
Chapter 1

The dark pressed in on her like stacked stones slowly crushing the life from her. She was jostled roughly as the car hit a pothole and threw her into the lid of the car trunk she was stuffed inside. She'd given up on escaping some time ago. She had barely even struggled, just a fleeting moment in the height of the adrenaline rush when the stranger had first grabbed her. The bleak truth was she didn't really care.

June had been wandering the dark streets in the dead of night, almost begging for something like this to happen. Barefoot with mascara-stained cheeks from tears that had only just dried, she stumbled over the broken sidewalk slabs, trying to push the evening's events from her mind. She wouldn't have to deal with what her brother's drunk friends had just put her through if she couldn't remember it. Every step had been filled with the hope that she could run away from the memory of their hands pinning her down while they took turns with her, and how some dark part of her had enjoyed it even as she resisted.

The black sedan pulling up next to her in the early hours of the morning, the voice in the dark within when the tinted window had rolled down, beckoning her to get in, hadn't felt

real. Her frozen and confused state had obviously frustrated the stranger. Things happened so quickly after that. It felt like she had been moving in slow motion compared to her impossibly strong attacker.

The car hit another bump and June grunted as she landed hard on her hip, bound in the fetal position in the unlit trunk. She should be frantic with fear. She could try to chew through the duct tape wrapped around her wrists, free herself and maybe find a way to open the trunk and throw herself out.

If she did, she'd certainly get banged up some, jumping out of a moving vehicle, but there would be a good chance she could escape before her kidnapper realized she'd gotten out or figured out which way she had gone. She could get to a house, call the police. They'd take her statement and get her some medical attention, which she desperately needed, but not from the kidnapper's manhandling. Ultimately though, she'd wind up right back in that hell house; she always did. It was like a blackhole, always drawing her back into it.

June had fantasized a lot about running away when she was younger. She was old enough now to strike out on her own, but it was an overwhelming idea thinking of going out into the big world all by herself. As much as she hated where she lived, there was a roof, a bed, and food. It was familiar. It was hell, but she knew the rules and how to survive it. What did she know about the world outside?

There was a dark humor to it all that made her chuckle in her dark prison, that this kidnapping might be the best thing that could've happened to her.

She didn't chew her bonds free. She repositioned herself to relieve the bruise blooming on her hip and instead nestled into the warmth around her, that pitch black which now felt like a velvet blanket draped over her and dozed off to the white noise of the car accelerating onto a highway, leaving the broken roads of her impoverished neighborhood behind.

“Get up.”

June couldn't rouse herself fully to the stern voice commanding her. Her eyes were swollen shut from all her crying earlier in the evening well before the stranger had taken her. Her body was so exhausted, her limbs sore from fighting and being twisted and held down, and there was a burning ache in her core. She groaned, unable to obey.

An exasperated exhale was let out from her kidnapper. “Fine.”

Then, strong arms curled under her bent knees, held together by the duct tape around her ankles, and the other slid under her torso and lifted her easily out of the trunk.

“You really are one hell of a mess, aren't you? You barely even fought me.” His voice was silky, his words low and tender, but there was something below the surface that made June's skin crawl. She'd spent enough time around monsters to know when she was in the presence of another. “Like a lamb to slaughter. Was there some part of you wanting this?” He let out a condescending chortle. “I think you're going to be a very good girl for me, Juniper Rhoades, aren't you?”

Through her exhausted daze, she was filled with shock that he knew her full name. Who was this person? Was this as random as it had felt, or had he planned this?

“Who are you?” she croaked out, her voice dry and scratchy from screaming and thirst.

He ignored her question and continued carrying her, his steps echoing. She cracked open her burning eyes just enough to note a parking garage, then a private elevator that required a keycard before they ascended.

The doors opened to a penthouse. With bleary eyes and no lights on, it was hard to make out any details beyond the vastness of the main room and that it must've cost more money than she

could ever hope to see in her lifetime. Her captor turned down a hallway and set her down on a surprisingly soft bed. Resting comfortably on the plush pillow and cloudlike duvet, sleep called to her, but she sensed him still lingering near the bedside. A thousand terrible possibilities raced through her mind of what this man might do to her in her sleep, but she decided she didn't care anymore, so long as he didn't wake her.

"There will be a doctor here tomorrow evening to patch you up. Whoever did this, they fucked you up good, little lamb." He paused to cut her bonds free with a pocketknife and then surprised her with the corner of the duvet falling over her numb body. "We'll talk more when you're feeling better."

She refused the siren's song of the impossibly welcoming bed to prop herself up on one frail arm as she looked over her shoulder at the silhouette by the door. The only thing she could make out in the dim light of the moon filtering through the crack of the heavily curtained windows across from her was a flash of white hair. "Wait. Who *are* you?"

There was a pregnant pause, as if he was silently debating how to answer. Then, his calm, dark voice replied, "Master." He didn't wait for any further questions, slipping out the door and latching it behind him, signaling to her that wherever she was, she was locked in there until he came back.

Too tired to care anymore, June collapsed onto the pillows with a pained whimper as she welcomed the chance to leave her broken body for the oblivion of a deep and dreamless sleep.

June wasn't roused by the sounds of the door unlocking or the two men entering while she was still tangled up in the duvet and bedsheets. What broke her from her deep sleep was the silky voice of her captor ordering brusquely, "Up now, lamb. Rise and shine."

Another man cleared his throat. “Jesus, Boss. What the fuck happened to her?”

June groaned as she did her best to sit up. Every muscle in her body was stiff and sore. A sudden thrumming began in her head and she about screamed when someone turned on the bright overhead light.

“Enough of that,” the man who’d referred to himself as Master hissed at his companion. He switched the light off, instead turning on a small lamp at the bedside.

“If I’m to examine her, I’ll need light, sir.”

“You’ll make-do.”

June rubbed her eyes so she could focus them to examine the two men, but instead caught her reflection in the mirror over the chest of drawers past the foot of the bed. She was almost unrecognizable even to herself. Her dark brown hair was frizzy and knotted, her hair tie long gone from the violence of the previous evening. Besides the black streaks of mascara still staining her cheeks, there were dark circles under each of her lifeless brown eyes, one darkened even more from where Liam’s elbow had landed during her struggle to get away from the drunken bastard. Fingertip-shaped bruises dotted her neck next to an unwanted hickey. As she looked down at herself, she could see many bruises around her arms and wrists and probably so many other places from where they’d grabbed her to hold her down.

“I-I don’t really do this sort of thing, Boss. I’m more used to patching up knife wounds and gunshots with the boys downstairs. This girl... she needs some real medical attention.” The second man had taken a seat on the edge of the bed as he watched her check her reflection with a dazed look on her face. “Here, dear.” He handed her a bottle of water and watched her chug it down in a matter of seconds. June noted a familiar red skull tattooed on his forearm but couldn’t recall where she’d seen it before. Even so, a heavily tattooed doctor seemed strange and out of place.

“She’s staying here, so figure it out.” The harsh command came from the taller figure standing behind the portly man examining her. A man in a deep ebony, finely tailored suit watched them from behind a frightful skull shaped mask made of black plastic. He stood with rigidly straight posture, one pale hand resting over the other in front of him. The flash of white hair she’d caught the night before was no longer visible, tucked away behind the material of his mask.

The other man, the presumed doctor, hesitated as he looked her over again. “I’ll need to examine all of you, hun, if what he says you went through is true.” He paused, waiting for her to confirm it with a faraway nod. “I’ll need you to undress.” He rose from the bed and turned to the masked man. “It would probably be easier for her if you leave, sir. She’s been through a lot.”

The masked man didn’t answer at first, then turned. Instead of heading out the door, though, he took a seat in the armchair by the closed windows. “The last doctor I trusted with my things stole away in the middle of the night with my most prized possession. She doesn’t leave my sight, Henderson.”

The doctor, the man he’d called Henderson, let out a heavy sigh, but didn’t argue further. He was delicate with June when she was undressed and lying back on the bed again for him to examine. Naked, the abuse she’d suffered became even more apparent and this man who had just spoken of knife wounds and gunshots cringed as he patched her up but said nothing.

June was too numb to note his concern or appreciate his delicate hand.

When he was finished, he pulled the sheet over her so she could cover herself.

“Get rid of those,” the masked one in the chair ordered as he pointed at her pile of clothes on the floor. “She doesn’t need those anymore. I’ll clothe her.”

Henderson nodded and gathered up the oversized tee she’d

grabbed off the floor before fleeing and her worn out leather jacket but stopped at the door. He lowered his voice, attempting to keep his words between the two men, but June still caught the hushed whisper. “Sir, I know you’re mad about Mouse, but this girl...” he trailed off with a heavy breath. “This is no place for a girl like her. She won’t be able to handle it.”

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion.” The masked man rose to his full and intimidating height, lean and dangerous in his sleek suit.

“Rex, she needs real help. She’s no good to you. She’s broken. Just look at her.” He motioned his hand to the bed.

June couldn’t argue. There was definitely a lot wrong with her, even before the other night and then this kidnapping. She hated catching her hollow-eyed reflection in the mirror and rolled over onto her side, so she didn’t have to look at it.

“I’ll be the one to decide that. I suggest you leave, Henderson, before *you* are no longer of use to me.” The words were calmly spoken in his silky deep voice, but the underlying threat sent a chill down June’s spine as she listened halfheartedly to their bickering.

The doctor left quickly after that, leaving her alone again with her captor. He approached slowly, easing himself down onto the side of the bed as he watched her through his skull mask.

“If this is a ransom thing,” she told him hoarsely, “somebody gave you bad information. I’m worthless. You won’t get anything for me. I doubt anyone has even noticed I’m gone.”

He didn’t answer. He was still, those empty screened holes of his mask observing her in silence.

“Thank you,” she muttered groggily, pulling the sheet up to her chin, “for letting me sleep here.”

“You’re grateful?” he asked, a note of amusement in his tone.

“It’s a nice bed.”

He went quiet again, his mask still pointed at her, but it didn’t bother June. When she began to doze again, he woke her by

snapping the sheet off her naked body. “Enough sleep. Up. Come with me.”

June recoiled slightly, turning her naked form onto the mattress to hide her breasts and then crossed her thighs over each other to hide the set of lips just below the brunette patch of curls between them.

His imposing figure stopped, and he turned over his shoulder to catch her still in the bed. “Where is the good little lamb that went so willingly into my trunk last night? Up. *Now.*”

She pressed her chapped lips together tightly, holding back her protests. He was right, after all. He had stuffed her in that trunk so effortlessly, carried her here to whatever gilded prison this was, without a fight, and she had thanked him for it. It was almost laughable that now she might refuse his orders.

Reluctantly, she rose from the bed, her arms still crossed over her chest nervously, and followed him around the bed and to a second door that led to a spacious en suite.

Her captor flipped another switch, but the recessed lights in here were moody and easy on the eyes. “Clean yourself up and get dressed, then I’ll feed you.”

She paused, wide-eyed at the massive walk-in shower, big enough for a small family to fit easily into. Next to it was an equally impressive tub with built-in jets. “Uh,” she muttered.

The man stopped at the door, waiting expectantly.

“Where’s the soap?” she asked meekly, though it was certainly one of the least important questions she might ask this masked man.

A soft chortle came from behind the skull, as if he, too, was aware of this irony. He motioned toward the vanity stretching the length of the huge room. “You’ll find everything you need in those drawers. Clothes will be laid out on the bed for you.”

She nodded and returned another outrageously inappropriate, “Thank you,” to her captor.

She spent a little longer than she needed under the soothing

heat of the shower and returned to the bedroom wrapped in a pristinely white robe, her hair already dry from the expensive hair dryer she'd found in one of the drawers.

Her captor was seated and waiting for her in the chair by the windows again, texting on his phone.

"Who exactly are you? Some sort of mafia boss or billionaire or something?" she asked incredulously as she eyed his expensive suit again.

"I've already told you that you may call me Master," he answered without missing a keystroke.

"Are you a politician or something? Is this like a kink thing with hush money? Listen, I don't care. I'm not going to report you to the cops or media or anything. To be honest, this has been like a vacation for me. You have no idea what my life is like."

He locked his phone and set it down on one of his open knees. "But I do, Juniper."

She shot him a look of confusion. Whatever gut intuition that should've been warning her that she was in the midst of something far more dangerous than she was used to, didn't seem to be working anymore, switched off after years of repeated abuse. She panicked over phone calls and crowded public spaces now, not bad men in scary masks.

"I've been watching you, sweet girl," he continued. "And I saw what those Neanderthals did to you."

An amused snort escaped her. "Yeah, well, it wasn't the first time those *Neanderthals* have done that. When Jakey and his friends party, that's usually what ends up happening— and they love to party."

"Your brother is a careless individual who will let *anyone* wander into his house."

"Exactly." She sighed. "And Liam and Travis are absolute assholes."

"Shall I kill them for you?"

June stopped fussing with the dress on the bed and looked

over to him, jaw agape. She let out a nervous laugh. “Y-you’re joking,” she stuttered.

“Not at all. Say the word, little lamb, and you’ll no longer need to worry about those particular wolves. It’s a one-time offer. I won’t ask again.”

Flashes of the previous night came back to her. Their bruising fingers and tight fists. The way they twisted her arms. Their laughs while she flailed and humiliating comments about her body. Their disgusting grunts over the bass of the music thundering in the living room downstairs where her brother had probably been forcing himself on some other poor girl.

Her voice was quiet, worried she might somehow be heard. “And Jakey?” she asked hesitantly. With their stark age difference, she’d been in her brother’s custody for years since her mother was put away in prison. Living under his care had proven to be far worse than the negligence of a heroin addict.

Her captor answered coolly, as though he was sending away for takeout, “All of them.”

She bit her lip in thought. She couldn’t possibly agree to the murder of three people, one of them her own blood. It was wrong. It was immoral. It was illegal.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He gave her a nod and sent out a text. “I’ll have it done tonight.”

She watched him wide-eyed, clutching the plush lapels of the robe around her. Instead of the instant regret she thought she’d feel or the burden of taking not one, but three human lives, there was a euphoria that tickled through her. Elation. Gratitude.

“You’re mine now. Do you understand?”

Her heart pounded excitedly in her chest as she nodded obediently.

“And who am I?”

A smile tugged at her lips at this strange man. Was he for real

or was this all a game? She didn't care, happy to give him the answer he searched for. "Master."

"Good girl," he responded absently from behind his mask. Gracefully, he rose from his seat and motioned his white hand toward the bed where the outfit was laid out for her. "Meet me in the main room when you're dressed. It's time for you to join the others."

Her brow furrowed. "Others?"

He didn't bother to answer before making a swift exit, leaving the door wide open behind him.

June looked down at the clothes and pursed her lips in disapproval. After the events of the previous night, she felt more inclined to remain in the fluffy robe rather than the scanty scraps of silk and golden cuffs meant to drape it around her. It reminded her of some flowy, sexy thing an Egyptian seductress might wear, nothing like the jeans and hoodies she was used to.

Boldy, she left the room, making sure to double-knot the sash of her robe. Barefoot, she padded down the hall until she reached the enormous main room. A few lights illuminated the space tonight, revealing a massive couch wrapping around the living area and low table, a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows looking down on the city behind it. Across from it was a dining area with a huge table surrounded by expensive-looking chairs. There were other doorways and another hall, leading somewhere out of sight, and to her right was the private elevator he'd brought her up in from the parking garage.

Her captor's skull mask locked onto her as soon as she entered the space. He was sitting on the couch, knees open, one arm draped over the back. The figure of a woman stood behind him, a silhouette hidden in a cloak with a deep hood covering her face. She spoke softly to him, unaware of June's presence yet.

"And then you'll restore me back to my full power, Master?" she asked.

He flicked the fingers of the hand draped over the back of

the couch and she clammed up instantly. Her hood turned to June standing unsurely in the hallway at the edge of the room. She gave the master a nod even though it was doubtfully something he'd be able to see through the back of his head. It was like a habit, an instinctive response to his unspoken order. She turned quickly on her heel and disappeared through one of the other doorways, leaving them alone.

"Were my clothes not good enough for you, or do you require assistance dressing?" Contempt dripped off every word.

June sucked in a shaky breath and squared her shoulders, feeling more like herself now that the shock was beginning to wear off. "I'm not wearing whatever that is. It's ridiculous."

"I don't remember asking what you thought of it. All I recall is telling you to put it on." His last words were sharply enunciated, sending the hairs on the back of her neck up. "Go put it on." He looked down at the phone resting on his thigh to check the time. "We need to head down."

She crossed her arms defiantly, chin up and posture rigid. "Look, I appreciate," she fumbled for a diplomatic way of describing murdering her rapists. "I appreciate you helping me with my *situation*, but—"

He cut her off before she could continue. "*You're mine* now." His arm dropped from the couch, and he leaned forward, elbows draped over his knees. She could feel his stare burning through the mask and into her. "Your master commands it, Juniper. There are consequences for refusing your master." His fingers flexed and it was all it took to make her flinch. The flash of reflexive fear wasn't missed by him. His fingers relaxed again, and he leaned back into his leisurely pose against the cushions once more. "You choose how this all goes, sugar. I'm not asking again."

She held in the tremor of fear at his sweet threat and stood her ground. "It's a ridiculous outfit. Did you pick it up at a

Halloween store or a nerd convention? I'm not dressing as your Egyptian slut."

His chuckle behind the mask was cold.

June was unable to suppress the shudder it sent down her spine.

He rose from the couch and crossed the room quickly. He stood so much taller than her, lean, slender and deadly. The skull mask leaned in to the side of her face as he bent down to her. The lifeless expression of the black plastic and screened eyes seemed to amplify the sharp tone of his words. "That is the thousand-year-old dress of the honored few who once served my people in willing sacrifice. If you'd like to reduce it to such filth though, consider yourself a Roman slut instead." His cold hand wrapped around her wrist tightly as he spoke.

She turned to the mask confused. "A thousand years? Who are your people?"

Another chilling chuckle rumbled through the skull next to her ear and down her spine. "Vampires."

June wasn't stupid enough to challenge him anymore. She could practically feel the evil emanating off him. She felt as though she'd barely escaped the clutches of one den of monsters, only to fall into the clutches of one far worse than anything she could ever have imagined. Her chest felt tight as it rose and fell with short, sharp breaths.

He gave her no time to digest his words. With a hard tug on her wrist, he dragged her back to the bedroom, kicking the door wide open before shoving her to the bed where the dress was still laid out.

Adrenaline began coursing through her again, fear wrapping its spindly fingers around her throat to crush the breath out of it. *Sacrifice*. He had said the word *sacrifice*.

"Get dressed," he ordered as he took the seat in the corner again.

June glanced nervously at the door still wide open.

“Oh, come on, sugar,” he goaded. “You’re used to undressing for more than one strange man. Don’t act shy with me.”

She glared at him at his reduction of the unkindness she’d suffered under her brother’s roof. However true it may be, it didn’t mean she enjoyed it. Not all of it.

He chortled low. “Don’t make that ugly face at me, little girl. Don’t mistake me for some idiotic frat boy or druggie burnout. You think I didn’t see the way you flaunted your beauty in front of them? Do you think I didn’t see the way you bathed under their hungry gazes and reveled in their unwavering attention at that party? Maybe you won’t admit it, maybe you can’t even admit it to yourself, but I know. I know some dark secret place inside you loved it. Mousy little Juniper Rhoades, *finally* noticed.” He leaned forward, his words softer, but darker. “I saw the excitement on your face as they pulled you onto their laps and groped and praised you. You loved how hard they were for you.”

Instead of fear or tears, she felt rage boiling under her skin. “How dare you!” Her outburst was brittle, a weak defense. It shook her to her core to hear him utter the words she couldn’t even admit to herself in private. The attention was only part of it though. She hadn’t asked for everything else.

He ignored her outrage. “Take off the fucking robe, Juniper, or I’m going to come over there and do it myself.”

She knotted the sash again with a defiant scowl. “I’d like to see you try.” She regretted the challenge as soon as she spoke it. He was next to her in a flash, his hands tearing the fluffy robe apart effortlessly.

Vampire. She wasn’t sure how she’d managed to forget that, but now, under his impossibly strong fingers shredding her one defense like paper, she remembered to cower. He made fast work of the robe, leaving her standing naked in front of him and hugging herself as her eyes dropped to the floor.

“Are you going to obey your master, now?” His silky voice

lowered to an intimate tone, as though he hadn't just come at her like a wild beast.

She gave a small, silent nod.

The knuckle of his finger slid under her chin to raise her face to his hidden one. It was impossible to gauge his expression behind the mask. His hand dropped to pull her arms from her chest and the screened eyeholes of the mask lowered slightly. She heard his exhale as she watched the lifeless mask follow the length of her soft body, completely naked and exposed under his scrutiny. There was an odd thrill to being fully naked while he remained completely covered and absolutely hidden to her while her every pillowy curve was left out for his eyes to devour.

All at once, a plan to stay alive knit itself together in her mind. Surviving was what she had been doing her whole life. Dignity and pride didn't mean anything here, only staying alive, and if she was going to do that, this was the man to cozy up to.

She wetted her lips and stared up into the empty sockets of the skull. "Do you think I'm pretty, Master?" she whispered meekly.

June had never been a skinny girl. She'd always been thicker than the other girls she'd grown up with, and though she had been bullied through her youth for it, it quickly became apparent that it came with the curves many men found irresistible.

His hands were still wrapped around her wrists from unfurling her arms from her body. It was as though it pained him to admit it, but he answered just as quietly, "Yes."

She straightened her posture to push out her chest. "Are you going to touch me, Master?"

The mask cocked to the side as he silently evaluated her sudden change of attitude. His finger lifted to push a long strand of her brown hair behind her bare shoulder as the other released her wrist. The finger trailed over her shoulder, following the sloping wing of her collarbone, then down to tickle around the curve of her heavy left breast before his touch fell away.

June's skin puckered and her nipples tightened.

"The ritual will decide who I touch tonight," he answered cryptically. "Now dress."

Disappointment tugged away the smug grin that had begun to form at the corner of her mouth. She gave an obedient nod this time, answering, "Yes, Master."

Her captor nodded in approval and this time took a seat on the edge of the bed and silently watched her wrap herself in the strange white dress. Cuffs at her upper arms held the billowy sleeves up. The bodice of the dress was held up by a delicate collar around her neck, leaving her midriff exposed as a matching golden circlet wrapped around her meaty hips and dipped under her navel to hold the ankle length skirt to her. The silk was so lightweight and sheer that it did little to hide her body. Her nipples protruded obviously through the material and even under the dim light of the tableside lamp, it was easy to glimpse the silhouette of her round ass and thighs, if their shape wasn't obvious enough through the high slits up both sides of the skirt. She wondered what sort of ritual required such scant clothing.

Master grabbed the last lone circlet off the bed and knelt down in front of her. His cool fingers found her bare foot and lifted it to rest on his knee. The pink polish on her toes was almost comical in contrast to his serious black suit. The slit of the skirt fell open around her thigh, giving him a generous view of her leg and the slight crease where it met her meaty hip, the subtle line tempting his gaze to follow where it disappeared behind the flap of silk hiding her vulva.

"What is this ritual?" she dared to ask.

He set her foot back onto the carpet under them and rose. "Come. We'll be late." He motioned for the door and nodded with approval at her obedience, leading them back to the elevator where he used his keycard to take them on a long trip down into the bowels of the building.

Chapter 2

June was ushered into the basement of whatever skyscraper she'd been brought to. Her captor left her in the charge of the mysterious, hooded woman, before disappearing through a side door somewhere private.

"You're late," the woman sneered once the master was out of earshot, as though it were June's fault.

June stiffened and scowled at her.

"Don't get sassy with me," she hissed in response to the young woman's rigid stance. "You're nothing, just fodder for his divine plans, just another pretty face he'll chew up and spit out."

"Who the fuck even are you?" June snapped back. "His little servant?"

"You'd be lucky to serve Master Lerexus, whore. He is as inescapable as the night and holds this world in the palm of his hand." She turned to lead her down a tunnel where the distant sounds of many voices echoed off the concrete walls. She gave the girl a less than gentle shove to get her moving. "Consider it a gift to die for him." Then, under her breath, more to herself, she added, "At least you won't have to witness the horrors of his kingdom for long." Fear, reverence, and bitterness filled her