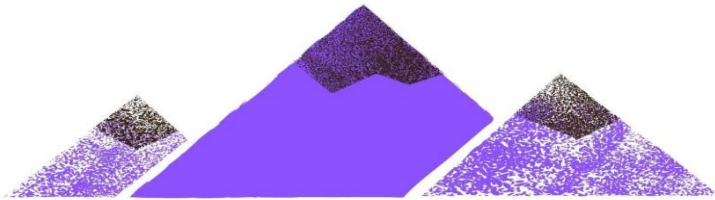


A FALL FROM GRACE

*Weeps Indigo*



**WEEPS INDIGO:  
A Fall from Grace is  
the Biggest Tragedy**

*Published by J.K. Jones  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

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DEFEND THE MIRAGE

J.K. JONES

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## Prologue

**There's no clear beginning of course, like all things beautifully and tragically headed for destruction.** There is a random and opaque series of events. They twist and turn, uniting and parting until Richard is intertwined with the person who is seemingly the catalyst.

If he was being honest with himself, (which he rarely is these days because self-deception comes so easily) he would recognize that although events were precipitated, he is at fault for being at the center. Perhaps, it all began when curiosity became an insatiable need, a throbbing sort of gaping mouth sore that he couldn't stop tonguing. Even when the sore split open and bled he continued to lick and probe at the wound. Being only human made him susceptible to dark desires.

In Byromville Georgia, where the land was vast and the people still believed in southern hospitality there lay a more corrupt side. The town was small, barely over four hundred people who live there, counting the farmers that resided past the interstate. A community with seemingly law-abiding citizens, and if he stepped outside his door there is without a doubt, he'd know everybody on his street.

At the ripe age of eighteen he married the prettiest gal in town, Lana Williams, fathered two children who he loved dearly. Perhaps it was a mistake, to marry so young and give up what was left of his childhood. Last year he was named Sheriff and it was the proudest day of his life. At first glance Richard was everything a model husband should be, he was a good father, he provided for his family and yet a sickness brewed inside him. After the War the sickness began to spread until it became insurmountable.

A demon he called it.

The proverbial wisdom which he seldom took and almost constantly ignored would have most likely saved him the eventual heartache. He always considered himself a practical man, pragmatic with years of experience on the police force to grant him the knowledge of how to read people.

The law was in his blood, he upheld it no matter what the cost, often rationalizing that if he didn't society would erupt into chaos and anarchy, all that sort of nonsense. After all there was no way a lawless society could be functional.

If Richard was the sort of individual who believed in nihilism, he wouldn't be in the situation he is in right now.

Yet, here he is. A wolf responding to the call of the wild and in the deepest part of the forest he found out exactly what terrors lurked. In the grand scheme of things Richard destroyed himself, or at least that's how it will seem.

In the end, things are nothing like what they see



# Chapter 1

## **It's all about a boy.**

A boy who changed his life. He's not just any kind of boy. Not someone of social status or unforgettable features. Not a boy that throws tantrums or is the sort to excel at everything.

Richard bets he isn't particularly athletic, nor is he quick when it comes to arithmetic. However, he isn't ordinary. In retrospect, there's absolutely nothing ordinary about him. For one thing, his attitude is *foul*, so much so that half the guys in the office cringe when he opens his mouth.

He's rough around the edges with a boorish attitude which does nothing to inspire the idea that the youth of today will amount to much in the world. However, there is something incredibly striking about his pitch black, thick curly hair, his long straight nose, thin lips, dimpled grin and a beauty mark hovering the corner of his upper lip.

Richard mentally runs through the Blackwell's sordid history in town. His brother's been arrested more times than he can count and it seems Beau was headed in that same direction.

Beau smokes too much, drinks too much, swears too much—*hell*, he does everything he shouldn't do in abundance.

Richard even spots a couple tattoos peeking out from underneath his shirt, and is immediately repulsed. *How old is he anyway?*

Beau takes out a packet of smokes, slides one between his thin lips, tilting his chin up exposing that beauty mark in a way that makes Richard feel *things*—things long since beaten dead.

“I don’t know shit.” Beau Blackwell exhales, blowing the smoke into his face.

There was a murder in town. It was unexplained, random, and caused a panic amongst the people. Gary Letterman was found dead in his trailer almost a week before. Richard had known him personally; he was a kind, gentle widower who owned a tire shop on Almond Street.

They interviewed everyone surrounding the area. Nobody had seen or heard anything.

Usually Richard wouldn’t get involved. He leaves it up to Roy Rhett, or “Roy Rage” according to the rest of the guys on the force, due to his violent outbursts. He is usually second in command when Richard is busy with other things.

However, since he knew Gary personally, he decides to take a more active role in the case. By all accounts, Gary was a good man, one that Richard knows he didn’t deserve to die in the way that he did, beaten and vigorously stabbed to death, drowning in his blood for hours.

Roy is furious, bracing his hands against the interrogation desk and glaring at the boy in front of them. The muscles in his arms flex, and his jaw tightens.

“Now see—” He growls angrily. “I don’t believe *that* for one second. We all know Creed Blackwell isn’t the kind of person to let a grudge like that go. It’s well known around these parts that he’s always had a problem with Gary after he fired him.”

“Two years ago,” Beau deadpans.

Roy huffs, looking like he might spit fire. In all honesty, Richard knows they’ve got nothing. No murder weapon, no motive. They are grasping at straws and bringing Beau in isn’t going to prove a damn thing.

Creed left town six months ago, took off somewhere north, and hasn’t looked back since leaving the youngest Blackwell with an estranged uncle.

Beau’s judging them with a look of superiority. Adjusting his stance, he tries something different.

How do you know when someone is lying?

Those same self-protective mechanisms are hard-wired into all of us. However, for a Sherriff with over fifteen years of service, it provides a skilled examiner the basis to form judgments about who is lying and who is telling the truth. There are some observable clues provided by each suspect; a nervous twitch here, eye-roll there, sweat or fidgeting are signs of mendacity.

For a trained interrogator such as himself, he tries a different approach. Instead of berating the subject into a confession or threatening them with immediate jail time or prosecution. He engages in small talk, slowly forcing the suspect to lower their guard to reveal sensitive or otherwise hidden information. This simple practice allows him to separate the liars from the truth-tellers.

“Why don’t you walk us through the events of that day?” Richard asks trying to diffuse the atmosphere.

“The crows.”

“Right,” Roy butts in boorishly, grabbing the file on the table. “According to your statement, you were sitting at Green’s diner and then you went home. On your way home you saw crows circling Gary’s trailer.” Roy sneers. “That’s funny. As if a Blackwell never lied before.... What’s even better is when we got there the place was clear. No crows, no nothing. Just Gary stabbed to death, clearly drowned in his own blood. By the smell of him he had been dead for weeks. What led you to following the crows? We are surrounded by farmland. Your own father owned a farm. Why would you be *compelled* to follow crows? Do you not see them on a daily basis?”

Beau leans back in his chair and shrugs.

“Did you know Gary personally? Is that why you went to check on him? Did you maintain a relationship with him after your brother quit and left town?” Richard asks, his eyes searching.

He doesn't answer right away. Richard knows it may have come off as a dumb question, but he needs Beau to take the bait. There's a beat of silence, Richard stares at him, those cat-like eyes slant with suspicion, and he knows it's going to take a lot more than a few questions to get Beau to talk.

"Nah," he says and stubs out his cigarette on the table. "Are we done, *officers*?" He rolls the word mockingly before standing to his feet.

Richard jerks a nod. The door opens, and Beau struts right out.

"Damn kid," Roy seethes. "A fucking menace. Never can trust a Blackwell. What're you thinking?"

"He knows something," Richard replies, mulling over their interrogation. "My instincts are telling me he knows something.... but we can't talk to him again without a lawyer present next time. Even if he is a menace and he did volunteer to participate in the questioning, he's still underage. *Fuck*." He sighs.

"It was a mistake to bring him in the first place," Roy raves.

"He lives in the area, and since his uncle wasn't home, it makes sense. He came willingly, so we haven't done anything wrong, just asking a few questions."

"Whatever you say, brother," Roy responds, hanging his head

slightly.

“Let’s get back to the briefing room. I want a list of people who were customers at Gary’s shop on my desk in a few hours. That might help us narrow down our search for suspects that have had something against him.”

“Sure thang.” Roy nods, gathering the folders on the desk and walking out of the room.

It’s after nine o’clock when everyone calls it quits. The briefing room is jam-packed with everyone on the force researching information on Gary’s personal life and his shop. Unfortunately, they didn’t find much other than the fact that he was underpaying several of his employees, but it isn’t enough to warrant a true motive.

Richard returns home, exhausted and defeated. He can already tell that some people are already losing hope. There isn’t enough evidence to tie anyone directly to the murder.

When he arrives home, Lana smiles up at him radiantly from the couch. Her auburn hair is pinned in a messy bun, little tendrils falling to frame her heart-shaped face, she’s cradling a sleeping Kyle in her lap.

“Hey.” She breathes, brown eyes shining and he can’t help but kiss her cheek. “How was your day?”

Richard shrugs, nestling down beside her and placing Kyle’s feet in his lap.

“Could’ve been better... you?”

“Not bad.” She grins. “It seems like our little bean was worn out waiting up for you. He wanted you to see the picture he drew in class today.” She reaches over to the coffee table and hands it to him.

Richard chuckles, tracing the crayon stick figures with his hand. “He drew this?”

“Sure did.” Lana beams.

“My boy.” Richard pats his little feet, staring at the picture. “Ida?”

“Baby girl is out cold...hey, umm, you hungry?” she says softly. “I can warm up some leftovers.”

Shaking his head, he places the picture down and turns to gaze at her. Without a doubt, he’s married the most beautiful woman alive. He can’t help but let his eyes follow the column of her long neck, endless smooth skin that is barely concealed by her loose-fitting shirt. He grabs her hand and brings it suggestively to his lips, leaving no room for misinterpretation. “Not for food.”

He loves her.

He really does. For a while he wasn’t so sure that he did, but being with Lana made everything so easy. At the ripe age of sixteen he married the prettiest gal in town, Lana Williams, fathered two children whom he loved dearly. After Kyle was born,

he returned from the war, by then, everything was inside out and outside in.

He spent years coming to terms with his new life. If it wasn't for Monroe offering him sanctuary, he would have lost his mind completely. Time passed and things evolved. He got help for his PTSD, began functioning properly and then joined the local police force. When he turned thirty, he was finally offered the Sherriff position, at the youngest age ever to receive the job title.

He was still reeling from the aftershocks and coming back into society wasn't easy. However, she had been there, coating him back when he was in his darkest hour and Richard appreciated that more than anything.

At first glance Richard was everything a model husband should be, he's a good father, he provided for his family and yet a sickness brewed inside him.

A demon he called it. A monster that he tried his best to reign in.

He always considered himself a practical man, pragmatic with years of experience on the police force.

The law was in his blood, he upheld it no matter what the cost, often rationalizing that if he didn't society would erupt into chaos and anarchy. He's seen all types of lawlessness in the war, he would not allow his town to succumb to it.

Yet, something about Beau throws him off, dismantles him,



causes him to think twice about caging his natural inclinations and allowing them to roam free. Something about him begged for Richard to let go of his inhibitions. He's only felt this once before and it nearly destroyed him.

Pushing those thoughts aside, he hauls Kyle over his shoulder. Wincing when he realizes how heavy his son has gotten in a matter of weeks. When his boy is safely tucked in, he retires to the bedroom, laughing when he sees Lana already on the bed staring at him like a devious kitten. He tackles her, both of them laughing hysterically while struggling to rid themselves of their clothes.

Richard is not hungry; he's ravenous.

## Chapter 2

### **A snip of the string is all it takes to unravel.**

Sending black beads flying, scattering wayward, and rolling into the abyss. Like an idiot, he searches for each missing bead. There are millions of them. Tiny, insignificant black beads that are useless individually. However, they combine to paint a bigger picture.

Nearly a month and they've found absolutely nothing.

No leads, no witnesses, nothing but dead ends.

Richard sits at his large desk, sipping his coffee and going over the notes again. In all of his reports, everybody had a kind word to say about Gary, even the people he was stealing from.

It just doesn't make sense.

If Gary was such an upstanding citizen, then why did somebody kill him? Who wanted him dead?

There is something Richard isn't seeing. He grabs the list of names of people who had been customers of Gary's in the past. They are all citizens, and he knows most of them personally.

Perhaps he got into a fight over payments? No, that can't be it. Everyone said Gary had been fair in his dealings, except his bookings state otherwise.

A sharp knock on the door brings him out of his musing. "It's open."

"Ready for lunch?" Roy asks, poking his head inside.

"Just about," Richard says, putting his papers in the folder and standing to his feet. They exit the station and head to their usual spot at Greens Diner.

"Lord, you better not be in here to raise hell." Maybelle Armstrong greets them at their table.

Roy snorts, leaning back in the booth, gazing at her appreciatively. Maybelle Armstrong is stunning, short brown hair that barely touches her neck, fierce eyes, and a smile that is almost blinding.

"Ah, hell, girl. We haven't been in here for more than five seconds before you are already badgering us."

"Whatever," Maybelle scoffs. "What did you do? Soak in cologne? Christ, can't you stop trying to get laid for one day?"

"Nope," Roy replies easily, he knows he is classically handsome, with his straight jet-black hair, strong jaw, brown eyes, and muscular physique. Most women can't help themselves. "There would be riots in the streets if I ever do."

"How do you put up with him?" Maybelle addresses Richard, rolling her eyes.

"Easy," Richard says. "We draw a red circle on his head and

use him for target practice.”

Throwing her head back, Maybelle belts out a laugh while Roy glares at him. “What’ll it be, boys?”

They come here almost every day at twelve-oh-five on the dot. They sit in the same booth while Maybelle hovers over them laughing and spewing insults while asking the same questions.

Sometimes, if it’s a day like today where he’s in a good mood, he’ll make a conversation, asking about Monroe Armstrong and the family. Sometimes he wishes he could say something different, like comment on how gorgeous she looks. It would be worth it to see the look of shock on her face. Instead, he smiles politely and orders his usual.

“Man, I don’t know what the fuck’s been up with you lately,” Roy says immediately after she leaves. “This case is a dead end. We should drop it already. Shit, the trail’s already gone cold.”

Richard sighs, “I can’t, my gut says—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Roy waves his hand dismissively. “I get it, man, I do, but we’re wasting our resources chasing a ghost. Whoever it is, wouldn’t stick ‘round here long enough to get caught.”

“True.” Richard resigns. “Still...”

“Get you’re fucking hands off me!” someone yells from across the room, making Richard pause mid-sentence.

From their booth, he angles his head to see over the people's heads in the restaurant. At the center of a quarrel is Beau Blackwell, his face twisted in fury as he shoves an older man away from him.

"Don't you ever *fucking* touch me again!"

Richard and Roy are on their feet, calmly walking towards the storm.

"What seems to be the problem here?" Roy asks first, hands on his belt, eyeing Beau and after closer inspection, his uncle, Mason Blackwell.

There's always been something about Mason that sets Richard off, whether it is the man's smarmy face, leering smile, blazing sunken eyes, or his unsettling way with words. He can't pinpoint it, but Richard doesn't trust him.

"Nah," Mason says, sending a warning glare in Beau's direction. "Just teaching my nephew here some manners, he's as thick as a hide on a bull. But he won't be any more trouble, will you, boy?"

All at once, the defiance in Beau's stance is gone. He shrinks and ducks his head in a clear form of submission that has Richard baffled. Just a moment ago he looked like he wanted to raise hell against the man, and now he is staring at the ground.

Mason's a fairly large man with pepper-and-salt hair and a greasy smile. He's wearing a leather biker vest akin to Beau's with a butcher's knife on his belt.

*Moonshiners.*

The name of the local gang comes to him immediately. They're harmless for the most part, they drink and rally outside the pub. Other than a few drunken brawls they've never caused him any real trouble.

However, those eyes are piercing and direct as they barrel into Beau with a promise of pain. "See, nothing to get all worked up about. He needs to mind his manners. Must have gotten them from the *other* side of the family, if you catch my meaning. Dumb kid has got nothing but shit for brains."

Roy nods, glad to let the whole thing go.

"Alright, y'all enjoy the rest of your meal."

They go back to their booth just in time for Maybelle to place their meals in front of them.

"Son of a whore." One of the patron's mumble as they go back to eating their food, his eyes gazing at Beau Blackwell. "Damn Blackwell. I thought it was better now that Creed is gone...looks like the younger one isn't much better."

Roy's rambling on about his date with a hot lawyer named Scarlett Knight, Richard isn't listening.

Instead, his eyes are glued to Beau who remains slightly hunched over beside his uncle while they wait for their takeout. Mason is speaking low and cuttingly, his lips curling into a sneer.

It takes only a second to notice, but he has a death grip on Beau's upper arm, Richard doesn't need to read minds to know exactly what the old man has in store for him when they get home. The minute their food is ready, Mason snatches it from the waitress and nearly drags Beau from the diner.

Their interaction makes something unpleasant twist within his gut.

Mason isn't a kind man. Hell, he can personally recall all those times he's hauled him down to jail for getting into brawls at the local pub. Richard knows the man has a nasty, violent temper. A man with questionable morals, an unstable man.

Richard realizes then he found a bead, black and shiny, glimmering in the light an invaluable trinket.

## Chapter 3

### **set of footprints.**

It's not much. Hell, it's barely anything, but it's the most they've found in weeks. Forensics comes by, does a general sweep of the area, and confidently returns- with substantial information. The footprint itself tracks away from Gary's trailer at a 38-degree angle before it disappears into the fields.

However, the print of the boot is what interests Richard the most. It's a boot popularly used for farming. Richard happens to know that it's a Barracuda Gold Wedge Steel Toe work boot, one that's pretty darn expensive and primarily sold in major cities.

It's not much, but it's something to go off of.

They close down the area, placing yellow tape around the trailer. Richard stares down at the set of footprints in the mud while the sun hangs blistering over his head. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he breathes in deeply. The Georgia heat is unrelenting, and it's barely even June.

The perspiration causes his hair to curl in ringlets over his eyelids. He runs his tongue over his teeth, trying to decipher exactly what the print means and if it will leave some clues as to who the murder was. His icy blue gaze sweeps the area. Is this the person who killed Gary? Is he running away from the crime



scene?

From what he can tell, the set of footprints are a size ten or eleven.

It's a useless tidbit of information since it does nothing to narrow their search down. The forensic investigators are out in the field trying to gather as much DNA as possible. It's a tedious job, one Richard is thankful he doesn't have to do.

"It's not looking too good," Isaac grunts, coming to stand beside him.

"Yeah?" Richard says. "What have you got?"

"Turns out the tracks lead further northeast before we lose them, but if you look down there, it's only a couple more miles until you can reach the highway," Isaac Luther explains, holding up a large map so that Richard can see where his massive finger is pointing. "Now, the suspect may have had a car waiting down that way. We don't know, but I reckon that isn't the case."

"Why do you say that?"

"Cause," Isaac replies. "If you look here, there are several directions he could have split off to on foot. For instance, if he continues northeast, he's heading straight for Miller's farm, but we both know Old Miller's got those pit bulls tied up in the backyard. They'd make enough ruckus to wake up the whole damn parish. If our suspect continues and doesn't veer off his course but instead, cuts through the forest, then he's on the

Blackwell's property."

"Christ," Richard hisses. "That's all speculative though. He may not have walked in that direction at all."

"Maybe he did," Isaac drawls. "Maybe he didn't. A hunch is a hunch. It's better than sitting on our asses waiting for clues to drop from the sky."

"It's not enough for a warrant to search their properties." Richard sighs. "Unless they give us permission, we're back to square one."

"I heard about the interview with Beau. What happened?"

"Nothing," Richard sighs, digging his boot into the ground. "The kid didn't know anything. He said he saw the crows at the trailer, figured something wasn't right and then called the police."

"Mhm, well that's not uncommon. Crows do best in a mixture of open fields where food can be found and woodlots where there are trees for nesting and roosting. They use wooded areas along streams and rivers, farmlands, orchards, parks, and suburban areas. I even have a few batches of them myself. Noisy little fuckers if you asked me."

"Yeah, well...when we arrived, they weren't there...almost like the place was deserted. It was too quiet. Not a bird in sight. Seems kind of strange doesn't it?"

"Not really," Isaac grunts. "Who gives a fuck about a bunch of

birds? This is the first lead we've had in a while. I'm going to head back to the station to see if we can find any DNA for a possible match.... Fucking *birds*, really?"

Isaac cusses through his teeth and folds up the map with a little more force than necessary before stomping away. The man was built like a house, double-barreled chest and strawberry-blond hair to match. He was a sergeant in the military for twelve years before he took a job as a local police officer. Why he did? Richard will never know.

It's one dead end after another.

He knows his people are just as frustrated as he is. The first big murder case he's ever got, and all he's hitting are speed bumps and road closures. He doesn't dwell on how the inadequacies swell inside him or how the anxiety and pressure to solve this case is nearly overwhelming.

Around eleven pm, he calls it quits and tells everyone to go home. It's late by the time he drops Roy off at the station to get his car, and he knows he has a mountain of paperwork waiting for him in the morning.

It's been a stressful week, and an even more stressful month.

On his way home, he takes a detour route, driving down the dark, almost abandoned streets of Byromville. When he was a rookie, he used to drive around town this late all the time. Enjoying the emptiness and hollow feeling it gave him.

Sometimes he'd even park somewhere with a six-pack and drink sitting on the hood of his car, watching the streetlights change. On this particular night, Richard drives cautiously, not sure what he is looking for until he sees a lone figure walking down the street.

He knows who it is before he rolls down his window.

“Beau?”

The boy turns sharply, eyes narrowing and body tense. He stops walking, hands shoved deep into his ratty hoodie covering his head and face twisted in a scowl. Richard parks the car, opening the door, still dressed in his uniform he gets out.

“What are you doing out here? It's late....” Beau continues to stare at him, distrust written all over his face. “I'm off duty, so no worries, kid.”

“I am not a damn kid. What the *fuck* are you following me for anyhow?”

Richard is suddenly amused. “The law says you're a kid, least 'till you reach eighteen. I wasn't following you. Just happen to be driving by, is all.”

“Whatever, pig,” Beau spits. “Why don't you fuck off, then? Leave me be.”

“Christ.” Richard chuckles. “You kiss your mother with that mouth? Plus, that isn't the way to talk to your elders.”

“My mother is dead,” Beau grunts. “I don’t give a shit about how I should talk.”

Those words leave Richard winded. He stares at Beau now like he’s never seen him before. In front of him isn’t some bratty kid who doesn’t know manners if it hit him in the face. This teenager is a sad, soiled creature filled with hate and resentment for everyone around him. Richard realizes then that he is no better than his brother Creed. Or his piece-of-shit father who abandoned him. Richard nods solemnly.

“Sorry to hear that. I apologize if I said anything that might’ve come off as insensitive. Come on I’ll drive you home.”

They lock eyes.

The heat of his gaze stirs something long beaten dead to life. Richard looks away first, as something akin to fear settles in his gut. The shadows grow long, a gangly creature hangs in between the alleyways, crimson eyes haunting his footsteps, a demon.

Neither friend, nor foe—always there, always present. Richard fixes his gaze elsewhere.

Beau doesn’t respond for a long time, his eyes laced with cynicism until finally he shrugs and jumps into the passenger’s seat. The ride to the Blackwell residence is silent. Richard knows the way well due to the sheer amount of times he’s arrested Creed.

“What were you doing out that late anyway?” Richard has to

ask.

“It is none of your business,” Beau says, staring out the window.

“Well, someone like you shouldn’t be wandering the streets at night.” Richard smiles and is surprised when Beau scoffs but doesn’t snap back.

When they pull up into the driveway, Beau immediately tells Richard to slow down, to cut the lights, and park under a tree. Despite the darkness Richard can see the outline of the Blackwell’s house just over the ridge. Beau makes no move to exit the vehicle, so, he waits patiently.

“Food,” Beau says so quietly Richard isn’t sure he hears him.

“What?”

“I was looking for food.”

Richard notices the slight bruising under his eye and his lip looks split. Before he can respond, Beau is out of the vehicle, slamming the door shut.

It’s not much.

Hell, it’s hardly anything, but it’s something

## **.Chapter 4**

### **THERE’S a firefly dancing in the night.**

A flickering beacon, a prelude to sanctuary and hope shrouded by darkness. It’s stunning to witness. All at once he feels his heart expand and longs to reach out to touch. Instead, he holds back, afraid his hands will chafe the insect or squash it carelessly.

The bug moves with fluidity and grace that would shame a dancing swan; a speck of light seemingly captured behind a black canopy. Completely mesmerized by the movement, he tunes the rest of the world out. Awestruck and pensive, he ignores the television in the distant background as he stares outside his small window.

Upstairs he can hear Kyle and Ida getting ready for bed, Lana gently scolding them before turning off the lights. He hears her footsteps coming down the stairs.

“Richard.” Her voice is like the crack of a whip.

At first, his initial reaction is to feign interest in the television; it proves to be futile when she shuts it off and stands directly in front of him. The tone of her voice signifies dissatisfaction, among other things, but Richard knows this confrontation will end with him apologizing and Lana gaining the upper hand.

Things have been tense, since the case.

Richard spends more hours at the office trying to solve Gary's murder. Most of the time he's there he doesn't accomplish much. He ends up spending most of the time zoning out, his mind going back to his time in the military.

Often, he's in the field again, Roy studiously by his side in the Godforsaken land of Fallujah, fighting Iraqi insurgents, neck-deep in blood and shit, eyes blinded by sand.

Richard imagines he's back there, limbs flying, his men screaming while he stands there in the midst of chaos and does nothing. When he returned, the doctors said the hallucinations would eventually go away, along with the neurosis.

Even before he went off to serve, there was a sickness inside him, twisting and churning under his skin like cancer. A demon, he called it.

For some reason seeing Beau, helpless and neglected, slices his skin open, allowing the contaminants out like Pandora's Box.

Usually the demon is calm, like a razor-sharp blanket shredding his skin, gently rapping the gilded cage. Now, it shrieks in agony, claws at his chest and *begs* to be released.

The first time he saw the creature he went half-mad, buried himself in a ditch in the backyard and didn't resurface for days. By the fifth time Roy found him, pissing and shitting his pants in the men's locker room at work.

Tonight, isn't a good night. Richard is not in the mood for



anything other than peace. When he opened the front door this evening, he immediately thought of walking back out.

The bar a few blocks down the street seemed like a welcoming alternative to another night at home with his wife and kids, drinking hard whiskey and imagining those dusty emerald trapezoid eyes under a pale moonlight.

“Are you listening to me?” Her shrill voice cuts through his thoughts.

It takes a moment, a brief struggle of sheer will and endurance to force himself to look at her eyes. This warrior Goddess standing before him, hair windswept and piled atop her head. Nevertheless, Richard Clayson isn’t easily swayed, especially when tonight isn’t a good night.

“What is it?” Richard inquires, forcing himself to be polite.

Lana scoffs. “Will you kindly explain where you were two nights ago?”

He sighs, rubbing his forehead. “Working on the case...I’m not sure, to be honest.”

“You aren’t sure...” Lana repeats slowly, those words personally offend her. “Well, while you were *not sure* where you were, I was doing everything myself. I can’t be a single parent. I need you to help out.”

Richard's eyes narrow. “You’re home all day.”

It's a low blow; the sole purpose is to demean her. Due to his large military pension and cushy Sheriff promotion, Lana doesn't have to work. Not that she plans to anyway, since his family comes from old money.

"I'm home with the baby," Lana huffs.

"I take care of our daughter, Ida, twenty-four seven, and all I'm asking for is a few hours for myself."

"Is that all you are asking? Because it sounds like you're asking for a bit more than that."

"Is it too much to ask for you to spend time with your children?" Lana demands. "We haven't seen you in weeks, you're hardly home anymore, and I know you've been sleeping at the office."

"The case—"

"I don't want to hear any more about the damn case. If Isaac can make it home every night to Luciana, then you can make it home back to us. It's that simple, Richard."

This isn't the time or the place to have this argument, not when his kids are probably kept awake from the ruckus Lana is causing.

"Keep your voice down"

"Don't tell me to be quiet. We need to have this conversation."

He grunts as he stands from the couch. "This stopped being a

conversation when you started yelling.”

“That seems to be the only way to gain your attention these days.” Lana huffs, placing her hands on her hips.

“Okay. Fine.” Richard yields. “I’ll try to make it home more often instead of sleeping at the office.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“What the hell do you mean?” Richard snarls, his temper flaring.

“It’s not *enough* just to show up. You have to be here with the kids. Helping Kyle with his homework, being a father.”

“Are you saying I’m not a good father? You’ve got some nerve,” Richard hisses. “You can barely handle Ida on your own, and you are with her all day. How’s that for parenting skills? It must be nice to sit on your ass all day!”

“Don’t you *dare*.” Lana glowers at him. “I am taking care of our children, just like we discussed. I used to work too. You know I used to have a life before I was *forced* to stay home with the kids.”

Richard feels like shit. A great big pile of steaming shit and he sighs deeply. Years ago, Lana had a good job working as a school teacher, but after they got married and her father died, she decided to stay home with the kid’s full time. This argument has gotten out of hand and deep down, he knows Lana is right. He

hasn't been there for Kyle or Ida lately, and she isn't asking much except for some time for herself. "I know...I'm sorry."

"What the hell is the matter with you? You've checked out. People are talking, Richard."

"So, what? Let them."

"Our friends are worried. Even Roy says you aren't acting like yourself."

"You talked to Roy about me?"

"We are worried." She presses. "Take a break. Let someone else handle the grunt work, take some time off for me, please—"

"I can't...we have to solve this...but I'll be home more. I promise you that," he vows.

It's not enough; they both know it.

Lana stares, her face drawn in exhaustion and disappointment. Before Richard can articulate a more thorough compromise, she leaves, climbing the stairs three at a time and slamming the bedroom door. He sits back on the couch, staring out the window, searching for the firefly again.

It's gone, fluttering off, no doubt, to enchant someone else, and he's left gazing out in the abyss, picturing a crude mouth and a startling beauty mark.

## Chapter 5

### **The dream comes next.**

Brimming with a violent disposition, so much bloody gore, Richard sweating, quivering and pissing in his sheets like a damn twelve-year-old girl.

Always the same dream.

The one with him covered in blood, feeling invincible with blind fury racing through his core and laughing maniacally. It stains his hands, and even when he washed them raw, he can still see it under his fingernails.

The noise wakes the entire house; his screams pierce the distilled air until everybody is grumbling from lack of sleep. Lana cautiously mouths the words: psychiatric and help in the same sentence which causes Richard to blow a gasket in the middle of breakfast. He slams his coffee down, startling all three occupants of the table. Kyle stares at him wide-eyed and looking frightened while Ida mirrors his expression.

Richard is exhausted.

It's been three days, and he's had less than two hours of sleep each night. He can barely focus on the case; he can barely function now.

"No."

His voice is raw and hoarse but firm.

“Richard,” Lana pleads, desperate for some compromise. “You are barely keeping it together...these dreams they aren’t healthy. Not for you and not for the kids.”

“I’m sorry,” Richard says, swallowing. “It’s just so random, this insomnia I can’t—” he sighs. “I’m sorry. I’ll get help. I will.”

She smiles, taking his hand in hers. “That’s all I ask.”

He clears his throat, nods to Kyle, pats Ida’s hair, and continues eating breakfast. He has to be at the station in a few hours. When he comes into work that day, his attitude is less than jovial when they run into another dead-end regarding Gary’s case. It turns out the set of footprints belongs to a man named Oscar Grisly, who Gary employed to help mow the fucking grass every year.

The news comes awkwardly in the briefing room by one of the rookies, Hiromi Lee, who describes the interaction with Oscar in detail. Hiromi is part of the technical service division, and since they are understaffed, he also works as a liaison if they have a lead on a case. His lithe body and Asian features make him look almost like a spooked kitten. Richard is seething by the time Hiromi finishes; everyone stares at him expectantly.

“*Fuck.*” Is all he manages to utter softly. It’s not exactly the most intelligent thing he should say as the Sheriff, but it sums up the day.

“We should swing back around,” Houston Jefferson speaks up. He is a dark-skinned man, with large muscles and a deep booming voice. People often describe him as the gentle giant due to his soft disposition. “I know you got a statement from him, Hiromi, but it wouldn’t do any harm asking a few more questions?”

“We can’t badger him,” Hiromi rebuts. “He’s already lost a close friend. It was hard enough getting him to agree to talk to me without breaking down.”

Isaac scoffs. “What do you know, rookie?”

Hiromi glares at him across the room, and Richard intercepts their feud. “What’s forensics’ saying? Did they find anything in the fields?” He demands from Tanya Jefferson. She is Houston’s twin sister and works in the forensics department.

“Not that I’m aware of,” she replies, tilting her head slightly. Like with her brother, she has beautiful dark skin and her hair is worn in an afro.

“We keep looking,” Richard says, the determination in his voice. “We keep searching the surrounding area, even if we have to branch out even further. I want another list of every fucking person Gary encountered before he died on my desk tomorrow morning.” He snatches the folders off the table and leaves the room with Roy and Isaac trailing closely behind him.

“What the fuck are you doing, man?” Roy snorts once the door

is closed. “We just searched that area for weeks, and now you want to see our crew back out there? Look, I knew Gary, okay? I know this is a tough pill to swallow, but most of the *evidence* we found—I’ll use that word loosely—isn’t even worth digging into. The trail is cold. Face it. Whoever killed Gary cleaned his tracks up pretty quick.”

“I agree with Rhett on this one, sir,” Isaac says, with his massive arms crossed over his chest. “I don’t like it. Sure, as hell isn’t going down well with the people of this parish, but we don’t have any leads to go on.”

“Then we keep looking.” Richard stresses. “Keep searching until we find something—anything. It can’t go unsolved. Not here. Not in Byromville. Not in my town, and certainly not where my kids sleep. This is our backyard that somebody has come into. Now get back to work.”

“Richard, brother, I seriously think—”

“Get back to work,” he snaps, glaring fiercely at him.

Roy stares back in disbelief before he scoffs.

“Yes, sir.”

Once they leave, Richard pushes the heel of his hand against his forehead. He knows that at some point during the day he has to go back to his team and explain that the first breakthrough of Gary’s murder has been a fluke.



The whole thing will embarrass the shit out of him, and he knows many of the guys want to close this case, but Richard can't do it not yet at least. He feels he is missing something, a giant piece of the fucking puzzle, and he will not rest until it is solved.

He leaves the office late into the night and takes a detour through town. In the light of day, he refuses to think about it, refuses to acknowledge exactly what he is doing. The idea seems foreign to him, and even as he drives down the calm streets, he knows it isn't normal to seek Beau out.

To his surprise, he doesn't have to search long.

Beau is dressed in the same hoodie, standing at the edge of the sidewalk, balancing on the balls of his feet. Puzzled, Richard pulls up to the curb and rolls down the window.

"Saw you two blocks away," Beau says, answering the unspoken question.

"Get in." Richard jerks his head, and Beau doesn't hesitate and jumps in the passenger seat. They drive around for a minute before he pulls into an all-night diner and steps out of the car. He doesn't wait for Beau to catch up to him, but walks inside and grabs them a booth.

When the drinks are placed down and the silence stretches on, Richard finds that he's finally feeling the weight of his fatigue.

"You look like shit." Beau observes, cocking his head to the side which is oddly enduring.

Richard swallows his biting comeback and settles for playing with a straw. “Rough week.”

“Good excuse,” Beau replies, sounding disinterested.

The food comes, hot and the smell is mouth-watering. Richard watches across the table as Beau inhales his meal of steak and potatoes with all the fixing when he can barely stand to nibble a few bites of his own. After several minutes, he gives up trying to eat and instead stares dejectedly at the table top, drinking his diet Coke. Beau cleans his plate, and Richard asks to take his home in a to go box.

Throwing some money on the table, they both leave the diner, and when he checks the time, he realizes it’s almost three in the morning.

The drive to Beau’s house is longer than he remembers it being before. The windows are rolled down to let in a fresh breeze. He can smell pine and maple sap trees, hear the crickets and the cicada rule the night.

He drives languidly, not too eager to return home, enjoying the serene atmosphere. When he sees the Blackwell’s house crest the hilltop, he stops at the side, cutting the engine and leaning back in his chair. Christ, he’s so tired. What he wouldn’t give for a few undisturbed moments of blissful sleep.

*A deal is a deal*—Richard thinks snidely. Shit, his limbs feel like anchors, and eventually his bloodshot eyes close, and he

waits expectantly.

Luckily, he doesn't have to wait long. There is a light shuffling beside him, a belt buckle or a seat belt. Richard isn't entirely sure. It takes seconds for him to feel the insurmountable warmth on his cock. It floods his core with an intense rhyme that he can't place.

A quick groan, a hiss, and his eyes are rolling in his head. There's a delicious slurping sound, heavy breathing, and tugs that makes his skin prick with desire.

*"Fuck."*

That word again. This time it's whispered in ecstasy. Richard has found nirvana, pure and simple as that. It's blinding lights, wet and sweltering with hard strokes, lightly scraping teeth, and red rosy lips.

It's all one big fucking deliberate mistake he makes.

Hands twist and coil in dark messy curly hair. Mouth flung open in a mock scream that will never pass his vocal cords. It's so *very* wrong, yet vanity won't allow him to feel bad about this.

It's been a long time coming.

That night he found Beau walking down the familiar bleak streets, he knew exactly what he was doing. Watching him in the interrogation room, his eyes coveting the way that cigarette easily slid between his lips.

He knew what Beau's nighttime occupation was; he's always

known.

Richard wasn't a cop for nothing.

"Shit!" he gasps.

A strong yank on his balls leaves him paralyzed, and the temptation grows too deep. Suddenly he's staring down, watching Beau suck his cock like a fucking pro. His mouth instantly goes dry; he feels he might explode because he's never seen anything so beautiful in his entire life. The sight of his pale dick sliding between Beau's full lips, spit and saliva leaving a trail, nearly tips him over, but Beau has him hovering at the edge not quite there but painfully close.

Richard's gotten blow jobs before but they were nothing like this—*nothing so catastrophic*.

A stiff strike of Beau's tongue and Richard erupts. Bursting and flying sky-high, tensing and expanding, blinded by white lights and electric shockwaves of unrelenting pleasure. Beau drinks all of it dutifully like he was born to do it. When it's over, Richard feels like jelly, he doesn't hear the car door open and his companion slips out, but instantaneously falls into a dangerous sleep, right near the Blackwell's property.

## Chapter 6

**For a week he sleeps like the dead.**

It's the best sleep he has in years, and even Lana compliments the progression of his therapy, smiling proudly at him. Richard didn't go to therapy, but he placates her anyway, graciously nodding along. She can't help question why he's been coming home later and later almost every night this week. Richard winces slightly, and he has no choice but to deflect by stating that the case is requiring longer hours.

It's a little white lie.

One that he feels conscience-stricken over, but she can never find out what his nocturnal activities include. When he's in his office at work, he is finally allowed some quiet time to think and reflect, and he almost breaks down from the culpability.

He never thought he'd cheat on his wife.

Never once had any desire to. It's just Beau is...well, he's not entirely sure *what* he is, but it's making Richard confused. The thoughts in his head are jumbled and mixed up. Sometimes he feels like being sucked into a vortex.

In the end he doesn't get help.

He does however, do everything in his power to spend as

much time with his family as he can. Kyle and Ida both squeal when he takes them to the zoo and then out for ice cream. Lana hasn't stopped smiling all day, and Richard feels like God should drop an anvil from the sky to crush him.

He feels like scum.

As they drive home, he grips the wheel tighter than necessary. "Are you alright?" Lana's voice startles him, and he nearly flinches when she touches his arm.

Richard eyes her warily, breathing in through his nose. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"You haven't said much all day," She says, resting her hand on his forehead for a brief examination of his temperature.

"Just...thinking..." Richard finishes lamely.

"About?" Lana edges.

Richard can't tell her; he knows that. How can he say that he was thinking about how disgusted she would be if she found out he picked up a prostitute?

An underage prostitute whom he bought a meal so that he would suck him off in his car later.

The transaction between Beau and Richard has been clinical at best, but still it wasn't something he was ever going to tell her. A painful lurch in his gut reminds him of his children sleeping in

the back and his doting wife sitting next to him.

All the things he can stand to lose if anyone ever finds out.

“The case,” Richard mumbles, shifting in his chair. It’s not the answer she’s hoping for. It takes only a moment before she slumps back into her chair, sighing “Oh.” As far as Richard can tell, the conversation is over. Lana has gone back to staring out the window.

It’s utter anguish, but he endures every second.

~

Beau has a black eye.

It’s grotesque and makes his stomach turn in the worst way imaginable. Beau is leaning against a brick wall outside of a bar, smoking. Richard is off duty with Houston and Tanya doing some last-minute shopping for Hiromi's birthday party.

When they exit the store, Richard's eyes hone in on Beau across the street, and he doesn't hesitate to make up some lame excuse to get away from his friends.

They nod happily and pat him on the shoulder. He waits until they are long gone before crossing the street.

Beau flicks away the cigarette bud, pinning Richard with one of his infamous Blackwell glares.

“The fuck you want, Sherriff?”

It's then, under the streetlights, that he sees the bruise. The discoloration turns his skin an ugly purplish color, spreading to his cheekbone and edging closer to his nose. Richard can't stop the rage. It is hot and quick, like a flare. "What happened to your face?" The words gush out of his mouth, and then he's touching Beau's chin, tilting it to get a better look.

"Stop." Beau flinches, then knocks his hand away. "Get your hands off me."

The word is meant to insult him, but it doesn't. Instead, it makes him feel sullen. "Come on. I'll drive you home."

"I'm not going *home* with you," Beau grunts.

The mulish look in his eyes causes Richard to pause a moment. Richard knows he made a mistake. He should never have had Beau suck him off. It makes his heart twist just thinking about it. Yet, it's all he can think about.

*Whores in moonlight.*

He knew prostitution was a thing in these parts...never once did he consider he would be taking part of it.

*Is he a cop in name only?*

He doesn't want to, but he knows he'll have to because threats aren't something, he frequently indulges in.

Self-preservation. It's better to deny than to take responsibility. Because he is 100% responsible.



“You can go home with me now, or I’ll grab my police cruiser and we can drive home later.”

“Fuck you. You want a bitch at your beck and call? Well, it isn't me. The next time I suck you off you better be paying.”

“Are you soliciting an officer for sex?” Richard asks. “I can drag your ass to the station right now for saying shit like that.”

“Do it.” Beau challenges. “Except you can’t. ‘Less you want to admit how much you enjoyed it with the rest of your cop buddies, or how you sought me out for a blow job in exchange for dinner.”

Richard seethes at the prelude of an ultimatum. This isn’t going well. Certainly not the way he was hoping for. Before he can spit something back, Beau is speaking again.

“You are all the same, ‘fucking pigs’ Creed used to call you. It’s so easy to go back to your white picket fence life and forget about everybody else.”

“That’s not true,” Richard defends adamantly. Beau’s simplistic analysis of his life grated on his nerves. How many sleepless nights did he have to endure case after case? Looking at gut-wrenching photos and agonizing how to catch the bad guys. “I made an oath to protect those who need it. Even when I’m off duty, I’m always on duty. I could never forget. Beau, sometimes things aren’t that simple.”

“You are not a very good listener,” Beau says irately.

Richard doesn't know what to think.

"Is it so damn hard to see what's in front of your face?"

By now, Richard is feeling befuddled by the entire conversation. It doesn't make any sense. He wants to pacify Beau's doubts about his adherence, but he knows it will fall on deaf ears. Instead, he stands, hand on his hip narrow hips, feeling like he's missing something. Beau's voice has remained harsh, raspy from the smoke, but he's stepped forward, they aren't far away from each other.

To onlookers they might seem confrontational, ready to use their fists instead of words, but Richard knows differently. Beau's eyes betray a much sinister meaning. It isn't until he sees Mason exit the bar that the meaning becomes clear.

"Beau," Mason snaps, like striking a match.

The boy stares at him, and Richard at last realizes what Beau said without actually *using* the words.

Those large emerald eyes beseech him. He feels them clawing at him for help, and it is only after he watches Beau walk away with Mason and several of his slimy friends does he gain the overall message.

The thin, silk veil is lifted and now Richard Clayson can see.

## Chapter 7

**IT'S one of those days.**

The heat is sweltering, thick with humidity and the sun seems relentless. A day where there's a light breeze, not enough to cool him down but enough to remind him of the perspiration accumulating on his back.

Kyle and Ida play in the shade, lazily tossing a small ball back and forth, since it's too hot to do anything more than that. Lana has her gardening hat on, along with those hideous Crocs he loathes. It's a simple afternoon in the Clayson household. They ate pancakes this morning before going to church. He can still recall the disgusting taste of Lana's special mostly uncooked—pancakes she insists on making every Sunday morning.

He's at the grill flipping burgers and keeping an eye on the time.

Roy should be here any second, to yell at him or to talk shit about that new lawyer he's been seeing. Either way, Richard isn't looking forward to this visit. Mostly because Roy can read him like an open book, and he knows that if he says the wrong thing or looks the wrong way, Roy will know.

He'll see the betrayal.

The lust, greed, and sinful desire he has for a kid who will most likely end up like his older brother, a delinquent. It's so wrong, disgusting, and he hates himself for it, but he can't seem to stop. Beau has taken up a significant part of his mind, consuming it and *sprouting roots*.

At first, he had denied it, told himself that it was a phase, a passing infatuation that would soon end. But it didn't. As the weeks waned and his life consisted of the same mundane pattern, it only seemed to grow.

"Ouch!" He jerks his hand away from the grill, realizing too late that he has been burned.

"You never could grill properly," Roy says, coming to his aid and taking the spatula away. The wind blows his pitch-black hair across his face. "Go tend to your wounds, soldier."

Richard grunts and disappears into the kitchen to run cold water on the wound. The burn itself isn't bad. It hurts like a bitch but it's superficial and should heal in a few days.

Looking out the kitchen window, he watches Roy and Lana. He tosses her a beer, they chat cordially. Since high school, the three of them have been inseparable, and it continued well after the war and into their marriage.

He joins them, snatching another beer from the cooler. They continue with their conversation while he hangs back, not particularly eager to interrupt. Lana excuses herself to set the

table, calling Kyle and Ida to wash up and help.

“These are ‘bout done,” Roy says, closing the grill and setting the spatula down.

Richard nods, taking a long sip of his beer.

“How’re you doing, man?”

“Fine.” He gives Roy a sideways glance. “Why?”

He shrugs, using half his shoulder. “Don’t seem like it.”

“What does it *seem* like?”

“You tell me, brother,” Roy baits. “Look...”

*Here we go.*

“...There isn’t any way to say it, but to come straight out with it,” Roy says, tilting his head forward. “Now, things haven’t been right since you started this case. You’ve been prissy. Hell, half the time everyone at the office avoids you, I know it can be stressful. Believe me, brother, but....” He sighs, rubbing his forehead. “We’re supposed to be partners, like we’ve always been, but lately it seems like you’ve gone off on your own. Ignoring wise counsel and such. So why don’t you just tell me what’s going on? Is it Lana? The kids? Something’s been up with you, and it’s time we stop pretending.”

“I don’t know man.... have you ever thought of...being someone else?”

Roy frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know...just having something different...having something *more*..."

"More than what?" Roy laughs. "More than this? Man, I just waltz around in my uniform and women are ready to give it up in a matter of seconds. Pussy is served on a platter every night. There ain't nothing better than this."

*It would be easy, he thinks, to tell my best friend everything.*

Truly, he wanted to confess that he screwed around on his wife, his perfect wife that men would die for, in order to be with another man—a *kid*. Roy would side with him. Say it was a one-time thing, curiosity and such. Then they would never speak of it again. Occasionally Roy would look at him, questions burning in his eyes, but he'd stay silent.

*Except Beau is my secret.*

Those eyes, that body, those lips belong to him, and he doesn't feel like sharing them, especially with Roy, who sleeps with anything that has two legs. Instead, he scoffs, gripping his beer tightly.

"Like I said before. I'm fine, brother. I appreciate your concern. I do. But everything is right as rain." He lies.

One he tells out of necessity. Roy nods once, muttering something about getting a plate for the burgers before he retreats

inside.

He stands there for a moment, contemplating what to do next. Lana told Roy something. *What* he isn't exactly sure, but now he knows they are working together. Sooner or later they will ambush him. For his own good they'll say and impose restrictions. Don't work late. Drop the case. Take a break.

It will make him want to rebel.

Richard swipes the sweat off his forehead, gazing at the skyline with a troublesome look in his eyes.

A perfect house, a perfect life, a perfect lie.

## Chapter 8

### **A fiendish demon sits at the foot of his bed.**

He stares at its sickly pale skin, abnormally long limbs, and its dark red glowing eyes. The creature is all foaming canines and pointed ears, clawing desperately at his legs.

He shudders violently, gawking in disbelief at what is happening in his bedroom. In his home. At first, he questions his sanity. Then the demon lurches forward, talons scratch at his face, drawing blood.

*Save me*, it says, tearing him apart. *Save me*.

He wakes with a scream.

Lana is beside herself the next morning, wringing her hands and mumbling about therapy being a load of shit anyways. Ida is unusually fussy, and Kyle stays clear of his father in the morning, grabbing his lunch and heading to school immediately after breakfast.

Richard drinks his coffee black, mixing it with whiskey before he goes to work. He slept maybe two hours last night, and it shows. His normally brown curls were limp and listless, his icy glacier eyes hollow and sunken, his usually plump lips cracked and weathered. Despite all that he was still handsome. He clenched his chiseled jaw, fighting against the undertow.



His mood is brusque and profane when he enters the office. They scurry around him like rats, large groups leaping out of his way.

There's nothing new in Gary's case, which isn't surprising.

Hiromi breaks the news to him timidly, he can tell Hiromi would rather be chewing rusty nails. At noon, there's a call for a domestic dispute on King Street. He doesn't hesitate to jump into the police cruiser with Roy, his blood pumping with adrenaline.

A fury, a rage, something he's used to, becomes insoluble. Richard curls his fist around his M1911, a weapon he kept from the war. His face draws into a harsh grimace as they get closer to their destination. When they pull up into the driveway, he can tell shit has already hit the fan.

The screen door is hanging off its hinges, and Violet Canary is sitting on the steps sporting a busted lip. They get out of the car. Roy is already speaking softly to the little girl, telling her that everything is going to be okay and to wait in the car. She immediately does as he says. Violet's a good girl, barely twelve with long brown hair and a timid expression, but already Richard can tell she's strong.

"Calm down." Roy checks him first.

Richard wants to *scream* at him. Tell him to shut the fuck up, and that if it were his kids, he wouldn't be so damn calm. Instead, he glares at him, gritting his teeth because Roy will *never*

understand. It's a small town, everybody knows everybody.

Violet and Kyle happen to be in the same class and go to the same school.

Bernard Canary, nicknamed Bud, is the bane of Byromville.

Being the most miserable human being in existence next to Austin Blackwell and his low-life son Creed. He taints everything this town stands for. He can't count the number of times they've been called up here for domestic abuse charges. They are never filed, Callie Canary kept changing her story.

"Police!" Roy shouts through the door, and they both walk in.

Callie is on the couch. Both of her eyes are nearly swollen shut. And there's a large handprint around her neck. Her blonde hair is shaved into a buzz cut, and Richard knows that's only because Bud would tear it out, given half a chance. She attempts to stand but nearly falls back on the couch, gripping her side.

"Hey, Richard," she says, slightly hysterical. "Roy. What can I do for you?"

Roy levels her with a hard look. "Come on, Callie, you know why we're here. Got a call 'bout domestic abuse."

"Tell that damn Sheryl to keep out of my business," she bites back.

"Now, Callie—"

"Don't you 'now' me," she replies. "Y'all think you can come

into my house and start making assumptions. Bud never touched me, never laid a finger on me. I fell, you hear?”

Richard had enough of her lies, her denial, her delusions—*her everything*. A little girl was at risk, a child and someone who was very close to Kyle. Imagine the kind of dysfunction she will think is normal growing up like this. Daddy beating Mommy will be normal to her. Violence, blood, and tears will be all that little girl will ever know.

“Where is he?” His question slices through the thin argument.

Callie’s feigned bravado slips instantly. The question rattles her. Wringing her hands, she pauses, mouth stuttering to form words and body shaking with nervousness. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll say this and I’ll say it just once: You tell me where that sack of shit is right now, or else I’ll haul you down to the station on child negligence charges.”

Callie swallows, twitches, and stares at the rug for several minutes before muttering that he’s in the bedroom.

“Call for backup,” Richard grunts before taking off into the bedroom, drawing his gun and keeping close to the wall. He forces himself to remain steady, to not act irrationally, but his hand is shaking around his gun.

Bud isn’t *that* dangerous.

He’s just a mean old fat drunk who likes to beat his wife

occasionally. Richard doesn't want him in this town anymore. Not in his town. Polluting his air, his people. This isn't right, and he is going to do what he can to make it right. The bedroom door is wide open. He can see Bud's feet dangle off the edge of the bed.

A thought, more like an image, explodes across his vision. At that moment, he wants Bud dead, brains splattered around the wall, blood trailing down the giant hole in his skull. He wants that. *Craves to see it.* The nightmarish dreams come back full force, and all he can see is red. Stepping inside the room, he leans over Bud who snores loudly, like he doesn't have a care in the world.

Richard deliberates the law briefly. Not that it matters because he is the law, at least right now. Still, there are rules, protocols. However, the law isn't justice; it's ideal, it's power, and at this very moment, he has all the power he needs.

He points the gun, cocks it, the click like an explosion in the quiet house. Bud opens his eyes, slow and lazily, smacking his buggy lips.

"Get up."

Bud's eyes widen in horror. He makes an odd mewling sound, and he rises on the bed. "Get on the ground and don't move a fucking muscle."

The bastard smirks. "Ah, I see Callie has been running her mouth. Don't pay any mind to my little wife. She just fell down

the stairs again. Clumsy bitch has two left feet.”

Richard strikes, quick and fast like a cobra. He smashes the blunt end of his M1911 into the side of Bud’s face, relishing the sickening crunching sound it makes when metal meets flesh. The blow sends Bud flying from the bed, hurtling him onto the ground.

“You aren’t very good at listening.” Richard taunts, standing over his body. Bud curses, struggling to move, but his nose is gushing blood, and Richard can see he must have busted a blood vessel in his right eye.

“You’re under arrest.” He’s pushing Bud onto his stomach, slapping the cuffs on him. Roy and Isaac enter the room, both looking winded and puzzled. Bud is shouting about police brutality and suing them when he can get in touch with his lawyer, but Isaac is already hauling him out the door. The EMS team is already there tending to Violet and Callie, but this isn’t over. Richard storms over to Callie, shoving a piece of paper in her face.

“Sign it.”

“Richard, man, this isn’t the time,” Roy chastises him.

“Sign it,” he barks at Callie, making the woman jump.

She stares at the paper blankly, a delicate bird without feathers. Richard wants to grab her and shake her until her ears ring and teeth clatter. Instead, he holds it out, an olive branch she

better take; or so help him, he will drag her ass to prison right along with Bud's.

She signs.

He thunders out the front door, heart racing and his skin feeling tight. *What a rush*—the sight of blood, how it floods so thick and red. Bud's stunned, bruised, and battered face glares up at him hatefully. Serves him right for putting his hands on a woman.

Richard won.

This victory is sweet, tooth-achingly so. With this restraining order, Bud won't be able to go near his wife and child again.

Old, passive Richard could have never gotten this done.

New Richard, well, he doesn't give a shit anymore. He feels high, like he could climb a mountain, jump from skyscrapers, and punch Gandhi in the face.

Roy trails up beside him, head hanging low, giving him that look of serious dissatisfaction. The same one he sees in Lana's eyes every day. "Man.... I don't even know where to begin."

"Don't," Richard says because fuck him and his superiority. "Either you have my back or get off it."

Not willing to wait for a reply, he gets into his car. For all he cares, Roy can walk back to the city. He smiles on his way to the station.

The demon moves from his back and sits on his shoulder.

## Chapter 9

**Drinking and driving isn't something cops should do.**

Especially Sheriffs, but Richard is feeling unabashedly reckless tonight. It might essentially have something to do with the fact that he has all night to do whatever he wants.

The kids are in bed, Lana is knocked out cold from her yoga class this evening, and he is supposed to be going home from work. Instead, he drives with the windows down, relishing the summer breeze fluttering through his wavy hair.

Alcohol is effervescent in his veins.

Richard may have had a beer or two after work. Then several more when he realized that he couldn't go home. Hell, at some point he stops at the liquor store to get another six-pack and sits in the parking lot of Chuck E. Cheese to drink some more.

Flashbacks of the war simmer in his brain. Crawling in the mud, death, destruction decay. *Fuck*—he'd rather pretend the whole thing never happened. He tries to.

Inebriated: check. Delirious: check. Horny-as-fuck: double-check.

As the days went on, his relationship with Lana deteriorates rapidly and his friendship with Roy goes sour. It isn't that he



doesn't love them anymore because he does, unconditionally, but this thing inside him is eating him alive.

He can't sleep most days without seeing that damn kid.

Smoke curls around his mouth, face half-secluded in darkness and those eyes black with mischief. Beau is an enigma, one that he desperately wants to pull apart with his lips, mouth, and teeth. It is so wrong, twisted. He is barely seventeen, just a few years older than Kyle.

This obsession is dangerous, he knows that. If anybody ever finds out, his reputation will be ruined, his livelihood destroyed. All for some hillbilly kid with a tight ass and a talented mouth.

Just a quick taste, a lick, a suck, a *fuck*, and then he'll be cured. The demon will leave. Richard is sure of it. He needs to scratch this itch, quench his thirst, and then things will fall back into place.

He'll stop daydreaming about those eyes, that hair, and that boy.

The road is dark, winding and deviating. It doesn't take a genius to figure out where he's going. He can only see one person in his mind.

At some point, he should acknowledge this turn of events.

His guts twist uncomfortably whenever he thinks of Beau, but he can't seem to stop. It all becomes irrelevant after a while

because his thoughts blur together into two major compartments: things about Beau and things not about Beau. The distinction becomes obscured until all things are about Beau: what he's doing, where he's going, and if he's okay.

The resolution to ignore whatever sickness is brewing inside him is almost instinctual. He is a creature of habit after all. Change isn't commonplace.

When he rounds the corner, he slams on the brakes. His heart is palpitating in his chest as the boy in question is lurking the streets again. Everything is practically deserted when he pulls up. Beau is wearing army pants with combat boots, paired with a black sleeveless shirt, exposing his arms in a way that makes Richard feel vastly uncomfortable.

The passenger door opens, closes, and Richard drives on.

He's got nowhere in mind so he continues to follow the road wherever it takes them. A dull silence has hijacked the car. Now they are both held hostage to it. Richard sneaks' glances over at Beau. The bruise on his eye has all but vanished, but the boy is tense, staring out the window and gnawing on his thumbnail.

"Two blocks and you still can't ask me." Beau's voice pierces the air. "Fucking pussy."

He stares back at him, perplexed. "Ask you what?"

Beau gives him a side-eye. "Ask me."

“I don’t understand.” Richard frowns.

“Ask me.”

“What?”

“Fucking ask me already.”

It’s there.

The answer, but it’s muddled in his brain, dancing at the tip of his tongue, blurring at the edges of his peripheral vision. Not far, just out of reach. He blanches, mouth making a slight wheezing noise as he inhales and exhales.

It’s coming. He blurts, barfs, and vomits—

“How much?”

*Spiraling down, down, down.*

His words are crisp, clear leaving absolutely no room for misinterpretation.

Isn’t this why he was seeking Beau out? Why he’s been searching for him for two weeks? No, it’s sick and wrong and against everything Richard stands for, but he can’t seem to stop himself.

He wants this, more than anything.

His hands grip the steering wheel. They are slightly trembling with the exhilaration charging through his veins, like an engine revving up. Beau is pensive, half of his face shadowed in darkness.

His lip twitches, he lights a cigarette.

Richard fidgets, and they both ignore the growing implications of what's going to happen next.

“A hundred for one night.” His response is slow.

“And I only accept cash. Drive to the motel off Highway 95.”

Richard floorsit.

## Chapter 10

HEREAFTER he shall admit he was careless.

Not purposefully, of course not. Nevertheless, if there were things he could do again, rewind time and whatnot, this place would have been one of them.

When they arrive, the sign is blinking neon blue, several of the letters don't light up, so instead, it spells O and L, which makes absolutely no sense. But he guesses the general public understands what it's supposed to say.

The parking lot is empty, the gravel makes the ride bumpy as they pull into space. Beau gets out first, pulling keys from his back pocket.

The room has already been booked.

Richard is apprehensive when he follows Beau inside. To his utter lack of surprise, the place is by all accounts filthy. A light layer of grime covers the windows and furniture. A simple queen-sized bed, a black leather chair that is held together by duct tape and a television that has a hole through the glass center with a flimsy paper attached to it that says *Out of Service*.

The place is sordid.

It makes his skin crawl, his muscle tense, and fills him with dread as he gazes at the rug that has a variety of questionable

stains. The owner must keep all of his rooms in the same slovenly fashion, and it hits him that this must be where Beau conducts his business. Where he brings his clients, to engage in all manner of beastly behavior. At first, Richard is offended, to his very core aggrieved, that he is brought here. To this place, to this level of degradation where he must share the same bed as those monsters did with Beau.

He isn't like *them*.

Not in the slightest. Richard is a good man. As an upstanding citizen, he doesn't partake in aberrancy. Damn Beau for thinking he is. Damn him for bringing him here to this place. All at once, his confidence is waterlogged.

He loathes it and immediately wants to go back to the sanctuary of his car and forget this ever happened. And he almost does. He almost turns right around and walks out the door. However, Beau is already removing his boots, and it makes Richard's throat go dry.

This siren has started singing. The paralysis seizes his arms and legs as the musical voice emits from the sky. At first, he allows himself to let his gaze linger. It's okay here. In this place, in this disheveled room is a sight to behold him.

A rare beauty.

That strikes at his heart so swiftly that the wound is nefariously fatal. He bleeds a crimson mulberry of silk, drenching

his clothes and blackening the carpet. Beau turns to face him, unaware of the turmoil he is in.

“Where do you want to start?”

The question hangs in the air. Where should they start? He’s never done this. Doesn’t have the slightest clue of what goes into where and who does what.

He settles for a shrug.

“First time?” Beau needlessly asks.

Richard nods.

“Well, on account of you being a cop and all, I figured the first time should be for free. Usually I tell them to put the money on the table. I have two rules. No spanking, which includes hitting or any of that kinky Daddy shit. And you can’t fuck me raw.”

“Only two?” Richard can’t help but inquire.

“Yeah.”

At that moment, he wants to chastise him. To tell him that he should at least have fifty rules, plus a lookout if things ever went wrong. Hell, he shouldn’t be here. He should be tucking Kyle in bed.

This dingy motel shouldn’t be his night.

The guilt comes back full force, and suddenly he sees past Beau’s physical appearance. This isn’t right. He’s just a kid, barely

legal, and here he is propositioning a cop so he won't go to jail. Richard swallows down his self-disgust.

"How old are you?"

Beau regards him. "Nineteen."

"Don't fucking lie to me," Richard utters so savagely that it causes Beau to start.

There is the silence that follows.

Now he's angry, furious at the situation and his brewing sickness. He's the fucking adult. This is everything he swore to fight against. This isn't right—*it never was*.

"Seventeen," Beau finally mumbles.

"Christ."

"It doesn't matter none," Beau says adamantly. "I won't tell anybody. It is not like anyone would believe me."

"That is beside the point." Richard is revolted, his stomach turning because Beau thinks so little of himself. "I am nearly three times your age."

"So?" Beau challenges. "It is just sex. Don't mean nothing."

"It means everything." It does.

He knows that now.

Before it was nothing, meager skin slapping against skin, flesh



penetrating flesh, but now it's something entirely different. Beau isn't some faceless boy that he can use to satisfy his desire, and Lana isn't some witch he is tethered to. She is the mother of his children, his wife.

"Are we doing this or not?" Beau is suddenly impatient; he can sense a shift in the atmosphere.

Everything that was blurred before suddenly becomes focused. The winds have changed, blowing, howling in a different direction. Briefly he thinks of Kyle, imagines him tucked in bed or playing with his action figures. That's where he should be now, with his kids and his kids with their dad.

"No. We're not."

It's a sobering reply.

Beau doesn't immediately respond. He does, however, give him a devious smirk. Then he flips his dark curly hair out of his eyes and his pink tongue peeks out to lap at his bottom lip. "Afraid you might like it?"

The resolve he had before is precipitously crumbling.

He realizes all too late that it was built on quicksand. That is all heightened by the fact that Beau is fully aware of his sexual yearning, the white-hot heat flashing in his veins.

"Yes."

The truth is ultimately what he decides.

Knowing full well the implications of what will happen if he does like it. Beau will take on a new client, one with power and position that will have to look the other way while he procures more clients. It will be an endless, addictive cycle of him paying for sex. Even if it is with a vixen that will make all of his wildest dreams come true, he can't.

For the sake of his wife and children, he must make a decision. He knows if he were to have Beau, here and now bent over, begging and open for him, that he will never be able to leave.

"Then go." Beau jerks his head towards the door. "Haven't got time for scared pussies anyway," he mutters. "Might as well get someone who's paying."

Everything happens in an instant.

Richard lunges forward, grabbing Beau's shirt and slamming him against the wall. There are light tremors in his hands. The ire he feels so violently is back full force until he is consumed.

"You bring anyone else here, and I will haul your ass down to the station so fast you won't know what fucking hit you."

Beau looks surprised, his eyes widen with shock and gleam with something else, something primal. "Is that right, Officer?"

Richard seethes at the derisive tone Beau uses.

He doesn't want to see it, doesn't want to picture Beau with those men. They are ravenous, evil and despicable men, touching

him, staining him, with their dirty hands and perversions. His heart clenches in his chest. He can't bear it.

All at once, Richard is moving his hands. They glide from clenching Beau's shirt and move up towards his neck. Curiously, his hand traces the long column of his smooth skin until he is cupping Beau's jaw.

Beau swallows anxiously, his mouth slightly parted, and Richard can't help but thumb his thin lips. The air has thinned around them. Richard can scarcely breathe because his own need is surging through his veins. One look into his emerald eyes, slanted with sensuality and passion, and Richard finds himself falling, plummeting headfirst into a pit, filled with brazen fire.

"God help me."

Their lips clash together. It's electric and electrifying.

Setting all of his nerve endings alight. It's brutal and unrestrained, more tongue and teeth colliding in an unholy battle of sin. When their lips connect in a heated graze of fervor, his inside solidifies.

This kiss is a harsh concoction of impetuosity, ardor, and vengeful hunger. His tongue is rough, demanding entry, his beard scraping against the soft flesh. Beau grunts, yielding powerlessly to him.

Richard devours him, searing-hot hands gripping his delicate face and neck, thumbs pressing tightly against each pressure

point until Richard nicks his lower lip with his teeth.

Beau draws back immediately, stunned.

Richard is possessed, staring at the drop of blood gathering at the tip of his thin lips. He's never seen anything so magnificent in his whole life. Before he can stop himself, he wrenches forward and licks it away.

When he pulls back, Beau is staring at him, terrified.

Richard knows what he must look like. Lips stained with blood, a wolfish grin threatening to split his face, but this is how things are meant to be.

This kiss has opened a gateway to ecstasy.

One that he isn't eagerly willing to close just yet, and before Richard can fully regain composure, he swoops back in, mouth claiming his. A few keening moans, a slight airy gasp strung from Beau has Richard soaring on the backs of eagles.

He plunges his tongue deeper, lapping, drinking from the wound callously and letting the blood flow into his mouth. It's so fucking hot; the rush and having Beau pressed up against him tightly. They pant together, Beau clinging to his broad shoulders as they kiss like wild men dying of thirst.

Richard curls his arm, winding it around the kid's narrow waist and moving to suck on his neck. Beau is a mess beneath him, quivering and breathless, digging his nails into the back of

his shirt. Suctioning his lips around the toffee flesh, Richard sucks vigorously, desperate to claim, to mark with a mantra running rampant in his head: *mine, mine, mine—*

*Ring, ring.*

The ringing of his phone puts everything to a grinding halt.

Richard groans inwardly, burying his face further in the sweet scent of cigarettes, musk, and something distinctly Beau. He hurriedly reaches into his back pocket and takes out his cell phone with every intention of throwing it across the room until he sees the name of the caller displayed.

Lana.

She is no longer asleep and will be wondering where he is. Richard moves, only slightly, just to put some space between them so he can gather his thoughts. The taste of metallic and iron are still caressing his tongue. He has captured every sigh and moan emitted from Beau's lips.

Richard feels delirious.

They are both panting. Beau's lip is still bleeding, and Richard is fighting everything within him not to attack, lick, and imbibe at the wound.

The demon is angry.

Rattling against the confines of its cage, it is riotous to escape. However, his will is stronger, and with all his might, he keeps the

creature confined and releases Beau. To distract him, he goes into the bathroom and returns with some toilet paper. Beau accepts it and gently dabs his bottom lip.

“I’ll take you home,” Richard mumbles.

He waits in the car while Beau locks the motel door. The ride into town is silent, and it suddenly occurs to Richard that he doesn’t want this night to end. Not like this. Instead, he pulls into the local diner, and they get a booth together.

After they get their food, Beau eats insatiably across from him, like a starving man having his last meal. Richard watches and finally asks a question he already knows the answer to.

“Beau...is that the first meal you’ve had all day?”

He stills, right in the middle of shoving several French fries into his mouth. Beau’s eyes lower to the table, and he gives a slight nod.

“Okay,” Richard says. “Okay.”

Before they leave, he orders another burger to go, and they drive towards the Blackwell residence.

“You won’t, you know...arrest me or nothing?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know...I guess I like having you around.”

Beau snorts a laugh, gazing out the windshield, and Richard finds that he feels content. They sit there for a few moments, just being together. It's nice, serene if he was to think about it, and he hasn't felt this stress-free in a long time.

"See you 'round," Beau says.

"Wait."

Richard stops him because this can't go on. Even though he hates it, can't stand the idea of Beau being with those men, he knows that for Beau to keep out of trouble, he needs to occupy his time with something else.

"I'll make you a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"Well," Richard replies. "I don't much like the idea of you walking 'round these streets late at night...whatever is going on with Mason...I know it isn't pretty. Have you considered protective custody? If you are willing to work with me, we can get you back on track, starting with a good home, new identity and you can start going to your classes regularly—"

"No deal."

"What?"

"I said no fucking deal."

"Why not?"

“First off, because I’m not a fucking snitch.” Beau fumes. “Second off, it’s easy for you to come down here all high and mighty, thinking you are doing me a favor by buying me shit and talking sweet, saying you’ll save me or whatever. I’ve heard all that shit before and do you know where it gets me? Right back to where I am now.”

“Look,” Richard says, trying to abate the situation. “I am not speaking from a position of privilege. I want what’s best for you. You’re a bright kid with a promising future. Now, let’s see—”

“A future doing what? Sucking cock and taking it up the ass?”

Richard cringes at his blunt tone.

“You don’t know my future, so why don’t you let me be?”

“Beau—”

“This is all I’m good for, anyhow.”

The passenger door slams in his face. Richard sits for a moment, sullen, as he watches Beau walk up the road towards his house.

Then it hits him, and he wants to punch himself for being so blind.

Of course, Beau doesn’t want to go into protective custody. Mason probably threaten to kill him or worse if he ever leaves. This is a textbook study of the victim not wanting to leave their abuser.



Richard sighs deeply, shaking his head in frustration.

There has to be another solution, another way to keep Beau off the streets and to fall into the hands of some of those heinous men. He needs to figure out what.

## Chapter 11

### **Time and space elude him.**

Richard is buoyant, he slips into different dimensions, drifting like a cumbersome crab against the waves of the shore. At some point during this voyage, he manages to trip, stumbling blindly into a black hole. There he descends into the abyss of besmirching despair, hatred, and whatnot because that is where he must reside with the demon.

Richard doesn't want to time travel anymore.

It's not as glamorous as they make it out to be.

After he decides that such an odyssey is futile, the hole spits him out, tossing him back to earth where he must live out his sentence. Richard comes to his senses. At some point he fell asleep in his car at the Blackwell residence.

When Richard returns home his wife is raving mad. He enters the door after four am and, at first doesn't think much of it, of the shadow hulking behind Lana's lean figure. The grotesque, lanky being hovering menacingly behind her doesn't startle him in the slightest.

He doesn't question his sanity, doesn't even blink. Instead, he heads straight to bed, ignoring her cries of outrage.

The next few weeks move fast.

Jumping, twisting, and hopping in such a crisscross manner, that he isn't sure they are happening. He doesn't sleep much. If he sleeps, he dreams, and dreams are decidedly the enemy. The fear is turning him inside out and outside in.

His mind wanders to Beau.

He can't help but wonder what would have happened if that night had gone differently. If and only if he had done what he wanted to do; which, if he was quite honest with himself, alarms him. His corrupt fingers are caressing virginal flesh, so sweet and ripe like a peach. Fuck, he can almost taste it.

Beau will be spread out before him, begging and pleading while he pounds into him mercilessly from above. It's brutal, the act itself because at some point in his mind Beau's lustful cries turn into horrific screams. There's more blood than there should be and more cum than necessary.

Richard jerks awake, stupefied.

Perspiration runs down his face and back as the demon smirks, curled up in the corner. The house is quiet when he grabs breakfast and leaves for work. It suddenly occurs to him that Lana has been spending a lot of time at her parents' house with the kids.

When he walks into work, he can see that everybody is already assembled in the briefing room. Richard stops mid-stride, not

sure why they are there, since he doesn't remember calling a meeting. A little bewildered, he steps inside the room, giving Roy, who happens to be standing in the middle, a questioning look. "What's going on?"

"Come inside, brother." Roy inclines his head.

Richard does, puts his case files on the desk, and observes everyone else. They are all standing around, waiting for whatever is going to come next.

"We just heard from Bud's lawyer," Roy says, addressing everyone in the room. "He wants to file a case against the force, some bullshit charge of police brutality."

He clenches his jaw, fist automatically curling. "Is that right?"

Roy nods, confirming it. "That's not all..."

"What else?" Richard probes.

"I searched the Canary residence after Bud was arrested and Callie took Violet to that woman's shelter...after they were settled Callie started to talk..." Roy sighs deeply. "Look, this gets ugly. We need to follow all the necessary rules and regulations from the UCR...but she is willing to testify against Bud, granted she gets full immunity..."

"From *what*?" Richard asks slowly.

"I was able to get her statement, but she says that Bud is heavily involved in human trafficking."

There are gasps around the room.

Richard can feel his stomach turning.

“What else?” He forces out.

There’s more; he knows there has to be more. He should have just killed the bastard like he wanted to.

“Turns out he’s been having secret meetings, going to events and hosting them at their house. I went over to the Canary residence just to verify her claim and she’s right. On his computer are monthly subscriptions, dates, times and locations. Although the, names that are used are under an alias, I personally believe that Bud is deeply involved in this. Hiromi here is our tech-savvy guy, so he managed to hack into the account. It turns out it’s a dummy account, but the information given isn’t hard to trace back to the source...however, given the content, I reckon there’s a possibility it might be local.”

“What the fuck?” Isaac explodes. “What do you mean *local*? Like we have a human trafficking ring right under our fucking noses local?”

“Yeah.” Roy rubs his head. “That’s what I mean.”

Chaos erupts.

Everyone speaks at one, a rapid fire of chatter that reminds him of chickens clucking, and in the midst of all of this, Richard is lost. This thing is happening, right in his backyard, and he didn’t

know about it. He thinks of his kids. Holy fuck, it very well could have been them. He wants to run home, check on Lana and the kids.

The panic is palpable. They are all afraid; he can nearly smell it, that stench that is drifting into the air and so strong it stings his nostrils.

“There is one more thing.” Hiromi clears his throat. “I did some digging on Gary’s computer...I found the same websites...”

*“Jesus Christ!”*

Fuck. He’s known Gary for years or at least he thought he did. This is beyond disturbing and all kinds of messed up.

“Good work you two,” Richard says to them. “The problem now is the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program. It is their job to help overcome the significant challenges to understanding the prevalence of human trafficking, and provide policymakers with an official tool to understand the scope, nature and distribution of the crime. We have to inform the UCR program to help begin collecting information in the Summary Reporting System and the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) about what we just found out. I suggest appointing a task force. We divide and conquer. We need names, addresses and all the people involved. Can Callie give us all that?”

“Negative,” Roy responds. “She doesn’t know who is involved, but her story checks out and I reckon if we dig deeper, we will

find out more information.”

“Why not search the database?” Tanya chimes in. “This process first allowed us to identify if human trafficking victims or perpetrators who are identified by the police are identified in other data systems. We will have a wider variety for searching for perpetrators. Since this is local, many of those people might have a record already. This is obviously critical for determining areas where double counting may exist if databases were separately used for estimation of the prevalence of human trafficking.”

“Wait a second,” Hiromi says hastily. “Isn’t anyone going to talk about how utterly fucked we are? I mean, lack of training aside. I don’t even know where to begin. We would need to study sites, have more extensive training for specialized human trafficking investigators implemented, and basic awareness training for some non-specialized officers through the academy or in-service training.”

“That’s why I am putting you in charge of the task force.” Richard grunts. “Alright, now Hiromi has volunteered, we need to focus on evidence. Human trafficking cases require evidence of force, fraud, or coercion, it is critical the victims are able to provide information about the commercial sex or labor operations that can be corroborated by law enforcement. This often requires victims to provide detailed information about the exploiter and their activities.”

“We’ll get those fuckers sure enough,” Isaac says confidently.

“My suspicion is that Gary either was in way over his head or he wanted out. Either way those fuckers aren’t getting away with what they did.”

“What is the link?” Tanya asks pensively. “How did Gary get mixed up with human trafficking? What did he gain from it? Was he coerced? Is he victim or preparator?”

“Excellent questions! Tanya, I want you to do a full sweep of Gary’s belongings. I want to know who he was in contact with before he died and why, check the phone records.” Richard says rapidly.

They don’t have time for this.

Precious seconds are ticking away, and each minute they waste, the criminals who did this are escaping. Richard doesn’t have the luxury of showing his true emotions. He wants to weep for those people, sob buckets of salty sapphires.

Now isn’t the time.

“Okay listen the fuck up,” Richard demands.

The conversations stop immediately. Silence cuts through the air as he stands tall and firm in the middle of the room, furious and stunning like the God of Mars, naked and ready for battle. They don’t need morose words and soothing phrases; they need power, direct action.

“Roy,” Richard says. “I want you and Isaac all over the crime



scene, sweep the entire fucking residence. I want statements from all the neighbors surrounding the area.” Richard spins suddenly. “Houston, you will personally handle the case with Bud’s lawyer and make sure that fucker isn’t aware of what we have on him. Report back to me with all the information you have. Get moving.”

They all jump, each of them running to their respective posts and positions while Richard moves like a hurricane to his office. Once the door is safely closed, he screams, tossing his papers across the room, knocking everything he can reach off his desk. The suppressed wrath he kept locked up and chained is thrashing within, and he reacts instantaneously, slamming his fist into the wall several times.

The demon has found a way out, crawling from his mouth, splitting his face in two. Richard braces his hands against the desk, head hanging low and covered in shadow. This is how it was always going to be. He knows that now. The demon cannot be inhibited any longer; it must be set free. One cannot live without the other. There will be no reconciliation, no atonement for his kind, no reprehension or absolution.

There will be a river of mayhem and blood.

The noise causes Roy to knock on the door before entering the room. “Richard? Are you okay?”

Richard composes himself, panting heavily, lip curling into a snarl.

“Whoever did this, whoever thought they could come into our town and corrupt our people with their filth, must be out of their minds to fuck with us.”

## Chapter 12

**RICHARD dreams he is surrounded by fruit.**

Mountains of lush oranges, pears, pomegranates, grapes, pineapples everything his heart desires. He doesn't waste time; hastily indulging in anything he can get his hands on. He gorges avariciously, stuffing his face and chewing with such vigor his jaw begins to ache.

The juices drip from his lips; each bite better than the last. The texture is wonderful, sweet, so delicious he can barely control himself. But things turn stale. The fruits grow rancid on his tongue. It's not long until his throat is blistering. No matter how much juice is squeezed from the fruits, he is still parched.

A shiny apple catches his eye.

This he can tell isn't an ordinary apple. It is ruby red, magnificent against the rays of the sun, and it stands alone in its singularity. Richard crawls through the mountain of fruits, crushing some with his heels to get to this one apple. When he is within reach, he snatches it quickly, brutishly taking a bite. It melts on his tongue, the decadent juice alone quenching his thirst. It is only after he draws back, gazing triumphantly at his prize, does he realize that the apple isn't shiny at all, but a pasty yellowish purple.

The inside is brimming with puss, bright blue fungus, and black worms.

Richard feels his stomach wrench.

The beautiful fruit transforms into a repulsive wasteland, filled with flies, beetles, and maggots swarming everywhere.

He wakes, floundering in his sheets and inhaling a sharp breath. The remnants of the dream shake him to the core, but instead of dwelling on it, he pushes it aside, cataloguing it for another day.

These horrid dreams are so frequent he's become almost desensitized to them. They range, of course, from most grotesque to least. This dream in particular is on the lowest scale.

Sunlight streams through the window, and Lana is fast asleep beside him. With a quick glance at the clock, he realizes that it's after seven am. It's Saturday, he's got the rest of the day to spend with the kids.

Richard crawls out of bed, brushes the taste of rotten fruit from his mouth and goes downstairs to start breakfast. Kyle is the first one at the table, blurry-eyed and intolerably famished.

"Can we go fishing today, Dad?" he asks, devouring the eggs Richard places in front of him. "Patrick says his dad takes him all the time."

Richard hates fishing.

It's boring, tedious, and he can't catch a damn thing.

"Ask your mother."

"But she'll say no!" Kyle protests.

Richard sips his coffee, deliberating for a moment. It's been a while since spending time with his son, and they are long overdue for father-son bonding. "If she says no, then I'll convince her."

"If who says no?" Lana asks, coming downstairs with Ida.

"Mom," Kyle starts. "Dad and I want to go fishing today."

"No," Lana replies immediately.

"Why?"

"Because Bonnie Armstrong is going to tutor you today, and you promised to get a better mark on your math that's why, hun," Lana responds, placing Ida in her high chair.

"She came last week, and I did well on my math quiz." Kyle bemoans. "Please. I promise I'll do better, just this once!"

"I said no, Kyle," Lana says sternly. "Finish your food. She'll be here shortly."

"Dad." Kyle beseeches staring at him.

"Lana..." he begins. "I did promise him we would spend the day together."

"You made promises without consulting me?" she bites back.

“Don’t make me out to be the bad guy here, Richard.”

“I’m not,” he says, scratching his chin. “Well, I reckon it’s been a while since we’ve spent some time together—”

“You would, if you were here more,” she snaps, tending to a now fussy Ida.

“That’s not what I meant.” Richard abates. “How ‘bout we forgo the tutoring this week? Or postpone it? If Bonnie agrees to come, then we can go fishing. Deal?”

“Fine,” Lana agrees begrudgingly. “I’ll call her and see what I can do. Go get dressed now, and we will talk about this later.”

Kyle leaps from the table happily, running upstairs to his room to get ready. Richard leans against the counter sipping his coffee, steadily ignoring the look Lana gives him.

“It isn’t right,” she finally says.

“What isn’t? Letting the boy have fun every once in a while?”

“He should be focused on his studies,” Lana hisses. “Now he thinks he can slack off just because his daddy says it’s okay.”

“What do you want me to do? Go back on my promises?”

“Just talk to me about it first,” Lana snaps. “If you had, you would have known he had tutoring today.”

“You’re right,” Richard concedes. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” Lana presses, her face turning

bright red. "I want you to do better."

There it is that look of dissatisfaction he loathes. He nods, coming to the slow realization that nothing he ever does will be enough. They finish their breakfast in silence, except for Ida's gurgling sounds.

Richard showers and grabs his fishing rod from the garage. Kyle is ready to go, sitting shotgun before the car is even fully loaded.

"Ready?" he asks when he gets in the truck.

"Born ready, Dad."

## Chapter 13

### **Things don't go as smoothly as planned.**

First, Richard forgot the fishing bait at home, so he has to run to the store to buy some. Then he makes several wrong turns to the lake and gets them lost for two hours. By then, Kyle is seething beside him, Richard's mood isn't any better.

When they do finally reach the lake, it's jam-packed.

Kids are swimming everywhere, parents in beach clothing, and the price to rent a boat is far too expensive. This is the last straw. Richard drags a disgruntled Kyle back to the car, saying that they can go fishing another time. On their way back to town, Richard must have made a wrong turn because he doesn't recognize the area at all.

"Damnit!" he yells, slamming his hand against the steering wheel.

The gravel road is one-way. He can't possibly turn around with the forest so close. He'll have to see where it leads or turn around when the road gets bigger. At some point, Kyle falls asleep. It's hot and sticky, Richard is suitably miserable.

There is someone up the road.

*Thank goodness*—he hasn't seen anyone for at least ten miles.



Hope blossoms in his chest. Perhaps this person can tell him how to get the fuck out of here. He slows down, driving very cautiously on the road, careful not to hit the pedestrian. As he draws closer, the person in question becomes clearer, and Richard can't help the way his heart jumps.

"Do you have a permit for that?" Richard asks, rolling down the window.

"Nope."

That damn kid is wandering down this path like it's nothing.

Like he's done it a thousand times.

The whole thing is unnerving to him, and yet there is something about the forest and Beau that makes it seem like he's right at home. Not to mention the gigantic crossbow strapped to Beau's back or the various assortment of rabbits and skunks he has in his bag.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Hunting," Beau says matter-of-factly.

He doesn't slow his strides or stop to look at Richard.

"Well." He sighs. "Can you tell me how to get out of here? I'm kind of lost."

"Where are you trying to go?"

"My son and I were going fishing and—"

Beau stops, then pivots sharply to face him, causing Richard to react quickly and slam on the brakes. The abrupt halt sends Richard's torso lurching forward, and he heaves a sigh of relief when Kyle is unmarred by the movement. When he finally looks up, Beau stars at him bizarrely, eyes narrowing.

Then again, Beau probably thinks he's some closeted rich prick who doesn't give a damn about his wife or kids. There is an awkward silence between them. He isn't sure what to do or say next. It probably would have been better if he just kept driving.

Beau shifts beside him, adjusting the strap on his crossbow, subtly trying to peer into the front seat. "He is yours?"

"Kyle? Yeah, my eldest son."

"Alright." He nods. "Come with me. I'll show you a good spot."

Beau leads. Richard follows.

They go down a winding road that is so deep in the forest Richard's not sure his truck will make it, but Beau keeps pushing onward. Beau slows down in front of him, signaling to get out and join him. It's a bit of a struggle to wake Kyle. They hurry to grab their stuff and head out into the unknown. He's not entirely sure what he's expecting when he steps through the clearing, but it certainly isn't this.

Richard blinks disbelievingly, freezing mid-stride.

There are crystals, literally dancing on the deep blue. It's

marvelous, and he feels unworthy to gaze at such grandeur. Kyle screams excitedly, and Beau lights a smoke, a stark contrast to nature's beauty that has Richard's heart caught in this throat.

Yes, he thinks. This will do just fine.

Beau's eyes flicker out to the lake and eventually slide over to his. *Would you like to live beneath the sea?* He mutely asks.

Indefinitely.

## Chapter 14

### **A blue lagoon.**

The water is shimmering with vast arrays of diamonds, sapphires, and minerals that capture the light so splendidly it raises the hairs on his arm. It looks so deep, so wonderful that he can barely tear his eyes away. He wants to take a dip, shed this layer of old flesh for a new one.

This water would rejuvenate his soul, in a higher purer way. And he's sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, he'll find exactly what he needs, plunging in those still waters. The place is secluded, hidden behind a cavern of forest and foliage so they are completely alone.

Richard is stupefied, every nerve ending in his body tingling with anticipation.

"Dad!" Kyle shouts at him across the bay.

His head jerks in their direction, immediately understanding their distress. They need help dragging a small rowboat off the deck and into the water. The whole exercise doesn't take long, maybe five minutes or so, and suddenly he's wildly afraid.

When it's done, Beau has this look about him, the one that people get when they've done their duty and are now deciding to

retreat.

“Stay.”

It's more of a demand, something he would say to an animal, and instantly he sees his mistake. Beau recoils, taking a step back on the deck, the sunlight gleaming against his hard, muscular arms.

It's been weeks since that night in the motel.

He can remember it vividly. Beau wanton beneath him and their bodies thriving together with lust. The taste of Beau is still on his tongue, flooding his mouth and weaving into his cells. Every time he closes his eyes, he can see him, naked, unbound beneath him, begging to be owned and claimed.

*Fuck.* If they were alone right now, he doesn't know what he'd do.

They haven't spoken since that night, since Richard decided that he didn't want to be a monster anymore. A decision he despises every day.

Beau is so close, too close, and it's fucking with his brain, with his decisions.

Making him deliberate them and shit.

Can a leopard change his spots?

Perhaps with some acid bleach and sheer will of the imagination. However, he is weak. they both know it, and

eventually he'll implode.

It's only a matter of time.

"You might as well say yes," Kyle cuts in knowingly. "My dad doesn't take no for an answer."

Beau smirks, clearly amused and then turns to Kyle. "If you insist, kid."

"Let's go. We are losing light," Kyle chimes impatiently.

They grab the supplies from the truck and jump into the boat. Beau rows them into the middle of the lake where the water is nearly black. It takes a moment for Richard to help Kyle put his life jacket on. When he is done, he takes two beers out of the cooler and hands one to Beau.

"Thanks," he mumbles.

On the other end of the boat, Kyle is excitedly putting bait on the end of the fishing hook. Unfortunately, Richard isn't having much luck, fumbling clumsily with the fish bait and then accidentally getting the hook in his pant leg.

Beau intervenes. He expertly puts the fish bait on, throws the line out farther than Kyle on the opposite end, and wedges the pole between his legs.

Satisfied with the turn of events, he plops down beside Kyle, drink in hand, staring out across the lake. The sun is high in the sky, and his shirt is drenched with sweat. It's so hot he can see

Kyle wiping furiously at his brow beneath his baseball cap.

Richard hasn't been this content in a long time.

He is so grandly happy, so sublimely conscious of everything. How the sun rises high, touching the tops of the umbrella pines, the misty humid air, and the golden gleaming sand at the shore. Richard is swollen with jubilation. This cove is a hidden paradise, a refuge for his growing temperament.

One glance to his right and he knows that his previous pronouncements, dedications to family, duty, and honor would crumble. Being next to Beau like this shatters any resolve he had. It has to be a sin not to touch him, to caress the dainty hairs on his arms, or to kiss his brow.

There is an injustice in not owning Beau.

A sort of incompleteness he feels in his very soul. It would be stupid to try to rationalize something different. His body sings, pitching high with vibrations whenever that damn kid is within thirty miles of him.

*To deny it*—to deny Beau is to deny his being.

He curses the heavens, then the earth, blaming them for his foolishness. Although he is only human, susceptible to all whimsical debauchery, he feels a shame for his feelings. How can he be an upstanding citizen of the law when all he has is contradictory scruples about the law?

In his precarious situation, solutions are few and come at a great cost. If anyone ever finds out, what is he willing to risk for Beau? Shared family warmth, the well-worn jokes, the coy familiarity of his wife and children?

For what? Frequent rendezvous at a sleazy motel? Crazy, sporadic sex that would turn his world outside in?

Richard rubs his chin, conflicted.

This isn't the time to dwell on such things, especially with his son so near and the weather so agreeable. Instead, he pushes them aside, filing those thoughts for another day and enjoys just being here.

"Used to come here all the time," Beau comments randomly. "Creed and I..."

"Do you miss him?"

"Sometimes...not really..."

Richard gives him a sideways glance. "That's not an answer."

"I don't know...I guess it's what I'm supposed to feel..."

Richard frowns, not sure what to make of that. "Were you close?"

"Not particularly." Beau shifts in his seat, uncomfortable now.

More silence.

"I just, never mind..."



“What?” Richard urges, curiosity burning in him.

“Feels like...holes...you know? A bunch of them...like they can’t be filled no matter what.”

“I get it.”

“I try to put tape over them or stuff them with shit, but it doesn’t stick—it doesn’t stay...you know?”

Richard nods slowly. He does know.

“Shit, my uncle Mason and all the Moonshiners would kill me if he ever heard me talk like this.” Beau laughs. There is nothing remotely funny about it.

The detective in Richard knows that Beau has just confirmed something he has suspected for a long time. It’s no secret around these parts, but to hear it out in the open makes him feel disgusted. The puzzle pieces fit, piece by piece, inch by inch.

Beau stares at him, those eyes holding an ocean of secrets, pain, emotional and physical abuse, too cosmic to begin to comprehend.

He wants to tell Beau that Mason will die if he ever lays a finger on him ever again. He wants to say that he’ll protect him, that Beau shouldn’t worry because he is here now. In the end, he says nothing, turning his face away and sipping his beer so consciously aware of Kyle it hurts.

It would be inappropriate to say such things in front of his

son.

He changes the subject. "I didn't know you hunt."

"Yeah..." Beau equivocates. "Just a hobby."

"Seems more like a hobby to me, you come out here often? To get away from the city?"

"Something like that," Beau mumbles, finally taking a sip of his beer.

"Dad," Kyle calls. "Where are all the fish?"

"I don't know," Richard replies. "I guess they're sleeping."

"It's the middle of the day," Kyle grumbles.

"I doubt they are willing to come to their deaths," Richard says back, causing Beau to laugh beside him.

"I'm hungry."

"Do you want to call it a day? There's always next time, and we can come bright and early. Plus, your mom will be wondering where we are."

"Fine," Kyle grumbles, reeling his line in.

"What do you say? Lunch on me?"

"Burger King," Kyle belts happily.

Beau looks hesitant. "I should be getting back."

"Why?" Richard finds himself demanding. "Alright, let me

give you a ride—”

“It's alright,” Beau interrupts. “I walked here, plus I still got some more hunting to do.”

“Will you teach me how to use your crossbow? Please?” Kyle begs.

“When your arms get long enough, kid,” Beau grunts, rowing the boat to the bay. When they reach the beach, they unload everything back into Richard's hulking Ford-150 truck.

Kyle is trying to show Beau that his arms are indeed long enough. They debate for a while; Kyle unwilling to be dissuaded. With a mischievous glint, Beau hands his crossbow over to Kyle, who struggles to lift it off the ground.

Richard laughs heartily at the face Kyle makes. It's one of exertion and miserable recognition that his arms aren't long or strong enough to lift the bow. Beau takes it back, easily swinging it over his shoulder and then pats Kyle on the head.

“Next time, kid,” he says encouragingly.

Beau's arm flexes around the strap, his muscles bulging. The action is so sexy Richard is sorry he didn't notice his sleeveless shirt before.

Dear God, he wants him.

Not passionate carnality not selfish craving of *taking*, but something else. Richard wants something deep; it's obscure and

obfuscated, but he wants it all the same.

A brush of unsure lips, wispy grazes of fingertips exploring uncharted flesh. He wants cheerful laughs that are musical during the night or softly spoken secrets of their past. Richard yearns to see Beau's eyes in the morning light, waking sleepily from bliss. He is desperate to peek inside Beau's brain and unspool all of his hopes, wishes, and dreams. He craves movie nights, snuggling on the couch or candid intellectual talks on a winter's windy day.

These explosive feelings are not rampant, scorching its way through his core. The fire burns, but it's languid and steady, not at all tempestuously leaving destruction and a trail of carnage in its wake.

In reverse, they are quiet, tranquil like a cool summer's day.

Richard smiles, eyes crinkling with mirth and heart soaking with joy. This day brimming with silence, mystic language, and a concealed prelude makes everything seem so saccharine.

A new beginning.

Of what? He isn't sure.

The unknown excites him, more than he ever thought possible.

## Chapter 15

**They open the door, bursting with excitement.**

Both of them are filled with cheap burgers, smelling strongly of musk and sweat, yet they can't stop smiling. Kyle is babbling about a baseball game they need to go to, Richard already agrees, even though he detests baseball.

When they enter the kitchen, Lana has just started dinner.

"Welcome back, my boys." Lana kisses his cheek. "Gosh, you stink."

"Thanks." Richard laughs.

"Mom." Kyle grins ecstatically. "We had the best day ever!"

"Oh." Lana grins. "What happened?"

Richard takes Ida out of her high chair and balances her on his lap. "Well, the fish were sleeping, so we didn't catch"

"Who cares about that," Kyle cuts in. "I held a crossbow!"

"Did you?" Lana gives Richard a look.

"Yeah, Dad's friend Beau was there, and he had a crossbow with him. I held it, and he said when I get bigger, he can teach me how to use it. Isn't that so cool? I mean, he's a skilled hunter since he caught those squirrels and rabbits, but do you think I can have

one when I grow up?”

“Beau as in Blackwell?” Lana asks sharply.

Kyle shrugs. “I don’t know, but I’m going to see if Patrick will take us fishing next time because honestly, Dad, you suck at it. If it weren’t for Beau, we would still be lost in the woods.”

Lana whirls on Richard furiously. “Baby, why don’t you go upstairs and shower before we eat?”

“I’m stuffed,” Kyle replies. “Do I have to?”

“Yes,” Lana says through gritted teeth. “Now go.”

Kyle stomps upstairs, taking three at a time. The silence in the kitchen is deafening. Richard knows the shitstorm is coming, and he wants to kick himself for being so stupid. He should have told Kyle to keep their adventure between the two of them.

Now his wife will take it upon herself to be the moral compass. Similar to Roy in that regard, both equally narrow-minded with fixed prejudices.

It’s something he has come to expect in the years they’ve been married. Lana’s constant worry about what other people will think. Her need for approval from the people in this small town.

But her disapproval of Beau seems personal.

It grates on his fucking nerves how condescending she can be, how she can openly degrade Beau and look down her nose on him. Who the hell is she to judge? Just because his last name is

Blackwell, doesn't mean Beau is automatically guilty by association. Richard clenches his jaw tightly, his resolve strengthening with each passing minute.

Attacking Beau feels like attacking him, and he can't allow Lana to do that.

Lana stands steaming near the stove, hands on her jutted hips.

"Richard." She seethes brimstone.

"Yes," he responds, not hiding the challenge in his voice.

"What in *hell* possessed you to bring a prostitute around my son

## Chapter 16

**MAUVE velvet weaves into the sky.**

Sinuous like blackstrap molasses, inclining into the heavens, forcing the sun rays to retreat. The warm air turns chilly. Shadows grow longer against the even wood beams beneath his feet. Richard sits on his front porch, sloppily spread out on one of Lana's expensive couch chairs, sipping vodka straight from the long-necked bottle.

A few of his neighbors' glance at him, but after one fierce glare is sent in their direction, they keep walking.

This is what it's come to.

Him drinking alone on his front porch because he can't stand the sight of his wife or her pitchy voice that drives him up the wall. It's like nails on a chalkboard. She just sounds like noise.

Richard presses the cool bottle to his temple.

It feels so damn good against his boiling skin. He thinks while he drinks, wondering exactly when everything in his life turned to shit. It has to be ever since that fight with Lana, that fight that turned their crumbling marriage into a pile of concrete.

All their happiness ruined by a few callous words.

He wishes she hadn't said it.



If only she hadn't pushed his buttons, forcing him to strike back like a cat o' nine tails laced with contempt. Christ, he could have been more tactful. He should have lied like he originally planned to instead of taking everything she said about Beau so personally, but her words had been so poisonous, so vindictive that he could not remain complacent.

*What the hell possessed you to bring a prostitute around my son?*

A panic erupted inside of him.

In defense, he had shot back a venomous reply, shouting and raging at her for her damn ignorant disposition.

*Who the fuck cares about what other people will think? Who the hell cares that he's a prostitute?*

Lana's argument is valid and hates that she's right.

How could he expose his son to someone like Beau? It was stupid, pure foolishness to think otherwise. It's a small town. Everybody knows everybody, there is no way Beau's nighttime activities go unnoticed. However, Beau is his friend, and he doesn't give a damn about what people think. His temper hit the roof as they exchanged gunfire across the room, each trying their best to pierce flesh.

*He's a damn kid, Lana. You've got some nerve to look down your nose at him.*

*It doesn't change what he does for a living!*

*Do you think I'll let anything happen to Kyle?*

*He's an impressionable young boy, Richard!*

*Being a prostitute will rub off on him? Is that what you're saying? That he'll wake up one day and say 'Hey, Mom, I want to have sex for a living?'"*

*Don't you dare mock me—*

*You don't know anything about Beau.*

*Kyle is my son too! And I feel that you should have talked to me about it first instead of bringing a prostitute around my son.*

*What the fuck is he supposed to say to that?*

They are in the middle of nowhere, not to mention lost on top of that. Does she seriously expect him to call her? To beg her permission? He remembers how he had clenched his jaw so tightly his head began to ache. Part of him had prayed that she wouldn't see right through his façade.

He doesn't care. He will continue to see Beau, no matter what.

Richard rubs the back of his neck, mind flashing back to that damn kiss that felt so right, so tender and so fucking veritable that it made him ache with longing. Every time he closes his eyes, all he can see is Beau, smell him against his skin, or envision those eyes that haunt him in the night.

Self-deception isn't working anymore.

It takes everything in him not to drag Beau back to that shitty motel and fuck him raw. He feels feverish, out of control with his emotions. Lana had stared back at him with something else, something akin to fear when he had given her a frosty look, one that could freeze the ground solid.

*Fuck what you feel.*

She flinched and he knew that the argument was over.

At least for a time, but as always, she can't let things be. She brings it up again and again and again and again, day after day, until he wants to stab his eardrums out. On this particular evening Richard has turned red, then tore through his house like a hurricane looking for some liquor to help quell the screeching banshee still ringing in his ear.

By nightfall, he is very drunk and sitting jaw-slacked on his front porch, staring up at the black canopy with star-shaped holes cut through it. The world blurs around the edges, and he sways slightly in the crappy chair, imagining what it would be like to pluck a star from the sky.

That would be nice, he thinks and drinks.

To have a flaming ball of light cradled to his bosom eventually it will incinerate his flesh, melting the skin right off his bones.

What a gruesome death, they'd say, but for him, it would be

the ultimate release. He sighs heavily, a lone tear sliding from his eye. He doesn't know what the fuck he's doing.

Destroying the foundation of his marriage for what? Beau wasn't supposed to get under his skin, *dig roots, and grow*. They should have parted ways after the interrogation. Richard swipes at the tear, feeling like his bones weigh a ton. With an enormous amount of effort, he gets up, swaying on his feet because the ground is moving, spinning actually. He makes it inside, spilling vodka in the process.

He collapses face first on the couch.

Alcohol brews in his veins, twisting and swirling the toxin contaminating the bloodstream. It's not long, maybe several seconds after he fights his way through the fog that he comes to one conclusive thought.

Beau has become a part of him.

An integral part, like a limb or an organ that he can't function without. This realization is problematic because there is absolutely no-way he can stay away from him now. Lana is expendable, interchangeable, and insufficient.

*More tears*—they come swiftly and violently, knocking the wind out of him. Pulling the air from his lungs.

Richard lies there for several minutes, taking deep strained breaths, knowing for a fact that his heart has split from his chest. The muscle is flayed, torn open wide, and exposed for all to see.

He stares out the window, bloodshot eyes straining against the dark house.

The sun is gone, leaving nothing but thick blackstrap molasses behind.

## Chapter 17

### **The morning brings bitter, new revelations.**

At dawn, he crawls into his bed beside his wife, ignoring the feelings drafting around him. He feels chained, to this bed, to this house, to her. They lie facing away from each other, Richard's head is pounding, and his stomach is turning, but he won't move an inch.

This house is starting to feel like a prison.

The marriage vow is hollow now, just a reminder of how they were so young too young to know what exactly forever means.

They both try their hardest to pretend otherwise. It's easier this way, to act like nothing is wrong and everything between them is fine. They go about their day as usual; he pretends that he didn't spend last night drinking and crying like a bitch.

When he goes to work, there isn't much he can do.

It frustrates the shit out of him because what the hell is the point? Why be held at such a high position if he can't do anything? The reality of the situation makes him want to scream like a child, beating his fist against the ground in crabby anger.

He's got a blistering headache. His vision is blurring and his stomach is turning. It's all irrelevant because he and his precinct are going to get fucked if he doesn't do something.

Roy paces beside him, rubbing his head and puffing like a bull.

On the other side of that door is Bud, sitting nonchalantly in the interrogation room with his lawyer. The greasy fuck managed to get the best lawyer to ever waltz into this damn parish. The juicy twist is that she also happens to be Roy's new girlfriend, Scarlett Knight.

"Man." Roy huffs, pausing briefly to pivot and then keeps pacing. "Fuck, man."

Maybe ex-girlfriend.

This blindsides them, and Richard isn't any less infuriated by the turn of events. They are going to be screwed if Bud continues forward with his case. The door suddenly opens, and Scarlett Knight stands there in a tight pencil skirt with a no-nonsense facial expression. She is a busty strawberry blonde with a slim waist, hazel eyes, and a zero-fucks attitude.

Just Roy's type.

"Ready?"

Richard nods and then looks over to his partner.

"Yup, let's do this."

When they enter the room, Richard can't help his abominable mood intensifying with one look at Bud's smug face. Scarlett takes the lead. "I've spoken to my client, and he still would like to proceed and press charges against this precinct for police

brutality. Now we can discuss everything later when we are issued a court date, but I'd like to get the matter of the restraining order settled now—"

"There's going to be no court date," Roy cuts in, glaring daggers at Bud. "Two witnesses saw Bud slip and fall off the bed. That's it and that's all. Hell, he must have bumped his head pretty hard to be making up these stories."

"Really?" Scarlett stares at him incredulously.

"Because the trauma to the side of his head indicates that he was hit with something very hard, almost like the blunt end of a gun."

Roy shrugs. "Like I said, honey lips." He drawls the word. "I saw him fall with my own two eyes."

"The EMS paramedic report clearly states—"

"I don't give a damn what that shit says. Isaac and I saw him fall off the bed. The end. What, are your panties on too tight, can't hear?"

"You misogynistic asshole—"

"Enough," Richard cuts in, leaning against the wall tiredly. "Stick to the subject at hand."

"Fine," Scarlett says through gritted teeth. "Bud will sign the restraining order as agreed. He will not go within a hundred meters of Callie or Violet—"



“The fuck I will,” Bud boorishly interrupts. “She isn’t keeping me away from my little girl, you hear?”

“Bud, we discussed this. Part of our agreement was that you would sign those papers so we can set a court date—”

“Are all fucking broads deaf or some shit? I said no, bitch.”

Roy steps forward, shaking with fury.

“Call her a bitch one more time. I fucking dare you.”

Bud smiles lazily, leaning back in his chair.

This is the moment when he realizes he hates Bud.

It’s inhuman how much he would love to rip out his throat, watch the blood spill out of his neck and pool around his body spasms. “That’s enough for today,” Richard says, his voice signaling finality. “We will take him back to his cell.”

“Like hell you will,” Scarlett grunts. “After what happened, do you honestly think I’d trust you with my client?”

Richard bristles.

This man—*this thing* that might be linked to a human trafficking ring; this man who almost killed Callie and his daughter, this man who is defecating all over Byromville with his fucking filth is trash. The same guy they are going to nail, balls to the wall, with a human trafficking charge.

This is who she gallantly refers to as her client.

He wants to laugh, to grab her arms and shake her silly. Everything is backwards; night is day and day is the night.

“Your client?” Richard says condescendingly. “The man who beat Callie and Violet to a bloody pulp? Who terrorized them for years? The revolting, slimy bastard who isn’t different from dogshit? If we are speaking about the same person, then yes, I’ll escort him to his cell. Any further inquiries, Ms. Knight?”

Scarlett glares at him and petulantly gathers her things, turning to speak slowly to her client before standing. “If he comes back with more bruises, I won’t hesitate to prosecute every one of you. Roy, walk me to my car, please?”

He watches them leave before turning back to Bud.

The man that was so cocky before has now visibly shrunk in his seat. Richard stares down at him, hand fiddling with the handle of his gun.

“I’m not sure what’s worse...” He circles Bud before coming to stand behind him. “The fact that you’re still here or how stupid she is for defending you?”

Bud shrugs dispassionately, but Richard can see the sweat accumulating on his forehead. “I guess she likes the money. Hell, maybe after I finish with Callie, I’ll take that sweet piece of ass out.”

“Is that right?” Richard laughs.

It's a bleak, twisted sound that makes Bud shudder.

"Yeah," Bud responds. "Callie never could take a hit, but Scarlett...well, let's say she looks like she is begging for it—"

The white light burns bright.

It blots his vision, obscuring it until all he can see is spangled rays of blinding light that singes his core. This fury is swift, unfeeling a ravenous monster throbbing for carnage and malevolence. His lip twitches, curling over his teeth while reason and rational slowly dissipate him until all he can do is feel his blood boil hotter and hotter.

Something thrashes within—*whispering dark things into his ear.*

Richard growls low and deep, a subtle warning.

"...bet she'd look good," Bud continues, smacking his fat lips together. "I reckon she hasn't ever had it rough like that. Roy can't do that to her...nah, he's probably too soft. She'll need a real man for that, someone to remind her that she isn't shit. Just a set of wet lips—"

Richard attacks, smashing Bud's meaty face against the edge of the steel table.

The sound of flesh on metal echoes throughout the small room. Bud screams and thrashes, but Richard grips his head tightly, digging his nails into his scalp, holding his head down

against the hard surface of the table.

He rips out his M1911, pressing the cold barrel into Bud's stupid, empty skull.

*This is it*—the end for this fucking bastard. He'll kill him. If God is his witness, he will end his life right here and right fucking now.

It was always going to come to this.

Bud provoked him, probed with his disgusting words and perpetuated the grotesque behavior. *This man is scum*—he deserves to die, and Richard will personally send him to hell.

"You're like cancer." He sneers, like a lion toying with its prey. "A parasitic worm feeding off the living is the only way you can survive."

Bud's a whimpering mess beneath him, crying and pleading for mercy.

There is no heaven for people like him and no redemption for his sordid soul. One look into his face, and he can tell that Bud is beyond all of that.

Richard will deliver him alright.

"The only way to extract you is nice and slow..." He cocks his gun, struggling visibly not to pull the trigger.

“Richard,” Roy barks, entering the room and leaving the door wide open. “Let him go!”

He doesn’t move an inch, keeping his eyes steadily on the target, finger curled dangerously around the trigger. He can hear Roy’s voice, but it’s murky, like he’s underwater. Everything sounds so far away. It’s like a forest thick of foliage and he can barely find his way out.

There is so much noise.

Banging noises, people shouting and Bud crying, but Richard is delirious, drunk off power and butchery.

*It would be so easy.* One hit in the right position, and Bud would surely be dead. There would be so much blood, staining his hands, flooding the floor. So thick, so red so beautiful. If only Bud’s lifeless body would drain completely of it all.

Richard doesn’t feel high. There is no adrenaline pulsating through his veins, no hyperactive rush to his limbs. Instead something black, marbled and twisted is permeating in his core. He wants Bud dead so badly, wants to see his soul leave his body, wants to see the light fade from his eyes.

He wants that.

Roy takes a threatening step forward, hand on his gun and face fixed with determination.

“Richard, let him go.”

That tone he knows it too well. It's steely, tough and pure like titanium. Richard looks up, finally noticing how beyond furious he is, a caged bear ready to roar.

He releases Bud, holstering his gun, taking a step back from his chair. He gives the prisoner a wide berth and resolutely ignores the cries of pain. Richard does so mechanically, as if he were filing papers or taking inventory. Not at all like he was holding a gun to a man's head, ready to shoot him in cold blood. Roy stares at him like he's never seen him before like they are strangers.

Perhaps they are.

After nearly thirty years of friendship, they share a look which is not brotherly; there is no comradery in their eyes. Richard keeps the gaze steady, a silent challenge. Two alphas with their hackles rising, teeth bared, ready for a fight. Roy stalks forward, hand locked around his gun like an anchor.

"Take a walk."

The rage is festering, primarily at the base of his spine but moving upwards. They glare at each other, each unwilling to back down.

It's Hiromi who stumbles into the room unknowingly entering a ring with two champion fighters. "Richard, we need you in the briefing room." He breaks the line of tension.

He nods, following Hiromi out of the room.

This isn't over he knows that. Whether Roy will let this go is entirely up to him, but he'll be damned if he ever got dissuaded again.

Bud is filth, plain and simple.

There is no doubt in his mind that he needs to be eliminated.

## Chapter 18

### **Some days are more confusing than others.**

Some days, work doesn't appeal to him, and he'd much rather be out there fighting bad guys, kicking asses, and taking names, instead of sitting behind a desk and ordering people around. He has fallen back into the lackluster routine that bores him to tears.

The only thing that keeps him sane is salacious thoughts of hasty rendezvous with Beau. But that fantasy has turned to ashes in his mouth.

Beau is avoiding him.

When he finally gets some time to himself to escape, he goes looking for Beau. Desperate for some kind of temporary release to ease his soul, but Beau is nowhere in sight. Not on the street corner or near the pub, and Richard won't dare go to the Blackwell residence. As far gone as he is, he doesn't have a death wish, at least not yet.

In between shifts, he takes it upon himself to find out exactly where Beau is. Technically, he should be at the station, buried in a mountain of paperwork for Bud's case.

At the moment, this takes precedence.

Two hours ago, he spotted Beau entering the pub across the



street. How exactly Beau was able to get into a bar without having his ID checked is still unknown. So far, nothing worthy of concern has happened. It's a pretty calm day, hardly anyone on the streets so that Richard can be inconspicuous. He parks on the opposite side of the road and keeps his body low so that nobody will recognize him.

Watching isn't illegal.

There are some degrees of surveillance that may become misconstrued, especially when the parties involved are not aware, they are being observed. However, considering the dire circumstances he is willing to ignore that. He is willing to ignore how stalking is very illegal in Georgia, especially a man with his power, but he can't seem to stop himself.

It's been weeks since he's seen Beau.

Richard spends most of his time thinking about the Lagoon, how beautiful the water looks crystallizing over the lake. Then his thoughts spin. Lying splayed out on the golden sand, completely naked, is Beau, a feast ready to be devoured. It is an image he masturbates to, right before crawling in bed beside his wife.

He needs to see Beau.

"Fuck." Richard sighs, rubbing his forehead.

He thinks about driving away, contemplates putting the keys in the ignition and going back to work to actually get that paperwork done. Richard is just about to go when the pub door

opens and Beau walks out.

There's a painful lurch in his chest when he sees him, dressed in a red T-shirt with the sleeves cut off along with black pants and signature combat boots. The wind blows his curly hair about, his eyes squint against the harsh sun, and Richard can't look away.

A magnetic pull stirs low in his belly. He wants to go to him, to kiss him, to fuck him, who knows what else. Involuntarily, his hand moves towards the door. He's about to open it and shatter the illusion but stops when he sees someone come out behind Beau.

Everything becomes distorted.

The man is older, much older.

With greasy, stringy, black hair, an unkempt beard, and sweats in the middle of fucking June. Everything about this seedy man sets alarm bells off in his head.

His eyes strain to see the face, but he's too far away. Beau turns to him now, hastily, and the man in question nods. Nothing about this conversation is cordial. Beau is tense, his body angled away, and his face is fixed in a grimace. The man is spitting mad, and leering in Beau's personal space. It looks like a standoff; it's clear Beau would rather be anywhere else.

Richard shifts in his seat, rolling his shoulders uneasily as he continues to watch the events unfold.

Only after the stranger reaches out, his hook-like fingers grazing the top of Beau's bicep with mock affection, does he spring up.

The action turns his stomach.

He strains to angle his head, desperate to get a glimpse of the man who had dared to put his hands-on Beau.

A slimy smile adorns the creature's face, it's Enos from the tailor shop downtown, caressing his arm, his skin, polluting it.

Richard lets the rage building in his chest, hand curling around his M1911. The rage feels white-hot, blinding his vision.

Enos Harold is a traitorous bastard.

There is a moment, one that he almost misses due to his fury. Beau jerks his head to the left, signaling an alleyway, secluded and away from prying eyes. It's right beside the pub and Richard knows he can't allow this to happen, won't allow it.

They walk together, Beau leading and Enos following.

The sight is foul twisting sharply in his gut like razors. Enos is wearing a grotesque smile, lip curling over protruding fangs and eyes bleeding crimson. The demon is reflecting him, mocking him. Richard moves on impulse, nearly tearing the handle off to get out of the car as fast as he can.

He knows what he has to do. To kill the demon, he first must become one.



## Chapter 19

**DRAGONS spitfire, betwixt the alleyway and grueling concrete.**

Their language is harsh, esoteric, mostly grunts and angry slurs rapidly forming into harsh words. Richard hangs back, stalking behind the front of the building, enclosed in shadow. They speak low, voices drifting off, masked by the wind so he can barely make out what they are saying. He wants to inch forward, but that would risk exposure. Instead he watches.

Enos is chattering, moving side to side, pacing back and forth twitching with anxiety. His dirty sweatpants drag across the ground, his face is covered in a film of perspiration, along with his stringy black hair, which hangs limply on his forehead. His eyes are nearly black, beady and severe.

It's odd, them together. It's downright suspicious.

Richard has never seen Enos within ten miles of Beau, and he's lived in Byromville his whole life. His mind takes a dark turn, one he can't derail even if he wanted to. There is only one likely explanation for why Enos would know Beau, and the answer is staring him right in the face. The answer he's been trying to rationalize, trying to evade everything in him because if he does acknowledge the truth he will implode. These questions need

answers. Now is as good a time as any to start asking them.

He feels stupid, explosively idiotic.

His feelings betray him. They cloud his judgment; destroy his clear vision, turning it opaque. What the hell can he do? He is a slave to them. Like the rest of the world he revolves around impulses and whimsical desires. This sentiment for Beau is going to dismantle him, limb by limb, cell by cell until there is nothing but a globe of mold-less clay. Saccharine turns sour, the flowers curdle and wither, and Richard does nothing to quill the vinegary sludge that steeps on his tongue.

Beau is coiled tightly, like a cobra, his slit eyes following every jerked movement Enos makes.

He barely says two words, but when he does, each word is low and deliberate as if he takes his sweet time formulating the response. There is a swift moment when Enos stops pacing, turning sharply to give Beau a withering glare.

Whatever he says, Enos doesn't like it.

"The fuck you mean!" Enos exclaims, throwing his hands in the air. "I paid your twink ass the last time!"

More hushed words come from Beau.

"It won't change shit." Enos sneers, spitting on the ground. "Now I want what I paid for or else you can kiss our protection from the Moonshiners goodbye."

"...culpa que nos hayan atrapado, estúpido hijo de puta—"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Enos fumes. "Look, I did what you asked now you owe me."

Beau doesn't dignify that with a response and Enos lashes out, curling his hand around his neck and slamming him against the wall.

There isn't much Richard remembers.

He doesn't recall intervening, prying Enos' vile hands away from Beau's neck. Or how he wrestled Enos to the ground, shouting and raving obscenities.

However, he does distinctly recollect the slight twist of Beau's lips or the way his eyes glaze over in cool expectation, like he somehow knew it would end this way all along. It's troublesome and makes him feel all kinds of freaked out, but he hides it by subduing Enos.

"What's going on?" Richard asks, his knee wedging in Enos' lower back.

"Nothing, Officer," Enos speaks hastily. "Just a friendly disagreement between two citizens. Nothing to get worked up over."

Richard nods stiffly and turns to Beau who is rubbing his neck precariously, glaring at Enos. "Are you alright? "

"He's fine." Enos speaks for Beau. "The kid's got a thick hide;

he isn't hurt. We were horsing around. I lost my temper, but we are cool as cucumbers. Tell him, Beau."

Richard looks to Beau, and he lowers his eyes to the ground before mumbling, "We good."

"See?" Enos says, struggling in Richard's iron-clad hold.

There is a moment that passes between them. It's fleeting and underwhelming, but Richard knows that Enos is lying. However, since Beau isn't going to press charges and he can't confirm what he saw, he releases Enos. The three men stand there facing each other, Enos panting from being wrestled to the ground.

"Get the fuck out of here," Richard mutters, jerking his head to the side.

"Will do, Officer." Enos derides, rubbing his back. With a sly look on his face, he adds, "Watch out for them teeth...he bites."

The acid taste on his tongue intensifies when he watches Enos limp back down the alleyway. The implication of his words makes it very clear what type of relationship he has going on with Beau. There's too much he doesn't know, too much he's uncomfortable with. He breathes in through his nose, trying to ignore Enos' jab.

"You want to tell me what that was all about?" Richard demands, putting his hands on his hips. "Since when are you fluent in Spanish?"

He's been trained on this.



The complexities and idiosyncrasies of identifying human trafficking victimization. He's aware some victims are classified as perpetrators until proven otherwise, while others are victims.

For months he's tried not to see it. He's pushed it under the rug, buried it, fought with it and ultimately tried to kill it. However, once he looks closer his stomach twists violently because he knows the truth.

Beau is involved with all of this.

Distilled silence marinates the air, Beau in his usual defensive stance, all hard lines and distrusting features. The slow drag of Beau's emerald eyes up to his is enough to quench the yearning and blind fury he felt for days. Beau's absence has made him raw with anger, regret, indecision, and of course lust. In the past few weeks, he has been in torment, his job as lackluster as ever, and his wife morphing into a cold, frigid bitch.

With this one look, Richard can forgive everything that Beau has unknowingly put him through.

It is utterly inapprehensible to rationalize.

The sun reflects the light glinting off Beau's swan neck. It is then he notices the choker encircling his pale flesh. It's a tight and constricting plain brown leather band, with a tiny round ring

clasped on. The T-shirt is predictably sleeveless; however, his bare shoulders seem young, adorable apricot taut blades only refined with smooth, pubescent, lovely, gentle bones.

Richard gazes at Beau laboriously, drenched with an almost distressing convulsion of beauty assimilated.

Yes, he will gladly be a slave of his own volition if only he can gaze at this black beauty daily.

He swallows thickly, turning his face away to hide his enchantment. There is a rapid rush of desire, motivated by Beau's youthful beauty, the appearance of purity emitted with a resounding golden crack of passion.

"Don't ask," Beau says after several moments.

Richard sighs, rubbing his forehead. "You know, I can take you down to the station right now for this shit. I warned you against it before. If anyone else had caught you or heard the end of that conversation, you'd be in jail right now."

"Thank god for small mercies then," Beau grumbles, shoving his hand into his pocket and taking out his smokes. "Why the fuck are you following me?"

Richard glances at him. "Haven't seen you in a few weeks.... I reckoned..." He petulantly kicks at the gravel. "...that you might need some help."

"Nope," Beau responds, blowing smoke in the air. "All right as

rain here, as you can very well tell."

"That shit with Enos," Richard begins, not entirely sure he wants to go down this road. "It needs to stop."

"What shit?" Beau replies, leaning against the brick wall.

His answer is so nonchalant, so vague, so *condescending* that it grates on his nerves.

Richard may not know all the facts, may not have all the puzzle pieces, but he isn't stupid. He can see plainly, that the confrontation with Enos is only going to get worse, and it goes way deeper than some misunderstanding about money.

Beau knows Enos, personally and perhaps privately.

Whatever their relationship is, Richard needs to put a stop to it. Their connection needs to be dissolved; Enos will not be a part of Beau's future. At least if he has anything to say about it.

"Don't play coy," Richard starts, breathing deeply through his nose, hoping to catch Beau's scent through the smoke. "I am not fucking around, Beau. Whatever he has over you, it's best just to let me know."

"Or what?" Beau challenges.

Richard grits his teeth. The almost instantaneous provocation from Beau does nothing to inspire hope for their relationship in the future. It is admirable, in a way, to defy a superior, and Richard has enormous respect for the guts it must take for a kid

his age to be so...outspoken.

At the same time, it is irritating as hell. What the fuck is he going to do with this kid? He disobeyed his every command, openly defied him, and did it all looking effortlessly unruffled.

"It is what I thought," Beau mumbles. "You cops aren't shit."

There isn't much Richard can do to convince Beau that he's on his side. No amount of talking or persuading will do that, especially with someone as thick-headed as Beau. All he can do is be there, treat him like a normal kid in extenuating circumstances, and pray that Beau will trust him enough to tell him the truth.

"Look, I know right now things aren't right," Richard says. "With whatever's going on with Enos and Mason...I know there are certain things you might not want to tell me for fear of retaliation, but you need to know that your life is just as valuable. You matter, Beau, regardless of whatever lies they've told you."

Beau doesn't respond. He just kind of stands uselessly staring at the ground. It reminds him of the way Kyle stands when he's deliberating a decision, and it makes him feel a sting of longing for his child.

What doesn't elude Richard is the possibility that Beau has never heard these words before, the whole concept of being valuable and cherished might seem foreign or incomprehensible to him.

Richard can't imagine Mason or Creed ever giving Beau any encouragement, and for the second time he is forced to see Beau the way he truly is.

A broken-down, roughed-up, mixed- raced kid, with no parental guidance and in desperate need of assistance.

There is something so sad about it, so cripplingly depressing that he's not sure what to say next. The silence between them is heavy and oppressive, weighing down everything hopeful.

"Why?" Beau asks so softly.

"Why what?"

"Do you care?"

The answer is the most obvious thing in the world.

"Who else will?"

## Chapter 20

**Richard watches the sky transform from red to pink to yellow.**

A flat terrain of luscious green cornfields auspiciously nestled in the small borders of Byromville.

There is endless countryside of rich greenery, vast and unfathomable reaching beyond the skyline. Richard's eyes twinkle as the giant sun retreats calmly into dawn.

Twilight descends, the heavens have turned to a clear, purple-tinged gray, but to the west there is a ruby-red glow. The sun pours out its brilliant hot oranges and reds into the clouds like a pot of lava. Never before has he realized how tenuous and thin the tranquil clouds are. Wispy and frail, like for this reason alone they exist.

It's been years since he's done this. Not since he was a boy, running around the fields with Roy trying to catch fireflies, beetles, and other small winged creatures. Their chubby hands are reaching, grabbing for whatever they can get as they squealed with laughter. He shifts a little; the metal is hard against his flesh.

They are parked on the edge of Monroe's farm.

Both of them lying on the hood and windshield of Richard's car, legs spread out and bodies relaxed with ease. The past few

days feel like nothing, a hellish nightmare fading into obscurity. One casual glance to his right confirms that Beau probably feels the same. Beau unwinds the shackles of his past, momentarily lifted as he watches the sunset with Richard.

"I thought..." Beau starts, then immediately shuts up.

"Hmm?"

Richard feels like a feather, floating and drifting against the wind, leisurely and perhaps somewhat unwilling to land just yet. He lost himself in the pungent but healthy heat which hung about Beau like summer haze.

He should have been home hours ago.

Seated at the dinner table with Lana, Kyle, and Ida squabbling over what to make for dinner and whose turn it is for dishes. Instead, he's here, phone off most likely dead and feeling all kinds of high.

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

"You'll laugh."

"I won't."

Beau stalls and then continues. "When I was a kid, I thought that when the light came...I reckoned the monsters...with knives under my bed would go away."

"Knives?" Richard echoes, perplexed.

"You know..." Beau says softly. "Crescent-shaped knives, gleaming in the moonlight, like them Arabian Night's daggers...I see them in my dreams."

It seems, to him at least, that this is some unspeakable code for something much more sinister. What child would have dreams of men with knives hiding under their bed? Monsters sure, that's expected, but this? An anomaly for sure.

Richard doesn't know how to respond. Not sure he wants to acknowledge exactly what is being said here. If he does, it will shatter the illusion, this wonderful bubble of happiness he created for himself and Beau.

"I don't know..." What to say?

"Don't say shit," Beau grunts. "You are good at that."

Suddenly encumbered by the abrupt harshness of Beau's voice, he turns towards him, shifting on the windshield of his cruiser. "Wait now, hold on a second "

"It is just a stupid thought anyhow." He jams his hand into his pocket and pulls out his smokes.

In a sham effort to retrieve the cancer stick from his knobby wrist, Richard bats Beau's hand away, knocking the cigarette onto the grass, several yards away from the car. Beau glares at him, flustered like an angry, petulant fowl. It's at this moment that



Richard realizes he is hovering above Beau.

"You should quit..."

Without responding, Beau stares up at him, impassively with those wide eyes.

Those emerald eyes that have agonized him for months.

By this time, he is in a state of arousing excitement, bordering on insanity. This image, Beau beneath him while he stays suspended high has been etched deeply into his mind. Luckily for him, he also has the astute of the insane. By a series of stealthy moves, he tries his best to mask his lust of Beau's guileless limbs.

Richard is mortally afraid that some act of God may interrupt them. They are both breathing heavily; he is completely immobile with his eyes darting feverishly to the patch of pale creamy skin on his stomach peeking out from beneath Beau's shirt.

At some point, he pictures Lana's face, the face she'd make if she ever found out, all messy with snot and tears as she repeatedly asks, "How could you?"

The disgraceful way he will have to explain to his kids why Daddy and Mommy no longer love each other. He'll become the laughing stock of the entire force.

But he'll have something else, something much more invaluable.

It occurs to him then that he is willing to risk everything for

this kid, for the rest of his life. A boy he barely knows. The trade is unfair, idiotic and only an imbecile would agree to it. Somewhere deep, *deep down*, under rational thinking and such, he knows Beau has awoken something inside him.

He poked the sleeping bear.

Before he can reconcile himself to being a monster, a silent one is destined to lurk only in the shadows. At least if he does, his children will be free from shame and the town's ridicule.

Residual, recurring thoughts of honor, duty, responsibility cycle around his head. He shouldn't want this, shouldn't be doing this but—*Fuck it*.

Richard moves on impulse and, with a severe lack of sophistication, closes the gap between them. With a fatal simplistic lurch forward, their lips slide together and begin moving completely synchronized.

The gesture obliterates Richard's sanity. The feeling of his salacious lips against his, so soft and decadent unbridled something within. Groaning deeply, he takes Beau into his arms and buries his face into his hair. He kisses him over and over again, sliding his tongue deep into his mouth. Shaking with repressed emotion, half rage—half desire. He tries, for one brief moment, not to kiss Beau, but the red wine of passion draws him in.

Giving up the struggle, Richard devours him.

They kiss, fervently like they are both men dying of thirst.

“Shit,” he moans, covering Beau’s entire body.

Richard moves quickly, positioning himself between Beau's thighs and reaching up to cradle his face. They kiss urgently, searing hot, filled with tongue and saliva that drives him crazy. His cock thickens, throbbing with need; fluid drips from the slit and runs down the ridge. His entire being pulsates. He thrusts his hips forward and groans when Beau does the same.

There are things he notices, insignificant details anyone else would ignore, but he recognizes them almost immediately.

The way Beau kisses him back is clumsy, as if he has no experience, or his severe absence of finesse whenever their lips meet. After several moments of testing and tasting the waters, Richard charges ahead, dominating Beau and leading him properly. The musical, breathy moans fill the vacant field, along with the crickets and cicadas.

This sweet boy is all his.

Innocence surrounds him, the softness of Beau's refined silk skin, and his body is taut with unknown muscle. Nipping at his lower lip, Richard inclines his head, brushing his thumb against Beau's high cheekbones.

He distinctly feels blunt fingernails on his lower back. Beau fisting his shirt, trying to bring them impossibly closer.

They pull back to breathe. Richard is ravenously licking and sucking like a leech at Beau's delicate neck. The weight of two sunburnt arms, swaddling him and the taste of Beau's apple-sweet lips drive him mad.

Christ, he needs more.

Monopolizing Beau's immemorial fruit, singing and dancing through his pungent juices, Richard feels a spark in his soul. *Yes, God, yes. This feels so right.* Between his tactless grappling and artless thrusting, the beast bursts free. They consume each other. Wet, hot kisses that mystify him. Spells, unknowable magic, and magenta passion layered thick with ferocity.

*Let him stay; let him stay with me forever.*

His hand trails up to rest on Beau's lower back.

Richard stops immediately.

Completely pauses, drawing back slightly to stare at Beau who still has his eyes closed, lips still swollen in fervor. This isn't right. With his index finger, he experimentally traces what seems to be a large amount of scar tissue. The mutilated skin is a contrast to the downy velvet skin of his cherub face. It's the rigid and friable texture that is alarming and disturbing.

He gawks at Beau with a questioning look in his eyes.

It takes several moments for Beau to look at him, adorably shifting out of his impeccable cotton stupor.

“Who did this?”

The question is ignored.

He sighs, retracting his hands from the warmth. “Beau, what happened? Did Mason do that to you?”

Time is immeasurable as Beau stalls, turning his entire head away from his piercing gaze. He can no longer ignore this, the jabs, the self-deprecation, the rude responses that seem to suggest more than simple cowardly abuse.

*What the fuck is Mason doing to him?* The truth is slowly rising to the surface. He can’t ignore it any longer, especially when a life, so singular and abstract, is at stake.

“What the hell is going on?” Richard demands harshly. “All you have to do is tell me. That’s all you have to do. I’ll take him in. We can prosecute the shit out of him. Are you a victim of human trafficking? Did Mason put you up to the prostitution? Let me help you.”

If Lana is his roots, coiling around his neck and strangling him to the ground, then Beau is irrevocably his wings, flying free and spanning higher than the eye can see.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then tell me.”

Beau's face hardens, twisting into that all-too-familiar fictitious grimace of lingering abhorrence.

“Are you going to fuck me or what?” The question comes out harsh and cold, steel eyes glaring back at him.

Richard knows, like he’s always known that he can't have both roots and wings.

## Chapter 21

### **TULIPS in June.**

They bloom, vividly in their entire, virtuous splendor, opening wide and exposing their petals soon. Every summer they follow the same pattern, peeking up from the earth, wedging themselves between the cracks and crannies of concrete, and bursting open with color.

At first, they are the size of almonds, minuscule and effete, but buried within is cavernous of chromatics.

Richard knows this, seen it close to a dozen times, but still it amazes him: a tiny flicker of greenery, rupturing from the confinement of the industrialized world. There isn't much he understands about nature, so he doesn't try to. All he can do is admire it, the oatmeal flecks of green, scattered around auburn and durable oaks.

He isn't sure how he got here. Not exactly sure what it means to be here. All he remembers is that Beau had snarled at him, daring him to retreat into his shell like a shivering crab. Nothing much happened after that, no rude awakening or long droughts of heavy turmoil.

His mind is blank as he stares at the ATM, withdrawing

copious amounts of bills from his credit card. The money dispenses, and he heads back to his car, shoving the wad of cash into his back pocket. Beau is silent in the front seat, staring out the windshield, thin lips drawn into a heavy frown.

Richard doesn't know what the fuck he's doing.

They drive onward, and Richard feels nervous butterflies' flap in his stomach. He doesn't allow himself to think too much; thinking is the enemy. Instead, he drifts, going through the motions of driving, hands on the steering wheel, foot on the gas pedal, to distract himself. Beau mumbles something, and Richard pulls over to the gas station.

Beau disappears inside, then reappears back with a plastic bag.

They drive some more. Until finally he can see that sorry excuse for a motel coming up off Highway 95. The sordid sign is even worse than last time. Richard pulls into a parking space, kills the engine, and they both walk towards one of the rooms near the far end of the motel.

"Fuck," Beau hisses when he tries his key in door number 22.

"What is it?"

"New ownership," Beau grunts. "Listen, you'll have to rent the room tonight."

"Why?"



Beau gives him a dark look. “Cause that new fucker who owns the place won’t rent it to me no more. Says I’m too young or some shit.”

This must be a sign, some fucking smoke signal that he shouldn’t be here. He ignores it and nods slowly. “Alright.”

Richard walks to the front desk. There is no urgency in his steps. He is just blindly moving one foot after the other. He doesn’t think too much. Thinking will make everything a hundred times worse. When he steps inside, there is a man at the front desk. It’s not the man that immediately catches his attention; it’s the dark patch over his left eye.

He looks like a pirate.

“Hello,” Richard says. “I’d like to rent room number 22.”

There is a long silence, the man glares at him with disdain. The hostility is something he’s used to since he is in his cop uniform, but the angry glint in his eyes suggests something else. This man is new to Byromville. He can tell almost instantly. It’s clear he took over this place from the Bates family who used to run this motel. “That kid with you?” he demands, clenching and unclenching his jaw.

Richard brings himself up to full height, placing his hands on his hips, furious at what the man is implying. Fuck this prejudiced town. Who the fuck cares that Beau is a Blackwell?

“That’s none of your concern,” Richard snaps, his hackles rising.

The pirate mumbles something under his breath before he says:

“Cash or credit?”

“Cash.”

When the transaction is complete, the man hands him his receipt rudely.

Richard snatches the keys off the table, making sure to get a good look at his name tag before going back outside.

## Chapter 22

**Liquid courage burns his throat and tastes like battery acid.**

It proves to be ineffective after several gulps because he's still so nervous. He stands near the window, hands twitching and his entire body buzzing with alcohol and desire. It's too late now to go back, too late to rewind time and stop himself from putting the key inside the lock and opening the door.

Tequila never did taste good going down.

Beau is in the shower.

The condoms and lube are on the dresser. This is happening, and he still can't quite seem to get a grip. His hands are shaking, thrumming with energy, and he can feel the fever of longing building until it becomes insoluble. At last, when he is tipsy and can't stop himself, does he finally start to think.

He's about to make love to Beau.

Not fuck the shit out of him, not pound his ass until he can't walk, but really and honestly make love to him. In this quiet space, in this disgusting bed filled with bugs and stained sheets, he is going to worship his body and lavish it with kisses and shit.

The whole idea of penetration is not something horrid or

something to be scared of. With Lana it had always been routine, resounding effort to rebuild what had been destroyed between them through fights and boorish words. This is something else; it's pure, untainted, and greater than lust but not quite love.

Richard takes another drink, savoring the burn and trying his best not to gag.

*Are you going to fuck me or what?*

Or what.

The question had been posed. If he doesn't fuck Beau, then what? Will he leave? Gather up all of his belongings and storm out of Richard's life? He panics. The thought of Beau out of his sight, seeking pleasures from Enos and who knows who else fills him with something terrible.

Richard decides he needs to put aside all his questions about Mason. Not that Beau will answer any of his questions anyway. Instead, Richard chooses to ignore it, ignore everything his gut is screaming at him not to.

He doesn't want Beau to go. He doesn't want their day to end.

Before he can fully think, one word escapes his lip. A simple "yes" ties the noose around his neck, and now Richard is dangling over wheatgrass.

The water running in the bathroom stops.

The door opens and Beau emerges, wearing nothing but a

flimsy white towel. His mouth goes dry as he stares at the boy in front of him. Beau's shoulders are broad and his waist narrow, his happy trail disappearing down beneath the white towel.

Richard takes another drink.

There is a moment of shuffling. Beau is putting all of his belongings into one of the drawers and cleans the room a little. Richard stares at him unabashedly, gazing until he has to force himself to think. This is real; this is happening.

God, he feels sick.

His hands are trembling, his body is shaking, and he can't stop it. The butterflies flap unceasingly in their cage.

"Put the money on the table," Beau instructs, pushing his damp hair out of his eyes.

He does as he is told, breathing deeply. Beau counts the money and shoves it into the pocket of his pants that were lying on the floor. He puts the rest of his clothing into the drawer.

"I got two conditions," Beau mumbles. "Now, since you paid, I'll pretty much do anything. We can do anal fisting, rimming, assplay, shitplay, you can fuck me with a dildo, but it can't be more than 5.5 inches. My rules are you can't fuck me raw and no hair-pulling' either."

Richard doesn't understand half of what Beau says, but he nods anyway.

“Any questions?” Beau asks expectantly.

“What the hell is rimming?”

Beau laughs. “I’ll show you next time, but reckon we shall just stick to the basics.”

Hastily he agrees and an awkward silence fills the room. It isn’t until Beau sighs and steps towards him that he suddenly panics. “Wait. I’ve never.... with a man...”

Beau regards him impassively.

“There is nothing to it...it's like riding a bike.” Beau grins cheekily as he steps forward, invading Richard’s personal space. “It's all about mechanics really.... you just got to hop on and enjoy the journey.”

The assault of his senses is visceral. The strong smell of soap, shampoo, and body wash cascade around him. Beau is still wet, trails of water beading down his toned chest. Richard puts the bottle of tequila on the night table and cups the back of Beau’s neck.

“Don’t worry,” Beau whispers, both of their noses touching. “I’m an excellent teacher.”

Their lips touch, briefly at first, light pecks delicate like flushing fuchsia flowers. The slight touch sets his nerve endings on fire. Tingling raw sensations rips its way down to his core. Richard steps closer, fusing their lips together and begins kissing

him more urgently. Beau is all roses and raw honey, succulent drops and decadent blueberries.

A burst of flavor, so very superb and transcendent, that Richard falls deeply into damn near paralysis of joy. Spangled rays of colors are dancing before his eyes, and he pulls Beau closer, opening his mouth and teasing him with his tongue.

This is so new, so rapturously new that he doesn't try to decipher it.

All too soon heat invades his loins, stirring his cock, filling it with desire. Gentle touches turn rough, hands exploring uncharted flesh as he grips this boy in his arms. Their kisses become sloppy. Richard is no longer conscious of how he is moving and instead is doing everything on impulse. Their tongues wage war, thrusting and dancing, lips crushing and devouring.

Their hands claw at each other, Richard is tearing the towel off faster than he can think. It drops to the floor in an audible thump, there is nothing between them. He moves quickly, exploring Beau's narrow, pubescent hips before moving downwards to grasp his firm, taut ass.

Richard starts kneading plush globes and grunts in Beau's mouth.

He spreads Beau's cheeks, groaning softly when he finds how smooth and silky his skin is. *Oh, Christ* this must be what heaven feels like.

The air crackles between them, and he is assailed by how much he cares for Beau—how much he wants him. This is more than fucking; he wants to make Beau feel good too.

Richard isn't an idiot. He isn't a fool. He knows exactly what this is. Beau is doing his job, something he was forced into by men like Mason, and Richard is fully aware that he is taking advantage of him.

He's no different than Enos.

It's not too late.

He can turn back, stop this train wreck before it happens. But he can't or won't, which in this context means the same thing to him. Richard is like a junkie looking for his next high. His arms are busted and bleeding profusely with jagged holes, spouting puss and green liquid, but he doesn't care. He needs his next fix.

Beau lies down on the bed, stretched out beneath him all while he is still fully clothed. It's kind of awkward as Richard struggles to get out of his uniform. He puts his belt on the night table, accidentally knocking over the bottle of tequila. He tints with embarrassment; Beau shrugs it off. Then, like a complete loser, he fails to get his pants off because his shoes are still on, and by then Beau looks completely and utterly bored. When Richard finally manages to get naked, he is panting, flushing deeply, feeling stupid and embarrassed.

"It's alright." Beau smiles and snorts. "That was kind of



funny.”

Richard returns the smile and crawls on top of him, resuming kissing his lips and down his neck.

“I’m glad you find me amusing,” he says, pulling back a little to gaze at Beau. “Are you okay? Is there anything you need to feel more comfortable?”

Beau’s brows shoot up in surprise. “Nah, I’m good.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not very good at...” Richard swallows thickly, wishing he can stop his hands from shaking.

“It’s alright...we’ll go slowly.”

They continue kissing languidly, discovering each other’s mouths. Richard has the pleasure of tasting and suckling on Beau’s lips until they are ruby red. He’s so content at this moment, filled with such devotion, that he takes his time to gaze at Beau, in all his naked beauty.

Richard is fascinated by the wispy hair that lightly covers his chest and his hard cock, which lies nestled on his stomach. He’s seen men naked before, in the locker room and sometimes in the showers at work. Seeing Beau displayed like this, a dish ready to be served and eaten, is something else.

Richard moves his hips forward and startles when his cock brushes against Beau’s thigh.

“Fuck,” he hisses.

The movement itself, brief and swift, kindles ardor. Richard moans and takes Beau into his arms, fisting his hair and kissing him deeply. Beau gasps, mouth automatically opening as Richard claims his again.

“Split me open with your cock.”

Richard inhales sharply at the soft, yet insistent command, and all the preconceptions of his universe shift, as his mouth latches onto Beau’s with a hungry assurance that there is no place on earth he’d rather be.

The hand on his lower back dips, sliding innocently between his ass crack, and Richard jerks his entire body forward. Their kisses turn brutish, more tongue and teeth clashing together in an unholy battle of sin, and then, dear God, Beau spreads his legs.

Their cocks slide together, and Richard shudders and spasms as he feels the slick, virgin skin for the first time. It’s not like he expected. Beau’s long, thick cock is oozing milky white pre-cum, making it slippery and wet. Richard thrusts his hips forward, gripping Beau’s hips so tightly he’s sure he’ll leave a bruise.

“Fuck.”

Words fail him, and he lets his instincts take over, he jerks his hips forward, relishing in the sparks of pleasure that jolt through him. It strikes Richard then that they have become insurmountable lovers, wide-eyed and high-strung of passion.

In Beau’s frantic embrace, filled with inept kisses and self-

indulgent thrusts, he escapes himself. Forgets all the responsibilities of children, family, duty, and honor and gets lost in the feelings. Richard growls, attacking Beau's neck again, finding the tan skin heartrendingly beautiful and unmarked, elegant like a swan.

When he pulls back, he finds Beau shivering slightly, his lips red from the bristling hair scratching against his delicate skin.

Beau reaches over to the nightstand, digs his hand through the plastic bag they had gotten from the store, and produces a bottle of lube and condoms. He hands them over to Richard.

Richard stares at them for a moment, helplessly, before the panic comes, flooding back full force. The serenity is gone, replaced by poisonous doubt that pollutes his insides.

"I don't know..." He trails off, feeling useless and imprudent.

Beau's eyes appraise him carefully before he opens his legs wider. "I'll show you..."

Venus came and went.

Richard feels slightly delirious as he watches Beau, legs extended wide and his puckered hole waiting and presented for him as an offering. "I'll need prep first.... hasn't been that long, but it'll be a learning experience for you. Stick your fingers in me."

He squirts lube on his fingers and hand, lathering it up so it's not cold. He pours some over Beau's entrance, marveling in how it drips down his smooth, hairless crack. Richard enters, using his index finger, holding back a cry of ecstasy when he feels Beau's pucker hole engulf his fingers so tight and warm, sucking him in. He pushes in and out, salivating at the movement and watches Beau's face for any signs of discomfort.

Instead, Beau looks bored worse than that, impassive.

Richard enters two fingers, pumping them in and out, finding Beau's aloof reaction to be somewhat disheartening.

"Are you alright? What can I do to make it better?" Richard asks desperately.

He can feel his confidence deflating. If Beau doesn't enjoy this, then he might as well stop right now. God, what the fuck is he thinking? Of course, Beau won't enjoy this! It is practically rape. Richard begins to retreat, slowly drawing away from Beau's body to keep the bleak reality at bay.

For the second time, Beau looks genuinely surprised. He grips Richard's hand tightly, guiding him back to his entrance. "You are doing fine. Just curl your fingers and pump a little faster, like this..."

Richard does what Beau suggested, shoving his fingers in deeper, curling them slightly and pushing them in and out before his fingers strike a bundle.

“Shit!” Beau cries and then laughs lightly. “It’s alright...do it again.”

He slides his fingers out, then pushes them back in, watching as Beau falls apart beneath him. There is a misty haze, a boundlessness that comes with watching Beau yelp and cry, whimper and quiver under his fingers.

By the time Richard has worked out a nice rhythm, Beau’s skin is clammy, his pitch-black hair sticking to his face as he slowly strokes his aching cock and fucks himself on Richard’s fingers.

“I’m ready.” Beau pants. “Put the condom on.”

Richard tears open the condom package and slowly rolls it over the head of his cock and down to the base, his hands trembling the entire time. The gravity of the situation fully weights down on him. It’s horrible and earth-shattering at the same time.

“Spread my cheeks,” Beau gasps.

He cups the plush, pale globs and spreads them wide, getting a glorious view of Beau’s puckered hole, which is slightly swollen from the abuse by his fingers. “Put some lube on your cock...then ease in.”

Richard does so, nearly spilling half the bottle in his attempt to go quicker. There is a special sensation bubbling up from his gut, butterflies are flapping wildly, and he can hear his heart

thundering in his rib cage.

Holding the base of his cock, he eases in, passing the first ring of stiff muscle and watching it stretch over his cock to accommodate his girth.

It's nothing like a cunt.

Not wet, squishy, squelchy, dipping fluids and pungent smells of lavender and vanilla. The heat feels like hell flames, searing hot, constricting and coiling around his cock like an iron fist. It's everything he hoped for, yet nothing at all like he was expecting.

Beau is so tight.

Inflexible, indomitable heat and warmth—*Dear God, he almost comes just from the sight.*

Richard nearly convulses, shoving his cock in until he bottoms out. The feeling is indescribable. It's better than anything he's ever done before. Once he is back in control, he looks at Beau, who is all gooseflesh and grit, eyes clenched shut and lips faintly parted.

"Beau?"

"I'm okay..." Beau puffs softly. "Just need a minute to adjust."

He presses a kiss to Beau's shoulder blades, careful not to crush him or make any sudden movements.

"Alright," Beau says finally. "Move."

Richard pulls all the way out before thrusting back in. It's incredibly hard at first because Beau is so tight, but he manages to do it easily after several deep thrusts. "Like this?"

Beau nods. "*Ugh*, yeah...not so fast, slower."

Richard buries his face in Beau's neck, plunging his cock in and out, getting lost in their mutual delirium. It feels like a furnace. So pleasant, so splendid he wishes he could melt right into Beau and stay there forever. He puffs against Beau's neck, thrusting calmly, serenely like he has all the time in the world.

Beau groans, hooking his leg higher and breathing laboriously.

This must be what it feels like to be beyond happiness, beyond elation and jubilation and any other inconsequential thing that isn't this sublimely good.

"*Oh...fuck.*" Beau yelps.

Richard grabs a fistful of Beau's hair, angling his head so he can kiss his neck savagely. He watches Beau drift at sea, storm-tossed on a wild tempest of golden arousing bliss. Richard is drowning in his essence, the earth moves, the bud bursts into a full flower, and something inside him snaps.

Like a piece of his former life finally falls into place, he holds Beau tightly as his hips thrust forward. They fuck vigorously as Richard chases his release, admiring the feeling of heat wrapped around his cock, squeezing and clenching around it.

Beau cries out as Richard strikes his prostate, the sudden jolt of pleasure flushing his face entirely red. Richard is insatiable, pounding and jackhammering Beau's ass, fucking him wildly, brutally, feeling his balls constrict and tense. Richard captures Beau's lament screams with a lude kiss; he returns them with equal fervor.

*Paradise—within reach, within grasp—God, he is so close.*

Beau sobs a bunch of babbled nonsense and arches his back. Richard is ruthlessly racing towards his relief. He barely registers that Beau has reached between them and is stroking his cock furiously.

There's a swift grunt, a strange inhuman sound. Then Beau is soaking in his cum, squirting the milky juices all over their stomachs.

Richard fucks him through it all.

Plunging his hips forward, in and out, rampant like a wild bull. He can feel his orgasm building, pending like a typhoon just off the horizon.

Richard groans low and deep, feral and crazed, balls tightening, body flexing—*until, until, until—*

Sequins of red and white and black explode in front of his eyes, vision blurs, and his entire body judders from the impact. Richard is blind. White lights and shockwaves of torturous pleasure tear through his entire body as he shoots his hot release



into the condom.

He collapses on top of Beau, gasping loudly for air.

They are both quiet, and Richard takes a moment to come back to his senses. He peers down at Beau who is completely blissed out and glowing with a radiant red hue.

Richard manages a weak smile, feeling luminous and buoyant. God, if he had known what this would be like before, he wouldn't have wasted so much time. Brushing some hair off Beau's forehead, he can feel his heart swell, brimming with affection and something else. Something deeper, warmer, buried under all the decaying rubble of his heart. It's instinctual, he doesn't understand it, and doesn't want to. At least not yet.

At some point, Richard turns off the lights, crawls into bed and holds Beau tight, enclosing him in his arms, caressing his neck and kissing his shoulder blade.

The stars are encased by a black canopy of night. He stares out the window, gazing up at nothing but the lune.

This is what happens when tulips bloom in June.

## Chapter 23

**A SLIP, a slide, a trip, a glide, and Richard fall into Wonderland.**

It's a dreamy, melancholy space filled with misty tenderness, longing, and enchantment. His limbs are stiff, his back aches, and his thighs are burning. Muscles he's never used before are tender and sore. Richard is delectably sleepy. Time is shifting and drifting, unfolding and refolding in different ways.

Above all that, he's warm, sedated, and coiled around Beau, whose light snore vibrates around the room. The pillow smells like him, fresh and radiant. Richard brushes his fingers through Beau's black hair, which is undeniably soft, tickling his fingertips.

The sun catches the brilliance of Beau's facial features, highlighting the veins in his neck, sharp cheekbones, strong jawline, and emerald eyes.

He cradles this moment, stroking it in the palm of his hand.

The demon is satisfied.

For now, it seems like it retreats slowly back into the abyss. No red-glowing eyes, claws scratching his face, or grotesque creatures foaming at the mouth, beating their chest in a wild rage. At this moment, there is nothing but peace, alluring and seductive, ensnaring him into false compliance.

Richard is sure his heart will burst.

There is so much, too much of something: joy, exhilaration, excitement? Everything in between, and he can't take it. It's turning his insides into mushy, gooey liquid that sinks slowly into insurmountable warmth.

Last night was amazing, so right and so wonderful, and God, Beau was so tight, so gorgeous.

He breathes deeply, trying to comprehend the inevitable.

At some point, he'll go home, face his wife, and she'll see the reflection of his infidelity. Richard pushes that out of his mind for now. He showers Beau with featherlight kisses down the nape of his neck.

Beau stirs, slowly, blinking several times before opening his eyes. An explosion of green and cerulean hue assaults Richard, and he is besotted.

He wants to capture this picture; of Beau stirring immured in his arms like he belongs there and nowhere else. The realization slams into him, and he is astounded by how much he wants this kid right fucking now.

It's achingly delightful, and it makes him feel a pleasant exuberance, illimitable energy, weaving and prancing through the air a shapeless mass of pure, raw substance, drifting particles. Nothing is tying him down to earth.

Skin separates from bone, cells from the epidermis, until he becomes fluid, a formless being, floating and *rising higher, higher, higher—*

Richard is in the clouds.

“Morning,” Beau mumbles, adorably licking his lips.

The light catches his strikingly beautiful black hair, the delicate skin of his perspicacious charm and milky-white face with pink lips. That beauty mark is even more tantalizing in the light of day.

Richard feels the pull, and he responds immediately by pressing a light kiss to Beau’s waiting lips. They kiss slowly, Richard savoring the vanilla taste of innocence in the morning, like smooth and juicy peaches. Beau wraps his arm around Richard’s neck and pulls him closer, nearly crushing them together.

Between Beau’s heat and the sun, Richard is all hot and bothered.

He is smitten, flaming red with passion and throbbing pleasure, his cock is swelling with every light sigh and moan Beau makes underneath him.

Fuck, does he want to plunge in again and again, spread him wide, and see what’s inside.

The precious cherub beneath him moans, eyelids fluttering

close as they both sink deeper into a pool of lucid, luminous, fanatical love. Richard is all sunshine and rainbows, mythical creatures and dancing teddy bears.

“I need you.”

The words are foreign on his lips, but he blurts them out anyway. Beau pulls away and stares at him through slit eyes, cautiously and conflicted. There is a moment of silence, one which causes anxiety to scratch at the back of Richard’s throat.

What if last night *had* been just business? What if Beau didn’t want him in the light of day? He swallows thickly, wondering what the hell possessed him to say such a stupid thing out loud.

“What would you like?” Beau’s voice cuts through his thoughts. “We still got some time left...I reckon you’ll want to try something different.”

Richard shrugs, blushing crimson. “Whatever is most comfortable for you.”

“How about I ride you good and proper?”

His throat goes dry.

They maneuver into position. Beau straddles him slowly, taking his time and letting his fingertips trail down his chest. It’s like a dream, and when he feels Beau’s ass press snugly against his hard cock, he moans, deep and low.

Beau leans over to attack his lips. They kiss roughly and savagely. Richard uses his hands to cup and spread Beau's ass cheeks, experimentally playing with his puckered entrance.

It's a sin to have Beau in this position, to want him so severely that it distorts and depraves his mind. Their lips clash together, and the breathy sighs fill the air in their musical disposition. Richard hears a symphony, strings, French horns, percussions, and bass all tangled around them in this tiny room.

Richard reaches blindly for the lube.

Foggy with desire and drunk off those painted rosy lips and mad with hunger, Richard squeezes lube on his fingers. He presses his index finger to the slightly abused hole and quickly inserts, whimpering when he feels the heat engulf him.

Beau bucks into his hand, swirling his hips and arching his back into Richard's fingers.

This fierce-eyed kid is blinking stars and rubbing his dick against Richard's stomach at a frantic pace. Beau is wanton, succumbing to mindless pleasure and the sensations going on all around him.

Richard curls his fingers just like he was taught, thrusting deeper and hitting a small bundle that makes Beau grunt and yelp. His body spasms in hot, needy yearning.

*"Fuck!"* Beau gasps. His movements frantic.

Richard immediately withdraws his fingers and grabs the lube and condom. There is a moment of feeble fumbling as he puts on the condom and spreads lube all over his cock. When he is finished, Beau impatiently grabs his cock and positions his entrance over the swollen tip.

He watches with profound fascination as his cock is swallowed by Beau. Inch by inch he slides into singeing heat.

*It's hot, hot, hot*—Richard is writhing in elation and self-indulgence.

There is a swift murmur, some movement, and then Beau is churning his hips, bouncing up and down on his cock.

*Christ*—he grips Beau's hips to steady himself.

Beau is gyrating, circling his hips and moving up and down in a way that is wicked. Richard cries out when Beau grinds down hard on his cock, causing an outburst of white lights to blur his vision.

An obscene smacking noise fills the room as skin slaps violently against the skin. Breathy moans and high-pitched exclamations pierce the air. *Fuck*, he watches his cock disappear and reappear, squelching noises as he fills Beau up with his aching dick.

Richard is lightheaded, perspiring from exertion and cowering in bliss as he half-watches Beau ride him like he was at the rodeo.

He won't last long.

Not like this, not in this position where Beau is above him, the sun acting like a halo around his head, his face flushing mulberry in pure ecstasy and his mouth parted in a silent scream.

*Oh fuck*—Richard dances on the precipice of his climax.

Beau wheezes above him, laboriously moving, his perky ass raising high in the air. Richard catches a small glimpse. The pale globes are so taut, round, and firm. The sight makes his cock twitch and swell.

Beau is vigorous, knowing the precise moments to swivel his hips to maximize the pleasure. There are no words between them, no sweet nothings and useless pillow talk; there is only rough primal groping, animal sounds, and vicious kisses.

Reaching forward, Richard grabs Beau's dick, enclosing his large hand around the silky flesh and strokes forcefully. Beau stutters, his hips momentarily faltering as he gasps noisily in inclination.

*"Ugh,"* Beau pants, he leans over to kiss him, tangling their tongues together in a merciless kiss while Richard continues to thrust inside Beau's sweet ass.

The air ignites between them. Their eyes lock, and all of a sudden Richard is falling. Rapidly, disastrously, irrecoverably *down*.



His brain is shouting at him; his heart is pleading with him. It's all too much to make sense of, especially when his balls are coiling. His cock jerks and quakes.

A quiver erupts through his spine.

There is a sharp cry. Beau's hole clenches around his cock as he cums, squirting his release all over their stomachs. Richard watches, raptured by his endless perfection, the magnificent way he soundlessly cries out.

When Beau finishes, he collapses.

Richard holds him, molds him to his chest, wraps his arms around Beau tightly, and fucks him like a wild lion. He isn't gentle, he brutally sucks on Beau's neck, marking his territory in a bruising love bite. Richard braces his feet against the bed and thrusts his hips *up, up, up, up*, chasing his release.

Richard practically sobs—*pain, pleasure, exquisite pain, more pleasure*—Oh shit.

He erupts, waves crashing violently against the shore, and he is momentarily blinded by white lights. His entire body tremors from the impact. Torturous waves upon waves assault him, tearing through his entire body leaving him raw. Richard shoots his hot release into the condom, his orgasm still bursting in his veins.

Going completely lax, he pants openly, fully aware of the weight of Beau still on his body. Opening his eyes, he laughs when

he comes face-to-face with Beau, who is sodden with sweat, his lips cherry red.

“You okay, old man?” Beau mumbles, smiling too.

Richard is more than okay. He is delirious, wading in the bottomless waters of splendid euphoria.

“Nah,” Richard says, struggling not to let the undertow take him. “I’m wonderful.”

The heavens split, the sky opens, and Richard Clayson shuts his eyes to find the stars much clearer.

## Chapter 24

**Glee is not something he's accustomed to.**

It's not something he's sure he knows how to relish in. At work, he is content, trying to hide his cheerfulness through small smiles and idle talk with the other officers. They don't suspect anything.

Richard is good at hiding secrets, especially ones that could endanger his position as Sheriff.

The ache in his thighs is more like a slight burn. A paradisiacal reminder of what happened that morning with Beau. Richard can't help but grin as he recalls Beau's face when Richard went out that morning and came back with breakfast. They were both ravenous and ate on the bed, watching shitty TV. He remembers Beau's face as he tried pancakes for the first time. His mouth was scrunched up in syrupy, fluffy bliss as he devoured pancake after pancake.

Such a simple thing that Richard took for granted.

Pancakes are a luxury every kid should have.

They laughed and shared coffee from the cheap motel vending machine. It was by far the worst place he's ever stayed, but the company made it exhilarating.

Richard tries to concentrate on the meeting they are having in

the briefing room. There's been a crack in Gary's case, after months of going through various phone records, accounts, and employees from the garage, they have a lead.

Gary called someone hours before he died.

That information in itself is very alarming, and Richard is anxious to get a move on things.

"His name is Avery," Hiromi says, handing out the case files. "He owns a tailor shop on James Street, near the hair salon."

"What do you think he can tell us?" Tanya asks, flipping through the files.

"Nothing," Hiromi says. "Or something. Honestly, at this point, it's hard to say, but at least he can tell us exactly what he spoke to Gary about before he died. Maybe give us some clues as to what happened."

"Wait," Isaac says. "Did you say Avery? Isn't that the same fucker who hangs around Mason and his dirty crew?"

"At the pub?" Hiromi speculates. "I think so."

"Why the hell would Gary associate with someone like that?" Roy interjects, rubbing his head. "Something isn't right."

"I agree," Richard spoke. "Roy and I will head down to the tailor shop to speak with Avery. The rest of you keep up the good work."

They disperse.

Richard and Roy jump into one of the police cruisers and drive towards their destination. The radio is low, the sun is high in the sky, and Richard is smiling to himself. His thoughts drift back to earlier that morning, holding Beau and kissing languidly. It had been pure heaven, just the two of them, eating breakfast in that shitty motel.

There's that feeling again, bubbling up from his chest. He can't quite place it or exactly put his finger on it, but he can't stop smiling.

"You okay?" Roy asks, staring at him while he drives.

"Huh?"

"You are smiling." Roy snorts. "Haven't seen you smile like that in a while, brother...something going on?"

Yes, he wants to say.

He just fucked the most beautiful boy in the world—fucked him twice, then had breakfast. Instead, he leans back in the seat, soaking up the hot sun and sweltering heat. "Just a good day, is all," Richard says. "Pull in here."

They park a block away from their destination.

The shop isn't exactly pretty. It's a little rundown, hole-in-the-wall tailor shop that sells everything from tuxedos to rodeo equipment, and since it's the only one in Byromville, all the locals shop here.

When they get inside, a few shoppers wander around. Richard tips his hat to the ones that he knows and moves swiftly through the store with Roy right behind. They get to the counter where Avery is standing behind the register.

“Howdy, boys,” Avery says cheerfully. “What can I do you for?”

Avery is the type of man that eats more than he can fit in his mouth. The man is enormous, with a tight, plaid button-up that can barely button up.

“We have a few questions for you,” Roy says, looking around cautiously. “We need some information ‘bout some things about Gary.”

“Sure,” Avery replies. “Ask away.”

“How did you know Gary?” Roy starts.

“He used to come by the shop,” Avery answers honestly. “He’d come ‘round sometimes for some hats, shirts, pants, other things too I guess.”

“What did you all talk about?”

“This and that,” Avery answers vaguely. “To be honest, I didn’t know him well.”

“The phone records show you were the last person to speak to him. What did you all talk about?”

Avery tenses visibly. “I cannot recall.”

“I know it was a few months ago. I reckon it’ll be hard to remember right now, but if you could try, it would help us out—”

“I said I could not recall. Anything else, Officers?”

“Look.” Richard steps in, “We aren’t asking for private information. We want to know what you talked to Gary about before he died. If you were truly his friend, you’d be willing to help us out.”

“I don’t know anything.” Avery spits. “Now, I think I’ve cooperated enough with you all. If you don’t mind, I need to get back work”

“Avery!” A voice shouts from behind a dressing room. “Why the fuck did I let you talk me into trying on a size ten? I am *not* fucking size ten.”

“Fuck your mother,” Avery mumbles back.

“What do you say?” The voice calls.

Enos stumbles out of the dressing booth, fixing his clothing and tossing the size-ten shoes on the floor.

Richard’s hackles rise when they lock eyes.

“Well, look what we have here.” Enos smiles, slow and twisted. “Officer Clayson and Officer Rhett, what a surprise.”

“They were just leaving,” Avery grumbles. “Bad for business, I

can't have cops showing up at my place of employment. You know how it is."

Enos steps closer, his greasy hair falling into his eyes. "Is it just me? Or does Officer Clayson look like the cat that caught the canary?"

"It's just you," Richard deadpans, his eyes cold and hard.

"Y'all best be on your way—"

"Say, Richard." Enos sneers, cutting Avery off. "Do you like peaches?"

Richard glares at him.

"There is nothing sweeter than a nice peach, especially when the juices come out...absolute perfection." Enos licks his dry lips.

Resting his hand on his M1911 he glowers at Enos.

There isn't anything he wants to do more than knock Enos's teeth in and watch him fucking choke. The urge is immediate, like red-hot heat tearing through his core. He wants to smash Enos's face into the floor.

Instead, he swallows, nearly gags, but he manages to stop his twitching fingers from moving, latching onto his gun, and firing off a round into Enos's head.

"...best not to pick them too soon though. There is nothing worse than a peach that isn't exactly ripe..."



The way he talks about Beau is demeaning, and vile. As if he is nothing but a slab of meat, a hole for his filthy cock. His stomach wrenches at the thought. It seizes his heart in his chest to think about Enos anywhere near Beau. How often had they been together? What was their relationship?

Jealousy came, swift and unyielding, as he glowered at Enos.

This man knew Beau intimately. He had seen Beau cum, had been inside him. Richard shudders. The images are shoved into his brain, Polaroid pictures that feel like a red-hot poker ramming into his chest.

Richard unconsciously takes a threatening step forward, the demon resting casually on his shoulder, encompassing and fueling his blind fury. This rage is familiar; it clothes him and cradles his body like a newborn baby.

“Watch it.”

“What?” Enos responds with a coy smirk. “You don’t like to share? Come on, Clayson...there is nothing better than sharing a peach amongst friends.”

He clenches his jaw, glaring daggers at Enos.

“No?” Enos derides. “I guess I’ll have to take it upon myself to take it from you.”

Richard lashes forward, struggling to get his hands around Enos’s scrawny neck,

*“Shut your fucking mouth!”*

Roy intercepts. He is quick to subdue the wild animal by grabbing his arm roughly and pulling him back. “Hey, hey, man. Calm down.”

Enos snorts. “Oh Lordy, touchy. I didn’t do nothing, did I, Avery?”

“Not a damn thang,” Avery confirms. “Now, I am done telling you all to get the fuck out.”

Richard shoves Roy off forcefully before storming out of the store.

He paces outside the shop, walking back and forth, fuming. What the hell did Enos mean? If he did anything to hurt Beau, he would fucking kill him. Shoot him in his big dumb head for even breathing in Beau’s direction.

Christ, everything is getting more complicated.

What is Enos’s relationship to Beau anyway? Why didn’t Avery even bat an eye at Enos? Is he in on it too? Questions whirl around his head, and he has no idea what to do or what to think. Everything from this morning seems to crumble now.

It’s clear, Beau is hiding things from him, evading prominent questions and dodging all his attempts at answers. Richard is worn, tired, and gaunt from everything. Beau isn’t precious. He isn’t this wholesome being that Richard has made him out to be.

Beau is something else, something dark and secretive and distrusting.

What the hell can he do?

He's in too deep, his feelings are too multifaceted, intertwined, and looped with Beau's. He can't look at the situation objectively like a good police officer would. The angles are all wrong, his perception is obscured, his vision impaired.

He isn't pragmatic, cold, and calculating. Richard comes to the horrifying realization that he is the opposite; he's emotional, angry, jealous, and worst of all, erratic.

Not to mention so damn stupid.

"Fuck."

Flashes of Beau from this morning come crashing back, innocent, shy smiles, and fleeting touches. Beau is grinning wide, his cheeks puffed with pancakes as they watched shitty cable TV.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he gulps down his frustration.

Richard huffs, placing his hands on his hips when Roy comes up beside him.

"What the hell has gotten into you?" Roy exclaims, throwing his hands in the air. "Your cheese has slid off your cracker. What the fuck are you doing attacking a civilian? Fuck man, we needed the information on the phone conversation between Gary and Avery."

“Don’t you think I fucking know that?” Richard grunts.

“What were you thinking? You jeopardized the whole case over some stupid shit Enos said.”

“Just leave me be,” Richard says, seething.

“No,” Roy says, inclining his head. “Now, I wasn’t going to say anything, but I think it’s about time”

“Don’t start with me,” he warns.

“You are slipping, Richard.” Roy spits. “It isn’t just about your shitty-ass temper. You aren’t coming into work properly, and when you do, you look like you are a mile high or on another fucking planet. That’s not the worst of it. Lana says you haven’t been home in days. What is going on? Talk to me, brother. Let me help.”

“I’m fine,” Richard snaps. “I don’t need your fucking help.”

“Is...” Roy hesitates, before he says. “Beau wrapped up in all of this?”

Richard swallows, turning his face away.

“I don’t know...”

“You don’t know.... you’re fucking Sheriff and you don’t know.... Lana mentioned you were keeping a close eye on him... and that you guys met up a few times...Is that true?”

“So, what if it is?” Richard shrugs flippantly.

“Are you following up on a lead?” Roy probes, inching closer.

“Look, it’s more complicated than that. I can’t just go up to him and start making accusations and such. I need Beau to admit that he is being forced. So far, he hasn’t budged, he won’t say a word against Mason or anyone for that matter. I need to make sure the case is ironclad. We cannot have any loose ends. I need to give Beau the opportunity to help himself get out of the situation. Or at least allow him the time and space to feel like he can trust me. Once that’s done, we make an official arrest of the individuals suspected of being human traffickers.”

The lies flow like milk and honey.

Beau won’t crack, that much is obvious. He will never speak a word about what happened to him unless Mason is out of the picture for good. The real reason he hasn’t made a move or any arrest is because, number one, he lacks the evidence and number two, he is a willing participant.

He needs to play it safe. If Beau goes down, he doesn’t want to be swept up with him. For the sake of his family, he’s in too deep, nearly up to his neck with shit and piss.

He needs to find them a way out, that doesn’t implicate both of them.

“Alright, fair enough...Look, I know that you know that there isn't anybody in the whole world that means more to me than you do. We're family, Richard. Brothers. We made it through hell in Iraq.”

The weight is crushing his shoulders.

For a minute he thinks about telling Roy about Beau. He thinks about opening his mouth and articulating how he cheated on his wife with an underage kid—a prostitute. He thinks about saying how happy he is, how Beau makes his fucking lackluster life worth living.

He thinks and thinks and thinks but ultimately decides that telling Roy would be a fate worse than death. Roy with his heteronormativity mentality could not and would not be able to fathom his brother, his *Commander* being a fag.

Instead, he clenches his jaw in determination, squares his shoulders, and scowls at Roy into silence.

## Chapter 25

**CHAPPED lips clash violently, hungrily in their disposition.**

It's reckless, this behavior, pawing and clawing at each other like a couple of rabid animals. This isn't initially how he imagined the meeting would go. Sure, there would be some kissing, some necking, and perhaps *he* would suck Beau off, but not this. It's catastrophic, claustrophobic, a rash tangling of frantic limbs trying to consume each other.

Beau is up against the wall, his back scraping against the unforgiving brick.

Their lips click and clack, tongues wag and retreat in a strange dance that has Richard reeling and ready to tear off Beau's clothing.

It's broad daylight.

He can hear people walking down the sidewalk, dogs barking, kids clutching their mother's hands. The world keeps turning as he fucks his tongue in Beau's mouth.

Richard feels exponentially free like he could piss on puppies, take a shit on the White House, or shoot Bambi. There is nothing like this, nothing like feeling like he can fly. The rules don't apply

to him.

In this alleyway, nestling between Beau's pubescent thighs, he is invincible.

It's been two weeks since the motel. Two weeks of nothing. No guilt or feelings of shame, nothing but insistent desire. He wants Beau again and again; in every way he can have him, legs spread, bent over, on any available surface he can find.

Often, he does, when he can afford it.

Their sex had been dubious at first, awkward fumbling and apologies every thirty seconds. Richard had been so afraid, to him Beau was like shiny glass, fragile, easily breakable. However, that notion disappeared several days ago when Beau showed him exactly what rimming is and how hard he can come with someone tonguing his balls.

Beau groans, thrusting his tongue deeper into his mouth and fisting his shirt.

He is broiling, sweating profusely from the heat and passion that is threatening to singe his flesh. Richard is ravenous, hastily tearing the front part of Beau's jeans open and shoving his hands down to cup his cock.

Beau's eyes fly open, and his hand closes around Richard's wrist to stop him from going further.

There is a brief struggle, where Beau is trying to back away



and Richard keeps striding forward. They battle for several moments, Beau's protest stifled by long, harsh kisses and swift fondling.

Richard is past addiction, bordering on something much more destructive, much more sinister.

All he does is daydream about Beau: what he is doing, what he is wearing, how he could fuck him. These questions on a never-ending triad until he sees Beau again, lurking down his familiar alleyway, secluded in the shadows.

*God, I am out of control.*

"I need to see you," Richard grunts, practically mauling Beau's face. "When can we be alone?"

"Richard." Beau pants, placing a firm hand on his chest. "Wait. Slow down. Someone will see"

"Who cares? I don't care. I crave you," he says between kisses.

Richard decides he'll repent tomorrow for all of his sins, but right now he needs to be inside this kid. There isn't much he understands about his infatuation with Beau, only that it has derailed him, turned him outside in and inside out.

Two weeks ago, he had approached Beau behind a rundown warehouse on Peter's Street, madder than a bat out of hell. He had paced like a bull, angry, enraged at Enos's devious analogy of

peaches.

What the fuck was that supposed to mean anyway?

He confronted Beau, smoke blowing out of his nose and ears. He ranted, raved, and broken whatever he could reach to get an answer out of Beau. Only he didn't. Beau just stared at him vacantly.

All it took was one smoldering look, filled with something red hot that made Richard harden like a rocket launcher.

It had been upon him, something-something visceral, and he'd bent Beau over, against that shitty, rusting bench and fucked him stupid. God, it had been so very wrong and horrible and awful, but he couldn't stop. He needed to be inside him at that moment needed to be close enough to smell him, his sweat, his sweet essence. Richard wanted to drown in Beau.

That had been weeks ago.

It's irrelevant now, Beau is his.

Richard will deal with everything else later, but right now, things are sublime. He groans in subtle frustration but continues his attack on Beau's cotton candy lips. He tries to block out Enos's smug face or his sneer when he looked at Richard like he knew exactly what Beau tasted like. It drives him wild, just picturing them together, Enos's sickly hands all over him, soiling and contaminating him.

He isn't thinking clearly. He doesn't want to ruin the mood by bringing up Enos.

He doesn't want to break the illusions he created. Beau is perfect. Sure, he's a little rough around the edges, a little jagged at the sides, but he can change. Richard can guide him through it and polish him up. This thing with Enos is temporary, if it was anything at all. There are questions he needs to ask Beau, answers he requires, but it can wait. Richard wants to be balls-deep, thrusting in and out of Beau's tight, white heat.

Beau laughs. "I reckon you will care when your wife and all your cop buddies find out..."

That's enough to slow the feverish kisses he is planting all over Beau's jawline. "Fair enough."

"I got to go anyway," Beau says, fixing his jeans.

"Where?" Richard demands.

"I've got shit ta do," Beau responds. "Plus, my full-time job isn't making sure you'll always have something to stick your dick into."

"You know it isn't like that for me. Believe it or not, I enjoy your company," Richard grumbles, "When can I see you?"

Beau sighs, straightening his rumbled gray shirt. "This weekend should be good I reckon—"

"At the motel," Richard says, already formulating a way to get

out of his house. They correct their clothing, and Beau looks around cautiously.

“See you then,” Beau mutters and nods to him before walking in the opposite direction of the alleyway.

## Chapter 26

**The road stretches across the open country.**

Old mountains, pale fields, intersecting roads all make up the same sleepy town of Byromville. It takes Richard several hours to work up the courage to go home. When he does, the road there seems foreign, strange and distorted, like he's never been here before.

It takes an enormous amount of effort to leave his driveway.

He doesn't want to see Lana's face in particular, just because he's afraid she'll know. With one lasting look into his lying eyes, she'll know exactly who he is. For the past weeks he's avoided her and her questions that seem to grow harsher exponentially whenever he's within the vicinity.

Today isn't any different. The minute he steps through the door, Lana is on him.

Those eyes he used to love are now an avalanche of disappointment and dissatisfaction that seems to drag him under. She has Ida on her hip, and she's on the phone dancing around the chord while making lunch for the kids.

Richard shuts the door, avoids her questioning glare, and takes Ida out of her hands. Luckily, Ida comes willingly, squirming to get close to her daddy. Lunch is a tense,

unsatisfactory affair, filled with Kyle chattering on about the town fair that Richard is only half-listening to.

“What time are we leaving?” Kyle asks, chewing vigorously on his tuna sandwich.

“Huh?” Richard asks dumbly.

“The *town* fair,” Lana says.

“Oh...” Richard mumbles. “What time do you want to go, buddy?”

“Now,” Kyle says. “I’ve been talking about it for like ten minutes, Dad.”

“Sorry,” he replies sincerely. “Your old man just spaced out. Go get ready and I’ll take you—”

“And Ida,” Lana snaps.

“Right.”

“Cool.” Kyle jumps up from his chair and goes to grab his backpack.

And then there were two.

“I’m not going to pretend to know what the hell is going on with you. I won’t.” Lana spits venomously. “You’re out all hours of the night. Not coming home so I have to make up excuses for the children—”

“Look, about that, I’m sorry—” Richard apologizes, the guilt

clogging his throat.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lana concludes fiercely. “Whatever it is.... you are not going to make a fool out of me, Richard. Not in front of our children and certainly not in front of this town.”

They stare at each other for a long time.

He forgot how well she knows him. She knows the most intimate details about him and has known since they were sixteen years old. Of course, she would read between the lines, the blank spaces he refuses to fill in, and draw her conclusions. This shouldn’t surprise him, yet it does, and he feels the guilt coming back full force.

In that instant, he wants to tell her everything, pleading with her to understand that his *temporary* insanity turned out to be not so temporary.

That he might have indecipherable feelings for a boy.

All along his optic nerve are visions of Beau, his eyes, his nose, his smile—*everything*. Richard wants to tell her he’s never wanted anyone so badly, never felt so consumed by lust and desire. Richard opens his mouth, an apology dancing on his tongue when Kyle comes pounding down the stairs.

“Let’s go or we’ll be late!”

Richard swallows thickly, nods once, then twice before getting his daughter ready and leaving the house. Once he is out the door

and only when Ida is put in her car seat, does he acknowledge the crumbling look on Lana's face. He never confirmed or denied her accusations.

The fair is in full swing when they arrive.

Father Michael is the first to greet them in the church backyard with tokens for the children and candy corn. Kyle immediately runs off with Patrick, Richard wanders a bit with Ida on his hip. After they've played several games and Ida has nibbled on a little cotton candy, he makes his way over to Isaac's family, who are sitting with Houston and Karen.

"Isaac," Richard greets, nodding to Luciana Garcia who happens to be Isaac's girlfriend. "How are you all doing?"

A chorus of "good" follows.

"Aw, is she getting a little restless?" Karen Jefferson coos. She is Houston's wife of three years. She has long, beautiful dark hair that is nearly down to her back. She is of Aboriginal descent. Her skin is smooth and tanned, her face open and welcoming.

"Let me take her for a minute."

Richard hands Ida over, and then Houston gives him a soda.

"This is some event," Richard says conversationally. "Thanks again for putting it on. The community appreciates it."

"No problem," Karen says. "Too bad Lana couldn't make it though. She put so much effort into planning the whole thing. It's



a shame, isn't it?"

Richard nods and sips his drink so he won't have to respond right away. Luckily Tanya and Brendan choose that moment to walk over.

"What are you guys talking about?" Tanya asks after Houston gives her a pop.

"Richard was just thanking us for putting on the fair." Luciana smiles. "It was a collaborative effort, that's for sure, but the kids need this."

"Oh, no doubt," Tanya replies. "Houston Jr. couldn't get enough of the slides."

"And I'm pretty sure I just lost Kyle forever to that Jumping Jamboree," Richard chimes in.

They all laugh.

"We need these events," Isaac says. "Not just for the children, but for the community. There is nothing stronger than a community that builds together. That's what we need to be doing; building and making sure our kids are thriving together."

"How about a toast?" Richard grins. "To the women that help make the community stronger?"

"Hear, hear," Isaac replies.

They drink and toast with their sodas, chuckling a little at the ridiculousness of it.

“Also, a second toast,” Houston says. “To the best damn Sheriff to ever live!”

“Oh. No, no please—” Richard protests.

“Come on. It’s true.” Houston cuts him off. “When I was some broke brother looking for work, you took a chance on me. Now, I can’t speak for everyone else, but you were the first person who saw potential, who looked at me and saw past the color of my skin. I appreciate that. You are a good man, Richard.”

Beau immediately flashes before his eyes.

Bent over the table, riding him up against the wall, fucking him senseless—*pain, pleasure, superb pain, more pleasure*—Oh God, he doesn’t deserve this. Richard stares at his soda, a vinegar taste flooding his mouth.

He feels nothing but intense disgust.

What the hell is he doing with this kid? All of this their respect, their loyalty and his family just thrown away for some mind-blowing sex? Was it even worth it?

His stomach turns.

“Hear, hear,” Isaac says again.

They toast and drink again. Houston pats him on the back. Richard forces a smile, sips his drink quietly while the group changes the subject. The soda tastes flat, like detestable, sweet, warm water that is nearly impossible to swallow.

## Chapter 27

**There is a gap of weedy wasteland.**

A stretch long and far of vacant rotting farmland, fanning out between them as they drive onwards. Most of the land around these parts are abandoned, rundown shacks and broken fences.

Nothing but an echo of what was.

Richard rolls his neck, the heat making sweat drip down his spine.

Roy makes a left on Thyme Street. The houses get more dilapidated and decrepit with each passing moment. It's hard to believe someone who owns a business and has multiple investments lives in a sordid place like this.

They pull into the driveway.

Roy gets out first, hand on his gun scanning the area. His mirror Aviator sunglasses enhancing his handsome features.

“Doesn't look like anybody's home...”

He's right. No cars in the driveway and the house looks dark.

“Let's take a look anyway.” Richard says, walking up the front porch. The house is in fair condition, built ten or so years ago most of it is still sturdy.

He raps his knuckles on the door.

“Coming!” A voice calls, then the front door swings open. “Well tickle me pink...”

“Patricia,” Richard inclines his head respectfully. “We’re here to speak with Avery.... I reckon he’s expecting us.”

“Is it just me or did you age like fine wine?” She says, lips curling over a jack-o-lantern smile. “Come on in, sweetie.”

Richard walks in first, apprehensive and wrinkling his nose at the stench of cigarettes and something else, something that smells utterly *profane*.

Patricia Cobbs leads them into the living room, she’s wearing a shirt with a plunging neckline that shows off her wrinkling breasts.

A sight Richard wishes he could bleach from his memory.

She prances around in leopard print tights, that do nothing but enhance her belly and twinge legs. Her hair is flaccid and oily, graying at the temple. “Is that Roy Rhett? Oh, my goodness, two handsome men in one day? I guess Christmas came early.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Roy says, surveying the room. “Is Avery around?”

“No, he’s still stuck at the shop. Would you boys like some tea? How’s Lana and the gorgeous boy of yours Kyle? I see him all the time down at the ice cream shop.”

“He’s doing good thanks for asking,” Richard replies. “Lana is great, still getting used to Ida teething.”

“Oh, the best part is when they can’t talk.” Patricia laughs, it sounds more like a horrible hacking sound than anything else. “Mind if I smoke? I quit like a hundred times.”

Richard shrugs. It’s her house.

“So...” She looks between the two of them expectantly. “What did he do?”

Her eyes light up, as if she just hit the jackpot.

Richard shares a look with Roy.

It’s clear she knows something, whether or not it’s vital to the case is to be determined. Richard follows his gut instinct, deciding to goad her into revealing any information they might have to help with the case.

It’s his fault they had to seek out Avery again in the first place, if he didn’t fuck up so badly, they would have gotten their information and left the Tailor shop like they originally planned.

“We’re just asking some questions about his relationship with Gary,” Richard replies.

“You mean their late-night phone calls?” Patricia says flippantly, lighting up a cigarette. “I know all about that. What else?”

“Did you hear something?”

She shrugs. “So, what if I did?”

“It is valuable information regarding Gary’s case. I know you knew him well.”

“We all did.” She says, blowing smoke in the air. “What? Don’t look at me like that. Gary was a good man—*blah blah blah*—what a load of *horseshit*.”

Roy takes off the sunglasses, his eyes narrowing. “What do you know?”

Something in her expression changes, almost fearful and she retreats by waving her hand. “Nothing that can be helpful.”

He knows her story.

Debutante girl with a promising future falling for a redneck hick with nothing to offer. Rumor has it she had a full scholarship to Yale years ago, before black tar started spreading through her system.

Addiction is an ugly thing, it withers the soul, thins the skin and makes the eyes gaunt and sunken. She is nothing like she once was.

Richard remembers her as a child, she used to be fun and loving, but after nine miscarriages it was like the light slowly faded out of her eyes.

The demon wants to pounce, rip her eyes out, remind her that she is nothing and that’s all she ever will be. Richard barely

manages to hold the creature back, he swallows down the flash of excitement, the thrill of it down until he almost chokes.

“Is this your house?” Richard looks around, circling the living room. The couch is an ugly shade of orange with more cigarette burns than anything else. His eye catches the peeling wallpaper, dirty dishes and newspapers on the coffee table.

“My mother’s house.”

“Where does Avery stay?” Roy continues, both of them circling the area like birds of prey.

He used to love this part of the job, getting a witness to crack. It was nearly intoxicating, the ecstasy of pressuring and easing off, asking questions and enforcing them with a little intimidation.

“Oh yeah, like you don’t know.” She scoffs. “My husband stays in the city most nights. He usually fucks around with Mason and his crew—why don’t you ask that Blackwell kid?”

The mention of Beau makes his blood freeze.

She knows something. If he wasn’t sure of it before, he’s damn sure of it now. The demon whispers to him and it’s not long before his mind twists and his body takes on a new form.

Like shedding this old skin, for a new one.

“This isn’t your house.”

“Of course, it is—”



“The title is in Avery’s name and it’s a well-known secret that he stole it from your family.”

“Don’t you take that tone with me mister I used to change your diapers—”

“He swindled you out of your inheritance and stole your parent’s property, all the while forcing you to live here while he fucks around in the city. Everybody knows it. The question is what happens to you when he is out of the way.”

Roy frowns at him, but doesn’t intervene.

“Where do you get off coming into my home and threatening me?” She fumes.

“We can do this, two ways,” Richard squares his shoulders and stares down at her. “I can haul your ass down to the station right now for obstruction of justice or I can *arrest* you for snorting coke.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not snorting—”

Richard removes the newspaper on the table to reveal lines of cocaine on a glass mirror.

“*Fuck*. Shit, okay that was there already. It isn’t mine. You can’t believe it’s *mine*.”

This was almost too easy.

“If that’s the case you’re under arrest for possession of illegal substances, you have the right to remain silent anything you say

can and will be used against you in the court of law—”

“Okay! Okay! *Jesus Christ*, okay!” Patricia exclaims. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

## Chapter 28

### **The underworld is a world apart.**

That's primarily what separates us from them. What makes us the good guys and them the bad guys? In black and white, it makes sense. Richard has lived by this philosophy his entire life, never questioned it or thought differently.

They are the villains, the deranged dogs of society that need to be destroyed.

Richard had sworn to eradicate them, one by one through justice, duty and all that other shit. Now, none of that makes any sense to him. How can he uphold honor and fairness when behind closed doors he is doing the exact opposite?

He sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. It is almost noon, and even with the air conditioning on full blast, he is still sweating. In his stuffy office he watches the time tick by. It goes slowly, every minute feels agonizing, and Richard wants to smash the damn thing off the wall.

*Fuck*—it's too damn early to be thinking this much.

The weekend can't come fast enough, and then he can bury his guilt along with his cock inside Beau. He doesn't want to think about how he's become the enemy, about how he bridges the gap between the two worlds and is now dancing dangerously in the

middle.

Richard wants to *feel* again.

He wants exploding sparks, desolating passion, and he wants it all right now. He wants to make Beau laugh again. He wants to see him tell silly stories and jokes, and above all else, he doesn't want to destroy what little happiness he's found.

"Richard?" Houston says, knocking on his door.

"Yeah?"

"Emergency meeting in the briefing room."

"Alright, I'm coming."

He pretends to clear some stuff off his desk, stalling a little before he grabs his coffee mug and heads to the briefing room. Everyone is already waiting, Hiromi and Tanya taking the lead by standing up at the front, passing out files.

They look up when he enters the room, and he snags a seat near the front next to Roy. They haven't spoken since Richard told him to fuck off. It's not as awkward as he thought it would be. Roy mainly minds his own business, occasionally twirling a pen around in his hand.

If they could survive the war together, they could survive a few harsh words. Richard isn't sure if he should speak to him, not sure he even wants to open that can of worms. They both neglected to get any viable information out of Avery. The entire

visit had been a colossal waste of time. Hopefully Tanya and Hiromi were able to dig up something more substantial.

“Alright,” Richard says. “What do you guys have?”

“Well,” Hiromi replies. “It was hard, nobody in their community wanted to talk to us, but we managed to get the mother lode of information. Since you guys weren’t able to talk to Avery about what he spoke to Gary about before he died, Tanya had this brilliant idea to go another route. It was just a genius; I don’t know why we didn’t think of this before.”

“Okay.” Richard nods.

“She suggested that we speak to the spouses, even if they didn’t have any relevant information, they might be more helpful in sharing information in the future, and that’s how we got a few exclusive testimonies from Avery’s wife Patricia.”

“Is she a viable witness?” Roy asks.

“Yes,” Tanya answers. “She gave us her testimony but wants full immunity if it ever goes to trial. I was honestly surprised by how quickly she gave up the information.”

“Well, at least we have Patricia’s testimony,” Roy interjects. “Could she tell us who else is involved?”

“She gave us a full list of names,” Tanya says. “Their names match with the IP address we found on Bud’s computer. All we need to do is wait for our tech guys to come in, they’ll trace it back

to their email accounts. It'll be all the proof we need."

"You got a court order for that?" Isaac asks, skeptically. "Last I heard, you can use IP addresses, just like your mailing address, it can identify the physical location of your mailbox and mail carrier. However, one important detail is that it isn't a *physical* address."

"What are you saying?" Roy asks.

Isaac shrugs indifferently. "I just want to make sure we're protected, you know, if this search happens to go tits up."

"Why would it?" Hiromi demands.

Isaac scoffs. "You know as well as I do, that IP addresses are based on internet service providers, not physically where you are. If an IP address is assigned to your computer at home, then another could very well be assigned to your neighbors."

"I am ten steps ahead of you." Hiromi says smugly. "We already got the court order and our technical division will analyze the results soon."

"Fantastic work," Richard says. "We should get more evidence before making an official arrest. Oftentimes relying on victim testimony to identify and build a trafficking case can be problematic."

"How come?" Hiromi asks.

“Because relying on victims to provide a statement to build a strong case can be difficult. Once we have those willing to testify in protective custody, we need to work with prosecutors to identify other types of evidence. We need the whole nine yards; such as bank records, signed documents, and or Internet ads, so that they are not solely reliant on victim testimony to classify offenses as human trafficking.”

“I’m sure Callie and Patricia are willing to share all of that. The only question is if they used their joint bank accounts.” Roy injects.

“How long?” Richard stresses, his eyes skimming over the files. “We don’t want them thinking we’ve got any leads so they skip town.”

“Three or four days maximum, Patricia says the group calls themselves the Moonshiners.”

“Dipshits,” Isaac laughs. “What kind of dumbass name is that?”

“I have no idea, but it’s named after their leader. That’s not even the worst of it,” Hiromi says, his face ashen from all the information.

“When it rains, it fucking pours,” Isaac mumbles, crossing his arms over his chest. “Who knew this shitstorm could get worse?”

“Who’s their leader?” Houston asks.

Richard prickles in his seat.

“Well, Tanya ran his name through the system considering it isn’t that common around these parts. That’s what I meant when I said things couldn’t get worse,” Hiromi says grimly. “No doubt they pinned him on the wrong charge. It is common for there to be a large gap between human trafficking incidents and offense reporting occurs at multiple points, including lack of identification, failure to classify internally, and disconnect between investigations and crime reporting programs.”

“Yeah,” Tanya chimes in. “The guys got a rap sheet a mile long, ranging from arson, to vandalism, rape, and the worst of it, human trafficking. I had some trouble locating his information because he’s jumped from institution to institution and across state lines. Before that, nobody knows shit about him. There’s a warrant out for his arrest in Vegas. The guy was either in prison or doing illegal drugs with the Moonshiners.”

“The fishy thing is, he’s been in Byromville a few years now and nobody noticed,” Hiromi says, utterly perplexed. “I mean I knew he was creepy but—”

“Hiromi,” Richard interjects sharply. “Who is he?”

“His legal name is Mason Buckley, but we all know him as Mason Blackwell.”



“No shit?” Roy laughs. “You’re fucking me right?”

“It’s true.” Tanya injects. “We’ve got a rap sheet longer than Charles Manson on here.”

Richard stares at the case file pensively, this isn’t making much sense. Although the fact that Mason is the leader isn’t all that surprising, Richard has had his suspicions for a long time. Something isn’t adding up. How is Beau mixed up in all of this? If his uncle was the leader of a human trafficking ring how did he become the center? Was his uncle prostituting him for sex? Was it all about the money? How did he get the evidence to bring the fucker down once and for all?

“Why the name change?” He asks Hiromi.

“Huh?”

“He changed his name from Buckley to Blackwell, right? Was it just to hide his identity or what? Does he have outstanding warrants in any other states? It just doesn’t make sense how he could legally change his name.”

“No, he was never a Blackwell. He didn’t legally change his name; it was always Buckley. I guess...he just told people to call him that but he has no blood relations to them.”

The air is sucked from the room.

Richard stares at Hiromi like he is riding a tricycle while juggling plates. He stares at him like he’s grown six heads and a

limb. He stares at Hiromi as the demon erupts from his rib cage, spraying blood and guts everywhere.

This is some sick fucking joke, some demented, ill-timed illusion that will soon end with them all falling over and laughing their asses off. It's not real; none of this is. The punch line will come. It will break the barricade of silence, and they will all go back to some semblance of normalcy.

“What do you mean?” Richard steps forward. “If he isn't a Blackwell, then who in the holy hell is Beau living with?”

They all stare at each other for several moments, Richard incredulously before the words finally set in. Those words, nasty and bitter and so disturbing unlocked the heat in his bones. Richard twitches, his entire body threatening *mutiny* as they sink in, seeping into his pours, coiling around cells and membranes.

If Mason isn't Beau's uncle, then who the fuck is he?

That man—who is possibly deranged, vile and despicable is living in Beau's house, settling in and sprouting roots. Images of the past, brief and strident strike his vision all at once. The first is Beau at the diner with Mason, and their argument which Richard thought nothing of. He remembers clearly now, Mason's hand, flexing and immobile constricting around Beau's bicep.

*Don't you ever fucking touch me*—Beau had yelled.

The bruises, split lip and blackened eye as Beau stared at him and begged with knowing, oceanic eyes, filled with hurt and

emotional decay. The second image flashes like a bolt of lightning; Beau at the lagoon, sad and desolated—*Mason would kill me.*

No fear, just a rather blanket statement as if it were a fact, a cold rationale calculation. Like there was no doubt in his mind that Mason would.

“We need to get him out of there,” Richard breathes, the silence in the room unsettling. “We need to get him the fuck out of there. Call all units we need to head over to the Blackwell residences right *now*—”

“Richard, we don’t know if it was him.”

“I know!” Richard says, with pure conviction. “I *know* it was him”

“Look, we need five things to prove a murder. Without that he walks and we are caught standing there with our dicks in our hands.” Isaac says evenly. “We can’t just storm the premises.”

“We need to get Beau into witness protection now.”

“Let’s cool our tits,” Isaac replies. “We need to find the defendant guilty of first-degree murder either on the basis of malice, premeditation and deliberation, or under the first-degree felony murder rule, or both.”

“We have enough motive to prove both,” Richard barks. “You

can't look at Beau and tell me he isn't the center of all of this! That Mason didn't *sell* him into sex trafficking and pimp him out! Not to mention the abuse he's suffered for years. We need to nail this fucker right away. We can't wait a second longer. Lives are at risk."

"Look," Roy cuts in. "The reason we haven't been able to bring Beau into the station is because we never actually *seen* him conduct business. As fucked up as that sounds, can anyone in this room honestly say they've seen Beau picking up johns? Because I can't. We have no proof. Aside from Bud and Gary being connected through human trafficking, we don't have anything on Mason other than speculation. The only witnesses we have can prove Gary and Bud were a part of it, other than that we've got *nothing* on Mason."

"I agree with Rhett on this one," Tanya says. "We can bring him in for questioning and see if he can collaborate their stories. Other than that, our hands are tied. We still need to bring our witness in custody, gather all the information we can before we make a formal arrest."

"We have no murder weapon and no motive. Why would Mason kill Gary if he was a loyal client? What reason would he have to kill someone who was giving him money? If they were partners, it doesn't make sense. Why not kill Bud too?" Houston

speculates.

“What you are all failing to understand,” Isaac says, rubbing his temples slowly. “Is that for us to find the defendant guilty of first-degree murder, the State must prove that the defendant intentionally and with malice killed the victim with a deadly weapon. If we don’t have those things, we going to get *fucked* by the prosecution and Mason will walk free.”

“We need to get him out of there now.” Richard says, his hands tremor.

There’s no time, he should have left already. As soon as Hiromi said anything about Mason he should have been gone.

Blinded by his own selfishness and hedonism he overlooked everything, when it was right under his nose this entire time. Every lasting look, the way Beau would flinch or shudder away from certain touches as if he were afraid.

*God*—and that look on his face when he first found Beau, wandering.

How can he tell them that *he* is one of Beau’s clients? That he knows for a matter of fact that Beau is a prostitute. That Richard has *fucked* him in every way possible.

“Brother,” Roy chimes in. “I understand how you feel, but let’s do this the right way. We need to collect all the evidence first. If we move too quickly, they might all get spooked and skip town. We already questioned Avery, so they are already on edge.”

“Why not get Beau to flip?” Tanya asks. “If he is being abused by someone then why don’t we bring him in to see if he will testify against Mason? He is the missing link after all. He’s connected to Gary through Creed and since he’s living with Mason, he may be able to tell us everything we need to know.”

“He won’t talk,” Roy sighs. “Trust me, damn kid is hard as nails. I’m sure he knows exactly what’s going on, but he won’t turn on Mason.”

“We’ll bring him in anyway,” Isaac says confidently. “Kicking and screaming. I’ll bring him in myself. After we expose Mason for the twisted fuck that he is Beau will have no choice but to talk, or face becoming a juvenile delinquent.”

This was getting *too* close.

He needed to speak to Beau first, get to Mason *first* before they dug deeper into everything that going on. They would find out the truth, that he sold his soul for a kid—a *prostitute*. Was it worth it? If the truth came out could he justify his actions or behavior? Would it be worth it if he could save Beau? Like he should have done in the beginning?

It would be worth it. Beau was worth everything.

He would need to be sleek, cunning—he would have to twist things in a way where Mason was undoubtably guilty, while his team remained in the dark about his relationship with Beau.

The demon eyes are watchful, slit black, bleeding red as they

gaze at him from under the table.

The conversation dims and the lights flicker. His heart slams against his chest and perspiration beads on his forehead.

The sexual abuse, the physical abuse and mental abuse. The sheer *violation* of Beau makes his stomach wrench and he can barely stand, his legs quiver and he can feel the anger rushing at him. He cannot stand by and do nothing. He needs to free Beau, he needs to get him away from Mason as soon as possible. Whatever it takes and it if meant removing Mason, then Richard would personally deliver him to hell.

“I’ll go and speak to Beau. Tanya, I want you and Hiromi getting back to the witnesses. Make sure they are in protective custody. Houston find everything you can on the Moonshiners. Roy and Isaac, I want you digging deeper into Bud and Gary’s involvement.” Richard snaps, grabbing the case file and shoving all the papers inside. “This meeting is adjourned until further notice.”

Richard sprints out of the building like his ass is on fire, jumping into a Police cruiser and shredding out of the parking lot, the tires squealed, grinding viciously against the concrete.

“*Fuck!*” Richard screams slamming his fist against the steering wheel.

The sirens blare as he jams his foot against the gas, dodging wayward vehicles and beeping his horn so people move out of the

way.

His hands quiver against the wheel.

Sweat accumulates on his brow, face and lower back. He feels *filthy*, like he's covered in piss and shit. Richard doesn't want to see it, doesn't want to see the ugly reflection of his own willful ignorance. Truthfully, he had been infatuated with the idea of Beau, the thought of beauty, so transparent and transcending, ingeniously in the form of a perfect person. He overlooked so much, the unfathomable grief and sorrow on Beau's face daily.

The car swerves and static from the radio buzzes in his ear, vaguely he can hear Roy in the background along with other voices.

By the time he makes it to the Blackwell residence the blood is pounding in his ears, he can barely see straight, the rage is boiling over and there isn't anything from stopping the demon from ripping, tearing its way through.

The house comes into view, dilapidated on the hillside, crumbling piece of shit that Richard loathes more than anything.

*Cage the night.* The demon whispers to him.

He presses harder on the gas, dirt and debris flying everywhere as he drives recklessly up the pathway and parks the car near the house. Sirens blare loudly as he slams his foot on the brake, nearly crashing into the front porch. Richard flies out of the vehicle, leaving the door hanging wide open and stumbles up



the front porch with his gun heavy in hand.

Richard wants to laugh, as the white light burns bright.

**END OF BOOK ONE.**

## Cage the Night

**By the time he makes it to the Blackwell residence,** the blood is pounding in his ears.

Richard can barely see straight, the rage is boiling over and there isn't anything stopping the demon from ripping, tearing its way through. The house comes into view, dilapidated on the hillside, crumbling piece of shit that Richard loathes more than anything. He presses harder on the gas, dirt and debris flying everywhere as he drives recklessly up the pathway and parks the car near the house. Sirens blare loudly as he slams his foot on the brake, nearly crashing into the front porch. Richard flies out of the vehicle, leaving the door hanging wide open and stumbles up the porch with his gun heavy in hand.

There is nothing, white noise, air bustling in his ears and the tunnel vision of paralyzing vehemence. It's dark, raw and savage, the demon's lips curl and its breathing fire and brimstone as he clamors his way up the stairway of the Blackwell property.

The M1191 is secure in his grasp, fingers tightening around the trigger because there will be *nothing*, but brutality, sickening violence of blood and guts and gore.

Wooden stairs creak and groan under his foreign weight, the

screen door is hanging off its hinges and he knows, knows within his bones that there is something *very very very* wrong here.

Richard doesn't think, doesn't bother formulating a plan, instead he crashes into the front door, using his shoulder to smash into the weak wood. The door bends, cracks and nearly splinters beneath the blow and ultimately breaks, bursting open.

Pain explodes in his shoulder, searing and crippling, all the way up to his collarbone. The place is trashed, garbage is lying everywhere, the stale stench of old mold and rotting food fill the air. There is blood on the floor, perhaps animal, but he isn't too sure and the couch is torn to pieces, bits of wool are dancing in the humid Georgia air.

It takes him a moment; he stares dubiously around the room until his eyes land on a figure in the corner of the kitchen counter. He's panting like a madman, the fire still red hot in his veins, the ire like an eruption of blinding lights—*fireworks*.

Beau is there.

Hunching over, curling within himself, his head on his knees as he sobs into his arms. Richard trips, stumbling blindly trying to get to him. He kneels beside Beau, desperately checking him for any wounds. A string of babbled nonsense escapes his lips as he urgently tries to get Beau to acknowledge him.

Beau lifts his head, his left eye is swollen shut, so black and blue and hideous that Richard nearly jumps back. His clothes are

torn, his shirt barely concealing his chest. *What the fuck happened?*

Suddenly Beau is pushing, shunting, shoving then abruptly—barking, yelling at him in a hoarse voice to *leave and get the fuck out and never come back*. There is so much noise, he can't think straight, can't see straight, it's fucking with his perception and the demon is ravenous, the gun is beckoning him and the animosity comes swift and unyielding.

Richard grabs his arms roughly, shakes him.

“Where the fuck is he?” He screams at Beau.

More tears and Beau stop tersely and stares at him, one emerald eye that is unscathed is wide and beseeching.

The kid is terrified.

Richard doesn't need to turn around to know what inflicts that look. The silence is deafening, except for the pounding mantra, the convulsion of rage spreading through his core. He takes his time, touching Beau, caressing him and brushing the hair out of his eyes.

Then he stands, turning to meet the man with cool detest detachment.

Mason is leaning against the door, a sleazy, lazy smile adorning his blackened teeth. Everything about him sets Richard a blaze. Mason's twisted indiscretions have been brought to light,

every dark crawling, mangled secret is going to be dragged from the shadows and into the light.

## **Author's Note**

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my story. I know the journey for Richard and Beau is just beginning. I wrote “Weeps Indigo” two years ago. I never thought it would amount to much, just a nagging thought in my head, however, I knew I needed to get this story out. I am a self-published author, which means a lot of the work I’ve done on this book has been manual. I never claimed to be the best. However, I am glad you decided to stay with this story and the sequel to come. To the true fans of this story I appreciate you. A year ago, I never thought I would be here and it is because of you guys that I am.

Thank you so much for downloadin this book. If you enjoyed it please consider leaving a review or recommending it to a friend.

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