

CIGARETTES AND RUST

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CIGARETTES AND SCARS

The Note



Payton

IT NEVER HAPPENED.

I cram all the awful things about today into a tiny little box and slap a padlock on the latch like Mum taught me. Say nothing. Forget. But remember, nobody gives a shit because it never happened.

A perfect ring of orange embers sears the fresh joint of bad decisions that never happened. The mischievous glint in Charlie's gray eyes matches the intensity of All That Remains blasting through the speakers in her brother's Jeep Wrangler we borrowed. I have zero regrets about the grand theft auto, only because I'm jamming out next to my best friend.

Herbal clouds billow out of her nostrils, dancing like a Japanese painting. She passes me the bud, and I inhale the guitar and lyrics, branding my lungs.

Fat blue numbers blink 11:46 on the dashboard. In the distance, Flubber's long-lost twin works his rolls around the steering wheel of a rusty BMW on the dark side of the 7-Eleven we pulled into.

Mr. Clorox.

CIGARETTES AND RUST

Charlie shoves a hand in the pocket of her denim shorts and unveils the note tossed at her during freshmen orientation. I swallow the dust bunnies stuck on my tongue and read.

HOW TO GET A SLEAZY CHEERLEADER DRUNK

1. DRESS LIKE A HOE
2. PARK AT STALL THREE AT 7 ELEVEN AT 11:46
TONIGHT
3. FLASH MR CLOROX, AND POCKET YOURSELF A TREAT

-ANONYMOUS

I stretch my head out the window. Pump number 3 flickers above us with drunken-brown beetles buzzing. "Dude!" I groan and slither back into my seat.

"Who wrote the note?" I ask.

"Why? Are you salty?" She asks.

Two-point-five-seconds pass, and I lunge over the center console, snatching the note from her hands. Follicles tear from my scalp, and Charlie has her claws locked on a chunk of my hair in a tight fist.

"What's your problem?" Charlie asks.

"That note is."

Charlie's cheery lips curl inward, and she releases my hair with a forceful push. The dirty look in her gray eyes slaps me in the face. I shrivel back in my seat as she rips the note from my hands and tears it in half. "Do you wanna be part of Cheer Phi or not?" She snaps and tosses the note onto the center console with a huff. She tilts her head back, her eyes darting.

"That dude is a freak! We have out-of-high-school baby faces." I smack the back of my skull against the headrest and shove the joint between my lips. Our cat fight put out the herbs, and I sulk.

"Damnit." I run a hand through my hair.

"Relax..." She pulls out a lighter from her back pocket. "I'm flashing, you're looting."

I release a heavy sigh, but the weight in my chest overflows with cement. "I dunno."

"Stop trippin'! We have weed, and my moms at the casino with some new dude she's fuckin." She twinkles with a sly smile and one of her iconic dimples caves into her plump cheek. With a thumb and index finger, she pries the herb out of my mouth and easily relights it.

"I'm just not into this stupid initiation shit Brittni put you up to," I say.

"We are just having a little fun. Plus, she guaranteed us spots for the sorority house next semester." I take a long hit until my lungs sizzle and cough up a puff of smoke.

"Yeah, if we sleep with one of the seniors and film it," I argue.

Charlie snatches the joint, squints her eyes, and whispers, "Come on, have a little fun with me tonight."

"Dude, they have cameras in there. That shit's permanent on your record."

Smoke swirls out of Charlie's nostrils, and an imperious grin wraps around her cheeks. "All you have to do is act hot."

I roll my eyes and mutter, "Fine..." I open the passenger door and slither out. Charlie pats out the joint, scrambling right behind me.

I glance over my shoulder, and she sashays like a queen in her velvet red stilettos. Inky curls bounce up and down her back. She plops in a stick of gum and throws the wrapper behind her like she rules the world.

We strut down the parking lot, to the gum-stained sidewalk. A bell dings over our heads as we swing open the front door.

The air conditioner blasts, and I meet eyes with Mr. Clorox licking a thumb repeatedly as he counts bills. The insides of my brain melt like a nuclear reactor. Fluorescent lights beam off his greasy hair, and chunks of cottage cheese dandruff flop onto his sleeve. His fat, round, classic pizza face and beer gut, shout pervert living in grandma's basement, and I bet he eats expired frozen dinners.

It—he, smirks, checking us out. Sweat curls up between my toes, meeting the stench of cat piss seeping off him. His eyeballs look like they are about to burst out of their sockets. Those eyes crawl up our tan legs to our tight high-rise denim shorts and matching Korn crop tops.

“Hey, you!” Charlie flips her long locks over her shoulder and smiles at him. She leans against the counter, and the minty gum swirls around her tongue. Then she pulls up her top as planned.

“Whoops.” She flutters long lashes and slides him a crumbled bill stashed in her cleavage. “Can I get twenty on three?”

A wide grin molds across his face. It takes every ounce of my being not to choke on the vomit dancing in my throat. He's a sewer-pipe-break kinda stench. Someone needs to invent the bleach bucket challenge and pour it all over him.

“I'm gonna grab a drink.” I elbow Charlie in the arm. She winks. I turn on a heel and stroll down the aisle with racks full of candy bars and make a sharp right to the fridges in the back. My heart acts like a bird trapped in a cage. I scrunch my fingers against the strap of my purse and open the fridge. Glass clinks as I weasel out a thick bottle of Fleischman's vodka. Four liters of pure Satanism.

I gaze up at the mirrors above, and a cold shudder crawls down my back to the bones of my toes. The front entrance dings, and two old,

gangly men arguing stagger in. The fridge seals shut, and I shove the bottle in my purse, zip it, and find the biggest jug of orange juice.

I'm sweating when I reach the register. The jug thuds on the counter, and I pat down my pockets, searching for cash I swear I shoved in there. Charlie nudges a hip into mine, paws in her purse, and pulls out another twenty.

"Can I get two packs of Camel Blues as well?" Charlie tilts her head and smacks gum. Mr. Clorox doesn't say a word. He flashes us an unnerving smile while he pets the wall, knocking down several packs of cigarettes.

"Oops, uh, sorry," he says.

Charlie picks up a little pack of Big Red gum from the impulse-buy row of random merchandise on the counter. "And these too..." she gnaws at her bottom lip. Sweat drips down Mr. Clorox's forehead, which he wipes with the back of his fat hand. Spotting the dude's raging boner poking out from his khakis strangles me from within

"See ya later." Charlie wiggles fingers and shoves pennies and cigs into her purse.

We sashay out of the store and stop the facade the moment we link arms. Our heels clank against the concrete, racing to the jeep.

"Did you catch the sight of his boner?" Charlie giggles, popping open the gas cap.

"Oh god!" I gag. "I think I threw up a bit."

"Oh, shut up," she slithers in the gas nozzle to fill the tank and leaps into the front seat as we wait.

"Have some gum, bitch." She tosses me a piece.

"How did you keep a straight face the entire time?" I ask.

"I'm not sure, but all I think when I see him is, where's the Clorox when you need it?" Her cheeks burn, and she combusts into laughter and mouths a hand over her lips, until tears pool in her eyes. "I'm

going to hell!" She wipes them away with care. "He smells sooo-bad!"

I unzip my purse a little, and Charlie purrs, pawing inside. "Tonight is gonna be lit!"

"Only if I'm not holding your hair later," I say. Charlie punches me in the shoulder as I close the passenger door.

She slips out and finishes filling the tank. I flip open the glove department, where I stash a music collection in a black CD case for our late-night adventures. Charlie talks non-stop-shit when I pulled this sucker out. I ignore all the yada about how it's easier to store music on phones and connect it to the car, but this seems more authentic. I love the smooth, reflective metallic color I stain with my fingertips when I slide it out of the case.

Once Charlie leaps into the Jeep, the perfect mix is wedged between two fingers. We peel out, and I slide the CD in.

Ryder

I'M HIGH AS A KITE, and like nothing, I swing a leaky trash bag into the rusty dumpster, reeking of bullshit and rotten pizza. It's one in the morning, and I've delivered wrong orders left and right to every house in a shitty Honda that Pizzeria forces me to drive.

The kitchen staff is tripping on acid and incapable of putting together a simple pepperoni pizza without fucking something up. I light up the remainder of a joint, then pull out a handful of tips I have.

After six hours, forty-five minutes, and three seconds of being a slave, I've collected four Lincolns and half a dozen quarters. This always has to happen to me. A chuckle creeps under my breath. I slide to the backside of the dumpster, inhaling a deep hit and let the weed settle into my lungs until they catch fire.

"Ryder! Where the fuck are you?" Karen hollers outside the kitchen door. I blow out a puff of smoke, aiming at the grease trap on the ground. My stomach roils. Karen, the manager, takes every chance to rip me apart.

It's impossible for her to shut up for five seconds. Every other word is about our shitty night and the receipt machine spitting out another order for her to mess up. The kitchen staff is mentally retarded. I'm waiting for her to pinch my last nerve so I can tell her to take a hard look at herself in the mirror. This bitch doesn't realize every thirty minutes she needs fifteen to take a smoke break.

"I swear to God that if one more thing goes south, I'm fucking quitting. Who's supposed to wash the dishes?" She screams loud enough to rupture an eardrum. A distance crash bangs around. "Someone get in here and fucking clean these."

I'm waiting for her to crack. One of these days, she'll lose her cool, and when it happens, I'll flip out my phone and record every other word spilling out of her mouth about how her life is one big cluster-fuck.

"Get your ass in here before I write you up!"

God, I've never hated someone so much. Karen is nails to a chalkboard.

"I could be a nurse, but here I am babysitting lazy ass people!" My capillaries are about to burst. Did she really pull that nursing license bullshit again? She's forty and somehow trapped at a run-down pizza joint. A nurse works at a hospital, not lathering tomato sauce on piss-smelling dough. It doesn't help the kitchen looks like a homeless man's tent. I take another drag and hold it in for as long as possible before releasing a cloud of skunk.

"I see you smoking behind that dumpster. Get the fuck back in here!"

I step out, staring at her fat fingers clenching her hips. I think Karen's the punchline in a really bad joke called her life. It's not my fault she's caught in the endless cycle of a corporation, blinding her with an eight-cent raise every six months like it's a plate of gold. I bet she lies on top of a bed full of used needles when she goes home.

"What the hell is taking you so long?" Karen pushes back greasy blue strands of hair. I toss the joint to the ground and smear the ashes with a foot. "Who said you could have a smoke break?" She grumbles.

"I did," I say, and weasel past her.

"And I didn't. It doesn't take half an hour to throw out the trash." I head to the storage racks away from her complaining, rolling out several large black bags. "People here would like to leave on time, and you're eating the clock."

I raise an eyebrow and swallow the laugh creeping up my throat. She's unhinged. I can't remove my eyes from the single black hair curling around the mole on her nose. When she realizes I'm not responding, she storms off and disappears into the office.

Jared, my teammate, and best friend, walks in through the back door and tosses his visor on the cardboard soda syrup boxes. A pair of scraped-up rollerblades is fisted in his free hand. Lucky him, he works across the street at a drive-in, where he skates around, delivering burgers and foot-longs to cars.

"What a shitshow." He runs a hand through his hair and groans. White smears of what I assume to be ice cream covers his uniform.

"How were the New York Dogs tonight?" I ask.

"Shit, it's all about those cones. But you know me, I hate working during half-price-shakes and on a Saturday night." Jared smacks the back of his hand onto my chest.

"While you're sucking dicks, these dumbasses didn't even put barbecue sauce on the wings." I chuckle and relive the nightmare playing

on repeat, but it's always chaos here. "Twenty in tips, and I'm making six an hour."

"I managed one-fifty tonight."

"Shut up, man! All my orders were fucked. I had cooked dough. No sauce, no toppings, and it wasn't even cut. They just put fucking bread and banana peppers in the box, dude."

Jared leans into the metal racks and starts laughing. "Just come work with me. Girls like guys on skates."

"No, I ain't gonna work there with that prick."

"Brody? You're still not over him screwing your girl."

"Fuck him, and fuck her."

"Dude, the ladies come here just because they have the chance to get Brody as their car-hop. I get numbers all the time. I got two this week, and one of them might wanna swing by tonight." He bites his bottom lip.

The ugly truth is any girl worth getting with has already hooked up with Brody. I change the subject, refusing to let the thoughts of Brittnei cheating on me slide back into my brain.

"I shouldn't have picked up the phone when Karen called. The moment I got here and delivered my first pizza, Charlie stole my Jeep."

"That's why you don't pick up the phone. Her name is literally Karen."

"Dude... I need the money."

"Are the rents giving you shit?" He asks.

I take off my cap and run a hand over my hair as I lean into the storage rack. "I came home this summer to my dad's shit gone. Just fucking gone, and Charlie doesn't know when to quit. I can't wait to move back in with the fraternity."

"Damn... he really left," Jared says.

I stare at my greasy black Converse and say, "Yep, and for some bitch young enough to be my sister."

"That sounds like some old-school playboy shit."

"Do you know where Charlie went?" I ask.

"I overheard through the grapevine about a house party on the south side of town. You have to bring booze to get in."

"I get she's pissed off at dad, but every other weekend she's into something else. I'm sick of covering her ass."

"You're her brother, not her parent. You don't need to always protect her."

"With mom out gambling and dad nutting in some random bitch, clearly no one else is going to do it."

"I'm guessing you need a ride, then?" Jared asks.

"You read my mind."

"Well, on the lighter side of things, what do you want to bet Karen hasn't seen a dick in ten years?" He teases and wiggles his eyebrows.

"Her boyfriend probably only takes her from behind."

"Wait, she's got a boyfriend?" Jared asks with a chuckle.

We both burst into laughter, but it's cut short when Karen opens her mouth again. "Hey dipshit, get your ass in here so I can count your deposit." She peeks out of the office doorway, using her index finger to bait me in. Jared pretends to gag, and I snicker as I trudge back to her while he sneaks out the backdoor like he never existed. Karen collects my money, and I'm clocking out seconds later.

I walk along the sidewalk with orange streetlights guiding me to Jared's hand-me-down Civic, sitting alone in the parking lot. The neon Sonic sign lights up the lot, while the P in Pizzeria flickers.

I crumble into the passenger seat with the door hanging open and the dashboard blaring its annoying beep. There are over a dozen notifications on my phone. I scroll through the thirsty girls, sending pic-

tures of their cleavage and undies, until I find the story my sister posted on Snap.

“Fuuccck.” My head falls to the back of the headrest. Let’s play stupid games and win stupid prizes. Freshmen and little sisters mixed have a gift of pushing limits, and Charlie is the queen of them. I’m positive I’ve witnessed the devil himself pocket her soul in a to-go bag.

A video post shows Charlie screaming along to the lyrics of a heavy metal song in the Jeep, my Jeep... that she stole.

She’s taking pictures with Payton and the vodka they magically got at a gas station, and since they’re thieves, I bet they stole that, too. The cherry on top is her flaunting cigarettes like candy.

What’s funny is that before Mom left, they had a screaming match about her not being responsible enough to move into the dorms. Charlie refuses to follow rules when she didn’t create them. She surrounds herself with stupid ideas and bad decisions.

Mom’s gonna kill me if she finds out I took an extra shift instead of babysitting Charlie while she drowns her sorrows at the casino, sucking some random dude’s dick to fill the void dad left her with. I bite down hard on my cheek, telling myself this is an easy cover-up. I’ll go there, throw them over my shoulder, and stuff them in the back seat. We all go home. We say nothing. It was a crazy horror movie marathon night and sleepover. That was it, and that’s what we will call it.

Knowing Payton, she is never three feet apart from Charlie, and she also sucks at turning off her location. I don’t define myself as a stalker, but I can watch her every move by simply zooming in and out on my maps and finding her avatar. It pins her down in Stockton, where the theme song is police sirens. I text Payton, asking where she is, knowing she’ll leave me on read, and if she responds, she’ll lie to cover Charlie’s ass like always.

Careful What You Wish For



Payton

MOST EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRLS roll down windows and blare WAP by Nicki Minaj. Speaking of the devil, a rusty Cadillac blasts the same trash pulling up next to us. We're trapped on the white line at a red light. I lean over to crank up the volume, and Charlie slaps my hand.

"No, you need to behave!" She wags a finger at me. I don't listen and turn that bad boy on full blast. "Hey! Hey!" She yells as I crawl over her lap, I roll down the window old school style, then glue myself back to the passenger seat, pleased with my choices.

A Latina girl with acrylic nails sharp like talons puckers her lips. She hollers over and points a finger at us. "What're you listening to, girl?"

A black girl leans out the rear window, tossing lengthy red braids behind her. "Girl, I like what you playinn!"

Charlie's jaw drops and mouths O.M.G. She glances over with her goofy, embarrassed smile.

"Ask her!" She points a thumb at me. Charlie spins a one-eighty, snarling at me.

I lean over. "Emo's not dead, bitches!" I wave my horns at her.

"Every time you play this, I gotta sing along!"

"That means it's good!" I unbuckle, climb over the armrest, and weasel under Charlie's arms to poke my head out the window rapping Bleed it Out by Linkin Park.

"I need some of that white-girl music in my life!" One chick in the other car lip-sings along with us.

The light flashes green, and Charlie slams on the gas pedal. We shriek as she floors it. My head still sticks out the window receiving a gust of wind to my face. I slither back into the passenger's seat, and we are laughing so hard my stomach starts to hurt. Tangled hair thrashes its wrath at my cheeks, and the spring air fills my lungs.

We ride side-by-side through the next several intersections, matching each other's speed. We turn in opposite directions when we reach the freeway. Streetlights smear the sky and ten minutes later, we exit and park in the neighborhood with cars lining the street.

Music thumps and cheers drift out from the backyard. I stare out through the windows at the flashing lights inside. People pour into the front door. With the looks of it, this place is begging for cops sniffing around for something to do.

I spot several shadows scampering down the sidewalk. The vile plastic Barbie emerging is nonetheless Brittni James, Gray Canyon University's cheer captain, and the queen bee of Cheer Phi. Car keys twirl in her hand, and the yellow Ferrari Daddy bought. It beep-beeps like bling-bling when it locks.

If I lived in a cartoon, this is when a magical hammer appears, and I'll bang-bang-oops-it apart. A few mental punches to the air and the feral urge to declare nuclear war on Brittni's existence eats at my flesh.

Perfect blonde hair whips back and forth. Her two pack members strut right behind her, Autumn with her red locks twisted in some braid, green eyes, and God's hidden gift of the biggest rack. Then there's Naomi, the annoying dumb blonde with a classic bob cut. They walk up the porch steps and disappear into the house party.

"Did you grab any soda?" Charlie asks and paws into my purse hiding under my feet. "I wasn't paying attention."

"Sorry, I only snagged orange juice." I pick up the purse and rest on my lap to showcase the jug of sunshine and vodka.

"Good enough."

Charlie grabs a cigarette and scrounges through the center console for a lighter, then pulls out her cell crammed in her pocket.

"Take a video of me lighting this." The phone tumbles to my hands. Charlie's charcoal grey eyes glimmer as they stare into the lens. She brings the cigarette to her mouth and the flicker of the lighter crackles. Once done, she snatches the phone, inhaling the sweet taste of nicotine.

"Damn, I look good." Charlie releases a wave of smoke. I lean against her shoulder and watch as she makes some edits and posts it to Instagram without care.

More than half of our graduating class follows her. Immediately, the notifications pool in. At the top of her stories, I see a message icon from Brody Thomas and my stomach falls. It's the asshole ex-boy friend Charlie dumped and blocked after last night's screaming match.

I sat on her bed and stared at his name displayed on her screen, calling her excessively. He left her atrocious voicemails and hollered insane expletives at her. When she finally answered, I listened to an incomprehensible argument about meaningless nothing and dumb shit for almost an hour.

It's only been a three-month relationship, but it's the longest Charlie's ever been in. It only took the dude one week before he slept with Brittini, and that was a dumpster fire within itself. The dude throws more red flags than a referee, and she's oblivious. Brody's a leach. He refuses to drop the subject of us being best friends, and he's done everything to tear us apart. I lost any respect for him when he called me a closet dyke, slash, trailer bitch. The feral urge to floor it on a lawnmower and cackle as I maul the hideous blonde bad boy comb-over right off his skull never felt more inviting.

I clear my throat, restraining the ache of cussing her out because I watched her click the block button. Now I'm staring at his profile picture, and it burns a hole in my chest because at some point today the temptation to unblock him won.

A twenty-dollar bill, an unplanned sleepover, and a trip to the mall to take millions of pictures of us modeling overly expensive clothes used to equal us. Recently, it's not the same. Charlie's dad bounced, and this summer was riddled with smoking pot twenty-four-seven, and screaming matches with either her mom or Brody.

Charlie and I spent ten years together in elementary, middle school, and more. We're two girls chilling, watching horror movies, binge-eating pizza, and I'm somehow the biggest threat to their relation-shit. He's led me and Charlie into fights all summer. It's left me rather numb.

Brody will deny his true bullshit colors for all eternity. Mine, they bleed out, watching my best friend walk out of my life at a painfully slow rate. Charlie opens her inbox, and his picture flashes at the top with numerous unread messages. He wrote to her less than an hour ago. She scrolls through them with kisses and hearts. She responds fast before I can read any other context.

Charlie pulls down the sun visor and gushes in the mirror. "Are you ready to get trashed tonight?" She asks.

I roll my eyes and stare out into orange streetlights with bugs buzzing about. She knows damn well I eyeballed her phone, and she casually pretends nothing happened.

"I'm excited for Brittni and her cheerleading to die from alcohol poisoning. Goodbye bitches, I'll see ya'll in therapy." The words slither off my tongue like a venomous snake.

Charlie coughs up a laugh. "They aren't that bad."

"Because they actually want to be friends with you."

Charlie takes in a drag of her cigarette. "If you lightened up and quit the emo façade, they might like you. Once they get their bottle of vodka, we're in."

"They're just using you. At some point, they're going to use the theft as leverage and get you to do other shit for them."

"Chill with your conspiracies. We're just having a little fun." She reaches for the purse, and paws the alcohol out, not wasting a second to twist off the cap. She dips her head up, and a long swig sends her nose curling.

"Holy shit, that's nasty." The vodka sloshes, and she hands it to me by the neck. "Drink and lighten the fuck up. I'm not in the mood for your emotions tonight."

With two fingers, I plug my nose and take a shot. I gag at its horrific taste burning down my throat. My phone buzzes, and a little red crab pops up on the screen. I swipe open and see I have an unread message.

Crab: Hey cutie, do you steal jeeps often?

Payton: Not my fault you weren't looking.

Crab: Where the hell are you two?

Payton: The usual, robbing banks and other shenanigans.

Crab: Real funny.

Payton: Trouve-Moi

Crab: I always do.

I turn my attention back to Charlie, knowing she wants to head in. The contents in my stomach turn, and I'm not ready to socialize with the worst possible people on the planet.

"You flirtin' with my brother again?" Charlie asks with her lips in a flat, straight line.

I roll my eyes and tighten my grip on my purse, then say, "You know it's not like that."

"Whatever, you got the hots for him."

"Yeah sure, I have hots for the running back that has girls begging at his feet for his dick. Plus, I don't feel like being murdered."

"You're right, I'd nail you to a fucking cross."

"Ha ha, real funny," I say

"Okay, let's do this shit." Charlie opens the door and leaps out.

Ryder

THE AIR IS HEAVY with the scent of gasoline when Jared parks at the 7-Eleven. The car idles at stall three, and any moral reasoning washes away. Making bad decisions is imminent. An inverted crucifix runs its mark over my forehead for all the times I stole Hennessy from this fatso working the midnight shift.

"Keep it cool, man," Jared says as he steps out. There's no way to be chill. I'm walking with a sweltering fever, and its pure rage over my sister's naïve tendencies.

I slam the passenger door and raise my chin to Jared. "Let's go wish this fucker a happy birthday." With sweaty palms at my sides, we both head down the sidewalk. I burst through the front door like one of those lunatics from stupid talk shows about to manhandle the cameraman and toss him to the crowd.

"I'm gonna get some beer," Jared says, disappearing through the shelves filled with snacks and candies.

"Can I help you?" Fatso asks and raids my nostrils with his dumpster fire odor. Sweat drips down his face and saturates his armpits. Someone must have waterboarded him in a grease trap because his hair swims in oil.

"Yeah, I'm looking for my sister." I pull out my phone to show a video of Charlie and her friend with a bottle of vodka in their hands.

"Oh, them." He raises an eyebrow. A grin exposes his yellow teeth, with the rot caked between the gaps.

"When?"

"A few hours ago. They got some cigarettes and left."

"You know that's some bullshit." An adrenaline-fueled pulse pounds in my ears.

"It is what it is, man." He shrugs, and I'm met with the decay bleeding out of his breath. I'm about to unleash a nuclear warhead and blow his teeth right out of his mouth.

"You know damn well why they were in here."

"And I don't know what the hell you're talking about." The lie rolls off his tongue, and he doesn't even flinch.

I throttle over the counter. Both of my hands curl around the collar of his shirt as I drag the fatty across the counter, knocking over boxes of lighters and chargers to the floor.

"You sick fuck! Stop lying to me! Tell me the fucking truth. Why was my sister in here?"

"Get your hands off me! I'll call the cops!" His eyes lock onto mine.

"How about I call them and tell them about the underage girls who flash you for booze? Let's see how that conversation goes!"

"Chill man, I don't think you can take on a four hundred pound man!" Jared yanks on my shoulder and pulls me off him. I step back with a hand raked in my hair. I'm on the verge of grabbing one of the

candy racks and pitching it through the door to get the point across. I'm not playing around. If I need to, his face will eat concrete.

"I'm three-ten, jackass."

"And you're still fat as fuck!" I curse.

"I just want a case of beer." Jared places the cheapest twenty-four pack on the counter. "Go fucking grab some Hennessy."

I straighten my jersey and head to the fridges in the back, blinded by the instinctual habit of opening the fridge and pulling out the liter bottle of my guilty pleasure.

"You better show me some fucking ID." Fatso straightens his shirt and rolls his shoulders. Jared reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his wallet. "You too." He snarls and points a finger. I roll my bottom lip under my front teeth.

"Here." I hand it over, and hell rages through my veins. He stares real carefully at it.

"Sebastian Ryder Henderson. Are you sure this is you?" He wedges the card in between his fingers and sniffs it. "It smells fake."

"I'm twenty-one."

"Well, it's thirty. Now pay up, buttercup." He smiles again. I can picture the green fumes coming out of his mouth.

"Why do you always pick out the nasty shit?" I ask Jared, staring at his twenty-four pack.

"It's for beer pong." He pulls out the accumulation of dollar bills. The dude is rich like a stripper and tosses money on the counter.

Fatso opens the register and smooths out the crisp edges of each bill with his tiny fat fingers, then says, "I shouldn't even have to tell you why your sister and her slutty friend were in here. It looks like you already know... They are playing one of your stupid sorority games."

"At some point, you'd think you'd have some decency to tell them to stop," I say.

"Every year, there's a handful of sorority girls parading in here right before the fall semester starts. They choose to flash me to get tipsy. It looks like your sister is the one showing off her tits this year."

The coolers hum in the silence.

"Let's go." Jared slides the beer off the counter. I snatch the bottle of liquor, and the door dings as we leave.

"I told you to stay cool, man." Our feet crunch under the gravel, and we reach the car.

"It's my sister." I open the passenger door and slide in. I don't waste a second before yanking the clobber covering off the bottle and taking a shot. It's creamy, with a hint of vanilla. It's smooth as it runs down my throat. It'll numb the demon inside me for the time being.

"Charlie doesn't need her hand held. You're her brother, not her dad."

I scoff and wedge the bottle between my thighs as I buckle. He tosses the case of beer in the back. "Sometimes I wish she wasn't fucking born." I take another shot and twist the cap back on.

"Is that you talking, or the boiled pennies you're drinking?"

"It's better than your diluted piss water."

"Be careful what you wish for, dude."

"Tell that to her." I laugh and pull out a joint stowed in my pocket. "She wished Dad would leave, and look who isn't around." I find a lighter in his glove box and ignite it.

"It's not your job to replace him," Jared says with his brows furrowed.

"I fucking know!" I lean against the headrest, taking in a long drag. The windows roll down as we pull out of the parking lot and head to the freeway. We are silent. All I do is stare at the white lines and dullness of the streetlights. Sweet Emotion plays on the stereo. God is messing with my head. Dad blasted Aerosmith, smoking his cigarettes and drumming his hands on the steering wheel.

We haven't spoken two words since he packed and left. The pictures of him online are enough to spare me any guilt about what I'd like to say. Ms. Blonde Bitch, with a lip injection addiction and big tits, can dig his grave and bury him for all I care. I'll dream for my sister not to be a magnet for trouble, but no one else prohibits her from making stupid choices other than me.

"Sorry man." Jared's eyes glue to the road.

"It's chill."

"I get it. You wanna protect her, but..." He pauses and curls his bottom lip.

"It's her choice," I say.

Dirty Roulette



Payton

“SWEET! My bitch has something to drink!” Naomi squeals and snatches the vodka from my grip before I close the screen door to the patio deck.

“Wait, have you seen Brody?” Naomi brings a hand up to her lips in a gasp, but it doesn’t hide the lipstick smeared on her snaggle tooth.

“No, and I don’t care to. I’m here for the beer pong.” I lift my chin toward guys laughing in a huddled group around a table.

“Oh, my god! A little birdie told me about the breakup. Spill the tea.” She says in a whisper and leans into my personal bubble.

“I’m not spilling anything.”

“Come on!” She flutters her cakey eyelashes. “Brody called me. I had to console him if you know what I mean.” Pure alcohol breath greets my face better than morning gum disease.

“Ha, no.”

“That poor guy. He was so heartbroken.” Naomi’s face tells me she actually believes the sob story he made up.

“Pitty.”

Another word from her might make me hurl. I hit her with the bitchiest eyes I possess. When she realizes I refuse to entertain the

subject, she groans and twists off the bottle cap before dipping her head back to take a shot. "You should have grabbed blue raspberry."

The feral urge to rip the bottle from her fingertips and scream, thrashes in my ribcage. I'm the one who stole it in the first place, and I didn't steal it solely for her to poison her liver. Brittni emerges into view amid jocks hanging around the beer pong table. Guys trash-talk to one another as she spins an orange ball in her fingers.

"I swear, if you lose to a chick, your nickname is going to be little bitch!" A guy shouts.

"Shut up, man!"

Brittni tosses the ball. It swirls across the rim of a plastic cup and plops in. Cheers roar behind her as she throws up two peace signs for her victory. The other player takes out the ball, shaking off the foam before downing the contents in the cup.

"Brittni!" Naomi squeals, holding up the bottle of glory.

She struts over, and Autumn magically appears like someone rubbed a genie bottle. Brittni gasps and flips her blonde Barbie hair. "No way. I didn't think you'd actually have the balls to do it." Her voice is sultry and pretty. I have no other option but to hate it.

"Maybe Payton is cheerleading material for GCU." Autumn slurs out.

"Don't flatter her just yet. She still has to play the game." Brittni wiggles her fingers in a give me motion. Naomi passes the liquor to her. Each one of them takes turns downing a shot.

One of them caught my flutter-bitch-eye-roll because someone croaks out. "Trash!" Then all three spit out alcohol in idiotic laughter.

I push through them and head back to the sliding glass door. Charlie digs for treasure in a gigantic bag of chips. She's dipping her head back in a laugh as she talks to a guy with lengthy dark hair. Metal-head vibes are written all over his forehead. Both of his arms are a canvas painted with a plethora of tattoos. The baggy shirt, skinny

jeans, and a pair of Vans speak for themselves. The guy snatches the chip bag, throwing a handful of crumbs into her face.

I walk back inside the house, booming with music. "Oh shit, here comes another one of those bitchy cheerleaders."

"Shut up, Noah! We aren't all bitchy." Charlie pushes him playfully on the shoulder.

"Who knows, maybe I listen to awful screaming music and worship the devil too," I add.

"So, you're not a shallow, ditzzy cheerleader who only cares about makeup and Taylor Swift bubblegum pop music."

"Charlie, do you know this guy?" I can feel it in my face. I'm giving this guy a dirty look. Before Charlie responds, Brittni and her gang pour into the house. I've been here for five minutes and wanna crawl back into a hole. It never takes long for the world to prove that I don't belong here.

"Charlie, are you ready to play dirty roulette?" Brittni smirks with the bottle in her hand. Autumn stands beside her with a red cup, giggling at nothing in particular, and wobbling like her legs are made of jelly.

"We found a handful of hotties who wanna play?" Autumn says with a wink, then hiccups. "And you can bring the bad boy with you... He's cute."

She takes a swig of her drink as Brittni says, "Oh my god, you brought a guy for Trash. How sweet of you." Autumn chokes and spits out her drink, snorting like a pig. "Don't be such a bitch."

"Well, someone's gotta take on the responsibility." Brittni giggles.

Where is Norman Bates with the fattest knife in the world when you need him? If he doesn't show up, I'll have no other choice but to gouge her eyes out.

Noah dips his hands into his front pockets. "Is this a drinking game?"

"Come upstairs and you'll find out." Brittnei uses an index finger baiting us to follow.

"I'm in. Let me grab a friend and I'll be right up." He walks out to the patio deck. "Hey, Rafa!" He lifts a chin and disappears into the mob.

Charlie snatches my hand. "Let's go!" I spin my head around, fighting against her pull as we weave through the tide of partygoers.

I drag my feet. "I dunno about this."

"Stop acting like a wet blanket and lighten up."

We climb up the crowded stairs and down a dim hallway to a bedroom at the end. Other girls burst through the door. When we step in, the devil's eyes meet mine.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Brody says. He stands in the corner like an appetizer waiting to be licked. In my reality, he's a spoiled, hard-boiled egg, fermented to perfection and I want to throw up. I can't toss his rot into the trash or escape the jacked bodybuilder features that can snap my neck in half like a twig.

I lean into Charlie's ear and whisper, "Why the fuck is he here?"

"Let's just go sit down."

"You broke up with him."

"We aren't doing this right now." Like a magnet, Charlie follows Brittnei, Autumn, and Naomi and sits down on the grey shag rug in front of the unmade bed. It smells like sweaty socks, spilled beer, and a cloying mix of aftershave. Strung lights shed colors across the wall and discarded red plastic cups lay everywhere.

I don't recognize any of the guys in the room, but my sixth sense tells me they are part of the football team. The guys elbow one another, pointing at us like we are a bag of chips on a snack rack.

Charlie eyeballs me, and mouths, "Get over here." She pats her palm, demanding me to sit next to her. I pull off the fabulous, tilt my

head back, groan move, and weasel over with my five-year-old tantrum.

"Hey," says one of the guys. He's got an alpaca haircut and I can't see his face with the curly hair hanging over his pointed nose.

"Mm, hey white chocolate..." Snoop Dog's long-lost son sits at the edge of the bed with his best friend, a neon bong. Others look like typical Brads and Chads. It won't surprise me if there is a Kyle in here too. My mouth becomes dry and my heartbeat greets my eardrums.

Noah and another guy several inches shorter than him stumble in. He's basically his twin, but with a man-bun and a punk wife-beater showing off his chest tattoos. They sit down on the carpet. A few other girls pop in and there are over a dozen of us.

"Listen up!" Brody throws several packs of cards to the center of the circle with the bottle of vodka I stole.

"We're playing Dirty Roulette. So, for you virgins out there, I'll make this easy for you. It's poker with a twist. Each time you have the lowest value in hand, you take a shot and spin the bottle. Whoever it lands on can either ask you to strip down or kiss you. Once you are down to your last garment, whoever you land on... well..." He laughs as he runs a hand underneath his chin.

"You're fucking and filming it. Especially, you freshmen joining." Brody looks directly at me as he says it. "I suggest you play your cards carefully." The smile doesn't wash off his face, but I wish someone would.

I cross my legs, watching any rationality we possess circle down the drain. Snoop Dog lights up the bong and takes several long drags before handing it to me. "Have a hit and chill," he whispers in my ears. "Either way, you're having sex with someone."

The water bubbles as I draw in a hit. A cloud of smoke pours out of my nostrils and I pass it to Charlie.

"It would've been nice to know I'm losing my virginity, tonight," I say.

"You either want to be in Cheer Phi or you don't." She takes a long drag and is gifted with an aggressive cough.

"I'll lose my scholarship."

"That makes two of us, and you're not the only virgin."

I want to fill my head with lead, but I numb it with another drag. The buzz doesn't take long to seep back into my bloodstream. My nervous system is going haywire as Brody shuffles the cards.

"Anyone wanna hit?" Charlie passes the bong. Brody finds a seat between Brittini and the first round of cards are dealt.

In the first few rounds, I'm not too messy. The bottle spins and girls lean across the circle to kiss one of the football players. When a guy lands on another dude, they gag, laugh about how that's not how they play, and immediately tell them to strip.

I study the cards in my hand and fumble at the corner. A chill crawls down my spine, staring at my two-of-a-kind. It's useless. I'm bound to lose this round and so far, anytime I have to spin, no one wants a kiss.

The shoes and socks are gone, and the thought of taking off my shirt makes my palms sweat. Unlucky is my middle name, and I didn't get the memo to put on layers like some girls did.

I hear the roar of the party downstairs and slick skin slapping in the other room next to us as two people lost in ten minutes. They made noises of pure animal pleasure.

"Payton!" Noah calls my name.

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Lay down your hand." He places a flush in front of me. His square jaw was visibly tense. He comes off rugged. A thick lump rests in my throat and I stare at him hard. I can't pull my eyes off the heart-shaped tattoo on his index finger as he rubs a hand over the faint dip

between his chin. When I meet his dark brown eyes, he stares at me intensely, and I catch the tiny hint of Asian descent.

I suck in a labored breath through my teeth and check my hand. "Well, damn." A pair of queens is tossed on top of his winning cards. I reach for the vodka bottle, twist the cap off, and take a shot. If I want to get through this game, I need to be sloppy drunk and maybe this nightmare will be a blur tomorrow.

"Spin it. Maybe someone will spare you a kiss instead," Brody adds as I swirl the bottle.

My heart attempts to break out of my ribcage as the bottle slows down to a stop, landing on Satan himself. A hand covers his mouth, concealing a smile as he laughs. "I rather fuck you, so take something off," Brody says.

"In your dreams!" Charlie snatches cards in the pile and chucks them in his face.

"You had your chance!" Brody shoots back at her. "I can fuck whoever I want now."

"Dickhead!"

"I can't wait for emo girl to lose again. I'll make you take that black bra off, babycakes." The Alpaca licks his lips as he eyeballs me up and down. All the Brads and Chads lean into each other's ears and whisper.

"Well damn, if you landed on me I would have kissed you." Noah's friend sneers with the other guys in the room.

"Fuck them. Take it off and show them what they are missing." Charlie curls her lip under her teeth. Noah's friend shoots a roguish grin, and temptation is written all over his face.

I gulp down the tightness lodged in my throat and slither out of my crop top. "My best friend is gorgeous!" Charlie encourages me.

I doubt I'm pretty, but I'm positive I can't play poker worth my life. Losing seems to be written on my forehead until Brittini folds several

rounds. Plenty of spit-swapping sessions occur, but now she is down to her matching cherry red lingerie. She lands on Brody a few times, and he makes out with her. He checks to see Charlie's reaction the moment after. Brittni is nothing more than a platter of barbecue ribs he wants to tear into.

"I already made you squeal earlier. You really want round two, don't you, baby? Why don't you take off that bra?" Brody tells Brittni as she unclips it. She holds a bra between her fingers before doing the I'm-cute-head-tilt. A grin greets her pink lips, and the bra falls to the floor. Great, Brittni's got great boobs too. I stare at the ceiling or anything else other than her nipples.

Charlie loses a few rounds and tends to land on Noah. When he throws down a completely shitty hand, he takes a swig and spins. It points to Charlie. She chuckles, batting her long lashes at him, and says, "Cheater. You're doing this on purpose."

"What will it be?" Noah asks. Charlie grabs a fistful of his hair, and plunges her tongue down his throat. Brody's face molds into disgust. They are both in a nuclear war, messing with each other's heads. Charlie pulls away and stares Noah dead in the eyes, and I overhear him whisper. "You better land on me."

One by one, garments fall to the floor with each hand we play. Naomi folds, lands on Snoop Dog, and they leave.

Brittni spins on a Chad stripped down to his tight boxer briefs. His pecks glisten in sweat, and he's pure muscle, like the perfect pool boy. They disappear together.

On the king-size bed behind us, Autumn makes out with some dude with a six-pack. My stomach plummets to the floor when the headboard thumps against the wall, and the room turns into a porn-hub. Brody whips out his phone and starts filming for several minutes until they reach a climax.

My whole body convulses as I'm still down to my matching black bra and panties. I'm dizzy and at any second I could vomit on myself. Drumsticks bang on my heart at the realization I lost this round.

Another shot burns down my throat and I spin the bottle. It lands on Brody. "Fuck!" I swear the devil is out to get me.

"Take it off, so I can put you on this bed next." He laughs.

All I want to do is find an excuse to race out the door. If I lose again, I'm going to have to walk out of the room in shame with some random dude and sleep with him. With my luck, it will land on Brody, and I will straight up spit in his face if it does. I inhale a deep breath and fumble at the strap, unclasping it.

Noah bites the edge of his lips as my breasts spill out. Brody continues to smirk. Then Charlie loses the next round and drops her bra on the floor like nothing.

"You're fucking hot!" Brody whips out his phone, and the flash incinerates my retinas.

"Too bad you're not going to touch them." Charlie sticks a tongue out at him. I curl my legs up to my chest to cover up.

Seven shots deep and my fingers tingle, my head swims in a lake of intoxication. It's bad enough I'm craving another hit of pot. If I have a bit more to smoke, I'll see sounds and hear colors.

The hundredth hand is dealt and Charlie flat-out folds, with no value to her cards. She didn't try, and I think she wanted to spin the bottle one last time to get this over with.

Her eyes don't leave Noah's as she takes a shot and twirls the satanic bottle. It spins and the look on Brody's face turns sour when it slows down and misses him by an inch. It points directly at Noah.

"Well damn..." Charlie dips her head to one side. "I guess I got lucky."

Noah pushes his hair back, his cheeks flushing red, as he nervously chuckles. "I think it's the other way around."

Charlie crawls over the carpet to Noah, and she runs a hand across his thigh, kisses him on the cheek, and moves to his lips.

"Let's get out of here." They are both consumed with idiotic laughter. Noah clearly has no idea what to do with himself and neither do I.

Brody's nostrils flare, his fists curling. "Fucking Bitch," I watch his lips mouth the words as they leave. Out of all the players I've seen walk out, they are the most excited.

"Well, we always save the best for last, don't we, emo girl?" Brody grins and it dawns on me. I'm the last girl with thirsty dudes waiting to see if they can claim me for their prize.

Ryder

IF HELL EXISTS, it's the little voice telling my sister how great of an idea it was to attend this mad house. Jared and I reach the front door. It's nearly two in the morning and this place hasn't let up. We walk in and some dude sways over, holding his baggy sweatpants. This meathead is Slim Shady's donated sperm that needs momma to purchase him a belt. They'll fall to his ankles if he doesn't wipe off the mean mug plastered on his face.

"Pay the toll, asswipe." He looks me dead in the eye and Jared shoves the box of piss water into his chest.

We push our way through the thick crowd. A shirtless guy with bulky glasses wears a lampshade as a hat and stumbles past me. Someone starts a chant at the beer pong table, and it deafens the booming music. People stumble around, some girls dance suggestively, and others huddle in corners with beer. There's spit swapping against the wall.

It's way past the chill buzz vibes and this is a typical weekend for students.

I lean into Jared and say, "I'm going to check upstairs."

"I'll be outside." He points his head to a thick crowd in the backyard.

I race up the stairs and walk down the long hallway. A door flings open with one of the linemen from the team zipping up his jeans. Two seconds pass and Brittnei emerges, combing a hand through her hair and wiping the edge of her lips.

"Cute..." I say.

"Hey, you." Brittnei sashays over and brushes a hand on my forearm. She does that thing with her blue eyes locking onto mine, making my heart melt under a lighter she ignited.

"Don't hey me." I shrug her off.

"It's roulette, and you weren't here to win me."

"So, you slept with him?" I ask.

"We aren't even together, so there aren't any rules to follow."

Brittnei put a leash around my neck and tossed me into a glass house, seeing right through me. There's still a gaping wound and her betrayal leaves a metallic taste in my mouth. She's a vampire draining any vitality I have left to dust, and yet I still feel something for her.

"We should go somewhere else. You know, just the two of us." She plays with my jersey and tugs me closer to her.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because I miss us." She brushes her blonde hair to the side. "I mean... I was thinking about you the entire time. It's not the same without you picking me up in the morning."

I woke up for the past three years, nine months, and twenty-four days to her voice as my alarm clock. I kept over ten thousand texts, saved every chat in Snap, and adored her good morning messages. She took a branding iron and held it against my heart when we split. I started talking to the ceiling at night instead of midnight phone calls with her. I've spent my entire summer ignoring her existence.

"Yeah, sure..." I say.

"Come on, let's go grab a drink."

"Okay." I dip my hands into my pockets and walk alongside her down the stairs. She grabs me a beer, then takes my index finger to drag me outside to the corner of the house. It's darker over here, yet the thick trees still create shadows. The moonlight peers through the mixture of rolling clouds and I lean against the wall. Brittini doesn't hesitate to wedge herself between my legs and plays with the seam of my jersey.

"So, what do you wanna talk about?" I ask, battling against the voice in my head that urges me to grab her hips and pull her in closer.

"I never got the chance to talk about that day."

"You fucking Brody and me walking in. Yeah, maybe I don't want to, and for good reasons."

"Okay, but I can't help think you have a thing for your little sister's friend."

"What?"

"Every time you go home, she's always there. You wouldn't shut up about her transferring."

"She's my sister's best friend. Are you out of your fucking mind?"

I sigh and look down at my feet before she gets closer. "Sebastian," she dips her head to the side, and her plump lips shine with gloss.

"You know I hate that name."

"Oh stop, you liked it when I would say it when we... well, you know what I mean..."

"It's been over two months." I shrug. "Why are we having this conversation?"

"I've seen the way you look at her, and all your Instagram posts with her in it."

"Are you seriously jealous?"

"What if I am?" She asks.

"You had my whole damn heart and gave it all away the moment you hooked up with Brody. What do you want me to say? For better or for worse? You just got done letting someone else finish in you when you had me first."

"I know it won't be easy, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes. Just give us another chance." The thought of it has slipped my mind occasionally, but my true feelings spill from my tongue.

"You're drunk and desperate."

It tugs at my heartstrings. I've come to miss the late nights at a gas station grabbing Snickers ice cream bars with her and then making the windows fog up when we were in the back seat. On the other hand, I can't erase the nights I spent counting sheep because she was out drinking while I focused on upcoming exams.

"You know that night I was really drunk. I didn't know what I was thinking." Brittni's face falls.

"When aren't you drinking?"

The word mistake wasn't written on her moans, begging Brody for more when I walked in. She wanted it as much as he did, and they didn't stop. I can't erase the fucker's whitey-tighties on the floor, and the pink bra she swore she bought at Victoria's Secret for only me to see. It lay there at the edge of his bed.

"Oh, come on, I'm not that bad."

"So, you're sober now?" I ask, remembering why my heart is boarded up.

"Oh, and somehow you are?"

I laugh under my breath. She's right. I'm not sober, I numb the fact I fell for the girl I lost Dirty Roulette to when I should have known better. She's messy. We were always fighting, too. There would be nights she'd break up with me over some story her brain concocted, and she always accused me of flirting with other girls.

"I dunno if I can trust you again," I say.

"I don't want him. Do you really wanna throw away the three years we shared?"

"I dunno if I'm ready or if I even want to try again. I need time to process everything and figure out what I want." I say.

"Well, maybe this will help you process everything." Her eyes lock onto mine in a passionate gaze, reminding me of the surge of electricity we shared. Her cold fingers brush against my cheeks as her lips meet mine in a tender kiss.

I melt with the taste of cherries on my tongue. Her hand find their way to my inner thigh, and she rubs me. God damnit. My balls catch fire within seconds, and I'm hard as a rock. Dating Brittini turned me into an addict. Every night I wanted a piece of her. Soft pink nipples in my mouth. Her wet opening thrusting my dick in deeper. The way she'd blow me in the jeep before class. I miss having empty balls, but that was all I had with her. Sex, booze, and fucking fighting. The voice inside my head screams and I pull away before I'm in too deep.

Silence is all I can offer. I push her off and remember why I came here in the first place. I need to find my sister. Plus, I'm better off with nothing but memories of Brittini's face when I actually felt butterflies in my stomach.

I open the beer and chug half of it. Jared is preoccupied. He dragged himself into a game of beer bongs with guys slumping over. When I head inside to the chaos, someone cuts right in front of me and leans over a trashcan to hurl.

"You're shitting me." I weasel past him and head upstairs. Another door opens, and I watch Nick stumble out with a satisfied grin. Something darker than his brown skin coats his right hand and forearm.

"That white chocolate was worth it." He fumbles on his feet, his dark eyes in a haze. I peek into the room and spot a girl passed out naked on the bed. "I gotta..." He hiccups. "I gotta work tomorrow."

"Do you have a ride?"

"No man... I'm uhh... uhh, I'm gonna drive."

"Fuck... no. Let me take you."

"Alright..." He wobbles and sways back and forth.

"Where is my sister?" I ask. Nick lifts his right hand and I stare at the dark maroon shit all over his arm.

"Is that period blood?"

"Oh shit, I dunno man..."

"Okay, uhh... meet me downstairs." I pat him on the chest and slide past him. I storm to the back room where he pointed. The voices and laughing are loud. I jiggle the handle and it's locked.

"Spin the bottle emo girl!"

I hold the door handle and take a deep breath. There is no other choice but to bust the lock and I won't feel bad for the dumbass stupid enough to host a party this out of control. It's their mistake in the first place. I slam a shoulder into the door, and it bursts right open with splinters flying.

I stare directly at Payton and go numb. My Payt. The girl next door who refused to leave and stayed over for the second night in a row. The one always fighting with my sister like they're siblings.

Payton covers her bare chest with her bony knees. Her breasts and curves leave me in a chokehold. She spins a glass bottle.

It twirls around the guys in the room, who all turn their heads to me. It slows down and points directly at the bedroom door I stand in front of.

"Spin again, that doesn't count! He ain't playing!" Brody snatches the bottle and throws it at her face. She holds two hands up to block it as he hollers, "Spin that shit again!"

Payton gulps, shaking her head. "It didn't land on you. Shove your ego up your ass." Her knees shift and Satan wags a finger like a pendulum on an antique clock to not look.

"Payton..." I say. She scatters around, clutching onto a shirt to cover her perky breasts, stumbling over her feet when getting up. Brody snatches her shirt, and she trips with it fisted in her hand.

"Let go! I didn't land on you!" They fight over it like a tug of war.

I hate myself. An uncomfortable weight of anxiety digs deep inside the pit of my stomach attracted to her hourglass figure, but she's topless and every unholy thought runs through my neurons and down to my aching dick.

"You're just scared you'd like it!" I'm imprisoned with a dismembered nervous system, and I can't shake it off.

"In your dreams!"

"Fuck off, prick! I'm in." It slips off my tongue.

Payton morphed into my own personal siren. The flat nerdy girl I teased looks silky smooth. Like dandelions, she's invasive, and the sight of her in nothing but black panties short circuits the wires in my brain. No matter how hard I try, I can't tear my eyes off her.

"Fine, you either kiss her or fuck her brains out."

"You already know the answer. She's not yours."

Payton scurries around for her clothes and heels. She races over with it all clutched to her chest.

"You know the rules." He steps in front of her. "I want the tape when you're done, but before you go, you two need to seal the deal, or you can kiss Cheer Phi goodbye, sweetheart." He drags his phone off the floor. The camera lens and red dot steal another piece of my soul.

"I bet Charlie will love this. Her best friend sleeping with her brother. Now drop those clothes to the floor for your close-up, sweetie. Or I'll post the pictures I already got of you."

Payton's emotionless expression throws ten lashes into my back. The clothes plop to the floor and land on top of her feet. She kicks

them aside and the dirtiest look glares straight into his soul. She storms up to me and her body shivers.

I bite my lower lip and rub a thumb over Payton's cheek. Goosebumps crawl up my skin, but I'm not cold. I lean in, close enough to feel her breath on my skin. Blue irises scan me, and my heart pulsates loud enough for me to hear.

"Take off your panties. They're mine." I gulp. Her gaze refuses to leave as she shimmies out of them and places the garments balled up into my hand. I shove them in my back pocket.

Payton curls a fist around the fabric of my jersey. We are both hesitating, and it hurts enough to break open my ribcage. I scan every inch of her face. My core burns at the sight of her plump lower lip. The devil can have anything it wants as long as she doesn't get ruined by Brody.

I move near her breath. It's warm, heavy, and pulling me into the pits of hell. Her eyelashes fasten, and an utter moan breaks free from her windpipes when she closes the space between us.

Payton's lips freeze as if she'd never kissed anyone before. I mold a hand across her cheeks and dig them deep into her hair, curling a fistful into a tight ball. A nibble to her bottom lips forces her to part wide enough for me to pour myself in. She's mixed with the taste of vodka and orange juice. Her tongue is soft on the roof of my mouth. Muscle memory has one of my hands wrapping around her neck and massaging her breasts the next.

"I..." Payton says hesitating. Her lips turn away, but I follow a trail of pecks down her neck, and suck on her skin. She tugs at my jersey, stumbles backward and meets the wall. She finds her way back to me, erratic, grinding against my thigh. My dick pulsates against my jeans. Nails claw my biceps, she breathes hard into my mouth, and her lips sweep along mine.

She turns her head away again. "I'm sorry..." she whispers, and I stare at the empty cups on the floor with all her belongings. My heart stops. "I'm a..."

Her button nose brushes mine. I place my hand under her jaw. "I've never done anything before," she whispers. The insides of my brain shut down like a circuit breaker cutting the power. Fuck... fuck. She's a virgin. No wonder why he wanted her.

Brody is the wolf wearing sheep's clothes, and his guise of kindness masked the malicious intent until I played his game. I paid my dues, but now I'm forced to pay the continuous price like a user and his drug of choice.

"Put your clothes on and let's go." My lips feel unholy, but I'm still drawn to Payton as she scrambles, throwing on the crop top over her head. She slips on her shorts and shoes and hurries out the door buttoning up.

I wiggle a door handle and slam it open to the other bedrooms in the hallway. They are empty, but one is locked. I bang a fist on the door. "Charlie!" A ringing in my ears pierces the inside of my skull. "Open the damn door!" I pound a fist and the bitterness of bile meets my tongue.

My vision blurs and turns white as I shove a shoulder into the door. It takes me three tries before the lock breaks, and it flies open with a thud. The hallway light bleeds into the room. Charlie's hands are tangled in some guy's hair, her legs wrapped around his waist, and he's working his way to pulling her underwear off. I smack the light switch on the side of the wall.

"What the fuck, Charlie!"

She covers her eyes with a hand. "What the hell!"

"Jesus-fucking-Christ! Put some fucking clothes on!" I shout and stare at the carpet floor with the wrath of God erasing any moral sense left within me.

She shrieks and kicks herself away from Noah. "What the hell are you doing here?" She fists a blanket up to her chest.

"I'm- I'm sorry," The random guy flips his hair back with a hand and leaps off the mattress.

I scoff. "You're sorry?" I storm up to him with fists tense. "That's my sister!"

He holds up his hands, backing away with a please-don't-hurt me expression plastered on his face. "We were playing a game." He stumbles over a pile of clothes, glances down, and scoops up his shirt.

"Ryder, leave him alone!" The shock drains blood from Charlie's face. She scrambles for clothes and pulls a shirt over her head in an angry fit. But I'm a perfect storm.

"I'm not sixteen anymore!"

"Wait! Wait! I'm sorry..." He throws the shirt over his head but doesn't get another word in. A fog layers over my eyes and pure rage tears through me as I seize him by the shirt and throw him against the wall.

"Stop it!" Charlie cries.

"Were you actually going to have sex with him?"

Do they even know each other? My knuckles turn raw and my fist greets his face again. I hear nothing but a blistering thud of me swinging into his jawline until he crumbles down the wall to the floor.

"Ryder, please!" Payton screams and grabs my shoulders to pull me back.

"Noah!" Charlie rushes over to him and cups his face. "Oh my god!" She turns blubbery and cries. Payton wraps her arms around mine, tugging, and I step back.

"I'm fine... I'm fine." He wipes blood off his nose with the back of his hand.

"I'm so sorry! I'm sorry!" Charlie's cheeks burn red, her eyes watering. He shrugs her off. "No wait!" She paws at his hand, but he

weasels out of her grip and disappears out the door. "Please, Noah!" Charlie scrambles to her feet, chasing him out into the hallway. "Stop!" She chokes with hands raking through her hair and lets out a searing sob. She turns to me, her nostrils flaring, and tears brimming the edge of her eyes.

"I hate you!" She retorts, stomping over and shoving me in the chest. "I fucking hate you!"

"You're barely eighteen! Get your shit and let's go!" I find her shorts and throw them at her face, but that seems to tick her off more. All I see is her nails flailing, she's smacking and punching me in the face like the typical immature brat that she's always been.

"Stop it!" I fight against her noodle arms and restrain both of her wrists.

"Then stop being such a control freak!"

"I kinda can't if you're crashing every goddamn party, and I told you to lay off!" I shoot back.

"Charlie, let's get out of here." Payton attempts to intervene, but my sister and I are at each other's necks with a knife in hand. There isn't a day my throat doesn't turn raw. We always fight, and if she isn't telling me how shitty I am as a brother, then I'm doing something wrong.

"It's just a fucking game, and it's not like you didn't play it either!"

"That's exactly why I don't want you playing it. This is how guys get the wrong impression of you!"

"You don't always have to protect me!" Charlie retorts.

"You have no idea who those guys are. You're gonna get hurt, and you dragged Payton into it, out of all people!"

Charlie furrows her brows darting her gaze to Payton. "Who did you land on?" She asks. Payton runs a hand through her hair, and her opal eyes burn, staring at the ceiling as she shakes her head.

"No-no one." The tone in her voice cracks. "I didn't land on anyone."

"You're lying?" Charlie tilts her head to the side, with the distinct look of knowing something smelled fishy. "Did you land on Brody!"

"NO!" she shouts out.

"I broke the game up! Are you happy now?"

"Fuck you!" She storms out to the crowded hallway with her shorts not even buttoned. I roll my eyes as her tantrum burns like a raging wildfire out of control.

There is no other choice but to chase her down the stairs and make a scene.

My brain is leaking into my spine. People shove and jostle me in the crowd. I squeeze through a tightly packed stairway. The air is thick with sweat and the aftertaste of vomit. Everyone here is sloppy. I catch Brody storming behind my sister, grabbing her shoulder to swivel her around. If he touches anyone else, I won't hesitate to stain the wall with the inside of his brains.

"I'm grabbing my purse and leaving." She hisses.

"Stop walking away from me!" Brody snaps at her. I stand at the edge of the living room watching them like a soap opera. "It's not like I planned it. It just happened." He pushes his hands forward to emphasize whatever point he's trying to make.

"Screw you, Brody Thomas."

"You really slept with him in spite?"

She reaches for her purse stashed behind the couch. Everything inside spills out to the floor, including the keys to my jeep.

"Like you care? You cheated on me with my brother's girlfriend months ago and bragged about sleeping with her again. I can't believe I gave you a second chance. Go have that slut suck you dry. I want nothing to do with you."

Brody runs a hand through his hair, and curls his lips. "You aren't willing to put out for me when you said you would. Then you give it up to some tattooed poser."

"He has a name?"

He coughs up one of his sarcastic laughs. "Like I give a shit!"

"What's the fucking hurry? I'm allowed to wait." Charlie starts picking up her pack of cigarettes and all the knickknacks that spilled out.

"But you meet a guy tonight and you'd give it up in a matter of minutes."

"Did Payton land on you?" She snaps back.

"And what if she did? What if I fucked her in that bed tonight? What are you going to do?"

"So, you won't tell me either?" She snaps and throws the purse into his chest. "Go fucking sleep with someone else to make your sleazy homemade videos."

"You're the one who broke up with me? You wanted this!" His words are like a virus in the air.

"You made it clear how little I mean to you, and now you want my best friend."

"Whatever, slut!" He throttles the purse back into her arms and stares at her straight in the face.

"You either sleep with me, or I'm posting those tits of yours for everyone to see. You wanted to start playing the game, now you're in it, baby." Brody laughs, and my heart shrinks into itself as he pulls the crown off her head as if that's always been part of his plan.

I watch her visibly swallow. "You're insane!"

"Then do what I fucking say."

My lungs sizzle as I stare at Brody, tempted more than anything to punch him in the face and shatter my knuckles, but man makes monsters, and his monsters have videos of me too.

"Looks like your babysitter is here to take you home," Brody smirks, not even fazed by me. Charlie spits in his face before she takes her purse, storms off, and snatches Payton's hand heading out the front door.

Blue and red lights pour in through the window shades and a ear-splitting voice shouts "Pigs! The pigs are here!" Someone cut the booming music within two seconds flat.

"I'll see you at practice on Monday, Crab." His hands fall into his pockets with the mess of people hopping over furniture and storming down the stairs. He starts to walk off as everyone in the house scrambles out the patio door in a panic. I bite my tongue, dead on the inside.

I race out the door as several patrol cars with flashing lights pull up. The cops seem more interested in the idiots running off than me speed walking to the jeep.

"Hand over the fucking keys, thief!"

By the time Charlie reaches the jeep, the passenger door is wide open... for me, and she's buckled, hands on the wheel fuming.

"Hell no! Get out! You're drunker than me!" I climb in, tossing my sister in the back like luggage, where she belongs. Another door swings open, and Nick weasels in with a family-size bag of cheddar-coated popcorn. Payton hops into the front passenger, and all the doors slam shut.

It's quiet besides the sheer panic outside with cars peeling out and Nick munching on popcorn like he's Michael Jackson.

"Where did you get popcorn?" I lean over in my seat.

"Uhh... there is a Mexican party down the street too." He points cheddar covered fingers to the house behind us. "They had tacos... and I won it in a poker game, and became some ninos god papi... I think they called the cops. I got lost."

"Right..." I say.

I watch an officer lung at someone in the grass, tackling him to the ground as I drive off. Payton passes out with her head against the window. In the rearview mirror, Charlie sits with arms crossed and the pissed-off stare she keeps throwing at me.

She doesn't get it. An invitation to join the football team at GCU is rare, you gotta have skills for Coach Storm to notice. Out of everyone he scouted in the area, he offered me his card. The smell of cut grass, digging up graves with cleats, and the ball cemented to my chest as I bolt past the faded touchdown line is the best definition of me.

I earned my position.

Big-Shot-Daddy, a lawyer, bought his way in for Brody to be the quarterback. The Thomas's law firm became the school's biggest donor. Questions don't need answers when Daddy is sucking the dean's clit.

I watched this Neanderthal senior year decked the opposing team's coach, on some stupid fumblerooski play. I bet a trash can and shredded expulsion papers landed her a pay raise and the Audi she parks in her designated spot.

There's no way Brody maintains a 2.0 GPA average when he's hungover most days in class. He gives professors flack when they don't cater to him, and somehow Thomas carries high honors. I'm holding a 4.0 and cemented to the dumbest fucker, using me as a constant puppet.

Brody chained up plenty of teammates, making them slaves to his dog fights. There is no alias. He indulges in drama. The internet is powerful, and with one click, everyone sees it. Money, tits, and ruining lives. It's his heroin. Brody throws dirty punches, kicking faces until it's soaking and red.

Freshmen year consisted of dropping leftovers off by hospital dumpsters and Brody showing off his collection of photos and videos. I played with fire and Brody enjoyed watching me get burned. He

handed me the bottle, and I spun it like Charlie did. It's a gun to the head and Brody holds the trigger. I have no idea how to protect either of them, and they are moving into the dorms this week with Cheer Phi scholarships. That's an extra fifteen grand in the bank. They pay girls to cheer. Damn, they are good at it too.

It feels like tonight has been an eternity, and driving home is just as painful. Luckily, we beat my mom by twenty minutes. When they stormed in, Mom was milking some random dude she met online. They stumbled down the hall, slamming the door behind them.

Mom didn't bother to question the commotion in the bathroom between Charlie and Payton arguing. Nick passed out on my dad's recliner. The pillow of choice is his ten-pound bag of popcorn. At some point around four in the morning, I crash on the couch.

It doesn't feel like I slept for ten minutes. Sunlight bleeds through the curtains and doves plugged in microphones for morning tunes. They purposely loiter in the thick untrimmed bushes by the sliding glass door.

Fantastic. The one streak of light meets my eyeballs. The fan blowing hits the hanging blinds just right. I pat around the couch, looking for my cell. The light bites the lids of my eyes when I press the side button. It's seriously ten in the morning. I groan. There's no way I can pack up the rest of my shit and get it to the house. Not with this blistering headache and cotton mouth.

I sit up and my first sight is Nick's hand flopping over the lounge chair. It's covered in a crimson layer of some substance. Flaky and dry. It's mostly on his index and middle finger, but it climbs up his palms, twirling around to his elbow.

"Nick..." I poke him in the chest. "Dude, you got shit all over your hands and mouth. Dude...What the hell were you doing last night? First the popcorn and..."

Charlie strolls out of the kitchen dressed in a baggie shirt and booty shorts. She slurps on a bowl of cereal. Payton follows behind her. I swallow down the lump in my throat over a Ramones tee, barely covering up Payton's best Saturday underwear, knowing her black panties are still in my pocket. A half-eaten Twinkie lays dead in her hand.

"Is that period blood?" Charlie's nose curls up.

"Eww. What was he doing last night?" Payton asks with half a Twinkie lodged into the side of her cheek. My mouth waters, revisiting her kiss, her breasts in my hand, and the knife searing my balls off when she admits she's a virgin. A piece of frosting rests at the corner of her lips, and my heart spasms as she licks it off.

"He hooked up with Naomi last night." Charlie shrugs.

"Gross," Payton says without emotion, and turns on her heels down the hallway.

Cotton Mouth



Payton

I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING LIKE NOTHING. No hangover, just an overly dry mouth. Tap from the bathroom sink saturates my tongue. The water runs on high, and I dip my head, taking mouthfuls. I rest over the counter and stare into the mirror, my chin and neck drenched. A nest of hair is matted on my right side, and my mascara is smeared. It's Crypt Keeper bad.

I lick the water off my lips, and Ryder crashes into my memory bank. The smokey taste of his tongue on mine sinks to my thighs. My chest collapses miserably. I want to jab a knife in my heart and rip out this feeling rampaging through me.

Vodka poison is instant zombie juice, and it enslaves everyone's brain to do stupid things. The ache in the pit of my stomach tells me to lock up the kiss and pretend nothing happened. At the same time, Brody wants me to sleep with Ryder, film it, and send it to him. All for pom-poms in a football stadium and a shot at living in a sorority house rent-free.

The door creaks open, sliding clothes into the corner of the wall. It's musty here. Blotches of toothpaste litter the ceramic sink, runaway strands of hair stick to everything like glue, and every type of lipstick scatters across the countertop. Charlie weasels her way past me and drops her shorts, plopping down on the toilet.

She hunches over, resting an elbow on her bare leg. "Last night was crazy." Charlie groans and coils teepee around her fingers as she pees out a gallons worth of bad decisions.

"You can say that again."

"So, are you gonna tell me who you landed on?"

"No one. Ryder cockblocked them... and he saw me naked and looked... I don't know... like he was disgusted at the sight of me... I dunno how I feel."

"He's such an ass...I kinda regret going down on Noah." Charlie flushes and pulls her shorts back up before washing her hands.

"Do you like him?"

Charlie dries her hands on the towel hanging on the maple-brown door. "I dunno." She shrugs. "I just can't get over Brody sleeping with Brittni. No matter how hard I try to forgive him and give him another chance, my gut tells me he's just gonna do it again."

"Will you believe me when I say I didn't land on him?"

"But you landed on someone." She ruffles her hair in the mirror, and the pillow head looks a million times hotter than I could ever pull off. "I'm not an idiot. I've known you since we had baby teeth. You suck at lying."

"Look, Brody's a douchebag that deserves blue balls." I cross my arms and lean my back against the sink. She grabs a comb, tosses her locks around, and wraps it into a scrunchy.

"Stop beating around the bush and tell me."

"How many times do I have to say, no one?"

If you've known a bro longer than a day, their siblings are off limits. I'm breaking bro code, which is close enough to sister code. No way, I can't say it. My tongue is broken. Confessing I liked Ryder running his fingers through my hair and shoving his tongue down my throat has bad idea written all over it. There's no way in hell I can tell her I gave him my underwear and granted him my virginity too.

It's on tape. Someone needs to pour gasoline on top of my head and hand over the matches so I can light myself on fire. I rather die in boiling oil than see my naked photos all over the internet for someone to jerk off too.

If I had a million fingers, that's how many times I told Charlie I wanted nothing to do with this initiation bull. Now out of mere stupidity and following along I'm smack in the dead center of it.

Never have I ever kept a deep, dark secret from Charlie. This digs a grave for our friendship when it meets the noose. My skin crawls from the mere thought of Brody winning either way.

"Mhm..." Charlie runs a hand through loose strands of hair falling out of her bun. "Do you plan on hanging today?"

"I might head home. I've been sleeping over here for three days straight, and I ran out of clean clothes, and I need to finish packing up my room."

"Oh, shit, it's really been three days? What's our record?"

"Two nights and I stayed till dinner before my mum came banging on the door."

"Let's not forget, my mom insisted we need space," Charlie adds, knowing that didn't work out well. Now we are sharing a dorm out of mere luck and begging the University staff in charge of assigning the housing arrangements. We did the obnoxious, leaping up and down and breaking our windpipes in each other's faces when we got assigned together.

"I think I'll shower and head out," I say.

"When you're done, do you wanna meet back around one? There are free demos at Smokey Vinyl." Charlie wiggles her fingers at me and scuffs down the hallway in her pink slippers.

"That gives us four hours of space."

"Shut up and sneak back later, hoe!"

"Fine." I agree.

After a shower, I pack up dirty clothes and all the things I moved into the bathroom for the last couple of days. I throw the duffle bag over my shoulder and climb down the porch steps with the screen door slamming behind me.

Snoop leans against the hood of Ryder's jeep. Smoke pools out of his nostrils. It reeks of sweet skunk. He pretends he's cool as hell with his black sunglasses hiding the evidence of a bad hangover.

Ryder marches out of the garage with football gear hanging out of a tote. My insides beg for him to glance over with his charcoal grey eyes, but he dismisses my existence entirely. It's a plunge to the chest, sensing the hint of regret perforating off him.

Football gear thuds in the bed of the jeep. I turn my back and enjoy the company of dirt crunching under each step. I take out the Walkman I bought down at Goodwill. It still works, and even though everyone on this planet has air pods, I enjoy twirling a wire around my fingers and holding onto the Walkman with my dear life.

When I reach the decaying metal sign saying Cloud Nine, my stomach drops. It never gets easier walking down this dirt road filled with trailers crumbling apart.

Neighboring faces change, but they're all the same type of people. No matter what, there is always a Crusty-Wrinkles. He's the old smoker, hacking all hours of the day. The man slouches with the curse of a hunchback on a sun-bleached chair with his fifth cigarette of the day. I've never seen him wear anything but the same stained white shirt, and I figured he'd be a rusty metal collector, but he decorates his yard with beer cans.

In the next trailer is Old Cat Lady. She waters the hundreds of plants hijacking her patio. Cats pounce around her. Two are humping on the roof, keeping the cycle rolling.

Other trailers rot, ceilings cave in, windows smashed, and littered with graffiti. I'm nauseous when I reach the front door and open it. I

never know what I'm walking into. Mum's got a bad habit of leaching onto older men with some money. It's stepdad number three, the life cycle of each one is the same. When the relationship rears its ugly end, Mum paws on a bottle of wine.

The front door creaks closed. Mum wears yellow gloves and scrubs the stove. She glances over her shoulder and says, "Oh... look who's alive."

"Yeah, sorry, I kind of lost track of time." I clench the strap of the bag.

"Staying out and partying is going to run that scholarship of yours to the ground."

"Can you just trust me that I'll be fine?"

"I was eighteen once too."

"I know." I smile and stare at the ceiling, realizing my entire body language screams, liar. They reek off my skin.

"I'm going to finish packing. Charlie and I are going to Smokey Vynil later."

"You're not going anywhere until that entire room is cleaned up. You're not moving out with it looking like a dumpster shit in it. You leave in two days"

A boa constrictor wraps around my lungs, and I gape down the hallway to my bedroom. I've neglected it for the past two months and I won't be surprised if a rodent is rooming with me.

"I'll clean it."

Richie sits in his recliner with his feet kicked up. Fat fingers curl around the TV remote and the volume goes from twenty to seventy in seconds because I'm the annoying background noise. Richie's dark sunken eyes glare. It's all he does. His mustache hangs over the firm line of his mouth, and it looks like he wants to say something.

I rush down the hallways in the middle of Mum lecturing and close the bedroom door. It's the only layer of protection from her strangling

CIGARETTES AND RUST

me to death. An emo girl's room with cheap tape and hand-selected posters of heavy metal artists is solace, but I have to tear them all down. The rest of this room is a minefield.

I sit on my bed dreading the cleanup and pull out my cell.

Payton: Hey...

Crab: Hi

Payton: I'm sorry...

Crab: Yeah

Payton: Do you hate me?

Crab: Out of all the stupid shit you choose to do, no... I don't hate you. But I'm pissed.

Payton: Can I have my underwear back?

Crab: No, and I'm busy. TTYL

CHARLIE AND I RACE one another into the record store. It carries a nostalgic aura of different musical generations. My soul hurts as if I missed the true era I belong to. Devil horns consume the entire store. Peace signs, weed, millions of Bob Marley posters, and the hint of Black Sabbath. I could live here.

Old books and dust are heavy in the air. Looming tobacco residue stains the moldy carpets. The place has suffered its fair share of abuse from countless souls who died centuries ago. It's pretty cool to scroll through different vinyl records.

One day I'll get a record player, but right now the necessities are underground tasty metal artists. New beats are an imperative need for my survival. I'm sure whatever I discover will be better than listening to boring lectures I'll soon endure.

I walk my fingers over the plastic grooves on the CD cases, scanning each album cover. Every now and then, I'll uncover a lost gem. Countless underground bands from the mid-nineties need some loving ears and mine beg for a new verse.

"Drake's pretty good," a guy mentions behind me. His voice is sultry. He retrieves a Drake album from where they're hidden and pulls one out. I glance up and it is Noah. His long hair is fastened in a bun. A purple bruise molded over his right eye with a cut across his nose.

"It's on sale for seven ninety-nine, plus tax, your soul, and it potentially skipping." He passes the album with two fingers. I look at the rapper's songs, then glare back at him. His hands sit in the pockets of his black skinny jeans covered in chains and bondage straps.

"Let me guess, your favorite song is Hotline Bling?" I ask with a chuckle escaping. I read the list of horror music.

"Wu-Tang Forever."

I drop my arms to my sides and scoff.

"You're fucking with me." I shake my head, eyeballing his angst-goth look. "You're wearing a Black Sabbath sweatshirt," I point and hand the CD back with no remorse.

"You're missing out."

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"My ego is a bit bruised, but I'll be fine."

"You could have at least suggested Fall Out Boy."

"How about Bow Wow? Sounds like it would fit a cheerleader."

What a prick. I might wear spandex, but I'm not a stupid girl. "Are you saying cheerleaders don't have taste?"

He bounces up and down with the stupidest smile, pretending to have pom-poms in his hands.

"I don't look like that. GCU gave me a four-year scholarship if I show off at football games."

"How nice of them." He's snooty. Sounds like someone needs to bruise his ego a bit more.

Charlie peeks over merchandise from the other side of the display racks. "Don't you have a Malibu beach party to go to with your band?"

His stormy almond eyes admire Charlie. "Oh, it's you." His expressionless flat lips lift a moment but drop as fast as they appeared.

"Don't act all surprised," she says.

"I didn't think you'd swing by. Is your brother going to come in here too?"

"He's an asshole. You can't be mad at me for what he did."

"I really don't want to talk in front of your friend."

"I'll just check out another section," I point behind me and stroll off to a rack on a different side of the store with ears wide open.

He whispers, "I only came to that party for you." In my peripherals, Charlie stares out into space and not directly at him, but when Noah sees me eavesdropping I advert my head away. "You can't lead me on just to get back at your ex."

"That's not what I did," she argues.

"That's bullshit. I played your stupid game and when it came down to it, you didn't want to sleep with me, either. I should have known better. I'm not the type of guy who is good enough for you."

Charlie sighs. "That's not true... I do."

"You've been hounding my phone all day and you show up here knowing I have to run the store."

I finger through the CDs and skim the different artists. I'm not even invested in the country genre I randomly selected.

"I do like you."

"Then actually let go of the guy and be with me. I'm not pretending I hate you because that's not true. I like you... a lot."

"I know."

I'm tired of their emotionally damaging conversation and head to classic rock picking out a Rolling Stones album. Charlie has a bad habit of leading on guys and dropping them when she gets a spark of emotional attachment. I honestly feel terrible for Noah. She'll drag his heart through the mud. The one guy she let sink in was Brody. Girls would die to be with a guy in consideration of the NFL draft.

I tip-toe back over with the album in hand, staring at the sticker price tag.

"Here, take the tickets. It's in a month, but the band has a chance at getting scouted. You should come," Noah says.

"I found something," I cut into their conversation and wave the album around. That awkward smile and a weird laugh slip out.

"Yeah..." Noah nodded.

"I was meaning to ask... where did you guys meet?" I ask.

Noah's face went flat, and he raised a brow. "I caught her red-handed drawing Jesus holding a penis in the bathroom...at church..."

"You crashed the girl's bathroom, and I'm the sinner." Charlie puckers her lips. "Please, you need confession more than me!" She teases, folds up the tickets, and places them in a pocket of her purse.

"You still go to church?" I ask.

"Sunday nights. You've missed out."

"Huh... I didn't know."

"Mom's been dragging us all summer."

"I'm sorry I got laundry and can't live more permanently with you," I respond.

"Mom thinks we need to cleanse our souls, since Dad wants to fuck some bimbo only three years older than us. You know how she is. Something about demons in the house." Charlie rolls her eyes and pretends to choke on her middle finger.

Noah rubs the tip of his nose with a hand. "I help the band at church services. Gramps over there makes me." He dips his head at the old man, shuffling behind a glass display case.

I catch some gnarly bruises on the old man's arms. His skin is over-stretched like an abused broken rubber band, and he wheezes. My heart sinks further. I don't think it is even in my chest anymore.

"Your Gramps works?" I ask.

"Yeah, I help him run it..." Noah says. I tilt my head and the sweet man is checking out a customer. His hands shake, handling the money given to him.

"We live in the apartment upstairs, so I'm always here," Noah says.

"Where are your parents?"

"Fuck if I know. He's all I got."

"Oh..." I say.

"We all got Daddy issues. I don't even know mine." He lifts his eyebrows and his lips are flat. "Well, I'm going to help my grandfather. I'll ring you up..."

"Yeah, yeah... thanks." I head to the register and unfold some crumpled bills to pay. When he hands me my change, he smiles without showing any teeth.

Charlie flips her hair across a shoulder, and we walk down the rows of records to the front door. One look from Charlie greets my chest with a steak knife. I glance back one more time, and Noah flashes a peace sign. He strolls to his grandad and helps him sit on a comfy stool.

I walk to the glass door covered in layers of tape and flyers. Charlie beats me to the metal handlebar, and she opens it. We walk down the sidewalk to her mom's beaten-up Civic she took to the casino last night. She's supposed to release the title to Charlie, but can't find the time of day to take her to the DMV.

"He's a nice guy..." I say, opening the passenger door and sliding into the stench of cigarettes and musk of old man cologne.

"Well, he's like every other dude out there. He wants to shove his dick in me."

"He's taking care of his grandpa. That doesn't scream out, I wanna bang every chick in sight." I scoff at her pure blindness. The guy is actually human with some sensibility and isn't self-absorbed.

"Maybe... I dunno."

I blink in astonished silence. "Seriously?"

"I dunno how I feel about him, okay? Out of all the things I did with Brody, Noah..."

"He what?"

"Okay, do you promise not to laugh?"

"Oh my god, what?"

She runs her fingers over her face and then places her hands on the steering wheel. "Every time Brody and I did something, I really don't think he knows what he's doing. It's always, yeah baby, you like that, yeah you like that." She mimics a deep voice with a stupid laugh. I grin at the irony he isn't amazing after all.

"So, it was a fake it until you make it?" I wiggle my brows.

"Yeah, and I give him a hand job and be done with it."

"Go on... Spill the tea."

"But Noah, he ate me out and gave me my first orgasm ever. Holy hell, I was legit in heaven. I can't even describe it." She leans into the headrest and groans.

"Oh yeah..." I cover my face with a hand to hide my giggles.

"You promised you wouldn't laugh." She pushes me on the shoulder.

I hold up my hands in innocence. "I'm not. Just don't hurt him like all the other guys you dump through a text."

"Well, I'm not ready to jump the gun with him. I'd sleep with him. I'm just not into any commitment and doing the whole jealous bull again. I watched that crap all the time with Brittini and Ryder. Oh my god, I didn't tell you. She came over today."

My heart drops at the syllables that spell out her name. "Brittini came over?" My mouth burns dry and then is saturated with saliva. I'm suddenly sick to my stomach, wanting to open the car door and vomit.

"They went into his bedroom together. I think they're patching things up because they were in there a long time," she says.

I'm silent and swallow hard. I'm well aware the smile on my face melted off. My soul leaves my body, and I'm looking down at it from above.

"I dunno why he would anyway. If he does, he's a fucking idiot. You saw him this summer. He went on some madden binge for a week straight," she says.

"Yeah..."

"What's wrong?" She asks. I pull the seatbelt over my chest and click it into place. My palms get sweaty along the album I bought, and I stare at it long and hard. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No..." I say.

"You're acting weird. Are you into my brother or something?"

"What?" I shake my head and say, "No...."

"You're acting like you spun the bottle and landed on him, fucked his brains out, and now you're hurt like a used-up doll. What the fuck?"

How does she even sense how I feel unless it is perforating off my skin?

"He wasn't even playing..." I roll my eyes with a fake laugh, wanting her to shut up already.

"Whatever, listen! Brittni and Ryder always had a thing. They totally lost their virginities to each other. I tell Ryder all the time he just needs to turn into a bad boy with no heart. Girls never go after the romantics."

I stare at the tiny pebbles lining the car mat. I imagine Ryder's hands nestled in my hair, his heavy breathing pushing me into a wall. For a second, I thought he liked it. Something inside my chest hurts, and I shuffle the rocks to destroy the image. My stomach sours, and I poke a salty sore in a weird crevice of my mouth. I guess that's why Ryder didn't bother to look me in the eye when I left this morning. His text messages were bitter. God, I must be disgusting to him.

"Cut the shit. What happened last night?" She asks. Keys twirl in her fingers.

"Nothing, let's just head back..." I say.

"Why do you always gotta be a soggy pop tart?"

"I'm not. I'm tired. It's just starting to hit me, I guess."

"Yeah..." she says.

We don't talk much as she drives on the freeway. It's not the usual jamming out to music like we always do. It's silent.

Charlie drops me off at home, and I finish packing up my room. Then vacuum crumbs from centuries ago. When I'm done, I wrap up the cord and fall onto a mattress stained with sweat from the eighteen years I slept in it. I can't help but feel burned. I reach for my cell phone and stare at Ryder's name. It's like a knife cuts through my ribcage, and I'm bleeding out everywhere.

Payton: Are you getting back together with Brittni?

Crab: ????

Crab: Why?

Payton: Charlie said she came over and you two...

Crab: lol okay

Payton: I fucking hate you

The phone buzzes in my hand, and I let it ring several times before sliding the green arrow over to answer him. "Give me my underwear back!"

Ryder huffs on the phone. "Quit it."

I pause and don't say anything. I lay there shaking my head, wanting to burst to tears as to why I feel utterly weird, and it hasn't been twenty-four hours. It's pulverizing my insides like a brain-eating amoeba.

"I'm not sleeping with her. I don't want to touch her. She came over to grab some stuff I found. That's it. She was in and out in five minutes. I don't understand your passive-aggressive texts. You, out of all people on this planet, know she fucking hurt me."

"Yeah... you were on a binge for a week straight."

"And who got me out of the bed?"

I laugh under my breath. "Charlie and I dragged you out by your feet."

"Then you thought it was a great idea to push me into the pool," He adds.

I chuckle at how aggravated he was with us, not letting him go. We hauled him out of his bedroom door and down the hallway.

Ryder huffs and the phone shuffles on his end. "I don't think I've laughed that hard in the past three years with you two."

"My stomach hurt from that," I say.

"And Charlie pissed herself..." He chuckles for a moment and it's static again.

I continue to stare into space, not knowing what to say, but having the urge to ask him about last night. At some point, it has to be brought up, but my brain screams at me, not to mention it.

"Look, on Monday your classes will be short. It's mostly the syllabus and guideline bullshit, so they can give you time to settle in the dorms."

"Yeah..."

"Come over afterward... yeah?"

"Okay..."

"I'm still unpacking, so I'll see you in a couple of days."

"Yeah... yeah, okay, umm, bye."

"Bye, cutie." He hangs up, and I lay there with time fighting against me.

THE REST OF THE WEEKEND IS UNEVENTFUL. It's Sunday hitting noon and Mum drives me and two fat totes to the dorms at GCU. Curses fly out of her mouth every five seconds at everyone's erratic driving on the freeway.

Any time a massive semi truck passed, it rattles her Mustang. Something about the hiss of its breaks and diesel fumes send her spiraling thinking we are in the next Final Destination movie.

Parking was a bitch, and carrying a hundred pounds of music up three flights of stairs broke the bones in my fingers and seared the skin off. Sunlight streams through the blinds swaying on the window. The room is empty besides the two beds sitting on opposite sides. There are two small desks at the corner of each bed and a closet for Charlie and me to share. Doors open and close as footsteps echo down the hallway.

"I wish I went to college." Mum circles around with her arms folded along her chest.

"Why didn't you?" I peel off the lid of one tote and pull out the one set of bedsheets I own. The embarrassing worn princess sheets screaming virgin.

"Forensics. I always thought that was interesting."

"It's never too late to start."

She furrows her brows in a scoff. "I'm over fifty. That's not something I can do now."

"Yeah..."

"Call if you need anything, yeah?" She checks the gold watch on her wrist. Then groans under her breath. "I still have to go to the store." She complains.

"Yeah, I'll call."

"Okay." She comes over, wraps her arms around my neck, and pecks me on the cheek. "Have fun. I'll see you later." Mum grips her purse and heads out of the room.

Ryder

MOM'S POURING HERSELF A DRINK the minute I walk through the front door to gather the rest of the totes. Bile burns in my throat, watching her destructive history of dependence dig up her grave. She always got the short end of the stick but made a fire with it by going off the deep end. I take two steps down the hallway before she snaps the sarcastic remark.

"Well, hello to you too."

"Sorry, I'm just trying to get settled."

"I can't believe you! You can't even say bye to me." Here comes the pity party from a full-grown woman. Someone put her in timeout because I can't stand her damn tantrums. I seriously need to put my foot down and not tolerate this anymore.

I make a B-line to the kitchen with my hands resting in my pockets to stop the nervous fidgeting. "How many have you had?"

"Why do you care?" She snarls with a hint of liquor on her breath. It's barely three in the afternoon, and she's drunk. Last night, I cleaned up her hoarded mess, and in two seconds it's a cluster-fuck again. Empty bottles litter the counter, reminding me my summer has been a waste. I've picked her up off the floor and mopped the bathroom when she soils herself. She's pouring gasoline on her liver, and I'm watching it burn.

"I'm guessing you're not taking Charlie to the dorms tonight?" I ask.

The cold look in her eyes bites back. She's dead inside, and death seeps to the outside. Pale skin and thinning hair take over. I don't even recognize her anymore. The woman is barely in her mid-forties and looks way older.

She hiccups, and stumbles on her footing, turning around. "It's one drink."

Liar.

I want to spit the truth in her face, but the alcoholic demon with its grip on her neck won't let the message get across. She'll lie again and be closer to her grave. There isn't another minute I can spare watching her drown without sinking myself.

I suck in a deep breath, but it doesn't feel like any oxygen is getting inside my lungs. "You can't drive her drinking like that."

"Then I'll take her tomorrow." Breaking promises and lying is muscle memory. It's the only thing she knows how to do. Fuck my feelings at this point. I don't need them.

"You realize she starts tomorrow at nine?" I ask.

"What do you mean? It's Saturday."

"It's Sunday..."

She takes another swig and her lips curl. "Oh..." So much for her seeing Charlie off and wishing her luck. When Charlie graduated, I did my best to hold Mom together to watch her walk, but she was shit-faced for that too.

When she glances at me, her eyelids are heavy with a drunken haze. She missed church. The one place she was adamant about. I feel like I'm sleepwalking. I don't even know her anymore. Growing up, there was never a day that passed without her telling me to carry my damn cross. It looks like she lost hers on the way to the burning gates of hell. Now that damn bottle is her crutch.

"Where's Charlie?" I ask.

Slamming the glass on the counter, she snaps. "What do you want from me?"

"Do you even know where Charlie is?"

"Why?" The wicked laugh under her breath reeks. I don't care.

My blood boils over. I rake my hands through my hair. "You don't, do you?" She hasn't bothered to pay attention to Charlie or her whereabouts for months. Letting her do whatever the fuck she wants. "You don't care, do you?"

She doesn't answer. The one thing she cares about is numbing out whatever feelings she wants to bury. If I wasn't paying the bills on the house, I would punch a fucking hole in the wall.

"Why don't you do it yourself..." She takes another long swig, and I swallow what feels like my heart lodged in my throat.

I walk to the counter and dig through the plastic thank you bag from the gas station. A crumbled receipt sits at the bottom. Picking it up, I read the list of purchases and stare at the demons she made friends with. Fifteen little shooters of all her guilty pleasures. She inhales a quarter of the glass like it is water.

"Mom, you need to slow down. I'm not picking you up off the floor tonight."

"I'm fine."

"You're gonna kill yourself."

"Fuck off and leave already!" She takes her drink and downs the rest before throwing the glass in the sink. It shatters, and pieces scatter. "You're good at that too... just like your father." She storms out of the kitchen and down the hall. A door slams shut, and everything in the house goes still.

Next to the plastic bag, there's a pile of unopened mail with a red stamp. FINAL NOTICE. I clench down my teeth so hard I think I might break my molars. The glorious capital letters piss me off. Leaning against the counter, my stomach doubles over, tearing it open. Another unpaid bill throws a pix axe right into my paycheck.

Fuck. She can't even pay the damn property taxes on the house.

There is no way I can keep up with this unless I pick up a second job. That would mean dropping half of my courses to keep a roof over her head or quitting football altogether. It's not like I have a chance of getting drafted. At this point, a contract that will wash away the debts is a pipe dream. Brody wants his name in the pot, and he likes it when I hit a wall and eyes are on him. I guess I can't blame Dad for packing up and dipping either. Then again, he's a bigger piece of shit by throwing the burden on my lap.

It never used to be this bad. There were occasional weekends when Mom went too far. Some nights, she needed a drink and a pack of cigarettes. Then three deaths hit the family in two months. Every blood relative she had. Grandma, cancer. Grandpa, congestive heart failure. My aunt, a drunk driver. The cherry on top was Dad having an affair. She nosed-dived and binged every night. Charlie said the fights were bad. Yelling at all hours of the night. Dishes thrown. Belligerent sobbing. At times, I think meeting the reaper is her sole purpose.

I slide out my cell from my pocket and dial up Charlie. It rings three times, and I'm greeted with an annoyed sigh. "What do you want, heffer?"

"Look..." I pause a moment, the words chained to my tongue.

"What?" she asks.

I let out a deep breath before spitting out the bad news. "Mom's not feeling good."

"Oh..." The disappointment leaks off her sudden change of voice.

"I'm sorry."

"Okay..."

"I'll load up your bags tonight... I can drop them off tomorrow, but I can't tonight. I have to head to work."

"Okay... well, I'm hanging out with some friends. So, I'll talk to you later."

"Do you plan on coming back?"

The phone beeps in my ear as she hangs up without another word. I guess the answer to that question is no.

Monday



Payton

MONDAY MORNING WAGES A WAR AGAINST MY SINS. I clench the map and dig my nails deep into the paper when I pass the group of senior girls with Brittni and her gang. They sit on freshly cut grass in the courtyard and their heads follow me like the Mona Lisa effect.

"Do you think she's seen it?" Brittni turns to her friends, pretending to gossip quietly, but purposely saying it loud and clear. I guess high school antics die hard.

Naomi twirls the stick of a cherry red lollipop. Her sunglasses slip to the tip of her nose, following my steps.

Gum twirls around Brittni's finger. "Why is Charlie friends with that girl, again?" she asks.

I turn on a heel in the opposite direction. Ryder tosses a football back and forth between hands, enmeshed in talking with Jared as they stride down the sidewalk to the dining halls. Their laughter dies when Snoop nudges Ryder, and points his chin to a group of girls gaping at them.

Their jaws scrape against the floor, gaping. My caged heart thrashes inside my chest, watching Ryder eat up the attention. Secrets must be easy for him to keep. Being a notorious running back who is breaking records isn't going to kiss and tell. Especially when it's the girl coming from Cloud Nine. What happened the other night stays between us. I need to dump a bucket of holy water on top of my head to wipe him off my lips and push the memory into a bottomless pit.

I unfold the map with my schedule and room numbers I scribbled down in a hurry. The dorm is a mess with unfolded clothes and textbooks. Not to mention my hair is twisted into the messiest bun in existence, and I'm pretty sure I smeared my mascara this morning and didn't bother to fix it. Fuck. My brain is on fire. Pull yourself together.

"Hey girly," Charlie pops out of nowhere, snaps gum between her teeth, and pulls at my damp hair. "You went with the out-of-the-shower look today, huh?"

"Yeah, I woke up late and forgot to shower last night." I crumple the map with my heart about to burst open.

"How's the dorm? Ryder's bringing my stuff after lunch."

"It's nice."

"Can I at least braid your hair?" Charlie paws in her purse for a tiny comb and scrunchy. Before I can object, her fingers tangle into my hair, working their magic, twisting and weaving a Dutch braid. She yanks on my hair like a mother does a child. "So, what's your plan for later?"

"Just unpacking," I say. She finishes and grabs her stash of lip gloss in her purse.

"Pucker up." She squeezes the tube and dabs it on my lips. I shrug. Needles of guilt flood into my bloodstream. I'm not sure what my plan is. The past two nights, I imagined different scenarios and held

conversations with myself about breaking the news to Charlie. Sleep ceases to exist and I'm running on an empty tank.

Charlie pulls out a compact mirror and admires herself. After every class in high school, she's welded to the bathroom mirror, reapplying eyeliner.

"See any cute guys yet?" She asks.

"Hell no."

Charlie shakes her head with an annoyed eye roll. "Okay, well, you need to find one to entertain you. I have plans later with Noah. The dude can write some pretty damn good music, and I really want to try some things with him. I kinda need the dorm. It will only be a couple of hours."

I glance down at my phone and there are five minutes left before my first class starts. Hell equals this three-hour advanced English course I magically placed in. I catch Brittini and the other cheerleaders in the squad, swinging bags over their shoulders. Some of them glance back at me with their resting bitch faces.

When Ryder half-shakes Snoop's hand, his eyes come into my line of vision and turn cold. A painful expression molds across his face. It short circuits parts in my brain. It's like he ripped out my heart and threw it at the wolves. He hangs onto one leather strap of his book bag, and like clockwork, his right hand dips into his jean pocket. His footsteps are smooth against the grass as he heads off. Immediately, I drop my gaze to my Converse and pretend everything's fine.

The make-out session lingers at the tip of my lips, and an ominous feeling digs into my heart. At this rate, I'm heading for a panic attack.

"Okay, I'll see you after lunch. I'm so excited we have French together. Love yah!" We hug, and I inhale a mixture of strawberries and stale cigarettes. She blows me a kiss before strutting down the sidewalk.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket and when I pull it out, my skin crawls. A text message pops up from an unknown number.

Unknown: Ryder and Crusty Trash sitting in a tree. K.I.S.S.I.N.G

Payton: Who is this?

Unknown: What do you think Charlie will say about this?

A link pops up, and I press it without a second thought. A series of photos and videos airdrop right into my hand.

Disgust with myself seeps into my nervous system, seeing my naked photos in the hands of some asshole. Charlie and I are crystal clear, our faces and every part of me raw for the world to see. Then the embarrassing video of Ryder and I. Him kissing me down my neck. His hands are all over me. My thighs burn. I didn't even realize I was breathing that heavily, and grinding myself against his leg. The kiss came flooding back to my core, but someone dumped a bucket of maggots on top of my head.

My vision clouds with hot white light, and my bloody heart spills all over the floor. I kick a trash can next to me, leaving a dent.

"Damn girl, who pissed you off." Two guys stroll past me with humored expressions. The feral urge to scream races through every vein in my body.

I storm to class a heated mess. My thoughts spin faster than the Millennium Falcon. I can't focus. My leg shakes under the desk. The professor goes over the syllabus and types of assignments we will be getting, and the damn book required.

This one chick continues to ask absurd questions, keeping us all stuck in our seats. Please, someone in here must have duct tape to shove across her mouth. The classical analog clock on the wall ticking is worse than being in a night terror.

As he talks non-stop to answer every question, I pull out my cell underneath the table.

Payton: Where are you?

Crab: Weight room.

Payton: Is Brody there too?

Crab: Yeah... why?

"Now if you turn to the next page on the syllabus, it will talk about rules on using cell phones in class." The professor flashes me a quick glance.

I couldn't prevent the eye roll I gave him as I slid the phone back into my pocket. The packet stares at my face for another thirty-five minutes. He tells us something about writing a biography and I miss half of the words he says with my brain drifting off into other thoughts.

When we are dismissed, I race out the door before anyone else. My gaze stays on the worn muddy blue tiles as I fume down the hallway, staring at the map for the weight room.

I push the sports center doors open and footsteps pound into my eardrums. It's as if a mosh pit stomped on my lungs because I can't breathe.

At this point, I have zero control. The manual system is overridden and tossed overboard. I guess the little voice in my head decided to pull a no-call-no-show on me today. My brain screams. It's legit, a building on fire, with filing cabinets tipping over. Some subconscious part of me rocks in the back corner sobbing.

Nothing matters now. I storm into the men's locker room like a full-blown category-five hurricane.

I funnel through the narrow metal lockers with clenched fists at my sides. Boys wearing boxer briefs stare with sweat skating down their

faces. It stinks, and I can't tell if it's mold or the mixture of hormones perforating off sweaty bodies.

"Girl, are you lost?" A guy asks in tighty whitey underwear with a nice bulge greeting me.

I shoulder-check another dude. "Hot chick at five o'clock!" He winks and blows me a devious air kiss. I recoil when I inhale a whiff of cat piss and rotten feet.

"Look, it's trailer trash!" I hear the laughter bouncing off the metal lockers.

"Fuck, what the hell are you doing in here?"

Stray clothes litter the benches. The howl of the showers gets closer with each step. I whip my backpack off and drop it on the wet floor. The steam melts my face as I draw the black curtain to find Brody. Sizzling water hammers down his soapy back as he turns to meet my gaze. His shaggy blonde hair drips with foamy water, and his dreamy eyes fuel my blood with rage.

I push Brody hard in the chest. "You're a piece of shit! Delete those fucking pictures!" I ball my fists and slug at his face multiple times. My heartbeat burns a hole in my knuckles.

He coughs up a laugh. "What the hell!"

I'm molten hot from the shower raining down on me. I thrash, kick, and slap him repeatedly in the face. "Get this trash off me..."

My palms burn. My bones snap, and I punch him in the chest.

Brody's bare feet slip on the tile. He steadies himself, grabs my wrists, and pits me against the ceramic wall. My brain switched back on like a neuron installed a new fuse and presto, I'm off autopilot.

Drops of blood pour down his nose and into the gurgling drain below. "What the hell! What's wrong with you?"

"Delete those pictures!" I snap.

He throws my wrists down and wipes his bloody nose with the back of his hand. "Come on, Trash... you never wanna put out. Thought maybe you need a little encouragement."

"You can't keep dangling my virginity over my head like it's a trophy to be won. God, you're an ass!"

A hand grabs my upper arm and pulls me out of the hot shower. I'm sopping from head to toe. My eyes blur with tears as I look up at Ryder in a pair of gray sweatpants and dripping wet hair. His mouth sets in a grim line, jaw tense.

Brody mops his brow, "You would call Crab to save your ass?" He steps out of the shower, snatches the towel hanging on the rusty rack, and wraps it around his waist. I claw off Ryder's grip and shove all my strength to push Brody. "You're fucking nuts!" His foot slips, and he stumbles back into the towel rack.

My throat tangles in a knot and I shout, "I'm not the narcissistic psychopath extorting shit!"

Brody scoffs, and a cunning smile creeps onto his face. "You're a vapid bitch. I bet with how much time you spend with this prick, you've been fucking him all along. Slut!"

Ryder swivels around and knocks a fist into Brody's jaw. Goosebumps run down my skin as his knuckles crack and Brody crumbles to the floor like a floppy fish. Other guys in the locker room swarm around, pointing fingers.

"Dude, you just got knocked the fuck out!"

"Man, I'll take her if you don't want her! I like it rough!"

Ryder grabs my upper arm and hauls me from the chaos into another part of the locker room.

Coach Storm yells at the boys to leave and voices drown out. I lean against the cold metal with shoelaces and papers hanging out of the locker slits. Teardrops stain my cheeks at the realization of what I've done. Mascara runs off my hand when I wipe the tears and crumble to

the floor, holding my face. I'm hyperventilating in silence, gasping for air I can't reach.

What the hell is wrong with me? Why do people treat me like the garbage my stepdad pours into a metal bin and drowns with a tank of gasoline? I'm fucking screaming, but everyone hears the squealing plastic lit on fire and curling up into nothing but toxic waste.

I peek over the rows of lockers and watch as the coach rights Brody to his feet. "What the hell happened?" He asks.

Brody shakes off the coach's grip. "Nothing, just piss off, all right?" He leaves my eyesight, and I hear a locker jimmy open.

"What happened?"

"Nothing, just crazy ex-girlfriend drama," Brody says. I spot the pool of blood staining his white towel.

"Have you been drinking again?"

Brody scoffs. "Get off me."

"The board directly told you if we catch you drinking on school grounds, you will be benched."

The coach turns his head in my direction when Brody's eyes stray over to mine. I gasp and plant myself against the metal once more.

"Who's over there?" Coach calls out.

I mouth the word shit.

"Just me, Coach." Ryder waves a hand.

"Hurry your ass up and get to class."

"Yes, Coach," Ryder replies. He winks a charcoal grey eye at me and his sly smile molds over his face again.

"Quit the bullshit, Thomas, or I'm benching you on the first game."

"It's not like you're doing your job anyways," Brody interrupts. "My dad ain't giving you money for you to shit on. I'm done with you protecting that fucking nut-gobbling running back!"

"Watch your mouth!"

"Write an incident report. I don't give two shits."

Coach lets out a cocky laugh that fills the locker room. "Stop dick-ing around and maybe you'll be good enough to get drafted."

"What did you say?"

"Hurry up and get out."

"Whatever, Coach."

I'm cemented to the locker wall, palms sticky on the cold metal. I peek over again and watch Coach leave. His dad shoes squeak against the wet tile floor. Brody wipes his bloody nose and shuffles his bag over a shoulder after dressing.

"This ain't over, Crab!" Footsteps echo across the empty locker room, and my heart plummets further into my stomach as he leaves.

I hate Brody. I hate him more than the security guards sending me to the office for dress code violations in high school. Then him calling me a whore. There is no way I can handle college if this is going to be my first day.

I clench my fist and start to make a break for it.

Ryder chases after me and cuts in front of me. "Whoa... whoa... wait." He runs an arm over my shoulder and pulls me back into the row of lockers. "What happened?" he asks.

"I'm not your sister." I sniffle and cross my arms around my chest. "I don't need you to save me." A thousand knives pierce through my skin, saying it, and the back of my head bangs against the lockers repeatedly until my eye sockets combust all over again.

"Stop!" He grabs me and gives me one of those teddy bear hugs. "What happened?" Ryder whispers, but the truth hurts.

"I can handle myself." I want to curl into a ball and die. Someone spare me from Newton's third law because there is always an equal and opposite reaction to everything you do in life.

"And the lie detector test says that was a lie." Ryder mimics Maury. Someone shoot me, please. Make him shut up for one second so I can

process what happened. I circle around and collapse on the bench, "Stop... stop, please," I beg.

"Sorry."

"I got the video he took."

Ryder shudders his locker open and pulls a white shirt over his head. "And..."

"I'm naked and stupid. I've never looked more hideous in my life," I say and shove my feelings about him into that imaginary box where it belongs.

"I don't think that." He says, his eyes tender with a brief smile. "You know you got some real balls?" Ryder changes the subject. "It's not every day a girl comes storming into the locker room to punch the sleaze of GCU."

"And?" I raise my eyebrow, feeling my eyes dry up. Now I'm left with the uncomfortable sensation of my skin tightening around the stains of my tears.

"Look, he gets away with everything and that'll never change." Each word from his lips digs into my heart like razor-sharp thorns. I feel guilty for being stupid.

"Fuck... he's gonna snitch." I bury my head in between my soaked jeans and sob all over again. A horrifying image of the Dean manifests. Screaming, spitting at me, and my mother dragging me off campus grounds.

This is worse than when my pants ripped down the center of my ass. I showed off hot pink granny underwear for hours until Ryder wrapped a hoodie around my waist. What's more deflating, is that I can't lean on Charlie without her making me feel shittier about myself by exposing I made out with her brother.

"Hey... hey, Payton, stop!" Ryder says and leans down, grasping onto one of my shoulders and lifting me to my feet. I glance up, drool soaks my lips, and my entire body burns up.

"I doubt it, and if he's gonna snitch, he would've told Coach."

I suck in a deep breath. "Are you sure?"

"What happens in the locker room stays in the locker room," he says.

"This isn't Vegas."

Ryder stands up and pulls a black shirt and basketball shorts from his locker. "They're clean, I promise." He tosses them to me, and I notice the red swelling on his knuckles and bits of dried blood.

"Thanks." I slump down to the wooden bench and wriggle the soaked shirt over my head. It tumbles to the floor with a plop.

"You're fucking gorgeous." He drops the bomb and my heart throbs. He runs a hand through his dark hair, "Fuck... I'm sorry." He says and looks away as I change.

Ryder

WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME? I'M GONE. Lost, my fucking mind gone. I sit down on the bench next to Payton, defeated by the sight of her.

The party wasn't originally the way I imagined seeing Payton naked for the first time. Or seeing her naked at all. The thought never crossed my mind, not even when she grew tits. Okay, that's a lie. I wasted time and energy debating Payton's nipple color once in high school. Now that question finally has an answer, and I was right. They're perky and pink.

I spent all day yesterday wondering what the best Trojan condom I would use. Imagined what her laugh would sound like when I shimmy her out of those black booty shorts she wears. There wasn't a way to stop thinking about how soft and unholy her skin would feel

underneath me. Then running my hands through her dark hair that's like silk.

I was hornier than hell itself and laid there with balls aching. She blew me up with her messages, and no matter how much I told myself not to respond, I refused to erase her from my thoughts.

A girl hasn't been in my bed for months. It's me and my hand in the shower, and I thought I was fine with it. Then that bottle stopped, pointing like a barrel of a gun. I swear, God planned it to humor me.

The videos of Brittni and I used to bug the shit out of me. Mainly because it's her reputation that would be tarnished. Then she slept with the guy filming it.

It's not surprising Brody sent Payton the video. Now I'm here again, protecting someone else. They got her rattled, and that's exactly what they wanted.

I'm imprisoned in whatever feeling I randomly have for Payton at this second. I should shove it down a dark hole and pretend it doesn't exist. I grew up with her and headed to college the moment she started her sophomore year in high school.

Out of pure insanity, I can't break my gaze off her milky skin as she weasels into my black Rolling Stones shirt. My mouth dries as her jeans plop to the moldy floor. She leaps off the bench and puts one leg into the basketball shorts and then the other.

I catch a glimpse of her panties with Monday stitched in the front. "Those are cuter than the ones I have," I say, pointing. Her mom must have bought her those at Walmart because she'd never let Payton step foot in a lingerie store.

Payton chokes on a laugh. "Yesterday, it said Sunday." She sits back down on the bench next to me.

"The ones I have don't say Friday. What a shame."

"Yeah..."

"Are you really a virgin?"

She pauses a moment, and her eyes meet her feet. "I think the underwear speaks for itself."

"You're...." I pause and run my hands across my face. "You're fucking gorgeous, so that just doesn't seem real."

"Brody isn't full of shit, is he?" she asks, her right leg taps against the tile a mile a minute.

"No, he'll post them. I've watched plenty of girls drop out and move to other cities to start over. One, umm... it followed her across the country. She...."

"She what?"

"Overdosed."

"I have no other choice but to sleep with you and film it?"

I place a hand on her right knee to stop the shaking. "I'm not out to hurt you. We'll give him what he wants and he'll leave you alone."

"I lose my virginity to you... then what? He threatens to post it unless I fuck him too. Don't you see how fucked up this is?" She storms off the bench and rams a foot into the locker. Tears stream down her face, and she covers her mouth with a hand.

"I dunno then. Be with me. Don't give him the option. I won't hurt you, and if I could, I'd snap his damn phone in half."

"Be with you? So, you're gonna pretend to be my boyfriend?"

That didn't come off right. I'm not speaking in different tongues or throwing her in a paradox loop.

"Fuck..." I run a hand on the back of my neck. "I've known you forever. Can you trust me, please?"

"I don't have a choice, do I? I never get a fucking choice." I grasp the tips of her fingers and pull her back to the bench. I spread my legs wide enough to wedge her between them.

"Okay... so you don't want to sleep with me?" I ask and stare at the bruises forming on her knuckles. They're swollen and pink. A layer of skin peels back.

"No, that's not it!"

She's confusing the hell out of my brain. There isn't a way around this unless she drops out of Cheer Phi. Even then, there is no guarantee she'll find freedom.

"So, you do want to sleep with me?" I ask.

"Do you really think I'm pretty?" She asks dodging my questions.

I smile and nod my head. "Very..." The messy braid, the smeared makeup, and her creamy white skin. It's a good look on her.

"Can we not tell Charlie about this?" She switches the subject fast, and her nails dig into my shoulder blade, and she sits on my leg.

Charlie is overly protective of Payton, but it's me, out of all the guys in the world. I tilt my head to one side. "Which part? Beating the shit out of Brody, me punching him in the face, or you spinning that bottle and landing on me?"

"The whole thing." She plops her head to my chest.

"Why do you care about what Charlie thinks? Tell her the truth."

Payton rolls her eyes, and they fall to the floor. "She's my best friend and her big brother saving my ass in the locker room isn't something I think will sit right with her. I don't know how I feel about... you... Ugh... never mind... I need to tell her myself."

"Me?" I ask.

"Forget I mentioned anything."

I run a hand along my neck, but I can't help it. I place her palm against my chest with a heartbeat pounding harder than anything. "I fucking can't get it to calm down. Just trust me, okay?"

She fists the shirt in her hand, pulling me closer and says, "Can you just go slow?"

I grab Payton's cheek closing the distance. "I can do that." One tug and my mouth is on hers. She makes the sweetest gasp in the world. When our tongues meet, minty gloss finds my taste buds. My hands coil around her waist and maneuver her to straddle my lap. Her fin-

gers tangle in my hair. There isn't a way for me to catch my breath. She's erratic, and I don't want the softest lips in the universe to leave me stranded.

She grinds into my lap. It triggers every nerve down there to wake up. "Payt..." I run a hand over her pink cheeks. The freckles on her nose taunt me.

"Meet me later." I push a wet strand of hair off her face. I peck her on the lips before she scoots off my lap.

"Yeah... okay."

AT NOON I'M SWIMMING IN WORK. Pressure over this damn capstone project they expect me to finish by the end of the year will put me in a hospital.

My teammates call over from across the football field as I drag myself to the shaded bleachers. I peel the wrapper back on my chicken patty sandwich I purchased at the dining commons and inhale another bite. When I reach them, my bag slides off my shoulder and lands on the concrete with a loud thump.

Lunch is an hour before my mechanical engineering course. Every day since freshman year, I hung out under the football field bleachers, smoked some weed, and ran a few plays with the team. I snag the bottle of water from my bag and swallow the contents in two gulps before I chuck it into the overflowing trash bin infested with bees and reeking of sour piss.

Brody brags to the offensive linemen. One of them is a Samoan. We call him bustling Tito. He's scary as shit, with feet stomping, growling at anyone with the football, but when handed a box of cinnamon rolls, he'll cry and frolic with butterflies.

Another is Officer Farva. He's right out of the movie. His voice, the way he walks, and how his drug of choice is a liter of cola. The cherry on top is he's notorious for getting us in strange predicaments at burger joints.

I'm half listening to his raunchy recap about the party on Friday. Jared and Nick sit adjacent next to me, hunched over devouring crumbs they call a sandwich.

I scroll on my phone and tune them out as much as possible. On the daily, Brody posts another girl's dirty laundry on the website he created. Nudes he receives go online. Streaming videos trend. He uploads them all and it spills across the internet, downloading to someone's hard drive. The ones he considers sluts, he links profiles and numbers. He knows who's easy to get with, the screamers, the flexible girls who like hair pulling, and he blasts who caught chlamydia last weekend.

Jared flicks the ash off his joint into the green grass and takes another drag before passing it to Nick. "Hold up, you did what?" Nick's question spills out, and his breaths come out in white puffs as he coughs.

Jared's jaw drops, and his blue eyes bulge out of his skull. "Did he say what I think he said?" He points a finger at Brody in mid-laugh, darting his eyes around us. "You sent a video of you jerking your shit?"

"Yeah, I sent it this morning," he leans against the metal of the bleachers with a smirk sliding up half of his face. "It lets her know I want a round two. The girl's a squirter."

"Do girls even like that kind of shit?" Jared laughs and punches me. He wants to drag me into this idiotic conversation. "Like here is your souvenir for sucking my dick."

The team and I chuckle. Taking pictures or filming my ball sack isn't in my plans any time soon. Either it's because Charlie retches

and hysterically laughs at every man's dick, but I figured I have a sense of self-respect.

"They can see my nine inches in person. A picture doesn't do mine justice." Nick wiggles his bushy eyebrows.

Farva cocks up his brow, taking a sip out of his pink mountain dew. "How many times do you have to remind us you're black?"

"Not my fault that mountain dew shrank your dick."

Insecurity is a bitch, and when it's about the size of his penis, we let Nick believe his is brag-worthy.

I burrow my fingers into my eye sockets, as I'm not high enough to tolerate this conversation.

"Can we not talk about our dicks? Yesterday, ya'll made my ears bleed arguing about shaving ball sacks."

"Hey Crab..." Brody lifts his chin up at me. His thick arms cross over his chest. "Care to explain why Trash crashed the locker room?"

"Depends. How's the eye treating you?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah!" Farva repeats behind him. "How is it? I heard he knocked you out in there."

"Shut up, Farva." Brody snaps at him.

"Why ya'll keep calling me that? My name is David."

"I don't think you remember the conversation we had after you fucked my girlfriend," I say. Heat licks my skin, and my limbs vibrate. "But now it makes sense why I didn't get the invite to the damn party."

"Look, Brittini had been hounding me for months. Something about you always cheating on her."

"Right... so you cheat on my sister and steal my girlfriend. You're a great fucking person."

"Let's not go there." Jared slaps the back of his hand against my chest, and his mouth folds into a grim line, his jaw tense.

Nick licks his lips and gets up, fuming and throwing his hands down. "Man, if you two don't settle your shit, not a single team is going to wanna touch us. Neither of us will get drafted." He paces back and forth. "Damn, bro..."

"Not my fault his sister and her sleazy friend wanted to play." Brody laughs through his nose. "You should be thanking me. You get a tight-ass virgin."

"If he doesn't want her, I'll take her," Farva interrupts but doubles over when Brody knocks a fist in his stomach.

Jared furrows his brows and turns to me. "Wait, what happened?"

"Oh, he didn't tell you? Crab here barged in and the bottle landed on him. He's gotta sleep with Trash." The wry smile creeping on his face sparks electricity to fire through my spine and into my fists.

Jared's mouth gapes open as he says her name. "Payton?"

"Don't tell me you're already soft for her?" Brody raises his brow.

I push myself off the bench, but Jared and Nick grasp my shoulders on cue. Another fist fight and the Dean will take his side. She'll stretch her legs across that maple desk, lace fingers behind her head, and soak up whatever white lie Brody scrounges up to cover his ass.

"Man, we should be good now." Brody runs a slick hand through his shaggy blonde hair. Joke or not, it's not funny. "Lighten up. I sent her the video and photos."

"So, you can jerk off to the video you want me to make with her? You're sick."

"Here, you need this." Nick passes me the joint, and I inhale a long drag to deal with Brody's antics. I'm hoping the other guys grow tired of his cocky attitude and stop inviting him to chill. I'm wasting my lunch hour listening to this idiot when I could toss the football back and forth with the guys.

"Maybe this one won't get bored with you," Brody says.

"It came out of your mouth that you wouldn't do this to my sister."

"But Trash isn't your sister, now is she?"

No, she's not. He caught me there, but I stumbled out of the bedroom every weekend to see Payton inches away and never thought about laying a finger on her. Sleepovers, her invading the house lodges in the back of my mind, and the past seventy-two hours the way I see her switched gears. I suffer every second from memories of watching her binge-eating popcorn and pizza, wearing booty shorts and a halter top. She is like a second sister, but she blew my mind with a kiss, and she wants to lock it up and pretend it never happened.

"I got class. I'll see you around, Crab." Brody pats me on the shoulder and walks off into the grass with his linemen following like a herd of brainless sheep.

Jared holds the palm of his hand and presses it against my chest to keep me calm. Although I'm sweating and becoming a rampant mess. My heart ruptures out of my ribcage, and my brain imagines tying Brody to a chair and kicking him off a bridge.

If I wasn't at risk of being benched, this cocky-ass dude would have another black eye.

I grab my shit and walk next to Jared. He hangs onto the strap of his bag as we stroll to the lecture halls.

"You're pissed." He wrinkles his forehead, glancing in my direction. I don't respond, but my teeth grate tightly together to where I think they might shatter. "Dude, you know Brody is just giving you shit. He's doing it because he knows it pisses you off."

Still, I'm silent, and I dig my hands at the seams of my bag's strap. "He would do anything to see you benched for good. He thinks he's the next Tom Brady and wants scouts on him. The fucker deflates balls as a hobby."

My body twitches as I stare into Brody's back while Nick catches up with them down the sidewalk. Jared and I pace ourselves behind

them until Brody disappears in the mob of people walking in and out of the building.

"You need to quit this shit, man. What the hell is going on with you?" Jared presses harder and stops me from walking any further. "Fuck Brittni, fuck him. Stop picking fights in a war you can't win. He's not going to change because your feelings are hurt."

"It's Payton."

"I get she's your sister's best friend, but she played his game. That's not your fault. Sleep with her and get her out of your system."

"Fuck off, man!" I weave around him with the vein on my forehead throbbing.

"Don't do this yourself again. She's not going to replace Brittni."

I climb up the stairs leading to the double doors, head into the swarm of students, and disappear from Jared's sight. Maury needs an entire season for me. Playing football, and hanging on to a pipe dream of the stadium, is unrealistic. Maybe I'm not over Brittni. At the same time, I have no clue why I'm on the verge of a heart attack because of Payton.

College life, frat houses, getting tanked every night, and girls lining up to suck my balls dry. I don't want any of it.

Payton

IT'S NEARING THE END OF FRENCH, my last class of the day, when Ryder and Brody's name blasts over the intercom to report to the coach's office. At first, I think I hear it wrong, but other classmates whisper and gawk at Charlie, including me. Some grunge boy turns in his seat to face Charlie. "That's your brother and your boyfriend isn't it?" He coughs up his annoying smug laugh.

"Brody isn't her boyfriend." A chick next to him flutters her eyes and shakes a head as she continues to write in her notebook.

"Oh wait, I heard your friend over there broke into the boy's locker room to beat up Brody." His eyes dart over to me. "Is it true?" He bites his bottom lip checking me up and down.

"Wait, what?" Charlie swivels around in her chair. "I was wondering why you were in his clothes?"

"So, it's true?"

Charlie's cheeks pucker as if she tasted a sour lemon. "Mind your damn business," she snarls. "Don't you have something better to do?"

"I'll mind my business once you show me those sweet tits of yours."

"When your balls drop, and you don't sound like a little girl, maybe I will." Charlie throws her smug remark back, and the class overhears. In sync, they all chant, "Oooh!" The older crowd huddled in their own group shake heads with annoyed faces.

"Payt, what the hell?"

I tap my pencil against the desk. Guys do anything to sleep with a girl. I'm positive, dickhead is tattooed on his slimy wrinkled ball sack.

Professor Hays orders us to settle down and get our textbooks out, or we can leave and drop the course. I'm incapable of focusing on the thick reading. Twenty pages of personality types, and verb tenses. It's been demanded that we write a paragraph in French to describe ourselves, and we are presenting in two days.

I sit with the woody taste of a pencil in my mouth and jot nothing down in my notebook. I stare at my bruised knuckles, reminded of my embarrassing outburst hours ago.

Dread coils in my stomach. My brain runs wild with endless thoughts that something terrible happened to Ryder. They're going to expel him for punching Brody and defending me. I undo the messy braid and ruffle my hair. She repeats the due date, and we should practice with a partner, which isn't helping with the dread roiling in my stomach. I'll fail the class if the workload is this overbearing.

CIGARETTES AND RUST

I flip through my notebook, tear out a corner piece, and jot down a swift note.

I dunno what you want me to say.

I fold the paper and hide it in my palm. Once the professor turns her back, I slip Charlie the note. She flips it open and scribbles on it.

How about telling me the truth?

I did.

Liar is tattooed on my forehead as I pass the note and receive the nasty eye. She unfolds it and I pretend to be interested in the book with an 8-point font. After two minutes of no response, I glance over my shoulder and mouth the words. "Hello..."

Charlie shrugs in my direction and whispers, "Will you stop."

She douses lighter fluid on my nerves and lights me up like one of her cigarettes. She's right. I can't admit it. None of it. What happened with Brody in the locker room is painted on my knuckles. The kissing session with Ryder the other night is on videotape. Straddling him on the bench in the locker room was my own doing. I've cut my own tongue off and willfully made myself a mute.

When class ends, I gather my textbooks and trudge along. Charlie heads in the opposite direction and doesn't bother saying a word about Ryder. I clench the textbooks against my chest and welcome the anonymity of losing myself in a tide of students.

I'm about ten steps away from the library when someone yanks my upper arm and tosses me into the janitor's closet.

"What the hell!" I ball my fist, ready to punch someone square in the face for the second time today. I swivel around, and there's Ryder

with a fat bloody lip and a cut against his eyebrow. He uses the collar of his shirt to wipe the remnants of blood off his lip.

"What happened?" I grab onto his forearms. He's soaking in sweat. Sheer panic creeps up my spine, and the sight of Ryder leaves me incapable of catching my breath.

"Shh," he presses a finger to his lips and closes the janitor's closet. His voice shakes. Ryder isn't the type of guy to express fear, but he's shuddering, and his face is ashen.

"Why are we hiding in the janitor's closet?"

"Shh, lower your voice." He hushes. His eyes dart toward the door like he's expecting someone to chase him down. I swallow a large lump stuck in my throat. All the blood drains from my face, and my heart thuds hard.

"You dragged me in here. Why were you called down to Coach's office?"

"Brody..."

"Wait, what?"

"I got mad." He runs a sweaty palm through his hair and falls against the wall.

"You're always mad! I should just tell them what happened." I reach for the doorknob, but Ryder tugs on the baggy shirt he lent me, pulling me back. A weight presses on my chest, robbing me of breath.

"I can handle it." He grabs my shoulders and shakes me to pay attention to him.

"I don't want anything to happen to you because of me."

Ryder grabs me by the cheek and presses his lips on my mouth. "Payton, I need you. Please." His sweaty forehead leans on mine, and his hands tremble.

"If I'm not at the frat house at midnight, look for the dumpsters behind the Buddhist temple!" He digs into his front jean pocket and tosses me the keys to his jeep.

"Where are you going?" I ask. Ryder doesn't answer me. Instead, my back meets the wall. One hand brushes around the crease of my neck, and he kisses me hard.

"Ryder!" I open my eyes but he is gone. He leaves the janitor's closet without an answer.

I HEAD TO THE LIBRARY. It's frigid in here with the stale stench of old books. I find an empty seat at a computer and navigate the online technology course. There are over a dozen assignments, and boring readings for stupid programs I'll never use again. Leaning my head back in the chair I groan in agony.

A greasy, fat man sits next to me. Red curly hair invades his head, he wheezes with a mouth hanging open. I gag. Not because of the body odor and sweaty pits, but he's on the deep forums of Reddit scrolling through pictures of girls in bikinis. It's impossible to finish what I need to get done with this guy getting off right next to me. Grossed out, I swing the backpack strap around my shoulder.

This is harder than I thought. A surge of panic and sweaty palms puts me in a chokehold. Today proves I'll undoubtedly fail at college life. I head out into the crowded hallway and Charlie links arms with me. She drags me out of the double doors to the parking lot.

"You have some nerve." She rolls her eyes in annoyance.

"It's all my fault." I halt and look at Charlie dead in the eyes as tears welt up. I run a jerky hand through my hair as I watch the sea of students swarming us in terror. "They're gonna expel Ryder, and it's... it's all my fault."

"Uh-huh." Charlie wraps an arm around my shoulder and whispers, "We're not having a meltdown in the middle of the parking lot. Put your big girl panties on and let's go."

She snaps her fingers at me and holds out her hands for the keys. I find them jingling in my pocket and smash them in her palm. The door flings open, and I hop in the passenger side as Charlie climbs into the driver's seat.

"Why does my brother have to be so fucking tall?" Charlie complains as she adjusts the seat.

We drive back to the frat house without a word, and I have a gut feeling Charlie knows more than she's letting on. The ache plunders my gut. Ryder. Me. Kissing. The humiliation of the videos might be on her phone too. I lost my mind earlier today. My stomach swirls in circles, and I can barf at any second from the tears pooling down my face.

When we reach the house, Jared busts out the screen door, and it bangs into the wall. He storms down the patio steps. His cheeks burn scarlet red, and his fists ball up at his sides as he marches through the freshly cut grass.

"Where the hell is he?" His chest puffs out. We haven't grabbed our bags in the back seat, and the interrogation begins.

I walk behind Charlie and stumble into the kitchen with my knees buckling. My heart hammers in my ears as Jared lays right into us.

"Well?" Charlie raises both hands, expecting an answer.

"I honestly don't know!" I sob.

"Sit!" She points her manicured finger.

"Why don't both of you stupid girls sit!" Jared spits out.

I do what I'm told. I pull out a rustic wooden chair tucked under the table and plop down. I cradle my backpack against my chest and dig clammy hands into the fabric.

"I don't know where he's at." Charlie flings her hands in the air and crumbles into the seat.

"Both of them missed practice, along with several linemen!" Jared raises his voice, and a frog lodges itself in my throat. He crosses his

arms and shakes his head. The dude stomps back and forth biting a thumbnail.

"Payton, please just tell her what is going on." Jared's eyes glare into my soul. Ryder promised. He said he wouldn't tell anyone, and now it's written all over this frat house as if he knows.

Charlie flutters her eyelashes, places her manicured fingers under her chin, and laughs in utter shock.

"You know what, I haven't unpacked yet, and after today it's really tempting to ask for me to switch dorms. I don't know if I can handle being in there with you if you're going to cause this much drama. It's the first fucking day, and I'm a laughing stock."

"If that's what you want, then do it," I say, and it comes off colder than I expect.

"Would you shut your melodramatic mouth!" The look on her face is like my mother's when she flings off the belt and slaps it against the floor.

"You made me play that stupid game! You're fucking ex sent me the damn pictures! Happy now?"

Charlie chuckles. She picks at her cuticles like it's not a big deal. "You agreed the moment you walked into that gas station with me!"

"I told you I didn't want to."

"Okay, and what happened with my brother then?" My heartbeat hammers into my ears.

"I swear if he hurts him." Jared bangs a fist against the wooden table, and Charlie doesn't budge. He whips out his phone and places it against his ears. The ring makes mine bleed as it goes to voicemail.

"I genuinely don't know where he is," I say.

"Brody won't answer either." Jared runs both hands through his hair.

"They were fighting over me!" I blurt out.

It all goes silent. Their eyes bore into mine and a cold tremor shoots down my neck. Charlie lifts one eyebrow in curiosity.

"You're such a liar! You landed on one of them, didn't you?" Charlie puckers her lips together. She crosses one leg over another, folds her arms, and leans back in the chair, ready for me to share. How do I spell this without spilling out the entire truth, and ruining our friendship?

"I'll spare you the trouble and move out myself." The chair grinds along the wood and I storm out of the front door with the screen smacking against the brick wall. I stomp down the porch. My heart fumes. The weight of my backpack digs sharp nails into my nerves.

Charlie marches out the door behind me.

Pissed.

Her knuckles are white, her cheeks burn like the fire caverns waiting for me at the pearly gates of hell. "So, you're just going to act like a baby and leave because you don't like what you hear."

I swivel around and all I want to do is scream in her face. I told them the truth slash half-truth. I left out the part with the bottle, my naked ass grinding on Ryder that night. It should be easy to tell her everything, but I'm drowning in cement. Then I kiss him two more times like the idiot I was born to be.

I refuse to enlighten them. It needs to go away. All of it. It piles up, and somehow it's impossible to stuff this mess into my tiny little box before I spill over.

"So that's it?" Charlie asks.

"I told you what happened."

"Clearly, you're only telling me part of the truth! You really want to throw away fifteen years of friendship. I tell you every goddamn thing about me. You're my only friend, and you've never lied to me like this! I called shit off with Noah tonight because of this."

"Because you wouldn't understand what happened. I told you what you needed to know, which was true. He defended me because Brody and I got into it. What else do you want from me?" I ask, and I'm at the point of ripping every hair follicle out of my skull.

"Payton!"

I shake a head. "He said if I don't make it home by midnight, go to the Buddhist temple."

Our argument dies. Neither of us can make eye contact. The grass sings with the wind reaching my ears. Charlie carves a hand through her hair, holding it back as she stares into the distance and away from me.

"Yeah, I'm done talking about this." She releases her grip and her eyes simmer. "That's our one rule when we turned thirteen. To never lie to each other. Fucking stay away from my brother, he doesn't deserve this shit."

Jared stalks out, his blue eyes glower. "I'm so done hearing you two fighting in the front yard. Go unpack Payton, and fucking chill out." He grabs onto Charlie's forearm and yanks her toward the house.

Charlie stumbles up the steps and claws her fingers out of his grip. "Get off me!"

"We'll find him!"

I stare at the screen door latching shut and listen to the deadbolt locking behind them.

There it is again.

The magical word people love to call me crawls into my bloodstream. Demons inside my brain haunt me with voices calling me trailer trash. Not a day passes that I'm not reminded I lived in the infamous Cloud Nine since the moment I was born. It's where the fat lady with one gangly rotten tooth sings. I have this dreadful pit in my stomach, she's my future with two dozen cats to keep me company.

At least that's what Charlie would tell me whenever we rode bikes down the dirt road slurping on a frosty from the gas station. I can feel the vibrating grip of the handlebars and the painful remark percolating into my veins. If I don't stop wearing second-hand clothes or put on mascara, I'm condemned to trailer life forever.

I cross the main street and stumble onto loose gravel. Weedy fringes and dandelions grow along the sidewalk up to the dorms.

I make my way to the third floor and climb the steps into the musty room with my unpacked boxes. It's quiet, and still, with dust floating in the light seeping through the blinds. I plop onto an unmade bed with the embarrassing princess sheets. I pulled out my phone after seeing half a dozen messages from Charlie.

Charlie: Brody called. Everything is chill.

Charlie: Look, I'm sorry for being a complete bitch.

Charlie: Hello?

Charlie: I'm sorry, okay. I don't want a different dorm mate but I wish you didn't hide things from me. We are supposed to be best friends. I legit tell you freaking everything, and I don't get why you can't tell me what happened.

Charlie: Hello?

Charlie: Ryder came back. I thought you should know.

Charlie: Hello?? Dude, answer me.

I swipe out of her messages. She'll never comprehend how transparent my feelings are for her brother right this second. There won't be a morning when I wake up without regretting my entire being for playing Dirty Roulette.

Charlie at this point will dump me as a friend. It utterly guts me. She's the one who combed my hair and showed me how to put eyeliner on. Then share her brand-name clothes. When I begged my mum

to take me shopping at the mall, she'd drag me into Goodwill reeking of Windex.

I'd search for band tee shirts and old CDs. I found a boom box one day and ever since, I blasted music in my room when I worked on homework.

The clothes I got from Goodwill didn't last long. Most shirts fit baggy on me. Charlie handed over old skinny jeans and in return, I delivered chill music.

My run-down grunge look is mortifying. At times I imagine I'm part of her that's grime and dirt, and she tries to wash away the filthy piece of me to be clean again. But fixing me in her image will never fix her.

I decided to distract myself by unpacking. The first thing I pull out of the boxes is my boom box and posters littered with folded tape. At this point, it might be the only thing I can do to calm my nerves.

Hennessy



Ryder

“WHAT THE FUCK, RYDER!” Charlie crashes the bedroom door open and storms in with her arms pinned across her chest. I slap at the alarm clock on my bed stand, confused as shit. What time is it? I wrestle the sheets with my feet and leap out of bed. Am I late for class?

“What the hell?” I groan and press two fingers into my eye sockets before the blurry red numbers on the clock materialize. It’s nine in the evening, and I’m groggier than a sloth. I seriously slept for three hours.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“Payton won’t answer my texts!” Charlie hisses, and it’s as if she froths at the mouth. She snags the hodgepodge of loose change on my dresser and tosses it at me. I shield my face as quarters clink onto the hardwood floor. “AND... she was wearing your ugly ass basketball shorts you always use for the gym. You get in a fight with Brody, and disappear, so tell me what the fuck happened!” She shoots daggers at me with her sadistic eyes, grabs the aftershave, then my deodorant, and chucks it in my direction. I block one with a hand, but the other bottle smacks me in the chest.

"Would you stop being a complete psychopath for one day?"

"My best friend is lying to me, and now I'm betting my brother wants to sleep with her!" Charlie grabs the greasy plate of old microwaved pizza I haven't thrown away from last night and hurls it at me.

I glance down at the floor, biting the inside of my cheeks.

"I don't want to sleep with her." I lie. There's no way I'm having this conversation with my sister. The dick and his cravings don't need to liquefy her ears.

Charlie's cheeks burn crimson, and her chest heaves from her ragged breaths. "Then why was she wearing your clothes?"

Easy, because she looks better in them than on anyone else.

"Why the hell are you fighting Brody to defend her?" She asks.

Charlie kicks the overflowing trashcan to the floor, and empty water bottles slither out. "Hello!"

"What?" I ask.

"Weren't you just hooking up with Brittini? Naomi and some freshmen named Lisa saw her blowing you in the theatre?"

"Months ago... Maybe I slipped up when I was drunk this summer. I don't remember."

Payton asked me not to but the little voice in my head tells me to spill the truth. If Charlie wasn't my sister it would be easier to put in on blast that Payton turned me into a rabid animal the other night.

I can't sleep.

A fantasy about sucking on Payton's pink nipples, and her underneath me won't quit popping up. These daydreaming episodes are worse than a hangover on the bathroom floor.

The past three nights I've been rock-hard with her cemented into my mind. Her naked. I'm unholy with some fucked up insatiable attraction. The girl was always gorgeous, but I didn't think she could

be softer than lace. There is no way to put those thoughts into perspective for Charlie to understand.

"Why do you care?" I ask.

"I'm not going to sit here and watch you break my best friend."

"Well, I'm not telling you shit. That's for Payton to tell you, not me."

"Did something happen with you two? Did you two fuck in the locker room or something?" She asks.

I scratch my ears, wondering if I hear her correctly, and an awkward laugh tumbles off my tongue. I wish... I fucking wish Charlie saw me kiss her. I wish she knew I craved Payton like a junkie but fuck my feelings.

"It's not like that, and you know it." I storm to the door. She uses an arm to block the doorway like mom does when she's pissed at me for something petty. Her chin tips up in a snobby manner, and I suck air between my teeth before I lose my cool and punch a hole in the wall.

"Just fucking tell me what happened!"

Charlie's talented at finding a nerve and smashing it into unrecognizable particles of desolation and anger. I don't have the energy to deal with her.

"Can you just go back to your dorm, kiss, and makeup with her or something?" My body pulsates in pain from being ambushed by Brody.

"No." Of course, my sister focuses on herself.

"Fuck Charlie, I have to take a piss."

"Then tell me before I give you a black eye to go with your fat lip!"

"If you weren't so judgmental all the damn time, Payton would probably feel more comfortable telling you the shit that happened."

"I don't judge her. Something happened at that party and you know it too."

I let out a hysterical laugh. "You judge everyone and always have an opinion on how Payton dresses and acts."

"Okay, her grunge punk look is cute to an extent. I know what's in style and what looks good on her. I'm a damn good friend." Charlie places two hands on her waist and flutters her eyes.

"Fuck dude, if she doesn't do what you want, then you'd have a complete fit and ignore her for days. Last month, her mom pawned the diamond necklace her father bought for her birthday. You told her to stop crying and get over herself."

"That necklace was vintage! Only old ass women wear shit like that."

"You don't even realize how fucked up you are."

"No, I guess I don't." Charlie's face crumbles and her eyes wander down to her bare feet. "But what's fucked up is both of you lying to me."

"You need to stop. Leave her alone."

Charlie clears her throat. "When did you become so overly protective of her?"

"She's my friend too."

"Since when? You used to bully her freshmen year and call her flat-chested. Then you'd shoot spit wads at us. You're no better. I'd catch her crying in the bathroom all the time because of something you said."

"I'm not an asshole anymore. Plus, she finally grew a nice rack."

Charlie grabs dirty clothes from my floor and throttles them at me. I hold out my hands, march to her, and snag her before she throws something else at my face.

"Just fucking tell me what happened!"

"Ask her yourself." I use my shoulder to push her to the wall, but she storms right back, shoves all her weight into me, and thrashes her fists on my chest.

"I want to hear it from you!"

My blood boils over into a vaporizing puddle of fury, and I shout, "I punched Brody in the locker room because he sent her videos of that night. I've played Dirty Roulette too, are you happy now?"

She lowers her fisted hands, and they collapse to her side. Footsteps pound down the hallway, and both Charlie and I turn our heads in sync with Nick and Jared.

"I swear if I hear you two screaming at each other again, I'm dragging both your asses to the curb!" Nick complains. "God Damn, my ears hurt!"

"Oh my god!" Charlie tilts her head dramatically letting out one of her hormonal groans. "Screw you and your stupid fraternity!"

She storms out of the house slamming the front door and making sure everyone can hear. I head to the bathroom and throw up the toilet seat to piss.

I might be that guy who can drink his weight in beer all night and still pass a calculus test in the morning hungover, but I'm a fucking wreck right now. I'm unable to clean or unpack the rest of the boxes leaving my room a mess. This place makes me miserable. Fuck, I need fresh air.

I flush and it dawns on me and I whip out my cell.

Ryder: It's a bit late, will you still meet me?

Payton: Sure, there is a playground on 7th. Can we meet there?

Ryder: I'll be there in fifteen.

I storm out of the bathroom and slide out the screen door. That playground is two blocks away, and once I cross the main street it's right there.

A gangly man with greasy hair and rotting teeth hunches over on the corner of a building. I'm sure it's the random homeless guy who appears out of nowhere and struts around the campus with cheap beer, wearing a yellow thong, and demanding spare change.

I cross a street and pass the sign stating in bold that the park closes at nine. It's past ten, and I don't have the slightest care. Dim orange lights cover the sidewalk path that circles the park. Finding Payton is easy. If she's ever taken to a playground, her guilty pleasure is swaying on the swings or spinning on a creaking merry-go-round.

After circling the park once, I find the playground covered in pitch-black shadows. She's lying flat on the rusty Merry-go-round with a foot kicking the sand as she turns. The screen on her phone is bright and illuminates her plump cheeks.

As I approach, I spot the little cities she drew with a black Sharpie on the white toe cap. Funny how old habits die hard. In high school she stole markers from my room when I wasn't looking. She'd sit on my bed and draw away. There were a few times she stayed while I did my homework. She was so focused on drawing those cities. It never dawned on me until now that I couldn't concentrate.

I was more immersed in her long-tangled hair hanging over her tan legs and how her chin rested on her kneecap. She's like a deity bathed in lavender and gasoline. It's a shame I'm only realizing that now as I stand over her.

I grab the metal bars and halt the spin. I gape into her blue eyes. She pulls headphones out of her ears while some screaming music blasts through the speakers.

"Hey," I say.

"I'm so sorry for getting you into trouble." Payton sits up and stares down at her feet, swirling dirt up in the air.

"No, it's okay."

"It's all my fault." Payton's lower lip sticks out into a pout, and her eyes grow glassy. "I'm going to ruin my friendship with Charlie and any respect you've ever had for me. I can't forgive myself!" Her hands meet her eyes, and my heart constricts.

"Hey, hey... no," I plop down next to her and wrap an arm around her shoulder. Her head falls on my chest. Tears slip from the corner of her cheeks.

My throat thickens. "We're benched for our first game as of right now. That's it. Coach is clueless you were in there."

"Charlie is pissed, and she knows something is up," she says.

"Well, you are guilty of keeping secrets from her."

"She keeps thinking I landed on Brody."

"We both know that bottle picked someone else..."

She pulls away and uses the sleeves to rub the bottom of her eyes. "I tried talking Brody down after Coach grilled us for an hour straight."

"And..."

"He has a sweet spot for Charlie, but there is something about you..."

"Me?"

"In all honesty, you're on his bucket list of chicks he wants to fuck."

"I rather go to hell."

I'm silent. I push away the hair sticking to her tear-stained cheeks. Stroking her velvet skin, my gaze rivets on her face and my eyes stray down to her cleavage, peaking out of her tank top. Without hesitation, she folds the hoodie over her chest.

"Have you told anyone?" She asks.

"Jared knows," I say. She lowers her gaze to the gravel and shrugs me off with a shoulder. Shit. Wrong answer. I'm horrible at reading a girl's mind or interpreting what exactly they want from me. "You mad?"

"No..." She shakes her head, staring at her shoes. "It's fine..." She kicks up dust.

"You sound upset."

"I'm not," she grumbles.

"Look, nothing is going to change between us. Charlie and you should have been born sisters because you two are obnoxious together."

Payton coughs up a soft laugh and says, "Yeah..."

"I'll do whatever I can to protect you. I wasted three years doing the same for Brittini... but..."

"You're not over her, are you?"

"I don't know, I just don't... I... ugh... That's not what I'm trying to say."

Payton lays back down on the hard metal. I sweep off the dirt on the merry-go-round and follow her lead. City lights dull out the night sky. Stars barely exist up there. There are a couple of constellations visible, but not much of anything else.

"Look I was a nervous wreck in high school. It was like a fire alarm was going off in my head anytime a girl tried to talk to me. I can't explain it, I met Brittini, and I dunno. Things change I guess."

"Oh..." She rubs her upper arm, and it's like her gaze is far beyond my reach.

"I didn't think she was in my league. I'm sorry if that's not what you want to hear." A round of bullets plunges into my chest. Jumping the gun on a new relationship is the last thing on my mind. "I don't want to give you the wrong impression."

I can't read her face. It's like a gray curtain covers her in shadow. One second, I think she likes me, the next I'm the worst human being on the planet.

"So, you aren't then." She scratches the edge of her hairline and turns her head sideways.

"I'm still a bit sore, and I won't be giving her another chance." I suck in a deep breath and hold in the pain burning through my veins. Biting my tongue and shutting the hell up is warranted or I'll make it worse. My feelings toward her and Brittni are polar opposites.

The cell in my pocket vibrates. I pull it out and swipe open my messages.

Charlie: Have you seen Payton?

Ryder: No, why?

Charlie: Forget it. You're such a liar.

I slip the phone back into my pocket and Payton is chewing her thumbnail.

"I have class early. Message me when you get back to the dorms." I sit up and scoot off the Merry-go-round.

"Boo, you stink," Payton props herself up with both elbows and jumps off. She waves goodbye and scurries down the sidewalk. No hug, nothing but coldness. I can't read her at all, everything she does and says gets me lost in a maze.

I take the twenty-minute walk back through the alleys with dense clouds looming under the crescent moon. When I reach the house, I slip back through the screen door. Once I get into my room, I crack the window open and collapse on the mattress. It squeaks as I adjust myself and try to sleep.

MY EYES PRY OPEN when the creak of the window hits my eardrums. Tiny fingers push the screen and a backpack dumps on my mattress. A girl in a black hoodie and Converse plops right onto my bed.

"Tell me I'm dreaming," I groan and cover my eyes with a hand.

"Charlie's not there." It's Payton again, she must be trying to escape her demons. Her long black hair is sodden, and eyeliner smears down her puffy cheeks. I glance at the alarm clock on the nightstand, it's one in the morning.

"Okay," I say and scrounge around the trash on the nightstand for a bottle of water. The sight of Payton with watery eyes stops me from twisting off the cap. Fuck, she's crying, again. Her shoulders sag, and I sit up beside her on the mattress. She takes a handful of my silk shirt before weeping into my chest.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I'm not sorry."

"Not sorry about what?"

"For landing on you... I'm not sorry."

"You're impossible. Can you at least let me sleep?" I ask.

"No..."

Why me? I don't know if I can tolerate her emotions when my head is about to combust from the deprivation of sleep I've already lost. "Why?"

"Because I can't sleep." This girl is hanging me upside down letting the blood rush to my head. "I dunno where Charlie went, either."

"Yeah... sounds like her. Are you surprised?"

"No."

I take hold of her bruised knuckles as they are now molding into a dark blue with blotches of purple. "You need ice, bad and a splint." I clear the lump in my throat.

"Yeah, I know."

"Did you eat anything tonight?" I rub a thumb softly over her hand. Today's life utopia included her hot pink nails breaking too. She's silent, and it tells me all I need to know.

"Well, if we aren't sleeping, we're drinking." I turn on the bedside lamp and reach behind my mattress, where I stash the Hennessy. The cap twists off and I take a shot. It burns, snaking down my throat. I pass the bottle to Payton, and she sips.

I slide off the bed and grab the trash on the nightstand, dumping rubbish laying all over my room into the trashcan. I pinch the black banana peels, crush soda cans, and toss half-eaten hot pockets. "Sorry, I've been a slob the past few days."

Payton pulls the hoodie over her head, revealing a thin, light pink tank top with no bra on. Fucking hell, she's doing it on purpose. She dips her head back and downs another shot then paws through her bag, yanking out a hairbrush and combing it through the feet of hair. Then she scrounges and finds one of my used towels. She wipes it under her eyes to remove her smeared makeup.

"You know that towel touched my balls, right?"

"Shut up!"

Payton slithers off the bed, staring at the wrappers sticking to her shoes. "If you help me fix my nails, I'll help you clean your room."

I raise an eyebrow and say, "That's an interesting proposition. Do I get to sleep afterward?"

"No," she says.

"Well, you are better at cleaning than me."

"And you have steadier hands...."

I seize the bottle and take another large gulp. Payton pulls off her sneakers, then peels off the paper stuck to her sole, and tosses it into the waste bin. Within ten minutes, the rubbish in my room overflows in the trash. Payton chucks dirty socks and boxers lodged behind the bed into a hamper. She's much better at organizing and finds everything nestled and stuffed in nooks and crannies.

When we're done, I bring in a large bowl of spaghetti with an extra fork to share. Payton slurps up the noodles getting red sauce stuck to

the side of her cheek. I'm crossed-legged on the bed, squinting at her nails, and steadily putting a fresh coat of hot pink polish on. She shovels the noodles and devours all the sweet sausages.

"You'll need seconds at the rate you're going," I say, finishing up the last coat on her hands. I tighten the lid on the bottle. "You realize they serve food at the dining halls until seven, right?"

"Are you calling me fat?" Payton asks, dipping her head up with a mouth full of noodles.

"I will if you tell anyone I sat here and painted your damn nails."

Payton flashes me a wide grin. She admires her freshly trimmed nails and the smooth coat, and she blows to help them dry. I snag the fork, twirl a huge chunk of spaghetti noodles, and shove it into my mouth.

While I chew, Payton picks up the bottle, twisting off the cap and brushes it across my big toenail without bending a finger. "Hey, hey no!"

"Here, I'll make you look beautiful like me," a half smile appears on her lips.

Netflix and Chill



Payton

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I strut into the girl's bathroom at four in the afternoon. Thirty minutes before the cheer team goes to practice. I dig out my makeup bag and plop it onto the counter, spilling out the contents. When I look into the mirror, I don't bother to gaze at myself. I stare at the stall door swinging back and forth behind me.

In Sharpie, someone wrote Brittni and Ryder's name, enclosing it in a cliché heart, saying they would be together forever.

My brain boils into mush seeing it. High school graffiti isn't extinct after graduation. I drop the bag off my shoulder and dig through the side pocket, finding my hidden stash of markers. I stomp to the door with my teeth gnashing on the marker's cap. My knuckles turn white as I cross out their names.

"Fuck you, Brittni!" I whisper, ensuring to scribble out every inch of the cherry red heart as if it would magically erase they were ever together, to begin with.

"Why didn't you call me back yesterday?" Charlie asks, and I leap from my feet and twirl around. Charlie drops her bag next to mine and gushes at herself in the mirror. Her ebony hair spirals down her shoulders, and her cheerleading uniform encompasses her curves. Flat and bare is all I see in my reflection.

"You weren't at the dorm when I got back."

"And you weren't there when I got there at one. Where were you?"

"Nowhere fun..." I say.

"Do your spankies give you wedgies? I swear to God, mine are too small," Charlie complains and runs a finger along the outline of her spandex briefs to cover her thighs. I suck in the lodge of emotions caught in my throat and swallow hard.

"Are we not talking or something?" Charlie frowns at me through the mirror.

"I'm embarrassed about it... The whole thing...."

"I would be too," Charlie snags the eyeliner from my makeup bag and touches up the corner of her eyes. "But the good thing is everyone is saying Brody got his ass kicked by a girl. Your totally Cheerleading material."

"I guess..."

"Oh, by the way, have you seen Ryder's bloody knuckles? He posted it on his Instagram, and it's gnarly."

The fact he posted anything on Instagram about it makes my stomach churn and tie itself into knots. He probably did it to uphold his ego and to gain attention from other girls who drool over him. I swallow down unshed tears constraining their fingers around my neck.

I'm unsure what words to start with or how to explain the debts of betrayal, gutting, and stabbing the flesh of my heart. There is no way to climb out of this bottomless pit I'm stuck in. At this very minute I could just tell her everything, confess I landed on her brother, but the voices in my head whisper about how unworthy I am to be with him.

"Oh my god, I have to tell you something!"

"Okay..." I say.

"I'm sure you'll really like Noah's music. I managed to still see him practice. His voice is sexy as hell," Charlie bats her eyes in the mirror, leaning over the ceramic sink and applying a coat of mascara.

"So, is he your boyfriend now?" I ask.

"Well, I think it would be good for me to not be so attached to you. I think it will be good for you to get out more too. Meet some guys."

I lean against the metal between the stall doors and stare at all the graffiti scribbled on the peeling paint. I spot writing in red Sharpie I didn't catch before. Ryder's name is carved in cursive, and a thick ball of bricks lands right in my stomach. "Payton's gonna have sex with Crab."

"Oh shit..." My heart caves in.

"What?"

I grab the black marker off the counter and race over to the writing. Charlie struts behind me, and she chews the inside of her cheek.

A smug smile molds on her lips. "She is such a bitch. Get over yourself!" Charlie chuckles like it's the funniest thing in the world. "This girl is out of her fucking mind. Give me that marker!" she snags it from my fingertips and crosses out the remark.

"Over my dead body, bitch!" She snarls as she writes it down in a fit of rage. She emphasizes the exclamation mark before snapping the cap on and handing the marker back.

"Now, let's fix your hair." I follow Charlie over to the counter and plop myself up as she works her magic. She partly braids my hair in pigtail buns, leaving a layer of my natural curls to flow down my back. She adds two green bows to match the university's colors. Styling hair comes naturally to Charlie. Half the time, my buns look like an abandoned bird's nest.

We link arms leaving the bathroom, and Charlie's curls sway behind her back, staying intact without the frizz that always dominates my hair when it's humid and rainy.

I miss high school. Whenever we made our entrance, it's like those stupid Netflix Teenage movies where everyone turns in our direction.

Jaws would fall wide open with eyes superglued to our legs. Books fell from guy's hands, and girls would smack their sleazy boyfriends.

We reach our spot on the football field for practice. Our bags drop from our shoulders, and we prop ourselves on the bottom seats on the bleachers. Ryder and the team are running laps. He wears his football jersey, the same as the other players. Charlie finds the squad talking shit about our professors, hating them with passion.

I glance at Ryder getting tugged away from his lap as Brittni stops him. Hands rest on his hips, and he dips his head back breathing heavily. Beads of sweat glisten and carve out the muscles of his biceps. Even his thighs are bulging with power. When he moves the right way his penis pokes out of the fabric of his shorts, and I can't stop staring.

Brittni twirls hair around a finger, biting her lip with her two front teeth. I want to hurl. She flips her straight blonde hair and wraps her arms around his neck. The pit of my stomach twists into tight coils, gawking as she kisses him on the cheek with red lipstick. The color is too bright for her skin tone. He gently pushes her off but she swats playfully at his chest and carves a hand through his bedhead. Fuck, she severs my head off.

She's too close, breathing in his sweat, and it's unnerving because I want to breathe in it. The horror swallows me up. He'll be escorting her down an altar and for whatever reason the feeling makes me want to put a gun to my head. A sour aftertaste builds in my mouth. My chest is raw and clawing at me to go over there to revert his attention.

"Aww, how cute," Charlie gags herself with a middle finger and nudges me on the shoulder. "Not."

"He's not over her," I mutter out.

"I swear she probably has some voodoo doll in her closet with pictures of Ryder, and she secretly performs witchcraft on him." Charlie swats my arm.

"Who cares right?"

"She tries too hard, and it's annoying." I bring a leg up to my chest and wrap my arms around it. Half of my shoelace hangs over my soles untied, but I could give two shits right now. I want a thousand-pound brick to land on top of Brittini and squish her.

"You could pull down your shirt a little and show off your boobs." Charlie wiggles her brows.

"Shut up."

"Last night, he told me you have a nice rack," Charlie presses her thumbnail to her upper lip, flashing her sparkling blue nails that almost appear like lion claws.

"Be honest for once and tell me... Do you think my brother is cute?" She dips her head to the side.

I cover up my laugh and say, "You'd disown me."

"Yeah, you're right. It would be weird if my best friend dated my brother. Can you imagine? And what sucks is all the girls here want him. I think you're too sweet and I'd hate to see the jealous tendencies, fighting, isolation from all your friends, plus the sex that isn't even good. If you two did date and broke up, I'd be torn in the middle of you two. So yeah, I refuse to put up with that shit."

"Does sex really suck? All the other cheerleaders rave about it or how big someone's dick is."

Charlie bursts into laughter. "Payt, half the guys don't even know what a clitoris is. Remember Brody?"

"Does it hurt? You know... when you lose your virginity?" I ask and stray my eyes back over toward Ryder. The other girls swarm around him.

"Why?" Charlie asks and steps in front of me to block the view of Ryder. "Can you just tell me who you landed on?"

"No one. I'm just curious."

"Come on, you won't quit staring at him."

"I'm not staring." I roll my eyes. The coach comes out with a notebook in his hand calling over the players to run plays.

"Payton," Charlie holds out the palm of her hands, her eyebrows narrowing. "You're on edge. Do you want some magic water to get you through practice? I have some in my bag." Charlie twists her bag in front of her, unzipping it and showing me the hydro flask, she stores booze in.

"No, I'm fine. I didn't sleep much last night," I say and slowly backpedal to our squad leader not too far behind Coach and rallies us up with a whistle. I do everything possible not to turn my gaze back to Ryder as he gears up. The helmet with the number eleven slides onto his head. My heart throbs when Ryder glances over, and I pick up my poms.

We start with basic cheers, our voices ring out in unison with simple choreography that's easy to remember. The squad dulls the roar of the football team calling out plays. The linemen hit blocking sleds. Other players grunt and shout, blending in with clashing pads. The cheers come out of my mouth, but my eyes are locked on the ball as Brody throws it across the field and Ryder dives in and catches it.

Water bottles and protein bars are tossed at us at the end of practice. I'm thirsty, my tongue is dry and solidifies to the roof of my mouth.

Charlie sits down next to me on the bench.

"Hey, I'm gonna go shower and hang out with Noah for a bit." She squirts water into her mouth. Beads of sweat melt down her flushed cheeks. "You cool with it?"

"Yeah, do what you want."

"You're going out?" Ryder comes over pulling off his helmet. He reeks of sweat and socks, and oddly I'm not heaving into the bushes.

"Yeah, my friend is buying me food," Charlie says.

"So, I can have cutie over here?" He asks.

"You want to hang out with Payton?" Charlie furrows her brow and gives him a sly grin. "Why are you asking me permission?"

"Do you wanna come over? We are ordering pizza." Ryder turns to me as I wrap my entire mouth around the rim of the water bottle and dip my head backward. It's the only way to avoid the question entirely, and maybe he'll smile and wish me well for the night.

"Ew, you are backwashing! You're disgusting!" Charlie crunches the plastic water bottle pushing a mouthful down my windpipe and I choke. She yanks it from my lips and I spit water like a fire hydrant and all of it is in his direction. Ryder uses a hand to cover his face.

"Seriously!" He finds an unopened bottle, twists the cap, and douses us. Shriek breaks out of our mouths as it's icy cold. "Yeah, that's what you get!"

Payton

ONE STEP OUT OF MY UNDERWEAR the door swings open, letting the cold air flood in before I hop into the steamy shower.

Charlie invites herself in, kicking the door shut. "You could knock!" I shriek and cover up my chest with an arm.

"Is that a Brazilian?" Charlie points a finger. I swivel around with a heart about to rip out of my throat.

"It's not like you don't shave down there!" I pull the shower curtain to the side and let the water run over my back. There is no way I'm going to spill the bad decisions I made in searching up tutorials on how to do it.

"Okay, you've never shaved down there before! How many times have I seen you naked?"

I tug the curtain back and say, "I don't need you up my ass about my grooming habits!" She wipes the foggy mirror with a hand and pulls out a stick of neutral shade of lipstick and applies it.

"Well, enjoy the greasy pizza." She places the lipstick on the counter and blows me a kiss. As quickly as she came in, she's out the door.

When I'm done showering and the condensation starts to clear in the mirror I put on a light coat of mascara and stare at the long-sleeved crop top I picked out. It's white, but my bra leaves creases and its outlines look weird. Frustrated, I unclip the bra and toss it to the floor then readjust myself in the mirror.

Now my nipples peak out, and they seem smaller. The frustration is coming out of nowhere. I'm going over there to eat Pizza, with cheese and pepperoni. The shirt is doomed to die from sauce so why am I in such a panic that my palms are sweaty?

The lipstick gives me a death glare. I pick it up and look at the name caramel nude. The cap pops open, and it's a rosy beige. I try it out for myself.

Checking my phone it's a little past seven, and I dip out of the dorms. The walk isn't too far away, but the closer I get, the more nervous I am. My chest aches, I can barely breathe. The voice in my head tells me to chill out because I shaved my legs, but I might have missed a spot. I pass the courtyard and cross the main street at a traffic light.

Once I'm standing on the sidewalk, the front door is too daunting. I round the house and find Ryder's window cracked open. With two hands I push it up and crawl my way in, landing on top of Ryder's mattress with a plop.

He is at his desk typing on the computer. "You know, there is a front door?" He swivels around and pulls off a pair of nerdy glasses. I weasel off my backpack and slink out of my black sweater.

"Yeah... umm I know."

I gulp and glance at my chest, biting down on my bottom lip with the bitter truth that my nipples are poking out.

I catch a whiff of his woodsy body wash and a faint hint of sweaty socks. Ryder is shirtless with a pair of gray sweats. He kicks his dirty clothes into a pile the size of Mt. Everest.

A light in the hall flickers off, and little thuds make their way down the hallway.

"Hungry?" He stands up. Gray sweatpants rode low on his lean hips and revealed a hard flat belly. His penis is poking out again, and my thighs are on fire. He closes his door slowly with a light click. My voice is tangled up in my throat and I jerk my shoulders in a sloppy shrug.

This is it, he's walking over to me with his six-pack and glorious muscles. I'm like jelly, my knees are going to buckle at any second now. Something between my legs is about to burst, and my heart pounds. It's the charcoal eyes. No wait, it's the messy fuckboy haircut. He's a drug that won't stay down. I'm anticipating him grabbing me by the waste and stripping me to nothing, and my mouth waters.

But that's not what he does. He slugs onto the mattress and pulls out that bottle of Hennessy, twisting off the cap. "Want some?" He holds it out fucking depressed, and he's drinking it like he wishes it was fatal.

"Sure..." I sit down on the bed, and stupidly I tried looking gorgeous for him. He's staring at the floor when my nipples are poking out of this damn lose shirt. If he peaked underneath he'd see my entire rack, but I take a shot. I let myself gag as it coats my throat and burns when it reaches my stomach.

The phone on his nightstand goes off, and at the corner of my eye, the name Brittni pops up. Ryder slides it open, and it's legit only messages from her, but no responses from him. He reads it then tosses it.

He runs a hand over his face and groans. Without hesitation, he grasps the liquor and takes another swig. "I'm already so fucking tired. I got a paper to write." He points the bottle at the computer.

Fuck. I'm awkward. Say something. "Someone wrote your name all over the bathroom stalls in the girl's bathroom." It slides off my tongue attempting to make conversation.

Ryder dips the bottle to his lips. "Cute, what did it say..." He hands it back to me, and I take a shot. This must be his nightly routine. Drinking out of this bottle until he passes out.

"That you're hot..."

The cell buzzes on the nightstand again and her name appears. Ryder yanks it from the charger and holds the power button. When the screen turns black another shot slips down his throat.

"I'm sorry..." He says. "She's been hard to deal with." A hand runs through his hair, and the look in his eyes makes me wish the world never saw me to begin with.

I pin my arms over my chest. "I saw her kiss you on the field."

"We aren't getting back together. It won't click in her head. If I never played fucking roulette then maybe I wouldn't have broken her so much."

"Charlie said you two both lost each other's virginity that night."

"Yeah..."

The tip of his tongue ran between his lips. "Okay umm... the writing said you and I are hooking up and Charlie had a cow. Then she stole my sharpie and wrote over my dead body." I giggle. Ryder scoffs with a grin perking up on one side of his face, but his mouth sinks into a sad smile.

"Sometimes she tries to be a good sister and a good friend," he whispers under his breath. The doorbell rings, and footsteps scurry down the hallway.

I follow him out into the kitchen where Snoop holds five gigantic boxes in his hands and puts them on the table.

"Dog, you think you ordered enough," Snoop asks and opens one of the boxes with melted cheese all over the place. The pepperonis look delicious and coated in the perfect amount of grease.

"Bruh, I got wings too!" Jared digs into another box. Other football players huddle at the table fighting for the plastic plates, and the liter of Pepsi.

Ryder lifts the pizza over his head, the cheese sliding right off into his mouth. "Want to watch a movie?" He asks in mid-chew. "You need to eat more than that." He stares down at the tiny slice on my plate and snatches a fatter piece. "Eat this one too."

"Bossy much?" I ask.

"Guess you're going to have to listen." I follow him back to his room, and he props his computer on the edge of the bed, skimming through the different movies on Netflix. First, it's the action thrillers, then horror. He's unhinged when reaching the romance. After ten minutes of his brain not making a decision, I crawl over and cover his eyes with both hands.

"I can't pick a movie if I can't see." He chuckles and pulls on one of my fingers.

"No, pick one without looking. You're driving me insane. We'll be staring at titles all night at this rate."

"I'm not that bad."

"Just pick one."

"Fine." He spins his finger and points at the screen, and he finds the most ridiculous corny horror movie out there.

"That's a good one!" I gush.

"When Mars Attacks?" He looks over his shoulder. I bite my bottom lip and nod. We prop up some pillows and the movie starts. We finish eating and place our empty plates on the nightstand.

Every other scene he's chuckling under his breath as none of it makes sense. The aliens have eyes-bulging. Their brains are legit pul-

sating and it's the best invention on the planet. He's laughing hard at laser guns blasting people in half.

At some point after sitting adjacent to each other for forty minutes, he leans his head on top of mine. I wrap an arm across his chest and pull one leg over him. He gathered me into his arms and held me snugly.

A light stroke of his fingers runs down my naval. The mere touch from him sent a warm shiver up my spinal cord. I'm hot and sweaty, my vagina screaming touch me. His hand sears a path down to my thighs. It aches. God, is this how it feels to be horny? Something must be wrong with me.

When I glance up at his face the screen flashes, casting shadows on all his rugged features. I gulp, lean in slightly, and peck his cheek. My lips stay there hovering close to his mouth. His eyes turn away from the movie, and he gives me a layered look. A hand brushes over the crease of my neck, while his other hand pushes up my crop top. I think my brain shut off. He's taking a handful of my breasts.

Ryder's breath quickens and his lips hover on mine. His pupils dilate as he squeezes my breasts peeking out. My nipples turn hard. He tugs and unfastens a button on my shorts.

Oh, shit. He's got experience and I'm clueless. "I don't know what I'm doing." Fuck, stop talking. That's not sexy at all. Shut up before you make his dick go limp.

"I can show you." He unzips the shorts, breathing harder with his hands between my thighs, and he rubs them against my panties. Ryder is touching me. I'm a statue, not moving. Fuck, do something. He's not going to get a boner with you just laying there like a dead body. He hesitates when he stretches the elastic. His fingers slip inside my panties, and uncovers a tight bundle of nerves I never knew existed. I gasp as his fingers massage me in a slow circle.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" He asks, with our mouths an inch apart.

I bit my bottom lip. "Mhm..." is the only thing that manages to break out of my windpipes. With one pull, my shorts are on the floor. His lips brush against mine as he says, "I'll go slow..." His gaze was riveted on my face, then moved over my body slowly.

"Okay." I coil my fingers around his hair and plant another peck on the side of his mouth. His hand stretches the seam of my panties, and I'm burning up, my face on fire as his fingers rub gently. A bolt of electricity sizzles up into my chest and my breath is stolen right out of my lungs.

Oh god, that's his penis. His hard-on rubs against my leg. My brain goes haywire as I've never touched one, or seen one in my entire existence. Never mind, scratch that. I've seen one on a porn sight, but this is front row seats. It's Ryder's. Holy shit, it's Ryders. I'm breathing harder into his mouth and my groin is grinding in his hand as he strokes faster.

I want him to kiss me, but the only thing I manage to do is breathe out his name. "Ryder." And he crashes into my lips, his tongue brushing the roof of my mouth.

Something intense and foreign grows ready to explode at any second. I keep losing the feeling, and it comes back slightly stronger. I'm desperate and I moan into his mouth.

My brain melts like a nuclear reactor when my fingertips reach the seam of his sweatpants and graze his penis. It's impossible to ignore. He pushes them down to his waistline and guides my hands onto his length.

"I've never..." He pushes my hair to the side, sending it over a shoulder, and kisses my neck. He whispers into my ear. "Like this." He shows me the movements and how to rub over the tip. "Now go a

little faster," He breathes into my mouth, and I nod. I closed a hand around his erection, tracing each vein as I massaged him.

"Fuck... like that." He kisses the pulsing hollow at the base of my throat and sucks on my neck hard in between his groans.

His skin is soft, and he stares directly into my eyes as I go faster. "Shit..." He says and continues where he left off, rubbing my gem. Right in that moment I'm in heaven, there is no way I can think straight. All I can process is his groaning, my slit sopping wet, and the rough texture of his fingers sending me over the edge.

He's thrusting into my closed fist. "That feels good." We are both erratic, kissing one moment, he's cursing and sucking on my neck, then out of breath the next.

I'm boiling over, drowning in my own skin as the sensations come rippling back. It scatters like electricity. "Holy shit." It pours out of me, and I'm squirming all over the place. I couldn't think straight and I'm panting.

"That's it, cutie. Fucking come for me."

"Don't stop, oh my god." I thrust into his hand, and I'm high off the climax. "Ryder." He brushes his lips along mine and I stroke him faster.

"Oh fuck...coming." He groans the sexiest sound I think I ever heard. Ryder Henderson is hot as hell having an orgasm from my virgin self. I don't have a clue what the hell I'm doing. His charcoal eyes look deep into mine like he's in love. His thrusting slows down and he begins to quiver. "Fuck, Payton." He spills out on top of my hands, shaking all over. Shit, I forgot about that part. Semen. All over my fingers, but I'm still going, stroking his length.

"Fuck..." He moans and I haven't let go, "Payton," He laughs. "Oh god stop." I let go. He pecks me on the lips before getting up to grab a Kleenex on the nightstand to wipe off my hands, and the leftovers on his length. I'm trying to simmer down, but the movie credits are

rolling over his computer screen. My heart jolts and my pulse pounds. I became instantly awake, fully aware of my surroundings. Then the unholiness sinks in what I just did with him.

I find my shorts, button and zip them up.

"I should get going..." I say, gathering my things.

"Umm yeah..."

"I'll see you tomorrow." I kiss him on the cheek before I grab my things and leave the bedroom in a hurry

The Hickey



Payton

THE NEXT MORNING, I roll into the bathroom wishing I was run over by a car and left to die like roadkill. The mirror paints a canvas on my neck displaying a perfect bruise with haunting shades of purple and pink.

I scrounge around my makeup bag, lathering the spot with primer and foundation. The blender needs to be fired by the HR department because it's offending my very soul by not covering it up.

Nothing I do seems to fix my current situation. Pulling my hair in front of my shoulder doesn't hide the evidence clear as day. A judge would even say I'm guilty.

"Hurry up! Other people need to shower..." Someone pounds on the door. I'm out of time and energy, and wasting a bottle of foundation won't spare me now.

I gather my things and unlock the door. When it opens, Brittni runs her fingers over her cherry lipstick like she got done sucking someone off. The bitch doesn't live in the dorms but at the sorority, yet she's here at six in the morning shooting me an arsenal look. She pulls a strand of my hair aside and a chuckle comes out from her mouth.

"How cute..." She pushes her shoulder into me and shoves me out of the bathroom before slamming the door behind me.

Fuck. She saw the hickey. If she spotted it with me covering it up with a pound of makeup, then Charlie will figure out her brother is sucking on my neck. I rush back to the dorm room, and Charlie's gone, her sheets all over the floor with her dirty clothes.

I slam open the closet plowing through the shirts for something to cover my neck. It hits like a hurricane. She'll rip me limb from limb and crucify me on an inverted cross. There will be no shoulder for me to lean on, and I rather hang my head than lose her as a friend over this.

One word, and without any doubt, she will move out of the dorm. I'm such a fucking liar. The label makes my ears ring and bleed at the same time. She tells me all her dark secrets and the thought digs deeper into my heart and shatters it like glass.

If I sit there and lose my virginity to Ryder, nothing about him and I will ever be the same. It'll be a miracle if my friendship with him stays the same, but he'll treat me like a dog and its bone. Rip it apart and bury it in the backyard where it's gone and forgotten. Everything beautiful about Ryder makes me unstable, and he's the death of any peace of mind remaining within me.

If it was any other guy in the world, I'd confess how it feels, and with it being my first time doing anything, I'm sure the firing neurons rampaging in my bloodstream was how she described an orgasm. But it was her brother. It was his hands, his lips, it was her God damn unholy brother. There aren't any words to narrate it, but our friendship will go out of frame once a hole is cut through the center of the truth.

Ryder

THE GOOD NEWS, Payton gives the best hand jobs. The bad news, Brittni's subtle post online is calling Payton out with that child-

ish nickname, Trash. If the boys heard us last night it would be odd for them to mention it. They wouldn't walk around the campus pointing out a hickey on her neck. Girls brought back to the frat house get their names tossed under the rug, and we don't talk about it outside.

Brittni's post crawls under my skin reading it. It's worse than I thought.

EW the Trash got a hickey. Not even a fifty-year-old deadbeat would want to touch her. If she really thinks she can get with a running back, she's out of her fucking mind.

A hammering knock on the front door echoes through the house. I kick the sheets and sit up in bed. The pounding doesn't stop as I open the bedroom door and scuffle down the hall. The clock on the stove blinks 6:45. I rub the sand out of my eyes as I reach the door.

I unlock the deadbolt and slide it open with Payton on the other side. "Hey cutie," I unlatch the lock on the screen door, and it squeaks as she slips in.

"You always up this early?" I ask. She throws her bag to the floor and crumbles in one of the dining room chairs.

She's in a black turtleneck crop top that shows off her hourglass naval. My mouth waters as I can't peel my eyes off the matching tight leggings and Converse.

"I have a..." She tugs the collar of her shirt and stares into the abyss.

"I know... Brittni dropped the bomb on a random post not even fifteen minutes ago."

"Are you serious?"

"It can't be that bad."

She pulls down the neck of the shirt, and it stares me in the eyes. All my sins bite back at me. I tattooed last night right on her skin. "Oh, wow. I left a monster there..." A chuckle slips off my lips.

"It's not funny!" Her cheeks burn in crimson fire, and then her eyes start to water. "I can't cover it up! I tried all morning!"

"Calm down, give me a second." I huff and go over to the fridge, and pry open the freezer digging in the ice tray gathering several ice cubes.

Opening drawers left and right I search the kitchen until I find a lonely Ziploc bag and seal the ice. I scoot a chair in front of her and sit down with the ice searing my fingertips off.

"Let me see." One tug of her shirt and I place the frigid bag right on that bad-boy. "Hold it there." She does what she's told, and I pull my cell out of my pocket and stare down at Brittni's social media and the comments flooding the post. A cinder block weighs heavy on my chest dreading to click on it, or see who's laughed and swarmed it with angry faces like a colony of wasps.

Then it comes back and all I can think about is how wet Payton was, the sweet desperation in her innocence, and me milking it until I came all over her hands like a slob. Now Brittni can't handle me touching someone else. In the pits of my heart, I like the thought of her suffering over it. She deserves it.

"Do you have a tube of chapstick in your bag?" I ask.

"Umm..." She leans over the armrest unzipping a small pocket and paws around. It's a tube of lipstick, the same shade she wore last night. "Here." She slaps it into my palm.

"Okay, pull the ice away."

She does, and I push her tangled hair to the opposite shoulder. "Lean a bit." Her eyes roll, and I take the tip of the tube and rub it into her neck.

"Ow!" She smacks my hand away. "That hurts!"

"Do you want me to help you or not?"

"Yesss."

"Fucking stop and lean your head back."

She grumbles under her breath and I take the tip of the lipstick and twirl it around to break up the blood vessels I popped. God damn, she's a pain. After a couple of minutes, I put the ice pack back on her neck and held it there. The ice burns my fingers red and sears the tips off. The condensation drips down her shirt, and it's sopping wet.

"What did Brittini post?" She asks and her opal eyes take a quick glance at me, then back to her fingers where she's picking at her cuticles.

"I'll deal with it." I peel the ice off, and she leans her head as I push the tip of the lipstick back on the hickey working it in circles.

"But Charlie...."

"Stop it!" I press the ice against her neck. "At some point, you're going to have to tell her. Why can't you get that through your stubborn skull."

"You don't get it."

"God, you're annoying."

"And you're an ass for giving me a hickey."

"You could have told me to stop at any time, but you asked me not to. Fuck, you wanted it as much as I did." My head is shaking, and she is silent again. Tattoo the word asshole on my forehead, but I'm doing her a favor as I care about her more than I'd like to and more than she knows. Someone's gotta tell her like it is.

I peel the ice back, and the blood vessels are clearing up turning into a pink. Scrolling through videos in the middle of the night sometimes teaches you interesting tricks and I finally get to try out one that actually works.

"How many times have you two fought and didn't talk for weeks straight, but legit come back to each other? You two are fucking superglue on steroids."

"But it's you," she says.

"Who fucking cares if it's me. She'll get over it, and I'm not going to sit here and tell you I regret giving you this hickey."

"But this is going to change fucking everything. How the hell are we going to move on from it, or even be friends afterwards."

"Who says we won't be friends?"

"I'm giving you something of me I'm not getting back."

"It's only going to change if you choose it to."

After another round of ice and putting enough pressure on her neck, the mark fades into her soft skin tone as if last night was erased.

"Look." I put my phone into camera mode and turn it to her face. She takes it and rubs the tips of her fingers where the mark was.

"How did you know how to do that?"

"Magic."

"Fuck you." She lifts the phone at an angle, flips the bird, and snaps a picture.

"What the hell are you doing?" She twists around in the chair leaning over it at the same second I try to catch it out of her hand.

"Give me that." I get off the chair. She is clicking random buttons and doing something in my settings. I reach for a common tickle spot above her waist. A cute laugh fills the kitchen.

"Okay, okay." She swats a hand at me to stop. "Here." The phone is tossed back to me. When I turn on the screen the wallpaper is the damn selfie of her flipping off the camera. For what it's worth, I think I'll leave it there.

"Cute... What time do you have class?" I ask and lean against the armrests supporting my weight.

"At ten..."

"Oh... then you're coming with me!" I tug her wrist pulling her off the chair.

"What the hell!" She yells with her hair falling over her face as I throw her over my shoulder. Little fists bang on my back. "Put me down!" She laughs and kicks her feet as I carry her through the hallway. I get to my room and use a foot to slam the door shut. "What are you doing?"

"This." I toss her to the bed with a thud. Then grab her by the ankles and pull her up against my waist. I run a hand over her cheeks and one look into her eyes and I cave in. She swings an arm around my neck and my mouth is on hers. Kissing and biting her bottom lip and her tongue plunges against mine.

Payton grinds her lower body in an agitated rhythm and the heat of her groin scorches my thigh. She's violent and my heart thumps wildly in my chest. She is minty and I can't help but flip her hair away from her neck and suck on her skin. Her teeth sink into my shoulder blade and a whiff of her fruity shampoo greets me.

"You're going to give me another hickey" She whimpers out and her sweet soft moan promptly turns my cock to granite. "I'll get rid of this one too."

Wicked thoughts run through my mind on all the things I want to do to her. It's a couple of minutes past seven, and I have three hours to waste, and making her come again has all of my attention.

"Get rid of this." I fist the bottom of her shirt, rip it over her head throw it onto the floor, and fall back to her lips. "No bra?" I say in the middle of her soft tongue brushing against mine.

"No."

"Are you doing it on purpose?"

"Maybe." I run a hand down her chest and soak in the gorgeous view of her pink nubs. "Do you want this?"

With my heart pounding in my ears, I reach to the seam of her leggings ready to tear them down to her knees. "Fuck..." she arches her back practically fucking my thigh.

"I'll take that as a yes."

With her heels, she kicks off her Converse and the leggings are on the edge of the bed. Silky nude panties beg me to tear them off with my teeth. I'm not nice to them either and tangle them in a fist, and they're gone. I grasp her hips and push her closer to me. I spread her legs farther apart and bury my head in paradise. Brushing and kissing her wet opening makes her hips rock against my mouth as I ease a tongue over her clit.

With her hands tangled in my hair, she grinds my mouth in a slow rhythm. Her eyes misting over in pleasure and her innocence pants out a sweet sound. I suckle and lick all over doing everything but putting my mouth on her swollen bud.

My dick aches at the sound she makes as I play around with her like a cat does with its food. Toying with it, tempting it over the edge but not giving her the finale she's whimpering for.

When I feel her reaching the top of the mountain I pull away not ready to give her the gratification. She pissed me off and this is the nicest way for me to get my point across that she's a fucking pain.

I pull my sweatpants off, and she looks at me feverishly as she props herself up with an elbow. Her eyes are mixed with confusion and temptation. I grab her right hand and guide her like last night. She massages my hard-on. "I want you to try."

"Try?"

"Open your mouth." She props up, sits on her knees, and beats my meat harder. I realize she needs to be rewarded so I run my fingers down her belly, find her opening and stroke her slowly. She dips her head back and reels herself in, opening her mouth and taking my length in. She is tickling the head of my cock with a tongue, stroking

me. Fuck, her mouth is warm, her tongue working me the way I like it. "Fuck, like that." I'm seeing stars. She's getting sloppy and wet. She is erratic and a fucking natural. I take a fistful of her hair showing her the slow rhythm I want, thrusting gently, and soaking up the sight of her blowing me. She's sexy as hell.

The longer she milks it, the better the outcome. I massage her harder, finding her clit. She fucks my hand as if her life depends on reaching the end. She breaks off sucking me, panting with my dick still sliding in and out of her mouth.

"Fuck, I'm coming." There is no way for me to hold in my release. It's sizzling at the tip of my dick exploding right into her mouth. "Oh, shit Payton." Her eyes steam over as she pulls her lips off my dick and swallows my juices like it's frosting.

"Lay back down, I'm not done with you." I pull at her ankles again and go back down to her tangy honeyed opening and make sure to suck on her sweet spot. She is fucking my face again, grabbing a handful of my hair and thrusting into my tongue. Her thighs squeeze my face, and her breaths are uneven, and she whimpers shutting her eyes tight, and releases a soft sweet moan. Her legs tremble, and she explodes from my mouth.

When I know she's satisfied I pull away and lay a few kisses on her belly and trace my lips back up to her neck and face and plunge my tongue back in her mouth.

Pressing my chest on hers, she still grinds against my hard-on. Her wet opening taunts the tip of my dick. "Fuck, I want to," I admit. "I want too so bad."

"You do?" Her eyes scan me.

"Yeah, but I'm not ready to give you that." I peck her on the lips, brushing her hair away from her face, and kiss her again.

Checking the time on the clock, it's a couple minutes past eight. "I need to get ready," I run a hand along her neck, her lips dragging me back in. "You feel good now?"

"Yeah..."

I fist her panties bunched up by my pillow and place them into her palm. "What classes do you have?"

"It's Wednesday so I have algebra at ten, then French at one, and some earth science that is late, it's at six... you?"

"I can go to the weight room any time of the day for the credit. Otherwise, it's my capstone at nine and then it's electrical engineering for a good three hours at noon."

"Are you free tonight?" Her fingers carve down the crease of my back pushing me into her wet opening. The tip of my dick aching for more.

"I'll be working some closing shifts for the rest of the week, but when I am off are you gonna come visit me?"

"I dunno..."

My hard-on rubs along her clit and I whisper, "Are you playing hard to get?" I dip my lips back to her neck kissing her.

"I guess we can call it that." She grins.

"Damn, bro..." Nick hollers outside the door. "Finally, ya'll done fucking or what? Ya fucking loud as fuck..."

Payton covers her mouth and whispers. "Am I really?" Her cheeks burn red.

"Not even close." She's not loud at all, and I find it even sexier her orgasm is all in her face, and the way she's looking at me. "He's probably mad about you banging on the front door." I run my palm through her silky hair and kiss her on the lips. "he'll get over it."

BEFORE I MAKE MY WAY to the main campus. I drive Payton and I to a local coffee shop and let her order the stupidest fancy bullshit concoction she could come up with. Something about sweet foam, drizzle, vanilla with non-fat milk, and triple shots. It was some iced latte nonsense and all I wanted was a black coffee and a croissant.

With a punch to the glove box, she pulls out the CD case she stored her collection in. "I got another album." She paws at her bag and takes out a CD with the iconic cherry red lips and tongue sticking out. She pushes it into the stereo and turns up the volume. The tune pops on, and Payton knows the lyrics by heart. It's not like she hasn't heard it a million times on the classic rock station.

"Rolling Stones?" I dip my sunglasses at her and sip on the black coffee, turning right on an intersection. She is snapping her fingers to the beat singing along to, You Can't Always Get What You Want. "Sing with me!" She pushes me on the shoulder.

"No, you're fucking nuts."

"Loser!" She sticks her tongue out at me.

"You seriously making faces at me."

"I'll do this too!" She unbuckles. The girl is nuts. She grabs my cheeks and smashes her lips into mine. My heart jumps out of my chest. I can't see the road. When she pulls away three seconds later, I have to swerve back into the white lines.

"Are you insane?" I cough up a laugh.

"You can't tell me you don't like this song. Everyone likes this song."

"You're lucky I like you." To please this music junkie, I allow her to drag me right into singing along with her, bobbing my head with her to the beat once it hits the chorus.

We pull up to the campus and I walk with Payton down to the courtyard. My hands are in my jeans, and I'm staring at her pretty face. She rambles about some bands I need to listen to. The way she is

passionate is cute. She doesn't shut up about guitar solos and the different beats of drums. I'm not following a damn thing she is saying, but I'm warm inside my chest. It's fluttering in my stomach, and I almost think I might like her too much. She mentions something about going to a concert in a month with Charlie.

Speaking of the devil, Charlie's making a B-line straight towards us. The butterflies drop dead in my stomach with the nasty look plastered on my sister's face and her hands fisted at her sides.

"Where have you been all morning?" Charlie storms up to us, and Payton's thought process switches gears. The girl sucks at lying and her head is going into overdrive to think about what to say.

"She stopped by to grab her phone charger." I lie through my teeth. In the back of my mind, it's Payton whimpering and fucking my face feverishly. I swat the memory away. "I thought I'd give her a ride back and we grabbed some coffee." I point to the iced bullshit in her hands. It doesn't make sense how she can drink a pinch of caffeine with all creamer and ten pounds of sugar.

"Oh yeah... what did you two do last night?" Charlie crosses her arms over a chest with that stupid eye flutter.

"Watched a movie," I say.

"What movie?"

"The one about Aliens from Mars." Payton shakes her head with a nervous laugh.

"How did it end..." Charlie asks.

Shit, I didn't pay attention to the screen anymore once Payton had her hand wrapped around my dick, and all I could do was stare at her breasts bouncing as she fucked my hand.

"I fell asleep." Payton shrugs and slurps some of her coffee through the thick green straw. The way her mouth wraps around it, I'm reliving her sucking my dick.

"I honestly don't remember." My molars clench down hard. That was a bad response. I need to shove a croissant in my mouth and wave goodbye so they can settle it on their own.

"And you fell asleep too?" Bullets shoot out of her eyes like a machine gun. "We did eat an entire pizza," I add.

"I don't believe you. Fucking show it to me!" Charlie grabs the collar of her turtleneck and yanks it down. There's nothing there but her silky soft skin I had my hands all over. The ice cubes worked their magic. The hickey pulled a Houdini and poof, it's gone. "What the fuck was she talking about? There's nothing there!"

"What's your problem?" Payton shoves her off and straightens out her shirt.

"Nothing," Charlie says, but now she's lying, and both of them are spitting out everything but the damn truth. This would be a million times easier for Charlie to get mad at the fact Payton landed on me for dirty roulette and settle with the reality that at some point I'm going to fuck her best friend's brains out. When I finish, I'll send the stupid video to the dickhead wanting to jerk to it and move on with my life.

At the same time, I don't want to be thrown to the lions. Payton chained me up and dragged me into the mess. It hasn't been a week yet, and I'm sick of it. "You two are obnoxious. You know that?" I shake my head and lick the front of my teeth. "I know what Brittni posted online."

"Oh, you do?" Charlie asks.

"She likes to make up stories,"

"I saw her in the dining hall talking nonstop shit about it. Then you're wearing a damn turtle neck. If that doesn't scream guilty, I dunno what does!" Charlie argues her point.

"Fucking quit it. She's just mad I won't get back together with her," I say.

"Fine. Whatever. I'm going to class." Charlie shoves her shoulder into Payton and storms off, cutting through the grass to the other side of the courtyard.

Payton's face falls, as she watches the birds scatter as Charlie walks through a flock of them.

"You need to tell her, or someone else will. It'll be better coming out of your mouth than me or anyone else for the matter."

"I don't understand why I can't though," Payton says.

I have a headache and the brief moments of her luring me into a raging crush on her wither like roses without water. I pull out my cell checking the time, and I should head over to the weight room before it's too late. "I'll text you..." I wrap an arm around her shoulder and kiss her on the forehead before I get anymore agitated with their drama.

Ghosted



Payton

THE MOVIE BEETLEJUICE PLAYS on my computer, and I don't think I've watched five minutes of it. It's been seven days of purgatory with my head suffocating in a pillory.

Zero is the number of messages I've received from Ryder. He's left me with an uninvited feeling that I'm not sure what to do with. The middle of my sternum burns, and it travels everywhere. It's worse inside my heart, as if something demonic strangles the life out of it.

No matter how hard I try to climb out of the pit, I sink further into the emotions tangling me up. It'll be easy to message him, but I'm holding him accountable to his words. Girls who text first are desperate. And I definitely am, but I'm not about to blow that wide open.

Practice is the only time I see him, but there isn't a second his eyes turn to mine. It kills something inside me. I'm the one staring miserably at him. Brittni won't let up either. The playful pushing, the hair flips, her arms swinging over his neck. The irking persistence to win him back is pathetic.

Her lush pink lips, sapphire eyes, and thick mermaid blonde hair burn into my cranium. I've never felt a raging ache this deep, and it hurts. I hate her so much. I'd gag her with a jawbreaker, tie her up, throttle the bitch in the back of a trunk, and drive her off a cliff. I want her miles away from Ryder.

I'm drowning from the thought of him biting the edge of her lips, sucking on her neck as he did mine, or combing his hand through her hair. I want to slam my head into a brick wall. My brain swirls, imagining her every moan and sigh from him fucking her and doing all those things to her he did to me. It's suffocating.

The ten bags of popcorn I've binged and the dozens of Butterfinger wrappers living in my bed aren't helping.

White noise blocks the words coming from his mouth that he won't ever get back together with her, but it's the complete opposite visual on the field. If I could turn off my life, I wish it was a black screen.

Croaking alone in bed from a heartbreak must be a thing. Another day of this, I'll have flies laying eggs inside my mouth, gaping open.

I get caught up staring at Ryder's posts. The pictures, the thoughts he types up, and skimming through the comments from girls all over the campus swooning for him to notice.

Getting sucked into the loop is easy, and when I talk myself down and log off, I'm back online within thirty minutes. Staring at my messages, watching his icon go online, all of it wages war against my heart.

Every day, I cuddle up with my blanket in the dorm room with a thousand pounds of books and homework. None of it pulls my eyes off social media. Brittni's stupid post sits on her feed and eats at me like maggots burrowing out of a dead body.

EW the Trash got a hickey. Not even a fifty-year-old deadbeat would want to touch her. If she really thinks she can get with a running back, she's out of her fucking mind.

Naomi: What did I miss?

Autumn: Not a single guy was willing to kiss her the other night. Talk about gross.

Brittni: Right, and dressing for attention is trashy. Oh wait, she is trash.

Charlie: ???

Brittni: Oh, you didn't know? And you actually consider her a friend.

Charlie: What the hell are you talking about? Are you saying she's hooking up with my brother?

Brittni: That's the only person she was with last night. He totally downgraded when he could have me.

Charlie: Lol okay, wow...

Brody: She's not Phi material, sweetheart.

Brittni: Trash.

Autumn: Burn it.

Brittni: Set it on fire, and get the hint no one wants you here.

Naomi: You're such a bitch. I dig the no-bullshit attitude.

Ryder: YOU don't stand a chance. Sounds like you're angry at the fact someone came on the team with skills you can't match up to. If she wants a running back, I'm hers.

Charlie: Are you for real right now?

Brittni: oooo burn. I'm so offended that I might go cry in a corner.

I've read the post a million times. Reported it. The response is it doesn't violate any community standards when they legitimately want to throw me to the stake and burn me like a witch.

I don't know why I'm drowning in what everyone says. There should be some type of strength in me not to give a fuck about them. It's hard enough to be myself around anyone.

The only thing that's given me any relief is Charlie not drilling into me about Dirty Roulette. I've grounded myself in the dorm, writing

papers for English and talking to the wall in French. I've left to find the old man tutoring algebra in the library for help.

Today is gloomy. The sun isn't supposed to set for another hour, but these heavy gray clouds race across the sky leaving us with endless dusk all afternoon. The onslaught of rain hasn't stopped pattering against the window for the last hour. It fits my glum mood.

The obsessive compulsion hits an all-time high when Ryder posts a new picture of himself shirtless, sitting in his Jeep by the lake. The devil horns, his tongue sticking out. He's with someone else. The pit of my stomach flops more. His biceps flex, the chiseled tan abs. It ruins me. Smears of mud and paintball residue make him look like an edible candy bar.

Naomi: Fuck, I'm sweating.

Jared: Can I pour oil all over you and give you a back massage?

Ashley: Watch out, hottie on the loose!

Nick: Bro, stop it. You're stealing all the thirsty girls.

Katie: I think you've made my panties wet.

Brittni: Hey, remember the other weekend? When are you gonna invite me over again?

Ryder: Last I checked, you weren't with me.

Brittni: I bet you were thinking of me the entire time.

Anessa: Want to know what would look good together? Me and you.

Ryder: Lol

Payton: Fuck you...

Pursing my lips into a flat, hard-line, I try to ignore the way my body flushes from hot to cold. What's wrong with me?

I pitch my phone hard against the wall and crumble to the mattress, ready to burst into an earsplitting scream of blubbery tears any second now.

Charlie pulls an earbud out and cocks an eyebrow. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

I sink my palms deep into my eye sockets, and it pours out. Gross and disgusting waves of tears run down my cheeks as I heave a sob.

"Fuck this, and fuck him!"

"Him?" Charlie slams the computer shut, scoots off the bed, and crawls into mine. "You need to get out of the dorm. You're bed rotting." Charlie grabs the metal bowl with popcorn kernels and gathers a handful.

"I'm not bed rotting!"

Charlie stares me down, then reverts her attention to the television screen.

"Then who the hell are you sobbing over?" She crawls across the mattress and slithers off to pick up my phone on the floor. "Why the fuck is my brother calling you?"

I swallow the bulge lodged in my throat, and it sinks to my stomach like a hot rock.

"I don't know."

"Quit the bullshit!"

"It's not him."

"Yeah... okay."

I wipe the edges of my eyes, but tears pool into little streams of agony falling down my cheeks. It hurts to the core, ripping the skin off my bones and crushing everything else into nothing.

"I swear his birth certificate is an apology letter from a condom factory." Charlie gawks down at the phone ringing in her hand. The stupid little crab icon swims across the screen. "I really want to know what he wants."

"No, wait!" With my elbows, I prop myself up and reach for the cell, but Charlie slides off the bed and answers it.

"Why the fuck are you calling her like that?"

Ryder's voice is muffled, and I'm unable to hear a word he says. "Uh-huh... yeah... sure." Maybe I shouldn't care but his silence the past week runs deep.

"Okay, but you're not explaining to me why the fuck you are calling, and she's sobbing right now? So, what the hell have you done?"

I lace my fingers tautly until my knuckles turn white.

I choke on the sob and climb off the bed to reach for the phone. "Just hang up!" Charlie paws me off. Her brows furrow, and her eyes search as if she's trying to soak in whatever he says.

"Charlie!" I rip my claws into her hands, grab the cell phone, hang up, and throw it against the wall. Then sink back to the bed. My hands tangle into my uncombed hair.

"What the fuck Payton..." She huffs and scratches the back of her neck. "Okay... we're hanging with Noah. Put something decent on and grab a swimsuit." She swings open the closet and throttles a top at me with a pair of leggings.

I put my big girl panties on, wipe the tears off my face, and change. I grab my cell, and luckily the screen hasn't combusted. Ryder's name pops up again, and this time I turn it off, yelling at myself to keep it off. We leave ten minutes later, get into Charlie's Civic, and drive off.

It's a thirty-minute trip down the freeway to a random neighborhood with cars littering the street. In the distance, the pounding of drums shakes my eardrums. The different strings of a guitar playing hit my bloodstream.

I push myself off the seat to the wet concrete with little streams running along the sidewalk. Cold rain and wet soil hit my lungs when I slam the door. A three-car garage is wide open, with a complete drum set and guitars connected to speakers.

Charlie takes the lead and I follow her to a group of guys, huddled in the garage. Noah sits on top of a speaker with a notebook and pen in his hand, and a computer resting on a stool. "I dig these siren sounds. We could play it on beat one and three." He paws at the mouse pad. Then lifts his head up.

"Hey, you!" He pushes himself off the speaker and wraps arms around Charlie's neck, planting a kiss on her forehead, then heavy on the lips.

"Hey, I remember you," Noah's friend with the man bun lifts his chin up at me.

"Oh yeah. I never got to introduce you to Rafa." He holds out his hand while Rafa waves at me with a friendly smile.

"We should probably take a break. We've been messing with this song all day." The guy sitting on the drum set taps his foot, playing a low thump on the bass, then dribbling his sticks across the snare, toms, and crashing into the symbols.

"That's Vince." Noah dips his head to him, as he swirls the sticks between his fingers.

"We should grab some drinks."

"I haven't eaten since this morning. Let's order some hot wings while we are at it." Vince slides off his stool and pushes back his chocolate brown hair. It's not as long as Noah's mermaid disaster that gives my hair a bad name. Vince's wavy mess falls to his shoulders. Tattoos climb up his neck, and he has sleeves on both arms.

"Hey, you wanna get a tattoo? I see you staring at Vince. I can draw you up one right now?" Rafa asks me.

I bring my shoulders up to my neck and shrug. "I have no idea what I'd get."

"What do you feel like right now?" Rafa opens the garage door and I step into a dimly lit living room. A faint hint of pot and smoke fill my lungs. A black lab whines and paws at the stained-glass door

leading to the patio. Noah and Charlie weasel outside. The dog barks, leaping up and down, licking her to death as she pets him.

"I don't know, fucking depressed."

"Aren't we all? You're telling me."

I stroll with him into the kitchen. He pries open the empty fridge with condiments and rows of beer cans. He pulls one out, cracks it open, and hands it to me.

"Let me paint a canvas on you."

"Why?" I sip the beer. The taste is smooth but disgusting, like it's watered down, but I've had enough of all this painful shit in the pit of my stomach.

"Because it would look fucking hot on you."

Empty beer cans lay all over the kitchen counter. A faucet drips steadily on dishes stacked up to the brim in the sink.

"Come look. I got a room set up."

"Okay." I tap on the beer can and walk down the dark hallway into a room with lights a shade of blood-red.

"So, this is where you murder people?" I ask.

"Haha, no!"

I sit on the black leather chair and stare at a wall covered with framed designs of diversified tattoos. There has to be over a hundred options, from flowers to dangerous animals, lettering, and crosses.

One piques my interest. "The dandelion one is cute." I point a finger at the picture. The wind blows through the fluffy seeds, carrying them off. There are small butterflies tangled within them, flying off into the sky.

"I drew that last night. You like it?" He pulls the frame off the wall.

"Yeah, it's cute."

"I'll do it right now. All you gotta do is let me take a picture of it to gain some attraction on my page." He says. I'm already numb, and doing dangerous new things seems to be on my bucket list of bad

decisions. I think a needle piercing my skin will ease all the demons caged inside. Maybe it will perform the long awaiting exorcism I've needed for centuries.

"Yeah. How about getting it here?" I rub against my upper arm.

"Hell yeah! You can keep your shirt on tonight, but you'll need to remove that sleeve."

"I get to keep my shirt? How nice of you."

"I'm not a dick like that."

I wiggle my arm out of the shirt, lay flat in the chair, and stare up at the red ceiling as he rummages around the drawers and cabinets putting everything together.

The smell of antiseptic lingers in the room as he wipes down the area on my shoulder. It doesn't take him long to make a stencil of the design and he places it on my arm, and he rummages around for other things. The buzzing of the needle fills the air, and it hits my skin.

"That game we played was pretty nuts," he says.

"Oh yeah, you were there." A sharp, bearable pain shoots through my skin as his eyes are dedicated to his art.

"That guy running the show has some crazy fucking ego shit going on."

"Brody... Yeah, he's an asshole."

"Did you really have to sleep with that guy who came into the room?" It tingles and dances on my nerves and a faint aroma of ink swirls in the air.

"You saw that?"

"Yeah, you must have known him."

"Umm... well, did Charlie sleep with Noah and film it?"

"I don't know about the filming part, but yeah. She's been coming over with him a lot. Half the time he's not practicing with us, they are sucking face in the hot tub." The buzz continues as he presses a hand

into my skin. "You know that guy kinda looks like Charlie... are they related?" He asks.

"Have you mentioned any of this to Noah or Charlie?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like what you saw?" I ask.

"Nah... why?"

"It's Charlie's brother."

"Oh, shit... No way."

"I don't know how I feel about any of it. I don't want to lose my scholarship, and I really don't want to lose Charlie." There I said it. It came out of my mouth. "I haven't figured out how to sit there and tell her. He's getting over some bitch who screwed him, but her hands are on him all the time."

"Well, if he's sleeping with you, but letting her touch him. Then he's probably just using you."

"Yeah..."

I say nothing else and let him work. The buzz drowns out everything. Eventually, there are no feelings in my arm. It tingles entirely and staring into space instead of my phone takes away a fragment of the ache. At some point, I must have fallen asleep because I sat there for almost three hours when the buzz stops, and I'm back to reality.

"Shit, that came out good." Rafa wipes a cold cloth over my arm. The skin is raw and pink around the edges of the ink. I glance in the mirror along the wall and see the perfectly etched lines. Rafa digs around for a camera and shoots several pictures of it before wrapping it up and giving me a quick rundown on how to let it heal.

We come out of his dungeon of tattoos and into the kitchen. It's dark outside and Charlie's eyes glimmer and gush. She takes my fingers and pulls me over.

"I thought you were sucking him off in there. That looks hella sexy on you."

"Yeah," I say, ogling down at it from my angle.

"Okay, let's get drunk!" She giggles.

I pound four beers with nothing else in my stomach. It doesn't take long for me to swim in a buzz. We are all chatting about music and the different songs they are writing. Their band is called In Sheep's Skin. I listen to Noah sing, as they practice and him laughing when he fucks up his own lyrics.

They tell stories of people in the mosh pits at their concerts. The pushing, shoving, crowd-surfing. They have over fifty thousand followers, and climbing fast.

Downing my fifth beer, I realize my bladder betrayed me, and I need to take a piss.

I hurry down the hallway to the bathroom at the far end. When I plop on the toilet, my cell falls out of my back pocket to the tile floor. It stares at me with its sinful temptation. As gallons of piss rages out of me, I hold down the side buttons watching my screen light up.

Crab: What's with the comment?

Crab: Can you call me back?

Crab: I have to work tonight. Message me, please.

There is a voicemail and the transcription of it sends a violent storm to flood into the category five hurricane running rampant in my chest. Sirens announce in my brain to the world we now have a category six.

"Hey... I'm not sure what's wrong, or if I upset you. I'm really swamped. I know I said I'd call you, but I got busy. Just call me when you can."

Fuck it. Let me play the same game. I flush, wiggle up my leggings, and stare into the mirror. It's vintage and rustic here. I dig the vibes and set up the phone to capture a picture of all my imperfections and

the one thing that's without flaw on my body. I post a selfie with my gorgeous tattoo and type nothing but black hearts and toss it all back at them.

Ryder

A DELIVERY ORDER MINUTES before closing is a dick move. It's the worst sound in the entire store that's been quiet for the last thirty minutes. I swept and mopped the damn floors. Scrubbed the dishes overflowing in the sink, and even washed out the trash cans I'm sure someone vomited in to keep Karen at bay.

"You gotta be shitting me!"

"Oh, here we go," I say. She is on a roll again, storming over with hands fisted at her sides. She's better at creating raging headaches than a damn pizza. The non-stop bitching is worse than the stench of our ovens smoking like we're cooking tar. She rips the receipt from the machine, licks her chapped lips, and grumbles. "Fuck these people. They got a hundred-dollar order."

"Fuck me."

"You're in luck. They paid with a card." She tosses the order to the kitchen staff.

I run a hand over my eyes, lean on the counter, and throw off the stupid hat. Everything in my head is all over the place. Vibing with Jared and Nick this afternoon wore me out, and taking on another shift thinking I'd be good wasn't the best decision, but paying off this car loan is eating my wallet.

Mom financed the Jeep at the start of freshmen year, and we shook on it. I'd pay half. When Dad bounced, he put the ski mask on and robbed the bank, draining the accounts. She doesn't have enough pennies under the couch to pay the water bill and throws her paycheck gambling on it.

A letter on the kitchen counter this summer with a threat of repo murdered me like Rambo and his machine gun. The lie and fake congratulations of getting scouted to play football at GCU slapped me hard across the face. To think my girlfriend cheating on me was rough. This was an axe to my chest plate. Now Mom messages me to help pay the damn bills when I'm not living there.

"It's late. Can I just take the jeep and call it a night?"

"As long as you don't rat me out." She counts the stacks of bills in her hand. "I'm clocking you out at twelve either way."

"Okay, cool." I toss her my deposit. The order doesn't take as long as I thought, and I'm out the door fifteen minutes before twelve. When I get into the Jeep, I light up a joint, starving for a hit, and bad. The ache for a buzz claws at my skin. The pinch of lemon and sweetness envelopes the jeep and burns into my lungs. I can't wait another second and soak as much of it in as I can. It hits fast and eases into my veins, numbing everything.

When I check my phone. Brody sent me half a dozen messages. I haven't had the chance to look at them, and rather not deal with him. There have been a few missed calls, and his name rolls on my cell like some sixth sense told him I'm off work.

I place the cell to my ear. "What do you want?" I take in another drag. Smoke pools out of my nose as the ashes fall to the asphalt.

"You haven't answered me."

"I'm working. I think it can fucking wait."

"I wanna know where my video is?"

He's worse than Brittini having one of her jealous meltdowns. I have zero patience to deal with everyone's shit when the only thing on my brain is sleep. "You're going to have to give me time..."

"Time? You've had two weeks."

"This isn't Brittini. She isn't one of your sleazy girls."

Brody coughs up a sadistic laugh. It's almost like he's possessed by the devil himself. I pull my ear away from the speaker. "You're soft, just like you were with Brittini."

"This isn't the same, dude. I've known her since I was a fucking kid. This is beyond fucked up and you know it."

"Here, hold up."

The phone vibrates in my hand and when I glance at what he sent me, it's the pictures of Charlie and Payton topless. They're drinking from that damn bottle, giving up their souls on a contract signed in blood. It's raw and naked, and there is nothing I can do. He's pulling the trigger and helping them commit artificial suicide.

"You're not keeping your end of the bargain. I figured that bloody lip I gave you would've knocked some damn sense into you. Fuck her brains out, send it to me, then dump the bitch."

"You want me to fuck her, then leave her?" This is too fucking painful. There is no miracle that can save me now. God's watched me make this bed, and I need to lie in it because he's not coming off his throne to help.

"See, this makes you easy to fucking destroy."

"Being a decent human isn't a hard thing to do," I say.

"You really can't be telling me you want more from a freshman? Brittini wants you back, so why don't we patch things up?"

"If I want to be with Payton, there is nothing you can do that will stop me. You'll get your Goddamn video when I'm ready to make it." I hang up the phone and toss it onto the passenger seat. First, it's Payton's remark on a damn picture, her sobbing on the phone when I try to figure out her deal. Now Brody is on my nuts.

I pull the stack of tips out of my back pocket. It's enough to finish covering the car payment this month, and if Mom calls, at least I'll have extra to keep her lights on for another thirty days.

When I'm done delivering this order, I might as well come undone and drink until I pass the fuck out. That seems to be the only tangible solace I can find.

The drive isn't far, and I'm there right at midnight, knocking on the door to freedom. When it opens, Charlie stands there. "No way. I thought you were off tonight?"

I tilt my head back with a laugh. "You gotta be fucking kidding?"

She flashes me a lopsided grin. "If you wanna come in, you gotta promise not to punch Noah again."

"You're the bitch ordering this late? Fuck you."

"Hey, at least we tipped you."

I roll my eyes. "I'm coming in." With a shoulder, I push the door open and see a group of punks with long hair and tattoos huddling in the kitchen. They are from a completely different world, and I'm not someone who fits into this muse of worshipping Satan himself.

"Where do you want them?"

"The table is fine." I throw the strap over my head and the order of five pizzas and a mountain of wings lands in front of her.

"Where's Payton?" I dip my hands into my front pockets.

"You wouldn't even tell me why she was crying earlier. Why should I tell you?"

"I wanna make sure she's okay."

Charlie leans against the table and cracks open a sweaty beer. "What the hell is up with you two?" She takes a sip, then throws open the pizza box.

"She needs to be the one who tells you. I promised. Now, where is she?"

"You're a shitty brother." Charlie lifts a gigantic slice of pizza, with the thick cheese melting off. She points a finger out the patio door. I walk across the carpet and step outside into the cool night air where it's dark.

There's a faint hum of jets from the hot tub a group of people lounge in. They are drinking and laughing. Stepping closer, Payton is chugging on a beer. Some dude with a man bun, skinnier than a twig has his arm over her shoulder, and my heart tanks. When she sees me standing right in front of her, the smile washes off her face within seconds.

"You ordered pizza?" I feel my eyebrows lift in annoyance.

"Ryder..."

"Oh shit, man, that's the guy from the party." The guy points a finger at me with a beer in hand. "Small world, you're a delivery boy?"

"Fuck off." My blood pumps into a heart that can't deal with this shit anymore. If she's going to fuck with my feelings, she can do this on her own.

"Get out!" I'm fuming in the face.

"What?" She asks.

"Get out! Now!" I can't stop my tongue from lashing out. Payton's pained expression incinerates me from within. She stands up and climbs out of the hot tub in a skimpy bikini with her nipples falling out, dripping wet from head to toe.

I grab a towel from a chair and toss it to her chest. She follows me into the house, crunching her hair dry with the towel before wrapping it around her body. She storms down the hallway and flips on a light switch in the bathroom.

The door slams shut behind us, and I lock it. "Why is his arm around you?" I ask.

"Oh? Explain why Brittni's hands are wrapped around you every fucking day at practice and you don't bother to push her off or do anything but let her touch you right in front of me! Then you can't even text me at least once! And you post pictures online with girls just wanting to lick your dick!" She turns a heel to the door, but I snatch her wrist before she can escape.

"Stop it!" I yank her over to me. Then I see the ink etched into her arms. It's swollen and red, but I stare at the dandelions and the neatly done butterflies with it wrapped over. "You got a tattoo?"

"Don't change the subject. I'm fucking mad at you."

"Well, that makes two of us then... but that's pretty... and shouldn't you NOT be in a hot tub."

She says nothing, but the watering in her eyes, and the red puffy cheeks stab me in the chest. "I didn't submerge my arm... can you please let me go?"

"Not until I know we're fine..."

"You haven't talked to me all week."

"Neither have you." I lean against the bathroom counter, her fingertips in my hands. They are bony, but soft along my palm. The pink nail polish I painted hasn't chipped.

"You don't even notice me at practice either... It's like I don't exist or anything."

"Okay... but we've been dragging this out for two weeks. You don't want anyone to know, but you want me to pay attention to you. That's not how things work."

"That's not what I'm saying. Are you disgusted with me too? Is that why you won't talk to me?"

"No! I figured you were busy... I'm sorry." I shrug, and she attempts to pry her fingers out of my grip. It drags a knife through my chest plate, not understanding a damn thing she wants. "Stop running away from me. You're pissing me off." I fist the back of the towel and pin her against my chest. Sopping wet hair soaks through my shirt, and it's cold on my skin.

"I dunno why I feel this way... I rarely give a shit and I fucking give some kind of shit." She sniffles, her hands fist my shirt. I'm sure I reek of pizza and grease, and she still clings on to me. It's like I'm on death

row, stumbling down a long hallway, shackled and chained to my execution.

She's a virgin.

There's nothing I can do to stop her from getting attached. I'm not sure if I can give her what she wants. I'm begging to feel something, and in the end if I don't feel the same it will collapse like a house of cards.

"Come back with me?" I ask.

"Okay..."

"Get dressed, I'll wait."

I unlock the bathroom door, step out into the hall, and head back to the kitchen where everyone huddles over the pizza and wings, devouring it like a pack of wolves.

"Hey," I grasp Charlie on the shoulder.

"Yeah.." she asks.

I look at the time on my cell. "It's late. I'm gonna head out..."

"Is that Payton as your wallpaper" Charlie cocks a brow and ignores what I say. She snatches it right out of my hand and chuckles. It must be the middle finger and Payton's pissy expression. "Don't lie to me. Do you have a thing for her or something?"

"I'm too tired to have this conversation with you. I will tell you I'm driving her back to the dorms. I think she's had one too many."

"She's barely had 5 beers. When has she ever been a lightweight?"

I let out a heavy sigh. "Can I talk to you about this tomorrow?"

"Can you stop avoiding my question for once?"

The option isn't available on the menu and like any friend, I'll respect Payton's wishes. "What do you want me to say?"

"That you have a thing for her." She coughs up a laugh. I can see it engrained in the gray eyes we both share, she's aware of the truth.

"And what if I do?" I shrug with my hands inside my pockets.

"Tell me... She's my best friend, and suddenly my brother is..." She pauses, biting her bottom lip and shaking her head.

"I'm what?" I ask.

"I dunno. You're literally a fucking drunk and always pissed off," she says.

"What's your point?"

A frown snaps between her brows. "I've never seen her like how I did today."

"Neither have I. Why do you think I was calling her? As much as you think I'm some heartless son of a bitch. I give a shit too."

"So, you like her?"

"I dunno, Charlie. I liked one person, and that really went smoothly."

She scoffs. It's not what she wants to hear. "I wish you'd give me a straight answer..."

"You know the answer, but you're just as blind to say it as she is scared to admit it. I don't want to hurt her. Can you at least trust me I'm not going to?"

"No, because as much as you hate to admit it, you're drinking to get over Brittini, and you will hurt her. But whatever... Tell her not to wait up."

I lift a brow. "You really like this Noah guy with the fucking barbie hair?"

"Yeah..."

"He seems nice, but I'll fuck his face in if he hurts you."

"If you lead Payton on, I will personally choke you in your fucking sleep. You can go now." She flashes me her cocky smile and wiggles her fingers telling me to piss off.

"Later." I flip her off.

Payton stumbles out of the bathroom with the towel and her bathing suit wrapped in a ball around her arms. Charlie gives her a side hug before we dip.

I open the passenger door, and she climbs inside the Jeep and I round the corner and hop in. I'm surprised she doesn't dig through her collection of music in the glove box. She stares out the window. Streetlights smear orange and yellow hues along the highway.

Silence makes my skin crawl. The desire to leap into her brain and understand what she is thinking about digs a hole in my chest.

I pull up into the gravel at the fraternity. It's dark other than the porch light out front flickering. June beetles do flips and land on their backsides with legs twitching.

Payton drags herself in and scurries to my room. The bathroom is across the hall, and I'm pulling the grease-stained shirt over my head, craving to scrub myself down. I kick on the shower and climb in, lathering pounds of soap to get the smokey smell of pizza off my skin.

The curtain skids across the bar above, and Payton emerges at the far end of the tub.

"Hey..." she slips her way in, and I'm running my hands through my soapy hair, rinsing it out.

"You're everywhere, aren't you?" I ask.

"I dunno why I wanted to come in here, but I smell like chlorine."

"Here..."

I squirt a glob full of body wash and lather it in her hands. Innocence carves all over her as she runs the soap along her long legs and breasts. There it is, my head thinking with my dick as her wet skin slides against mine to hog the water. It turns into a sword poking her in the leg. The tiny wish she lost her virginity in high school burns into my balls. I'd do anything to pin her against the tile wall and feel her wet opening to take all of me in. I'm exhausted and horny as fuck.

"I'm going to dry off." I wipe off my face and pull the curtain aside to step out. Shaking the thought out of my head is harder than expected. My mind is dangerous. Nothing seems to calm my dick down. I'm addicted to bad things, and she's one of them.

The dial twists and the shower turns off. She pulls the curtain aside, hugging herself. "Shit, give me a second. I'll get you a towel." I wrap mine around my waist and step out to the hallway, where cold hair hits like a freezer.

I dig through the closet snatching the last clean towel and step back into the warm steam. She pulls it out of my hands and wraps it around her chest.

She follows me back into my room, where I lock the door behind us. Her towel drops to the floor, and she stands there. It rips me to shreds seeing her with nothing but the skin she was born with and knowing I'm the one causing her pain. I don't know what I need to do to make her feel comfortable or change her perspective.

Having sex is exactly what it is... Sex. It's a way to get yourself high off someone else's touch. Payton, being a virgin won't get it. I don't even want to go through with it if she'll be ridiculously attached.

I'd grab her right now and plunge my tongue inside her mouth, but after how painful I somehow made her feel and being powerless over the emotions she has for me, I stop myself.

Something is there, but it's not like what I felt with Brittni.

"I dunno why I feel like this," she says.

I step closer and run both hands over her silky shoulders. God, she's soft. "What do you want?" I ask.

"I dunno... you."

"Fine."

She gulps, and the palm of her hands runs over my chest, tracing all the curves and everything that sends electricity to the raging ache

in my balls. They curl around the cords on my neck, and she kisses me on the side of my mouth. With the other hand, she traces her thumb over the towel wrapped around my waist, tugging it enough for it to plop at my feet.

“You want more?” I ask.

There are no words, but she nods and a sweet sound comes out of her throat. I grasp her hips and guide her to my bed. She sits down and scoots back as I follow her lead and hover over her. “Lay still...”

I kiss her. Velvet lips melt into me. I tell myself it’s better if I stay empty, but with her, I’m letting her in. She’s bringing out the worst in me as her tongue finds its way along mine. There is no way to pretend I don’t want her back.

I don’t know how long I can hold on to this secret as I slide my mouth to her neck. Sucking on her skin, feeling her hips gently thrust against my dick with its own heartbeat pounding inside me. With a hand, I grasp her firm breasts. Her nipples are soft and perky, and hard as a rock like me. My tongue wraps around her nubs and I suck and nibble, making my way down to her navel.

Without my help, her legs spread, and I kiss her wet opening. My tongue dances along her clit, sucking her hard. Within a minute, she’s fucking my face, thrusting her hips into my mouth. Nails tangle in my hair, pulling hard as her sweet whimpers fill the room. I don’t let up. My hands burrow into her thighs. She sounds sweet. It’s tempting me further to just take her and rawdog into her and fill her with me.

Her muscle tense in my grip, and my mouth pulls on her clit. She’s struggling to break, quivering as I’m on the brink of making her come. When she does, she whispers out my name. Her thrusts into my face are erratic, soaking it in, and I give her every ounce of ecstasy I can offer.

Payton pulls on my hair and drags me to her lips, where I share the sweetness of her. She pushes me in the chest and tosses me to the

mattress. I don't even have to ask. Her hands wrap around my dick and her tongue traces my throbbing veins. Plump lips suck on the tip, and she swallows me hard. Her head bops up and down, getting soppy wet as she strokes me on top of it. The twirls of her tongue, the warmth in her mouth, take in all of it.

There's no way I can last long, or drag it out. I'm coming hard, thrusting my dick in her mouth slowly. "Fuck..." I throw my head back on the mattress as my release zips through my balls, and I'm pouring out into her mouth. She sucks me dry, swallowing it again like nothing.

My Secret Place



Ryder

I TRY TO DO THE BOYFRIEND THING although Payton's doesn't have an official girlfriend label. Stalking her on Snap is toxic as hell, but I can find her loitering in the courtyard, or sitting with Mr. Gary in the library helping her with math. At lunch, I scout her in the dining hall, ordering one of their thick cheeseburgers. I'll sit with her and Charlie and listen to them bicker and fight and question how they tolerate each other in the dorms. I steal fries when I already finished mine and get swatted at.

When it's time for practice, I make the effort to peck her on the forehead like I used to do with her in middle school. It's harder than I expected, forcing myself to do something my heart begs me not to. There's this emptiness in a bottomless pit in my stomach, knowing what I feel for her is completely different from Brittnei. I'm warm inside my chest one minute, then it's aching like a knife ripped into me the next.

The last four nights, she's snuck out of the dorms when I get off work and my dick fucks her mouth, emptying my balls. Nick even banged on the door, telling us to quit, but I went after her clit for another ten minutes until she squirmed and came into my mouth.

Last night I couldn't get her to fill my cup enough that I went back after her clit a half hour later to make her come again.

I'm at a point where the need to actually go all the way aches. She's fucking gorgeous with the way her lips take in my length. In class, I can't stop daydreaming about her breasts in my hands and her mouth on mine. The way she whimpers and pants as she comes sends a rush of endorphins down my shaft.

The sun starts to set after football practice and I watch the cheerleaders rustling pom-poms, yelling chants, and running through their routine. They move in perfect synch with one another, arms reaching over their heads, legs kicking into the air. Four girls are lifted in the air performing a one-leg stunt.

The girls squeal and scream as they finish practicing, holding each other's hands as they spin around in circles.

I race to Payton. She's wearing a light green cami and high-waisted leggings packing up her gear on the bleachers. Charlie is with the other team members, laughing and chatting away with them.

"Hey cutie," I come up behind her and pinch her sweet spot. She flinches with a laugh and swats at my hand.

"Stop!" She spins around in a way that makes her mold into my body like she aches the way I do. The thumping in my heart bursts out of my chest, and I use all the willpower in the world not to kiss her.

"What are you doing?"

"Go out with me?" I ask.

"What?"

"Let me take you out on a date. I don't want to hide anymore."

Payton looks at her sneakers. One of her shoelaces is untied. She breaks free from me and sits down on the bleachers. Before she can reach her laces, I'm on a knee with my hands tangled with the string.

"You want to take me out?"

"I dunno, I want to do something else with you... get to know you more."

A giggle comes out of her mouth as she rakes a hand through my sweaty hair. "You already know me."

"There's gotta be something I don't know."

Her nose burns red and flushes across her high cheekbones, and the euphoria in her eyes removes a piece of the wall I'm barricading myself in.

"What do you want to do?"

"Dinner or something, a movie, arcade games. I'm not good at any of these things." I double knot her laces and I can't help but run a hand across her smooth legs to her thigh. She's already shivering, biting her bottom lip like she does moments before she climaxes.

"When?" The word comes out heavy from her mouth. She's breathing hard.

"I have tomorrow off. I can pick you up from the dorm around six. It will give us a little over an hour to shower after practice."

A smile beams, and I melt at the sight of her white straight teeth. I grasp her cheeks and peck her on the forehead. When I hover over her lips, she turns her head to the right, and I wish she wouldn't.

"I'll see you later," I say.

"Okay."

She grabs her duffle bag and waves at me as she heads in the opposite direction. I snatch my red helmet off the bench and trail behind my other teammates, heading to the double doors inside. Before I fully walk in, a hand grabs my wrist and swivels me around.

"What the hell was that?" Brittni fumes, throwing my wrist out of her grip.

"What? Get off my nuts."

"You're literally eye fucking her on the field, that's what?" She marches in front of me. Those opal eyes of hers are like looking at the sun for too long. They are blinding when she's angry enough.

"We're done. Why can't you get that through your head?" I throw up a hand and rub it across my forehead.

"Brody forced me to sleep with him?"

"That's bullshit." I swivel around her, but she follows, keeping up with my quick pace into the building with the air conditioner blasting.

"I'm not lying! He said he would post all my pictures online." She racks her cherry red nails into the blonde locks I used to adore more than anything. Then it hits my heart again, and I'm cementing bricks together to barricade any feelings I have behind it.

I swallow the lump in my throat, wanting to punch a wall. "I don't know if I can believe that." I shrug.

"Three years and I've loved you. I never did anything with anyone else until that night."

"And out of three years, you'd think to tell me he threatened you... it didn't look like you were forced when I walked in."

"I want you back... please..."

"No." I throw down my helmet onto the tile. My hands dig into my scalp. Going back to her won't change the fact she slept with him. At any minute, she could have told me he made the threat. I can't figure out if she's lying through her teeth or not. Either way, I spent my summer hungover and drunk because of how shitty she made me feel.

"I'm done doing this with you. You're always blowing up my phone. You won't stop touching me. I ended it because I had enough. I had enough of you breaking my heart every second you got. I'm done."

"And you move on so quickly with that trash. She's not even pretty."

"Her name is Payton, and she's fucking gorgeous."

"I don't care if you film that damn video with her. I'll make sure she's out of Phi by the end of the semester." She hisses like a serpent. I'd give anything for an angel to throw her demons out.

"You and Brody need to fuck off and leave her alone."

"Or what?"

"Get it through your head, we are finished, and leave my girl out of it." I grab my helmet off the floor and barge into the locker room.

"Your girl?" She cackles at it, but it dulls out once the doors close behind me.

I SIT ON THE EDGE OF THE MATTRESS in my best jeans and a long-sleeve plaid Henley with the price tag still on it. The damn fact I picked out a shirt from my mom to go on a date with Payton tells me I'm a nervous wreck. There was an unopened box of rugged brown captain boots I forgot she purchased me at Christmas. What guy in the right mind wears clothes from their mother at twenty-one to go on a date?

Somehow, I'm sweating my balls off. The girl saw me go out in a pair of shorts and a plain shirt. For fuck's sake, I roamed in my boxer briefs all the time as a teen. It's Payton, but too many mixed feelings battered all over. I want to make some type of impression.

Flipping through the bills in my wallet, I plot out how much I can afford tonight without breaking the bank. There's enough for dinner, but I'll have to skip the popcorn at the theater.

When I check my phone, it's 5:30. I'm impatient. I've never stormed through the house and showered so quickly to get ready for anything. I gather my keys and head out. When I park in front of the dorms, I climb up the three flights of stairs and knock on the door at 5:39.

It creaks open and Payton peaks out. "Oh, my god you're early."

I rub the crease of my neck. "Yeah, sorry, I couldn't wait." My heart pounds. Am I seriously this fucking nervous?

"You're such a cheese ball."

"Are you alone?"

"Yeah," she cracks the door wider but keeps herself barricaded. I slip through. She closes and locks it behind me.

"Charlie is always gone. Sometimes she doesn't come back." She's in a matching pair of nude panties and bra as she rummages through a hoarded closet with clothes spilling out and piling up into a mountain from the floor up.

"She must really like that guy then." I glance down at Payton's bed with the pink princess sheets and sit on her unmade bed. I swallow hard as she unclips the bra and tosses it to the floor. She pulls out a black dress and throws it over her head. I admire the freckles on her shoulder as she adjusts a spaghetti strap, and smooths out the dress that fits tight along her hourglass curves. It's not close to reaching her knees and I poison my mind with the image of running my hands up her thighs.

"What?" she asks with a goofy smile.

"You're... Uhh..." I'm choking on my own words. For some reason, I'm having a hard time breathing. She's beautiful and dangerous. "Sorry..." I say.

"Really? Are you okay?"

I wipe my sweaty palms on my knees and pull myself together. "Where do you want to eat?"

She tilts her head to one side and shrugs. "I don't know."

I reach for her hand and pull her close. "Oh come on. I want to treat you."

"Okay, hear me out." She squeezes my shoulders. "There's this hot-dog stand."

"Honey, I already have a hot dog stand for you."

She dips her head back in a laugh. "Shut up!" She shakes me. "You're nasty."

"You like it." She wraps her arms around my neck, leaning into me. I push away her hair, cupping her face as I kiss her. Payton slings a leg over my thigh and climbs on top of me. Her legs are smooth as I massage her waists and pull her closer. Leaning in, she pecks me on the lips and I part mine wide enough for her to melt into me.

"I like your mouth better." She whispers in mid-kiss. With a hand, I capture the back of her head and kiss her hard. She tastes like sin, and there's nothing that can pull me away from her being an absolute addiction.

I run a hand over her thigh and pull the seams of her panties to the side. With three fingers, I find her clit and slowly circle it. She breathes into my mouth as I reach her wet opening and slip my fingers inside. She gasps. Fuck, she's tight.

Her head dips, panting, and my lips kiss her chest. One of the spaghetti straps falls off her shoulder to expose her breasts.

"Does it hurt?" I thrust my fingers in and out, graze my lips over her neck, and bite down into her skin.

"No," she whimpers and her head nuzzles between the crease of my neck, her sweet sounds meet my ears. I get hard, and my balls ache. I stroke faster, massaging her clit, then pounding my fingers inside her.

"Fucking come for me," I whisper in her ear, and she thrusts into my hand, erratic and demanding. Nails carve down my shoulder blades, and she starts trembling, her breaths catching in her throat. "That's it."

"Oh my god!" she pants out. "Fuck, fuck... Ryder." Her eyes gloss over as she comes. When she's done, she pushes me into the sheets, unbuttoning my jeans and pulling them down my waistline. She

works my dick out of my boxers and sucks me off. Her tongue twirling just right, suckling the tip of my dick, and massaging my balls in her hands.

The warmth of her mouth swallows my length. Her head bobbing up and down. She's sloppy, her hands wet.

"Oh, fuck, I'm gonna come." I thrust my dick into her mouth, helping her suck me hard. Electricity ignites from the tip of my dick, spreading through my veins and across every atom in my body. "Fuck, you're good at that." I spill into her mouth.

She swallows and rests on my chest. I run a hand through the soft, silky strands of her hair.

"Okay, where's this hotdog stand because we aren't going to leave if you keep teasing."

"Why?" she whines with a hint of giggles mixed in. "What if I want more?" She reaches my lips and pecks me.

"I can give you a hotdog later," I mumble between her lips and that cute laugh of hers.

"Really?" she claws at my chest. "I'm not that hungry. We can do it right now."

"I'm taking you out to eat first!"

"You're such a tease!" She sits up and pulls me off the bed. She fixes her underwear and dress. I adjust myself, buttoning up my jeans, telling the damn hard-on to chill out for one second.

"Come on!" This girl holds onto my index finger as we race down the three flights of stairs to the parking lot. She lets go and runs to the Jeep, pulling the handle to the passenger side door.

"You're not opening that yourself." I dig in my pocket and unlock the Jeep, helping her in.

When I get in, she kicks open the glove box, flipping through her collection and tuning the stereo to her liking. I back out of the parking lot and listen to her telling me how to drive. Any time we have to

turn, Payton stretches out the seatbelt, and pushes me on the shoulder, pointing at the sign. She's bossy making me go left, then right. There were a couple of instances where she shouts about stopping at a yellow light.

"Oh my god! We're here!" Her fingers wiggle at a food truck wedged between two buildings. There are picnic tables with red and white striped umbrellas. The line doesn't look too bad as I pull in and park.

This girl must have snorted cocaine as she leaps out of the jeep and opens my door before I can turn the vehicle off. "Hurry up! I'm hungry!" She crawls over my lap, unbuckling me, fisting my shirt, and tugging me out of the seat.

"The hot dogs aren't going anywhere."

I slide out, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and pull her into my chest. There is no one here that we know, and I don't have to cover up any truth. No one I need to lie to. My lips brush against hers as we get in the line of people waiting to order. This feels more natural like it should be something permanent. When I glance down at her, I get a peek at her pink nipples, and her perfect smile reeling me in.

When it's our turn, she doesn't get any luxury hot dogs on the list. All she asks for is something simple. Mustard, ketchup, relish, and onions. That is all she wants on it. Then she digs through a deep fridge, pulling out a bottle of strawberry milk.

I get a couple of New York dogs, with a side of onion rings and soda. The wait isn't long, and I have our baskets and sit down at one of the picnic tables with her sitting across from me. She didn't lie about being hungry. Ketchup covers her fingers, and she's licking off everything that spills onto her hands. The hot dog disappears within a matter of minutes, and I still have one more dog to chow down.

"You know I remember the first time I ever got drunk, and you're the one to blame." She steals an onion ring, dipping it into a cup of ketchup.

"What?" I ask in mid-chew, before grabbing my soda and taking several gulps to wash down the bun sticking to the roof of my mouth.

"Do you remember Kyle in eighth grade?"

"Sounds like a douchebag already." I wipe my fingers on a napkin, staring at the way her chin lies on her hand.

"I got this Ramones shirt from Goodwill and his name was written on the tag."

"Still not clicking. Keep going."

"Well, he found out it was his shirt, and went around the school telling everyone I was his boyfriend, and I sucked him off in the girls' bathroom." She says with her mouth gaping open like it should be something I'll always remember. "You seriously don't remember this?"

I shake my head, as there isn't a neuron finding the videotape to recap it for me. I've shoved a lot of memories from high school on the back burner of my mind. But I'm curious for her to continue.

"Okay, well, these preppy bitches told the principal they saw me do it."

"You're shitting me?"

"No!"

"This happened in eighth grade?" I ask.

"Yeah, I remember coming over telling you how the principal wouldn't let me go pee until I admitted to it. I pissed myself in the office, and she forced me to go back to class."

"Oh shit."

"You made me a screwdriver after school."

"I did?" I ask, leaning over the picnic table, having no recollection of it. "I drank a lot of those when no one was looking. I was always fucking drunk. That's probably why I don't remember this."

"I got super buzzed off it, and you gave me your jersey."

The napkin crumbles in my fist as I search around for a moment, trying to dig inside my head. It's foggy and vague and most likely because I drank my parents' vodka all the time. They blamed the empty bottles on each other, while it was my fingers tingling. But a little neuron dusts off the videotape I'm searching for and hands the memory to me.

"I made you wear it the next day." I look back at her and toss the napkin into an empty basket.

"Then you picked me up and kissed me on the forehead." She rubs her hands together underneath the table with her cheeks flushed. "They all thought I was dating a junior in high school. It was the coolest thing ever."

"I always kissed you on the forehead after that, didn't I?"

"Yeah..."

"Fuck... Payton." I carve both hands into my hair and stare down at the wooden picnic table. The crumbs and dried ketchup stains glare back at me. When I try to feel anything, I choke up. Right now, something has its claws wrapped around my lungs, refusing to let me free.

"You dated in high school, right?" I ask and lift up my head.

Her cute little button nose crunches up. "Not really."

"You never sat there and made out with someone under the stairway."

"No, umm..." Her laugh turns nervous and shy.

"Payton..."

"Yeah..."

"Was I your first kiss too?"

"Umm..." She visibly swallows, biting her bottom lip. "I'd make out with Charlie, but with a guy... I Ugh... yeah."

I run a hand along my neck. I can't wrap a finger around how someone as gorgeous as her managed to walk with a diploma without dating one fool. With one look from her blue eyes and thick lashes, I cave in, and she's let her hair grow out to her navel. I've always liked a girl with long hair.

"Is there something wrong?" She asks.

"No... I'm just stealing all your firsts that you can have with someone else."

"Oh..." Her eyes dart around as she bites the inside of her cheeks. "I'm going to throw these away." She snags the baskets and empty drinks.

"No, wait."

She gets up and walks to the trashcan on the other side of the food truck. I follow behind her, and she turns around to face me. "It's just because it's me... I dunno how to say it. I'm not good with this sort of thing," I say.

"Do you want me?" She scrunches her brows.

"I do. It's just..."

"Just what?" She asks.

"I care about you... I always have. I just never really noticed it before."

"But not the way you felt for Brittni? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"What? No, this has nothing to do with her. Just listen to me, okay?"

"Okay..."

"I dunno how to describe it. Or how I feel. All I know is that I don't want to be the one who hurts you."

"Do you want whatever this is to end at some point?" her brows furrow as a pained expression finds its way across her face. She hugs herself as if it's cold, but it's still warm outside.

"No... No, I don't want it to end, but I'm scared of what it's turning into."

Payton

FOR A SECOND, I'M SKINLESS, BONELESS, MELTING into all the lies I tell myself and everyone else. The rich outlines of Ryder's shoulders strain against the fabric of his long-sleeved plaid shirt and my pulse quickens.

Nothing can save me now. All I can do is wrap up how I feel in barbed wire, and pray it doesn't unravel slowly. Play it cool and pretend my heart isn't flopping like a dead fish on the floor. But whatever this is, feels real, and it's choking me.

I don't want it to end either. I can't formulate the words or spit them out.

"Thanks for bringing me to the best hotdogs in town..." Ryder dips his hands into his jean pockets.

All I do is smile at him and stare at his grey eyes that shouldn't exist. "Yeah."

"I want to take you somewhere. It's a secret, so you can't tell anyone about it."

"Secrets. I think I'm good with those."

"Yeah. I know you are. Come on." He dips his head to the jeep. I hung onto one of his arms as we cross the street. He opens the passenger door for me, then rounds the corner and climbs in as I'm buckling up.

We take a fifteen-minute drive and pass the beach shops downtown. They are all closed for the night but still have one display light illuminating in the windows. "Where are we going?" I ask.

"I told you, it's a secret." He turns through some random streets I've never bothered to notice, and we hit a dirt road.

It's bumpy, and the lifeless air freshener hanging on his rearview mirror violently swings back and forth. "Oh, come on, tell me. Secrets don't make friends."

"Let's just say I don't even bring friends here." He uses a palm to turn the steering wheel. Trees tangle and twist, all around the road, but clear up with a view of an old lighthouse beaming its light against a restless ocean.

Ryder parks the jeep. He leans over the center console and grabs his football jacket hanging out in the back seat. "Here." He hands it to me. It's thick and warm, with Henderson stitched on the backside with his lucky number eleven. "It can be cold here at night." The jacket is gigantic and Ryder's woody scent saturates the inside. It's big enough to be a dress as it almost reaches my knees.

He's brought me to the beach. That's the number one most romantic thing a guy can do, right? Besides getting roses, writing poetry, and reciting Shakespeare. I didn't even think this was a thing – Ryder being a romantic and all. The guy is gruff, with his muscles rippling under his shirt. He always has a fist clenched, fighting someone else, and he has a sweet spot. An actual human piece to him he doesn't cut out and share with people.

I open the door, and I'm hit with cold salty air. The wind presses and pulls at my hair.

Ryder rounds the front end of the jeep, lacing his fingers in mine. "Come on..." He dips his head, and he leads me through a pathway of

bushes, littered with white flowers glowing bright in the moonlight. We twist and turn through the narrow path until the brush clears, and my feet meet beach sand.

Crashes of the waves and the fizz of foam sweep along the shore. The yellow light pulsates like a heartbeat as it spins in a circle across the ocean.

We walk a bit further through the sand where there's a cluster of smooth large stones. "Okay... this is it." He sits down on one of the rocks and rests his arms against his knees. I follow his lead, plopping down next to him.

He didn't lie. The push and pull of the waves force the frigid air to prickle my skin with goosebumps. My butt is cold as ice, and the rock steals any warmth from me.

"Do you come here a lot?" I ask.

"When I want to disappear, yeah. Sometimes I'd come here for an hour or so after work. Kinda came here a lot after Brittni, and shit with my Dad."

Lovely, he brought me to his get-over-my-ex spot. I tell the little demon whispering that nonsense in my ear to piss off, but the thought settles into my brain.

"What was it like?" I ask, trying to put the words into the correct order so the question doesn't come off wrong, and I'm insecure and another crazy. "You know... dating Brittni?"

"We only started seeing each other because of Dirty Roulette. I knew her for maybe thirty seconds before I had to. Umm...." He stares down at his boots, tapping them against the sand.

"Losing your virginity?"

"Yeah..." He pauses, and I stare at the way the ocean breeze pulls and tugs his hair in all directions. "I actually never told anyone before, but I was trying to wait until I found the right girl. Roulette wasn't a part of the plotline I drew out for myself..."

"I don't think any of us have the pen to write out our lives," I say.

He lets out a brittle laugh. "You're right... we don't have an eraser to go backwards, either."

I dip my head into his shoulder blade. "There are still guys waiting like that?" I ask. He maneuvers his arm and wraps it around me.

"Kinda stupid, I know..." He puts his chin on my head, and his warm breath fights against the reckless cold wind.

"No, it's not."

"I believed whoever that person was, I would always be connected to them somehow. It was supposed to be sacred or some shit. So I tried to be her boyfriend, but she was always partying, and telling me I was the one cheating. Me and her were just two people always fighting, and..." He inhales a deep breath. "Fucking."

"Do you love her?" There it is. The insecure question opens the lid of a little box of things that shouldn't sneak out.

Ryder pulls away, his eyes bore straight into mine. "No... but she fucking broke my heart. Three years of my life wasted." He rubs his hands together, and his lips are in a flat, expressionless line. I think he stabbed me in the chest with a knife he's hid because I don't think I wanted to know the answer to that question.

"You never brought her here?"

"She'd bitch about sand in her ass, plus she liked to stalk me sometimes. She doesn't know this place exists, so I rather keep it that way."

"For someone who's only slept with one person, you really know what you're doing."

He cocks up his eyebrows and laughs. "Thanks for boosting up my ego."

"I'm serious..." I playfully swat him in the chest.

"Okay, well, I'm already oversharing, anyway. I couldn't... fuck..." He presses two fingers in his eye sockets. "It took me months before I

could get Brittni off. I went into a dark web of Reddit to figure that anatomy shit out."

"Oh, I thought you were just a porn star."

"Fuck no!" He laughs.

"Was Dirty Roulette always a thing, though?"

"If there was a haze, it wasn't Roulette. Brody set that up. There were two guys who came in that year for the quarterback position, Brody and Logan. The previous ones graduated, and one of them got drafted. Logan had a better record for touchdown passes and more yards. Brody was looking at being the backup, and in college, he wasn't going to have cameras on him."

"How did he convince you all to play, then?" I ask.

"I thought it was strip poker... but turns out Brittni and some girls stole the booze. Brody was given footage of it from the store. How he got it, I don't know. But the guys there were dogs, so they wanted to sleep around, and if any of us backed out, the girls were looking at charges. Classic manipulation with fear, I guess... but we were eighteen and stupid. We all found out Logan was into dudes and a Mormon. I guess getting fucked in the ass and it being filmed was not something Logan wanted out. He dropped out after the first semester... Never heard from him again. Brody has been the quarterback and captain since..."

"Oh shit..."

"Yeah..."

We are silent, listening to the waves crashing to the shore, and receding. I get lost in the restless motions of the water and stare at Ryder, who gazes at the sea. I scoot closer to him, burrowing my face into his neck. He's smothering hot, and I'm an ice cube. It must have caught his attention because his hand molds over my cheeks and drugs me with a kiss. The strong hardness of his lips parts mine, leaving my mouth to burn with fire as our tongues brush together.

Ryder

INSTEAD OF A NORMAL MOVIE THEATER. Payton convinces me to pull into the drive in where they show the oldies. It's a million times cheaper and a box of candy doesn't cost fifteen dollars, including a severed arm. The one they are showing is Fright Night, and the muse fits Payton perfectly. The acting is terrible, and she giggles at every corny scene.

There is about fifteen minutes left of the movie, and it's going on eleven. My cell vibrates in the center console, and it's Charlie's picture on the screen. I let it go straight to voicemail and continue watching the movie. The phone goes off again, and usually, Charlie never calls me. It's always a text message to drill into me. I grab my cell and put it to my ear.

"Hey."

"I need you to come home!" she screams into my ears, but it's not the normal loving bitchy sister I'm used to listening to. Her tone is off.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Mom won't wake up. She called me and... And she was crying and..." Charlie sobs on the other end stuttering as she says, "I dunno what to do!"

"Calm down!"

"Don't tell me to calm down!"

"Is she breathing?"

"She won't stop puking! I can't pick her up. She's covered in... she's covered in it."

"Okay, Okay. I'm on my way. I'm maybe ten minutes from there."

"Fucking hurry!" She sobs.

"Push her so she is lying on her side. If she's not on her side, she can suffocate."

"Okay... Okay." There is a thump as if she dropped the phone to the floor.

"I don't know what to do! Mom! Please, mom wake up!" Her voice is further away.

"Keep her on her side. I'll be right there."

Payton furrows her brows. "What's wrong?" She asks.

I'm shifting the gears into reverse, peeling out of the drive-in theater. Dust kicks up underneath the tires and I speed off. I'm ignoring the red light yielding me to turn left.

Payton presses a palm on the ceiling as I weave in and out of traffic, cussing at anyone with breaking lights.

"Ryder! What's going on?" Payton asks and each sharp turn sends her throttling from one side to the other. "Ryder!"

"Fuck!" Someone slams on their brakes for no good reason. I flip on the blinker, cutting past them. "Come on!" My palm lies on the horn. "MOVE!" I'm drenched in sweat, my head heavy.

"Ryder!" she screams at me. The thing I call a heart thrashes as I swerve around people driving slow as fuck, and hightail it when a light changes to yellow.

I peel into the driveway and don't bother to turn off the Jeep. I throw the seatbelt off and run to the front door. Charlie is on her knees, combing Mom's hair back with mascara pooling down her cheeks.

"Sebastian!" Charlie uses my first name, and she's legit a mess, her fingers soaked in mom's disgusting disease.

"I'm sorry... I dunno what happened... I just answered her phone call... all I did was answer it!"

A wrenching gurgle climbs out of mom's throat and vomit pours out of her mouth. She's choking on it.

"Fuck, not again.... you're not doing this to me again." I pat her on the cheek, her eyes fluttering open and falling back into nothingness.

"Mom!" She did this right after I got home in the summer, but pissed all over herself in the bedroom. She drank until it was fatal. I pull her up to a sitting position, and she gags with vomit running down her chin. "Mom, fucking wake up."

I pick her up, throwing her arm over my shoulder.

"Get your fuck—" Mom stumbles on her footing as I carry her into the bathroom. "...hands off me..."

When I get her to sit on the tile floor, I throw up the toilet seat, and she hurls straight into the bowl. I turn on the shower letting it get lukewarm.

Payton stands in the doorway wrapped in my football jacket sitting above her bony knees. A hand comes up to her mouth. The most painful expression I've ever seen manifests in her eyes. The fear carves scars right into my skin. "I need you to get out!" I yell at her.

She stands there like a statue, staring at me through the mirror.

"Payton, get out!"

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry." She scurries off.

I don't want her to see me like this, or the person I am. She doesn't know about this part of my life. The gruesome truth is that my parents killed themselves again and again.

I've sheltered her and Charlie from it, always coming home on nights that would be worse. They were so interested in each other that I held the hair. I picked Mom off the floor when she fell, and they were jumping into the pool. Those two didn't need to worry about the adult shit I've burdened myself with. They never saw it. I cooked for them, cleaned for them, logged into Charlie's school account, and made her do the homework.

Tonight was supposed to be a date, where I prove to myself and Payton that I actually like her. But happiness is an illusion and sadness is what makes mom happy.

In madness, she'll find her death and drown in alcohol until her liver gives in. The drinking was bad before Dad left, but once he packed, she went on a full-on binge, and the cycle repeats with me. I binge. Drowning out Brittini and all the shit she put me through. I had it with pointless sex and fighting with her.

Nevertheless, I'm fucking depressed. Now Charlie picks up the bottle and binges too, because no one is watching.

Mom lays an arm around the seat of the toilet, spewing. When she starts to dry heave up nothing. I pull the puke-stained shirt over her arms and I lay her down in the tub. I grab the shower head with a hose and run it through her hair. Soap bottles thump and crash against the porcelain as I reach for the shampoo. My arms are soaked with a sour stench. Vomit stains the boots I've never touched. I comb through Mom's hair, washing out the gunk. When she's clean enough, I end up having to pull her out of the tub, dry her with a towel, and help her put on a clean pair of clothes. I toss her into the bed to sleep it off.

Stumbling back to the living room, the clock on the wall says it's one in the morning. Charlie is on her knees with the black mop bucket, using a sponge and paper towels to clean up the carpet. Tears soil her eyes. Now she fucking sees it. The veil is coming down for her to realize this is the reality God put us in. Payton sits next to her, helping her scrub the pink vomit staining right into the fibers.

"I think you got most of it. Go back to the dorms. I'll stay here."

"Is she going to be okay?" Charlie asks.

"For now... yeah."

Payton uses her palms to push herself off the carpet and slides the jeep keys off an end table. "Umm... here." She gulps and takes one step forward and hands them over. "You're jersey is on the couch."

I look at Charlie and say, "I'll call you in the morning."

"Okay..."

Secrets Don't Make Friends



Payton

NOT A SINGLE WORD. Nothing but the sound of the car humming and a sharp high pitch tone rings in my ears. Charlie pulls up to the dorm rooms, her hands super-glued to the steering wheel. The look in her eyes is straight out of a horror movie as they search into the distant darkness with nothing there.

"Are you okay?" I break the silence.

"I don't know."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"For fuck's sake, you are wearing my dress. That's my dress..." Her grey eyes are empty as her fingers twist the leather of the steering wheel as if it were what she wanted to do with my neck.

First, it's Ryder screaming at the top of his lungs for me to go away with their mom hunched over the toilet. Now Charlie is using me as a punching bag too.

I couldn't swallow, feeling a lump the size of a jawbreaker lodged in my throat. All I can mutter is the word. "Yeah..."

"Why was my brother dressed like that?" She doesn't break eye contact with the nothingness outside.

"What do you mean?"

"He's all fucking nice, like he is trying to make an impression."

I chewed on her words. "Oh..."

"Is that honestly all you can say?"

"I'm sorry... I."

"You don't care about anyone, do you?" She asks.

The pitter-patter of drizzling rain hits the roof of the car. It's a few drops, but within seconds it turns heavy, dulling the streetlights.

"Sorry..."

"He is my brother..." She hisses it out.

I wish he wasn't. This would be easier without the label tattooed on his forehead. If it were anyone else, there wouldn't be a care in the world. If I wanted to fuck any other guy's brains out, it wouldn't matter, but it's him.

"We just went to get something to eat. You are always out with Noah, so we've been hanging out a bit more, I guess." I shrug.

"But you're wearing my dress... the dress I told you screams fuck me, but now it's covered in vomit."

"I'm sorry about your mom..."

"Don't change the subject..." She clenches a fist and starts punching the center of the steering wheel, laying on the horn. A scream rips through her mouth as if someone stabbed her thirty times over without bleeding out and dying. She's shaking the steering wheel, with the slobber and tears pooling down her face.

She turns to me as if I'm the ugliest human on the planet. "You're my best fucking friend! And you're lying to me!"

"We are just friends. Can I not be friends with him?" I ask.

"I want you off my brother's nuts. Whatever you feel for him, you need to stuff it down your throat and forget it. Now get out of my damn car!"

"Charlie..."

"OUT!"

I shrivel up inside myself, open up the car door, and slip out. Frigid rain hits my skin, and in a matter of seconds, I'm drenched standing on the sidewalk staring at the headlights pulling out of the parking lot. The tires squeal as she hits the gas, peeling out to the main street and driving off.

Nothing anyone says to me at this point isn't something I already tell myself six inches from the mirror. I'm trailer trash, and I've never been anything more than that. No need to point out the obvious. I'm in no way deserving of Ryder, or any friendship for the matter.

Telling lies and hiding the truth has been a vendetta since that stupid bottle landed on him. Might as well call it off. Let Brody post the damn picture of my tits, pack my shit up and leave. The scholarship isn't worth it. Going to gymnastics and dance since fifth grade and the drop of hope I was Cheer Phi material was the stupidest decision of my life.

Charlie is slipping from my fingertips and I dunno how to salvage my friendship with her. I walk up the flight of stairs, with the sound of booming music getting louder as I reach the last step.

Several dorm rooms are wide open, with a crowd of people laughing, holding those stupid red plastic cups screaming I'm drunk.

I paw for the dorm keys out of my purse, jimmying the door to open, when someone jerks me back by the shoulder.

"Hey, sexy..." A hand runs over the wet fabric of the dress and gropes me in the chest.

"Stop!"

"No, I heard you earlier. Ohhh.... ohhh... yeah Ryder, fuck me!" He croaks, and a chorus of laughter fills the halls. I swig around, throwing my purse off a shoulder, and whack him in the face. My eyes are staring straight at Jeffery Dahmer, a night stalker on wheels. His pointed nose and fat ugly glasses need to be snapped in half. The

dude is riddled with vibes of lotion and tissue boxes by the nightstand. I'm sure that's all he'll ever get.

It doesn't seem to faze him as he runs a hand between my thigh, pulling up the dress and touching places he's not invited to.

"Fuck off!" I claw and push the guy in the chest. His weight is a thousand times stronger than my skinny, fragile bones, and it leaves me no choice but to ram a knee between his legs.

A loud groan ruptures out of his throat. "Fucking bitch!" He backs up with his hands cupping the dick I bet is the size of a peanut.

I'm shaking, swiveling around, unlocking the door, slamming it behind me, and deadbolting the lock. My back meets the walls, and I stand in the darkness, trembling. This dress, this stupid night, thinking it would be something special, proved I'm not worth anything. If only there was a belt, I could wrap around my neck and hang myself from a chandelier to end it right now. My entire body crumbles to the floor.

My phone vibrates in my purse and I tear it out, praying it's Charlie. Begging to God for her not to be so angry with me, but it's not her. No, it's that stupid, anonymous number prowling like a lion hunting me down to devour me.

Anonymous: Where is my video?

Payton: Leave me alone.

Anonymous: You played the game, it's time for you to pay up. Or I can come over right now and fuck you myself.

Payton: You're disgusting.

Anonymous: Do you really think Ryder is going to stay with you?

Payton: Quit.

Anonymous: He already agreed once he films it, he'll get back together with Brittni.

Payton: I don't believe you.

Anonymous: Don't believe me? He filmed this last week with her.

There's another stupid link sent to me. Temptation daring me to click on it. My thumb trembles, my heart bleeding out with a knife Freddy Kruger chased me with. Dumb me opens up the tab to a video, and Ryder's there with Brittni on his bed. He's pinning her hands above her head. Her tan legs curls around his hips as he thrust into her. They are aggressive, erratic, and she's loud, and he's cussing about how good she feels. The time on the video is an hour and six minutes.

My stomach doubles over within itself. I skim through it. There is no way I can watch the entire thing. It's a razor blade to my heart, peeling back layers one slice at a time. She's riding him, he's taking her from behind, then her legs on his shoulders.

I want to puke, slit my throat over a sink as the last two minutes of the video is him telling her how much he loves her as he finishes.

The only thing I can think of doing is turning off my phone, changing my numbers, packing, and leaving. I crawl over to the closet, pushing aside the mountain of clothes, until I find my duffle bag. Anything that belongs to me, I stuff into it in without folding.

There isn't anyone who can drive me home, and my only other option is paying for a ride. As I shake violently, I type in the address, as the anonymous number keeps sending me links and pictures. They are forcing a funnel down my throat and pouring bleach into my stomach so I can die.

A driver picks up the ride without question and is a couple of minutes away. When it pings, they are outside. I throw the duffle bag over a shoulder and make a run for it down the hallway.

"Oh look, it's trash running away!"

I bite my tongue and swallow the tears breaking through my ribcage I thought was once fiberglass. Pounding feet stampeded behind me. "Come back, trash. We won't bite!"

The concrete is wet and slippery when I reach the final step and slip. A throbbing pain surges through my knee, and a pool of red liquid spills onto the sidewalk.

The headlights of a red car sit on the side of the building. I climb into a run and race to the back door, opening it and throwing myself in.

A group of guys came down the steps laughing. Punching each other in the chests, shaking shoulders in complete hysteria. Brittni and Autumn follow behind them, leaning over the rails and flipping me the bird.

"Are you okay?" The driver asks, staring at me through the rearview mirror with furrowed brows.

"Yeah..." I lie, which is turning into pure muscle memory. "I'm fine." With a hand, I wipe my cheek. Not a single word I say is true at this point. I'm not okay. All I want to do is go back to the trailer park and rot like my destiny calls me to.

BANGING A FIST on the front door at three in the morning is embarrassing. Mum wraps a robe around her naked self when answering. Cold eyes pull my heart down like gravity.

"God Damnit Payton! It's three in the morning!"

"I know!" I cry back.

I climb up the three narrow stairs into the trailer and storm down the creaky hall to my bedroom. The mattress is still stripped, the pillow worn and used up. I collapse to the one thing I know is real. My fingers burrow into the fabric sobbing.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She asks, standing in the doorway, with the dim hallway light bleeding in.

"Nothing! I just want to come home!"

"I told you to watch yourself. What kind of mess did you get yourself into?"

"I didn't get into anything! I just don't wanna be there anymore!" I sob like a two-year-old clinging to the pillow to my chest as if it's the only thing in the world that's going to save me.

Mum storms up and yanks the pillow from my grasp. "I can't hear you when you cry like that!"

"College was a stupid idea! I belong here so I can rot and smell like the cat lady down the street."

"Stop that!" She smacks the top of my head. "What the hell is wrong with you talking like that? I might live in a trailer but it doesn't make me less of a person! Now shut up! Go to sleep, and tomorrow you're going back!"

Mum storms out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

"I thought that brat was out of here?" Richie mutters outside the door as they shuffle away to the bedroom on the other side of the mobile home.

I'm a lying piece of shit. I'd be lucky to meet a friend down at the gates of hell because that's exactly where I'm going. Guilt washes over me, and drowns me until somehow my eyes close, and I fall asleep. Blackness envelops me, and my brain goes dark. For those hours, nothing touches me, not a single thought, and I wish it lasted longer. When my eyes unfasten, it feels like I got five minutes of sleep.

Cicadas buzz outside the window. The blinds in the room sway back and forth, and it must be well past noon when I pull myself off the bed. I'm still in the dress, and it's saturated with a piss-sour stench. I throw it over my head and toss it to the corner.

Slipping out of the room, I sneak into the bathroom to shower and wash off everything. With a loofah, I scrub the sins coating me like a black plague until my skin turns raw. I can't stomach to look at myself in the mirror without feeling disgusted with who I am.

I get dressed and go into the kitchen where Richie made a batch of bread and eggs. He plops a bunch on a paper plate and hands it to me. I mumble my thanks and open the drawer with clean forks. My mouth waters as I sit down on one of the bar stools and stuff my face. It's mushy and gooey. A weird combination of being similar to French toast but without the cinnamon and sugar.

Mum comes back into the trailer with the stench of nicotine on her skin. "It's almost noon. Do you feel any better?"

"I dunno..." I fiddle with some of the scrambled eggs blended with the bread then imagine the food as Brittni and Brody and stab the fork right into it like I'd do with their eyes.

"It's Sunday and tomorrow you have class. It's going on a month. You still have three months of it. You said you would be fine?"

"I thought so too."

The truth refuses to leak off my lips to my own mother. That's social suicide, and knowing her, she would commit arson on the entire building and live happily in a jail cell with the type of revenge she craves. "I have fall break in October."

"Well, you know you can stay here during fall break."

"I know."

"If you throw this all away, you won't have another chance to be in college. Tonight, you need to pull yourself together. I'll drive you back up there after dinner."

"Okay..." I say.

When I finish eating, I lay on the couch watching a weird documentary mum put on the television to drown out the white noise. After a while, she turns it onto the news where I stare at all the awful things they say about the reality of our grim world. The anchors are boring, and it makes me pass out for several more hours.

The sun is low when I wake up, and Mum is packing me dinner in a Tupperware container, telling me to gather my things so she can

drive me back before it's too late. Astigmatism wrecks her eyes when it gets dark.

The entire drive back, I'm chewing off my thumbnail. My chest caves in, collapsing within itself as she pulls up to the dorms.

Mum pecks me on the cheeks before I climb out of the car and make the dreadful steps back up to the room. When I unlock the door, it's empty. Charlie's side remains untouched, and it doesn't look like she came back either.

I sit on the edge of the bed staring at the phone I left off all day long. My chest is on fire as I hold down the side buttons, turning the damn thing on. My mind is a prison, and the voices in my head whisper all the awful things that will pop up on my notifications.

What's worse is when nothing pings on the screen. No one giving a shit or caring to message. I open up my social media, skimming through the posts. Naomi, Brittni, and Autumn were drinking last night with Brody and a bunch of other douchebags. Their pictures litter the feed with what feels like a million comments and hearts. Why does everyone like them? They are disgusting and horrible.

There's no activity on Ryder's account. Charlie is silent with the icon, saying she hasn't been on in almost nineteen hours.

The door knob rattles as keys unlock it. It slides across the carpet as Charlie steps in, clenching the leather of her purse. She throws the keys onto the nightstand with her other belongings. With a foot, she pushes off her ankle boots.

"Hey..." she says and plops down on her mattress and scoots where her back meets the wall. Her arms wrap around legs.

I stare at the ceiling fan above us. "Hi..." It whirs, and my eyes start circling with the blades, making me dizzy with each loop.

"I was really mad last night."

I dig my palms into my eyes. "Really? I couldn't tell..."

"I'm serious."

"Okay..." I say. I'm never this bleak with her. We usually always hug and makeup, but something feels utterly off in my chest.

"Are you okay?" She asks me.

"Yeah..." I fill her head with more lies and chemicals. I wonder when the side effects will finally set in and the withdrawals from every lie will leak out of my spinal cord. I'm not okay, and there isn't a word I can say about last night without her connecting the dots. The guy grabbing me, the sex video on my phone. All of it leads back to me messing around with Ryder and these uninvited emotions I have for him. There is no way I can be saved. The life I had, everything I loved and known circles the drain. I can't be saved from it, and nothing will change it. If I tell Charlie I lose her, if I don't tell her, I'll be able to cling on a tiny bit longer.

"Do you want to go with me to Noah's and watch them practice?"

"You're only asking me to be nice..."

"I get it you're mad at me. I was a complete bitch last night."

"I guess I can understand why, but you're also never here."

"I really like him... I dunno. That's all I can think about is him..."

"Have you two... you know... done it?" I ask.

"I'm waiting until after the concert. We kinda did a cute pinky promise." I turn my head to her, watching her push up her cheeks in glee. "In just a couple of weeks, I'm going to lose my virginity and he's perfect!"

"Oh..." I briefly smile. "I'm happy you found someone nice."

That damn bottle devoured what solace I had left in me. The diadem was ripped off my head with all my innocence. The halo burned in hell and left me with nothing but painful horns piercing through my skull. There is no tiny box anymore to stuff my thoughts in, or to hide anything I feel.

"Well, I'm going to head over there. Don't wait up for me?" She slips into her booties, blows me kisses, and walks out the door like nothing happened last night.

I SPENT AN HOUR completing a few assignments I procrastinated on. Once I finish, it's a little past eight. The sky seeps in darkness, and it starts to sink in that Charlie won't be coming back tonight. She might as well pack her things and go move in with Noah at this rate.

I slide into my shoes and leave the room wearing a baggy t-shirt and a pair of shorts. The night air is crisp, and I stroll down the sidewalk, walking the long and lonely route to get to the fraternity. When I get there, I stand on the lawn, my eyes glued to the orange glow from the lamp in Ryder's room.

The grass is soft between my footsteps as I reach the window and lean against the wood paneling of the house. Ryder's at his desk, his hair ruffled as he types and taps on the mouse pad.

The window is cracked open. My nervous system is in overdrive, and the awful voices inside my head tell me he wants to be left alone. I'm the obnoxious fly buzzing around everyone's face that needs to be swatted at. Thoughts tell me I'm invading his space. I'm not acting like a sane, normal human being and ringing the doorbell. In fact, I should be waiting for him to invite me over, but my hands are holding me against the wall.

I bite my bottom lip and curl my fingers around the window, pushing it up. Ryder's lips lay flat as he turns his head. His eyes glaze over, and there are two bottles of Hennessy sitting next to his computer. A demonic voice whispers in my ear and says *Cheers*.

"Why do you keep sneaking in?" He asks with a brow lifting, but this sadness molds across him as he drags the bottle off the desk and takes a swig.

"Do you want me to stop?" I ask.

"No... get in here." I push myself up and crawl through the window and tumble to his bed. He stares at the bottle in his hand, twirling it around at the neck.

"I tried knocking on the dorm this morning. You weren't there..."

"I took a cab home..." I say, my fingers coil together. My breath gets caught in my throat.

"Why?"

My mouth goes dry, and my palms sweat. The ache in my heart pulls out the phone and I cup it into my hands, staring at the screen asking for the passcode to get in. My thumbs type in the password, and I open up the messages from the anonymous number with half a dozen links sent.

The tears well up in my eyes as I click the one I watched last night and hold out my hand. Ryder's a stoic statue. He grabs the phone and presses the play button. I burrow my palms into my eye sockets. Adrenaline and all its painful fury pump through my veins.

His front teeth bite down on his bottom lip, the video on blast. He visibly gulps, and a pain etches in his eyes. "I don't remember filming this..." A hand runs through his hair. With a thumb, he scrolls on my phone, his eyes darting across the screen.

"Yeah..." I suck in a deep breath, the tears building up in my eyes.

"I didn't sleep with her last week? You have to believe me."

"Okay..." With a palm, I wipe away the tears pooling down my cheeks. They are hot and angry. I'm riddled with lies and for how many times I don't tell the truth, there is a serpent coiling around me whispering there is no one I can trust.

"Payton.... I dunno what Brittini and I even were. It was honestly the most draining thing I ever went through. Look where it got me." He waves the bottle at me.

"I don't think you even know what we are..."

"Because you won't admit to it." He takes a swig, and I'm not sure if he's ever sober. "I have to hide it when we could just tell everyone."

"But you're drinking to get over her."

"That's not it." He places the bottle next to the empty one on his desk. This is fucking painful to watch, a mess right in front of me when I can't even clean myself up.

"Then why are you drowning yourself?"

"So, I stop fucking feeling. Anything and everything. I don't want to feel a damn thing." He tosses my phone onto the mattress and throws himself off the chair. Pacing around the room, his hands run along the crease of his neck. "Delete those videos and stop responding to them."

"Okay." I drag the phone across the blankets and gape at the delete button, getting rid of the videos that shredded my heart. Ryder stares into the nothingness. His hands raked in his hair. Then he crumbles to the bed.

A phone vibrates on the nightstand, and Ryder's face shrivels with annoyance as he sits up and snatches it. "What the fuck does he want?" He swipes the green arrow and presses the phone to his ear.

"What?"

"Where's my video?" Brody nails me to a coffin with his voice on the other end.

"You need to fuck off..."

"Or what?"

"Stop sending her videos. I'm done playing your games."

"Oh... you're drinking again, huh?"

"What's it to you?"

"Well... trash met a friend of mine last night who's really interested in getting with her. He really got her going last night."

Ryder darts his eyes and glances at me. He puts the call on mute, leaving it on speaker. "What the hell is he talking about?"

I swallow the knives I want to slit my throat with. The guy's hands were all over me, touching me in places I never invited him to. "I... umm."

"Did someone touch you?"

"Hang up!" I holler, reaching for his phone and slapping the red button on the bottom to get rid of him. The call disconnects, and I sit up with my hands covering my face.

"Payton!"

"Stop, it's fine!"

"Who the hell touched you?"

"I kicked him in the balls. I'm fine..."

"Don't lie to me too!" He pulls my hands away from my face. His grey eyes are torture, gazing into mine. The pure fear in them is possibly only an ounce of what I felt when that stranger grabbed me.

"You and Charlie were both really mad at me."

"We are done hiding this. We need to tell Charlie. If everyone sees that you're my girl, no one will dare touch you. If I'm not there and someone..." He bites his bottom lip. "I won't ever be able to live with myself."

"I'm fine..."

"No, now talk!"

It Was a Mistake



Ryder

CHECKMATE. He's right by the vending machines smoothing out a dollar bill. Not a single security guard is within sight. The joints in my knuckles crack, and I come up on him like a wolf hunting a lamb. Jerking his shoulder back, I spin him around, and with a forearm, I pin the fucker against the glass by the neck. The stupid eyeglasses tumble off his nose, and beads of sweat pour down the side of his face. Funny how Payton described him because he looks like a Dahmer with a pointed nose and flat comb over.

"You touch my girl?"

Trembling hands raise up. The dollar falls to the concrete. "I—I was... I..." He stutters with a sour stench seeping out of his mouth.

"Huh?"

He licks the string of orange gunk, coating his teeth. "I....."

"I can't hear you!" He's skinny enough to break like a twig, and if jail ceased to exist, I'd stuff the insides of his cranium in the vending machine with a toothbrush hanging off the jaw I'm about to rip in half.

"Did you touch her?"

"S-Sorry... I-I won't ever do it again!"

I fist his shirt and throw him onto the concrete. "If you or any of your friends lay a finger on her again, I'll end you!"

He scrambles up into a run, bolting down the sidewalk like the pathetic and shitty person he is. Clapping echoes off the walls as Brody slithers around the corner. His forked tongue hisses underneath his teeth as he chuckles.

"What the hell do you want?" I pick up the dollar the punk left on the ground. The machine crunches the bill and swallows it.

A smug smile molds across Brody's face. "Your girl, huh?" He asks as I punch in the numbers and a Snickers bar thumps to the door flap. "I knew you had a sweet spot for her."

I peel back the wrapper and bite into the creamy caramel. "What's your problem now?" I ask in mid-crunch.

"Same problem I had yesterday." He cocks up his brows and the smirk across his face widens. "I want my video."

I shoulder-check him, unwilling to continue this conversation every time he finds it convenient to harass me about it. "This isn't something you take your sweet ass time with. You must really want my linemen dumping you off at the hospital."

If he thinks he can dig deep enough to bury me, I'm taking him with. Nothing he can do or say will get rid of me.

"You won't win a damn game without me, and you know that."

"I'd rather watch you never catch a ball again." I hear the smile on his face, liking the thought of my demise.

He wants me to break out in a cold sweat, but I'm sweltering in the rage I've pent up for the past three years. His shadow inches closer, trailing behind me. I inhale another bite of the candy bar with peanuts crunching under my teeth.

"But maybe you can buy some time off me if you tell me the name of that fucker dating your sister."

"You won't find him on the campus," I say.

"Oh..."

"You fucked that one up."

"You have a week, Crab. If you don't pay up, then I will take care of Trash's initiation myself."

Peeling the wrapper back, I engulf the last chunk of the bar and toss the garbage in the trash. Brody's shadow disintegrates as he walks off in the opposite direction.

I'm done with classes today, and make my way to the courtyard where Payton said she would meet me around four.

People litter the grass, and she's under the cover of a tree wearing a white tank top, with her bra bleeding through, and jean shorts riddled with holes. One of her Converse sneakers is untied. I'm not surprised.

When she spots me in the distance, she leaps up and down on her tiptoes, waving at me. The white smile pushing her rosy cheeks washes away the conversation with Brody. I can't help but grab her by the waist, lifting her up into a hug with her legs wrapped around me.

The sweet fruity shampoo wafts off her as she digs her fingers into my hair. I can't help but leave a trail of kisses along her shoulder blades and up her neck. When I reach her lips, she sticks out her tongue, licking the tip of my nose.

"What the hell!" I cough up a laugh. "You're so weird. Let's see how you like it." I take my tongue and lick her on the right side of her face.

"Gross!" She leans back.

"That's what you get."

"Put me down." She pushes her hands into my shoulder blades, kicking her legs.

"No, you're coming with me." I walk off with her cradled in my arms. She's laughing, as I'm not joking. The girl is coming home with me. She can do her homework later.

At the other end of the courtyard. Charlie digs into a bag of chips with devil eyes shooting daggers at me. Payton doesn't seem to notice, and I wonder if she's bothered to think about when she will tell her the truth.

Sometime tonight I'll have to talk to her again. It's obvious at this point she's into me. The blushing, the way she smiles. It's completely different now when she sees me. I'm craving her the same way. Everything I feel is coming undone.

I drive her back to the house, and it doesn't take us two minutes before we split a brownie. A brownie, coated and laced with the best weed. Nick put on his apron last night and turned into Martha Stewart, telling us step-by-step how to make them.

Payton's supposed to be studying for her upcoming French test tomorrow. Talking to me with that sexy voice and all the naughty things she wants to do, but being high on a Monday night seems more appealing.

We lay on my dirty wooden floor talking and staring at the fan above my room, spinning. The light illuminating off the lamp is warm and orange, making Payton's skin bathe in gold.

I have piles of dirty clothes clogging the doorway to my closet. Sweaty sheets stain my mattress. Even though it smells like moldy feet and football gear, Payton doesn't seem to care.

A mix of different artists plays on the Bluetooth stereo sitting on the dresser. Each song has a hint of temptation telling me to throw her on the bed now.

My phone vibrates next to me, and I pick it up seeing a text from a group chat I'm in. Payton glances over as I respond.

The letters and numbers on the screen are wobbly. When I click on the emoji page, Payton giggles. I glance into her eyes directly, and she immediately stops. It looks like she's choking on her tongue. I turn

my attention away and back at the phone, and she is spitting out a giggle.

"What?" I ask and couldn't help but catch the chuckles like the black plague. Payton covers her lips with a hand. She heaves and lets out a burst of laughter.

"Jesus Payton, what's so funny?"

Her eyes water from laughing. She wipes her tears with an index finger and sucks in large gulps of air to calm down.

"The egg..." Payton points at the phone. "The..." She crosses her arms around her waist, swaying back and forth, stomping her feet on the floor, and bursting into uncontrollable laughter.

"The... egg?" I shrug, confused at what's so hilarious. I glance at the screen and then search Payton's eyes lighting back up as she laughs.

"Egg... Ha-ha. Eggplant..." Payton continues to chuckle. She waves her hands over her face like a fan. I've never seen her cheeks so pretty and pink before.

"What do you mean eggplant?"

"You're first emoji icon is the... the big... Haha... purple... eggplant!" She pushes a hand into my shoulder, and I drop the phone. A smirk forms across my lips.

"Wait what?"

"You're such a guy, you're totally sending the eggplant like it's hot."

"Hey, hey don't be so judgmental. You like my big egg..."

Payton shushes me with her finger over my mouth. "Uh-huh..." She pushes my shoulder and climbs on top again, her legs straddling me as I lay on the floor.

I put my hands across her waist, marveling at the texture of her smooth skin. Using my elbows, I sit up slightly, getting closer to her lips, chuckling, and inching my way to her. When she least expects it,

I grab her legs, throw her off me, and down onto the hardwood floor. Snatching her ankles, I drag her around, sending her into a pit of laughter.

"No!" she begs, clawing at the floorboard creases as they do in horror movies. I have her pinned to the floor, and I'm holding both her arms above her skull. My free hand tickles her in between her rib cage and waist. She squirms, flailing her legs up and down, trying to break free.

"What do you do?" She laughs and hyperventilates the words. "Do you tell your bros how you have a BIG eggplant?" She giggles and deepens her voice.

"Hi, I'm Ryder and I have a big eggplant. Yeah, the babes like it, do you like that? Do you want to have a taste? Meet me at the park on 7th Street. Come see my eggplant!"

"Jesus Christ, Payton." I burst into complete laughter.

Piglet snorts rip from her mouth. "Did you just snort?"

"No!"

Payton bores into my eyes. I've been up close to her too many times to count, but never took a moment to admire her indigo irises molding into carnations.

I release her wrists and electricity bursts through my chest at the sensation of my fingers trailing down her black hair. I'm convinced she short-circuited my brain. Her creamy thighs graze across my waist, her nipples perk up through her bra.

She's given me a monstrous boner. If I move in the wrong direction, she'll notice, and I'm done for. I've been staring at her for almost a full minute without saying a single word.

Payton turns my heart from a solid to a liquid. A warm, gooey pile of mush in my chest. Her fingers curl around the collar of my shirt, and she twirls the fabric. Her breath brushes off mine, and an ache drills a hole into my chest.

"I want to..."

Payton's nose nuzzles against mine, her breath on my lips. She brushes them along the side of my mouth. They are warm and soft, meeting mine as she kisses me.

"I don't want to film this... just me and you," I say.

"Just me and you?"

"I'm not sharing this with anyone."

"But we have to," she says.

"I'm not recording me taking your virginity."

She bites lightly at my bottom lip, and her tongue touches the seam. I'm flooded with endorphins. I graze a hand across her cheeks, meeting her bottom lip with my thumb. Payton grabs a fist full of my hair before she pins her body against mine, and we kiss again.

I part my mouth and our tongues tangle together. I'm drowning. I can't fill my lungs with air quick enough to meet each stroke of her lips. A raspy groan escapes her as she grinds her hips into my thigh. My dick aches, pressing hard against my jeans.

I run a hand up her silky thighs, up her chest, grasping her right breast. She breathes hard into my mouth and her hand travels to my chest and straight down to my boner.

I pull her off the floor, and we stand still. My heart pounds in an erratic rhythm, hammering into my ears. She reaches for the hem of my shirt. I lift my arms and let her pull the cotton up and over my head. Popping the button of her shorts, she shimmies the tight denim down her long legs.

She throws her tank off, and I unclip her bra in one swift movement and ease the lacy garment aside. Then I shuck off my jeans and briefs. She walks backward as I lead her to the bed. I follow as she sits down crawling back.

She twined her arms around my neck, pulling me into her mouth. Her tongue brushes against mine. I try to ignore the strange aching in

my limbs. Her trembling thighs clung to me. Quickly, I rolled away to the bedside table, searching the drawer for a condom, and tore it open with my teeth. I run it down my length, and I'm already seeing stars.

I hook two fingers on the edge of her panties and give one easy tug to pull them off.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah..."

I slide a hand across her silken belly, and she curls into the curve of my body. I cup her bottom, lifting her hips. She stiffens, her breath coming fast and harsh. "Let me know if it hurts." I adjust myself, finding her wet opening, the tip of my dick on fire.

A loud bang explodes through my door.

"You lying bitch!"

We scramble, Payton grabs a blanket, and I'm pissed. My hard-on dies in an instant.

"What the fuck!" I yell. A loud ring screeches in my ears, and all I hear is my heartbeat pounding in my chest. Payton swallows with me in synch at the sight of Charlie. She scoffs with a smirk across her face.

"Charlie I..." Payton's white as a ghost.

"Oh, shut the fuck up, and don't treat me like I'm blind." Charlie snaps. She finds the nearest thing and fists it into her hands. It's a collection of water bottles I hoarded on my desk this week.

"How fucking dare you!" She crunches the bottle and throws it, hitting my chest. I slap another away, grabbing my briefs off the floor.

"Haven't you heard of knocking?"

"Oh, now you want to talk about knocking!" She chucks the water bottle at my head. "You're a sleazy ass dog!" I miss blocking one of the bottles, and it smacks me straight in the forehead.

I burst into laughter over her hypocrisy. "I'm a dog?" I question with a laugh.

"So, you're sulking all summer over Brittni and now you're suddenly in love with my best friend." I stalk toward her, slapping away the bottles she throttles at me.

"Yeah, I like her. What are you going to do about it?"

Charlie ambushes me with her acrylic demon nails. I push her away like the tiny pest fly she is. I thought little sisters got less annoying with age, but if I spend another minute dealing with Charlie's tantrums, I'm going to suffocate her with a pillow in her sleep.

"And what happens when you lose your temper over any guy friends she has, huh?"

"So, you're saying Payton is going to cheat on me, too?"

Charlie's cold and grey desolate eyes grimace at me. Her lips pucker, and her fists clench at her sides.

"I fucking hate you both!"

"Charlie... I'm sorry I wanted to tell you." Payton's eyes water, but she's frozen with the blanket clutched to her naked skin.

"I would rather dump hot oil all over my body than live with someone I thought was my friend."

"No, Charlie!"

"You're a fucking liar! You fucking lied, you bitch! Fucking rot in hell!" She storms off, slamming the bedroom door behind her.

Payton and I marinate in silence. The fan whirs above us and my dick's ache for a release is squished like a rotten pumpkin. I rub the back of my neck and glance over toward Payton, ringing her fingers into the fabric of the blanket.

"She'll cool off," I say and slunk into the bed.

Payton gathers her clothes on the floor and shimmies back into her underwear. "I hate myself." She pulls the shirt over her head.

"Don't say that!"

"You don't get it!" she screams at me, buttoning up her shorts. "She'll never forgive me!" She crumbles to the floor and her head

meets her hands. She curls up into a ball and a sob rages out of her mouth, and she heaves in and out.

"No, Payt stop. Don't cry." I lean down, rubbing her shoulder with a thumb.

"I need to go." She throws her hand off me, storming around for her Converse and wiggling them onto her feet.

"No wait..." I stand up and reach for her hand, but she swats at me.

"Please, don't touch me!" She swings her bag over her shoulder and barges out of the room. "I don't want this! I don't want you!" She screams in my face, saliva and her nose running. Her cheeks burn red in between each sob. Tears are like pouring rain. She rips the skin off my bones and guts the heart right out of my chest. It's stomped on all over again.

"I rather have my pictures posted. I'm so fucking done with this place!" Her footsteps thump down the hallway. The screen door swings open and slams as she races out and leaves.

The Concert



Ryder

I'M PLAYING AN INTENSE ROUND of Madden with Nick. We both lean forward, eyes fixed on the screen. Some guy living in grandma's basement won't stop cussing through his mic. Who can blame him, this game is trash.

"This game is laggy as fuck!" Nick's fingers tap on all the buttons.

The controller clicks, and I throw a ten-yard pass, and some crazy ass player jumps twenty feet in the air and intercepts the ball.

I cough up a laugh. "You're shitting me?" The joysticks move back and forth, fingers tapping the buttons.

"I told you Madden is bullshit," Nick grumbles, clicking his fingers on the remote harder as if it's going to magically make the player do what he wants.

"Why do you two still play this game?" Jared plops onto the other side of the couch with a beer in hand.

"I dunno..." I say and put the controller down as the defeated sign pops up on the screen. That's a lie. I'm battling my psychotic demons, carving Payton's name in my chest with a knife. I'm that fucking hurt. Jared sips on his piss water and asks, "You work tonight?"

Running a hand over the crease of my neck, I say, "No."

"Sigma is having a get together tonight."

"Sounds fun..."

"You need to quit being pissy. Sigma means hot bitches." Nick leans over, grabbing the bong and lighter on the coffee table. "It's better than playing shitty ass games."

"Right..."

"What the fuck is wrong with you, man? You look like a caveman."

"Get off my nuts, I'm fine." At least he's not criticizing my shitty attitude on the field. I've dropped the ball on each pass, and my brain can't seem to fire the neurons it needs to function.

"You're not fine, though." Nick clicks the lighter. "When you gonna quit moping?"

"He got dumped." Jared throws the dirty laundry out into the air. "Again."

The water in the bong bubbles as Nick inhales a deep hit. "You're seriously mad about a freshman?" He asks while holding in his weed.

"I dunno, man..." I lean over and grab the bag of pretzels on the table, plowing a handful.

It's like Payton rewired my brain, and I'm not sure what the hell is wrong with me. She told me she wanted me, and two seconds later she wanted nothing to do with me and fucking stormed out. Someone put me through a damn paper shredder, and I don't give enough shits to find all the pieces and tape them back together.

Having one crazy girlfriend with a knife at my throat should have been enough to make me single for life. Yet here I am, pissed off at thinking I could open up to Payton.

"Why would you even mess with a freshman man?" Jared asks, his eyelids heavy. "They're nothing but drama."

I crunch down on another mouthful of pretzels. "She's not just some fucking freshman."

Smoke pools from Nick's nostrils. "She played the game dude... we don't need another Brittni making the house a living hell."

Jared places the empty can of beer on the coffee table. "That bitch is crazy, fucking banging on the door at three in the morning to pick a fight over you liking some chick's post."

Nick scoffs. "Classic unicorn, that's a ten crazy."

"Just come out with us and find a bad bitch to nut in. There are gonna be plenty of bitches." Jared cocks a brow.

"Yeah..." I fold the pretzel bag and scoot off the couch. "I'm gonna shower."

"Shave that shit off your face, too."

It doesn't take me long to clean myself up and head out the door with Nick and Jared. Sigma is on the other side of the campus and when we get there, people flood into the house. It's another drinking fest begging for the cops to break in.

Music plays inside, and several Sigma members rush in with Kegs. The noise itself is giving me a hangover. Nick finds a cozy corner with a group of girls pawing at his bong. His weed bag bounces up and down as he gives them instructional time and tips for everything you need to know about devil's lettuce.

They have beer pong out in the back, and it's Jared's go-to. A slow way for him to get tanked. At some point, he's going to find a girl to flex to and take home.

I flip the chair in reverse and sit leaning over the headrest with a coke. The late nights drinking Hennessy and writing papers are starting to eat at me. After mom's fucking meltdown, I figured I should lay off and try not using it as a crutch. I don't need anyone picking me off the floor after I piss myself.

Plenty of chicks come up to me. They're either sweet, twirling hair, or desperately showing off their tits. Regardless of how hot they are. I can't seem to get myself interested in any of them.

My dick is silent. Nothing helps. I'm fucking dead inside.

"Oh my god, where have you been? I miss you." Brittni comes into my line of vision.

Fuck me.

Of course, she's here. Any party with free booze has her name written all over it. She flips back her wavy blonde hair and bats curly fake eyelashes. God refuses to give me a break from this chick. Without warning she plops onto my lap and squeezes my chin, yanking me over, and plants a kiss on my cheeks.

"We should leave together." She whispers in my ear. "I'm so horny." Vodka leeks off her breath. She hasn't changed. It's like she gets off by fucking with my head, pretending to give a shit. "Come on, I know you miss me." I struggle to hold back the flattery, but I dunno what the hell I miss anymore. It certainly isn't her.

Autumn and Naomi come over with red cups attached to their hands like glue. Eyelids are heavy on both of them. They got those stupid drunken smiles and giggles. Whenever I see them, they're always drinking and sloppy.

Naomi ruffles her hand through my hair, and Brittni wraps her arms around my neck. "Oh my god, you are so hot in the moonlight." Naomi's annoying laugh makes me want to pour hydrochloric acid down her throat.

"Look at this face. You and your devilish good looks," Brittni says harshly, taking my jaw between her fingers and forcing me to face them. "Don't you just want to kiss him?"

"Payton and you are over... I heard the news." Naomi sips on her drink. She doesn't know how to mind her damn business. Her eyes flutter with cakey eyelashes. A thousand pounds of foundation layer on her face, I'm sure she used it as lipstick too.

"Thank God." Brittni dips her head back in relief. "I can't believe you'd lower your standards like that."

Autumn wobbles like an inflatable arm flailing tube man. "Right... she's trash."

The only way they would have known anything about Payton calling it quits would be Charlie airing the drama on a live podcast. I'm not surprised, but disappointed she considers these three, friends.

"Wouldn't we be so cute if we got back together?" Brittini hallows out my eyes, planting a kiss on my cheek. All of my veins tangle up, and my head submerges into a thick cloud of smoke.

"Well, babe... I figured you'd get the hint by now." I look her dead in the eyes. "I'm not interested," I say.

Autumn and Naomi pull the oh-my-god jaw drop. Mouths scraping the floor kinda drop, as if they can't believe the words coming off my lips. I push Brittini's arms off, and gently stand up, giving her no other choice but to get off my lap.

She flashes me a sour look. "Fine, let's leave this loser." There it is. The eye roll complimented with her classic insult. The three of them walk back inside the house into the mesh of people.

I sit back down, pull out my cell, and find myself scrolling to my death. Payton's social media is a graveyard other than the dirty mirror picture with her dandelion tattoo. It triggers a bitter ache in my chest, staring at her through the screen. I want to touch her, and can't figure out how to erase the knot of thorns living in the bottom of my gut.

Clicking on the comment box, I type out how gorgeous she is, how much I miss her, and a desperate apology. A pathetic paragraph of emotions piling up. When I finish, I press the backspace button until every letter disappears with nothing left. Guys like me can't share bottled-up thoughts. Not without someone calling me weak.

Might as well keep the persona of don't fuck with me. It's better if people see me as the asshole who beats in faces when I'm ticked off.

I watch Jared play another round of beer pong. He's having a good winning streak, but getting too drunk for my taste tonight.

Within another thirty minutes, I head into the house. Three cokes in, I need to take a piss. I make my way down the narrow hall, weaseling past people loitering. When I reach the end of the hallway and turn the knob, I'm greeted with Brittni's sun dress at her ankles. Bent over. Feverish cheeks. A guy has her by the waist, pounding, milking it like there is no tomorrow.

Well... I guess I'm taking a piss at home. Tired as hell, I leave the door wide open and walk off.

Payton

THERE IS NOTHING SADDER than plotting out my life like a B-rated horror movie. I always imagine the worst possible outcome, and since Charlie barged into the room with Ryder, I manifested everything I feared from the very beginning.

She moved out of the dorm that night, and it's been a week. I've plotted dozens of scenarios in trying to fix everything, but it all leads back to her murdering me. Then I'm sobbing in the corner of the bedroom all over again. I haven't eaten much all week and skipped going to class for the past three days. I haven't accomplished much of anything besides oversleeping.

The one thing Charlie left was the ticket to Noah's concert and his demo on my bed.

It gave me a bit of hope she still wanted me as a friend.

I stand in line surrounded by the pitch blackness of night at the venue. The air was thick with sweat and the pungent aroma of earthy herbals. When I reach the security, I hand them my ticket, and they scan me in. I weasel in and catch Rafa leaning with one foot against a brick wall. He scrolls through his phone and picks up his head, spotting me.

"Hey, didn't think you would show up."

I push my hair behind an ear and say, "Yeah..."

"Don't tell anyone." He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a green wristband, stamped with the VIP and twenty-one label. "Hold out your wrist."

I do, and he places it around my arm snugly. "Now you can party. There is a lounge where you can get drinks."

"Thanks." I fiddle with the thick band. "When do you go on?"

"We are the third opener. So, in about ninety minutes." He slips his phone into his back pocket and lifts up his chin. When I turn a head I spot Noah and Vince ushering him to follow.

"I gotta go. Have fun. I'll see you later."

I find the VIP lounge. The walls are black as night, the floor a rustic wood. Dim orange light bulbs hang from the ceiling on thin wires. They have rows of all sorts of alcohol behind a man with the darkest circles around his eyes. He's flipping his vape between his fingers and taking a puff.

Anything a drunk could possibly want litters the counter behind him.

Smoke pools out of his nose. "What do you want?" Sleepy Eyes asks.

"Just a beer is fine." He snags a red cup and pours me beer from one of the kegs.

"Thanks..." I mutter. People swarm in here, indulging themselves in whatever they can paw their hands on.

A crowd erupts in a deafening roar, and the first cord strikes on the guitar. Drums and the bass pound. The singer's guttural growls hit the mic. I head out and stare out into the pit where the group of people are pushing and shoving. Their heads bang with the beat of the pounding drums. I walk down the flight of stairs leading to the stage with flashing lights and towering amplifiers.

The band goes through about five different songs before something in the pit of my stomach tells me to turn around. When I swivel my head to the staircase, my stomach drops to the floor.

Brody burns into my retinas. My imagination manifested the illusion of him chopping up my body parts and stuffing the remains into Tupperware.

He's the Anti-Christ, and he marches straight to the mosh pit. Skinny dudes with long hair bash into each other, kicking and pushing without care. He's like a troll stampeding through them. Stocky muscles glisten in the multicolored strobe lights like he's Magic Mike.

Fans scream the lyrics as loud as they can with the singer who roars the song at the top of his lungs. Drums shake the concrete at our feet. My ears split, and my tongue is cotton on the roof of my mouth. I'm pressed against a railing made from rusty pipes. A surging crowd squishes and packs me tight like saran wrap.

Watching in the crowd, I spot Charlie, and he's a magnet picking her out. A thousand needles poured down my throat.

I storm through the crowd with my beer high up above my head. I'm pushing and stomping on toes to get people to move. Body heat envelops me, and I'm sweltering in an oven within seconds. My eyes don't leave Charlie's and when she's inches away, I snatch her wrist.

"Oh, it's you?" I read her lips.

"Brody is here!" I yell straight into her ear.

Her grey eyes flood with concern. "Who?"

"Brody!"

I push a couple of unruly strands of hair away from my face and chug down the cheap stale beer in my hands.

"Did you tell him?"

"No!"

"We aren't friends!" Charlie waves her freshly manicured fingers at me.

"Charlie!"

"Fuck!" She throttles her red cup full of beer to the floor. The contents splatter all over me.

"He's a fucking sociopath!" I holler over the roar.

"Just because he's a fuck boy doesn't make him one! As far as I know, he's not the one who lied to me!" she yells back.

"If you knew what he did, you wouldn't fucking hate me!"

"A little late to tell me the truth now!"

"I'm not lying anymore!"

She shoos away the comment and snakes around the crowd to meet up with him.

I look at Charlie's red cup, staring at the thick gold texture and foam on the floor. She barely touched it. I kick the damn cup. My brain is in overdrive. I want to pull out her hair, spit in her face, and wallow in self-pity all at the same time.

I don't know how I feel anymore, but something tells me not to leave her alone with him.

Blue streaming lights beam off different faces. I'm sick to my stomach, watching hands thrown up in the air, and everyone's in sync with the beat. The lights flash on Brody and I squeeze through the mob.

My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach, watching Charlie wrap her arms around his neck, giving him a light hug.

"Oh look, it's Trash!" He hovers over me. I catch him linking hands with Charlie. He licks his lips and leans into Charlie's ear. "Let's get some drinks!"

"Something feels off!"

"I gotta pee, and I'm thirsty." She throws up her middle finger.

"No! Charlie, wait!" I push and shove through thick bodies to catch up with them. But they're gone.

Ryder

ACID SLOSHES A BLISTERING trail up my throat, as I can't peel my eyes off Payton's pictures. They are all over the website Brody coded into existence to put girls on display like a mannequin. My stomach churns like spoiled meat in my gut. Her phone number. A map to her dorm room. Where she lives off campus. All of it is there.

I dump myself in the driver's seat of my jeep. My hands turn clammy, staring at a countdown clock. A sex tape, saying I cheated on her, and the video will be released tonight at midnight. My brain can't process it. A sex tape. It's probably some recycled bullshit with me and Brittni. I hate myself for ever dating her. She tied me up with rope and dragged me to my death.

Payton did her best to untie the knot of that rope. I dunno how to express myself or the way I feel when it comes to her. The way she looked at me was different. It was like she truly saw me. All of me.

The comments of thirsty guys nail me to a cross. There's not a damn thing I can do to stop anyone blowing up her phone. It's a done deal. I want nothing more than to spare her the agony of playing dirty roulette. But I'm reliving my own nightmare from freshman year thinking I was done with this bullshit.

Fear wrapped itself around my skin like the devil finally has me by the neck. I'm losing my mind and the rage building in my blood is leaving me unable to think straight.

Before I can switch on the engine, Brittni comes storming down the stairs at Sigma, clenching a hand over the strap of her purse. As I close the door, she snatches and pries it open.

"See what you make me do!" She spits out and shakes with a tattered breath.

"I just walked in on you AGAIN. Sleeping with some other fucking dude!" I pitch the phone to the passenger seat and climb out of the jeep.

Brittini's eyes drill into my gaze. "You made me this way!" Her fingers coil into tight balls at her sides.

"I didn't make you do anything. This is all you." I hold up my hands.

Tears gather in her lashes.

"I told you Brody forced me to sleep with him! Look at my damn phone." She pulls the purse from her shoulder and throttles it into my chest. I don't need to or want to look at any of these messages. It falls to the asphalt, her things spilling out as well as her phone.

"And what if he did? What if I looked at it?" I ask, my heart gunned into overdrive.

"Do you not believe me?"

"You don't need to prove anything." I shrug, my body sinking like an iron block she threw in the ocean. "It's the fact you didn't bother to immediately come tell me."

"Then fucking fight for me back!" Her nails comb through the long, pretty blonde hair. "I'm throwing myself at you, and it's like you never gave two shits about me to begin with." The pain on her face rains knives into my skin.

The bulge in my throat wrenches up and down. "I did care about you." I slump back and lean against the jeep, refusing to cave into looking at the tears rolling down her cheeks. "I don't want to be with you anymore. Not after all this drama. My sister was dating Brody... and you slept with him. Then you expect me to apologize for apparently hurting you when you put a hole in me."

"I gave you everything, and you fucking filmed it when you deflowered me!" She scrapes up the purse from the ground and paws through it, throwing it at me.

I yank the strap out of her grip. "Fucking stop it!" I throw the purse into the grass. She will need to walk several feet away in order to grab it. If she turns her back, I'm getting in the jeep, locking the damn doors and driving off.

"You wanted to play football so badly you didn't care if you threw me to the wolves." She takes her tiny fists, throttling them into my chest. Pounding as hard as she could. All the pain she bottled up was spilling out.

I grab her wrist, but she's fighting against me, with her hot mad tears, and the burning crimson cheeks. "I wasn't the only one who wanted something out of it! You're the fucking cheer captain of the squad. I bet you anything you have your eyes set on Dallas! Quit acting like I'm the only selfish one."

"So, you admit it. You used me!"

"For fuck's sake, I stayed with you for three years." I throw her wrist up, hoping she would back off me for one second. At this rate, if a police officer drives by, it's going to be a fucking-fantastic time chatting with them. She's loud enough to grab people's attention, and it's late. "I stayed with you."

"Out of fucking pity that you raped me." Rage flares through the disgusted look she lashes me with.

My heart drops. "I what?" I rake a hand in my hair, push myself off the jeep, and I can't help but pace back and forth. "Is that how you really feel?" I stop and look at her, and the haunting tears and pain tell me that's honestly the subconscious feeling buried deep inside her. A thought she only told God.

"You truly believe I did something that cruel when I was a virgin, too? You knew I came from a Christian family..." I pound a fist into my chest, sucking in all my emotions. Men don't fucking cry, but's brimming, and I have to swallow it. She doesn't deserve to pull me down that deep.

"You know that's what it was." She folds her arms over her chest.

"You agreed to it," I argue, and barrel back to the driver's side of the jeep. Voices in my head scream at me to leave. End the conversation and go.

"No one agrees to the game." She says and torpedoes behind me.

"You played the game and knew the conditions of it as much as I did." I drop down to the driver's seat and hold on to the door handle.

"You're so fucking blind." She breaks me down and tears me to pieces.

"I asked you a million times if this was okay. You said yes, you can't sit here and change your mind three years later. This is why I will never be with you again. You're fucking angry I'm moving on, but you keep being a complete bitch. If you wanted me so badly, you wouldn't be sleeping around with other guys, you wouldn't be fighting with me constantly. At some point, you would have been able to communicate with me and express this."

"You never listened to me!"

"I'm listening right now, but you can't put your fucking emotions first and not look at the reality of it. You keep trying to blame me for your actions. We are not good for each other, and we never were."

This conversation is eating me alive. I want to leave and go somewhere else. Anywhere that would put thousands of miles between me and Brittini. There is nothing left for me to give to her. I'm empty.

"So, you really want to be with Trash?"

My heart aches in telling the truth. I'm fighting gravity. Tossing and turning at night with Payton. "Yes..." Like grains of sand in the ocean, the feelings are surfacing with the waves crashing in my chest. "I love Payton. I think I always have."

She backs away from the door, and I slam it shut, jamming the keys in the ignition. Brittini storms up, slamming a fist on the window. "I

fucking hope she rots in the dirt like everyone else in your damn family."

The engine ignites and I flip her the finger. "Fuck you!" I put the car in drive, watching her take a step back as I spin the wheel and peel out.

Payton

I MARCH DOWN THE HALLWAY into the lounge. Sleepy Eyes pours shots, vaping, and vibing. His eyelids are heavy as I stumble up to him.

"Can I get some tequila?"

Smoke billows from his mouth. "You want me to mix you a drink?" He asks with that smooth voice, telling me he is high as a kite. For someone working here, he's really not giving a fuck.

"No, just pour that shit in a cup."

"Ice?"

"No, just straight."

"Alright, buttercup." I'm pissed and feeling more stupid than usual. He doesn't measure it, he just pours me half a glass of tequila without question, and I smack a ten-dollar bill on the counter. I lean against the wall, sipping on my demons.

Might as well reap what I sow.

All I want to do is shoot bullets through my skull for never telling Charlie a damn thing. I dip my head in Brody's direction, watching him with his back to me. If they didn't search me for weapons, I'd risk spending a lifetime in jail and stab him a million times over with the sharpest knife on the planet.

Brody leans on the bar. A sly smile is like a permanent scar on his face. "Can I get two cups with blue raspberry vodka and grape juice?"

One with ice, and another without. Also, can I have some sugar packets?"

"Yeah... whatever..." Sleepy Eyes says back.

He slithers out a red cup from the plastic sleeve and pours Smirnoff mixing up the drink and hands them over before grabbing his vape, soaking in another hit. The dude is a misfit, not giving a shit about anyone's bullshit or if they approve. I wish the vibe rubbed off on me.

Brody stops and his head turns in my direction.

"You want something?" He asks.

My nervous system short circuits and a shock wave claws to my fingertips. It's like someone wrapped their hands around my neck because I can't breathe when his eyes meet mine.

"No," I say with a straight face, but my heartbeat rampages in my ears. I clutch the cup to my chest and lean against the wall, taking a long swig. The burn running down my esophagus is like a magical potion. Within seconds, a wave of bliss and no longer giving a fuck pumps through my veins.

"I can make you something better than a cup of Jose Cuervo."

"I'm not into douchebags."

"Oh..." Brody tilts his head and smiles at me.

"Well, I'm into lying virgins."

"Prick..." I whisper. He's poisonous, wrapping me in barbwire, and thorns dig into my skin.

I crank my head and glare as Brody puts both cups onto a round table. He pulls something out of his jean pocket and I blink.

It happens too quickly, the crackle of a clear capsule, and white powder sprinkling into a cup.

I shake my head, and people buzz. My body feels off. Everything is moving too fast. I'm swarmed around hundreds of clinking bottles and bodies.

Brody turns to me. He spins the ice with an index finger. I'm trapped in a movie on fast-forward. Dizzy and nauseous. I'm not sure if I'm dreaming or if Brody's exact moves were real and recorded in my brain like a surveillance tape.

His neutral expression mushrooms into someone dark and scary. I'm legit standing in front of the night stalker himself. The thought of tupperware and a rusty deep freezer as my grave sinks back in. The heaviness of my arms and legs melt into the floor.

I use every ounce of strength to storm up to him and shove him as hard as I can. "What did you put into that drink?" I ask.

Brody turns around, holding up his palms and the drink. "Whoa."

"What did you put in the drink?"

"Umm...Grape juice and vodka?" He narrows his brows at me, looking around at gaping people turning with confused expressions.

"What else?"

Brody licks his index finger and uses the same finger to swirl and mix the drink. "Sugar." He flashes two empty white packets. He cocks his brows with a devious smile. "Do you want one or something?"

Charlie parades over before my mouth can budge. She takes the drink into her hands and downs half of it. My heart falls to the pit of my stomach, watching the muscles in her throat swallow several large gulps.

"Thanks." She pecks Brody on the cheeks and sashays her shoulders back and forth. "This is really good!" She dips the cup to her lips, taking another large swig.

"Charlie, can we talk?" I swallow the brick cemented into my throat. Brody wraps an arm around Charlie, glaring at me. His eyes are dark and cold, reading into my emotions as if they were written in neon on my forehead.

Brody takes the red cup from Charlie's hands and tilts it against his lips. His eyes lock onto mine. Before he takes a sip, he mouths the words again. "It's just sugar."

A voice in my head is telling me to tread carefully.

"Charlie..." I say.

"What? Do you want to lie to me some more? Then go sit on my brother's lap. No thanks."

"I think she needs a drink," Brody laughs, handing Charlie the cup.

"I dunno why you are even here. Her boyfriend is going on stage."

Charlie taps on the red cup, agitated. "Look, Brody and I are friends."

"Yeah, we are friends. So why don't you tell Charlie who the bottle landed on?" Brody cocks his brows and smirks at me. "Hurry up, before that shitty tequila knocks you out." He circles around me. I swallow hard, his shadow making me feel extremely small.

"You said Ryder broke it up?" Charlie's lips press in a fine line, sipping on the drink.

"Charlie..."

"No, no.." She waves the cup around, her lashes fluttering. "We aren't doing this bullshit anymore. Fucking say it."

"I landed on Ryder..."

Brody slaps the bottom of the cup, knocking around the contents. I scream and almost drop it.

My entire body shudders. "Don't touch me!" I stare at him hard, my blood pumping, ready to claw the skin right off his face.

"I'm fucking with you." He holds up his hands like I'm overreacting. "Chill."

"So, my brother is just a game to you?" Charlie asks.

"I never said that!" I argue.

She storms where her breath is right in my face and screams. "You could have told me!"

"She's fucking trash. I told you that's all she'll ever be." Brody grabs her shoulder and pulls her back. I hate how he's twisting my flaws and spitting them out like I'm the joke.

My heart beats in my fingertips. "Shut the hell up!"

"Yeah, she definitely needs a drink." He licks his lips, grabs the cup from Charlie's hand, and takes a sip. "Girl, just ask, and I'll get you a Xanax."

"You're both fucking annoying!" Charlie snaps with arms folded. "Let's go back downstairs. I don't want to miss the opening song."

"You should try it, Payt." Brody holds out the red cup, and I push my palm into it and knock the drink to the floor. It splashes to our feet. No ice, nothing but a sticky lukewarm concoction.

Charlie's mouth gapes open. It splattered all over her shoes. "Jesus, what's gotten into you?"

Brody leans down and grabs the cup from the floor.

It's just sugar.

His words whisper into my ears. I take a large mouthful of tequila.

"Charlie, can I talk to you for a second?"

"What does the tequila wanna say?"

"Alone?" I ask again, watching Brody crush the cup with a hand, tossing it into the overflowing trashcan behind him. Something inside me tells me he wishes that cup was me.

"Whatever you're going to say, spit it out already."

"Here." Brody grabs another red cup from the counter. The ice swishes back and forth. White residual sinks and disappears... and I think I might be sick.

"I'll be downstairs." He taps her on the shoulder and weasels through the crowd and blends into the mesh of people.

"What's your problem?" Charlie asks. I stare at the red cup with Satan's blood in it. "Are you gonna say anything?" She's sloppy and

wobbles back and forth. I reach for the cup, but she turns away sharply and starts to chug again.

"Forget it!" I throw up peace signs holding onto the cup of tequila.

"Oh my fucking god Payton, I'm not about to deal with your self-pity tonight." Charlie rolls her eyes, batting her fake lashes. She leans against the round table and crosses her arms. "We aren't friends." She chugs the Smirnoff like it's water.

"I actually like your brother."

"Oh, you care about him?" She scoffs in surprise. "You walked out on him and told him you want nothing to do with him. I'm so fucking sick of chicks fucking with him."

"I'm not going to apologize for landing on him."

"Then don't, but you lied." Charlie laughs and stares at the ice in her cup. "I trusted you, and you go off and hurt me, and you hurt my brother." It sinks in. She wants to be as far away as possible.

"I thought I was doing you a favor," I say and stare at the tile floor littered with dried, sticky stains.

"A favor?" She coughs up a laugh.

"I thought you would hate me if I told you the truth!" I argue.

"Wow, after all we've been through." Charlie laughs under her breath and looks away from me. She's mixed with alcohol and confusion. "What hurts is that you had the nerve to think you needed to lie to me, and I knew the entire time something was up with you two. I asked over and over and gave you opportunity after opportunity to tell me! Guess what? You lied!"

"So, are you saying you wouldn't have cared?" I furrow my eyebrows.

"I dunno..." Charlie's free hand digs into her long, curly hair. "I never wanted Brittini to one day be my sister, but you... that was different. But you fucked that up the moment you decided to keep it

from me..." She sips her drink and looks down at the staircase leading to the colorful lights and loud music.

"Give me another chance!"

Charlie rolls her eyes. "I'm not your friend anymore. Why are you begging me to take you back? If you want Crab, then you go fucking talk to him, but don't expect me to support it."

"Brody put something in that drink..."

Charlie hysterically laughs at my words. "Okay... sure."

"No, I'm serious."

There I did it. I called Brody out, and told the truth, but I can't wash myself clean of the lies I stacked up. The house of cards is crumbling at my feet. I'm the boy who cried wolf.

She steps up to me and grabs the cup from my hands, sniffing what's inside. "You know how gross you can get when you drink this shit? It makes you sloppy and bitchy."

"Fucking believe me!"

"Are you kidding me right now? He used to make this at his house all the time and put extra sugar in it. Get a grip!"

"Fine... go ahead... drink that and get raped!"

All emotions disintegrate off Charlie's face. She grey walls me. Her eyes stray as far away as possible, she straightens out her back. Her left thumb dips into the belt loop of her high-rise booty shorts.

"This is over..." Charlie's lips pucker, and I know she's down to punch me in the face and rip out every hair follicle. "We aren't friends. I hate it when you get drunk like this. If he really put something in my drink, he wouldn't have had any."

"Charlie..."

"Don't... your drama is boring. I'm not going to waste my time fighting with someone who purposely lies because they're soggy and tasteless." She finishes the drink in her hand and crushes the cup, tossing it in the trash.

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out." She storms off. I watch her from the lounge as she heads back down the staircase.

Maybe it was sugar.

I'm too attached to the one person I've known since I was five.

I lost all my other friends for starting emotional wars with them over something trivial. Once I unleash another nuclear attack, more people hate me. It's the mean girl posts. My nasty text messages. It was a matter of time before I pointed the warhead at Charlie's head.

I slump my way to an empty table and fall into one of the cushioned chairs, taking a long swig of tequila. I'm not sure how many songs I miss, or how many split ends I tear off my messy hair. I pound and chug as much as I can, getting another refill from Sleepy Eyes. I try to drown my demons and thoughts, but they know how to swim.

"Have another drink," I say to myself. I put the cup to my lips, listening to the voices telling me to keep chugging. Sleepy Eyes pours more shots. I'm standing alone, watching people swim by grabbing beer and food. I chain myself to the table and drink until my fingertips are numb.

A girl who vaguely looks like Brittini comes up to my face. The blue eyes gawking at me with a cruel smile. She bends over with her hands on her knees. The blonde hair falls down her shoulders.

My eyesight clouds over in a dark haze, and I'm dizzy, crumbling to a chair zoning in and out of her, laughing in my face. Flashes of lights hit my pupils.

"Jump off a cliff!" She cackles, putting a phone screen up to my face with my naked photos online. Comments pooling it through a live chatroom. "I can't wait until you're dead."

She's gone like a ghost that fades away as my head dips back into the chair. The shit in this world turns dark, becoming black again.

I keep jolting my head back up and watch the staircase waiting for them. I'm trembling as I pull out my phone, the screen blurry from

the chemicals dancing in my eyes. I notice I have a text message from Ryder that I haven't bothered to read.

His name displays on my phone as it buzzes in my hands. I stare at the green answer key, but I run my finger in the opposite direction and ignore him. Ryder's name pops back onto my screen, and I reject his phone call again.

This time I laugh under my breath, knowing deep down somewhere within that I'm acting like a completely unhinged bitch. The third time he calls me, I accept it.

"Hey, you..." I say and dip the empty cup against my lips. The world is spinning around me, and it's like I'm melting into the floor.

"Can we talk?" he asks, and all I can do is mumble as my head spins back and forth. Everything swirls in circles, and I'm not sure if I feel good anymore.

"It's loud. Are you at a concert??"

"Why? Not like you care... Charlie made it clear you hate me too." I say, longing for the tequila to help me stop feeling a thing.

"Is Charlie there?"

"Yeah... but who cares?"

"You're drunk."

"Yeah... guess who else is here?"

"Who?" Ryder asks me.

"Brody."

I hang up the phone and slide it into my pocket. I use the armrests to lift myself off the chair. The empty cup tumbles off my lap and to the floor.

I stumble out of the lobby, my brain wanting to shut off. I see everything around me perfectly clear one moment, and the next it goes dark. I fall against the barren walls. It's like my head weighs a thousand pounds, and I'm fighting against gravity with its fingers wrapped around my neck just to walk straight. The front door is

inches away, but my brain is telling me it's too far. I sway back and forth, my arms chained to the floor like lead.

I turn my head back one more time and watch Brody and all his fake innocence climb the stairs. Charlie leans into his chest. For a moment, she looks happy drunk, but then her head dips back, eyes flutter. Her feet still move, but they're like jelly, sliding against the floor.

My mouth waters. Sweat falls down my cheeks. My breath is in my eardrums. Every inch of my skin burns as I watch Brody swing a bathroom door open.

The light flickers on. His tongue runs up her neck, to her mouth. His hands yank onto her shorts, ripping the button off. At that millisecond the music stops, and the crowd scrambles around me. I spot Charlie in the cracks of moving bodies. She flails her arms, pushing and shoving him in the chest, but my vision turns dark. Like a broken television, it's all white noise, and I can't see anything. I move my head around, and the bathroom door shuts.

Everything inside my body goes numb and dark.

I can't drown my emotions anymore. I race to the exit leading outside. The door slams open, and I stumble over the railings, heaving into the bushes.

Ryder

THE HIGHWAY IS BARREN with a few patrol cars passing. Then there are the drunks swerving into my lane and cutting me off. Within fifteen minutes, I'm outside a venue that looks sketchy as fuck, screaming danger.

Graffiti is painted everywhere, and the lawn is overgrown. Cars sprawled throughout the parking lot, and people move about outside,

smoking and drinking. I crack open the window and fight with an empty lighter to ignite another joint. The taste of burning newspaper meets the roof of my mouth before inhaling pure green.

I imagine Mom's shrill voice screaming in my ears, telling me how pathetic I am, spitting in my face. In the pit of my stomach, I think she's right.

I text Payton again, and she still fails to write back and leaves me on read. I wedge the phone between my ears and cheek. She's somewhere in that venue with a band pretending they're Metallica. I'm seconds away from dragging her out. The phone rings three times before it's cut off and disconnected.

My palms sweat. This is the last time I'm going to play nice. The phone is slippery in my hands as I dial her again. The only one wanting to answer me is her goddamn voicemail.

"Fucking freshmen!" I holler into the phone and chuck the joint out the window. I want to march up there, fight the security, and break in. I swear, freshmen are all narcissistic parasites who are disconnected from reality. I dial again, my blood hammering.

"Hey, you..." Payton says as if she's curling her index finger around her hair like a preppy brat.

"Can we talk?" I ask. The beat of my heart pounds in my neck. The drums and guitar make my ears bleed. "It's loud. Are you at a concert?" I act stupid and stare at a group of people walking out the entrance.

"Why? Not like you care... Charlie made it clear you hate me too." She slurs and something is off with her tone of voice. None of what she says is true. I'm always fucking pissed at her, but there is no way I can hate her and what I feel is completely the opposite.

"Is Charlie there?"

"Yeah... but who cares."

"You're drunk."

"Yeah... guess who else is here?" She asks.

"Who?"

"Brody." She slurs the words,

Then she hangs up. Something feels off. I can't shake off the shivers crawling up my spine. Brody, at a metal concert, is way out of character. He posted those pictures and when scrolling through my phone, a sex video is supposed to air within minutes. He's like a fucking dust storm, raging on, and no matter how hard it rains, he's going to keep blowing through everything until there is nothing left.

I didn't join the football team to become one of his slaves, and I'm through with him. I'm fucking done. So, done. Drinking, picking out the weak girls at parties, and filling their cups, leading them to bed. He's done.

I'm convinced the world is a stage, and I'm the show. Brody, sits back with a bag of popcorn to watch my life fall apart.

I might as well rip off the mask and stop pretending I like the guy for the world to think we are teammates. I toss my phone to the passenger seat and step into the gravel. The door slams behind me. I'm heavy like my shoes are made of metal.

"You need a ticket, man. It's ten..." a guy says right at the entrance. I dig out my wallet, throwing him two fives. He slaps a wristband on me as Payton bursts out the front door and curls over the railing. Splatters and heaving overpower the metal band.

"God, you're like the fifth person yo!" the ticket guy says and walks off.

I mouth the word. Fuck.

"Where is she?" I stumble over, pulling hair away from her cheeks. She swivels around with tears soaking her lashes. Mascara pools down her face, and she points a shaky finger to the door. Her eyes flutter and she crumbles to the ground.

"Payton!" I drop with her and pat her on the cheeks. Gurgling ruptures from her throat, and immediately she vomits again.

"Payton!" I held back her hair, shaking her to wake up and focus. "Where is she?" I ask.

Her eyes flicker open for a second, and she mumbles. "He locked the bathroom door... he... he locked it." Chills crawl down my back and my stomach roils, not from her vomit, but from what she said.

"Can you walk to my jeep?" I stand up and point my finger at it in the distance. "Lock the doors. Don't fucking move."

I'm barely breathing, vomit stains my jeans, and I'm sinking into the floor, drowning in a sea that's not even there. I hand over the keys and she nods.

I walk in. Something snaps inside my brain. It's like I'm in overdrive and no longer in control. Vibrations of the drums beat inside my chest. There are people everywhere. A guitar breaks out in a solo and I can't hear anyone talking.

I worm my way through people. It's dark. Cigarettes burn with yellow embers. It's heavy in here. Orange lights flicker against black walls, and pentagrams drawn with red spray paint burn under the dimness of the hell I walked into. A closed door with the tilted bathroom sign lies beyond the long narrow hallway with lights bleeding through the gap.

I grab the doorknob and wiggle it. Locked.

Someone smacks my hand off the door with nasty-looking nails and cheap moldy bracelets. "Get in line." A girl with multiple hair colors, and most of it shaved off on one side, points to the line wrapping around the hallway.

I ignore her, grab the doorknob, and bang my shoulder into the door.

"Fucker, I told you there was a line!" She screams in my face, veins in her eyes are bloodshot. What the fuck is wrong with her? It's like she is on acid. I bang into the door again.

"Someone, come grab this dude! He's trying to break down a door!" The bitch keeps screaming, and grungy-looking people creep over.

"Stop!" Screams rip out behind the door. It sounds like Charlie, sobbing. There's a shuffle. Something breaking. Shadows move under the door's wide gap.

"Who's in there?" I ask.

"Ah fuck... you're so tight," It's a guy's voice.

"Open the door!" I smash my fist into the wood. That's when someone brave enough grabs my wrist, pulling me back.

"Let me go!" I crank my shoulder, elbowing someone in the jaw.

"Come on baby, just take it."

I turn around, pushing another junky to the floor. Profanity, screaming, and a crowd of people flood every inch around me.

"Shut up! Shh... Shh, fucking enjoy this with me, baby."

I bang my shoulder into the door. It doesn't budge.

"Get off me!" Charlie's voice, clear as hell, shrieks.

"Fucking open the damn door!"

"Stop!" I hear from the other side. Everything becomes tense. Someone else pulls my shoulder back. I swing around, his face eating my fist, and falling into the crowd behind me.

Pressure builds like a dormant volcano erupting for the first time in decades. My knuckles crack the moment I clench my fists. All it takes is one kick dead center into the door frame, and it bursts open.

Satan injected me with gallons of lidocaine. All emotions left, there is nothing there. Everything drains from my face, and I'm numb, cold, and floppy inside.

Blood runs down Charlie's right leg. A ripped condom wrapper sits between her boots. Brody pins her against the counter with his jeans dropped to his waist, pounding into her. My sister's shorts ripped down to her ankles. All I hear is his breath, his body breaking hers.

Her eyes lock onto mine. Horror engraved on her face with puffy veins.

"Stop!!!" she shrieks at me, her hair wailing around as she struggles with Brody. "Get off me!" She claws her nails into his chest. Her eyes hemorrhage with tears, and he covers her mouth with a hand. "Shhh-hhh!" He hisses. Charlie wraps her teeth around his fingers and bites down hard.

Brody wails and shoves Charlie into the counter. "Fucking bitch!"

I don't know how, but everything goes dark. My brain turns off like a light switch, and it registers brief seconds. Pain sears into my knuckles like someone lit me on fire. I snatch him by the collar of his shirt and lose it on him.

"Stop!" Someone else and a group of people yank on my arms. Nothing pulls me off. Straddling Brody, I pummel him with my fists.

I'm not behind the steering wheel. I have no control. I'm on the edge of a cliff, and my grip slips away. Everything is black, but I'm yelling expletives. My throat turns to cotton, and the taste of metal lingers at the tip of my tongue.

"Ryder! Stop!" Charlie heaves out a hysterical sob.

I blink.

And I'm wide awake.

My consciousness comes back and leaves again every few moments. Charlie's ebony hair is stuck to her flushed cheeks, drenched with tears. Something dark and red covers my hands. It's wet and dry, and it smears onto my shirt as Charlie yanks on the fab-

ric. It reeks of iron. Brody lies on the floor, unconscious. A pool of blood flows out of his mouth and nose. It drips from my hands.

They're soaked.

My knuckles are raw. The flesh scraped off like someone took a vegetable peeler to them.

My chest hurts. My lungs crumbled like an empty soda can.

Charlie pulls up her shorts, her legs tremble, and she can't even stand. I lift her up into my arms and sprint down the hallway. She burrows her head in my chest. Everyone gets out of my way now, but they stare, sipping their red cups as I march out of the exit.

Payton pulls herself out of the jeep, running sideways over to me. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" She cries. Somehow, I make it to the jeep, open the back door, and slip Charlie into the seat.

"It's all my fault! I... I... I didn't stop him!" She pukes again.

"Shut up! Let's go!"

"I'm so sorry!" She sobs covered in snot and vomit.

"It's not your fault. Stop it!"

Payton's eyes fall back again, and I grab onto her before she collapses face-first into the dirt. I threw her over my shoulder and placed her in the back seat. They're both a fucking mess. Sloppy and completely intangible at this point.

My brain refuses to register what happened. I can't seem to get any oxygen into my lungs as I get in the Jeep. I beg my brain to work properly, but it's blocking everything out, and I'm granted small fragments. Neurons laugh like the Joker, pouring gasoline all over my memories and setting them on fire. The taste of blood is on my tongue and my body feels more alive than ever.

My foot pushes down on the gas pedal as I reverse out of the parking space. I can't stop staring at the dried blood staining the creases in my fingers. It's smeared all over the steering wheel. It's like someone

handed me a gun and I pulled the trigger. I'm uncertain if I fucking killed Brody.

"Please..." Charlie mumbles in the back. "Ryder please..."

"What?" I ask.

"I need Noah!"

"Are you serious right now? We need to go to the hospital! Brody fucking... He fucking...!" I can't even say the words and stare into the rearview mirror. Charlie's head wobbles back and forth, her eyes dark and clouded. Payton's hunches over, completely unconscious.

A police vehicle with flashing lights hightails it into the parking lot. I drive in the other direction, unable to focus on where the exit is.

"No... no!" Charlie sobs, covering her face with two hands.

"Fuck, they called the police on me!"

Her eyes roll to the back of her head, and I'm not sure if she understands what's going on. "We need to go to the hospital!" I slam my hands onto the steering wheel, punching it over and over again before I scream a lung out.

"I fucking hate you!" Charlie sobs, balled up in the back seat like a toddler, hysterically screaming and crying. "Let me out!"

"I...I...fuck" I choke up, seeing her in the mirror.

"I hate you both!"

"No, Charlie... I..."

"I need to go see Noah!" she shrieks.

"You're not getting out!"

"I want Noah!" She kicks the back of my seat. I'm jerked forward, swerving in the parking lot. Snot runs down Charlie's nose like a waterfall. Her cheeks burn crimson red and look raw. She shrieks as we're all jostled left to right. It breaks me. My heart feels like it's being peeled apart. I want my body to work properly, but my nervous system is having a mental breakdown.

"Charlie!" Every nerve is continuously being electrocuted. My body convulses and my mouth waters and I think I might get sick.

She fights with her seatbelt. "I'm getting out!"

"No!" I slam on the brakes. The tires screech as we skid on the road. Charlie flings forward in the back seat. The stench of burning rubber fills the air the second I come to a complete halt. I inhale in a deep breath of fresh oxygen.

"Shut up!" She screams at the top of her lungs, and a plethora of saliva runs down her chin. "I'm leaving!" she cries, and the snap of the seatbelt screams into my ears. The door lock clicks and opens as she leaps out, making a break for it.

"Charlie!" I unbuckle and run out after her. Then another patrol car comes peeling in with a fire truck. She's feet from me, running away fast to the flashing lights, and I'm covered in blood.

I feel out of control, and I'm not sure how I'm alive. "Fuck!" I punch the hood of the jeep. There is no way I can stay here unless I want to be put in cuffs. I slide back into the seat and peel out of the parking lot.

Like Rust



Payton

I STARE AT THE WHITE TILES lining the bathtub. Lukewarm water cascades and patters against the shower curtain. A rusty metal caddy hangs up high above me. It holds a cluster of fragrant soaps and crumpled empty bottles with crusty remains.

I've zoned out several times already.

I played with conversations and the avenues they could lead me in. I spin excuses, but my feelings get eaten by a garbage disposal each time. No matter what, I've watched myself destroy the only friendship I trust.

I stare at water drops running down the tiles coated in a fine film of calcium, and it molds into a movie I'm directing.

Everything spins.

And I'm pinned to the hot brick walls owing recess again. The sun pointed directly at my eyes like a magnifier to an ant. Other girls laughed as they clambered up the monkey bars, while I drew on hot concrete with a pebble that acted like chalk.

Teachers yelled at me a lot.

I don't think any of them really liked me.

My mother dragged me out of every parent-teacher conference by the wrist.

Charlie never cared about me interrupting her mid-sentence or talking nonstop in class. She always carried a second pencil because I misplaced mine a lot and sometimes those spare pencils shared answers and started sleepovers.

I always left my toothbrush in her bathroom. I lost toys. She'd forget to bring them to school, and it made a great excuse for another sleepover. I spent the five minutes left of my recess hopping over the parallel bars with Charlie, and those were the highlights of my days.

Middle school was worse. The teachers were bitchier and fatter, and they had more wrinkles. When one turned to me, it was always a look of disgust. Something was always wrong with me. I smelled weird once. Even Charlie stuffed up her nose to me and would spray me down with her fruity body perfume.

It started to catch up with me. We got in an argument over my messy bedhead balled up into a ponytail. It was no longer socially acceptable, and it took months for Charlie to convince me I looked pathetic. Baggy grunge shirts and jeans belonged in the garbage too, and it's all I had.

High school hits, and Charlie starts hanging out with the preppy popular girls. The ones leaning against the lockers always twisting their lollipop sticks, sucking, and slurping on fat red globs of cherry goodness.

They stare at all the hotties, twirling the lollipops between their lips, giggling, and whispering about guys' reactions. They always wore tight low-rise flare jeans, any type of crop top, sparkly sandals, and painted toenails.

Brittni coming over to the house made it ten times worse. A Barbie with hip-length blonde hair, and piercing sapphire eyes that stepped out of the fancy car daddy bought. Always all over Ryder, hiding in his bedroom with the door locked, and turning Charlie into someone I didn't recognize.

I wore baggy jeans and tank tops; I painted my toenails white to blend in. I joined the cheerleading team and performed at the pep rallies. I wasted hours dancing, and chanting next to Charlie, only for me to end up here.

I took it too far this time.

It doesn't matter.

I can apologize, but forgiving me is a hard pill to swallow. I let my emotions get the best of me like they always do. I should have accepted the Xanax offer, because maybe for once I wouldn't feel trapped in a body that doesn't work.

My heart pounds. I feel it in my eardrums.

I blink several times, inhaling a lungful of air like I haven't taken a breath in hours. My thoughts stop reliving and relishing my trauma, and I realize I'm still in the tub.

Everything spins in circles, and my tongue is stuck on the roof of my mouth. I'm still slightly drunk, and wide awake with a throbbing headache. My body forces me to live with the consequences of tequila mixed with bad decisions.

I'm drenched. The fabric of my shirt is glued to my skin. Water patters the white tiles lining the tub. I open my mouth, letting the hard water meet my taste buds. It tastes good, but it also ignites the after-taste of bile.

I cup my hands, chugging mouthfuls of water, and then the shower curtain crackles against the metal rod. I scream and curl up in the tub.

"Are you serious right now?" Ryder stands above me, wearing nothing but jeans covered in blood. A water bottle plops into my hands. It's cool to the touch and condensation runs down its ridges. Without a care, I open the bottle, the cap tumbles between my legs, and I chug hard. The plastic crunches and shrinks from the pressure until I take a deep breath, almost gasping.

"What happened?" Ryder asks, sitting on the edge of the toilet.

"Huh? Where am I?"

Ryder shakes his head and looks away in disbelief. "You have to be kidding me." He says. "You're here every fucking weekend." Ryder rises off the toilet and leans over the bathroom counter, turning the faucet on high. He dips his hands in the water, washing off reddish brown dirt I never noticed. My head spins and I attempt to lift myself out of the tub.

"No, sit down," Ryder demands, and I sit back down in the tub. "You were definitely drugged..."

"Wait... What?" Ryder leans over on his knees and twists the rusty dial, shutting off the shower head. "What do you mean?" I ask. My eyes search around the bathroom, avoiding Ryder's painful expression at all costs. My eyes jump from the towel rack to the vanity, casting a warm orange light. Words are stuck in my throat. I stare down at the fluffy bathroom mats and see the dark hairs on Ryder's big toe.

"What do you remember?"

"Charlie left me the ticket, and I went thinking she wanted to still be friends... and Brody showed up..."

"Well, no shit..." He interrupts.

I bite my bottom lip and shake my head. "Why do I even try if you're going to be a complete jerk?"

I don't blame him. I've ruined every relationship with my emotional appendages of believing it's true I'm nothing but trash. I suffocate everyone like a plastic bag over a head. But no one understands that.

Ryder grabs onto one of the clean towels on the rack and throws it into my lap. I'm shivering.

"Sorry," he says and sits back on the toilet. He stares at his bleeding knuckles, rubbing the blood around with his thumb.

"I think she said she invited Brody" I roll my eyes and grab the water bottle, chugging several large gulps. "But she also told me she

planned on losing her virginity to Noah..." I say and wrap the towel around my shoulders.

"She was gonna sleep with Noah?" He asks.

"Yeah." I grind my teeth together. I swallow a hard lump stuck in my throat. Chills crawl across my arms like roaches scattering and goosebumps prick up my skin.

"I think you were both drugged... What is the last thing you remember?"

I lick my lips and stare hard at the porcelain edges of the tub. "Look, we went upstairs to get drinks. Charlie used the bathroom. Then Charlie and I got into it about Brody. They ditched me so I tended to my demons with tequila, which was a marvelous choice..."

"You got into it with her?"

"Yeah... because..." I pause. I'm sweating and frozen at the same time. I clench the fabric of the towel and dig my fingers into the fibers.

"Why?"

"Because I want to be with you..." I stare up at the ceiling, glaring at the shadows the curtains make along the walls.

"Okay..." It's all he says. I break down, crying. I don't understand what I saw. I'm not sure what was real or a figment of my imagination. I want to believe I saw Brody putting something in the drink. At the same time, people were crowding the counter.

"I... I don't know." My eyes dart everywhere. I clench my jaw. Ryder's eyes pin me down. I shrug, unsure how the words will sound coming out. "He said it was sugar..."

"Sugar?" He runs both hands through his hair and stands up.

"I asked what he put in the drink, and he told me it was sugar." I shrug.

"Sugar?" Ryder takes a couple of steps back, and his skull meets the wall in front of the closed door. His eyes water and he crumbles to the floor. With a hand, he covers his face and heaves a sob.

"He put something in her drink..." He states, reading into my mind as if my story is written all over my skin like a book.

"I tried telling her. I really don't know what I saw. I was drunk when he arrived, and it pissed me off. Charlie...she... and I dunno... there were people everywhere."

"You fucking ignored me, knowing something wasn't right!" Ryder hollers at me. Eyes glisten, and he turns his head away from me before wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

"I tried telling her..." My voice cracks between my tongue. "I know... I fucked up."

"I fucked up too," he wipes his nose again. Hangs his hands over his knees, and he investigates me hard. I tremble. The dampness of my clothes meets the frostbite of the air conditioner kicking on. A string of dust flutters out of the vent on the ceiling and blurs the moment tears come pooling down my face.

I stand up and hold on to the towel rack. My shoes are heavy, soggy, and filled with water. Each step comes with a squish and puddles of water pooling out. I step forward. Ryder holds his knees with his arms locked across them.

We are dead silent. Skin peels off his knuckles. The sores are yellow and swollen. Purple blotches appear around his fingers. "What happened...between you and Brody?"

"... it's best if you leave." He clenches his fists together, and he stares at the wall, not blinking, not even budging his head to face me again.

"Is Charlie okay?"

He shakes his head, biting his bottom lip. "No..."

"What do you mean?"

"Just fucking leave!"

"Okay..."

Ryder

PAYTON HANGS ONTO HER GRIP of the front door before glancing back at me with opal eyes. The feral hunger to light another joint crawls its way into my head. I don't know how Payton is standing. I'm so heavy I could fall through the Earth. I'd do anything to numb everything racing inside me.

I wait because at any second, she'll tell me this is wrong, and we should call the cops. I can't be the only one with their heart hammered to the floor with nails. Her bloodshot eyes burn a hole into mine, her lips tremble like she has something to say. I'm choked up, actual fucking tears pooling down my face and I haven't cried since I was a kid. Something behind her watering eyes tells me she feels it, too. Regret pouring over us like a bucket of endless ice. Payton bites down on her lip, and the glint of tears in her eyes dries.

"Bye," I say.

"Bye." She opens the front door. I'm blasted with frigid air and the aroma of incoming rain. She's gone in seconds, and I feel like I'm melting into the floor. Everything sinks in all at once.

The shit show with Brittini.

And Brody.

Fucking Brody... I bite down on my tongue and stop myself from going down that black hole. But the thought I might have killed him digs my grave.

I crumble onto the couch, staring at the dark blue light trickling in through the blinds. The sun will be up in half an hour. Someone needs to kill me.

The living room is trashed. Empty chip bags crumble on the coffee table. Beer cans and pizza boxes pile up. There's a condom wrapper on the carpet floor. I'm functioning on zero sleep, and my mistake

drills into the center of my conscience. I lay in silence, closing my eyes.

Endless thoughts race through my head, even when I fall asleep. When they become unbearable. It jerks me awake. I groan, but shift on the couch to get comfortable again. I take a deep breath, mad at the fact I was almost asleep.

"Why can't I fucking fall asleep?" I open my eyes, clenching my fists together. I roll over again. Huffing and crossing my arms. My head runs a marathon, and if I were able to jump in front of a train to get it to shut up I would. My thoughts point speakers straight into my eardrums, not daring to shut off the microphone for a second.

I blacked out when I saw Brody fucking her, holding her waist, and doing what he does best. Ruining everyone's life to get off. That's it. It's all I remember besides snapping out of it to the blood on my hands, Charlie sobbing, and Brody's face bloody.

I think I killed him. My brain convinces me I murdered him, and instead of going to the hospital like a normal human being. What do I do? I go home.

Footsteps creek down the hallway, and Jared emerges in his boxers. "Dude, where did you go? We had two girls over just going nuts on my dick..." He shuffles to the kitchen, opens the cupboards, pulling out the container of coffee.

"Congratulations..."

"You're still fucking pissy?"

"I don't want to talk about it..."

Coffee gurgles as Jared leans on the counter, staring as it fills the pot.

"DUDE!" Nick comes out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. The shower hammering in the background. He holds his phone up to Jared. "Brody's in the hospital."

"Shit..." I mutter out and sit up.

Jared snatches the phone and scrolls with a thumb, his eyebrows crash in the middle. Then fix me with a disturbing look. The bloody knuckles speak the truth. I don't want to talk about it. There is no sugarcoating it. I put him in the hospital.

I'm done. No football, no future other than an aggravated assault, which I know will be a felony right on my lap with a prison cell. Eating up the time bleeds with my guilt.

"What happened, dude?" Jared asks.

"Oh shit, man..." Nick's eyes bulge out of their sockets. I stare down at my knuckles, biting the inside of my cheeks until they bleed.

The words queued up in my throat. "He raped my sister..." I cover my face with a hand, slumping back onto the couch. Bile rolls in my stomach and I think I might vomit.

"Dude... okay... we need to go to the cops. Take Charlie down there, and they will see it as self-defense." Jared says.

"I just went to go find Payton... I got into it with Brittini, telling her I was just done with her shit and realized... fuck..." I sob like a god-damn baby.

"Realized what?" Jared asks, brows furrowed as he sits down on the lounge chair. He leans over, his arms resting on his knees.

"I fucking love Payt, and I... fuck... I'm so fucking stupid..."

Nick swallows hard, his tongue rolling over his top teeth, nodding his head. "Shit..."

"I went down there to tell her... they were both drugged and I... Charlie was fucking screaming at Brody to get off, and... I lost it, I fucking lost it... I fled, I thought I killed him."

"His face is pretty fucked up, but he's alive dude..." Nick steps over with the phone in his hand. I vaguely see the pictures with blood and stitches.

"Where is Charlie?" Jared runs both hands through his disheveled hair.

"She jumped out of the jeep..."

"You let her leave?" Nick paces back and forth, rubbing the back of his neck. "What the fuck, man!"

"Okay, dude..." Jared's eyes dart across the floor as he wipes the edges of his lips. "I think you'd have self-defense on your side. The cops are gonna be pissed you left, but you were protecting your sister."

"No, it will be battery. I'm heading straight to prison."

Nick huffs. "Shut up man." He holds his towel tightly around his waist. "We just need to go find Charlie and we'll go to the hospital and call the cops. Fucking tell them the truth, and everything will be fine."

"Nick, go shower and chill out." Jared points to the bathroom.

JARED DRIVES. I slouch in the back seat where the windows are tinted, and I'm nothing but a silhouette to each car passing by. Every ten minutes I'm drowning in water, calling up Charlie for her phone to go straight to voice mail.

There hasn't been any activity on her social media in the past eight hours. She's always scrolling, posting pictures every day. Social media is her diary for everyone to read.

Nausea froths in my mouth, sending her message after message, leaving her voicemails begging her to call me. We checked my home first. Mom has only seen the bottom of her bottles. She was still so hung over that she didn't realize anything had happened. It spared me the agony of telling her I'll rot in jail, and she'll need to find her own way of paying the bills because I can't.

A thready pulse made my blood violent in my veins. Jared parks in front of Cheer Phi's fraternity. He unbuckles, gets out of the car, and

walks up the porch steps. Brittini answers the door with arms crossed and rolls her eyes within seconds. She's acting bitchy as usual, waving him off and slamming the door in his face.

With hands falling into his pockets, he comes back to the car plopping down in the seat. The annoying ping of the car beeps non-stop until he slams the door shut.

"She's not there..." Jared releases a heavy breath and looks at me through the rearview mirror with a levied glare. "Do you know where her boyfriend lives?" He asks.

I pull out my cell, looking through previous locations I plugged in when delivering pizzas. It takes me a few minutes to find the correct date, scrolling through the history.

"Here..." I show him the address, and he types it into his phone before we pull out.

While he drives, I try again to call Charlie. It still does the same thing. It goes straight to voice mail. Numbness crawls all over my skin, and it's starting to sink in there is something wrong. Fear clamped my heart, pulling it right out of my chest.

Another ten minutes we roll up to the house, the garage door open with musical instruments hoarding every inch of the place. This time, I get out of the car and dip my hands into my pockets. Muscles in my legs burn, going rigid as I reach the front door and the doorbell stares at me.

I drown my lungs with air, but the small relief it grants me when I release it disintegrates the minute I press an index finger on the bell. The sound echoes through the house. Shadows move in the window, getting closer as someone answers the door.

It's not Noah who I was hoping to see. Or Charlie telling me to fuck off, hit me, beat the living shit out of me. No, it's another fucking guy with a man bun giving me a death glare through the screen door.

"I'm not interested in finding Jesus, man..."

I shake my head and wipe off the remark. "I'm looking for my sister..."

"Your sister... there isn't any chicks here buddy..."

"Charlie! You know who my sister is. She's all over Noah's nuts. Have you seen her?" I ask.

"Oh..." He hisses out a breath. "The bitch who broke up with him minutes before we went on stage. No, I haven't seen her."

My mouth waters and everything sinks in my stomach. "Can you call Noah and ask if he's seen her?"

He licks his lips with an annoyed eye roll. "Look, man..."

"Please... I don't know where she is..."

"Okay... hold on." He disappears into the dim house. Cool air floods out of the door as I stand there with pain hurting like hell traveling in all directions in my body.

The guy comes back, his phone in his hand. He unlocks the screen door, stepping out. Noah's name is on the cellphone. "Here..." The guy hands it over and leans against the brick wall with arms crossed.

"Hey..." I swallow hard.

"What's going on?" Noah asks on the other end.

"I dunno where Charlie is."

He is quiet on the other end, the sound of his breath inhales in the speaker. "I haven't heard from her since last night. She dumped me, something about me not being the right fit for her. I don't want to talk to her. I want nothing to do with her..."

"Did you see her after the concert? Anything?"

"No, why?"

At this point, I think my stomach is bleeding. It hurts so bad. "Brody... umm." My tongue is an unnecessary accessory that can't do its damn job.

"What?"

"He raped her last night. She screamed she wanted you and she jumped out of my jeep. I should have just gone after her, but..."

"You're a fucking shitty brother?" He snaps out, and I go limp, and it's like he hammered a nails into my wrists.

"Fuck you, man. Clearly, you were a shitty ass boyfriend."

"I haven't seen her... I dunno what you want me to say. I gotta go..."

"If you hear from her, can you please let me know?" I ask, regret eating at my flesh like I'm a dead carcass and maggots are burrowing holes through every inch of me.

"Yeah... I'll let her know to reach out to you." The phone call ends. His friend presses his lips into a fine line of bitterness, and it rubs off on me the wrong way. I hand over the phone, and he slips into the back pocket of his skinny jeans.

"Sorry about your sister, dude," he says, his eyes staring down at the gravel and weeds decorating the front yard. "I'm sure she'll turn up. Have you tried calling the hospital? There were paramedics at the concert. Quite a few people passed out and that one dude got the shit beat out of him."

I throw up my knuckles and lift a brow. "I know."

"Whoa..." He says, blinking at the bruises like it's some sort of surprise. "Fuck man..."

"That's the dude who raped her..."

"Yeah, call the hospital... she's probably there." He steps back into the house.

"Thanks," I say as he closes the door and I walk down the concrete, staring at the weeds peeking out of the cracks.

I slip back into the car. Jared's hands on the wheel. "I'm gonna call the hospital." I scroll through my phone, looking at the numbers until I find the correct one. They put me on hold for several long minutes to speak to a representative. The worst type of music plays on the line as

I wait. The time on the screen turns from three minutes to fifteen easily.

"Sorry for the hold. Can I help you?" A lady finally answers.

"I'm looking for my sister. I dunno if she checked in there."

A keyboard clicks in the background. "What's her name?" The phone shuffles.

"Charlotte Henderson." Typing continues, and she breathes on the phone, huffing. She's reading names in a whisper. The dread plummets to the pit of my stomach. The voice in my head telling me she wasn't there.

"Yeah, no one has checked in with that name, sir."

"Okay..."

"I'm sorry. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Are there any other hospitals or any other medical facilities she might have gone to for an emergency?"

"We are the only hospital in a fifty-mile radius."

"Oh shit... yeah."

"Is everything okay? Would you like me to connect you to law enforcement?"

Jared gives me the look, nodding his head, but I dismiss him. "No... It's fine. Thanks..." I hang up the phone.

"FUCK!" I bellow out, slamming my head into the back seat. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

Handcuffs



Payton

THE WORST REQUIRED COURSE in the history of the earth...wait no, the universe is this online technology course. This week is focused on keyboarding. It took me a hot minute to find the classroom I could come into anytime. The rules are simple and have been posted on the whiteboard since the late 80s.

First, shut the hell up before coming in. Find one of the obese computers with diabetes and log in. Hands must be under the dusty papers, always hanging on by a thread. If it falls off, gum works better than the crusty tape.

I don't know the instructor's name, but he's more outdated than the computers in here. He looks like the old fat version of a greasy eighth grader who hasn't discovered the holiness of deodorant. He's never said anything since I've walked in. All he does is hide behind mountains of magazines and old comic books on his desk.

I plop down at a spot in the back of the room. I type in my login information, then slip my backpack over my shoulder and drop it to the floor. I sit down, watching the loading sign spin in circles.

Two linemen stroll in. I recognize them from practice. When they get closer, Dirty Roulette flashes in my eyes like a monster who jumps scares. It's one of the Chads. He spins a football wearing a jean jacket and working the natural curls of his hair to pull off the bad boy

aurora. His friend is the Alpaca, he looks like he ran a razor over the hair-part running down the center of his skull. The guy seems lazy like he woke up late and left with his pajamas on.

Before coming here, I waited in my usual spot by the big tree in the courtyard, scanning all the faces, hoping for Ryder to show up. He sent me one text message asking if I talked to Charlie. I typed out the word no. The message was left on read.

Charlie was nowhere in sight, either. The campus felt empty, even with people walking across the lawn with friends. By now she would be prancing out of the dining hall was a coffee and bagel. It's not like either of them to be gone.

Hard feelings hit me like a bullet once my phone tells me it's almost nine. So now I'm here, completing the week of keyboarding, avoiding football roaches, and battling demonic thoughts invading the borders of my brain.

Chad sits directly next to me, his smile cocky, and his eyelids droop like he's doped up. He reeks of a bad hangover and musty weed with a hint of aftershave.

Alpaca sits by the computer on the opposite side of mine. Both of them are tagged in several of Brody's Instagram photos. They are stocky, arms muscular, ripping out of their shirts kind of buff. They snicker with one another and throw eyebrow cues.

I stare at my phone, debating if I should message someone or bury my feelings in a grave full of thorns. I swallow the hunger to make shit worse and shove the phone in my jean pocket.

"Psst..." I turn to Chad next to me, but he clicks the mouse loudly and stares blankly at the computer. He's not even logging in. I don't think he even belongs in here. He looks over in my direction, dips his head back, and says, "Hey girl... what's up?" He slides his chair next to me, his arm slithers over my shoulder.

"Psst..." I swing my head around and Alpaca rolls his chair right up behind me. "You're cute..." he says and coils his fingers around a strand of my hair.

"What the fuck..." I pull gently on my hair, watching it slide out of his grip and push it behind my back. "Don't touch me."

"Are you new here or something?" His minty breath burns a hole in my lungs. "Oh wait... I know you. You're Charlie's friend, right?"

He asks and pulls out his cell phone. A thumb scrolls for a quick second and flips the screen to me. It's the nudes Brody took of me. Then the video of me kissing Ryder with nothing on. The feelings enveloping me are equivalent to a bucket of worms falling on top of my head.

"Umm... yeah." I push the phone away, but the damage was done. A cement block was thrown right on top of me. I shake off Chad's grip and swivel back to my computer.

"You look pretty damn hot," he chuckles. I stare at the screen, watching the outline of his actions through the reflection. "I bet I can show you a good time."

Maybe today isn't the day to come back to class. I stand up, but Chad grabs me by the wrist. He twists me around, and I'm sitting in his lap like a little kid. He smells my hair, and his breath makes my ears sweat. "We hear you like it rough..."

"And you're pretty easy," Alpaca whispers. It's like he slithered his tongue inside my ear and millions of spiders started crawling all over my skin.

The video plays on repeat. Ryder's hands were all over my breasts, digging fingers in my hair. I lean into Chad's ear and whisper, "In your fucking dreams."

The cell slips back into his pocket and I push myself off him with the dirtiest death glare I can stab him with.

Mr. Keyboard Lord waddles around the room. With a thumb, he ripples through pages of his newest comic book. He gives them both a raised eyebrow. Chad huffs, his eyes meeting mine, he licks his lips, looking me up and down, but he goes back to the computer knowing he'll get kicked for fucking around. Both linemen storm out like a violent mob.

I move closer to the professor's desk and complete the week's lessons and finished the final quiz with ten minutes remaining before algebra. I pack and gather my things. When I walk to the door, I check the hallway, and watch people fade.

One step out of the door and Chad puts his arms around my shoulder, his fingers coiling a strand of my hair, his nose smelling the top of my skull. "Come on, let me get a taste, I know you wanna fuck..." he says.

"Get the fucking hint!" I tell him, spinning myself in some kind of figure-eight position to get his grip off my shoulder and slap him right across the cheek. He grabs my face, and laughs out of his nose.

"Who's going to stop me?" Chad's grin widens as if he slit the corners of his mouth. It is wicked and evil and the ugly thoughts perforate off his skin.

"Dude. Come on. I ain't about to be the next Brody...let's go," Alpaca licks his bottom lip and places his palm on Chad's chest.

"No one's going to save her this time... her fucking running back is in cuffs."

My whole body goes numb. I take my chance and start barricading it down the hallway.

It doesn't take long before Chad chases me and grabs my backpack. I fell back, crumbling to the floor. He stops me dead in my tracks. Everything drains out of my body like I'm slowly being injected with Rohypnol all over again from head to toe. It's worse than the aftermath of drinking that bottle of tequila.

It's seeping in that I'm actually scared. Fucking terrified that someone else wants to hurt me just as much as Brody wanted to hurt Charlie.

Chad grabs my forearm, dragging me up to my feet. "Stop it!" I push his fingers off my wrist. But he fists my shirt into his palm and pulls me close. My heart is stuck in my throat as he spins me around and shoves me straight into the wall. Hands grab my ass, his body pinning me, and I can't move an inch. He's exploring me and taking a fistful of my breast. "Now I see why the Crab likes you..."

"Bro!" Alpaca throws up his arms.

"Chill out. Bad girls like it rough," he tells him, his breath running down my neck and his groin rubbing against my body. "Right? Aren't you a bad girl?" He's so close, his fingers at my collarbone. I tremble. I can smell him again, and he has a lingering touch of getting too high on a Monday morning.

Alpaca pushes Chad on the shoulders. "I'm leaving... Peace out!" He races down the hallway like he should be on the track team. "You should come party with us sometime... yeah?"

I say nothing but stare at the barren hallways. His crooked smile fades, and his eyes scan the floor. He leans back into my ears, his lips centimeters away. "Maybe we can make a film, too." He moans and bites his bottom lip before pushing himself off me and walking off.

Ryder

IT'S TOO QUIET IN THE TESTING CENTER. I've counted each tick of the black wall clock. It's been five hundred seconds and I still have over ten thousand seconds left before the test times out. The scribbling of pencils and the flap of pages grind into my ears. I haven't read the first question.

The room is bare. Dust hangs off the vents. Loose wires snake along the stained carpet. The only thing with any remote color is the tube of Clorox wipes by the whiteboard. Something about the fluorescent lighting and dirty carpet odor leaves a pit in my stomach.

I tap the back of my heel on the floor and glance at the door. Two figures pass the window. I break out in a cold sweat when a man in black, gazes through the glass. My heartbeat tears into my ears. I gather my bag, standing up the second I hear the keys rattle. The wooden door creaks open.

The Dean of students twists her keys and props the door with her foot. I log off the computer and make a B-Line to her.

"You were just who I was looking for!" She yelps. "Come with me!" Her high-pitched voice drains the blood out of my body. I'm numb the second everyone's attention drifts at me. I picture the documentary of all those students sitting on spotlight chairs, with an eerie background and melodramatic music.

All the eyes meeting mine will tell the world how shocking it was to sit next to Sebastian Ryder Henderson when he beat the living shit out of everyone's favorite quarterback, Brody Thomas.

I dig into the strap of my bag and step into an empty hallway. An officer leans against the wall with his hands resting on his utility belt. He briefly glances at me, stoic, lips flat, with no visible way for me to read his intentions. I follow the clack of the Dean's heels up into the main security office. She flips a badge over a sensor that unlocks the door.

I step in first. The stench of reheated pizza and burnt coffee hangs in the air. The police officer follows us in and ensures the door is closed behind him and life moves into slow motion again, as if I'm watching on the sidelines.

The secretary sits at her desk and cranks her head up against the phone as I'm escorted through the hallway. "Ma'am...Ma'am." Bel-

ligerent yelling sears through the speaker. The secretary slams her neon pink nail file on her desk and pulls the phone away from her ears.

We mosey through a maze of different hallways until we get to the one with the Dean's name engraved on a copper plaque on the door. Dr. Paige. "Have a seat and I'll be right with you."

"Why am I here?" I ask, but knowing damn well I can't play stupid with the bruises and scrapes all over my knuckles.

"Just sit down." She shoos me into her office and shuts the door. There's a familiar fruity smell swirling around the room from the diffuser. Not a single grain of dust here. It's outrageously cold. The usual office supplies sit perfectly on the desk like they were never touched.

A perfect family photo sits on her desk, rubbing their wonderful life in my face. I want to vomit. I turn the picture away, and the clicking starts again.

The wall clock ticks and ticks... ticks... Each second burning a hole in my eardrums. At any moment, the police will walk through the door and the rest is history.

My cell phone buzzes in my front pocket, and I'm suddenly drenched in a cold sweat. I bite my lips and take out my phone.

Jared: Dude, the police are here.

Ryder: It's too late, man. They grabbed me from the testing center.

Jared: Tell them the fucking truth. Charlie is missing. You fucking defended her.

I'm sweaty again. Cold drops run down my cheeks. Freezing air blasts on me from the vent above. Footsteps pound on the carpet, voices get louder as someone gets closer. My heart stops and my arteries burst. I shove my phone back into my pocket, holding my breath until they pass by the door.

I collect myself and pull my phone back out. Every cell in my body is on fire, and I'm begging for something to turn this nightmare around.

Ryder: I assaulted Brody. There is no way around it. It's a felony. I'm done, dude.

Jared: He raped your sister. Get that through your damn head! You were protecting her.

The murmur of voices comes through the wall and gets louder. I slip my phone inside my pocket as the door rushes open. The same police officer outside the testing room stalks in alone. He holds onto a yellow folder, notepad, and pen. I tap my heels on the carpet a thousand miles a minute as he takes the blue plastic chair next to me and sits down.

"I'm Detective Cutler. Who do I have the pleasure of speaking to?" He holds out a hand. We lock eyes. He doesn't budge or hesitate to glance away. His eyebrows furrow as if they stare right into my soul.

I clear the knot in my throat and break his grip by shaking his hand. "Ryder," I say.

"Henderson?"

"Yeah." Fuck. Don't say yeah. He'll think you're an ass.

"First name, Sebastian?" He asks.

"Yes." I shrink into the chair. He licks the tips of his fingers and opens the yellow folder.

"Do I need a lawyer present?" I ask, my throat drier than the school's cheeseburgers.

"Do you want a lawyer?" He places an arm over the documents in the folder and twirls the pen between his fingers.

"Depends..."

"Oh, gotcha. I'm doing my due diligence and trying to get a story straight."

"Okay..." I clench onto the edge of my knees and lean over, taking in a deep breath.

"Now, do you know why you're in here today?" He asks. I glance through the tinted windows on the door, looking for any type of shadow. But it's completely still.

I realized he asked me a question. "Do I know why I'm here?" I ask.

The officer scratches a furrowed eyebrow. "It's just a simple question."

"I don't know," I shrug. The monsters inside my head scream in all different directions. The officer crunches up his upper right lip as if I should know better.

The vibes leaking off the cop taste sour. The look in his eyes and the sound in his voice is one I can feed lies to, like formaldehyde. If I tell him the truth, he won't believe it. "... I think I do," I say.

I run a hand through my hair and stare off into the blinds, my mind twisting them to rusty jail bars.

"You think you do?" He asks and then points at my raw and bruised knuckles. "Do you know how you got those bruises on your hands?"

I sit with chaos unfolding inside me, a complete civil war rages through my veins. I honestly don't know what to say to the detective.

I shrug again. "... Maybe... I dunno." I wasn't prepared for questions.

"Let's cut the bullshit."

"Okay," I say. I've sprawled out plenty of times on the carpet watching Mom's collections of crime shows to understand, this is the moment that'll set my fate. Right now, I look guilty. It's as if someone wrote it on a sheet of paper and taped it to my back.

"Can you tell me what you did Saturday night?" Detective Cutler clicks the pen and scribbles something down.

"Yeah...I went to a party." I say.

"Where?"

"Sigma's fraternity house." The devil on my tongue wants to know if I'll be in handcuffs after this conversation, but that would possibly give away my guilt.

"Did you drink at the party?" He asks while jotting something down in his notepad.

"No, I had a coke." I rub the crease of my neck and lean back in the chair.

"Who drinks only a coke at a college party?"

"Me..."

"What time did you leave the party?" he asks, tapping a pen and staring down at his notes.

I look up at the ceiling, trying to remember the exact time, but after fighting with Brittini, I didn't pay attention to the clock. All I wanted was to find Payton.

"Sometime after nine, ten maybe... I dunno" I rub my sweaty palms on my pants. My tongue is pure cotton. The detective glances down at my lap and straight up to my face.

"Where did you go afterward?" He asks.

"I wanted to see my girlfriend..."

"Who's your girlfriend?" He glances at me, and the pen taps on the desk.

The question takes me off guard. "Payton..."

"Payton, who?" The detective chuckles under his breath. I noticed his front right tooth is slightly crooked.

"Bailey..."

"Do you smoke pot?" He lifts an eyebrow.

"Sometimes."

"I can smell it on you. Did you smoke on Saturday?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you go to the concert again?" He asks and rests an arm over the paperwork, seeming amused by my response. I cross my arms and sink further into the seat.

"I found out my girlfriend was there. I wanted to apologize to her, and my sister was there." I shrug again. I can't control it, and stare at the frame I knocked over earlier.

"That's not what I heard?" The detective says.

"Umm...Okay." I shrug again. Fuck. He does the same thing and starts writing down an excessive amount of notes. The silence makes me sweat.

"Why were you there?"

"I told you I was just looking for my girlfriend and found my sister there..."

"Look, we have surveillance videos of you from Saturday night with Brody Thomas. Tell me, what set you off?"

I'm silent and the clock ticks in my ears.

"We know Brody and your sister are dating. You two play football, and you two got in a fight last month, right?"

I run a hand over my hair and scratch the back of my head. It's hard to follow everything he's saying.

"They are not dating. My sister was dating Noah. One of the vocalists for a band playing that night," I say.

"That's not what Brody said." He tilts his head and gives me this look, as if he thinks I'm lying. "They've been together four months now."

"Look, I've never been to that piece of shit venue until Saturday. I went there looking for Payton. That's it." I'm waving my palms all over the place, not sure what the guy wants me to say.

"How did you find out she went to this concert?"

"She has her location on through her snap." I ruffle my hair. "I check it sometimes to find her."

"So, you stalk your girlfriend and keep tabs on her?"

"That's not what I said."

"Do you hit her too?"

"No!"

"Look, Ryder, we have a problem. We have your records, we have everything. Why don't you tell us the truth about what happened?"

I stare down at my knuckles, and clumps of dried blood flake off as I rub them with a thumb. I bite down on the inside of my cheek and the detective rolls his lips between his tongue. My mouth waters, and bile hikes up my throat.

I watch him slide out a photo hiding in the paperwork, and he scoots it to me. I side-glance it, and my blood reaches its boiling point. It's a blurry hospital picture of Brody's face bruised and covered in blood.

I don't crane my neck even an inch to let the fucker get any more attention. The words are stuck in my throat, and they should have been the first thing to come out of my mouth.

"He raped her... he raped my sister."

"Okay... let's not make assumptions..."

"What?" I ask.

"How long have you known Brody?" The detective holds out his hand and starts taking notes again.

"Are you listening to me?" I ask. He didn't even acknowledge my statement.

"I'm trying to figure out what happened on Saturday. We have a serious aggravated assault charge we are investigating. So, were you and Brody good friends? You both play on the football team, right?"

"No. NO!"

"You never played football together?"

"No!" I yell.

"You don't play football together? None of that?"

"You're not listening to me. He raped her!" I stand up and slam my fists on the desk. "I don't know where Charlie is! She hasn't fucking come home! It's been almost two days, and that bastard raped her! I fucking saw him. I kicked that door open because she was screaming! I fucking tore him off her because he was assaulting her. What do you expect me to do?"

"Ryder, we've talked to Brody, and the sex was consensual between them. So, tell us what happened."

"You're kidding me?"

"Just tell us what happened. We know you smoked some pot, you went to a party, you went to the concert, but you caught your sister and Brody having consensual sex in the bathroom. It set you off, didn't it? Was it your girlfriend cheating on you with him?"

He snatches the photo of Brody's injuries and shoves it up to my nose. "I'd be jealous too. He's bound to be the next greatest quarterback this generation has seen."

"Is that what Brody said?" I ask.

"That's what happened, right? You assaulted Brody Thomas?"

"But that's not how it played out," I say.

"Ryder Henderson, you're under arrest for the assault of..."

I drown out his voice and I'm screaming. "What the fuck, man! That's not what happened!" I leap up out of the chair and almost make a break for the door before the detective grabs me.

"You just admitted to the assault of Brody Thomas."

"You're not listening. That's not how it played out!" The door swings open. "That's a fucking bullshit story! That's not what happened! That's not what fucking happened!"

My mom gasps at the sight of me and pins herself against the hallway wall. The officer pushes me to walk faster. "Mom!" I scream out

and we round the corner. "Fucking call dad! Please!" I can't even turn around to tell her I'm sorry.

Payton

I'M A SOBBING MESS, unpacking my things for Algebra, only for security to storm the class, asking me to pack my things and come straight to the office. I feel like it's a sense of relief maybe someone spotted what those two assholes did to me in the hallway.

But it's not. Ryder's in the office, fighting, kicking, his face red, eyes crimson, and tears pooling down his face. A police officer escorts him out of the school in handcuffs. Ryder's mom screams at the secretary, hysterically sobbing, and collapsing on the edge of the counter. There is a paper in her hands that I'm thinking is what they call a warrant.

"Payton, come this way?" Dr. Paige waves her arm in the direction of a maze of hallways.

"What happened to Ryder?" I ask.

"I can't say."

"What do you mean? They just carried him out of the office." I point a finger behind my shoulder.

I'm taken to a small conference room. "Find a seat." She switches on the light and points to one of the dirty blue chairs. There's a small round table with pencils and a notepad.

"Dr. Paige," I roll my ankle in a painful circle and stomp my feet on the floor. I clench my mouth shut, feeling like a balloon overly stretched.

"What is it?"

"These two guys really freaked me out and I don't want to start anything but—"

She cuts me off with a hand. "We have an officer wanting to ask you some questions."

"These guys grabbed me and showed pictures of me naked..."

"Okay, you can talk to the officer about it."

"But... but it just happened?"

"Payton. What they want to know happened off campus grounds. Go sit." She points to the chair and my view on the world narrows, as no one wants to listen to a damn thing I need to say.

"What? Why? What about the guys who have videos of me?"

"Sit!" She points her index finger. I bit my tongue. Let my bag fall to the floor, and I sit flat on my butt in the ugly blue chair. I cross my arms, and the Dean creeps out and spins around the corner.

Within a matter of five minutes, the door clicks behind a female officer in uniform.

"Hello. Are you Payton Bailey?" She asks.

"Yeah..." I sit up more and push the hair glued to my face away. I combed it this morning, but who knows what it looks like now.

"I'm Detective Harrison. You're not in any kind of trouble. I want to start that right off the bat. I've notified your emergency contact, your Mom, about the circumstances. She'd liked you to be truthful with me.... Do you understand?" She asks, leaning to the left, and pulls out a cheap blue pen. She yanks the top off with her canines.

"Yeah," I say. She smiles, checks the time on her watch, and scribbles words down.

"Tell me what happened on Saturday night?"

"What part do you wanna know?"

"Let's just take this step by step. Where were you on Saturday night?"

"I went to a concert."

"Did you go with anyone?"

"No..."

"Are you friends with Charlotte Henderson?"

"Uhm... yeah... Charlie is her nickname."

"When did you get there?" The detective looks up. Her brown eyes bore into mine as she taps the edge of the pen on the table.

"I dunno, maybe around eight."

"Did you drink?"

"Yeah?" I'm back to staring at my fingernails. I'm picking the polish off.

"You realize you're eighteen."

"I know..."

"When did you start drinking?"

"Once I got there," I say.

"How many drinks did you have?" She asks and begins to scribble. Her note-taking seems violent as if she were reiterating everything I'm saying with the caps lock button on and in bold.

"I dunno a few beers and some shots of tequila."

"How did you get home?" She asks.

"Umm... my sister's brother took me home."

"Where you in any condition to drive?"

"Umm no... I don't know how... I don't have my license yet..."

"Okay, so at the concert, when does Brody show up?"

"I dunno, it was right before the first lineup wrapped up. There were about four bands playing that night."

"What did the three of you decide to do?" She asks.

"Nothing, really?"

"Really?" She cocks an eyebrow. "I heard you made some nasty remarks to Brody, then you got into a heated argument with Charlie. Why? What happened?"

She's scribbling hard, and I wonder if it's possible to break a pen clawing my truth in that notebook.

"I don't know." I shrug.

"Yes, you do."

"I don't like him. He's an asshole." I admit.

"That doesn't answer my question. What happened?"

I shrug so hard that my shoulder blade reaches my right cheek. "I don't know what I saw." I stare down at my fingertips and pick at the dirt hiding under my nail beds. I've tried so hard to not chew the nails off, but I'm craving to grind my teeth into them now.

"I was really mad." I feel the emotions stuck in my throat. My face turns bright red. "Charlie found out I've been sleeping with her brother and she hates me for it. I thought Charlie wanted to hash shit out at the concert but Brody shows up, and I swear he put something in her drink..." I use the back of my arm and wipe the snot off my nose.

"Okay..."

"I told her, but she didn't believe me and they left..."

"What did you do after they left?"

"I drank a lot of tequila."

"Why tequila?"

"I dunno to feel better. I drank some... and well... I thought..." I scratch the side of my head and lean against the table, not sure. "I saw Brody pull something out of his pants. It looked white, and I think he put it in her drink."

"You think?"

"By now, how many drinks did you have?"

"A beer and tequila."

"How many shots?"

"I dunno... three... four" I hold up three fingers. "I chugged a lot."

"Did you eat anything?" she asks.

"No..."

"Okay, Payton." The officer crosses her legs and scoots a bit closer to me. "How much do you weigh?"

"A little over a hundred pounds."

"With how much you drank within the first two hours, your blood alcohol level would be substantially high. And how did you get home again?"

"Charlie's brother took me home."

"The guy you're sleeping with...Right... we've established there was no way you could drive. You were illegally impaired."

"I guess... yeah."

"Knowing you were drinking heavily at the time, and could not operate a vehicle, and you are very much impaired, how certain are you that Brody put something in Charlie's drink?"

I shrug again. "I dunno he drank out of the cup, too."

"Oh..." She writes that down.

"I dunno what I saw. I just know I saw something, and it was white, and he poured it into her drink."

"So, you're not certain?"

"I dunno..."

"On a scale of one to a hundred, how certain are you Brody Thomas put something in your friend's drink?"

I stare at the ceiling, at a fan that I don't think has ever been turned on. My tongue is lodged in my throat. "Ninety-nine percent positive..."

"And what about the one percent?" She asks.

"Then I'm just crazy and really, really jealous I guess..."

"Okay..."

"... and a really shitty friend, too."

"No further questions, Payton." The detective stands up and opens the door. I snap right out of it. Whatever trance the officer put me in, whatever she did, made me feel oddly weird. The room seems eerie and still. I grab my things and leave quickly.

Missing



Payton

WHEN I GET OUT OF THE UBER and walk up the porch steps to the trashy trailer, I belong to. I say nothing. There is no way I'm staying in the dorm tonight. My phone won't stop blowing up. Every five minutes, someone else is calling me from an unknown number. Text messages flood in and my inbox on social media is a dog and pony show. I'm mortified. The guys harassing me earlier today finally makes sense.

I'm an easy S.L.U.T., and let's not forget virgin is still written on my forehead, but someone must have erased it off. It's bullshit I can't carry myself and put my big girl panties on.

Richie lounges on the couch. He's wearing one of his cutoff shirts and a black pair of shorts that was popular for maybe thirty seconds in the 80s. He's smoking and watches whatever show he likes best out of the thirteen channels they get for free from the old satellite on the roof. It usually went to Judge Judy, and at some point, the Local News will be on.

Richie doesn't say shit to me. He just takes in a long drag of his cigarette, and I scurry down the narrow hallway to my room.

I tidy up, make my bed, and wash a hundred pounds of laundry. Scrambling through my bathroom, I flip on the light, thinking there was no logical way my life has become this bad. I put my toiletries in pleasant spots on the counter with the pit of my stomach falling on the floor knowing I don't want to go back to that campus.

At the dining table, I spend some time on the computer working on assignments and the math program that guides me through the algebra questions. After a good hour, mum pulls up in the driveway in her mustang, pissed off with her day. There is no doubt she's bought a new set of lungs on the black market with the way she storms up the steps.

The purse is throttled onto the counter. A lighter snaps over a cigarette wedged between her index and middle finger. A glass of wine is filled to the brim in her other hand.

"We'll need to talk in a bit." She wiggles her eyebrows and scrunches her lips. Her threatening eyes tell me she'll find a belt in less than two seconds, and beat the demons out of me if she needs to.

"Okay..." I say and smile.

Mom disappears to spend her evening on the patio in one of the old white lawn chairs, drinking her wine and the cigarettes wobble up and down between her lips. Richie follows and sits next to her.

My phone flashes on the table, and when I swing it over. It's my older sister. I swipe right, seeing the three little dots on the bottom of the screen showing me she's typing.

Phoebe: How's college going?

Payton: I dunno... I left, and I'm back in my bat cave.

Phoebe: You'll be whiter than a ghost if you're hiding.

Payton: Yeah...

Phoebe: What happened today? Mom spilled, but I want you to tell me.

CIGARETTES AND RUST

Payton: I fucked up.

Phoebe: How?

Payton: I dunno...

Phoebe: You're shitting me? You're not going to tell me about the episode of COPS you were on today?

Payton: I wasn't on the damn show. I went to a concert and got shit-faced. I think Charlie got drugged, and now Ryder is in jail.

Phoebe: Don't be mad, but mom called freaking about the cops showing up to her work. I talked to them with her over the phone, and it's about an aggravated assault charge being pressed on Ryder.

Payton: Brody drugged her... and assaulted her.

Phoebe: Have you watched any TV or looked at the news?

Payton: No

Phoebe: Well, I suggest you don't. It hit the local news somehow.

Payton: It's on the news?

Phoebe: Have you heard from Charlie?

Payton: No why?

Phoebe: Don't freak out.

Payton: What's wrong?

I dismiss her warning about looking at the news, and it's embedded in my everyday notifications about an arrest at GCU. At least Ryder's mug shot isn't in the article, but it has a picture of the cops on the campus. Then the bold words hit me with a million knives.

Charlotte Henderson Missing

Charlotte Henderson was last seen after an assault at a local concert venue. Her whereabouts are unknown at this time, and law enforcement is asking the community to call the police department if anyone has any information about the incident.

CIGARETTES AND RUST

One arrest has been made in connection with the missing eighteen-year-old, but no charges have been pressed at this time.

Phoebe: Payton...

Payton: She's missing???? Oh my fucking god!

Phoebe: Don't freak out. She'll turn up.

Payton: I fucked up. It's all my fault. I lied to Charlie!

Phoebe: You lied?

Payton: I was sleeping with Ryder...

Phoebe: O.M.G he deflowered you?

Payton: Almost... I kept it a secret from Charlie and if I didn't, then none of this would have happened. I don't even want to be in the dorm rooms. It's just fucked.

Phoebe: Pack your bags, bitch, you're staying here.

Within an hour, Phoebe rolls up into the driveway, headlights beaming through the windows. The night is dark, and she's a shadow walking up the steps and breaking into the trailer. It's like she never moved out. We grab my duffle bag and pack it in the trunk before she kidnaps me.

On the drive to her house, she tells me to spill everything. It comes up my throat like vomit. Dirty Roulette, stealing booze from Mr. Clorox, landing on Ryder the moment he walked in. Kissing him, then it turned into us messing around, how he made every atom of my body come alive, and catching feelings like it's the fucking flu.

When it comes down to the concert, all of it seems to click into Phoebe's head. The second I mention the two football players harassing me in the hallways, and the photos of me getting posted online. She loses it.

"You realize Brody is breaking the law. Hazing is illegal, and that's exactly what he did. He hazed you guys." She peels into the driveway, fighting with the gears and putting her car in park.

"Yeah..." I say and unbuckle myself.

Phoebe shuts off the engine, and it winds down and there is nothing but the sound of crickets and still air.

"Why didn't you just tell Charlie you were dating her brother? Lying never gets you anywhere."

"I dunno... it was stupid. I figured she would hate me entirely if I had a thing for him."

"It's so common for best friends to fall for the older brother. That's such a cliché in society." She huffs and flashes me a pitiful smile. "You really liked Ryder, didn't you?" She asks, shuffling around to grab her purse she threw in the back seat.

"I still do..."

"Well, let's make tea. We have leftovers you can eat. A shower and sleep will do you some good. I can drive you to the campus tomorrow." She opens the car door before climbing out.

THE NEXT MORNING, I plop down on the dining room table. Dried food is caked on the scraped wood, half-eaten mushy cereal is left unattended by the two toddlers running the house like a mob boss.

Phoebe sits hunched over, scrolling through her phone with disheveled hair and the droopy eyes of pure motherhood exhaustion. She nurtures her coffee, sipping on it.

"How did you sleep?" She asks.

"Rolled over on some legos, but otherwise okay, I guess."

She puckers her lips and nods her head. "Fair enough..." she slurps, as the boys argue over some toy car. "I don't think you should quit."

"Kinda hard not to..."

"But then you let this Brody asshole win. Do you realize how many celebs have some kind of sex tape leaked?"

"Yeah, but they are famous. They still make money and profit from it."

"I had to turn off my phone last night. Guys are disgusting. I had some voicemail of some sicko jerking his shit."

"Lovely."

I'm weak in the knees. How do I put my feet back on the ground? Cops can't do shit when it comes to the internet. Once it's posted, it's like the needle and ink of a tattoo. It's permanent. I can scrub it and tear my flesh off, but it's not going away.

"At some point, it will catch up with that asshole. He's gonna mess with the wrong person and tear him the pieces."

"Yeah... well, I guess I'll go shower. Do you mind driving me?"

"Yeah. I'll take you." She smiles.

We leave within forty-five minutes. I keep a low profile and stay in the vicinity of people and security. Cops are still all over campus. No matter where I went, one was talking to students, holding a photograph of Charlie.

I try to focus, but my brain refuses to think straight. Nothing can remove the knife lodged in my chest. Nothing feels normal or the same. It's all backwards. I try to figure out when I died and was put into another reality to finish my mission on this stupid planet I've been cursed to.

My last class ended up being canceled, but the assignments were still posted online for us to complete. I sit down at a bench by the

parking lot, putting in my information to grab an Uber to head back to my sisters when text messages pop up on top of my screen.

Noah: Can you swing by the store? I need to talk.

Payton: Sure. I'm leaving campus right now.

Noah: Okay, I'll be here.

Smokey Vinyl was a short ride. When fresh air hits my nostrils, I hightail it away from the stranger's tampon on wheels he called a car. It reeked of smelly feet and too many people catching rides with him. He was singing along to Mariah Carey, and my ears were bleeding.

The front door is covered in new posters for bands playing locally, and different upcoming concerts. The bell chimes as I walk in. The familiar scent of cigarettes burnt into the carpet greets me.

Noah cuts open a box with a switchblade of new merchandise. It looks like a bunch of shirts in a variety of different colors and sizes.

"Hi..." I say. He looks up at me, pushing a long strand of hair behind his ears. Gosh, he puts my locks to shame with how shiny and undamaged his ends are. "Have you ever thought of making your last name fence?"

Teeth peek through his lips as he blew a laugh out of his nose. "Fuck you." The switch blades waves at me.

"Noah... fence... get it... No offense."

"I've heard that a couple of times. Shit ain't happening." The brief smile sank and dissolves quicker than a raccoon washing cotton candy. His lips curl out dejectedly.

Sweat puddles in my palms as I coil them into tight balls. "Are you okay?" I ask.

His dark eyes stare at the box, picking at the tan tape sealing everything inside. "I thought she would have turned up by now. It's Tuesday..."

"I know..." I swallow hard.

He places the knife on the counter and takes a lungful of air. His eyes glance away like they are starved and everything inside him is beaten to nothing.

"She broke up with me, and it didn't make any sense..." He pauses, curling his lips over his teeth and staring into the carpet. I'm tangled up in the pain tattooed on his face. "She came over that morning and we..." He swallows, the words dripping off his tongue. "I... we... fuck..." He runs both hands through his hair.

My heart batters, bruising the flesh inside my ribs. Not another word needed to be said. "I'm sorry..." I lick my chapped lips, my tongue dries up sticking to the roof of my mouth.

"The whole time, she told me she was in love with me."

Everything inside me rots hearing what he says. Charlie never uses the L word with guys. A host of emotions crisscross his face, mixed with pain and anger. None of it makes sense. Tears gum up in my throat, it burns, and the saltiness meets my taste buds. "That doesn't sound like her..."

"She came backstage." He circles his finger around, his eyes haze over as he recounts it. "Threw her drink at me and ended it right before we went on stage... told me she lied, never wanted to see me again. She didn't explain why, she just cried storming off." Noah rubs the edge of his nose with the back of his hand and snuffles.

"She never tells guys she loves them... Charlie always ended things with anyone before that feeling even surfaced."

"Fuck..." He runs his hands over his face and tilts his head back. The sky is falling and raining down, crushing us with every horrible thing it can toss.

"She was fucking pissed at you, and decided to stay here with me until she figured out her living situation..."

I slop my sagging body against the counter. "I've been with her brother..."

Eyebrows jog up his forehead. "That was obvious the minute he dragged you out of the hot tub."

"Yeah..."

"Is he always pissed off at the world?"

I run my tongue over my teeth and huff. "Only when Charlie and I do stupid things..."

"And you want to be with a guy like that? Just someone who beats people up?"

"Well, I'm sure I fucked up that relationship too." Regret for everything I ever did wrong seeps like rot through my bones. The lies eat away at my flesh like an awful decaying body with nothing left but the trench they were dumped in.

"Brody drugged us both..." The bulge in my throat wrenches up and down.

The assault of the words hit Noah straight in his face, and he's swarmed with emotions. His eyes water, and he presses his fingers in deep into his sockets. "Fuck!"

Acid slicks the back of my throat. "I honestly don't remember much..."

"We played but left right afterward. My granddad was rushed to the hospital..."

"I'm so sorry..."

"He had a stroke and hasn't been responsive."

My stomach sinks and fills with cement of dread with those words. "Then why the fuck are you here? Shouldn't you be at the hospital?"

"I can't think straight..." He says and my insides tumble into each other as if the last thing I saw was the headlights of a semi sending me crashing with all the pieces of me across the pavement.

"Close up and go down there and be with him. Don't waste your time here..."

"Yeah..." Noah says.

It takes a couple of minutes before he agrees to close the store and leave. Death to his heart creeps into my own veins. Pain radiates off him and I stay until he locks up the doors and heads to his car. I sit on the cement parking barrier watching traffic and for the Uber drivers that picked up my ride.

Lie or Rot



Ryder

IT'S FUCKING COLD IN HERE. The damn police dragged me into a small room with white walls and cameras at every angle to make sure they don't miss a single movement of mine.

They have taken off the cuffs but shoved me into a crowded cell with thugs. Tattoo graffitied on faces. The smell of meth on dudes breaths. No one let anyone sleep, and every other hour someone was destroying the toilet that couldn't seat one ass cheek.

An officer gave me a tiny cup of lukewarm water, and it didn't even begin to quench my thirst. I've been left in here for a good thirty minutes, staring into outer space. Knowing this entire thing is being surveillance, I pay attention to my movements. Body language speaks volumes and one thing that is out of place, the worse it's going to get.

Keys jimmy the lock and two men step in. One in a suit with a folder in his hand and the other an officer in a dark uniform. The steps they take into the room whisper in my ears, if I'm not scared, then they are going to make sure I am before they leave.

"Ryder..." The man in the suit sits down, placing the folder on the square wooden table. The blonde hair and structure of his face and Greek nose are identical to Brody's. "I'm Mr. Thomas."

Now this seems like a conflict of interest. The contents of the puny bologna sandwich they fed me swim like they want to resurface.

I don't say a single word. My tongue runs across the back of my teeth. Damn, I'd give anything to have a toothbrush and toothpaste. That shit doesn't exist here.

"I'd like to discuss a few things, and you'll be on your way out of here..."

Nothing comes out of my mouth, not even a sign I can breathe. I continue to dig my tongue between my teeth. If any words are going to come out of my mouth, it's me demanding for a damn lawyer. They have refused to meet my request for the past twenty-four hours, I asked.

Now I'm faced with a lawyer, but it's not the one representing me.

"I can get these chargers pending dropped if you work with me..." He tilts his head, and I meet his poison-tipped gaze.

The tremors in my legs act up again, and I place a hand on my knee to stop the world from seeing me as some fucking nut job who lost his cool. Jealousy doesn't exist with Brody. Pure, unfiltered hate for him burns inside me.

"In your interview with the detectives, you said my son assaulted your sister?" He tips his chin in superiority. Lacing his fingers together, he places them over the folder on the table and leans closer to me. "If you retract your statement, this will all go away..." The serpent leaks off his tongue.

Charlie is missing, too. Does that mean her vanishing into thin air is swept under the rug? My hands bunch in tight fists on my lap. A sledgehammer slams in my chest with a venomous look on his face.

"She's not around to tell her side of the story... so why don't we just put this behind us?" The menacing confidence in his black eyes convinces me he has no soul, and I'm sitting in front of the devil. "Or I'll be taking you to court and I promise you they'll put you in for the maximum amount of years... Twenty-Five." A smirk slid up one-half of his face.

"You can still go play football. Graduate without anything following you." A chill runs up my spine, lifting the hairs on my nape. I sag deeper into the chair, my hands folding across my chest. Anger grabs me by the jaw, but I keep it shut like an iron door.

"You won't have to rot in here..." Power over the police force and the law reeks off this fucker. It will be easy for him to write me off or throw me back behind the bars. Either way, there is no justice for my sister. Brody gets a slap on the wrist.

"What do you say?" His Adam's apple convulsed. The evil look on his face makes my mouth water. The only way out of this hell is by tying a noose around my neck and throwing myself off a ledge.

"All you need to do is write it down." He pulls a pen out of the pockets of his slacks and places it on the table. He opens the folder with a document for a witness statement.

It slides over to my side of the table. I gulp down the lump of lies I'm about to write on the sheet of paper. I push the cap off the pen and stare down at the document and the dull lines.

A high-pitched noise seeps into my ears as the tip of the pen meets the lines and I start to write out the lie. Choking back the pain welling up in my throat, I have no choice. If Charlie has any shot, it's going to be this sheet of paper.

Acting like the word rape didn't exist in the dictionary, I finish writing him a five-paragraph essay retracting my entire statement. I push it across the table with the pen and lean back in the chair.

A wicked smirk forms on his lips, reading it and making sure everything he wants is in ink. Might as well slice my hand open and sign it in blood to seal the deal I made with the devil.

He motions at the officer with two fingers. "We are good here..."

The officer cocks a brow. "Looks like you got lucky." He mutters and opens the door for me. The officer takes me through the hallways

until we reach the main front lobby. I'm given back my wallet, phone, keys, and book bag.

The smell of rain meets my lungs when I step out of the double doors. My phone only has ten percent battery life and I manage to schedule an Uber before it powers off.

I stand under the sizzling hot shower for an hour. When the water runs cold, I turn the dial and get out. A biohazard team was needed when it came to my teeth. The toothpaste spat in the sink was crimson. I scrapped my gums and tongue until everything was raw and throbbing. I even threw out the toothbrush and grabbed a new one from under the cupboard.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, the notifications and news outlet blows up my phone.

The Brother of the missing eighteen-year-old was released today. No charges or connections were made for her disappearance or the battery of her boyfriend, Brody Thomas. Police are still investigating Charlotte's disappearance. It's been almost seventy-two hours since she was last seen. Law enforcement will continue their efforts in locating her and bringing her back home.

I scroll out of the article, tossing the phone onto my nightstand, and run my hands over my face. It doesn't wash away the ache lodged in every muscle in my body.

A knock of a finger taps on my door, and I lean over, spotting Jared holding his football helmet at his thigh. Sweat slithers down the side of his face, his hair drenched.

"The chargers were dropped?"

"Yeah..."

"So, they believed you? It was self-defense?" Jared asks, stepping in the room. I stare up at the ceiling, melting to the bed, wishing I could shut my damn eyes and never open them again.

"It's a lot more fucked up than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't slept since Friday night. Can we talk about this later?" I ask.

"Yeah, man... Take your time." Jared shuffles out of my room, closing the door behind him.

Payton

I SPENT ANOTHER NIGHT AT my sister's before attempting to be in the dorm room again. I jiggle the keys in the lock, open the door, and see Naomi with her cakey makeup, snaggle tooth, and the strange mole on her face in the dorm folding clothes neatly on the side of the bed Charlie slept on. My heart pounds a million miles per minute. Its furious beats burn more than stubbing a pinky toe.

"Hi...." I say and throw the dorm keys on my unmade bed. "I didn't realize I have a new dormie."

I switch on the warm lamp on my desk. It illuminates my side covered with posters of rock bands from the 80s and 90s.

Naomi combs a hand through her short blonde hair, ruffling the layers as she stares down at the bed. Her belongings are halfway unpacked and sleeves of shirts hang over the side of a brown cardboard box.

"Did they not say anything to you?" She plops down on the bed Charlie slept on picking at her cuticles.

"No..." I let the duffle bag slip off my shoulder and tumble to the floor. "I kinda haven't been in here either..." I sag to my bed with those stupid princess sheets I seriously need to dose in gasoline and set fire to it. "I knew Charlie wanted new living arrangements, but never thought she would put in the request..."

Out of the thousands of students on campus, it's Naomi and her outrageously annoying squeaky voice. The chick butts into everyone's personal space, breathing down guys' necks for attention. She makes me want to pull out every hair follicle off my head for her to shut up.

"I saw Ryder earlier with his mom taping up some missing posters of her up at the doors." She says.

I'm honestly numb, starving to be more empty than I already am. If I'm drained of everything, then I can be deeper in a state of nothing. Being numb is still a feeling and I can't handle it anymore.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

I shrug my shoulders and frown at her. "It's fine..." My palms sweat as it's one of Brittni's minions that follows and mimics her every move, but she's acting nice and not shouting out that damn nickname.

"The charges on the assault were dropped. It was all over the news," she says.

"I've been avoiding it."

"Did you two break up or something?"

"I don't even know what we were honestly..." I rub the crease of my neck.

"Yeah... well, I don't have any issues rooming with you if you don't."

"Weren't you in the sorority house for Phi?" I ask.

Her lips mold into a puckered scowl. "Let's not talk about that dumpster fire."

"Why, what happened?"

"The haze kinda fucked me up..." She crosses her legs, leans against the wall, and stares far away from my existence.

"You're telling me. My nudes are all online. You want to know how many phone calls I get in the middle of the night. I had some old ass fucker telling me he wanted to rub my..." I mimic a gag thinking about his rancid voice I listened to the other night.

"Yeah... I was..." She visibly swallows and chuckles under her breath. "I was on shark week."

The blood drains from my face. She bites her bottom lip, nodding her head. "There is a picture of me too. I passed the fuck out with my ass covered in blood."

"You landed on Snoop?" I recall the vague image of his hand covered in what I figured was period blood, but now it's confirmed. How embarrassing. Pity melts into the bottom of my stomach thinking I had it bad with my tits trending on the internet. Memes and trashy people with nothing better to do than type cruel words on a keyboard about a girl being on a period feel even worse.

"You call Nick, Snoop?" Naomi tilts her head with a brow cocked.

"Yeah, all he thinks about is pot. He's all green vibes and has that chill reggae feel." I sway back and forth with the sensation of being high off the green on my brain.

"That's funny."

"I'm sorry about the picture of you."

"Brittni said it would ruin her reputation if I stayed at the sorority and kicked me out."

That girl has some nerve. If it was her, I'm sure it would be a completely different scenario. Within minutes, she would be an outcast with the rest of us. I'll never be like her. Fuck that. She wants to say

I'm not good enough, I can't make it. Nothing I do will prove that I'm better unless I tear them all to fucking pieces and knock down their house of cards.

"You said Ryder was putting up posters?" I ask.

"Yeah, I didn't see him too long ago. He was down by the dining hall."

"I think I'm going to try to find him."

"Kiss and makeup, why don't you?" Naomi wiggles her eyebrows. "I rather watch Brittni squirm seeing him happy with someone else."

"Thanks." I push myself off the bed, snag my keys, and head out of the dorm.

It's getting chillier as the sun starts to set. I stuff my fingers in the pockets of my light jacket and throw up my hoodie. The sky is mixed with pinks and dark blues. The dim orange lights flicker on as I stride down the sidewalk.

The dining hall is still packed. The aroma of burgers and fries fills my nostrils as I walk through the double doors. The tables are full of faces engorging themselves.

Scouting the mass of people, I spot Ryder leaning on the wall, slapping the flyers against the palm of his hand. The sunken eyes and disheveled hair tear me to pieces. He's white as a ghost and looks sick as hell. When a group of people walk out of the dining hall, he races up to them with the flyer, following them as they walk to the double doors, begging them to take a flyer.

They dismiss him with a hand and rush out the doors. I remove the hoodie, and his eyes meet my line of view. My heart sinks as the defeat washes all over him and his hands drop to his sides. One of the flyers breaks free from the stack and glides to the ground.

Those grey eyes he shares with his sister glisten, and the flyers all flutter and scatter across the floor. My knees crumble where I stand, but I push them to bend, walking to him with one step, two steps, and

a third. I can't bear the distance and dash across the tile floor running to him like nothing else exists in the world.

His arms cradle me the second I meet his chest. A heartbeat pounds into my eardrums, and it belongs to him. The ache in each beat causes me to break down into tears. His face is wet. Hands dig at the fabric of my jacket and his embrace is entirely different than anything he's ever given me.

"How long have you been in here?" I ask, muffled under his long-sleeved shirt.

"I don't know..." He mutters, and he rests his head on top of mine. His breath brushes against my hair.

"Let's go take a break..." He releases his embrace. We lean down and pick up the flyers with Charlie's senior pictures.

All the blame in the world seeps into my veins, telling me this is all of my fault. If only I told her the truth, then we would've been at the concert together as friends. Brody would have never got his fingers on her, and she wouldn't be missing.

I walk with him out of the dining hall, flyers a complete unorganized mess in my hands. I follow his footsteps down the pathway to the parking lot. We are silent getting into the jeep.

Ryder's hand rests on the steering wheel, his eyes hazed over staring out into the darkness of the night sky.

"I had to retract my statement about Brody..." He visibly swallows. The streetlights grant me small glimpses of the tears staining his eyes. He wipes his nose with the sleeve of his shirt. "The only way to get out of the chargers was to write a statement that it was consensual."

"They made you do what?"

"It was that or his father was going after the maximum amount of years. Twenty-five fucking years." He rests a hand on the door paneling, running his fingers across his face.

"His dad plays the same fucking games."

“Apparently.”

“I talked to Noah a bit. He said she lost her virginity to him that morning and was telling him she loved him... there is no way she would have agreed to sleep with Brody. After the whole Brittni thing, she wanted nothing to do with him.”

“I know she wouldn’t agree to it.” Ryder lifts a brow and digs into his jeans pocket, pulling out clinking keys.

My hands coil into tight fists. “I fucking hate both of them.”

“They say after forty-eight hours, the likelihood of finding her drops dramatically. Over two hundred and fifty people go missing in this state alone every day. They aren’t looking for her...”

I lean over and grasp one of his hands. His fingers are rough as I squeeze it. “We will find her.”

“I fucking hate myself.” He runs his teeth over his bottom lip. “I wished her fucking dead, and now she’s gone.”

Ryder ignites the engine, and he pulls out of the parking lot. The five-minute drive to the fraternity dragged as we both fell back into silence. My head races a mile a minute, trying to plot out how the hell I can take the bastard down.

Ryder

THE ONLY THING I KNOW HOW TO DO is twist off the gold wrapper of another bottle of Hennessy the second gravity pulls me down to my mattress.

Payton follows me to the bedroom, leaning against the door frame as I take a swig. The flyers crumble under her arms as she crosses them around her chest.

“What can I do to help?” She asks.

Jared pops up behind her, squeezing himself between her and storming up to me. "Are you seriously drinking?" He holds his hands up with the disbelief all over his face. "You need to lay off the booze. You went through a bottle last night." Jared attempts to steal it from my grasp, but I shrug him off with a shoulder.

"Fuck off, man!"

"No man!"

"I said fuck off!" I shove him in the chest.

"You're out of control!"

I take another swig before setting the bottle next to the two I've destroyed the past twenty-four hours I've been out of the piss-reeking jail cell.

Payton's eyes soften, her lips fall into the deepest frown. She's disgusted by the sight of me, just as much as I am disgusted with myself and all the shit I've done wrong.

Dad never bothered to call or help Mom out when I needed him the most. He never answered any of the voicemails she left. When I called him behind rusty bars, I got nothing but an empty ringtone and he forwarded my call straight to the robot voice saying he was unavailable.

"Do you see what you are doing to yourself?" Jared asks.

"I'm not going to apologize. You have a family that sits there and fucking pays their damn bills."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Jared runs a hand in his hair licking his lips. "I'm sorry about your sister, man. I'm sorry about the shit you went through with Brody. But you gotta pull yourself together. Drowning yourself in that bottle isn't going to help you."

Payton stumbles over and plops down on the bed next to me, her arms wrapping around my neck. "Let me know how I can help?"

Not even medication can help me at this point. There is no way to battle my demons. Burning a bridge means falling into water filled

with sharks. The crosses on my wall fell upside down, and all I want to do is put a bullet in my head. I couldn't do anything for my sister. People don't fucking care. They brush me off, and she's missing. No one gives a shit, and I rather there not be a tomorrow.

I drag the bottle off the nightstand and take another swig. Wanting something to numb whatever anger is pent up. I want Payton's help. I miss the smell of her, but at the same time, everything inside me is fucked.

"My Dad doesn't give two shits," it slips off my tongue.

"I know he left, and you guys didn't deserve that." Payton rubs my shoulder. It's a pity. I'm supposed to be a damn man at the age of twenty-one. At this point, I should be able to handle my own shit.

"You don't get it!"

"What do you mean, man?" Jared asks, his eyes in disbelief, his arms spread wide apart.

"Neither of you two understand." I brush off Payton's hands.

"Ryder!" she scolds.

Any feelings I have left are gone. The chemicals mixed in the Hennessy is the serpent tempting me to take another drink. Listening to God telling me to trust him during the storm dissolved. He's not there holding out his hand to help me walk on water. I'm drowning with the light of the surface disappearing.

Hope doesn't exist and the tiny bit of it I had of Charlie hiding out for a day to cool off is the grain of dust washing away with the rain. I never wanted the noose around my neck more than now.

"My mom's a fucking drunk, doesn't pay her bills, I do. Now my sister is missing. The only damn thing I had left was catching a football. I'll never be drafted after this. I fucked that up the moment you and Charlie played that fucking game."

"So, this is my fault..." Payton scoots off the bed. Her eyes water and they burn down her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry! I didn't want to play it! If I could, I would change everything!"

"There is no way you can go back in time. You can talk about it all you want, but it's not going to change a fucking thing!"

"Fuck, man! I'm done helping you right now. Fucking drink that bottle. Go down the same route your mothers picked, but I'm so done! I drove you all over town looking for her! I tried helping you, but you can't even help yourself. If the roles were reversed, Charlie would be the biggest bitch this city has ever seen looking for you, and not moping around like a fucking child!"

"Fuck you, man!" I take a drink. I've already crucified myself. They can't help me at this point.

"You got nothing to be mad at but yourself!"

Payton's head collapses to her palms, and she sobs. "It's all my fault! If I told the truth, none of this would have happened."

"Dude, you know that's not true. None of this is your fault." Jared huffs and takes Payton by the shoulder. "He's been a mess. I know you care, but I think he needs space."

His hand falls down the crease of her back, leading her out of the room. The door closes behind them. I have no idea what the fuck came over me.

I'm spiraling deeper down the rabbit hole. I don't know how to cope other than taking another drink. Choking on it, letting it soak into my liver, and maybe at some point if I drink enough, I can rest in peace.

I hate this planet and every single person on it. What is the point of ever being created if people need to endure this much pain? This place is hell, and I'm rotting with maggots. God swallowed me up and spit me right out. I'm lying on a bed with nothing but terrible memories.

Deflate His Balls



Payton

WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED? I storm down the hallway, doing what I know best. Steal and lie. I drag Ryder's jeep keys off the counter with Jared following me.

"He'll calm down at some point. I think he needs time," he says.

"Time?" I ask with a scoff. "What time? I'm done with Brody and what he's done to everyone! He deserves to fucking rot, and I'm going to make sure of it, if it's the last thing I do." I point a finger into Jared's face, the keys dangling in my palms. I storm to the front door, my pulse pounding.

"So you're hijacking his jeep?" Jared wedges himself between me and the door. "What are you gonna do? Go unplug Brody from a ventilator because he was discharged yesterday?"

"Move!" I push past him and kick open the screen door. I have no idea how to take Brody down and drag him through the mud, but the voices in the back of my head tell me to start with where it all began. 7-Eleven at 11:46 tonight.

It's 11:38. I've sat here for two hours and stared at the radiant orange numbers on the electric dashboard. I used to love borrowing

Ryder's jeep and Charlie always fired me up for the thrill of driving around without a license, but its hype faded like the bruises Brody left on my soul. It's old news and outdated like my outfit and the sirens that wake me every night.

I lean back into the driver's seat and pound my head with a flat palm for being a stupid girl. So freaking stupid. Stupid for playing Dirty Roulette. Stupid for allowing Charlie to walk away with Brody and stupid for feeling anything at all.

I bury my palm deep into my skull, trying to squeeze out this parasite controlling my brain, but the only thing coming out is a horrendous sob. My vision blurs when I crumble into the driver's seat, punching the glove box. Suddenly, I'm overjoyed at the thought of hurting myself and I punch it again. And again. The door flops open, and an orange light pops on.

I dig through the glove box for Ryder's secret pot stash and those cheap dollar lighters from the gas station. Sitting up, I smear away tears on my face with the back of my hand. The lighter flicks and I ignite one of the joints and shrink into the seat. Out of all the places for me to go to, I come here. I parked at the 7-Eleven like it's going to change a damn thing.

I painted out the different tales inside my brain about how this might go. Nothing makes me sadder than my head force-feeding me my worst fears. I want a clean slate without all the dents, but that thought is heavier than emptiness clinging onto my shoulder.

Noah's demo blasts on the stereo and I lean out the open window. The air is crisp. I'm numb, aching for anything to medicate this pain. It feels like nothing is real, but all I want to do is leave the jeep and make it right with the world.

I inhale from the joint holding in the smoke until my lungs incinerate within me like a nuclear meltdown. I pull down the visor and look

into the tiny mirror. Mascara smeared on my cheeks. I sniffle and wipe them away.

Mr. Clorox is right on time, his rolls wiggle out of his car. He wobbles to the front door, stumbling in. I grant him a couple of minutes, seeing him through the tinted windows licking his fingers and counting money.

When cars clear out, I make a break for it. I'm not the hot chick flashing him tonight but the bad bitch who's going to jump over that counter to ring his neck.

When the bell dings over my head, and the air conditioner blasts my face, I choke up. The cat piss smell. His greasy hair, and the biggest white-head in existence in the dead center of his forehead ready to explode like a volcano. We meet each other's gaze. His tongue runs over his upper lip like he's expecting my tits to plop out of my shirt.

My lungs clog up, and I mosey down the aisles, looking at all the snacks and random gadgets people need at the last minute that's overly priced. Then I stop at the condom section. Boxes of the damn rubbers and all the crazy selections to choose from.

After spending ten minutes reading all the weird things about rubbers being ultra-thin and made of latex, I snatch a box. The voice in my head telling me I'll need it.

I get in a long ass line of people grabbing late-night booze and snacks to quench the hunger of their bad addictions.

The cluster of dirt on the linoleum floor is swirling into tiny, cute kittens. Their shapes change and shift like someone is projecting stills onto the floor. An old lady spent the entire dinosaur age counting out five dollars' worth of crusty pennies from her purse and after 165 million years, the line finally moves forward one step.

I look like an idiotic shoplifter trying to cover the condom box with my sleeve. I'm not even trying to rob the store. But there's no good way to hide the rubbers of the devil. Fuck it, I'm guilty. It feels unnat-

ural to hold the golden box, knowing exactly what I'm buying them for. I pin the front of the box to my chest, trying to figure out what side of the box to hide, either the name Trojan Ultra Ripped or the diagram of the condom on the back.

A lady and child walk hand in hand next to me. Her eyes glue to me and the gold mine I have in my hands. An eyebrow raises, there's a scoff, and a cliché head shake.

This is one of those things where everyone knows what you're up to. There is no other story behind it. Right now, I'd do anything for a sassy bad bitch Latina to possess my body and tell her to piss off, and its way past her child's bedtime, but I don't want to take any chances.

The store is practically empty, except for an old man in front of me struggling to enter his pin on the credit card machine. He mouths his thanks, and Mr. Clorox hands him his shopping bags and receipt. I stand at the register, numb to the core. I'm seconds away from a panic attack riddled with sobs and hyperventilating. The box plops out of my fingers and onto the counter, and it dawns on me it's my only item.

Mr. Clorox seems uninterested as he scans the box of condoms, but I swear my skin melts right off my bones. He doesn't remember my face, and it's evident.

"That will be seven fifty-nine." He rubs his right eye and stares at me like I'm the worst person on this planet for entering the store. I take one last glance around before slipping him some money, along with the box of condoms, for a little privacy. When he hands me the receipt and bag, it finally slips out of my mouth.

"What the fuck does Brody have on you?"

He shakes his head, cocks a brow. A fire sizzles in his eyes as if I should have severed my tongue off.

"Who are you?" He asks.

"My friend Charlie is missing." I paw my cell out of my back pocket, unlocking it and finding the most recent picture I have saved and throw the screen into his face.

"Oh, I remember now..." His tongue pokes into his cheeks. "Some guy came in here pissed off ya'll stole some booze." He leans his fat fingers on the counter.

"She's missing..." The stab of those two words twists the knife in my chest.

"I'm not sure how I can help you." He turns around, grabbing a brown box filled with a different assortment of chips. I follow him as he walks down one of the aisles to restock.

"You let girls flash you for booze. Why the hell do you let us do that? We play the game and it fucking ruins us."

"You sound like that fucker who came in here trying to beat the shit out of me!"

"Then answer the question!" I fist the bag in my hand with the feral urge to bash the box of condoms on top of his head.

"That's none of your business!"

"It is my business! My fucking friend is missing. That guy who came in here is her brother and he's a fucking mess! Brody ruined our fucking lives! So, what the hell kinda dirt does he have on you?"

Mr. Clorox huffs and wobbles back to the front counter. "I'm gonna call the cops if you don't leave." He grabs the corded phone on the wall with his fat fingers hovering over the numbers.

"No!" I cross the yellow tape, snatch the phone from his hands, and slam it back on the receiver. "He raped her and got away with it. Now tell me!"

"I'm not about to rot in a jail cell. I'm sorry for your friend!"

"What does he have on you that's so bad that you're going to rot in jail?" I ask, knowing I'm spitting in his face with my words.

"Fine... you want to know?" He asks.

"Yeah... I want to fucking ruin him."

"The fucker pretended to be a seventeen-year-old hottie online. Sending me nudes. I wanted to fuck the shit out of her. Happy now. I'm a disgusting fucking piece of shit as you can see. He saved the entire conversation. I was a drunk as fuck that night and a dumbass. If I didn't want him to release it to the public, so now I let girls flash me and steal the booze..."

A lump forms deep in my throat. "Oh shit..."

"He fucked me over good. I was a pretty damn good hacker... the whole secret clearance, save the world kinda of hacker..."

"Wait, what?" I take a step back, questioning if he's being honest, or if he is just a creeper who tries to hook up with ladies on Craig's list. "If you're a hacker, why didn't you just go and find shit on him and expose him?"

"The fucker put the conversations on a flash drive. I can't wipe that shit unless I get hold of it. I quit working. Brody forced me to work at a gas station so he could get free booze. If this shit got out... I'd be in a body bag and tossed off a boat... I'm sure you've heard of Epstein."

"But you could just hack his shit and expose him..."

"To who? His dad owns the fucking police station. Plus, I can't wipe the conversations on the flash drive unless I get it..."

"Do you still try to hook up with underage girls?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you no, and it was a one-time thing... a stupid thing." His lips go into a rigid line.

"I'll fucking expose him if you help me."

FIVE HOURS, THIRTY-TWO MINUTES AND FIFTEEN SECONDS and the sun breaks over the horizon. The cat piss smell subsided after spraying him down with febreze and stuffing my nose

in a bag of mints. Mr. Clorox seemed a bit more human than a creep living in the basement with a million forty-two-ounce plastic cups with mold growing in them. He met some woman on a random dating app. She's as plump as him, has black hairs on her chin, and over the age of eighteen.

The amount of data we uncovered from his cloud was enough to impale me a million times over. I spent half of my time scrolling through conversations destroying girl's reputations, to videos of him giving guys stitches and dumping bodies at hospitals. Even videos of Ryder and other football players fighting.

Every girl he had sex with had some type of sex tape with him. The psycho filmed himself with at least fifty women. My mind boggled with his thought process.

"You'll need to find that flash drive of his..." Mr. Clorox places everything from Brody's phone in the palm of my hand. The holy grail is on my fingertips in this tiny gadget I snagged from the impulse buy row.

"I have an idea... we'll see how it goes."

"What's your plan?"

"Either I convince a friend of mine to seduce him, or I do it." I shrug and hold up the bag of condoms.

"Well, be careful. Wouldn't want you to go missing too." He smiles with his rotting teeth blinding my eyes.

"I don't plan on it."

I stumble out of the gas station. Mr. Clorox decided to do me a favor and set up a virus that encrypts everything he does on the cell. All of it will download into a random email he set up for me.

I stare at my crooked parking. I'm in the dead center of a white line taking up two spaces. Regret for not letting Ryder teach me how to drive during the summer breaks is eating at me.

I crawl into the Jeep, and the door is heavy as I slam it shut. The engine revs to life and I can barely hear my own thoughts. I manage to pull out of the gas station and follow other cars, leading me onto the main road and highway. My palms sweat at the steering wheel the second I speed up too rapidly, and I throttle against the seat when I slam on the brakes. I keep up with everyone's speed, making sure I stay close enough to read license plates, and I glue the tires to the white dotted lines.

A pothole I hit sloshes me around like a defrosted slushy. By the time I step out of the Jeep, the fraternity house is staring at my face.

I storm up the steps, throttling open the screen and bang on the door until the deadbolt clicks. It's Snoop with the fat puckered lips and the annoyed look on his face.

"Girl, I don't think it's a good time for you to be over here."

"Let me in..."

"If you piss him off, I'm gonna throw you outside myself." He lets me weasel in. When I reach Ryder's bedroom, I crash in like a raging, angry girlfriend about to blow her top to set the man straight. The door hit the twangy door stop.

The bang doesn't disturb him. He doesn't budge, and he's dead asleep, lying flat on the bed in his briefs. The Hennessy bottle is empty on the floor. I want to fling and break it over his head, but instead, I smack the plastic bag and the box of condoms on his back.

Groggy eyes open, hazed over as if he might still be slightly intoxicated. At least by this point, he would mostly be sober, and hopefully, the headache wasn't raging because I want to talk.

"Fuck..." He grumbles, turning over in the bed, and covering his eyes with his forearm.

"No, we aren't going back to sleep!" I smack him again with the bag.

"Quit it!" He swats a hand at the plastic bag, attempting to grab it.

"No, get up!" I hit him again. He managed to snatch and rip the bag in half. The box of condoms acts like a slinky and tumbles down his chest to the mattress.

He groans and uses an elbow to sit up. Running two fingers through his eye sockets, he asks, "What is this?" The box finds its way into his hands. "Ultra ripped?" He groans, sitting all the way up glaring at the tiny black box. "I have condoms..."

"We need to make a sex tape..."

The curl of his nose and huff rips my heart out of my chest. "Payton... I... Fuck." He places the box on his nightstand. "You're a virgin. I can't do this to you. It's not right..."

"I don't want it to end." I swallow the lump in my throat.

"It's kinda late for that now..." He ruffles a hand through his disheveled hair, then searches his floor littered with dirty clothes for a water bottle. The top twists off and he chugs, the plastic crinkling until nothing is left.

"I thought you liked me..."

"Fuck Payton, you left me!" He holds out his palms and points at the door. "You walked out telling me you wanted nothing to do with me."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I was upset. It was a stupid mistake."

"What to know, something just fucking crazy?" He asks, laughing under his breath as he wipes his wet lips with the back of his hand. "Trouve-moi."

"Find me..." I say.

"You've never hide your location on snap. I always fucking find you. I found you at that concert because I wanted to apologize and tell you exactly how I felt about you. But you ignored my damn calls, you ignored me, and now you don't want it to end... after fucking everything."

CIGARETTES AND RUST

I paw out the flash drive from my jean pockets and hold it between two fingers. "I want you... and I have everything I need to destroy Brody Thomas, the worst fucking quarterback this generation has ever seen. Let's go deflate his fucking balls."

Saturate



Ryder

SIX DAYS. Over one hundred hours. I am told to live a life as normal as possible. Delivering Pizzas is a nightmare, but I put a flyer in each order. For once, Karen actually doesn't act like her name, but has all the drivers take a flyer to hand out. Classes are unbearable, but the Professors allow me to inform classmates. I keep posting on my story and hope people share Charlie's picture, but getting a missing person to go viral is harder than I expected.

Police don't plan on putting out a search party until they feel the need to recover a body. Surveillance at the venue is nonexistent, which leads them to a dead end of what happened. The thought of her being dead drops like a cement block in my stomach.

I pull up to Brody's fraternity shortly after ten, and the stench of cheese and pepperoni leaks off my shirt. This can go one or two ways. Either my teammates turn against me and pay the same respect and beat me senselessly, or I convince them to let me talk to Brody.

I knock on the door and dip my hands into my pockets. It doesn't take long for someone to answer and the woody smell floats out the door. It's Farva with a beer in hand and sleepy eyelids.

"What the hell do you want?" He looks me up and down with bitchy judgmental eyes. "You should be kicked from the damn team."

Lucky for him, I don't plan on going back into a jail cell, otherwise I'd put him in a hospital too.

I'm annoyed and snuffle my runny nose the frigid air triggers. "Where is Brody?"

"He doesn't know where your damn sister is at." Farva attempts to slam the door in my face, but I catch it with a hand. "Why don't you go sit on the bench where you belong?"

"We have our first game next week. I just want to talk." I play it nice and shrug a shoulder. A heartbeat hammers nails into my sternum, and I swallow the urge to snap.

"Let him in, you asswit!" Brody shouts in the distance.

I cock both eyebrows and Farva puckers his lips, and his chest heaves in and out as he opens the door. I step in, the floor creaking under my footsteps. My hands stay firm in my pockets, I keep the straightest face strolling into the living area where Brody sits on the couch with a hand of cards.

"Hey..." I say.

"Here to short shit out?" Brody asks. One of his eyes is still swollen shut with a bruise the size of a melon. It starts to brown around the edges. The cuts on his nose are scabbed over.

"You could say that."

"I don't know where your sister is at..." He mutters, fumbling the corner of a card.

"Well, that's obvious..."

Poker chips and bills are crumbled in a pile on the coffee table. The place is littered with beer bottles. Half of the linemen sit around the couches, smoking and taking swigs of their drinks. The glares and stale expressions wrap hands around my neck.

"You gonna be able to play next week?" I ask. There is another ten days before our first home game.

"Yeah..."

"Coach plans on benching you for the season." Brody lays down his hand with a flush. The other guys throw cards as they lose.

"You're the only one going to fix that if you tell him you need me. No one is going to look at our team if we have a losing streak."

"I dunno if your five thousand yards are going to convince me."

"Then what do you want?"

More money is thrown into the pile on the table. "You know what I want." Cards shuffle.

"The video?"

"Then dump her at the game..."

"You are fucked up..." Linemen shuffle, one of them leaning an arm against the couch with a tight fist. One word from Brody and I'm done for. I'm messing with a damn college cartel, and he's the king. I bite my tongue.

"Eye for an Eye."

"Fine..."

There's no handshake, just him waving a hand at me to get the fuck out of the house. I leave the fraternity and take the five-minute drive to the other side of the campus and park in the gravel.

One of Payton's mixed discs plays at a low volume, and I'm not sure how to break it down to her. There is nothing natural about cutting ties with her. It's wrong, and I know it. Pretending I can get over her for a fraction of a second is impossible. I'm about to be the one responsible for her virginity and killing her heart at the same time.

Gaining Brody's trust back is thin ice, and I can fall through the cracks at any second. It's a rope around my neck. If her plan to sabotage the game and broadcast his dirty laundry on the screens works, it will be on live television. Getting past their firewall would be some miracle and I have my doubts.

I remove my keys and step out of the jeep. The frigid air crawls up my skin as I make my way up the porch steps. Jared and Nick are on

the couch gaming, with the screen flashing in the darkness of the living room.

Making my way down the hall, a dim light bleeds under my door and I push it open. The dumpster unloaded on my floor was picked up. The hamper of clothes is empty. A little scented candle flickers on the nightstand. It smells like something tropical, and it's better than my sweaty socks and gear.

Payton's tongue is poking out the side of her lips as she rests her head on her knee, dabbing nail polish on her toes.

"You didn't have to clean my room. I would've gotten to it, eventually..."

She dips her head at me. "Can you help me?" She holds out the brush and the pungent odor crawls its way to me.

"Depends. Are you going to paint my damn toes again?"

"Maybe."

I plop down on the bed, snatch the pink bottle of nail polish, and take her tiny foot into my lap. Her feet are soft like lace as I put on my Van Gogh hat and glide the brush over her nails.

When I'm done, her feet lay flat on my bedsheets. "How did it go with Brody?" She wiggles her toes with a satisfied grin. "The only way I'm playing is if we make that video."

"Well, my nudes are all over the internet, anyway. What's the harm of it at this point?" Her arms wrap around her legs, and she rests her chin on top of her knees. "Want to listen to the voicemails I got tonight?" She reaches for her cell, hiding in the crevices of the bedsheets.

"I need to tell you something else..."

She scrolls through her phones, and presses buttons until she gets to her voicemails with about twenty missed calls. "What is it?"

I think twice about telling her Brody wants me to leave her high and dry. My heart is like a fist pounding the inside of my chest, rob-

bing me of my breath. Her blue eyes burn into mine, and the words get stuck in my throat.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She asks.

"Actually, I think I'm going to shower before it gets too late." I slide off the bed, pulling the pizza-reeking shirt over my head and tossing it to the empty hamper. It's halfway in, and slumps to the floor instead of the basket. "Do you want to stay?"

"As long as you don't touch another bottle of Hennessy."

"I won't touch it..."

I step out into the hallway. The house reeks of pot. Jared and Nick are still shit-talking in the living room, laughing up a storm, then cussing at the screen.

The minute I turn the dial, the bathroom steams up, fogging the mirrors. I stand there. Hot water rains along my neck as I lean my head against the tile. It takes every atom of me not to break back down. Brody is the mouth of the wolf, Payton has the precious eyes of a lamb, and my sister is greeted with flames engulfing the gates of hell.

I gouge my eyes, holding the pain burning in them to escape. A heavy breath gets sucked back into my lungs, where I bury it deep in my chest cavity. When I pull myself together, I manage to wash my hair, and comb out the sweat and grease work tipped me with.

The shower curtain yanks against the metal bar above. Payton peeks her head in. I didn't even hear the sound of the door opening. "You have cute muscles on your butt."

I'm tangled up in a laugh, and the silly grin on her face leaves me in a trance. There is some type of chemical she injects into my bloodstream. It's freeing for those three seconds. I'm not thinking about anything but her. She's got her hooks in me.

"Are you getting naked?" I ask.

She lifts up a shoulder to her cheek. "I dunno."

"Okay, what are you going to wear for me then?"

"Whatever I want to..."

"Did you bring over any lingerie with Sunday written on it?"

"Maybe I did. I'm gonna wear whatever I feel like." She leans over the tub to the bottles of body wash on the opposite side. "What are YOU going to wear, hmm?" One of the bottles plops to the moldy shower mat from her two fingers struggling to grab it. "Gonna put on some old Fruit of the Loom boxers and rock my world."

Her shirt starts to get saturated as her fingertips snag one of the bottles, and she pumps the soap into her hand. She hurdles a leg in the shower and steps in with clothes on and all. The soap lathers in her palms and with flat hands she starts at my shoulder blades and traces them down my chest, the suds not missing a single inch.

"Ahh, look at the cute little guy down there." She stares at my junk, wiggling her fingers.

I turn my back against her and rinse off her attempt to bathe me. "Are you serious right now?"

"Yes!"

"Who the hell climbs into a shower with their clothes on?"

"Me, clearly." Her tiny hands circle around my back, barely being able to interlock together as she squeezes me.

"You're a hot mess..." I say.

"Well, I'm sure that's both of us."

I turn the dial, the hot stream of water dying and dripping quietly to the drain below. "Are you going to run away this time?" I ask.

"No..." When I turn around, her pupils dilate and are sleepy. There is something different about her gaze. Those eyes bore into me like she was really looking at me for the first time. My soul and its entirety were thrown into a glass house for her to do whatever she pleases.

"You sure?" I pull the shower curtain to one side.

"Stop asking me that." Her head falls to my biceps, pecking me with her lips.

"Come on." The towel wraps around my waist and I crack open the bathroom door. Frigid air meets my face, with water skidding down my cheeks.

Interlocking my fingers with her, we race into my room and I lock the door behind me. Taking in a deep breath, I unplug my cell from the charger, swallowing hard as I switch on the camera. A painful thump in my chest boils down to my stomach, as the red button for the video stares at me like the forbidden tree holding the fruit that cursed me here to begin with.

I press the button, the seconds beating onto the screen like my heart. The steps I take are heavy as I prop the phone on my dresser where there is a clear view of the bed.

Payton leans into my ears. "I'm going to play some music..." Soft lips kiss me on the cheek as she finds my Bluetooth speaker, fiddling with it and her phone.

It's not too loud to give it away to Jared and Nick what we are up to. The bass pounds, the guitar plays heavy cords, and the vocalist's voice deep is haunting and ethereal. I think my soul left my body.

"Who's this?" I ask.

"Sleep Token..."

When I turn around, I swallow the rock stuck in my throat. She shimmies the wet black yoga pants down her long legs and steps free. My hard-on aches, throbbing, and I think it might stab a hole through the towel. Reaching for the hem of her shirt, I pull the cotton up and over her head.

My thumb rests on the bottom of her plump rosy lips. "I'm sorry for everything I'm about to do."

"Don't be..." That same hand coils around her neck and wet hair, and I kiss her.

I throw the towel to the floor, and we walk in reverse. I don't remember nerves sky rocking in every direction when I did this with my ex.

I'm fucking nervous.

You know how you don't go to Denny's, but wind up there with twenty dollars in your pocket and a broken life at two in the morning? If she runs away again, I'm going to wind up being that guy.

Moonlight bleeds into the room, bathing her pale, flawless skin as I stretch her out on the sheets

With my fingers, I hook the edge of her panties, giving one easy tug. She gently shakes her legs and pushes them down to her ankles. They fall off the mattress to the floor.

I ease the lacy cup of her bra aside. With one hand I massage a breast, and my lips tease her taut pink nipple on the other. My lips trail up her collarbone to her neck and bite down on the sweet spot that makes her heartbeat noticeable through her artery. Branding her neck seems to be my trademark. Her hips rock as I touch her and in one quick movement, I unclasp her bra, tossing it aside.

Sitting up slightly, I wrap my hands around her hips, sliding her to the edge of the bed, and I drop down to my knees.

Something is wrong with me. My head leans against her inner thigh, my heart hurting as I brush a hand on her silky skin. Perfection has always been in front of me for over a decade.

Exploding opal eyes eat me up. She steals all the oxygen particles from my lungs. They bore at me with a rawness I can't shake off. I pepper the sensitive skin of her inner thigh with kisses and slowly go down on her. My tongue strokes in and out over her opening.

She breathes a bit harder, her back arching slightly, and she brushes her hips against my lips. I catch her clit, drawing my lips to suckle her, lick her, teasing it with my tongue until she makes that sweet sound under her breath. She digs her fingers in the sheets, jerk-

ing into my face. When she becomes erratic, her thighs almost put me in a chokehold. I'm unable to breathe as I suck on her. "Oh my god." Her little whimpers force my heartbeat to drop to my dick, and it throbs. When her shudders calm down, I trail my lips over her thighs again, before I pick myself up.

Crawling on the bed, I hover over her and run a hand on her crimson cheeks. My lips brush a gentle kiss across her forehead like I've done every summer, every holiday, every time I saw her since eighth grade.

Leaning over, I pull open the drawer on my nightstand. The yellow box fumbles in my hand, and I rip open the box. The rope of condoms unfolds, and I take one off, rip it with my teeth, and hand it to her.

Both brows of hers lift with a sweet giggle. "Ultra ripped."

"For her pleasure." I smile and peck her on the lips. She pulls out the condom and tosses the wrapper on the floor. With an elbow, she props herself up, studying it too hard in her fingertips. "Like this..." I brush my hand along hers and guide her fingers to rubber that bad boy up.

"Ohh... I'm so stupid." The nervous giggles match my trembling hands, clenching her ass. I lift her, and her slender legs grip my hips.

Payton

RYDER'S TONGUE MADE a path down my neck, leaving a trail of kisses mixed with nibbles. He teases my lips with his teeth, biting them sweetly before he nudges them apart so that he can explore every inch of my mouth with his. His tongue finds mine, teasing. Rough thumbs brush my cheeks, and his hard chest rests on my breasts.

"You good?" He whispers in my mouth.

I swallow hard. "Yeah..."

He bites his bottom lip and props himself above me. It burns everywhere as his hand runs down my breasts, taking a handful, before he travels down my naval to my thighs. My heart bursts into open flames as he spreads my legs slightly, tracing my nerves, and navigating himself. Then the tip of him hard and stern pokes at my entrance.

I am quickly infected by his ashen eyes glazing over when he looks at me. My mouth turns dry, my throat choking on my own tongue. My heart is out of control, throttling to break free. I rest a palm on his pecs which are hard like a rock. His heart thuds against my own, and I realize he's nervous too. But I'm the one who's never done this before.

"Are you okay?" His voice shakes. He's trembling above me.

I brush a hand up his neck. "It's okay." Goosebumps prickles all over his arms, and he steadies himself.

He leans in and pecks my fingers. "Are you sure?"

"I haven't run away..."

"And I adore you for that." With a gentle push, he slides in... just the tip, staring hard at me. He's motionless as if we were playing freeze tag on the playground, but at the same time, his eyes pour into mine like Jack Dawson losing his heart in a Coupe de Ville.

"You good?"

"Are you?" I ask, and his head falls to the crease of my neck, his breath in my ears. "Am I doing something wrong?"

"No, you're not doing anything wrong." He nibbles my earlobes. His thumb finds its way to my cheek, stroking my burning skin. "You're my pretty Payt. It's because it's you. I don't want to hurt you."

"You're not going to... but doing nothing isn't going to get you any action."

"Fuck..." He laughs under his breath. "Action?"

"Come on running back and deflower this cheerleader." I tangle my ankles together behind his waist and push my hips up gently, helping him like he does with me. "We don't have all night."

"I'll definitely take my time now..."

"No, I want you."

"I want you too. Just tell me if it hurts." His lips recapture mine, more demanding this time. He slides inside me, all the way. I think my eyes fell out of my sockets. I break from his lips and I almost dislocated my jaw biting down on my bottom lip from the pressure. Painful. Things were stretching in ways they never had before.

"Payton..."

"Don't you dare stop." I coil a hand in the thickness of his hair.

"Does it hurt?" He bit gently on the sweet spot of my neck as he moved in and out of me.

"No..." I can't catch my breath.

"Does it help if I say you feel good?" He's slow. Ryder's body melts against mine and my world is filled with him.

"Yeah...you feel good too..."

He gives me a cocky smile. "Good." He kisses me. Hollow, gentle movements pump in and out, and the pain stops.

Between my thighs, the throbbing need drowns me. My body burns, then erupts into chills, my brain not working and full of static like an old television that lost its signal.

"Do this." Ryder grasps my fingers tangled in his hair and slicks it across the sensitive piece of flesh between my folds. He's gentle, showing me how to circle my fingers around. "It will make you feel good."

I bite my bottom lip. I suck in a harsh breath and tremble with the sudden surge of electricity firing in my nerves following his directions. "You don't have to go slow anymore..." I whimper, the chemicals inside me about to burst into a million pieces.

"You sure..."

"Stop teasing me."

"Okay..." One of his hands grabs my ass, lifting my thigh higher, and he picks up the pace. Each pound smacks against my flesh. Rapture rises in me like the hottest fire, clouding my brain.

His breath rasps hot on my neck. "Fuck..." He groans and rains kisses, biting hard.

The chorus erupts on the Bluetooth speakers in perfect unison with everything I'm feeling. It's like a universe explodes into existence, dust turns to stars, and galaxies mold into perfect worlds. It ruptures, firing every nerve endings down my thighs.

Nothing is working. I can't touch myself anymore. My nails dig into his sweaty skin. I want to pull the cliché and tell him I love him as I unravel underneath him. "Fuck... Payton." His breath says my name. Everything in the world, all of him becomes a part of me, as I've given him the one thing I can't ever give to anyone else.

"Fuck, I'm coming." He breathes hard into my neck, his groin jerks, and then he stiffens. His grey eyes burn silver into mine. "Fuck... Payton... I." He holds me for the longest times, still pulsing inside me, still pushing in and out like he wants more. Kissing me, holding me like he never wants to let go.

"Did you have fun?" He asks in my ears, between raspy breaths.

I nod my head, panting. "Yeah..." He combs a hand along my hair.

"Good." He brushes his lips on mine. For the longest time, he embraces me, holding onto me. Kissing me before easing out of me, pulling the condom off, and disposing of it. There is a blood stain on his sheets, and there is nothing around to cover it up as he takes the phone, turning the camera off.

"What's wrong?" He narrows his brows.

"I stained your sheets."

He places the phones on the nightstand and runs a hand over the mark. "It's not a stain, just something special and it will wash out." Ryder grabs a bottle of water and hands it to me. "Here."

"Thanks..."

"Stay with me tonight?" He leans into the crease of my neck, his breath on my skin.

"Okay..."

I spend ten minutes curled up to him, our legs tangled under the sheets. He's a kisser like it's his love language. Our tongues having their own conversations before he decides to shut his eyes and fall asleep.

His arms stay wrapped around me, breathing into my back. He's not much of a snorer, but the moment sleep hits him, his breaths are harder.

I fall asleep but stir awake when the sky is turning into a brilliant blue through his blinds. He's groaning, and kissing my shoulder blades. Rough hands massage my breasts, and I'm waking up to his hard-on pressed against my butt. His hand runs down my naval and between my thighs.

"Are you sore?" He whispers in my ears, and he starts to massage my clit again. It feels good, and I'm about to explode all over again. "Fuck baby. I love the way you sound." It's like he's half asleep, having a sex dream, and waking up because you can't climax.

"No."

"I want you right now, holy shit. I want you so bad."

I turn around in bed, brushing the dark strands of hair away from his forehead, and kiss him on the lips. Our tongues talk in their own foreign language, and he lays me flat on the mattress before patting the floor for the rope of condoms. Tearing one open and wrapping it around his dick that is pulsating.

He's feverish, grasping my ass so my thighs wrap around his waist. Then he slips inside me with ease, and my thighs are on fire.

He lets out the sexiest sound I've ever heard. "Fuck..." His chest presses against mine, as he goes slow, pushing in and out with his eyes hazed over as he stares at me. His lips brush against mine as he groans with each thrust of his hips. Going fast, and smacking against my skin, then slow and steady. I think I'm getting too loud, moaning his name in his mouth, begging him to go faster. He's sweating, his eyes laced with pleasure.

Each stroke massages my clit in a perfect rhythm, and I explode within a minute as he picks up the pace, pounding in me. We both climax in sync, breathing hot into each other's mouths.

We spent all Sunday sleeping and waking up, chatting about everything and anything. I used to talk to him a lot growing up but never realized how easy it was for us to mesh so well together. Then, out of the blue, we'd start kissing, making out, and wanting each other. We were worse than rabbits humping. By noon time we reeked of sex and ran out of condoms, and since I was expecting shark week within a few days, we didn't bother, and skin on skin gave me the hardest orgasm ever that I think I blacked out for a minute.

He had to pat my cheeks to help me come down from it. We were laughing so hard, and my heart turned to mush. Without any doubt, the L word is at the tip of my tongue, but girls saying it first is a red flag for crazy so I lock the feeling in the tiny box inside my head.

I ended up leaving with the messiest hair in existence, wearing his clothes, and looking rather ravished when I entered the dorm room.

Naomi was working on her computer as I walked in. "Where have you been all weekend?"

I'm silent, knowing the deed is written all over my face, but I know I'm smiling stupidly as the door shuts behind me. "You didn't!"

"Oh, I did. I did all day too."

“Spill all the details!” Naomi gushes, with her tiny fists pushing up her cheeks.

Ryder

I HIT THE GYM LATE Friday evening to burn off steam. The treadmill takes the abuse as I run a mile at its top speed. My muscles burn hotter than the center of the sun. Music blasts in my ears and I try to drown everything out.

Payton has helped me and my mother post flyers of Charlie at small local businesses all week. Stapling them to telephone lines. The rolls of tape I go through, the sleeve of staples I replace, the harsh click of the stapler against the wood. It’s settling in the pit of my stomach. This is my life. I’m drowning in the present of a past that won’t change.

It’s molding into my bloodstream, normalizing itself that I’m going to be searching for Charlie until I meet the grave. There is nothing normal about my sister not chewing me up and spitting me out. She speaks to me in my dreams, popping up in random adventures my subconscious put me through.

When I wake up in the morning, I’m riddled with the fear of coming back to reality and everything is the same.

She’s gone.

The police department hasn’t received any new leads. It’s only the witnesses from the concert who saw me beating the living daylights out of Brody coming forward thinking her disappearance it due to me.

Payton and I were ruled out. As the cameras picked up Charlie leaping out of the jeep and running off. Then I drove in the opposite

direction. Many of the cameras were down, only picking up that one piece of evidence that her last known whereabouts were there.

Pulling phone records, her location was shut off. Something feels off. It strangles me like a madman attempting to take my life.

Payton is the only person distracting my brain from drinking myself into a coma. She came over before my shifts, sitting on my lap and emptying my balls. We sneaked off at lunchtime. It's harder for me to be quick, and I've gotten in a bad habit of taking it slow and soaking her up and attempting to break my record of how many times I can get her to come.

Naomi walked in on us once Wednesday, right as we were both climaxing hard on her princess sheets. Payton told me we had twenty minutes, and she actually granted us thirty. Fuck me and taking my time. Payton turned bright red the second Naomi mentioned I had a nice-looking dick.

Every night, I've begged her to stay with me. I'm like a child and I don't want to sleep alone. It's fucking pathetic. When she's not there, I stare at the ceiling, wiping my eyes with my sister haunting me.

I'm panting as the treadmill slows, coming to a stop and I hop off with sweat running down my face. I grab my cell and find my messages to Payton.

Ryder: I'm almost done. Wanna spend the night? It's been a whole day and I'm fucking dying, I need you.

Payton: I'm miserable OMG. I don't know if you would be able to handle me.

Ryder: What, why? What's wrong?

Payton: I have the worst cramps *Tears*

Ryder: Cramps, why do you have cramps?

Payton: I'm closed for business until further notice.

Ryder: Why you gotta do that? Can't you tell it no?

Payton: OMG you're stupid! It doesn't follow orders. It's a fucking dictator and I have cramps. I'm out of my shit, and bleeding to death.

A shutdown for business text is worse than a breakup over text messages. My heart hurdles into a trench and impales itself on a sharp knife. I'm about to slam my head against a brick wall. I guilt myself into thinking I'm using her to forget the existence of my shitty responsibilities, and my life crumbling like a house built on sand.

I bit my thumbnail. She's out of her shit. Brittini had periods, but she'd ignore me for seven days. Having a sister didn't teach me anything because I never knew when she bled to death. There is no way, I'm going to be alone tonight. I can't stand the silence and being cold.

Quickly, I shower and leave the gym in a rush. There is a Walgreens about two miles north from the college and I drive down the streets like I'm in a high-speed chase with twenty cop cars. When I get to the store, my sneakers are squeaking against the tile floor. I'm panting and reading the labels on all the aisles. I'm confused as hell about what I'm looking at. For half a minute, I stared at the ugly green bag of Depends reading the back of it.

"Can I help you find something?" An older lady with a messy grey bun in a light blue shirt with the store's logo stumbles up to me. Her trolley wheels behind her with boxes to restock the shelves.

"My girl says she's bleeding to death, and she's cramping and out of her shit."

She curls her lips into her mouth as if she is sucking back a laugh at me holding a bag of adult diapers.

"Oh, she's on her period..."

"Yeah..."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"Really? Those aren't gonna help her. She's gonna break up with you after handing her those." She laughs through her nose. I'm in my twenties majoring in engineering, but I have zero knowledge about vaginas and bleeding.

I stare at the bag, hold it tight with both hands, and start sweating. "Right..."

"If you go down to the end, you'll find the maxi pads and tampons. Midol is by the pharmacy. It's a hot pink box. You can't miss it." She points me in the right direction and then continues to pull the trolley down the aisle, heading to the different soaps and shampoos they sell. "If you don't bring her some snacks, you're as good as dead, too."

I put the Depends back on the shelf and pretend this conversation didn't happen. Scratching my head, I stare at all the boxes of tampons, even more confused than I was before. Cotton, organically grown, extra absorbency, scented supers. What the fuck is a diva cup?

I head back to the front of the store, snatch a mini cart near the double doors, and toss one of everything into the cart. I rest a foot on the bar of the rear wheels and push myself around the store as if I'm on a skateboard. The Midol was less confusing, but when I went to the candy sections, I had no idea what she would be in the mood for.

My head meets the cold metal handlebars, thinking back to when I'd take her and Charlie to the gas station. It's vague, and I barely remember what they would dump on top of my bag of flaming hot Funyuns. A bag of M&M's, Sour Patch Kids, and Gummy bears. Those seem like good selections.

The freezer section barely had any ice cream flavors, but no one can go wrong with vanilla. Snatching other bags of chips fills the cart to the brim and I make my way to the check-out.

The total eats my tips from last night, but a paycheck is pending in my account with the extra hours I put in. The General manager took me off tip wages to help my finances a bit better.

When I reach the dorm room, I'm finishing off leg day with the plastic bags, biting my arms and making my way down the hallway to her room number. I knock. There is a shuffle and footsteps and the padlock against the wall unlatching.

Payton cracks open the door wearing her cute pajama shorts and a baggy Nirvana shirt. That's what happened to it. She stole it from my closet. But for her to be bleeding to death, she's hotter than hell.

Her jaw drops to the floor, her eyes watering within seconds, and she starts hysterically crying. "Why do you have all that stuff?"

"You said you were out!" I lift up the bags, and she paws at them, her lips curling under her tiny sobs mixed with laughter.

"You really went and got me stuff?" She sniffles with smiles and frowns mixed together. With the back of her hand, she wipes the tears from her cheeks.

"You're bleeding to death. I can't lose you."

"Oh my god, you're insane."

She lets me in, shutting the door and locking it. "Naomi went out with Snoop. I don't think she'll be back tonight." She shrugs, following behind me.

The bags plop to the bed. "So, I didn't know what shit you used, so I got the organically grown cotton stuff." I pull out the plastic tube, and she takes it in her hand. "Then these had different sizes. I don't know your vagina size... I mean, I guess I do... but..."

"What?" She laughs and takes the blue box and places it on the bed.

"Here is a diva cup. Maybe you know what that is? The instructions kinda scared me, but I think I'll live." She paws through the bags, listening real closely with the sweetest smile on her face. "Oh, and Midol for your cramps, I can't have you cramping on me. That's a big no-no..." I pry open the box, man-handling the bottle so she can

pop some right now. "Here's some water for that, too. I got you a bunch of candy and ice cream."

She wraps her arms around my neck and sobs into my shirt. "Thank you."

It's the perfect opportunity for me to tell her how my heart aches for her, but I'm counting the days I have left with her. Seven.

I'm looking at a little over thirty-one days being with her, but then there is my entire life I've spent with her. Five-thousand, four-hundred and seventy-five days. In seven, I'll tell her and break my heart by finishing what Brody wants.

Payton gathers her towel and bag of toiletries to shower. I'm impatient and don't want to be alone, so I stand outside the bathroom leaning against the wall, hands in my pockets, listening to the shower pitter-patters, and the sloshing of water.

She comes out smelling like strawberries and I follow her to the dorm, where I refuse to leave and watch one of her favorite silly horror movies. I helped her eat the little container of ice cream and at some point, I fell asleep at midpoint. When I do wake up, it's dark, but she's curled up to my chest.

I love her. And it hurts. It fucking hurts how much I care about her.

Wolf in Sheep Skin



Payton

CONVINCING NAOMI TO SEDUCE BRODY has to be the most diabolical plan I've ever come up with on a whim. Knowing Snoop had a massive crush on her, we figured he would be able to stop them from actually hooking up. He'll be blowing through the house like a trail derailment in thirty minutes. All Naomi has to do is act sexy, get in Brody's room, and have him leave for at least five minutes so we can find the damn flash drive.

When she stumbles over to the fraternity drunk as hell, I'm yelling expletives in my head. We agreed to act drunk. Not come over with a bottle of gin swaying back and forth like a dumb blonde, slurring, "Heyyy! Oh, my god, I'm so horny!"

I facepalm, squatting in the bushes watching the shitshow pull back the curtains as Brody opens the door, and she stumbles into the house.

The window to Brody's bedroom faces the backyard. My brain couldn't unsolved the puzzle of how to unlock the gate. I try to find the lock to unlatch it, but splinters are a bitch. Instead, I lift myself over the wall like an amateur burglar. And I trip... on my shoelaces... of course, they came untied once I land on my feet. I'm face-planting on empty cans of beer littering the yard.

Weeds are up to my knees, and everything back here is dead. I'm Indiana Jones with the Mission Impossible theme song playing, but without the revolver, as I barricade myself to the wall sneaking to his window. His blinds are open, and Naomi is swatting him playfully in the chest.

"It's sooooo hot in here... I'm just gonna crack the window open." She coos as she comes over, unlocking it and cracking it by an inch as I requested.

"You gonna get fucking naked or what?"

"Oh my god, come on let's have a drink. I'm a foreplay kinda girl." She plops on the bed, leaning back with her arms, and crosses her legs.

"Fuck... I'm gonna need a drink with you."

"That sounds perfect. Can you make me one of those blended daiquiris with every type of fruit you have in the freezer? Maybe bring some of that fruit back here, and I can eat it off your dick."

What the fuck, Naomi? I said seduce him. Do the kissing, grab his penis, and get him in the mood. Don't make it shrivel up that he kicks you out of his room before I can break in.

"Okay... just be naked when I get back." He leaves the room. Naomi tip toes to the door to peek out and see if the coast is clear, and accidentally trips on a loose sock like it's a banana peel. Face planting. Falls into the door frame, and it slams shut. The sound could be heard miles away.

"What the fuck was that?"

"Nothing, I'm just getting undressed for your sexy ass." She holds her nose as blood is dripping down her fingers.

"Seriously?" I whisper as I push the window open wider and slunk in. The room is messier than Ryder's and has about a year's worth of garbage piled up. Wrappers and old food bags crumble under my feet

as I uncover his computer desk. I pull out all the drawers, yanking out a million chargers and old phones, but no flash drive.

"Help me look," I whisper, and she grabs a shirt off the floor, holding it to her nose. "It's a flash drive." I scurry around, opening every drawer in his dresser, and patting it down for anything hard.

"Aha." I uncover a cock ring, and some sort of contraption I think guys shove up their assholes. I'm about to vomit. "Eww!" I throw it back into the dresser and slam it shut.

The blender is revving down the hallway. I leap over to his nightstand, but it's a drawer stuffed with condoms and a Ziploc baggy of white pills. "Not what I'm looking for."

The blender stops and the whirring of whipped cream gives me a heart attack. This place is such a mess it's going to take me more than five minutes to locate it. Footsteps come down the hallway, and I'm a deer in headlights. "Fuck." I race over to the closet and shut it as the door opens and Brody comes in with a pink drink.

The brows lifting in the shock of Naomi's bloody nose are priceless. He stands there for several seconds like he doesn't have a clue what to say to her.

"Here..." She takes the drink from his hands and licks the whipped cream as if that's how she is going to treat his dick later. But the dried blood still on her nose is not sexy in the slightest.

The dumb blonde turns to me hiding in the closet and through the slits, we make eye contact. Lord help me. Don't give away my position. It will foil everything. I scoot into the darkness and the back of my heels hit something hard.

Looking down, there is a safe. Bending slowly, my knees pop louder than firecrackers. I mouth the word shit under my breath.

The sudden pound is right on time at the front door. "Hey! Where the fuck is my baby white chocolate?" The fists bang.

"Who the hell is at the door now?" Brody puts his drink down and walks out of the room again. Trembling, I inspect the safe and the dumbass left it unlocked. When the pot of gold opens, there are three flash drives. I pocket all of them and slink out of the closet with Naomi's eyes bulging out of her eye sockets, telling me to get the hell out of there.

I somersault out the window, dropping to the ground like a splattering scoop of melting ice cream. Nick is then bustling into the bedroom, and all hell breaks loose.

"White chocolate, what the hell! I know yah mad at me but come on boo!" I'm crawling through the grass like I'm in the middle of a battlefield until I'm good enough to make a break for it at the gate.

Ryder's jeep is at the corner of the street. He's tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, and his entire face is white as a ghost as I'm sprinting down the sidewalk and leaping into the back seat like I'm dodging a bomb.

We watch Snoo take Naomi out of the house and into his Cadillac. Ryder dips his head at me in the back seat. I pull out the flash drives from my pockets.

"No way! You fucking found them! Hell yeah! That's my girl!"

Payton

I STEP INTO THE DORM with Naomi sitting on the edge of the bed in her cheer uniform. A note delicately folded in a symmetrical heart lies on her comforter.

"You ready for tonight?" Naomi asks with a wheezing nervous laugh and sinks her hands into her hair. "What if we fuck up our routine? What if Nick fucks up the kickoff?" She releases the grip on her hair and is a spitting image of Ace Ventura in his pink tutu, having his episode at the psych ward.

I gather my duffle bag from the floor and throw it on the bed. "Chill, he's going to be fine."

"Okay, I'm just really paranoid. The girls were shit-talking in the gym after practice about your sex tape with Ryder..."

I can see my ghost at the edge of the bed grinning at me. "What about it?"

"It's going to get posted tonight..."

"Want a red-carpet premiere? I have it saved." I plop on my mattress and yank the charger off my phone, scroll through my albums to the hidden secret compartment.

"I already got front-row seats last week." Naomi shakes her head with a toothless smile.

"Ryder was super sweet the entire time... I've heard horror stories."

Admitting it aloud would be weird, but I rewatched the video and cried myself to sleep when Ryder works late. I've stared at the empty ceiling with that piece of my past circling on repeat. Since starting college, I've become a rat in a maze lost in tunnels and couldn't figure my way out. He took me back to Eden, and I'm afraid of white roses turning black and pushing me into the fiery pits of hell.

"Wanna hear mine?" Naomi asks.

"Do I need to get my tea ready?" I sit up on the bed as Naomi leans her back against the wall, her arm resting over the knee she planted up.

"Pinky promise you won't laugh at me?" She wiggles her pinky with her fake acrylic nails.

"Just tell me."

"Okay," she clears her throat with a cupped hand on her mouth. "This guy and I were dating for about a month. His parents decided to go out for the night, so I snuck in. Mind you, we were completely nervous." Her arms flail everywhere, telling the story. Naomi is vibrant, her emotions written in the movements of her hands. "We

took shots of some whiskey to calm down. Well, I was not chill and, the second he put it in, it hurt so bad I pushed him off, ran away and projectile vomited all over the bathroom floor. Yeah, we stopped dating a couple of days later."

My mouth drops, and a laugh and gasp mixes together.

"Noo!"

"Yes!"

"You threw up all over the place?"

"It was so bad." Her eyes stare up at the ceiling, and she chuckles between her words. "I tried to help him clean it up, but it made him throw up too."

"How old were you?"

She crisscrosses her legs, thumping them back and forth on the mattress. "Fourteen I think."

"Really? You were that young?" If a guy looked in my direction at fourteen, the whites in their eyes turned black. I swear they were all demons, and I hissed at them like a feral cat.

She lifts her brows. "Well...." She sighs and her lashes flutter, looking sideways. "I was kinda exposed to it rather early. I didn't try again until I was sixteen. Classic Prom date fun."

"That's a cliché..."

"The girls said something else..." She twiddles her thumbs. The back of my mind tells me my fate is headed to a bad collision.

"What?" I ask.

"Can I ask you something first?" Naomi asks.

"Shoot."

"Are we friends?"

"After what you did for me in getting those flash drives, yeah?"

"Okay, please don't be mad at me. The girls were saying Ryder was gonna dump you at the game and get back with Brittini."

A warhead impales me in the stomach. "Dump me?" My heart plops out of my chest like a soggy pop tart. I'm thick tar inside, burning and melting. "Are you sure?"

"It's the only way he's going to play this season, by sending Brody the video... then dumping you." I can feel the walls around me closing in. "It was the only way for you to be in Cheer Phi, too."

"I thought we just needed the video?"

"Look, I don't think he wants to end it with you... like I wish a guy would look at me like that." She makes eye contact for five seconds and holds it, then darts her pupils all over the room. The way Naomi bites her bottom lip, her brows furrowing. This conversation with the other girls is real. The angel wings I was soaring with are ripped right off my back, and I'm face-planting on the ground all over again.

"Nick really likes you..." I swallow hard.

"Definitely not the same. It's the way Ryder looks at you. I'm just hoping he doesn't end things with you to play football, and it's just a rumor."

"Yeah..."

"I found this." She throws out her arm with the note folded into a heart.

"What's this?" I lean over and take it.

"It was knocked behind the bed. I didn't read it, but I think it was from Charlie..."

"Oh..." My chest ignites on fire like a field of dead grass, spreading all over the place.

Naomi scoots off the bed and waves. "I'll meet you on the field."

"Yeah..." I unfold the note, the same way I did in high school as we always did the cute old school notes, passing them between classes.

Dear Payton...

CIGARETTES AND RUST

I've never wanted to not be friends if that makes sense. For the longest time, I wished you were my twin sister who lived with me, because we've done everything together since we were little.

I'm serious. Do you remember we both got our first periods within days of each other? We were always in sync too. I don't remember a month when we didn't start within twenty-four hours of each other. We'd strut down the hallways fucking proud we had our periods together.

You've always been family to me. Since the day we met.

At church, when we had to kneel during communion, I would pray to God every Sunday for you to become my sister. God, please magically make her my sister. Of course, you'd never turn in my biological sister. That's silly.

Then I kinda noticed in eighth grade when Ryder started hugging and kissing you on the forehead. He even took you to his senior prom, and you were embarrassed slow dancing with him. I took a picture and hid it in my sock drawer, waiting for the day you two figured out you're perfect for each other.

Ryder looks at you differently. He's never, and I mean never, looked at a girl like how he looks at you. Not even Brittni.

That was a shitshow. I hated seeing him exhausted all the time coming back from break. I thought college was a vampire, but no, that was Brittni suck-

CIGARETTES AND RUST

ing the life out of him. She would hang out at the house and always complain about something, and nothing he did was good enough for her. The fighting was worse than my own parents, and you knew that marriage was doomed to begin with.

When Brody cheated on me with her, I was beyond thankful that I dodged a bullet, and Brittini's true colors came out. Ryder could finally actually breathe for a second.

I knew you landed on Ryder that Saturday. He was acting off that day, and you were off. Brody sent all the cheerleaders that video of you two kissing. That wasn't just sent to you. It airdropped to all of us.

You didn't land on Ryder by accident and don't ever say it was just a coincidence. You landed on him for a reason.

And I waited and waited for you to tell me and because you didn't tell me, and you continued to hide it, I resented you for it. I sat there and prayed like a ten-year-old girl again for you to be my sister again. You.

Who would have thought something greater out there would actually fucking answer that prayer? I mean, He really answered it. He put the opportunity right in front of you. You actually becoming my sister.

If anyone were to date my brother, that dumbass Crab. It would be you, and only you. Promise not to break his heart, because I'm going to be the best fucking auntie one day.

CIGARETTES AND RUST

I'm sorry we had to part ways like this. We do need some space. We've been tied together in a really really tight double knot, and college is about finding out who you are, and what you are becoming.

I want you to grow and actually live life without me having to always help you up when you fall. You gotta pick yourself up, comb your hair, and take care of yourself because I'm not always going to be there to do it for you.

I love you, Payton.

You'll always be my best fucking friend forever. Now make sure you seduce my brother so we can have the same last name, and have a squealing fest later.

-xoxo

Charlie

Ryder

TEAMMATES SHIT TALK WITH ONE ANOTHER in the locker room. Duffle bags thump as they are dropped on the benches of the floor. Echos and laughter bounce off the walls. I slump to the cold metal bench, sweat skating down my back as I tie my cleats.

"Oh shit! Not again!"

Lockers slam shut, and laughter gets more ridiculous. "Who you mad at this time, Emo girl?"

"Can't wait to see your sex tape, babycakes."

"Wanna ride on my lap!"

"Fucking touch me again! Fucking touch me!" Payton's voice pounds into my eardrums. The slam of metal and cussing makes my ears bleed.

I stand up and emerge from the row of lockers and push aside teammates and Payton swigs a palm into a guy's face.

"Payton!" With a shoulder, I shove myself in the middle and grasp her wrist. "What the hell!" I pull her away from the crowd and swing her around to my locker.

I'm not in the mood. Coach has me benched, and I'm a fucking backup for the shortest freshman, barely standing at five-four and has barely five hundred yards to his name. It's bad. He hasn't been able to catch a ball at practice. He fumbles, trips, and half the time he gets intercepted. It's opening a can of worms with him being on the field.

"Why are you in here? You should be on the field?" I grumble, and it comes off my tongue like a complete asshole, but my blood is sweating.

"Is it true?" A hand runs through her pretty long curls.

"What are you talking about?"

"Cheer Phi says you're dumping me tonight and getting back with Brittnei." She bites her pretty bottom lip.

I lick my chapped lips. "We can't have this conversation right now." Sweat pools to my palms, and I'm pacing back and forth again. My hand digs into my scalp.

"Tell me!"

"Yeah, why don't you tell her?" Brody squeezes his fat head into his helmet and leans against the lockers. He lifts his brows with a snarky smile, like he's the fucking Terrifier with a hacksaw ready to finish the job and kill me for good. "I got your video... I honestly didn't expect to get the grossest vanilla bullshit. Kinda sad to see it end... actually I'm not."

"Fuck you. I'm benched either way because you couldn't keep your hands off my damn sister." The boil is pouring out of the pot, and its gasoline about to blow this shit wide open.

"You retracted the statement and said you lied."

"I lied..." I lose it again. Twenty-five years doesn't taste sour anymore. I'll tattoo my lips shut and be top dog running the prison like a fucking king. Everyone will know my story. I'm the guy who snapped the neck of his sister's rapist. "You've fucking lied your way to being a quarterback." I grab the fabric of his Jersey and slam him into the locker with my knuckles white, ready to break his nose...again.

"What the hell is with you two!" Coach Storm slams his notebook on the bench and pulls me off him.

"I'm done with both of you and your petty drama shit. You can't get along during practice. Both of you fucking fighting in here over some chick. Get a fucking grip!" He rants on, spit spewing out of his mouth. His face is redder than a ripe tomato. "We start in five minutes." Then Coach cranes his head at Payton and points a finger in her face. "Get the fuck out of my locker room, or there will be an incident report in the dean's office Monday morning! GET!"

Payton's eyes water when she looks at me, and my chest caves in. Collapsing like an unstable cliff, taking everything with it. She knows the truth. Brody can't keep his mouth shut. Her head drops to the wet tile floor and races out, shielding her face with her forearm.

"Both of you get a grip. One fucking word out of your mouths on the field, and I'm dropping both of you from the team. I rather lose the damn season than deal with this bullshit any longer." He snatches his notebook from the bench and storms away. "Let's go, Falcons!" His voice vibrates off the walls.

I slam my fist in a locker. Brody cocks a smile and leans into me... "Come on running back, and deflower this cheerleader." He uses a

girly voice and mimics her. He taps me on the shoulder as if we are buddies. "If you wanna play... dump her."

Brody turns a heel and walks out with the other players. I slide the football helmet from the bench, slip it over my head and stumble out behind them.

The double doors swing open and the white lights ignite the field in green. The air is crisp and greets my nostrils. It's a roar, a complete drowning sound of the stadium packed. Not a single seat is empty and people cheer in dark green jerseys.

As the team dips right, I swing left to the group of cheerleaders chanting. Payton gathers her pom-poms and my heart thrashes in my chest when she turns to meet my gaze. Pain shoots out of her eyes, her cheeks puffy red.

"Payton..." I swallow, my mouth dry with the faint hint of bile creeping up my throat.

"Yeah..."

I meet her cheek with a thumb and lean down where my face is aligned with hers.

"I..." Fuck, say it dude. Fucking say and it get it over with. "I... I love you. I'll always fucking love you. Please forgive me for what I'm about to do."

I release my grip, and stand tall, hating everything about who I am in those seconds. Someone run a dagger down my chest because I deserve it.

With one swift movement, I pull off my helmet. I'm going to die in this bed I made. Regret swallows me hole and I'm drowning in a dream I can't escape, and I wish someone would wake me up.

I tremble in pure agony as I step in front of Brittini, a painful chill crawling up my back as I drop the helmet to the grass. With both hands, I grasp her pink cheeks and kiss her. Not a peck, but a full-

blown make-out session, tongue and all, brushing against the cherry flavor of her lips.

When I pull away, I say nothing to Brittni, but stare into her eyes, knowing whatever Payton feels about me will die like the treasure she is in a sinking ship.

Payton

MAYBE CHARLIE IS IN HELL.

The thought of being there with her doesn't seem way better than any place on this planet. I'm sweating when I storm up to Ryder. I push him off, Brittni. My tiny fists smack him across the face, shoving him in the chest, and punching his shoulder pads like there is no tomorrow.

"Fuck you!" It's a blister bursting out of my throat. "That's how you feel!" I'm pounding, my tears soaking my face. "You used me!"

Ryder doesn't say anything. He grabs my arms to stop me from fighting. Then throws them off him as he grabs his helmet and jogs off, putting it back on like nothing, and I'm nothing because all I've ever been is Trash.

Brittni chuckles with Autumn and the other girls. I'm a laughing-stock. "Come on running back, and deflower this cheerleader..." They mimic my own words and soil the memory. Brittni's cold grip strangles me with all the stupid shit she includes in her opinion of me.

"Welcome to Cheer Phi, bitch." Brittni throws up her middle finger and sticks out her tongue. "Guess you did have it in you."

The game is done. That's it. Everything I went through for what? My mind is a prison, and I'm done using my tiny little box to hold everything I hate inside. I couldn't swallow the lump in my throat. This was indescribable and I guess it was the legitimate feeling of my heart actually breaking, and it takes every ounce of strength not to

storm off the field. Or to find the pocketknife in my bag and slit her throat.

Jealousy was only going to cloud my mind from deflating this asshole and his stupid balls. Once halftime hits, I have to plug in that flash drive while In Sheep's Skin plays and showcases the revenge I want to taste. I'll bury Brody, and he can rot with all his skeletons.

There is no choice but to swallow hard and dance, chant, and complete the routines on repeat. My curls losing their bounce, and my throat is raw from cheering out.

Nothing can worsen my condition as I shake the pom-poms and ruffle them together. My heart hurts so badly I think my chest is going split wide open and hemorrhage all over the grass.

Ryder managed to get off the bench when several plays were intercepted and the opposing team scored three touchdowns in the first seven minutes. We are at zero and the crowd isn't happy.

A timeout was called. Brody and Ryder hash it out on the sidelines. They fist bump, and I've lost all hope of staying calm. There is no room to breathe.

Once Ryder hits the field, the stadium roars his nickname. "CRAB!" They stomp their feet three times and shout again, "CRAB!"

Brody would throw the passes deep, and Ryder was quickly sprinting the yards to the end of the field. Linebackers failed to keep up with his speed. Each time Ryder was clear and the end zone was right at his feet.

Touch down after touch down he'd celebrate, throwing off his mouth guard and flexing like he's Johnny Bravo. It became harder to watch him come on the big screen.

The grey eyes, the conversations we shared, my feelings taking over, and I'm falling at the seams. I fed off his touch, and it's just memories, the intents of hard penmanship remaining after erasing the

story. He tells me he loves me, but his lips kiss the one person he claimed he never wanted to be with again.

Cheers are muscle memory, and when halftimes come, I have to snap myself back into reality. The teams go in opposite directions, emptying the field. Noah and the band come pooling out with equipment.

Noah's dark eyes meet me yards away, and he throws a thumbs up. I need to finish this.

The cheerleaders are required to stay on the field, but when the girls are taking quick water breaks, I'm slipping away from them and racing through the double doors. Running bleachers would have been a good idea for a workout, as I'm climbing five flights of stairs to get to the top.

Mr. Clorox wobbles in the hallway right on time. Flubber sways back and forth with each step he takes. "Hurry up!" I zip past him. "They will be set up within three minutes and start playing! Move those legs!"

"Oh, geeze." He huffs and sprints, and in two feet into his run, he's wheezing with fists clenched at his sides.

"Come on, shake off some of those pounds!" Tremors judder the floor like a small earthquake as he pushes through his run.

The control room is at the end of the hall, and when I jiggle the handle, it's locked. I gaze up at the medal green doors, and down at the tiles matching the colors of the school with the falcon painted on it.

"It's locked..."

Mr. Clorox pops up behind me, panting. He digs around in his pocket like it's Mary Poppins bag and there is a magical key somewhere on the bottom. A small gadget that looks like a magnet strip jingles in his fat fingers.

"No one uses regular keys in this building..." He swipes the magnet over the key card lock. It flashes green, and the click is music to my ears as I swing open the door.

No one is here. The leather whirling chair is cold and lonely in the dark room, with computers and buttons controlling all the sound systems.

Mr. Clorox plops in the chair with a heavy breath like it took all of his energy to sit down. I wonder how difficult it was for him to gather his blubbery belly and stand up.

He holds out his hand and I dig into my sports bra, pulling out the flash drive covered in sweat. "Now what..." I throw my hands onto my hips.

Lacing his fingers together, he cracks them. "Sit back babycakes and go enjoy the show. It will take me sixty seconds."

"Oh, I have something else for you..." I reach into the other side of my bra and take out the only two flash drives. One of them still in my bedroom. I don't want to risk him ever hurting someone younger than me. And he knows it. "I checked them... they have your conversations on them."

He swirls around with a brow cocked and puckers his lips that have cottage cheese caked at the creases of his mouth. "Really?"

"Yeah..." I hand them over.

"Well... we don't have much time." He swirls back around, his fingers typing on the keyboards, turning everything into an old-fashioned black and green computer screen. He plugs in the flash drive, the codes typing themselves out.

"All done, babycakes..." He dusts his fingers together with a satisfied grin. "I'm leaving 7-Eleven, by the way. Gonna go north with my lady. So, you won't see me once I walk out those doors. Dirty Roulette ends here."

"Thank you." I hold up a fisted hand, and he bumps it.

“Good luck finding your friend.”

I smile, and he struggles to get up out of the seat, strolling out the door like nothing. I peek out the blinds with two fingers.

Noah’s head hangs low, holding onto the standing mic, pumping his head as the first cord strums. Lights go dark and the stadium is silent as the base of the drums set the pace. A Nineties classic, *Come Undone*.

Not bad for someone who likes listening to Drake.

The grit in the voice is a near-perfect match to the vocals of the original. His extra grunts and growls give it spice, and my heart is thumping.

I race out the door, slamming it open. Security leaps on his toes, coffee spilling out of the Styrofoam cup and onto their hands and uniform. “Hey! How did you get in there?” They hiss, shaking off the creamy coffee. “Get back here!” They start to jog after me, but the hot bean water sloshes everywhere.

My arms sway back and forth as I race down the hallway, my feet sliding against the smooth tile as I make a sharp turn to the double doors, racing out into the frigid night. I’m at the top of the stadium and start to climb down the steps.

“Hey!” the security guard calls out. I swivel my head around with his finger pointing at me.

I book it. A robber with the money bag over their shoulder, making a break for it kind of run. People are coming up and down the steps, and I’m the stampede with security chasing after me.

Voices in the loudspeakers echo through the stadium.

“You wanna be a part of the team, you gotta spin the bottle, baby. Film it, or I post it.”

“Are you serious? You’ll ruin my parents’ careers.”

“Not my problem.”

The people in the stands are still singing along. They put up their hands and sway to the lyrics I'd scream along to on one of our adventures.

The voices on the loudspeakers cut through the music again.

"The dude's into sucking dicks... wait until your entire cult of Mormon morons find out you're gay."

"You're fucking sick, man."

"Well, it's time to come out of the closet. It's not like you can throw a ball anyway."

As I push and shove people aside, making it through two flights of stairs, the crowd starts to go still. Stopping in their tracks, heads tilting, whispering to those next to them.

"Sleep with me and break up with him."

"I've been with him for three years. Are you for real?"

"Date rape is easy when you're always drunk, just like you are right now. Either way, you're sleeping with me."

The band easily flows into their next song. Noah clenches his eyes tight as his grunt vocals take over the entire stadium. The cords branding my soul, like it's doing to him as his lyrics scream out. The drumsticks beat against the snare a mile a minute. The bass guitar was heavy with the perfect cords.

You lie, you lie, and you can't cover it up now.

You're bleeding in sweat

Self-destructing in a bed of silver you laid

Nothing you say is real

Did you really think we couldn't raise ourselves from this hell?

Nail me to the cross, I'll still find you in three days,

burn me at the stake, and I'll still rip off your mask

We are the wolves in sheep's skin

Now it's our turn to have a say

The large screens turn to static and white noise blares through the speakers. Then it switches to the black computer screen with green letter codes typing. The period dots blink, loading.

Static switches again and the videos pop up. Brody, forcing the girls to drink. Him so close to the screen with alcohol in his hands, you can't miss the ugly bad-boy blonde haircut or his stupid pointed nose, and the eyes of a serial killer. He tosses a girl, clearly intoxicated, and out of it onto a bed.

It's static again, a new video of him and a bunch of the linemen dragging Ryder out of Brody's ugly white Camaro. They kick him in the stomach, and the shock wave of the sound sends the exact same pain into mine and I want to double over. Brody punches his face, throwing him to the ground.

"I'm not going to delete those damn pictures of that piece of trash." He twists his fist in Ryder's hair, pulling up his face so Ryder is looking at him. "Ask me one more time, and you won't be breathing."

My palms sweat. It's skating down my back. Security lost me in the midst of people frozen at the sight of the videos and audio. I race through another set of double doors, cutting the corner and making it back out onto the field. My hands are on my knees as I pant.

When I glance at the cheerleaders. Brittini is blinking a mile a minute, her blue eyes dart to mine and mouths the words... "What the fuck is going on?"

Naomi's jaw runs across the grass. When the football teams pour back out, they don't even make a full entrance. Some of them pull their helmets off as they stare at the screens.

Ryder drops to one of the benches, head down at his cleats, unable to watch it. He runs a hand over his neck before he turns in my direction. No expression on his face, just the flat line, cold and empty again.

Hands cover mouths in shock as the crowd stands like statues. Security races up the flight of stairs leading to the main control room as if they are going to be able to make it stop. They finally see the maggot haunting the feed of social media. He's done. The damn anti-Christ is on blast, and I've never felt more alive.

"What did you fucking get yourself into, Thomas? That girl is missing."

"I don't give a fuck if she's missing."

"What did you do?"

"Gave her sugar and had my way."

Noah drops the mic on the stage, holding out his arms and the final punchline hits deep. He stands back as the lights slowly go from dim to bright. The crowd once cheering turns into a chaotic mosh pit waiting to happen. Cups, food, whatever is on hand come flying out of the bleachers and raining down on the field like hail. They are mad and raging, cussing up a storm.

The category five hurricane boiled up in my mind is finally set free. The police stampede out the double doors. Their black uniforms flood the field over to the team, grabbing Brody and throwing him to the ground.

Ryder

WE LOST OUR FIRST GAME. But I lost more than a stupid football game. I dunno what's got its teeth in me. There is nothing left in me to fight back as the boys slunk our way into the fraternity with defeat written all over us. I can't believe I did that. I fucking choose football over the girl I love. The whole time, I doubted she would be able to pull off her stunt. She actually fucking did it.

When the door closes behind us, Nick leans into the headrest of the couch. Dirt and sweat on his face, and through his dark skin he's blistering red. "What the fuck was that shit out there?"

Jared collapses to the recliner. He curses under his breath as he digs into the cushions and throws one of the Xbox controllers across the room. The plastic snaps, and I swallow the lump in my throat as I stand there. I'm weak enough to collapse to my knees, but I stand there staring at the floorboard underneath my sneakers.

"I dunno." I throw the bag off my shoulder, and it crashes to the floor.

"Man..." Nick licks his lips. "We don't have a quarterback now. They dragged that mother fucker out so fast." He grumbles and groans.

"Are you serious?" I ask, my voice raises enough it quickens my heartbeat. "That's what you're worried about. Having a fucking quarterback?"

Nick holds up his palms. "I didn't mean it like that, bro."

Jared leans his hands lankly over his legs. Feet tap on the floor, and he's shaking his head. "Did you know?" Jared's mouth hangs open, his tongue resting underneath his bottom teeth.

"Yeah..."

A knock beats on the door three times, and on cue, we all turn. Nick rolls his eyes and dips his head back as he cracks open the door. "Oh, hell to the fucking no! Get yo white ass off the porch." He points a finger out into the darkness.

"Who is it?" I stumble over to squeeze past him, but he pushes two fingers into my chest. "You and your damn freshman drama bullshit." He throws his hands onto my shoulders and pushes me against the wall.

"Chill the fuck out, bro!" Jared stomps over and grabs Nick by the forearm.

"We lost the fucking game!" Nick snaps.

"Dude, get a smoke in, and chill."

Nick's lips curl, and he throws his hands at us like he's tossing a basketball into its hoop. "I don't want her here. Don't yah think she's caused enough issues?"

"Go calm down, man. Tonight was rough." Jared pats him on the back. Nick's footsteps pound down the hall as he cusses up a storm and disappears into his room.

I unlock the screen door and it creeks open. She steps inside but doesn't move any further than the doormat.

There is a bitter pain in my chest. I dip my hands into my pockets and stare at her fingers fiddling with a note. Her Converse sneakers glare at me. The voice in my head tempts me to look into her eyes, but shame spreads to every corner of my brain and I can't stomach to meet them.

"I came here to give this to you..." She holds it out.

"What is it?"

"Your sister wrote a note." I take it from her hand and only get a millisecond to touch her soft skin.

A brittle ache sits in the back of my throat, dragging a knife through the warm meaty flesh in my chest. "Can I explain?"

"No..." She's stern, and when I gather the courage to look into her eyes, they glisten with it pooling at the rims.

"I meant what I said."

She uses the back of her hand to wipe her face. "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"No... that's not true," I say.

"Admit it. You were drinking to get over Brittni, and I was just a part of Dirty Roulette and nothing else."

I bite my tongue and look the other way with a heavy breath leaving my lungs. "No... I'm not going to say that."

"You dumped me for your own personal benefit."

"I did it so Brody would lay off you and finish the game."

"You think I cared about the game at this point... I didn't care about being part of Cheer Phi anymore. I would've..." She pauses, biting her bottom lip and sucks in the sob, breaking free from a deep breath she exhales. "This conversation is pointless."

Tires roll up in the gravel outside with blue and red lights flashing. They are bleeding through the blinds and reflecting off the white walls of the house. Something awful settles in my stomach with the way the police officer steps out of the vehicle, rounding the hood of the Ford.

Dread and the voice in my head tells me to prepare myself now. It's lodged into my cranium like a bullet. It's the cold sad expression on the officer's face as he holds his belt. The soft and slow movements of his footsteps crunching on the gravel as he makes his way to the front door.

"I'm looking for Sebastian Henderson." He swallows, and his lips press together.

"That's me..."

"May I step in?"

Without questioning it, something else takes control and opens the screen door. Payton squeezes past me, standing away with arms hugging herself.

"We tried going to your parent's residence, but no one was there..." He starts and runs a hand against his face.

"It's your sister..." He pauses for a moment.

My voice quivers and my hands tangle into my hair. It's those words. The way he says it with care and the sadness leaking off his tone. His eyes are fragile as spilling the truth is the hardest part of the job. "No..."

"We received a call earlier tonight. A body was found about two miles away from her last whereabouts."

"No... please no." It's an avalanche, heavy stones thrown onto my body, breaking every bone. Ripping my insides wide open.

"I'm sorry. She was found deceased."

My knees buckle, the weight of myself stumbling to the wall. Both hands meet my face. I bang the back of my skull against the stucco hard enough to put a hole in it. Something throttles my soul and yanks it from my body. On the sidelines, I'm forced to watch my demons rip open my stitches, flooding over me like the cold Atlantic sea. I can't breathe. There's no air. Just water pooling into my lungs. No one was around to hear me scream.

Charlie drifted past the fog, into the weightlessness of a kingdom I'll never be able to go. It mixes in my chest, and I'm not sure what I feel other than imagining my brain matter splattered on a porcelain sink. Numb isn't a powerful enough word to describe it as I crumble to the floor.

Payton sucks in heavy breaths as she drops to her knees. The worst sound, a violent scream, comes from her mouth.

She's like Dandelions



Ryder

1 Month

I DUNNO IF I BELIEVE IN GOD. If he existed, then my mom wouldn't be dragging me to the hard wooden pew hungover after a night of binge-drinking and letting some random stranger take advantage of her at 3am.

She's wearing white, but it won't mask over the bitter truth my father packed and left with a woman not much older than me. It's been months, but Mom still plays with her wedding ring, holding onto some bitter hope the man will come to his senses, pick up the phone, and call. But he's like God. He's not here.

He doesn't care that my little sister's face is printed on a black and white sheet of paper nailed to telephone poles asking for information on her death. If God truly watched over my family, my father wouldn't have been tempted by Satan with blonde hair and big tits.

I wouldn't be choking on the charges pressed against Brody with the sickening feeling he's getting away with everything.

I've come here every Sunday since she was murdered. It's been a little over a month, but nothing I pray about is being listened to. I

watch families in here pretending to be good Catholics, with their hands folded in prayer, all so devout, so pious.

When the service is over, Mom stays seated on the chair, her eyes staring at the cross up front. The stained glass behind it shows each part of the story of Jesus and his crucifixion. If he went through the worst punishment in this world, then why am I feeling that the burdens on my shoulder are too heavy to carry? That damn cross sinks me into quicksand, and I'm suffocating. If only I could, I'd march up to those pearly gates, spit in the man's face, and scream it out. Fuck you. Fuck you for everything, for not protecting my sister, for leaving me behind when I fell to my knees. Where is the hand to pick me up off the floor? Nowhere.

"I'm going to rehab tomorrow..." Mom says.

"What?" I ask.

"I haven't been the best mother to you or Charlotte..." her hands falling to her lap where a rosary sits on the bible she's carried here since I could remember.

"That's not true." I place a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it tight.

"You don't need to lie to me... I've been terrible, and maybe Charlotte would still be here if I was a better mother."

"I'm the one who let her run off..."

"But if I raised you both right, then you would have known better to walk away from a stupid haze. Now we are the only ones left... just me and you. I don't want you to end up being alone."

2 Months

THEY SAY GOD WEPT TOO. Crumbled to the ground with tears when he finally experienced the pain of someone he loved to meet death because it wasn't his time to wash his blood over me. My faith in him collapsed like his temples.

Sitting in the audience of a still courtroom crushes my bones into nothing but atoms. The court rises as the judge steps to the podium with the yellow folder in his hands. Brody stands next to his father awaiting sentencing.

The judge speaks to the courtroom, stating the case number and small pieces of the judicial system my brain can't process. My hands tremble at my sides, scars on my knuckles stretch as I tighten them into fists, taking in a deep breath.

"Good morning." He starts off, opening the folder and the world slows down, moving at such a speed I believe the world will end by the time this is over.

"I've been a judge for over fifteen years in this county, and the overwhelming amount of evidence of hazing has been incredibly disturbing. Not only have you caused physical harm, but degradation on students at GCU. I even attended college here, and never once met someone who degraded and humiliated people for their own benefit."

Come on. Get it over with so I can move on from my life and Dirty Roulette. My palms sweat, my face is leaking, and my tongue is swelling up in my mouth. I can't fucking breathe.

"In the case of Brody Thomas and the state of California penal code 32050 for initiating hazing, the jury finds Brody Thomas guilty and will receive a maximum fine of five thousand and one-year imprisonment with the chance of early release for good behavior and one year of probation."

The courtroom gasps and a group of family members of Brody begins to cry. Disgust pinches in my chest. They are the ones who enabled the behavior and never put the damn bastard in the corner. He was handed everything he ever wanted and never understood the stupid shit you do has consequences.

"Charges of wrongful death of Charlotte Henderson code 377, the jury finds Brody Thomas not guilty due to lack of evidence. Charges

for rape of Charlotte Henderson code 261, the jury finds Brody Thomas not guilty due to lack of evidence. Sentencing begins immediately.”

The gavel echoes through the courtroom as the judge steps down. Disappointment courses through my veins and someone stabbed a needle in my neck, injecting me with Lidocaine. I run a hand over my mouth and crumble down to the wooden benches as Mr. Thomas pushes open the wooden gate, his eyes impaling my chest with his heat vision.

If I never wrote that statement, I'd be rotting in a jail cell, but at least there would have been a better chance of Brody getting thrown in a cell next to me for fifteen for rape. Regret bites me on the ass, but at least he'll never have a chance to haze anyone ever again.

But I never expected Brody to be charged with a wrongful death. Charlie's autopsy showed extensive head trauma and was marked as a suspicious, unnatural death. A rock was found with remains of her brain matter. It was confirmed that someone bashed into her cranium.

There is not a single person who comes off as suspicious as the only one was Brody and he was taken to the hospital during her murder.

Payton

3 months

I FEEL A LITTLE LOST IN THIS WORLD as I step out of the little blue Volkswagen beetle. Noah took the time to teach me how to drive and parallel parking is the biggest bitch. The number of times he massaged his face in the pure agony of my idiocy turned into a lot of jokes that cheered me up for a brief moment.

The lighthouse pulsates in the distance and its yellow lights cut through the thick fog. I could never be a guide like that. I'd lead all the boats to the rocks.

Breathing is hard. Noise and music I love go silent as all it does now is make me choke. Wet sand massages my tired feet as I walk on the beach to the smooth large stones Ryder showed me months ago. I stare out into the dark blue water. Waves crash to the shore, foaming with bubbles that burst and recede just as fast as they appeared. Nothing about the sea is calm. It's all the damage and anger I've bottled up crashing to the shore to escape the world that has nothing but pain to offer.

Frigid wind presses and pulls my hair like it wants to drag me out to sea. The sun refuses to break through the thick layer of clouds and fog and it's much colder than I thought.

This place shouldn't be somewhere I come to, but some magical hope in my chest prays Ryder will show up and talk to me. He would find me like he always did. But being here feels like an invasion of privacy. It belongs to Ryder. The waves of the ocean. The smell of salty air in my nose. The one thing I didn't want to come off as was clingy and desperate. Videos trend all the time online with girls refusing to leave a guy's property because they couldn't handle a breakup. I don't want to be the girl banging on his door in the middle of the night, sobbing.

Soft footsteps crunch behind me, and my gaze looks up directly at Ryder. His eyes are sleepy. The salty air ruffles his hair. I'd run my fingers through his locks again if he asked me.

"Hi..." I say, pull my legs up to my chest, and hug my arms around them.

"Hey," He sits down on the rock next to me. "How long have you been here?"

"Umm... maybe twenty minutes."

"Oh..." He swallows, and I feel like I invaded a space I was never invited to. Me simply being here makes me stalkerish and pathetic. The thoughts racing through his head must be that I'm a crazy unstable girl stalking his every move. There is no way to deny I am here to feel close to him again, but just that feeling is icky and makes me want to croak.

"Sorry, I shouldn't be here..." I place my palms on the wet stones and lift myself up and, as I slip past him, his rough hands reach out and snag a finger.

"You can be wherever you want to be," he says, his eyes sad, cold, and far away from this universe. The solid diamond he used to be is crushed into sand.

A gust of wind swirls around my skin and my teeth chatter. "It's your secret place and I shouldn't exploit that." I pull my hand away and cross my arms, staring back at the ocean, wondering if the world to him was just as bleak and black as mine.

"I wish you weren't like that..."

"Like what?"

"If I never wanted you here, I would have never brought you here to begin with." He turns to me and his eyes burn into mine like he's trying to show me the truth. "Can you sit back down...If this is going to end? Let me at least do it right."

End. I swallow hard, my eyes tearing up because those are the words I don't want to think about. Not after Charlie finding her end. As I predicted, the world never meant for us to be together. The little wish in my head about Charlie's prayer being true washed and eroded away like the broken shells dug in the sand.

"Did you even want it to be something?"

"I don't know..." He finds a piece of driftwood stuck in the sand and pulls it out, dusting it off with his thumbs. There is no straight answer. After this short amount of time, he still can't find a direct

answer to give me. Any hard conversation he avoids. It's painful to stand here and continue to think I was anything other than a haze. "I just don't know, Payton. I need time, to think, to fucking breathe. But I didn't lie to you. I fucking love you."

"But you don't want it to be something? How can you say you love me, but not know what you want?"

"Because everything hurts."

"Take your time to fucking breathe," I walk away, wiping my cheeks with a hand. The ache in my heart begging for him to get up and run after me like they do in the movies. Begging for him to wrap his arms around me, but it's the cold air and bitterness. And each step takes me farther away from him. He doesn't budge, just sits there with his hand over his knees.

When I open the car door and plop into the musty metal contraption, the collection of music I stored in Ryder's jeep sits on the passenger seat. If that's not a fucking way to break someone's heart, then I don't know what is.

I pull out my cell phone and open my snap, my location still on. Taking a deep breath, I turn it off. Hiding it from him.

Ryder

6 months

THE TEAM TRIED to talk me through the damage done daily. Not sure when the fog in my brain will actually let me listen to them and snap out of the slump I'm buried in.

"Come on, bro. We made it to the playoffs." Jared punches me in the shoulder as I sit on the couch playing a video game and taking hits from Nick's bong.

"You seriously need to come with us tonight. Last time we had two girls over." He licks his lips, rubbing his palms together like he's reliving his ball-smacking secession with those two girls moaning up a storm until three in the morning.

"Thanks for reminding me I could hear you three fucking on this damn couch. I'm aware..." I swallow and continue to stare at the television, pressing buttons and swirling the joystick. "Fuck..." I die, and the screen flashes the restart or quit option on the screen.

"When's the last time you fucked the shit out of a girl?"

"Do I really need to answer that?" I throw down the remote on the couch and lean my head back, staring at the ceiling. Dust hangs off the vents as the heat kicks in. It's been snowing non-stop for the past several days without letting up.

"It's been forever, dude."

"If I go, will you get off my nuts?"

"If you don't bring back a bitch to fuck, I'm kicking you out."

"Sure."

They don't understand. Words from them only tried to convince me I needed to fuck girls to get it out of my system.

I get ready and let Jared drag me to another pointless party, where everyone acts stupid because this is the last year we will live freely like this. The music shakes the house, and I do several rounds of beer bong. Cold beer going down my throat through a funnel to numb it all out.

After a while, I slouch onto the couch. Jared wraps his arms around a group of blonde girls in tight, skimpy dresses and pushes them toward me.

They melted into the couches with me and flirted up a storm. Running hands through my hair, kissing me on the neck, or trying to bite my ears. I don't mean to, but I tend to shrug a shoulder into them and push them off. Eventually, they get the clue and climb off my lap as my dick stays limp like a dead fish.

People buzzed past me like my life was put into fast-forward. Everything zipping by at such a high rate. Time fleeting as I wiped away the condensation of the bottle with a brittle memory of wiping sweat from Payton's cheeks as my teeth sank into her skin.

Time is borrowed, and I thought I needed it. As I wept at night, listening to some of the music, Payton placed in the glove box of my Jeep. I kept my favorite albums, especially the one I found of Sleep Token. I worked on papers with him singing in my ears, trying to control the one thing I had left. A fucking education. I'm not sure what I would do with it.

Looking at my phone, it's eleven. Jared's making out with someone in the kitchen, and since he's distracted, I dip. Stupid me. I slip into my Jeep, scrolling through the apps on my phone, and open up Snap. I scroll down to the bottom where Payton's name is hidden in the mess of people I'm randomly friends with. When I click on her name and maps. There is no location on. It's blank. Hidden. It's the first time in years that I don't know where she is at. I guess I deserve that for leaving her the way I did.

My best guess is she might be in her dorm room, and I guess it doesn't hurt to try. I take the five-minute drive to the other side of the campus, parking in the first row of spaces. When I place the jeep in park, two figures stroll down the sidewalk.

Noah stands next to Payton by the stairwell, with his hands in his pockets. She is smiling, and he's laughing. My heart is a fucking mess, drunk, and stupid, watching him wrap arms around her shoulders. She squeezes him back and I'm fisting a hand in my hair.

Noah leaves, and she hangs onto the stairwell, waving at him. Then her eyes gaze out, spotting the damn yellow jeep. I place the jeep in drive, pulling out of the parking lot. The smile washes off her face as she looks right at me through the review mirror, then climbs up the stairs.

Ryder

8 Months

CRACKING THE CODE TO MY HEART LOCKED UP seems impossible. I'm not even sure what the hell happened, or why I pulled my anchor out of the harbor and sailed off to the nothingness. I buried my body underwater, sinking deeper into the trenches, murdered like my sister.

I walk across the grass of the cemetery, dandelions litter and invade every square inch of the place like an army. The cool spring air washes over my face. The sunlight dances between the leaves of the trees.

I bought flowers for Charlie, and I try to come visit at least once a month to help cope with her being gone. I miss her yelling in my ears or storming in my room to bitch at me for something I did wrong.

The amount of times Charlie annoyed the shit out of me turned into bittersweet memories. I'm able to laugh, but still tear up at the same time. When I find her gravestone, I pull the weeds away, clean up the dead flowers, and replace them with new ones.

I plant myself down and take off the graduation cap, my dark green gown blending into the grass. Today, I'll walk across a stage with no one there. My mother was in rehab, and my sister was lying six feet under me. Dad floating somewhere in outer space where no

one can reach him. Then the one person I love dumped off on the side of a deserted road I left her on.

"Hi Charlie," I start off. The embarrassment prickles my skin for speaking to someone no longer in this universe. People talk to the dead all the time in the movies, and I try to work up the courage of not feeling so crazy about being one of them.

"I got a job offer from the Navy that could utilize my diploma, but I'm leaving in twenty-four hours."

After I walk across the stage today, I'm gone.

The draft of being a famous football player didn't die, but I pushed away the contracts. I'm not sure why. The money was enough to give me a clean slate, but the last time I picked football, I lost my heart in an endless maze, and I drowned in the flood that God pushed me into.

I woke up this morning like every morning, begging for an answer as to why I'm here, when all I want to do it turn off life and fade into blackness.

"I read the letter you wrote to Payton... it took me eight months though to open it. Maybe you already know that... or not." I wipe my nose. The damn flowers blooming on every tree are flaring up allergies I didn't ask for.

"I never knew you prayed for me to end up with Payton... I'm not sure if I can believe it was preordained. It was kinda out of this world for me to walk in the second the bottle stopped. I almost crashed the game earlier, but of course, Brittini shows up when you least expect it." The wind picks up, the leaves rustle in the trees above, and the flapping of the American flag fights against the wind in the distance.

"It took every ounce of strength in me not to take her back that night and fall into being miserable with her. I walked away from her at the perfect time."

I pick up the one red rose in the bouquet. The peddles are vibrant, like the blood running through my veins.

"What are the chances out of the billion seconds I get to breathe on this earth... Probably really slim, I'm guessing." I exhale the pressure lodged in my lungs, my eyes watering, and I suck it back in and wipe my face.

"Sometimes I think I fell for Payton right after I kissed her. Like it flooded into me, something that might have already been there, to begin with, but God gave us free will, so why would he interfere? Why would he time it so perfectly?"

It's cold next to me, bitter with the breeze as the wind ruffles my hair and the peddles of the rose I twirl in my hand. When I look at the gravestone I sit next to, the ghostly image and a vague picture of Charlie emerge. All the curves in her face, all of her, the way she looked, her voice, the smell of her is there.

The memories in my brain of her slowly turn into dust, and it's hard to imagine her voice and hear her laugh. Remembering how she looks fades too, and all I can do is stare at the picture saved on my phone.

But I see her there, leaning on the gravestone, with her arms criss-crossing lazily over the hard stone.

Her dimples cave in as she smiles at me with a snarky attitude.

"Because he gives you opportunities... didn't you ever pay attention?" Her voice is mixed in with the air. "You said you wouldn't hurt her."

A harsh gust of wind meets my back, blowing the hundreds of dandelions from the grass. The seeds float in the air and fill the cemetery like the invasive flowers that they are.

I'm stupid. It's sinking in now. I broke up with Payton. Told her I loved her, and gave it all up. If that is Charlie's voice calling out to

me, the message is clear, and she fades like a mist blowing with the seeds dancing in the sky.

Payton is invasive like dandelions, and there is no way I'll ever get rid of her.

I poke my thumb into the thorn of the rose, a drop of blood pooling out. I suck on it, and lift myself up off the ground. "Okay... I'm listening."

Payton

8 months

RYDER DROWNED ME OUT, and waiting for him seemed pointless. A little bit of time turned into hours, days, weeks, months. A typical fucking guy move. Things would never go back to normal, and I wish we could at least be friends instead of a distant memory.

It took me months after our last conversation to wake up and out of bed without the help of Naomi dumping ice water on my face. My stomach hurt so bad in the mornings from not eating I thought I'd spit up blood the second my eyes opened. The one thing drowning out the bitterness that invaded my body like a holocaust was catching up on schoolwork I dipped out in.

Grades slip faster than stepping on a banana peel, and I severed off both legs in order to get my GPA high enough to keep my scholarship.

Charlie's funeral was never mentioned, but the grapevine whispered it was private. No invite left me rather bitter, but it's not my place to ask to be there. Best friend or not, my blood doesn't belong in their dynamics anymore.

Noah, Rafa, and Vince turned into good friends, inviting me over when I had some free time. Hot tubs and late nights with beer took off the edge. Rafa was always turning Noah's skin into a canvas. Letters spelling out Sheep Skin went onto his fingers. Noah would come over sometimes. His grandfather passed shortly after finding Charlie's body. He took a beating from losing the only father figure he had. Sometimes, talking with each other helped ease the pain of losing Charlie.

Naomi comes into the dorm room as I tie my Converse. "Hey girl, you read for summer break?"

"Almost. I have one more final to take." I finish tying the knot I'm sure will come undone by the time I walk down the flight of stairs.

"Are you serious? Why are you procrastinating, you're ADHD is wild?"

"It's Algebra. It's fucking killing me. I hate this class." I say.

"Well, tonight seniors are getting together after graduation. Wanna come with me to a party?" She wiggles her shoulders, puckering her glossy lips.

"Noah invited me over for some drinks and wings. I'll probably skip out."

Naomi tilts her head to the side and groans at me. She slumps over and falls to my bed. The sheets are no longer the damn princesses. I tossed them into the dumpster months ago when Naomi shoved me into Ross and dragged me by the wrist to pick out better bed sheets. They're black, like my mood.

"Tell me you're riding his emo dick."

"We definitely are not." I chuckle and flutter my lashes at her. "He's not emo, and neither am I. That label is so fucking overused and stupid."

"Okay, if he's not emo, then what is he?"

"Emo is a genre of music. He's metal... but I honestly have to go if I'm going to make it on time for this final."

"Catch you later."

Algebra two was the tenth worst decision of my life. There were too many other terrible mistakes I made, but the course hurt my brain hard. When I went to the math center, I never understood the concepts. I'd just write the formulas down ten times each like I did with spelling words in the fourth grade.

I step out and the hallways were packed, and the campus was swarmed with seniors wearing their dark green caps and gowns.

Walking along the sidewalk, the grass blossomed into a fresh green. Leaves weren't dark yet, and still had their bright tint to them as the sun bled through the branches. I push on the door, and it takes me two seconds to realize it says pull. A laugh escapes my lips as I walk into the cold room with the air conditioner on blast.

The professor hands me the test, with a number two pencil and scratch paper. He's old school, but I don't blame him as I sit down on a cold plastic blue chair and scoot in.

Chewing on my pencil, I stare at the questions that twirl into a foreign language the moment I study the fifteen problems. Using the strategies I know, I skip the ones hurting my brain and tackle the easy ones.

The door opens, and another student comes in, grabbing their test and sitting down at a different desk. The instructor doesn't bother to pay attention to us as he leans back in his chair with a red pen between his teeth.

Twenty minutes later, and I'm down to the last problem on my paper, when the door opens again. I glance over, and my heart falls straight to the carpet floor with a plop.

Ryder stands in front of the doorway, wearing his cap and gown with a single rose he stares at. The door stays pried open, moving in

CIGARETTES AND RUST

slow motion as he picks up his head and his grey eyes meet mine.
Trouve-moi