

# RETALIATION

BY S. D. PAINE

## CHAPTER ONE

*Sara*

*Oh fuck me, I'm about to die.*

I scrambled back, ducking behind a maroon wingbacked chair as the next gunshot rang out, the bullet narrowly missing my head. Despite the fact I'd spiked this motherfucker's drink with enough sleeping pills to knock out a whale, he was still standing. Sort of. Furniture crashed as he wobbled around the room, shouting for my death. I peeked over the chair and ducked back down just as quickly when he fired the gun again. The bullet whizzed by where my forehead had been seconds before, exploding into the drywall behind me. I guess they didn't call him Bullseye for nothing. Thankfully the Rohypnol slowed his reflexes enough for me to dodge his shots. The bulky asshole lunged for the chair, and I darted behind a bookshelf. He roared his fury, his words slurring as he hounded after me. Thank the gods I wore my combat boots tonight instead of my heels. The shoes didn't match my dress, but whatever. Comfort over fashion. Kill or be killed.

The sizable mansion ten minutes outside of Boston was pretty much destroyed. I'd managed to cut down the majority of The Obscuritas cult henchmen while they sat around their fancy dinner table getting drunk on their uber-rich employer's fancy liquor. The last few goons had been holed up in the study smoking cigars, exactly where I anticipated them to be. But damn if Bullseye didn't go along with my plan, favoring his smokes over the drugged booze—hence the sloppy shootout. I had one weapon left and I had to make this final strike count.

“Alright, I'm coming out! Don't shoot yet!” I made my voice quiver with fear like a frightened little girl. A naturally soft voice had its perks.

More incoherent words tumbled from his lips. I was very confident he said something like “*Sure Sara, come on out and let's be friends.*”

I slid the knife from my boot and sucked in a steadying breath, quieting my mind and sinking into the darkness inside me, preparing to pounce on my prey. My eyes snapped open, and I sprinted around the

bookshelf and threw the blade seconds before Bullseye could pull the trigger. The knife buried to the hilt in his left eye. He dropped a heartbeat later, and I let out a sigh of relief.

*Bullseye, motherfucker.* I snorted at my own joke, then winced as pain shot through my ribs. Definitely bruised, possibly broken. But I healed quickly—like inhumanly quickly—so at least I had that going for me.

I looked around at the other dead bodies, but none of them were important enough to remember. I didn't mind killing them. Actually, I enjoyed it. My body sang with adrenaline and arousal at what I'd just done. Fucked up, maybe, but I didn't linger on that thought. Avoiding emotions like guilt and feeding on ones like rage worked well for me over the last decade. Besides, they were all predators. Karma was bound to catch up with them. And tonight, *I* was their karma.

Bullseye, aka Big Fugly Douchebag, was one of the top assassins working for The Obscuritas, and he had a vile kink for torturing women. Rule Number One, never trust grown men in creepy cults. Unfortunately, the core members of The Obscuritas were much more than creepy. They were vile murderers with fucked up rituals. And they would pay for taking my family from me and fucking up every good thing I had ever known.

My dagger slid from Bulleye's eye socket easily. I wiped his filthy blood off the blade with his jacket. Blood dripped down my arm from a nasty cut, so I tore a piece of fabric from the dead guy's shirt and tied it around the wound, knotting it with my teeth. I picked my way through the broken glass and overturned furniture toward the front door, sucking in fresh, wintry air soon as I opened it. The wind whipped my hair around my face. I was still getting used to the silvery blue color of it, but I couldn't risk anyone recognizing my signature copper locks. The brown-colored contacts itched my eyes, and I was more than ready for comfy clothes and a steaming hot shower to wash away this day.

I stepped over the dead guy on the doorstep and walked toward my Buell motorcycle, one of my few prized possessions. Many hours were spent modifying and painting the bike to make it my own. Riding was a freedom unlike anything else. For that stretch of time, I was free from my thoughts and the darkness attempting to swallow me whole.

"Come in, Nova," a voice cracked in my ear, and I winced from all the gunshots still ringing in my brain.

"Here, Tib—"

She cut me off quickly. "Code names, Nova."

I rolled my eyes. "Here, Zenith."

"Injuries?" The *click, click, click* of her keyboard echoed in my ear as I made my way down the long driveway.

"Minor," I grunted, holding my ribs and eyeing the cut on my arm.

“Casualties?” She popped a gum bubble in my ear.

I snorted. “Many. Full house tonight. Including one very dead Bullseye.”

“I saw. Really going for that deadly double entendre, eh?” Zenith popped another bubble.

I snorted a laugh. “I suppose I did. Felt good too. Did you get anything from them?”

Tibby let out an evil laugh. “Of course. Despite your failure to keep them from blowing their entire system to hell, I was able to extract some information before they crashed the network.”

I smirked to myself. “Your skills are inferior to none, queen.” I hesitated, but couldn’t help asking my next question. “Anything on my family?”

The silence verified what I already knew. If Tibby had found them, she would have told me right away.

“Sorry, friend. Not yet.”

I swallowed down my emotions and sighed. “See you later, Zenith.”

Another bubble popped in my ear. “Peace out, Nova.”

I strapped on my helmet, tucking my hair inside, and revved the Buell’s engine. My motorcycle was great for quick getaways, even if it was a freezing January night in Massachusetts. I zipped down the dead-end street and away from the bloody mess, not feeling the cold biting at my skin quite like most people did. I kept the lights off as I eased out onto the main road. Tibby hacked into the cameras and diverted the feed when I first arrived at the house, but I couldn’t risk someone seeing me leave.

Tabitha Marsden, aka Tibby, aka Zenith, was pretty much my one and only friend. We’d met in a shelter for homeless teens. She was hiding out in the States after leaving London where she put her abusive stepfather in a coma. And I was...well I was a mess with nothing and no one. A few friendship bracelets and several bottles of vodka later and voila. Tech hackers, thieves, and murderers.

I’d stolen a few pieces of jewelry, all the cash in the safe, and one particularly badass-looking medieval club-like weapon from the mansion to throw off anyone who came hunting for the murderer. Not that anyone would be looking for me specifically. No one even knew I was alive.

I didn’t linger on that thought, not feeling up for a pity party tonight. I had plans in place. Things were finally coming together after almost two years of solid detective work on my part and a bit of tech sleuthing by Tibby. The Obscuritas would pay. Starting with their Princes.

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I pulled my bike into one of the employee parking spots behind the local pub, The Haven. I’d made friends with the bar owner and, as of two months ago, occupied the apartment above it. I’d finally found a solid lead on the men I sought and, lucky me, all four of them currently lived in the same city.

Devon Parrish was my first mark, an Obscuritas Prince masquerading as a “lowly” bar owner. Of the four men I tracked, he was the only one not strutting about the town, flaunting his wealth. Then again, I’d found out only six months ago his father, Ezekiel Parrish, one of the four Obscuritas Kings, was dead, and Dev didn’t seem to stay in touch with any of the other Princes. Tibby couldn’t find any details about his father’s death other than the headstone Dev had purchased. The mystery of it just screamed “secretly murdered by the cult leaders.”

I locked up my bike and used the fire escape to enter the apartment. The only other way in was via the stairs through the bar, and since I didn’t fancy Devon knowing all my comings and goings, the fire escape was preferable. I shoved open the window and crawled through, cursing as my bloodied arm bumped into the rusty stove. The small kitchen was barely big enough for a child. Lucky for me, I was only 5’3” and although I wouldn’t consider myself thin, seeing as I lived in the gym when I wasn’t committing crimes against cult leaders, I could slip in and out of small spaces easily enough. My older sister, Lailah, had been gifted with legs for days and supermodel looks. I grimaced, unwrapping my arm and shaking the thoughts of my murdered sister from my mind. I tried not to think about her. Unless I was killing people, and then her broken body was all I could see before the rage took over. Sometimes I even blacked out from the fury of it, coming to on my bedroom floor with broken things scattered around me. I kept very little furniture these days.

I flicked on a lamp as I grabbed a towel from the hall closet and tugged off my boots, heading for the bathroom. My arm no longer bled freely, and the cut wasn’t too deep. I hissed in pain as I rubbed a cotton swab with peroxide over it, cleaning it out before it closed up full of dirt and grime.

I wasn’t entirely sure how my healing abilities worked, so it was better to be safe and clean the wound. The first time it happened, I was ten years old. I remembered my mother’s face like it was yesterday because everything changed after that stupid day.

*“Momma!” I cried out as I ran to her, my knee bleeding freely. Lailah and I had been playing in the yard when I fell from the trampoline. We were pretending to fly.*

*Our mother was beautiful, like an angel. Her auburn hair fell around her shoulders in waves as she ran toward me. “My sweet princess. What happened?”*

*I sniffed, my face wet with tears. “We were trying to fly. I fell and landed on one of Michaela’s toys. Look at my knee!”*

*We both looked down at the bloody mess. Mother had come prepared with a cloth. She wiped it away gently, but the cut was already healing. I stared, confused. I looked up at her, and her eyes held something I didn’t understand at the time. Fear.*

My eyes burned with angry tears as I shook the memory out of my head. I turned the shower handle all the way to the left, needing the scalding hot water to cleanse my body and clear my mind. I stripped out of my bloody clothes and tossed them into a trash bag stashed in the bathroom closet. I'd need to pick up a few more shifts at the club to replace all my ruined clothes. Even though Tibby kept us rich with stolen money and offshore accounts, I needed to maintain a believable, low profile for now. I chose the underground burlesque club for two reasons: to observe drunk, rich idiots willing to spill their secrets and to sing.

The scalding water soothed my mind and washed away the grime from the evening's events. I lathered my skin with my favorite lavender and mint soap and scrubbed my body as I replayed the fight in my mind. While taking out Bullseye had been incredibly satisfying, tonight didn't go as planned. He'd made me instantly, and I didn't have time to interrogate anyone before the shooting started. Bullseye wasn't a completely useless assassin and somehow saw the devil in my eyes when I walked into that mansion. I needed to change tactics. None of the lower level cult members were giving me what I needed. So lucky me, I'd be starting law school next week.

Andras Blackbyrn was currently attending Harvard Law School's elite master's program. And with a bit of tech magic, Tibby had me enrolled as a student. We shopped online and purchased anything that screamed "slutty student." I didn't entirely hate it. I could really rock a tiny plaid skirt. Based on his dating history, Andras preferred his women blonde, young and pliable. I wasn't changing my hair again, though. The long, silvery blue locks were staying. I couldn't risk him recognizing me with a more neutral color. Not that he would. I hadn't seen the sons of The Obscuritas leaders since we were children.

I was only thirteen when they came for my sister, and the Princes were only a couple years my senior at the time. Lailah, my beautiful and bold older sister, was seventeen when she was murdered; sacrificed for some stupid ritual I still didn't understand. Tibby and I scoured the dark web for details, but found very little. The Obscuritas clearly had their own tech wizard to keep their dirty secrets hidden.

The details of the night my family was murdered only came back to me in small pieces, like my mind was trying to protect me from the horrors. We drove a very long way in the middle of the night. My sisters slept in the car, but I felt uneasy. Something wasn't right. When we pulled down a long, wooded drive, my father cursed. I could just barely see my mother take his hand in the dark, whispering reassurances.

I remembered my father giving Michaela, my younger sister, and I something gross to drink before we got out of the car. It made my limbs heavy and my mind clouded. Michaela was even more affected and she quickly fell into a deep sleep, so he had to carry her. He stuffed us into a large wardrobe before The Obscuritas arrived, but I could still hear everything when the ritual began. Beyond the door to

the wardrobe, Lailah cried out for our parents, and my father quietly sobbed as he leaned against the door. Why wasn't he trying to save them? Why didn't he go to Lailah when she cried out for him?

I wanted to scream, but then my mother began shouting words in a language I didn't know. The house rocked and shook as the chanting grew louder, and I peaked out of a crack in the closet door, my curiosity getting the best of me. Thunder boomed as the storm built, and lightning flashed through the windows. It all ended so quickly, and suddenly my father was carrying us away. The shock of deathly silence assaulted my ears, and I could feel my heart pounding rapidly. My eyes landed on the men lying unconscious on the floor all around the house. I saw my sister, bound and prone inside a chalked pentagram on the wood floor. Her throat was cut, her blue eyes glassy and terrified. My mother lay on the other side of the chalked surface, her eyes closed and her face pale. Her fingers only just grazed the tip of the chalky symbols. I barely registered the four boys passed out in the circle with Lailah. And then we were gone, driving away from my murdered mother and sister. A piece of my heart broke away and got left behind with them that night. The beginning of the end.

For almost eight years, I plotted my revenge. It didn't matter if the Princes hadn't actively participated in the ritual then or not. My insider information told me they were taking over as the cult leaders as soon as Andras graduated in May. Something big was coming. More and more members of the cult were traveling into town each week.

I lingered in the hot water for a few more minutes, keeping my hair dry, before deciding I needed a drink and loud music to drown out my dark thoughts. I quickly dried off and slipped into a pair of fleece-lined leggings and an oversized black sweater with Ghostface on it. I rearranged my hair in a messy knot and coated my lashes with mascara, finishing with my signature blood-red lipstick and leaving my freckles on display. Perks of being a natural ginger—fair skin and a few freckles. I pulled on some cozy socks and boots, grabbed my keys and cash, then headed down the stairs into the noisy dive bar.

The Haven was a favorite for locals and far enough off the beaten path to avoid cringe-worthy college boys and tourists. Dim lights and sticky bar stools dominated the space. Nirvana played loudly from the digital jukebox, the only new-age piece of technology in the place. I slipped onto a stool at the far end of the bar and waited for Devon to make his way to me. I watched him work, appreciating the fitted T-shirt riding up as he flipped a bottle of whiskey into the air and smoothly poured four shots. Devon's scruffy beard dominated his face, hiding his unruffled and easy smile, which he only gifted to his regulars and myself. Otherwise, he was permanently in grumpy mode. I called him grumpy-sunshine. Not that anyone would notice, but I'd been watching him for some time now. He had a soft side, a good side. Dev wasn't evil on the inside like I hoped he'd be.

He passed out two of the whiskey shots and grabbed the other two, turning toward me with that sweet smile, the skin around his light-green eyes crinkling as he dropped the shot in front of me. It was impossible not to be captured by his gaze, the amazonite color of his eyes contrasting against his dark-brown skin and shaggy, dark hair. My stomach fluttered and heat flooded my body, heading south fast. *Down, girl.*

“Hey, beautiful.” His smile widened, and I couldn’t help smiling back.

I wanted to point out that he was the beautiful one here, but that was a little too bold for tonight. I wanted him close but not too close.

“Hey, Dev.” I picked up the shot, clinking the glass to his and knocking it back. “Looks like a busy Saturday for you.”

“It’s been steady. Mostly regulars. Nothing too exciting. How’s your night been?” He leaned against the back of the bar, crossing his arms and giving me an eyeful of his muscular, tattooed arms.

He was just so pretty to look at. It was a shame he’d have to die with the others. I told myself his hot bartender vibe was the only thing I’d be missing, even if it wasn’t entirely true.

“Nothing exciting in my life, as usual.” I shrugged, keeping the details of my life vague as always. He never asked for them anyway.

Devon Parrish was going to be the hardest of the four to take out. He seemed normal, well-adjusted, and very much my type of bad boy turned good guy. But he was one of them. His father had been one of them. And for what they did to my family, they all had to pay the price. No matter how deep those piercing eyes stared into my revenge-riddled heart.

I tried not to dwell on the knowledge that in two months of semi-close contact with Dev, I’d felt more alive than I had in the last eight years, which was impressive since we hadn’t even kissed. Sure, I’d been with men before, but it never meant anything to me, it was always a job. I faked the smiles, faked the orgasms. Besides, how could you feel anything for anyone when you were already dead inside?

“Sticking around for a bit?” He leaned toward me, muscular arms stretching his shirt sleeves.

I caught a whiff of his whiskey and sage scent and inhaled deeply, finding it oddly relaxing. I dipped my head and winked playfully. “I could be persuaded.”

Dev grinned and poured a double shot of Jack into a glass. I grazed his fingers as I took the glass, a spark of heat passing between us. It was always like that, but for the two months since I started renting his apartment upstairs, I hadn’t acted on the urges to drag him into my bed. And I would not be sharing how many times I used my vibrator and thought of his hands on my body. I could tell he was into me, but he was so damn private, he’d never really made a move beyond our little bar bantering. As he pulled back, I noticed a new tattoo on his wrist. His arms were covered in tattoos, but this one looked fresh—and strange.

I nodded toward his outstretched arm. “Did you get a new tattoo?”

He frowned, looking at his wrist. “No. I’ve had this for a while now.”

“Are you sure? It looks new.”

Was he lying? The ink was clearly brighter than the rest of the tattoos on his arm.

Dev shook his head, his bright eyes avoiding mine. “Nah. It’s just the bar lights playing tricks.”

He was definitely lying, but I wasn’t about to ruin my cover by going all detective on him now.

I shrugged casually and smiled. “Yeah, for sure. It’s cool. I’m a sucker for tattoos.”

“Don’t move, beautiful.” He winked, and my insides heated.

Beards, tattoos, and cute smiles really looked good on him. I’d tracked his movements, and he never brought women back to his place. I saw him leave at the end of his shift with a female or two, but never back to his apartment upstairs, which was across from mine. We both kept our sanctuaries firmly in the no guests zone.

I watched Dev work, wondering if he’d be rough and let his bad boy loose in bed. The way he tossed kegs and shoved the drunks around, I could definitely see it. Okay fine, he was hot, and I could definitely see myself pinned against the bar, his beard tickling my throat as he trailed kisses down my neck. Maybe I just needed to get laid; like well and truly fucked by someone who could make my blood boil and finally give my body the sexual release it needed. Maybe one little night of—fingers crossed—real pleasure would be worth it? My plans wouldn’t change. He’d still die with the others. Who said I couldn’t make him moan my name before I cut his throat?

I clenched my thighs and gulped down the whiskey. Mina was feeling extra feisty today, and I was having a difficult time keeping her in check. *Bitch been real quiet for years now and you perk up for an enemy?* And yes, I named my vagina. I called her Mina, after the character in the novel *Dracula*. Even though Lucy was presented as the slutty one, Mina was all lust and danger when she gave into the darkness.

“Hey there, girlie,” a deep voice slurred into my ear, making me jerk back.

I looked up into a pair of glassy, familiar eyes. I scooted away as a pudgy, old man sat down on the stool next to mine.

“Hey, Jackson.” I rolled my eyes at him, a regular at The Haven.

Jackson also managed a garage not far from here. He let me self-service my bike there for free because of my sweet-as-pie smile, so I tolerated a little drunken flirting. While he wasn’t unattractive, he was pushing sixty, and I wasn’t generally interested in men old enough to be my father. He was also married, so not really my type. Oh, and of course, the whole bit where he belonged to the cult that destroyed my family.

“How’s the little blue bird doing tonight?” He leaned into my personal space, tugging my silvery blue hair.

His stale beer breath made me want to vomit. His eyes dipped down my body, and I held back a shiver. Just, no. If I wasn’t trying to maintain a low profile, I’d smash his head into the bar until his nose cracked. I sipped my drink, imagining it instead.

“Just fine, thanks.” I pulled Jackson’s grimy hand out of my hair and turned away from him to continue watching Dev work. I noted his frown from the other end of the bar as he glanced our way.

Jackson, who clearly could not take a hint, tugged the arm of my sweater. “You’re looking lonely tonight, blue bird.”

I pulled my arm out of his grasp with a tight smile. “I’m not. Thanks, though.”

He leaned in closer, grabbing my arm, and I winced where his grip connected with the cut from earlier. “Come on—”

“Jackson,” Dev’s gruff voice cut in, and I turned to see him standing behind us, his shadow bearing down on Jackson. He glared down at the drunk mechanic. “Time to go home, man.”

He gripped Jackson’s wrist and twisted until he let go of my arm with a little cry of pain. A tattoo on Jackson’s arm caught my eye, and I nearly choked on my tongue. He had a simple design of the letter *O*, the mark of The Obscuritas. It was easy enough to overlook, but I’d seen enough of them on the lackeys I’d taken down already to notice it. I let my gaze search up and down Dev’s muscular arms for the same mark, but I couldn’t see it among his many other tattoos. Fuck, I loved tattoos.

“I’m just talkin’ to her, Dev. It’s no big thing.” Jackson smiled broadly and stood, nearly tipping over.

Dev caught him, towering over the man by several inches.

“The conversation is over. Go home, Jackson. Home to your *wife*.” Dev enunciated the last word. I wrinkled my nose. Fucking cheaters. He deserved his death for that alone.

Jackson huffed and stumbled off. Dev stood with his arms crossed, watching him until he pushed through the exit. His sea-green eyes turned back to me, concern etched on his face as his gaze slid down my body.

“You okay, beautiful?”

I nodded and smiled. “Yeah. He’s pretty harmless.”

Dev grimaced, his muscular arms tense and itching for a fight. “He’s a drunk and a douchebag.”

I smirked. “Well that too. I’m good, though. Thanks, Dev.”

He reached out and gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze, heating my skin beneath the soft material of my horror movie sweater. Dev nodded to the image. “We should catch a movie sometime. Haven’t seen a good thriller in ages.”

“My favorite genre.” I smiled, tugging at Ghostface printed on it. “You pick the day, I’ll bring the popcorn.”

Dev leaned down, dropping his mouth close to my ear and making me shiver for a whole new reason. “It’s a date then.”

He stepped back smoothly and wound his way through the customers, picking up empty bottles and chatting casually with the patrons. I didn’t know what to think about his last comment. A date? Dev had *never* asked me on a date. Why now? Did he know who I was? Was I overthinking this? Fuck. I’d have Tibby look into his latest movements to see if anything changed.

I downed the last of my whiskey and watched him work. Maybe this was a good thing. Devon Parrish had no contact with the other three Obscuritas sons, as far as I could tell. But if I could get into his apartment, maybe I could find something new. The sons were easy enough to find, but the four men truly responsible for destroying my family were like ghosts. I found Vespertine Hall about two months ago. The place was a fortress, but there was no evidence of anyone actually living there, just a massive mansion about two hours outside of town where The Obscuritas held their secret meetings and fancy parties. So where were the leaders of The Obscuritas staying now?

Dev might be hiding information that could help, and if going on a date with him brought me closer to my end game, so be it. Speaking of the devil’s son, Dev sauntered over, flipped the whiskey bottle, and filled my glass once more. He popped open the fruit box and dropped a sticky, blood-red cherry into the glass.

“What’s that for?” I batted my eyelashes up at him.

“A dive bar’s Manhattan.” He winked with a smirk, and my pussy purred with desire.

Fuck. I should probably play with a toy or two on my own *before* going anywhere near Dev’s apartment or he’d have me parting my legs faster than a whore in heat. *Get it together, Sara. Since when do you get so turned on?*

“So fancy.” I winked back, pulling out the cherry and pushing it between my lips. I watched his hungry eyes track the movement. I sucked the tart fruit into my mouth, enjoying the bite of whiskey coating it. “Delicious.”

Dev’s eyes heated as his gaze locked with mine. His hands gripped the edge of the bar, and his biceps bulged as he leaned toward me, bringing his lips close enough to taste. I licked mine slowly, my skin feeling hot everywhere his eyes roamed.

“That’s what I think you’d taste like, Sara Braun.”

“Oh?” I whispered, my whiskey brain melting any real words before they could form coherently in my mind.

“Oh yeah.” Dev shoved off the bar and went back to slinging drinks.

What was his deal tonight? He was never so forward with me. I needed to get out of this bar fast before I dropped my panties and let him get a taste right here in front of everyone.

The whiskey was warming my insides as quickly as Dev's flirting, and I stood slowly, needing some air. I felt Dev's eyes tracking me as I walked toward the front door and pushed out into the street. Multiple patrons followed as the local bars began to close for the night. January in New England was always cold, and the chilly air bit into my face, cooling my skin. I walked toward the alley leading around back to the fire escape, figuring I'd just tuck in for the night. If I was going to take Dev up on his offer, I needed to be sober and in control of the situation. Maintaining my plans was required to do what needed to be done. For my sisters, for my parents, for myself. The Obscuritas deserved all the pain I had planned for them.

Someone shuffled in the dark behind me, and I turned my head, the liquor slowing my movements just enough that I stumbled and fell into the rough arms of the shadow behind me.

"Hey, blue bird. I've been waiting for you," Jackson took me by surprise, grabbing my arms and shoving me against the wall.

"Fuck, Jackson. You scared the shit out of me." I tried to laugh and push him back, but he wouldn't budge.

His sagging dad bod pressed into mine, and his rank beer breath filled the air between us as he looked down at me. I couldn't see much of his face in the dark but I knew this was not good.

"It's time to pay up, little birdie," he slurred, gripping my waist and pressing into me as the cold bricks bit into my back. Fuck he smelled awful.

I needed to think fast. He was on my list just for being a creep, but not worth my time tonight.

"Okay, Jackson. How about tomorrow, though, at your shop?" I lowered my voice to a seductive whisper. "You know I've always wanted to test out that '70 Chevelle tucked away in your garage."

His hands tightened around my waist, and I fought the instinct to punch him in the nose. I couldn't murder a local in the alley next to my apartment. Too many questions. Too many nosy cops, and all my plans would go to shit. I refused to let some lecherous drunk ruin everything I had planned. But I could use my body as a weapon to lure him in. I learned very early on how easily men turned into vile animals at the sight of a beautiful female body. Only then, I was too young to realize I could say no, and by the time I did, it was too late. But this old prick, I was more than prepared to handle.

"I'm going to fuck the shit out of you against that car, blue bird," Jackson slurred.

I wanted to gag, but I forced it down and wrapped my fingers around his flabby arms and smiled coyly instead.

"Tomorrow night then, okay? I'll come after hours. Let me get my beauty sleep tonight, though, yeah?" I teased, giving him a little shove, and he finally stumbled back.

“I’ll be waiting.” Jackson shoved me against the wall again and brought his sloppy mouth down to mine.

I wanted to puke but let him kiss me instead. If you could even call it a kiss. He groaned like this was something magical, and I stared up into the sky, waiting for it to end and methodically planning his demise.

“Okay, big boy,” I teased, breaking the kiss and faking a ragged breath. “Let’s save the rest for tomorrow.”

Jackson staggered back and grunted like a drunk ape. How was this guy even married? I’d probably be doing his wife a favor by killing him. He stumbled away down the alley, and I deftly backed into the shadows to wait for him to leave. The fucker was so drunk he might not even remember our play date. But I would be there, and he’d regret forcing himself on me. You picked the wrong girl, Jackson. My head felt clearer now that the ugly fucker had officially killed my buzz and my libido. I climbed up the fire escape and into my apartment. I tugged out of my clothes and put on an oversized t-shirt. I washed my face then brushed my teeth twice to get the yuck Jackson left behind out of my mouth.

I padded barefoot into my bedroom, if you could call it that. It was just a room with a bed, no personal touches anywhere. I didn’t even own a dresser or nightstands, just a bed with a shitty iron headboard and a small lamp on the floor. I didn’t care about furniture, and it wasn’t worth the money to decorate when I destroyed it so often after my nightmares. And besides, I had my own fully furnished room at the apartment I shared with Tibby downtown. When I slept there, the nightmares stayed away too. Here in this sad little apartment, weapons were more important. The most expensive furniture I owned here was the gun safe hidden behind a false wall in my bedroom closet. Another reason why Dev could never come to my place. As my landlord, he’d easily find the new addition Tibby and I added to the closet. Although he didn’t seem like a snooper.

I pulled the covers around me like a cocoon and sighed, staring up at the peeling popcorn ceiling. What a fucking day. Started with murder, ended with assault.

“Ugh, gross. At least I’d make him pay for the shitty end to my day,” I murmured to myself.

Well, it wasn’t entirely shitty. I remembered a few good things from before Lailah died, before my life became focussed on revenge. I closed my eyes and forced my brain to focus on those memories instead. At least, I tried. Sleep usually brought me nightmares of the people I killed, so I avoided it often. It wasn’t so much that I regretted killing them, what scared me most was that I felt nothing at all.