

Chapter 20

The Shadow

The bass from the music is all-consuming. It feels like the beat is coming from inside my chest. I never quite got used to the volume in clubs.

I make my way through the throng of grinding couples, drunk girls shaking their asses, and obnoxious douchebags wearing too much cologne with a mountain of gel in their hair. Oh God, one even has his button-up parted so he can show off the gold chain dangling on his hairy, overly tanned chest.

Scarface is a role model very few manage to do justice to when they imitate him. They can stick their faces in a pile of coke but don't exhibit the same finesse while doing so.

My hood is pulled over my head, concealing my identity as I make my way up the metal stairs. The same metal steps Addie climbed up not too long ago with another man's hand wrapped around hers.

I enjoyed sawing off that hand and would definitely do it again.

When I reach the landing, I stop short. On the half-moon couch is Max with his legs spread and a waitress bouncing up and down on his lap while his head is kicked back with his eyes closed. Her skirt is hiked up, and her thong pulled to the side, baring her pussy eating up Max's cock for all to see.

I arch a brow, unimpressed with how low she has to bounce. Addie would never have that issue.

A pair of twins sit on either edge, receiving their own treatment from a girl.

Sighing, I step back in the shadows, pulling out my gun and screwing on the silencer piece. The bass is milder up here, but a bullet zipping by your ear will draw anyone's attention.

I take aim and shoot, the bullet an inch away from Max's head.

Immediately, he dives for cover, pushing the poor girl off him and onto the floor. She yelps, covering her body as she scrambles up and makes a run for it.

“Hey,” I say calmly. She freezes, while the twins move into action, reaching for their own guns while Max quickly yanks up his slacks to cover his now flaccid dick.

“I’d appreciate it if you tuck the guns back in your pockets along with your dicks. None of you are my type. Unfortunately for you, I only have one, and she’s got pretty light brown eyes and a penchant for dangerous men.”

When one of the twins doesn’t listen, continuing to pull out the gun and take aim, I fire off one shot next to his head too. He drops the gun and raises his hands.

I turn my eyes to the three girls. “I want you beautiful ladies to see yourselves out and never speak of this again, yeah? I have the memory of an elephant, especially with faces.”

These women will never see the wrong end of my gun, even if they do tell, but it sure as hell would make my life a lot harder if *they* knew that.

They all nod and run out of the room like there’s a Rottweiler nipping at their bare asses.

“Who the fuck are you? Where the fuck is security?” Max spits, a hand resting on the gun in the back of his pants.

“Security from this club?” I laugh. “You know, for someone who has some pretty seedy business dealings, you’re a cocky son of a bitch for not having your own damn guards.”

Max sniffs with indignation. I smile wider, realizing that he’s still struggling with loyalty and that pesky power vacuum now that the Talaverras are wiped out.

“Couldn’t get any loyal guards?”

“Mind your fucking business,” he snaps. “Who are you and what do you want?”

I trot over to where he’s sitting and take a seat next to him, sighing as if I just sat on a beach chair on a private island with a piña colada.

And then I press the cold metal of my silencer to his temple. I’m riding on the fact that at least these two bozos will show him a shred of loyalty.

“Does it freak you out when someone pops up out of nowhere and threatens your life? I’ll admit, I was a bit more direct, but the intention is the same.”

The twins’ eyes shift to each other.

“What the fuck are you talking about, man?”

“I’ll tell you why I’m here when the three of you set those purdy little guns you got riding up your assholes on the table there,” I say, nodding my head towards said table.

The twins look to Max for direction, and when he nods, they listen.

Oh. Goodie. He *does* have two people that have a shred of loyalty. Let’s see how long that lasts when someone who is clearly in over their head is running the show.

A bead of sweat drips down Max's forehead as he follows my directions, nearly throwing the weapon on the table from his anger. The other two follow suit, one twin picking his up from the ground and the other sliding his out from the back of his pants before setting them on the table with Max’s. Slowly and gently. Indicating this isn't their first rodeo where a gun is in their face.

“Adeline Reilly and Daya Pierson. Those names ring any bells in those empty heads of yours?”

Max's eyes round at the edges slightly, enough to reveal recognition.

“Never hear—”

“Here’s the thing about liars,” I cut in. “I really don’t fucking like them. They kinda make me twitchy actually. Do you want me getting twitchy when my finger is on a trigger?”

Max’s lips tighten into a hard line.

“Your girl was involved in my best frie—”

“And here’s the thing about assumptions,” I cut in again, grinning when Max snarls with irritation. “They’re baseless, and most of the time, you’re really fucking wrong. Addie doesn’t have anything to do with Archie's death. But I do.”

Max's head jerks towards me but is deterred by the gun still firmly pressed against his temple. He grits his teeth, his chest heaving with fury. I smile as his body trembles.

“What, is Addie an ex or something? You get jealous she wanted Arch instead?” Max hisses. Man, those two really were besties. They sound

exactly alike when laid on their deathbed.

I shrug, unbothered. “I did get jealous, but she’s certainly no ex. Your best friend was a shit person. You sorry pieces of shit may get off on slapping around women but can’t say I find enjoyment out of that.”

“I will fucking kil—”

“You’re not going to do shit,” I interrupt for the third time. “You’re a tadpole in an ocean of sharks and you have no fucking idea who I am, but you’re about to learn.”

When Max's eyes meet mine, I flash my teeth, pull out my phone and click the play button on the awaiting video.

Max's father sits in a chair with a gag in his mouth. Sweat and tears run down his face as he looks at the camera with all the fear humankind has ever known.

The two of them are as close as a father and son can be, sharing the same interests in drugs and tossing around women for the hell of it.

His father rambles behind the gag, pleading for his life. I have no plans to kill the man. While he’s a shitty human, he wouldn’t be any good to me dead. Not when he’s going to be the leverage hanging over Max's head.

I came awfully close to walking in here and shooting them all dead, but then I’d have to kill all their families too, and my girl doesn’t like it when I do that.

Now that Addie’s on their radar, the more of them I kill, the more enemies I make not only for myself, but her too.

Exhibit A—the dickhead who has my gun pressed to his head because I killed his best friend.

I don’t have the goddamn time to deal with small fish when I have Great White’s floating around in my ocean. Too bad for them, I’m a fucking Megalodon.

“What did you do to him?!” Max shouts, jerking forward towards the guns. I grab his arm and haul him back against the booth, a breath of air puffing out of his chest from the force.

“He’s not dead, so settle down. No need to yell, my ears are sensitive.”

Colorful expletives spill from his mouth, but I ignore them and tap the silencer on the underside of his chin hard enough to make him bite his tongue.

“As long as you leave Addie and Daya alone for good, daddy dearest will continue to live a long, healthy life. I don’t want to see a goddamn hair out of place on either of their heads, you feel me? I know everything about you, Max, and your two helpers over there too. I know where you eat, sleep, and shit. And I will watch you until some other sorry asshole puts a bullet in your brain. You pickin’ up what I’m puttin’ down?”

His blue eyes narrow into slits, glaring at me heatedly. It’s the equivalent to throwing a bunny at me, but whatever makes the asshole feel like Elmer Fudd.

I stop the video of Max's sniveling father and stand, keeping my gun trained on him. Specifically on his dick. Most men would rather die than live without a dick.

“We have a deal, Elmer?” His brows plunge at the name, but he doesn’t question it. Having a gun pointed at your family jewels changes your priorities sometimes.

“Yes. As long as you let him go.”

I flash a wide smile. “He’s already on his way home.”

I turn to leave, walking back over to the staircase before his voice stops me once more.

“Hey! You never said who you were,” Max calls from behind me, his voice still packed full of unbridled anger.

Turning to look over my shoulder, a feral grin curls my lips, and I say with a wink, “You can call me Z.”

And then I see myself out, laughing from the look on their paling faces.



“Mr. Forthright, welcome to *Pearl*,” the blonde woman says, ushering me into the dimly lit foyer. She’s dressed in a plain black blazer and skirt, with nondescript heels and her hair pulled back into a tight bun.

Shit looks painful.

A serene smile is on her face, but her bright blue eyes are missing their sparkle. The baby blue color is lifeless, and it’s my first clue that she’s seen too much in this place.

I enter into what looks like a foyer with gold tiled flooring, black walls, and an obscene chandelier. Gold framed pictures of the founding members of the gentlemen's club line the walls.

Or, in other words, a bunch of fucking rapists line the walls.

Men in business suits, smiling at the camera and probably still riding the high from raping a little girl or boy. They all look the fucking same to me.

I walk down the hallway, the creepy men staring at me from either side the whole way down, while music with a heavy bass emanates from somewhere ahead of me.

I'm keeping the earpiece tucked safely away in my jacket until it's needed.

It took five minutes to get in this godforsaken place because Detective Fingers from security wanted to thoroughly investigate my asscrack. I had to spend several minutes lecturing him about what would happen if his fingers brushed up against my asshole one more time.

After walking down Rapist Alley, I walk into a massive room filled with couches and poker tables. Men lounge on the couches with women draped over their laps and shaking their asses or tits in their faces.

At the back of the stage, a woman is currently humping a pole while men are throwing dollar bills at her. A full bar is off to the left of that, where several men in business suits sit, drinking glasses of alcohol. Probably fifty-thousand-dollar Scotch that tastes like ass.

Then again, they probably enjoy that taste since they think their own farts smell like flowers.

Women in scantily clad clothing roam the room, delivering drinks, and pretending to laugh at their lame jokes and—what the fuck?

Ten feet from me, a woman stands at a poker bar holding out her bare arm while an asshole stubs out his very lit cigar on her skin. My face drops when I see that asshole is Mark fucking Seinburg.

Goddamn it.

Smoke sizzles from her flesh, but she doesn't move an inch. In fact, she doesn't even flinch.

Anger punches through my chest. I force myself to stay calm as I walk over to the table, acting more interested in the game than I am in the girl.

As I get closer, I notice she has a blank look on her face, much like the hostess that greeted me.

The smell of burnt flesh fills the area. One dickhead even waves his hand in front of his nose dramatically, as if it's *her* fault it smells. She drops her arm and just stands there, a glazed look in her eyes. After closer inspection, I notice that the entirety of her arm is covered in burn scars. Old and fresh. All in different stages of healing and plenty of fresh burns from tonight.

Mark shoos her away, and she robotically turns and walks off, as if she didn't just have a cigar stubbed out on her flesh.

She's drugged.

And after looking around at the women, I realize they all are.

Not only does it keep them compliant, but they probably won't remember the majority of the shit that goes down in here.

My mask stays in place, refusing to crack from the anger swirling in the depths of my chest. Keeping my eyes on the table, I approach the men.

"Gentlemen! Who's winning tonight?"

Five pairs of eyes turn to look at me, all with snide looks on their faces. I can tell what they're thinking without them even saying it.

Who are you? What gives you the right to speak to us?

"I am," Mark chirps, and I literally couldn't have planned that better myself. It's like God opened up His hands and dropped that fine piece of blessing in my lap Himself. "Do you play, boy?"

What I really want to do is smack the shit out of him for calling me 'boy' when I'm a thirty-two-year-old man, but instead, I offer a devious smile.

"Sure do," I say.

Mark looks over at a bald man and tips his chin up. "Let him have your spot."

The table seems to go silent. I keep my expression calm as the bald man stares back at Mark with a blank expression. But he doesn't have his eyes on lockdown. Anger sparks in his brown pools, and he looks at Mark much like how I really want to. Like he wants to kill him.

It's for the best really. He wasn't a good poker player anyways if he couldn't even keep his anger in check.

Calmly, the man stands and places his cards down. Royal Flush.

He would've won that round.

I keep my face blank, not unveiling the smile that's threatening to emerge. I would feel bad for him if he didn't get off on hurting women.

Who am I kidding? I wouldn't feel bad at all.

While Mark was burning his cigar on the waitress's flesh, this bald man over here was adjusting himself. He wasn't the only one, though, and I made sure to note every one of their faces for later.

The man gives Mark and me one last look before walking off without a word.

The valuable little lesson that came out of that embarrassing spectacle was that Marky-Mark here has power. Whatever weight he pulls, it's enough to give him superiority over the common folk.

Wonder how many little boys' and girls' lives it took to get that far.

"What's your name, boy?" he asks.

"Zack Forthright," I lie easily.

"Name's Mark Seiburg. I'm sure you already know who I am, though. How long have you been playing poker?" Mark asks as they restart the game, brushing over his narcissism like the notion of me *not* knowing who he is isn't an option.

I know exactly who he is, but not for the reasons he thinks.

"Since I was a kid," I answer truthfully.

My father was a professional poker player, and he taught me how to master a poker face. Something that has been crucial to my field of work.

He'd sit me on his lap as a little boy, teaching me the game, and then show me his cards as he played with his friends. Testing me to see if I could keep a blank face. He lost a lot of games doing that.

But he truly believed I wouldn't learn how to master a poker face unless I knew what it meant to play the game. He'd whisper in my ear, point out my tells, and teach me how to not only read and understand facial expressions but micro-expressions.

During that time, my father never truly lost any money. After my lesson, I'd run off and play, and he'd win all his money back plus some. It took me a couple of years to master a poker face and even longer to master the game itself, but he made me play against him once I did.

I beat him in the first game, and I don't think I've ever seen pride in a man's eyes shine brighter since that day.

"Well, boy, let's see what you're made of then."

He'll find out what a bullet is made of when it's lodged in his throat. But I don't say that.

Throughout the next several hours, I purposely stay neck-in-neck with him. I understand a narcissist's ego enough to know that it would've only angered him if I cleaned him out. And if I'm horrible, he won't respect me. So, I keep the playing field even.

You win some, you lose some. Back and forth until he slaps his cards down with a hearty laugh.

"I've met my match," he chortles, taking a drink out of his whiskey glass.

I smile prettily at him. "You're a lot better than I gave you credit for," I praise.

He offers me a cigar and I take one, but I'd let Detective Fingers finger blast my ass before I put it out on a girl's arm. I'll have to figure out a way to stop him without breaking his neck if he tries it again.

"How come I haven't seen you here before?" he asks, eyeing me closely as he lights his cigar. Not necessarily suspicious, but every man in these types of clubs looks at a new member with an air of wariness. "I'd recognize those nasty scars anywhere."

That was fucking rude. But he's not wrong.

I shrug a shoulder. "My money is new," I lie.

Zack Forthright is a self-made millionaire from web design and branding. If that name is googled, there will be a Wikipedia page and social media posts with fake followers and engagement, but everything is a blanket site.

Once I start gaining a reputation here and showing my face more, I'll be looked into, and I'll have little enough to raise an eyebrow or two, but nothing that would make someone think I'm trying to take down the club.

"How'd you get them?" he asks, nodding his head at my face.

"Bully in middle school. Pretty fucked up kid that liked to play with knives," I lie again, flashing a grin. And then I shrug. "The ladies seem to like them."

He chuckles. "Oh, I bet they do. The young girls have always liked that—oh, what do you call it? Bad boy look?"

Before I can respond, a waitress approaches with refills of our drinks, the same glazed look in her eyes.

"Come here, sweetie," Mark says to the girl, patting his hand on his knee for her to sit on. The wedding ring on his finger glints in the light, as if to shine a light on the fact that he's a skeezy son of a bitch.

Addie won't ever have to worry about that shit when I marry her, that's for damn sure. She doesn't even have to worry about it now. The only pussy I want wrapped around my cock for the rest of my life is hers.

The waitress looks at him like he's merely an apparition. She's looking through him.

Robotically, she sits on his lap, a toneless smile gracing her bright red lips.

Mark cuddles her closer, looking at her with a smarmy grin. From here, I can see his cock growing in his pants. Normally, I'm not one to judge another man's dick, but when it's hard for an abused girl and the tent is lackluster, well... that's just disgusting on many levels.

He pulls her back directly onto his dick, gripping her hips tightly and guiding her ass to grind against him. I sigh, keeping my composure.

Carefully, I swallow the last of my whiskey and purposely set it on the edge.

I raise my nose in the air, sniffing dramatically.

"What is that delectable smell?" I ask aloud. Mark looks over to me, his grin growing, while I stare at the girl. "You smell delicious. Lean over, let me smell you."

The girl doesn't hesitate. We both lean towards each other, and once her body is hovering over my empty glass, I flick it.

The glass tips and it goes crashing to the black tiled floor. Thousands of glass pieces shatter, the sound ringing out loudly despite the heavy music in the room.

Chatter ceases and heads swivel towards the commotion.

Reminds me of high school when a kid farted in class, and the whole room went silent and stared at him until his face turned purple.

The girl jumps up, tiptoeing her platform heels through the glass as planned.

"I'm so sorry," she apologizes, the first hint of inflection in her tone. "I'll clean this up right away."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I shout, glaring at her like she's the one that knocked it over.

Her mouth falls open, and I stand.

"Come to the back with me," I snarl, my eyes flashing with fury. She curls in on herself, while the other men snicker.

“Clumsy bitch,” one of the men mutters, looking at her the same way you would if you accidentally touched the week-old gum stuck to the bottom of your desk.

“I’ll be back once I take care of her,” I say directly to Mark.

He laughs heartily, enjoying the thought of an innocent woman being punished for something so trivial. The old fuck probably falls over once a week and needs LifeAlert to get back up. Asshole can’t talk about glass falling when he can’t even keep his body vertical.

I grab the woman’s arm firmly, jerking her against me and dragging her away.

She doesn’t fight too hard. Self-preservation is kicking in, fighting its way through the cloud of drugs in her system. But she has long accepted her fate.

As soon as I get her into a quiet room, I turn to her. She’s already dropped to her knees, her green eyes looking up at me with sorrow and acceptance.

She’s a beautiful girl, with bright red hair, grass-green eyes and freckles dotting her nose.

Something about her reminds me a little of Addie, and I nearly walk right back out and crush my fist in Mark’s face just for touching her.

“Get up,” I say firmly. She gets to her feet unsteadily, looking much like a baby giraffe walking for the first time.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” I say. Her brow puckers and she frowns.

“Sir—”

“What’s your name, sweetheart?”

She stutters over the question. “Cherry.”

I shake my head. “Is that your real name or stage name?”

She rolls her lips. “Real.”

Her parents are really fucking unoriginal. Like might as well have a second child and name her Strawberry or Watermelon.

Anyway, besides the point. “How would you feel about getting a fresh start in life, yeah?”

Her eyes widen, and it seems like the prospect of escaping this one has some of the drug-induced fog receding from her gaze. But then she turns

wary, and then resigned. Tears line the edges of her lids, and the sight will forever haunt me.

She looks down, seeming to collect herself. “I know what that means. I’m really sorry. I didn’t realize I was leaning that far down.”

“I’m not going to hurt or kill you, Cherry,” I cut in. “I’m going to help you, but I need you to listen to exactly what I say.”

She shifts on her feet, peering up at me through her lashes and bobbing her head frantically. I slip out the Bluetooth earpiece I had hidden deep in my inner suit pocket. All of my jackets have a special lead lining in them that deflects radiation. Meaning I can walk through any body scanner without the devices being detected.

I pop it in my ear, press the button that immediately calls out to Jay, and wait for him to answer.

When he does, I explain the situation. It takes fifteen minutes before he has a car ready to pick her up. In that time, Cherry tells me about her family. About her younger sister that has cancer and her poor single mother. She works this job to pay the medical bills, but she confesses that she doesn’t know if it’s worth it if she’s killed and the extra income stops.

She won’t ever have to worry about taking care of them again. Or being killed because of a broken glass.

Jay watches the camera feed and directs me towards a back door exit without detection.

I grab her wrist before she walks out of the door. The nondescript black sedan is waiting ten feet away, and the door already open for her.

“I know,” she says softly. “I don’t know your face. I’ve never seen you before,” she guesses.

I shake my head. “Cherry, you’re not going to a place where you’ll ever be questioned about something like that. You and your family will be taken care of and safe. I promise. All I ask is that you do something meaningful with your life. That’s all.”

A single tear slips from her eye. She hurriedly wipes it away and nods. Her brightened eyes shine with hope, and doing this shit, involving myself in the worst of humanity—it’s all worth it when I have a survivor look at me like that.

Not like I’m a hero, but like they can actually envision a future.

She stumbles off to the car, and I make my way back inside, making sure no one spots me.

“Jay, clear the cameras,” I say before taking the earpiece out and slipping it back in the hidden pocket.

The cameras will be spliced. If anyone reviews them, they’ll see me dragging a dejected Cherry into a room and us walking out separately.

It’s one of my specialties that I mastered and then trained Jay in. Taking parts of a camera feed and manipulating them to look exactly how you want them to, without even the best hackers being able to detect manipulation.

I crack my neck, and ready myself for a very long night of shooting the shit and becoming BFF’s with a fucking pedophile.

July 4th, 1945

4th of July is always one of my favorite holidays. I spend all day setting up for guests while John grills.

And then we let off fireworks in our backyard over the cliff. It's always incredibly beautiful and my favorite part of the whole night.

But right now, I'm in my room crying.

John is drunk again. And he's been yelling at Sera and I all day. Nothing is done right and he even went as far as throwing a glass plate against the wall.

I'm thankful our guests haven't arrived yet.

Frank is on his way here, and I'm thankful for it. He's been a little distant since the dinner where John finally exploded.

But I imagine he doesn't want to be involved in our marital disputes. Still, I'm glad he's coming. He'll be able to keep John busy while I entertain the rest of our family.

I only pray John doesn't embarrass me tonight. I don't think I'll ever forgive him for it.

