devils' Den, past the train car, and into the woods. Candles flicker randomly in the darkness, naked bodies shining as revelers fuck or drink or laugh, the sounds echoing like the cries of the devilish spirits that live in the land.

When I stumble out of the trees and into the clearing, still clutching my lacy skirts and panting like crazy, I see Sonja, Raz, Luke, April, and a handful of other Knight Crew members clustered on the far side. Between the trunks of two huge trees, there's a red and white bullseye set up.

As I watch, Raz moves into the center of the clearing and lifts a handgun, firing off a single shot. The sound echoes through the woods, making my ears ring.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I demand, coming up behind him as he lowers the gun, and everyone turns to look at me.

"Hey Karma," Luke says, looking a bit nervous in her sequin dress shirt and goblin mask as she jogs over to us. April is sitting on a stump on the left side of the clearing, still wearing her Crescent Prep uniform and the same pixie mask that Luke gave her on that very first day. She's talking to a girl whose name I don't know, laughing and nursing sips off a water bottle. "Where have you been all day? I've been texting you."

Sonja saunters over to join us, smirking at me behind her red leather mask and wrapping an arm around Luke's waist as my bestie pales and her eyes widen in fear.

I don't have time for her and Sonja's secrets though, not today.

Raz turns to look at me, wearing a different mask than usual. This time, his mask looks like death—a skeleton face with a black shroud molded above the forehead.

"Hey Karma," he says, dropping the magazine to the forest floor and loading another one. He hands the gun out to me. "Do you want a turn?"

"What is wrong with you?" I ask, wishing I could tell him about the day we spent at the cottage, how he ate chocolate ice cream with me and cuddled me naked. But we can't talk about that, now can we? "Put the gun down, Raz, and let's talk."

"Talk?" he scoffs, dropping the gun to his side and stepping close to me. His voice gets dark and quiet, almost menacing. "About what? About your baby with Calix? I haven't told him yet, but

maybe I should?" Raz lifts his head up and gestures with his chin in the direction of Calix and Barron as they step out of the trees.

*Holy shit, is this it?* I wonder as I glance down at the black handgun clutched in Raz's tense fingers. *Is his jealousy going to end the night in bloodshed?*

Pearl appears just a moment later, coming over to stand beside me.

"Don't you *dare* bully her about her pregnancy," she hisses, and I realize just how out of control this has gotten. I started the day with good intentions, but my lie is becoming twisted. I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

"Yeah, and what are you going to do about it?" Raz retorts, stepping closer. The thing is, regardless of the mistakes I've made, today is for Pearl. Just Pearl. She's owed that, at least, a single day.

I push Raz back, desperate to keep him from saying something to her that he might one day regret.

"Please don't drag her into this. You're mad at me, and I know why." Calix and Barron are coming closer, and I *really* don't want to have this conversation with them around, so I rush on. "You love me and you're jealous. Well, guess what? I love you, too."

"What the ... what?" Raz asks, rearing back, his fingers loosening on the gun. "The hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm in love with you," I choke out, my heart aching so fiercely that I'm afraid I might have a heart attack and wake up at the gas station before I get a chance to finish this day. Pearl must live, that's my only goal right now. "So please don't do this."

Raz just stands there, dumbfounded, as one of the other Knight Crew lackeys steps close and grabs the gun. It takes me a second to realize that it's Erina fucking Cheney.

"If you're just going to stand there and chat, I'll take a turn," she says, and bile rises in my throat. That girl, with a weapon in her hand ... this can't be good.

"You're telling me this now that you're pregnant with Calix's fucking kid?" Raz asks, just as Erina lifts the gun to point it at the target. The thing is, when she goes to take her shot, something about what Raz has just said makes her startle. She fires the gun nearly forty feet to the left of the target, and I watch in sick horror as the bullet hits April right in the chest.

Red blooms on the white of her dress shirt as her eyes go wide and she crumples forward, almost in slow motion. Her brunette braids trail behind her as she falls into Luke's arms. My best friend catches April before she can hit the ground, but I can already tell this is going to end poorly for everyone involved.

"She's been shot!" Luke screams as Sonja helps her lay April on the forest floor. "We need a fucking phone; get the gatekeeper!" Luke turns back to April, sobbing and shaking as I stand there, thunderstruck.

Clearly, the universe hates me.

Why else would it do this to me? All I was trying to do was help. I just wanted to fucking help.

Barron takes off at a full sprint, clearly heading back to grab the phones. Raz stumbles a bit before seeming to shake himself out of a stupor.

"Give me the fucking gun, Erina," he says, moving toward her slowly. Erina just stands there, ignoring him and clutching the gun in two hands as she stares at April's still form with wide eyes.

Pearl takes off, dropping down to the ground in her new emerald gown and leaning down to put her ear near April's lips, already flecked with pink spittle.

Calix isn't looking at Erina. Instead, he's staring at me, like he knows this moment is going to destroy me, like he'd do anything to change that.

He must've heard Raz shouting about me being pregnant, but obviously, he won't believe that, considering we haven't had sex in a year. The expression on his face says that maybe he's already forgotten about that part of the conversation though. I sure as fuck have, all of my attention focused on April.

"Karma," he says, his voice almost ... tender? Calix takes a step toward me, reaching out for my hand.

"Don't touch her," Erina says, and my attention snaps over to Erina and Raz. He has both hands raised in surrender and a deep frown etched into his handsome face. As I watch, Erina swings the gun from him and over to me and Calix.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Sometimes I forget that I go to a school full of delinquents and psychopaths. Sometimes, but not often. I mean, they don't *let* me forget often enough.

"Erina, give me the gun," Calix says, frowning as he holds out a hand, his imperious attitude making me extremely nervous. This isn't going to go well if he cops the dark faerie prince of the forest bullshit. "You made a mistake; don't turn it into a crime."

For a split-second, Erina's pale blue eyes lower and I feel like she's *this* close to giving Calix the gun. She lifts her gaze just in time to see him flick his own toward me, that same sort of fragile tenderness in his eyes. My friend has just been shot, and Calix's hard shell is falling aside like it was never there.

*April is dead.*

The thought doesn't even penetrate my foggy brain. Besides, today isn't the day, is it? It can't be. I won't *let* it be.

"Why do you love her?" Erina asks, sounding sick to her stomach. "What is it about her that makes her better than me?"

"Are you kidding?" Calix asks, his face tightening with anger. "You just *killed* a pregnant girl with an illegal handgun, and you're asking me about Karma?"

"Answer me!" Erina screams, gesturing with the gun in Calix's direction. He closes his eyes briefly, only bothering to open them when Erina presses the barrel of the gun against his forehead. I desperately want to say something, do something, but clearly, I'm at least partially responsible for Erina's anger. I'm afraid if I draw her attention, she won't hesitate to shoot Calix and me both. For his part, Calix doesn't seem particularly concerned, more pissed off than anything else.

Raz makes a move, like he's planning on tackling her to the ground, when Erina swings the weapon around and fires a round into his leg, dropping him to the leaf-covered earth with a howl. I drop down beside him, putting my hands over the wound, trying to stop the flow of hot crimson.

"Tell me," Erina says, turning the gun back on Calix. "You may as well, it's already too late."

"Karma is freedom," Calix says with a small sigh. "She's empathy. She's everything I'm not."

*He said it again*, I think, but I can't exactly find it in me to be happy, not with April likely dead, and Raz bleeding all over me. His teeth are gritted as he sits up, panting as he looks at me with something akin to fear in his gaze. He isn't ready to die. I reach over and rip his awful skeleton mask away, tossing it aside.

"You love her?" Erina asks, sniffing, and I glance back just in time to see Calix nod.

"I love her."

Those are the last words he says.

Erina drops the barrel to Calix's chest and shoots him, right through the fucking heart.

The sound of that gunshot makes my head ring as I choke on my own breath, watching as the boy I've loved for years falls to his side in the leaves and does not get up.

"No, no, no, no, no!" Raz shouts, scrambling to get to his friend, even as he bleeds and bleeds and bleeds. I look up to see Erina pointing the gun at me. Her face is pale and pretty beneath the leaf-covered mask she wears, her expression as cold as ice.

"Goodbye, Karma," she says.

That's the last thing I remember, the horrible, horrible sound of her voice.

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There's blood all over my steering wheel.

I sit up, shaking all over, wanting to puke. I'm so disoriented that when Calix opens my door and tears me out of the car, I barely see him. My eyes are glazed over, and I start to wonder if I'm coming apart at the seams.

"Are you fucking insane?!" he snarls, but then I collapse forward into his arms, fisting my hands in his Crescent Prep blazer and letting out a small sob. I'm strong, at least, I try to be strong, but holy shit.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

I lift teary eyes up to Calix's face and find him staring down at me with an expression that isn't entirely unlike the one he had just moments ago. There's an edge to it, like he's balancing on a precipice, but there's a tenderness, too. I realize then that I've seen this expression before, more than once, but that I've just never recognized it.

With a gun to his fucking head, Calix Knight admitted he loves me.

There is no more of an endgame romance than that.

"Let me go today," I whisper, my voice verging on hysterical. *April with bloody spittle on her lips, Luke screaming, Barron running, Raz bleeding, Calix dying.* Seems the only person I

managed to save yesterday was Pearl, but at what price? “Something bad happened. Just ... let me go home, okay? And I’ll explain everything to you tomorrow.”

“Karma, what are you talking about?” Calix asks, his fingers tightening on my shoulders instead of releasing. Why he panicked and broke my heart last year, I may never know, but it’s clear from where I’m standing now that he loves me. Calix Knight is in fucking love with me.

He’s looking at me like maybe the car crash was an accident.

“Please,” I whisper as the woman in the bright yellow shirt, with the little daisies on her nails and the purple hat, approaches us.

“Are you okay?” she asks, and I have to bite back a scream. It isn’t fair that when I tried to help, I just managed to make things so much worse. Pearl didn’t kill herself last night, but I saw two people I care about die. I saw Raz shot. I saw Luke’s heart breaking as she held April’s dying body.

“Leave me alone,” I snap, knowing it isn’t fair to the old lady, and putting my forehead down against Calix’s chest. *He’s holding me in the hotel room at the Crescent*, I tell myself, eyes squeezed shut. My mind is entirely blown when his left hand comes down to rest on the back of my head.

“She’s fine,” he tells the woman, his voice much less caustic than normal. “I’ll take care of her.”

“Should I call the police?” she inquires, taking another step forward. I suppose I should be grateful to her for picking up on the subtle signals between me and Calix. But today, I just can’t. Minutes ago, one of my classmates killed two others, and I’m struggling to wrap my mind around why. I’ve never needed that mental health day more than I do right now.

“That won’t be necessary,” Calix says, and I nearly collapse. Hearing the script today is pretty much the last thing that I want. My actions, no matter how small they seem, are capable of blowing this script to high hell, of ruining lives. “We’re friends; she just had an accident.”

My head snaps up to his, but he isn’t looking at me. Those ebony eyes are on the front on the convenience store, watching for Raz and Barron.

The woman retreats, but her eyes don’t leave us.

“Why did you leave me last year?” I ask, tears still rolling down my cheeks as I picture the blood blooming on Calix’s bare chest. He looks back down at me, his lush, full mouth twisted into a frown. “Why did you lie?”

“I’m a coward,” he says, and it’s the first real answer I’ve ever gotten out of him, on any of these days. I want to believe—no, I *need* to believe—that he remembers at least *something* out of the past month. I wasn’t there all alone. Maybe I’m the only one who remembers it the way I do, but there are fragments of those days inside of everyone I know. Barron draws me; April mentioned the ‘sex act’; my mothers made ‘ants on a log’ as a snack. Calix said friends, not classmates. Friends. “I panicked,” he continues, and there’s something strange in his voice. I wonder if he’s still feeling the fear and pain from last night. “Once I’d turned on you, what was the point? You were never going to forgive me.”

Calix releases me as Raz and Barron step out of the store, carrying their bags of snacks, as usual. I’m just waiting for Raz to call me Trailer Park and break my heart all over again. I turn back to Calix.

“How would you know that if you never tried?” I ask, dropping my arms to my sides. He looks back at me, a sad, distant expression in his face. Despite his good looks, his group of asshole friends, his money ... Calix Knight is decidedly unhappy. Only, he wasn’t that night, when he was with me. He smiled then, for real. Not a smirk or a sneer, but a true smile. “I forgive you, Calix, and I still love you.”

“What the fuck happened here?” Raz asks, but this time, he doesn’t circle the cars. He just stands there with Barron at his side. He also doesn’t say what he’s said a half-dozen times before. “*Little trailer trash bitch thought she’d get the first Devils’ Day trick on us, huh?*” Those words never leave his mouth, not today. Maybe he, too, remembers being shot.

“Calix and I love each other,” I say, taking a step back toward my car. Calix watches me with dark eyes, but he doesn’t say anything, one way or the other. I glance back at Raz and Barron. The former is gritting his teeth, his jaw tight, hand clenched around the handle of the plastic grocery bag. Barron studies me with his usual intensity, sucking on the red lollipop in his hand, blue and brown eyes focused on my face. “Barron draws me; Raz is jealous. I love you both, too.” I slide into the car and slam the door, turning the key three times to start the damn thing, tears still running down my face.

Raz slams his fist against the window.

“What the actual *fuck*, Karma!” he shouts as I pause briefly to roll the window down, but just a crack. Today is not the day where I try to balance all three boys and their affections.

“What do you know about Erina Cheney?” I ask, and Raz just gapes at me like I’ve lost the damn plot.

“Erina Cheney?” he asks, glancing over his shoulder at Calix and Barron.

“Coincidence, she’s also in love with Calix Knight,” Barron says in that cool, smooth voice of his. He’s standing on Calix’s right side now, brows furrowed. “Why? What did she do to you?”

“She ... has a video from last year’s Devils’ Day party—one of us in the treehouse—and she’s planning on uploading it.”

“What?” Calix snaps, taking a small step forward. “Is that why you crashed?” he asks, and it’s quite clear he doesn’t realize that I did it on purpose, not today. “Is she threatening you?”

“I’m not letting you drive off after saying weird shit like you just did,” Raz growls, ignoring the rest of the conversation in favor of this one thing. He leans down, red eyes flashing. “What do you mean you love us both, too?”

“I have to go,” I say, putting my foot on the gas. Raz curses and jumps out of the way as I reverse away from the Aston Martin and then put Little Bee in drive, heading straight for home.

Once I get there, I make sure to clean the blood off and dry my tears, and then I make my excuses to my moms and lock myself in my room.

A quick search on my phone gives me a whole list of books, movies, and video games with a time loop plot.

*Hey, can you find Pearl today and tell her that she can keep the dress; I want her to have it. Also, maybe just keep an eye on her tonight at the party? She’s been really down and depressed lately. I’ve got a thing to deal with, but I’ll see you tomorrow.* I shoot the text off to Luke and then settle into bed. I turn on the TV that’s mounted to the wall next to my closet doors and search for *Groundhog Day*, the first movie on my list.

And then I hit play.

Even though I know I can’t carry items over to the next day, I start making a list of all the things that happen to the main character in the film as he lives the very nightmare that is now my life. One day,

on repeat. Only, it looks like Bill Murray—who plays the lead in the film—is stuck in the snowy small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania for years. *Years*’ worth of days pass, and he even manages to master the piano.

My throat gets dry as I wonder if I have the mental fortitude to survive that long. I’ve been at this a month. One month. A whole year might just destroy me. Every day, I’ll wake up a drooling mess, Calix will yank me out of the car, and the boys will dial me into the looney bin. I’ll doom the whole town—maybe the world—to living on a script, day after day after day.

The movie ends and I pick up my phone, finding a couple texts from Luke and April.

*Are you okay? Calix, Barron, and Raz are being weird as hell today. They even came up to me and asked if I knew what was going on with you. Also, they pretty much destroyed Erina this morning out front of the school. What’s that about?*

I ignore Luke’s text, pausing as Mama Jane knocks on the door and then gently cracks it open.

“Can I get you some tea?” she asks, and I nod. I’m in for a *long* day and night, as long as I can manage to stay awake.

“Maybe some coffee?” I ask, making a prayer position with my hands. “I’d love you forever.”

“I hope you’ll love me forever regardless,” she says with a smile, “but yes, I’d be happy to make you some coffee.” She steps out and the words I want to say die on my lips. *I love you, I always have, I always will, and I’m sorry I’ve never told you how much I appreciate you and Mama Cathy.*

I turn on my next movie of the day, *Happy Death Day*, pausing only when my mom comes back, giving me a kiss on the forehead, and a steaming hot cup of coffee with cream. She quietly lets herself out, giving my notebook a raised brow before she closes my door behind her.

“At least this isn’t my fate,” I murmur, scribbling down some notes as the main character in this particular movie gets murdered over and over and over again. Ugh. I sip my coffee with one hand and rub the bridge of my nose with the other. In *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray stops the time loop by helping everyone in town who could use a hand. The thing is, I’m not trapped in such a small area, the way he is. It’d take me a week to help everyone in the Diamond

Point Mobile Home Park, let alone Crescent Prep or the town of Devil Springs. In *Happy Death Day*, on the other hand, the main character has to change and become a better person, at one point committing suicide to save someone she loves. At the end, she has to discover her murderer's identity to break the loop.

I finish that movie and switch to a play-through of a video game instead, searching for meaning in fiction. There's always some truth in fiction anyway, lessons to be learned. The game I decide on is *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, an older game that was remastered some years ago. The character in that lives a three-day time loop which seems infinitely more valuable than my one day. But for him, the loop ends when he saves the world.

"Fuck." I put my forehead on my knee, blocking out the play-through on my computer. Next up on my list: *Russian Doll* and *The Butterfly Effect*. After that, I'll likely read *Before I Fall* by Lauren Oliver. I have a long fucking night ahead of me.

A soft knock sounds on my door and I pause, lifting my head up to glance toward it.

"Karma?" It's Mama Cathy, paint-splattered and beautiful as always.

"What's up?" I ask, exhaling and trying not to let the feeling of hopelessness wash over me. As long as I'm willing to fight, I can beat this. I know I can. I truly believe in the power of the mind, and I'm determined as *fuck*. Especially after yesterday. Yesterday with the gun and the blood and ...

"There are some boys here to see you," she says, sounding a bit uneasy. "I think they're those boys you don't like, the Knights of the Round Table or something." A harsh laugh escapes me as I check the time on my phone and see that it's just barely four o'clock. School will have just gotten out.

"Hardly. They're pretty much the opposite of the Round Table Knights." I stand up and brush my hands down the old tank top and ratty sweats I've got on. A month ago, before I ever entered this shitty time loop, I wouldn't have been caught dead talking to the Knight Crew in an outfit like this. Today, I don't care if they see me naked.

Okay, well I do care, but in a different sort of way.

Stepping onto the porch, I let the creaking screen door swing shut behind me, padding down the ramp that leads to the gravel road in

front of our house. All around us, the mountains rise up, covered in trees, trapping us in a little valley of sunlight.

The Aston Martin is parked in front of my house, and all three of the boys are leaning against or standing outside of it.

Jesus.

“What are you guys doing here?” I ask, crossing my arms under my breasts. Raz’s red eyes go right to my peaked nipples before lifting to my face. He scowls at me, but the expression is empty, just a gesture he’s comfortable with instead of an emotion he truly feels.

“You had a car accident this morning,” Calix says, and the softness in his voice makes me want to lie every day about the crash being an accident. But I hate lies. I can’t live to tomorrow on a lie. “Then you threw yourself at me crying.”

“And then you said you were in love with us,” Barron adds, cocking his head to one side. He’s wearing that white hoodie again, the hood pulled up over his rainbow-colored Mohawk. He thrusts a lollipop into his mouth that’s in the shape of a skull.

“Yeah, how about that shit?” Raz asks, crossing his arms over his chest. His blazer is unbuttoned, his tie loose, dirty blonde hair mussed. “We dealt with Erina today, by the way.”

“Dealt with her how?” I ask, looking between the three of them. I’m shaking a bit from the adrenaline rush of seeing them here at my house, but I’m not embarrassed about what I said this morning. I only get to live one day, so I have to use that one day to say what I need to say, do what I need to do.

“Sonja loaded up on rings, and beat the shit out of her,” Raz says, like it’s no big deal to commit a felony assault on another student. My eyes widen as I glance over at Barron and Calix. They’re both as stoic as the trees looking down on us from the backyard, soaring sugar maples that shade the house but leave the studio in brilliant golden sunshine. “She confessed to taking the video; we got into her cloud account and got rid of it.”

“Thank you,” I say genuinely, looking between the three boys and wondering if some of the trauma from last night wore off on them, and that’s why they’re being so nice. Either that, or all the time we’ve spent together—whether they remember it or not—is having an effect. Although, I don’t know how I feel about using violence on Erina. That can’t be the only way, right? *She shot and killed people*

*last night, Karma. Not everything in life can be tied up in a pretty bow.*

“Did she hurt you this morning? Threaten you?” Calix asks, taking a step forward and then pausing when Mama Cathy steps out of the front door and beams that beautiful smile of hers down on the four of us.

“Would you all like to come in? I could make tea or coffee? I’m assuming you’re all heading to the party after this?”

I open my mouth to respond when Barron beats me to it.

“I’d love some tea,” he says and Mama Cathy grins, turning to head back inside.

“I’ll start the kettle!”

“*I’d love some tea,*” Raz imitates, rolling his eyes in a dramatic fashion. “Since when the *fuck* do you drink tea, Barron? That’s for like, old British people.”

“Since whenever the hell I want,” he says back, voice as depthless as a starless night. He cracks his teeth against the lollipop and steps up beside me, leaning down and enveloping me in that unique scent of his, like mint and lanolin and charcoal. “I want to show you something.” He reaches down and takes my hand, pulling me toward the front door.

Behind me, I can hear Raz cursing as he storms up the ramp.

Barron and I slip inside, and Barron lets the door slam in his friend’s face, pausing to take in the art that covers every wall from floor to ceiling.

“Nice, bro, real fucking mature,” Raz snaps, pausing just behind me. I look back at him as he wrinkles his nose, nostrils flaring as he takes in what’s got to be a vastly different environment for him. Raz comes from a rich, conservative family while I’m from a poor, progressive family. We couldn’t be anymore different, and yet ...

“Don’t mock my family,” I warn him, my voice calm but deadly serious. I love Raz—I feel like I’m finally able to admit that to myself—but I will throw him out on his ass if he tears my family or my moms or my sisters down. Or me. Especially me. I’m done just barely standing up for myself; I will actively fight back from now on.

“My parents taught me better than that,” Raz growls with a slight reddening of his cheeks and forehead. “Politics and opinions are best



left outside the front door of someone else's home." I raise my brows, surprised to hear that I actually like something the Loverens taught their son.

"Take a seat," Mom calls out, popping her head out of the kitchen to gesture at the table. "And don't worry: I'll bring you your tea and leave you alone."

"Karma!" It's Emma, sprinting down the hall, breathless, her blue-gray eyes shimmering as she takes in the boys standing on either side of me. "Are these your boyfriends?"

"Yep," I say, and her mouth drops open in shock. Both Barron and Raz look over at me like they're not sure what to make of my response. "There's a third one, too."

I'm not even positive he's going to come in, but as Emma stands there gaping and Katie creeps down the hall shyly to glare at the boys, I hear footsteps outside and my heart thunders like crazy in my chest.

Calix steps inside, his ebon hair shimmering in the sunshine, his dark eyes taking in the room with a single sweep before landing on Emma's cherubic face.

"You have *three* boyfriends?" she asks, narrowing her eyes as Calix's widen, almost imperceptibly. "How?"

"The same way a person has one boyfriend; they just love more than one person." I push past Barron to pause next to Katie. She's frowning and glaring, her eyes fierce and sharp with an emotion I can't quite place. Then it occurs to me: she's *pissed*.

"These are the bullies," she says, coming around me to glare up at the three six-foot plus assholes standing in my living room. "You bullied my sister." Her nostrils flare as she stares them down, her breathing labored with the strength of her emotion. "Why?"

Barron glances back at Raz and Calix, and then turns to face my sister, moving forward and crouching down in front of her. He clicks the candy against his teeth as he thinks for a moment.

"I may have judged your sister against unfair standards," he replies as Katie returns his stare with an unflinching one of her own. Emma still looks confused, pondering over the triple boyfriend thing while the kettle whistles and Mama Cathy pretends not to be listening in on our conversation. I'm just glad she's in here while Mama Jane's outside in the studio; she's a much less forgiving or understanding person. "But I can see that maybe I was wrong."

Barron pulls two more lollipops from his pocket, offering them up to my sisters. Emma snatches one right away, but Katie doesn't lift a finger.

"Maybe? You're a jerk. You made her cry." Katie looks over at Raz and Calix. "You all made her cry, and you should be ashamed." She turns on her heel and heads down the hallway as I do my best to fight back a grin.

"She's almost as feisty as you are," Barron says as he stands up and Emma cocks her head to the side in careful contemplation.

"If you date three boys, do you get three penises?" Emma asks, and Cathy groans.

"Alright, go, outside. You can work on your mural." Cathy shoos my sister down the hallway and then casts the boys an apologetic look. "Tea is on the counter. Help yourself to teacups from the china cabinet. And I'm sorry about her, she's a little ... blunt sometimes." Cathy disappears down the hall, and I hear the giggling of my sisters outside.

"Your sisters look a lot like you," Raz says, almost like he's confused. "How? Aren't you all adopted?" I give him a look over my shoulder.

"Nope. My moms ordered sperm online, got it delivered on dry ice, and impregnated each other." I smile. "They made sure to use the same donor for my sisters as they did for me. So, surprise, surprise, we're all blood related!" I grab a set of teacups with little *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* characters printed on the inside and put four of them around the table before I collect the teapot and a tin of homemade shortbread.

Barron takes a seat without being asked, pouring himself a cup of tea, and dropping in a half dozen sugar cubes. Raz is next, sitting on the other side of me and looking so uncomfortable, I'm fairly certain he'd crawl out of his skin if it could grant him an escape from my house. Calix ... he hangs back, like he isn't sure he's welcome here. Or if he is, that he isn't sure he *should* be welcome here.

"Come sit down," I tell him, pushing out the chair at the end of the table with my foot. After a brief moment of hesitation, he complies, folding himself into the chair like an insouciant faerie prince with a crown of thorns. Without asking, I pour both him and Raz a cup of tea and push the cups toward them.

“This is weird, isn’t it?” Calix asks, sounding like he’s having a bit of an out-of-body experience. “Us, sitting here in your house.”

“Why? You came to see me, didn’t you?” I ask, doing my best to ignore the memories from last night. Erina is clearly unstable, a grenade with the pin dangling precariously, ready to blow. “So my family invited you in, and now we’re hanging out. What’s weird about that?”

“We’ve never ‘hung out’ before,” Calix says, blinking slowly as he stares at me from those crow-black eyes of his.

“And whose fault is that?” I retort, snapping the end off a piece of shortbread with my teeth as I muse over the time loop stories. My eyes scan the three boys sitting at my table. If this had happened on the first day, I’d be shocked as shit. After living through a time loop, nothing so mundane as having tea with my bullies/love interests is going to shake me. “You three treat me like garbage, so hanging out has never really been an option.”

“This is fucking ridiculous,” Raz snarls, but more to himself than to me. He swipes his hand down his face and closes his eyes for a moment before flicking them open and turning his glare on me. “What the hell did you mean this morning? You can’t run from that shit forever.”

“You mean about loving you?” I respond, and I swear, all three of them lean back in their seats like they’ve just seen a nuclear explosion and are trying to avoid the fallout. “I meant it. I wasn’t sure at first, but ... life is short. Lying to other people is insane; lying to yourself is suicidal.” I push the rest of the cookie into my mouth as something occurs to me, niggling at the back of my mind.

There’s one constant through all the time loop stories I just studied.

One constant that I don’t want to acknowledge, no matter what.

It feels suddenly sad, sitting there with the Knight Crew boys and not knowing if something good might blossom out of my new relationship with the three of them.

“Why today, all of a sudden?” Raz asks as Barron loads a small plate with heaps of shortbread cookies. He even dips one into his tea before snapping the end off with those pretty white teeth of his. “I thought you were fucking with us, but then, you never did show up to school.”

“She could still be fucking with us,” Barron muses, but Calix is looking at me like he’s fairly certain I’m not. That’s a surprise, seeing him on my side so easily. I maintain that some fragment of yesterday is haunting him, reminding him that life is temporary. *He said he loved me, at gunpoint.* The thought is both thrilling and terrifying, the ultimate truth spoken from lips about to be bloodied with violence.

I shiver and pour a bit of cream into my tea before taking a sip.

“I assure you, I’m not,” I say, curling my legs up in the chair and wondering if I ever manage to get past today, if I might have hangout sessions with all three boys more often. They seem so out of place here: rich, cruel, arrogant. Yet ... I’m comfortable with them in my space, more so than I expected. “I’m in love with all three of you. What should I do about that?”

“What do you mean *what should I do?*” Raz snaps, pushing his tea aside and sending hot liquid splashing onto the surface of the table. “Yesterday, you told me to eat shit in French. Today, you’re confessing your love? Sorry if I don’t buy that crap. Too sudden.”

“Not as sudden as you might think,” I say, looking down at the decorative black runner that lines the center of the table. It has glittering silver stars and moons; the moms sewed it just for Devils’ Day. I only see it out one time a year. “My feelings have been developing for a long time. Maybe since freshman year.”

“What would you do, with all three of us?” Barron asks, his voice as shadowed and dark as always, smoothing over my body like fog. I love the sound of it; I could drown in it and die happy. “That is, if not a one of us actually hated you. If, in fact, we all reciprocated your feelings?” He smiles at me; it isn’t a particularly nice smile. “This is all hypothetical, of course.”

“Of course,” I reply as Calix picks up his tea and stares into the cup like it holds all the answers. There are a few loose bits of tea leaf in there, so if he’s got some Harry Potter shit going on, maybe he really can read his future in the Darjeeling? “What would I do? I guess I’d offer up a truce. You three play at being devils—and not just on Devils’ Day—but every day. You’ve treated me like shit for years, so ... I’d ask you to consider my feelings. Date me, share with each other, and we’d see how things went. Hypothetically speaking.”

“Hypothetically,” Barron agrees, his not-so-nice smile turning into a grin. “That’s quite the offer you’ve presented us with.”

“This is fucking stupid,” Raz says, red eyes burning with fury as he leans back in his chair, balancing precariously on the rear legs. I notice he doesn’t stand up and leave though. He’s still here, and that has to count for something. “We’re not going to *share* you.” He practically gags on the word.

“Why not? From what I hear, you and Calix were into each other in junior high.”

Silence descends on the table, the tension thickening like fog in the woods, obscuring a clear way out, trapping us all.

I stand up and pad over to the cabinet to grab some incense, lighting the stick with a match and then carefully blowing on the end until it burns bright and perfumes the air with smoky sweetness.

“Where did you hear that?” Calix asks, his voice dark. “Erina? She’s been stalking me, you know.”

“Stalking you?” I ask, turning back to see Raz’s jaw clenched, his face burning with rage. I can’t decide if I struck a nerve, and what Pearl told me is true, or if his internal homophobia is starting to show. “Since when?”

“I’ve been struggling with her since last year,” Calix says, frowning hard. “Since, likely, she filmed us fucking in the cabin.” He takes a sip of his tea and then pauses to glance down the hallway, like he expects one of my moms to appear. Mama Jane very well might, and her initial reaction to finding out that Calix and I slept together was not good, despite her sex positive beliefs. She doesn’t like him; he bullies her little girl. Jane thinks I deserve better.

I agree.

But the Knight Crew deserves a chance to prove themselves. I’m laying everything out on the table here, spilling every grain of truth that I have, and seeing what they’ll do with it.

“He’s had to change his number a dozen times,” Barron says, shrugging his broad shoulders. “And move dorm rooms after she picked the lock and snuck in one night.”

“I woke up with her naked in my bed,” Calix grinds out, his own jaw clenched as Raz remains uncharacteristically silent. “She won’t leave me alone.”

“Why?” I ask, trying to understand Erina’s motivations. They must be strong ones, if she was willing to kill Calix for his feelings towards me. I mean, likely she has barely concealed trauma, like all

the rest of the students at Crescent Prep, but there has to be some specific reason she'd target Calix. "Did you fuck her and leave her sad and lonely, too?" Shit. I shouldn't have said that, especially not after what he told me at the hotel. Old habits die hard, it seems, even for me.

"I never touched her," Calix snaps, running his fingers through his ebony hair in a rare moment of frustration. He turns his raven-dark eyes on me, searching my face as I stand there with incense smoke curling around me. "Boys are more often monsters, yes, but you attend Crescent Prep with us. You know as well as I do that girls can be cruel."

"You've never done anything to her?" I ask skeptically, raising an eyebrow and then moving back to my seat. My feet bump into Calix's as I settle in and our eyes meet. "No bullying? No tricks? No teasing?"

"She hangs out with us, doesn't she? I've tried to handle her as best I can." His voice is smooth, capable of devilish machinations I could only dream of. He'd make an excellent politician. No, no, he'd make an excellent *prince*. "We were friends when we were kids, but it's not her that I want."

"No?" I ask as Calix finishes his tea and sets his cup on his saucer with a clink.

"No."

Just that one word.

My heart is thundering as he closes his eyes in thought for a moment.

"Who told you that gay shit about me and Calix?" Raz asks, clearly still stuck on the previous subject.

"Pearl." I reach for the teapot at the same time as Barron and our fingers tangle, eyes locking as electricity shoots up my arm. It turns to goose bumps as it sizzles through me and Barron makes a half-bow, offering up the teapot to me first. "She said that she's the reason you two attend Crescent Prep, that she told her parents you were a couple."

"She did," Calix replies easily, looking at me with a slight tilt to his head, like I've managed to surprise him. "And did she tell you about my brother?"

“That your parents stole the baby she had with him, yeah,” I add, wondering how I might be able to help with that situation at some point in the future. I mean, I know it’s not my business, but Pearl deserves to be reunited with her baby, if that’s what she wants.

Which is why I can’t let her die.

Not tonight, or any other ...

There might also be something else that I have to do, something that I don’t want to think about, not right now. I’ll try a few more things, and then ... we’ll see. Because my actions, they don’t just affect me. There’s a whole web of humanity attached to each and every one of us, if only we could see its thin, fragile strands. I can’t let the world sink with me, living on repeat. I shove the ugly feeling down again, determined to ignore it.

“Weird that they sent them to the same school, huh? Considering they were so worried about the gay thing,” Barron adds, shoving a whole shortbread cookie in his mouth. “That’s how little attention our parents pay, that they didn’t even know they were shipping their delinquent faggots to the same school.”

“Call me a faggot again,” Raz snarls, shoving up from his seat and turning his red-eyed glare on his friend. “Do it, I dare you.”

“What’s wrong with being a faggot?” I ask, hating the word, knowing it shouldn’t be my emotional burden to teach Raz not to be a bigot. Sometimes, though, it’s okay to give a little to help incite change. “You’re so pretty, Raz, but when you talk like that, it’s ugly as fuck. Please don’t.”

“We made out,” Calix says with a shrug and a sigh. “Pearl ended up with a picture, somehow, and sent it to our parents.”

“You and Raz kissed?” I choke out, struggling to picture it. And not because I see anything wrong with them kissing—well okay, I’m a *little* jealous—but because Raz and Calix are like oil and water. “I would’ve paid to see that.”

“We were making out at a party for some girls,” Raz says with a smirk, trying to take control of the situation. Yet another defense mechanism of his. He doesn’t like that I know one of his secrets, and he’s shamed at the thought. If only he knew how little I’m judging him. If we ever get our tomorrow, I’ll have to show him. “Chicks do it for guys all the time.”

“You don’t have to justify anything to me,” I tell him, looking directly into his eyes. I’m desperate to ask if they might want to do it

again sometime, but this isn't the time nor the place. Pretty sure I'm still in a bit of shock over what happened last night, but at least the pieces of the puzzle are starting to come together.

Erina Cheney is the one with the sex tape. She can be stopped. The boys can all be made to, at least, listen to me if nothing else. But what next? I know I have to go to the party. This day ... it was always going to end at the party.

No matter how I break this loop, that's how my night is going to end: at the Devils' Day Party.

"Yeah? Well, you'd be the first," Raz says, and then we all pause as the back door opens and Mama Jane steps in, pausing and tossing a critical eye in the boys' direction.

"New friends, Karma?" she asks, smiling as she nods at the teapot on the table. "And can I get you guys more tea while I'm here?"

"We're okay; we have to leave for the party soon." I'm just sort of assuming here that the guys are going to drive me. Honestly, to them, this is a day like any other day. As far as they're concerned, I'm public enemy number one. But I've got to think positive. I have to assume they're *not* going to lock me in the cabin tonight. Or the Devils' Den. "And yes, new friends." I gesture loosely in the direction of the guys. "Calix Knight, Raz Loveren, and Barron Farrar."

Swear to god, Jane's eye twitches at the mention of their names. She's heard stories; she's seen me cry. I can guarantee that she isn't impressed.

"Well then, I'll come back and fiddle around in the kitchen later," Jane says, giving me a look. "If you need any lemon cake, just let me know?"

My lips curve up in a smile.

'Lemon cake' is our family safety word. If we're ever in trouble, we can always call and just mention lemon cake, no questions asked. In a situation like this, where the boys could very well be finding some way to drag me to the party against my will, I could just thank Mama Jane and tell her I did indeed want cake. She'd kick the Knight Crew's collective asses to the curb.

"I'm okay, but thank you." Jane nods and then slips out the back door. A few seconds later I hear Jewel's *Foolish Games* start playing from inside the art studio.



“Look, I don’t care if you and Calix kissed, Raz.” I shrug my shoulders, only slightly unnerved by having all three of them staring at me so intently. The Karma I was before this all started wouldn’t have been so calm in this situation. “What I do care about is the fact that all three of you like me back.”

“Says who?” Raz barks with a caustic laugh. “Your weird gay bestie?”

“She’s pansexual, but no, I’m sure Luke is more concerned with her yearlong relationship with Sonja.” Raz’s eyes widen and his mouth drops open, temporarily shocked into rare silence. “Barron’s been drawing me every day since freshman year, Calix wasn’t lying last year when he said he loved me, and you’ve been jealous ever since.”

“Jesus,” Barron murmurs, brows drawing together as he pushes his sketchbook across the table toward me. His dual-colored eyes are intense as he stares me down. “Remember how I told you I wanted to show you something?”

I take the book and then turn it around, flipping it open to images that make my heart throb painfully. Me and Barron, kissing at the Devils’ Day party. Me and Barron, in the cave of butterflies. Me and Barron, in the chapel. My throat gets tight as I close the book and pass it back to him.

“How did you know about this?” he asks, gesturing with the sketchbook. “I’m never without it for long, so how did you see it?”

My lips tilt up in a sad smile, but I don’t have time to spend the evening explaining the time loop to them. We have to get ready and get to the party. Tonight, we’ll do it without lies and guns and blood.

“So fucking creepy that you draw her,” Raz murmurs, but he doesn’t deny being jealous.

Calix doesn’t deny that he loves me. If he wouldn’t deny it at gunpoint, then he certainly can’t deny it now.

“Part of me wonders if this is too easy, if you’re going to play the worst sort of Devils’ Day trick on us and tell us it was all a lie later.” Calix studies me, his full mouth set in a slight frown. His fingers are curled tight and there’s tension in his shoulders that I bet he thinks I don’t see.

“And you’d deserve that, wouldn’t you?” I retort, raising both brows. “So, what do you have to lose?”

Raz stands up and curls his hands around the back of his chair, staring me down like we're in a contest or something.

“Let me get this straight: you want all three of us to take you to the Devils' Day party? Like, as your dates?”

“Would it be so bad? You guys are always hanging out anyway.” I just stare Raz down. What he doesn't know is that I'm not only struggling with my feelings towards all three of them, but I'm drowning in a goddamn time loop. The magic of Devils' Day has really and truly gotten the last laugh from me, the ultimate party trick. So, can I choose one of the three guys I love? Break my heart into thirds, and throw two pieces away? I can't. “But let's skip Crescent Prep's party and do Devil Springs High instead.”

Either tonight they share, or I stay away from them altogether.

“I want you as my girl,” Raz says, standing up and lifting his chin defiantly. He's such a cocky prick, his dirty blonde hair mussed, red eyes narrowed, sharp mouth curved in a smirk. “Just mine. How about that, Karma?”

“How about you earn it?” I retort, and Raz laughs, shaking his head at me. There's a flash of something in his gaze that I don't quite catch, but then it's gone and I'm not sure if I imagined it or not.

“You know what? You had the balls to ask, so why the fuck not? We'll even triple-team if you want us to.” He shoves his chair in and throws his hands up. “We'll play your game tonight, Karma. Like you said, it *is* Devils' Day. It's a night for finding rules and breaking them.” He pulls his leather mask from his back pocket and slips it on.

“If you want three devils on your ass all night, then I'm game.” Barron puts his mask on next. Calix pulls his black mask from his pocket and looks at it for a minute, rubbing his thumb over the leather. He hands it over to me and I take it, purposely bumping my fingers against his.

“I have another red one in the car,” he says, standing up. “I'll wash the dishes. Get dressed.”

I struggle to keep my jaw off the floor as he sweeps the cups, plates, and teapot off the table.

Calix Knight ... washing dishes.

They say magic happens on Devils' Day.

They must be right.

As I move down the hallway in a daze, that niggling feeling is back, that unwanted, awful feeling that tells me what I need in order to break the time loop.

Sacrifice.

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Darkness is just beginning to kiss the horizon when we arrive at the party, climbing out of the Aston Martin to a rapt audience. Dozens of pairs of eyes reflect back the light, as if the Devil Springs students are predators instead of teenagers. Painted fingers reach up to adjust masks with papier-mâché moth wings or store-bought monster maws.

Their masks are nothing like the ones at Crescent Prep, where each one is a piece of original art, shrouded in mystery and money and magic. The ones here are ... just masks. It's a bit of a relief, actually, to be surrounded by teenagers instead of a court made up of cruel, dark faeries.

“Crescent Prep, huh?” one of the students says, stepping forward in a maniacal looking demon mask, eyes wild, teeth just a bit too real to be glued to a cardboard face. “Thought you guys were too good for us.” The boy steps back and grabs the chain-link gate, dragging it open and allowing us into the party proper. “But, on Devils’ Day, all are welcome.”

There's a massive bonfire in the middle of the Devil Springs Junkyard, much bigger than the ones we make in the woods. Theirs, too, is piled with old, broken furniture and stolen tree limbs, fed with gasoline and youthful rage. Instead of a live band, one of the students has put down the top on an old green Mustang, music blaring from its speakers.

“Hollow” by *Icon for Hire* is playing as revelers feed the bonfire and dance in a circle around it, wielding metal pipes, more animal

than human. The darkening sky lights up with flames as orange tongues flick up toward the stars.

“Let’s go,” Barron says, striding forward in his white coat with the curled tails, his ass a slice of perfection in those black leather pants of his. Raz, Calix, and I start after him, entering into a fray of red Solo cups, cheap beer, and raucous laughter.

“The poor man’s Devils’ Day,” Raz says with a laugh and a grin so sharp it looks like his face is being sliced in half by the sharp shadows cast from the bonfire. He snatches a bottle of beer from a big plastic bucket filled with half-melted ice, and pops the top with one of the bottle openers sitting nearby.

Much to my surprise and pleasure, he hands the beer to me before going back for his own.

Calix’s dark eyes watch the interaction carefully, but he doesn’t say anything. Tonight, he’s dressed in a black velvet coat that hangs to the ground. It’s unbuttoned, and he’s shirtless underneath, his black jeans too tight and covered with bloodred glitter. Yet another new outfit. How many he has, I’m not sure, but enough that I’ve never seen him dressed in the same one twice.

Part of me, a very distant part, feels bad about what Sonja did to Erina. Yet ... just yesterday, Erina killed April. And Calix. She shot Raz.

She’s clearly dangerous, but I don’t know that bullying or violence are solutions for *anything*.

One thing I do know: saving Pearl isn’t the magical act of sacrifice the universe is looking for from me. Clearly, I’ve missed the memo on something here.

“Walk with me,” Barron purrs in that sensual baritone of his, each word like a caress of dark satin against my cheek. He turns around and starts walking backward, beckoning me forward, his sketchbook tucked under one arm.

I hurry to catch up with him, Raz and Calix not all that far behind me.

“I can’t stop drawing you today,” he says, studying the masked figures crouching on top of ruined cars or fucking in the backseat of an old minivan, the doors wide open, a boy’s pale ass pumping up and down. I glance away and take a sip of my drink, studying the outfits of the Devil Springs High students. Most of them are wearing something related to the school: a red hoodie with the grinning devil

that makes up their mascot, black sweatpants with *Don't Deal with the Devil* printed down one leg, or t-shirts with *Devil Springs High* written above a red splash that looks suspiciously like a blood splatter.

“Based on my insider knowledge,” I start, tapping the side of my head with a single finger. I’m wearing the black ballgown again, the one with the red laces and the corset-like bodice. “It seems you draw me every day.”

“Yes, but today’s different,” he says, handing me back the sketchbook. “It’s like my brain is bursting with images I can’t erase. They plague me unless I draw them.” I flip the book open, turning the pages until I get past the images I already recognize from earlier. Apparently, while I was getting ready to go, Barron added several more.

One of them features Erina, gun raised, the barrel pointed at April. I stand helplessly by as my friend falls toward the ground. Seeing it in still form like this gives me the chills, and I close the sketchbook quickly, tucking it against my chest.

“I’m living in a time loop,” I tell him, glancing his direction and seeing his brows furrow. “I’ve told you this before. Maybe some, distant part of you remembers?”

Barron says nothing, pausing near a plastic folding table covered in liquor bottles. He pours himself a generous amount of vodka in one, splashes in some juice, and then flicks those beautiful eyes my direction.

“A time loop, huh? Like ... the same day on repeat?” he queries, and I shrug my shoulders. He doesn’t have to believe me, but I want to be honest.

“Exactly that. You’re drawing other timelines. The more days I live, the more timelines you have to draw. That’s why it’s getting harder.” I glance over my shoulder to see Raz and Calix, surrounded by girls—and a few boys—their mouths in coquettish half-smiles, lashes batting behind their masks. I narrow my eyes and glance back at Barron. He’s watching me with that intense stare of his, making me shiver.

“You’re cold,” he notes, almost clinically, but then he swings his jacket off his own shoulders and puts it over mine, leaning down to look me in the face. “If you’re right about this time loop thing, then we’ve fucked before. More than once.”

“Several times, actually,” I reply, lashes fluttering as Barron leans in and closes the gap between us, stealing my breath away and drawing it into his own lungs as he kisses me.

“You taste familiar,” he murmurs, licking my lower lip and then drawing back to his full height, rainbow Mohawk slicked back and colored orange by the roaring flames from the bonfire. “Like coming home.”

“Barron,” I warn, but I’m not-so-secretly pleased by his words, my lips curving into a smile. “I don’t expect you to believe me about the time loop thing. But I’m sort of working under an *honesty is the only policy* thing right now.”

“I don’t ... *not* believe you,” he says, reaching up to rub at his chin and then shrugging those glorious shoulders of his. He could kick ass in most any sport, but then ... he’s not a sportsman, is he? He’s a fucking artist. “But I’m not convinced, not yet. Maybe some more vodka would help?” Barron pours himself another generous cup as the song switches to some popular hip-hop tune that I just barely recognize. “If you plan on keeping a harem, you better go get your boys.” Barron nods his chin toward where Calix and Raz are standing, and I glance over my shoulder to see that they’re still surrounded.

I mean, Crescent Prep kids at a Devil Springs High party? Not the norm around here.

But ... still.

I only ever get one night, and I’m not sharing it with anyone.

With a frown, I move over to the group and push my way through.

“Who the hell are you?” a girl in a wolf mask snarls, her expression blending into her mask so well that she looks like a feral beast.

“Who I am doesn’t matter. All you need to know is that these boys are mine.” I don’t smile to soften the blow. Instead, I just stare at her, bathed in firelight and shadows. She’s wearing a wolf’s mask, so surely, she can see that I’m marking my territory here?

“Oooh, I like this version of you Karma,” Raz says as I glance back and find his red eyes glimmering like rubies. My hip aches where I had his name tattooed, the flesh now almost disturbingly bereft of ink. Maybe one day, I’ll get his name put there for good? “You heard the girl, get lost.”

Most of the crowd dissipates with little more than barely-heard grumbles, but not the wolf girl. She squeezes her Solo cup until the plastic cracks, staring me down, like she thinks I owe her something.

“Both of them?” she spits back, and then scoffs. “You Crescent Prep bitches think you own the fucking world. Just remember: this isn’t your territory.”

Calix steps forward before I can respond, tilting the girl’s chin up so he can look down at her. She swallows, and licks her lips, nervous energy skittering across her skin like static electricity.

“Karma is not a *Crescent Prep bitch*.”

“I didn’t—” the girl starts, but Calix shushes her, his eyes impossible to see in the shadows. They’re just two black pits, making him look like a true devil, one with horns that cut and bleed.

“You did. But you’re wrong. Karma is local. She’s poor. She’s an artist. And if she managed to snag a couple of filthy rich boys for herself, who are you to begrudge her that? Get fucking lost.” Calix releases her chin and then glances back at me, his face as impossible to read as it always is.

Doesn’t mean my heart doesn’t swell with pride and affection.

The girl scurries off, and I bite my lower lip.

“You might be an artist, too. I just think you paint with words and cruelty.” I look up to find Calix watching me, Raz sipping his beer and studying the two of us with interest. What the hell did I do today to get them all on my side? Because I like it. “Still, you could’ve been nicer to her.”

“You’re the only girl I care about being nice to,” Calix says, pausing for a moment and narrowing his eyes. “Although I don’t think I’ve ever managed to actually do that either.”

“*Marry me, Karma.*”

Calix’s words flit through my head like a butterfly searching for nectar, hungry, desperate, but weightless, too. He’ll say those words to me again, one day. I just ... need to figure out how to get us all to tomorrow.

“You will,” I promise him, choking back the rest of the words I want so desperately to say. *You did. You did before, at the Crescent Hotel.* But I’m not quite ready to mention the time loop to Raz or Calix. Barron is different; he thinks differently. “Let’s go find somewhere to be alone.”



“Alone, huh?” Raz purrs, throwing his head back with a laugh and downing the rest of his beer. He chucks the bottle at an old minivan, the brown glass shattering to pieces and raining down like sharp rain. “I like the sound of that.”

I turn and lead the way, noticing that Barron’s already snagged one of the full vodka bottles and found us a place to sit in the back of an old school bus. He’s waiting for us with the emergency exit open wide, legs dangling over the edge. The bus has no tires, and it’s sitting on top of several other cars, but there’s a stack of wooden boxes creating a makeshift staircase.

Barron holds out his hand and helps me up, leaving Raz and Calix to climb up on their own.

“Oh, wow,” I murmur, moving down the aisle and touching the cracked headrests of the few remaining seats. Most of them were stripped out long ago, but there are plenty of places to sit. There are blankets on the ground, too, and I’m surprised to see that they look relatively new.

“I just gave a kid a thousand bucks to leave his blankets and beer and fuck off,” Barron says, explaining the presence of a small blue cooler and the makeshift bed before I even get a chance to ask. The roof of the bus has been rolled back, the metal crumpled up like a fucking banana peel. Whatever accident the bus must’ve been in for that to happen, I don’t want to know.

“Sweet digs,” Raz says, slurring a bit as he grabs the bottle of vodka from the floor and tips it to his lips. He pushes his red mask up into his blond hair and looks around with red-rimmed eyes, already on his way to being drunk. *Fuck, you’re such a sweetie underneath all of that bite*, I think, watching him drape his insouciant ass into one of the seats like he’s the king of this gritty junkyard.

Calix looks like a visiting dignitary, glancing around like he doesn’t quite know what to make of the place.

“I like that we can see the stars, even from in here,” I say, tilting my head back to look up at the night sky. It’s as if the world is dressed in ebony velvet, dotted with diamonds that sparkle and wink in the silver light from the crescent moon. It’s amazing, how beautiful the sky is, how ugly the junkyard is, and how fucking happy I am in this moment.

I take a seat, sweeping my skirts aside and finishing my beer. After a brief moment of hesitation, I throw it toward the front

windshield, hitting the glass and shattering both items in the process.

“Nice one,” Raz hisses, leaning over the back of the seat, his eyes bright with interest. “You’re really shaking things up today, aren’t you, Karma Sartain?”

“I’m sure as hell trying,” I say, swigging the vodka and then choking on the sharp, awful taste of it. This isn’t that pricey shit the boys were passing around at the Crescent Prep party. No, this is cheap shit, but it does the job. “And it feels like you three are as well, which I appreciate.”

“Like you said,” Calix begins, pausing in front of me and putting his hands on the seat backs on either side of me. “It’s Devils’ Day, after all. It’s not supposed to be normal, that’s the point. We revel and we break things and we fuck people we don’t like.”

“Do we?” I ask, tilting my head at him. He doesn’t know what I know, that I’m the only person he’s had sex with. I decide not to bring it up just now. “Is that why you got tested twice after you slept with me last year? Because you fucked someone you didn’t like?”

Barron throws his head back in dark laughter as Raz raises both brows in surprise, like this is new information to him. Calix, on the other hand, tightens his face up like I’ve just seriously pissed him off.

“How do you know about that?” he asks, but I just smile enigmatically, leaning back in the old bus seat, like it’s *my* throne, like I own the Knight Crew and everyone in it. It feels like I do, wearing that black devil’s mask that Calix has worn every single night that I’ve seen him. It’s as if I’m now the Knight whose name brands this crew of diabolical assholes.

“Does it matter? Why did you get tested twice? You knew I was a virgin.”

“Because my parents found out about you and made me do it,” Calix grinds out, gritting his teeth and glancing away, toward the shattered windshield. He’s the hardest nut to crack, that’s for fucking sure. Barron just needs me to know about the sketchbook, and we’re thick as thieves. A little honesty goes a long way with Raz. But Calix ... it’s like his heart is encased in ice, and I have to melt it before I can get what I need from him.

“How did your parents find out?” I ask, taking another drink of the vodka and handing it over to him. He takes it from me, frowning, and sits down in the seat opposite me. Raz is on my right side, and

Barron just leans casually against the wall on my left, likely standing where a seat once stood.

“Pearl.” Just that one word, spit from Calix’s lips like poison. He glances away sharply, shrugging out of his coat, and leaving me in a broken-down, old school bus with not *one* shirtless bully, but three. Three magnificently beautiful assholes to savor. Like jewels dug up from the earth, just waiting to have their rough edges polished, smoothed, the dirt cleaned away so they can shine.

The devil inside of me purrs with pleasure.

“Don’t you feel sorry for her though?” I ask, knowing that I’m steering this conversation with knowledge that I shouldn’t rightfully have. “About the baby and everything?”

Calix glances my way with a sharp look, like his eyes are knives, blades glinting.

“I hate what my brother’s done, what my parents have done. But I also hate Pearl for getting me sent here.” Calix pauses for a moment, like he’s considering his statement. He reaches up to ruffle his ebon-dark hair. “Or I did.” He looks back over at me. “Maybe not so much anymore.”

“Your parents think I’m STD-ridden or something?” I ask, and Raz snorts.

“You think my dad is bad? Or Barron’s folks? Calix’s parents are the monsters behind-the-scenes who pull all the strings. My dad takes hush money from them to keep their dirty secrets hidden. Of *course* they think you’re disease-ridden. You’re the opposite of everything they stand for.”

“Which is why I’m in love with you,” Calix says, and it flows off that whiplash tongue of his like it’s nothing. He taps his fingers on the back of the seat nearest him as I just sit there, dumbfounded and mind blown. Maybe I shouldn’t be, considering he was willing to admit that under duress.

No matter what happens with this time loop, there’s one thing I know for sure: the things we’ve been through, that I’ve done, they weren’t for naught. The feelings, the revelations, the progress we’ve all made ... it’s still here.

“Good to know,” I choke out as Barron bends down and digs a cherry cola out of the cooler, passing it over to me. I take it, studying him as he stays crouched beside me. He seems to enjoy sitting like that, low to the ground and observant. As I watch him, he pulls out a

red lollipop with the image of a black window etched into it, likely some sort of Halloween party favor. Still, it's eerie, watching him slip that between his full lips. "You love me, and you hate your parents."

"To sum it up succinctly," Calix replies, exhaling sharply and then leaning forward. He pushes both hands up his face, loosing his mask. He pulls it off and tosses it aside, like he, too, has had enough of wearing a fucking mask. He said as much at the hotel, didn't he? "My parents are monsters. I suppose Pearl didn't have many targets she could actually shoot and hit."

I shiver.

Some part of yesterday must've stuck with Calix, and hearing him use a metaphor like that just brings it all rushing back.

"I mean, she wasn't wrong," Barron adds, and both Raz and Calix give him death glares that make the hateful looks they've thrown at me over the years seem ... watered down. "It's not like you only made out with each other once. We had to beat the shit out of that kid freshman year to keep your first Devils' Day party escapades under the rug."

"Why don't you just spill all our secrets?" Raz asks, leaning back in his seat, one leg thrown over the side nearest me, his leg encased in red leather, his foot tucked into a black boot. I reach out and play with a small bone-charm hanging from the laces.

"Actually, that's a brilliant idea: spill everything for me." I pop the top on the soda, taking a sip before Barron passes the vodka back to me. Upon closer inspection, I see that there are dried flowers floating in this one, too. See what I mean? There are themes that run between these days. Doesn't matter if it's expensive vodka in the woods or cheap vodka in a junkyard. This bottle is spiked with a bit of its own magic. "I told Barron earlier that I've been living in a time loop. I've lived twenty-five Devils' Days in a row."

"Oh yeah?" Raz asks, his blond hair sparkling with silver glitter. "And how did you spend those twenty-five days?"

"Courting the three of you mostly," I say, taking my phone out—they don't have a gatekeeper here like we do at Crescent Prep—and starting up one of my personal playlists. I set the phone aside and make myself comfortable, taking the joint that Raz lights and passes over the seat to me. "I've fucked Barron in Thorncrown Chapel, Calix in the Crescent Hotel, and Raz at my Aunt Donna's cottage."

“A time loop, huh?” Calix asks, reaching out for the vodka. I hand it to him, moonlight staining our pale fingers as they tangle together for a brief moment. “That’s an interesting Devils’ Day tale. I saw a ghost once. It wasn’t on Devils’ Day, but Halloween. Maybe some days are just tainted with sorcery?” Calix tips the bottle to his lips as Barron cracks the candy in his mouth.

Hope spikes in my blood, and I suck in a sharp breath, pulling in two lungfuls of weed smoke and magic. *He remembers. Maybe not in the same way that I do, but he does.*

“So you two made out in freshman year? *And* the year before? Am I getting this right?” I glance over at Raz as Calix’s face tightens up in irritation.

“Yeah, so? I’ll do anything to please a pretty girl,” Raz brags, lighting up a cigarette. When the joint makes its way back to him, he smokes it with one hand, taking a drag on his cig with the other. It’s the very picture of debauchery and excess.

“Is that so?” I ask, glancing over at Barron. He adjusts himself, so that he’s sitting on the floor, tossing his sketchbook onto his thighs and flipping the cover open. “Because there may or may not be a pretty girl sitting here now.”

Raz taps the ash off the end of the joint and passes it my way, a thoughtful expression on his face. He was so pissed earlier when I brought this up, so terrified I’d think he was gay or bi or something. I don’t give a fuck how he labels himself, just so long as I’m the one he wants.

“A pretty girl who wants to be pleased? Say it, beg me for it, and maybe I’ll do it?” Raz suggests, smoking his cigarette as Calix leans back in his own seat, steeppling his fingers on his bare chest and crossing his legs at the ankle.

“First, you hit my car. Then, you tell me you love me. Now, you want me to kiss Raz for you?” he asks, looking up at the stars. I follow his gaze and notice a shooting star streaking across the heavens. Scrambling to my feet, I make a wish with my whole heart. *Please end my torment, but only if everyone around me is safe. Just let them be safe. That’s all I want. Even if the night ends in a clusterfuck, that’s all that matters.*

“That’s what I want,” I say, dropping my gaze back to his face. “I want to see you pushed out of your comfort zone.”

“You don’t think having the girl I’m interested in tell me she’s in love with two other guys is out of my comfort zone?” Calix purrs back at me, a challenge in his gaze. The sound of Barron’s pencil moving across the page comforts me, making me smile.

“I don’t know. You tell me? All I can say is, tomorrow is never guaranteed. I love the three of you right now, in this moment, so that’s what I want. I want to spend time with you. I want you to kiss Raz for me.” I play with the metal tab on my soda can, watching, waiting, like a queen with an audience.

It feels good, to have the tables turned like this.

I spent day one looking up at Calix on my car-turned-his-throne. He wore a crown. Raz wore a sneer. Barron was an enigma.

Today, everything is different. But in a good way. In a way that feels right, like it was always meant to be.

“Say we play along with this,” Calix muses as Raz sits up, chucking his cigarette butt to the floor. It’s already strewn with leaves and pine needles anyway. I mean, we *are* in a junkyard. “What happens tomorrow? What will you tell people?”

“What happens tomorrow depends on you,” I tell him, looking him straight in the face. “What I want, is for the three of you to date me. At least until graduation. Maybe longer than that.”

“That’s not asking a lot at all,” Barron murmurs, but when I glance his way, he’s smiling, his attention focused on his sketchbook. “I don’t see why that should shock either of you. We bullied the fuck out of her for three years. Don’t you think you owe her at least three years of groveling?”

“I might owe her more than that,” Calix says, his face drawn and tired, sad. Just like it was at the gas station. He glances toward me, exhaling sharply, and then sits up straight, chin raised, ever the dark faerie princeling. “Do you think you’ll ever forgive me for last year?”

“I already have,” I say with a shrug of my shoulders, reaching up to push the black leather devil’s mask away from my face. “You can’t hold onto hate forever, or it seeps into your heart. It’s the worst sort of venom. I’m done with that. You made a mistake, but if you’re truly sorry, then it’s not enough to keep us apart.”

“Shit,” Raz grumbles, ruffling up his blond hair. His red eyes narrow as he leans forward and looks over the seat at me. “You can’t say crap like that. It makes me feel like a total asshole.” I give him a

look, and he laughs. “Alright, fuck, I *am* a total asshole. Let me guess: we’re gonna have to tongue each other now, aren’t we?”

“One of us is getting tongued,” Calix says, looking me dead in the face. He rises to his feet as I trade out my empty soda can for the vodka again.

“Do you mind if I sketch this part?” Barron asks, reaching up to pull his own mask off.

Now, this is what I wanted.

All four of us, unmasked, open, bare, bleeding in front of one another.

Vulnerable.

I wanted vulnerability.

“Touch yourself, so I can see it,” Calix orders, looking down at me with a devil-may-care sort of arrogance that makes me bristle. And yet, heat flushes through my body at his decree. I watch with gently parted lips as he climbs onto the seat in front of Raz, one of his knees between Raz’s leather-clad legs. Calix flicks his eyes my direction as Raz accepts the joint from me and inhales, waiting until Calix presses their mouths together before exhaling, sharing smoke. Calix pulls back slightly, letting tendrils of smoke curl out from between his full lips.

“I hope you enjoy this because it’s not happening again anytime soon,” Raz quips, handing the joint over to me. He puts his hands on Calix’s shoulders as their mouths slide together. They’re both vicious as fuck, dripping venom, like two monsters entangled in a sordid affair.

The sight nearly undoes me.

I slip my panties off, pulling them over my heeled boots and tossing them at Barron. The black lace hits his sketchbook, drawing his dual-colored eyes up to me. With a suggestive smile, he takes them and tucks them into the front pocket of his leather pants.

When I turn my attention back to Calix and Raz, I find them with their mouths still slanted together. One of Raz’s hands is on Calix’s bare chest, while Calix’s fingers hold Raz’s blond hair in a punishing grip.

The joint falls from Raz’s fingers, burning a small hole in the old cracked vinyl of the seat, singeing the air with the smell of burning things. It doesn’t matter; we can smell the smoke from the bonfire,

even all the way over here. The junkyard itself seems to have a smell, too, like iron and rust and forgotten things. A slag heap towers over the place, casting its shadow on the corpses of old cars, just a man-made mountain of discarded things.

The four of us in that old bus, we're going to create magic out of urban decay, spin sorcery with the heat of our bodies.

I sit back, my legs spread, and sneak my hand beneath the heavy tumble of my skirts, finding the wet, swollen heat between my thighs. A groan escapes me as I slick a single finger along my opening, collecting lube to use on my clit.

"Oh, fuck, make that sound again," Raz murmurs, and I glance over to find him holding Calix's chin, both of their gazes focused on me. I keep their attention, working my clit in a circle, shifting my body as my skin heats up, sweat beading between my breasts.

"I will, if you keep kissing him," I murmur back, and the boys turn to look at each other. Calix narrows his eyes, dragging Raz's face to his, their mouths clashing with an equal mix of heat and aggression. It turns me on, to see them kiss like they're clashing swords on a dark battlefield. My eyes are half-lidded, the silver light from the moon peeking its head into the old bus, the stars twinkling above us like the cheeky eyes of an unforgiving galaxy.

*This could be it*, I think, wondering if Luke will watch over Pearl, wondering if letting her keep the dress she stole will make any difference. *This could be the day it all ends*.

But I won't let myself hope.

Because that itchy feeling inside of me, that dark whisper of *sacrifice*, it's still humming its sonata too loudly for me to ignore.

Instead, I focus on this risqué nocturne, slipping two fingers inside my heat and crying out. My back arches, and I hear footsteps. Barron slams his hands down on the seats on either side of me, and I glance his way, finding him shirtless and sweaty, his pupils dilated in excitement.

"If you insist on being irresistible, then I have no choice but to abandon my art for more carnal pleasures."

"Please do," I whisper, reaching up for him. His white coat falls from my shoulders as I wrap my arms around his neck, drawing him in for a kiss that tastes like moonlight and sweet shadows, like dark promises and possibilities. Barron claims my mouth with a



punishing kiss, his tongue sweeping across my teeth, tangling with my own.

It feels impossible to keep my heavy lids open, but I do, letting my gaze slide back to Calix and Raz. They're still kissing, still putting on a show for me.

Barron slips his own hand between my legs, putting one of his fingers inside of me, right next to mine. A cry escapes me at the feeling of fullness, but he cuts it off with that perfect mouth of his, adding another finger so that two of his are intertwined with two of my own. He pumps them slowly in and out of me, making my breath catch.

"Shit, I'm so fucking jealous," Raz moans, his mouth still pressed up against Calix's. The latter has heavily hooded bedroom eyes, as black as the night sky without any stars. He looks at Raz as his friend talks, their lips brushing with each movement. "Switch me, Barron. You can kiss Lix now."

Barron laughs, heavy and low and dark. "No," he says, looking back at me and leaning in to press another brutal kiss to my mouth. My lips are going to be swollen before I even make it to the other two boys. "Not just yet."

"Don't stop," I murmur, reaching my free hand up to the back of my seat and finding Raz's. We tangle our fingers together as Barron thrusts his tongue into my mouth, increasing the speed of his fingers as he fucks my cunt. I slip my own out and head for the swollen nub of my clit, working myself into a frenzy as I watch the boys make out, their hands wandering over one another's bodies.

They're not looking at each other though. Instead, they're both looking at me.

Once again, I feel like the night queen, the bride of Devils' Day, its ruler and slave both. I control everything and yet, I control nothing. I live on repeat, yet I can dictate every single thing that happens with my own actions.

It's a dizzying thought.

"I want to touch you," I whisper, but Barron just laughs, pushing my hand back when I try to move it from my clit to his pants.

"You're a girl, aren't you?" he says, and then pauses, frowning his brow. "Have I said that to you before?" he whispers, his fingers still trapped inside my wet heat. Barron shakes his head to clear it

and turns that incredibly intense stare of his back to my face. “Enjoy the orgasm, Karma. You’re allowed to have more than one.”

He puts my hand back on my clit and continues to work his fingers in and out of me, until the stars seem to spin above my head, until I can’t see anything but white splotches in my vision. The climax hits me hard, and I bite down on Barron’s lip as I come, making him bleed.

He just laughs, pulling back slightly and licking the blood away as I sit there, shaking and sweating and wanting more.

“Here.” He grabs the vodka bottle with wet fingers and hands it back to me. “You’re gonna need this.” I take a swig and then pass it to Calix and Raz. The former swigs a mouthful of vodka, meets my eyes with a defiant gleam, and then drops his lips to Raz’s, feeding him the alcohol. “Come with me.” Barron picks me up and I wrap my legs around him, just I like I did in Thorncrown Chapel. He carries me over to the mess of blankets piled on the leaf-strewn floor of the bus and lays me down. “Does anyone have any condoms?”

“We don’t need any,” I say, panting heavily and sitting propped up by my elbows as Barron hovers above me.

“Because of your time loop?” Barron asks me with a mocking smile.

“You get tested every six months, and Calix hasn’t had a partner since he was with me last year. Raz has never *not* used a condom because he’s afraid of getting a girl he doesn’t like pregnant.” Silence reigns in the bus for several seconds as Calix stands up and moves over to the blankets on my left side. Raz does the same, flopping down on my right, his mouth swollen from Calix’s rough kisses.

I can’t help it; I lean forward and capture Raz’s mouth with my own, tasting Calix on his lips. He groans and cups the back of my head, meeting my intensity with some of his own. When we break apart, we’re both gasping for breath.

“You say no condom, I’m not arguing,” Raz growls, throwing a scathing look in Calix’s direction. He’s just standing there above us all, watching with crow-black eyes. “You gonna make a fuss over this, Lix?”

“No.” Calix kneels down on the blanket, reaching for the fly on his jeans and flicking it open. With our eyes locked together, he

pushes his pants down just enough to free his cock, taking the base of it in a tight grip. "I won't."

"Well then ..." Barron murmurs as I reach for his fly. This time, he waits patiently as I work it open, palming the velvety length of his shaft as his eyes flutter closed in pleasure. "Shall we remove this dress then? From what I remember, it isn't easy to get your tits out of it."

"You remember?" I choke out, but he just laughs, shaking his head again.

"I do, and I don't. I don't know." He reaches behind me to undo the laces, kissing me as he loosens the knot with those expert fingers of his. As soon as it comes undone, he pulls back, yanking the dress down and off before chucking it aside. I'm completely naked now, dressed only in starlight and arousal, my body dotted with sweat, heart thumping.

Calix settles down on my left side while Raz lounges on my right, both of them watching as Barron kisses his way down my body, starting with my lips and trailing his way down between my breasts, heading straight for my cunt.

I stop him by grabbing a handful of his hair and yanking his mouth back to mine. He settles his big body over me, sliding his cock against the outside of my folds, making me writhe beneath him. I feel a bit like a pinned butterfly beneath that stare of his.

"Have you ever been with more than one guy before?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"Have you?" I retort, but he just laughs at me, stroking some purple hair back from my sweaty forehead.

"There are so many ways we could do this," he murmurs, nipping the pert, pink point of my nipple as Raz watches hungrily, rubbing his cock through his red leather pants. Calix is stroking his own, his eyes never leaving my face. "Do you want us one at a time ... or together?"

"Together?" I ask, as my mind spins through the possibilities. Oh. *Oh.*

"Either way works for me," Raz groans, leaning in and kissing the side of my neck, one of his hands cupping my breast, kneading the flesh with strong fingers. "Just so long as I get to touch you, taste you, fuck you." He punctuates each word with another kiss, leaving me breathless.

“How about both?” Barron asks, and then he’s thrusting into me, balls-deep. I throw my head back, arching my back and pressing my body into his. Raz doesn’t give me a moment to think, moving closer and licking the side of my neck, nipping my flesh like a naughty vampire. One of his hands continues to massage my breast while the other strokes his cock through the leather of his pants.

For a moment, it seems like Calix might maintain his usual standoffishness, but then he scoots in close, taking my lips as Barron holds himself up with a palm on either side of my head, thrusting deep, stroking the raging fire of my starlit lust.

Calix’s tongue takes over my mouth, obliterating any remaining thoughts and leaving me prisoner to the pleasure wracking my body, taking over every limb. I can barely breathe as Barron pumps his huge cock into me, moving faster, harder, until he’s spilling his seed deep inside of me, big body shuddering above my own.

“That was quick,” Raz quips with a small laugh, but Barron just smiles, cupping the side of my sweaty face and taking my lips from Calix for a brief moment.

“We have all night, don’t we?” he asks, sitting up and looking down at me with an expression somewhere between affection and possession. “Have I ever said it, Karma?”

“Said what?” I ask, the words husky and broken. I’m not ready to be done yet, not by a long shot.

“That I love you. If I haven’t said it before, in any of your other timelines, I’m saying it now.” He smiles at me, and I can’t tell if he’s just humoring me or if he actually believes me. Either way, my body flushes with heat, and tears prick at the edges of my eyes.

“That’s really fucking sweet,” Raz growls, “now get the fuck out of my way.”

I push up to a sitting position, and then straddle Raz’s waist, not caring if I’m making a mess. He’s just going to have to deal with that. He cups the back of my head, kissing me with that razor-sharp mouth of his. I grind my hips on the bulge beneath the leather of his pants, making him groan.

“There’s no rush,” I whisper, kissing either side of his mouth and rolling my hips against him. “Just kiss the fuck out of me.”

“Done and done,” Raz murmurs as Barron lays down between us, kicking off his pants, and then folding his arms behind his head. He looks up at the stars as the moon casts strange shadows across the

butterfly tattoo on his chest. It takes Calix a minute, but he finally decides to move around Barron and over to me, straddling Raz's legs, so that his body is pressed up against mine. "The hell do you want?" Raz asks, looking over at Calix.

"The same thing you do: Karma." Calix pushes me forward and then lines his cock up with my opening, pushing into me as I groan and cling to Raz's chest. He growls under his breath, but lets me kiss him, my mouth working frantically against his as Calix drives into me, his hands locked on my hips.

"Fuck, I'm going to blow my load before I even get my pants off," Raz murmurs against my lips. I sneak one of my hands between us, flicking the button on his pants and sliding my fingers beneath his waistband. I find his cock, thick and hard and ready for me, and tease it with my fingers.

"Please do," I whisper back at him, working him as Calix fucks me. Raz's hands find my breasts, tweaking my nipples and kneading the aching flesh with strong fingers. Calix doesn't let him have all the attention though, leaning over and pressing his lips against the side of my neck. His left hand keeps him propped up, but with his right, he takes my other breast in his fingers. The two boys glare at each other over my shoulder in challenge, but I don't care because it feels too good, having them fight over me like this.

"Idiots," Barron murmurs sleepily from beside me.

"*Tu es plus belle que la lune et les étoiles ensemble,*" Calix murmurs against my ear, his warm breath making me shiver with pleasure. *You're more beautiful than the moon and stars combined.*

My body shudders around his cock, succumbing to another orgasm that I can only blame on his sweet words, whispered in French and moonlight. Calix's fingers tighten on my hips, but he manages to control himself as my body squeezes around his, starting to move again only after my breathing evens out a bit.

"I'm not letting this asshole steal the show," Raz hisses against my lips, sucking my lower one between his teeth. He puts his hand between us to find my clit, making me cry out as he brushes his fingers across it. The sensation makes me clamp down on Calix again, and he comes inside of me with a low, sensual groan, as soft and dark as ebony velvet.

"Damn it, Raz," he snaps as he moves away and Raz flips me over, pinning me down on the plaid blanket as he stares down at me

with those brilliant ruby eyes of his. He casts a cocksure glance in Calix's direction before returning his attention to me.

"Don't think that because I'm going last, I'm in last place."

"Nobody would ever think that," I tell him, touching the side of his face. Raz lets me go, sitting down beside me so he can shed his pants, leaving him nude and beautiful in the darkness. Before he can make a move, I crawl between his legs and wrap my fingers around the base of his shaft, tracing my lips with the head of his cock, and licking away the salty pre-cum beading at the tip.

"Oh yeah, princess, right there," he murmurs, putting his hand on the back of my head and fisting his fingers in my hair. With an agonizing slowness, I lower my mouth over his shaft, taking as much of him into my mouth at one time as I can. My left hand plays with his balls while my right remains wrapped around the base of his shaft.

"With your ass up in the air like that," Barron comments, "it's awfully tempting to start round two."

"Don't you fucking touch her," Raz snarls, his voice dripping venom. "Not yet anyway." I slide my lips off of his cock and lick my way down the length of him, tracing the underside of his shaft and making him quiver as he groans. "Goddamn it, Karma. You're too damn good at this."

I smile, but I don't stop, putting him between my lips again and working him until he's spilling hot, salty cum into my mouth. I even swallow, washing it down with a swig from the vodka bottle.

"Give me ten, and I'm fucking that sweet pussy of yours," Raz says as I take another sip of vodka and press my lips to his, spilling the alcohol in his mouth the same way that Calix did.

"Do you really need ten minutes?" I ask, handing the bottle over to Barron as he and Calix watch us, their eyes hungry, their cocks stirring back to life. Situating myself on Raz's lap, I work my hips against his crotch until he's hard and straining for me again. When I lower myself down on his shaft, we both shudder.

Sweat drips from my body and onto his as I roll my hips, pushing him deep and then lifting up so that the tip of his cock is just barely inside of me. It feels good, almost too good, so I take a break, sitting up with him inside of me and glancing over at the other boys.

"Don't stop," Raz murmurs, kneading my hips with his fingers and then sliding his hands up my sides to cup my breasts. "Don't

stop, Karma. You're killing me here."

I take the vodka bottle again, tilting it to my lips as I work my hips again, drinking and fucking at the same time.

"Screw this," Calix murmurs, getting to his feet and coming over to stand in front of me, his cock in his hand. I hand the bottle of vodka back to Barron and lick my lips, reaching out to take the base of Calix's shaft in my hand and fitting my mouth over the tip of his dick. As I work my pelvis against Raz's, I suck Calix's shaft.

Barron, meanwhile, moves up behind me, cupping my breasts from behind and kissing the side of my neck.

"Calix couldn't stop talking about how much you liked it in the ass last year," he whispers against my ear, and I shiver. It's true. I did like it. "You're blushing, Karma." Barron chuckles, reaching down and slipping a single finger into me, right next to Raz's cock.

"Jesus, dude," Raz groans, bucking his hips up and making me cry out. Barron takes some of my natural lube and uses it to insert first one, and then two fingers into my ass. The sensation makes me see stars, so I close my eyes, sucking Calix's dick, grinding my hips into Raz.

When Barron pulls away, he chuckles and spits into his hand, using his saliva to lube up his cock with his fist. He makes himself nice and wet, and then puts the tip of his shaft up against my ass, teasing me with it before he pushes his way in slowly, inch by inch.

I've never felt so full, a sense of euphoria sweeping over me as Barron takes over the pace, thrusting slow and deep into me, his cock and Raz's squeezing the thin wall of flesh between my openings.

This time, when the orgasm comes, it's earth-shattering, taking over my entire body, working the devil's magic into every limb.

I end up collapsing on the blankets beside the boys, shuddering and shaking, soaked in sweat. Raz must've come inside of me before I finished, curling his body around mine and pulling me close. Calix and Barron are forced to finish themselves before they join us, the four of us stretched out together on one blanket, looking up at the stars.

"That was ... less disturbing than I thought," Raz murmurs, and Barron laughs, like there's an inside joke we're all in on.

“Glad to hear it,” Calix quips from my other side, his body pressed up against my back. When I hear the sound of Barron’s pencil against his sketchbook, a sense of contentment settles over me.

Could there be a night more perfect than this?

I don’t think so.

But ... I wiggle out from between the boys to find my phone, checking for messages from Luke or my moms.

There’s nothing.

No sex tape.

No messages about suicide.

I shoot off a few quick texts to Luke, asking about April, about Pearl. She replies almost immediately, promising that everything is okay, but that she has a secret regarding Sonja that she wants to tell me tomorrow.

A grin takes over my lips before I put the phone aside and head back to bed.

It’s Devils’ Day; I’m at a Devils’ Day party; nobody is dead.

*Come on universe, give me this,* I think as I crawl back into the nest of bully boys and close my eyes. *Give me this day and I’ll live every one beyond it like it’s my last, I promise.*



Before I get a chance to drift off, snuggled up between Calix and Raz, I hear Barron stand up, and open my eyes. When I sit up, he glances back at me, his leather pants undone and slung low, his Mohawk mussed up in that sexy bedroom hair look.

“Where are you going?” I ask, and he smiles at me. Not a smirk or a sneer, just a smile.

“To draw the sunrise,” he says, and my heart skips a beat, remembering my mother’s words about seeing the sunrise and painting it. Even though my limbs are heavy, my body sated and lazy, I scramble to my feet, throwing on Calix’s velvet coat and my discarded panties. It’s all I have the energy for, but it doesn’t matter. It’s good enough.



Barron helps me down from the emergency exit, taking my hand like a true gentleman and leading me to the edge of the junkyard, where a hole sits in the chain-link fence. We slip through it and find ourselves a place to sit, facing out toward Devil Springs lake. Just beyond the trees, the orange face of the sun peeks out, banishing the dark cobwebs of the Devils' Day party, and the lurid pleasure I found in the naked, sweaty arms of my bullies-turned-lovers.

"This should do it," Barron says, opening his sketchbook and penciling in the tree line. It's amazing, how he creates such beautiful landscapes with only one pencil. I lean my head against his shoulder, watching the sun come up and wondering if today might actually be the day. If this could be my tomorrow.

I glance at my phone, looking through my texts from Luke. The last one she sent was in response to my questions about Pearl. And there's still nothing about the sex tape either.

*Did I just do it? Did I just live the perfect day?* I wonder, barely daring to breathe.

Nobody died.

Nobody fucking died.

I swallow the lump in my throat and close my eyes against the morning sunshine, listening to the birds in the trees, and the gentle lap of the water against the shore.

"Let's go for a swim," Barron says, putting the notebook aside.

"Now?" I ask, shivering slightly in the cool morning air. The sun might be shining, but it's still fall, and it's early as fuck.

Barron gives me a dark look and a smile, standing up and shedding his clothes.

After a moment, I take his hand and let him pull me to my feet, his warm fingers reaching for the button on my coat, his hand sweeping my tangled hair back from my face.

"You've never looked as beautiful to me as you do right now," he says, leaning down to capture my lips one, last time before he turns and strips off his pants. He dives into the water completely nude, and I'm reminded of Raz and me at the spring, swimming naked together for hours.

I shuck my clothes as fast as I can and stumble over the rocky shore to join him, cringing at the ice-cold water, but jumping in

anyway. When I come up, I swipe my hair back and look around for Barron. But I don't see him.

At first, I figure he's pranking me the way Raz did, that I'll feel his strong arms band around my waist, his lips against the back of my neck as he surprises me. Only ... that never happens. I wait there, treading water for what feels like an obscene amount of time.

Barron does not come up.

That's when I panic, scrambling out of the water and throwing the coat over my shoulders. I run as fast as I can back to the junkyard, barefoot and dripping. My feet are bleeding by the time I get there.

"I can't find Barron," I choke out as I climb through the door to the bus, the panic in my voice startling both Raz and Calix awake. "He went under the water, and he isn't coming up."

The two boys are on their feet in seconds.

"Show me," Calix says, yanking on boxers as Raz wraps a blanket around his waist. There's no time to get dressed; it doesn't matter. Instead, we race back to the eerily still surface of the lake. The three of us dive in, dipping our heads beneath the water, searching for Barron.

Raz is the one that finds him, an old rope tangled around his ankle, holding him under. It's wrapped up in other debris from the junkyard, and it's too heavy to move. Instead, Calix stays under the water for as long as he can, unwrapping the stupid fucking thing, and then helping Raz get Barron to shore.

As I stand there, shivering, teeth chattering, feeling helpless as fuck, the two of them perform CPR, and I dial 911.

It takes the ambulance too long to get all the way out here.

Barron does not breathe again.

When I collapse in tears at the hospital, I must pass out, and seconds later ...

There's blood all over my steering wheel.

I've never been so happy to be so wrong.

Clearly, this fucking time loop isn't done with me yet.



For *ten days* I try this timeline in varying flavors.

Ten.

And on every single one, I'm happy. I spend time at home, I confess to the boys, we spend a night together naked and under the stars.

Then somebody dies.

That first night, it was Barron. The next night, I get a call from Luke that April had an accident. Then Raz. Calix. My mom. Luke. Calix, again. Barron. Barron. April.

Tonight ... Luke.

My phone is clutched in my hand, the text message from April still showing on the screen.

*You won't answer, but this can't wait. Luke is dead. I need you, Karma. I need you.*

With a scream, I throw my phone as hard as I can into the trees. I took off from the boys as soon as I got the message. I just need to be alone right now, just for a second.

I punch the trunk of the nearest tree as hard as I can, sinking to my knees in the leaves with a sob. My knuckles are bleeding, but I don't care. No matter what I do, somebody always gets hurt, somebody always dies.

Closing my eyes and letting my head fall forward, I pray for the universe to just take me. Send me to the next life or to heaven or hell or wherever it is that souls go because I can't take this anymore. I can't make the perfect day happen over and over, if only to see my friend die.

Or Pearl.

One of the boys.

One of my friends.

One of my family.

What do I have to do to end this? At this point, it feels like I've tried everything. Everything. Fucking everything.

But then I realize ... that that isn't true.

There's one thing that I haven't tried.

Dread fills me as I collapse against the side of the tree, my eyes staring into the darkness of the woods as the laughter from the

junkyard drifts my way, the smoke from the bonfire curling against the inky blackness of the night sky.

There's one thing that I haven't tried, that in my right mind, I would *never* try.

If there's one thing I do know, however, it's that the universe demands balance.

Life cannot happen without death.

“Shit.”

I close my eyes and lean my head against the tree, praying for sleep to claim me. Fortunately, I'm so exhausted that it doesn't take long. Unfortunately, it sends me right back to the gas station, and to what I'm certain is going to be my final Devils' Day this year.

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*It's not the destination, is it?* I think as I wake up and see the blood all over my steering wheel. *It's the journey.* I've been fighting like hell to claw my way to my final destination: tomorrow. But that doesn't mean I haven't enjoyed so many moments in the past month, too many to even count.

Painting with my mothers, cooking with my sisters.

Laughing with Luke, and getting to know Pearl.

Punching Erina in the face.

My lips twitch at that last thought as I reach out and hit the lock on my door. Calix grabs for the handle just a moment later, and, unlike on the many other days I've locked my door on him, I roll the window down and turn to glance his way.

*Fuck, this sucks. Why does it have to be this way? Why does today have to be my last day?*

But in my heart, I know it is.

It's time.

"I forgive you," I tell Calix, before the words can fester inside of me. I've needed to say this for a hell of a long time. He pauses and lets go of my door handle, looking down at me with dark, unreadable eyes. "I shouldn't have hit your car, but I saw your face as I was driving past."

"Are you fucking insane?" he asks me, right on schedule, but with much less heat than usual.

“You looked sad and lonely, Calix, and you’re not allowed to look that way, not when I was willing to love you.” I glance up at him and smile tightly. It’s just occurred to me that there’s always at least one constant here: sacrifice. When one event in my life tends to go right, others tend to go south. I can’t have it all; I have to choose. As much as I was loath to do it before, I’m ready now. It has to be today. “Not when I still do.”

“Karma ...” Calix starts, hesitating just briefly before he steps forward and curls his fingers around the glass of the window. “I’ve never stopped loving you.” My heart lodges in my throat, and the tears come, even though I don’t want them to. Even though I want to enjoy the day without feeling sad, without thinking about what I need to do. “Not for one single second.”

“What the fuck happened here?” Raz asks, as he usually does, coming to a stop beside Calix, Barron at his side.

“I’m sorry we spent so much time fighting,” I say to Raz, looking up and through the glass, finding his ruby red eyes narrowed on me in confusion. “I love you, Raz, just as much as I love Calix.”

He freezes up, but the snide expression on his face disappears, leaving a much more vulnerable looking Raz than I think I’ve ever seen before. My attention turns to Barron next, sucking on his lollipop and holding his sketchbook under his arm.

“You draw me,” I tell him, smiling as his eyes widen, almost imperceptibly. “Almost every day. You’ve been doing it since freshman year.” My throat threatens to close up and choke me, keep me from saying the rest of the words I need so desperately to get out. I fight through it, knowing I’m not going to get another chance. “I wish you’d told me that sooner. Because ... I’m in love with you, too. Despite your cruelty, despite everything that’s happened, I care about all three of you.”

“I don’t ... understand,” Raz starts, blinking in confusion and reaching up to ruffle his dirty blonde hair in frustration. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying ... I want you to come and pick me up after school, for the Devils’ Day party tonight.”

If it’s going to end anywhere, it’ll be there, in the woods, around that bonfire.

“And Calix?” He’s still watching me, fingers curled around the glass of the window. “You need to find Erina Cheney and talk to her.

She has a video of us from last year's party."

"You've got to be shitting me," Raz growls out, but I've got to nip this in the bud before it gets violent. I don't want that video getting out and messing up whatever future it is that Calix has planned for himself, that wouldn't be fair. Especially since ...

Since I won't be there to help him through it.

"How do you know about that?" Calix asks, dropping his hand to his side. I shake my head, because there's no easy way to explain things, not right now. And I only have so much time left. "Is she threatening you?" I ignore his questions, fighting back tears, my hands curled so tight around the steering wheel that my knuckles have turned white. I look at him, at all of them, pausing on Barron's face before switching my attention back to Calix.

"Please don't hurt her. For me? You've hurt me enough over the past three years, and while I'm willing to forgive you, I can't let you hurt anyone else. Talk to her, Calix. You were childhood friends. Let her know that some part of that has stuck with you."

Before he can answer, I roll the window up and peel out of the parking lot, heading straight home with a sense of determination burning inside of me. Today is Devils' Day, and tonight, tonight is the Devils' Day party. It's a night of magic and strange happenings, of sacrifice and ugly beautiful things.

I can make anything happen tonight, if I want it badly enough.

On the way home, I dial Luke's phone and notice that she's out of breath. Glancing at the time, I figure she's probably already naked in bed with Sonja.

"Hey, are you too busy to talk?" I ask, and there's a long pause before Luke answers.

"I'm okay to talk for a second, what's up?" Now that I know where she is and what she's doing, the hesitancy in her voice makes so much more sense.

"I just ... want you to know that I'm here, if you need to talk. About your parents or Sonja or anything else." Luke is silent for a long moment, her breathing loud as I switch to speakerphone, setting my phone in my cup holder as I make the drive back to the Diamond Point Mobile Home Park. "If I was judgy, or self-centered or ... anything else before, I'm sorry."

“Karma, you don’t need to apologize for anything,” Luke says, and I can hear blankets rustling as she moves around. There’s the sound of a door opening and closing, and I wonder if she’s just locked herself in the bathroom. “It’s me that needs to apologize.”

A smile tilts my lips as I head down the winding road, tucked safely away inside of Little Bee. The rain’s just stopped and the clouds are parting, making way for the sun.

“About sleeping with Sonja?” I ask, and I listen to her sharp intake of breath with a chuckle. “It’s okay, Luke. I know, and I’m fine with it. You have a right to love whomever you choose—even if that person is a complete and total asswipe.”

“I ... I don’t know what to say,” she whispers, choking on tears of her own. I’m crying again, but that’s to be expected. I’ll probably spend the rest of the day sobbing. It can’t be helped. On the first day of this journey, I died. I was given a second chance. More than just a second chance, actually. Dozens and dozens and dozens of chances. Thirty-seven, actually, if you count the first day.

Thirty-seven do-overs, which is more than most people get.

“Don’t say anything. Just bring my committee gifts to the party tonight. I’ll meet you there around seven.”

“You’re not coming to school?” Luke asks, and I shake my head before I realize that she can’t see me.

“Not today,” I tell her, doing my best to keep my voice even and upbeat. “Could you do me a favor? Could you tell Pearl she can keep the dress? Tell her I’m sorry I didn’t appreciate what I had; she was right to take it from me.”

“Right to ... what?” Luke asks, but I just grin and cut her off before she can ask.

“I love you, and I’ll see you at the party.”

“I love you, too,” Luke says, a smile in her voice. “And I’ll see you there, too. We can talk about Sonja or ... whatever else. And yes, I’ll tell Pearl that. I’m lucky to have you as a friend, Karma.”

“I’m the one who’s lucky,” I say, ending the call, and finishing the drive with my windows rolled down, the wind whipping my hair around my face, my stereo turned up as loud as it can go.

When I pull into the driveway, I walk in, leaving the blood on my face and knowing that this is my last chance to be honest.



“Oh my god, Karma, are you okay?” Mama Cathy asks when I step in the door and she looks up from her pile of bubble wrap. She rises to her feet as Mama Jane comes out of the kitchen and rushes over to me, cupping my face in her hand and studying the shallow cut on my forehead.

“I’m fine,” I tell them, gently pushing Jane’s hand away. “I had a minor car accident is all.”

“A car accident?” Jane echoes, moving around me to look out the window at Little Bee. She glances back in my direction, dark hair perfect and coiffed, brown eyes shimmering with worry. Mama Cathy hurries into the kitchen and comes back with a warm rag to blot away the blood. “How did that happen?”

*This isn’t going to be easy*, I think, as Mama Cathy fusses over me.

“Come sit down first,” she says, giving Jane a look. “She needs to rest. You seem okay, but I’m sure it was a frightening experience.”

“Actually, it wasn’t.” I wet my lips as Cathy continues to dab at my forehead and Jane wrings her hands like she isn’t sure what to do.

“Let me make you some tea,” she says, and this time, I don’t protest. I want her to make me tea. And ‘ants on a log’. I want her and Cathy to fuss over me and ask me questions and worry. Because they care. Because I’m lucky to have them. Because I love them.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you’re not comfortable,” Cathy tells me, her hands splattered with paint. She smells like lilacs and clay from the potter’s wheel, and I want nothing more than a hug from her. So I give her one instead, and she hugs me right back, kissing the top of my head. “I love you, sweet girl,” she tells me, stroking my purple hair back. “You know that, don’t you?”

“I love you, too,” I whisper, thinking that this may be the hardest part of my day. No, knowing it is. I hate what my plan is; I hate it. And I don’t want to do it, but I’m starting to realize there is no other choice, not if I want this time loop to stop, not if I want to free my friends and family from living on repeat.

Jane comes back with a tray, laden with tea and fresh cream, and a small plate, covered in celery with peanut butter and raisins.

I almost lose it right then, almost decide that I’d rather live on repeat than never see this moment again, never smell Cathy’s lilac scent or see Jane’s face creased with love and worry.

“I appreciate you,” I tell her, catching her hand before she can move away. “And I love you, too. I love both of you, and I’m grateful.” The tears well up then and Cathy laughs, reaching over to give me another hug. She rubs my back in big circles and sweeps some hair away from my wet forehead. “Thank you for letting me be myself and encouraging me to make art. Thank you for making everything in my life both functional and beautiful.”

“Honey,” Cathy coos, but then I look up and see that Jane—stoic, uptight, perfectly coiffed Jane—has tears in her eyes. When Cathy lets me go, I stand up and throw my arms around my mom, burying my face against her neck, and doing my best to hold back the sobs as she gives me a hug unlike any other I’ve ever had from her.

“I love you, too, Karma, and you’re so welcome. You’re so very welcome.”

“You know,” Cathy starts as Jane and I hold each other, mother and daughter wrapped up in the most perfect embrace I’ve ever had, “we don’t have to talk about the accident today.” Jane releases me and I step back just in time to see her give her wife a look. “Mark my words, we *will* talk about it, but it doesn’t have to be today. There’s magic in the air. It *is* Devils’ Day, after all. It’s a time for sorcery and art and enigmatic things. Come, let’s cast a spell with paint and canvas.” Cathy stands up and offers her hand, and I take it. With my other, I grab Jane’s hand, and it’s like I’m five years old all over again.

That, that is some Devils’ Day magic right there.

Every once in a while, it feels good to be a kid again.



The dress I sewed for last year’s Devils’ Day party is even more beautiful than I remember it, and my lips turn up in a gentle smile as I finger the see-through lace of the formfitting gown. It’s half black, half white, split right down the middle. The sleeves are long, but there’s a slit in the skirt that allows me to move freely, despite the fabric that hangs to the forest floor, a train of lace and tulle that drags behind it. After seeing Barron’s curled coattails, and the way they pick debris up as he walks around in the woods, I’ve decided I want that, too. To collect some of the forest and add it to my ensemble tonight.

I weave a crown out of some dried roses my mothers give me, braiding the stems together and clustering the dead blossoms on one side. They used to be red, but now that they're dried out, they're more of a red-brown color, like rust, like old, dried blood.

Slipping the dress over my head, I call one my sisters in to help me button it up.

"There are so many buttons," Emma whines after slipping just two of the silk-covered buttons through the holes. Katie takes over, her hands more patient than our sister's, steadier. On the easel beside my desk, the canvas with the stars and the moon sits, wet with paint.

Finished.

The last strokes I'll ever make catching the light from the late-afternoon sun.

I've added a few things, people mostly. Their tiny figures stand near the tree, looking up at the moon. They each wear a mask, but we can't see it. Instead, it's just the backs of their heads, and the little pieces of elastic. Because you never really know what's a mask and what's not, what someone's true face is, unless they strip themselves bare and show you.

There are three boys in the middle, two little girls holding their mothers' hands to one side, and a pregnant girl leaning her head against her friend's shoulder, her blue hair tinted silver under the moonlight. There's even a woman with bloodred hair nearby. She stands near the girl with white-blond hair, and the one with raven locks that fits more easily into the picture than she rightfully should.

I've painted everyone who's touched me during this journey, whether for good or bad. Because every person on this canvas has mattered. They've all made a difference, their actions influencing me just as much as mine did them, even if they weren't on repeat.

"It's like a wedding dress and a funeral garment all mixed into one," Cathy says, leaning in my doorway as she watches Katie finish. I stand up and turn to look in the full-length mirror in my room, the gown's lacy length clinging to my curves, my purple hair loose and wild, as one should be on Devils' Day.

Katie balances on the bed and carefully places the crown of thorns and roses onto my head.

"A wedding and a funeral," I repeat, watching myself in the mirror, big gray eyes in a pale, heart-shaped face, full lips, a small nose.

“I’ll light some candles, and we can do a quick spell before you head out the door,” Cathy says, moving down the hall as I turn and wrap my arms around Katie, closing my eyes against a sudden rush of fear at the unknown.

“I love you, kid,” I tell her, and she goes very, very still in my arms, like she can sense where my trepidation and fear are coming from. “I want you to remember that, always.”

“I love you, too, Karma,” Katie replies, and when I pull back from her, I see that her eyes are the same as mine, just a little fearful, but also depthless, hope burning deep within. She and I are more alike than I ever realized. Tucking some dark hair behind her ear, I swallow back the tears. Tonight is not a night for tears.

I don’t have the time or luxury to indulge them.

“And me?” Emma asks, bouncing off the bed to rush over to me. She throws her arms around my waist and squeezes me as hard as she can, knocking the breath from my lungs. I laugh, reaching down to run my fingers through her silky hair. “I love you; do you love me?”

“I love you more than the moon and the stars,” I tell her, and she grins, looking up at me from blue-gray eyes. “And thank you for letting me help you with the mural today.”

“No, thank *you*,” she says, giving me another squeeze. “You painted better than me or Katie anyway.” Emma releases me and then grabs a lollipop off my nightstand, one I don’t remember putting there before. In fact ... it looks almost like the one Barron gave her on the day the boys and I had tea together.

I exhale sharply as she unwraps the candy and turns to look at me.

“Are you okay?” she asks, blinking long lashes at me. “You look like you might cry.”

“I’m fine, I promise,” I tell her, giving her a kiss on the top of the head.

“Karma, your friends are here!” Jane calls out, and I sigh, glancing at myself one, last time in the mirror before I slip my glittering black mask over my face, the antlers tall and curved above my loose, purple hair.

I head down the hall and find all three boys waiting, dressed in their Devils’ Day finest.

“You actually came,” I say, when I get close enough that they can hear me, but my mothers can’t. “I’ll admit: I wasn’t sure that you would.”

“It’s Devils’ Day,” Barron tells me, reaching out to cup the side of my face, his eyes dancing with a dozen shared memories I’m not sure he’s even aware of. “It’s a night for the wicked. We three are wicked, and we’ve come to take you away.”

Raz snorts and shakes his head, offering up a single rose.

“I don’t know what you’re up to today,” he tells me, grabbing my hand and pulling me close. He stops just short of kissing me when he notices my moms hovering nearby. “But either way,” Raz leans down to put his lips near my ear, “I like it.” He presses a quick kiss against the side of my face before pulling back.

I clutch the rose against my chest as Calix and I lock gazes.

“I talked to Erina,” he tells me as I stand there, waiting, my heart racing like crazy as I study his dark eyes beneath the black leather of his mask. “She isn’t going to do anything with ...” He pauses and looks over at the moms again.

“Oh, come on, Jane,” Cathy murmurs, dragging my mother down the hall so we can have some privacy. “We can do the spell another time.”

But, of course, we can’t.

She just doesn’t know that yet.

And no fucking way am I going to tell her.

I turn back to Calix and see that his lips are turned up in a slight smile. A real one, this time.

“She isn’t going to post the video ... at least not tonight. I don’t know how you knew about it, but I’m glad.” Calix pauses and exhales sharply, like this is a hard thing for him to talk about. “Apparently, her mother is sick, and she’s going through a lot. I’m not sure that she even really wanted to post it. I think she just wanted someone to pay attention to her or talk to her. Considering she followed me to Crescent Prep in some fucked-up attempt at making us the perfect couple, I guess it was only fair that that person should be me.”

“Well then,” I say, holding out my arm and letting him take it. “I’m glad you did.”

“Are you sure you’re not pulling a Devils’ Day prank on us?” Raz asks as the four of us head outside and down the ramp toward the Aston Martin. “Because there’s just something all of this that feels ... different.”

“You’re not wrong about that,” I tell him as I move around the front of the car and Barron steps up to open the door for me. “Because everything will be different after today.” I smile just before I climb in the car, pausing to look up at the crescent moon and the splatter of beautiful cosmos across the night sky. “*Everything.*”



Once we hand over our phones to the gatekeeper, Calix heads up the winding road to the parking lot, taking up the frontmost space that’s been left open specifically for him and the other high-ranking members of the Knight Crew.

That’s expected.

What isn’t expected is for *me* to climb out with them.

Masked faces turn to look at us, a sea of goblins and faeries, ogres and demons, devils and pixies alike. They watch as I approach the bonfire with an entourage of wickedly beautiful men in tow, pausing in their revelry and debauchery to stare at us.

“Well?” Calix snaps, getting that haughty air of superiority that I’m so used to. “What are you waiting for? This is supposed to be a fucking party.”

A moment of silence passes before all the still forms, the ones dressed in goddess-like shrouds or floor-length coats of velvet, they start moving again, as if some cosmic hand has just pressed play.

Luke appears out of the crowd, dressed in her sequin shirt and bow tie made of sticks and leaves. She’s got Sonja with her, both of them looking at me like I’ve sprouted horns.

“You ...” My best friend squints her brown eyes behind the ugly façade of the goblin mask. I’ve managed to render her completely speechless. *I’m going to miss you, Luke, I’m going to miss you so hard that no matter how many lives I live, you’ll always be my best friend.*

“I’m here with three devils?” I ask, holding my hands out to either side, palms up, as if to say *here’s my harem, bitches, deal with it.* “If that was your question, then yes, yes I am.”

If I can only have the boys for one more night, then so be it.

They'll always be mine, whether there's a tomorrow for me or not.

“Get used to it,” Raz sneers, sauntering over to the table laden with alcohol and grabbing an entire bottle of vodka for himself. It has bits of flower petals floating inside of it, just like the one we drank inside the school bus, the school bus that we painted filthy with our lascivious acts. “Your girl over there just asked us to treat her to an orgy this weekend. How could we possibly refuse?”

“It's not as bad as it first appears,” I murmur, snatching Luke's arm and dragging her away from the bulk of the Knight Crew. “Were you able to talk to Pearl today?”

“Look.” Luke points over to one of the logs where Pearl sits, draped in my dress and nursing a drink. April sits close by, one elbow on her knee, a smile on her face as the two of them talk in low murmurs. They're both teen moms—well, one is a soon-to-be-mom—whose families want to take away their babies. I'm sure they have a lot to talk about. “I had April deliver your message since she's in the same math class as Pearl; they've been thick as thieves all day.”

A smile takes over my lips, and I exhale, closing my eyes against the flickering orange fingers of the fire for a moment. When I open them, I find Luke staring at me strangely. She can't know how hard all of this is for me, how fucked up it is that I've finally managed to master my environment—just like she said when I told her about the time loop—when everything has to come to an end later.

The universe does not allow things to be tied up in a pretty bow.

Everything is going right which means ... something must go horribly wrong.

Balance.

Sacrifice.

I try not to be sad, but the pain clogs in my throat anyway, turning this night into a hazy dream, one that I know I'll always remember. Whether I live another life, or I end up in heaven or hell, I'll hold onto it, keep it close to my soul and cherish it forever.

“How did you know about me and Sonja though?” Luke asks, blinking rapidly before turning her attention back to the boys. Barron's flipped his sketchbook open, and this time, he doesn't bother pretending that he isn't drawing me. His tongue runs over his

lower lip, making it really, really hard for me to look away. “They told you, didn’t they?”

“They didn’t, actually,” I tell her with a grin, pouring some cranberry juice into a plastic cup. I don’t even have to grab the vodka; Raz turns his bottle over, filling my cup to the top.

“What are you two whispering about over here?” he asks, wrapping his arm around my waist and smirking at Luke. “You know your girl here confessed her love to me this morning?”

“She ... what?” Luke chokes out, but then Sonja appears, throwing her own arm around Luke’s waist and kissing her on the mouth. “Sonja,” she grinds out, flashing a look of panic my way.

“I know you guys think you were subtle about your relationship, but I saw the way you looked at each other. I’m not surprised that you’ve been sleeping together.” I give Sonja a look. “But if you hurt her, I swear to god I will come for you.”

“Oh, will you?” Sonja quips, flashing me a saucy smile from beneath her red leather mask. “That’s quite the challenge. How about I promise to leave you be if Raz promises to leave Luke alone?”

“I hear she paints tiny orc figures and stages mock battles with them,” Raz says, squinting like he can’t quite remember when or how he heard that before. I smile, hoping that’s not the only memory of me from the time loop that he can recall when he thinks about my face or my art or our back and forth quips to one another. “So, that’ll be a hard promise to keep, but I’ll sure as fuck try.”

“You better try hard,” Sonja purrs as Barron and Calix step up to join our group.

“Shall we take this to the train car?” Calix suggests, wearing a crown made of purple flowers and thorny twigs. Today, he’s got on an emerald green velvet coat, black jeans, and white boots with bones hanging from the laces.

“Let’s,” I say, making a small sound of surprise as Raz scoops me up in his arms and carries me over there. I let my head fall back, opening my arms wide and laughing as the smell of bonfire smoke curls around me. Barely visible through the trees, Cami Alhambra and her friends chant around a spell book, several of them dancing in voluminous skirts and nothing else, their breasts bare under the moonlight.

I wish them the best of luck with their magic as Raz carries me up the steps of the train car and sets down, pulling me into his lap.



Barron sits beside us, his sketchbook open to a page I well recognize: the one of me on the podium, his head buried between my thighs and beneath my skirts.

“That’s a pervy thing to draw,” Raz tells him as Calix takes a seat on his other side, and Sonja and Luke stretch out on the floor, cuddled up together with a bottle of whiskey.

“I could think of worse things,” Barron drawls, flipping to a drawing of us on the school bus, the four of us naked and connected in the most carnal of ways. Raz curses under his breath, but Calix ... he actually *laughs*. And it doesn’t sound fake or forced. The sound of it makes my heart crack a little as he looks at me.

“Is this what you had in mind when you told us all you loved us this morning?” he asks, and a naughty grin takes over my lips.

“Maybe,” I tease, wondering how this is going to go, what their final, lasting memory of me will be like.

“If so,” Barron adds, pulling a red jewelry box out of his pocket and passing it over to me. “You may as well be wearing this when it happens.”

I open the lid to find the Diana fritillary necklace, speckled with his blood, trapped in resin but forever beautiful. I hope this is how he remembers me, as perfect and eternal as this butterfly. Taking it out of the box, I hand it to him and allow him to clasp it around my neck.

“Here.” Luke slips a black tourmaline bracelet from her pocket and passes it my way with a smile. She snaps the matching one on her wrist for emphasis. “We know each other too well, my friend. Oh, and also, April sent you a cupcake but then she got hungry and ate it. She says you can remind her that she owes you one.”

A laugh slips past my lips, verging on the edge of a sob. Calix glances sharply my way, like he notices, but then Raz carries the conversation on and the sound of my melancholy drifts away like a forgotten nightmare. Laughter replaces the sadness, and I encourage it. I’m not going out of this with a frown on my face. That’s not how I want to leave my friends, with memories of me sobbing and hurting and wanting.

For the next few hours, we stay together in the train car. People come and go, but it’s always the boys and me, Luke and Sonja. April is there for a while, dragging Pearl along with her. Even Erina stops

by, but as much empathy as I feel for her, I will never forget what she did to April and Calix. Fortunately, she doesn't stay long.

Eventually, the fire gets low and couples—or groups—secret themselves away in the shadows for a taste of the forbidden, kissing lips they never thought they'd kiss, fucking strangers or villains or true loves. When Luke and Sonja excuse themselves, leaving the boys and me alone in the train car, we weave lascivious spells with our bodies, a near perfect replica to our time on the school bus.

It's just as dark, as sensual, as fervid and lush.

It's also the perfect goodbye.

Because as soon as we're done, and I'm sure they're all asleep, I untangle my limbs from theirs and make my way to the mouth of the Devils' Den.



*Somebody has to die tonight*, I think as I stand at the edge of the spring and stare down at the cool, black surface of the water, smooth as glass. No matter what I do, how I play my cards, somebody dies.

Sometimes, it's Luke. Sometimes, it's Calix. Oftentimes, it's Pearl.

But the universe demands balance for all of her gifts, and as I stand there, staring down at the dark water and my pale reflection, I know that she has to be paid. Somebody has to sacrifice their life to get things going again, put the timeline right again. The longer I put this off, the more everyone suffers; they're all very clearly living this day over and over with me. The thing is, I'm the only one that remembers it. I'm the only one who can make this conscious choice.

Sitting down on the edge of the water, I put my feet in, letting the long train of my skirt float around my ankles like the fins of an exotic fish as I stare down at the glittery reflection of my mask, with its strange antlers.

The water is freezing cold, but I figure that's for the best. Maybe hypothermia will speed the process?

*I don't want to do this*, I think as a few stray tears slide down my face, slipping out from under the mask and plopping into the smooth surface of the water like raindrops, creating ripples that shimmer and dance in the light from the lantern.

The Knight Crew set these up to bring light into the darkness, and now I'm using one to call it quits. It's beyond depressing. For so long, I've just been trying to make it from one day to the next, without realizing that there's no end goal worth sacrificing the present for. I should've been living from day one, just ... living.

With a small sob, I take the rocks I dragged in from outside, and I tie one to each ankle with the rope I brought, like macabre little Christmas presents. Then another two to my waist. I thought about other ways to do this, but they were all equally ghoulish, equally horrible. The thought of falling into the cool, dark embrace of the earth seemed like the least traumatizing way to go.

*I can't believe that I'm doing this*, I think, but then, I tried every other possible way. I've had so many perfect days, but somebody always pays the price for my happiness. There is no other way. Lifting my gaze up to the ceiling, I can see the stalactites above me, the reflection of the water dancing on the rock.

Thoughts of my mothers dance in my head, the way they always stay up late on Friday nights with wineglasses in their hands and an old movie on the TV. Even though I'm a senior now, they don't mind if I sneak out to join them, curling up like a child between the two of them and nodding off to the soft murmur of their voices.

My sisters will cry, I'm sure, but they're so young ... they'll be okay, right? Because I can't even seem to sacrifice Pearl to save myself. If she dies, then her kid is left with the Knight family, and she'll never get a chance to fight for something better. I know what it's like to be bullied and pushed and targeted.

Except ... I've had a chance to learn, to fix my mistakes, to realize what I've been missing all along.

If Pearl dies, she will never get the opportunities that I got.

"Happy Devils' Day," I whisper as I think about Luke and April, dancing in the shadows of the bonfire and laughing together. They'll move to New Orleans after they graduate, I bet. And I bet Thad will join them, just as April says he will. Their friendship will mature and grow as they evolve to handle life's challenges. *I want to be there with them*, I think as I push myself off the edge of the shore and into the water.

It's hard not to struggle as I sink below the surface, my hair floating around my face in a purple tangle, the pins in the rose crown keeping it in place. It's likely the boys will be the ones to find me

here, and even though it's too wet to be sure, I'm almost positive that I'm crying.

The rocks tied to my ankles hit the bottom of the spring as bubbles escape my gently parted lips. I try to take a breath, but my body won't let me pull in water, not of my own accord. I have to wait.

*Calix's dark eyes, his smile so warm when he finally gives it, his hands skimming across my bare skin. And Raz ... so angry and broken, but so smart, so desperate for someone to look his way and see him beneath all his bullshit. Barron, the quiet enigma, and the butterfly necklace that even now floats in the dark water with me, escorting me to the grave.*

I close my eyes against the darkness as my chest spasms, and I suck in two lungfuls of water against my body's better judgment. Automatically, my hands go to the ropes around my waist, struggling to untie the heavy knots, to save me even though I know I can't be saved.

I will forever live in this loop if I don't do this, dooming the ones I love to live in repeat. *If you stay up long enough to see the sunrise, paint it.* In my mind, I mix colors and pick up one final paintbrush, splashing yellow across an empty canvas. It gets brighter as my body struggles, my legs kicking, the stones dragging me down as my lacy dress tangles around me like a net.

Brighter and brighter and brighter, like the sun kissing the sky for the first time after a long night.

My body gets heavy and my lids drift closed in the darkness, the scene from my imaginary painting exploding behind my eyes like a true sunrise.

This all started because I drove my moms' car off the edge of the road, because I died, because I didn't appreciate what I had when I had it.

*Goodnight, little devil,* I tell myself as I start to drift further from consciousness. *And good luck in the next life.*

Wherever that may be, however it may turn out, at least I know what I'm going to do when I get there.

I'm going to live.



“Wake the fuck up, Karma.”

That’s Raz’s voice; I’d recognize it anywhere. But it’s coming from so far away, and I’m so damn cold. I try to turn away from the sound, to drift off into that peaceful blackness where I belong, but my chest hurts, and my body is yanking me back into reality whether I like it or not.

Blinking awake, I see the roof of the cavern, the reflection of the spring’s water dancing on the ceiling as the lantern casts its glow across the still surface.

My chest spasms and I roll to my side, coughing and choking on water as someone rubs my back. Sitting in front of me, his black leather mask pushed up into his hair, his ebon eyes dark with fear, is Calix Knight.

Tears of black makeup streak down his face, like he might’ve been crying. If he was, he isn’t now, but his face is stripped of both his Devils’ Day mask *and* the emotional prison he trapped himself in for so long.

I cough and vomit onto the stone floor, surrounded by stalagmites while Raz crowds in close, putting my head in his lap and stroking my hair back as he murmurs to me, his sweet nothings peppered with curse words in true Raz fashion. *You’re gonna be o-fucking-kay, Karma. I’m fucking here Karma. Fuck, Karma, just fuck.*

“Should we call an ambulance?” It’s Barron behind me. I manage to glance back just long enough to see that he’s soaking wet, glitter

bleeding down his chest, his mask missing as wet rainbow-colored hair drips into his face. *He dove in to save me, and he did a much better job at saving me than I did him.*

A wracking sob takes over me as I sit up, curling my arms around my legs and putting my forehead to my knees.

“Call it,” Calix demands, but I shake my head, lifting my face up to smile at him. He might not be crying now, but I am. Ebon eyes meet mine as Raz scoots in close and pulls me against his chest, wrapping me up in warm arms.

“Please don’t,” I whisper, not wanting to spend my last few hours of the day in the back of an ambulance. *I failed them*, I think, knowing that I’m going to have to try again at some point, not realizing how much I didn’t just want to live, but how much I wanted to live *this* life, right here and now.

I don’t think I’ll be able to do it, even though I know I should.

I’m both heartbroken and elated at the same time.

“Karma, what happened?” Barron asks, leaning in to look at me, his hand reaching up to smooth some wet hair back from my forehead. “I’d ask if this was an accident, but I figured the ropes didn’t magically tie themselves around your waist and ankles.”

I snort a bit of laughter, but end up coughing instead as Raz rubs my back in a soothing way that I would not have thought him capable of.

“Did you try to ...” Calix starts, taking a deep breath and then exhaling. “Did you try to kill yourself because of us? Because of how we’ve treated you?”

I shake my head, not wanting him to imprint that level of trauma into his psyche.

“No, that’s not it at all,” I whisper, my voice hoarse and scratchy. I guess almost dying will do that to a person. Or should I say, almost committing suicide. “I’d explain it to you, but I don’t think you’d understand.”

“Did you really want to die?” Raz asks, holding me close, like he’ll never let me go again.

The shitty thing is ... he will. He’ll let me go, and I’ll wake up, and then I’ll see my steering wheel, covered in blood. I’ll see Calix, sneering at me. Raz hating me. Barron indifferent as fuck.

“Of course not,” I tell them, my words echoing around the stone walls of the cave. “More than anything, I want to live.” I lift my head up as Calix scoots closer, taking one of my hands in his. “With you. With the three of you.” I swallow a lump and end up coughing. It’s weird, but even though I just nearly drowned, I feel like I’m desperate for water. “I love you guys. I don’t want to go. I want to stay here.” Hot tears pour down my face as Raz climbs to his feet, lifting me up in his arms and holding me close.

He carries me outside with Calix and Barron stuck to his sides like glue, refusing to put any sort of distance between us. Raz sets me down on one of the logs near the smaller fire and gets a water bottle from one of the coolers, bringing it to me without my even having to ask.

All around us, students lay in piles, sleeping on blankets or mattresses dragged here for this specific purpose. Liquor bottles litter the forest floor, along with discarded clothing, and forgotten masks. It’s mostly quiet, a few people chatting here and there, one lone boy dancing naked near the bonfire.

I almost smile, putting the water bottle to my lips, but there’s a bittersweet energy in the air that I can’t shake. I didn’t die, but I also can’t move on. Sure, everyone remembers bits of the other timelines in a hazy, dreamlike sort of way, but we’ll never be able to progress any further than this. Live in New Orleans. Travel the world. Have children.

This is it, all I have, just the Devils’ Day party.

Barron crouches down beside me as Calix and Raz take a seat on either side of me, pressing their bodies up against mine. Calix throws his coat over my shoulders and buttons the top button, looping an arm around my waist to keep me warm.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” Barron asks, but I shake my head. There’s no point. As soon as I close my eyes and fall asleep, he’ll forget it ever happened. Calix and Raz, too. I’m just glad Luke didn’t have to see me like that. “Is this something that’s likely to happen again?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever do anything like that, in this life or any other,” I whisper, closing my eyes as more tears begin to fall.

“Fuck,” Raz growls, wrapping his arms around me and not giving a shit that Calix is already doing the same. “You scared the crap out of us, Karma. How could you do that, after you just told us you’re in fucking love with us?”

“I’m sorry,” I sob, putting my face in my hands as Barron kneels down in front of me, adding his arms around me, so that all three boys are holding me. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, Karma,” Calix says, his voice hoarse and dark. “Everything will be different tomorrow, I promise.” He holds me close, and I sob harder, hearing the tears in his own words, and wondering why I can’t just have this, why I can’t live to see tomorrow.

“Come on,” Barron says after we’ve all cried ourselves out and a dawn blush is pressing its lips to the velvety darkness of the night sky.

He gathers up some spare blankets and creates a nest for us in front of the log bench while Calix fetches some dry clothes from his car.

“Do you want us to look away?” Raz asks, but I’m already stripping my wet dress and tossing it aside, not caring who sees. I just want to pull the fresh hoodie and sweats on and go to sleep. Seeing the boys be so tender with me, so caring ... it’s going to fucking break me.

“Don’t look away,” I tell Raz, meeting his red eyes with my own tired, aching ones. “And don’t leave.”

“I wouldn’t fucking dream of it,” he says, pulling me down to the makeshift bed.

The boys and I crowd around the dancing flames of the fire, their bodies close as they cocoon me under a black blanket, studded with silver stars. I’m shivering, but that’s okay. It’ll be over soon, and I’ll wake up at the gas station, doomed to die, desperate to live.

“Close your eyes and we’ll greet the sunrise together,” Barron whispers, his voice as warm as the flames near my now bare toes. I’m wearing the Burberry Prep hoodie and sweatpants that Calix had in his car, cuddled up between Barron and Raz. Calix is so close, our fingers curl together as he lays with an arm over Raz.

*If I’d known it’d only take me trying to commit suicide to get them to stop fighting, I’d ...* But I can’t even pretend I’d have ever tried anything like this before. And even though my eyes are getting heavy and I know I’m just seconds away from a reset and a morning spent at the Gas and Go, I don’t care.

I know I’ll never be able to try anything that drastic again.





Hot afternoon sun cascades across my closed lids, as bright and blazing as the pretend sunrise I saw when I was half-drowned and floating. Blinking my eyes, I squint against a scene I never thought I'd live to see: the aftermath of the Devils' Day party.

Crescent Prep students stumble through the woods in fantastical costumes, their magic stolen by the reaching rays of the hungry sun. Masks are pushed up or tossed aside, makeup is smeared, and a very familiar girl with blue hair searches the leaves for her pants, cursing as she snags the glittering slacks from a pile of dry leaves.

I sit up, the black and silver star blanket falling forward as a small choking noise catches in my throat. The fire in front of me is nothing like the beast of orange and yellow flames from the bonfire last night. Instead, it's just a little crackle, with Raz sitting on a stone beside it, a marshmallow on the end of a long stick. As soon as he sees me sitting up, he turns to look at me with blue eyes surrounded by black-framed glasses, his red contacts taken out some time ago.

"She's awake," he says as I look over and find Calix with one of last night's beer bottles halfway to his lips, his crown of thorns askew, his dark eyes stripped bare.

"Good morning," Barron says, sitting up beside me, the butterfly on his bare chest catching the light, his sketchbook lying open beside him. The image he's drawn is one of me, floating beneath the water, my hair tangled, my dress a cloud of lace. My eyes lift to find his dual-colored ones.

"Morning ..." I start as Luke stumbles over, once again wearing her slacks. She sits down heavily on the log next to Raz, giving him a sideways look as he stares at me. When she notices that Barron and Calix are staring, too, she raises a brow in confusion.

"Something happen last night that I should know about?" she asks as April makes her way over to us, clutching a blanket and a pillow against her side.

"No," Calix says, still watching me. "Nothing you should know about."

A small sob tears from me, but on the end of that sound ... there's a bit of laughter. It's the exact opposite of the sound I made last night, from melancholy to joyous instead of the other way around.

And it's fucking *fantastic*.

It escapes me like a swarm of butterflies, twirling up through the smoke from the campfire, and disappearing into the too-blue sky above the trees.

"What time is it?" I whisper, and Luke pauses to glance down at her phone. Now that it's morning, the net that held all our phones last night is lying on the ground not far from the parking area.

"It's almost one, holy shit. You should probably call your moms?" Luke says, and I smile as she hands over her phone. I dial up my parents and close my eyes, waiting for Jane's voice to greet me.

"Luke?" she asks, a slight tension in her voice as she waits to hear what's going on. I could die from happiness at the sound, my heart swelling inside my chest, my mind bursting with brilliant color. That's the only way I can think to describe my emotions in that moment, like a rainbow arching across the darkness of last night and overshadowing it.

"It's just me," I say, loving the feel of the sun on my face. My hand shakes as I clutch Luke's phone, happy tears pricking the edges of my eyes. "I just wanted to let you know that ... I'm okay."

"Good. I know how those Devils' Day parties can be," she says, hesitating briefly. "Don't rush home today, okay? Enjoy your time with your friends."

"I will, and I love you," I whisper, hanging up and opening my eyes again.

"There's a video of you two online," a girl in a witch's mask says, pausing near us and gesturing with her phone toward me and Calix. "Just thought you'd want to know."

Calix and I exchange a look, and he grits his teeth. But you know what? The universe demands balance. Guess Erina was full of shit, after all, huh? Then again, if that's the price I have to pay to be awake, to be alive, then it's a very, very small price to pay.

"Holy shit, Karma," Luke says as I pass her phone back and she quickly Googles the offending video. She seems upset, but how can she possibly know that I don't care? I'm awake. I'm alive. I'm surrounded by people I love.

"This is from last year's Devils' Day party," April says, sitting down beside Luke with Pearl by her side. Pearl seems uncomfortable, wearing my dress and sitting around a fire comprised

mostly of the Knight Crew, but she holds her chin high and when she catches me looking at her, she forces a smile. April yawns and lifts up her phone to show us all a still of the video, of me and Calix in the treehouse together. “Who the hell would be cruel enough to post this?”

“Someone who’s hurting and doesn’t know what to do with their pain,” I say, exhaling and rubbing both hands down my face. When I drop them to my lap, I’m smiling and Luke, April, and Pearl are all looking at me like I’ve lost my fucking mind.

But not the boys.

I’m pretty sure they understand what I’m going through.

“Oh well,” Calix says casually, taking another sip of the beer and then reaching up to pull the crown of thorns from his head. “There are worse things than having the world see you fuck the girl you love.” He tosses the crown aside as Luke gags and shakes her head, shivering as Sonja appears behind her and kneads her shoulders with long nails.

“Saw the sex tape. What a bummer,” Sonja says, taking the beer bottle from Calix’s hands before it can reach his lips again. He scowls at her, but it’s short-lived. Instead, his attention falls to me again.

“Should we kick the shit out of Erina?” Raz asks, his fingers stroking up my arm, like he has to touch me to make sure I’m real, that I’m alive. I wonder if he can sense how I’m feeling right now? Like there’s a sunrise bottled up inside of my chest, like I’m sunshine incarnate. I’ve never felt so warm or so happy to be alive.

“No, we leave her. Karma always finds a way,” I say, flashing a grin. Barron smiles at me, passing over his sketchbook. He’s drawn me sleeping, with a single butterfly sitting on my cheek, wings folded, resting before it continues on whatever journey has caught its fancy.

“This happened last night,” he tells me. “Just after you fell asleep. If I’d had my phone, I would’ve taken a picture.”

A grin takes over my lips as I study the drawing, listening to the sounds of the partygoers as they come to, groaning about hangovers and missing underwear and mosquito bites.

I wonder if any of them knows how lucky they are?

Because I sure as hell do.

*I see you, universe, I think, touching my fingers to the butterfly in the drawing. I see you, and I'm listening.*

Go out and fucking live, it's telling me.

Live and love.

Message received, accepted, and understood.

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I won't truly believe it's over until I've woken up on a dozen tomorrows, until I've seen enough sunsets and sunrises to know that time is limping along as she always has, steady and sure, unbreakable, immovable, eternal.

But that's okay. I know how I broke the ... curse, or whatever it was.

I had to find a day where I truly and honestly wanted to live. And I don't just mean survive, I had to truly want to be alive in a way I never had before.

I had to need this: the sun on my skin, the wind in my hair, and a smile on my face.

Calix pulls up outside the house in his Aston Martin, Barron and Raz sitting in the backseat. Raz rolls down the window as I stand there in a white pleated skirt and a lavender Crescent Prep blazer, smirking at me like the asshole he is.

"Need a ride to school?" he asks, raising a brow, his blue eyes watching me like I matter behind the dark frames of his glasses. But not just that, like I'm worth fighting for, like I'm worth caring about, worth loving. "Because we just happen to have an extra seat available."

"How does Sonja feel about that?" I ask as I open the door on the passenger side and climb in, setting my book bag on the floor near my feet. Luke is still pretty weirded out by my seemingly sudden relationship with the guys, but then, I did let her off the hook for

lying to me for a whole year, so we're pretty even. Still, it's likely she's going to flip when she sees me drive up in the front seat of this damn car.

This fucking goddamn overpriced ostentatious Aston freaking Martin.

I almost never want to see it again, now that I've escaped the purgatory that was the Gas and Go parking lot. But I'm too excited to be sitting here, heading toward Crescent Preparatory Academy with three guys willing to make something weird, something new work. Or at least try to.

"Sonja's knuckle-deep in your bestie," Raz growls out, and I roll my eyes as Calix scoffs and Barron groans.

"For Christ's sake," Barron murmurs. "This is our first day at school with Karma, so can you chill?"

"I can't believe I agreed to this shit," Raz whispers under his breath, glancing briefly back at me. But for all they did, and all they want from me, they're going to have to deal with it. At least for now. Who knows what the future holds, but I'm more than willing to give it a go. One, because I know that if I get the chance, I'll keep all three boys close to my heart forever. But also because I'm not afraid of anything anymore.

Life is about consequence and choice, about living with the knowledge that every single thing you do affects somebody else in some way. I'm not sure why I was chosen for a once in a lifetime opportunity like I got, but I'm grateful because I know I won't take another step without remembering that what I do matters, who I am matters, and how important we all are to each other, whether we know it or not.

Raz has flaws. Barron has flaws. Fuck, Calix *definitely* has flaws.

But so do I.

I'm willing to help them realize theirs, but only if they're willing to help me with mine.

"She's with Luke, huh?" I say, thinking about what a wild card Sonja's always been, with her bloodred hair and bright green eyes. She beat the crap out of Erina for me once. Well, for Calix, but still. At the same time, I saw her on days when she was prepared to fuck Luke over the same way Calix had done me. But she *is* Raz's best friend, and he's not nearly as bad as he seems, so I figure there must

be a heart buried in there somewhere. That, and ... Luke seems to be in love with her. That's enough for me.

"They'll meet us there," Calix says, glancing briefly my way, his eyes hard and dark as always, but with an undertone of tenderness, a softness that says our midnight conversation last night was as good for him as it was for me. I climbed out on the roof at night, my glittery stag's mask on my forehead, my phone on speaker and sitting next to me as I looked up at the stars of another night, a different pattern from the same one I lived over and over and over again. And the moon, the moon was different, too. "Some of the others might have trouble dealing with this."

"And by this, you mean me?" I ask, glancing back to find Raz and Barron watching me. No matter how old I get, or how many things I see and do, how many people I meet, I'll always remember pushing Raz in the ice-cold creek. Looking at butterflies at midnight in the devil's woods with Barron. Listening for ghosts as Calix and I held each other like we were the last people in the world.

"I mean you," Calix says with a small frown. "Erina, for example." He grits his teeth as he says her name. Letting the sex tape go, now that was hard, one of the hardest choices I once might've thought I'd ever make, especially since it meant letting Erina off the hook. But only for now. Once Calix's parents find out that she's the one who uploaded the photos, they'll press charges. She'll pay at some point, even if it isn't today. "They won't want you to hang out with them."

"Her hang out with *them*?" Raz asks, shaking his head. "Nope. It's *them* lucky enough to hang out with *us*, so if they can't deal, then screw them. They can get fucked."

"Right," Calix says with a sideways smirk as Barron grins and hands a purple lollipop toward me. I take it with a smile of my own, our fingertips sparking as they brush, and I take the candy in my hand. "It *is* the *Knight* Crew, after all."

"Right, and it was *you* who said naming your friend group is fucking weird. Don't act like a haughty king." Raz kicks the back of Calix's seat and his eyes narrow as he sneers back at him in the rearview mirror.

"God, they're nasty, aren't they?" Barron asks, almost deadpan, but then he smiles and leans back, lifting his chin in a move just reeking of superiority. All *three* of them are dick-bags, but damn it if I don't like it. They're never going to be *nice* per se, but maybe they

can be nice to me, and I can make an effort to *not* kick them in the balls and we'll live happily ever after.

"The college fair starts today," I say, an almost sad smile blooming on my face. I didn't think I'd ever see this Monday, September 28<sup>th</sup> of my senior year. Even something as boring as a college fair seems exciting now. "Do you guys have any graduation plans?"

"Become Banksy," Barron says, biting into a cupcake as he grins, and I blush back at him. We're into each other; he draws me too much; but we're new at this, and I'm still getting used to being casual with him.

"Real smart game plan," Raz drawls sighing and shaking his head. "I have no idea. Whatever college my dad wants me to go to."

"Pretty much," Calix agrees, shrugging his shoulders. All three of the boys are dressed in their purple blazers, lavender ties, and white dress-shirts. I love it, a man in a uniform. "Why? What about you?"

"I want to move to New Orleans and live in the French Quarter," I say with a shrug. "I want to have adventures. College, maybe, but mostly adventures."

"Want to live in the French Quarter with a trust fund?" Raz asks, smirking sharply. It's an expression I'm used to seeing. I'm most definitely *not* used to seeing Raz's blue eyes and the pair of dark-rimmed glasses on his face.

"That's one of the ... cutest things I've ever had anyone say to me," I murmur, completely and utterly shocked. "*Où est passée ta langue de pute tête de gland?*" In essence, *have you forgotten how to have an acidic tongue, dickhead?*

"*Lui oui, mais pas moi. Tu vas avoir besoin de quelqu'un qui parle français pour toi dans le Quartier Français,*" Calix purrs, his voice sliding over me like silk, settling into every nook and cranny of my heart. A whole month of Devils' Days, of parties, of revelations, and it's finally over. *He has, but I haven't. You might need someone to speak French for you, in the French Quarter.*

"I don't speak French, but I can definitely translate bullshit," Barron says, looking me dead in the face with his beautiful eyes, one blue, one brown. His Mohawk is clean and tamed today, slicked back and vibrant. "I want to make art, and art appreciates experience. I'll go wherever the fuck you go, Karma; you *are* an experience."



I snort.

“You don’t have to be so nice to me, just because I ...” We haven’t really talked about my suicide attempt, but it’s there, waiting to be brought up, the proverbial elephant in the room.

“Yes, we do,” Calix says, frowning hard and flicking his dark eyes over to me. “But not for the reasons you might think.”

“You mean like pity?” I ask, but I’ve seen them all at their most vulnerable, stripped down and emotionally bare for me. Their sudden care and affection isn’t as surprising as it might’ve been before all of this. The time loop. One day, I’ll tell them about it. But not yet. I’m not ready to talk about it just now. Some part of me is afraid that if I bring it up too soon, I’ll go to sleep and wake up at the gas station.

Wake up to a steering wheel covered in blood.

“Pity?” Raz snorts and shakes his head, raking his fingers through his dirty blonde hair. “Not a chance in hell. Do you really think we do anything out of pity? I mean, like, *ever*?” He pauses for a moment, like he’s thinking unbelievably hard about something. “You never know when someone’s so full of pain, they might ...” Raz trails off, and my lips curve into a smile.

He’s repeating what I said to him at the cabin, almost verbatim. He was listening. Even if he doesn’t remember it the way I do, some part of that night stuck with him.

“They might snap,” I finish. “One kind word could save someone, and you’ll never know. It’s always better to be nice.”

“Hey, whoa, let’s not take it that far.” Raz holds up his hands in surrender as Barron pulls a box of cereal from his book bag. A whole box, unopened and everything. He tears the top off and digs into the brightly colored Fruity Pebbles inside, popping them in his mouth one at a time. “Nobody ever said shit about being ‘nice’.” He makes little quotes with his fingers, and I roll my eyes.

“We’re not treating you differently because you tried to kill yourself,” Barron says in that deep, low voice of his. “We’re treating you the way we should’ve treated you all along. Your suicide attempt was a wakeup call for all of us. You won’t be here forever, Karma, waiting around for us to get our shit together.” Barron pauses and glances out the window as we pull up to Crescent Prep. “Life doesn’t often give do-overs, now does it?” He glances back at me with a smile, and then tosses his sketchbook my way.

I catch it just before he opens the door and steps out, greeting Sonja with a nod of his chin as she and Luke pull up beside us in the old white Caddy.

I take a moment to flip open the book, smiling at the now-familiar images of myself, lovingly etched in charcoal. As I flip through the pages, I find drawings of our time in the butterfly cave, at Thorncrown Chapel, at the Devil Springs high party ... But then I get to the end and discover several new images, ones I've never seen before.

Barron's nude drawing of me in the art studio.

An image of me on my knees in the grass beside the gas station parking lot, head in my hands.

An underwater view of a lake, a rope wrapped around the ankle of a man whose face I can't see.

Fuck.

"Anything interesting?" Calix asks, and I shake my head, clutching the sketchbook to my chest and closing my eyes.

"Art is always interesting," I whisper, opening my eyes as Raz hops out of the car and he and Sonja start fist bumping and cackling and acting like assholes together. Calix watches me carefully, reaching out his hand to take one of mine.

If Barron remembers even little things, then ...

"I know we're just getting started," Calix begins, his voice hesitant, strained with an unfamiliar hesitancy. I open my eyes to look at him, finding his raven-dark gaze locked on my face. "But, if I can be good to you this year, if I can earn this ..."

"I'll get lost with you," I tell him, choking on the words and trying my best not to cry. I've been crying a lot since I escaped the Devils' Day time loop. But not sad tears. No fucking way. Happy tears only. Pearl is still alive; April is alive; Luke is alive. Everyone I love is okay. How could I dare to be sad now, when I've been given the world? "Always."

"How ..." Calix starts, tilting his head slightly as he tries to figure me out. "You knew what I was going to say?"

"Maybe," I start, exhaling sharply and looking him straight in the face. "But not all of it. Keep going."

"I ..." he starts, and then grits his teeth, shaking his head briefly. "Never mind."

Calix climbs out, and I purse my lips, surprised when he comes around to open the door for me. *Don't rush things, Karma*, I tell myself. I don't have to recreate every moment I had during the loop, not all at once.

“Good morning,” Luke says, putting her arms around me and giving me a hug once I've climbed out into the cool fall air. Red, orange, and yellow leaves swirl around us, a leftover tingle of Devils' Day magic in the breeze that kisses our hair and teases it around our faces. “I still can't believe you're here with ... *them*,” she grinds out, forcing a smile as she pulls back. But then, she doesn't know what happened inside the mouth of the Devils' Den.

Only the boys know.

The boys.

*My* boys.

“I still can't believe you've been banging Sonja for a year,” I retort, and Luke rolls her eyes, glancing back at her red-headed lover and then sighing dramatically.

“Okay, fine, good point. I suppose I should just be happy that you're not mad at me.” She sounds surprised when she says that, like she's mulling over the very idea. I just lean forward and kiss her cheek, moving around her to say hi to April.

“I may very well die if I don't get this kid out of me,” she groans, leaning back against Luke's car, her brunette hair unbraided and dancing in the breeze. “Fucking crotch goblin.”

“Have you heard from Thad?” Luke asks as April stands up straight and takes her proffered arm. The three of us head toward the front steps together, the Knight Crew following behind us.

Erina Cheney frowns when she sees me, but she doesn't say anything. She's clearly unstable, and it isn't my job to 'fix' her, but I also don't have to add to her problems. Pearl's, either. I wave when I see her, smiling as she pauses and then, hesitantly, waves back.

Eventually, I'll talk to Calix about her baby, but it's a complicated issue and not entirely my business. But I'll do what I can. That's all any of us can ever do, but if we all try, then it's enough. It's more than enough.

“Thad is flying in next week,” April says with a private little smile. Luke and I both recognize that look, exchanging grins of our

own. “He’s going to stay here until the baby comes, no matter what his parents say.”

“Fuck his parents,” Luke declares as we pause near her locker. I glance back to see Calix, Barron, Raz, and Sonja standing near the front entrance. They’re acting casual, like this is any other day, but every now and then, a pair of eyes flicks toward us. Watching. Waiting. This is a new normal for us; it’s going to take some adjustment. “We’re moving to New Orleans together at the end of the year and starting our own family.”

“I’d like that,” April says, rubbing her belly and then sighing as she looks up at us. “Just ... if you guys are bringing *them*”—she gestures in the Knight Crew’s direction with a tilt of her head—“then we’re going to need a big house. Huge.”

“We can’t predict the future,” Luke says, blushing, but the way her eyes seek Sonja ... It’s fate, it seems, that my best friend and I would fall for another pair of besties. Pretty sure she didn’t figure me falling for three assholes though.

Three jerks, all to myself.

“No, we can’t,” I agree, thinking on my own experiences. “And every day, we make a dozen decisions that affect everyone around us. Today, I’m going to assume we’re all moving to New Orleans to live happily ever after. That’s good enough for me, that I’m happy right now, here, today.”

“Whoa, when did you get so profound?” Luke asks, but I just laugh.

“I’ll explain it all later, I promise,” I say, fingering my butterfly necklace and closing my eyes for a brief moment. “Tomorrow, actually.”

Tomorrow.

What a novel fucking idea.

I *actually* have a tomorrow coming, and it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

“Okay then, weirdo,” Luke snorts, ruffling up my hair as I open my eyes. “Whatever you say.”

Footsteps sound behind us, and I turn to see the Knight Crew waiting.

“Did you like my drawings?” Barron whispers, sliding the sketchbook from my hands. “I dream of you every night, and then I

sketch what I see.”

“I love it,” I tell him truthfully as Raz approaches, hands tucked into the pockets of his slacks. He has idle hands, that boy.

“Love what?” he asks, blue eyes narrowing in on me.

“You,” I respond, looking right at him and then turning my attention to Calix as he moves over to us. “And you.” My gaze moves to Barron. “And you.”

“I don’t know how to process that,” Calix tells me, but I notice he has to pause and swallow a few times before he can keep talking. “But this year, you can do what you want. We owe you that, at least.”

“After this year ... come to New Orleans with us,” I say, gesturing back at my friends. “Don’t think too hard about it. Just say yes. If you change your minds later, that’s okay, but for now, just say yes.”

“I’m down for New Orleans,” Raz says, hands still tucked in his pockets. “Party central.”

“Vibrant art scene,” Barron adds, giving me a secret smile.

“And you,” Calix says, nodding and then taking off down the hallway.

I can’t decide if he’s saying *and you* as another bullet point on the list of why New Orleans would be an interesting place to live.

Or if he’s telling me he loves me.

Either way, it doesn’t matter.

Because he does.

And so does Raz. So does Barron.

I know because they told me.

I know because they *showed* me.

The bell rings, and I take a moment to reach up and fix my tie, straighten my blazer, and adjust a button on my shirt.

“Shall we?” Raz asks, holding out an elbow for me to take. “*C’est l’heure d’aller à notre putain de cours de français à la con.*” *It’s time to head to our stupid, fucking French class.*

“I’m impressed,” I tell him, and he grins back at me, nice and sharp, as devilish today as he was on September 25<sup>th</sup>. Just as naughty. Just as full of tricks. “Let’s go.”

We head down the hallway, April, Luke, Barron, and Sonja just behind us, Calix just in front.

To them, it's just another day.

For me, it's a tomorrow I never thought I'd see.

And I thank the universe with every single breath I take for giving it to me.

Each moment we have here on this earth is worth being thankful for because it's more than we're owed.

I wave goodbye to Calix and Barron, Luke and April, before Raz, Sonja, and I step into the classroom and into our own version of tomorrow.



*Two years later ...*

The full moon casts a silver glow on the gravel as the boys and I move across the frozen ground together, heading for the stone steps that lead up to my aunt Donna's cottage.

"God, that was weird as fuck," Raz snorts, lighting up a cigarette and pausing near the retaining wall as he inhales. "No wonder I've never done a ghost tour before."

I push my mask up and off of my face, giving Raz a raised brow and a look.

"Theodore Rasmus Loveren," I scold, and he shudders as Barron chuckles and Calix smirks, enjoying his discomfort. Just because they're no longer bullying me, that doesn't mean they're finished being bullies to each other. "Were you *afraid*?"

"Like hell I was," he snorts as Barron pushes the hood of his red sweatshirt back. "I just don't believe in ghosts, so really, we just forked over cash for a boring-ass history lesson." I grin, but Raz can complain as much as he wants; during our tour of the old morgue in the basement of the Crescent Hotel, he grabbed my hand and squeezed. The little pissant was scared, whether he wants to admit it or not.

“I enjoyed it,” Calix says as I look over and meet his eyes, a sharpness arcing through me as I remember our breakfast at the Mud Street Café and our subsequent tryst in Michael’s room. I swear, when we were in there today, and I met Calix’s eyes, something strange passed between us. That feeling, it can’t be faked or manufactured. In his own way, he remembers. “Besides, it’s Halloween. Don’t be an asshole, Raz.”

Raz narrows his red eyes on Calix as Barron sits down and flips his sketchbook open. I admire that, the way he falls into his work at every available opportunity. I’m learning from his dedication. I mean, that’s not the only thing I’m learning from Barron Farrar, but the rest of his lessons are a bit darker, a bit more sensual.

“Seriously, do you believe in that shit, Lix? Ghosts and faeries and crap.”

“He might not, but I do,” I say as I grin and then head up the wide stone steps, using the code to let us in the deck-side door. The boys follow after me, stepping into the dark house as I turn on all the lights, filling the place with warmth.

“You really do?” Barron asks, carrying several reusable grocery bags into the kitchen, filled with the food we picked up at the store yesterday. We’re going to need it, considering that we’ll be staying here for the next week; the moms’ trailer is not big enough for me and my three boyfriends. I almost choke on laughter at the thought of them staying with Jane and Cathy; it wouldn’t go well for long. “Believe in faeries and ghosts and shit?”

How could I not, after everything that happened to me?

“Sometimes things happen that we can’t explain,” I tell him, helping to unload the groceries. Calix and Raz spend the time arguing with each other instead, but that’s alright. They have their own issues to work on.

When I start a pot of coffee, Raz finally gives up and moves into the kitchen, pausing near the peninsula and putting his palms on the epoxied brick surface. His eyes widen as I glance over at him, the bag of coffee grounds in my hands. We look at each other and something passes between us, a fragment of memory that’ll never truly be lost, not so long as I keep it in my heart.

“I’m never doing a ghost tour again,” he murmurs, but I just laugh as he slips out the door with Barron to light up some joints.

“There was something else I wanted to say to you tonight,” Calix starts, coming into the kitchen to stand beside me. He leans back against the counter, his velvet doublet unbuttoned, his leather pants low-slung enough that there’s a bit of a sexy gap between the top of his waistband and the bottom of his shirt. I appreciate the boys wearing their Devils’ Day costumes tonight, truly. It felt ... important, somehow. I mean, it is Halloween, and we’re home for the first time in months. We’ve been living in New Orleans since graduation, and we don’t get back to Arkansas as much as I’d like. I only wish Luke and April could’ve come with us. Sonja, too, I suppose.

“And that is?” I ask, pouring four mugs full of coffee and turning to look at him, my heart racing frantically inside my chest.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you this for a while now, actually.” He crosses his arms over his chest and looks up at me. “I didn’t have the courage before.”

“But you do now?”

“I do now,” he says, exhaling and lifting his dark gaze to focus on mine. “Karma, what I meant to say was ... I want you to marry me.”

My cheeks flush red, and I find that the words have left me, stolen away by the spirits of All Hallows’ Eve. Too bad for them that I’ve tangled with much deadlier spirits on Devils’ Day. These assholes could never compete.

“We’re still in college,” I whisper back, because that’s the right thing to say. “Plus ... Raz and Barron ...” But holy god, I want to say yes. I’d probably say yes to all of them, if they asked. So what do I do about that?

“Don’t reply to me now,” Calix says, giving me a rare smile, as perfect as the jack-o-lantern outside on the porch. “Think about it.”

“I will,” I tell him, choking back tears as the door opens and the other boys step back in.

We take our coffees outside and sit on the deck, listening to the sounds of owls, the rustling of the deer in the brush, the distant scream of a cougar that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

When we head upstairs, we head up together, shedding clothes. Their hands are worshipful, their attention focused.



I spin around, now in nothing but a bra and panties, and push the door to the master bedroom open.

When I flick the light on, I gasp and clamp both hands over my mouth.

The room ... is filled with butterflies.

“Diana fritillary,” I choke out as Raz gives me a *huh, what?* sort of look. Calix moves into the room, turning in a circle as he stares up at the rafters, covered in black butterflies. Some have orange-tipped wings, others blue. He moves to the window and pushes it open while I reach down and press the switch for the fan.

The movement in the air stirs the butterflies up from their resting places as my gaze slides over to Barron’s. He’s looking right at me, a smile lighting his lips. We both turn in unison as the swarm beats their wings like a single entity and takes up in a collective cloud, swirling toward the window and out into the night sky.

The moon smiles down on them, the silver light limning their wings, giving them a glorious send-off into an endless sky.

“That was beautiful,” I whisper as a warm hand circles around my own, pulling me toward the bed.

Together, we shed the rest of our clothing, naked bodies intertwined in the most sinful of ways. Wanton. Ribald. Lascivious.

A bacchanalia of devils.

We didn’t start off our relationship in an easy or average sort of way, and that’s not how we’re going to continue it.

That’s not how we’re going to live today.

There is no blood on my steering wheel, no crashed car, no script to follow.

Just ... life.

Unscripted.

Raw.

Real.

Mine.

The boys, and the future.

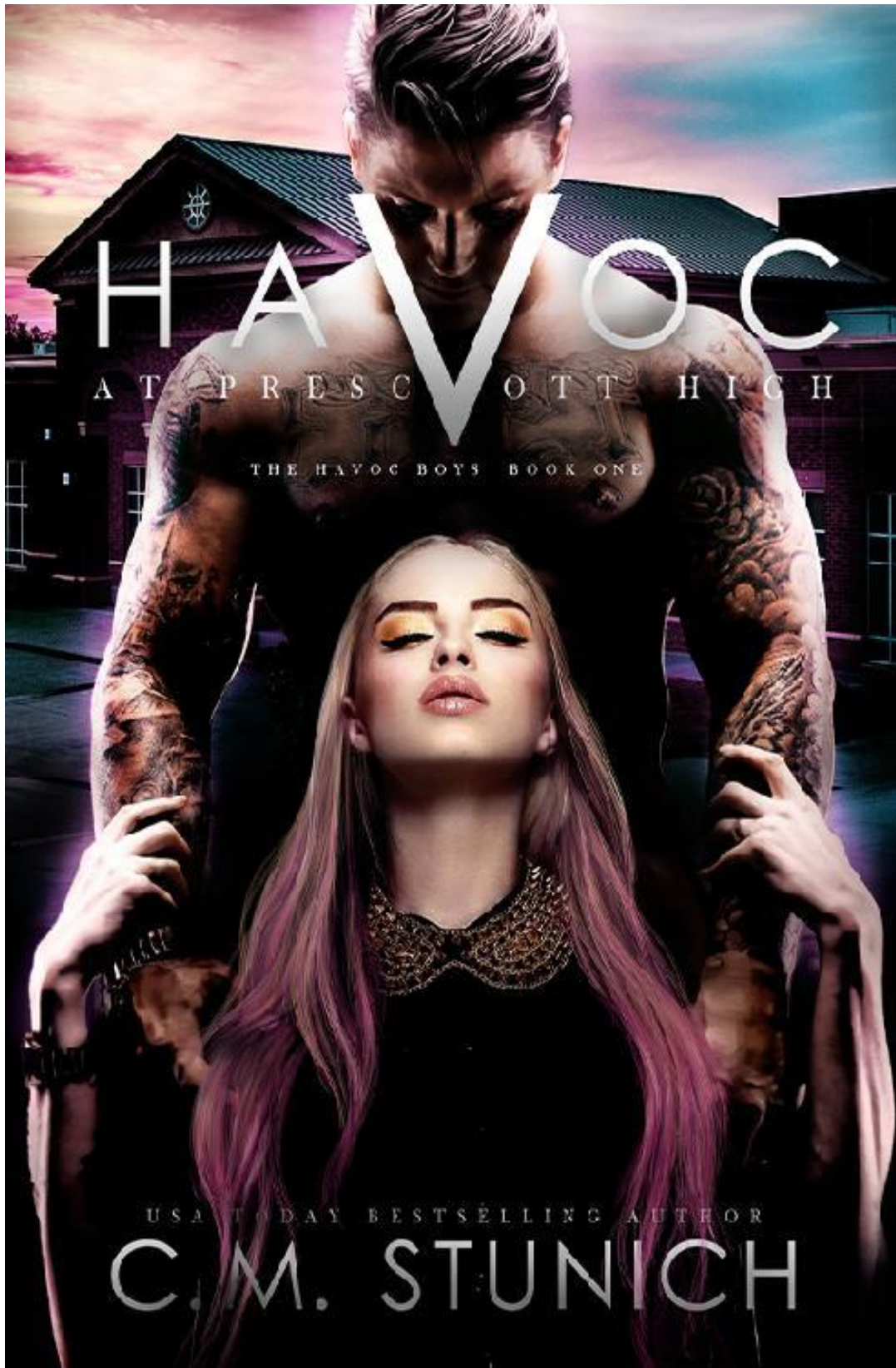
Because I don’t have to choose between those things.

My name is Karma Sartain, and I can have it all.

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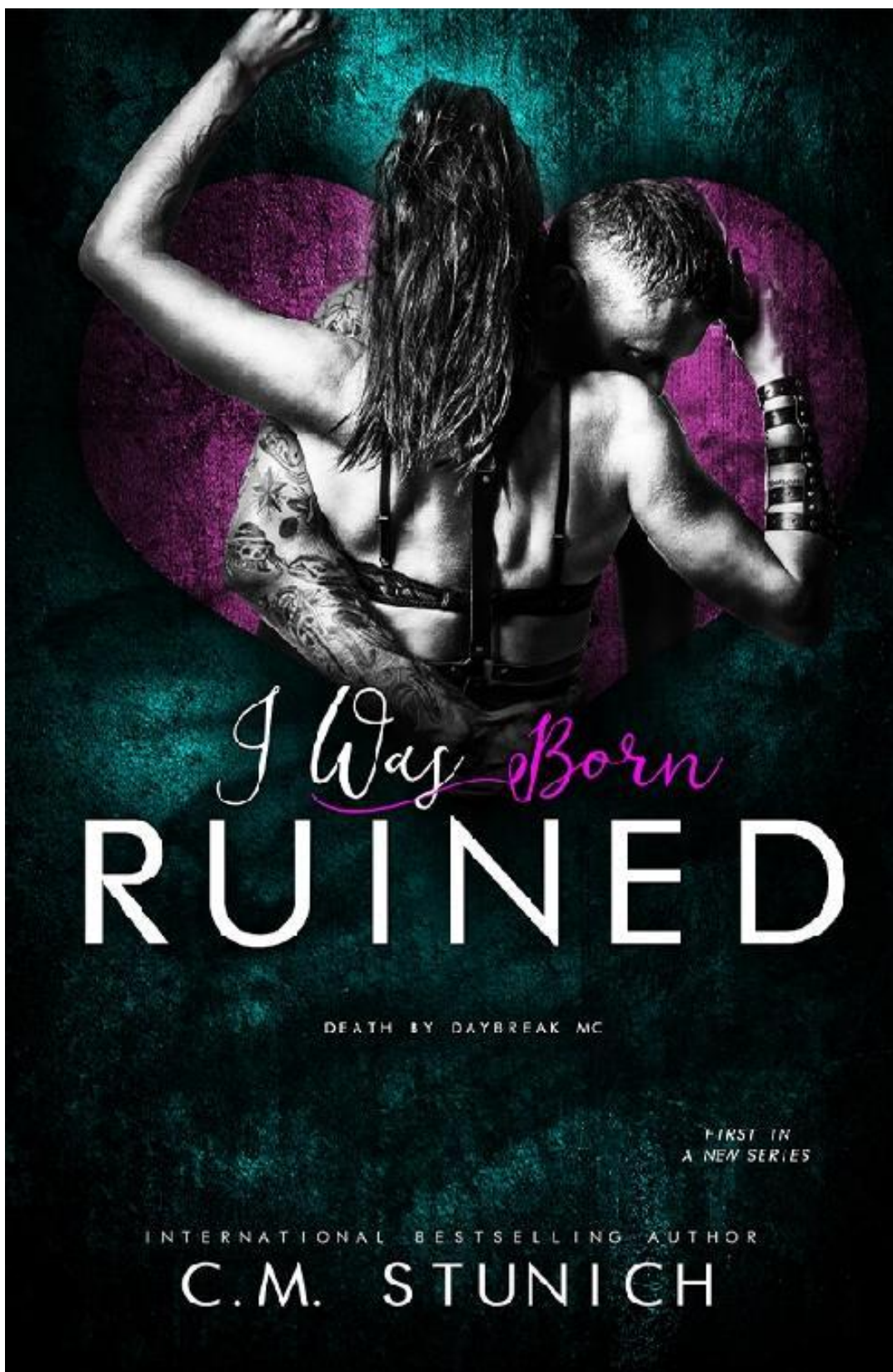
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## ***About the Author***

*C.M. Stunich is a self-admitted bibliophile with a love for exotic teas and a whole host of characters who live full time inside the strange, swirling vortex of her thoughts. Some folks might call this crazy, but Caitlin Morgan doesn't mind - especially considering she has to write biographies in the third person. Oh, and half the host of characters in her head are searing hot bad boys with dirty mouths and skillful hands (among other things). If being crazy means hanging out with them everyday, C.M. has decided to have herself committed.*

*She hates tapioca pudding, loves to binge on cheesy horror movies, and is a slave to many cats. When she's not vacuuming fur off of her couch, C.M. can be found with her nose buried in a book or her eyes glued to a computer screen. She's the author of over a hundred novels – romance, new adult,*

*fantasy, and young adult included. Please, come and join her inside her crazy. There's a heck of a lot to do there.*

*Oh, and Caitlin loves to chat (incessantly), so feel free to e-mail her, send her a Facebook message, or put up smoke signals. She's already looking forward to it.*

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