

Chapter 12

The Shadow

“There’s another video,” Jay says through the phone, his voice solemn. “I scramble up from my couch and make my way into my office.

An array of computer screens line the ten-foot-long desk, and all my other illegal devices in here. Jammers, trackers, buttons that set off explosives in a number of places should someone betray me, and so on.

This room alone is worth millions with all the shit I have in here.

It’s both my happy place and my living nightmare.

This is where I make a difference in the world. Where I find women and children who need saving, while also witnessing the torture those sick individuals put them through.

It takes money to infiltrate high-security buildings, rescue the girls and give them sanctuary and safety off the grid.

Big corporations pay me an ungodly amount of money to hack into their rival’s systems for whatever bullshit reason, whether it be because they’re competing and want to know what the other is cooking up, or because they have a lawsuit against one another and trying to find information.

I don’t give a fuck what their problems are with each other. It’s only my concern that they get what they hired me for.

In the end, someone wealthy gets fucked over, my client makes a massive profit from it, and I collect interest on it. It’s dirty, but I’ve never been in the business of keeping my hands clean.

And it allows me to dedicate my life to ending human trafficking.

“Where?” I bark, my fingers already flying over the keyboard.

“Already encrypted and sent to your email.”

I roll my neck, cracking the muscles and gearing up for something that’s going to make the steak I just ate settle in my stomach like a wrecked ship in the ocean.

The video starts playing, and despite my instincts screaming at me not to, I turn up the volume so I can hear.

It's a grainy video of a fucked up satanic ritual. The person recording is breathing heavily, more than likely from the risk of being caught doing something extremely dangerous.

Four robed men stand over a stone slab with a squirming little boy tied down to it.

Over and over, he's screaming to let him go. His little voice breaking as he cries for help.

I run a hand over my face when they plunge a curved knife into his chest. They fill metal goblets with his blood and drink the entirety of the cup in one swallow.

I force myself to watch and endure the pain alongside this boy. Because even though this innocent soul is now gone, that doesn't mean I won't do everything in my power to find justice for him.

When the video is over, I have to turn away and breathe through the urge to vomit.

"Z?" I had forgotten Jay was even on the phone.

"Yeah?" I respond, my voice hoarse and barely there.

"I... I couldn't watch it, man. I couldn't do it."

I close my eyes and breathe deeply.

"That's okay," I say. "You don't need to."

Jay knows how hard I take these things, but he also knows I refuse to turn away from them. That's what most people do when it comes to human trafficking. Everybody knows it exists, and most will educate themselves on how to avoid it, but they can't watch when it comes to the reality of it. Can't listen. Can't see the depravity. Because if they don't look, then they can go back to their normal lives and live on as if there aren't thousands of people out here dying every day.

Jay isn't one of those people, he's doing what he can. But he also doesn't have the stomach for it, and I can't blame him.

Because I don't either. And to be honest, the people who do are the ones who are trafficking them and committing the crimes.

"Is it the four we've been tracking?" I ask.

Jay sighs. "No, Mark was spotted at a restaurant last night with his wife during the timestamp of the video. Looks like different men, but these

ones aren't identifiable. I imagine they only do the ritual once."

I nod my head, my mind racing as I try to figure out what the fuck I'm going to do.

About six months ago, a video leaked on the dark web of four men in black robes performing a ritual on a little girl. I'm not sure if it was arrogance or what, but the men kept their hoods down, unfazed with onlookers seeing exactly who they were.

Even with the low-quality video and dim lighting, I was able to identify them immediately.

Senators Mark Seinburg, Miller Foreman, Jack Baird, and Robert Fisher.

They surrounded the little girl on a slab of cement, stabbed her and then drank her blood. The girl was still alive, wriggling and screaming at the top of her lungs as the men chanted around her.

The same exact ritual the little boy just went through, still looping on my computer screen. Except in this one, the four men surrounding the little boy have tall, sharp-pointed hoods drawn over their heads, concealing their identities.

I can already feel myself slipping back into that black hole it took weeks to crawl out of six months ago. It put me in one of the darkest headspaces I've ever been in.

I locked myself in a room and didn't come out for twenty-six hours after watching that first video. I was physically unable to go on living my normal day-to-day with the knowledge that this was being done to children.

That helplessness grew as I explored the dark web and found thousands of videos of parents raping their own children. Alongside the millions of other videos of torture, cannibalism, and even necrophilia. A lot of those videos take place in red rooms, where buyers can direct how exactly they want the victim to be tortured, raped, and killed.

And those are just the ones involving children.

Those videos in particular are what drove me to create Z five years ago. Since I was a kid, I had a knack for computer science, and my skills have surpassed even the top hackers in government organizations.

Finding myself on the dark web and stumbling upon those videos was by accident. But it changed my fucking life.

I haven't been able to sleep since then. Knowing sick people pay to view hundreds of thousands of children being subjected to those things. Even

worse, knowing that the people committing the acts do it both for their own pleasure and monetary gain.

And that just as many women and children continue to go missing every day so they can be subjected to those same things.

Since then, I made it my mission to find and kill them all. I've killed hundreds of people at this point. Locating predators that I have one hundred percent proof of their involvement in human trafficking.

Now I'm going to make my way through the government, starting with the four politicians from the first video, and then making my way through the rest.

I know exactly where they live. What they eat, where they sleep, shit, and work. But what they haven't led me to is where these rituals take place.

And every day that goes by without that information, these rituals will be performed more.

"Did we get a hit on an IP address from who leaked the video?" I ask Jay, though I already know the answer.

"No, they covered their tracks. Whoever leaked it knew what they were doing," Jay answers. I roll my neck again, gritting my teeth against the flaring pain radiating from the tightened muscles.

More than anything, I'd love to feel my little mouse's hands working out the near permanent knots in my neck and shoulders. But it'll be a little while before she agrees to that.

"Alright, I'll see what I can find out with this new video," I say, before ending the call.

Fuck. I need a drink.

And my little mouse happens to have a bottle of my favorite whiskey in her house.



A bone-chilling cold settles on the back of my neck. I hiss through my teeth and turn my head, convinced I'll find someone standing behind me.

But no one is there, despite the persistent cold surrounding me like dense fog.

I've already experienced a few unexplainable things while perusing Parsons Manor.

But whatever ghost that's floating up my ass has bad fucking timing.

"Back off," I mutter through gritted teeth, turning back around. Surprisingly, it does. Whatever it is.

And I go back to staring mindlessly into my whiskey glass.

Whoever's whiskey this is, it's divine. A citrus flavor lingers on my tongue as I sip from the crystal cup. Addie's upstairs sleeping, none the wiser to me being down here, drinking her whiskey, and stewing in the hornet's nest buzzing throughout my skull.

Two of my employees installed security systems throughout her house, unknowingly to keep their boss out. I basically invented these systems, so I'm more than capable of disarming them with a click of my phone.

In the beginning, I just picked her locks to get in, then reverse-picked them after I left. The only predator I'll allow in her house is myself. Despite her shit locks, I'd never leave her vulnerable.

I was relieved when she installed the security system, even if it was meant to keep me out. Breaking past those barriers is just another lesson to teach. Eventually, she'll learn that she can't shut me out any more than she can fuck another man.

She tried to convince me of that the other day, but with one look at her cameras, I knew she was bluffing. Trying to get me riled up. It almost worked until I remembered that I'm taking it slow with her.

In the beginning, I tried so hard to forget her. I tried to run. But I couldn't get her out of my mind. I went home from that bookstore and attempted to talk myself down. But it seemed the more I struggled to convince the beast inside of me to leave her alone, the more it raged.

And the second I started looking into her life, digging up anything I could find, the obsession only grew. She became an inoperable brain tumor that plagues every waking moment of my life.

Sometimes it feels like if I tried to cut her out of me anyways, I wouldn't survive it.

Taking another swallow of whiskey, I twirl a red rose between my thumb and forefinger, a drop of blood pooling from where the thorn pricked me.

Ignoring them, I keep rolling the dangerous stem between my fingers, a vortex of anger and anxiety swirling in my stomach.

Children are being tortured at this very moment. This second—this *millisecond*—while I sit here and drink liquor from a crystal glass.

There are children being sacrificed right now. Hurt. Maimed. Raped. Killed. While sadistic fucks circle around them and drink the blood from their bodies.

My phone rests on the island, the screen lit up with the grotesque video playing on a loop.

I haven't been able to stop watching it—or rather, stop torturing myself. It's a small price to pay for the absolute horror this poor kid suffered from. My need to find where these rituals take place digs deeper, and it's driving me fucking insane.

There's nothing I can do at this moment. I've attempted to trace the source of the video, but whoever is leaking them has done their homework. No hits came through, leaving me feeling utterly fucking powerless.

I may be the best, but technology has limitations. I've learned how to bend and coerce information from almost nothing, but sometimes the tracks don't exist. The numbers just aren't there.

My thoughts spiral downward, like the amber liquid sliding down my throat.

I roll the rose harder through my fingers—faster. The sharp thorns slice through my flesh. The small amount of pain offers me a semblance of release.

Sometimes witnessing the torture these kids go through makes me want to slice open my own skin and feel the pain alongside them. I want to ease their pain by creating my own. Maybe if I'm bleeding out on an altar next to them, they won't feel so fucking alone.

But I don't. The urge is unfounded and I recognize that. I recognize that I need to be strong, not weakened from blood loss and my mental state hanging on by a fraying thread.

If I'm going to save these kids and destroy the skin trade, then I need to be at my best. They need me to be strong and capable because they can't be.

The video restarts. I snarl, the cries of the boy renewed, filling the otherwise silent space around me.

I've studied the video closely, just like I did the last one, searching for any type of clue. But I could detect nothing. Nothing significant that would lead me to where exactly these rituals are taking place.

Just four people dressed in black robes, surrounding a stone slab. From what I can see, the entire area is rock, emulating a cave of sorts.

But I'm not stupid enough to believe these men have found some cave in a mountain to sneak off into. This is a manmade cave, somewhere deep in the underbelly of Seattle. Someplace that no random civilian could accidentally stumble upon.

The whole reason I moved to Seattle six months ago was because of this dungeon. Originally, I was born and raised in California. But when the first video leaked, I was able to get a ping from the person's IP address that revealed Seattle as the original location.

They haven't made the same mistake twice.

This job gives me the freedom to live wherever I want, so it took only a day to settle on moving to Washington, where I could find the hellhole and destroy it.

And times like these, where I'm at my lowest, I can't help but feel like it also changed my life in the best of ways. It brought me to Addie, after all.

My head drops low between my shoulders, tension threading throughout my overused muscles.

The black cloud surrounding me darkens, sucking me in deeper as the video loops around again. I curl the rose, crushing it tightly in my fist. My hand trembles from the pain and the force in which I'm squeezing the flower.

I continue to crush it until it's nothing but crinkled petals and a crushed stem painted in the blood pouring from my hand.

I grit my teeth, just barely holding onto the sorrowful wail that threatens to leave my lips.

This—this is the destruction from what I do.

Some days, it's hard to live with. Some days, I can barely stand from the weight of this cruel world resting on my shoulders.

But I know if I don't, my life would be worthless, and those kids would have died for nothing.

