

## Prey

The first thing you notice is the smoke. It is not a smell, but a sight. It is so thick that you cannot take in any other stimuli. Its weight presses against your face firmer than the ground beneath your feet. It is not gray or brown, but a muddy combination of the two, tinted orange under the streetlight. They stand there, a handful of men, swaying in the cold air. You wonder what they are smoking: cigarettes, maybe a cigar or two and definitely a joint. You hope they will be gone soon.

You open the heavy door with the words “Back Entrance” carved into the wood and slip inside. You take a cautious step into the bar, your eyes scanning faces, searching. You have never been this close before. Tonight will be the night. *Calm down and order a beer.*

You follow the wall, your hand trailing just behind you, gliding over the paneling. You notice the jukebox near the bathroom. *Perfect.* Your foot stumbles on a chair that was left in the middle of the walkway by its previous occupant. At once, everyone is looking at you: men with long beards and leather vests and women with tattoos and breasts pushed unnaturally high. *Whores.* The Bad Thought bursts in your brain before you can stop it, bright and hot like a star falling out of the sky. It feels good, is sweet in your mind like one of those butterscotch candies Grandma would give you while Mother was in the other room doing *her business*. You shake your head. *Always in the other room with the squeaking mattress springs, moans and the sound of money being peeled off a silver clip, a gift from their wives who never understood their needs.*

*Two Bad Thoughts in two minutes. Shit, that is not what Dr. Darryl would call progress.* Dr. Darryl wouldn't approve of you being here, either. Dr. Darryl in his clean white coat, thick black glasses, silver wedding ring and blue file that said you were crazy. Dr. Darryl, with his

judgments and suggestions and pills. You hated the pills and got good at pretending to swallow. *Just like your whore mother.* You push all thoughts away and walk up to the bar.

The male bartender is of no interest to you. His muscles bulging under his tight black T-shirt with “Mike’s” scrawled across the left breast do not intimidate you, nor does his buzzed hair alarm you. Not even a bit. “I-I’ll have a beer.” The words fall out of your mouth. He nods and pulls a cloudy glass from the rack behind the bar. The liquid makes your mouth water. It sloshes in the glass and over the rim. *What a waste.* But when he slides the glass to you with a push of his meaty paw, the smell eases your mind. Its heady odor fills your nostrils, a much preferred alternative to the smoke outside. You slide him a five and sit on the stool. Hunched over your beer, you can feel the hard blue handle of the knife.

The first sip is always the best. You hold it in your mouth with your cheeks bulging as the beer mixes with your saliva. The inside of your mouth tingles. You feel a presence next to you and every ounce of calm drains from your body. It is *his* smell. Your heart pounds as stale Marlboro assaults your nostrils. For a moment, you are scared to look. *He always said he would escape.* Your palms sweat and your hands shake the glass enough that liquid sloshes over the rim.

Cautiously, you turn to your right and expect to see him, but it not the face from your nightmares. This man has a wiry beard, not gray stubble that is shaved on shower days; this man’s beady close-set eyes are a dull dishwater brown, not a calculating hot blue. However, it is the skull tattooed on his arm that finally reassures you; he hates needles.

*Do what you came here to do.* This six-foot-six giant and your reaction remind you of your mission. The clock’s black hands are parted in a V with the little red one racing around

them. Her shift started thirty seconds ago. Before the red hand reaches the second black one, the door at the end of the bar opens and she walks out. Her red hair is held tightly back and she has on a ridiculous glitter headband. She smiles at the man, two rows of straightened teeth flashing like pearls on a strand. You think about buying her a pearl necklace, but quickly dismiss the idea as absurd. *That's not what she's for.* Her green eyes have too much uneven black lining around them and there are a few flakes on the delicate white skin under her puffy eyes. *Late night.* You want her so badly you forget about the first time you saw him, smiling from the top bunk, the sound his match made as he ignited it, the way his thin lips curled around the cigarette butt, the smell as Marlboro smoke filled the cell. You forget about the hollow metal sound the cell door made as it closed, leaving you trapped and alone with him. You forget about what it felt like the first time he came to you in the dark, the smell of blood, the tearing, and the pain you had for days when you sat. You forget about the following months of torture, the sound of his bunk's springs as he came to you, the nightmares. You smile and look into her green eyes. You knew she was good, but didn't imagine she would be this...intoxicating.

“Another?” Her voice is a melody; she is your siren and your muse. She will give you power. That word echoes in your mind: *Power.* You let it sit on the tip of your tongue as she pulls the spout. You are so close, a mere two feet across from her, that you get a little hard. You feel the power of your body as you watch the glass fill with liquid. You will not be scrawny or weak anymore. You will be a man.

Twenty minutes later, she looks at the other bartender. You feel each of those twelve hundred seconds march across your skin, but you will not let them diminish your resolve. You have worked too hard to get here; tonight will be the night you promised yourself. You watch as

she takes the orange box out of her pocket; Pall Mall Lights, not Marlboros. He couldn't break her, but you will. She looks at the other bartender. "I'm going out back."

He shakes his head. "Those things'll kill you." His eyes look at the clock. "You haven't even been on for half an hour."

She rolls her eyes and smiles. "Come on, Mike. There's a lot more out there than cigarettes that'll kill me."

His eyes darken and a moment passes between them, one you watch but cannot read. "I told you to stay away from him."

She nods and sticks her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "Mike, I know you don't think so, but he's good to me. And," she looks down at the floor, "I love him."

He mutters under his breath, "But can only see him through Plexiglas."

She frowns and walks over. After kissing him on the cheek, she says, "We agreed you would stay out of my relationship, big brother."

You have to wait eighty-six more seconds for everyone to be looking at something other than you. Then, you slide off your stool, mentally whistling as you walk towards the bathrooms. At the last second you veer to the right, drop a coin into the jukebox and press a random number. Though you know you are being irrational, you quicken your pace as you pass by the man with the skull tattoo. You learned a long time ago that you can never be too safe.

You slip out the door you entered through and into the air. Though you want to go over to her, you remain pressed against the wall and watch for a minute. The group is gone; the only smoke is that which she exhales. You watch the tiny bud of her cigarette glowing in the night, trace its path from her side to her mouth with your eyes. The streetlight flickers.

She drops the bud onto the ground and smashes it with the toe of her boot. A few seconds later you hear the click of her lighter and see the flame. As she is taking the first drag, you move away from the wall but stay in the shadows. Your heart races; you are so close. It will all be better after tonight. You inhale a wisp of her smoke and feel a surge of predatory power. The streetlight flickers again. *Yes, now.*

You step into the light. She opens her mouth to say something (probably to tell you that customers are not allowed back here) but you are too quick. You cover her mouth with your hand and press the knife into her side. You turn her around so that she is pressed against the wall. The cigarette falls to the ground, the tip still glowing. You smash it out.

Leaning into her, you whisper, "I've been watching you, Caroline." Her eyes widen the moment you press into her belly. She tries to scream, but you shake your head. "No one can hear you." A tear leaks out of her eye; you smudge it away and lick the drop off your thumb. "You taste so good."

You grab the headband off of her head with more force than you intended, but it was too ugly. You pull the elastic out of her hair and watch as it falls in orange waves that release the smell of coconut. You bury your nose in her hair and inhale, pressing the knife into her skin in a surge of excitement that's a little harder than you mean. She whimpers; you lean back and press your lips against hers in apology. They are soft and warm. You ignore the smell of smoke on her skin; it is not Marlboro and it is not him, not the predator. You want her to kiss you back, so you pull on her hair and nip her lips with your teeth. You force your tongue in her wet mouth. She tries to turn away and you become angry. You reach down to rip her jeans open. Her exposed neon pink thong is too vulgar and is in your hands with an easy pull. You push it into your

pocket. “Caroline,” you murmur as your body soaks up her heat. You unzip your jeans, push into her and almost release because it feels so good. Hot and wet and perfect, as though you two were meant for this. If you had known it would be like this, you would not have sat out in the bushes and watched all those dirty women as they taunted you, smiling as they undressed with the lights on and blinds up. What a waste it was, just watching. But you are also glad you saved this for now, for Caroline, because she is special. She is the predator’s, but tonight you make her yours. It is her body that returns the power he took from you. But you won’t be so cruel; you don’t want to make this any longer than necessary, no matter how good it feels. Release builds in you, burns as it races through your veins. Your eyes widen. The knife slips in your sweaty palm, so you grip it harder. You know you are close. Everything falls away: the nightmares of the men walking out of the other room after finishing business with your mother; Dr. Darryl’s look when he forced you to talk about the night you were caught you in the park with your pants down; even Caroline with her sweet eyes and smoky skin. They all disappear as your hips pump faster and faster until you are on the brink of release. The streetlight flickers again.

For a second, you think your body is pumping your liquid into her. Then you feel the pain. It is blinding, and you realize you do not feel her wetness around you anymore; your bodies have separated. You look down and see the knife handle sticking out of your stomach. You wonder why it is red, not blue. She reaches down and pulls it out. Your mind registers the hot liquid, watches your red blood spurt over her. *It should be white. Creamy and white.* Your legs give out and you fall to your knees. She drops the knife and open her mouth, but you do not hear her scream. Seconds later the male bartender and the man who is not the predator burst through the door. They look from her, torn jeans shoved around her ankles and splattered in

blood, to you, curled limp on the ground with a gash in your stomach, and without hesitation walk over and kick your face in. You feel a sharp pain behind your eyes. Inhaling, you smell smoke. Another kick to the gut forces you to choke up beer and is followed by one that lands on your chest. The streetlight flashes, its final surge of energy, and your world goes dark.

Walking down the cement hallway, you hear catcalls and whistles from men who have not seen daylight in decades. They hang their hands out of the bars and beckon you closer with a crook in their tattooed fingers. The guard yells at them, but he smiles. He gets off on it.

A few steps later, you both stop. “Open on five,” he yells. The metal door slides open and he pushes you in. “Have fun, princess,” he chuckles. You stick your hands through the opening and he unlocks your cuffs.

You grab onto the cold, hard bars and wish you could slide yourself through them. You hear the springs groan. You close your eyes and don’t want to move. You know you are too exposed with your back to him, but before you can turn around, you feel his weight press into you.

“Is this what you did to my Caroline?” the predator growls into your ear. You can smell stale Marlboro on his breath. “I knew we would see each other again.” He rips your orange pants down and buries a finger in you. “Ain’t no one going to stop me from doing whatever I want,” he whispers and pushes your head against the bars with a meaty paw. “You’re mine now, Prey.”