

EVERMORE



In his world of darkness, her light consumes him

SINNERS

atone



SOMME SKETCHER

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SINNERS
atone

Somme Sketcher is an internationally bestselling author of dark and mafia romance.

She is best known for her Sinners Anonymous series and for writing the slowest of the slow burns (for which she is not sorry at all).

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A NOTE FROM *Somme*

Dear reader,

Thank you for picking up a copy of *Sinners Atone*! I hope you love reading it as much as I loved writing it.

I wanted to remind you that *Sinners Atone* is book one of a duet. It ends on a cliffhanger, and the story concludes with *Sinners Absolve*.

Before you dive in, you should know that this book is a **dark romance**. There are several triggers, including talk of alcoholism, murder, incarceration, violence, and child abuse (not on page). Please read at your own risk.

Love,
Somme x

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*We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real
tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.*

— UNKNOWN

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THREE YEARS

Earlier

My father had these rules.

They were mostly bullshit, hammered together from age-old clichés and Hollywood one-liners, but when he spoke them into existence, they had a nasty habit of hardening into prophecies.

I was born bad because he said I would be. He said I'd withhold my first breath out of spite, and that not even shoving the family's silver in my mouth before I took my second would pacify me.

Now, I'll take my last exactly where he said I would: in the dark that made me The Villain.

My laugh echoes through the forest, deep and bitter, before morphing into a spluttering cough.

Guess death isn't so funny after all.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I scan the black sky. I learned the first time I died that the long tunnels and the white lights weren't meant for men like me. Hell, after everything I've done, God is more likely to cut his electricity and draw the curtains than signpost me to heaven. I'm looking

for a different light, an orange one, and when I spot it filtering through the branches, I bite out a curse.

It isn't growing any fucking closer.

I press my palm against the gash in my side and glare up at it. I'm dying, but I'm not delusional. There's no miracle waiting for me at that streetlamp, but if I reach the lamp, I'm on the main road. Then all I have to do is cross it and I'm at the church. It's my only chance to warn my brothers.

My brothers.

Fuck.

A new kind of pain behind my sternum drives me onward, but as my boot strikes soil, a white-hot heat roars up my leg and explodes in my stomach. I stagger backward and clip something with my heel, and when a whirring noise prickles my ears, my muscles tighten.

I've tripped over that fucking 'play' button.

I knew it was coming because it always comes. It's a myth that the worst part about dying is the pain or the uncertainty of what comes next. It's not. It's the part where your life flashes before your eyes and there's fuck-all you can do about it.

I tried outrunning it once; it only chased me. Tried closing my eyes, but it just projected off the inside of my eyelids.

Knowing I can't spare the energy fighting it, I clench my jaw, steady myself against a tree, and reluctantly wait for the show to start.

The Beginning plays out in Technicolor.

Nine summers spill out from between the trees and swallow the darkness whole. Days roll out along the forest floor; long and lazy; grass-stained, sunburned. Even the October wind warms and thickens, bringing with it the smell of chlorine and that sun-block I hated so much.

A memory of Angelo putting me in a headlock and smothering my face with it dances against the trunk of an oak tree. My

mother pretending not to notice while she flips through a magazine by the pool plays out on another.

Amusement rattles my next exhale, and I rub my thumb over a mud-caked knuckle. The first scar I ever got was from the day I was strong enough to twist out of my brother's grip and sucker punch him in the nuts.

Then the days fade to terracotta. Summer nights never got dark in The Beginning. They were always lit by bonfires in the garden and the torch I'd tuck under my chin to tell my brothers ghost stories around them.

Rafe's shrieks rustle between the branches, and a cold snap brushes my cheek as Angelo's laugh chases after it. He was *vicious* long before it solidified into a nickname.

When the next sound echoes in my ears, my smirk fades. All the fresh blood in my mouth congeals and threatens to choke me. '*Gabriel.*'

Fuck. I'd be an idiot to close my eyes. Being this close to death means there's a good chance they won't open again. But when my mama's voice shoots through the night and pierces my chest like a second stab wound, I squeeze my lids shut and drop my head back against the tree.

Maria Visconti was a woman with many hobbies, but her favorite was believing in bullshit. She believed some chick named Eve ate an apple and caused all the evil in the world, but if she'd just wished on a stray eyelash, everything would have been okay anyway. Every shiver was someone walking over her grave, and every black cat to cross her path was a sure sign she'd soon be lowered into it. The bearded dude in the sky, the fortune teller at the fair. Even the smackhead who hangs outside the Visconti Grand Casino and swaps tourists a lucky penny for a dollar.

She believed everything everyone told her to.
Except her husband and his rules.

'Gabriel!'

I grit my teeth and turn away from her voice.

No doubt she'd have believed him at first, back when he was telling her all the shit every mother wanted to hear. That her first child would be born to lead, and her second would take the silver spoon in his mouth and turn it to gold. But when he placed his hand on her swollen belly and declared her third son the Devil, she'd soured into a skeptic.

'Gabriel . . .'

I press harder onto my bleeding stomach, letting out an acidic hiss. I was wrong. The worst part of dying isn't watching your life flash before your eyes, it's hearing it ring in your ears. And tonight, not even the sound of sins could drown it out.

A guttural wheeze shoots from my lips, melts into a bleach-white puff, and blows all nine summers out of the clearing.

Nine winters bring silence and a blanket of snow. My retinas burn from the sudden contrast, and I look to the gray fog hanging beneath the forest canopy to escape it. But there's no relief up there, just a familiar face, a familiar expression, and a familiar fucking smirk disappearing behind the faceted crystal of a whiskey glass.

A new voice sears the back of my neck.

'I told you so, Maria.'

And then comes the familiar fury.

Alonso Visconti was so certain I'd be bad, so certain of his prophecy that he'd refused to name me after an angel like my brothers. Something about blasphemy and poor taste. But my mama had a way of making spite look pretty, and named me after her favorite angel of all.

'Oh, Gabriel.'

The bastard was right from the jump. While my brothers gurgled, laughed, and crawled, I bit, hissed, kicked. One of my earliest memories is stabbing a cousin with a butter knife at

Sunday lunch, and I can't even remember which one because I've tried to kill them all at some point.

I slam my head against the tree, trying to shake my mother's voice out of it. But it's too late, it's already crawled into my brain and made itself at home. '*Gabriel*' plays on a loop over and over and over. All three fucking syllables because she only ever said my full name, and never with a hint of irony. If anyone, including myself, dropped the last two, she'd tut, pick them up, and stitch them back on.

I don't know if she said my name the way she did to try to convince God I was good or just to piss off my father. If the latter was the case, it worked.

For the first nine years, he called me nothing at all.

From the tenth on, he called me The Villain.

My lungs seize, and my next inhale is desperate and wet. When I throw my head back to gulp more air, the darkness eats at the edges of my vision. Right on cue, it swallows all nine winters, all the half-drunk hot cocoas, and the half-built snowmen with wonky carrots for dicks.

When The Beginning ends, the darkness will take everything.

The last pinprick of light swims before my eyes, then disappears, plunging me into the black abyss. Silence doesn't follow, it's just bittersweet memories yelled through a megaphone, and when I can no longer stand it, a roar of frustration lights a path of fire up my throat.

I slide a few inches down rough bark, panting.

My stomach slides south too, and my gaze reluctantly follows.

There's that glow from the streetlamp again, only it's not. It's too small and too low, dancing against the dark at chest height. I give my head a shake, squeeze my eyes shut, and when I open them, the light has fractured and sharpened, taking the shape of fire.

Birthday candles. Ten, striped blue and white.

They flicker in the wind, pushing the darkness from my vision until all I can see is light. They slow my heartbeat, steady my breathing, and for a moment, life isn't leaking out of me from the six-inch gash in my stomach.

The last time I cheated Death, I swore when it found me again and flashed this part before me, I wouldn't hold my breath. Said it the time before that too. Yet here I am, my inhale locked at the base of my throat as if I'm saving it for later.

The backs of my eyes sting. Guess dying makes you a sentimental pussy. It's got me wondering about stupid shit, like alternate realities and butterfly wings and what would have happened if I'd been the first or second child. If I hadn't been born at all.

Seconds pile up into minutes, and I'm still holding my breath, chest convulsing, lungs burning, doing it anyway. The flames turn a darker shade of orange, pulsing in and out of focus. My lips tingle and my head spins. Instinct rises, and before I can squash it, blood and breath splutter from my lips, snuffing out the candles.

Darkness engulfs the forest again. I wipe my mouth and glare out at it. It glares right back and whispers, *What did you expect?*

I huff out a weak laugh. Yeah. Mama could have said all three syllables until she was blue in the face, it would never have made a difference because my father had sealed my fate.

I was born bad, and I'll die in the dark that made me the worst.

Fuck this.

I don't have time for end-of-life hallucinations, I've got shit to do.

I shove myself off the tree, my boots sinking farther into the soil with every step. The Devil's grasping at my ankles, trying to drag me home, but he can't have me, not yet. Not until I've knelt on the concrete steps of the church and carved my message into its doors.

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The Middle starts with a honk of a horn.

That *bastard* noise.

The first time I heard it, I made the mistake of looking out of the bedroom window.

The second time, I wished I'd never heard it at all.

And after the third, I learned the consequence of pretending I hadn't.

The sound rips through the dark again, louder and angrier, hitting me in the back like a freight train.

Even after all these years, it still has a way of lurching me forward.

When the brush thickens and scrapes over old scars, I turn my eyes skyward and find the orange glow again.

It's growing closer, but so is my father.

He had the dangerous combination of being a heavyset man with a light tread. I'd know the sound of his gait anywhere – in The Middle, it followed me into these woods every night for eight years. Eight fucking years of torture, games, *lessons*. Eight years, until he followed me up a gravel path, shoved me through iron gates, and left me to fight for my life.

The Middle was dictated by a new set of rules. And like the birthday candles, there were ten, just for me.

His whiskey-tainted breath grazes past my ear.

Rule one: You must become The Villain for your brothers to call you a hero.

I walk faster to get away from The Middle. To get away from him. The next few steps send a molten heat to my groin and buckle my knees, but I grind the pain between my teeth and keep moving.

Finally, the orange glow stretches out its hand. Space expands, branches retract, and soil turns to asphalt.

Though I slow to a stop under the streetlamp to catch what little breath I have left, my gaze goes for a walk. It sweeps over

the road, and I wonder when it got so fucking wide. Then it climbs the stones of my father's church on the other side.

That bastard building hurts to look at on my best days, but on my worst, just a glance in its direction burns.

I skim over broken windows and the crumbling spire, looking for relief where the Pacific meets the black sky behind it.

And then I realize what I'm doing, and sour amusement floods my chest.

A dying man always turns his eyes to the sky.

When I was young and invincible, I vowed I'd be the exception. That when Death finally stepped out of my shadow and tapped me on the shoulder, I wouldn't tilt my chin and look for the God I've cursed for a lifetime. Yet here I am, gazing in the opposite direction to where my soul is headed, wondering if he's really up there and if he's taking good care of my mama.

My next inhale rattles around my chest; my next exhale paints a white streak across the night. When the wind rises over the cliffs and sweeps it sideways, I see Him.

He glances down at me and breathes a sigh of relief.

No laughing this time.

Lungs too weak now.

Legs too weak. Arms too weak.

Don't close your eyes.

Don't. Close. Your. Eyes.

I step forward and the world tilts, trying to shake me off it. I push onward against the wind; it drives me back even harder. Its roar is deafening and cold, but when I cock my head, I hear something softer within it.

'Hello?'

Tension leaves my lips in a short breath.

The voice is like cashmere and chocolate. Like a gentle kiss on the cheek, a warm bath on an icy night.

'Hello? Are you okay?'

It's a ray of sunshine through an open window, a cool breeze on a hot day.

I want to die to its soundtrack.

I want to hear it again.

I scan the horizon for its source, and when I find it, my vision jolts.

Under the next streetlamp stands a girl. No – an angel. Not one of those biblically accurate ones they'd draw on the whiteboard to scare the shit out of us in Sunday school, but one from the movies. The human-shaped, heaven-sent kind with outstretched wings and a halo hovering over flowing blonde hair. She's also wearing a fuzzy pink jacket and matching earmuffs, but fuck, who am I to question what angels wear these days?

There's no time for side quests, but getting to the church suddenly feels secondary, and curiosity steers my path.

I take a step toward her; she takes one back, glances at my stomach, throws her hands in the air, and says, 'Um, that's a Halloween costume, right?'

What?

The cogs in my brain whir at half speed, but when they groan into place, I realize I'm a fucking idiot.

It's October thirty-first. Halloween.

Of course I'd die on Halloween.

I'm still too weak to laugh, but the irony is all-consuming, so I do it anyway. It takes the last shred of energy from me, and I fall to my knees.

She's not an angel; she's just a girl dressed like one. Looks like one, sounds like one, even now that she's shouting. She floats toward me like an angel too, out from underneath her lamp and into the light of mine.

Sparkly pink boots and frilly socks pulsate in and out of focus beneath my eye line.

Christ. So much pink.

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'Oh my God. What happened?'

Ha.

I blinked, that's what fucking happened.

Rule two: Near enemy, family, or friend, The Villain never blinks.

He'd plucked that one straight out of his ass in a panic after the first time he shot me. He swore he'd done it just to show me what it feels like, but even at eleven, I knew the cunt just had shit aim.

Rule three came just nine hours later as I was waking up under the harsh strip lights of a makeshift operating theater: *The most powerful villains are as unlovable as they are untouchable.*

I'm as unlovable as I am untouchable.

So why the *fuck* is she now touching me?

Delicate fingers sear my shoulder. Violence is a deep-rooted reflex, and I jerk out an arm to shake her off.

'Fuck. Off,' I snarl.

But more fool me, because now the sky is slipping. I'm falling forward, down into the Devil's arms.

The ground catches me, because *not yet*.

With her sweet voice, she calls out to God again. My cheek scrapes gravel, then suddenly I'm on my back, and there she is.

Fuck. Maybe she is an angel. Because I swear, the streetlamp above wasn't as bright until she dropped to her knees beneath it. Now it bends to accommodate the curves of her heart-shaped face and reflects in her wide blue eyes, like sunlight dancing on water. It skates over her golden bangs, sparkles on her eyelids, and carves a straight line from the top of her nose down to the deep groove of her cupid's bow.

No. This isn't how death is supposed to go. I'm meant to die in the dark, not under her light, and the last thing I need is to be seen like this. Remembered like this. Weak and pathetic, lying in the fucking dirt bleeding out.

But the ground is too comfortable and my jaw too heavy to tell her to fuck off again. The best I can do is fight to keep my eyes open and track her every move.

Her gaze fixes on my stomach, wide-eyed and disbelieving. 'Is that *blood* ?'

'No, it's ketchup,' I grit.

'It looks painful.'

'No shit.'

She nods solemnly, ignoring my sarcasm. With a hand at her mouth, she bites down on the tip of her middle finger and tugs off her pink glove. 'Don't panic, I'm going to call for help.'

Trying to call anyone is useless, but so is my voice box, so I only watch as she stuffs her hand in her coat pocket and pulls out her cell. Like the rest of her, it's ridiculously pink, as are the half a dozen charms attached to it. They clink and rattle like my mama's wind chimes on the back porch as she furiously taps in her pass code.

'No signal,' I manage to huff out after several attempts. 'Just go.'

She glances at her screen, down to me, and back again. The tiniest crease lines her forehead. 'Dammit. Well, there's a phone booth just there. You got any quarters?'

'It. Doesn't. Work.'

'What?'

Fuck this, I'm wasting too much time. Must cross the road. I feel for the ground beside me and push down on it in an attempt sit up. A sharp stabbing pain shoots through my core, and I collapse back against the asphalt.

'Hey, you need to stay still –'

I bark at her to leave again, but it comes out in a gurgle so guttural it jolts her to her feet.

'Crap, crap, crap,' she whimpers, her composure cracking for a moment. Then she rolls her shoulders back and takes a deep breath. 'Okay, wait right here.'

As if I can go anywhere else. The light follows her to the middle of the road. My eyes tag along too, watching as she paces from left to right and back again, holding her bag on her shoulder with one hand and her cell to the sky with the other.

Pausing for breath, I try to make sense of her.

Maybe God sent her as a cruel joke. A final taunt of what could have been had I been born Angelo or Rafe. But then I dismiss the idea immediately, because He's not stupid enough to send her to a man like me. He wouldn't take the risk.

So if she's not from another world, what the fuck is she doing in this one, walking along a dark road alone in the middle of the night?

Curiosity and a slither of annoyance entwine with my pain, but I ignore it. I don't have the time or energy to dig deeper. She needs to leave, and I need to get moving.

With a hard puff, I roll myself onto my side. I ball my hands into fists and press into the earth, trying to drag myself forward on my knuckles. If I can't walk, then I'll crawl to the church. And if I can't crawl, I'll fucking roll – whatever it takes to warn my brothers.

She jogs over and gives my chest a little kick with the tip of her toe. 'Christ – stop moving! You'll make it worse!'

I glance up to see if she's joking, because how can this get any worse? But I'm distracted by the cell phone pressed flat against her forehead.

What the fuck is she doing?

I guess my glare asked the question for me because she launches into a rambling explanation.

'If you have no signal, you can put your phone to your head and you'll magically get service. Don't ask me how it works, I just saw it on Instagram – oh, *God*.'

There she goes, calling out to God again. But I've collapsed

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flat onto my back and can see that the sky beyond the lamp is empty.

She doesn't float now, she stomps and jingles, then drops to her knees at my side, muttering empty promises into the wind.

'Okay. You're okay. Let's see, uh . . .' She slips the huge bag off her shoulder and upturns it. Its contents spill out around her, and she combs through the mess. 'Right, we just need something to stem the bleeding, that's all.' She picks up a tube from the pile and holds it up to the light. 'Eyelash glue? No, not strong enough. Okay . . .' Another small package glints under the light. 'I've got Band-Aids, but they're for, like, blisters and cuts, not . . .' Her gaze shifts over my stomach.

'Stab wound,' I grunt.

She freezes, and for a second, fear threads through her perfect features, but when her eyes climb up my torso and lock with mine, her expression changes shape, and I don't fucking like it.

I'm used to being regarded with fear. It's familiar and comforting. The sickest part of me almost enjoys it. But now she's got the same strain of pity in her eyes as my mama had every time she'd watch me limp down the driveway at dawn.

'Who did this to you?' she whispers.

Mama used to ask me that too. And like it did then, my father's voice scratches my inner ear.

Rule four: If it happened in the dark, it didn't happen.

But as with my mama, silence doesn't satisfy her.

'What did he look like?' she presses. 'Or she,' she quickly adds, clamping her hand to her mouth. 'Sorry, that was *so* sexist of me. Would you recognize them if you saw them again? If he – or she! – is still out there, we need to tell the police immediately so they can catch them. Can you describe them to me?'

Irritation rises within me, and it hurts more than the gash splitting me in two. 'Go away,' I mutter. I've never been in the

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business of asking twice, let alone three fucking times. I'm starting to sound like a broken record.

But she's not even listening, let alone looking as though she's about to fuck off. Instead, she goes back to mumbling to herself, picking up objects, tossing them down. Rinse, repeat.

I grit my teeth and squeeze my eyes shut. The voice that was so sweet just moments ago is now grating.

Guess my father was bang on the money with rule five: *A Villain never dies peacefully in his sleep.*

I always thought it meant I'd be tortured to death, not slowly bleed out in a sea of beauty products under the watchful eye of an annoying angel.

'Hey – don't close your eyes,' she demands. 'You've gotta stay with me, okay?'

I force an eye open to make sure she doesn't touch me again. But it's worse. She pushes up off her heels, sucks in a shaky breath, and slams her hands down on my torso.

The pain is excruciating. It zaps through my body like a lightning strike, shocking every cell, nerve, and muscle. I writhe and shake and groan, trying to buck her off me.

My thoughts are nasty, and they're all pointed at her. If I had even a fraction of my usual strength, I'd snap her fucking wrists, every finger and knuckle too.

But the angrier I get, the more she apologizes and tells me to *just breathe*, as if I'm getting a fucking Brazilian wax or something and it'll all be over in a moment.

Her voice is breathy and restrained as it cuts through the ringing in my ears. 'I've got to apply pressure to the wound, but my hands are too small. I'm going to have to sit on you.'

'No –'

Too late. Pinning her dress to the backs of her thighs, she shifts sideways onto my stomach, like she's sliding into a diner booth.

I'd think I was hallucinating if the pain wasn't so fucking visceral. I can feel its pulse, taste its minerals. But before I can let out the scream to accompany it, it wilts in my throat.

She's touching me again. Skin to skin. The fingers I desperately wanted to snap now rest on the hollows of my cheeks. Her thumb tracks over the same two inches, dipping in and out of my beard in an unfamiliar, soothing, stroking motion.

Her gaze locks with mine, and for a split second, the world dies instead of me. It drains of color and light. Even the wind has stopped breathing.

'That feels better, right?'

The pain returns, but it's dull and misplaced. My torso throbs a little less, but now it hurts where she touches, a slow-moving burn seeping through skin and bone and bloating every cell between.

No, it doesn't feel better. It feels worse than dying.

Rule six, my father warns from the treeline: *the most successful villains aren't the ones who have nothing to lose, but who have nobody to lose.*

He didn't just speak that one into existence, he beat it into me with the hard crack of his belt during the summer my balls dropped and I realized blood rushed to my dick every time a pretty girl walked past in a tight dress.

Not that it mattered, of course. Just because I looked, doesn't mean they were brave enough to look back. And even if they were, they never looked at me like this girl is gazing at me now.

She regards me with this wide-eyed concern, as though she's seeing the worst of humanity for the first time and is certain she can fix it. Not an ounce of reservation or fear swims in those ocean-blue eyes. Judging by how she's sitting on top of me, touching me, there's none in her brain either.

Annoyance darkens my edges. She shouldn't be out here, at this hour, looking like . . . *that*. She's an angel with broken wings,

and I couldn't count on both blood-stained hands the number of men I know who would snatch her off these streets in half a heartbeat.

'What are you doing out here?' I grunt, rolling my head away from her touch and eyeing the contents of her Mary Pop-pin's bag. There's a lone flip-flop, a jumbo pack of crackers, and enough lip glosses to stock a beauty store.

'Saving your life, what else?' she replies flippantly, checking her cell for signal again.

My annoyance burns hotter at her smart-ass answer. 'Do you stop and chat to every strange man you meet on a dark road?'

'When they're bleeding like a waterfall, sure.'

'Well, you shouldn't.'

Her gaze falls to mine, sparkling with amusement. 'But aren't you glad I did?'

I study the smugness puckering her lips, and disbelief trickles through me. 'You realize I'm going to die, right?'

She tuts. 'Well, you will with that attitude.'

I let out a frustrated groan. Great. Not only does she not understand the concept of personal safety and personal space, but to top it all off, she's a fucking optimist.

When *The Middle* began, I soon developed a hatred for all the positivity in the world because I'd seen what the dark side of it looked like. My brothers were oblivious, happy kids, and it never seemed fair they got to wake up every morning and laugh over breakfast while I'd spent the night before in Hell's seventh circle.

I'd tried to show them the dark side too. I'd bring home road-kill with the hope the corpses would haunt their nightmares, and hold their heads underwater until they grew limp, just so they, too, knew what dying felt like.

And when that didn't work, I started carving the dark side into the church doors instead.

Looking up at this girl now, I'm overcome with the same childlike spite I had back then. I want to shake the light out of her. To peg her eyes open and force her to watch my life flash before them too, if only to make her realize the world isn't all sunshine and rainbows and she shouldn't walk around late at night in it.

But I couldn't shake her even if I tried. My arms and legs are growing heavier and melting into the earth.

As though she feels me dissolving beneath her, she rests a light hand on my chest.

'Don't worry, it's nearly dawn.'

'So?'

'So, a car will pass by soon.' She cranes her neck and squints down the long stretch of road ahead. 'You're going to be fine, we just need to get you to the hospital.'

'Yeah. A couple of stitches and a lollipop, and I'll be right as rain.'

'That's the spirit.'

Christ. I really must be the number one player on God's shit list.

We linger in stiff silence for a while, only my wheezing breaths and her little puffs of impatience polluting the air.

She keeps glancing down the road. Then she tugs at the hem of her dress and shifts her weight on me. As she reaches up to smooth down her bangs, she stiffens. Slowly, she turns over her hand and inspects it under the light, as if seeing it for the first time. Then her gaze falls to her coat, dress, legs.

Blood. It's everywhere. Soaking into all her pink, dripping from the tips of her wings, staining her the same shade of black as my soul.

Good. Bitter amusement washes through me as the realization drains all the color from her face. I can practically hear her little bubble of delusion pop. Maybe now she'll fuck off and leave me to die in peace.

But seconds scratch by, and she doesn't move. She just stares, blank-faced, at a lone red droplet snaking down her thigh. It dribbles over her knee, along her calf, and disappears into the instep of her boot.

'Blood's a bitch to get out,' I say, only to twist the knife further.

'Only if you don't know how to clean it.' She dabs at the red trail with the cuff of her coat and flashes me a limp smile. 'Nothing hydrogen peroxide, enzyme cleaner, and a little elbow grease can't handle, honey.'

My eyes narrow. What the fuck does she know about getting blood out of clothes? A river of curiosity runs thin beneath my skin, but then common sense gives me a weak kick. My view of the world is so skewed that I'd forgotten normal people clean for cleanliness's sake and not just to hide a body.

Letting out a labored breath, I finally give in to the weight of my eyelids.

Rule seven, my father hisses from between the trees: *The Villain never taps out.*

Yeah, well. Here I am, old man, finally tapping out.

I've fought my whole life, and I'm tired of it. I don't even care to make it to the church anymore; I just want to go home.

There's nothing left to do now, apart from watch The Middle bleed into The End.

I roll my head to the side, and my cheek smacks the 'play' button. The clicking and whirring are weaker this time, the memories on the backs of my eyelids little more than flickering shadows and whispers.

Eighteen, no candles. My father honks his horn outside my window for the last time, and so begins the long drive to hell.

A pile of dead friends. I stacked the bodies high enough to climb on top and claw myself out.

My brothers glancing at me over the dinner table.

My mother crying a year's worth of tears.

'Where have you been?'

'What's wrong with you?'

'Gabriel. Gabriel. Gabriel.'

'Hey.' Warm fingers grip my jaw and tilt my head back to the sky. 'Talk to me.'

'Can't.'

'Then what are you doing right now, silly?' When I don't reply, she pokes me square in the chest, and her huff skitters along my jaw. 'All right. Listen, then.'

Something foreign probes at my ear.

'No –'

'Shh.'

My protest melts under the palm on my cheek. I swear, all the good in the world is behind it. It seeps through my skin and churns my blood into butter. Then it clots at the base of my throat because it's not *right*. It's too soft, too kind.

I've done nothing in this lifetime to deserve it.

I realize the thing in my ear is an earbud when a familiar piano run fissures out of it. Forcing my eyes open, I wait for my vision to sharpen, and find her at the heart of it, grinning.

She adjusts her own earbud. 'It's "Dancing Queen," by ABBA,' she says proudly, as if she wrote the fucking song herself.

'Get it out,' I grunt.

'No, it'll make you feel better.' When met with my glare, she adds, 'Seriously, it's scientifically proven that ABBA songs make you happy. With "Dancing Queen," it's because both Agnetha and Anni-Frid are singing the same key – which literally never happens in a duet, by the way – and at a really high register. When you hear it, your brain signals to your body to produce adrenaline, which, in turn, reduces the feeling of pain.' She glances down at my blood seeping out from beneath her thighs. 'I'd say Google it, but there's no signal. And well, you know . . .'

She gestures down at me as if the sweep of her hand will finish her sentence.

But I'm too busy staring at her mouth to register the nonsense seeping out of it.

'Fuck, you're beautiful.'

I hadn't meant to say that aloud. Guess death softens your insides, and liquid shit is coming out of my mouth too.

Her wings flutter beneath the light as she cocks her head and flashes me a broad smile. It's like looking at the fucking sun.

A bitter amusement filters through me. 'You hear that all the time.'

'Yes, but tell me again.'

My laugh comes out in a weak choke. The chorus in my ear drowns it out, and when her fingers smooth over the curve of my cheek again, I suddenly can't even feel its burn.

She changes path, tracing a line from my brow down to my chin. 'How'd you get this scar?'

I swallow. 'My barber was a drinker.'

Her laugh is warmer than the wind. It'd feel good in a different timeline; tonight, it feels bittersweet. 'How'd you get those wings?'

'Eh, I just bought them off Amazon,' she chirps, eyes holding a sparkle.

I shake my head, humor playing on my lips. I can still see her eyes when I close my own.

With ABBA in my ears and her touch dancing on my skin, an odd sense of calm drifts over me. Turns out, there's peace in purgatory. Never felt it in my life, and I sure as hell won't feel it in the afterworld, either.

So I lay in limbo for a while. The flames of hell brushing my back, the touch of an angel caressing my face. She's heavensent, I'm hell-bound, and here we are, crossing paths in the middle.

When the music cuts out mid-verse, I open my eyes again.

Something in her expression has shifted. A storm shaking the calm in her gaze.

She breathes out on a shaky whisper, 'You're actually going to die, aren't you?'

'I will with that attitude.'

Humor flickers across her face, but it doesn't meet her eyes. They're too full of something else, something dark and heavy. Her hand slides down from my face and fists the fabric of my shirt.

She leans in. So fucking close that she steals one of my last breaths from me. An inch more, and I'd feel those lips on mine and taste the strawberry scent of her gloss. 'Can I tell you a secret?'

What ?

My thoughts fizzle and my gut twists. A secret. The mere idea of a secret breathes new life into me, but then my father's voice blows it away.

Rule eight: a secret is The Villain's most powerful weapon.

'No,' I grit out, twisting my head out of her grip. She only tightens her hold and pulls me back. A weak spark lights in my core as her nose brushes mine.

'Please,' she whispers, urgency tugging at her tone. 'You're dying. I just need to tell someone. You'll take it to the grave.'

The darkness rears its ugly head.

If we'd met on a different night, under different circumstances, I'd reach down her throat and yank out her secret with my bare hands. I'd have her researched and studied. I'd find her name, age, address. Her fucking star sign. I'd climb her family tree and shake all the secrets from its branches too.

That's what I do. I take secrets and turn them into weapons.

But for once in my goddamn life, I don't want to know. The moment's too perfect, *she's* too perfect. I ruin everything I fucking touch, and I don't want to ruin her.