

176 Drowning

Eve 1

The walls bleed ink and blood, black and crimson seeping into each other, coming closer to where I was perched on the bed. My knees drawn towards me, my arms tightened around me but it did nothing to ward off the chill that had embedded itself in my bones.

I could see faces in the macabre fluid, faces of those that rained me with words of damnation.

"Just fucking die!" My mother hissed, the details of her face in the dark fluid so hauntingly familiar that I reversed into myself. "Why don't you just fucking die!"

I clamped my hands over my ears, squeezing my eyes shut but I could not endure the darkness behind my own eyes and I snapped them open only to see yet another face, bile rising in my throat. 1

"I never loved you." James' voice struck like a blade, his inky face etched with disgust. The ghost of his touch, the way he had once traced my skin with something that resembled affection, turned rancid. "You were just

something to pass the time." His lips curled into a sneer. "Pathetic, desperate. Always hoping someone would stay. No wonder everyone leaves. No wonder they betray you."

The faces bled together, shifting, warping, until another emerged.

"Murderer." Mrs Miller, Jules Aunt stood before me, her eyes like pits of endless sorrow, her mouth twisted in a grief so consuming I could feel it leeching the air from my lungs. "You killed her. She trusted you, and you killed her."

"No—" My voice cracked, barely a whisper.

"She didn't pull the trigger, did she?" The voice belonged to my father now. The lines of his face were distorted, but I knew them. "You let her die. That was the only thing you were ever good at, wasn't it? Letting people die."

"It wasn't—" My words were drowned out by a chorus.

The voices rose, blending into a cacophony that scraped against my skull.

"You should be the one rotting in the ground."

"You took her life, just like you ruin everything you touch."

"How many more will you destroy before you're satisfied?"

"Monster."

That one was Jules' voice. Soft. So soft. But it cut the deepest.

I gasped, my chest tightening, but there was no air. Just ink and blood, rising, reaching, curling around my legs like grasping fingers.

I wanted to run. But there was nowhere to go.

Because they were right.

The ink and blood slithered closer, tendrils of darkness licking at my feet like tongues of an insatiable void. My breath hitched. The voices had never been wrong.

"Monster,"

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My heart seized at the fluid continue to slither, another face forming in its eerie waves.

"Sister,"

Ellen.

"See? You deserved it." Her voice was deceptively

gentle, as if she were merely stating a fact, one long since carved into the marrow of my bones. "You deserved every year you spent in that cell. You deserved every ounce of pain inflicted on you. You deserved every slap, every kick, every whisper of disgust."

The ink surged forward, curling around my calves, seeping into my skin like venom.

"I was just eighteen" I rasped, my throat raw, my body trembling. "I didn't—"

"Didn't what?" Ellen's laughter was hollow, brittle. "Didn't mean to live? Didn't mean to stop Jules from revealing the truth?" Her face darkened, shifting like a reflection on shattered glass. "But you did, didn't you? You killed her to keep her mouth shut!" 2

"I tried to stop her!" My voice cracked, desperation clawing at my throat.

"And yet, you were the one holding the gun."

The weight of it was suddenly in my hands again, cold, heavy, unforgiving. My fingers curled around the ghost of it, the same way they had that day. The moment the world had split apart.

Ellen's lips parted, her expression twisting. "You

always claimed you loved her, but in the end, you let her die. Just like Mom said you would. Just like Dad always knew you would."

More voices rose from the ink.

"Selfish."

"Weak."

"A burden."

I was sinking now, the ink swallowing me, slithering up my ribs, pressing into my lungs. My skin crawled with the weight of unseen hands, clawing, grasping, pulling.

The faces multiplied—some I knew, some I didn't. The judge, his gavel slamming down like a death sentence. My cellmate, laughing at my nightmares. The guards, watching me with empty eyes as I choked on the injustice of it all.

And Jules.

Jules, standing in the ink, her body fragmented, shifting between what she was and what was left of her.

"You were supposed to save me." Her voice wasn't angry. It wasn't loud like the others. It was worse. It was disappointed.



Something inside me cracked.

"Jules—" I reached for her, but my hands passed through the ink, the illusion shattering like glass.

The walls bled faster now, the room suffocating in darkness, my own name whispered over and over like a curse.

Eve. Eve. Eve.

I should've died with her.

I should've pulled the trigger on myself.

The ink reached my throat, cold fingers tightening like a noose.

And then—

Silence.

A deafening, aching silence.

And a single breath.

Not mine.

But real. Close.

"Red!" 1

My eyes darting in the direction of the proceeding figure, gray eyes haunted, hair tousled, skin pale.

Hades.

Warm hands cradled my face, his mouth moving
but the syllables came out muffled, the voice of
the ink and blood rising and drowning out
everything else.

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I looked up at him but my ears were ringing with the words. The words echoed in my skull like curse. Like a brand seared into my soul.

The ink seeped into my skin, clawing away at my fragile spirit, pulling at my will to live.

Hades' lips moved again, but this time, the ink shifted. The voices, once a cacophony of torment, faltered, their shrieks muffled beneath something else—his voice.

A crack in the abyss. A sliver of warmth in the ice.

"Red," his voice broke through, deeper now, steady, as if he could hold me with just his words. "Look at me. Come back to me."

The ink pulsed, seeping into my skin like a parasite, but the ringing in my ears dulled just enough for me to hear him.

I gasped, shuddering as my fingers curled into

his sleeves, anchoring myself to the solid weight of him. My lips trembled, my voice barely above a breath.

"They're coming for me."

Hades stiffened.

I pointed at the walls, at the ink that bled and writhed and whispered with faces carved from the depths of my worst nightmares.

"They said I should be dead," I rasped, my throat raw from screams I hadn't realized I had swallowed. "They said I'm a monster. That I killed her. That I ruin everything I touch. And they're coming for me, Hades—"

My voice cracked, panic surging like a flood, washing over me in violent waves.

Hades' expression shattered. The ever-unshakable, ever-unyielding Hades looked at me as if something inside him was breaking.

His hands trembled where they cupped my face, his fingers brushing over my cheek, as if trying to wipe away something he couldn't reach. His throat bobbed, his gray eyes burning with something too raw, too heavy, too much.

"They're lying to you, Red," he murmured, but

there was an edge to his voice, something frantic, something pleading. "They're not real. Look at me. Feel me. I'm real."

The walls pulsed, the voices wailing in protest. 1

I flinched, curling further into myself, my breath coming in shallow, uneven gasps.

Hades exhaled sharply, and then, suddenly, his arms wrapped around me, crushing, desperate.

"No," he murmured against my hair, his grip ironclad, unyielding. "They don't get to have you. I won't let them take you, do you hear me?"

I trembled against him, my fists clutching his shirt as if he were the only thing keeping me tethered.

"They're coming," I whispered again, broken, lost. "I can hear them."

Hades let out a shaky breath, his hold tightening as he pressed his lips against the side of my head, his voice a low, desperate murmur.

"Then let them come." His arms around me were fierce, protective. "Let them fucking come, Red, because they'll have to go through me first."

The words hit something deep inside me.



Hades.

Hades, who was not looking at me with disgust.

Hades didn't flinch at my shadows, who didn't turn away when I unraveled at the seams.

"I am drowning, Hades," I whispered, hollow.

"I will rescue you," he did not miss a beat.

"Always." 1

"You can't," I murmured.

"Then I'll drown with you," The conviction in his voice filled me with a prickle of warmth. 8

Hades, held me like I wasn't something ruined, but something worth saving. 2

I clenched my eyes shut, pressing my forehead against his chest, listening to the rapid, uneven beat of his heart.

The ink seethed, but its grip loosened, the voices faltering.

Because for the first time, I wasn't drowning alone. 2